

Ong's Hat: Is Princeton Opposed to Satire?

Introduction

On May 31, 2021, Princeton's elite educational institution, through their journal, *TORTOISE: A JOURNAL OF WRITING PEDAGOGY*, published an excerpt of a paper by one of their freshman students, Jayaditya Deep. The article is titled, *The Fiction of Ong's Hat: Too Good to be False!*. In this paper, Jayaditya Deep, who likes to be called Jojo," levels criticism regarding two pieces of satire, one written by me about 30 years ago and another written by me about 20 years ago. Both articles are in out-of-print publications.

"Jojo" uses archive.org links as his reference in this piece. The criticism never once mentions that the articles are satire and treats them as if they are not. These articles are not murky as to their intention as humor, but satire, clearly written and published as such.

But in fairness, before we go any further, I'm going to ask you to do something. I'm going to ask you to stop here and read the two pieces we will be discussing.

I ask this for two reasons.

One, if you can read these two pieces and not agree with me that they are works of satire that do not need to carry disclaimers, identifying them as such, then you can stop reading this rebuttal. We fundamentally disagree on what is identifiable as satire and what is not, and I don't see the point in trying to persuade you otherwise. I see no need in wasting each other's time.

If you agree they are obvious satire, then the second reason I ask you to read these two brief pieces is so that you are fully informed when I step through the critiques published in *The Tortoise*. I want you to be fully informed about the material referenced.

As you may have observed, we live in a time where people often form opinions without referencing background material. People are too busy, too distracted, too pressed for time. This makes them subject to manipulation by strawman arguments. This tendency is particularly ironic considering the focus of the particular critique I am rebutting here.

The Background Material

I promise, these two articles are not long:

Article one: BOING BOING Issue 11, 1993-

<https://archive.org/details/bOING.bOING.Issue.11/page/n22/mode/1up?q=dos+equis>

Full article as PDF- <https://jmatheny.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/pages-from-boing.boing.issue.11.pdf>

Article two: New World Disorder Magazine, 2004-

<https://web.archive.org/web/20040202200717/http://www.newworlddisorder.ca/issuetwo/interviews/matheny.html>

Full article as PDF: <https://jmatheny.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/nwd-interviews-joseph-matheny.pdf>

Once you've read those two articles, you may read the excerpt here as it appeared on *The Tortoise*.

<https://tortoise.princeton.edu/2021/05/31/the-fiction-of-ongs-hat/>

The Post-Research Discussion

I appreciate you taking the time to read the material in question. Too often, people form opinions about a subject without having full knowledge of the facts, and too often, a writer can exploit that absence of background to manipulate a reader into a conclusion that may not always be consistent with the facts. This tactic is commonly referred to as a "strawman argument." Again, the irony of this is not lost on me.

First of all, I'd like to state that this is in no way a personal attack on Jayaditya Deep, the paper in question's primary author. As they say in the paper, he and his editor wrote this as college freshmen, so the oversight, misunderstanding, or yes, even willful distortion of the facts (as we shall see) is somewhat forgivable. What I propose here is more of a rebuttal aimed at The Princeton *Tortoise*, who should know better than to publicly publish an op-ed posing as an academic critique without vetting it. At the very least, the *Tortoise* can not expect to post something publically and not expect a rebuttal. Again, the irony of their irresponsibility is not lost on me.

So, having read the first two pieces, which are the subject of the critique published at the *Tortoise*, I'd like to take a little poll before we embark on some point-by-point analysis.

Do you feel that the two pieces you read were written in a way that should have required a disclaimer preceding them as to their intention as satire?

[poll]

Some points about why these are unquestionably pieces of satire

What follows is a list of points from each of the two satire pieces in question that identify them as satire and remove the necessity for disclaimers to that effect, which Deep's paper seems to indicate was necessary.

Boing-Boing Issue 11

Besides the general absurdist tone taken in this article, ala Discordianism or Church of the Subgenius (both satirical projects covered in this and other issues of Boing-Boing), the following are items that clearly signal this as a satirical piece. Princeton should be familiar with the art of scientific satire, as outlined superbly in the piece by Gwern Branwen, titled, *The Math of Hunting Lions*ⁱⁱ, and which I outline in the intro to the Authorized Edition of *Ong's Hat The Beginning*ⁱⁱⁱ.

The items that are bolded are the signals that this is a satirical piece and not a true piece of science or serious journalism.

October 13, 1992^{iv}

"I finally get a trace on Incunabula. Following a lead from a **culture-jamming club** in San Francisco (**MEDIASEIZURE** 415/241-1568),..."

"All I found inside were overdraft notices from his bank and some **solicitations from a church of geniuses in Dallas. Texas or some such thing.**"

"I am **told by the inbred boob on the other** end of the line that there is no such town listed in New Jersey, and after a long and heated debate, **we terminate the phone call by mutually insulting each other's gene pool. God, I hate the phone company.**"

"Two days (and **two bottles of Johnny Walker Black label**) later,"

"His past areas of research involved pleasure dome technologies, **Quantum Tantra**, Time and Dimensional travel theories, and **gelatinous substances.** "

"**I hopped aboard one of the private bOING-bOING Lear jets** and **parachuted in**, about a mile away from Herbert's mock farm house bunker."

"**I hitched a ride into town on a cartage truck** and waited for him to show."

"I decided to phone Nick on **my satellite cellular phone** before bursting in on him."

"About an hour later, Dr. Herbert appeared in the parking lot **driving a converted electric Stutz Bearcat**. I recognized him instantly from his jacket photos, even with the recently acquired beard. **Was he changing his appearance to hide from someone? Was he preparing to flee**, like Cranston had 30 days ago? **I casually reached inside my jacket and activated my HidaMike**. I waved him over to my table, and after shaking hands we settled down to Dos Equis and Gorditas."

"**I looked around to see if any operatives were nearby. I didn't see any tell-tale signs of info-agents in the cantina.**"

"Joseph Matheny is a freelance writer living in San Francisco **His next book. Giving the Media a Seizure is about culture jamming in theory and practice** He also lives under the delusion that **he is some kind of secret agent (or some such rubbish** I If you meet him. humor him. He's basically harmless."

New World Disorder: The Ong's Hat Mystery Revealed: An Interview with Joseph Matheny
The entire bit below, used in the opening, should disqualify this "interview" as anything to be taken seriously.

New World Disorder: For our readers who may not know about it, could you give an overview of the Ong's Hat mystery and how you got involved/interested in it?

Joseph Matheny: *[Cue Spooky Music]*

When MKULTRA was exposed, THEY had to resort to other means to secure budgets (think Iran-Contra and Air America). They also had to subcontract most of their projects out to third parties but under black budget cloaks to keep them alive but hidden. (Think \$2,000.00 toilet seats for bombers, etc.)

One of those contracts was handed to a group of cultural engineers. Their mission: build a better mousetrap. The results produced by this ad hoc think tank was labeled, "The Incunabula." The name was chosen for several reasons, one of which was its phonetic ominousness and relative obscurity in the everyday vernacular. Another was its link to mysterious texts, which the

creators observed, seemed to be a common obsession among certain personality types that were representative of the target demographic.

The kernel of this conceptual operating system was a framework structure that would allow scalability in the future so that yet unseen cultural modules could be put into place within the framework, meeting trends and fads as they emerged. To put it in layman's terms, it was designed to be upgraded. The goal was to create a strange loop/strange attractor scenario that was so addictive that users would act like heroin junkies if faced with the prospect of being cut off.

Needless to say, they used the emerging medium of computer networks, enhanced by a mytho-poetic connection to Xerox pamphlets, to deliver the payload to the pre selected demographic.

This model has now been tested, perfected and enhanced a bit. The latest version was delivered to JPL for social group simulator testing and then handed off to several prominent computer game companies to utilize in upcoming console, PC and cellphone games to be released starting this year. It is a model that is designed to be addictive, circular (leading nowhere while always promising to lead somewhere) and results in madness in the user after extended exposure. Think of it as a virtual asylum that the inmates willingly enter. Attract/Entrap/Entrain. What better scenario can be imagined? The elegance from a design perspective is exquisite! If the Entrainment or "Exit Strategy" part of the program is unsuccessful the Entrapment mode is still in place around the subject. No need for physical asylums! Hooray! A budgetary success as well!

Some say that some of the people responsible for The Stanford Prison Experiment were involved. Others say that members of the Black Lodge were involved as well as the Aviary. The Aviary member in charge is known as The Crow. No reference to that name in connection to the Aviary can be found though.

Wait. That's not it...

What I meant to say was:

The Incunabula catalog is a culture jam, created by culture jammers. There is no 'group' that existed previous to 1987, at least not as described in the brochure. 4 people got together in the 80s and 90s and put those documents together. NONE preceded their existence. However, many legends and synchronicities have occurred since. That is beautiful and indicative of a responsive universe.

One was an artist, who made beautiful, moving and otherworldly collages and pictures.

One was a poetic terrorist who could weave words together with an unparalleled passion and vigor.

Another was a media and network hacker who could make the media pay attention to a bingo match in Poughkeepsie if he wanted them to.

One was a physicist with lots of friends in the Dancing Wu Li master circles and a wonderfully twisted sense of sexual humor.

They decided one day to take some pre-existing fiction bits, stir in some current pop science, parody of paranormal conspiracy literature and graffiti it on the walls of the noosphere. Boys will be boys after all. Over the years, others in certain academic circles were brought in to work on updating and upgrading the concepts employed and to integrate the lesson learned into other projects, some of which are currently underway.

Three of them (the latter 3) made a verbal pact:

Never let it be used to start a cult.

Never let it be used as a platform to piss down the back of anyone who gave blood, sweat and tears to make it realized.

If a channel became available that made it more accessible to more people and money was involved, always give the money away (aka charity).

When and if it all becomes too much to manage, toss it into the public domain via a free game or something like that.

It fell to the third to complete the mission.

This was called stage 3.

Done.

And so, a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority was born. I was lucky enough to be a rather conspicuous fly on the wall to a lot of this.

No, that's not it either...

Okay. It comes down to 2 camps.

One, the majority view as what it was meant to be, a joke that should have flamed out a few years ago. This majority includes the creators who in an attempt to get it through to those that clearly have missed the obvious, put out the heretical inc5 and 6 in a collaborative effort to re-inject some levity into the situation. If you have missed the point that it is a joke you have missed THE point.

Another, a vocal and persistent minority that will resort to any low road tactic they deem necessary to preserve the fundamentalist view in an effort to perpetuate a cockeyed religion based on something that was intended to be the polar opposite of such. Even when being repeatedly told this point blank some elements of this cadre of "believers" resort to elaborate schemes of deceit and denial. Believers will be believers after all. *wink*

No. Not that one either. Hmmmm. Wait. I've got it!

Behold! The projects greatest triumph: Lisa Agnes Gardner:

Take this shitty thing *off* of me right now. I *detest it* and the people inside of it, who treat me like a *sack of shit*!

I want this mother fucking *piece of crap* off of me immediately!~ Then people in it seem to have their IQ's halved after being in it for a while, and they become brutal and willing to mistreat completely the 'wearer' of the hat.

I never signed up to have this fucking thing on me! It just came upon me *unasked for*!

I have gotten maybe 10 hours or so sleep in then last three days and I have a new baby to care for! Does this government want me dead or decaying?

There is a John Michale Gannon in this place who tells me that he is going to 'kidnap my four month old baby' and 'sell him' for millions of dollars.

My baby has a very special thigh, and it seems that some in the United States want to sell that thighbone to Great Britain.

This country with its continual government and corporate pushings and pullings into my mind is *treating me like shit*. *I will start looking into moving to other places on this planet*, *with my two sons* - if these places are willing to offer me asylum from this continual psychic harrassment and mind control research bullshit.

Yesterday I was told that the gov wants to keep me doing this because 'you shovel shit so well'.

What the fuck did I do to deserve this?

I hate George Bush and this administration with a passion for what they are doing to me and the fact that this administration continues to let me burn in Gehenna year after year after year, without seeing fit to do anything about it.

I don't have the money or resources (or even the sleep time) available right now to work on engaging a lawyer myself. I would like to see the gov do the right thing by me. The first thing I would like to see them do is to *get rid of this Ong's Hat bullshit* - get it the fuck off of my head, I never signed up to wear it and I don't know why it is on my head. -

Lisa was seen in a Monterey cafe recently, holding up a Buzz Lightyear doll and screaming: "To the brink of madness, and beyond!"

That you will read this and continue on your current path of discovery is only further, though insignificant, testament to the robustness of the design."

To add to the question of "believe it or not" I signed off at the bottom,

"I will however leave you with this notaricon: T.F.Y.Q.A.

Think For Yourself, Question Authority."

Thoughts on Deep's Thesis

Deep attempts to paint a picture of an attempt to masquerade an obvious piece of satire as "truth" or scientific facts. This conclusion is drawn from statements that were made in pieces of **satire**, the Boing-

Boing and New World Disorder articles, in which I propose not one but several ridiculous, competing, far out, pseudo, conspiranoia tinged explanations for the Ong's Hat satirical thesis.

Deep then spirals off into what appears to be a sort of apologia for people who believe conspiracies. Deep seems to be advancing some kind of theory that people who believe conspiracy theories are "not to blame" but rather the creators and propagators of said theories are wholly responsible.

While I am not inclined to give the progenitors of said theories a pass as to the responsibility for the results of such disinformation, I also do not give the "believers" a pass. I think there are equal amounts of responsibility here, as events like January 6 have shown us. We should not allow believers to avoid personal responsibility when not exercising discernment and critical thinking: the manipulators and the manipulated share equal responsibility in the damage being done with misinformation and disinformation.

More Counterpoints to Deep's Points

Let's take some of the controversial or confusing claims of this critique and examine them in the context of a work of satire and how they are being represented as something other than such.

One of the first things I found confusing was this statement early on in the paper:

"You find that he is a self-proclaimed secret agent, attempting to uncover and communicate the truth about Ong's Hat..."

I know I wrote this about thirty years ago, but I did not remember ever representing myself as a "secret agent" at any time in the document or thereafter. It was only after looking at the end of the Boing-Boing article that I realized where this was coming from. In my author description at the end of the article, I wrote,

"Joseph Matheny is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. His next book, *Giving the Media a Seizure* is about culture jamming in theory and practice. **He also lives under the delusion that he is some kind of secret agent** (or some such rubbish). If you meet him, humor him. He's basically harmless."

I'm not sure if Jayaditya Deep is incapable of identifying satire when they see it or if this is an attempt at constructing a strawman argument, but it is, either way, a misrepresentation of the spirit and intention of myself as a "secret agent, " clearly being added as a joke.

Note this comes after the end of the article, so it is not in context to say that I was a, "a self-proclaimed secret agent, attempting to uncover and communicate the truth about Ong's Hat..."

This was a statement added in the author bio, after the article, as a joke and is never used in the article as any kind of proof of bona fides.

The next confusing "proof" that Deep uses is the following:

"In the interview, Herbert discusses various quantum theories of his, and when the elements of the Ong's Hat research was brought up by Matheny, Herbert hastily ended the interview saying, "there are some questions you should not ask, ever." ³ You understandably decide that there must be more to Ong's Hat than a joke if all of this theory is involved and

especially if the most qualified of scientists want to keep it top secret. Given that the documents pertaining to Ong's Hat had been downloaded over 2 million times, you certainly were not alone."

Let's break that into the two parts that seem to be conclusions that the writer makes that are not at all consistent with what we know here.

First, the statement:

"You understandably decide that there must be more to Ong's Hat than a joke if all of this theory is involved and especially if the most qualified of scientists want to keep it top secret."

I'm at a loss to understand how this conclusion can be made about an article that is so obviously identifiable as satire, as we've demonstrated by our insistence that you, the reader, make yourself familiar with the material.

Something that seems to be happening here is either a misunderstanding by Deep or a desire to misrepresent, gambling on the fact that you, the reader of their paper, won't read the material being critiqued. In the case of a paper being submitted for a class, that is a bet that might very well be assured. What teacher or teacher's assistant has the time to read the source material for each and every paper submitted. In the case of a paper that is then publically published, though, one might think that Princeton would at least fact check their publication.

But I digress.

The second part of the statement draws a conclusion that seems to have no logical basis.

"Given that the documents pertaining to Ong's Hat had been downloaded over 2 million times, you certainly were not alone."

So, 2 million people would not download a story on the Internet if it was, as you the reader, have already seen for yourself, a work of satire? I'd like to know the chain of reasoning that gets us from point A to point B there.

Another point

"When it became known to Matheny that some of the consumers of his fiction were taking his work to be real, he categorized the Ong's Hat tale as "a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority." 6 This insinuates that Matheny felt that his work made it abundantly clear it was just fiction. Who would believe in a club of scientists devising elaborate alternate dimension travel plans from the middle of the woods in New Jersey? According to Matheny, only a "pathetic few," only the individuals whose thinking deranged from the majority. This might seem like a brash, offhand comment about the certain individuals who believed in the story; however, the idea that conspiracy theory believers have inherently different psychology is a firm belief of many scholars. As Matheny suggested was the case for believers in the Ong's Hat story, perhaps it can be generalized that it is the "unintelligent," "pathetic few" who tend to believe in obvious fiction as conspiracy theories."

He fails to note when it became apparent to me that some consumers of my fiction were taking it seriously, I made a public statement and shut down the project. This is well documented, including but

not exclusive to the academic study *Legend-Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat*^v. This occurred in 2001, and the satirical New World Disorder article Deep cites, wherein I state, "a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority" was written in 2004.

So, his observation that I "categorized the Ong's Hat tale as "a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority" was made four years after the conclusion of the project and not "When it became known to Matheny that some of the consumers of his fiction were taking his work to be real." I made that particular observation in 2001^{vi} and immediately shut down the project making a public statement and ceasing the creation of any new material.

Deep has his facts all mixed up, either because he is underinformed or he is trying to make a point at the expense of the facts.

Maybe the most ironic of what appears in this paper makes an appearance in the author's "About" or bio, which appears at the end of the paper.

He enjoys a good laugh (who doesn't) and is a big fan of comedy.

He forgot to add, "except when it makes for a good premise for a strawman critique."

Conspiracy Hierarchies

I have spent the last 20 years and most notably the last five years, as a vocal opponent to conspiracy culture and conspiracy culture thinking. Unfortunately, my warnings have only recently gained traction since the advent of such damaging and harmful belief systems like Pizzagate and Qanon, to name a few, have gained a larger acceptance and following. I have noticed and commented on a rise in far-right belief systems and noticed their coupling with the conspiracy, spirituality, and wellness movement as well as their intersections.

For a long time, I felt that my warnings were ignored because it admittedly seemed absurd that such formerly fringe beliefs were finding traction among the mainstream. But they were, and now with events like the assault on the capitol on January 6, 2021, people have begun to take notice. Hopefully, not too late.

The conspiracy community is and always has been divided among two distinct segments. The first, the producers, or as I call them, the predators, make up the smallest percentage number-wise but hold the majority of influence, philosophically speaking.

The "believers," i.e., the consumers, make up the majority of people in the community. They are responsible for the viral repetition of the information and usually for the financial support of the producers and their causes. This follows a typical pattern set by religions, cults, and any number of personality or charisma-driven movements.

While I agree that a part of the responsibility for the actions inspired by the propagation of toxic fringe beliefs falls upon the producers as well, I, unlike Deep, am not willing to give the consumers/believers a pass.

I see a mutual responsibility for people to exercise discernment and critical thinking when consuming and acting upon information and responsibility and thoughtfulness when producing and distributing it. That goes for critiquing it as well.

Maybe we have entered an age where comedic and satirical pieces require disclaimers. What's next? Fantasy, Sci-fi, speculative fiction disclaimers? I, for one, want no part of that world.

Is Satire in Danger of Extinction?

Satirical treatments in the tradition of comedians like Paul Krassner's Realist, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Bill Hicks, and even more contemporary sources like Charlie Hebdo, and Chapo Trap House, should not be the subject of academic criticism unless they are recognized as satirical, criticized as such and not misrepresented or held to account as anything other than that. Otherwise, we embark upon a slippery slope that ends up in some unsavory places.

Conclusion

The reader might think this is much to do about nothing, because after all, what are we talking about here? A paper written by a college freshman. Who cares? That may have been the case and even remained the case until Princeton's *Tortoise* decided to publish this paper and enter it into the public conversation via Google and other public search-related resources.

Their accountability is made even more relevant due to Princeton's unique position as an EDU domain with millions of backlinks and a long timeline, which gives it a unique position as an SEO powerhouse, meaning it has undue influence in the online conversation.

One might think that a prestigious, ivy league university might care more about its reputation for academic rigor and as an example for its students and others as educators. Apparently, one might be wrong in assuming that.

Or maybe I have it all wrong. Maybe it is all just "a teeth grinding obsession for a pathetic few and a fun run for an intelligent and vast majority."

I'll leave it to you to decide which you prefer to be in that equation.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poe%27s_law

Poe's law is an adage of Internet culture stating that, without a clear indicator of the author's intent, it is impossible to create a parody of extreme views such that it cannot be mistaken by some readers for a sincere expression of the views being parodied.

ⁱ <https://tortoise.princeton.edu/2021/05/31/the-fiction-of-ongs-hat/>

ⁱⁱ <https://tortoise.princeton.edu/2021/05/31/the-fiction-of-ongs-hat/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://archive.org/details/ongs-hat-the-beginning-2021>

^{iv} https://jmatheny.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/pages-from-boing.boing_issue_.11.pdf

^v <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tvcgr>

^{vi} <https://web.archive.org/web/20200109133721/https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/pageview/the-surprising-online-life-of-legends/29221>