

Reanimating Bodies in the Dark: Staging Movie Riffing as Embodied Media Criticism

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This essay explores the cultural practice of riffing, responding to a mediated text through a series of humorous and/or critical speech acts and movements, through reflection on a devised experimental riff of the movie MegaForce. Experimenting with contemporary and historical audiencing threads such as the movie riffing model of Mystery Science Theater 3000, the participatory embodiment of The Rocky Horror Picture Show's famous ritual, and the bawdy audiences of Shakespeare's groundlings and the peanut galleries of Vaudeville, this essay reflects on the possibilities and challenges of riffing as a model for talking back to ideologically loaded cultural texts while restoring embodiment to the audiencing experience.



“What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper)... The battle for the survival of [hu]man as a responsible being in the Communications era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives.”

-Umberto Eco, “Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare”
(*Travels in Hyperreality* 142)

“So, where did this all begin, this riffing? This looking at things and saying things about them to the amusement of others? Perhaps the first Neanderthal to look at the fluid, delicate image of a bison on a cave wall in what would eventually become Altimera, and then whisper to his cohort ‘That dog looks pregnant’ was the first riffer. If his cohort laughed, then indeed yes.”

-Kevin Murphy, *RiffTrax/Mystery Science Theater 3000*
 (“Foreword” 1)

Included with the purchase of every ticket to my local cinema is an indoctrination into the behaviors expected if I wish my presence to be tolerated. The dimming of the house lights signifies it is time to suspend corporeal presence in barter for my neighbors' concordance in mutual erasure of body and voice. We are to exist silently, contained within the space of a single seat; bodies that cannot or will

not conform to preexisting spatial allocations invite scorn or overt disciplinary action. *Turn off your cell phone* has joined the litany of commandments all geared to ensure a uniformly unobtrusive audiencing experience. In a crowded theater, conspicuous bodies are problematic bodies.

Talking during the movie? Social anathema: a travesty of atrocious behavior, a transgression worthy of loathing, threats, perhaps even physical violence. A story out of Philadelphia tells of a moviegoer who shot a man for refusing to stop talking with his son during a screening of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Billington). A 21-year-old Washington man punched a 10-year-old boy in the face for being too loud during *Titanic* (“21-Year-Old Punches”). On the other side, a California woman whose in-theater phone use drew complaints retrieved a man who stabbed the objector in the neck with a meat thermometer (Winton). Though bloodshed for breaking, or policing, in-theater decorum is the outlier, threats of shame, expulsion, and banishment for refusing stillness and silence waft through the theater air as heavy as non-hydrogenated butter-flavored topping oil.

“Instead of luxury recliners, theater chains should install wooden pews. No armrests. No cup holders,” the *LA Times*’ Glenn Whipp’s piously suggests. “Oh, and maybe equip ushers with wooden rulers so they can take appropriate measures against people who fail to turn off their phones.” Yet, for so many theatergoers there seems to be something tantalizingly transgressive about breaking out of this preconceived role of silently genuflecting before our god the screen, especially when their apostasy is rewarded with the ever-gratifying laughter or applause that just the right pithy comment can evoke from our neighbors. From such performances of defiance, new congregations emerge. *The right performance*, it seems, remains capable of moving an audience and transforming the audiencing experience.

Perhaps it is in at least partial response to dominant models of still-and-silent in-theater etiquette that we have witnessed the (re)emergence of a number of remarkable rituals and performance genres constituted by vocally demonstrative, fully embodied approaches to audiencing mediated texts. Today’s moviegoer pining for an interactive, extratextual audiencing experience far removed from *sit down and shut up* has a plethora of options. The connoisseur of rhetorical snark via ridicule of flawed cinema has performance art built around the ethic of *movie riffing*—responding to a mediated text with critical, often humorous, comments laced

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with intertextual or metatextual references to ancillary cultural texts or icons—modeled by the cult TV show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. The enduring popularity of *MST3K* is evident in its record-shattering 2015 Kickstarter revival (Grinberg) and in the many disciples of its methodology, including comedic riffing troupes RiffTrax (comprised of *MST3K* alumni), Cineprov, Doug Benson’s Movie Interruptions, Mile High Movie Roast, Riff Raff Theater, and Master Pancake Theater.¹ Seekers of embodied in-theater mayhem—dancing, chanting, props, projectiles, and costumes—have interactive audiencing rituals such as those associated with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, whose audience-generated script of vulgar jokes, prop-play, singing and dancing, and cosplay has maintained cultural relevance five decades and counting. Its heartily maligned 21st-century successor, *The Room*, has been putting plastic spoons, footballs, and audiences’ bodies in motion for fifteen years, and films ranging in quality from *Troll 2* to *The Sound of Music* have spawned dedicated embodied audiencing rituals.

For moviegoers who wish to taunt movies until their vocal chords give out, there is B-Fest, Chicagoland’s destination 24-hour “bad movie” marathon, which privileges an interactive audiencing ethic incorporating elements of both the *MST3K* tradition and the *Rocky Horror* tradition. And for lovers of riffing who prefer home theaters to cinemas, RiffTrax.com hosts over 200 professionally recorded commentaries for download and dozens of riffs in the iRiffs marketplace for fan-created commentaries. One could not begin to tally the homebrew commentaries available for access online on personal websites and streaming hosts such as YouTube and SoundCloud. The endurance of it all suggests more than a fleeting cultural embrace with talking back to commercial media for entertainment, for textual criticism, and for restoring corporeal presence to the cultural practice of audiencing movies and other mediated texts.²

The argument against talking during a movie appears outwardly simple. Fixing our gaze or tuning our hearing to a conspicuous neighbor draws upon the senses; splitting attention between competing stimuli limits our immersion in the mediated text that we’ve paid to experience. A riffed text cannot be easily

¹ *MST3K* may be too popular to die, but movie studios are striking back to silence movie riffing acts, leading to at least one long-running troupe, Mile High Movie Roast, shuddering its act (Wenzel, 2019).

² The study of embodied moviegoing practices will benefit from expanding to consider identity markers such as racial, gender, or class identity. For example, there is everyday discourse on the normative claim that Black audiences are more inclined toward conspicuous audiencing practices than White audiences. How much of that is social reality and how much is racist stereotyping, particularly in light of discourses that tie still-and-silent audiencing decorum embraced by White audiences to civility and politeness, deserves further inquiry. We must be mindful not to impose ethnocentric conceptions of cultural practice as monolithic; thus, audiencing practices featured in this study are not intended to construct a universal portrait.

disentangled from the commentary that flows into it, for we are not merely distracted: we are confronted with the substance of each new utterance. This dynamic is precisely what intrigues me about embodied audiencing practices: they brim with potential as a performance model for challenging not only how we understand audiencing as a social experience but also how we orient to specific mediated texts. By responding to mediated stimulus as it emerges on-screen, embodied audiencing has potential to make explicit or productively complicate the text-reading processes undertaken, with various degrees of purpose, in every media consumer's mind and body.

As critics and scholars of media and culture, what and how might we create by mobilizing voice and body through an embodied audiencing ethic? A cast of twelve writers and performers joined me in exploring this through the staged performance of *Nacht der Textlichen Leiche: The Movie Riffer's Performative Guide to Reanimating Bodies in the Dark*. I conceived *Leiche* as experimental performance praxis with the space- and text-based possibilities and constraints of embodied audiencing as a model for purposeful media criticism.³ As space-based practices, in-theater audiencing rituals of the *Rocky Horror* and *Room* tradition offer a cornucopia of site- and occasion-specific performances that derive their cultural salience in part because they privilege actions forbidden in most theaters. The audiencing experience becomes complicated, potentially productively so, when audiences become acutely aware that meaning is produced not only in the interplay between text and reader but between text and a community of readers who introduce their own voices and bodies into a dynamic communal space.

The discursive implications of embodied audiencing rituals—the matter of what is said—warrant further exploration. Obscured by the novelty of the singing, dancing, chanting, and heckling of an *MST3K* episode or a screening of *The Room* is the fact that they themselves are texts that comprise an evocative, often contradictory series of speech acts rooted in various interlocked ideological structures, introduced into a distinct performance space with its own macro and micro histories. If, hypothetically, a riffer ridicules a film's male protagonist as effeminate (thus, ineffective in the tasks of heroism), this statement cannot be disentangled from ongoing social dialogues on gender and masculinity, the use of power and force in social regulation, and mythologies of heroism—to name but a few. Complementary and conflictual discourses intermingle as rifiers mobilize voice and/or body to enter into dialogue over not only the text on-screen but any number of ancillary cultural texts drawn in through intertextual evocation.

It is in this fecund intermingling of space-based and text-based possibilities that movie riffing and embodied audiencing offer untapped potential as vehicles

³ I evoke the distinction of “purposeful” criticism to honor the fact that existing embodied audiencing and movie riffing (e.g., *MST3K*, RiffTrax) texts frequently constitute meaningful criticism, though their primary purpose is ostensibly entertainment rather than cultural critique.

for meaningful dialogue on a multitude of salient social issues facilitated through media criticism. Through an experimental staged riffing of 1982's *MegaForce*, the cast of [performance] endeavored to explore this universe of embodied audiencing by devising a conspicuous, ideologically charged riff. Our goal: set minds and bodies in motion to talk back to a provocative cultural text, thus talking back to culture itself.

The Road to *MegaForce* and *MegaForce* As the Road

The concept of *riffing* has roots in the creative tradition of jazz music, in which riffing refers to playing an existing piece of music in an idiosyncratic, radical style that takes that piece in a new direction that cannot be confined to nor fully understood apart from the root text(s). Yet, even the most unbridled, visceral jazz comes from somewhere and is grounded in something: the core movements of playing music and the cognitions behind them are products of musicians' histories, disciplines, and bodily habits. The mindset of the riffer, to borrow from Horkheimer and Adorno, may be likened to that of a "jazz musician who is playing a piece of serious music, one of Beethoven's simplest minuets, syncopates it involuntarily and will smile superciliously when asked to follow the normal divisions of the beat" (128). This jazz metaphor informed our understanding of movie riffing: as is jazz, riffing is simultaneously enabled by the artist's creative whims and constrained by limits of their perception and intertextual chops.

As director and co-writer, I sought to experiment with the text-based riffing techniques of *MST3K*, laced with purposefully political rhetoric, intersecting with the embodied and space-based traditions of ritual audiencing. My collaborators set out with me (1) to experiment with the sense-making and articulation work that goes into crafting a coherent counter-narrative to an ideologically loaded pop culture text, and (2) to craft a carnivalesque in-theatre atmosphere as a symbolic affirmation of the text-reader's active role in the in-theater experience and theater as space itself. We knew the film we chose would powerfully influence the tone and content of our approach to both objectives.

After screening over 40 films and pursuing screening rights to a half-dozen, that special text arrived: *MegaForce*. *MegaForce* follows its titular multinational mercenary unit on its campaign to invade and subdue the fictional Mideastern nation of Gamibia at the behest of Sardunian general Byrne-White. After over-performing its black-ops subjugation of its target and drawing unwanted Gamibian attention, Byrne-White informs *MegaForce* that the latter cannot be permitted to cross the Sardunian border without starting a war, leaving *MegaForce* to blast its way out of Gamibia while being pursued by Duke Guerrera, cordial but formidable mercenary and former ally to Ace.

Directed by special effects maven Hal Needham and starring *Rocky Horror's* very own Barry Bostwick as heroic mercenary commander Ace Hunter and *Star*

Trek: The Motion Picture's Persis Khambatta as his stay-at-home love interest Zara, *MegaForce* offers fast vehicles and big guns, a glorified military-industrial complex not deigning to depict a single casualty, and a cosmopolitan group of happy-go-lucky soldiers blowing up another country's structures free of ethical or humanitarian concern: Blackwater Security filmed through the lens of *Smokey and the Bandit*. *MegaForce* was an attractive vessel for our experiment because it packages a grim, ideologically repulsive slice of neoconservative reality with a thick coating of Reagan-era Hollywood saccharine. We were confident our acid tongues could burn through that coating and expose the toxic underneath.

Our staged response to *MegaForce* emerged from a rich multiweek devising process that saw eleven people directly contribute to the script. As Nico Wood explains, devising performance "is a method of creating a staged, aesthetic event. But to begin with, it is a method for creating a *method*" (112). One of my hopes for *Leiche* was to devise a foundational model that can be adapted for future performances or by others interested in movie riffing and embodied audiencing from within or outside the academy. As Barry Brummett suggests of useful criticism, "Theory and method need to explicate this example, this object of study, but they also need to explicate the next example, to teach us how to understand the next rhetorical event that comes along" (366). Inviting so many and so diverse contributors into the devising process likely resulted in sacrificing some rhetorical precision in the staged product, but what we sacrificed in perceptual unity we gained many times over in generative multivocality.

Pre-cast scripting began with a series of initial screenings, during which our first wave of writers sat down with *MegaForce* for multiple screenings, writing jokes and teasing out potential themes for criticism. After casting, production formally began with a brief orientation period in which we watched Cinematic Titanic on DVD (to model verbal riffing) and attended a *Rocky Horror* screening (to model embodied audiencing). Our seven principle characters, like so many, quickly mobilized lifetimes of riffing from their couches; little orientation was required.

We screened *MegaForce* together six times in a variety of settings. As we riffed the film freeform, I recorded jokes that seemed to have potential as evidenced by generating laughter or discussion. Our conceptual framework—riffing not only for humor but to assemble an ideologically charged response to our text—required not only riffing scenes, characters, and dialogue but teasing out broader themes for criticism. Doing so required mulling over each joke or gesture at multiple levels of signification. For example, a recurring trope that emerged during devising was riffing the prominent crotch bulges that pervaded every scene in which the members of *MegaForce* don their spandex jumpsuits. Riffers responded with improvised jokes (e.g., "Ace is off to the Battle of the Bulge" ... "I'm sorry, you're going to have to check that, sir"), and from there a recurring bulge-theme drinking game was borne. As production progressed, the bulging crotch trope

culminated in one cast member going full burlesque with stuffing the crotch of his own MegaForce-themed jumpsuit.

Simple mockery of such on-screen iconography was not enough: we inspired to use the riffing form to identify and destabilize the text where its symbolic articulations of reality might read as natural. Roland Barthes explains this process in terms of *mythology*: “it transforms history into nature ...[;] it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason” (*Mythologies* 129). It is here at connotative/mythological levels of language that riffing stakes its claim for meaning. Skillful riffing employs tactical rhetoric to draw attention to connotative elements of the text and critique them in ways that reframe or unmask them. Returning to our example, riffing MegaForce’s crotch bulges tapped into critique of the phallus as a symbol of masculine power, which we intended to work against the film’s packaging of military imperialism as masculine conquest.

This is not to say the film’s producers strategically showcased the cast’s spandex-wrapped genitalia for this purpose or that purpose of any kind was at play, but MegaForce’s virile masculinity *is* the agent through which the film’s violent acts are committed. We attempted to draw our audience’s attention to problematic elements of the text’s construction — (1) prominent phallus equates to potent masculinity → (2) masculinity equates to heroism through violence → (3) violent acts are masculine, heroic — and invited them to reject the attitudes conveyed through them. Doing so *during the film* drew attention to how those attitudes are constructed by particular symbolic elements of the text, presenting us with the chance to destabilize them before crystallizing into mythology packaged in pleasing narrative form.

Once themes for criticism began to solidify, I assigned individual lines to riffers who modified them to fit their characters as they conceived them. Each performer wrote a breakout session⁴ — a moment in which their character would step forward and address the audience directly — ranging from a soliloquy inspired by U.S. military drone strikes, to an outgoing theatre veteran’s meta-commentary on performing on the Kleinau Theatre’s stage for the final time, to a direct message to the audience on the significance of our riffing project.

The themes embedded in *MegaForce* to which we elected to respond (military imperialism, proxy war in the Middle East, military-industrial glorification) were and remain risky topics for comedic performance, and our challenge was compounded by the fact that *MegaForce* rolls them in a breezily entertaining, if mindless, package. We enjoyed our time with *MegaForce* and wanted our audience to

⁴ On *MST3K*, the characters took breaks from riffing the movie to discuss the events of the film or interact in scenarios inspired by noteworthy elements from the film. We saw borrowing this technique as an opportunity to speak directly with our audience about what was happening on screen as opposed to the “talking *at* the screen but *to* the audience” channel we primarily utilized.

enjoy the show, but I was concerned the comedic aspects of riffing and the celebratory carnivalesque tone of ritual embodied audiencing could promote laughing along with the film rather than breaking it apart. “Art that makes the audience ‘feel good,’” Shannon Jackson argues, “risks dulling its capacity to critically reflect, whereas art that disorients or implicates the audience sharpens the critical eye” (138). Though *MST3K*’s opening theme urges its audience to “just relax” — i.e., not dwell on micro details at the expense of enjoying the show — we wanted the opposite effect.

Media scholars including Demo, Hariman, Harold, Meyer, and Warner suggest that performances of humor can function as vessels for subversive or political critique and are essential forms of political discourse. *The Daily Show*, *The Onion*, the Gizmodo (née Gawker) network, *The Borowitz Report*, and AdBusters are examples noted for discussing hot button political issues through ridicule, parody, and humorous contradiction — all tactics that fit well into rifiers’ toolboxes. We proceeded on the assumption that humor can “demolis[h] fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 23). Hariman argues that “scholars should not assume that democracy needs only the right forms of serious public discourse” (248). Even when addressing dire topics, humorous or irreverent criticism that is also reflexive and dialogic invites the audience into the discussion where they may learn more and engage with adjunct issues further.

Ghosts of Audiences Past

Our approach to dramatizing embodied audiencing crystallized as a pastiche of vocal (spoken word, chant, song) and embodied (sight gags, pantomime, dance, prop-play) riffing in a ratio dictated by the collective identity of the cast. Our dramaturgical methodology was a tribute — elegy to the past, paeon to the present — to a rich history of theatre and film audiences activating their voices and bodies in ways that contradict still-and-silent models of audiencing decorum.

Each of our five principle rifiers channeled their performance through homage to a different iconic historical audience, which served not only as creative inspiration but also to remind our audience that embodied audiencing has manifested in different forms throughout the history of theatre and cinema. In our absurd fantastic universe, each riffer played an undead member of The Order of the Lich, a group of theatre/film audience members who haunt contemporary theaters with embodied audiencing.

Brian represented the groundlings of Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, our eldest sampled audiencing archetype. In contrast to wealthy, sophisticated audience members who watched Shakespeare’s dramas from covered galleries, the groundlings probably consisted of blue-collar and lower-class persons who were quick to

express their dissatisfaction with the night's play with vocal demonstrations of disapproval and were as much a part of the Globe experience as the play itself. Verily, as Amanda Mabillard notes, Shakespeare acknowledged the groundlings in no less than two of his revered dramas: *Hamlet*⁵ and *Henry VIII*,⁶ establishing a kind of early dialogue between author and audience centuries before Tommy Wiseau conjured fame from attending screenings of *The Room*. Powerful voice booming and pop culture references blazing, Brian was the most likely member of our ensemble to make a vulgar joke, engage in side conversations with other riffers, or challenge or piggyback onto a fellow riffer's joke. His intertextual fluency was on display throughout the show, serenading the film's swirling Fortune Star productions logos with his best John Fogerty bellow or sardonically dismissing a military general as "half Michael Caine at a quarter of the price."

Angie represented the *parterre* ("on the ground") audiences of 17th and 18th century French musical theatre. Always vocal, occasionally riotous, and "a far cry from the powdered and beribboned dandy that populated stages later in the century" (Mittman 3), *parterre* audiences were the harshest and most vocal critics in the house in a period predating the French Revolution, when the arts were bound to monarchy. Booing, whistling, and throwing fruit were common methods for criticizing a performance, and *parterre* audiences were willing to employ their bodies with all the "[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness" and transgression that characterize Bakhtin's *grotesque body* (*Rabelais and His World* 303). For example, "When the police attempted to outlaw whistling in the spectacles, inventive audiences learned to express their displeasure via coordinated choruses of coughing, spitting, and sneezing" ... and probably breaking wind (Ravel 44).

Lest we mistake *parterre* audiences as grotesquely obnoxious without purpose, they channeled their collective energy into impressive folk power, which Ravel suggests was vital in France's transformation from absolute monarchy (227). Given the politically charged epoch in which they operated, Angie delivered most of the script's more overtly political riffs (comparing MegaForce's disregard to civilian death to Wayne LaPierre's scapegoating strategies, mocking Clint Eastwood's "empty chair" speech at the 2012 RNC) but was not above working blue, punning gratuitously, or planking silently, contemplatively, amidst her peers as they frolicked around her.

Carlÿe (pronounced Car-Lay) was inspired by the fabled peanut gallery audiences of the 19th-20th century vaudeville era, the poorest and most unruly patrons who would communicate their opinions of the night's performance by

⁵ *Hamlet* 3.2: "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise."

⁶ *Henry VIII* 5.4.65-8: "These are the youths that thunder at a playhouse, and fight for bitten apples; that no audience, but the Tribulation of Tower-hill, or the Limbs of Limehouse, their dear brothers, are able to endure."

showering the stage with peanuts (the snack of choice in the cheap seats), as well as booing and hissing. As in the parterre era, the rowdiness of peanut gallery audiences became a point of political conflict between audiences, performers, and powerholders, and ultimately their “boisterous audiencing came under attack” from authorities to re-seize control of the theater space (Bellanta para. 6). Like its parterre predecessors, the peanut gallery employed body and voice politically; Robert C. Allen suggests tensions between audiences and theatre management coincided with rising class tensions of the day, and thus, to borrow from Victor Turner, the peanut gallery’s embodied exuberance represented a liminal period of struggle over control of the theater as vital public space (55). Carlÿe channeled the peanut gallery’s mythology with an energetic full-body performance that blended verbose riffing and wielding props, including, of course, throwing peanuts—circus peanuts: our ghouls would not want to disinvite those with peanut allergies.

Joining Carlÿe in embracing embodiment in audiencing was Margarethe, who channeled midnight movie cults in the spirit of the cult of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, whose members not only coalesce around their beloved text but also “interact as much with each other as they do with the characters and action on the screen” (Austin 46). Margarethe brought amazing embodied energy to the stage in her role, innovating prop-play, serving as a sort of emcee for our live audience, and driving home the burlesque nature of our performance aesthetic by teasing her hair mercilessly to match Ace Hunter’s mullet-and-headband coif. Greg also came from the *Rocky Horror* tradition, but unlike Margarethe’s poised veteran persona, Greg played “the virgin”: a newcomer to the ritual who had recently “died” during his first *Rocky Horror* ritual by impaling himself on a stiletto heel. Like so many who are new to embodied audiencing, Greg overcompensated for a virgin’s inexperience and underdeveloped heuristic vocabulary with enthusiasm and a desire to please his audience with accessible intertextual references such as adding a beloved local professor’s name to his peers’ running list of feminist scholars. His virgin status rendered him a target of light-hearted antagonism from his fellow rifiers, particularly Margarethe, who marked him as a virgin with the iconic lipstick “V” to his forehead.⁷

The Order of the Lich was joined on stage by its antagonist, the manager of the fictional Monsanto Amazing-Plex 14. David represented outside forces that constrain our in-theater behaviors. If our five principle rifiers represented the carnivalesque rejection of in-theater decorum, the manager embodied James C. Scott’s counter-balancing reminder that, “So long as speech occurs in any social situation it is saturated with power relations” (176). The manager served as a

⁷ Our five rifiers were joined by a robot (i.e., puppet) sidekick, Overkill the Omniscient (our homage to *MST3K*’s robot rifiers); Overkill, wrangled by Benny LeMaster on stage, handled the night’s many audio samples and sound effects.

meta-character who moved throughout the theater during the film and our riffers' response, chastising our audience for laughing out of turn or too verbosely; passing in front of the stage to remind our audience that they were being surveilled by management; and reminding everyone that what we said in the theater that night was not without potential consequences once the show was over.

Rounding out our cast were two (on closing night, three) cult members who entered the theater mid-film and performed a *Rocky Horror*-inspired audiencing script of *our* audiencing script. Adorned in frowzy approximations of The Order's *MegaForce*-inspired jumpsuits with props in tow, our cult members filled the theatre space with cheers, jeers, and chants marking key moments in our script and antagonizing the manager. Their presence charged the space with kinetic energy and provided our audience with an easy-to-mimic model of appropriate (in our universe) audiencing behavior.

Barthes reminds us that reading "is a form of work" and "is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority" (*S/Z* 10). By engaging all these voices in a humorous yet oppositional dialogue with *MegaForce*, we constructed a conspicuously challenging audiencing experience. We tasked our audience to be mindful of the following communicative streams: *MegaForce*, the performers on-stage and their scores of riffs and activities, the antecedents to the intertextual references evoked through riffing, a theater manager calling out social transgressions and threatening reprisal for unruly behavior, and (most importantly) their own internal voices, positionalities, and experiences inextricably bound to the ways they made sense of all of the above. Sensory overload was all but assured at the door, for though we assumed our audience would be comfortable with the idea that reading mediated texts is work, our show became the audiencing equivalent of maxing out at the gym with all the hyperawareness of feeling it afterward.

The Order of the Lich v. Ace Hunter: Three Themes in Critiquing *MegaForce*

With characters formed, costumes and props in tow, and hundreds of scripted riffs at our disposal, the primary goal of our experiment remained to disrupt *MegaForce*'s façade of structural sovereignty by conspicuously situating our bodies and ideas between our audience and the screen. As Ryan and Kellner observe, films "impose on the audience a certain position or point of view, and the formal conventions occlude this positioning by erasing the signs of cinematic artificiality" (1). Through verbal riffing and conspicuous embodiment, we sought to identify and magnify elements of the text that had been minimized by the film's bombastic façade of fast cars, big explosions, and jovial soldiers.

We structured our response to *MegaForce* around three recurring themes: (1) problematizing the film's bloodless, heroic depiction of proxy war and rejecting

military imperialism; (2) discouraging audience identification with the text's hypermasculine protagonists, Ace Hunter and his right hand, Dallas; and (3) rejecting the film's depiction of virtuous romance between Ace and Zara by employing *perspective by incongruity* to draw attention to the film's sexist gender politics. All three discursive themes were directed *toward MegaForce*, but, as with any useful critical gesture, they were *for* our audience. We challenged our audience to interrogate *MegaForce's* articulation of reality in dialogue with our counter-articulation of reality.

"A Day Without Killing or Burning a Village is a Day Without Sunshine"

Our most explicit theme was the rejection of the film's depiction of MegaForce's attack on Gambia as a bloodless, victimless military adventure. We perceived the film's depiction of proxy war—zero wounded, zero care for property damage or the terror injected into civilian life, zero regard for potential retaliation on innocents—as grotesquely problematic and reminiscent of the glorification and sanitization of depictions of war that have dominated the U.S. post-Vietnam. In response, we worked to re-insert undercurrents of racism, nationalism, and colonialism that the filmmakers strategically erased in order to power its affirmative articulation of Western military imperialism.

For example, when General Byrne-White expresses concern that MegaForce's pre-invasion plan lacks precision, Carlye mockingly over-performed American imperialism by declaring that MegaForce's true plan was simply "to kill people with different color skin and let light-skinned Jesus sort them out." When Ace Hunter closes a briefing of MegaForce's invasion plan with "Any questions?" our rifiers inquired rapid-fire about probabilities of civilian casualties, troops at risk, or ethical implications of proxy war; Byrne-White then "answered" us by saying he'd greet MegaForce with champagne after their successful mission, leaving our questions unaddressed on screen but hopefully not amongst our audience. During a scene in which MegaForce demonstrates its capacity for spectacular violence by shooting what resembled balloons from their motorcycles, Greg quipped, "Apparently Haliburton charged the U.S. government \$45,000 per balloon," referencing the military-industrial titan's high-profile role in U.S. aggressions against Afghanistan and Iraq. Later in the film, Hunter and Zara have arranged a post-invasion drink in London; when Hunter asks Zara if she remembers where they will meet, Greg suggests, "At your arraignment on war crimes?"

Working to connect on-screen events to real-life atrocities, we compared MegaForce to the presence of Blackwater Security in the Gulf War and Jordan, to the point Carlye performed difficulty telling the two apart. The film put up little resistance to our analogy: at one point, Zara laments that MegaForce's presence in Gambia will be used for "political expediencies," a phrase Blackwater founder Erik Prince employed in interviews to mitigate criticisms of his company (e.g.,

Ciralsky). We extended our criticism of war outward to critique racist, nationalist, and colonial attitudes that undergird the proliferation of Western military imperialism. Greg interjected nationalist racism into the Sardun-Gambia conflict by suggesting the war was the result of Gambians “crossing our border, taking our jobs, using our hospitals, taking our jobs, and making the Walgreens drive-thru ask me to press 2 for Gambianan.” We inserted allusions to former President Obama’s affinity for drone strikes and to War on Terror flashpoints WMDs, yellowcake uranium, and anthrax; as well as conservative figureheads such as Alex Jones, David Petraeus, John Boehner, and George W. Bush. Each reference connected a character or iconographic element from *MegaForce* to a (locally) unpopular real-life figure in an effort to transfer loathing of the real to the text.

Ultimately, we said nothing profoundly new about war, nationalism, or neo-conservative military imperialism; our attitudes toward them were likely consistent with a majority of our audience. But we hoped to demonstrate how those attitudes fit snugly into an otherwise lighthearted action-adventure film, reminding our audience of the presence of powerful ideology even in the kinds of movies we might sanctify as harmless enough to “turn off our brains” without peril.

“I See Ace Leans to the Right.” “This Whole Movie Leans to the Right”

MegaForce’s most potent beacon of audience identification lies in the members of MegaForce: led by Ace Hunter and his affable confidant Dallas (Michael Beck), the cosmopolitan crew of MegaForce is physically capable, ruggedly masculine, and unwaveringly optimistic. Like a crude Hypercolor image of a Howard Hawks ensemble, MegaForce remains cool under pressure, jokes around in the face of demise, and comes through on guts and ingenuity even when best-laid plans are thwarted. We were often charmed by Ace and company in the writing room, but we did not want to risk our audience excusing their violent acts because they grew comfortable with the cast. Thus, we adopted playfully antagonistic stances toward Ace, Dallas, and company to degrade their status as Reagan-era action heroes.

Our first objective was Ace Hunter himself. Though the film presents Hunter as noble, fearless, and charming, we tinkered with gestalt by suggesting that his eyes were too close together. We ridiculed his crotch bulge frequently for reasons previously described. We discounted Bostwick’s esteemed film, television, and stage career by referring to him as the star of the made-for-TV *Parent Trap IV: Hawaiian Honeymoon*. We thrice marked his iconic role as Brad Majors in *Rocky Horror* by recalling the ritual’s repeated branding of Brad as an “asshole,” bestowing the moniker on him first when Ace first reveals his handsome face, again when he enters Zara’s room in formal dress to kindle their romance (“ascot-hole!”), and finally in the film’s climax when he celebrates with MegaForce after escaping his pursuers on his flying motorcycle. At the three moments at which Ace’s

desirability as a man and hero are most potent, we slandered him rather than celebrated him, a precise contradiction to the reaction implied by the text.

Likewise, we rejected identification with the aw-shucks southern charms of Dallas, attaching the stigma of racism to the Confederate flag patch on the sleeve of his jumpsuit and suggesting he “secede” as a character. When Dallas affirms his allegiance to Hunter by humorously suggesting he’ll “get lost” if Hunter surrenders himself to save his men, Greg wryly suggests “it’d be a damn shame if we lost Dallas,” to which Carlÿe responds, “Can we lose Fort Worth, too?” Later, Carlÿe observed that without Hunter, “we’re stuck with Dallas in charge,” setting up Margarethe’s punchline, “We tried that already. Twice,” referring to the historically unpopular George W. Bush presidency.

Our jabs at Bostwick (surely, he endures worse epithets during an average *Rocky Horror* screening) and “his idiot friend from Xanadu” were made not of malice toward the men or their performances in *MegaForce* but rather as vehicles to introduce shades of gray to the film’s protagonist/antagonist structure so that, we hoped, our audience be less inclined to view them as heroic, virtuous, or desirable. Bostwick, Beck, and crew were never true targets of our ire, nor would a mean-spirited takedown of a 38-year-old film with a 0 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes (“*MegaForce* [1982]”) be worth the time and resources of scripting and staging. It was *MegaForce*’s embedded attitudes toward war and violence we sought to diffuse, and our antagonisms toward *MegaForce* opened avenues to question its actions.

“Persis, You’re Getting Lipstick on the Glass Ceiling”

We saw ample space for criticism in the film’s depiction of romance between Zara and Ace. Though Zara, a Sardunian major, is initially presented as an assertive, capable feminine character, that façade quickly crumbles as she falls for Ace, attempts to join *MegaForce*, is explicitly rejected for her gender, and then declares, “Even though I’m not going, I’m glad I came this far!” We groaned aloud in the writing room at the jellification of the film’s only woman yet opted against relying on direct refutation.

Rather, we channeled our disgust through an *MST3K*-inspired embrace of *perspective by incongruity* (Burke, *Permanence*). We *over*-performed the movie’s sexism toward Zara, feigning enthusiastic acceptance for her subjugation to Ace. Our goal in doing so was dragging sexism embedded in the film to the fore; by modeling an extreme inverse of how we wanted our audience to interpret Ace and Zara’s relationship, we indirectly challenged the audience’s capacity to enjoy an earnest *dominant-hegemonic* (Hall) reading of the text. Building on Burke’s ideas, Demo suggests that perspective by incongruity can be an effective tool for critics utilizing humor toward political ends due to the “highly charged nature of the symbolic alchemy produced when differing rhetorical/ideological orientations mix” (139).

Though perspective by congruity is a risky tactic for political humor—what one audience member perceives as over-performing sexism, another may perceive as earnest sexism—we trusted that we could build up enough goodwill with our audience to experiment with it.

In a scene in which Hunter turns his male gaze upon Zara's medals, Brian and Angie condescendingly suggest (as Ace) that Zara was decorated for "dish-washing, walking old people across the street, and most Thin Mints sold." When Byrne-White suggests that Zara "may well end up commanding MegaForce" after her training montage with Hunter, Carlye made the general's vulgar implication of impropriety explicit by shouting that Zara was [sleeping] her way to the top. When Hunter attempts to explain to Zara that she won't be allowed to fight alongside MegaForce, telling her that she "more than proved [her]self...", Margarethe finishes Ace's enthymeme: "... to not be good enough to fight with men." When Zara asks, "Is it because I'm a woman?" and Hunter responds "no," Angie explains, "It's not so much that you're a woman as not a man."

We hoped that our brand of "verbal atom cracking" (Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* 308) would connect with our audience but, recognizing the risk of our intentions being misunderstood, we hedged our bets by making our anti-misogynist message explicit in Angie's break-out monologue. After citing a text on feminist film criticism, Angie concluded that at the end of the film, decorated major Zara's status as feminine love interest demanded she either die, get married, or go to the Lion's Head in London for a drink with Ace, leaving the audience to ponder which restricted path Zara was doomed to follow.

"That Talk is Going to Get Us in Trouble": Failure and Fortune in Vocabulary Building

When culling riffs for our script, we planned to test the limits of perspective by incongruity by inserting a few jokes that were likely to strain the frame of humor to the point of risking offense, discarding some lines that the cast was uncomfortable delivering. Despite our earnest attempts at practicing maximum consciousness for the implications of our language choices and transgressing only with purpose, the possibility of crossing some lines unwittingly loomed, and it was entirely possible it would arrive without intent to transgress.

Two unanticipated audience reactions to jokes stood out to me as being especially informative as to the combustible nature of playing language games in movie riffing. We draw the ire of at least one audience member in an early scene in which Byrne-White arrives in the desert to recruit MegaForce. We commented on Byrne-White's tie-and-fedora attire as being "hipster"-eque, attaching the stigma of "lame" to his aesthetic. In a failing of reflexivity while scripting, I failed to consider that "lame" has been condemned by disability studies scholars (e.g., Donaldson; Fox and Lipkin) as being degrading to persons with ambulatory

disabilities. Being confronted on this transgression instigated a series of constructive post-show discussions and reflections concerning what work I conceived “lame” as doing in the broader framework of our critique. An able-bodied person with professional training in sports journalism, I read “lame” as connotating a temporary injury (e.g., coming up lame in a footrace after straining a muscle) rather than an enduring disability. Ergo, “lame” as shorthand for something that is disappointing or ineffective fit our broad framing of Byrne-White as a character.

Movie riffing as a form of critical discourse has the power to bring the language with which we respond to cultural texts into sharp focus. I regret the unintentional violence of our use of the term “lame.” By entering into dialogue with our audience and reflecting on the language choices we employed in our riffing, we moved closer to crafting a more humane, inclusive and precise heuristic vocabulary with which to respond to future audiencing exigencies.

Further complicating our experiments in “verbal atom cracking” (Burke, *Permanence*) was our heavy reliance on intertextual pop culture references. We made liberal use of intertextual riffing throughout the performance, connecting on-screen stimuli from *MegaForce* to familiar but polyvalent texts such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, Creedence Clearwater Revival, *Red Dawn*, *Cool as Ice*, *Taxi Driver*, *Xanadu*, Hypercolor clothing, The Who, the boardgame Risk, “Time Enough at Last,” *Flight*, *Ru-Paul’s Drag Race*, *The Room*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Se7en*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the *Planet of the Apes* series, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, and the stormtroopers of the *Star Wars* universe.

For the intertextual references listed above, we saw something in the dialogue, soundtrack, tropes or iconography of *MegaForce* and tied it symbolically to a similar element in an outside text we hoped our audience would recognize, bringing the constructed and recursive nature of our text to the fore while inviting comparison between our text and ancillary texts of significance for our audience. For example, we noticed a tendency in *MegaForce* for Zara to turn melodramatically toward the camera when sharing a scene with Ace, so we highlighted the melodrama by singing a verse from Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart,” which we selected (1) to mark Zara’s tendency to “turn around” and (2) because we hoped the song’s concomitant melodrama would color Ace and Zara’s romance as unworthy of emotional investment. Later, in a close-up over-the-shoulder shot between Zara and Hunter, Greg substituted “turn around, close eyes” for “turn around, bright eyes” to harken back to sour earlier riffing on Bostwick’s eyes.

Other times, an intertextual reference can be used to point out something that is clichéd or done more effectively in another text, thereby breaking the illusion of authorial originality and framing the text as derivative and less than. For example, when Duke lands in a helicopter to inform Hunter that *MegaForce*’s invasion of Gamibia has hit rough waters, we celebrated his arrival by singing the *M*A*S*H* theme song. When Duke departs *MegaForce* after his prophecy of trouble is confirmed, we riffed on *M*A*S*H* again, sobbing its iconic theme to

feign sadness that MegaForce appeared to be thwarted. Intertextual beings that we are, we borrowed the “sad version of the theme song” motif from *Team America: World Police*.

Through the complicated dynamics of intertextual riffing, I experienced a productive moment of reticence. One of our recurring riffs involved Suki, *Mega-Force*'s representative of Japan. Each time Suki (played by American actor Evan C. Kim) appears on screen Brian would bark out his name with an ambiguously sharp intonation. I was concerned our audience would perceive this as mocking Suki's ethnicity and did not understand how it played into our emerging critique; it seemed, in fact, to work against our criticisms of racism in times of war.

Ultimately, I lacked the pop culture fluency to understand the significance of the reference. While gathering post-show feedback, those I surveyed read the Suki riff as an intertextual reference to Sookie Stackhouse, the protagonist from *True Blood*. Such was the riff's power to hail our local audience that not only did audience members tell me after the show that “Suki!/Sookie!” was one of their favorite parts of the show, they wanted to discuss and celebrate *True Blood* with me. Whether in such moments of unexpected signification or through the mind-bending process of pondering the second- and third-order meaning of hundreds of riffs (and failing at times), our adventures and misadventures in manipulating language made clear that crafting a shared heuristic vocabulary for criticism through a riffing methodology presents significant challenges, and also opportunities to build goodwill and identification with an audience. As much as I tried to funnel hundreds of riffs into a unified critique, meaning was always filtered through our individual perceptions and experiences, which prove invariably difficult to predict and elusive to fix.

Occupying and Riffing from Every Chair

As Zara aces her predestined-to-fail MegaForce tryout with a simulated motorcycle shootout, we watch as Ace informs Zara she cannot join the squad. Standing in front of a backlit lavender screen, Ace and Zara are only visible in silhouette. “You have got to understand,” Ace tells Zara melodramatically. “Those sixty guys, they have trained, they have fought and lived as one man.” (“Seems like I might have mentioned that before wasting your time and endangering your life,” Greg quips as Ace).

As Ace lectures, he gestures with index finger on his right hand extended toward Zara to emphasize his words. His left arm rests at his hip, finger hanging downward limp, resulting in an unintentional yet obscenely phallic shadow. “Hold on!” Carlÿe hails the booth. The on-screen image freezes, and Carlÿe approaches the screen for inspection. With help from a well-timed ascending slide whistle glissando, the audience realizes what has caught Carlÿe's eye and begins to laugh. “Has anyone else noticed the inordinate amount of bulging crotch in this movie?”

Carlye asks incredulously. Discussion ensues as Ace's "shadow wiener" hangs frozen in time.

"Well, since film criticism is part of our job description," Angie declares, "I think it would be downright irresponsible of us not to talk seriously and knowledgeably about this." From there *The Order of the Lich* tries its collective hands at traditional scholarly criticism by organizing a panel-style discussion on phallic imagery in film. "It's about time you start showing some respect," the manager says with relief.

The pretense of "serious" film criticism is eviscerated in short order, as the panel degenerates to a haze of pseudo-psychoanalytic jargon, profane phallic innuendo, and liberal use of "the ways in which." Our respondent Margarethe weeps at the presentations' beauty, disregards their ideas ("I spent a lot of time with your paper, and I notice you had a title. Don't worry: I'm going to email all this feedback and more in a timely fashion") and urges everyone to come to the business meeting. The manager, frustrated at what he hoped would at long last constitute acceptable criticism, laments:

You're not even taking this seriously. These presentations sound like they were put together on a turbulent plane or maybe a bumpy cab ride from the hotel from the airport. Your "scholarship" is indulgent. It's laden with jargon as to cover up its dearth of thought, and I doubt it will be of use to anyone ever.

The mock panel, which segued into intermission, received one of the biggest audience pops each night. As the audience filed out to the lobby and the cast left the stage to change costumes, I wondered if the manager's dismissive castigation rang true for some of our audience, even those who were laughing and enjoying the show. In a house filled with cultural, critical, and performance scholars who pour their souls into the acts of criticism on the page or the stage, would a riffing as a vehicle for criticism—built on verbal irreverence, embodied precociousness, and intertextual wanderlust—be perceived as an impediment to the goals of scholarly criticism?

In post-show feedback I was able to broadly surmise whether the audience enjoyed the show (generally yes, but not universally so) and if the audience decoded our broader critical themes (generally yes, though some felt they were obscured by casual swearing). For practicing media criticism, though, is riffing as a methodology ultimately a novelty (or an indulgence), saying in two hours across nearly a dozen bodies what could be more efficiently said by one in 5,000 to 8,000 words?

Such a conclusion focuses only on the final product and discounts the generative work undertaken in devising and embodiment. Elyse Lamm Pineau argues, "Performance research, whether it takes the form of ethnographic fieldwork or formal productions of aesthetic texts, insists that living, breathing, speaking, and moving bodies are invaluable sites of inquiry and understanding" (46). On the stage, there seemed to be something potent in the way riffing's commitment to

corporeal presence — different voices and bodies present in the *doing* of criticism — that honored Terry Eagleton’s assertion, “Valid critical judgement is the fruit not of spiritual dissociation but of an energetic collusion with everyday life” (23). Part of our “energetic collusion” (or was it a collision?) with *MegaForce* involved reacting to the text with not only good humor but the “essential political emotion” of anger (Nehring 70) along with exasperation, tedium, and disgust for our object of criticism. Rather than erasing or downplaying our visceral reactions to the text in pursuit of a disembodied authoritative voice, we bore them on stage, inviting the audience to partake in the ebbs, flows, and cul-de-sacs of our interpretive journey.

The process of riffing *MegaForce* also affirmed what makes riffing a fascinating site of cultural production: it revealed the often-opaque meaning-making process — decoding, fragment-gathering, assembly, application — and bore it beneath the theater lights, where signification could be explicated and shared with our audience. What other directions could riffing be taken if undertaken as purposeful ideological criticism? What form and tone might a radical feminist riff of *The Notebook* assume? A postcolonial riff of *Avatar*? Would further riffing experiments critiquing a range of texts through diverse ideological lenses affirm our show’s assumption that humor empowers cultural criticism, or would riffing become a more effective vehicle for criticism if rifiers forsook humor for harsher antagonisms, “mak[ing] use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image” (Adorno 72)?

Such questions needn’t be reduced to binaries of correct/incorrect, for different perspectives and approaches to textual criticism intermingle dialogically like Burke’s conception of *poetic meaning*. Not every riff is critical and not every riff is an enjoyable experience, yet they contain or hint at valid and valuable articulations which “cannot be disposed of on the true-or-false basis. Rather, they are related to one another like a set of concentric circles, of wider and wider scope. Those of wider diameter do not categorically eliminate those of narrower diameter” (Burke, *Philosophy* 144). If we embrace Umberto Eco’s call to occupy chairs in front of every movie, we’re going to need a lot of bodies and we’re going to have a lot to talk about.

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