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RUBE STORIES AND PARADIGMATIC CRIMES AS NARRATIVE MODULATORS AT THRESHOLDS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

ABSTRACT: This essay investigates two species of a larger genus of narrative (“narrative modulators”) characterized by its function as a sort of compromise formation addressing recurrent anxieties and tensions at major thresholds of cultural change. One of these is a story type linked with cinema’s early reception: that of the “credulous spectator,” figured in early film and film lore as the country bumpkin or “rube” who, misperceiving the projected image as real, runs from the oncoming train or from the wet of onscreen waves or tries to enter the story; I extend this type beyond cinema to include precinematic literary examples. I’ve coined the term “paradigmatic crimes” to describe stories of criminal acts used to address pressing cultural concerns at given historical junctures as a second type of “narrative modulator.” As with “rube stories,” what unifies “paradigmatic crimes” as a story type is their specific function as “narrative modulators” in moments of cultural change. My hypothesis is that functionally similar stories appear at structurally comparable thresholds of media change in various cultures at various times, and that the similarities are to be explained mainly morphologically (i.e. mainly at the abstract level of their capacity to modulate cultural change).

KEYWORDS: Media archaeology, Narrative theory, Early cinema, Crime stories, Literary morphology.

In memoriam Thomas Elsaesser (1943-2019)

In this essay I mean to explore two species of what I suspect is a larger genus of narrative that I am calling “narrative modulators,” a form characterized by its function as a sort of compromise formation addressing recurrent anxieties and tensions at historical thresholds of major cultural change. I’ve chosen the musical metaphor of *modulation* because I’m interested in how such stories allow a culture so to speak to change key, in how they aid transitions from one phase of a culture to another while still providing a feeling of continuity.

I have argued elsewhere (Schwartz 2013) that versions of the Faust legend have often been used to process anxieties provoked by the rapid spread of new media technologies, and that the Faust material is comparable

in this respect to a story type linked with cinema's early reception: the type of the "credulous spectator," often figured in early film and film lore as the country bumpkin or "rube" who, misperceiving the projected image as real, runs from the oncoming train or from the wet of onscreen waves or tries to enter the story.

In a *locus classicus* from 1902, Edwin S. Porter's two-minute film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*, we see Uncle Josh, a country bumpkin or "rube" type, borrowed from vaudeville, who thinks that what he sees on screen is reality: we watch him desiring a female dancer, fearing an oncoming train, and then getting angry because he thinks a second woman seen embracing a man is his daughter. Trying to enter the story, he tears down the screen to reveal the projectionist, who then beats him up.

Porter's film was a remake of a film of 1901 by the Englishman R.W. Paul, *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures*. There are other examples, although in fact not very many. Such "rube films" dramatize anecdotal accounts of early film spectatorship that had people running in terror from the Lumière brothers' approaching train in 1896-97, or scampering out from under the crashing waves of R.W. Paul's *Rough Sea at Dover* in 1895. These stories probably qualify as urban legend, although they are often repeated in published film histories. The apparent scarcity of known examples of actual "rube films" further suggests that the urban legend has reproduced itself at the level of scholarship (Bottomore 1999; Elsaesser 2006; Elsaesser 2009, 15; Gunning 1994; Hansen 1994, 25-30; Loiperdinger 2004). To my mind, this only increases their value as a symptom of cultural anxiety about the new medium of film.¹

The film historian and media theorist Thomas Elsaesser has argued that rube films enact a drama of sublimation. To quote Elsaesser, rube films "articulate a meta-level of self-reference in order to 'discipline' their audience – not by showing them how *not* to behave [...] but rather [...] by allowing them to enjoy their own superior form of spectatorship, even if that superiority is achieved at the price of self-censorship and self-restraint"

¹ Stephen Bottomore (1999, 178) mentions a Russian film of 1910 called *My First Visit to a Motion Picture Show* and a Mack Sennett film of 1913, *Mabel's Dramatic Career*. Charles Musser (1990, 236; 250; 278; 325; 330; 345; 349; 386; 400) lists some ten other early rube films, but it would seem none of them represents the rube as a "credulous spectator": his comic encounters are all with other aspects of urban modernity. Elsaesser (2006, 213-215) construes several later films (Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*, 1924; a segment of Fritz Lang's *Siegfrieds Tod*, 1924; Jean-Luc Godard's *Les Carabiniers*, 1963) as deliberate citations of the earlier rube film genre, but names only Paul's and Porter's films as examples of the latter. When I wrote Elsaesser to ask if he knew of other early instances of the genre, he said he did not, but that he considered such individual examples "sufficiently 'symptomatic' to merit attention, rather than requiring them to be (quantitatively) representative" (emails to the author of 14 & 15 October 2019). I would like to thank Roy Grundmann and J. Keith Vincent for their helpful comments on drafts of this essay.

(Elsaesser 1999, 16). In other words, they model the increase in affect control required by bourgeois socialization, particularly with regard to the sensory sublimation required by media consumption, which has been linked with an ascendancy of the visual sense over the other four senses (Giesecke 1991, 649-655; Johns 1998, 380-443). Elsaesser inscribes this media moment within the longer historical arc of what Norbert Elias called the process of civilization, understood as a progressive reining-in of affect and of the senses. At this crucial media moment – at the birth of cinema – the viewer, unlike Uncle Josh, is given to understand that the price of getting to watch is *not touching*, and that the price of infracting this rule is slapstick, as an image of the violent punishment that, psychologically, threatens failures at sublimation (Schwartz 2013, 197-199).

If this is so, then we can expect some sort of equivalent at other transitional moments of media history. I believe I have found one in Don Quixote, a key Uncle Josh of the earlier age of print. The poor hidalgo reads too many romances, and like Uncle Josh he can't tell the difference between fiction and reality. The outcome is that he's beaten and battered and bloodied, chapter after amusing chapter. At least, *we're* amused: as with Uncle Josh, we'd like to think we won't make the mistakes that he does, and we're happy to pay the price of just reading to relish in print the consequences of his error.

Much the same can be said of the figure of Faust. The German *Faustbuch* of 1587, a text that turns on the dangers of reading in the new Protestant world of print, artfully plays the same double game as Cervantes of offering pleasure in its description of Faustus's sinfulness, magic, debauchery, and gruesome end, while giving the reader a moral alibi with his damnation. The message, once more, is: "Watch, enjoy, but don't do." One might also associate the apocryphal story of Gutenberg's financial backer, Johann Fust, that conflates him with Faust and has the *doctes* of the Sorbonne rather rubishly refusing to believe that Fust could produce so many identical copies of a single book without the help of the Devil (Detering 2018, 124; Eisenstein 2011, 1-2; Johns 1998, 324-379).

Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is perhaps even more clearly a media rube. In the opening scene of Marlowe's play, Faustus reads aloud from a series of books, each time conspicuously failing to apply them to his own state of soul. As any Elizabethan spectator would have noticed, he omits for example to finish the premise of 1 John 1:8 ("The reward of sin is death") with its conclusion in 1 John 1:9, thus ignoring the Bible's conditional promise of salvation: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness." From this Faustus concludes that there's no hope for him; his fatalism will be fatal. *We*, however – like the early viewers of cinema's Uncle Josh – go home from the theater feeling that *we* know better.

Two centuries later, in 1774, we have Goethe's *Werther*, who like Marlowe's *Faustus* is a bad reader.² Comparing himself with the suitors of Penelope while shelling peas, he omits their eventual slaughter by Odysseus (letter of 21 June). Identifying with Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah at the well, he forgets that the woman is meant not for the servant, but for Isaac (12 and 15 May). In the pivotal "Klopstock" moment with Lotte, he implicitly ties his fate to a literary tradition of couples inspired by reading (Dante's Paolo and Francesca, Abelard and Héloïse, Rousseau's St. Preux and Julie) while eliding the prospect of death or castration implicit in each of these cases (16 June). In other words, he has a notable habit not only of confusing literature with life, but also of forgetting how the stories he lives by will end. This is a later print-era rube story, a negative model of media response at a key juncture in the history of German book production and distribution, the 1770s, as the German *Mittelstand* begins to define itself as a reading class.

My hypothesis, then, is an expansion of Elsaesser's thesis that rube stories are a "transitional" phenomenon: that is, that they appear when a culture needs them to sort out a rapidly changing relationship to new media situations (Elsaesser 1999, 2006, 2016). Their "modulating" function consists in the way they permit populations to recalibrate regimes of affect to suit the demands of new media, to play through new problems of referentiality and coding, to address recurrent anxieties regarding the magical power of images (cf. Kris and Kurz 1979, 61-90), and to negotiate the social disruptions that can occur when media landscapes are transformed. In this they somewhat resemble what Freud called "compromise formations" (*Kompromissbildungen*), except unlike Freud I see the compromise not as one between consciousness and repressed memory, but between successive historical phases in the development of a given culture's media landscape. The similarities between rube stories arising in various times and places are to be explained mainly morphologically (that is to say, at the formal level of their capacity to modulate cultural change), although we may also see cross-cultural transmission and adaptation of particular stories across historical time, as with the Faust legend.

The next question then would be whether my theory can in fact predict further instances of the "media rube" genre, preferably somewhere diffusion can't really explain things.

² A comment by Goethe from *Dichtung und Wahrheit* points once again to the desideratum of sublimation as aesthetic form: on completing *Werther*, Goethe "felt as glad and free again as after a general confession and entitled to a new life. [...] But whereas I felt relieved and serene for having transformed reality into poetry, my friends were misled into thinking that poetry must be transformed into reality, that they must re-enact the novel, and possibly shoot themselves" (Goethe 1987, 432).

Poking around, I've found someone like Quixote or Uncle Josh in print-obsessed Edo Japan: Santō Kyōden's buffoonish character Enjirō in the *kibyōshi* (or yellow picture-book) *Playboy, Roasted à la Edo* (江戸生艶気蒲焼, *Edo umare uwaki no kabayaki*, 1785), a runaway bestseller in its day. Enjirō is Japan's full equivalent of a rube: he is characterized as *yabo* 野暮, an accepted antonym to the more positive term *iki* いき, the latter being a concept developed within the urban merchant class of eighteenth-century Edo to distinguish the "Edokko" or savvy true-born Edoite from peasants, aristocrats, and the denizens of Kyoto and Osaka, Japan's formerly dominant cities (Jones 2013, 19-21). This pair of asymmetric counterconcepts (Koselleck 1985) – *iki* and *yabo*, savvy and dopey, classy and classless – organizes the value system of Kyōden's book (Yamamoto 1999, 8; Shūzo 1997).³ Enjirō's "rubiness" consists in his clueless attempts to behave like an *Edokko*, without in fact being to the manner born. He learns how to write sentimental poetry, he gets himself tattooed with the names of imaginary past mistresses, he hires a geisha to act the part of a working girl madly in love with him and has news of imaginary exploits with her printed up and distributed throughout Edo so as to be properly gossiped about, he hires a prostitute to play the jealous mistress and local ruffians to beat him up so she can comfort him, and he does his very best to be disinherited by his parents. He knows what he *thinks* are the rules of *Edokko* behavior, because he's read lots of books – he's especially obsessed with romantic Kabuki stage songs – but all his attempts to play by those rules fall amusingly flat. Amusing, that is, for the reader and for all the true Edoites in the narrative, with whom the reader prefers to identify. Like Quixote, Enjirō gets laughed at and beaten up – and he's dumb enough, or deluded enough by his reading and by his vanity, to keep coming back for more punishment and ridicule. He'd like to be *iki* (that is to say: savvy), but he's terminally *yabo*, dopey – and our perception of him as *yabo* is what reassures us that *we* are *iki* (or at least not as *yabo* as he is).

What would then be a rube story for our digital age?

Elsaesser has seen a "return of the rube" in recent museum installations that combine techniques of cinema and digital art to "invite the spectator to get caught up in cognitive loops and bodily double takes, putting the visitor in situations that demand or promise to reward his participation while also deflating, deriding, and even punishing it" (Elsaesser 2016, 206). My own first thought, though, was of the Pokémon Go issue of mid-July 2016, when it seemed players were catching Pokémon at Auschwitz, the Wailing Wall, and Washington's Holocaust Museum. I don't mean to say that this didn't happen (though nearly all the news stories on the subject are from a single day, July

³ An English translation of Kyōden's book can be found in Kern 2006, 359-400.

12, which again suggests the legendary construction of a limited sample of events as symptomatic), or that this wasn't in very bad taste (it was a Koffing, a poison-gas Pokémon) – only that one must distinguish between events and our stories about them. It's both the particular pathos of these reports and their actual scarcity that makes me wonder about their meaning as stories. What could be rubier than letting an Augmented Reality game override the reality of the Holocaust, if only by a few people on one single day? The news reports gave us a chance to react in horror at people misusing new media technology – the same sort of *Besserwisserei*, of knowing better, that we saw with Uncle Josh, Enjirō and Quixote.

At this point I'd like to ask whether what I am calling “paradigmatic crimes” share enough characteristics with “rube stories” to warrant treating them as two species of narrative belonging to the same genus – although “culturally symptomatic crime narratives” might be an equally useful term.

I'll take the sharp rise in German writing about suicide and infanticide circa 1775 as my first example. Here, as with the urban legend of Uncle Josh, we need to distinguish between the *actual incidence* of certain types of event at given junctures in history and a sudden profusion of *writing* about such events. *Werther* and suicide is a case in point. The novel is commonly held not only to have *caused* suicides, but itself to reflect an earlier increase in the German suicide rate. Yet as far as I know, no reliable statistics were kept, and the only real data we have is a rising rate of published *writing* on suicide, both critical and fictional, spiking significantly just after the novel's appearance in 1774. On closer inspection, it turns out there's nearly no data at all on Werther-inspired suicides: the story may well be entirely apocryphal, or at best an elaboration of one or two cases.⁴ There's plenty of evidence that people were *worried* that reading *Werther* could lead to suicide, but little to none that it actually did.

Much the same can be said of infanticide, another subject of public concern in Germany at the same time. As the historian Isabel Hull points out, in July 1780 over four hundred essayists responded to a prize invitation from a scholarly journal, although no precipitate rise around then in

⁴ As with the “genre” of rube films, the actual sample is strangely small. Only three cases are reported with any degree of specificity: Christel von Laßberg (mentioned in a letter of Goethe's to Charlotte von Stein of 19 January 1778), an English Miss Glover (“*The Sorrows of Young Werter* [sic] were found under her pillow: a circumstance which deserves to be known, in order, if possible to defeat the evil tendency of that pernicious work” [“Miss Glover Obituary” 1784]), and a further story – of dubious provenance – of a young German who dressed in *Werther-Tracht* and shot himself in front of a gathering of friends. Many thanks to my colleagues on the Goethe Society of North America listserv (Bruce Duncan, John Lyon, W. Daniel Wilson, Horst Lange, Katherine Arens, David E. Wellbery, Astrida Orle Tantillo, Elizabeth Powers, Birgit Tautz, Bryan Norton) for corroborating my suspicions in this regard and supplying me with useful information (emails to the author of 12 October-4 November 2019). See also Schwartz 2013, 214n88.

infanticide has ever been demonstrated; in fact, as far as historians can make out, “the actual infanticide rate seems to have remained relatively low” (Hull 1996, 109-110). As with the urban myth of Uncle Josh and the oncoming train, this gap between incidence in writing and incidence in reality suggests that one feature the two story-types share is their symptomaticity. Indeed, this distinction permits Hull to characterize the discourse on infanticide as one of a series of late 18th-century “thought experiments” in which people explored their fears about the historically new social world of bourgeois or civil society by dramatizing key moments of conflict between the subjective claims of the individual and the objective ones of both the new order and the old; or, to quote Hans Robert Jauss, by exploring “the tragic experience of an autonomous sense of self” (Hull 1996, 257; Jauss 1989, 178; Schwartz 2010, 173). It seems clear that the discourse on suicide worked the same way.

Every era may have certain delicts that catch its attention, not necessarily because they’re happening then more than at other times, but because the *form* of the crime is well suited to express current cultural anxieties. The recent rise of public concern about sexual abuse across social power differentials is a case in point. There’s a clear disjunction in time between when, for example, Catholic clergy worldwide are supposed to have taken advantage of members of their congregations, and the historical moment – say, the past twenty years – in which they’ve been loudly taken to task for their crimes, a disjunction that once again highlights the difference of incidence from story, and the function of story as thought experiment. If one scans the full range of the stories that dominate the news cycle these days, it’s politicians, the clergy, employers, professors, businessmen, corporations; not simply “people in power,” but people to whom our societies have delegated authority, power and trust. Taken together, the rise in abuse stories may be more than anything an expression of disappointment in our institutions in general, an angry pointing at the contracts we thought we’d made with them.

I’d like to insist that such “thought experiments” be understood also as “feeling experiments,” because I think this is where “rube stories” and “symptomatic crimes” overlap. To adapt Elsaesser: such crime narratives, like rube stories, “articulate a meta-level of self-reference in order to ‘discipline’ their audience – not by showing them how *not* to behave [...] but rather [...] by allowing them to enjoy their own superior form of spectatorship, even if that superiority is achieved at the price of self-censorship and self-restraint” (Elsaesser 1999, 16). Like the rube film, the symptomatic crime story offers the viewer or reader a safely narrativized

ersatz of the sadistic or prurient or otherwise morally dubious pleasure it shows its protagonists being punished for.⁵

One might possibly include in the genus of “modulatory” narrative such not entirely narrative phenomena as those described with Aby Warburg’s concepts of the *Pathosformel* or the *Ausgleichsformel* (“iconic formula of reconciliation”), or by Hans Blumenberg’s notion of *Umbesetzung* or “reoccupation” of what he calls answer positions to culturally indispensable questions (Blumenberg 1985, 63-76). All of these terms describe mechanisms of cultural transformation that repeat at particular junctures in history, taking different forms but all working as compromise formations exercising “modulatory” functions at moments of major cultural flux.

Just to give one example, using Warburg’s notion of the *Ausgleichsformel*: the term first appears in an essay of 1907 on the Renaissance merchant Francesco Sassetti, where it is used to describe the Renaissance reconception of the goddess Fortuna as a ship’s pilot as an “iconic formula of reconciliation between the ‘medieval’ trust in God and the Renaissance trust in self” (Warburg 1999, 242). This is once again a compromise formation, arising to modulate a transition required of men of this class at a certain juncture in cultural history; the affect it seems to negotiate is the metaphysical aggressivity of humanist claims to worldly power. Returning some sixteen years later to the Fortuna material, Warburg reads the medallic *impres*e of the mathematician Camillo Agrippa – which shows “a helmeted warrior equipped with a lance hastening to grasp at the forelock of naked Fortuna, who, vainly defending herself with her left hand, attempts to flee from him. Her raised right hand is holding the sail [of the boat with which Fortuna is often associated in the Renaissance], which is however already threatening to go limp. Inscription: *Velis nolisve*”⁶ – along the same lines: in the “conception of fate implied by the steered sailing ship [...] the will to surrender oneself to the superior power of the elements fuses with the humane discovery of a direction of travel imposed by the hand of man” (Warburg 2008, 35; image, 118).⁷ This requires subjecting perception and affect to technical mediation: in order to sail by instruments or navigate on mathematical principles, as sixteenth-century sailors did, one had to dispense with direct physical perception of one’s destination. Warburg describes this renunciation in terms reminiscent of Norbert Elias: “This

⁵ Charles Musser (1990, 337-419, esp. 348-49 & 393) describes a similar dynamic in American films of 1903-1905, a period in which the industry began to concentrate on comedies, sexual voyeurism, and narratives of violent crime.

⁶ Warburg makes an error here: Fortuna defends herself with her right hand, while grasping the sail with her left.

⁷ “Schicksalsvorstellung von dem gesegelten Steuerschiff [...] verschmilzt der Wille zur Hingabe an die überlegene Elementargewalt mit der humanen Entdeckung der [von] Menschenhand erzwungenen Fahrtrichtung.”

navigation against wind and water with hand on the tiller, blind as it is to its destination and knowing only its direction, is the simultaneous renunciation and self-restraint that make man the master of space. Forgoing the use of primitive violence against hostile powers requires a cultural awareness to which primitive man is averse" (Warburg 2008, 35).⁸ Warburg's lecture of 1925 in honor of Franz Boll links Agrippa's *impresa* more clearly yet to the problem of media: here he sees radio transmission as the latest stage in man's replacement of direct perception of nature with technological abstractions from it (Warburg 2008, 120).⁹ He makes a similar point in the slightly earlier lecture on snake ritual: "The evolution of culture toward the age of reason occurs in the same degree as the graspable, earthy fullness of life fades into mathematical abstraction."¹⁰ And here again I think I see something like a rube story: when in the final paragraphs of this lecture, Warburg accuses "the modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus," Benjamin Franklin and the Wright brothers, of destroying the "sense of distance" that makes for what he calls *Denkraum*, or space for reflection (Warburg 2008, 50), he is recalling notes of 1918 that identify wartime radio with "Prometheus als Brandstifter" – "The cosmic torch used for arson / Prometheus as an arsonist."¹¹ The rube in this context is Europe, seen as a victim of radio-borne propaganda.

To thoroughly prove my point, I think I would have to map out the sublimations of affect that each of these mechanisms exacts as the price of transition to a new cultural state, and that is something I haven't yet managed to do. I am also not certain that their "modulatory" function *necessarily* involves a modulation of affect. Still, I expect that a common thread may be found in what, expanding on André Jolles (2017, 27-30 & *passim*), we might possibly call the *Geistesbeschäftigung*, or mental

⁸ "Diese, das zielblinde, nur richtungsbewusste Fahren gegen Wind und Wetter mit der Hand am Steuer ist zugleich Entsagung und Selbstbändigung, die eben erst den Menschen zum Herrn des Raumes macht. Der Verzicht auf die Betätigung primitiver Gewalt feindlichen Mächten gegenüber verlangt ein Kulturbewusstsein, das dem primitiven Menschen widerstrebt."

⁹ "Es scheint bei der Beherrschung der Elemente so zuzugehen, dass die fortschreitende Gewalt über die Natur in umgekehrtem Verhältnis steht zu den unnatürlichen Anforderungen greifbare Sinnfälligkeit erregender Ursache. Erst seitdem Töne, deren Erzeuger für den Empfänger unsichtbar ist, erzeugt werden, empfängt der Mann am Führerstand trockene Zahlen also sicheren Kompass."

¹⁰ "Die Kultur-Entwicklung zum vernünftigen Zeitalter besteht im selben Maß darin, wie sich eben die greifbare derbe Lebensfülle zum mathematischen Zeichen entfärbt."

¹¹ "Die Astrologie schwankt zwischen mathematischer Abstraktion und religiöser Praktik / wie die Kriegskunst zwischen Rechnen und Kämpfen/Praxis / Die Uhr in der Hand des Sturm Truppen Offiziers / wie die Handgranate / sind Ergebnisse der mathematischen Abstraktion. / innerlich sinnlos u tragisch / die kosmische Fackel zum Brandstiften benutzt / Prometheus als Brandstifter." Warburg Institute Archive (WIA), III.90.1.4 [28] ("Notizen Luther 1918"). Cited by kind permission of the Warburg Institute Archive.

disposition, of a need for their modulatory function at given moments in cultural history, not in any particular content.

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