

“I'm too Drunk to Taste this Chicken”: The Hidden Poetry of Will Ferrell's Comedies

LAURA GARRISON¹

Although Will Ferrell's broad style of lowbrow humor is indisputably popular with American audiences—since 2003, comedies starring the actor have earned more than 1.3 billion dollars in domestic theaters—the attempt to introduce his films into academic discussions of poetics is likely to be met with a lukewarm-coffee spit take (*Box Office Mojo*). This response seems reasonable at first glance, as entertainments involving deliberate contact between drum sets and exposed testicles are unlikely subjects for serious scholarship. But vulgar humor is featured in many great works of literature. In Chaucer's “Miller's Tale,” Alison makes a fool of Absalon in the dark: “He put up his mouth and kissed her naked arse / Most savorously” (103). Petruchio conjures a similarly distasteful image of his own tongue in Katharina's tail in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (2.1.13). The unfortunate Strephon peers into Celia's brimming chamber-pot in Swift's “Lady's Dressing Room,” while Joyce's *Ulysses* treats readers to a description of Bloom “asquat on the cuckstool,” enjoying a leisurely poo while reading the newspaper (Joyce 68; Swift 89-90). There is nothing inherently unpoetical about crude or scatological references, and their presence within a work clearly does not indicate art of inferior quality.

Yet popular comedy continues to be regarded as aesthetically suspect, as illustrated by a scene in the NBC comedy *30 Rock* in which Tina Fey's character Liz Lemon tells a colleague about something that happened while she was waiting in line for “the Truffaut retrospective,” only to have a flashback reveal she was

¹ For students in my American Film class at Roanoke College initially drew my attention to this subject matter: Cameron Guernsey, Matthew Lintner, Thomas McAleer, and Dylan Stein. Thanks, guys. This would never have been written without your unflagging enthusiasm for Will Ferrell's *oeuvre* and cheerful disregard for my detailed directions.

actually buying a ticket for *Hot Tub Time Machine* (“Don Geiss” 00:02:43 - 00:02:55). Liz Lemon's impulse to hide her affection for these sorts of films likely resonates with anyone who wishes to be perceived as intellectual. Perhaps people worry others will conflate the characters in these films with the audiences who watch them. Aristotle says comedy presents “an imitation of inferior people . . . the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful,” and this is still a common perception of the genre (9). But some popular comedies have substance lurking beneath their insouciant surfaces.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque shows how an atmosphere of irreverence provides an important opportunity for social criticism: “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). What Bakhtin terms “grotesque realism,” with its emphasis on “the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life,” is rooted in a tradition of folk humor (18). Echoes of grotesque realism are seen in *Film Comedy*, in which Geoff King describes contemporary “gross-out” comedy as “based on crude and deliberate transgressions of the bounds of 'normal' everyday taste” (63).

Other film studies provide additional points of connection between old and new comedies. Gerald Mast's *The Comic Mind* is an important early effort to establish film comedy as a subject for serious study, and while its list of eight comic film plots is overly restrictive and incomplete, recognizing elements from some of these plots in Ferrell's films helps situate them within a broader tradition. Like Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*, Ferrell's *Step Brothers* and *The Other Guys* exemplify the *reductio ad absurdum* plot, in which “a simple human mistake or social question is magnified, reducing the action to chaos and the social question to absurdity, while the use of lots of “miscellaneous bits” in *Anchorman* connects it with Charlie Chaplin's pictures (Mast 5-6, 7). In *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, Henry Jenkins argues that the fusion of Hollywood cinema's “demand for character consistency, causal logic, and narrative coherence” with vaudeville's “emphasis on performance, affective immediacy, and atomistic spectacle” produced a new film genre he dubs “anarchistic comedy,” which is exemplified by the Marx Brothers (24). The success of the Marx Brothers has a lot to do with their off-the-wall dialogue filling the need for verbal humor that emerged when motion pictures began to incorporate sound, and some of the funnier exchanges in Ferrell's films are animated by this same spirit of anarchy.

Ferrell's comedies have not received a great deal of attention within the field of film studies, and what has been written has largely focuses on specific characters he has played or his comedic persona. Michael Tueth's *Reeling with Laughter* covers eleven distinct categories of American film comedy but mentions Ferrell only in passing as a “clownish grown-up” (176). The study also includes *Old School* on a list of examples of “Dionysian” comedy, a sub-genre epitomized by *Animal House*. Tara Powell offers a thoughtful analysis of Ferrell's character Ricky Bobby, arguing that “*Talladega Nights* is the *Deliverance* of our time, responding to white anxieties about the suburbanization of the rural South by commodifying and colonizing its stereotypes” (218). Saul Austerlitz lauds *Anchorman* as “a luminously subversive tribute to misplaced masculine aggression” and singles out Ferrell as one of “American cinema's two great exemplars of the non sequitur exclamation” along with Ferrell's grandfather, W. C. Fields (362, 358). In his study of *Anchorman*, *Elf*, and *Talladega Nights*, Colin Tait finds a direct link between Ferrell's comedic persona and the theatre of the absurd, focusing on how both offer “thinly veiled critiques of institutional irrationality (corporate capitalism, patriarchy, whiteness) as well as the breakdown of language” (167). These studies offer some valuable insights about the ways in which these films reflect or critique American culture and society, but there is another important comedic element of these films that has not yet been examined in a systematic way.

A compelling case for a detailed poetic analysis of the dialogue in Ferrell's comedies is rooted in a facet of their popularity: the alluring yet elusive quality of quotability. A highly quotable film can be loosely defined as one from which many lines are quoted frequently by a large number of people. Comedy is subjective, but high quotability suggests that a film not only offers the sort of humor that resonates with a lot of people but also that its dialogue is funny in a particularly memorable way. This analysis focuses on four films: *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004); *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006); *Step Brothers* (2008); and *The Other Guys* (2010). All of these films were co-written by Will Ferrell and director Adam McKay, so there are reasons to expect common stylistic elements among them. In an interview for *Variety* with Ferrell and McKay for the tenth anniversary of Gary Sanchez—the production company they formed in 2006, which has become known for its “offbeat choices”—the interviewer observes, “they don't so much finish each other's sentences as trade off words throughout an ongoing free association”

(Riley). This playful approach to language is one of the many distinctive features their films share with well-crafted poetry. An investigation of underlying metrical patterns and other devices of sound along with an examination of vivid figurative language and original imagery will reveal how poetic techniques contribute to the comedic effects of the lines.

Different types of poetic meter, repetition of words and structure, figurative language, and surprising imagery work on their own or in combination to create funny lines that audiences tend to cache in their mental storage units. The devices of sound lend a catchy, musical quality to the rhythm of the dialogue, while the vivid descriptions create indelible sensory impressions. The success of Ferrell's comedies in this regard is a more meaningful indicator of their lasting popularity than their impressive box office receipts. Recognition of the subtle but persistent poetic qualities of their dialogue suggests these films possess some aesthetic merit, which makes it difficult for detractors to dismiss the films themselves or the audiences who flock to them.

It has been asserted that these films are highly quotable, but determining a film's relative quotability is an inherently squishy task. The sorts of informal conversations in which people tend to bat their favorite lines back and forth are not typically recorded or monitored in any way that would allow a sufficient sampling to be mined for relevant data, and an attempt to recreate such conversations in a structured environment would be hopelessly unnatural. Casual observation and interaction with people in social situations can build up a sense over time that certain films tend to embed themselves more deeply into a culture's consciousness than others, but that evidence is circumstantial.

The most useful resources in determining a film's quotability are media outlets with a focus on popular entertainment that have taken it upon themselves to weigh in on which films are the funniest and most quotable in the form of traditional lists and the list-article hybrid known as a *listicle*. These are either written by staff or compiled from reader responses to surveys. Among such pieces, *Anchorman* appears frequently and is consistently placed high on ranked lists (*Alloy*, *AV Club*, *College Humor*, *Esquire*, *Hollywood.com*, *MTV*, *TimeOut*). As noted in *Empire's* "50 Funniest Comedies Ever," where tens of thousands of reader votes determined *Anchorman's* rank of number two, "When endlessly quote-worthy dialogue enters everyday conversation (as it has at Empire Towers), you know it's something special." *Entertainment Weekly's* "35 Most Quotable Movie Comedies," where it is also ranked as number two, calls *Anchorman* "a delightful

collection of whimsical non sequiturs,” while *IndieWire* proclaims it “a satisfying, endlessly quotable masterpiece.” *Step Brothers* also appears on many lists of funniest and most quotable comedies (*Alloy*, *AV Club*, *College Humor*, *Esquire*, *Hollywood.com*, *IndieWire*, *MTV*). *Talladega Nights* is number thirty on *College Humor*'s list of the “Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time,” and Amber Lee refers to it as “one of the most quotable movies ever” in a feature on sports movie one-liners for *Bleacher Report*. Both *Uproxx* and *Moviefone* have recently published listicles focusing exclusively on humorous quotations from this film. *The Other Guys* is one of *College Humor*'s “Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time” as well as one of *MTV*'s “25 Funniest Movies Ever . . . This Millennium.”

Taken together, this evidence presents a compelling case for the high quotability of these films. In discussing the cumulative impact of Ferrell's films in “The 50 Best Comedies Since 2000,” the *AV Club* singles out their dialogue and connects it to their box-office dominance: “Sixteen years in, our new millennium looks like a banner age for big-screen comedy, as eclectic as any that came before it. This is when Will Ferrell transformed the multiplex into a deliriously Dadaist screaming match.” This description is particularly apt; as Walter Benjamin notes, “Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in the film. . . . Their poems are 'word salad' containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language” (41). Contemporary film audiences seem to crave these same effects, and Ferrell and McKay consistently provide them.

With Ferrell's comedies situated within a rich tradition of literary and film history and their dialogue having been established as integral to their comedic effects, a close poetic analysis of particular lines can begin. Any attempt to explain what makes something funny is a perilous undertaking; as E. B. White notes, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (xvii). However, this scenario can be avoided by exploring the effects of poetic elements in these films in a way that leads to an increased appreciation of their craft and an encouraging view of the state of contemporary comedy in general. The formalist method employed here follows the approach outlined by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry*, with necessary adjustments to accommodate the transcription of auditory text as experienced by a film audience. The metrical analysis uses the scansion technique outlined by Brooks and Warren and explicated in detail by Paul Fussell in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* in which

stressed syllables are indicated with an acute accent and unstressed syllables are indicated with a breve, like so:

ˈ h ă n d l ɛ b ər | m ʊ s t ʌ t ʃ ə
handlebar mustache

It also adopts the premise of Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense* that a poem's meaning is inseparable from its auditory effects.

Poetic Meter

Naturally, the dialogue in *Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*, and *The Other Guys* is in prose, not verse. But as Brooks and Warren observe, “Rhythm is a principle of all life and all activity and is, of course, deeply involved in the experience of, and the expression of, emotion . . . rhythm is a natural and not an artificial aspect of poetry and is, therefore, an indication of the relation of poetry to the common experience of life” (2). Rhythm and timing are key elements of comedy, and an audience attuned to poetic stress patterns will detect several distinct poetic meters in the lines spoken by various characters, each with a corresponding range of humorous effects.

The Anapest

Anapestic meter is composed of feet in which two unstressed syllables are followed by one stressed syllable, resulting in a carefree rhythm that bounces like a cartoon rabbit in a clover patch. It has a long tradition of use in the composition of humorous verse, with the limerick being the most famous example. As Fussell observes, “the very pattern of short anapestic lines is so firmly associated with light impudence or indecency that a poet can hardly write in anything resembling this measure without evoking smiles” (12). It is fitting, then, that this poetic meter sometimes emerges in the dialogue of Ferrell's films.

Brennan Huff, Ferrell's character in *Step Brothers*, is a reluctant guest at the reception following his mother's second marriage. When dinner is served, Brennan sums up his frustration at having his desires ignored in a single complaint: “I didn't want salmon; I said it four times” (00:03:42 - 00:03:45). Scanning reveals the dominant anapestic meter of this statement:

~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~
 I didn't want salmon; I said it four times.

Unable to bear such disappointment, Brennan storms out of the banquet hall. Halfway to the exit, he makes a bitter declaration that reinforces the pattern by exactly replicating the meter of "I didn't want salmon":

~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~
 This wedding is horsesh*t. (00:03:50 - 00:03:51)

Taken together, the whole speech forms a short poem with humor that is heightened by the disjunction between the speaker's anguished *cri de cœur* and the anapestic meter in which he expresses it:

I didn't want salmon;
 I said it four times. . . .
 This wedding is horsesh*t.

This line spoken by Ferrell's character Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights* is also in anapestic meter:

~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~
 I'm not sure what to do with my hands. (00:09:28 -
 00:09:30)

This dialogue is not intrinsically funny on the page. Without the visual context the film provides, the tone is ambiguous; the speaker could be anyone from a jittery bride-to-be posing for her engagement photographs to an axe murderer regarding his own blood-dripping fingers with consternation. In the actual film, racecar driver Ricky Bobby is being interviewed by a reporter, and the comedy arises from the combination of the words, which are delivered as an apologetic aside, and the actor's movements. While he answers questions, Ricky's hands rise into the air and hover awkwardly at chin level for a few seconds before starting to grope the microphone and his own face, seemingly of their own accord, as if feeling around for a doorknob in the dark (00:09:33-00:09:56). The simplicity of the dialogue allows the funny gestures to shine, while the anapestic meter's close association with light verse underscores the laugh.

The Iamb

While trochaic meter is comparatively rare, iambic meter is the most common poetic meter in English verse (Arp 181n). An iambic line's pattern of feet composed of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable echoes natural speech patterns and therefore calls less attention to itself than other metrical schemes, but it lends an effortlessly musical quality to any speech. Sonnets are traditionally composed in iambs, and epics including Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* are written in the unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter known as blank verse. Metrically, this line from *Step Brothers* would be right at home in a Shakespearean soliloquy:

~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ '
 You know what's always good for shoulder pain?

(00:30:49-00:30:51)

Brennan shouts this question to his younger brother, Derek, who lies injured on the ground; Brennan and Dale are still in the treehouse from which Derek has just fallen. Before Derek has a chance to respond, Brennan continues, switching to trochaic trimeter as he answers his own mocking question with blatantly unsound medical advice:

' ~ | ' ~ | ' ~
 If you lick my butthole. (00:30:52 - 00:30:53)

In this delightful metrical mash-up, the abrupt intrusion of the trochee's forceful beat adds extra punch to the punch line. As if this question and answer were not sufficiently insulting on their own, Dale (John C. Reilly) chimes in with a supportive “Snap!”, cheering Brennan's vivid burn with a single syllable that maintains the dialogue's puerile tone (00:30:54).

A similar effect is produced in another line from *Step Brothers*:

~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ '
 The f**king Ca-ta-li-na wine mixer! (01:14:27 - 01:14:28)

This exclamation is first voiced by Derek (Adam Scott) and echoed later as a refrain by Derek's wife (Kathryn Hahn), Derek, and Dale's father (Richard Jenkins) (01:26:31 - 01:26:38). The whole line is in iambic pentameter except for the final foot, which is trochaic. This places two stressed syllables, “wine” and

“mix,” back-to-back, creating a jarring disruption of the established rhythm that is in keeping with the negative feelings expressed in the statement, which is the source of a great deal of stress for the protagonists.

As seen in these examples, the presence of meter in dialogue introduces a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that can have different effects, sometimes by creating a rhythm that complements or contrasts with the message conveyed and other times by setting up a predictable pattern only to deviate from it, delivering an auditory goosing to startle the listener into a laugh.

Repetition

Ferrell's films often employ repetition in dialogue for comedic effects. Neutral words or phrases become funny when they are repeated, and the effect of innately humorous words becomes magnified through repetition. As discussed in the previous section, this occurs with *Step Brothers'* refrain of “The f**king Catalina wine mixer!” But it can also happen on a smaller scale within a single speech or line of dialogue. While repetition can be used for many different effects, in these comedies it often reinforces the immaturity of the male characters.

Ferrell's character Ron Burgundy delivers this short speech in *Anchorman* while seated at his desk drinking a glass of scotch, shortly before going live on the air to read the news:

I love scotch.
Scotchy scotch scotch.
Here it goes down,
down into my belly. (00:02:35 - 00:02:41)

The repetition in these lines is glaring; the word “scotch” appears four times in a row, with a slight variant in the second instance, where the addition of the suffix “-y” transforms it into an adjective. Anadiplosis, a scheme in which a word occurring at the end of one phrase or clause is repeated at the beginning of the next, is also employed here with “down.” In both cases, the repetition of words contributes to the childlike quality of the speech, which is composed entirely of one-syllable words, except for “Scotchy” and “belly.” The latter is a child's word for “stomach,” while the silly-sounding “Scotchy scotch scotch” contains

phonetic echoes of *cootchie-cootchie-coo*, a nonsense phrase associated with tickling.

The action that accompanies the speech—drinking scotch—is mature in the sense that it is something only an adult would do (although a responsible adult would wait until after work to engage in this activity). The unprompted statement of adoration combined with the redundancy of describing one's own actions as they are happening suggests some state of intoxication has already been achieved; i.e., this is probably not Ron Burgundy's first scotch of the day. The overall effect of the words, the delivery, and the action makes Ron seem like a drunk toddler, and the laugh arises from the inappropriateness of this combination.

Less obvious but perceptible effects can be achieved through repetition of structure, as when Brennan exclaims “So much space! So many activities!” as he and Dale jump around their shared bedroom in celebration of having transformed their twin beds into a loft in *Step Brothers* (00:37:58 - 00:38:01). The parallelism in the construction of these phrases emphasizes the connection between the ideas, implying that the newly uncovered expanse of carpet is the potential site of a vast array of future undertakings. This effect is further reinforced by the use of anaphora, a scheme in which a word is repeated at the beginnings of successive phrases. This giddy enthusiasm is inherently funny in two middle-aged men who still live with their parents, and the comedy is heightened by the visual of the loft itself, a shoddy, haphazard construction that towers precariously in the frame, building anticipation of the inevitable collapse in which beds and dreams will be simultaneously crushed.

Repetition of words and structure can also work in combination; in a memorable exchange from *Anchorman*, Brick Tamland is moved to contribute to a discussion about love by professing his ardor for an assortment of inanimate objects in the office: “I love carpet”; “I love desk”; “I love lamp” (00:39:57 - 00:40:12). When Ron Burgundy gently questions the sincerity of these statements—“Do you really love the lamp, or are you just saying it because you saw it?”—Brick, instead of elaborating, staunchly reiterates his feelings, infusing each repetition with the fervor of deep commitment: “I love lamp. I love lamp” (00:40:14-00:40:17; 00:40:18 - 00:40:21). Alliteration strengthens the connection between “love” and “lamp,” while the omission of an article (e.g., “I love *a* lamp”) or demonstrative adjective (e.g., “I love *this* lamp”) results in an assertive subject-verb-object construction in which every word receives equal stress, which in turn magnifies the ridiculousness of the assertion. At the same time, the

absence of an article elevates the singular object's generic status to a proper noun with a unique identity, as in "I love Lucy" or "I love Paris." Through complementary elements of repetition and Carell's inspired delivery, which conveys both confusion and a stubborn devotion, this simple three-word sentence achieves a powerful comedic effect.

Metaphor

Figurative language is another poetic element that frequently contributes to the comedic effects of the dialogue in Ferrell's comedies. Sometimes the role of this element is understated, as in this line from Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman*: "I'm in a glass case of emotion!" (00:52:00 - 00:52:02). On the page, the figurative implications of this statement are unclear, because only the source of the metaphor is identified. The target is provided by the visual context of the film—this outburst occurs inside a phone booth, in response to a question about Ron's location posed by the person on the receiving end of the call, Brian Fantana (Paul Rudd). Brian is baffled, but Cleanth Brooks would understand this organic fusion of the realm of ideas and the world of tangible things: "Finding its proper symbol, defined and refined by the participating metaphors, the theme becomes a part of the reality in which we live—an insight, rooted in and growing out of concrete experience, many-sided, three dimensional" ("Irony as a Principle of Structure" 741). Ron's feelings are in a tumultuous state that cannot be encapsulated in the vernacular, but his fumbling attempt at elevated language is so clunky that it is actually charming. Its utter uselessness as a reply to Brian's question "Where are you?" enhances this amusing effect, elevating it to an expression of pure poetry that is untainted by any hint of a practical purpose (00:51:58 - 00:52:59). The scene in which the line occurs could even be viewed as an example of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative: "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" ("Hamlet" 61).

While the previous example demonstrates how figurative language can be used effectively in combination with visuals, many of the metaphors in Ferrell's films do not require any visual context beyond what the audience's imagination can supply. In *The Other Guys*, Mark Wahlberg's character Detective Terry Hoitz

encapsulates his frustration at being cooped up in the office with this metaphor: “I am a peacock; you gotta let me fly” (00:14:14 - 00:14:16). Likening his own situation to a generic caged bird would have made for an accurate yet clichéd (and therefore forgettable) comparison, but by specifically identifying himself a peacock, Hoitz ramps up the humor by defying conventional bird species symbolism. The peacock's most notable feature is its stunning tail fan, which it ostentatiously displays in its efforts to attract a mate. For this reason, the peacock suggests an exaggerated sense of self-importance; it is typically associated people who are vain about their looks and like to show off. So it is an odd choice for a self-descriptor. Furthermore, while the peacock *can* fly, it is not especially known for its flying abilities; any number of other avian species would have made for a more sensible comparison. This slight mismatch of diction and purpose undermines the character's argument in a humorous way.

Specificity plays a similar role in this metaphor flung by Ron Burgundy during an argument with his co-worker Veronica Corningstone (Christina Applegate) in *Anchorman*: “You are a smelly pirate hooker!” (01:07:57 - 01:08:00). There is quite a lot to unpack in this juvenile insult, which denigrates the object's personal hygiene, assigns a cutthroat viciousness to her character, and labels her a prostitute with admirable succinctness. “Hooker” gets the most emphasis as the object, which is an effective placement choice, because the implied comparison of Veronica and a woman who debases herself by performing sexual acts for money is the most cutting element of the remark. On its own, this word would have sounded cruel, but the two modifiers preceding it serve to mitigate this effect. “Smelly” disparages Veronica's odor, but as this adjective is associated more with the playground than the office, it comes across as amusingly childish. The second modifier, “pirate,” used here as an attributive noun, catapults the whole insult into the realm of a swashbuckling adventure on the high seas, achieving a level of absurdity that drains almost all the venom out of “hooker.” The comedic effect is heightened if one attempts to visualize the three elements in combination. Furthermore, the metrical similarity of the words emphasizes their close connection:

' ~ | ' ~ | ' ~
 smelly pirate hooker

Each word receives stress on the first syllable; together, they form a line of trochaic trimeter, infusing the whole phrase with a metronomic severity that

attests to the speaker's anger but clashes with the silly metaphor he uses to express it.

There is an exchange in *Talladega Nights* in which ineffective similes are taken up as a topic of conversation. Ricky Bobby and his best friend Cal Naughton, Jr. (John C. Reilly), are celebrating another racetrack victory when Cal observes, "We go together like Chinese food and chocolate pudding" (00:21:27 - 00:21:30). When Ricky points out that those items do not pair particularly well, Cal tries again: "We go together like cocaine and waffles" (00:21:37 - 00:21:38). This would have been a funny exchange even if Ricky had given up at this point; matching an illegal stimulant with a family-friendly breakfast food is wildly inappropriate. But the dialogue continues as Ricky adopts a different tack, prompting, "We go together like peanut butter and . . ." Cal confidently finishes this sentence with "ladies," and Ricky patiently corrects him: "No. Jelly" (00:21:44 - 00:21:50). When Cal counters with "You'd like to put jelly on a lady?" Ricky finally abandons his attempt to extract a sensible simile from his friend, whose mind seems to follow some deviant system of internal logic (00:21:52 - 00:21:54). This exchange demonstrates a conscious awareness on the part of screenwriters Ferrell and McKay of the comedic applications of figurative language, which may help to explain why they incorporate so many off-kilter metaphors in the dialogue of their films.

Unexpected Imagery

Vivid imagery is another key poetic element that appears in the dialogue of Ferrell's comedies, sometimes expressed as figurative language. Imagery is such a fundamental aspect of poetry that it has its own school, imagism, whose adherents follow Ezra Pound's command to "Go in fear of abstractions" and believe, as William Carlos Williams declares, there are "No ideas but in things" (Pound 201; Williams 9). Ferrell and McKay share this respect for the power of the concrete image, and the examples in this section focus on the comedic effects of unconventional sensory imagery that surprises the audience. Sometimes this is achieved by pushing a familiar image into unfamiliar territory, as in *Step Brothers* when Brennan confides to Dale, "I feel like a lightning bolt hit the tip of my penis" (00:43:13 - 00:43:16). This line occurs during a conversation in which the two stepbrothers come up with a plan to form their own international

entertainment company. There is nothing unusual about signifying the arrival of a brilliant idea with a lightning bolt, but there is something peculiar about specifying one's penis tip as the location of the strike. It introduces a sensation that sounds both sexual and painful, yet Brennan's experience is neither of these things. The comedic effect is achieved by stretching conventional imagery into an unexpected shape that is bafflingly at odds with the sensation it describes.

Detective Hoitz, the unjustly grounded peacock from *The Other Guys*, is scornful of any male who falls short of his minimum standard for masculinity, but his criteria are elusive. One man who definitely does not measure up is his colleague Detective Allen Gamble (Ferrell), a mild-mannered desk jockey. As part of a lengthy explanation of why he does not want to work with him, Hoitz offers this critique of Gamble's elimination process: “The sound of your piss hitting the urinal—it sounds feminine” (00:07:35 - 00:07:38). This comment is bizarre for a couple of reasons. While it is not uncommon for the sounds emanating from one coworker to act as an irritant upon another—constant sniffles, desktop pedicures, tuneless humming—voiding one's bladder into the appointed receptacle is not a noise typically singled out as problematic. The specific nature of the criticism is even more confounding, as it is unclear how the splash of anyone's pee in a urinal, a fixture that is absent from traditional ladies' rooms for anatomical reasons, could be perceived as “feminine.” Even attempting to imagine this auditory experience is funny.

The stress arrangement amplifies this humorous effect; the remark is a metrical cornucopia. It starts off with the skipping beat of anapestic meter:

~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~
 The sound of your piss

But then there is a shift to dactyls, which are feet composed of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. This is surprising because dactylic meter “is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen” and therefore calls attention to itself by virtue of being unusual (Arp 181n):

~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~
 hitting the urinal—

Following the stressed syllable “piss” with another stressed syllable, “hit-,” has the added effect of emphasizing the assonance found in the *i* sounds of both those

words, which strengthens the connection between them; an unstressed echo of this occurs a few syllables later with “urinal.”

The last part of the line is composed of an iamb and another dactyl, which has the effect of bunching up the stress in the middle of the clause:

 ~ ' | ' ~ ~
 it sounds feminine.

The back-to-back stressed syllables keep both the verb and the adjective in focus, which makes the audience more likely to note the nonsensical nature of the criticism itself. Because the rare dactylic foot has a “feminine” stress pattern (i.e., it ends with an unstressed syllable), its prominent use may even lend a subliminal irony to Hoitz's words. The “i” assonance established in the earlier portion continues in this clause with “it” and “feminine,” lending an audible coherence to the whole line that highlights the significant metrical variation within it.

Hoitz's complaints about the lack of testosterone in the sounds of Gamble's bodily functions do not end there. “Even your farts,” he observes, “they're not manly.” When Gamble dismisses this accusation as “ridiculous,” Hoitz gets more specific, using figurative language to convey sound imagery: “They sound like a baby blowing out the candles on a birthday cake” (00:25:23; 00:25:24 - 00:25:26). He first calls Gamble's masculinity into question by claiming the sound of his urination is effeminate; here, he continues this line of attack by describing the sound of gas emitting from his anus as infantile. Key words in the image are emphasized by consonance (“baby,” “blowing,” birthday”) and alliteration (“candles,” “cake”) as well as consistency of stress—all of the two-syllable words in this line are trochees:

 ' ~ | ' ~ | ' ~ | ' ~
 baby blowing candles birthday

These poetic devices of sound combine with the unique imagery to create a memorably funny line that makes Gamble's farts sound enthusiastic and cute. The insult is a mild one, conveying a sense of celebration even as it paints Gamble as helpless and inexperienced.

There's a scene in *Anchorman* where field reporter Brian Fantana attempts to seduce Veronica Corningstone after applying pungent cologne called Sex Panther. The fragrance is so objectionable it sends his coworkers fleeing from the room.

Veronica compares it to “a used diaper full of Indian food,” and another office worker, Garth Holliday (Chris Parnell), finds it reminiscent of “a turd covered in burnt hair” (00:23:41 - 00:23:44; 00:23:50 - 00:23:52). While both of these images are distinctive, and the second uses similar sounds to solidify the connection between “turd” and “burnt,” the funniest description is delivered in perfect iambic trimeter by an unnamed female character (uncredited):

~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' |
 It smells like Bigfoot's dick. (00:23:56 - 00.23.58)

While the imagery in the first two descriptions attempts to capture the smell by combining two undesirable but familiar odors, the third employs a single cryptozoological anatomical reference. This simple sentence adheres to the three principles of imagism that were first outlined in *Poetry* in 1913: be direct, avoid unnecessary words, and “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase” (Flint 199). Despite the Sasquatch's unsubstantiated existence, its large, hirsute form is humanoid enough to make visualizing its sex organ both easy and comical. However, the real genius of the image lies in its olfactory component—like an effective horror film, it harnesses the awesome power of the human imagination, daring the audience to conjure a stench that no one has ever experienced. Capturing this humorously crude image in the iamb's elegant, understated meter creates a line that is unforgettable.

Conclusion

Examining Ferrell's films as part of a broader comic tradition is critical to evaluating their impact. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot observes,

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the superinvention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (5)

In this view, what has been learned through this study has significance beyond the films themselves, not just in terms of their potential influence on the next generation of comedies but also for our understanding of their precursors and the development of the genre as a whole. Bakhtin argues the medieval carnival “sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever-changing, playful, undefined forms”; this applies in equal measure to comedy in general and McKay and Ferrell's films in particular (10-11). At its best, the dialogue in Ferrell's films is a creative fusion of original images with classic poetic devices, eliciting a laugh of mingled surprise and recognition that resonates deeply with the human experience. In the words of Mel Brooks, revered comedy director and pioneer in the field of cinematic fart jokes, “Humor is just another defense against the universe” (*Rolling Stone*). In this view, zany metrical schemes and nonsensical metaphors have purpose; they fight chaos with chaos and laugh in the face of cosmic indifference.

As this analysis of *Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*, and *The Other Guys* has demonstrated, the presence of poetic elements in the dialogue of these comedies amplifies their effects in a way that may help explain their exceptional quotability. The degree to which the lines penned by Will Ferrell and Adam McKay have been absorbed into the popular lexicon speaks to a cultural impact of some consequence. The act of quoting, whether tossing off a favorite one-liner or reenacting whole scenes verbatim with one's buddies, is a sort of verbal cosplay in which one playfully inhabits an aspect of a fictional character's identity by trying on his or her words. Memorizing a line of dialogue is an act of linguistic preservation that conveys value; if enough people within a culture can quote lines from the same film from memory, that film takes on the status of a cultural artifact. Understanding the factors that influence this process could help construct an effective critical framework for evaluating humor in dialogue. To that end, this study represents the first step in the development of a poetics of comedy in American film.

Works Cited

- “The 50 Funniest Comedies Ever.” *Empire*, Bauer Consumer Media Ltd., 20 June 2016, empireonline.com/movies/features/50comedy/?film=2/.
- Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell, Christina Applegate, Steve Carell, Chris Parnell, and Paul Rudd, DreamWorks, 2004.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin, 1996.
- Arp, Thomas R., editor. *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 9th ed. Harcourt Brace, 1997.
- Austerlitz, Saul. *Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy*. Chicago Review P, 2010.
- AV Club Staff. “The 50 Best Comedies Since 2000.” *AV Club*, Onion Inc., 11 July 2016. film.avclub.com/the-50-best-comedies-since-2000-1798250301.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana UP, 1984.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Prism Key P, 2010.
- Box Office Mojo*. “Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=anchorman.htm>.
- . “Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=anchorman2.htm>.
- . “Blades of Glory.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bladesofglory.htm>
- . “Daddy's Home.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=daddyshome.htm>

- . "Daddy's Home 2." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=daddyshome2.htm>
- . "Elf." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=elf.htm>
- . "Get Hard." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=gethard.htm>
- . "Old School." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=oldschool.htm>
- . "The Other Guys." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ferrellwahlberg2010.htm>.
- . "Step Brothers." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=stepbrothers.htm>,
- . "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=talladeganights.htm>.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "Irony as a Principle of Structure." *Literary Opinion in America*. Edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel, Rev. ed., Harper, 1951, pp. 729-41.
- Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry*. 4th ed., Harcourt Brace, 1976.
- Brooks, Mel. "Seven Revelations about Mel Brooks." By Charles M. Young, *Rolling Stone* 9 Feb. 1978, rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/seven-revelations-about-mel-brooks-57086/.
- Calhoun, Dave, Cath Clarke, et al. "The 100 Best Comedy Movies." *TimeOut*, Time Out Group Plc., 11 June 2018, timeout.com/london/film/100-best-comedy-movies.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Miller's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill Coghill, Penguin, 2003, pp. 88-107.

- “Don Geiss, America and Hope.” *30 Rock*, season 4, episode 15, performance Tina Fey, National Broadcasting Company, 18 Mar. 2010.
- Eliot, T. S. “Hamlet.” *Elizabethan Essays*, Haskell House, 1964.
- . “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1932, pp. 3-11.
- EW Staff. “‘Billy Madison’ at 20’ and the 35 most quotable movie comedies.” *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly Inc., 10 Feb. 2015, ew.com/article/2015/02/09/most-quotable-comedies.
- Flint, Frank Stewart. “Imagisme.” *Poetry*, vol. 1, no. 6, Mar. 1913, pp. 198-200.
- Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Rev. ed., McGraw-Hill, 1979.
- Holmes, Dave. “The 18 Most Quotable Movies of All Time.” *Esquire*, Hearst Communications, Inc., 5 Jul. 2016, esquire.com/entertainment/movies/news/a46379/best-movie-quotes.
- Horner, Rachel. “14 ‘Talladega Nights’ Quotes We’ll Never Stop Using.” *MovieFone*, AOL HuffPost Entertainment, 3 Aug. 2016, moviefone.com/2016/08/05/14-talladega-nights-quotes-well-never-stop-using.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Reissue edition, Vintage, 1990.
- Jenkins, Henry. *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. Columbia UP, 1992.
- King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. Wallflower Press, 2002.
- Lee, Amber. “20 Favorite One-Liners from Classic Sports Movies.” *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., 21 July 2014, bleacherreport.com/articles/2136854-favorite-one-liners-from-classic-sports-movies.
- Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

- Newman, Jason. "The 25 Funniest Movies Ever . . . This Millenium." *MTV*, Viacom, 28 Mar. 2011, mtv.com/news/2803280/best-comedies-2000s.
- The Other Guys*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg, Columbia Pictures, 2010.
- Playlist Staff. "The 25 Best Comedies of the 21st Century So Far." *IndieWire*, Penske Business Media, LLC, 12 May 2015, indiewire.com/2015/05/the-25-best-comedies-of-the-21st-century-so-far-264139.
- Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry*, vol. 1, no. 6, Mar. 1913, pp. 200-206.
- Powell, Tara. "'You Taste of America': *Talladega Nights*, *Deliverance*, and Southern Studies." *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970*,. Edited by Andrew B. Leiter, McFarland, 2011, pp. 217-29.
- Riley, Jenelle. "Will Ferrell and Adam McKay Celebrate a Decade of Gary Sanchez Productions." *Variety*, Penske Business Media LLC, 27 May 2016, variety.com/2016/film/features/will-ferrell-and-adam-mckay-gary-sanchez-productions-1201782344.
- Savage, Lily. "The 15 Most Quotable Comedies of All Time." *Alloy*, Defy Media LLC, 5 July 2014, alloy.com/entertainment/10-grool-quotable-comedies-time.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Edited Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, et al., The Norton Shakespeare Comedies, Norton, 1997, pp. 144-203.
- Step Brothers*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell, John C. Reilly, Adam Scott, Kathryn Hahn, Richard Jenkins, Columbia Pictures, 2008.
- Suarez, Ana Luisa. "The 25 Most Quotable Movies of All Time." *Hollywood.com*, Hollywood.com, LLC, 27 Oct. 2015, <http://www.hollywood.com/movies/the-most-quotable-movies-of-all-time-60479486/#/ms-22554/1>.

Swift, Jonathan. "The Lady's Dressing Room." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. C: *The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Lawrence Lipking, and James Nogle. Norton, 2006, pp. 2590-93.

Tabrys, Jason. "'Talladega Nights: The Ballad Of Ricky Bobby' Lines That Will Turn You Into A Champion." *Uproxx*. Woven Digital, 23 Mar. 2015, uproxx.com/movies/talladega-nights-quotes.

Tait, R. Colin. "Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrell's Time-Bending Comic Persona." *Communication Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2014, pp. 166-82.

Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly, Columbia Pictures, 2006.

"Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time." *College Humor*, Connected Ventures LLC, 11 Mar. 2011, collegehumor.com/toplist/6426788/bestcomedy.

Tueth, Michael. *Reeling with Laughter: American Film Comedies: From Anarchy to Mockumentary*. Scarecrow P, 2012.

White, E. B., and Katherine S. White, editors. Preface. "Some Remarks on Humor." *A Subtreasury of American Humor*. Coward-McCann, Inc., 1941, pp. i-xxxii.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. New Directions, 1995.