

*The New Atheist Movement in the Blogosphere: Burlesque and Carnavalesque as
Rhetorical Strategies in Visual Productions,*

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0201

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper examines the visual production of the New Atheist Movement in the Blogosphere. The new atheist movement appeared as an action to fight the exclusion and alienation of atheists' beliefs in the U.S. religious discourse. I argue that the images of New Atheism use burlesque and carnivalesque as rhetorical strategies.

Result, in the public sphere, the New Atheist movement uses burlesque images to criticize the major religion in the U.S. by critiquing the power dynamic between religion and humanity. The atheists also criticize the relevance of religion with contemporary issues and offer an alternative perspective focusing on human empowerment, science, and technology. The burlesque strategy finally functions to foster in-group identification by comparing atheism with other beliefs.

Meanwhile, the carnivalesque images function to uncover the problematic social discourse from the atheistic point of view. When employing a carnivalesque approach in their visual discourse, proponents of New Atheism counter the status quo and offer the "atheist good news." Through carnivalesque images, atheists reconcile their perspectives and identity within society

The analysis on this paper is not only identifying burlesque and carnivalesque strategies of images in the blogosphere, but also to contribute to the understanding of how symbols function in religious discourse in the U.S. I conclude the paper by examining that in atheists' (digital) enclaves, they build their subaltern identity and then expand into the broader public sphere, seeking points of connection between themselves and theists.,

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Introduction

Understanding the concept of diversity can be a lifetime process for people, a government institution, an organization, and even a nation. Although the United States is one of the most prominent advanced democracies, diversity continues to pose challenges. One particularly divisive issue is the relationship between religious groups and non-religious groups.¹ In U.S. culture, Judeo-Christian values continue to dominate politics, interpretations of the U. S Constitution, education, culture, national identity, and public discourse.² However, what about the groups who are not in the dominant and singular public sphere related to beliefs and religion in the United States? What happens to those who have alternative religious views?

Non-Judeo Christian groups in the United States are marginalized. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, people who do not want to affiliate themselves with any religion and self-identify, instead, as atheist, agnostic, secular, humanist, or “the Nones,” increased from 8.1% in 1990 to 15% in 2008. However, this group remains stigmatized.³ According to research from the University of Minneapolis in 2006, atheists are America’s most distrusted minority. This research revealed that respondents rated atheists below Muslims, immigrants, gays, and lesbians; the respondents also associated atheism with moral indiscretions.⁴

I have chosen the label “New Atheist movement” to represent the atheist movement in the United States.⁵ From an etymological perspective, the term “atheism” came from a Greek word, *atheos*, which means to “deny the existence of gods.”⁶ In the 21st century, a “New Atheism” developed in the scholarly community, which uses rational argument to counter and to criticize religious group.⁷ The focus of the New Atheism is to advance secularism, especially in the United States.⁸ While the concept of New Atheism grows, the people who believe in this concept gather in atheist organizations and create social movements to spread the discourse of atheism.

Mario Diani defines a “social movement” as “networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity.”⁹ Thus, the New Atheist movement could be described as a social movement since it consists of interaction between diverse individuals who share an atheist identity. The New Atheist movement also creates collective challenges to the dominant religious perspectives, organizes collective actions, and demonstrates solidarity within their group in mass media.¹⁰ Various publications such as best selling books, blogs, and advertisements appear as the tools to support the concept, theory, and movement of New Atheism.¹¹ Richard Dawkins compares the atheist movement to the gay rights movement a few decades ago.¹² He argues that the more people try to be honest that they are atheists, the more people get encouragement to “come out” as atheists. Thus, the New Atheist movement promotes the idea of (a) revealing one’s “authentic”

atheist identity and (b) comforting those who feel uncertain and afraid to “come out” as an atheist.¹³ However, Tom Flynn also criticized that the New Atheist movement is not a “brand new” movement because these types of arguments have existed throughout history. What has changed, however, is the mass appeal of New Atheism in popular culture. Therefore, some people get their only exposure to atheist rhetoric through New Atheism.¹⁴ Following the arguments from Flynn, this paper examined the perspective on atheism and theism as discussed by the “four horsemen” of New Atheism: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.¹⁵ Their perspectives, however, are both an oversimplification of the complicated issues and the fragmented population/identity of both atheists and theists; They fail to differentiate between, for example, fundamentalists, evangelicals, agnostics, skeptic, the moderate religious believers who become the silent majority, intellectual theists, etc.¹⁶ Instead, the four horsemen present an adolescent version of atheism, one that ignores nuanced arguments on both sides of the controversy and fails to acknowledge the positive intellectual and moral contributions theists have made throughout history. This paper examines the less nuanced rhetoric of New Atheism because of its mass appeal, however, I am fully conscious of the contributions that theists, atheists, agnostics, and others have made to the United States. My analysis examines the ways in which New Atheists disseminate their message in popular culture and their effort to make the atheist message easier to digest by wider public (of course compare to their predecessors or the “old” atheist philosophers such as Karl Marx, Michael Foucault, Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, Frederick Nietzsche, etc).

This paper looks at the visual images produced in three atheist blogs: 1) *Atheist's Blog*, 2) *Atheist Comics*, and 3) *The Pantheos- Friendly Atheist*. These blogs are well-known exemplars of the New Atheist movement. My preliminary research has revealed that the rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque emerge as the key strategies in various visual images from the atheist movement. Thus, this paper examines visual images produced in the atheist blogosphere by identifying and assessing key metaphors present in texts that exhibit either burlesque or carnivalesque rhetorical strategies.

In this study, I assess the visual rhetoric of the New Atheist movement as it is expressed in the blogosphere. Specifically, I answer two questions. First, in what way does the New Atheist movement employ the rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque in its visual resistance to dominant Judeo-Christian culture in the United States? Second, in what ways do these rhetorical strategies shape the identity of the New Atheist movement? By answering these two questions, I hope to contribute to the discussion of how the New Atheist movement resists opposition and negotiates its identity visually in the realm of the blogosphere.

Burlesque and Carnivalesque

Kenneth Burke argues that humans view the world through frames of acceptance and rejection.¹⁷ Burke argues that the frame of acceptance is a positive perception of human life. He gives the example, “if you break your leg, thank God you didn’t break your neck.”¹⁸ This frame views human activity as a friendly phenomenon. On the other hand, the frame of rejection is a “by-product” of the frame of acceptance.¹⁹ The frame of rejection emphasizes the different perspectives and attitudes towards the symbol of domination, authority, and highlights a shift commitment to the symbol of power. These frames discursively construct human perception. Burke argues that the frames of perception prompt humans to produce symbolic frames, which represent human acceptance and rejection.²⁰ Those corresponding to frames of acceptance are epic, tragedy, and comedy (which includes carnivalesque). Those associated with frames of rejection are elegy, satire, burlesque, grotesque, and didactic.

Burke explains that the burlesque frame is designed to criticize other individuals and groups of people, not by challenging their argumentation, but by negatively caricaturing them. Edward C. Appel uses the words “excuse of dignity”²¹ to explain the way in which burlesque criticizes the external behavior of the victims and amplifies their stupidity. Burke suggests that the burlesque approach propagates social breakage and continues one’s separation from his or her enemies.²² Burlesque form tends to focus specifically on people and their social behaviors, creating “victims” or scapegoats.²³ Thus, burlesque is not only making fun of these behaviors but also exaggerating and humiliating the “victims.” However, not every visual production is meant to reject the symbol of authority; some visual approaches invite audiences to question established hierarchies. Burke calls that approach “carnavalesque.”

Carnavalesque strategies attempt to conceptualize levels of hierarchies in alternate ways and sometimes neglect the settled structure.²⁴ Stephen Gencarella Olbrys describes carnivalesque as “a turning of the world upside down.”²⁵ Sobhi Al-Zobaidi asserts that carnivalesque is a “temporary experience, something that appears only to disappear, an acting out, or a forgery. Yet it is a forgery that is repeated and ritualized; a fictional escape from all abstractions and the indulgence of the body in earthly matters.”²⁶ Carnavalesque strategies, then, introduce audience members to different perspectives than those to which they are habitually exposed.²⁷

Carnavalesque discourses function to release audience members from communal norms through a rhetorical work of art,²⁸ and to motivate people to resist symbols of power and authority.²⁹ Thus, carnivalesque rhetoric challenges hegemonic genres, ideologies, and symbols through laughter.³⁰ Consequently, its message is often ambiguous, challenging hierarchy and deconstructing dominant discourse.³¹ Al-Zobaidi argues that through carnivalesque, people can have opinions on a phenomenon which would otherwise be considered taboo.³² Thus, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the carnival allows the audience to think freely about the world.³³

Carnavalesque appeals, then, allow the rhetor to laugh and, through laughter, disrupt the social order. Bakhtin notes that, as a shared public experience, carnivalesque involves all participants, including the rhetor. Thus, whereas burlesque targets the individual, carnivalesque spoofs the community as a whole. Carnavalesque creates a space where critique and reconciliation are more possible than they may otherwise be in society.³⁴ The rhetorical strategies of burlesque and carnivalesque discourses are deployed in the intersections of dominant and marginalized cultures that comprise the public sphere.

Visual Resistance and Rhetoric

Jurgen Habermas's concept of an idealized "public sphere," in which interests are bracketed and actors engage one another free from the constraints produced by uneven power relations, is highly contested in academe.³⁵ For example, Nancy Fraser argues that the singular notion of "public" in Habermas's analysis has neglected the minority.³⁶ Fraser proposed the concept of the counter public. Robert Asen contends that "counter publics as discursive entities emerge in a multiple public sphere through constellations of people, places, and topics."³⁷ Asen defines counter publics as those "formed by participants who recognize exclusions in wider public spheres and resolve to join to overcome these exclusions."³⁸

How does a counter public disseminate its message in the public sphere? Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples argue that audiences often are drawn to "[i]mages over words, emotions over rationality, speed over reflection, distraction over deliberation, and slogans over arguments."³⁹ Image is an important instrument to magnify events, issues, and relationships.⁴⁰ In his discussion of framing, Robert Entman explains that frames exert political influence over publics through mass media, promoting particular interpretations and evaluation of issues, events, and conflicts. Combinations of words and images function as mass mediated frames, making the cultural message more "*noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged.*"⁴¹ The resonance and magnitude of the message can perpetuate similar interpretations and understandings to the audience. The concept of resonance and magnitude is similar to the idea of "optical regimes."⁴² Images can deliver a visual experience and create a subject position that shapes audience perceptions.⁴³

The visual experience facilitated by burlesque and carnivalesque strategies reveals the ways in which marginal groups are positioned in a culture. The experience also encourages the audience to perceive interpretations about a target of criticism that may be similar to the rhetors' own attitudes. The development of digital technology also enhances the freedom for each individual to share ideas, critiques, interpretations, and expressions. One of the popular digital spheres in which to share diverse perspectives is the blogosphere. Next, I discuss the ways in which the New Atheist movement has deployed its "resistant manifesto" in the contemporary blogosphere.

Resistance as Manifested in the Blogosphere

As a minority movement, the New Atheist movement has effectively employed digital media to spread its message of resistance. The blogosphere is a medium that reaches a worldwide community, is unbounded by time and geography, and provides opportunity to spread and manage issues.⁴⁴ Practically, blog users must affirmatively search the blog, thus many scholars argue that blogs attract homogenous groups of readers or niche audiences who have pre-existing interest in whatever issue the blog addresses.⁴⁵ In his study on the exploration of student resistance, Mark Warren Liew contends that “an informal blogosphere thrives beyond these official uses, characterized by all manner of backstage talk, from casual chatting, joking, and banter to vicious complaints, slander, and rumor.”⁴⁶ Thus, individuals or groups use blogs to express their opinion towards authoritative objects, such as religious leaders, teachers, governments, legislators, etc. With the freedom of expression in the blogosphere, individuals or groups are able to publicly humiliate, criticize, and mock the authoritative objects.⁴⁷ This expression is a part of the resistance towards the hegemonic culture or dominant publics. However, blogs are located in a virtual arena, where people choose to search it, click it, open it, and eventually read or consume the message. Blogs are not a “pop up” medium, where the message suddenly appears and audiences are “forced” to see it. Having grounded my study in the literature on burlesque and carnivalesque form, visual rhetoric and resistance, and the blogosphere as an emerging technology, I move on to the next section, in which I articulate my critical methodology.

Critical Methodology

Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson argue that visual rhetoric is a mode of communication because it consists of meaningful signs and depends on cultural context. I follow Cara A. Finnegan’s lead in treating images as “a potent mode of public address which should be studied in ways that recognize images’ political, cultural, historical specificity, as well as their fluidity as circulating objects in public culture.”⁴⁸ Following that direction, this paper will examine the important role of visual rhetoric in the contemporary New Atheist movement. Finnegan presents five approaches for analyzing visual images: production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception.⁴⁹ In this study, I will use the composition approach. Finnegan explains, “Composition involves description and interpretation of the visual grammar of images.”⁵⁰ Through composition, the critic can understand the cooperation of content and form that construct potential meaning for the audience. In this approach the critic needs to examine color, content, light, and spatial organization.⁵¹ Images are a representation of values, thoughts, social constructions, etc; thus, by reading the grammar of an image, a critic may reflect on its potential socio-cultural and political implications.

One way in which images may be assessed as forms of public address is to examine the metaphors invoked explicitly or implicitly in each image.⁵² Scholars have long acknowledged that metaphors construct reality.⁵³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that since “our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler argue, “Since metaphors are foundational to language, perception, and persuasion, critically assessing their function in a particular body of discourse lends useful insight into how that discourse affects people.”⁵⁵ Metaphors can produce groupings, arrange processes, and construct both social structures and the opposition to those structures.⁵⁶ In order to identify and assess key metaphors, critics have developed a clustering technique wherein the critic strategically organizes key metaphors and associated terms and concepts.

I look at images that has been reblogged by numerous bloggers or commented by visitors. This allows me to compare my interpretation of the latent metaphors with the rhetor’s discussion of the images’ explicit meaning. Both theistic and atheistic discourses can trigger strong responses from particular persons or groups. Some images may appear in blogs that would not be published in more mainstream, conventional media. Some images may also appear outside the blog as a public ad, merchandises design, and/or other media that garner public attention outside the blogs. Based on those considerations, I chose images from three blogs: 1) *Atheist’s Blog*, 2) *Atheist Comics*, and 3) *The Pantheos- Friendly Atheist Blog*. Tumblr’s *Atheist Blog* has been active since July 2010 and approximately 764,771 viewers have visited this blog. The blog consists of images, video, words art, etc. In the blog’s archive, the blogger started to post messages in July 2010 and had 153 posts until February 2012.⁵⁷ Another blog resource is the *Atheist Comics*, which also mostly consists of images. It does not have any information about the bloggers, but most of the images get six commentaries on average. With the main statement of “Sometimes you just need to laugh about religion,” *Atheist Comic* has interesting posts and images. *Atheist Eve* is housed at the website atheist-community.org and is a humorous blog that caricatures both theism and atheism. The blog was active from October 2004 through August 2012.⁵⁸ The *Atheist Comic* blog was included in the top 30 atheist/agnostic/skeptical blogs according to *The Pantheos*, a prominent website that hosts conversations about faith.⁵⁹ Another popular atheist blog, according to *The Pantheos*, is *Friendly Atheist*.⁶⁰ Although *Atheist Blog* is not included in *The Pantheos* list, it has many interesting images that employ carnivalesque and burlesque strategies, and its entries have been reblogged by multiple bloggers. Consequently, all of the blogs I’ve chosen to examine in this study are well-known exemplars of the New Atheist movement. Because the blogosphere offers rhetors a relatively unfettered environment in which to express their opinions visually, it contains the potential for

rhetorical innovation. Analysis of key visual images will contribute to the larger understanding of the New Atheist movement.

Result

Atheists utilize strategic tactics for communicating in the public sphere, to deliver the message in a way that grabs media and public attention. One example is to create messages that engage people's emotions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger. An image can involve an audience's emotions, such as sadness, or even send a provocative message, to bring the discourse into wider public discussion.

In the following sections, I describe the roles of atheists as a counter public in terms of burlesque and carnivalesque images. First, burlesque images in atheists' blogs foster their own identity and help them develop their belief system. Second, carnivalesque images help atheists to move outward and challenge the dominant public sphere.

Burlesque Images are used for Building Identity

A caricature entitled "Man and Religion Synopsis" was posted on October 17, 2011. There were 122 bloggers who responded, re-blogged, and commented on the cartoon. The image also appeared in the popular "Friendly Atheist" blog,⁶¹ and it was re-blogged by 154 bloggers.⁶² Other online newspapers, blogs, and websites also have displayed this image.⁶³

The burlesque rhetorical strategy in this comic ridicules Christian believers and the dark side of the history of Christianity. Islam also becomes the target of this burlesque, but Islam comes across as a contemporary threat whose dangerous future is a story "to be continued." The external message is clear because the rhetor portrays the target from an outsider's perspective, simplifying the history of Christianity and associating it solely with its darkest episodes. The comic also ridicules the contrast between the promise of Christian religious leaders through the words "religion of peace" and the accusatory words: "infidel," "heretics," and "witch." Despite the comedic tone, the cartoon demonstrates the "dark side" of Christianity's history and alleges similarities between that and contemporary Islamic teaching.

The burlesque image tries to challenge the audience to connect the moral value of religious people's attitude with contemporary judgment. The audience in this era has different judgment than the people in the past. Those who historically were labeled heretics, witches, and infidels according to Christian standards, would likely not be punished today. Although some modern Christian denominations might condemn actions like heresy and witchcraft, contemporary punishment within the church is not as severe as punishments have been historically.⁶⁴ The image also provides the

information about this change by acknowledgment in the fifth frame that Christians have finally “calmed down.”

Another image appeared in the *Atheist Blog* on October 11, 2012.⁶⁵ There were 35 people who re-blogged this image. The most interesting point about this image is the words “If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘faith,’ you can spell ‘microwave.’” These words also appeared in around 264 atheist websites and blogs, with different illustrations and videos, such as when it appeared in the *Think Atheist* website,⁶⁶ where 17,090 people connected as the members. However the rearranging of words comprised of letters that look like *Scrabble* tiles also creates an interesting and a strategic burlesque appeal. Contextually, the image appeared on October 11, the same day that Pope Benedict XVI announced the “Year of Faith.” This celebration of faith started on the October 11, 2012 and will conclude on November 24, 2013.⁶⁷ He announced it as a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Vatican II in the Apostolic Speech and letter to all Catholic churches in the world.

The atheist uses intellectual issues, technological association, and historical narrative, as well as promoting atheistic interpretations and evaluations of the dominant religious groups. The main purpose of atheists’ burlesque images is to criticize the power of religion and point out the irrelevance and outmoded judgment of religious values to contemporary standards. As an alternative to replace “God” and religion, atheists offer human empowerment through technological development and science. This is the activity of counter publics, to create enclaves to establish their identity.

Enclaves enable atheists to identify their exclusion from the dominant publics. Burlesque appeals help to solidify the identity of the atheist enclaves. As an external approach, burlesque creates friction and separation between the atheists and the dominant religious group. Burlesque images and symbols seek to point out the stupidity, mistakes, and irrelevance of the dominant religious groups.

Using the burlesque approach, atheists challenge the dominance of religion in society. Atheists point out the authoritative tools of religion, such as religious leaders and the attitude of religious people who bow down to “God.” Burlesque strategy functions to bring down these authoritative tools by laughing at them as ridiculous objects.

The atheists not only criticize the authority of religion, but also develop arguments about the ways in which power is misused by religion. For example, they point to the history of the death penalty from a religious perspective as irrelevant to current moral standards. Religious leaders use their power to impose these death penalty standard as shown in Figure One of Chapter Two. They also juxtapose current searches for answers and hope through the Internet with the religious efforts through prayers, which are demonstrated in Figure Two of Chapter Two. This image shows the unequal position between believers and “God.” Finally, the burlesque image also

demonstrates the misuse of religious authority through the doctrine of faith as a way to force individuals to believe the impossibility by using the example of *Scrabble* games image in Figure Three of Chapter Two.

As a replacement for “God” and religion, atheists offer science and technology. Through visual rhetoric, proponents of New Atheism identify humanity as the empowering figure who utilized technology and science to further develop their civilization. In this burlesque strategy, the atheist presents the atheist identity, as the advocate of science, intellectuality, human empowerment, and technological development.

Enclaves serve as a safe space to rearticulate the atheist identity; they may isolate the groups from healthy discussion and criticism with outsider. To maintain healthy tension, the counter publics need to confront the dominant publics through interaction. The way to challenge ideas to wider publics is to criticize the existing social construction through different media and approaches. In the context of this paper, the carnivalesque is used to contest the idea of Gods’ existences.

Carnavalesque Serves to Forge Connection

Atheists’ carnivalesque images are instrumental in expanding their discourse to wider publics that consist of those who are uncomfortable with hegemonic perspectives, who share atheists’ beliefs, or who are indifferent. The movement of atheists into the public arena increases counter-public efficacy by expanding their public vocabulary and (re) articulating their identity. Then, the public expansion enables the counter public to invite others to contest their own premises and compare them with the dominant premise.

The message suggests that our ability to choose our beliefs is one thing that contributes to diversity among people. That diversity, however, need not be a source of division. The carnivalesque appeal attempts to negotiate the identity of the rhetor and the audience by uniting them as one. It also provides a space for the probability and improbability of the existence of god, and it encourages the audience to reflect on the ways in which their belief system impacts their quality of life.

A carnivalesque image appeared in the Friendly Atheist Blogs on November 13, 2011 as an image that lead into the discussion of myth issue in theist and atheist. I selected this image because the image firstly came up as a billboard from American Atheist’s “You Know It’s a Myth” Campaign and reposted in the blog. In 2010, the atheist group conducted a campaign by placing billboards with the theme "You Know It’s a Myth, This Season Celebrate Reason." In 2011, the atheist group used the image as an advertisement for the same campaign during the Christmas season. In their campaign, they placed a billboard in the west end of the Lincoln Tunnel, under the Hudson River. This tunnel connects Weehawken, New Jersey and the region of Manhattan in

New York City. The tunnel carries 120,000 vehicles per day, 1,700 buses, and 62,000 commuters. Consequently, Lincoln Tunnel is one of the busiest tunnels in the world.⁶⁸ The 2011 billboard also created public discussion,⁶⁹ prompted a Christmas holiday public debate,⁷⁰ and fostered discourse about religious advertisements in the public area. Thus, the advertisement produced a counter-public message in the public sphere.

The words “37 million Americans know MYTHS when they see them,” show the involvement of the communicator in the advertisement. The words also provide statistical data about the number of the non-affiliated to religion population: 37 million Americans. According to the *New York Times*,⁷¹ the billboard, with the dominant colors of orange and black, cost \$ 25,000 for placement. David Silverman, The President of American Atheists, argued that the purpose of the billboard was to “call out” to the atheists to confess honestly about who they are.⁷²

Through carnivalesque imagery, atheists perform as a counter public that expands the public vocabulary about God. The dominant vocabulary about God assumes God’s existence and regards God as the creator of humanity. Atheists contest this premise by presenting humans as the creators and God as something created by humanity. They introduce the idea that we are all atheists. Through the maneuvers of carnivalesque that challenge or question the dominant social construction inspired by religion, atheists as counter publics disturb the “unjust participatory privilege enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies.”⁷³ Using the new vocabularies about “God” via the entertaining approach of carnivalesque, the atheists can make their alternative identity and perspectives understandable to the public.

The counter statement uses carnivalesque images to disseminate its messages. For example, the caricature of an angry God makes the almighty personae of God more human; juxtaposing images of “God” with other myths may undermine the position of God; and familiarizing atheism by suggesting that everybody is an atheist may invite questioning of God’s inexistence. Through humor, entertainment, and attractive combinations of idioms and images, atheists use their rhetorical style to appeal to the wider public.

The carnivalesque style in atheists’ visual productions also strengthens their identity as supporters of humanity through supporting intellectuality, playfulness, and entertainment. The carnivalesque images involve the word “you,” emphasizing the freedom of individuals to believe whatever they want, and demonstrating the importance of human empowerment as the intellectual body that controls one’s life and “God.” The message within the carnivalesque imagery lets the atheist playfully participate in the dominant discourse and lets the public openly contest atheism’s values. The combinations of words, visual imagery, color composition, and word size

provide attractive messages to the wider public as noted in Chapter Three. Through a carnivalesque approach, atheists can invite others to contest their own identity.

Counter publics circulate and enact oppositional identity by inviting wider publics to participate in the discourse of atheism. Public spheres are not only fields for the development of discursive perspective; but it is also an area for the enactment of social identities.⁷⁴ By joining the public sphere, atheists enact their alternative and oppositional identity and engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas.

Both the use of enclaves and oscillation between burlesque and carnivalesque images enable atheists to participate in the public sphere as a counter public. Burlesque and carnivalesque rhetoric operates to disseminate counter discourse and strengthen atheist identity. The media that is used for this visual imagery may also construct the framework of burlesque and carnivalesque to invite the audience to participate in the discourse of atheism.

Discussion

When people reflect on a nation's diversity, they often point to demographics or face-to-face interactions to evaluate cultural attitudes of the different groups and toward each other. In Chapter One, I mentioned a study by the University of Minneapolis about the stigmatization of atheists as an example of public attitude. This chapter, however, offers another standpoint on public attitudes, in particular, on the attitude toward religious believers and non-believers. I examine the examples of two types of rhetorical appeals employed in the atheist blogosphere. This analysis examines the rhetorical strategies of carnivalesque and burlesque in atheist visual production, which is noticeable in contemporary culture and digital media. These two types of rhetorical appeals are employed in the atheist blogosphere. Although the increased legitimizations of atheistic beliefs are, themselves, historic,⁷⁵ we must also recognize the significance of the discursive symbols and images inspired by the emergence of the New Atheist movement in the U.S.

This paper aims not only to identify the burlesque and carnivalesque strategies of images in the blogosphere, but also to contribute to the understanding of how symbols function in religious discourse in the U.S. First, the images embolden the message of atheism and help atheist groups participate in the public arena. Second, the images invite the audience to fight, question, and criticize the dominant religious perspective in the U.S. In this chapter, I analyze how those two contributions remain salient in the New Atheist movement. I first investigate the connection between the theoretical approach of counter publics and the function of atheist images. Next, I scrutinize the ways in which atheists encourage their audience to fight, question, and criticize dominant norms and culture.

Another limitation of the study is the challenge of adopting the linguistic theoretical framework from Kenneth Burke to the visual rhetoric. I found that the polysemic power of visual rhetoric may have broad perspective in interpreting the images as both burlesque and carnivalesque. Burke's formulation is unable to adequately capture the nuance of the visual rhetoric because many examples displayed characteristics that could be read as simultaneously burlesque and carnivalesque.

Further research could explore other rhetorical strategies the new atheist movement has used. Also worth examining are other tenets from Burke's frame of acceptance and rejection such as grotesque, satire, and tragedy. Another possibility is to look at the interaction of visual imagery and audience dialogue within the new atheist movement, such as visual elements as significant communication tools in the interaction between atheists to theists, atheists and themselves, or atheists and society in general.⁷⁶

Furthermore, a minority group's visual rhetoric is a discursive form of deliberation, empowerment, and criticism through the playful power of symbol. Symbols and representations create large spaces for understanding relationships, perspectives, and criticism, and it is worth exploring the nature of these spaces. Additionally, digital media has the potential to increase participation by minority groups in the public dialogue. While the atheist movement becomes more vocal and has more spaces through digital media, little has been done to limit freedom and encourage more respect toward each other. Not only do atheists need to respect religious people, but also religious people should respect the point of view of atheism, which has been silenced for centuries, and acknowledge their existence in society. The new atheists' visual rhetoric in the blogosphere reveals that the power of rhetoric combined with political interest, science, and technological appraisal can attract more people and shape the wider atheist community.

Endnotes

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¹¹ However, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith argued that organization, which concerns on secularism, has had less impact in American Society compare to the religious-based organization, because of the instability of organization and marginalization. The pressure from the religious-based organization is even stronger when it comes to political decision especially in religious based states. See Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. "Secular Humanism and Atheism Beyond Progressive Secularism," *Sociology of Religion* (2007): 407-424.

¹² Richard Dawkins, "Science and The New Atheist," *Put into Inquiry*, December 17, 2007, http://www.pointofinquiry.oeg/richard_dawkins_science_and_the_new_atheism (accessed October 24, 2011).

¹³ Dawkins, *Science and The New Atheist*.

¹⁴ Tom Flynn, "Tour de force," *Free Inquiry* (April/May, 2007): 57-58.

¹⁵ Gribbin, *Four Horsemen of New Atheism Reunited*.

¹⁶ Similar ideas upon the controversies of New Atheism and problems of oversimplifications and generalization can be found in the discussion of Investigating Atheism, a website from Cambridge University, Psychology and Religion Research Group that discussed the problems around the issue of Atheism. Investigating Atheism, *Cambridge University*, <http://www.investigatingatheism.info/history.html> (Accessed June 24, 2013)

¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, Third Edition with A New Afterword (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd, 1984).

¹⁸ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 20

¹⁹ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 23

²⁰ Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 25

²¹ Edward C Appel, "Rush to Judgement: Burlesque, Tragedy, and Hierarchal Alchemy in the Rhetoric of America's Foremost Political Talkshow Host," *Southern Communication Journal* 68, 3 (2003): 217-230.

²² Burke, *Attitude Toward History*, 30

²³ Appel, *Rush to Judgement*, 220.

²⁴ Paul Pablo' Martin and Valerie Renegar, "The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique," *Communication Studies* 58, 3 (2007): 299-313.

²⁵ Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, "Disciplining the Carnavalesque: Chris Farley's Exotic Dance," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, 3 (2006): 240.

²⁶ Sobhi Al Zobaidi, "Hashish and the 'Carnavalesque' in Egyptian Cinema," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 3 (2010): 375-392.

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- ²⁷ Michael Gardiner. *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London : Routledge, 2000).
- ²⁸ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "From carnival to transgression," in K. Gelder & S. Thornton (Eds.), *The subcultures reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 293–301. Reprinted from *The politics and poetics of transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). See also Paul Pablo Martin and Valerie Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*.
- ²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, Translation from C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, Original work published 1963).
- ³⁰ Michael Gardiner. *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- ³¹ Thomas Hale, *On Being a Missionary* (California: William Carey Library Pub, 2003). See also Paul Pablo Martin and Valerie Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*
- ³² Hale, *On Being a Missionary*, see also Martin and Renegar, *The Man for His Time: The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique*.
- ³³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*.
- ³⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*.
- ³⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and The Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- ³⁶ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25, 26 (1990): 56-80.
- ³⁷ Robert Asen, "Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10 (2000): 430
- ³⁸ Asen, *Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics*, 144
- ³⁹ Asen, *Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics*, 113
- ⁴⁰ Robert Entman, "Cascading Activation," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 415-440.
- ⁴¹ Entman, *Cascading Activation*, 417
- ⁴² Brian L. Ott, Greg Dickinson, and Erick Aoki, "Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3 (2006): 27-47.
- ⁴³ Ott, Dickinson, and Aoki, *Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting*.
- ⁴⁴ Lance Porter, Kaye D Sweetser Trammell, Deborah Chung, and Eunseong Kim, E. "Blog Power: Examining the Effects of Practitioner Blog Use on Power in Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 33 (2007): 92-95.
- ⁴⁵ Samuel Terrilli and Liney Inga Arnorsdottir. "The CEO as Celebrity Blogger: Is there a Ghost or a Ghostwriter in the Machine?" *Public Relations Journal*, 2, 4, (2008).
- ⁴⁶ Mark Warren Liew. "Digital Hidden Transcripts: Exploring Student Resistance in Blog." *Computer and Composition* (Elsevier) 27 (2010): 304-314.
- ⁴⁷ Liew, *Digital Hidden Transcripts*.
- ⁴⁸ Cara A Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address: Lewis Hine's Progressive Era Child Labor Rhetoric*, 252
- ⁴⁹ Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*. In this paper, Finnegan presented five approaches to understand visual imagery in Public Address especially when critics want to conduct visual investigation. First, production is a process to understand the nature of the images, especially the original of the image such as where the image comes from and where to find the image. This approach focuses on the genre of the image such as documentary, advertising, religious iconography, etc.

Second approach is compositional approach. In this approach the critics are expected to engage in the description and interpretation of the visual imagery by analyzing the content, color, light, and spatial organization. Third of all, the critics try to look at the reproduction of the images through understanding a specific image in a specific context. This approach is based on the assumption that the image can be actively engaged and discovered by the audience, not just wait there passively. There are images that have powerful rhetorical message. Fourth is circulation. This approach helps the critics to discover the fluidity of the images through passive transmission of ideas, information, or images. Fifth is reception, where the critics try to assess the audience response to a work, through empirical research or evaluating the text.

⁵⁰ Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*, 253.

⁵¹ Finegan, *Studying Visual Modes of Public Address*, 253.

⁵² Burke, *Attitude Toward History*.

⁵³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “*Metaphors we live by*,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 3

⁵⁵ Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler, *Governing Codes: Gender, Metaphor, and Political Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

⁵⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, 3

⁵⁷ The first blog’s address that I will examine is as follows:
<http://atheistsblog.tumblr.com/>

⁵⁸ According to the Atheist Eve blog, the one who make the caricature of Atheist Eve is Tracie Harris. She is a graphic designer in Austin, TX. She received her BA in Liberal Studies from the University of Central Florida. Look at the Atheist Community of Austin, “About the Author,” *Atheist Eve*, <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/> (Accessed September 12, 2012)

⁵⁹ Daniel Florian, “The Top 30 Atheist/Agnostic/Skeptical Blogs,” *The Pantheos Unreasonable Faith* (February 5, 2009), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unreasonablefaith/2009/02/the-top-30-atheistagnostic-blogs/> (Accessed September 15, 2012). In the list the Atheist Comic named as Religion Comics with blog address as follows: <http://godisimaginary.com/comics/>

⁶⁰ Florian, *The Top 30 Atheist/Agnostic/Skeptical Blogs*.

⁶¹ Friendly Atheist blog is included as the most prominent atheist blog according to the Pantheos. “30 Most Prominent Atheist blog,” *Pantheos*, February 9, 2009, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2009/02/09/the-30-most-popular-atheist-blogs/> (Accessed February 2, 2013).

⁶² “Man and Religious, Synopsis,” *Friendly Atheist Tumblr*, October 2011, <http://friendlyatheist.tumblr.com/post/4959374394/via-imgur> (Accessed February 1, 2013).

⁶³ The similar image can be found in an online newspaper. For example: David Horsey, “Man and Religion: A Synopsis,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 27, 2009, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Man-and-religion-a-synopsis-2454398.php> (Accessed February 4, 2013). Some websites also have similar image such as: “Man and Religion: A Synopsis,” *Monicks: Unleashed*, May 15, 2010, <http://monicks.posterous.com/man-and-religion-a-synopsis-comic> (February 9, 2013), see also: “Man and Religion: A Synopsis,” *The Perplexed Observered*, November 20,

2011, <http://theperplexedobserver.tumblr.com/post/13061926126/man-and-religion-a-synopsis> (Accessed February 4, 2013).

⁶⁴ Jonathan Wright, *Heretics: The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the modern church* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2011).

⁶⁵ "If You Rearrange the Word Faith, You Can Spell Microwave," *Atheist Blog Tumblr*.

⁶⁶ "Faith Microwave," *Think Atheist*, http://www.thinkatheist.com/video/faith-microsave?xg_source=activity (Accessed December 27, 2013).

⁶⁷ "Pope Launches Year of Faith, to combat 'spiritual desertification,'" *Catholic World News*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=15876> (Accessed January 6, 2013).

⁶⁸ Michael Gardiner. *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁹ Sharon Otterman, "This Christmas, Atheists' Billboard Tries a Softer Tack," *City Room, New York Times* November 10, 2011: <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/this-year-atheists-billboard-draws-yawns/> (Accessed December 27, 2012).

⁷⁰ Liberty Counsel, "Atheists plan billboard campaign this Christmas season," *Catholic Organization*, December 2011: http://www.catholic.org/national/national_story.php?id=43708 (Accessed December 27, 2012).

⁷¹ Otterman, *This Christmas, Atheists' Billboard Tries a Softer Tack*.

⁷² Otterman, *This Christmas, Atheists' Billboard Tries a Softer Tack*.

⁷³ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25, 26 (1990): 155.

⁷⁴ Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and The Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

⁷⁵ Alice Gribbin, "Preview: The four horseman of new atheism reunite," *New Statesman* (December 22, 2011): <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/12/richard-dawkins-issue-hitchens> (Accessed February 4, 2013).

⁷⁶ Raymond Williams. *Culture*. (London: Fontana, 1981).

