

## Prehistory (Introduction to *Teleparody*)

This is parody's mission: it must never be afraid of going too far. If its aim is true, it simply heralds what others will later produce, unblushing, with impassive and assertive gravity.



Umberto Eco, "Preface" to *Misreadings*

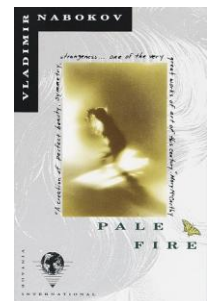
“The writing of a novel is a form of the loss of creative liberty. . . . In turn, the reviewing of books is a servitude still less noble. Of the writer one can at least say that he has enslaved himself—by the theme selected. The critic is in a worse position: as the convict is chained to his wheelbarrow, so the reviewer is chained to the work reviewed. The writer loses his freedom in his own book, the critic in another.”



Stanislaw Lem (as quoted by Stanislaw Lem in *A Perfect Vacuum*)

Every great writer, Borges once noted enigmatically in an essay on Franz Kafka, "*creates his precursors*" (365). But does every new art form as well? Every new critical form? Whatever the fictions that make up this volume actually are (and even the editors will admit they are not entirely certain, though as a gloss we have thought of them as “prophetic/prophylactic” criticism), they are not without precedent. They have not only cursors (those colleagues who complained at a national conference where some of them were presented that we had “gone too far!”) but precursors.

If, for example, some of these teleparodies make fabulous use of the footnote and the scholarly commentary as discursive forms, well did not Vladimir Nabokov in *Pale Fire* (1962), a “novel” comprised of a 30 page poem followed by 150+ pages of mock-pedantic annotation, pave the way?



If our supposedly academic volume taken as a whole strains credulity and fails to pass the “duck test,” it is not the first. In the June 25, 1996 issue of *The Village Voice* was it not possible to read an announcement of a forthcoming already published tome very akin to the present one?

**Re/bound: Slavery and Liberation in the Work of Dennis Rodman**

To be published last year by Routledge

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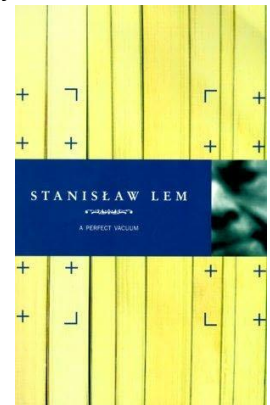
"Essays" for *Re/Bound* we are told in a concluding whimsical note "must be submitted in accordance with *The Chicago Bulls Manual of Style*."

If these pages contain occasional enigmatic references to other non-existents (books, for example, that will not be published for several decades, or futuristic

media developments) in a strange loop of interconnecting fictions, they are in good company. For do we not find in Douglas R. Hofstadter's award-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* an equally loopy, vaguely familiar annotated bibliography entry?

Gebstadter, Egbert R. *Copper, Silver, Gold: An Indestructible Metal Alloy*. Perth: Acidic Books, 1979. A formidable hodge-podge, turgid and confused—yet remarkably similar to the present work. Professor Gebstadter's Shandean digressions include some excellent examples of indirect self-reference. Of particular interest is a reference in its well-annotated bibliography to an isomorphic, but imaginary book. (748)

If *Teleparody's* reviewers have read and critiqued books that are not yet, they imitate genius.<sup>1</sup> For has not the impossibly polymathic Polish science fiction mastermind Stanislaw Lem authored two entirely comparable books: *A Perfect Vacuum* (1971), a collection of "perfect reviews of non-existent books" (books, Lem implies, he had always meant to write but had not gotten around to), and *Imaginary Magnitude* (1981), prefaces for books that will be written in the 21st century.<sup>2</sup> "Literature to date has told us of fictitious *characters*," Lem explains. We shall go further: we shall depict fictitious *books*." In such a development Lem discerns "a chance to regain creative liberty, and at the same time to wed two opposing spirits—that of the belletrist and that of the critic" (*A Perfect Vacuum* 4).<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Although the precedent I am about to cite is Polish, and more than one of our teleparodists is English, there may be something distinctly American about our enterprise. As the historian Daniel Boorstin has observed, American discourse is characterized by a way of speaking about things in which "what may be is contemplated as though it were in actual of taking place" as if they already existed. Our book dispenses with formalities.

<sup>2</sup> "Reviewing non-existent book is not Lem's invention," Lem tells us; "we find such experiments not only in a contemporary writer, Jorge Luis Borges (for example his "Investigations of the Writings of Herbert Quaine"), but the idea goes further back—and even Rabelais was not the first to make use of it" (*A Perfect Vacuum* 3).

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Lem wonders aloud:

If no philosopher named Schopenhauer had ever existed and if Borges had invented in a story a doctrine called "The World as Will," we would accept this as a bit of fiction, not of the history of philosophy. But of what kind of fiction, indeed? Of fantastic philosophy, because it was

If these teleparodies play matchmaker to artistic and critical/scholarly impulses through the medium of television, the following nuptials are not the first of their kind. Nor are they the first to blur the boundary between real scholarship and parody.

The reader will no doubt recall the grave commotion caused several years back by the publication in the cultural studies journal *Social Text* of an article (“Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutic of Quantum Gravity”) by NYU physicist Alan D. Sokal. When Sokal subsequently revealed in *Lingua Franca* that his essay was in fact a parody, a hoax intended to expose the nakedness of postmodern critical emperors, all hell broke loose.

Sokal was not the only scholar at play in the 1990s. Lawrence Douglas and Alexander George authored an hilarious put-on called “Freud’s Phonographic Memory and the Case of the Missing Kiddush Cups” (published in *Tikkun*), a send-up of scholarly discourse that includes a footnote citing an essay by Father Terence McFeely, S. J. entitled “The Mammary of Things Past: What is Beneath Freud’s Slip,” published in *The Journal of Genital Theory*.” As Douglas explained in a back page piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, their attempt at humor, perfectly recognized by his own mother, who found it hilarious, was subsequently cited with great seriousness by several scholars—possessing tin ears equal to those of *Social Text*’s editors—who had not gotten the joke.

When this book was in development, the editors posted for a time some of these teleparodies on the web to facilitate editing. One of the internet search engines discovered the otherwise blind site, and a surfer who discovered my own contribution to this book (a review of a book on *Baywatch*), called attention to the supposed author, a former acquaintance of me, of one of the essays in that book.<sup>4</sup> My colleague, congratulated on his recent publication, and e-mailed me to inquire how he had come to publish an essay that he did not remember ever having written. With ease I explained that I had merely appropriated his real name as the fictional author of a make believe essay in an imaginary book which I was pretending to review. He was not amused, and I removed his name.

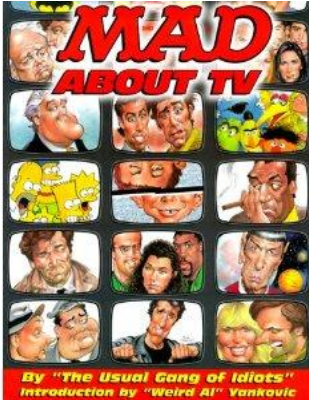
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published nonassertively. Here is a literature of imaginary ideas, of fictional values, of other civilizations—in a word, the fantasy of the “abstract.” (“Todorov’s” 220)

Our teleparodists, we might suggest, are practicing “fantastic criticism.”

<sup>4</sup> As the reader will soon discover, our authors sometimes use real names (though only with permission), and sometimes change names to protect the innocent.

Nor are we the first to send-up television. Perhaps television lends itself to parody. After all, as Mark Crispin Miller argues, the medium “does not elicit our rapt absorption or hearty agreement, but . . . actually flatters us for the very boredom and distrust which it inspires in us.” Television, in Miller’s deeply cynical view, “solicits each viewer’s allegiance by reflecting back his/her own automatic skepticism toward TV” (194). If TV “derides and conquers” (in Miller’s telling phrase)—if, that is, it is inherently inclined toward self-parody—it is possible that any serious (or mock-serious) consideration of it will seem to be a put-on.



I grew up reading the brilliant television parodies in *Mad Magazine* (recently collected in book form). Today, the always hilarious online humor newspaper *The Onion* masterfully parodies television scholarship. In one piece, “Report: Mankind’s Knowledge of TV Trivia Doubling Every Three Years,” we learn that research conducted by Rutgers University’s Center for Media Studies indicates that “species familiarity” with television minutiae is rapidly increasing and improving in quality. *The Onion* quotes Mark Bennett: “It’s no longer all that impressive to know that two different actors played Darrin on *Bewitched*. . . . To impress these days, you’d have to know that there were two Mrs. Kravitzes. Or two Louise Tates. Or that Jerry Seinfeld was on the first season of *Benson*.” In “Report: TV Helps Build Valuable Looking Skills” we learn (this time from NYU’s Center for Media Studies) that adults “who grew up in homes without television” have “difficulty staring blankly at things for longer than a few seconds.” In fact,

they frequently shifted their gaze and focus around the testing environment, often engaging others in the room in conversation and generally making a lot of disruptive noise and movement. Television enriched adults, however, could sit and look at anything: a spot on the ceiling, a fire-alarm box, a stack of magazines on a table.

But it hasn’t just been humor zines that have parodied television. In pieces that might well be included in this volume, we find such a major intellectual as the Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco parodying television scholarship in such

journalistic pieces as “How to Be a TV Host” and “The Phenomenology of Mike Bongiorno.”<sup>5</sup>

**Lawrence Douglas’ perplexing experience** with scholarly fiction led him to surprising conclusion: “For all our savvy and theoretical sophistication, we have lost the capacity to make very simple judgments about a text—such as, for example, whether it claims to be true or intends to make us laugh.” We trust *Teleparody* will produce no such confusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Bongiorno is an Italian TV celebrity, best known as the host of quiz shows.

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