

• Utopianism in
the Eighties •
Cheech and Chong

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Herr**

I first encountered the film productions of Richard "Cheech" Marin 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*. Pseudonyms and real names, dystopias of the future and of the past, the trivial and the meaningful, eccentricity as a barometer 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 viewing *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 effort to a medievalist colleague, 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 provisionally 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 Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. Reading nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, Jameson concludes that all literary works project both a "master narrative" of class struggle and a "Utopian" impulse that makes literature a sustained "meditation on the nature of community." Many critics have responded to Jameson. Again and again in these responses the topic of utopianism arises, with its promise that literary criticism might justify 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, especially difficult to defend when one writes about popular culture.

On what grounds do I choose to compare Jameson with Cheech and Chong (CC)? First, both find their most potent insights in generic inquiry, Jameson of narrative forms and CC of widely varying cultural "events" such as talk shows, rock concerts, film festivals, drug busts, telethons, science fiction, and (in the very structure of their movies) the adventure story. These events are, of course, what Baudrillard calls "simulacra," the constructed "realities" of the drug world, the gay world, the world of television. Both turn up, through these inquiries, unexpected but powerful moments of at least temporarily fulfilled desire for dialogue, for rec-

ognition and response, for the plenitude of a full stomach, 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 Jameson and CC evoke. Jameson makes no secret of his own formative moment; his recent joint editing of and writing for *The Sixties Without Apology* (1984) speak directly to that issue. For their part, CC always evokes 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 punctuated the late sixties and seventies, CC films are, like Jameson's brand of marxist criticism, a phenomenon of the eighties. Now, this temporal gap has created in the media the recurrent strategy of "trashing" the sixties. And it is at this level, that of what Baudrillard calls "mediatization," that CC films address both the sixties and the eighties. Their films communicate, mostly through parody of media genres, the function of sixties rhetoric in today's "simulacral," late-capitalist media-machine. My point is that, from the nostalgic collision of decades, they create subtextual rhetorics that may best be read as utopian.

CC's dominant mode is unmalicious self-indulgence that leads to conflicts with authorities and with law-abiding citizens. In their conflicts, CC enact "sixties" symptoms; they relentlessly resist establishments by being only marginally aware of them. Social restrictions that produce uptight behavior in others fall before weed, tastelessness (conceived as a political instrument, I would argue), and a benign misconstruing of others' intentions. Consider the conflict in *Nice Dreams* (1981) between CC and their tidy, garden-conscious next-door neighbor. Like the Philadelphia neighborhood whose distress over the deterioration of the house occupied by MOVE led to the bomb-burning of sixty-three homes, CC's neighbor eventually winds up with his garden and home in ruins. The point here has nothing to do with the virtues or demerits of destroying bourgeois property — far from it. Instead, we become aware that even as CC foil our expectations of retribution from their assaults on commodities, so any attempt to enforce some abstract notion of an underlying, necessary social order renders itself pathetic in the face of unchartable and uncontrollable forces like commodification, reification, dehumanization, and mediatization. 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 mirrors the real. The illogic involves a kind of utopian resistance. Because along with their endless capacity to alienate those who respect the decencies of middle-class life, CC possess the ability to attract with little effort upper-class comrades who join them to share in a pleasure which is more so for its being non-exclusionist.

Hence, in their recent (1984) historical excursion, a satirical remake of Dumas's "The Corsican Brothers," the twin brothers played by Cheech and Chong, cast out of aristocratic French life because they're illegitimate, escape the evil autocrat Fuckair as well as the guillotine and eventually scramble the class structure that has oppressed them. Strikingly, Fuckair is as intent on victimizing the legitimate Queen as he is the peasant masses; when the Corsican brothers produce a revolution, this materialistic middleman finds himself replaced by a utopian cross-class picnic at which the Queen is at last able to indulge in her favorite pastimes of feasting and gossiping. Partly taking their cues from Dumas, CC argue that upper and lower classes share common values, which can be expressed freely with the removal of bourgeois power-mongers. This theme finds itself replayed at the end of *Still Smokin'* (1983) when a Cheech and Chong comedy concert unites in humor the Netherlands' Queen Christiana and her people, after the symbolic narrative ferreting out of embezzling entrepreneurs.

In *The Corsican Brothers*, CC implicitly critique both contemporary class relations and the generic demands of Dumas's romantic narrative. Obviously, prescribed happy endings both do and do not take on persuasive utopian force; we may appreciate the energies of the Corsican twins while remaining ourselves unmoved to revolutionary activities. But Jameson compellingly sketches the way in which romance forms continue to emit ideological signals of mystery and reconciliation. Strikingly, Cheech and Chong are drawn repeatedly to stories that end "happily" and that emphasize the protagonists' abilities to produce harmony from social discord. Such provisional concords leave the larger powers less unmanned than temporarily disarmed, but the utopian elements in their filmic worlds remain active messages as they recode stereotypical situations to enable social fluidity.

More recently, perhaps in response to the considerable backlash against the sixties ethos, CC have become increasingly aggressive in their criticism of existing social relations. They entered the video genre with a parody of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." Springsteen, erstwhile working-class

hero, used the song in the largest concert tour in inevitable documented, it was clear that identified with the song's message. strung tells of a ghetto-frying pan of urban Vietnam combat. The "the U.S.A." speaks the horrors of war and identification with a wheel and yet, the document found the song a "real Americans") that he. sive social wounds east Asia.

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hero, used the song as a keystone for his largest concert tour in 1985. When the inevitable documentary of that tour aired, it was clear that audiences had both identified with the tune and misconstrued its message. Deeply ironic, the song tells of a ghetto kid pulled from the frying pan of urban poverty into the fire of Vietnam combat. The refrain of "Born in the U.S.A." speaks to displacement and the horrors of war rather than to patriotic identification with an American "cause." And yet, the documentary showcases a wheelchair-bound Vietnam Vet who found the song a rallying cry ("we're all Americans") that helped to heal the divisive social wounds produced in South-east Asia.

The 1985 CC remake, "Born in East L.A." (which was written jointly with Springsteen), shows both the slipperiness of their parodies and the fact that the underside of satire remains, even in the eighties, the desire for community actually voiced by Springsteen's audiences. Quite apart from the mythos of Rock-Concert-as-Utopia that enters into live performances from Woodstock to Farm Aid, the song, even in its appropriated form, fulfills rock's generic expectation (demands quite different from those of punk or pop) of joyful communality. But not before CC introduce a persistent theme in their work, the status of American ethnic groups. Cheech's story of deportation to a "foreign land" involves not Vietnam but Mexico. The Man who sent him there is not an agent of the draft board but of the immigration authorities. Starved, powerless, dispossessed, and hunted, Cheech does find his way back to the East L.A. celebrated in the song. He enters, like the other Hispanic persons portrayed in the video, through a manhole, and then leads a joyful crowd through the city's streets. Overtly, the categories of who does and does not belong become confused. Under the surface, however, the stereotype of an America of freedom, an America worth celebrating, remains vital. Oppression, it seems, is part of the mechanism by which community arises, at least in this upbeat version of the illegal alien issue. But it bears repeating that the turf is east L.A., and in Los Angeles, east and west mostly do not mix. Apart from the corner stores and barbershops, the hookers and gangs — the paraphernalia of urban "neighborhood" ethnic life — stands the shadow text of Hollywood, Rodeo Drive, and UCLA. The tropes of east and west L.A., of ethnicity and enfranchisement, point to the central conflicts that inform CC's productions. That is, ethnicity presents itself as an urgent issue not only because Marin is hispanic but also because he persists in charting the relations of power that in our culture ethnic prejudices help to air.

A theme related to ethnicity occurs in a daydream sequence from *Still Smokin'* called "Con 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 shooting 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 literary utopian agenda (comic resolution, class harmony) and an additional evocation of what, following Christine Buci-Glucksmann, I'd call a transgressive utopia.

By a transgressive utopia, I mean not a place, not even a remade social formation, but a process — enacted (hence at some level highly theatrical as well as potentially spontaneous) moments of self-definition and group-emancipation within a hegemonic 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 reappropriate a term used by Jameson) of sexuality, animality, exclusion, ethnicity, poverty, and self-indulgence. Delving into these zones, they locate cultural manholes, 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 misunderstanding; they misconstrue others' enmity and their own putative malfeasance; 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 differentiated society, from eighties to sixties. CC show us the extent to which, like the nineteenth-century texts faintly communicating utopian subtexts, their films emit sixties' signals within a contemporary format.

A similar assertion was made by Ernst Bloch, whose concept of the "not yet" assumes that events in the present contain messages about the ultimate destiny of human society, that within the desecrated everyday there are utopian, anticipatory messages. In contrast to the work of Marxist theorists like Althusser, who

do not account for the possibility of historical change or of individual deviation from social conditioning, Bloch enjoins us to contemplate a dynamic utopia. Within that dynamism and the multiple possibilities 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 assertions about the role of the individual in a community.

I am arguing that we can project an alternative utopianism of transgressive difference which, rather than fetishizing an idealized past or future, inheres in a process of critique, in recognizing and recontextualizing usable community-oriented moments from the past. These moments look toward a non-ideal but nonetheless utopianist future. Correlative to this theory 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, instinctualism, tastelessness, inversion, reversion, and so on) a perception of utopianism-as-process and as-possibility.

Basing an argument partly on the unexpectedly parallel visions of such disparate figures as Fredric Jameson and 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-everything, when even apocalyptic doom and attenuated survival have been endlessly previewed on TV, such content can be seen principally in a skeptical vein or simply ignored. Yet it remains, built into the formats of mainstream popular culture, 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 *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, the May 1968 general strike in France quickly fell victim to the numbing "mediatization" of its words.

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