

“The Sharpest Part of My Skeleton”: Digital Surrealism, Weird Posthumanism, and Performing Theory

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Today, I want to talk about a subgenre of weird twitter I'm calling "skeleton twitter." I find these tweets, which generally make humor out of the status of our bodies as encasing our skeletons (which is a statement that will make sense in a bit), to be performing some of the messier, stickier theoretical moves made in academic posthumanism, especially the version of that concept related in Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?*. In Wolfe's posthumanism, "the" "human" is articulated as a fictional line drawn (by humanism) as a false demarcation on our continuum with the animal, thus creating the fiction of humans as a cognitive and behavioral exception.

In discussing tweets about skeletons and posthumanism, I want to also highlight the part of Weird Twitter explicitly engaging with the longer tradition of surrealism, the subset of WT more apt to be truly unsettling rather than just merely humorous, such as tweets by "Village Fetish"



village fetish
@botandy

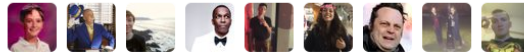


Following

the hotel doorman taps the brim of his hat as I exit, and opens the taxi door 'they're coming & we're going to be their pets' he says

RETWEETS
82

LIKES
272



2:00 PM - 3 Apr 2016

or "Post-Culture Review"



Post-Culture Review
@PostCultRev



Following

[I sit like Winnie-the-Pooh in his thoughtful spot, thinking about how long it would take me to eat a clone of myself]

RETWEETS
6

LIKES
38



11:53 PM - 10 Apr 2016

in which the point isn't so much a joke, but to be unsettling (in a humorous way), for which there's probably a word in German. This ability to be humorously unsettling, is a particularly comedic version of what Freud calls the uncanny, the passing recognition of and simultaneous alienation from a particular experience. Laughing at Village Fetish is to laugh at the fact that that THEY probably aren't coming. Probably.

Within the tweets about skeletons I'll be looking at in a bit, this uncanniness manifests as a destabilization of the human body, specifically a reader's ability to reflect on themselves as *cogito* and remain ignorant of their existences as sacks full of blood, meat, and bone.

To get to this alienation, however, I want to briefly detour through WT's use of irony. Specifically, as we heard about in Mike's presentation, joke formats are one of the animating principles of WT's use of humor.



sam mcdunna
@sammcdunna



 **Follow**

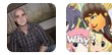
good cop: listen here, pal. my partner was bred
to interrogate pricks like you
duck cop: that's right, i—did you say bread?

RETWEET

1

LIKES

2



8:12 PM - 19 Aug 2014

These repeated comedy units are meant to suggest humor by variation on a set narrative form.

Jokes such as "good cop" (seen here), in which a stereotypical interrogation by police is disrupted by a cop not within the dramaturgical dyad of good cop, bad cop, work by ironically subverting our expectations of how cop shows make meaning. Instead, we find a duck cop, or, worse, ...



NickerDoodle
@OneTrickTofani



Follow

Good Cop: come out with your hands up

Joke Format Cop: normally I would be a different kind of cop that people wouldn't expect like a duck

LIKES

2



6:15 PM - 5 May 2015

... a joke format cop who just explains how the joke format works.

However, sometimes this ironic frission can be even more pronounced, as when WT authors blend two joke formats and make the joke about the subvention of the format itself. All the metatextual awareness of joke format cop is nothing compared to the moment when ...



REW
@therealeatwood



Follow

GOOD COP: Listen, we just need to know where the coke is.

SUSPECT: Is Pepsi OK?

BAD COP [slamming suspect's head down]:

WRONG FORMAT MOTHERF

RETWEETS

372

LIKES

828



11:12 PM - 22 Jul 2015

... a "is pepsi ok?" tweet intervenes within a "good cop / bad cop" tweet.

In these kinds of tweets, our ability to read them as funny (and I mean deeply funny) hinges on our embedding within WT as a discourse. That "is pepsi ok?" was the set-up for a variety of jokes a few years ago makes its interruption of the expected good cop / bad cop tweet all the more funny.

Thus, I think see joke formats and weird twitter in terms borrowed from Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*.

Returning is the becoming-identical of becoming itself. Returning is thus the only identity...Such an identity, produced by difference, is determined as "repetition." Repetition in the eternal return, therefore, consists in conceiving the same on the basis of the different. (41)

In that work, which I've quoted from here, Deleuze defines identity as not a function of difference, a function of our ability to be unique snowflakes, but of repetition, in which our repeated reaction to the chaotic flux of the world determines our identity through the things that remain the same in our responses to these confrontations with new and different scenarios. Thus I think we can see the ironic subversion of joke formats through the insertion of a some kind of funny police officer into good cop / bad cop ("wolf cop" and "deer cop" haven't been done, as far as I can tell) to mark a kind of identity in which the same is conceived as the "basis of the different" and humor is thus made by repetition.

Deleuze argues that we constitute our identities through the play of repetition of the same in the face of difference. The surreal brand of WT, especially w/r/t skeleton content, works on a higher level than joke formats to disrupt this smooth play of repetition, not by breaking up format, but by breaking up our impression of ourselves and our *ethos* on Twitter itself.



Post-Culture Review
@PostCultRev



Following

I've never cared much if I lose followers, because I'd still do this if you all died. This is my brain toilet and you're living in it.

RETWEETS

7

LIKES

34



2:44 AM - 9 Jun 2015

One of the central narratives about Twitter and one of its most addictive appeals lies in its ability to seemingly let us directly share the content of our minds to a (probably hypothetical) audience. We type into a box and our thoughts are published for the world to see.



Mike F
@mikefossey



Follow

me online: fuck off losers. i'll kick your ass easily
me trying to use the sink: owww the water is too wet... its making me aww wet... wahh

RETWEETS

255

LIKES

885



11:52 PM - 10 Apr 2016

This creates an ethos that is very, I argue, focused on the Cartesian notion of the *cogito* or the rational brain that discerns. Specifically, I think (non-Weird) Twitter encourages a writerly ethos in-line with certain bad-Cartesian models of subjectivity, in which we are brains in vats tweeting from a critical distance.

Indeed, tweeting can be an intensely disembodied (and therefore empowering in certain modes of transcendent thought) experience. Given that this is one of the most pleasurable aspects of Twitter, of course, WT exploits this mercilessly.



Thomas the Ripper

@HavocMantis



Following

Whenever I experience happiness, I signal this to other humans by showing the sharpest part of my skeleton.

RETWEETS

477

LIKES

1,108



12:41 PM - 8 Jan 2015

I first noticed this specific, anti-Cartesian mode in WT in this tweet, from Thomas the Ripper. The juxtaposition between "happiness" and "sharp" exploits the ghoulish, Halloween-decoration, ...



... *Evil Dead* implications of skeletons as specifically evil things. But it also reminds us that one of our most fundamentally joyous gestures, a universal greeting and signal of our good will, can be read, within the ghoulish context of the skeleton as a threat.

Thus, skeleton twitter exploits the ironic distance between our sense of people as self-contained minds moving through the world and our cultural representation of the machinery that moves these minds. In the normal register, we are not accustomed to reading humans as inherently threatening; in the weird, our bodies become the very content of our scary stories.



Johnny Normality
@Probgooblin



Following

"Have you tried... not thinking about skeletons?"
my therapist asks.

I look at her.

I look at the skeleton inside her trying to trick
me.

RETWEETS

8,010

LIKES

14,013



9:33 PM - 6 Feb 2014

From this initial observation, I started noticing more and more skeleton content on Twitter dot com. This tweet from Johnny Normality was the one that condensed skeleton twitter for me. The general pattern of these tweets focuses on the skeleton, and by extension the body, being something inside of us that we ignore as we go about our day-

to-day lives. I read these tweets as being comments on the kind of post-embodiment ethos imparted by Twitter itself.



11:44 PM - 30 Oct 2013

This skeleton-inside-me pattern, while not a joke format, structures some of the best examples of skeleton content we might find in WT. Essentially the basic pattern serves as a kind of chain-yank to our more outré fantasies of disembodiment at the hand of digital technology. A phenomenon some have called the "technological sublime," the idea that technology forces us out of our own embodiment and into this kind of *cogito* run amok. However, I think skeleton tweets are so interesting because they explicitly dramatize this in the day-to-day, non-digital spaces. Reminding thus that our brains on analog tend to forget we have a skeleton monster inside us at all times.

“the human” is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether...[posthumanism] comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools...it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xv).

As Cary Wolfe reminds us, Cartesian humanism—the ideology that underscored many of the excesses of Western European patriarchal, racist colonialism—is structured specifically on these forms of embodiment. Posthumanism, as Wolfe understands it in *What Is Posthumanism?* is a counter-theory to this ideology, one that seeks to:

1. Remind us that the human as we have operated within it is a fiction put forward by an ideology as a means of enforcing specific forms of power.
2. Point out that in the face of rapid technocultural globalization, the fictive nature of this fiction is increasingly hard to ignore.

Wolfe's project is especially important for how it shifted the discourse of posthuman theory in the academy. As he acknowledges, the primary focus was on robots and the digital monsters we might become in the period of the 1990s when the term was dominated by N. Katherine Hayles and British scholars Neil Badmington and Elaine Graham. Wolfe's work, however, situates posthumanism in the context of human animality and has found quite a lot of traction in the biopolitical, animal-studies scene (informed by works such as Roberto Esposito's *Bios* and Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That I Therefore Am*).



jomny sun

@jonnysun



Follow

son, evrey person is technicaly just a mass of living tissue designed to contain and control the skeleton inside of them. well good night

RETWEETS

202

LIKES

419



2:09 AM - 18 Jan 2015

Wolfe's version of posthumanism, aligned with a burgeoning animal studies, focuses on troubling the human/animal boundary more than it does specifically imagine a kind of machinic becoming radically reshaping the horizon of human being.



Johnny Normality

@Probgoblin



Following

A man once said "All we are, is dust in the wind".
He was wrong.
All we are is bone monsters covered in hotdog parts.

RETWEETS

252

LIKES

593



6:14 PM - 14 Aug 2014

That said, I think skeleton twitter reminds us, as these two tweets show, that these two ideas (human-animal continuum and cyborg becoming) are never very far apart. While our bodies are probably not just vessels for mischievous skeletons, it's hard to read tweets like these and not experience a feeling of uncanny creepiness.

The "hotdog parts" that make up our bodies are not something we often think about, even when we are in the process of injuring ourselves; yet skeleton twitter, by focusing on the body as a mysterious sack of meat we all lug around with ourselves, it performs a simultaneous move to remind us that we are just meat and bone *and* that the platform on which all of this is happening is explicitly designed for us to ignore that meatiness at the core, the secret skeleton inside us.



Johnny Normality
@ProbGoblin



Following

4 out of 5 dentists agree: "Teeth are evil. We don't know where they come from and we fear them."

RETWEETS

37

LIKES

93



1:19 PM - 28 Dec 2015



Thomas the Ripper
@HavocMantis



Following

FACT: When a dog barks at you, it's actually their skeleton barking.

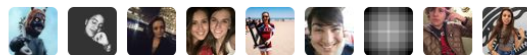
PROOF: I have never seen a dog without a skeleton bark.

RETWEETS

97

LIKES

235



12:04 PM - 13 Jan 2015

Skeleton twitter's focus on this secret skeleton undercuts the technological sublime that comes from using Twitter. These tweets remind us that we have a physical existence that impacts and shapes our experience of digital disembodiment.



non human paul
@Death_Buddy



Follow

THIS YEARS TOP SKELETON FASHIONS:

1. Adding flame stickers to skull
2. Cover with glow in the dark paint
3. Upgrade to Dinosaur skeleton

RETWEETS
14

LIKES
43



11:21 AM - 20 Oct 2015



Post-Culture Review
@PostCultRev

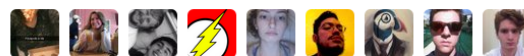


Following

My skeleton army is useless, they're just laying there, get up you idiots, today is our chance to bring honor to our people

RETWEETS
9

LIKES
55



3:14 PM - 13 Aug 2015

And that it is possible from within the medium itself to overcome this experience, if we so choose. Skeleton Twitter, as a subset of the surreal subset of WT, performs an important function of undercutting the escape toward disembodiment promised by online *ethos*.

I want to also read this undercutting as an example of what McKenzie Wark calls "low theory" in *Molecular Red*.

Critical theory became *hypocritical theory*...Rather than imagine theory as a policing faculty flying high as a drone over all the others, a **low theory is interstitial, its labor communicative rather than controlling**...It refracts affects, perceptions, and concepts from one domain of labor to another using whatever apparatus is to hand. The verification of whether a concept holds, or a story applies, is specific to each labor process. Theory proposes; practice disposes. It does not set its own agenda but detects those emerging in key situations and alerts each field to the agendas of the others. (218)

Specifically, I see skeleton twitter as doing in the interstitial context Wark identifies here the kind of work that Wolfe is speculating upon in a very different context in *What is Posthumanism?*. Rather than continuing to derive more and more sophisticated (and, by the way, more and more jargon-laden) versions of the posthuman turn, skeleton twitter alienates us from our *cogito*, breaks up our experience of Twitter's technological sublime, and forces us to confront the gross physicality of our animal being.

This kind of low theory work is especially important because, as we often forget, critical theory existed to *do things* with, not just to make increasingly knotty arguments about the nature of *physis* (or whatever). As Stuart Hall famously said (in the essay that first inspired the concept of low theory), "Theory is always a detour on the way to something more important," and low theory as Wark figures it does this work (42).As Wark makes clear in *Molecular Red*, it is the task of the low theorist to trace out new connections and to cross pollinate methodologies from one space to another.

So, with that in mind, I ask: is WT a space in which the theories of posthumanism are refracted and made into something shocking, startlingly, and novel?

For Wark, practice is the key term in any new theory: what does it let me do?
What does it let me say?



Johnny Normality
@Probgoblin



Following

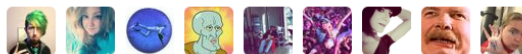
Hot on Burzfed [Foreign Advert]: Got bones? Try this one simple trick discovered by a mom to get rid of them! President Bone Lord hates her!

RETWEETS

3

LIKES

7



12:44 PM - 14 Sep 2015



Murray is a dog now
@MurrayOverboard



Follow

****Doctors HATE this one weird skeleton!****

RETWEETS

13

LIKES

44



12:23 AM - 11 Apr 2016

Jack Halberstam also discusses this idea of a low theory "as a mode of accesibility ... aiming low in order to hit a broader target" (16). In low theory, Halberstam discusses "a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to conform to hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (16).

With Wark and Halberstam's ideas about low theory (that resists the strangely militarized metaphor of high theory both authors deploy by using commando techniques), I think we can see what the meaning-making practices in skeleton twitter suggest, as well as the broader possible implications for what is at work in the uncanny subset of Weird

Twitter, the, as Halberstam calls it, "theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production" (17).

In skeleton twitter, however, one key differentiation I'm making from Wark and Halberstam's usage is that I find a version of low theory that is, particularly, (to put it vulgarly) a "piss-take" on the pretensions of high theory, in this case posthumanism. By taking the often lofty and cut off ivory tower figurations of a posthumanism that doesn't *do* anything, WT creates new meaning out of the same territory as high theory in this undisciplined zone of knowledge production imagined by Halberstam. This has a longer history than we might think ...

For instance, the infamous 1993 zine, *Judy!*, that was produced by anonymous students at the University of Iowa in parody of Judith Butler and the general culture of theory superstars that circulated in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Judy!



Vol.1, Number 1,

SPRING FEVER, 1993

Reporting MLA gossip and Judith Butler's keynote at a 1991 conference at UIUC as though they were the kinds of things published in supermarket tabloids, the zine uses the style of gossip rags to comment (rather viciously) on both the rise of the theory star culture and the distance from the stated goals of many of these theorists to *do something* (as Hall reminds us).

Let's talk about that real glamour gal of theory, super-theorist **Judy Butler**. She's especially good to see live, if you can. Her performances are rife with witty repartee about her mom or whatever ... Judy's a hot ticket but those naughty fickle grad students have probably picked another famous theoryhead to lionize by now ...

... No Star Trek at the **M.L.A.** but stars, stars, stars!!! The New York Hilton was **SIZZLING** this December as the famous theorists swarmed the lobby and the cash bars. The homo cash bar was a **starfuckers delight**. The glitterarti were in effect all night long. **Eve Sedgwick** worked the crowd. **Kevin Kopelson** breezed in and out, looking very *Details* in a polka-dotted tie.

By literally treating theory as a fashion (the zine's masthead is clipped from *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*), the zine highlights the growing sense of fadishness that often gets leveled at the work of critical theory.

special quiz: are you a theory- fetishizing biscuithead?

***Take this fun quiz and discover if you're
an illiterate pre-theory peon, or not!***

2. Have you ever been dumped for repeatedly deconstructing your lover's favorite cultural texts (like *Roseanne*, or maybe *Torso* magazine)?

3. Can you say these words in public, confident of your pronunciation?

- a. hegemony
- b. paradigm
- c. Luce Irigaray

7. Could you prove, in thirty pages or less, that:

- a. ...Motley Crue and The Cure are in fact the same band?
- b. ...club djs who remix old ABBA are as pomo as Kathy Acker?
- c. ...Nick Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (starring Joan Crawford) is a lesbian text?
- d. ...Freud was a lesbian?

Literalizing the metaphor that theory is often about gossip and fads, that it is a fashion, *Judy!* is much more effective at performing a critique of critique than anything written against theory up until Bruno Latour's "Has Critique Run Out of Steam" piece.

On a more serious level, though, *Judy!* highlights, like skeleton twitter, a way of shifting insights from critical theory into other registers, toward the production of

something new, remembering Hall's dictum that theory must always be in service of something more interesting.

On a higher cultural plain, this use of theory *for* something also happens in Gregory Ulmer's work.

One can learn *about* theory as if it were another topic of normal science (which at one level it is). But to reason and write theoretically requires one to draw on the kinds of resources that usually are associated with the making of art. What distinguishes theoretical texts from works of criticism in the language fields is just this added dimension of "literature" that theory possesses. It has been assumed that theory itself can't be taught, except at the most advanced levels of graduate school, because it requires a mastery of methods and objects of knowledge of the discipline. (Ulmer, "The Making of 'Derrida at the Little Bighorn,'" 148)

Ulmer's various concepts, one of which he's discussing here, including choragraphy, mystory, and heuristics, all ask students to create texts using the insights provided by high theory.

Like skeleton twitter and *Judy!*, Ulmer's work constantly reminds us that theory has to pay off in some kind of practice and that, often, that payoff can be *for* student writing. In this way, I want to suggest that "Derrida at the Little Bighorn," the sample mystory from *Teletheory*, is just as performative of Derrida's grammatology as skeleton Twitter is of posthumanism.



UNIVERSE SOUP
@UNIVERSE_SOUP



 Follow

IT'S BEEN BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION
THAT THE MICROSOFT KINECT HAS
"SKELETON TRACKING". I NEED ONE. I NEED
TO KNOW WHERE THE SKELETONS ARE

RETWEETS
7

LIKES
10



6:41 PM - 28 Dec 2014



Thomas the Ripper
@HavocMantis

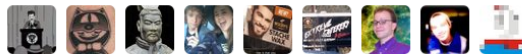


Following

"I'll become a skeleton" I said, drinking a potion
that would make me become a skeleton. "They
can't prosecute a skeleton."

RETWEETS
51

LIKES
136



7:52 PM - 10 Feb 2016

So, in conclusion, as Stuart Hall says, theory is a detour on the way to something more productive. This does not mean we have to shy away from theory, and Ulmer reminds us of this to, but we have to remember that our goal in working *with* theory is toward making something. Moreover, that something may end up radically divorced from the context of the academic essay, as *Judy!* and skeleton twitter suggest. The final challenge, though, of thinking applied theory is the question of form raised by all three examples: mystory, zine, and tweets, are not recognizable as "content" by either academic

teaching or credentialing mechanisms. That said, given that high theory has lost because of its increasing inward turn toward more and more self-commentary, how else can we liberate these insights

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