

The Musician as Critical Rhetorician and Public Intellectual: Comic Discourse in Frank Zappa's
film *200 Motels* as a Work of Critical Rhetorical Intervention to Western Popular Culture

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Introduction: Zappa's Universe

There is perhaps much to celebrate and equally as much to despise in the events of the late twentieth century. This was the century of rapid technological advancement and capitalist development. It was the century of cultural criticism and multi-cultural diversity issues that are still to be resolved in the legacy left to the twenty-first century. It was the century of war as a technology of 'peace.' It was a century of cultural imperialism by way of literature, entertainment, electronic mediums of international communication, expanding markets and push-button warfare. It was the century of 'the sexual revolution' that, though celebrated by Western culture, by some accounts (discussed later) never actually happened. Perhaps a little known fact, is the acknowledgment that one important aspect of the twentieth century is that it is also the century of Zappa's Universe. This fact may go unnoticed for generations yet, but it will be well-known and acclaimed someday, most assuredly, perhaps when the view of twentieth century art is afforded the appropriate measure of critical distance, and *if* such knowledges are not obscured by the ever-narrowing panopticism of a refined and ever more sophisticated hegemonic fascistic gaze.

Frank Vincent Zappa, as a composer, songwriter, guitarist, and film producer, was also a very interestingly comic critical wit that, through music, satire, and ironic verbiage and visual parody, critiques both twentieth century American 'garbage' culture and sub-culture during the years of the 'cultural revolution' of the 60's through until his death in 1993. In both his artworks and in his comments to the press as well as in his political advocacy and his participation in American and international commerce and transcultural exchange, for many fans and admirers Zappa was one of the few voices of reason in the age of 'pop' culture. For a great many of his fans, Zappa is a veritable cultural icon, though this fact has gone largely unrecognized by not only scholars of critical cultural studies, but interestingly enough, by scholars of art, art history and criticism, as well as by the formal institutions of music scholarship and American Studies.

Thus, the need for a focus on his work from inside the academy, which this particular effort and a few other stalwart works from other enthusiastic Zappa scholars of recent emergence, represent a primary investigation into Zappa's relevance to American cultural studies and, indeed, as suggested by Wragg (2001), to contemporary critical cultural theory (or *anti-theory*?) in general.

As noted by Matt Groenig in an interview for an A&E Biography on Zappa's life, taped shortly before Zappa's death (Groenig is creator of "The Simpsons" television show and friend of the Zappa family), the intriguing thing about Zappa was that he was, "...happy to make fun of anyone who couldn't stand being made fun of." Groenig says that this is '...the great secret of Zappa's humor.' Zappa, who may have been perceived as being part of the counter-culture of the 60's, 70's and 80's by the mainstream media oracles and ideologues of the time, was nonetheless openly critical of the stances and imagined accomplishments of these very counter-cultural 'movements.' He was openly critical of the presumptions they made about their representation of youth and sub-culture, not to mention their quasi-'revolutionary' potential. It is important to understand that Zappa is keen on attacking ideological positions, more so than attacking *ad hominem* the persons that represented or who performed these ideologies, no matter where they managed to turn up.

Zappa stood steadfastly at a critical distance from the proponents of '60's, 70's and 80's sub-culture' who, in Zappa's view, by claiming such victories and cultural encampments as 'sexual revolution,' strivings for world peace, cultural revolution, drug advocacy, and later, popular political apathy and activism as well as Right-wing fundamentalism, where, most of them, patently "out to lunch." Around the time that Russian Communism 'fell,' Zappa was involving himself with entrepreneurs in Eastern Bloc countries who were interested in marketing their products to Western consumers by offering to represent them and promote their products in the

West. These are not the typical concerns and activities of most Rock stars, by any means of analysis. His music and aesthetic adventures in film-making were equally as non-representative of what normally passed for 'popular' entertainment and are typically rarely appreciated by other than the few fanatical aficionados of his work. Some even despise and loath his proclivity to denounce piety and to, as they see it, proclaim degeneracy of the dominant institutions, ideological perspectives, common practices, and indeed, that which passes as common sense. This might explain his relative obscurity to the formal academic focus, despite the fact that approximately 70 separate musical projects and several film productions were released by the time of his death in 1993, over a career span of just less than 30 years beginning in the mid to late 60's. Zappa's critical and artistic contribution to twentieth century Western culture is yet to be recognized, its full implicit impact sure not to be appreciated for several generations, as is seemingly typical of most really great artists and thinkers throughout popularly known mainstreamed history.

This paper will attempt to posit Zappa's work, in particular, his film *200 Motels* (described by Peter Graves on A & E's biography of Zappa as "Zappa's *Heaven's Gate*") as an important embodiment of critical cultural intervention into mainstream American ideology of the late twentieth century. The methodological perspective is a combination of the theoretical perspectives of Kenneth Burke on comic discourse as critical rhetoric and Friedrich Nietzsche on critique that aims to destroy or undermine the 'common sense' and values, in this case of American mainstream late twentieth century ideology. The claim here is that it is a Nietzschean *art as critique*. Such critical works function for Nietzsche as the only possible escape from commoditization, short of one's own immediate death (Baudrillard, J. 1993; *Symbolic Exchange and Death*; London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications).

From this perspective, it will be claimed that Zappa, and other artists to which this kind of study might be extended, are performing a critical cultural intervention (despite the apparent commoditization of their works into the capitalist axiomatic) and thus might be characterized as representing a particular type of 'organic' or 'public' intellectualism heretofore not adequately apprehended or fully or easily understood (in part, for reasons addressed in the section on auto-ethnography) by the academy. These kinds of works typically fall outside of the traditionally promoted reified canon. Allusions are made to the particularity and specificity of focus in further studies that auto-ethnographic accounts of participation in the production and consumption of Rock music might offer to a larger 'thick description' (if you will, *a la* Geertz) of Rock music as a critical rhetorical cultural space (as *the* quintessential Deleuzean schizo-capitalistic phenomenon *at the limits*). This is an attempt to recuperate the ambiguous 'cultural capital' from Rock as a liberating force in people's lives, despite the fact, and perhaps *because of*, its constant appropriation and commoditization to the purposes of an over-determining capitalization of all things under a modern Taylorite Fordism, according to hegemonic reproduction of ultra-modern industrialism. The possibilities of comic discourse as critical rhetorical communicative intervention as 'outlaw discourse,' and as a pragmatic 'lense' for ongoing study of Rock music in particular and of media culture in general is briefly discussed.