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How Jerry Lewis Became A Great Filmmaker And Embarrassed Everyone In the Process

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There can be an almost archeological element to discussing the work and career of Jerry Lewis. The legendary Jewish-American filmmaker, who died on August 20, lived and worked through a period of immense transformation in American culture – one that he helped to create – such that it can be difficult for contemporary audiences to comprehend that Lewis, alongside his comedy partner Dean Martin, was once the object of a maniacal pop phenomenon that preceded the fervor stoked by Elvis Presley by a few years. There’s a sense of a paradise lost in some accounts of Lewis’s life. He was huge, once. His films are still obsessed over and beloved, we are told, in France.

More than any other great filmmaker, Lewis is presumed to be constantly in need of defense. Because of this, the Lewis debate can lack nuance, with his supporters dead set on defending Jerry against those out to prove that the slapstick emperor has no clothes. Especially in dealing with a figure as multifaceted and at points contradictory as Lewis, it makes sense to recognize both the good and bad parts of the comedian’s spastic oeuvre. His admirers should be able to freely own that his movies do contain a lot that is pretty stupid, and his detractors can recognize that he probably was a genius of sorts.

But make no mistake, Lewis was indeed a great filmmaker – not because of his cultural impact or his stardom, but because of his grace with the camera, his facility with orchestrating movement, and his masterful use of sound and color. In a reminiscence published in [The Guardian](#), Lewis’s “King of Comedy” director, Martin Scorsese, aptly compared him not to his Hollywood contemporaries, but to the French performer-director Jacques Tati. Yet while Tati’s formally precise,

pathos-laced investigations of modern life are held up as the very highest examples of film art, regularly appearing on lists of the greatest movies of all time, Lewis's formally precise, pathos-laced investigations of modern life are often perceived as relics of a benighted moment in American humor, before comedians claimed the right to curse.

"I doubt any other industry, or art form, has as many breakable rules," the director wrote in his generous 1971 treatise on filmmaking, "The Total Film-maker," pieced together from lectures he delivered at the University of Southern California. Like the Keaton of "Sherlock Jr.," Lewis doesn't so much rewrite the rulebook as exploit the surrealism latent within the classical Hollywood system of storytelling. He made the most of a de facto apprenticeship with the great, underrated Frank Tashlin, who had gotten his start making cartoons for Warner Bros. before crossing over into live action cinema. Presumably, it was Tashlin who taught Jerry to fully utilize the toy box of studio filmmaking.

For 1961's "The Ladies Man," Lewis constructed a vast four story set over two Paramount soundstages, putting his sizeable cast in what amounted to a human dollhouse ("I always dreamed of a million dollar set," he wrote in "The Total Film-maker," "and this one cost nine hundred thousand."). In the film, Lewis plays Herbert H. Heebert, an all-American nerd who develops an overwhelming fear of women after catching his childhood sweetheart in the arms of a strapping letterman. Fleeing his small town roots (in Lewis's home state of New Jersey, no less), he gets a job as a gopher in a boarding house for young ladies. This is pretty much the full extent of the film's plot.

Lewis's set is one hell of a spectacle, and a lesser filmmaker might have simply let it overwhelm the audience in a grand establishing shot. Instead, Lewis develops the space meticulously during an extended sequence set over the course of the girls' morning routine, moving his camera from room to room to the rhythms of a big band jazz tune. We glide both vertically and horizontally, before our perspective opens up into hallways and staircases. Eventually, sound and image crescendo to the final reveal, showing Paramount's \$900,000 set in all its transparently constructed splendor. Notably, the whole sequence is part of a larger gag, setting the stage for Lewis's gynophobe to first learn that he's happened into his worst nightmare.

Similarly, much of the humor derives from Lewis's flaunting of the cinematic apparatus. Herbert accidentally releases a handful of pressed butterflies, which spring to life when he opens their glass display case. Panicked, he whistles, the film rewinds, and they flap back into place. The already expansive house is revealed to have yet another chamber when our protagonist sneaks into the monochromatic quarters of the creepy "Miss Cartilage" (among his diverse talents, Jerry had a Pynchonian knack for silly names). Gradually, the austerity of her bone white room begets first a balcony, then a phonograph, and finally a small swing orchestra. Their dance, with the feline, black-clad lady stalking our girl-shy hero, is gloriously Freudian: The castration terror recast as ballet.

Aggressively flaunting its artifice and subordinating plot to Lewis's gags, whims, and psychological quirks, "The Ladies Man" does as much to challenge and reconstitute cinematic storytelling as the more celebrated art house classics of its day. By 1961, the French New Wave was in full swing and Hollywood was going through a period of turmoil and soul searching that would eventually give way to the auteur-driven New Hollywood of the late '60s and '70s. Despite Lewis's distrust of ostentatiously intellectual movies, what he was doing on that Paramount soundstage comes awfully close to the spirit of the adventurous filmmaking that was taking place on the streets of Paris and New York. And while Lewis might have regarded their project with some suspicion, many of the new generation of filmmakers, including Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, were enamored with his. Godard credited Russian-French Nicolas de Staël with inspiring the bold, primary colors of "Pierrot Le Fou," but their cinematic antecedent can be found in Lewis's loud, anti-naturalistic color schemes.

For all his skill, though, Lewis cannot be explained purely in terms of grace and mastery. Failure is an integral part of both Lewis's art and his legend. When he went down, he went down hard: "The Day the Clown Cried," his ill-advised attempt to tackle the Holocaust, apparently so bad that he barred its release, is one of 20th century pop culture's greatest and most disastrous pratfalls. His films, too, contain some of cinema's memorable iconography of failure. Lewis's comic persona, which he alternately called "the Idiot" or "the Kid," is always falling over himself and collapsing, to the point where his inability to stabilize himself can become nightmarish. Like Gogol's heroes, his protagonists will often lose the ability to communicate at critical moments. More so than any of the great slapstick heroes, Lewis's onscreen avatar suffers – one of his catchphrases is "Oh, pain!" His travails go beyond the physical as well. He's always vulnerable to humiliation, squirming under the watchful eyes of stony bosses and would-be love interests alike, and playing ostentatiously to the camera all the while. The effect of these constant, repetitive failures can skirt despair. His final effort, 1983's "Cracking Up" (also known as "Smorgasbord") contains multiple gags centered on the protagonist's unsuccessful attempts at killing himself.

The irredeemable helplessness and exaggerated, luckless physicality of Lewis's onscreen persona is perhaps the element most responsible for making him such a hard sell today. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has written powerfully on the relationship between comedy and identity, how humor works off of people's ideas of who they are and how they'd like to see themselves. "If movies in general owe much of their appeal to their capacity to function as Narcissus pools, offering glamorous and streamlined identification figures to authenticate our most treasured self-images, film comedy tends to heighten this tendency in physical terms," he writes in an essay comparing Lewis's critical exile to the cult of Woody Allen. "So that it would hardly be an exaggeration to state that how we respond to such figures as Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, Harold Lloyd, Jacques Tati, Lewis, and Allen has something to do with how we feel about our own bodies."

As is probably clear by now, I am an admirer of Jerry Lewis's films, and yet they still often make me uncomfortable. Part of this is due to a generational divide in American pop culture: the infantile passions and mannerisms of Lewis's character are out of step with the perpetual adolescence that has been the dominant perspective in American comedy since the late

1960s. But another part goes deeper into the psyches of both Lewis and his viewers. Audiences can be flattered to find their ideas overlapping with the insights of Allen, Louis C.K., Eddie Murphy, or Amy Schumer, their extracurricular misbehaviors and onstage self-critiques notwithstanding. To see parts of oneself in Lewis's character, by contrast, is deeply upsetting. Still more troublingly, Lewis denies the viewer the analytic distance that makes contemporary cringe comedy work. Lewis wants his character to be an object of identification. What's more, he wants to be loved. He wants to be loved so badly.

In contemporary parlance, Jerry Lewis is thirsty. The good people at [Urban Dictionary](#) define "thirsty" as "too eager to get something (especially play)" or "desperate." In the [New York Times Magazine](#), Carina Chocano wrote that the term, "Calls to mind the panting tongues, bulging eyeballs, springing hearts and steam-shooting ears of Looney Toons characters" – all physical symptoms that Lewis has quite possibly done more to embody than any other screen performer. Americans have a decidedly conflicted relationship with thirst, one of our defining national traits. On one hand, it's almost universally regarded as something contemptible and embarrassing, a neediness incompatible with the self-reliance and success to which we aspire. On the other, the nation just elevated to its highest office a veritable embodiment of thirst, presumably to slurp the land dry, once and for all. So clearly we have some things to work out in this area.

In both his work and his sometimes-testy public persona, Lewis's naked neediness is impossible to ignore. He's the bard of thirst, a slapstick Gatsby reduced to cartoonish spasms by his lust for the green light. It can be tempting to interpret the decline in his reputation along these lines, casting him as the lover whose fear of losing his beloved makes it inevitable that he will. But whatever happened in his career and personal life, Lewis had enough self-knowledge to make use of this in his work, making the violence of his own multivalent desires one of the primary themes of his films.

In Lewis's movies, his eagerness to please is weaponized and his obedience becomes a destructive force unto itself. One of the ironies of the Lewis character is that he sows chaos simply by doing what he's told. As he does, his supervisors and innocent bystanders alike are brought down to his position, often reduced to stammering, incoherent clowns themselves. Comedy has the potential to become the great leveler; not only are our hero and his superiors brought onto equal footing, but their physical surroundings are often given a similar amount of agency. Despite a certain degree of personal conservatism – manifested in his films in the form of their unwavering cleanness on one hand and, on the other, in their often archaic gender politics and a stubborn racial stereotyping that is alone responsible for their worst and most profoundly unfunny moments (his multiple forays into yellowface are essentially indefensible) – Lewis the artist had a pronounced anarchistic streak. Social hierarchies were another form of architecture to be sized up, exploited for jokes, and ultimately toppled.

Nowhere is this clearer than in his treatment of work itself. Anyone doubting that this is among Lewis's key concerns need only look to the titles of his films and the ones in which he performed for Frank Tashlin: "The Bellboy" (1960), "The Errand Boy" (1961), "Who's Minding the Store" (1963), "The Patsy" (1964), and "The Disorderly Orderly" (1964). He returned to

this theme in his penultimate directorial effort, “Hardly Working” (1981). Having made his directorial debut with the low budget “The Bellboy,” set in Miami’s Fontainebleu, Lewis returned to Florida to find it in the midst of an economic slump. He plays Bo Hooper, a clown who loses his job after the bank refuses to continue funding his circus. Hooper begins the film as a straight man, a kind and reasonable person simply looking for dignified work, but morphs into Lewis’s “Idiot” as he works a series of universally degrading gigs, a stark take on how labor can transform us for the worse. In “The Errand Boy,” set at Paramount itself, he is mistreated by a series of unattractive bosses – each alternately cold hearted and obsequious in the face of power and profit – and communes only with the puppets in the studio’s prop department. It’s among the loneliest of all American comedies, all the more so for not taking up loneliness explicitly in its story but instead leaving it to simmer sadly beneath the merriment.

By the end of that film, Jerry is elevated to stardom. Still, its closing message, “It Could Happen to You!” plastered on a studio billboard, reads equally as promise and threat. The idea that anyone could become an “Idiot” was present in Lewis’s work since the beginning, but it became more prominent as he matured and as his age put restrictions on the number of slapstick hijinks he could perform himself.

He uses the idea that we are all closer to his character than we might care to be to great effect in 1967’s “The Big Mouth,” possibly his most sophisticated and absurdist outing. Lewis plays it relatively straight as Gerald Clamson, a mild mannered accountant, who is on a fishing vacation in San Diego when he hooks his doppelganger (also Lewis), a gangster and conman named Syd Valentine, who is embedded in some kind of diamond smuggling imbroglio. This patently ridiculous set-up works less as a story than as the means for Lewis to dramatize the breakdown of language, meaning, and identity. In an early scene, Lewis tries to appeal to the cops, who ignore him in favor of arguing about what their own codes signify. Character after character loses their mind, to be reduced to babbling a stream of empty or blatantly misleading words. Visually, Lewis eschews large-scale slapstick set pieces in favor of a startlingly deadpan style driven largely by editing, working from subtle pacing gags and nonsense transitions between not entirely connectable scenes. To the movie’s eternal credit, it’s impossible to describe what happens in “The Big Mouth” without sounding like one of its damaged, febrile characters: A sizeable portion of it takes place at Sea World; and at one point, Colonel Sanders shows up to berate a hotel desk clerk. Released the same year as Derrida’s “Of Grammatology,” it’s a sustained, very funny assault on understanding itself.

Lewis’s greatest and most articulate statement on the fractured self remains the only one of his films still widely regarded as a classic: 1963’s “The Nutty Professor.” Lewis plays nebbish science genius Julius Kelp, a bookish variation on Lewis’s tried-and-true “Idiot,” like the calcified superego to that character’s untrammelled id. Tired of being the object of ridicule and hotly bothered by the stirrings of desire, Kelp undertakes to transform himself, creating a potion that turns him into smooth talking, mean-spirited playboy Buddy Love.

To my mind, the fifteen-or-so minute stretch in which Kelp becomes Love is pure sustained brilliance. It begins with a sequence out of a candy colored expressionist horror film, as Kelp takes the fateful potion. Lewis then cuts to a single tracking shot from the perspective of – what? Although we don't know what Kelp has become, we are placed in his – its? – shoes, moving through a crowd as bystanders turn to stare and gawk. Finally we enters the local nightclub, The Purple Pit, a set no less memorable than the massive dollhouse constructed for “The Ladies Man,” whereupon the creature is revealed as Love, a turquoise suited lothario. He goes on to strut around like he owns the place, terrorizing a bartender and subjecting Kelp's love interest to a hilariously egocentric seduction. After bragging that he refrained from beating up her other suitors so as not to muss up his look, he tells her, “I do a lot of nice things.” Over the course of this scene, our perception of Lewis himself shifts too.

Given Lewis's extracurricular exploits, a lot of discussion has been given to who served as the actual inspiration for Buddy Love. Some feel that it was Lewis's early comedy partner, Dean Martin, while others point out that his mannerisms mimic those of the Rat Pack's leader, Frank Sinatra. Some critics have posited Love as Lewis's autocritique, a repository for all he found most disturbing within himself. But each of these answers sells short the complexity of Lewis's thoughts about identity. Ultimately, Buddy Love is none other than Julius Kelp. The misogynistic predator and the wounded, sensitive professor are two sides of the same psyche, locked in symbiotic warfare. The self is unstable, a Möbius strip that threatens to consume us all. In this way, Buddy Love is everyone, and, above all, no one.

The film is also about celebrity, its relationship to power, and its peculiar effect on the American mind. Later in the film, Love will confront Kelp's boss, a college dean played by Lewis's frequent collaborator Del Moore, a humorless fellow who has frequently bullied and belittled the meek professor. Love preys upon the boss's vanity and then pounces on his eagerness to feel cool. By the end of the scene, the once imposing authority figure is standing on a desk reciting Shakespeare with his pants down. It's a very funny moment, and a cruel one as well.

By the end of the film, Kelp emerges from the Love persona and confesses to both the object of his affections and the college at large. Appearing as part-Kelp and part-Love, Lewis also addresses the audience. “Learning a lesson in life is never really too late, and I think that the lesson I learned came just in time,” he intones, nearly breaking down. “I don't want to be something that I'm not,” he continues, caught physically between the various sides of what he is. One imagines that Lewis himself could relate. He contained multitudes, clumsily.

Jerry Lewis

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Benjamin Ivry August 20, 2017 Edit

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Daniel Witkin August 23, 2017 [Edit](#)

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