

I'm with Stupid→: Considering the Genre of the Humorous T-Shirt

R. L. Jones

For better or worse, the humorous t-shirt has established a steady footing in everyday contemporary fashion. Ranging in tenor from subtle wit to bold vulgarity, these shirts offer an opportunity to analyze how a seemingly simple message on one's clothing presents a multitude of considerations for the student of genre studies. In "I'm with Stupid," R. L. Jones, an avid fan of the humorous tee, dons a couple of his favorite funny shirts in public settings to examine what they tell us about genre.

Sam was the first student to walk into my high school classroom the other day. He proudly sported a t-shirt of a giant hamster malevolently zapping a city with laser beam eyes (think Godzilla). Soon after followed Kylie, on whose t-shirt a much different drama was playing out. A little orange crying "Mommy, NO!" mournfully gazed upon a tall glass of orange juice. Over the past few years, I've noticed an increasing prevalence of these humorous fashion statements. I see them not only in my classroom, but in the market, at the mall, in the coffee shops . . . and on me. I've assembled a collection of ridiculous t-shirts over time, from the just plain silly, like my brown tee displaying an artfully drawn Bigfoot tackling a thrashing unicorn, to the inexplicably odd, like my t-shirt featuring a creepy, mustachioed man in a blonde perm proclaiming "You had me at hola." It occurred to me that the funny t-shirt operates as a genre in itself, with its own rules and considerations. Whatever the joke behind the t-shirt—whether it is ironic, sarcastic, satirical, absurd, a play on words, or an allusion to a funny movie line—when one wears a humorous tee, he or she makes a statement. What are the communicative processes that govern this statement? To further examine the genre of the humorous tee, I decided to put on a funny tee, wander around

in a public setting, and gather some field notes. Eventually this led to further exploration, with the assistance of my twin sister Peg, a fellow humorous t-shirt connoisseur, by way of a trip to the mall. What we found was that the genre of the humorous tee can be quite tricky to navigate.

The *Golden Girls* Go to Walmart

One of my favorite humorous tees features the cast of the *Golden Girls*—Dorothy, Blanche, Rose, and Sophia. The smiling girls are sketched in dark green on a golden yellow t-shirt. Beneath the image, it reads “Stay Golden.” One Saturday afternoon, I took these gorgeous ladies on a trip to the local Walmart, that bastion of low prices that draws people of all backgrounds like moths to a flame, to find out if, in fact, my shirt was funny.

Once inside, I unassumingly strolled from aisle to aisle seeking an unsolicited reaction to my tee. It took a half hour before I finally noticed a glance and a smirk from a fifty-something-year-old man in a polo. No one seemed to be interested in my shirt, but I was interested in theirs. I observed shirts with messages of all kinds—shirts featuring brand names, names of retailers, colleges, local school districts, sports teams . . . there were shirts promoting the Marines, the 2nd Amendment, Harley Davidson, Angry Birds, Pepsi, a crocheting club, local festivals, vacation destinations, television shows, musicians, zombies, and charity events. There were shirts depicting animals, nature scenes, and the American flag. T-shirts with messages outnumbered plain t-shirts by an approximate margin of 2:1. Seeing all of these different messages and images on t-shirts inside of an hour made me realize something. Apparently, we’re a society of people who want each other to know who we are. We want complete strangers to know what products we like, what schools we support, what entertainment we prefer, what stores we shop at, what products we’re fans of, where we went on vacation, and what our political beliefs are. Forget Facebook. Forget actual conversation. If you want to know who I am, just read my t-shirt, buddy! Look at me! I’m a Bears fan! I went to Fort Myers! I watch *Duck Dynasty*! I support St. Jude! Or, I suppose one could argue that in our quest to tell the world about ourselves through our t-shirts, we’ve unwittingly morphed into billboards for everything under the sun.

Since my t-shirt didn’t seem to be garnering much appreciation, I decided to inform others wearing funny tees that I appreciated their shirts. I counted eight other t-shirts I deemed as intending to be humorous. There was a scruffy-looking twenty-something-year-old man looking at yogurt wearing a hot pink t-shirt which read, “Don’t laugh. It’s your girlfriend’s t-shirt.” He appeared to be standing with a female companion (the woman from whom

he took the shirt?). I skipped him. A forty-something-year-old man passed me sporting a black t-shirt which read “Y_U AR_AN IDI_T” in *Wheel of Fortune* style tiles. Underneath this it asked, “Would you like to buy a vowel?” No thanks. Next, I spotted a young woman wearing a shirt that said something about recycling for Jesus. “Pardon me,” I said as she browsed through CDs. “I just wanted to let you know that I like your funny shirt.”

She turned with a glowering stare and replied, “This isn’t supposed to be funny.” Whoops!

My favorite funny tee adorned a forty-something-year-old man rifling through a rack of message t-shirts. It read “How to Pick Up Chicks” and showed a picture of a man picking up an actual baby chicken. “Excuse me,” I said as I approached him. “I’m conducting research for a grad class project on funny t-shirts. Do you think my t-shirt is funny?” He chuckled. After an hour of being ignored by nearly everyone in the store, I got a chuckle. We talked for a few short minutes. He bought his shirt at Kohl’s, and it’s just one of many humorous t-shirts he owns. Even if he has to wear a shirt and tie, he informed me, he’ll still wear a funny tee underneath. Well, a man after my own heart.

I asked four other people at Walmart if they thought my shirt was funny. When I asked a twenty-something male, he looked at me confusedly and commented, “Well, the only thing that’s funny is that it’s out of date.” Another man who looked to be in his twenties replied sheepishly, “Um . . . I guess I get it.” A thirty-something-year-old woman near the chips told me, trying to be kind, “Well . . . I’d say it’s more nostalgic.”

At this point, I decided I might have better luck with someone who may have watched the show. An older woman looking at yarn laughed out loud when I presented my t-shirt to her. “What’s funny about the shirt to you?” I asked. She responded that she thought the show was funny, and even more, it was hilarious that a man my age would be wearing it. Exactly!

Who's Wearing It, Who Sees It, and Where It's Worn: The Bakhtinian Dialogism Behind Funny T-Shirts

My interactions at Walmart merit some analysis from a genre studies perspective. First of all, the humor of my *Golden Girls* t-shirt is greatly dependent on that fact that I, a guy in my mid-thirties, am wearing it. If an elderly woman was wearing it, what would be the impression? I’d guess that the woman was a fan of the show—not really that funny. In fact, if anyone was wearing it, it should be an older woman, right? So, the level of the shirt’s

humor is dependent on the wearer. Consider the following shirt advertised on badideatshirts.com (Figure 1). The words are the same, but how could their messages be interpreted differently based on who's wearing the shirt?



Figure 1: The message differs according to who is wearing it.

I get the feeling the large man is poking fun at his own size, which to me is somewhat humorous. When the thin woman sports the shirt, I don't know how to interpret the message. Did she really have anorexia at one time? On the woman, the joke loses its steam.

Here's another example: "Yes, These Are My Real Breasts." I considered making a t-shirt with this message for my research. I think this would be hilarious for a man to wear. I see the idea as a play on gender, a self-effacing joke about guys' tendency to stare and wonder about passing girls, and it's funny because the question of whether or not a guy would augment that area of his anatomy wouldn't seem to be a legitimate consideration. Although, people do have sex changes. Now if a guy who had a sex change was wearing the t-shirt, that'd drastically alter the shirt's message. Then "Yes, These Are My Real Breasts" becomes a profound statement of gender identity. What if a large man with "moobs," or man boobs, were wearing the shirt? Then it becomes a self-effacing joke. If a woman were wearing the shirt, how would that change the message? "Only a really slutty woman would wear this," my sister Peg replied when I pitched her the idea. She hadn't understood I intended for a guy to wear it.

Speaking of t-shirts about boobs, consider the example of Meredith. I had Meredith as a student in my class two years ago. She was a rebel back then, but I had no idea how much of a rebel until I recently saw her strolling through the annual hometown festival wearing a tank top that read, in bright neon letters, "Show Me Your Tits." I'm guessing this was not a shirt made for someone like Meredith, a female high school junior, but rather a dirty, dirty old man or perhaps a beach-bound college male on spring break or a spectator at a Mardi Gras parade in the French Quarter. When sported by these possible intended wearers, the shirt's message is "I'm a perv and I'm here to party."

When worn by Meredith, in front of her entire hometown, in front of parents and their children riding the Ferris Wheel, in front of the Methodist Church members grilling for the pork chop benefit, I'm not sure what the message is. Was her shirt a subversive middle finger to the community? Could it have been a cry for help? Was it some sort of message about sexuality? I thought to stop her and ask, but I was actually a bit intimidated. You don't mess with people that are outrageous. Maybe that was the message—"Buzz off!"

Interestingly, although the words on a t-shirt remain the same, the message changes greatly depending on who's wearing it, where they're wearing it, and who's seeing it. This brings to mind Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism." Bakhtin wrote in the 1920s that the "utterance" (Bakhtin's term for a unit of speech) is not static, but highly variable, or "dialogic." A message or utterance can't be understood based solely on the speaker's intentions, but is only graspable when other factors are taken into account, specifically the audience's interpretation, the history behind how the utterance has been used, and the immediate context of the utterance (which would include factors like social setting and mood) (Vice 45). So, there is a lot at play when one wears a jokey t-shirt. The humorous t-shirt I eventually did create for my research reads "Don't Sext and Drive: It Can Wait!" Consider how this shirt's message, or the effectiveness of its joke, might change given any combination of the following variables:

Worn By:	Seen By:	Seen At:
A 70-year-old	A security guard	The mall
A 10-year-old	A six-year-old girl	Your college classroom
A college student	A protective father with his six-year-old daughter at his side	A church
A large man wearing an extra small shirt	Someone who's actually sexted while driving	A bar
Someone who hasn't bathed in two weeks	Someone who's received a harassing sext	A fancy restaurant
Your teacher	Someone who's lost a loved one in a text-and-drive accident	Chuck E. Cheese
Your father	Someone on their way to a funny movie	6:00am
Anthony Weiner	Someone on their way to a funeral	10:00pm
Someone looking to manage your investments	A primitive Amazonian tribesman	A nursing home
Will Ferrell	Your mother	The Oval Office

The variables that could affect the shirt's overall message are innumerable. Of course, this isn't just true for humorous t-shirts. I suppose it's true for any utterance. Thinking in terms of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), issues of "reception" especially come to mind. To return to the "I Beat Anorexia" shirt example, one person could use the shirt to announce, "I'm fat and proud of it." Another person could re-purpose the shirt as proclamation of empowerment at having overcome a life-threatening illness. How these two people take up and use the text (their reception) couldn't be more different.

The World's Okayest Mom Sexts While Driving

I had more to learn about the humorous tee, so I decided to enlist the help of my twin sister Peg. For the past five years, Peg and I have been embroiled in a "T-shirt War." We gift each other ridiculous tees for our birthday. For our most recent birthday, she gave me a t-shirt with a giant name tag that reads, "My Name is Terry" in shaking handwriting. I don't know where she got it or what the shirt's point is, but it strikes me as hysterical. The day I did wear it out and about really sucked. At least a dozen people came up to me and asked, "Is your name really Terry?" By the end of the day, I'd given up explaining and just said "yes." I gave her a stupid t-shirt that pictured a ballerina doing the splits and farting. It reads, "Smells good, don't it?" She can't wear that one anywhere, however, due to the possible social implications. I failed by going too vulgar, so I suppose she won that round.

My research plan was for us to locate or create a couple goofy tees and wear them around the mall for an hour. We'd gauge other's reactions and try to uncover more about the genre we were participating in. Peg and I pitched each other ideas back and forth over e-mail. I was determined to go the Custom Ink route (www.customink.com is a site where you can create your own message t-shirts). Peg was feeling less inventive and decided instead to surf the scores of funny t-shirts sites on the web for an item to wear on our stupid t-shirt outing. She discovered a shirt that fit her frame of mind these days, as a mom of a seven-year-old boy, a six-year-old boy, and three-year-old girl, which read "World's Okayest Mom." I originally designed and ordered a "Corey Feldman—2016" presidential campaign tee after finding some clip art on Custom Ink that was a dead ringer for the '80s child star. A customer service rep e-mailed me to report they couldn't make the tee, however, because of trademark issues with the name "Corey Feldman." I tried to e-mail Corey to get his permission, but he never responded, and I had to go with my backup idea, "Don't Sext and Drive—It Can Wait!" After having so few unsolicited reads of my *Golden Girls* tee, I wanted to make sure people read this baby. So I ordered it in sunshine yellow with giant red

lettering. The shirt also features clip art of a man in a suit and tie with one hand on a steering wheel. He's looking up and lines surround his head as if he's just had a "Eureka!" moment (Figure 2).

I fancied my shirt's message to be a mildly clever play on the recent, widespread public service announcements about the dangers of texting while at the wheel. The message also has some additional currency with recent high profile sexting scandals (a politician named Anthony Weiner sending women photos of his junk? It's just too perfect). Just the notion of some idiot trying to sext while driving is humorous to me. I suppose there are morons out there who have attempted it, and I can't imagine it's very easy to keep one hand on the wheel while keeping your camera phone steady, and . . . well, you get the idea. So, this shirt would also function as a public service, helping prevent imbeciles from driving into oncoming traffic while Snapchatting pics of their unmentionables.



Figure 2: Will these undies be sexting friendly?

I was apprehensive about the shirt being too edgy. After all, who at the mall might see me in this shirt? My students? Their parents? Members of my church? I could potentially land myself in some hot water over this. When I arrived at Peg's on a Saturday afternoon to pick her up for our humorous t-shirt research, her husband Greg and their boys were at the kitchen table playing Go Fish. "Dah, don't, sss, sss, sext, don't sext and drive," her seven-year-old carefully read. "Dad, what's 'sext' mean?" Oh yeah, I forgot. Young children could be reading this shirt. A peeved look from Greg sent me back out to the driveway to wait for Peg. Now I was feeling really nervous about wearing this shirt in public. "Everyone's going to see me in this thing," I worried, becoming a bit paranoid. To borrow a CHAT concept, "distribution," or who a text is presented to, suddenly became my primary concern. I had second thoughts about wearing this shirt to the mall in front of everyone and anyone. A divey bar at midnight would have been a safer point of distribution. However, I needed a broad population for conducting t-shirt response testing.

As we entered the mall, I caught myself covering my shirt with the legal pad I was using to take notes each time we passed younger children. The looks began to pile up quickly. Peg's shirt didn't get as many glances, because it didn't immediately appear to be out of the ordinary. It was a maroon v-neck with the lettering in a sort of faded block font. "Mommy, that looks like a football shirt. You should wear that to a football game," I heard Peg's six-year-old comment as we were leaving her home. She did get several smiles throughout our hour at the mall from ladies who appeared to be fellow moms. They got it. Meanwhile, I recorded a number of glances from moms I'd classify as irritated.

We stopped to talk to an Asian man with a thick accent selling t-shirts at a kiosk. He chuckled at my shirt, but Peg's took some explaining. "People of all ages buy these shirts," he replied as Peg asked him a few questions about his kiosk. "My most popular shirt is the one with the minion," he informed us, pointing to a yellow shirt featuring the bobbling character from the *Despicable Me* movies.

Then we strode into Spencer's, where we were met by a barrage of sexually explicit t-shirts. "This might be the only place in the mall where you won't have to worry about offending anyone," Peg quipped. The salesperson there laughed at my shirt. "Yeah, the t-shirts are one of our biggest sellers. Eighteen to 24-year-olds are our target buyers," he told me.

At the food court, I received my most emphatic response of the afternoon. "Did you see that guy's shirt?" a twenty-something woman guffawed to her male companion. Peg and I approached a woman working behind the smoothie counter who looked to be in her thirties. She didn't find Peg's shirt especially funny, but snickered at mine. "It's like a public service announcement about texting," she commented.

As we made our way to one final department store, Peg lamented, "Humor is tricky. It's so specific in terms of what one person will think is funny and another person won't."

"I know what you mean," I replied as I quickly dodged behind a kiosk to avoid eye contact with the wife of my church's pastor.

Peg needed to get back home to her kids, so we began rapidly asking people their thoughts on our shirts. A forty-something man looking at flannels told us he didn't find our shirts particularly humorous, but that he was not offended by my sexting t-shirt. Next, we questioned a twenty-something sales associate with a nose ring in women's accessories who told us flatly that she didn't find either of our t-shirts particularly funny. She wasn't offended by my shirt because, as she explained, "It takes a lot to shock me." Two other female twenty-something sales associates in the men's jeans section both thought our shirts were hilarious. An older female customer nearby overheard Peg and me explaining our research to the sales associates and came to look at our shirts. She agreed they were funny. Last, we ran into a classmate from my college class who knew a little about my project. This thirty-something mom laughed at our shirts and read mine aloud, "*I can't wait to have sex*—oh, that's not what it says. Whoops, I guess that was a Freudian slip."

Bluto and Booger: Delivery Matters

Peg and I wore our humorous t-shirts with some success and some unsuccess. In reflecting on my experiences at Walmart and the mall, I'm taken

back to Peg's earlier comment about humor being tricky. Like any joke, the humorous tee has the potential to bomb. In fact, there are a number of sites online featuring "t-shirt fails," or pictures of folks wearing humorous t-shirts where clearly the joke is on them. My favorite is mandatory.com's "Unfortunate T-shirt for Mug Shots," featuring mug shots of individuals wearing shirts such as "I can't get away with anything" and "I'm probably lying." One might liken wearing a funny t-shirt to a stand-up comic relating a joke to an audience, but with the t-shirt, the joke is not just related to people who paid to come see the comic. The t-shirt's joke is made to everyone, whether they're in the laughing mood or not. When people leave their house for the day wearing a funny t-shirt, chances are they will "bomb" with some of their audience, but that's a nervy risk the humorous t-shirt wearer must boldly accept. Hadley Freeman, fashion columnist for *The Guardian*, recently lambasted the funny t-shirt:

I have never understood the point of the joke T-shirt . . . simply because wearing a joke on your chest is like walking around all day and telling the same gag over and over, like a musical doll that has been jammed . . . Slogan T-shirts are obviously, utterly wrong in that they SHOUT AT PEOPLE AT FULL VOLUME REPEATING THE SAME PHRASE OVER AND OVER . . . There is really no excuse, unless you have lost the use of your vocal chords.

When donning a humorous tee, the wearer must take into account they are going to irritate the Hadley Freemans of the world. But, they must do so with confidence and panache. After all, there's delivery to consider.

Just as a hilarious joke can be spoiled by a poor delivery, a humorous t-shirt can be foiled by an inept wearer. To rock a funny t-shirt, one must display a certain degree of audacity and ambivalence. These qualities are proudly exhibited by two heroes of the humorous tee from film, John "Bluto" Blutarsky of *Animal House* (Figure 3) and Dudley "Booger" Dawson from the *Revenge of the Nerds* films (Figure 4). These film images can be found at the following websites: Figure 3 <http://savagebrothers.blogspot.com/2011/03/shirts-of-booger-philosophy.html> and Figure 4 can be found at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3582367488/nm0000004?ref_=nm_mi_all_sf.

Bluto ironically sports his nondescript "COLLEGE" t-shirt in the above picture, as if to sardonically say it doesn't matter what college he attends. He could be attending Faber College (as in the film) or any college—who cares? He's in college, so he's wearing a stupid shirt that says so.

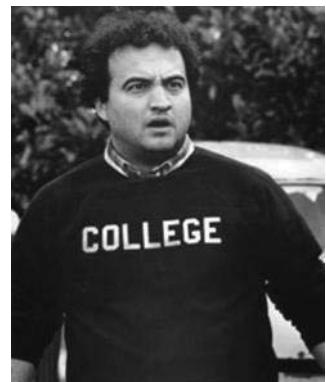


Figure 3: John "Bluto" Blutarsky



Figure 4: Dudley "Booger" Dawson

Customink.com tabbed the shirt as #3 in its list of the 100 most iconic t-shirts of all time. The shirt is made funnier by the fact that college is a place Bluto, a derelict character in his seventh year at Faber with a GPA of 0.0, clearly doesn't belong. He's the last person who should be the face of "college." Booger, a student at Adams College and one of the "nerds" of the Alpha Beta fraternity, is stylishly adorned in a ripped "WHO FARTED?" t-shirt. The shirt is one of several humorous tees Booger wears throughout *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Revenge of the Nerds II: Nerds in Paradise*.

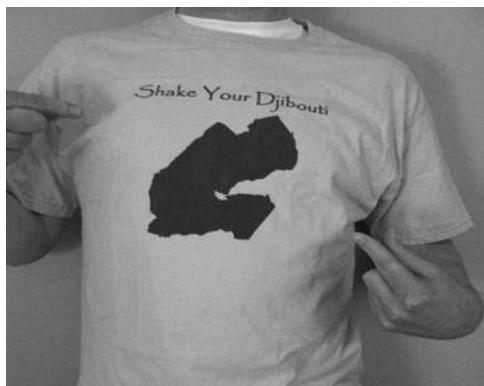
Bluto and Booger are successful humorous t-shirt wearers for two reasons: 1) They don't care if someone doesn't like or understand their shirt, and 2) They never acknowledge that their shirts could be funny. Bluto's shirt appears in only one short scene, in which he chugs a bottle of Jack Daniels in panicked response to his fraternity being shut down. He's clearly not in a mood to care whether others find his shirt humorous. Neither he nor his surrounding fraternity brothers make mention of his shirt. Essentially, the shirt becomes a sight gag, "a joke which achieves its effect visually" rather than through speech (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Were Bluto to draw attention to his shirt or were he to ask if others found his shirt funny, the humor would be lost. It'd be like a stand-up comic concluding a joke by insecurely asking, "Did you get it? Was that one funny?" The first rule of funny t-shirt wearing is "Don't talk about your funny t-shirt." Not far behind this is "Don't care what others think." Booger follows these rules to a "tee," wearing his humorous shirts nonchalantly, and in any setting, never pointing to his shirts or making direct jokes about them. If one of the other less comically-inclined nerd characters from *Revenge of the Nerds* had worn the "Who Farted?" shirt, the joke would be ruined because they would have hee-hawed and snorted at their own shirt. Bluto and Booger demonstrate that the best funny shirt wearers don their attire without acknowledging or caring that they're wearing something out of the ordinary. Incidentally, my research method of walking around trying to draw attention to my funny t-shirts and asking what others thought of them violated both of the cardinal rules.

The humorous t-shirt is a genre in which the participant must be aware of a multitude of factors that impact a shirt's message. Who's wearing it, who's seeing it, where it's worn, and the shirt wearer's delivery of the joke are all factors that should be considered. But, they're only a few of many. This article has barely touched upon issues of shirt design—font, graphics, colors, and shirt style. Also worthy of examination is the psychology of the shirt wearer. Psychologist Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner explains, "Our closets are windows into our internal selves. Every one of us attempts to say or hide something in the way we wear our clothes. But few of us can articulate what we're trying to express or locate the root of the pattern, the pathos (x)." What is the pathos of

the funny t-shirt wearer? Finally, the history of the genre of the humorous tee, with the t-shirt recently celebrating its 100th birthday (forbes.com), is another area ripe for investigation. These are topics I welcome another researcher to explore. In the meantime, when it comes down to choosing between a humorous t-shirt or a plain t-shirt, as customink.com's 28th most iconic t-shirt of all-time reads, "I'm with Stupid→."

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