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**Dark Humor and Suicide:  
Exploring Viewer Suicidality in *The Long Way***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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Death, dying, and the actual loss of life are some of the broadest sweeping concepts that typically evoke a wide array of emotions from sadness and anger to fear and despondence. It is unlikely that the first words associated with death are comedy, humor, or laughter. However, that is precisely what creators and comedians of dark, death, and gallows humor seek to achieve. For my senior capstone project, I have created a short fictional narrative film encompassing the traits of a dark comedy. However, noticing that few dark comedies delve into topics surrounding suicide, I wondered if it was possible to achieve the same comedic and filmic effects with suicide as dark comedies do with death. Is it possible to generate humor from suicide and desiring death? What is implied if humor is derived from the inability to reach death on one's own volition?

The general storyline follows a young man (early 20s) as he tries and fails to commit suicide on several occasions. The film itself outlines three separate attempts that he makes (all of which go awry due to random, external causes, not because the protagonist is a failure), but in the end, a bus hits him. I made a pointed effort not to make any claims about mental illness as an extension of suicide. The viewer does not know why the protagonist wants to commit suicide, but it is enough to understand that he is somehow struggling so deeply that he wants to end his life. Embracing comedic tools outlined by theories of dark comedy as well as utilizing classic film theory, I seek to incite feelings of ambiguity, self-reflection, and overall confusion for the audience both within themselves and toward the protagonist. If more traditional dark or gallows humor prompts the viewer to reflect on their own mortality, why wouldn't a dark comedy about suicide engage the viewer in considering their own suicidality? By employing many of the same methods as traditional dark comedy, I aim to invoke self-reflexivity upon the audience to consider their own thoughts about suicide, their suicidality, and death by extension.

Prior to diving into understanding dark humor, it is important to understand why humans laugh and what they laugh at. What could possibly make death laughable? To suggest that humans laugh at that which is funny is denying the existence of an entirely different reason for laughter's existence. Barbara S. Stengel posits in her article, "After the Laughter," that laughter allows the person laughing "to think and feel through immediate discomfort or delight towards a considered action that represents one's best self" (Stengel, 201). She furthers that laughter creates a space for reaction as well as reflection. Laughter often "breaks down" an experience, working to create a distancing effect between listening and laughing within that space. As a socially acceptable act, laughter grants humans the opportunity to distance themselves from the discomfort present in that situation or environment while they consider how best to respond. Another aspect of humor theory that is particularly applicable to the concepts of death/dark/gallows humor is incongruity theory. In his article, "Developing the Incongruity-Resolution Theory," Graeme Ritchie quotes Beattie (1776) who says, "Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them" (Ritchie, 1). Incongruity in humor relies very much upon the form of the "joke." The set up of the joke does fulfill with audience expectation for the punch line. For example, the joke: "—What animal is grey, has four legs, and has a trunk? – A mouse with a suitcase." The setup (in this case, the question) establishes the audience expectation for a different answer than what is correct. The broken expectation results in laughter. Ritchie furthers this in positing whether humor could rely on incongruity alone; he argues that a resolution to the incongruity is equally necessary. There must exist a sort of surprise wherein the setup of the joke does not align with the punchline. Ritchie notes this as the

surprise disambiguation model, informing us that this misalignment of a viewer's expectation for how the joke will "end" builds a sort of tension, and the only way to dispel such tension is through laughter. This element of surprise creates a duality of delight and discomfort. In this way, the laughter serves as a physical release of the accumulated stress created from the situation. While many of these theories of humor and comedy directly refer to spoken humor and jokes, they can also be applied to the theories surrounding dark/gallows humor.

Dark/gallows humor has long since been a tool recognized as a means of deflecting fears of mortality and coping with death. James A Thorson's article "Did You Ever See a Hearse Go By? Some Thoughts on Gallows Humor" defines gallows humor as "both intentional and has a coping motive. It is humor generated for a reason" (Thorson, 18). He goes on to explain that we tend to make fun of that which threatens us, in this case death. Much of the dark or gallows humor that exists within film and television works to displace both characters' and audiences' closeness to death. Because we, as humans, do not (typically) experience death first hand and then continue living, we have no way of understanding it or grappling with it. Its existence as an impending inevitability for which we cannot prepare imposes this tremendous fear of the unknown, of potentially no longer existing. Christopher R Long and Dara N Greenwood delve into this in their article "Joking in the Face of Death: A Terror Management Approach to Humor Production." They explain, "Terror Management Theory posits human awareness (whether conscious or unconscious) of the inevitability of death can lead to potentially paralyzing anxiety" (Long and Greenwood, 493). Humans develop cultural or psychological defense mechanisms in order to displace these fears and create further distance from this; these mechanisms allow humans to attempt transcending death itself. Long and Greenwood further that humor production is also a cultural phenomenon and taking part in death humor can reaffirm one's place in society,

thus creating the illusion that death is staved off a little while longer. Additionally, Thorson cites Freud's belief that *galgenhumor* is one of the chief defense mechanisms employed. "When somebody succeeds in paying no heed to a painful affect because he holds before himself the greatness of the world's interest as contrast to his own smallness, we see in the function of philosophic thinking" (Thorson, 18). Thorson furthers this by explaining that in deploying humor about our own deaths, we can further focus on the reality of our mortality and recognize our own insignificance. If dark humor enables audiences to distance themselves from their own mortality and alleviate the fear and stress that exists when facing death, and laughter theory explains that the physical act of laughter creates a similar distancing effect, it is not unreasonable to link the two as working in conjunction with one another. Although many of the articles of theory discuss humor on a broad scale (not just in relation to film), it is possible to apply these theories to classical Hollywood cinema and film theory to greater understand how dark humor and classic film can greater affect an audience. How can the two be brought together and applied to filmmaking practices?

My short narrative thesis film is a dark comedy surrounding a young man attempting to commit suicide, but as he fails with each attempt, the tension builds up to a necessary punchline. Film theory tells us that it is necessary to "plant" and "pay off" to keep the audiences invested in what is happening to the characters on screen. In an article by Todd Sodano called "Say it Again: Aaron Sorkin and Dialogue Repetition on *The West Wing*," Sodano discusses how Sorkin (an award-winning screenwriter) utilizes the concept of plant and pay off to "masterfully foreshadow" critical moments. Sodano explains that, "Plant and payoff serves as a microcosm for what Sorkin does so effectively with repetition: he increases audience involvement in the story, allows them to uncover new meanings, accentuates what is most important, but does not

insult viewer intelligence” (Sodano, description). In my short film, it is established (planted) that the protagonist has a small journal in which he plans his various suicide attempts. With each attempt, the journal is involved (planted), integral to his every effort. Therefore, the journal must have some sort of motivating quality; it must have a greater purpose than just for the protagonist’s planning. It needs to generate a greater meaning that tells the audience it was worth paying attention to. In the end, my protagonist sits on a bench waiting for the bus after his most recent attempt (his car died the previous day while trying to kill himself in it). He grows frustrated after so many failed attempts and misfortunes and throws the journal (symbolic for his plans). It sails into the street. Noticing a trashcan beside him and considering he is a neat and decent person, he knows he must pick it up and throw it away properly. But, upon bending over to pick it up, a horn blares in his face as an oncoming bus hits him. The journal’s existence has now paid off and given the audience the satisfaction they needed. But, what is most interesting about the audience reaction, and what my chief goal was, is that a greater feeling of ambiguity, discomfort, and confusion is thrust upon the viewer.

Classic film theory also tells us that the protagonist – whether an unlikeable antihero and or a traditional, likeable hero – is who the viewer roots for to succeed. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson discuss conventions of classical Hollywood cinema in their book, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. They say, “Hollywood characters, especially protagonists, are goal-oriented.” Who the protagonist is as a person is established in the exposition (first act) of the film, and the first turning point prompts recognition of what obstacles the protagonist will likely face throughout the story. Bordwell et al explains that protagonists define their wants and needs, and the obstacles that prevents them from achieving these wants or needs construct the story. In my film, a long take showing the

main character's bedroom subtly tells the viewer who the protagonist is while the young man goes about his business in the room. We see the objects of an average young man's room: refill cartridge of razor blades, survival/self help/fictional books, a pet turtle, a small figurine (of a hanged skeleton), a computer, etc. As he moves about the room, the viewer recognizes that the protagonist is a "normal," well dressed, traditionally attractive, young man. He appears to clean up some clothes in his closet; he has a pet, so we assume he is caring, not malicious. The viewer labels him as a likeable protagonist. A few moments after he walks out of frame, the viewer hears a loud crash. The camera cuts to show the protagonist sitting on the ground, a noose tied around his neck at one end while the other end is attached to a now broken closet rod. This particular moment establishes more precisely who the character is (a suicidal man) and what his problem is (that he has now failed to commit suicide). Although the viewer never learns why he wants to commit suicide, there is a general viewer assumption that he must be so miserable that he cannot go on living. Bordwell et al define this as the character motivation by saying, "Motivation is the process by which a narrative justifies its story material and the plot's presentation of the story material" (Bordwell et al., 19). It is has been made clear that he is not able to succeed in his immediate want, and this need to end his own life becomes the motivator for the character, which in turn drives the plot. These two pieces of information coupled with the fact that he is not a threat, but a likeable character immediately creates a sense of confusion within the viewer. He is the protagonist, and he is likeable, so the viewer *should* be rooting for him to overcome his obstacles to succeed in his goal. But, his goal is to commit suicide, which makes the viewer uncomfortable and confused. They are instantly forced to confront the reality of their mortality and reflect their thoughts on suicide as well as their own suicidality. As he

walks over to the desk, he pulls out the journal and crosses off another failed attempt. More information is given to the audience: he has attempted and failed suicide on several occasions.

The ending of the film truly encompasses the incongruity theory. Creating humor through incongruity-resolution operates best when the incongruity is brought to the audience's attention abruptly (Ritchie, 6). Thus, when the protagonist's third suicide attempt of the film goes awry and the audience has grown comfortable in the understanding that he will not kill himself, the audience does not anticipate the protagonist being killed by a bus so suddenly. As the film ends on his shocked face, the protagonist has technically not achieved his goal: *he* wanted to kill *himself*. The audience is not allowed to feel the usual satisfaction by a film's ending because he technically did not achieve his goal; film theory of classical narrative tells us that the audience cannot feel fully at ease if the protagonist is not successful in their "want" or "need" in the end. My goal is that this will spark greater reflection for the viewer, to consider their own suicidality and then their own mortality. Although comedy and the physical act of laughing create a sort of distancing effect for the viewer (or the one laughing), the actual death on screen creates a tension and confusion for the audience. Did their hero succeed? Did he fail? Furthermore, did he really want to die in the end, or was the point that he wanted control over the way he lived and died? To take it a step further, the ending also raises the question, how much control do we as humans have over our lives (and deaths)? The end does not match the audience expectation for the protagonist, and the tension and abrupt letdown heighten that tension and force this reflection upon the viewer. The irony of the protagonist being killed by random outside sources (very similar to those that caused his suicide attempts to go awry in the first place) is humorous, but as it maintains that same distancing affect for the audience, they can be assured it is acceptable to

laugh. But, as soon as the physical act of laughing is finished, they must now respond to what exactly made them laugh in the first place.

Though I contend that few films or television series delve into topics surrounding suicide, let alone humor surrounding suicide, I was inspired by a few different works. One such work is a film entitled *A Long Way Down*, which I had recalled seeing the trailer for a year ago. The film begins with four very different people encountering one another at the top of one of England's tallest buildings on New Years Eve. What ensues is the most awkward of situations where four different people all want their turn to jump off the building with the privacy they deserve. It begins to rain, a ladder falls off the building, a girl in hysterics tries to run and jump and suddenly the follies have dampened their efforts. Strangely enough, although they all want to die, each feels a sort of obligation to save the other. The rest of the film centers around the bond these four strangers create, giving each other the strength and joy to continue living. While much of the film is very dark and dramatic and ends hopefully, my film pulls inspiration from the very beginning where the awkwardness of the initial interaction takes place. The film did not garner tremendous commercial success despite an A-list cast with international appeal, but it produced many of the same emotions and sentiments with regard to discomfort and self-reflexivity that I sought to evoke in my film. To hear the characters speak so cavalierly and bluntly about offing themselves certainly jolts the viewer, forcing them confront their own suicidality and eventual death. Additionally, I have been inspired by another dark comedy that deals with death after the fact. *Dead Like Me* follows a young girl killed by a fiery toilet seat that flew off an exploded airplane and her afterlife as a grim reaper. With this text, I took inspiration from the pacing of the humor. Because my film has no dialogue, I paid close attention to the visual aspects of the film that were comedic. A girl being killed by such a random and rather humiliating object like a fiery

toilet seat is a tremendous visual and an extraordinary coincidence. In an odd way, it inspired me to write a script with the precise opposite situations. While this girl died because of a humiliating and horrendously random act of sheer coincidence, I decided to write about a man trying to kill himself but failing due to very ordinary and reasonable acts of nature.

Finally, I was inspired by another British short film, *Sweet Night Good Heart*; the topic could not be more different, but the ending of my film is similar in structure. The film centers on the train wreck that ensues when a man tries to break up with his girlfriend, and she thinks he has proposed to her. She invites all of their friends and family over immediately to celebrate, and the film ends very abruptly on the man's frozen face after the woman slyly says she never actually accepted the proposal, just as he never actually proposed. I loved the structure and abruptness of this ending that almost shocks and halts the viewer to reassess what just happened in the film and what it all means. Similarly, my protagonist is led into the street after throwing the journal. He hears the blare of a bus horn, and the frame freezes on his horrified and shocked face just before the bus hits him. This abrupt ending jolts the viewer, as it is different from the rest of the film's pacing. It prompts them to reassess the film and replay what just occurred in their mind.

Overall, the process of creating this film was tremendously challenging. I had gained experience creating a short film in its entirety on 16mm film during my semester abroad at the Film and TV School at the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague, Czech Republic. Thus, I was able to put forth this incredible learning experience to create my senior thesis film. However, at FAMU I worked in a group of three with a co-director and director of photography and had numerous professional mentors to work with me in everything from developing the initial concept and writing the screenplay, to the very end of post-production. For this thesis film, I was, comparatively speaking, on my own. Fortunately, a former employer/professional

screenwriter worked to edit and rework my original screenplay to best highlight the story I wished to convey. Once I was happy with the screenplay, I moved on to the producer/production coordinator aspects of the process.

Having decided to organize a full film crew, the most difficult part was trying to coordinate all of these people working for free who were, of course not as invested in the project as I. The shoot, as a whole, did not go as planned. I had initially hired a co-director as I have limited experience in directing actors. However, the co-director all but dropped out of the shoot, failing to uphold his pre-determined responsibilities. Despite this setback, it all worked out for the best. I had the opportunity to learn what strategies worked best to motivate the crew and get the best performance from my lead actor. This learning experience was invaluable. Furthermore, the footage that resulted from the shoot was better than expected; the lighting was consistent, the sound was well recorded, and the shots were all varied and interesting. Fortunately, through the Mosbacher/Gartrell Center for Media Experimentation and Activism, I had access to a Canon C100 camera, Kino light kit, a 36-inch slider, as well as a shoulder rig, Sennheiser HD microphone, and a variety of high-quality lenses to producer the best film possible. The shoot spanned over two days, accumulating all of the pre-planned shots from the shot list as well as copious amounts of B-roll footage to cover our bases in post-production.

Post-production took approximately 4 weeks to complete. Using Adobe Premiere Pro Creative Cloud to edit, post-production took a little longer than anticipated; there was trouble with trying to edit such that the humor could be highlighted at just the right moments. While the actor is a wonderful physical actor – a quality that is integral to a film without dialogue – he played the part more seriously and dramatically than was scripted. Because of this, editing and cutaways were even more crucial to capture the general aesthetic I was aiming for and ensure the

dark comedic elements were obvious to the audience. Additionally, as all of the shots were very consistently lit, I had little work to do with color-correction. I was able to simply adjust the brightness and contrast levels for each shot in Premiere Pro to exaggerate the colors. To enhance the dichotomy of dark and comedic aspects of the film itself, I used using very saturated colors, especially bright reds, and deepened the dark tones. Some of the shots, particularly those outside, are colored to look particularly cheerful, contrasting the dark content of the subject matter. Overall, the aesthetic I aimed for was achieved, best evoking the intended ambiguity.

The film itself mostly embodies what I wanted to achieve; I truly believe the irony and dark humor effects come across well to the audience. In general, it has been yet another invaluable learning experience. I was able to take all I've learned both in college and at FAMU to create a culminating capstone project that embodies all I have learned and wanted to learn while pursuing my degree.

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