“Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?”
Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter after 9/11
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When I arrived in the United States on September 12, 2002, exactly one year and one day after the attack on the World Trade Center, to study American humor, many people told me that I had come too late. “September 11 was the death of comedy,” people would tell me. “After 9/11, Americans have stopped laughing.” Most Americans felt that after these events, humor and laughter had become inappropriate. A year later, the nation’s sense of humor still had not recovered completely. Humor about 9/11, as the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had become known, was considered offensive by most people.

However, Americans still laugh after 9/11. They even laugh at the events of 9/11—albeit somewhat bitterly. The events of September 11 even gave an impetus to a new genre: cut-and-paste Internet jokes that were shared and spread around the world through e-mail, newsgroups, and Web sites. This article looks at the way the events of 9/11 affected American humor. It discusses the temporary moratorium on humor in the United States, as well as the jokes that did emerge, both in the United States and outside, in the wake of 9/11. I will discern three different ways in which these events affected American humor: first, the suspension of humor; second, the call for humor as a means to cope with the events of 9/11; and finally, and most extensively, the jokes that did emerge about these events, notwithstanding the public discourse about the inappropriateness of such humor. The article will focus specifically on the new genre of Internet jokes about these events. I will argue that these jokes cannot be understood as a means of coping with grief and suffering. Rather, they are a comment on the serious and mournful tone of public discourse and media culture surrounding the events of 9/11, and a way for jokesters, for a variety of reasons, to separate themselves from that obligatory response.

Humor and Disaster

The attack on the World Trade Center is the typical event that gives rise to disaster jokes: highly covered by the media, much talked about, tragic but undeniably sensational. The explosion of space shuttle Challenger, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the death of Princess Diana are examples of other events that became the focus of...
disaster jokes. The first jokes about 9/11 emerged almost immediately after the attacks. Bill Ellis reports finding the earliest American jokes about the attacks on September 12 (“A Model”). I collected the first jokes on Dutch Web sites on September 13.

The basis of humor always is some kind of humorous incongruity or “script incompatibility” (Attardo and Raskin 293). This incongruity can be between real and unreal (absurd humor), between taboo and nontaboo (sexual humor, toilet humor, aggressive humor), or between the gruesome and the innocent, the banal, or even the cheerful (sick humor). Although this incongruity can be exclusively linguistic, the easiest way of achieving such an incongruity is by some sort of transgression. Thus, inappropriate references to sexuality, hostility, and degradation are common ingredients of humor (Zillman 39–40).

Disaster jokes are usually sick jokes, based on an incongruity between the gruesome and the innocuous. The basis mechanism of these jokes is a “humorous clash” (Kuipers 456): in the joke, the disaster is linked in a humorous way with a topic that is felt to be incompatible with such a serious event. This incompatibility can go two ways. In some cases, the joke combines the disaster with a reference to something shocking or taboo. In these cases, the humorous clash results from confronting the disaster with “forbidden” references popular in many jokes, such as sex, religion, aggression, or ethnicity. However, in most cases, disaster jokes focus on topics rather less common in jokes: innocent or innocuous themes like advertising, children’s games, or fairy-tales. The effect of this mixture of an extremely serious topic with such unserious themes may cause outrage and amusement: disaster jokes, like other sick jokes, derive much of their appeal from their inappropriateness (Oring 276). That many people don’t like them only adds to their attraction.

The most common explanation holds that disaster jokes are a means of coping with unpleasant experiences. P. Morrow describes the jokes about the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986 as part of a process similar to coping with a crippling disease: “...the M.S. patient passes through stages of anger, acceptance, and acceptance, the same stages that many of us who have been hurt by the Challenger catastrophe must pass through” (Morrow 182). Likewise, Alan Dundes states, “The available evidence strongly suggests that sick joke cycles constitute a kind of collective mental hygienic defense mechanism that allows people to cope with the most dire of disasters” (73).

Indeed, humor can be used to cope with trauma by distancing oneself from the unpleasant experience and building community and solidarity with others. An obvious problem with this explanation for disaster jokes is that many people who in no way can be said to suffer personally from the disaster appreciate them. Christie Davies describes how the death of Diana, for instance, gave rise to a worldwide cycle of jokes (“Jokes about the Death” 253). One can wonder whether the jokers around the world really were struggling to accept her death. Similarly, it seems likely that people in the Netherlands weren’t as shocked about 9/11 as Americans, or New Yorkers. Even within the United States, emotional responses were quite varied.

The worldwide popularity of 9/11 jokes indicates that coping might not be the prime function of these jokes. Especially for those more distant from the event, such jokes might provide very different pleasures. In the literature on disaster jokes, as often happens in the study of humor, humor is reduced to one specific psychological function that all humor is supposed to have: if humor can used to cope with trauma, vent aggression, or express superiority, that is all humor does. In my view, different types of humor often fulfill different functions, ranging from coping to expressing hostility. Moreover, the same joke might fulfill different functions for different people.

Another problem with the coping explanation is that it tries to explain the existence of the jokes without looking at the jokes themselves. Sick jokes about Teletubbies jumping off the World Trade Center (Figure 1) may add to people’s suffering rather than relieve it. In my view, a close look at the content of the jokes is needed before one can explain their existence. A final objection
to this approach is that it cannot account for historical change. Although it is hard to trace the history of jokes, disaster jokes are probably a fairly recent genre (Davies, “Jokes and their Relation” 142–49), but suffering and disaster are as old as humanity.

A very different approach to the meaning of disaster jokes is the analysis of the Challenger jokes by Elliott Oring, who suggests that the rise of these jokes is connected with the coverage of disasters in the mass media. The media attempt to prescribe audience’s reactions, forcing feelings of grief and mourning upon them, openly discussing and showing what is usually considered “unspeakable” suffering. The estrangement this causes is augmented by the “sandwiching” of tragedy between commerce and entertainment in the media. Oring suggests that these jokes are a “rebellion” against this “discourse about disaster” (276). He provides several examples of jokes that clearly refer to media coverage. For instance, many jokes about the explosion of the Challenger contain references to television commercials.

Oring’s approach seems more apt to explain the global joking about 9/11 than the coping explanation. Since the explosion of the (first) space shuttle, the impact of mass media has increased significantly. New digital media have joined the traditional media and enabled an even more rapid global circulation of texts, sounds, and images in a global media culture. September 11 was unprecedented in many ways, but it also was a media event on a grander scale than ever before; all around the world, people watched the event, in real time, creating a worldwide public discourse about 9/11. However, the effects of these images were not the same around the world. Moreover, the discourse surrounding the terrorist attacks, which provided the context for the images and the jokes, differed immensely around the world. As a result, the same images have evoked different emotions in different people—grief and shock, but also less empathic emotions: fascination, gloating, or even outright triumph. Explaining the appreciation of such disaster jokes with one specific emotion, such as coping with grief, seems unhelpful for such global genres.

American Humor after 9/11

After the events of September 11, 2001, American humor and comedy were suspended for some time. Late-night comedy shows went off the air, the satirical magazine The Onion did not appear for two weeks, and The New Yorker magazine appeared with a black cover and without its famous cartoons. The general sentiment was that humor was inappropriate and laughter was impossible in times of such shock and grief. When humorists resumed their work about a week after the attacks, their tone was uncharacteristically serious. Comedian David Letterman made an emotional speech expressing his doubts whether he could go on making a humorous show. The (little) humor in this speech was gentle and quite unlike Letterman’s usual acerbic wit.

Watching all of this, I wasn’t sure that I should be doing a television show, because
for twenty years we’ve been in the city, making fun of everything, making fun of the city, making fun of my hair, making fun of Paul . . . well . . . So, to come to this circumstance that is so desperately sad, I don’t trust my judgment in matters like this. There is only one requirement for any of us, and that is to be courageous, because courage, as you might know, defines all other human behavior. And I believe, because I’ve done a little of this myself, pretending to be courageous is just as good as the real thing.”

Other talk show hosts like Jay Leno, Conan O’Brien, and Jon Stewart also started with emotional, solemn speeches instead of their usual humorous monologues.

Jon Stewart, the host of the Comedy Central news show parody The Daily Show, was the last to resume his show. He directly addressed the (im)possibility of humor in his opening monologue.

Good evening and welcome to The Daily Show. We are back. This is our first show since the tragedy in New York City . . . I’m sorry to do this to you. It’s another entertainment show beginning with an overwrought speech of a shaken host. TV is nothing, if not redundant. So, I apologize for that. It’s something that unfortunately, we do for ourselves so that we can drain whatever abscess is in our hearts and move onto the business of making you laugh, which we really haven’t been able to do very effectively lately. Everyone’s checked in already, I know we’re late. I’m sure we’re getting in right under the wire before the cast of Survivor offers their insight into what to do in these situations.

They said to get back to work. There were no jobs available for a man in the fetal position under his desk crying, which I would have gladly taken. So I came back here. Tonight’s show is obviously not a regular show. We looked through the vaults, we found some clips that we thought might make you smile, which is really what’s necessary, I think, right about now. (Stewart)

Although Stewart expressed the notion that the grief about 9/11 left no room for humor, he also addressed another theme that became dominant in American public discourse in the months after 9/11: the need for humor in dark times. The belief in the healing power of humor, which is central to American thinking about humor, was invoked often in the period after 9/11.

Several weeks after September 11, a public discussion emerged “when it will be all right to laugh again.” The urgency of this question is visible, for instance, in the fact that it was Mayor Giuliani himself who gave New Yorkers permission to laugh again. On October 10, 2001, a charity event featuring many New York comedians was covered by the Los Angeles Times under the heading “NY Finds It Can Laugh Again.” Mayor Giuliani opened the night, saying, “I’m here to give you permission to laugh. If you don’t, I’ll have you arrested” (Lieberman). That a humor charity was organized to commemorate the events illustrates the American belief in the importance of humor in times of grief. The feeling that humor can have beneficial effects is very widespread in the United States. However, as Oring observes about public discourse regarding the Challenger explosion, the attacks themselves were off-limits to comedy; although the meeting was intended to raise funds for the WTC disaster, most comedians did not joke about the attacks.

During my research, many people mentioned “the first thing that made them laugh again” after September 11. Besides the speeches by Stewart and Letterman, two “humor landmarks” were mentioned many times. The first was a piece in The Onion of a fictitious press conference:

“I tried to put it in the simplest possible terms for you people, so you’d get it straight, because I thought it was pretty important,” said God, called Yahweh and Allah respectively in the Judaic and Muslim traditions. “I guess I figured I’d left no real room for confusion after putting it in a four-word sentence with one-syllable words, on the tablets I gave to Moses. How much more clear can I get?” “But somehow, it all gets twisted around and, next thing you know, somebody’s spouting off some nonsense about, ‘God says I have to kill this guy, God wants me to kill that guy, it’s God’s will,’” God
continued. “It’s not God’s will, all right? News flash: God’s will equals ‘Don’t murder people.’... ‘Why would you think I’d want anything else? Humans don’t need religion or God as an excuse to kill each other—you’ve been doing that without any help from Me since you were freaking apes!’ God said. “The whole point of believing in God is to have a higher standard of behavior. How obvious can you get?”

The other “humor landmark” was the “New Yorkistan” cover of The New Yorker of December 10, 2001: a map of New York showing different parts of the city named Bronxistan, Central Parkistan, or, after the lifestyles of its inhabitants, Al Zheimers, Perturbia, Hiphopabad, and Pashmina.

These examples show that humorous references to 9/11 and the ensuing war in Afghanistan became possible in the public sphere. However, they were of a specific sort of humor: benign, nonhostile, solidarity-building humor, stressing solidarity between New Yorkers (in The New Yorker) and even religions (in The Onion). This humor very likely served as healing humor, a coping strategy for America.

The Digital Disaster Jokes about 9/11

American or Global: The Spread of the Jokes

Despite the public humor moratorium, people started joking about 9/11 almost immediately after the attacks (Ellis, “A Model”). I have collected approximately 850 jokes about 9/11, bin Laden, and the war in Afghanistan on Dutch and American-based Web sites. The Dutch materials, consisting of 398 different picture jokes collected between October and November 2001, were analyzed in detail in “Media Culture and Internet Disaster Jokes” (Kuipers). About 450 jokes (pictures and verbal) were collected on American-based sites between October 2001 and March 2002. At the time of writing (January 2004), many of these jokes are still online on American-based Web sites and in the archives of newsgroups.

The humorous pictures jokes on Dutch and American sites were very similar. In my estimation, some 85% of the pictorial jokes found on the Dutch sites were also present on the American sites. These jokes involved pictures and short movies. I also found a number of “kill Osama” computer games, but I am not completely sure whether they should be counted as humor. In the Netherlands, I found virtually no verbal jokes, whereas I found many on American sites. Thus, the pictorial jokes seem to be much more global than the verbal ones—probably because pictures are less dependent on language. In general, the picture jokes were as blandly global as most of the Internet: the language was English, without any clear references to their origin. It is likely that most of the pictures were created in the United States, as it is the largest national community on the Internet, and because Americans clearly were most concerned with 9/11, but it is hard to tell. Judging from the patriotism or the references to exclusively American brands (e.g., Target, Wal-Mart), some were definitely made by Americans.

The American-based sites yielded more or less the same pictorial jokes as the Dutch sites, with two exceptions. First, in the American collection, the proportion of jokes that were patriotic or directly hostile was larger. The Dutch collection contained mostly jokes that were more like traditional sick disaster jokes. Moreover, on the Dutch sites, I found some jokes that clearly originated in the Netherlands; they were either in Dutch or referred to Dutch inside knowledge (references to Dutch advertisements or celebrities). On the whole, the technique and content of these jokes were similar to the international ones. Other peripheral countries had their own jokes. I encountered Swedish, Spanish, and Belgian jokes. Thus, these jokes show the interaction between a global joke culture and local cultures: American pictures conquer the world, and other cultures invent their own variety for “domestic” use. This means that we cannot really speak of American
(or Dutch or European) culture when it comes to these jokes. On the Internet, a global popular culture has emerged that transcends national boundaries. However, this Internet culture has its basis in American culture, and as will become clear in this article, most of its references are also American.

**Themes and Techniques**

Like most popular forms, these pictorial disaster jokes have a limited number of recurring themes. The main themes in these jokes center on Osama bin Laden as the evil perpetrator (Figure 2) and as the enemy who has to be crushed and degraded (Figure 3). Bin Laden is by far the most prominent figure in these jokes. Another category concerns jokes about the attacks on the World Trade Center (Figure 4). More common than the jokes about the WTC were jokes about the war in Afghanistan and the Taliban. Obviously, these were made several weeks after the attacks, when the war in Afghanistan had started, and when “it was all right to laugh again.” These jokes are often rather hostile. I also found a number of jokes about Bush, sometimes together with other American or Western politicians such as Cheney, Powell, or Tony Blair (Figure 5). Finally, there were a number of jokes about Muslims and Islam, including a rather well-known series featuring the “Islamization” of New York (Figure 6). On the basis of the main humorous technique, the jokes can be divided into two broad categories: humor based on a clash of incongruous domains, and jokes containing more aggressive and/or degrading references.
Most of these pictorial jokes were based on a "humorous clash," a clash of incongruous domains similar to verbal disaster jokes: a reference to bin Laden, the war in Afghanistan, or the attack on the World Trade Center, combined with a reference to something that is relatively innocent or banal. In the 9/11 collection, most of these innocent or banal references came from three specific domains: commercials, popular culture, and computers.

Most common were jokes referring to the attacks, combined with commercials and advertisements—advertisements with bin Laden’s picture pasted into it, well-known slogans (“Just do it”) added to pictures of the attack on the WTC, or pastiches of the packages of goods with bin Laden’s name or face on them. Also popular were references to popular culture, varying from Sesame Street’s Bert flying a plane into the WTC to variations on pop song titles, lyrics, and CD covers. This technique was not limited to pictorial jokes; sometime in October 2001, a Taliban version of “The Banana Song” started circulating on the Internet. A much smaller category consisted of jokes referring to computer culture: flight simulator games, pictures of the WTC with the Microsoft window asking, “Are you sure you want to delete both towers?” Other domains that were used featured weather forecasts, children’s culture (“Talitubbies,” suggesting a pun on Teletubbies and Taliban), tourism and travel (“Greetings from New Palestine”; “Bin Laden Travel: The Fastest Way to the Heart of Manhattan”). All are domains that are very much part of everyday life, very remote from the extraordinary events of September 11, and prominent in contemporary visual culture.

What these pictorial jokes do is best described as playing with genres: they combine news events with the generic conventions of the computer game, the postcard, the karaoke video, the advertisement, or the CD cover. The basic mechanism resembles verbal disaster jokes: a clash of domains, one of which is felt to be incompatible with the serious nature of a disaster. However, where the oral joke is a genre in itself, the Internet joke has no generic conventions of its own (yet); by definition, it borrows from other genres. As can be seem from the many incongruous domains used in these jokes, the new medium offers a

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whole new repertoire of pictorial and linguistic conventions to play with.

These humorous clash jokes are deliberately amoral. They do not contain any empathy, nor do they make any statement. There is no sign of the shock and grief that was present in the public discourse about 9/11, and the jokes do not show much respect for the victims. In addition, these jokes do not really take a stand against the villain or in favor of the hero; bin Laden is portrayed a video game villain, but he is also shown as superman and as travel agent, and the American government is shown as the A-team—all of which suggest a more detached look than most people could manage and felt was appropriate in the weeks after 9/11.

Oiring’s interpretation of these jokes as a form of rebellion seems apt here. Much of the fun probably lies in the irreverence of these jokes, in the deliberate disregard of the serious, moral, emotional, emphatically unhumorous discourse about the terrorist attacks. However, this fun may contain a comment on culture and the media. The Internet jokes in the next category are similarly irreverent and amoral, but some do contain a statement. The humor in these jokes is based on aggressive and degrading references, and not all of these references are entirely amoral, neutral, and detached.

**Aggressive Jokes: Patriotism, Hostility, and Degradation**

A significant number of the jokes contained elements that can be described as hostile, degrading, or patriotic. This type was more popular in the United States than in the Netherlands. Although these jokes have a similar collage form, and they also contain many references to popular culture. What sets these jokes apart from the earlier humorous clash jokes is their general aggressive tone.

These aggressive references vary from playful pastiches on war movies to unmistakable belligerency. In some cases, the pictures are best understood as playing with genres that contain a lot of violence, such as computer games or movies (Figure 7). However, a fair number of these jokes contained an aggressive statement, such as pictures of bin Laden being hanged, gutted, raped, or beheaded (Figure 8). The hostility in these jokes was usually aimed at bin Laden, sometimes at Afghanistan or the Taliban, and in some cases, at the American government. Only very rarely was the aggression aimed at Muslims in general; this makes this genre stand out from oral jokes, which thrive on references to generic ethnic and religious stereotypes. A rare example of anti-Muslim sentiment can be found in Figure 9, which shows a plane crashing on the holy site of the Muslims in Mecca.
The aggression and degradation were mostly expressed visually, rather than in words. Ample use was made of signs and symbols denoting war and aggression, again showing how strongly these jokes are embedded in visual culture. Some pictures denoted direct physical aggression, such as the picture of bin Laden’s severed head eaten by an American eagle. Others contained symbols of modern warfare: mushroom clouds and fighter planes. Not all of these jokes were equally explicit; many jokes were pictures of bin Laden with the concentric circles of a shooting target.

American national symbols were recurrent themes in these jokes. These were usually visual as well—stars and stripes, the American eagle, Uncle Sam, and, more commercially, McDonald’s golden arch. Many of these patriotic pictures were quite vengeful. Sometimes these were rather humorous, as in the well-known Figure 10 (with Dutch caption). In some cases, these patriotic pictures were no less than a declaration of war: “Dear Mr. bin Laden, now that you have taken the time to get to know Boeing’s fine line of commercial aircraft, we would like to get you acquainted with Boeing’s other fine products.” These patriotic pictures stood out from the rest because some of them were rather serious, with pictures of flags waving and eagles crying above the World Trade Center (Figure 11). However, I found them on pages that were clearly marked as “humor,” so I assume that people seemed to feel that they fit in.

The degrading pictures, on the other hand, were clearly humorous. These degrading pictures
had mainly to do with traditional shameful categories: sex, gender, feces. Several pictures showed bin Laden engaged in sex with animals, or with Bush, Saddam Hussein, or anonymous males. Others showed bin Laden’s photo at the bottom of a toilet, or a dog defecating on his picture. The few degrading pictures that did not refer to bin Laden himself were concerned with his mother or his birth, or concerned Afghan women (“Miss Afghanistan”), who were pictured as fat, hairy, or both. Finally, a fair number of pictures portrayed bin Laden either as an animal or congregating with animals such as pigs, monkeys, goats, and other “degrading” animals (Figure 12).

However, simple debasement is usually not funny in itself; a good joke has to have some kind of incongruity or clash of domains. There is a whole series of jokes, for instance, where the annihilation of Afghanistan is suggested in a humorous way: the map of the Middle East showing Afghanistan as nothing but scorched earth, or replaced by “Lake America” or “Lake Victory”; and a picture of the American flag planted on the barren landscape of the moon, with a caption “Planting the Flag in Afghanistan.” Another technique is the “simile”: bin Laden among pigs, bin Laden toilet paper, bin Laden diapers. In the cleverer jokes, the incongruity was enhanced by a text accompanying the degrading picture. One of the porn pictures of Bush being penetrated by bin Laden came with the text, “Make love not war.”

Although oral disaster jokes, like the humorous clash jokes, may play with aggressive genres and references (as in the Star Wars poster; Figure 5), they usually are not as openly degrading as these jokes. This difference may be related to the nature of the events. Unlike other disasters, this was not an accident, but an act of violence with a clearly defined evil perpetrator. In addition, most disasters don’t culminate in war, and war gives, of course, rise to aggression. In this respect, these jokes may be more like war jokes than disaster jokes. This may also suggest that they fulfill yet another function than either coping or rebellion: the venting of aggression, and the creation of solidarity by targeting someone outside the group.

However, another reason for the prominence of aggressive symbolism in the picture jokes may simply be the prominence of warlike rhetoric in media, and political discourse about the events. Just as disaster jokes were interpreted by Oring as a reaction to the “discourse on disaster,” the bellicose jokes may be a comment on the discourse on war. Content analysis does not do complete justice to the ambiguity of humor. Depending on the context and the intention of the person creating or sending the picture, such jokes may express hostility, or a mockery of this hostility.

The technique underlying these jokes is again genre play. These jokes made use of visual symbolism well known from other genres. For degradation, they used (gay) pornographic pictures, but many other popular genres were parodied in these jokes as well, such as comics (bin Laden in Superman outfit flying into the WTC; Figure 7), television series (the A-Team defeating bin Laden), and movie posters (“Afghanic Park”; the “Home Alone” poster showing Bush assaulted by bin Laden). The most prominent genre was cinema: pictures of fighter planes in Afghanistan and the explosion of the WTC were transformed into movie stills by adding captions or actors. One joke nicely sums up the mood of these jokes: King Kong in his famous Empire State Building pose on the WTC, swatting planes like flies. The caption says, “Where was King Kong when we needed him?” (Figure 13). These jokes seem to present the events of 9/11 as an event of popular media culture—a media culture that is mostly American.
Disaster Jokes, Media Culture, and Public Discourse

The relationship with a predominantly American visual culture is visible in the jokes themselves; all of the Internet jokes use existing visual material. In some cases, text was added to an existing picture: a caption to a cartoon, or a headline to a news photograph. In the majority of the jokes, a picture was literally assembled from elements of other pictures.

The procedure by which these pictures are created is best described with the term *collage* (Giddens 26) or *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 26). The creators of these jokes use pictures, words, sentences, and slogans from many sources to assemble their jokes; they paste the face of one person onto the other’s body, the slogan of one brand onto another picture. All of the pictures collected are in some way composed of disparate elements. Even the simplest variety, adding a phrase to an existing picture, effectively creates a new picture with a new message. Very often, this procedure changes the genre: news photograph to advertisement, military promotional material to computer game. A good example of such a genre shift is a picture of bin Laden making a speech, subtitled with karaoke lyrics to the Abba song “Super-trooper” (Figure 14). Manipulation of the pictures provides even more opportunities for genre play than adding words; it can turn news items into commercials, war into weather forecasts, human tragedy into a comic strip, terrorism into an action movie. In these Internet jokes, the collage technique was used deliberately and self-consciously. The creators of these pictures have not tried to disguise the fact that the jokes are pasted together. On the contrary, they seem to want the collage to show.

Through this collage (or bricolage) technique, these jokes are constantly parodying, mimicking, and recycling items from American popular culture. These jokes are strongly embedded in the visual culture of commercials, movies, television, computer games, and programs, and the various entertainments of modern popular culture. Oring shows how traditional disaster jokes often use commercials; Internet jokes use genres from all domains of popular culture. This takes us back to Oring’s thesis: that the analysis of the pictures clearly shows their relation with the media discourse—news, commercials, and many other genres—in both old and new media. Even in the aggressive jokes, the aggression is often visualized with imagery from popular culture.

Why do the anonymous creators of these jokes use images and phrases from popular and commercial culture? Oring’s analysis provides a good starting point here. Indeed, these pictures reflect the sandwiching of the images of terrorism and
war between commercials, comedies, and games. And the discourse of the media, as well as the coverage, is as intrusive as Oring describes in the case of the Challenger. Not just the United States, but the whole world was drawn into a discourse of shock and fear, then grief and mourning, and finally, bellicosity and patriotism. This media discourse causes conflicting emotions in media users; they are drawn into feelings for people they do not know, and they are confronted with constant talk of things usually considered “unspeakable.” These mixed emotions are complicated even more by the (slightly guilty) fascination experienced by many people in the audience. The ambivalence, alienation, and annoyance this causes may well be vented in humor. Moreover, this discourse explicitly states that humor was inappropriate—and we have seen that doing the inappropriate is the basis of most humor. These visual jokes defy the moral discourse of the media, provide the pleasure of boundary transgression, and block feelings of involvement. In this respect, they are completely different from the healing humor that was present in the American public domain. These jokes do not build community or stress solidarity, but set the jokers apart from public discourse, and presumably, mainstream sentiments.

However, the clash and alienation caused by media presentation of disasters cannot explain the strong connection with popular culture. In my view, the reason for these references to popular culture is that the media coverage of disasters is itself like popular culture. It is “just like a movie,” many people said when they saw the explosion and collapse of the WTC. As Ellis observes, “I am . . . struck by how many people found the video footage of the real Trade Center disaster strikingly similar to the special effects in popular action movies like the Die Hard Series” (“A Model” 5). This was parodied in The Onion—specializing in irreverent humor—in the first issue after September 11: “American Life Turns into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie”:

NEW YORK—In the two weeks since terrorists crashed hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, American life has come to resemble a bad Jerry Bruckheimer-produced action/disaster movie, shellshocked citizens reported Tuesday. “Terrorist hijackings, buildings blowing up, thousands of people dying—these are all things I’m accustomed to seeing,” said Dan Monahan, 32, who witnessed the fiery destruction of the Twin Towers firsthand from the window of his second-story apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. “I’ve seen them all before—we all have—on TV and in movies. In movies like Armageddon, it seemed silly and escapist. But this, this doesn’t have any scenes where Bruce Willis saves the planet and quips a one-liner as he blows the bad guy up.”

Many people watching television on September 11 remarked how “unreal” it all seemed—yet so familiar: images of wars and exploding skyscrapers are part and parcel of popular culture. Internet jokes referring to action movies such as Die Hard explicitly articulate the similarity between images from popular culture and these events. Media users have been “trained” to respond to messages and images in a specific way. Grief and tears are usually restricted to the genre of drama, explosions to the action movie, burning skyscrapers to the disaster movie. When disaster strikes, what are supposed to be “fictional” events enter into “the news.”

This gives another clue to the importance of genre play in Internet jokes: disaster jokes occur when genre boundaries become fuzzy. Disaster jokes, verbal and digital, put disasters back where they are usually seen: in fiction and popular culture. This explains the prominence of movie posters, characters from children’s programs, and other references to fictional genres from popular culture. It also explains the symbolism in many of the aggressive jokes; this was the visual language of pop culture aggression of comic strips, computer games, and war movies.

These disaster jokes can be interpreted as a play on reality and fictionality of events. Modern mass media constantly address people’s emotions and understanding, and their skill in dealing with disparate and unrelated pieces of information at the same time. This collage effect forces the au-
dience to constantly keep in mind the boundaries between different items and genres in the media. Most of all, it forces them to keep in mind the boundaries between fact and fiction, commerce and the stuff in between commercials. The main signaling device in dealing with this collage effect is genre.

The ability to play with something is the highest proof of one’s grasp of the matter. These jokes play with many elements of media culture, but especially with genre, in highly sophisticated way. Thus, these visual jokes are not just a comment on the discourse of disaster; they are a more general reflection on and of the structure of modern media. Never does the collage effect become as clear—the policing of genre boundaries as complicated—as in the case of disasters. Emotion, news, commerce, games, fun, popular culture, and human suffering are then more entangled than ever. Internet jokes can be interpreted as a joking attempt to put these disasters back to where they usually are, where we feel they belong, and where we want them to stay: into the fictional, pleasurable domain of (American) popular culture.

Conclusion

Disaster jokes are best understood as a collective reaction to a phenomenon that is, to a large extent, experienced collectively through the media. The images of the terrorist attacks and the ensuing events confronted people around the world with conflicting emotions; they showed, from up close, the suffering of others. These images were shown in the same media that also teach people around the world to react to such images, through the ubiquitous images of fictitious suffering in the American-dominated media culture. The images, as well as the comments, summoned our involvement, but to many people, this may have remained confusing, distant, unreal, and fictional. In such mediated disasters, the boundaries between news, popular culture, and fiction become blurred. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were mediated into a collective experience on a larger scale than ever before—not just America, but worldwide. To many people, this caused an even greater alienation and ambivalence than disasters closer to home. Again, for most people who saw these images, New York was not experienced in reality, but had been experienced only as a place in the movies.

These disaster jokes speak to these mixed feelings of ambivalence, alienation, unreality, and rebelliousness about the media culture and public discourse about 9/11, rather than to the emotions of shock, grief, and disbelief that people also felt after September 11. To be sure, humor can definitely help in troubled times, but mostly after the first shock has subsided, as we saw in the description of the humor moratorium in the first few weeks after 9/11. The WTC jokes, however, started at exactly the same time as the humor moratorium, when humor was felt to be most inappropriate. In addition, the completely amoral tone of these jokes does not seem very healing. The open hostility of some of these jokes also does not seem to support the notion that the main function of these 9/11 jokes is to cope with trauma.

The global spread of these jokes speaks against the coping explanation of the jokes as well; if grief were the main factor, these jokes would have been most popular in New York. Instead, I have found that many New Yorkers still are not very responsive to these jokes, and the farther away from New York people are, the more sympathetic they are. This seems to be slightly different in the case of the aggressive jokes, which resonate with hostile feelings that are more widespread in the United States than outside. Given the global spread of these jokes and the very different contexts in which these jokes are appreciated, it seems unlikely that these jokes all express one single emotion or opinion about the events of 9/11, whether it be grief or hostility. The experiences of people around the world are too different and too varied to feel the same about one event. However, what people around the world do share is their knowledge of American media culture. It is this collective knowledge, and collective experience, that is reflected in these jokes.
Disaster jokes may very well be a comment on the public discourse about disaster. However, they are also a rebellion against the official discourse about humor: that humor is inappropriate in times of disaster and that some topics are too serious to be joked about. Any such attempt to forbid humor tends to evoke it, and many disaster jokes may simply be attractive because they are so inappropriate. Besides being a reaction to official discourse about disaster and the meaning of humor, disaster jokes about the events of September 11 are a comment on the moral and emotional language of the American media culture as a whole—of which both the discourse on disaster and the humor discourse are a part. The mostly visual language of this media culture has shaped the experiences, emotions, and expectations of people around the world. It is a small wonder that people around the world responded to these images with other images. And what these images show is mostly this: that the images of the attacks had spoken to their media-trained emotions, but betrayed their media-trained expectations, because in the America they knew from the movies, King Kong would have been there when we needed him.

1. For discussions of other sick jokes cycles, see Davies “Jokes about the Death”; Dundes; Goodwin; Morrow; and Oring.
2. Discussions of the variations in American responses to 9/11 can be found in Huddy, Khatib, and Capelos; Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg; and Schildkraut.
4. Influential examples of American proponents of healing humor are Norman Cousins, Allen Klein, and Paul McGhee.
5. A large number of verbal 9/11 jokes can be found in the archives of newsgroups such as rec.humor.funny and alt.tasteless.jokes, which can be accessed through http://groups.google.com. The archives for rec.humor.funny are also available through http://www.netfunny.org, which has a 9/11 section. Many of the picture jokes are still online at Daniel Kurtzman’s political humor site, http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/bitterrorspics.htm. Another good collection of such jokes can be found at http://www.lifesajoke.com/picturesindex.html.htm. A good scholarly overview of the entire cycle can be found in “Making a Big Apple Crumble” by Bill Ellis.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2003 ACA/PCA meeting. This article was written during a research stay at the University of Pennsylvania funded by grant S50-453 from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Amsterdam School for Communication Research. The author wants to thank Jeroen de Kloet, Christie Davies, Jane Caputi, and the anonymous reviewers for The Journal for American Culture for their comments.

All figure images were retrieved from http://www.members.rott.chello.nl/maalst1/ (accessed November 19, 2001) and http://www.home.student.uva.nl/thomas.roes/wtc/index.html (accessed November 4, 2001). Neither site is currently available. Most pictures can now be downloaded from http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/ossaminladen/

Works Cited


