CRACKING UP
AMERICAN HUMOR
IN A TIME OF CONFLICT

PAUL LEWIS

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
Chicago and London

Copyrighted Material
Contents

List of Illustrations xi

Introduction 1

1 | “One, Two, Freddy’s Coming for You” 23
KILLING JOKES OF THE 1980S AND 1990S

2 | Red Noses at the Ready! 63
THE POSITIVE HUMOR MOVEMENT

3 | Shut Up! No, You Shut Up! 109
FIGHTING WITH AND ABOUT HUMOR

4 | Ridicule to Rule 155
THE STRANGE CASE OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Conclusion 201

Acknowledgments 207

Notes 211

Index 227
"One, Two, Freddy's Coming for You"

KILLING JOKES OF THE 1980S AND 1990S

FIRST TEENAGE GIRL: Freddy, no question.
SECOND TEENAGE GIRL: You're crazy. Jason just chops your head off and it's finished, but Freddy makes you suffer first.
FIRST TEENAGE GIRL: I know. That's the whole point. If I have to be murdered, I'd rather be murdered by a guy with imagination.
SECOND TEENAGE GIRL: You're crazy! Jason or that Halloween guy, they just kill you and you're dead. . . . Freddy makes you a nervous wreck and then kills you and then turns you into a face sticking out of his chest!
FIRST TEENAGE GIRL: Yeah, but he's so funny.

Conversation overheard in a video store, reported in the Youthankasia column of Premiere Magazine, August 1990

In the late summer and fall of 1991—as the story of Jeffrey Dahmer's cannibalistic serial murders ran its course and before much was known about his personality—jokes about Dahmer started to circulate. A typical and much-varied one about a dinner party attended by the killer's mother just prior to her son's arrest constructed Dahmer as a sadistic humorist. "I don't like your friends," his mother says during the meal, and he replies, "Try the vegetables."

On June 18, 1994, following a televised chase on the Los Angeles freeway system, O. J. Simpson was arrested for the double murder of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman. Within hours the first O. J. jokes began to appear on the Internet, on talk shows, in comedy clubs, and in private conversations across the United States. In the context of earlier joke cycles about Dahmer, Polly Klass, Lorena Bobbitt, Michael Jackson, and Tanya
Harding—the O. J. jokes were predictable. Indeed, joking about violent crime had become so much a convention of folk culture that sensational stories about child molestation, murder, rape, or kidnapping raised the expectation that humor would follow, as in the question asked across the country on the morning after Simspnon was apprehended: “So, have you heard any O. J. jokes yet?” How did these expectations—that violent criminals tend to joke about their victims and that crimes will inspire jokes—develop?

For an answer to this question, we might turn to March of 1981, when, at the dawn of the contemporary horror film, reviewer Roger Ebert had an experience that alarmed him. At a showing of United Artist’s I Spit on Your Grave, Ebert was disturbed to find the audience supporting the film’s killer, applauding and cheering as one victim after another was tortured and/or murdered. What appalled Ebert most was his sense that “the audience seemed to take [the film’s many acts of cruelty] as a comedy,” as there were “shouts and loud laughs at the climaxes of violence.” In 1983, looking back over recent horror films, Philip Brophy argued that the work of such filmmakers as George Romero, Wes Craven, John Carpenter, David Cronenberg, and Tobe Hooper is defined by a repudiation of “social realism, cultural enlightenment or emotional humanism.” Audience response to contemporary horror films, Brophy noted, follows a series of shocks in which one moves through a set of emotions including frozen terror and screaming laughter. Far from random or coincidental, the audiences observed by Ebert and Brophy were reacting to early examples of what would become a strain of sadistic humor, of killing jokes, in the American 1980s, the decade of Freddy Krueger, Ronald Reagan, and the Vampire Lestat.¹

Frequently accompanied by twisted facial expressions and cruel laughter, these jokes invite us to be amused by images of bodily mutilation, vulnerability, and victimization. That a line of such humor can be traced through the 1980s and 1990s in American horror films, comic books, joke anthologies, advertising, cartoons, reality TV, and political discourse—from Freddy Krueger to Hannibal Lecter, from Blanche Knott to Mike Judge, from Ronald Reagan to Abu Ghraib, and from Robert Chambers to Old Joe Camel—must be significant. The apparent intensification of cruel humor over the decade—the increasing popularity and acceptability of killing jokes and jokers—suggests that they constituted an evolving and resonant humor convention, one that both revealed and supported a widely shared desire or need.

Unbridled and extreme cruelty distinguishes these jokes from such milder forms of potentially aggressive humor as tickling and teasing. The
tickler, often an overpowering adult, can hover or tower Freddy-like over the person being tickled, often a child; the teaser can use ridicule to reprimand, embarrass, even humiliate the target of derision. In such situations, kidders dance up to and even cross the line between play and seriousness, friendliness and enmity. But only if they charge across this line, combining physical violence and pain with their wit, moving beyond teasing or tickling to torture and attack, do they start to resemble killing jokers. For, with killing jokes, though the attacker adopts a playful pose and often seems to be having fun, the accompanying violence bars the butt/victim from joining in the laughter and puts the viewer in the awkward position of laughing with a monster, refusing to do so, or sustaining an uneasy ambivalence.

Most striking about these jokes are the mixed responses they are meant to evoke. Beyond mere humor but built around it, killing jokes assume socio- and/or psychopathic values and defy standards of decency not only to amuse but to shock, terrify, and appall as well: shock by amusing, amuse by shocking. A reading of these jokes based on established work on humor appreciation and audience disposition toward butts will demonstrate that as a group they provide (and therefore must appeal to a need for) an anti-sentimental detachment from their human targets and, by extension, from the human race broadly considered. This observation will lead to speculation, based on the work of Anthony Giddens and Joanna Macy, about the rise of the killing joke in a decade of increasing anxiety about (and denial of) global risks and dangers that seemed to threaten the survival not just of nations and groups but also of mankind. But, before this point about the appeal and function of killing jokes can be developed, an overview of their evolution is called for, if only to bring readers who have never seen a Nightmare on Elm Street film, or read a Splatterpunk story, or watched a Bumfights video up to speed.

Insofar as no cultural motif rises full blown, many antecedents of the sadistic humor that rose to prominence in the 1980s can be identified. Shakespeare put killing jokes into the mouths of several villains—including Richard III and Lear’s violent relatives—and Poe allows Montresor, the murderous narrator of “The Cask of Amontillado,” to enjoy a few. Examples in the pre-1980 American context include the slapstick violence of the Three Stooges, the horror comics of the early 1950s that led to the imposition of the Comics Code, the joking of such romantic film enforcers as James Bond and Dirty Harry, the work of Stephen King and Stanley Kubrick, and the popularity of sick (for instance, “mommy, mommy” and Helen Keller) jokes. Still, the following review of representative killing jokes in a number of 1980s and 1990s pop works and gen—
res is offered as preliminary evidence of the increasing popularity and intensity of this humor through these decades, a progression apparent in the movement from, say, mommy, mommy to dead-baby jokes, from the Joker of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s to the Joker of 1980s, and from the Freddy Krueger of the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* (NES) film to the Freddy of the sequels.

**Nightmares on Elm Street**

Englund has been quoted as saying that what Freddy stands for is the idea of killing the future. He elaborates: "This is the first time in the twentieth century that kids will probably not live as well as their parents. You can imagine what it is like to be seventeen or eighteen today and enter a world with a drug culture and hardly any jobs on the horizon, and AIDS and racial unrest. . . . Freddy represents all of these things that are out of kilter in the world, all the sins of the parents that are being passed on."²

A sense of the mainstreaming of sadistic humor in American culture over the past two decades can be gathered from the changing response to Freddy Krueger (fig. 3), the dream stalker of New Line Cinema's NES series. Although the first of these films was widely panned and marginalized as a derivative slasher, Freddy found wider and wider acceptance, a phenomenon on display when Mayor Tom Bradley declared September 13, 1991, Freddy Krueger Day in the city of Los Angeles. Diminutively named from the outset, Krueger became the Fredster, the Fredmeister, the Freddytollah . . . making (not copies but) corpses. As it entered its second decade of prominence in 1994, the NES industry could look back at its six commercially successful feature films, a syndicated TV show called *Freddy's Nightmares*, five LPs, and $15 million in merchandise, including a board game, Halloween costumes, and a Freddy doll, complete with plastic razor fingers.³

The most puzzling feature of this horror cult is not the interest in horrific violence to which it appeals. This interest, as the Marquis de Sade observed, has underpinned the popularity of gothic fiction since its first great outpouring following the excesses of the French Revolution. What is most intriguing is the popularity of Freddy himself, a relentless and savage, but also an imaginative and witty, murderer. A cutup in both senses, Freddy set the standard for humorous treatments of violence and sadism in the American 1980s.

Conceived by Wes Craven, who wrote and directed the first NES film, as a laughing sadist, Krueger evolved in sequels into a one-line comic who