

TV Similes: Language, Community and Comparative Poetics in *Northern Exposure*

David Scott Diffrient, Colorado State University, U.S.A.

"Similes...if they are good ones, they give the effect of urbanity."

— Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*

"But a simile must be a simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it."

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics"

Among the polylinguistic array of foreign expressions (e.g. *croquembouche*, *vita contemplative*, *weltanschauung*), Yiddish (e.g. *Chaim Yankel*, *schmuck*, *chametz*), medical jargon (e.g. *laryngemphraxis*, *esophageal diverticulum*, *ischemic*), bird names (e.g. *Siberian tit*, *Rufous-sided towhee*, *red-necked phalarope*), legalese (e.g. *fiduciaries*, *codicil*), and "Shellyisms" (e.g. *squeezola*, *bangeroo*, *creepsville*) peppering the hyperliterate cult dramedy *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-1995), one word in particular stands out for the frequency and significance of its usage. Indeed, each of *Northern Exposure's* 110 episodes is saturated with figurative statements expressed as similes, the word "like" being as ubiquitous as series mascot Morty the Moose. Like Morty, who can be seen wandering through the small Alaskan town of Cicely in the opening credits of each episode, this essay takes an exploratory tour through the spoken language of *Northern Exposure*, a groundbreaking American television series created by Joshua Brand and John Falsey. Today the show is remembered as an example of "quality TV," one that was produced during a decade of proliferating viewer options and increased satellite broadcasting.

As outlined by media scholars including Sue Brower (1992), Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (2007), and Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (2008), quality TV is a discursive industrial and critical category that encompasses everything from *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) to the creative duo's own *I'll Fly Away* (NBC, 1991-1993). [\[1\]](#) However, in lieu of teasing out the various connotations of the much-debated concept of "quality," I want to depart from the paths taken by other television scholars that have been drawn to the program's narrative complexity, sophisticated visual style, and quirky sense of humor. [\[2\]](#) Specifically, this essay examines how such rhetorical devices and linguistic maneuvers as similes and metaphors

— when connected to the many literary, philosophical, and cinematic allusions for which *Northern Exposure* is famous — foster a communal ethos among the multicultural cast of characters that is allegorically suggestive of the program's varied and devoted fan base. It is important to note here that the simile, along with metaphor and allegory, is a "figure of resemblance." According to Theodore Hunt, a "figure of resemblance" is founded on a law of association that is different from "figures of contrast" (such as antithesis, the epigram, and irony) and "figures of contiguity" (such as metonymy and synecdoche) (1884: 95-120). As such, its routine deployment throughout the run of *Northern Exposure* puts a uniquely verbal spin on a range of otherwise unspoken, community-building operations, including those "inside" the text (diegetically contained within the narrative universe) and those "outside" the text (extradiegetically located within the sphere of reception).

Despite their cultural differences, the men and women of the sparsely populated town of Cicely — including transplanted New York doctor Joel Fleischman (Rob Morrow), his quiet receptionist Marilyn Whirlwind (Elaine Miles), property manager and bush pilot Maggie O'Connell (Janine Turner), entrepreneurial ex-astronaut Maurice Minnifield (Barry Corbin), philosophical disc jockey Chris Stevens (John Corbett), widowed general store manager Ruth-Anne Miller (Peg Phillips), fledgling filmmaker Ed Chigliak (Darren E. Burrows), aging bar owner Holling Vincoeur (John Cullum), and his much younger love interest Shelly Tambo (Cynthia Geary) — collectively comprise a tightly-knit community linked primarily by language. Theirs is a metaphor-rich, simile-suffused language, a communicative discourse that functions as the primary vehicle through which to express their passions in life as well as their passing interests. Moreover, the series' emphasis on comparative poetics, rendered as actual speech acts by the primary and secondary characters over the course of its six-season broadcast history, dovetails with the producers' attempts to *visually* showcase parallels among group members through the use of rhetorical devices specific to the televisual medium yet indebted to filmic modes of discourse (three-point lighting, overhead shots, shot-reverse shots, mobile framing, staging in depth, and so forth). Like David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), episodes of which were similarly shot like single-camera "mini-movies" on 35mm film stock, *Northern Exposure* contributed to a transformation of "small-screen" entertainment at a time when "big ideas" — i.e. philosophical inquiries, long associated with more edifying pursuits or respected types of cultural production (such as literature) — were becoming a more overt part of television's communicative content and form. As such, the series' adoption of a literary mode of spoken discourse, combined with a cinematic mode of visual presentation, enables the audience not only to adduce simile-engendered similarities between ostensibly disparate ideas or individuals, but also to adopt a transmedial perspective attentive to

differences as well as resemblances between film, literature, and television.

Besides briefly delving into the personal and interpersonal implications of Ed's professed love of cinema (a topic I have explored in detail elsewhere), [3] I focus on particular episodes, such as "Goodbye To All That" (2.01), "Things Become Extinct" (3.13), and "Revelations" (4.12), through which to examine his and other characters' frequent use of simile (as well as their predilection for metaphor, a more direct figure of speech) to communicate or translate "real" experiences into something "reel" (and vice-versa). Doing so is not meant to simply underline already apparent, mutually impacting advancements in narrative complexity undertaken in the television and film industries (a somewhat hermetic exercise in textual hermeneutics). Rather, I hope to highlight how TV similes and analogies in general — as part of the community-building communicative discourse prevalent within *Northern Exposure* and other language-driven yet "cinematic" television programs — contribute to the larger project of cross-cultural connections being taken up in contemporary media productions.

When the show's main female character and Joel's verbal sparring partner Maggie O'Connell opines in the penultimate scene of the Season Four episode "The Big Feast" (4.21), "It's just *like* a movie" (in response to the spectacular array of food and fineries laid out before her at Maurice Minnifield's party), she mobilizes one of the most frequently spoken words in *Northern Exposure*'s lexicon, a seemingly simple yet highly suggestive simile that has broad applicability within the series. Similes are occasionally used throughout the series to describe physical states and sensations, such as when the town's resident millionaire Maurice, upon receiving a nose-numbing bottle of kimchee from his visiting Korean son, remarks that the pickled cabbage "smells like an old pair of gym shoes" ("On Your Own" [4.06]). More frequently, similes function as experiential approximations of intangible states of being or emotions. For example, in "The Big Kiss" (2.02), Chris arrives at the ambiguous conclusion that "love and pain and beauty [...] all seem to go together like one little tidy confusing package." In a later episode, "Only You" (3.02), the devastated yet thankful disc jockey relays his conflicted feelings to a visiting optometrist named Irene, saying her rejection of him has been "like an emotional tsunami." As a means of communicating his "excruciating pain" to this woman, who remains immune to the charms of the pheromone-emitting deejay, Chris relies upon simile as a richly encoded rhetorical device, something in which everyone — even the normally quiet Marilyn — seems to specialize.

Such figurative statements are used to facilitate communication and engender community rather than acting as ornamental embellishments or poetic flights of fancy within an already digressive text. These flourishes

therefore function not only as solutions to hermeneutic problems embedded in the text, but also provide a deeply idiosyncratic language that remains accessible to all yet communicates individual community members' feelings. Because they are productive and transformative as well as representational, the similes cited above are grammatical equivalents of *Northern Exposure's* many intertextual citations and thus amplify the comparative poetics of both Ed's cinephilia and Chris's philosophical musings. In the following paragraphs, I situate Ed's habitual recourse to the word "like" ("It's like *Casablanca*," "It's like Richard Burton in *Night of the Iguana*," "It's like Luke Skywalker"), and Chris's equally reliable tendency to equate seemingly unrelated things or philosophical ideas, through metaphor and analogy in addition to simile, within broader epistemological concerns about social and cultural comparativism. I argue that the *likening* of one thing to another, be it figurative or literal, is a form of poetic signification that has practical uses in the real world. Lending theoretical ballast to this argument is the concept of a simile-engendered comparative poetics proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), a philosopher whose interest in situated relatedness bridges linguistic, visual and social spheres.

Words That Weigh Us Down and Lift Us Up: Cinephilic Similes and Philosophical Musings in Cicely

One need not be a semiotician or linguist to appreciate that the word "like" has many denotative and connotative valences in the English-speaking world. As a preposition, "like" can suggest the probability of something existing or about to happen (as in "Looks like it will rain"), typical patterns of behavior ("It's not like her to act that way"), or reveal personal inclinations ("I just felt like doing it"). It like can also provide examples, such as when the orphic-voiced Chris in the *Northern Exposure* episode "Duets" (4.13) says "Everybody is hooked into everybody else, like Romeo and Juliet, Fish and Chips, Ben and Jerry, Gilbert and Sullivan, Mutt and Jeff..."). As an adjective, "like" highlights the underlying similarity between things, people, and events possessing the same or almost the same characteristics: for example, "on this and like occasions." Shaded negatively, it can underscore equivalence in value or quality, as in "there's nothing like a good book." Its adverbial incarnations can suggest approximations ("I would call you handsome, but you're really not very tall. More like cute," Ed tells a self-pitying Joel Fleischman in "Northwest Passages" [4.01]). The word can also intensify an action, as illustrated in the episode "Three Amigos" (3.16), when Holling reports to Shelly that he and Maurice "splashed through bogs, ate like hogs [and] slept like logs" on their ill-fated journey to No-Name-Point. [\[4\]](#)

Without the word "like," some of Western literature's most inspired, poetic passages would not exist, at least, not in their current canonical form, from Shakespeare's "How like the winter hath my absence been" to

Lord Byron's "She walks in beauty, like the night," to Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone." The fact that Chris, in the episode "Democracy in America" (3.15), quotes one of the most famous haiku from seventeenth-century Japanese poet Bashō — "On a withered branch a crow has alighted like fallen autumn" — but adds the word "like" in the process of translation (when "alighted" and "fallen" are actually side-by-side), only further illustrates *Northern Exposure's* manifest attempt to position itself as a cultural production *unlike* any other American television series, yet one that is *like* so many of its literary antecedents. Indeed, as the Cicelian most encyclopedically steeped in philosophy and literature, Chris shoulders much of the burden of sustaining that connection while pointing toward sites of signification beyond cultural, regional, and national borders.

Mining his wealth of knowledge in the world of arts and letters, this free-spirited metaphysician and part-time town minister preaches the tenets of Truth and Beauty to the 840 other residents in the secluded Alaskan town of Cicely. As likely to extemporaneously philosophize on Zen Buddhism as on the sexual proclivities of Walt Whitman, [5] Chris has an "eye for resemblances" (as Aristotle might say), and often frames his obscure observations with quotations ("It's like Goethe said," "It's like Lord Byron said," and so forth). But this "Voice of the Last Frontier" is just as likely to use the word "like" when conveying his own thoughts, especially when those musings take a metaphysical turn. This is illustrated in the episode "Burning down the House," when the inspired artist, after digging through the remains of Maggie's incinerated living room, finds the ash-covered scene to be "beautiful [...] *like the world at the dawn of creation.*"

Chris indeed seems to be the king of similes, comparing the sun to a brain ("Full Upright Position" [6.07]), driving to breathing ("Northwest Passages" [4.01]), marriage to "a cultural handrail" ("Our Wedding" [3.22]) and love to "trains changing at random stops" ("Altered Egos" [5.04]). Whether describing the feelings of others (as in "I Feel the Earth Move" [5.21], when he officiates at Erick and Ron's wedding and equates the constancy of their mutual devotion to the enduring warmth of the sun) or his own existential condition (as in "Old Tree" [4.25], when he compares sitting every day in the KBHR radio station booth to Prometheus being chained to a rock, eagle pecking at his liver), Chris is a metaphor machine, capable of pumping out poetic yet practical analogies with ease. A pioneering figure in rhetorical studies, Edward Corbett has written about the distinctions between metaphors and similes, with the former denoting the transference of a word or phrase "from its literal meaning to stand for something else." Although a simile, according to Corbett, differs from metaphor in its reliance on words such as "like" or "as," both figures of speech fall under the general umbrella of "comparative poetics." As figures of resemblance they not only provide clarity by transposing abstract thought onto the material plane, they also

enliven one's sensibilities by pointing up the unity of physical (and metaphysical) things; or, to borrow Robert Harris' expression, "by showing a relationship between things seemingly alien to each other" (2009: 5). In this respect, Chris's fondness for artistic likening, while done in one respect for "effect and emphasis," serves the practical needs of cultural producers and media audiences alike in their shared pursuit of *connections* and *linkages*, through a sophisticated use of spoken similes and metaphors, or through simple visual analogy achieved by means of shot-reverse-shots, two-shots, graphic matches, and so forth.

The idea that this loquacious lothario could somehow stop his intertextual discourse, that he could become like Brother Simon (Elizabeth Juviler, in disguise as a man) at the monastery and take a vow of silence, is as unimaginable as State Trooper Semanski (Diane Delano) ignoring her natural impulse to uphold the law. Yet, as inconceivable as it might seem, the very idea of turning off the verbal faucet may be desirable to someone like Chris, who seeks solace in the spiritual rather than secular world. This point is emphasized in the episode "Revelations" (4.12), when the self-professed "word junkie" becomes intrigued (and a little turned on) by Simon's "big, cavernous, thundering silence." Having dissociated himself from the temporal realm, having denied himself speech (which Chris calls "the most basic form of human interaction"), Brother Simon is "dead to the world," according to another monk. Chris's excessive use of language — in particular his penchant for uninhibited simile which, as many rhetoricians have emphasized, is the *formal expression of a resemblance* — casts in relief the dialectical interplay between the seclusion suggested in religious order and the abundance associated with the secular sphere. Moreover, despite his spiritual inclination, this tendency suggests that he, like Ed and many other characters in *Northern Exposure*, remains most assuredly *alive* to the world when rooted to the rudimentary pursuit of interpersonal connections (in face-to-face encounters), something at least partly achieved through metaphors and similes. Ironically, when speaking to the gender-masquerading Simon, Chris relies on a simile to translate his inability to shut up, saying, "It'd be like, I don't know, all the rivers in the world just slammed to a stop."

Running on a parallel track with Chris's journey of self-discovery in "Revelations" is Ed's struggle to choose between elderly storeowner Ruth-Anne and her former landlord Maurice, who are feuding over money and vying for the young man's loyalties. He attempts to resolve this conundrum by watching three films concerning interpersonal conflicts — director Anthony Harvey's *The Lion in Winter* (1968), Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) and Woody Allen's *Interiors* (1978). Later, Shelly advises Ed to see *The Parent Trap* (1961), Hayley Mills's post-*Pollyanna* (1960) Disney film about thirteen-year-old identical twins who conspire to reconcile their mom and dad. While this lighthearted comedy of errors would seem to offer little insight into the problems of people in

the real world, the symmetrical balance suggested in the iconography of twins resonates with the idea that Ed's problem — his inability to choose between two older friends — mirrors the more fundamental (if abstract) ontological crisis faced by Chris in the same episode. In that respect, *The Parent Trap* could be thought of as a "simile" linking seemingly discrete existential states or crises (faced by two differently situated characters), in much the same way that *Northern Exposure* as a whole — as a conglomeration of embedded similes — can be conceived as a text that forges uncanny connections across cultural thresholds. Ultimately, Ed draws wisdom from another movie: the 1980 tearjerker *Ordinary People*. Quoting Judd Hirsch's psychiatrist character, Ed believes that "the most important thing in a healthy relationship is good listening," a concept comically epitomized by Simon, the reluctant recipient of Chris's nonstop patter.

The third narrative strand in this densely woven episode concerns Joel's lack of patience with his lack of patients. Finding his very existence as a doctor undermined and at risk, Joel engages in a form of self-examination similar to that launched separately by Chris and Ed. Telling the concerned doctor that his "existence has no meaning," Bernard Stevens (Chris's psychically-linked, African-American half-brother, played by Richard Cummings) articulates a fear that filters into the separate yet connected worlds inhabited by each character, one that reverberates throughout the series and is dealt with most directly in an earlier episode. Titled "Things Become Extinct," this third-season episode not only finds Holling dealing with his midlife crisis (at the age of sixty-three) and Joel (one of a lonely few Alaskan Jews) contending with cultural isolation, but also tracks Ed's attempt to keep a "dying art" alive through the still-thriving art of cinema. His filmed subject, Ira Wingfeather (Bryson Liberty), is a "vanishing breed," an old carver of wooden duck flutes whose children have no interest in carrying on his craft. The episode culminates with Ed taking a more active role in preserving Ira's legacy and with Chris, who hails from a long line of men who died in their forties, sharing his thoughts on extinction. After reading a passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he describes the past as not so much a "solitary trail through secret woods, but a vista *as big and expansive as the ocean* itself, with our experiences stretching to the horizon *like tiny dot-like sail boats*, sucked up in the enormous sea."

Of course, Chris is not alone in relying upon similes and other figures of speech to publicly convey personal thoughts and abstract ideas. Maggie embroiders her feelings with strangely poetic, sometimes grotesque imagery. In "Get Real" (3.09), she tells an emotionally wounded Shelly, who fears that Holling still thinks her feet are too big, that "Sex is always looming in the picture *like a shadow, like an undertow*." Later, in the episode "Northwest Passages," she describes the act of sending letters downstream as a way to unburden herself "of everything that's been

festering in [her] guts and expel it into the universe *like a big popped boil*." In a similar vein, Holling refers to his "bent and broken" sperm (in "The Bad Seed" [4.07]) as looking "like Robert E. Lee's troops after the battle of Gettysburg." In "The Big Mushroom" (6.11), Michelle Capra (Teri Polo) tells husband Phil (Paul Provenza) — Joel's replacement in the series' final season — that their constantly uprooted, vagabond life is "like an endless trail of change-of-address forms." Later in the same episode, fur trapper Walt (Moultrie Patten), attempting to assuage Ed's fears about surfing the Internet, makes the odd comparison, "Electrons are *like pigs coming into the pen*." Even the scientifically minded Joel is not immune to this verbal virus and admits to an imaginary Sigmund Freud (in the episode "Jules et Joel" [3.05]) that he wants to lick Maggie's naked body "like a postage stamp." When the doctor blames Walt for butchering the frozen woolly mammoth he discovered (in "Lovers and Madmen" [5.24]), he conveys his anger in a statement that only he and a few others could fully appreciate: "This is like Louis Leakey taking an Australopithecus skull and turning it into a humidior." As I explain later, the specificity and obscurity of Joel's reference have significant implications at the level of community-building, given the fact that many viewers of *Northern Exposure* might not get the allusion and thus fail to gain complete entrance into the exclusive club comprised of the show's most knowledgeable fans.

Just as everyone in Cicely relies on similes and metaphors, so too do they all make use of film references to convey their innermost feelings. After hearing about Rick's tumor in the aforementioned episode "Slow Dance," Chris tells his listeners that the first thing he thought was "Klaatu, Barada, Nikto," the "immortal words that toggled off the robot Gort in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]." Shelly exclaims, "God! What's happening to me? I look like the Swamp Thing" when her skin begins to peel in "Wake-Up Call" (3.19). In "Altered Egos," Joel, who fears that he is undergoing a "serious personality meltdown" in being so far from the subways and bagels of the Big Apple, tells Maggie, "It's like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]. I'm being replaced by some insidious replicant, a Joel Fleischman look-alike that talks about crop rotation and carburetors." Significantly, the diehard New Yorker's comment, which subtly references Ridley Scott's 1982 dystopian tech-noir *Blade Runner*, comes just after he has bought a bunch of videotapes — crime-dramas *Serpico* (1973), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) — which he believes will restore his East Coast chutzpah. And, of course, Ed can be depended on to draw upon film as a means of describing his personal take on certain situations or the general state of things: In "Survival of the Species" (4.11), he tells Maggie about his post-apocalyptic vision of a future when the earth's food, air and rain are all poisoned: "I was at The Brick and it was all different. Like in *Soylent Green* [1973]."

Ed's and others' habitual recourse to the expression "like (such and such film)" points up the family resemblances between two audiovisual media forms — cinema and television — and suggests that, by gesturing *outside* the text, these TV characters use intertextual analogies and figures of speech as a way of ascertaining an increasingly *mediated* world's structure and meaning. A simile-enriched language thus helps to clarify ideas that are otherwise fuzzy. This argument — this idea that figurative language is often more "precise" than literal description — is reminiscent of words spoken by Chris in "Nothing's Perfect" (4.03). Musing on "that old ontological riddle...life," he draws upon Isaac Newton's notion that "the universe [functions] like clockwork, like a well-oiled machine," before ultimately siding with Ivan Turgenev, who famously told Leo Tolstoy that "a system is *like the tail of truth*, but truth is *like a lizard*. It leaves its tail in your fingers and runs away knowing full well it will grow a new one in a twinkling."

When Ed, in the episode "On Your Own," surmises that his lack of inspiration and defeatist attitude are "like Richard Burton in *Night of the Iguana* [1964]," he is trying to get a handle on the situation, using film to make sense of things; something he would subsequently do in the episode "Homesick" (4.20), when he beseeches the visiting lawyer Mike Monroe (Anthony Edwards) to let him join his Greenpeace mission, saying,

It's like *Casablanca*. You remember how Rick doesn't want to get involved. But, when the Germans are going to arrest Paul Henreid, he just realizes that all of his troubles don't amount to a hill of beans. So what does he do? He shoots Conrad Veidt and goes off with Claude Rains to join the Free French at Brazzaville.

Having conquered his hyper-allergic condition and decided to split from Cicely so as to fight environmental defilers, Mike tells Ed to stay behind and continue making his movies, which are important to the well-being of the community. While *Casablanca* (1942) — an archetypal film that launched a host of imitators [6] — is not the only cinematic touchstone in this episode, [7] it helps to center the text around Mike's impending departure, a precursor to Joel's more earth-shattering exodus in the final season. Ed's use of *Casablanca* furthermore illustrates how figures of speech shade into the alternate meaning of "like" (i.e. having an inclination or being particularly predisposed toward something); a definition linked to cinephilia, which is the emphatic "liking" of film and its material offshoots.

The "Ludwig Wittgenstein Masquerade and Reality Company": Dissimilar Things, Joined Together

"A good simile refreshes the intellect." This aphorism comes from one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who at the beginning of his academic career felt that metaphysical language was nonsensical and that most figures of speech create a false appearance of unity. As a student of Bertrand Russell at Cambridge, this Viennese-born philosopher became interested in logic studies and linguistics, fields in which he would fully immerse himself after 1913, when he moved to Norway and lived a life of relative seclusion. It was in Norway where the seeds of his 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* were sown. The only book published during his lifetime, the *Tractatus* is one of the most significant contributions to linguistic philosophy, effectively sparking a conceptual and critical paradigm shift in which statements *about the world* became as worthy of systematic analysis as the *world itself*. His text scrutinizes the logical syntax of language, the way it shapes and mediates a person's perception of the world.

Much of Wittgenstein's work focuses on how similes, metaphors and allegories are used in religious teachings and belief systems to shore-up metaphysical support for logically unsupportable ideas. While statements of fact need not depend on similes to exist, metaphysical expressions rely on them. Dropping similes results in the sandwiching together of absurdly unrelated ideas, and the resulting nonsense imperils the perceived wisdom of religious or spiritual discourse. This is similar to the critique of metaphoric language provided in Franz Kafka's contemporaneously written piece, "On Parables" (a.k.a. "On Similes"), which articulates a healthy skepticism about statements designed to provoke people to act in "ethical" ways. Dig beneath the dogmatic façade of *Tractatus*, however, and one finds a philosopher torn between deconstructing metaphysics in a rigorous, mathematical fashion and realizing the use-value of similes, which provide symbolic pictures of a world limited only by the limitations of language. For in the absence of fact, in the absence of accurate and authentic language to express the otherwise inexpressible, similes function as significant breaks from everyday ways of seeing the world and our connections with others. This, I argue, is how they operate in *Northern Exposure*.

Wittgenstein took up the conceptual lines of inquiry outlined above throughout the second half of his life. [8] Many of his dictated notes and lectures as a teacher at the University of Cambridge and Trinity College were compiled in the form of the *Blue Book* and the *Brown Book*, both posthumously published and — along with the groundbreaking 1953 *Philosophical Investigations* — recognized today as significant sources of insight into Wittgenstein's changing conceptions of linguistic structures

and communicating signs. [9] These texts, as well as his collection of personal jottings, *Culture and Value*, reveal a self-deprecating philosopher revising his earlier maxims and describing himself as "merely reproductive." As Wittgenstein states, rather than devising a "new way of thinking," he comes up with "new metaphors" (1984: 18-19, 36). Speaking of similes as figurative "gestures," Wittgenstein, like practically every philosopher before him, was himself no stranger to the simile, which he frequently deployed to describe uses of language, which are, in his words, "like games." There is a tension, then, between Wittgenstein's early and later works, which collectively ask if philosophy should be explanatory or descriptive, metaphysically inclined or rooted in the natural sciences.

While Wittgenstein preferred breadth to depth in music and literature, his taste in films ran far and wide. Though skeptical of the ability of mass media and modern technology to unite nations and spread culture, Wittgenstein was known to be a frequent moviegoer and especially liked the Hollywood dance duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers — notably two quite dissimilar performers united by their professional talents, which fused together in moments of ecstatic wonder on film. As he states in *Culture and Value*, "A typical American film, naïve and silly, can — for all its silliness and even *by means of it* — be instructive. A fatuous, self-conscious English film can teach one nothing. I have often learnt a lesson from a silly American film" (Ibid.: 57e). This is the Wittgenstein evoked in the *Northern Exposure* episode "Get Real," from Season Three, when the bus of a traveling carnival troupe, the "Ludwig Wittgenstein Masquerade and Reality Company," breaks down in Cicely. The troupe's star performer, a noticeably nonverbal "flying man" named Enrico Bellati, is thereby given the chance to fall in love with the equally quiet Marilyn (again, two very different people brought together, if only momentarily). The fact that Mummenschanz, the Swiss pantomime troupe famous for wearing masks made out of toilet paper rolls, also descends upon Cicely in the same episode, suggests that communication — be it verbal or visual — is at the heart of *Northern Exposure*, a television series rooted as much in the complex rhythms and simile-sustained linkages of the spoken word as in bodily language or physical expressions. Moreover, the embedding of a "voiceless" community within the larger group of townspeople collectively comprising Cicely highlights the contradictory aspects of such social organisms, their predication on artificial means of cultural exchange ("masquerade") as well as authentic emotions ("reality") normally ushered forth via verbal discourse.

Unlike Wittgenstein's "good simile," a bad simile can bring down a whole sentence or idea in one fell swoop. In his poem, "Very Like a Whale," Ogden Nash bemoans the unrestricted proliferation of similes and metaphors in literature. What Nash probably has in mind are those mechanical comparisons and cliché-ridden expressions ("as white as

snow," "as free as a bird," and so forth) so prevalent in Western culture. In this respect, for all of its genre-busting, clichés are in no short supply in *Northern Exposure*, as when Maggie (in the episode "Sex, Lies, and Ed's Tape") tells Rick what her mother said about his tumor: "She said that we are going to come out of this [...] happier than ever [...]. How did she phrase it? 'Like a bridge over troubled waters', or 'like a jaw broken, but mended stronger than ever'." [10] Given this self-conscious surfeit of similes, this landslide of "likes" in *Northern Exposure*, one might reasonably wonder if they simply overload the narrative and tax the viewer. As Marilyn states at one point, "Words are heavy like rocks [...] they weigh you down." Nevertheless, as Marilyn's own figure of speech suggests, metaphor-imbued words and simile-infused expressions provide the necessary tools with which not only to translate the unintelligible into something intelligible, but also to turn the everyday into something transcendent. The various combinational patterns of both intertextuality (the joining together of two or more texts) and the simile thus bear out the mythopoetic possibilities of the series, which juxtaposes the prosaic and the poetic, the quotidian and the sublime.

As an intrinsic element in simile construction, "like" (or "as") provides the connective tissue between two essentially (or seemingly) dissimilar things. However, unlike straight metaphor, which "attempts to conceal the gap" between individual elements, simile *reveals* the gap and, according to Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "provides a point of intimacy that is contingent upon [...] separation" (1986: 125). This tension between fragmentation and unity, this positing of "like" as an interstitial point of contact and rupture, gains significance in the context of a television series revolving around the interwoven themes of community and diversity, cultural belonging and "otherness." Like the more recent NBC comedy program *Community* (2009-), which aggressively brandishes intertextual allusions and snappy banter for the sake of making culturally savvy audiences feel like they "belong" to the titular group (as members of what might be called a "knowledge circle," one whose perimeter closes in with the incorporation of ever-more obscure references), *Northern Exposure* conceives of communities as language-based social organisms in which culture itself is the principal currency. It is to this paradoxical idea — this conceit that what motivates the show's simile-maintained comparative poetics is a desire to forge connections even as its often-obscure intertextuality threatens to disconnect or divide people — that I now turn.

Communicating Community and Evoking the "Whole Wide World"

When Ed makes a film about the people of Cicely (in the third-season episode "Animals R Us" [3.04]), he captures a landscape of cultural difference and ethnic heterogeneity, one whose soundtrack might be described as "jukebox eclecticism." [11] In addition to a sizable Native American population, this "Paris of the North" is temporary or permanent

home to African Americans, Jewish Americans, French Canadians, Mexicans, Koreans, Japanese, Russians and other representatives of the show's global gestalt. According to co-creator Joshua Brand, an important aspect of the series' multicultural universe "is how much it can absorb, how many inconsistencies and absurdities" (Kasindorf, 1991: 49). Notably (and absurdly), the allegedly French-Canadian saloon owner Holling has no linguistic resemblance to an actual French-Canadian person, as he does not speak English with a French-Canadian accent. This emphasis on negotiated incongruities is visualized in the opening credits, which show the painted-on sign for Roselyn's Café: an image of a camel and palm trees that seems as comically out of place in this frozen Alaskan setting as the show's many "foreign bodies." It is also what occasionally leads critics to dismiss *Northern Exposure* as little more than postmodern pastiche, as a series "populated by countless exhibitions of sensationalism and stylistic knowingness" (Caldwell, 1995: xi) and whose community of artificially aligned oddballs is sometimes thought to be "so downright Buddhist in its forgivingness as to be supportive of *any* cultural juxtaposition" (Leonard, 1991: 58). [\[12\]](#)

When, in "Kaddish for Uncle Manny" (4.22), Maurice says, "Jewish people are a lot like Chinese people, only with a sense of humor," he unwittingly inscribes a sense of "differentiated community" through comparative poetics, a mode of discourse which reappears throughout the series, albeit in less bigoted forms. Over the course of his five-year tenure in the backwoods borough of Arrowhead County, Joel reluctantly gains an apprenticeship in Native American culture and traditions, yet his knowledge of the indigenous people's customs, rituals, and myths has been partially filtered through his own "identity lens" as a member of an ethnic minority. That is, only by translating aspects of the "Indian way of life" (for instance, the totem-pole-raising ceremony in "Family Feud" [4.19]) into a Jewish equivalent (in this case, a bar mitzvah) can Joel begin to fathom the complexities of the culture into which he has been placed. However, as John Caldwell states, "Even as the show toys with Joel's upper-middle class Republican values, it denies his whiteness in order to create an ethnic victim on par with Native Americans" (1995: 166). Expanding his commentary to ruminate on the implications of so much hybridity in *Northern Exposure*, Caldwell muses, "American mass-culture now imagines itself not as a consensual melting pot, but as a hodge-podge collection of different ethnic and class oddities." As such, he concludes, "It is no coincidence that this general ideological lesson and mythos is also identical to the basic premise of both *Seinfeld* and *Northern Exposure*" (Ibid.).

As hinted earlier, cultural transference and translation are salient aspects of *Northern Exposure*. This is particularly true of the episode "Sleeping with the Enemy" (4.24), which hinges on Ed's attempt to dub the film *The Prisoner of Zenda* with the voices of Indian elders, whose metaphor-rich

native language — Tlingit — is dying out. Besides Native American and Jewish cultural identity, African-American culture is also emphasized in such episodes as "It Happened in Juneau" (3.21) and "Altered Egos." Outside of *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-1983) and *Lost* (ABC, 2005-2010), and discounting the short-lived Asian American sitcom *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994-1995), no other American television series has lavished so much attention on sympathetic Korean characters as *Northern Exposure*, which devotes two episodes ("Seoul Mates" [3.10] and "Sleeping with the Enemy") to Duk Won Minnifield (James Song), Maurice's son. French culture likewise filters into the episodes "The Body in Question" (3.01) and "The Big Feast." Both "War and Peace" (2.06) and "Zarya" (6.06) foreground the presence of Russians in Cicely. "Dreams, Schemes and Putting Greens" (1.04) and "The Final Frontier" (3.20) do the same for Japanese culture. Coincidentally, this revealingly titled latter episode concerns a package that arrives in town with various national postmarks. The package is a fitting metaphor not only for the international circulation of *Northern Exposure* (which crosses textual as well as extratextual frontiers and continues to be broadcast internationally, from North America to Finland to South Africa), but also for the television show's global gestalt — its ability to transmit ethnic, racial, cultural, national and sexual diversity into the homes of domestic viewers around the world. [\[13\]](#)

To conclude this discussion of comparative poetics and the community-building functions of spoken similes and cross-media intertextuality, I want to draw attention to a particularly fascinating episode that begins *Northern Exposure's* second season. "Goodbye to All" foregrounds the act of TV viewing as well as film viewing, metatextually laying bare some of the paradoxes alluded to earlier in this essay. The episode begins with Joel sitting alone in a movie theater, being told by his imaginary screen surrogate to "be a mensch!" Holling's gift of a Zarbiton C-10 satellite dish to Shelly launches a litany of international references. In Shelly's quest to see "the whole wide world," the mesmerized TV addict zaps from an Italian documentary about Chinese food shoppers, to *Adam-12* (NBC, 1968-1975), then from rap videos to Puerto Rican soap operas, to the Home Shopping Network, to *Wheel of Fortune* (NBC, syndicated, 1975-), to the British sitcom *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975-1979), to the German drama *So oder so ist das Leben* (1975), to the French miniseries *Les aventuriers du Nouveau-Monde* (1986), to *Magnum P.I.* (CBS, 1980-1988) dubbed into Japanese. "There are programs on [television] from Mozambique and Venezuela and all this Pakistani stuff!" she tells her neglected husband in view of a television set which, to her momentary disregard, is showing Henri-Georges Clouzot's black-and-white thriller *Les Diaboliques* (1955).

In his study of television and postmodernism, Jim Collins discusses this episode, arguing that Shelly, in succumbing to technology, "becomes

maniacal in the process." Collins states, "The determination of her character by television programs is stressed repeatedly, as she dances to music videos or dresses up as a Vanna White wannabe to watch *Wheel of Fortune*. But by the end of the programs she has confessed her television sins, in a mock confessional to the disk jockey-priest (Chris), and resolves to watch selectively" (1992: 323). Elaborating Collins' argument, Brian Ott writes, "Shelly's image-centered identity is critiqued, as her obsession with technology and television in particular is portrayed as a sin," a representational strategy that highlights *Northern Exposure's* "spiritual undercurrent" (2007: 110-111). However, in stressing the importance of spirituality and mysticism in the show, in emphasizing its persistent indictment of technology, critics sometimes miss the comparatively "secularist" concern for everyday discourse in *Northern Exposure*, a program that forges links between the quotidian and the sublime by way of spoken similes that emulate the associational logic of intertextuality. While it can be (and has been) argued that the many cultural references sprinkled throughout this prestige "boutique" series (and this episode in particular) "become little more than fleeting asides even to viewers who might actually know or care about their significance" (Caldwell, 1995: 253), I see them as essential means of constructing communities both inside and outside the text. As Robert Harris (2009) states, "No metaphor is 'just a metaphor'." Correspondingly, no simile is simply the sandwiching together of two things by means of a middle term (such as "like"). A figure of speech as well as a means of highlighting resemblances, this rhetorical device can be more broadly understood as a translinguistic phenomenon indicative of a larger cultural shift occurring over the last twenty years — a period when hyper-citational overlay became a more conspicuous part of casual conversations among viewers and scripted lines on TV.

The 200 channels of satellite television, which put the former Miss Northwest Passage in a state of stupefaction and bring her sex life to a halt in the tellingly titled episode "Goodbye To All That," would appear to exert greater claim to cultural diversity than the comparatively narrower focus of film, which allows characters to zero in on personal problems and — as *Northern Exposure's* frequent use of fake movie clips underscores — is linked to the imagination. However, the series' use of film and television as mutually impacting, cross-media meditations on the subjects of representation and identity politics suggests a more complex dialectic at play, an element deserving of additional thought and critical interrogation beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that Shelly's complete yet fragmentary immersion into the broken "flow" of televisual transmission, her flipping from channel to channel to seek out the most compelling TV shows worthy of her focused yet distracted attention, suggests a unique kind of comparative poetics at work in *Northern Exposure*. With each turn of the proverbial dial (or toggle of the remote control), a new "simile" emerges, a linkage between

culturally distinct programming whose equal footing in the character's spectatorial unconscious indicates her (and the producers') willingness to minimize (global) difference for the sake of (local) kinship and community-building.

In the same episode, Dr. Fleischman, while reading fiancée Elaine's "Dear Joel" breakup letter, imagines himself crawling through the barb-wired trenches during some nameless war. Shot in black-and-white, and with the soundtrack punctuated with bombs and machine-gun fire, this sequence does not overtly cite any one particular war film, but evokes the genre in general. Later, Ed counsels the doctor, telling him that he "can maybe go and get her back, you know, like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*." [14] Joel then tries to explain the concept of closure, which is so lacking in his failed long-distance relationship with Elaine, telling Ed that it is like the experience of watching Henri-Georges Clouzot's movie *The Wages of Fear* (1953): "The oil tanks are burning and [Yves Montand's Corsican character Mario] brings them the nitro, and WHAM! they cut your movie off in the last fifteen minutes." Like the "boom" that brings an end to *Wages of Fear*, closure comes soon enough to "Goodbye to All That." Guiltily associating TV with sin during her faux Catholic confession with Chris, Shelly, who admits she is hooked "like an addict, a junkie," eventually cuts off the television, bringing this particular *Northern Exposure* episode and its thematic emphasis on cultural and linguistic heterogeneity to an end.

Nevertheless, like Shelly's squeeze Holling, the series has longevity in its genes. Today, twenty years after its initial primetime broadcast, the program continues to inspire cult fan communities and media scholars with its multifaceted set of cross-cultural appeals and comparative poetics. To paraphrase Shelly, this densely intertextual American television series brings the "whole wide world" to audiences who are willing to look "outside the box" and listen to the sounds (and similes) all around them.

Notes

I wish to thank Jimmie Cain and David Lavery for their insightful suggestions and continued support of this project. Also, my colleagues in the Department of Communication Studies Writing Group at Colorado State University — Karrin Anderson, Eric Aoki, Carl Burghardt, Martin Carcasson, Greg Dickinson, Jon Lupo, Andy Merolla, and Brian Ott — provided many thoughtful responses to an earlier draft of this essay.

[1] The discourse of "quality" came to be a pivotal part of the post-network era of the 1990s, a period when, according to Amanda Lotz (2004), "the economy of the U.S. television industry [was] significantly reconfigured from the fairly static relations that had characterized it"

throughout the earlier decades. As Lotz argues, between 1985 and 1995 (a period that encompasses *Northern Exposure* as well as *Twin Peaks*, another quirky television program filmed in the Northwest and often associated with it), a variety of factors, "including the success of cable and satellite transmission, the appearance of new broadcast networks, increased ownership conglomeration, decreased regulation, and the emergence of new technologies," transformed the media landscape, marking a "transition to a post-network or neo-network era" (*Ibid.*: 22-23).

[2] An entire issue of the journal *Critical Studies in Television* (Vol. 1, No. 2 [Autumn 2006]) is devoted to *Northern Exposure*, with essays ranging from Janet McCabe's exploration of gender segregation and frontier history ("Cicely Under the Skin: Female Narrative and America's Historical Unconscious in *Northern Exposure*") to Meg Albrinck's comparison of the American series to the BBC production *Ballykissangel* ("Jewish Doctor, English Priest: *Northern Exposure* Across the Pond").

[3] For a discussion of the series' savvy use of cinephilia, see Diffrient (2006).

[4] Let us not forget the many nonstandard and informal uses of "like," which can provide a pause for emphasis or irony-inflected cynicism. For instance, in the fourth-season episode "Survival of the Species," the appropriately named teenager Brad Young (Edan Gross) cops an attitude with Joel, sarcastically saying, "Like, I'm trembling" when the doctor cautions him against cigarette smoking.

[5] An eclectic mishmash of movie references, literary bons mots, and philosophical reflections, *Northern Exposure* dips as freely and habitually into the "shallow" end of "low" culture (Danielle Steele, Maurice Sendak, etc.) as it does into the deeper, more profound waters of "high" culture (Marcel Proust, Immanuel Kant, etc.). This "radical" juxtaposition of high and low is actually not so radical in the context of postmodernism, the appearance of which (in cultural, political, and intellectual life) contributed to the late twentieth-century deconstruction of traditional genres and hierarchies. In postmodernism, multiplicity reigns supreme, a notion that materializes in the form of Maurice's mansion; indeed, the town patriarch's palatial spread is a kind of postmodern museum housing everything from an assortment of Fauvist paintings to an Augsburg clock, from a prized Guarnerius to a collection of Gershwin albums that would make Ron and Erick (the gay proprietors of Sourdough Inn) jealous.

[6] This is a topic on which Umberto Eco ruminates in "*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." As Eco states, "What *Casablanca* does unconsciously, other movies will do with extreme intertextual awareness, assuming also that the addressee is equally aware of their purposes.

Diffrient

These are 'postmodern' movies, where the quotation of the topos is recognized as the only way to cope with the burden of our filmic encyclopedic expertise" (208-209).

[7] In addition to citing *Casablanca*, the episode "Homesick" also references *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963) and *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987).

[8] Immediately after the First World War, he became a grammar school teacher at a monastery in Neuberg, Austria. Eventually he returned to academia, securing a teaching position at the University of Cambridge and then at Trinity College, where he revised many of his earlier tenets before returning to solitude in Norway in 1936.

[9] For a concise overview of the philosopher's work, consult Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (1996).

[10] Another episode, "Cicely" (3.23), revolves around the 108-year-old Ned Svenbourg (Ed Mace), who tells the story of the town's founding to his spellbound listeners. Ned poetically describes first setting eyes on the beautiful woman from whom the town's name is derived, saying, "it was like the unveiling of Botticelli's Venus;" but then he later falls back on more hackneyed expressions ("Cicely persevered [...] like a candle in the night [...] like a beacon in a storm").

[11] Mildred Bailey, Louis Armstrong, Enya, Buckwheat Zydeco, and Pee-Wee King and the Golden West Cowboys are some of the musicians and singers featured throughout this sonically eclectic series.

[12] John Leonard wrote this assessment of the show as it was entering its second season, a time when *Northern Exposure* was "in danger of becoming no longer [...] hip," in his words.

[13] This notion of a television series transmitting ethnic or racial diversity is underscored by words spoken by Maggie's Grammy, Elizabeth Stowe (Barbara Townsend), in "Grosse Pointe 48230" (4.14). After Joel jokes about the lack of Jews in the all-white neighborhood where Maggie spent her formative years, Elizabeth says that the only Jewish people she has ever seen were on *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), and *Brooklyn Bridge* (CBS, 1991-1993).

[14] Elaine is the name of both Joel's girlfriend of twelve years and Benjamin's love interest in *The Graduate* (1967).

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