The comedian Chris Farley routinely performed a carnivalesque humor. This essay considers his appearances on Saturday Night Live as a critical site for understanding a dominant practice of transforming the carnival-grotesque (a positive force, according to Mikhail Bakhtin) into a burlesque (a negative aesthetic expression, according to Kenneth Burke). Particular attention is paid to a skit in which Farley performs an exotic dance, which serves as a model for this problematic endeavor. Aligned with Bakhtin's concept of reduced laughter, this essay further considers media coverage of Farley's death as a symptomatic extension and completion of this disciplinary practice.

Keywords: Carnivalesque; Grotesque; Burlesque; Farley; Bakhtin; Burke; Reduced Laughter

The whole body, the whole being is a theater.—Hélène Cixous, Rootprints

The intense, abrupt life of comedian Chris Farley (1964–1997) was marked by a career dedicated to the carnivalesque. When he died of an overdose of cocaine and opiates, he left a legacy of movies and skits on Saturday Night Live (SNL) whose humor turned on a profound and laughing aesthetic of excess. His characters epitomized a desire to obliterate acceptable boundaries and social conventions. In addition to portrayals of such hefty iconic figures as Newt Gingrinch, Rush Limbaugh, Jerry Garcia, and Bill Clinton, Farley played a series of literally larger-than-life gourmands and grotesques: Matt Foley, the hard-on-his-luck motivational speaker condemned to live “in a van down by the river”; Bennett Brauer, the Weekend Update correspondent who does not “play the game,” “shower,” or even “own a toothbrush”; Cindy, an overweight saleswoman who routinely—and voraciously—
detours from her diet; the embodiment of the global weather event El Niño; Tommy Callahan and Mike Donnelly, bumbling members of a comic duo shared with the fastidious David Spade; and Haru the Great White Ninja.

Perhaps no example better demonstrates Farley’s carnivalesque representations than his character Barney, an exotic dancer who auditions for a gig at Chippendales opposite Patrick Swayze’s classical physique, in what was the comedian’s first feature SNL performance (27 October 1990). The skit immediately became a viewer favorite. Therein, Barney and Adrian (Swayze) trade move for move, shimmy for shimmy, pelvic thrust for pelvic thrust before three stern judges. While Swayze’s hard body glistens under the light, Farley’s unfolds. In Swayze, we gaze upon the controlled, the delicate, a dance of perfection; in Farley we witness the awkward, the flabby, and even his buttocks peeking from an unraveling costume. Barney not only loses the competition but is subject to ridicule in a tone delivered with matter-of-fact precision. “I guess in the end,” the lead judge asserts, “we all thought that Adrian’s body was just much, much better than yours.”

It is a profoundly hilarious and yet equally painful skit, and it speaks volumes about an aspect of laughter still in need of exploration: performances that promote pleasure by overtly disciplining the carnivalesque. While humor analysts, social critics, and an impressive number of theorists of the modern and postmodern have long celebrated laughter’s emancipatory and subversive potential, significantly less attention has been paid to rituals that unsympathetically yoke liberating laughter and invite audiences to delight in that disciplinary act. Similarly, while countless studies of the carnival-grotesque concern issues of marginality, relatively few address how mainstream discourse productions such as SNL might utilize this imagery in service of the status quo.

This essay explores the social practices that transformed Chris Farley’s performances of the carnivalesque from comedic resistance into an impotent object for derision. I examine Farley’s grotesque legacy, especially the Chippendales skit, within the context of “reduced” laughter. I argue that Farley’s comic management fomented a productively ambiguous tension between carnivalesque and hegemonic impulses despite the performances’ design to laugh at rather than with him. I then examine the representations of his death in popular media, which resolved this ambiguity and unleashed unbridled disciplinary endeavors to restructure his performances within a familiar social order. Finally, I critically examine Farley’s re-positioning as a tragic figure whose life serves as an admonitory tale in a book for young adults. These stages can be understood as a forced metamorphosis of Farley’s image from the positive grotesque conceptualized by Mikhail Bakhtin into the negative grotesque discussed by Kenneth Burke. Throughout, I argue that more attention must be focused on practices that discipline humor and its embodied forms, because their means often serve as very subtle but powerful rhetorical maneuvers that invite audiences to tame themselves through laughter.
Chris Farley Unbound: A Contemporary Gargantua

Farley’s explosive antics on SNL (1990–1995) rivaled John Belushi and outperformed the current “fat guy,” Horatio Sanz. A more appropriate term for this cast position might be the “Flesh Man,” since many of the characters these comedians portray are centered not simply around fatness but rather around indulgence—in food, alcohol, emotions, sex, and all other pleasures of an exaggerated body. SNL does not rely upon Flesh Women; since its start in the 1970s, the casts have favored idealistically thin female bodies. So, also, has the show been lax in minority representation except for a few notable exceptions. As with Belushi, Farley was a heterosexual, white male whose marginal status derived almost exclusively from his sizeable girth, his penchant for drug use, and his stamina for excessive performances. Much of Farley’s comedy originated in his willing abuse of a privileged social position. And like his predecessor, Farley quickly gained celebrity for a wild life off-screen that equaled his onscreen intensity. Characteristic of a carnival attitude, he did not readily distinguish between art and life, marked and mundane performance.

Farley’s humor long revolved around his excessive weight and superhuman capacities. From early appearances as “Whale Boy” with the illustrious improvisational troupe Second City Theater until his swan song in Almost Heroes, he delivered the grotesque body coupled with self-deprecating humor and comic timing. This was problematic, however, for incorporating fleshiness with ribald comedy upon an otherwise privileged body created the rhetorical capacity to please and dis-ease at the same time, and the responsibility to accomplish both well. His comic reliance upon a social ambivalence locates his performances within the carnivalesque tradition, which I will briefly review.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s work is a worthy starting point, for he asserts that the intensely indulgent, explosively playful, and deeply communal experience of the carnivalesque—a turning of the world upside down—exists no longer in contemporary Western culture except in the most paltry state. As he describes in several works, the carnivalesque is a highly interactive performative mode based upon ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various billingsgate such as curses and oaths. It offers a “second world” that is neither “finished nor polished” to stand in opposition to the official, the ecclesiastical, the political, and the serious.1 This is a world marked by “loudness,” defined by a “sensuous character and . . . strong element of play,” and “organized on the basis of laughter.”2 The carnivalesque is shared public experience—as Bakhtin asserts in an oft-recited quote, carnival does not know footlights, because it involves all present as participants rather than separating performers from audiences and makes it difficult “to trace any clear dividing line between symbol and reality.”3 Carnival laughter is festive, universal in scope, and ambivalent, a deliberate and abundant confusion of the social order.

Epitomized by Rabelaisian medieval culture, this carnivalesque offers a temporary liberation from hierarchy, from fear, and from suffering, all experiences that derive their power from dogmatic, monolithic seriousness. It emerges from no sanctioned decree, but is a gift “by the people to themselves,” and as an expression of a whole
people (rather than merely a crowd of individuals) the carnivalesque “is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization.”

There is a strong utopian desire running through the carnivalesque—and perhaps more tellingly in Bakhtin’s description of it—by which freedom is defined as the language of fearlessness, akin to marketplace and prandial speech.

During carnival, Bakhtin continues, “the ambivalence of being is revived.”

Death and birth, once intimately linked in ancient fertility rites that spawned carnival, embrace again momentarily. They do so within and through the human body, the living and dying phenomenon that becomes the “measuring rod for the world.”

Drawn to the extremes of human-as-animal sensuality, the carnivalesque emphasizes the grotesque body as a deeply positive element. This public body, at once a real thing and a collective expression, operates upon an elementary arithmetic: the good grows, the bad degenerates.

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world . . . the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body . . .

Exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness: the marking features of a carnivalesque-grotesque style. They are also the hallmarks of Chris Farley’s comedic performances, as I soon detail.

Bakhtin is insistent that any attempt to reconstitute the carnivalesque in Rabelaisian terms is doomed to fail. His theory of “reduced” laughter posits that “parody has grown sickly” in the centuries since Rabelais. By slow degrees, he argues, the carnivalesque was separated from its public character and profound laughter. The state encroached upon its spheres of influence, artists transformed its lived-through folkloric experience into a literary genre, and psychologists rechristened its celebratory social madness as a symptom of individual isolation. In time, Bakhtin claims, laughter lost its potential to regenerate those laughing. It was disciplined by sanctity, by civility, by sincerity, and “cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm.” This individualization of laughter, launched without remorse in the seventeenth century under the rise of modernity, permitted its control by social order. Soon, laughter was regarded as a rival and threat to seriousness rather than its complement. By the nineteenth century, concludes Bakhtin, all that was left was a superficial satire of “bare negation,” in which only a “vague memory” of the carnivalesque-grotesque “slumbers” in modern forms of abuse and infirm genres of laughter.

Following Bakhtin, we might lament that this colonization of the festive world by the systems world leaves us today in a very tenuous circumstance, bound by an impoverished laughter that merely encourages satirists to place themselves above the objects they mock rather than share in a comedy of errors. Still, there is a glimpse of
hope. For while a potent carnivalesque may be extinct, Bakhtin asserts that “the popular carnival-festival principle is indestructible,” and numerous attempts have demonstrated that approximates are possible, if only grafted onto an individual bodily vessel in lieu of a public event. The desire to search for a carnivalesque correlate, an impulse shared by creators, audiences, and analysts of contemporary American popular culture alike, should likewise not be dismissed too rapidly, nor should those ethnographic accounts of carnival that lie outside the scope of this essay. Such a generative energy, even if in nascent form, is itself a worthwhile challenge to contemporary hegemonic social organization. Revitalized folly must start somewhere, and in practical terms it makes sense in a world predicated on an ideology of individualism to start with individuals.

Chris Farley’s performances are ripe for consideration, then, since the cast of characters he portrayed regularly assumed the carnivalesque’s potential. It was not simply his weight that guaranteed this position, for there have been a number of comic fat men on television and not all subverted dominant paradigms. It was rather his artistic ability to bring understatement and brashness into a playful and unpredictable tension, echoing other such scandalous giants as Roscoe Arbuckle, Zero Mostel, and Jackie Gleason. Farley likewise offered a devoutly physical humor; at one moment sedate, at the next blustering. His was a body whose deftness defied its girth and whose humor embraced transgression. He routinely indulged the appetites, and dressed in drag to portray hefty female characters, sometimes further disguised by odious skin ailments, halitosis, old age, and other deformities that mark the grotesque body. He played a queer body occasionally, hyper-active children often, and became infamous for portrayals of out-of-control celebrities. He was prone to effervescent emotional displays. In a parody of the Folgers Coffee commercials, for example, Farley mimed a surprised diner thrown into a state of bulging rage from the betrayal he perceived concerning his drink. His Matt Foley character was a vagrant inclined to loud and abrasive speech, and his Bennett Brauer celebrated all possible social taboos of the engorged body with an indelible charm throughout several appearances:

Brauer. That’s right, Bennett Brauer, here with a commentary. Not quite what you’re used to, perhaps. Not a tidy picture, is it? Because in today’s souped-up society, apparently John Q. Viewer is only comfortable getting his opinions from a Ken doll. Well, maybe I’m not a “G.Q. model” or a “hunk.” Maybe I’m not “handsome” or even “presentable.” I’m not “pleasing to the eye.” Maybe I’m not “witty.” I have no “charm” or “appeal.” I’m not “smart” or even “average.” I don’t “pee in the potty.” I’m not “clean.” I don’t “smell good.”

Brauer. I don’t “wear the latest clothes” or even ones that don’t “reek.” I don’t “change my underwear.” I’m not “buff.” I don’t have “firm breasts.” I don’t “exercise.” And when I do sweat, I don’t “shower.” I’m not “spick and span.” I don’t “clean the area between my crotch and legs.”

Most of these portrayals were, of course, scripted by writers other than Farley himself, so it is important not to underestimate their roles in establishing the image of the carnivalesque nor overstate his. Farley’s contribution, however, was bringing
these images to life by literally throwing his body into them with tremendous intestinal fortitude. A smaller-framed, less daring performer could not accomplish the same novelty, nor could a typical “fall guy” like Chevy Chase, since the comedy presented was not simply slapstick but a nod to gigantism and the vulgar. Farley’s ludic outbursts often broke the professionalism of the production; in several skits, his co-actors hid their smiles in watching him perform. It was one of his “threats” to the show, a subversive potential. In an SNL he hosted just two months before his death, for example, the opening sketch revolved around whether Farley would ruin the evening.

He similarly brought all the senses into play through displays of his body—often unclothed—rather than cerebrally based humor: audiences saw his gut, his buttocks, his body hair matted with sweat, a style of performance that neither Belushi nor Sanz favored. For critics such as Robert Stam, such mass mediated representations are likely nothing more than a simulacrum of the carnivalesque, a top-down, ersatz form that parrots communitarian festivity and draws from its appeal for commercial ventures, but that lacks the authenticity of participatory carnival. It may well be the case that SNL merely serves up a carnival-like substitute, and understood thusly that the official scripts written for Farley may be regarded as repetitions of this exploitation, but I would note here that Farley himself, the performer, took responsibility for carnivalesque play with the images handed to him.

Farley could not, of course, represent the carnivalesque alone. No individual can, since it is fundamentally a shared social experience. While Farley’s series of performances of otherness established a ground for a complicated comic experience, namely simultaneous pleasure and revulsion, they remained a demanding and daring embrace of the carnival-grotesque, which requires all participants to share in its opportunity to toss the yoke of moralism and piety. Without this gesture to the social and without the accepted invitation to the festive at the expense of the “official” (Bakhtin’s term for dominant, hierarchical culture that replicates through hegemony and force), the grotesque body cannot become the “comic monster” that joyously conquers “the fears and oppressions of everyday life” and signals the “defeat of power.” Festive folk laughter requires a “folk” to laugh.

When such collective participation is lacking and the responsibilities to shoulder the carnivalesque are placed upon an individual, the division generates a gap for audiences to exploit. It is the same social gap that carnival experience closes in collapsing the distinction between performer and audience, and hence the reason why strictly theatrical performances of carnival images lie in a compromised aesthetic situation from the beginning. This gap, however slight, permits the audiences a moment to grow circumspect about their laughing, to laugh at rather than with the carnival performer—in short, to become spectators. Under such circumstances, the audiences can afford to forget to laugh at themselves, and therein lies their opportunity to lose sympathy with the other participants.

It is this loss of sympathy that Kenneth Burke addresses in his discussion of the negative grotesque in *Attitudes Toward History*, his early study of “human life in political communities.” Therein Burke introduces frames of acceptance and
rejection, strategies for living centered around particular systems of meaning. Epic, tragedy, and comedy are frames of acceptance, performance modes that accept a given structure of authority, focus attention on expected patterns of social order, and invite audiences to identify with heroes. They differ in scope, however, since epic heroes found civilizations, tragic heroes represent the individual shamefully caught up by the times, and comic heroes recall our common imperfections and folly. Elegy, satire, and burlesque compose frames of rejection in their contradiction to reigning symbols of authority and social structure, their focus on otherness, and, in most cases, their admonishment against “intimacy” with the subject of the attack. Two modes occupy transitional positions between acceptance and rejection: the grotesque and the didactic.

Burke calls the grotesque “the cult of incongruity without the laughter.” This is an important assessment, since it juxtaposes the grotesque with humor, which for Burke is a social practice of laughter. Earlier, he distinguishes humor from the comic, noting that humor alone does not adequately gauge a situation. In other words, something that is humorous is not necessarily comic; humor that laughs at instead of with, humor that polarizes instead of humanizes is not comic because it does not advance an attitude of identification and pathos, nor does it lend itself to the humane and reflexive sense of humor and appreciation of folly that Burke associates with the critical work of comic correctives.

Burke’s negative definition of the grotesque differs from Bakhtin’s positive conception, but there is an interesting relation to be forged. For the former, the grotesque experience—examples include Surrealist art, Nietzsche’s philosophy, Blake’s poetry, and Joyce’s novels—is “in deadly earnest” for those who regard it as true to experience. The grotesque becomes humorous only when one loses sympathy with its aims, whereupon it functions as an unintentional burlesque, a form of rejection. Calling the analysis of grotesque symbolism “a very weedy garden,” Burke argues that it comes to the fore when confusion in the forensic pattern gives more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery than to the objective, or public, elements. One could probably analyze any art, even the most classically clear, and find there such motives as the pit, symbolic castration, rebirth, the mystic awe of light. But when the public frame erected above these primitive responses is broken, the essence stands more clearly revealed. The symbolic quality is revealed more clearly, precisely because the forensic superstructure erected above it is less firm.

The grotesque manifests when the universe lies in pieces. As such, it corresponds with a kind of mysticism and periods “marked by great confusion of the cultural frame, requiring a radical shift in people’s allegiance to symbols of authority.” Too thorough an emphasis on the grotesque’s fantastical imagery may foster a passivity and paralysis, since its social challenge may seem terrifyingly insurmountable. Burke warns against this reaction and an equally pernicious solution, the trivializing of the concerns illuminated by the grotesque so that the ill-omened is quickly converted to the good-omened at the expense of productive but rigorous social reorganization. The grotesque impinges upon audiences and calls them to action in
the construction of society; as such, it occupies a demanding position that is most easily dealt with through silent dismissal.

Burke’s tentativeness towards the grotesque may be contextualized within Bakhtin’s discussion of reduced laughter. Except for Blake, all of Burke’s examples derive from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the period which for Bakhtin signaled a nearly total absence of appreciation for the Rabelaisian grotesque and festive laughter. Burke’s selectivity, then, supports Bakhtin’s lament. But his argument—that one viable solution to the challenge of the grotesque is to unsympathetically dismiss it as a burlesque—fits nicely with Bakhtin’s concern and the present analysis. Under certain representations, the tremendous potential of the grotesque degrades into all surface, caricature, and polemic, the constituents of burlesque action. 29 And as Burke suggests, this devolution occurs most poignantly when the individual overshadows the social, the private subsumes the public, and the psychological dominates the rhetorical.

Farley’s comic success, then, may be understood as resistance to this reduction of the grotesque into the burlesque. We do not here need to decide whether the script writers intended him to be a grotesque or burlesque figure, although I later demonstrate how the media represented his life as tragedy after his death. Unless they were maliciously minded towards exploitation, we might better conceptualize the SNL writers caught in the same entrapments of hegemony as the rest of us. Farley’s performances and willingness to push the line, however, expanded against insurmountable odds brought by contemporary expectations and scripts that positioned his characters for constant failure and rejection. In order to demonstrate how his comic management articulated opportunities for resistance, we must investigate both the ways SNL skits framed him as a burlesque object and how he opened an alternative space through indulgence in a material and collective body image. The Chippendales routine provides an illustrous example for a careful reading of this play of symbols.

The Chippendales Competition: Fat Body Politics and the Fate of Folk Laughter

The skit runs just over six minutes, but is replete with complicated interactions and rhetorical practices that construct a tension between hegemonic and carnivalesque motives. Three judges—two men and one woman—must hire a single dancer for Chippendales, the all male revue. The two competitors, Adrian and Barney, “have been through hell: a five hour audition [and] three call backs.” The judges call them to the stage for one final showdown of erotic technique. Moments later, Adrian and Barney dance side-by-side to Loverboy’s “Everybody’s Working for the Weekend,” whose lyrics heighten the shared voyeurism. It is a vigorous display. For Swayze, the act intertextualizes the smooth moves of his character from Dirty Dancing, Johnny Castle. For Farley, it provides a breakthrough moment of physical comedy that secured his standing at SNL and a legion of fans.

It is little stretch of the imagination to envision this event as a competition between a classical-modernist and a grotesque body. It is important to recognize, of course,
that Farley’s performance does not fully achieve the festive body, since all action is located on his singular frame and not distributed among other revelers. Still, the comparison is worthwhile because it rehearses the agonistic collision of two aesthetics, of what Bakhtin might describe as the difference between the qualitative and the quantitative or the ideologies of oil and wine. Swayze is secure, his composure serious, his body as “far removed from the mother’s womb as from the grave,” and his dance strictly choreographed. He represents the stability of official culture. His is a private, individualized, egotistic body, the “finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development,” the “strictly limited mass.”

Farley, on the other hand, moves so awkwardly that he comes to embody the freedom of movement. The taboos of his performance—the waves of fat, the profuse sweat, the unruly clothes, the explosive moment when his buttocks “take the place of the head”—quickly escape the confines of appropriate social order. His exaggerated gyrations—in one instant he throws himself to the floor spasmodically—mimic the body in death, birth, and orgasm. While Swayze dances, Farley moves, in both the physical sense of motion—a bowel movement—and in the motivated, inspiring sense of calling attention to the need for action. In this unrepentant, unrefined movement, he assumes the role of something universal, just as we begin our lives in random and free movement and only learn “proper” forms through training. In contrast to Swayze’s private and controlled body, Farley’s “becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” through his assertive release in all the possibilities the body offers us to play in the world.

Following the competition, the two wait backstage while the judges deliberate. The audience sees them in their anxiety, each convinced of the other’s victory. They soon return before the judges, who reveal their choice in Adrian. Barney congratulates his competitor and listens to the explanation:

Judge. Barney, we all agreed that your dancing was great and your presentation was very sexy. I guess—I guess in the end we all thought that Adrian’s body was just much, much better than yours.

Barney. Uh-huh, uh-huh, okay.

Judge. You see it’s just that at Chippendales, our dancers have traditionally had that lean, muscular, healthy physique. Like Adrian’s. Whereas yours is—well, fat and flabby.

Barney resists this judgment. He gazes deeply at the authorities and moves seductively as if to win them over still. It is at this moment that the carnivalesque is overtly disciplined; the lead judge ends Barney’s attempt in a tone resonating of a disappointed parent. Adrian comes to Barney’s defense, but his testimony only underscores the problem:

Adrian. I just want to say that this guy—he is one hell of a dancer, you know, and he’s got the sexiest moves I’ve ever seen. And if you’re really serious about going with me, you know, it can only be because his body is so bad.

Barney. Thanks, man.

Adrian. Sure. You know, because on straight dancing, in presentation, ain’t no way
I'm better than him.

*Judge*: Amen. Amen. You see, Barney, we considered the possibility that our heavier female customers might actually prefer a heavy, heavier man that they could identify with, but then we decided—

A telescoping close-up of Adrian’s face ensues and the audience hears only his private thoughts of a dream come true, “the time of his life” (another reference to *Dirty Dancing*). Barney disappears from view and the judge’s continued explanation becomes muffled and then silent. The skit’s final shot displays a still picture of Adrian’s perfectly posed and victorious body while the SNL audience applauds on cue. In this ending, we witness what Bakhtin termed the “world of interiority,” the “private and psychological level” that characterizes the modernist bodily canon. It is represented in contemporary literature by access to a character’s thinking, and it was a practice unknown in Rabelaisian narratives. This interior world stands in stark contradiction to that of action and dialogue, represented in the skit by Barney’s—and Farley’s—continued resistance. The camera’s eye, closing upon Swayze’s flawless body, unfolds the triumph of the psychological over the rhetorical.

Traditional humor theories might easily explain how the skit’s humor takes shape. Incongruities are manifold, starting with the very premise of an overweight Chippendales dancer. Farley’s vain attempts at winning dramatize the superiority theory’s emphasis on laughing at a target. Cathartic moments emerge in the pleasures of the skit’s absurdity. These theoretical perspectives, however, do not necessarily address what is accomplished as the humor surfaces—that is, its social significance as a performance that recreates a particular world of values and invites audiences to share in it. On the most elementary level, the skit blandly reinforces contemporary body politics: the fat body loses yet again. But two other significant considerations are woven into the performance.

First, it utilizes a private audition metonymically for the public sphere. The competition between Adrian and Barney is set on a private stage within the skit, but the stage itself lies before the SNL studio audience, the home audience, and the syndicated audience. In other words, it is a public viewing of a private affair, a mode that complicates involvement. The theatricality of the performance—its architecture, its formal expectations set within late night televised humor—establishes a key promoting spectatorship rather than full participation. The double-staging of the skit performs the breaking of a public frame that Burke identifies as comprising the negative grotesque; try as they wish, audiences cannot readily enjoin the act other than to applaud or laugh in ways that limit bodily experience. Likewise, action at the heart of healthy liberal democracy—public deliberation over the use of power—is here diminished to a private, hierarchically ordered process concerning which pornography best serves consumers. Regardless of the plurality of interpretations, audiences cannot make the skit more than it is during its flow because direct interaction is nearly impossible. With this dramatic turn comes a restoration of the dominant over the liminal, hegemony over carnival. This privatizing of a public event reverses the carnivalesque principle of degradation as the lowering of all that is high so that the normal order of things remains exalted. The abuse reserved for kings
during carnival is instead thrust easily upon the clown because in his private space the king’s power can never be resisted.

Second, the skit represents the act of judgment. By the dictates of the script, the judges drive the humor. They control the frames for meaning upon the competition’s stage just as the televised medium metaframes expectations for the audience and the skit itself. And despite Farley’s robust challenge, the script never erases the differences between superiors and inferiors, even temporarily; it never “winks.” It never caricatures the judges or Adrian with the same limitations as Barney. None of the judges even enjoy the absurdity of their position. They are Bakhtin’s agelasts, people “who do not know how to laugh” with a “blunt pious seriousness.” Through them, the art of judgment twists into the politics of denial. They silence alternative voices and opportunities: Barney’s body, heavier female customers, and the woman judge, who delivers only one line and otherwise nods in agreement with the men. And once they endorse the classical body, even the judges fall into silence as audiences enter into Adrian’s mind in the closing moments. The judges merely function ritually to fix categories according to existing patterns and a past employed to consecrate the present. They not only reduce the ambiguities invigorated by Barney’s/Farley’s presence, but they pass a sentence upon it.

Their judgment, of course, favors the world as it normally is—the official world, whose truth is “put forward as eternal and indisputable.” In this manner, the carnivalesque potential is rejected as burlesque but not entirely pushed into abjection, where it might grow more powerful and monstrous. It is punished and domesticated but then reintegrated as part of the social order, akin to a naughty child. Barney does not continue on as the Abject Hero described by Michael André Bernstein, which culminates in the likes of Charles Manson. Showing neither resentment nor darkness once disciplined, he emerges instead a flaccid hero—acceptable, but only because he is sexually defined and non-threatening. This skit’s pronouncement establishes the pattern for many of Farley’s future performances on SNL, including the “Chris Farley Show,” in which he abused himself physically for ignorance of common knowledge. There was a certain tenderness in these portrayals—he once asked Paul McCartney if it were “true” that in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make—but it came with a loss of vibrant resistance that erupted in his more carnivalesque endeavors. In these later skits, the scripts moved him from a quality of foolish stupidity to idiotism, and with them he lost the power to speak.

And the point needs to be voiced that an alternate ending—Barney victorious—is potentially just as humorous, if not more so given the incongruity, the twist of superiority upon the obvious choice, and the delight in the unexpected. While SNL skits are notorious for simply petering out following an innovative start, the writers certainly missed an opportunity to push the line in solidarity with Farley and the audiences, comment on taken-for-granted values, and sustain the generous humor to the end. The script failed Farley’s rambunctious “genius,” a genius that invited audiences into a risky comic space at once all too strange and all too familiar—and delightfully all too human. In their choice of the classical body over the grotesque flesh, the writers merely replicated the uncompromising hierarchy that the
carnivalesque uncrowns. In their emphasis on the word of the controlled and controlling judges instead of a breaking of frames to address directly the SNL or home audiences, they imposed an all too common socio-linguistic maneuver: audiences did not ratify meaning-making with Farley but watched it made for them.

The Chippendales script is not written to embrace the positive grotesque but rather to tame it, to transform and discipline its potential for transgression under a familiar hierarchical ordering of bodies. Farley’s ability to resist this message of dominance and provide a sympathetic portrayal within its confines is nothing shy of astonishing considering how terribly the deck is stacked. It is a sign of his comic abilities to maintain such sympathies, to play with his body in public, to laugh at himself and ask the same of us, and to ambiguate the tensions between the carnivalesque and the hegemonic, even as the official script moves to discipline him. It is regretful, perhaps, that the writers saw fit to invoke Bakhtin’s positive grotesque only to force its abundance into a coffin and conclude with Burke’s burlesque frame of rejection. It is also regrettable that this became the norm for Farley’s performances in the years that followed. Time and again, he upstaged the script through unexpected bodily gyrations, surprising violations of form, and an unabashed joy that marked its intensity upon his being. But so few SNL scripts left him victorious in the end. More often than not, Farley played an outcast whose marginality was justified rather than questioned.

It was perhaps this same principle that inspired Farley’s excessive off-stage performances of self, and as Bakhtin might have predicted, his attraction to the carnivalesque led to an existence in the borderline between art and reality. Furthermore, nomination to the embodied role of the carnival-grotesque is not facilely compartmentalized into a nine-to-five job. The critical issue, however, is that no individual can assume the work of the social to replicate that excess, open up spaces for meaning, and resist the hierarchical. When Farley tried, it took a heavy toll on him. Still, his trick was brilliant: he asked of everyone in life what we asked of him on stage—to indulge, to blur, to resist—and when no one answered his call, he answered it himself. This invitation, obscene in the purest sense of the word, may have hurried the end of his life, but it also questions the ways we organize our living. And it is remarkably problematic that given his challenge, he is turned into a martyr after his death in order to tip the scales in favor of the official.

The Rhetoric of the Flesh: A Morality Tale

Farley’s death on 18 December 1997 rapidly became headline news from the tabloids to CNN. The major networks and papers across the country covered his death in their evening news and morning shows. A wave of tributes and reports followed, with special focus on his troubled life. People magazine, for example, recounted his “desperate last days,” and the tragedy that followed “a bacchanalian final week full of strippers, drugs and alcohol.”43 The article featured Farley confessing to a hedonism overcoming his desire to be a good Catholic and stitched together comments from his associates regarding his outlandish behavior. SNL producer, Lorne Michaels, noted
Farley’s longing for structure; Jay Leno regarded him an “innocent guy”; Second City producer Joyce Sloane recognized the “demons he just could not fight”; and even the querulous basketball player, Dennis Rodman, deplored his lack of direction. The article typifies media representations of Farley’s demise. And like its companions in print and on air, People squarely places a species of blame on Farley for his lack of self-control. The end caption, for example, cites a friend’s assertion that he simply refused the help everyone offered.

Similar media accounts followed the same tragic structure of moving Farley from a public clown into a weak-willed addict. Early stories at the Toronto Sun, for example, announced “Death Should Come as No Surprise” and “Living Large a Death Sentence.” Details of his “abuse” of alcohol, drugs, and food were stressed in moralistic tones. Critic Richard Roeper lamented that Farley “just couldn’t contain himself,” while Ginia Bellafante offered an even more ominous analysis in her article for Time, “The Suffering of a Fool,” in which she proclaimed, “It is clear that Farley’s life was ravaged by his obsession with excess.” Lengthy and touching articles in Rolling Stone and Entertainment Weekly—“The Last Temptation of Chris”—likewise depicted his end through abundant Christian metaphors of a spiraling fall from grace, and the Wall Street Journal later headlined with an antidote based on Farley’s story: “For Addicts, Force is the Best Medicine.”

E! Online reports continued the religious imagery: Farley, for whom “food was a vice,” crashed and burned because he could not resist his “demons.” All of these accounts further psychologized Farley’s struggle and separated him from his social personae and performances. Few demonstrated the deftness of David Weiss’s obituary in the National Catholic Reporter, written in the days before autopsy results went public. Rather than sensationalize Farley’s death through enveloping metaphors of a—or The—fall, Weiss suggested that Farley died of the very “unabashed crudeness of excess” that he lived. For the author, his death says something about all of us and about the American dream, which Farley poked fun at “by inviting us to laugh at our own worst suspicions about ourselves and our motives.” In Farley’s death, Weiss sees a renewed challenge to audiences: to laugh once the show is over. It is a rare account of the comedian’s final days because it emphasizes his carnivalesque attitude rather than punishes it as the recipe for tragedy.

Thus began the postmortem disciplining of Chris Farley. Unable to speak for himself or resist with his body as he did against burlesque framing strategies, he was quickly positioned as the contemporary tragic hero: a fallen individual, a weakling in the face of temptation, a case study of the psychologically damaged. He was unceremoniously removed from the social context of his performances. His challenging presence was exorcised from the fans who encouraged him to always be “on.” He was exiled from rhetoric; he became psyche. His comic indulgence transformed into its own liability. The drama of the twentieth-century scapegoat, a definitive conclusion to his life’s narrative, fell upon him. In Farley’s case, the ritual obituaries privatized the grotesque body at the moment its flesh began to rot—that is, when it no longer is serviceable to the community—and disciplined what reached for the cosmic and universal when alive by relocating motive entirely onto the solitary
body. The throng of fans, pushers, co-workers, producers, fellow partiers, and enablers who once shared and thrived on his energy disappeared when nothing was left to gaze upon, and then blamed the clown for fulfilling the sacrifice.

Acts of entextualization, the process through which narratives are made stable and crafted into tangible texts and other material expressions, constitute a special kind of discursivity. They not only generate a standardized form for consumption but also unveil who in the community may speak and who does not have a voice. The social problems inherent in this practice are why Voltaire once quipped that history is merely a pack of tricks we play upon the dead: our capacity to entextualize those who are gone is indeed a considerable power with profound ethical concerns for the living who encounter those narratives. The creation of any text, then, bears traces of social organization and contributes to developing rhythmic patterns for socialization. This is perhaps nowhere more deliberate—and critically demanding of analysis—than in books directed at youth. And in Marilyn Anderson's young adult book, Chris Farley, the comedian's life is stripped of its sociability to become a morality tale.

The book is part of the They Died Too Young series from Chelsea House Publications, specialists in middle school library books. The series offers narratives for fourth to eighth graders on popular celebrities who died from overdoses, assassinations, anorexia, obesity, or similar tragedies. John Belushi, Kurt Cobain, Princess Diana, and Tupac Shakur are among the featured icons. The slogan for Farley's book captures the typical moral tone: "Success couldn't tame his appetite for foods, drugs, and alcohol." Following traditional tales of the fallen individual, it begins in medias res with the Chippendales skit and ends with a poster of his image bearing the message "Drugs and Alcohol Can Kill the Laughter in Anybody."

The tale advances along a common psychological binary. It recognizes Farley's professional ascension only through recourse to metaphors of personal entrapment. Anderson, for example, systematically positions Farley as a mind longing to be sound but trapped in an indulgent body:

> Unfortunately Chris was also a regular at wild parties and sometimes had to be carried home. His friends could see he was getting out of control. They urged him to take it easy. Chris knew he should slow down the crazy merry-go-round his life had become, but he just couldn't do it.

Elsewhere, she notes his refusal to comprehend the gravitas of his circumstances: "When Chris got lectures on his behavior, he always agreed that he needed to improve, but he also acted as if it were some kind of game."

This guiding sense of impending tragedy privileges Farley's psychological disposition instead of his social roles. As the biography continues, Anderson depicts Farley always "on" as an "outrageous party-guy moron" and "caught in a terrible trap that was partly his own making," but never questions the relationship between his staged performances and his "real life" nor contemplates that the audiences to both might hold serious responsibility for encouraging his indulgences as a vicarious embrace of the carnivalesque. Even when she suggests that the public would not let him "move on" from being "the fat guy who fell down," the locus of control always
lies squarely upon Farley, who “onscreen or off... felt he had to be the person his fans expected.”

Individualizing Farley’s struggle and holding him solely responsible for his demise through excess, the book performs a lesson and “transforms the center of gravity to a ‘moral’ meaning,” as Bakhtin decried in those who misunderstood Rabelais. Anderson’s story fulfills the rite of sacrifice begun in media reports of Farley’s death and completes an educative matrix, admonishing against indulgence and crossing boundaries of the socially acceptable. Reduced to the personal, private, and psychological instead of embraced as the discursive, public, and rhetorical, Farley’s on- and off-stage performances collapse into a single tragic flaw from which others may learn the necessities of order. The moral of the tale is obvious: he died too young. He died when he should have enjoyed a life equally distant from womb and grave. And with this pronouncement, the symbolic transformation of Chris Farley from an excessive fool to a tragic hero to a laughter-less allegory closes. The carnivalesque he performed so brazenly dies not with a bang but a whimper.

This transformation is predictable. Bakhtin commented upon a similar phenomenon in Romantic literature, wherein the carnivalesque was transplanted from the public realm into the private domain. For the Romantics, the excess of carnivalesque is conceptualized as a psychological cue to a tortured mind, a world “inside” driven to extreme and extremely dangerous passions. Privatized accordingly, the body assumes the shape of a mad artist who speaks against the world as it consumes him. Romanticism radically transformed grotesque meaning into the subjective and individualistic, a “private chamber” through which laughter loses its regenerative power, and madness becomes “a somber, tragic aspect.” In Bakhtin’s estimation, there is a pornographic reward in this new conceptualization, since what was once a healthy expression of the social reemerges as a representative of personal illness regardless of its creative potential. This gesture reduces complicated negotiations of meaning-in-interaction into simplicities and either/or categories. And while the proponents of a Romantic vision may presume a certain superiority by virtue of their personal madness, they do so only in advancing a belief in a normative expectation of balance regulated completely by the official.

In Romanticism, the “wholeness of a triumphant life, a whole that embraces death, and laughter, and food and sexual activity, is lost.” Anderson’s book follows in this vein and ignores the social aspects of Farley’s indulgences and his comedy; the latter serves only as a response to his psychological turmoil, an extension of the metaphor of official measure by which his life and death are judged. The rhetoric of the flesh transforms into the mind’s inner landscape. Balance, rather than excess, becomes the defining stage for human expression. The carnival-hegemony tensions Farley stoked when alive are resolved after his death as he is turned into an icon for temperance and self-control. The book is a culmination of the disciplining of the carnivalesque that initiated on SNL, except with no body around to resist the interpellation or move others to an alternate vision and voice.
Conclusion: The Weight of Laughter

Chris Farley had guts. In life and in art, he was corpulent, profane, vulgar, obscene, overabundant, lowbrow, gargantuan, and sensational. And he was disciplined for it. To appreciate his contributions, we should not place him outside of ideology, which would deprive him of his humanity. Farley was caught by the same hegemonic forces as the rest of us, and since the carnivalesque requires massive public participation, he could not transform his personal body into the social no matter how many indulgent expressions he wrapped himself in. However, Farley also demonstrated that we are not sentenced to the official; it is our creation, just as is subversion. Farley transcended these limitations and seeming impossibilities often enough, starting with the official scripts that directed his failure and depicted him a burlesque fool. In so doing, he performed many of the transgressive features of the grotesque, but with recourse to the hegemonic and carnivalesque attitudes colliding within his body. Had audiences rallied to join him in comic play rather than keep him on a stage, we might perhaps have created a very different worldview in which those who indulge might find a reason to survive.

Farley’s performances ultimately awakened and embodied what may best be described as a carnival-hegemonic aesthetic through which “the other is to be interdeterminately loved and loathed in a single gesture.”62 Farley the human being represented at once the dominant and the marginal, a “fusion of praise and abuse.”63 His characters dramatized the carnival-grotesque for mainstream audiences, but the scripts—the flow of hegemonic power—continually punished him for it. Still, while alive, his indulgence in excessive movement, emotion, and pleasures of the flesh offered resistance to this interpretation while at the same time he dramatized and earned a living from it. Once dead, however, Farley’s body was easily reconfigured in the service of an official moralism and imposition of hegemony. The media reframed his grotesque challenge as a tragic tale reinforcing a dominant order. As Burke forewarned, this gesture transformed a perceived “ill-omened” (Farley’s “abuse” and fall) into a “good-omened” (a lesson about temperance) and effectively silenced any sense of public responsibility or reconsiderations of social order. Comedy and carnival were pushed aside. Farley’s audiences, whose own desire for laughter fueled his indulgences onstage and off, fell silent with him. This is perhaps a common way to experience a celebrity’s death, but it ignores the contributions of his life and our common need for folly. Indeed, the human species has yet to show its deepest respect for our clowns, and until that great achievement is accomplished, we will be forever haunted by our dead.

I wish to make clear that I am not celebrating Farley’s painful drug addictions nor seeking to discredit those organizations such as Rebos House or the Chris Farley Foundation that memorialize him. Nor do I wish to relocate blame on his fans, the SNL writers, or those close to him. Ultimately, the concern here is not about Chris Farley the individual, but Chris Farley as a collective indictment of comic indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. What we deny in ourselves often manifests in others. To investigate how we treat our fools and clowns and laugh-makers, and examine what
demands we place upon them is to question the society we create that marginalizes or alienates them—and ourselves. If we find it troubling that Farley was surrounded by a barrage of texts designed to discipline the carnivalesque attitude he personified and the grotesque mantle he dared to wear, then a humane response may call upon us to recover our festive forms instead of burying them. We might respect his legacy by heeding its calls from the margins and not reduce the complexity of human desires to a morality tale by which to admonish the young.

It is no easy task. The artistic tradition that Farley inherited is one in which the performers abuse an otherwise privileged body—a body that should manifest the official. The carnivalesque is, as Bakhtin details, a temporary festive overturning of the world, but one that ultimately restores the balance in favor of dominant loci of power and its bodies. Thus, when the carnivalesque manifests on a body already categorized within a minority, it is somehow palatable because it does not pose a genuine threat; the eruptions of this carnival-grotesque are easy to ignore precisely because the eruptions end. Upon the heterosexual, white, male body, however, such eruptions represent a greater threat of contagion to the dominant because it is one of them. By making the body present, these performers violate an ideology that separates body from mind, dis-easing a system meant to benefit them. Hence, disciplinary procedures come quickly when these bodies rise to a modicum of attention. It is perhaps not surprising that at the height of their careers, Roscoe Arbuckle met scandal, Zero Mostel blacklisting, and even Jackie Gleason an erratic future. So, too, Chris Farley, upon whom similar limitations were cast both within and outside his professional life.

Reduced laughter perhaps does not unfold as systematically as Bakhtin theorizes, but in Farley, akin to his predecessors, we see a disciplinary reduction from stardom to scapegoat; lurking within is a loss of sympathy that Burke associates with the rejection of the burlesque. Yet, Chris Farley’s performances and the movements of his undulating body challenge us with the conundrum of laughter and life in communities. While he invites us to laugh with him and to recognize ourselves in his foolishness, the dominant frame encourages us to laugh at him. But by relocating the responsibility of public laughter upon the individual, by asking our comedians to carry the weight of the social, we shirk our own responsibilities to laughing, to clowning, and to the carnivalesque. We give in to hegemony without a struggle. And thereby we recreate the very conditions of imprisonment and recalcitrant moralism that we ask our clowns and gourmands to transgress. The ritual extermination of a laughter-maker, especially when retold as a narrative of self-extermination, exonerates all of us from action and from responsibility.

But a counter-point remains to that highly formalized dance: Laughter, especially carnival laughter, is a shared occupation. The organization of modern society may well be predicated on a denial of this notion, just as it is predicated on conflicting messages about consumption and the ideal body. In contemporary hierarchical culture, laughter’s ambiguity is often turned against the clowns who produce it and the audiences who delight in clowning. This tragic conclusion assumes its orderliness by purporting that the clowns have themselves to blame for their misery, and
accordingly advocates of the dominant may cleverly utilize the carnivalesque in their attempts to control meaning. But the clown—especially the profoundly laughing clown of excess bent with unchecked movement—questions the very definitions of freedom that modernity holds dear and asks all of us to re-perform and re-negotiate our desires for liberation in the face of our desires for tyranny. Thus remains the importance of keeping our clowns alive by sharing the responsibility of laughter with them. For in the end, it was not the drugs and the food and the alcohol that killed Chris Farley. It was all of us. We would do well, then, to eat, drink, and laugh in his honor.

Notes

[17] At the time of his death, Farley was in discussion to play Arbuckle in a dramatic role.
[18] I appreciate the questions of gender, race, class, and sexual preference that complicate an appreciation of Farley as a representative of the carnivalesque, just as I recognize Bakhtin’s own limitations in not addressing them. I do not intend to suggest that Farley was a better suited representative and fully recognize how he himself marginalized others in his portrayals of them. I likewise understand that the privileging of the male body in dominant American culture provides for it an indulgence into obesity that is not similarly afforded to women, and Farley took advantage of this for commercial gain. I would assert, however, that these complications should not preclude an analysis of his own transformations.
[21] Burke, i.
[22] Burke, 53.
[23] Burke, 58.
[27] Burke, 75.
[29] Burke, 54.
[30] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 308 and 285. Bakhtin originally describes Rabelaisian grotesque as both qualitatively and quantitatively large, but the re-designation is apt.


[34] The difference here is one of disciplined form: Swayze’s dance is practiced and built upon a repertoire typically identified for exotic dancers (Hanna); Farley begins with recognizable moves but soon erupts into wild gyrations, jiggling, and a parody of “voguing” that does not meet formal demands.


[38] By the “psychological,” I mean an emphasis on the privatized, “mental” world of the individual, which regards neither emotion nor inner monologue as a social construct; the “rhetorical,” conversely, emphasizes social construction and shared responsibilities for meaning-making through artistic communication.


[42] I use the term “genius” here to invoke its original meaning, as an influential spirit, rather than the psychologized notion of the (often-tormented) extraordinary individual, a concept that blossomed with Romanticism and its emphasis on a negative grotesque.


[50] Initially, I planned to present Farley’s own comments about his carnival attitude, such as his reported love of fat comics for their “heart and vulnerability” (*Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1997), but it is remarkably difficult to find representations of his voice before his death. Early reviews of his work throughout the 1990s offer little more than brief commentaries without personal citations. His appearances on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (6 May 1994, 22 March 1995, 12 February 1996), *Dennis Miller Live* (26 May 1995), and *The Tonight Show* (10 January 1997) were likewise promotions of upcoming features, during which Farley played the out-of-control spirit: he cartwheeled his way across the stage, for example, and carried a show writer out of the theater and tossed him into a dumpster. His appearance on MTV’s *Road Rules* (7 October 1996) was a similar vehicle for sheer exuberance. Even his appearance as Newt Gingrinch at the House Judiciary Committee in April 1995, covered by *Time* and major newspapers, brought little more than third-person
commentary. It is not until he begins to openly discuss his “demons,” such as in a *Playboy* interview with David Rensin in September 1997, or an article by Erik Hedegaard in *US* magazine of the same month entitled “Chris Farley: On the Edge of Disaster,” that audiences hear from Farley in his own words. Once he had died, a glut of media representations represented him speaking for himself, but as a victim or fallen one. Farley was a practicing Catholic, so the metaphors were not unfamiliar to him, but the point remains that his voice was kept largely kept silent until it resonated with a tragic story.


[53] http://www.chelseahouse.com/c/@o9gI87tKHAMFU/Pages/product.html?nocache@8+record@P36827 (accessed October 27, 2004).

[54] Anderson, 35.


[58] Anderson, 40.


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