first encountered the film pro-
ductions of Richard "Cheech" Marín and Thomas Chong when I
answered a morning radio show's
trivia question — "What was
George Orwell's real name?"
—and won two tickets to a local theater
that specialized in films like Big Meat Eater,
The Attack of the Killer Tomatoes, and
The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Pseudonym-
ously and real names, dystopias of the
future and of the past, the trivial and the
meaningful, eczematous as a hermitage
of mainstream culture — these are
the themes that might easily be developed
from the casual coalescence of social
forces that produced my seeing, for the
first time, Cheech and Chong's Next
Movie (1980). When I'd returned from
watching Next Movie, however, I instead
drafted twelve pages on what I called
"The Utopian Vision of Cheech and
Chong." The next morning, when I
mentioned this effect to a medievalist col-
dleague, she looked blankly at me and
merely asked, "Why?" It has taken me
some years to return to this essay, to try to
answer that question in a way that provi-
sionally satisfies me.

One of the events that occurred between
my seeing that film and the writing of this
present essay was the publication in 1981
of Frederic Janzon's The Political Un-
conscious. Reading nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century fiction, Janzon con-
cludes that all literary works project both
a "master narrative" of class struggle and a
"Utopia" that makes literature
a sustained "meditation on the
nature of community." Many critics have
responded to Janzon's advice. Again and again
in these responses the topic of utopianism
arises, with its promise that literary
fiction might justly at a level of praxis
the increasingly suspect activity of being
an intellectual and getting paid for it, a
claim that becomes, in some circles, espe-
cially difficult to defend when one writes
about popular culture.

On what grounds do I choose to compare
Janzon with Cheech and Chong? First, both find their most potent insights
in generic inquiry. Janzon is a narrative
forms and CC of widely varying cultural
"events" such as talk shows, rock con-
certs, film festivals, drug busts, televisions,
science fiction, and (in the very structure of their movements) the lawyer's story.
These events are, of course, what Bourdieu
calls "simulacra," the constructed
"reality" of the drug world, the gay
world, the world of television. Both turn
up, through these inquiries, unexpected
but powerful moments of at least tempo-
arily fulfilled desire for dialogue, for rec-
ognition and response, for the plenitude
of a self, for community. Both, that
is, attend to class struggle and to
emancipatory pressures within generic
ideologies.

A second point that compels comparison
is the shared context that both Janzon
and CC evoke. Janzon makes no secret of
his own formative moment; his recent
joint editing of short stories for The Stadies
Without Apology (1984) speak directly to
that issue. For their part, CC's ways evoke
the Sixties in dress, language, attitudes,
actions, and goals. Chong embodies the
Sixties in his usual role as burned-out
hippie he'll try any drug ("don't tell me
what it is, man, let it be a surprise!"), and he
has a kind of fearless optimism about
deviant behavior.

Third, although their comedy routines
punyact to the late sixties and seventies, CC
films are, like Janzon's brand of
marxist criticism, a phenomenon of the
eighties. Now, this temporal gap has cre-
ated in the minds the recurrent strategy of
"erasing the Sixties." And it is at this
level, that of what Baudrillard calls
"mediatization," that CC address
both the sixties and the eighties. Their
films communicate, mostly through per-
iod of media genres, the function of six-
ties rhetoric in today's "simplistic," late-
capitalist media machine. My point is that,
from the nostalgic: collapse of dec-
dades, they create subtextual rhetorics that
may best be read as utopian.

CC's dominant mode is unmusnificent
self-indulgence that leads to conflicts with
authorities and with law-abiding citi-
zens. In their conflicts, CC enact "sixties
"symptoms"; they rhythmically twist estab-
lishments by being only marginally
aware of them. Social restrictions that
produce uptight behavior in others fail
before wood, tastelessness (once as a
political instrument, I would argue), and
a benign misconstrual of others' intentions.
Consider the conflict in Nick
Dreams (1981) between CC and their
furry, garden-ornament near-side neighbors.
Like the Philadelphia neighborhood
whose distortion over the determination
of the house occupied by MOVE led to
the bomb-burning of sixty-three homes, CC's
neighbor eventually wins up with his
gardens and home in ruins. The film has
nothing to do with the viruses or
debacles of destroying houzzes prop-
erty — far from it. Instead, we become
aware that even as CC fail our expecta-
tions of retribution from their assaults on
commodities, so any attempt to endorse
some abstract notion of an underlying
necessary social order renders itself per-
fectly in the face of unanswerable and uncoun-
trollable forces like commodifica-
tion, reification, dehumanization, and
mystification. The conflict of ordinary
decent folks versus hippies, which has
been so often replayed on our TV screens,
CC take to an illogical extension that
marks the era. The illogic involves a
kind of utopian resistance. Because for
them, with their endless capacity to alienate
those who respect the decency of
middle-class life, CC possess the ability
to attract without effort upper-class com-
rades who join them in a pleasure
which is more for its being non-epic.

Hence, in their recent (1984) historical
excursion, a satiric remake of Dunin's
"The Conical Brothers," the twin broth-
ers played by Cheech and Chong, cast out
of aristrocratic French life because they're
"illegitimate," escape the evil aristocrat
Farkanor as well as the guiltline and
eventually scramble the class structure
that has oppressed them. Strikingly, Farkanor
is an intent on victimizing the
legitimate Queen as he is the peasant
man, when the Conical Brothers pro-
duce a revolution, this materialistic mid-
dream finds itself replaced by a utopian
cross-class pickle at which the Queen is at last able to indulge in her
favorite pastimes of feasting and gossping.
Partly taking their cues from Dunin, CC
argue that upper and lower classes share common values, which can be
expressed freely with the removal of bourgeois power eneogies. This theme
finds itself replayed at the end of Still
Smokin' (1985) when a Cheech and
Chong comedy concert unites in humor
the Netherland's' Queen Christians and
her people, after the symbolic narrative
foresting out of emblazing entrepre-
neurs.

In the Conical Brothers, CC implicitly
critique both the contemporary class rela-
tions and the generic demands of Dunin's
romantic narrative. Obviously, pre-
scriptio happy endings both do and do
not take on purely utopian force; we may
appreciate the exigencies of the Coni-
cal twins while remaining ourselves
unmoved by revolutionary activities. But
Janzon compellingly sketches the way
in which roman comes continue to emit
ideological signals of mystery and rec-
ciliation. Strikingly, Cheech and
Chong are drawn repeatedly to stories that end
"happily" and that emphasize the pro-
tagonists' abilities to produce harmony
from social discord. Such provisional
concerns leave the larger powers less
undermined than temporarily disowned, but
the utopian elements in their filmic
worlds remain active as messages they
recognize as utopian situations to enable
social fluidity.

More recently, perhaps in response to the
considerable backlash against the sixties
ethos, CC have become increasingly ag-
gressive in their criticism of existing
social relations. They entered the video
game with a preceded of Bruce
Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.
Springsteen, erstwhile working-class
hero, used the song
largest concert tour and
honorable document-
ated, it was clear to
beauty, with the
around its message,
song tells of a gritty
flyer of urban pop
Vansco Miller, who
the U.S.A." spoists
lakes of war or
identification with a
And yet, the docum-
found a soul in
local social wounds
 East Asia.

The 1983 CC remake
which was written
Stein, shows both
their parodies and
side of active parado-
nes, the desire for co-
voiced by Spring-
dap apart from the
nute-Avila that enter-
ances from Woodstock i
song, even in its ap-
f回馈 rock's generic ex-
quidate different from the
story of joyful communi-
introduce a persis-
ture, the sense of
the group's Cheech's
"foreign land" involve-
nt and not a part of the
immigration authorit-
dless, disconnected, a
vasion finds his way be-
celared in the song
other Hispanic perso-
n drug through a man
:

grown through a man's
crowd through Gr
the category
does not become the
the surface, however, America of freedom,

tating, remains a
seems, is part of the
community arises, a
version of the illegal
are repeating that th
in Los Angeles, es-
not mix. America from
d and barbershops, the
the "true American
etility of the white
of Hollywood, U
the U.S.A. The
tify and ethnic
the central conflicts
of Violence. That is, it
as an urgent
Martin is his basic
persists in charting the
to our culture ethi-

A theme related to ethnicity occurs in a daydream sequence from Still Smokin' called "C'mon Talk," a TV show hosted by an ex-convict, Sleepy Gonzales, with whom a notorious prisoner, Joe the Hole Cool, is to discuss gun control. In a twist on the old saw, the con argues that "Guns don't kill people, cops kill people." In fact, guns are the tools of his trade, he argues — right before accidentally shoot- ing himself. What interests me here is the airing of the tangible group conflicts being routinely negotiated by generic or patterned media events. The films of Cheech and Chong respond similarly to other anxieties of cultural life by spoofing and satirizing the forces that create those conflicts. Not that the powers-that-be are in any way disconcerted by their withdrawal from competition and assertion of primacy through comic satire, but within their comedy, we can discern both a liter- ary utopian agenda (cosmic resolution, class harmony) and an additional evocation of what, following Christina Ruci- Gockelmann, I'd call a transgressive utop- ia.

By a transgressive utopia, I mean not a place, not even a remake social formation, but a process — enacted (himself at some level highly theatrical as well as potentially spectacular) moments of self-definition and group-emanicipation within a haphazard structure. Again, let me emphasize that it is the gap between the ruined sixties and the relentless eighties that constitutes a sense of history and of possibility for the viewer of CC movies. Within that gap, the characters portrayed by Richard Marin and Thomas Chong unpack the "blind zones" (to reappropri- ate a term used by Jameson of sexuality, animality, exclusion, ethnicity, poverty, and self-in dulgence. Delving into these zones, they locate cultural manuholes, channels that allow access both to social supertexts that intend to oppress and to cultural undertexts that insistently shift the terms of programmed interaction. Their critique is a form of willful misunder- standing, they misconstrue others' enmity and their own positive malaise; they relocate the site of conflict by jumbling our sense of who the victims are and who has power. The essential act involved, of course, is shifting contexts, from conditioning society to differenti- ated society, from sixties to sixties. CC show us the extent to which, like the nineteenth-century tests fairly community subject, their films emit sixties' signals within a contempo- rary format.

A similar assertion was made by Ernst Bloch, whose concept of the "not yet" assumes that events in the present con- tain messages about the ultimate destiny of human society, that within the desir- ed everyday there are utopian, anticip- atory messages. In contrast to the work of Marxists theorists like Althusser, who do not account for the possibility of his- torical change or of individual deviation from social conditioning, Bloch enjoins us to contemplate a dynamic utopia. Within that dynamism and the multiple possibilites for historical change that it implies, there are intimations of creative transgression, moments that gain in value when they are linked across time gaps to solicit our attention to their shared asser- tions about the role of the individual in a community.

I am arguing that we can project an alter- native utopianism of transgressive differ- ence which, rather than fetishizing an idealized past or future, inheres in a proc- ess of critique, in recapturing and recon- textualizing usable community-oriented moments from the past. These moments look toward a more ideal but nonetheless utopianist future. Correlative to this the- ory is CC's comic agenda that, not content with a simple inversion of power, keeps flipping back on itself in endless ironic play. The point is not to "get there" but to keep alive, through whatever means are available (irony, parody, pastiche, inst- ancionalism, trivialization, inversion, re- version, and so on) a perception of utopi- anism-as-process and as-possibility.

Raising an argument partly on the unex- pectedly parallel visions of such dispa- rately figures as Fredric Jameson, Richard Marin, I conclude that at some level Bloch's theories about utopianism might be substantiated. It may be possible that within any phase of capitalist culture, representational activity like film and fiction projects, in low key or high, a utopian content, a hope for some form of classless society. In this era of post-every- thing, when even apocalyptic doom and attenuated survival have been endlessly previewed on TV, such content can be seen principally in a skeptical vein, simply ignored. Yet it remains, built into the formats of mainstream popular cul- ture, where the desire for community is persistently either affirmed or ridiculed. In the case of CC, both responses occur, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively, but also insistently, for it was in the sixties to which CC constantly allude that the rhetoric of community, often in specifically Marxist terms, most recently sought renewal on a mass scale.

As Baudrillard reasonably argues in his A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, the May 1968 general strike in France quickly fell victim to the numbing "individuation" of its words.

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