

Re:Action

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Hoaxed!

Anyone who takes their humour seriously knows that pranks make the world a better place. They transform our perception of reality and reduce pious fools to the level of a laughing stock. A classic example is Sterne's detournement of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton wrote: 'As apothecaries, we make new mixtures every day, pour out of one vessel into another... We weave the same web still, twist the same rope again and again.' Sterne's appropriation in *Tristram Shandy* ran: 'Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope.' Beginning in the eighteenth-century a long line of pedants starting with Dr. John Ferriar have been unable to appreciate the audacity, the irony and the many implications of Sterne's joke. Indeed, this prank only gains its full resonance in retrospect thanks to the blatant stupidity of those who have denounced its author as a plagiarist!

Sadly, amid the recent welter of shock headlines about fraudulent news reports and phoney documentary footage there has been little attempt to differentiate between the work of pranksters and that of con merchants. When the right-wing Bilderberg think tank began faking historical material about what it dubbed the "First World War" in the 1930s, this was done to cover up an alarming increase in industrial accidents over the previous two decades. The inventors of this non-existent conflict wanted the public to believe trench warfare was responsible for killing millions whose deaths were actually caused by lax safety standards in factories. Pranksters, by way of contrast, aim to expose cons such as belief in the "First World War" by making visible the mechanisms through which such falsehoods are passed off as truth. Pranks are necessarily a two stage operation, the perpetration of a hoax and then its revelation.

Pulling pranks is actually very easy. A cool way to start is with hoax calls to radio stations. Most talk shows have screeners who need to be convinced you've got something interesting to say. About five years ago I got in the habit of calling Brighton Festival Radio, who'd always put me on when I explained I was facing a serious emotional crisis. I had a lot of fun with a very earnest host called Dr. Devlin. The first time I called Devlin I said I'd got home early from work and found a man having sex with my wife. I explained that I'd run out of the house and decided I needed to talk to someone before going back to kill the bastard. The doctor tried to convince me that murder wasn't the best way of resolving my problems. I let him talk me around to his point of view. Eventually I told Devlin he was right, it wasn't worth going to jail just to get my revenge. 'I guess I'm feeling a little distraught,' I concluded. 'You see, my wife died last week and the creep making love to her was raping the corpse.'

It should go without saying that pranks have a long and distinguished history. Way back when in ancient Greece, a geezer known as Dionysius The Renegade wanted to deflate a pompous philosopher called Heraclides. The Renegade knocked up a play and attributed it to the famous writer Sophocles. Heraclides was fooled and accused Dionysius of lying when the prankster revealed he'd written it. The

Renegade won the argument after demonstrating that the first letter of every line in the play spelt out a series of satiric statements about Heraclides. Among these was an observation that made the philosopher cry. It read 'Heraclides knows nothing about literature'. Given that this prank is remarkably similar to some of what the *Brass Eye* and *Blue Jam* star Chris Morris does, it appears incredible that Victor Lewis Smith would claim the younger man has ripped him off. On the subject of Morris, Smith has gone as far as ranting 'imitation is the sincerest form of being an unoriginal thieving bastard'.

The feud between Morris and Lewis Smith is itself a hoax. The pair, who regularly drink together in the Groucho Club, tricked *The Guardian* into thinking they were deadly enemies as a publicity stunt. For their pains they were rewarded with a *Feud's Corner* feature in 1992. One would expect *The Guardian* to check a story like this more carefully since Morris candidly admits to orchestrating letter campaigns against his own shows. He claims this is 'a time-honoured technique for enhancing your notoriety. But it carries a risk: five years ago I unleashed such a convincing tirade against my own work for a radio station I complained myself off the air.' Morris is also responsible for a much loved media joke that runs as follows. Chris Morris dies and is greeted by Saint Peter. Morris announces he's glad to have made it to heaven because it means he'll never have to deal with Victor Lewis Smith again. While he's being shown around, Morris is sickened to see a huge throne with the name Victor Lewis Smith emblazoned on it. Saint Peter tells Morris not to worry, God only thinks he's Victor Lewis Smith some of the time.

Celebrity psychologist Al Ackerman has treated several individuals who've been the butt of Morris' jokes. He claims that all pranksters are maladjusted attention seekers. With regard to Morris, Ackerman insists that anyone who views his television programmes can see that 'his non-verbal communication is markedly abnormal, particularly in his use of eye-to-eye gaze, facial expressions, body postures and gestures to initiate or modulate social interaction.' Johan Huizinga, a Dutch expert on play and pranks disagrees with Ackerman's analysis. He sees pranking as crucial to human health and well-being.

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I LIKE JENNIFER LOPEZ:

STEWART HOME INTERVIEWED AT A HOT TUB PARTY BY YANNIS KOLOVOS

Stewart Home was born in south London in 1962 but is now based in east London. As a teenager Home was employed for a few months in a factory and this experience led him to vow that he would never work again. His activities and fields of interest have long defied categorisation. In addition to his role as prime propagandist for the Neoist Cultural Conspiracy, he is a novelist, musician, performance artist, more recently an occultist, and according to several sources “an ego-maniac on a world historical scale.” Perhaps Home’s greatest skill lies in his ability to transform everyday life into utter farce. In 1996 a hoax story he wrote for *The Big Issue* about being shown an arms dump by Jimmy Cauty led to a massive police operation and the arrest of the KLF star. More recently Home received lottery funding to make a series of prank phone calls to prostitutes as part of the Tork Radio project.

I met Stewart Home at a hot tub party where he spent the entire interview having sex with two teenage girls. I found it difficult to get the notorious egg bagel eater to answer my questions. He was more interested in raving about the actress Jennifer Lopez. He mentioned the Latin star’s derrière with alarming frequency. I have several hours of tape in which Home rambles about Lopez performances in a number of films. Rather than running this low grade cultural commentary, I will simply relay the information that Home likes Jennifer Lopez. What follows are the words I was able to drag out of the proletarian post-modernist about his own cultural productions. Personally, I found it shocking that Home can sit through junk like *Antz* just to hear a Lopez voice over.

YK: Do you think there’s a direct link between Richard Allen and you. In other words, how much has Allen influenced you?

SH: I don’t think there is much of a link between me and Richard Allen, I’ve parodied some of his prose, I detest his political views. I think my opinions are quite clear from the introduction I wrote to his book *Satan’s Slaves* when CodeX reprinted it. That concludes: “In the interests of sanity it must be made clear that I do not wish to endorse this muck.”

It is a mistake to treat Allen in isolation, at the point I was interested in him - which was many years ago now - this interest was both critical and came from the perspective of seeing Allen as simply one among many pulp writers. To treat Allen in isolation is to fall into one of the many traps laid by bourgeois proponents of literary “criticism”. When I first read Richard Allen he made no particular impression upon me, he was simply one of a large number of pulp writers I read between the ages of ten and fifteen. As I have recorded in both the introduction to the omnibus reprint of the Mick Norman hell’s angel novels and the interview I did with their author Laurence James which was recently run in *Entropy* magazine, of my pre-teen reading it was the four Mick Norman books that made the greatest impact on me.

After I was fifteen my reading moved much more towards what might be termed modernism and post-modernism: William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, the surrealists and exponents of the French nouvelle roman such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. When I was in my twenties and came to reread various pulp novelist such as Richard Allen and Mick Norman who I’d first encountered as a child, my reactions to them and uses of their work were filtered through a sensibility developed by some intense and structured reading of modernist and post-modernist literature. Lautreamont and the surrealists used elements drawn from pulp fiction within their prose compositions and I think my modus operandi - if not my choice of critically appropriated material - relates to these practices. While influence can be both positive and negative, I don’t think this is a very productive way to talk about the relationship between my work and that of Richard Allen. To me it makes more sense to speak of my detournement of Richard Allen, of my parodies of his works, of my highly critical reactions to him.

YK: Behind some of the characters/places in *Blow Job* are real people. Is the book a direct criticism of these individuals.

SH: Fiction has never been the most direct way of attacking those types of free floating idealism that attempt to penetrate the proletarian milieu, although sometimes satire can be used to such effect that it brings blisters to the cheeks of our opponents. However, it should go without saying that

in *Blow Job* I am not using the real names of those being attacked. In an essay entitled ‘Anarchism Is Stupid: Comedy, Identity & Fictive Politics’ I have explained in some detail exactly who and what is being criticised in *Blow Job*. This piece will be published in April 1999 as part of a collection of my essays and journalism entitled *Confusion Incorporated: A Collection of Lies, Hoaxes & Hidden Truths*, and so I have no wish to go over that ground again here. However, I do think it is worth pointing out that Hollywood actress Jennifer Lopez is scheduled to release her first music album in the very month this book will appear.

YK: *Blow Job* is a book about London, do you think it is a good introduction to the city?

SH: I hope that *Blow Job* is a bad introduction to the city, certainly I would consider anyone using it as a guide to be engaged in psychogeographical exploration. Aside from anything else, I always describe London as it exists when I am writing, and since *Blow Job* was written in 1993 and the city is constantly changing, quite a number of the places it describes no longer exist. **YK:** Long political comments, literary characters as caricatures, catalogues of tube stations, bus stops and areas. Would you describe this as a psychogeographical study?

SH: Psychogeography among other things, but I think humour is more important, it might be that I’ve written an “anti-novel”, or even - horror of horrors - “a novel”.

YK: Are the Situationists an influence upon you? What about situationist literary works such as Michele Bernstein’s *Toutes les Chevaux du Roi*?

SH: While I know nothing about the critical reception of the Situationist International in Greece, given the way in which this group has been misunderstood and misrepresented by both the mass media and various “political” and academic publications in England and America, it would be foolish of me to talk about the situationists without first setting the record straight with regard to certain facts. The necessity of making a stand about this becomes particularly pressing once it is realised that even former members of the British section of the Situationist International demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of the political perspectives embodied in the organisation to which they once belonged. To cite just one example, T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith in the article ‘Why Art Can’t Kill The Situationist International’ in *October* #79 completely overplay the compatibility of anarchism and situationist politics. It is as if Debord had never written the well known critique of Bakunin contained in theses 91 and 92 of *Society Of The Spectacle* where anarchism is condemned as “an incoherence too easily seen through”. Of course, Clark

and Smith are correct when they state in their essay that the SI met with individuals affiliated to Internationale Anarchiste in 1967 but strangely no mention is made of the SI’s meeting with Révolution Internationale the following year at a time when it would have been far from clear that the revolutionary wave was receding. Clark and Smith had been expelled from the SI by the time it met with the RI, so perhaps they are as unaware of this meeting as they appear to be of Chasse and Elwell’s *Field Study*. If the former members of the British section of the SI were familiar with these things they’d have probably worked out by now that their anarchism was the principle cause of their expulsion from the group.

From an understanding of where Révolution Internationale was coming from and going to one can see where the SI stood within the left-communist movement. RI was founded at the end of 1967 with Marc Chyryk as the principle mover, aside from the failed meeting with the SI which led to the denunciation in *IS* #12 (‘How Not To Read Situationist Books’), the RI was involved for a year with Informations Correspondance Ouvrières (a split from Socialisme ou Barbarie called Informations Liaisons Ouvrières at the time of this break in 1958 and from which Exchanges Et Mouvement later emerged). The RI launched the International Communist Current at the end of 1969. The ICC was initially councilist but adopted increasingly Leninist positions. Marc Chyvyk had been a founder of the Fraction Français de le Gauche Communiste (FFGC) in 1943 but quit the organisation in the autumn of 1944. Within the FFGC a split developed between Bordiguists and non-Bordiguists until the latter tendency quit the FFGC in the spring of 1950 and joined Socialisme ou Barbarie. From this and Debord’s involvement with S ou B, it becomes clear that understanding the internal politics of S ou B and related currents is crucial to understanding the SI. Of course, given Jorn’s involvement in the SI, the positions of the Danish Communist Party are also relevant, as are Hungarian councilist currents – Attila Kotányi’s contributions were clearly crucial to defining the SI’s politics, he left Hungary in ‘56. I don’t think it is possible to argue convincingly about the SI’s politics without having some understanding of the broader left-communist movement. Clark and Smith seem to have moved from anarchism to libertarian communism but despite their membership of the SI it is as if they’d never encountered left communism in all its originality, nor understood the nature of its break with the third international. It might be that in Greece, the SI - for all its faults - is well known as a communist critic of anarchism, but unfortunately this is not the case in England.

Actually, I have never read either of Michele Bernstein’s two novels but I am familiar with the literary output of Alexander Trocchi - another former member of the SI - having read both his so called pornographic work and the “serious” novels *Young Adam* and *Cain’s Book*, as well as a number of essays, translations and short stories. Of the “pornographic” books the only one which really works for me is the faked fifth volume of Frank Harris’s memoirs *My Life And Loves* which Trocchi considered to be a piss take although it took something like five years before anybody realised the book was a hoax. That said, there are good passages in some of the other “dirty books” such as the scene in the Spanish brothel in *Thongs*. In *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi succeeded in uniting his serious literary concerns with modes of writing that had previously been explored in the “pornographic” works. I think the “low” scenes in *Young Adam* are problematic - having been inserted at the insistence of the Olympia Press who first published this novel - for example, the passage in which Joe describes beating Cathie is completely out of keeping with the tone of the

rest of the book. For me, there has never been a need to separate “high” and “low” elements in my writing, so in that sense my output is quite different from Trocchi’s.

YK: In a few words, can you tell me what punk means to you?

SH: I described the difficulties of defining this style of music in my book *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory & Punk Rock*, It is quite impossible for me to reiterate in a few words here what I spent fifty thousand words elaborating there.

YK: Are you still going to concerts? What do you think of bands like the UK Subs who have been playing the punk circuit for many years now?

SH: I haven’t been to many concerts recently. I sometimes go to dance clubs or to see groups like the Finnish techno band Panasonic. The last punk band I saw on a regular basis was Beggars ITA and that was some time ago now. I last saw the UK Subs about twenty years ago and I have absolutely no desire to attend concerts by groups that I saw as a teenager, even in those cases – such as that of the UK Subs – in which this is possible. I listen to many different kinds of music when I am at home and this still includes punk rock. Right now I particularly like a French band called The No-Talents. Last year I released a CD of my old punk rock songs entitled *Stewart Home Comes In Your Face*, and some of the pieces on the album were nearly twenty years old by the time I got around to recording them. However, I have no intention of performing these songs live again. I haven’t played a gig with a band for ten years now.

YK: In the *X Tripping* television documentary you are described as a master of the occult. Can you tell me more about your new interests and the *Mind Invaders* book?

SH: Pictorial Heroes who made the *X Tripping* show asked me how I wanted to be described and I said ‘master of the occult’ as a joke, I think they thought it would be funny to take me up on this in the programme. The *Mind Invaders* book collects together psychogeographical and other material by a variety of groups and individuals based in Europe and North America. There are some really good pieces, such as an essay by The Workshop For A Non-Linear Architecture about a game of poker they are engaged in that involves people in different cities going out to look for playing cards on the street. The resultant game is long, slow and very absorbing. The material in *Mind Invaders* is quite old now and dates from a period when I would have described what I was doing as “avant-bardism”, subsequently I moved on to what I now call “proletarian post-modernism”. This new work involves a joke about master narratives that is almost impossible to explain. It would take far too long to give a detailed description of all the different things I’ve been doing recently but I have been working on some sound pieces. Last year I produced a thirty minute radio play entitled *Divvy* which used cut-ups and computer generated voices.

YK: Are you still teasing Greil Marcus?

SH: No, I was fortunate enough to get an art “critic” called John ‘Porno’ Roberts to respond to some of my provocations and I’ve had more fun with him in recent years, although his extremely limited intelligence means that for some time I’ve been seeking a new and more amusing target.

So there you have it. Stewart Home post-modern ironist or Stewart Home intransigent communist tosser. The choice is yours. But remember, only the former position adequately explains the notorious egg bagel eater’s obsession with Jennifer Lopez. PS. Stewart Home has two new books published this smmer *Cunt* (Do-Not Press, £7.50) and *Confusion Incorporated: A collection of lies, hoaxes & hidden truths* (CodeX £7.95).

COME TOGETHER!

World Wide Orgasm: 23.59 GMT 31 December

Get together with a friend and bring each other to simultaneous orgasm at 23.59 GMT. This world wide event to be followed by the final rally of the Neoist Alliance outside Saxlingham Post Office, Norfolk, at 5am on 1 January.

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Huizinga insists 'all the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas - pranks, laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic - resist any attempt at reducing them to other terms. Their rationale and their mutual relationships lie in a very deep layer of our mental being.'

None of the boffins I approached seemed to understand that pranks often have a very practical propaganda value. For example, in 1644 the English republican William Lilly issued a pamphlet entitled *The Prophecy of the White King's Dreadful Dead-man Explained*. Hijacking astrology and other forms of divination for purely partisan ends, Lilly predicted the defeat of the royalist side in the English Civil War. Since Charles I was vanquished as Lilly had forecast, the king's execution was widely accepted as a righteous fulfilment of God's judgement as described in this republican's pamphlet. No one at the time worked out that with only two sides in the Civil War, Lilly started out with an even chance of being proved right!

Another politician who understood the propaganda value of pranks was future US President Benjamin Franklin. In 1747 Franklin created a fake story about a non-existent New England woman called Polly Baker which he sent to a London newspaper. Supposedly tried for fornication after giving birth out of wedlock, the fictitious Baker claimed she'd been seduced by a magistrate and was simply following God's command to increase and multiply. Franklin made Baker's speech from the dock a powerful indictment of the existing order. This clever political broadside was reprinted as a true story in scores of newspapers.

Recently TV comedian Mark Thomas has been actively reviving this tradition of political hoaxing. In his Channel 4 show, Thomas has flown over the Millennium Dome in a white elephant shaped hot air balloon and taken the piss out of Home Secretary Jack Straw, then dealt with the armed cops who came to the assistance of this beleaguered dickhead. Another politically motivated prankster is New York based Joey Skaggs. Typical Skaggs hoaxes such as the self-explanatory *Cathouse For Dogs* or *Celebrity Sperm Bank* are launched with a press release that is bounced around the media until it gets picked up. Skaggs insists that his motivation in executing and

then documenting these hoaxes is to increase media literacy, create social change and creatively inspire people towards self-empowerment. These justifications lay Skaggs open to accusations of elitism, since he assumes that ordinary people need him to point out that not everything reported by the media can be accepted as true or accurate.

Chris Morris is equally cynical about the intellectual abilities of his fans: 'the whole of the media is a deception. You can dupe people till the cows come home as far as I'm concerned'. On this subject, American shockjock Howard Stern holds more progressive views than either Skaggs or Morris. 'Do I worry about what the audience's reaction is going to be?' Stern asks rhetorically. 'Absolutely not. You have to assume that they're reasonably intelligent...' Stern is one of the few media figures Morris admires. 'The real shock about Howard Stern's show is that it is warm, approachable and intelligent,' opines the star. John C. S. Quel who runs a web site that documents pranks reckons: 'Chris Morris and Howard Stern treat society as an endless playground, their motivation is simply screwing things up.'

A burning desire for social change, something that gives politically motivated pranks so much of their edge, is rarely evident in Morris or Stern's hoaxes. They lack the anger that drove eighteenth-century radical John Wilkes to dress a baboon as the devil and release it during the course of a Hell Fire Club black mass. Tory tosser Lord Sandwich is reported as screaming: 'Spare me, gracious devil! You know I never committed a thousandth part of the vices of which I boasted. Take somebody else, they're all worse than I am. I never knew that you'd really come or I'd never have invoked thee!' No further evidence was required to prove that the average aristocrat was a complete pussy. Nevertheless, Wilkes also produced a slew of pornographic caricatures of his political enemies, insulted the royal family and wound up in jail. As a result, whenever the London mob rioted, people chanted 'Wilkes and Liberty' as shops and jails were burnt to the ground.

Another admirable eighteenth-century political prank was the *Diamond Necklace Affair*. Louis XV ordered an expensive diamond necklace for his mistress but died before it was delivered. Knowing about the

jewels, an impersonator convinced Cardinal de Rohan that she was the Queen. The cardinal was persuaded that if he placed a deposit on the necklace and fetched it from the jewellers, he'd receive political favours in return. After de Rohan delivered the necklace to an accomplice of the impostor it was never seen again. When the jewellers demanded that the Queen pay off the millions of francs still owed to them, she refused saying she'd never agreed to buy the necklace in the first place. As a result, many people concluded that the royal family were a bunch of thieving bastards. The resultant bad publicity paved the way for the French revolution during which Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were guillotined.

Really good pranks can send whole societies off the rails and transform social relations. Joey Skaggs is too earnest to understand what's required. Chris Morris, who says he likes his shows to risk running off the rails, needs to aim higher. While Morris has been sacked more than once, he isn't prepared to fall flat on his face or risk his career. It was a willingness to fail that made the escapades of Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty so compelling. Burning a million quid, as Drummond and Cauty did, is not a standard move among media literate career builders. The KLF and K Foundation really did go off the rails, and in doing so illustrated the relevance of the prankster's adage that there's no success like failure.

Sadly, Bill Drummond isn't willing to talk about pranks: 'Nothing Jimmy and I ever did was a scam, a prank or a joke.' Translated this means that while many of Drummond's activities are humorous, it doesn't follow that they are merely a joke. Only a tenth of a really good prank is funny, the other ninety per cent is hidden beneath the water like an iceberg and it's cold, hard and serious. I cornered the journalist and raconteur Jeffrey Bernard in a Soho pub and asked him what he thought of this. His response was 'Are you drunk?'

This is the final issue of *Re:Action*. If you want back issues send stamps or IRCs to:

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