

1-15-2002

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Leora Kornfeld

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Recommended Citation

Kornfeld, Leora (2002) "The Teletrickster's Way: Transcending the Rational and Reconstituting Media Discourse," *Trickster's Way*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/trickstersway/vol1/iss1/3>

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The Teletrickster's Way

***The Teletrickster's Way:
Transcending the Rational and Reconstituting Media Discourse***

Leora Kornfeld

The trickster is now being televised. While most of us were indifferent to, or at best amused by, his unconventional if not negative charisma, he slyly made his way from the interstices to network television around the world, blatantly de-emphasizing control, grace, and refinement, and surrendering to a childlike spontaneity, a ravenous curiosity, and an uncensored world view. "In a country which is largely governed by the celebrity party", says the prank-perpetrating Dennis Pennis, formerly of BBC2, "I am the voice of opposition."¹

Pennis represents but one of this new breed of televised trickster. In the space of five years we have witnessed the emergence of this opportunistic media personality as a genre unto itself, with such global practitioners as Ali G (Channel 4, UK; website: www.boyakasha.co.uk/), Tom Green (MTV, USA; website: www.tomgreen.com), Nardwuar (Much Music, Canada; website: www.nardwuar.com), Jiminy Glick (Comedy Central, USA; website: www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/primetimeglick/), and Dom Joly (Channel 4, UK; website: www.triggerhappytv.com).

This increasingly commonplace *teletrickster* plays with what were once definite boundaries and modalities in media discourse – those demarcated by significations of truth, professionalism, neutrality and rationality – and has replaced them with multiply inflected signs and cues. The result is a difficult to decipher blend of provocation, play, dark comedy, and complex subversion. It is neither pure fact nor pure fiction, but rather an intertwining of the audacious and the earnest, designed to test the elasticity of, among other things, the borders of interpersonal communication on camera, or broadcast behavior.

When a tricksterized language of media is being spoken, and spoken widely as it currently is, we are unable to rely on conventional wisdom and inherited cultural categories as our guides. Resorting to the postmodern dictum of disorder as its own system of order seems overly simplistic as an explanation of the transmission of meaning instigated by this guileful character who enters the scene under one pretense and operates under others. And so the question arises, how does this audience make sense of this chameleon?

The answer lies in an examination of what I will be referring to as *the teletrickster's*

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way, a migration of the trickster archetype from myth and literature to the media sphere. This televised trickster differs from his trickster predecessors in his promotion of a spirit of constant, if sometimes veiled carnival, as opposed to planned and sanctioned rites of reversal of earlier eras. The deconstructive battle these soldiers against protocol have entered into takes many forms: the teletrickster versus accepted notions of media authority, the teletrickster versus the concept of celebrity, the teletrickster versus the audience, and in perhaps its most self-effacing manifestation, the teletrickster versus the media personality. This latter contest is perhaps the most significant in our consideration of the dark side of the trickster archetype, as by raising questions about the validity or rights of the interrogator, the teletrickster not only questions the integrity and power relations of the media encounter, but of his complicity as well. The illusion of media discourse as representative, reliable, and well intentioned is thus brought to the fore by this genre-straddling, and decorum-ignoring character. By choosing to multiaccentualize the coding of the media encounter, the teletrickster enacts a long term effect on a viewing audience for whom issues of subject positioning and identification were once clear-cut, straightforward matters.² The shaking up and constant shifting of the component parts of the communicative event thus transform the teletrickster into an unexpected but important agent of media literacy and communicative practice.

It seems reasonable to speculate that the emergence of the teletrickster represents a rebellion against a world characterized by a saturated media environment and a bias toward the technological and the orderly. To this climate of control, organization, and predictability, the teletrickster brings his own ideas, informed by such postmodern markers as irony, pastiche, parody, self-referentiality, simulation, and contradiction. Yet he also courts chaos in the tradition of the premodern medieval fool, using his wily ways to suspend authority and draw attention to the rules of order as he has rewritten them. In this way our broadcast fool is the ultimate manipulator of the media message, calling attention to the arbitrariness of norms and conventions and, in so doing, providing us

with alternate angles from which we may view the larger process of the media encounter. The candid camera of decades past has now been fully integrated into all manner of media encounters, thus facilitating the teletrickster's way.

At the "Idea City" conference held in Toronto in June 2001, trusted television news anchor Peter Jennings urged a return to what he called 'old-fashioned serious journalism'.³ Mr. Jennings' comment bears great significance. Referring to the days when material that was broadcast was expected to be, and furthermore accepted as, accurate, honest, unbiased, and reliable, and when a single-minded truth inhabited the public sphere of broadcast discourse, he identifies the trigger that the teletricksters have chosen to pull. Their existence, and furthermore their ubiquity and popularity, suggest that Mr. Jennings' wish will probably not come true any time soon.⁴ The public has seen the mechanics of media culture, witnessed their fallibility, partiality, and submissive attitude toward celebrity and power, and is no longer willing to invest in idealized notions of media authority in the same way.

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Could it be there is another route, still within the media sphere, to a different experience of this prized journalistic *truth*? This, I would argue, is the quest of the teletrickster. By juggling genres and reconstituting codes, he allows realities about interpersonal relations and behavior under the gaze of the electronic eye to reveal themselves. He folds in aspects of broadcast talk such as agenda-sharing polite discourse, logical/methodical modes of inquiry, and the more aggressive, investigative journalist style of reportage, then incorporates elements of all these styles into his own brand of media discourse, all the while shifting gears, baiting and switching, while capitalizing on the stigmas and significations already in place then spinning them all to suit his agenda of transmutation through insidious overthrow.⁵

His communicative intentions are multiple, his seemingly puerile and inane questions readable as clever and probing. He inhabits this ambiguous residence by occupying a liminal space, one that is "betwixt and between" in anthropologist Victor Turner's words: between the amateur and the professional, the ridiculous and the rational, the childlike and the mature, the artistic and the aberrant.

The teletrickster seeks to call into question the old categories, and cause new ones to expand to allow space for his voice to be heard from within these spaces. "There is an art-making that beings with...lifting the shame covers", writes Lewis Hyde in *Trickster Makes This World* "...[in] refusing to guard the secrets, that uncovers a plenitude of material hidden from conventional eyes and that points toward a kind of mind able to work with that revealed complexity, one called...the hinge-mind, the translator mind."⁶ By being both of the world of media and not of the world of media our teletrickster seems uniquely qualified to do duty as the hinge-dwelling troublemaker and intermediary of new systems of media meaning.⁷

The teletrickster's activities are, at first glance, resistant to media hegemony, yet largely expressed in its language. This ambiguity may be correlated to the teletrickster's simultaneous deployment of the "tactics of the weak" and "strategies of the strong", styles of resistance designated by de Certeau.⁸ The unpolished and unseemly teletrickster insinuates himself into the media space, and while the transformation from weak to strong is neither linear nor complete, the co-existence of the two states is undeniable. While the teletrickster appears to have the power as long as he is holding the microphone, the clock is always ticking, with the prospect of being *found out* increasing by the second. Weakness and strength, dark and light, play off each other as this trickster-instigated semiosis provides the undeniable thrill of media establishment *schadenfreude* for both the teletrickster and the viewing audience. The current climate of popular culture, in which we see subtext increasingly floating to the surface and considerable overlap between the mainstream and the subcultural, serves to add to the not entirely undesirable sense of displacement, uncertainty and confused subject-positioning engendered by the teletrickster.⁹

But being the rogue that he is the teletrickster knows that by speaking the language of the dominant media culture he is more likely to achieve his mischievous ends. His

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defiant incorporation of elements termed by Goffman as "backstage language" and "out of frame" behavior¹⁰ into the otherwise clearly governed world of media exchange, marks his paradoxical refusal of the norms and standards of the broadcast protocol while operating within its world of coded complexity.

The teletrickster succeeds in this reconstructive mission by assuming a persona and appearance that while tending toward the peculiar or incongruous, possesses enough of the requisite features to be read as a credible species of media personality. This is where the teletrickster makes the gradual encroachment of what were once significations of marginality and opposition (and are now part of the popular) work for him. As recently as ten years ago his garish appearance and impertinent manner would have prevented him from *passing* as a representative of the media. In today's world of rapid co-optation of styles and lifestyles, this does not seem to pose a problem for our electronic antihero. The teletrickster is thus able to benefit from established media norms and conventions being read as significations of authority and truth without having any actual claim to them. Things start to get particularly interesting when we can observe the implicit social contract of the situation being disavowed, in real time, when the media encounter is simultaneously inverted and subverted, when the interviewee becomes so confounded that he is at times forced into the role of interviewer? In such a case the chaos and disorder become palpable, with the potential for darkness flowing from the fact that even the teletrickster does not mind that he cannot control the shifting shape as the rules of interaction are improvised live and unedited. In the world of the teletrickster, after all, there are no outtakes.

The borders of the relationship between the media personality and the subject have been repositioned by the appearance of this increasingly common character, calling for a new way of thinking about both media personality and media discourse. The teletrickster's way is one in which the mistake is artfully transformed into the intentional

stratagem. In this way the trickster of the electronic age may be seen as the author of a new logic, one that promotes an interrogation of not only the logical and orderly, but of the ludic and destabilizing as well; a reshaping as opposed to a straight refusal of the media encounter. By aiming to do more than undermine the existing authoritarian framework of the media, the teletrickster effectively resets the parameters of what constitutes legitimate media discourse, staking out a place for his own disruptive yet instructive hybrid of work and play in an expanded media metadiscourse.

Footnotes:

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1. Dennis Pennis aka British actor Paul Kaye, "Anyone for Pennis" VHS, BBC Worldwide, 1995

2. In Bignell (1997) the author schematizes the narrative and ideology of television as a situation in which "...the individual subject...is continually asked to shift subject-position in relation to the rapidly-changing semiotic fragments" (p. 146-147) and furthermore that "by means of...TV's coded discourses, the viewer is invited to identify with the mythic representative [e.g.the mediator between the television viewer and the world of a program or an advertisement]...[and] take up a subject-position appropriate to the preferred decoding..." (p. 147). When a tricksterized discourse comes into existence, though, the clarities and loyalties of subject-positions lose their singularity, and a preferred reading becomes problematic..

3. From Fulford, Robert, "Tell me, what have you been thinking about: IdeaCity serves up some intellectual vaudeville", National Post, June 21, 2001. Fulford's description of Jennings' participation: "Peter Jennings, for instance, turned out yesterday morning to be the kind of guest who probably wouldn't get invited back. He nattered a lot, and in a brief period demonstrated several times that he can't finish a sentence, much less a thought. He deplored the fall of old-fashioned serious journalism, such as he, for instance, used to practice."

4. Within 8 weeks of Peter Jennings' bemoaning the state of contemporary journalism at the IdeaCity conference, CNN, once thought of as the gold standard of news organizations, introduced its revamped "Headline News" service, described by one writer as 'pitiful' and 'goofy', with "foolish decorators having junked up the screen, [allowing] the packaging [to] overtake the news and...correspondents to carry on like entertainers – the smarmy kind who play third-rate lounges." From "CNN introduces news to laugh at", by Hal Boedeker, Knight Ridder, August 10, 2001.

5. Tolson (in Scannell, 1991) to a large extent foresaw the turn in sensibility instigated by a nascent form of the teletrickster. Pointing to such mid to late 1980's television programs as *The Dame Edna Experience*, *The Max Headroom Show*, and *The David Letterman Show* as examples, he sees "...a series of transformations in the mass-mediated public sphere, evident in the changing forms and genres of broadcast discourse...[and recognizes] inter-generic developments and cross-generic effects...developments in the public sphere of broadcast discourse [which] may be starting to undermine the very notion of the 'general public' which broadcasting itself has constructed." (p. 196-198)

6. Hyde (1999), p. 305.

7. With regard to this notion of new systems of media meaning, the collision (and collusion?) of the factual and the fictional is beginning to be acknowledged in media coverage of media consumption. For example Janice Neil's article "So this is CNN?" (Globe & Mail newspaper, 15 August 2001) points to: "...young viewers, particularly those born after 1970...[who] log onto Internet news sites...or tune into late night talk and comedy shows for their information. The political satire on "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart became such a significant source of news during last fall's U.S. presidential election that Nielsen included it in its measure of TV viewers on election night." Similarly, John Leland's New York Times article of 03 September 2000, "The Heavy Metal Joke Not Everyone Got", refers to the 'split gaze' with which audiences are asked to view the movie "Spinal Tap", "...to see the band as both real and parody at the same time." He continues by noting that this "...smart alecky double vision has become part of our signature gaze."

8. From de Certeau (1984), a strategy is a "...place of its own power and will", as opposed to a tactic, which "...is the space of the other [and] an art of the weak." p. 35-37. The analogy being made here is that the teletrickster is able to craftily use both the tactics of the presumably weak media outsider and the strategies of the allegedly strong media personality, thus doubling his chances of successful chicanery.

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9. I use the phrase 'not entirely undesirable' as the criteria by which we judge entertainment, and in particular comedy, are changing. Jamie Malanowski's NY Times article of 08 October 2000 entitled "The Blunt Appeal of Being Stupid" coins the term 'post comedy comedy' to refer to much of today's prank-filled entertainment. "Its goal is less to provoke laughter than to elicit an amusing shock", writes Malanowski, "...it's all about the meta-joke...the blunt introduction of anti-social acts into routine public situations."

10. From Goffman (1959): Backstage language is characterized as consisting of "profanity.... elaborate griping...rough, informal dress...sloppy sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or substandard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity...inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts." (p. 128). In Goffman (1974) the author uses the terms 'in frame' behavior and 'out of frame' behavior to explicate how the various elements of communication are organized so that it is implicitly clear what belongs 'in' an interpersonal interaction and what is located outside this boundary. (p. 201-210)

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Note: This paper is an adaptation of the M.A. thesis I wrote while at University of London, Goldsmiths College (1999-2000) entitled "Deride and Conquer: situating the contemporary protocol-transgressing media prankster". When this adaptation was presented at the SSA's annual meeting in the fall of 2000 it was accompanied by a video presentation. There is no reference to the video clips in this version of the paper.