A Chapter from Will Kaufman's

The Comedian As Confidence Man

(Studies in Irony Fatigue)

Wayne State University Press Detroit

Notes from Kevin: In the summer of 1995, Will Kaufman and his wife flew in from England to learn more about Bill. Will is a professor of American studies at the University of **Central Lancashire,** and is actually a native New Yorker. Will cracked me up, asking me if Bill had sat in that chair, slept in that bed and so on. (He took a shit right here, in fact the seat's still warm!) Actually I kid Will, and the seat still warm joke is stolen from an old Bill bit about vacationing with his parents; I'll add it to the site. Will had a knack of putting his foot in his mouth around my friends and family, he asked my dad how I could have afforded all those years of college. (DOOEE!!) but even though he was a foreign guy we took a liking to him. His book put Bill into some prestigious company as there are chapters about Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Kurt fucking Vonnegut (a personal favorite) Garrison Keillor, Herman Melville and of course **Lenny Bruce.** If you like what you read, go out and buy it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bill Hicks: "Bob, they're just jokes"

In 1995, the updated publication of Bill Carter's The Late Shift appeared to reviewers as a Shakespearean tale of intrigue, passion, ambition, and betrayal in the "network battle for the night" between David Letterman and Jay Leno.1 Even if not agreeing with the inflated comparison, one can accept that, like any of Shakespeare's tragedies, Carter's book is littered with a variety of seemingly inconsequential victims and minor pawns in the power struggle. Yet, as Tom Stoppard showed with his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there are no such things as minor characters, only perspectives. Another point of view, then, will reveal the importance of a character who was missed entirely in Carter's reportage of the struggle. In November, 1993, John Lahr published a profile in the "Annals of Comedy" section of The New Yorker. It began: "On October 1st, the comedian Bill Hicks, after doing his twelfth gig on the David Letterman show, became the first comedy act to be censored at CBS's Ed Sullivan Theatre, where Letterman is now in residence, and where Elvis Presley was famously censored in 1956." There was a significant difference between the two: "Presley was not allowed to be shown from the waist down. Hicks was not allowed to be shown at all."2 Four months after this profile appeared, Bill Hicks was dead from pancreatic cancer, leaving Lahr to recall his importance: "He was really an ass-kicking comedian -- the best kind. The only kind that matters -- when jokes are meant to kill."3

The death of this Texan comedian at the age of thirty-two attracted nowhere near the media attention devoted the following month to his fellow-southerner, Lewis Grizzard -- at least, not in America. In Britain, where Hicks had been lionized, the quality dailies carried illustrated obituaries, documentary tributes were broadcast on network television, and on the first anniversary of his death, appreciations appeared in newspapers and on television. In America, Hicks had never gained the popular following of the sentimental, conservative Grizzard; he was rather, in Mike Sager's words, the "best-known unknown in the business. The comics' comic. The critics' comic."4 But on the other hand, Lewis Grizzard never had the honor (no irony intended) of being banned by American network television. In accomplishing this feat, Bill Hicks demonstrated why, in the long run, he is more worthy of notice, at least in a study such as this. Few American comedians since George Carlin have brought any significant challenges to the most powerful and censorial medium of communication, network television; and perhaps no other recent career raises such disturbing implications about the successful taming and silencing of the satiric voice by the commercial interests in that medium -- especially in an era of reactionary tendencies on the left and right; an era of political correctness and "family values" in which Catherine MacKinnon and Jesse Helms could conceivably be allies against freedom of expression; a bizarre era in which the most influential American ironist is arguably the quasi-comedian and self-conscious demagogue, Rush Limbaugh.

Bill Hicks was a progressive and a civil libertarian, a complex figure in which the paradoxes of his cultural and political milieu came to light. On the libertarian side, his routines dwelt on such issues as the legalization of drugs, sexual openness, freedom of all and any expression (including the pornographic), abortion, and the rights of smokers. He was defiantly, politically incorrect. As a progressive, he reserved his most scathing attacks for the arms trade, the domestic gun lobby, the Christian fundamentalist-Republican axis, the anti-abortion movement, and American militarism at home and abroad. His intellectual hero was Noam Chomsky (he enjoyed being called "Chomsky with dick jokes"). In the months before he died, he was invited to write for The Nation, America's venerable progressive weekly. Had he lived, he would have joined the ranks of such contributors as Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Molly Ivins, Kurt Vonnegut, Calvin Trillin, and Alice Walker. His "caustic observations," in Nation editor Katrina vanden Heuvel's words, would have been similar to those already enjoyed by readers of the satirical British

magazine Scallywag, to which Hicks had been a regular contributor before that thorn in the side of the Tory establishment was brought down by none other than the Prime Minister himself.5

The savagery of Bill Hicks as a satirist brought comparisons not only to Lenny Bruce, but also to Jonathan Swift and "the devil's lexicographer," Ambrose Bierce -- the latter of whom Hicks recalled in his signature outfit of all-black and in the satanic imagery of his routines, which earned him the appellation of "the Prince of Darkness" among colleagues and critics. At the same time, few American comedians in the past two decades have made such frequent and explicit appeals to the unfashionable sixties' ideals of love and peace. For our purposes, though, the most important contradiction in the case of Bill Hicks -- as with Lenny Bruce before him -- lies, as ever, in the conflict between the urge to tell the truth and the comedic requirement of the playful untruth. That Hicks was aware of this requirement, there is no doubt. True, he once took the potentially fatal, Brucian step of admitting that he was a "preacher" -- but that was only to his mother (IJR). Otherwise, he could tell the most playfully violent lies in the name of "truth," a paradox that was the source of his supreme irony and the cause of his greatest outrage, censorship at the hands of American commercial interests.

Recalling Swift and the either/or of irony

In order to appreciate why Bill Hicks might have been used by the producers of a late-night talk show to enhance the impression of their own subversive daring, and why he would be ultimately discarded by them in their subsequent retreat from that very impression, consider the interplay between Hicks and one of his live audiences. Picture him onstage, stopping his narrative in mid-flow in order to offer a modest proposal: "By the way, if anyone here is in advertising or marketing -- kill yourself." Imagine the audience's stunned laughter, followed by the comedian's protest: "No, really. There's no rationalization for what you do, and you are Satan's little helpers. O.K.? Kill yourselves -- seriously. You are the ruiner of all things good -- seriously." The more he protests his earnestness, the louder the audience laughs; the louder they laugh, the more he protests: "This is not a joke. You're going, 'There's gonna be a joke coming --' There is no fucking joke coming. You are Satan's spawn, filling the world with bile and garbage; you are fucked and you're fucking us: kill yourself. It's the only way to save your fucking soul."6 The comedian is drowned out in laughter and applause; short of pulling out a gun and committing the act himself, there is nothing left for him to do. Of course, even the advertising and marketing people are laughing -- and a few weeks later, to Hicks's amazement, one thick-skinned adman will actually approach him with the request to endorse his client's orange drink product. (Hicks will refuse with derision.) It is a routine which, in its pacing and dynamics, shows an experienced ironist, in John Lahr's estimation, "easy -- at ease, masterful with an audience" (IJR). With a little taming, a little cleaning-up of the old demon F-word, one can see why he might be David Letterman's prize catch.

This very routine, I believe, encapsulates both the ironist's victory and his dilemma -- the same victory and dilemma faced by Swift with his "modest proposal" to cure the tragedy of starvation and infanticide in Ireland by fattening up the children as "prime dainties" for sale to cannibals. H.D. Rankin believes that that joke relies on the likelihood that Swift really felt that his proposal "would be better than the contemporary practice of starving and drowning, etc."7 Perhaps Bill Hicks felt the same about his proposal; certainly the interpretation of his routine is akin to that required by Swift. In D.C. Muecke's words, it "is not a process that entails discarding the literal meaning; it is still there in all its plausibility."8 Logically, the case Swift makes for "the utilization of poor Irish infants is watertight in every particular."9 The same can be said for Hicks's proposals -- not only with regard to the elimination of advertisers' detritus, but also the utilization of "terminally ill people as stunt men in pictures." Cruel? "You know what I think cruel is? Leaving your loved ones to die in some sterile hospital room, surrounded by strangers. Fuck that. Put 'em in the movies." Inhuman? "Do you want your grandmother dying like a little bird in some hospital room, her translucent skin so thin you can see her last heartbeat work its way down her blue veins? Or do you want her to meet Chuck Norris!"10 Hicks's kinship with Swift is again evident. Rankin notes that "the outrageous suggestion in 'A Modest Proposal' that children in Ireland should be fattened for food is well known to be no more absurd and outrageous than the accepted treatment of children in that country at that time."11 The same may well be said of Hicks's observations about the treatment of the aged and the terminally ill in modern America.

But however plausible their proposals, and however heartfelt the anger that inspires them, could either Swift or Bill Hicks be taken seriously? For this to happen, they would have failed in their ironic endeavor just as much as if they had not been taken seriously. Gilbert Highet noted that "the Nazis fiendishly misunderstood Swift, for their 'final solution to the Jewish problem' followed lines not dissimilar to the Proposal, without, however, confining attention to the children."12 Such is the danger of the literal interpretation; but on the other hand, "[r]eaders of Mein Kampf who thought that Hitler must have meant something different from what he said were making a risky mistake."13 Such is the danger of assuming a joke. It is the either/or that Kierkegaard described as part of the ironic problem; and even Bill Hicks's competitors for the comic ear of America -- Limbaugh, or Gordon Liddy's "G-Man" -- must shudder to think of the part their mock-hysterical cries about rescuing American "hostages" from Federal captivity may have played in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The thought to them would be as unbearable (one hopes) as if they had not been heeded at all. But this is the dual risk of irony, which carries with it both the danger of credence and the license to dismiss an utterance at one's peril. And, as we shall see, it is precisely the potential cancelling out of the two sides -- the "negativity" also identified by Kierkegaard --

that could make an accomplished ironist like Bill Hicks such a valuable booking for David Letterman, himself looking at once to be edgy and safe. Hicks professed astonishment at the possibility that he could ever have been considered a threat to Letterman's audience or his commercial sponsors, given that all he had offered was one man's ironic voice. His modest self-assessment marked a great contrast not only to the monumental expectations that Lenny Bruce held for his voice, but also, admittedly, to the conflicting opinions Hicks otherwise uttered about the destructive potential of comedy. Like Keillor, Bill Hicks knew when to throw out a smokescreen in order to disguise his critical intent; and if he could not quite play the winsome, shy Keillor to Lenny Bruce's Carol Kennicott, he at least learned something about strategy from the trials of his predecessor. What makes his story sad is that even the most compromising strategy was not enough to avoid the gag of the censor. What makes it shameful is that, in 1993, in the United States of America, it should have been expected in the first place.

Shiva the Destroyer

Like Lenny Bruce before him, Bill Hicks often infused his irony with explicit appeals to the "truth" in a variety of contexts, most notably with regard to censorship, media disinformation, advertising, and artistic integrity. But at the same time, unlike Bruce, he neither proclaimed nor implied that he was anything but a comedian. In the climate of conservative backlash in which he performed, he may still have been considered a threat by those who would -- to use Vonnegut's image -- dress up in a suit of armor to attack a hot-fudge sundae. After all, Hicks stood squarely in opposition to an ascendant right wing culturally presided over by Limbaugh and tacitly or otherwise supported by a host of popular comedians. This in itself makes him noteworthy, along with a handful of colleagues such as Sandra Bernhard, Eric Bogosian, Will Durst, the "def jam" comics, and -- on the unfettered comic stage as opposed to their network shows -- Brett Butler and Roseanne. Otherwise, Limbaugh's "dittoheads" could conceivably applaud the law-and-order diatribes of Dennis Miller (however appalling Miller himself might find it), the dramatized racism and sexism of Andrew Dice Clay, or the homophobia of Eddie Murphy and Sam Kinison. Any patron of any Rush Room across America could also feel comfortably unchallenged by the deliberate lack of critical engagement characterizing Seinfeld -- a sitcom priding itself on being "a show about nothing"; or the Cosby show's apparent self-satisfaction; or the static "rhetorical spleen attacks" of Denis Leary; or the right-leaning libertarianism of Howard Stern.14 Even the challenges held out by Comedy Central's Politically Incorrect were lost in the reruns of old shows like Soap, which consistently carried higher ratings up until the time of Hicks's death.15 If, as it appears, the political consensus in America had removed popular satire from the grasp of left populism and placed it firmly in the hands of Limbaugh and his imitators -- a conferment enabled by the default of any viable opposition -- then Bill Hicks's comedic stance was rare for its political moment: "To me, the comic is the guy who says 'Wait a minute' as the consensus forms.... He's the antithesis of the mob mentality." Hicks suggested that, like "Shiva the Destroyer," his job as a comic was to topple idols, "no matter what they are"; and while part of his importance to this discussion lies in the necessity imposed upon him to detract from just such an impression of destructive capacity, it may at least be asked what idols there were to be toppled in 1993 -- the election of Clinton notwithstanding -- other than those thrown up or maintained by a conservative consensus and left virtually unchallenged by the progressives in their disarray.16

Hicks's stance as an anti-consensus comedian must be one among a number of factors accounting for the high regard in which critics and his fellow comedians appear to have held him. In 1991, while yet a relative unknown, he received the Edinburgh Festival Critics Award for comedy. In 1993 -- the year of the Letterman banning -- Rolling Stone named Hicks their "Hot Stand-up Comic" of the year; he was then also nominated for his third American Comedy Award. Len Belzer, the "dean of syndicated comedy radio," called Hicks "the hippest, most intelligent cutting-edge comic of our day."17 Edith Sorenson wrote, "If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then half the comics working are genuflecting before him."18 (Most commentators on the subject have pointed in particular to Denis Leary's "flattery" of his old New Year's Eve booking-companion, Bill Hicks, in terms of both mannerism and material -- an observation made credible by a comparison of the content and dates of their first comedy albums and videos.)19 Less speculative are the recollections of Hicks's colleagues, such as those contributed to a British documentary made shortly after his death. Richard Belzer recalled how Hicks had "challenged not only his audience but ... other comedians." Richard Jeni said, "He was the type of guy that, you'd watch him as a comedian, and you'd kind of feel bad. You'd go, 'You know, I really should be doing more of this kind of thing. I really should be telling the truth more often.'" Jeni mused on Hicks's integrity as a stand-up comic in particular: "With Bill you'd always get the impression that stand-up was an end in itself. To many people in the stand-up business it's just a stepping-stone. You know, it's 'Hey, I'll get a sitcom, I'll have a wacky neighbor, and the next thing I know I'll be chatting with Regis.' And it shows. Bill Hicks wasn't just out there to get some laughs and collect a check." The British comic Sean Hughes envied "his bravery" and wrote for him a moving elegy, while Eric Bogosian described him in the shamanistic terms that, a generation before, had been reserved solely for Lenny Bruce: "He was taking fully the role of the witch-doctor in front of the audience ... like a big, giant exorcism of all the evil shit that's inside of us, that poisons us day to day. Talk shows aren't gonna help it, the news isn't.... You just need a guy to get up there, take you by the lapels and shake the shit out of you." To Bogosian, Hicks personified a welcome contempt for the slickness that had still defined American stand-up comedy in spite of a resilient alternative scene: "He wasn't like the guy who just comes up and stands at a mike and lays out one-

liners, but rather, there's this sort of tornado moving around the stage and cycling around and throwing all this energy out at you" (IJR). Dennis Miller called him "the Waylon Jennings of Comedy -- the Texas Outlaw"; while Steve Wright, Robert Klein, Eddie Izzard, and John Cleese all sang their praises for both his comic artistry and his critical incisiveness.20

The question remains as to why, if Americans had a comedian of such apparent reckoning in their midst, they were denied the opportunity to hear him. Anonymity can indeed be deserved on the grounds of a lack of talent or substance; but in Britain, Hicks could sell out a 2,500-seat concert hall for a twenty-three-night run, get mobbed in the streets by fans, and see his specials broadcast unexpurgated on prime-time television. In America -- well, as he said in his last performance, "I've loved every moment of the sixteen years I've been doing it in total anonymity in the country I love.... Playing The Comedy Pouch in Possum Ridge, Arkansas, every three months -- it was my treat."21 If he indeed deserved anonymity, what was there about him that would have so attracted him to Jay Leno, for whom he had first opened at a Houston comedy club in 1983? It was Leno who handed him over to Letterman because he was "still too far off the wall for The Tonight Show." Why would Letterman have wanted Hicks "to come on and just blow the roof off the place" eleven times in the late eighties and early nineties? (IJR). It could only be for the same reason that he was invited for a twelfth appearance, the first on Letterman's new CBS. show, the battle for which was documented in Bill Carter's book. It must have been for his peculiar sharpening of what Linda Hutcheon has called "irony's edge" -- the edge that always threatened to draw blood, but never could; the edge that nonetheless got him censored.

Gag artistry

Bill Hicks would have added an important dimension to Carter's The Late Shift; for with all the author's scrupulous attention to the ratings war, demographics, corporate interests, and the advertising dollar, he makes at least one highly debatable assertion: "As the weeks went on and Letterman turned in classy show after classy show [in the new CBS time-slot], even members of his own staff marveled at his skill in modifying his comedy just enough to broaden out his audience base.... Yet he was not alienating those who had come to view him as a subversive, nonmainstream comic."22 If this were indeed so -- if the new, "modified" Letterman show had still kept the "subversive, nonmainstream" edge that it had maintained on NBC through the booking of comedians like Bill Hicks -- why, then, would Hicks end up on the cutting-room floor with his first appearance on the CBS show? The answer appears to lie in the old dilemma admitted by Melville to Hawthorne: "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned -- it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot."23 The banning of Bill Hicks raises the same questions that Melville implied: To what extent is the dollar the leverage between the voice of the subversive critic and the safe comedian? What is the actual price of "truth," or at least of "frankness"? These questions are what make the editing of Hicks's mere seven minutes so significant and unsettling. Letterman's co-producer, Robert Morton, had said of Hicks, "We always pushed the envelope by seeing, 'O.K., just how much of a fuck-you attitude can you have without going over the line on network television?' And that was always the thrill of presenting him" (IJR). This was in reference to the old show, where -- no surprise -- the commercial stakes were significantly lower. On the new show, where, by having jumped one hour earlier, Letterman could go from drawing eighteen-thousand dollars for a thirty-second advertising spot to twice that amount for the same thirty seconds, Morton's "line" was considerably farther from the edge, and the cost of the "thrill" was conclusively higher -- too high, in fact, for Hicks to be heard at all.24

As I will argue, there is more to the case of Bill Hicks's censoring than the raw economic lure, important as it is. His colleague on the comic stage, Thea Vidale, had a theory: "Bill said a lot of things that were so true, that they just couldn't deal with.... You know, a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. But there wasn't no spoonful of sugar with Bill" (IJR). With respect to Vidale, I would of course disagree with her final sentence. There was indeed a "spoonful of sugar" with Hicks -- there had to be, just as there must be with her own work and that of any comedian with something critical to say. The "spoonful of sugar" is inherent in the comic discourse; it is the trick that turns an earnest social critic into a comedian -- it is what prevents his remaining a mere polemicist. Hicks knew this and demonstrated it in his art; in fact his art, inasmuch as he was a comedian, consisted largely of knowing how to measure the spoonful. Brett Butler observed why, in Hicks's case, it was all the more indispensable: "For all the talk about Bill being like Hendrix, or Dylan, or Jim Morrison, or Lenny Bruce, it was Jesus Bill wanted to be.... He wanted to be Christ at his angriest" (IJR). With such an angry critical motivation, the comedian's measuring needs to be especially accurate. Bill Hicks, like any "ass-kicking comedian," must necessarily place himself exquisitely close to the margin between pure sugar and unadulterated medicine. To not cross the margin must entail at least some compromise of the "truth" (Vidale's and Jeni's observations notwithstanding).

But what makes the case of Bill Hicks and Letterman especially disturbing is the extent to which Hicks had already compromised in order to get his voice heard on network television in the first place -- even before his banned appearance. At the very least, there was his profanity. It was true, for instance, that the F-word was a regular feature of his speech, as it was with many his age and younger. It was true that the word hardly meant anything anymore among the people who used it. It had become, in linguistician Lewis Allen's words, "just an intensifier ... like shucks and golly and darn." Ending in -ing, it had become "simply a substitute for 'very.'"25 The real taboos were racial slurs, which Hicks despised anyway. Still, it was no problem for him to jettison the F-word if required. He could easily compromise over that little bit of truth; in fact, he had read Vonnegut's Hocus Pocus, and concurred with the observation about profanity offering a

convenient excuse for one's ideas to be ignored. His language on television was always clean, while on the live stage -- thanks to the rewriting of the rules by Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Redd Foxx, and others -- profanity was no longer even an issue (as I trust it will not be in this chapter).

No, the most significant compromises that Hicks made in order to get on television had nothing to do with the F-word; they involved something more fundamentally restrictive. As Jay Leno recalled, a subtle taming process had begun with the first meeting between Hicks and the Letterman staff in the mid-1980s: "I remember bringing him down, and Morty [Robert Morton] and the producers would hear him and go, 'Bill this is good, but can you change this?' And he'd go into these fits of rage -- 'No, I can't! It's the essence of the bit!' And we'd have these arguments, and I'd say, 'Look, just get on TV, will you?'" (IJR). In the early days, it may well have seemed to Hicks like an intriguing puzzle -- in his words, "a challenge to write material that I still believe in, and maintain a sort of integrity.... Network TV doesn't really like people with opinions."26 By his twelfth performance, however, it had become a process of outright self-betrayal, as Hicks told Howard Stern after the banning: "No one has ever come up to me after any of the other eleven times, and said, 'Boy, I saw you on Letterman and it was great.' You know why? Because it wasn't me. I'd been so de-clawed by the censors, that I went on as this perfunctory little joke-blower, and it wasn't me."27 The process was in fact disarmingly insidious, as the CBS program 48 Hours demonstrated in a segment on Hicks the night before one of his earlier Letterman appearances on NBC. It is a jokey portrayal of Hicks making the rounds of the New York comedy stages under the policing eye of a Letterman producer, Frank Gannon, whose job, he says, is often to "fight" with the comedian: "I will say that it's my judgment that a joke will not work with our audience.... I've never been wrong."28 Ultimately, it was a gagging by whatever name, as Hicks remarked four months before his banning: "David's been great to me, but his show is still network TV, so they tape your hands behind your back, tape your ankles, put tape over your mouth and then tell you to go out there and be yourself."29 Even more insidious, Hicks implied, was the normalization of the gagging process to the extent that it could not be recognized, let alone admitted, for what it was. In a letter to John Lahr, he recalled making the rounds of the comedy clubs before another Letterman taping: "During the course of the night, Mr. Morton decided I should drop a few of the bits from my set because they weren't 'right for our audience.' The next morning I did a radio show, and the interviewer asked me if it was difficult to translate my club act to television. I responded by telling her of the previous night's activities. That afternoon, when I showed up at the Letterman studio, Robert Morton ran up to me and said, 'Hey, Hicks, why were you dissing us on the air today?... You were saying we edit your stuff for T.V. We've never done that!'"30 After the banning, which caused Hicks to vow he would never attempt a return to American network television, he marveled at both his capacity to have submitted to the taming process for so long, and the irony of the fact that what had attracted the Letterman producers in the first place was precisely what they were afraid of showing: "I've finally realized something. I've been, for the last however-many times I've done it, in an abusive relationship, and I've kept going back for more. 'Bill, we love you because you're so edgy and hip -- but when you come on our show, could you not be that way?' And I made the mistake of doing it, thinking, 'Oh, well, I'll rewrite everything so it fits.' And now I have no interest in doing that whatsoever."31

What, then, was a great American television network afraid of, after it had already "de-clawed" one of its favorite comedians on the rise? I use the term "network" loosely; for another question remains as to who, precisely, was responsible for banning a set that had already been approved twice by the show's producers. As Lahr's New Yorker profile documents, Hicks was told by Morton that it was not the producers, but rather the CBS "Standards and Practices" officers who had deemed the set "unsuitable" for broadcast. Yet that very office denied any part of the censoring when pressed by an outraged viewer: "[T]he decision was solely that of the producers of the program who decided to substitute his performance with that of another comedian. Therefore, your criticism that CBS censored the program is totally without foundation."32 In the wake of the press storm caused by the New Yorker exposé, the last word came in a dubious statement from a Letterman spokesperson to the effect that "there exist broadcast standards that the show is obliged to follow every night. As entertaining as Bill Hicks is, the show's producers and CBS felt that Hicks' set didn't follow those standards."33 Again: never mind that the banned set had already been softened and doubly approved by the producers -- word for word -- presumably to satisfy the very "broadcast standards" referred to. In their separate urges to avoid the brand of the hated word, Censor, the producers and the network's Standards and Practices officers, after first pointing their fingers at one another, ultimately agreed to share the responsibility -- at least in public. And though David Letterman, visibly ill at ease, shifts in front of the documentary camera and admits his "personal sense of regret" about "mistakes that were made," Hicks went to his grave convinced that he had been betrayed at the eleventh hour by Letterman himself and his producers (IJR).

Of course, it doesn't matter which person or persons were responsible for ensuring that Bill Hicks's seven minutes would never appear on the contraption he came to call "Lucifer's Dream Box." But is it conceivable that one comedian's little jokes could send the CBS corporate structure into paroxysms of fear for their ratings or their commercial sponsorships? This was the most astounding part of it, according to Hicks. His first response to Morton upon learning that his taped set had been cut that afternoon was: "Bob, they're just jokes.... Why are people so afraid of jokes?"34 Later in the day, as he discussed it with his manager, Colleen McGarr, his bewilderment turned to rage: "'They're just jokes, they're just jokes, they're just jokes.... What are they so afraid of?' I yelled...."35 Finally, Hicks could write to Lahr upon calm

reflection: "Jokes, John, this is what America now fears -- one man with a point of view, speaking out unafraid of our vaunted institutions, or the loathsome superstitions the CBS hierarchy feels the masses (the herd) use as their religion."36

Ah. Not "just jokes," but jokes "with a point of view." Hicks had finally come to the crux, identifying not only the double-bind of all ironists who wish for the "point of view" behind their irony to be apprehended, but something even more distressing: nearly three decades after the death of Lenny Bruce, critically-minded jokesters who presumed to challenge the consensus were still considered a threat in America. To his credit, Hicks never took the step taken by Lenny Bruce, denying the comedian in him; on the contrary, in the few months left to him following the Letterman banning he brought the excised set to his remaining comedy club audiences, confronting them not only with the points of view that the network had denied them, but also with the safety factor of his jokery. As he explained, "I'm going to play it for many, many people and show them the exact set that was cancelled, and see if you, the audience, were so offended -- that you felt so threatened by my little skit -- that you went out of your fucking minds."37 In order to recognize the strategic compromises Hicks had thus made, let alone those that were, apparently, further expected in order for him to be heard on network television without an advertising budget behind him, a reproduction of the banned set is helpful. (In defense of free expression and as a gesture of contempt for American censorship, it is obligatory.) It also acts as a springboard for a discussion of one of the most prominent concerns of Bill Hicks's comedy: the relationship between artistry, truth, the media, and the advertising dollar.

The censored seven minutes 38

Good evening! I'm very excited to be here tonight! I just got some great news today. I finally got my own show on TV coming out this fall as a replacement series.

(The audience applauds)

Don't worry, it's not a talk show.

(The audience laughs)

Thank God! It's a half-hour weekly show that I will host, entitled "Let's Hunt and Kill Billy Ray Cyrus."

(The audience bursts into laughter and applause)

I think it's fairly self-explanatory: Each week we let the Hounds of Hell loose and chase that jar-head, no-talent, cracker idiot all over the globe 'til I finally catch that fruity little pony tail of his, pull him to his Chippendale knees, and put a gun in his mouth -- Pow!

(The audience is applauding and laughing throughout this run)

Then we'll be back in '94 with "Let's Hunt and Kill Michael Bolton."

(The audience laughs and applauds)

Yeah, so you can see, with guests like this, our run will be fairly limitless.

(The audience laughs)

And we're kicking the whole series off with our M.C. Hammer/Vanilla Ice/Marky Mark Christmas Special.

(The audience whoops and applauds)

And I don't want to give away any surprises, but the first one we hunt and kill on that show is Marky Mark...

(Audience cheers)

... because his unbuttoned pants kept falling around his ankles, and he couldn't run away.

(Bill mimes a hobbling Marky Mark. The audience laughs)

Yeah, I get to crossbow him right in the abs! It's a beautiful thing. Bring the whole family. Tape it! It's definitely a show for the nineties.

(The audience applauds)

"At this point," Hicks writes, "I did a line on men dancing. But it was never mentioned as a reason for excising me from the show, so let's skip ahead to the next 'Hot Point' that was mentioned....

You know, I consider myself a fairly open-minded person, but speaking of homosexuality, something has come to my attention that has shocked even me. Have you heard about these new grade school books for children they're trying to add to the curriculum, to help children understand the gay lifestyle? One's called Heather's Two Mommies, the other one is called Daddy's New Roommate.

(Here Bill makes a shocked, disgusted face)

Folks, I gotta draw the line here and say this is absolutely disgusting. It is grotesque, and it is pure evil. (Pause) I'm talking, of course, about Daddy's New Roommate.

(Audience laughs)

Heather's Two Mommies is quite fetching -- you know, they're hugging on page seven!

(Audience laughs)

(Lasciviously) Oooh! Go, Mommies, go! Oooh! They kiss in chapter four!

(Audience laughs)

Me and my nephew wrastle over that book every night. (Bill mimes his little nephew jumping up and down. As nephew:) "Uncle Bill, I've gotta do my homework!"

(Audience laughs)

Shut up and go do your Math! I'm proofreading this for you.

(Audience laughs)

You know who's really bugging me these days? These pro-lifers.

(Smattering of applause)
You ever look at their faces? "I'm pro-life! (Here Bill makes a pinched face of hate and fear; his lips are pursed as though he's just sucked on a lemon.) I'm pro-life!" Boy, they look it, don't they? They just exude joie de vivre. You just want to hang with them and play Trivial Pursuit all night long.
(Audience chuckles)
You know what bugs me about them? If you're so pro-life, do me a favor. Don't lock arms and block medical clinics. If you're so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries.
(Audience laughs)
Let's see how committed you are to this idea. (Here Bill mimes the purse-lipped pro-lifers locking arms. As pro-lifer:) "She can't come in!"
(Audience laughs)
(As confused member of funeral procession:) "She was ninety-eight! She was hit by a bus!"
(Audience laughs)
(As pro-lifer:) "There's options!"
(Audience laughs)
(Again, as confused funeral-procession member:) "What else can we do -- have her stuffed?"
(Audience laughs)
I want to see pro-lifers with crowbars at funerals opening caskets -- "Get out!" Then I'd really be impressed by their mission.
"At this point," continues Hicks, "I did a routine on smoking that was never brought up as a "Hot Point," so let's move ahead to the end of my routine....
I've been traveling a lot lately -- I was over in Australia during Easter. It was interesting to note they celebrate Easter the same way we do -- commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus by telling our children a giant bunny rabbit ... left chocolate eggs in the night ...
(Audience laughs)
Gee, I wonder why we're so messed up as a race. You know, I've read the Bible -- can't find the words "bunny" or "chocolate" in the whole book.
(Audience laughs)
Where do we get this stuff from? And why those two things? Why not "Goldfish left Lincoln Logs in our sock drawers?" I mean, as long as we're making stuff up, let's go hog wild.
(Audience laughs and applauds)
I think it's interesting how people act on their beliefs. A lot of Christians, for instance, wear crosses around their necks. Nice sentiment, but do you think when Jesus comes back, he's really going to want to look at a cross?
(Audience laughs. Bill makes a face of pain and horror.)
Ow! Maybe that's why he hasn't shown up yet.
(Audience laughs)
(As Jesus looking down from Heaven:) "I'm not going, Dad. No, they're still wearing crosses -- they totally missed the point. When they start wearing fishes, I might go back again.... No, I'm not going.... O.K., I'll tell you what -- I'll go back as a BUNNY....
(Audience bursts into applause and laughter. The band kicks into "Revolution" by the Beatles.)
Thank you very much! Good night!
(Bill crosses over to the seat next to Letterman's desk.)
(Letterman:) Good set Bill! Always nice to have you drop by with an uplifting message!
(Audience and Bill laugh. We cut to a commercial.)
America saw no trace of Bill Hicks at all that evening, but rather "a series of Orwellian cuts and edits that were so obvious and clumsily done, many people called to ask what had happened."39 Hicks was never told precisely why any of his set was deemed "unsuitable" for the Letterman audience. In the rush of interviews and writings that followed the banning, he speculated on the possibility that he might have offended the odd Christian fundamentalist who couldn't see through his irony to the point of grasping his respect for an ideal meaning of Jesus, free from degrading or irrelevant associations; or he might have offended the odd gay activist who couldn't recognize that he was mocking the double-standards of male voyeurism and homophobia. Hicks dismissed the importance of such possibilities: "We now live in the 'Age of Being Offended.' Get over it."40 But there was no speculation needed about the fact that in the week of Hicks's banning, the Letterman show was broadcasting highly lucrative commercials for the anti-abortion lobby. Again, David Letterman himself had admitted, in the context of his switch to CBS, that "[a]t the end of the year, everybody adds up the dollars."41 To Ken Auletta, the logic of the switch "was inexorable: the earlier the Letterman show was broadcast, the bigger the audience; the bigger the audience, the greater the advertising revenue."42 As far as Hicks was concerned, his banning from this new time-slot meant one thing: "Same old Dave, brand new censors."43 CBS could pontificate about the maintenance of their "broadcast standards" as much as they liked; but to Hicks there was a different message: "The fact of the matter is, this vast empire of network television called CBS are a bunch of shameless cowards who kowtow to very organized, although minority, special interest groups in America. They fear losing their corporate sponsorship, and that is the threat these special interest groups promise."44 Hicks concluded that his entire experience with network television was based on a

misunderstanding finally cleared up for him by David Letterman and CBS: "We live in the U.S.A., the United States of Advertising, and there is freedom of speech to the highest bidder."45 He would not go back to Letterman or any other commercial network show, even if invited, for the advertisers' demands were too eviscerating: "What kind of material?" he asked. "How bad airline food is? Boy, 7-11's sure are expensive? Golly, Ross Perot has big ears?"46 Letterman's embarrassed producers did in fact ask him back; so did Jay Leno in his continued battle for the late-night ratings. Hicks refused: "I don't know if I can learn to juggle that quickly -- 'Hi, I'm Bill Hicks. I used to have a social conscience and wanted to help the world by trying to point out how our belief systems are affecting us negatively. Now watch this -- an apple!'"47

Lucifer's Dream Box

John Lahr concluded that the banning from the Letterman show only confirmed Hicks in the belief that "television worked to control the society, to keep the culture credulous, to keep it from thinking; to enchant it -- literally, to spellbind it. And his job, as he saw it, was to break the spell" (IJR). Ironically, he had hoped to do so with comic enchantments of his own. "People watch T.V. not to think," he said; "I'd like the opportunity to stir things up once, and see what happens."48 His charm indeed would be irony, in his view, "a trick to make you admit what you've always known."49 Thus his strategy would be to employ the means of artistic illusion towards highly ironic ends: "You have people that want to hear comedy where they don't have to think about anything. To me they are missing the point. They say, 'I just want to escape from reality.' No you don't. You want to escape from illusion."50 In television, people had at their fingertips a magical box with an unprecedented power to inform and illuminate; but it had fallen into the hands of accountants, demographics analysts, and marketing experts whose intent was to deceive -- for money alone. In concert with them were a host of lesser, though equally satanic, deceivers. There were the critics and commentators invited on television to indulge in earnest, self-reflexive discussions about television: "Every few years, they cart out the old argument regarding television's role in our society. As usual, they pose the same two questions that are guaranteed to keep us divided and keep the problem unresolved, then it's back to 'business as usual.' The herd has been pacified by our charade of concern as we pose the two most idiotic questions imaginable -- 'Is T.V. becoming too violent?' and 'Is T.V. becoming too promiscuous?'" (Hicks offered his answer: "T.V. is too stupid. It treats us like morons. Case closed.")51 There were also the talk show hosts themselves who shied away from any controversy but the most sensational and insignificant, leaving the broadcast media as playthings at the disposal of "Satan" himself, Rush Limbaugh, and his fellows (I). Once upon a time a lone investigative journalist named Rivera could work undercover to expose the horrors of the Willowbook asylum; but now, "Geraldo gets plastic surgery done on the air, in the name of journalism. I can't wait until he tries that Kavorkian suicide machine. That's the show I'm taping."52 An even greater betrayal came from other comics who had graduated to hosting talk shows of their own, each one becoming in the process "another whore in the capitalist gang bang."53 The pre-HBO Dennis Miller; Arsenio Hall; even Hicks's early mentor, Jay Leno -- "[I]t's amazing these young, hip guys have done their best to put on 'The Mike Douglas Show.' Who are they speaking for?"54 Leno had been, at one time, "the number-one comic in the country." He'd had such challenging potential -- now, he was reduced to "talking with Joey Lawrence from Blossom. I'm sure that was his ultimate comedic dream. 'So Joey, good to see you again. What are ya, sixteen? Got a license? Oh God, what have I done with my life!'"55 Arsenio Hall was "the most dangerous one of all.... Jesus is gonna do that show when he comes back: 'Tonight on Arsenio: Paula Abdul, Della Reese, and Jesus of Nazareth. Let's get busy! Jesus, tell me the truth now. Mary Magdalene. Didja do her? Arf, arf, arf, arf. We'll be right back.'"56 Comedians had virtually taken over the front line of the talk show system, only to become complicit stooges in the networks' design to misinform and divert: "What's happened with this plethora of comedy on every channel is that it's totally trivialized what comedy can do and should do."57

One thing Hicks felt that comedians could have done was to counter the biased viewpoints and outright fabrications that television networks purveyed under the guise of objective news reporting. He was one of the tiny handful of comedians who dared to challenge, for example, the popular impressions of the Persian Gulf war created largely by CNN and reinforced by other networks. Eric Bogosian recalled how rare it was for comedians to make such an attempt, and how some unnamed "top comedians in this country" actually admitted to him why they had avoided challenging the official and received versions of the war's progress and aftermath. "They said they wouldn't put their neck on the line. They were against the war and they wouldn't say anything, because they basically felt that they'd watch those little bags of money just fly away. It was, like, kiss your career goodbye" (IJR). Hicks, however, was not afraid to propose comedically that the Gulf war was virtually a media fabrication: "First of all, this needs to be said: there never was a war. 'How can you say that, Bill?' Well, a war is when two armies are fighting. So you see, right there, I think we can all agree, it wasn't exactly a war."58 It was, if anything, a transparent public relations exercise carried out by the Bush administration in concert with the network news organizations: "Remember how it started? They kept talking about the Elite Republican Guard in these hushed tones, like these guys were the Bogeyman or something. 'Yeah, we're doing well now -- but we have yet to face the Elite Republican Guard.'" The ineptitude of the attempted media con soon showed itself, however, in the changing terminology of the news reporting: "After two months of continuous carpet bombing, and not one reaction at all from them, they became simply 'the Republican Guard.' Not nearly as elite as we may

have led you to believe. And after another month of bombing they went from 'the Elite Republican Guard' to 'the Republican Guard' to 'the Republicans Made This Shit Up About There Being Guards Out There.'" The unspoken message of the entire news campaign was: "We hope you enjoyed your fireworks show" (RC).

What Hicks called "the Persian Gulf Distraction" did not end with the war, however, nor with the defeat of the Republicans in 1992. The Clinton administration's launching of twenty-two cruise missiles on Baghdad in retaliation for what Hicks emphasized was "the alleged -- failed -- assassination attempt against George Bush" offered another opportunity for diversion, if not outright deception, in the highly orchestrated outrage that accompanied the reporting. "Everyone in the government and media called it a cowardly act on the Iraqis' part, because some Iraqi guy was going to drive a Toyota car bomb, and blow himself up in the process of trying to kill the President of the United States.... Meanwhile, we're launching cruise missiles two hundred miles away from floating iron islands. Who are the cowards again?" (Hicks proposed his own alternative: "We should have embarrassed the Iraqis. We should have assassinated Bush, and said, 'That's how you do it, Towelhead. Don't fuck with us.'") (I).

Hicks suggested that even comedians had the capacity to define what was both truthful and newsworthy, given that network television generally failed in that responsibility. "[I]f I were going to do a newscast, I'd have the most interesting people in the world I'd do stories about, and I'd just keep the camera on them, going, 'No, we're not going to leave. Look at them. They're skilled artists who are doing holy work.' But these psychos get all the news time. Man, I'm afraid to go to the post office at this point."59 Aware of the fact of the news mogul as a controlling phenomenon, he reflected upon the negative sensationalism characterizing American news broadcasts -- "You'd think if you just walk out your door, you're immediately going to be raped by some crack-addicted, AIDS-infected pit bull" -- and comedically proposed it as part of a calculated corporate strategy: "Ted Turner is making this shit up. Jane Fonda won't sleep with him, he runs to a typewriter. '"By 1992 we will all die of AIDS." Read that on the air. I don't get laid, nobody gets laid.'" Hicks implied that the sensationalizing tendency of the news, however beneficial in the network ratings wars, acted as a bar to public engagement with important issues, in addition to its simple terrorizing: "Pretty soon we're all going to be locked inside our homes, with no one on the streets but pizza-delivery guys in armored cars, with turrets shooting pizzas through the mail slots of our front doors. And every house will glow with American Gladiators beamed in: 'We are free. Keep repeating. We are free'" (REV). Hicks's championing of Public Access television as a potential counterweight to the corporate bias of the news networks is a further indication of his ironically informing goal, if not his quixotism. Hence his decision, as he watched the buildup of the media circus at Waco, to travel to the Branch Davidian compound with his producer, Kevin Booth, to film an alternative news broadcast for Austin's Public Access station. Filmed on the seventh day of the siege, the footage shows Hicks in newscaster's pose, ruminating on the perils of religious fundamentalism, with the compound in the background: "We're out here at Mount Carmel, [with] the Branch Davidian Latter-Day-Saint Adventist Seven-Day-Church (Lutheran Yahweh Division) breakaway group.... It looks like Grandma's house."60 At that time, of course, Hicks had no idea of what would transpire on the final day of the siege; but in the fatal storming's aftermath he risked the inevitable charges of paranoia in order to speculate as to why none of the network news organizations had bothered to pick up the freely available Public Access footage of Bradley tanks apparently shooting fire -- not teargas -- into the compound. In any event, he maintained, the news organizations were too compliant even to question the Clinton administration's official justification for the military assault -- child abuse: "If that's true, how come we don't see Bradley tanks knocking down Catholic churches?" (I).

It was a politically incorrect proposition, to be sure, but wholly in keeping with the brutal nature of the "attack comedy" that characterized Hicks's battle with the American television networks.61 Given that their objective was to anaesthetize, his objective was to shock. As he saw it, the shock would need to be ferocious enough to cut through the passivity engineered by complicit -- or at least, compliant -- television programming: "Go back to bed, America. Your government is in control again. Here -- here's American Gladiators. Watch this. Shut up. Here's American Gladiators. Here's fifty-six channels of it.... Here you go, America: you are free to do as we tell you" (REV). When Hicks looked around for comedic assistance in his attacks on the network deceivers, he found that some of his most potent colleagues had joined their ranks. Leno and Letterman were in fact the two greatest American gladiators, battling it out for the ratings, the advertising spoils, and the credulity of the public. Jerry Seinfeld was about to become one of the highest-paid performers on network television, following in the footsteps of Bill Cosby. Whoopi Goldberg, Chevy Chase, Roseanne, Brett Butler -- they too had signed contracts that implicitly required them to watch their mouths.

In his brief dalliance with the networks and their sponsors, Hicks had also agreed to watch his mouth: they silenced him anyway. But it was an uncharacteristic dalliance on his part, as the liberality and subjects of his comedy club material would demonstrate. Most of that material indicates, by contrast with the banned set, the sacrifice he was willing to make in order to be heard on commercial television, as well as the reasons why he might have considered it an act of self-betrayal. Paradoxically, his live routines

also show that even at their most incisive and urgent, his various appeals to the "truth," in whatever context, were necessarily reliant upon the fictions of trickery, and thus a great test of his critical integrity.

'Where's my commercial?': Diet Coke and the War on Drugs

It is perhaps the greatest irony of all that Bill Hicks should have been silenced on network television by, of all things, advertising interests; for no two subjects had borne so much contempt in his live comedy as the agenda of network television to mystify, and the selling of the soul to advertising. It was in relation to television and advertising that nearly all of his imaginative references to "truth" were made, informing his advocacy of first-hand drug knowledge (as opposed to the manipulations of the "Just Say No" propaganda) and his scorn for artists -- musicians in particular -- who had sold themselves to advertisers. Inevitably, he opened himself up to accusations of irresponsibility, incitement to drug addiction, brutality (for his withering attacks on corporate rock stars), anti-patriotism (for his skepticism about the reliability of the Gulf War reporting), and godlessness (for his scornful treatment of televangelists and the Christian fundamentalist media machine). His response to all such charges would be either a plea for "truth" or, at least, for the allowance of another "point of view" through which the truth might be perceived, as distinct from those biased points of view that massive funding alone had enabled. The popularity or unpopularity of a viewpoint was not an issue -- consensus had nothing to do with "the truth": "[R]egardless of how many people go with it, a billion times zero is still zero."62 The repercussions of such appeals came right to his doorstep: "Sometimes my dad even gets on this kick: you hate this country, you hate the government, and you hate religion. I have to tell him to step back. 'Dad, I really don't think you're watching me. I just hate being lied to.'"63 It was a curious position to be in, attempting to combat corporate and media lying through the lies of comedy. It was also an unenviable position, because his advocacy of "truth" as the first principle put him on a collision course with generally popular social agendas, beliefs, and personages -- in spite of his acknowledgement of the requirement that he play with the truth (which, although he could be heard to grumble about it, ultimately distinguished him from Lenny Bruce). And through the ironic play to which he had thus committed himself, Hicks embarked upon a meteoric crusade against what he saw as a host of competing liars.

His comedic attacks on the War on Drugs, for instance, were based on his belief that the campaign was not only an exercise in mendacity, but the work of uninformed amateurs, whatever their expertise in advertising. His references to the War on Drugs are consistently those of an accomplished trickster out to expose the inept confidence game of lesser rivals. "They lump all drugs together: it's not gonna work. Pot and crack? Hey, hey, hey, dude -- don't put pot in the drug category. It's an herb, man. Like tea." As far as Hicks was concerned, the incompetence of such attempted trickery was embarrassing not only to anyone with the least experience of drug use or an academic knowledge of drugs, but to anyone concerned with the fine art of fooling: "George Bush says, 'We are losing the war on drugs.' You know what that implies? There's a war being fought, and people on drugs are winning it. Well, what does that tell you about drugs? Some smart, creative people on that side. They're winning a war, and they're fucked up. Hah!"64 As a player highly sensitive to the requirements of artful manipulation, Hicks derided the condescending advertisements that so blatantly presumed a naïve viewing public: "I knew we were in trouble with that damn egg commercial.... 'Here's your brain.' I've seen a lot of weird shit on drugs, but I've never, ever, ever, ever looked at an egg and thought it was a fuckin' brain, not once" (RC). Having exposed the opposition's inability to fabricate a credible version of the "truth," Hicks raised his own (double) standard of truthfulness regarding drugs. As a reformed alcoholic and drug abuser who had once feared for his own life, he made a defiant admission of a fact that the War on Drugs advertisers had not only failed to accommodate, but, if anything, had actively set out to suppress: "I'll tell you something honestly about drugs. Honestly -- and I know it's not a very popular idea. You don't hear it very often any more. But it is the truth: I had a great time doing drugs. Sorry." Again, truth had nothing to do with social agendas or conventional wisdom. "Never murdered anyone, never robbed anyone, never raped anyone, never beat anyone, never lost a job, a car, a house, a wife, or kids. Laughed my ass off, and went about my day. Sorry. Now, where's my commercial?" (RC). These were verities about Hicks's drug experience that could not be denied, even in spite of his own awareness that he had been in danger, and that some of his acquaintances had gone so far as to organize betting pools as to when he might die: "But I am not sorry I did the drugs. I had fun, and it changed my thinking. I stopped because I didn't want to die."65 Nevertheless, the possibility of his own death or anyone else's still could not reduce certain truths, no matter what the Surgeon General said. "Drugs have done good things for us. 'What do you mean, Bill?' Well, if you don't believe drugs have done good things for us, do me a favor, then. Go home tonight, take all your albums, your tapes, and your CDs, and burn 'em. Because, you know what? The musicians who made that great music that has enhanced your lives throughout the years: real fuckin' high on drugs." The Beatles: "They were real high, they wrote great music: drugs had a positive effect" (RV). Keith Richards: "You never hear the Surgeon General mention Keith, do you? Oh -- a little hole in the theory there!" The crime of the War on Drugs was that it churned out mystifying propaganda while burying points of view that were valid, however thorny: "Keith Richards is shooting heroin into his eyeball, and is still touring. All right? I'm getting mixed signals" (D). Thus, no matter its ends, the corrupt means of the campaign were suppression and disinformation at the expense of knowledge and experience: "The extent of our drug education is a slogan. 'Just Say No' -- that's our drug education. To me, 'Just Say No' is very closed-minded -- the opposite of open-minded, the opposite of learning. See, all my friends, and myself -- we

Just Said Yes, and I guarantee you, we learned a whole bunch about drugs."66 Not a popular admission -- sorry -- but it was the truth. Moreover, it enabled a perception that might credibly challenge the status quo: "Why is the drug czar of this country a cop? Why isn't he instead someone who's been through recovery, who has had an alcohol and/or drug addiction and overcome it?... Putting sick people in jail -- does that make sense?" (I).

But there was more to the War on Drugs than its "know-nothingness" and its obstinate refusal -- after the fashion of propaganda -- to encourage a dialogue. There was also its conspicuous selectivity, appearing in the collusion between government, media, advertising, and the tobacco and alcohol industries, in a transparent attempt to divert attention away from the harmfulness of protected drugs. "The War on Drugs is hypocrisy, man. That's why it's not gonna work: it's a fucking lie. Alcohol and cigarettes kill more people than crack, coke, and heroin combined."67 The standard retort was predictable: "'Oh, wait a minute, Bill. Alcohol's-an-acceptable-form-of-social-interaction-which-for-thousands-of-years-has-been-the-norm-under-which-human-beings-congregate-and-form --' 'Shut the fuck up. Your denial is beneath you. And thanks to the use of hallucinogenic drugs, I see through you" (RC). The aspiring tricksters in television programming and marketing departments were shamelessly showing their hands: "All day long we see those commercials -- Here's your brain, here's your brain on drugs; just say no; why do you think they call it dope? -- And then the next commercial is: 'This Bud's for You....'" If anything, the selectivity of the War on Drugs made network pretensions to "broadcast standards" all the more contemptible: "Exactly what standards are you practising? I've seen these commercials during 'in depth' reports on the war against drugs. At least drug dealers have enough shame to lurk on street corners and in alleyways, and not come over the tube into our homes with all the slick, glossy production values the beer-hawkers can muster...."68

Thus, the one inescapable meaning of the War on Drugs was revealed by its artless confidence men through the brazen messages in their television commercials: "It's O.K. to drink your drug; we meant those other drugs -- those untaxed drugs. Nicotine, alcohol: good drugs. Coincidentally, taxed drugs." Having grasped the obvious meaning behind the inept commercial charade, the intended dupes -- the American public -- were fully entitled to draw an uninvited conclusion: "Thank God they're taxing alcohol, man. That means we've got those good roads we can get fucked up and drive on.... We'd be doing donuts in a wheat field."69 Moreover, in its discriminating protection of socially harmful drugs, the Just Say No campaign blinded the public from other possibilities which, to Hicks, were grounded in truth -- and if it took a more able hypocrite, i.e. a comedian, to set the record straight, so be it: "If I were going to have a drug be legal, it would not be alcohol .... Pot is a better drug than alcohol -- fact -- and I'll prove it to you. You're at a ball game, you're at a concert, and someone's really violent, aggressive, and obnoxious: are they drunk or are they smoking pot?" The resounding "Drunk!" invariably shouted out by the audience would confirm Hicks in the belief that his superior trickery could release people from the spells cast by presumptuous rivals in the advertising departments. "I have never seen people on pot get in a fight, because it's fucking impossible." Hence, an ironic alternative to a no less hypocritical official agenda: "Not only do I think pot should be legalized, I think it should be mandatory.... That'd be a nice world, wouldn't it? Mellow, hungry, quiet, fucked-up people everywhere? Domino's Pizza trucks passing each other on every highway...." (RC). The absence of tobacco commercials, too, was no indication of either government or media sincerity in the War on Drugs: "Shoot, T.V. would still be hawking cigarettes if the government hadn't stepped in. Why the government stepped in in the first place is anybody's guess. Perhaps it's because we've opened so many new overseas markets to push the number-one killer drug in the world...."70 So, the advertising competition should have fooled no one, as any real trickster could see.

Hicks did not fully expend his comic scorn on the commercial operators in television's War on Drugs; he reserved some for the news managers. They, too, were confidence men, and sorry specimens in their failure to hide their bias and collusion. "Did you ever see a good drugs story on the news? Never. News is supposed to be objective. Isn't it supposed to be The News? But every drugs story is negative. Well, hold it: I've had some killer fuckin' times on drugs. Let's hear the whole story." The "whole story" was the only way to the truth; but news managers were less interested in truth than in convenient plausibility: "Same L.S.D. story every time, and we've all heard it: 'Young man on acid. Thought he could fly. Jumped out of a building. What a tragedy.' What a dick. He thought he could fly? Why didn't he take off from the ground, and check it out first? You don't see ducks lined up to catch elevators to fly south" (RV). The "whole story" must -- by definition -- include a positive report: "Wouldn't that be newsworthy? Just once? To base your decision on information rather than scare-tactics and superstition and lies? Just once? I think it would be newsworthy." And he would offer the positive report, in the interests of "truth" rather than advocacy: "'Today a young man on acid realized that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration, that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively, there is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves.... Here's Tom with the weather'" (REV).

In its entirety, then, the War on Drugs was to Hicks a greater evil than the drug abuse it purported to attack, because it was based upon censorship, misinformation, hypocrisy (without the saving grace of irony), and the manipulation of fear rather than the inculcation of awareness. While in one libertarian aside he maintained, "No, it's not a War on Drugs, it's a War on Personal Freedom," he implied that it was much more: a War on Truth (D). It was yet another advertising campaign that benefited only the advertisers or the interested parties in concert with them.

Among such parties, and bearing the brunt of Hicks's scorn, were those high-profile rock stars whose participation in the War on Drugs was one of many indications of their willing submission to the pressures of consensus and the enticements of corporate sponsorship. In the hands of the new rock "heroes," the War on Drugs -- like any of the other products they endorsed -- became just another distraction intended to condition the American public into passive consumers (of ideas and agendas) rather than responsible thinkers. Having grown through the sixties and seventies as a hero-worshipper of Jimi Hendrix and a host of other rebellious artists, Hicks viewed the eighties and nineties as decades of betrayal by the very people in whom the power to resist conformity most resided: America's rock musicians, timid and talentless now, hiding behind the façades of glamor, over-production, and relentless marketing.

Hicks found it easy to segue from the War on Drugs into a critique of artistic prostitution and dishonesty. After invoking Hendrix, the Beatles, Keith Richards, Janis Joplin, and other musicians for whom drug experimentation proved a litmus test for the creative pursuit of an alternative viewpoint -- an "altered state" -- he would "extend the theory to our generation now, so it's more applicable" (RC). His conclusion was merciless: "These other musicians today who don't do drugs, and in fact speak out against them: boy, do they suck. What a coincidence. Ball-less, soul-less, spiritless, corporate little bitches, suckers of Satan's cock, each and every one of them." Signing up to the War on Drugs was tantamount to masquerading as a rock star: "'We're Rock Stars Against Drugs because that's what the President wants!' Aw, suck Satan's cock. That's what we want, isn't it? Government-approved rock and roll" (REV). The same rock stars fighting the War on Drugs were just as likely to be selling Pepsi-Cola and Taco Bell products: there was a connection. Certainly, a review of the eighties' and nineties' most prominent rock stars suggests an advertising chumminess inconceivable in the sixties and seventies, when the music was synonymous with nonconformity: Michael Jackson pushing Pepsi; Phil Collins and Eric Clapton pushing Michelob; George Michael pushing Diet Coke ("Diet Coke? Even Madonna fuckin' hawked real Coke"); M.C. Hammer pushing Kentucky Fried Chicken; Barry Manilow pushing McDonald's; Genesis pushing Volkswagens; Pink Floyd pushing Volkswagens. (Heaven alone knows how Hicks would have handled the news that, less than two years after his death, even Keith Richards would be pushing Volkswagens.) "Everyone is hawking products. That's the highest thing you can achieve now, isn't it -- become some barker?... I'm waiting to see, 'It's Jesus, for Miller! I was crucified, dead for three days, resurrected, and I've waited two thousand years to return to Earth -- it's Miller Time!'" (D).

Brett Butler suggested that "Bill got freeze-framed in the scene where Jesus went through the temple and said, 'This is my father's house and you have turned it into a den of thieves'" (IJR). If she is right, Hicks was indeed "Christ at his angriest" when he confronted both his musical targets and the audiences he would scold for supporting them: "You don't see the imminent danger, do you? You're staring at me like, 'Well, they're just musicians and they're just doing their thing, and --' NO! They are demons set loose on the Earth to lower the standards of the perfect and holy children of God, which is what we are. Make no mistake about it" (D). Music was artistry and artistry (ironically) was truth, not the trick-turning of prostitution. Hence the explanation Hicks offered for those who could not apprehend the meaning of his character assassinations: "You can print this in stone, and don't you ever forget it: Any -- any -- performer that ever sells a product on television is for now and all eternity removed from the artistic world. I don't care if you shit Mona Lisas out of your ass on cue: you've made your fucking choice." The product could be either Diet Coke or the War on Drugs -- it made no difference: "'Oh, come on; it's just a good product, and it's making a good --' Suck that big, scaly pecker down your mouth -- suck it!" (RV).

Hicks maintained that he was in an "art war" between the forces of slick, commercial lies and the forces of integrity.71 If commercialism and integrity were antithetical, then music designed solely to sell as a commodity was just as satanic as music that sold other commodities. This left most modern popular music open to Hicks's guns. M.C. Hammer, Vanilla Ice, George Michael, The New Kids, Debbie Gibson, Tiffany, Rick Astley, Marky Mark, Michael Bolton, Billy Ray Cyrus -- all fell before his satire, all because of their blatant commercialism. They would turn Hicks into a comic demagogue onstage: "'Oh, come on, Bill -- they're the New Kids. Don't pick on them. They're so good, they're so clean cut. They're such a good image for the children --' Fuck that! When did mediocrity and banality become a good image for your children? I want my children to listen to people who fucking rocked! I don't care if they died in puddles of their own vomit -- I want someone who plays from his fucking heart!... I want my rock stars DEAD!" (RV). Given the extent of corporate backing and image-projection that Hicks's targets had behind them, they were, in his estimation, fair game for violent satire: they were hardly powerless. Thus, he could in good conscience dramatize the dismemberment of Debbie Gibson; or the shotgun murders of Kenny Rogers and George Michael; or the sexual degradation of Michael with a pair of Gibson's bloody panties -- it was all part of the "art war" being fought here on "the third mall from the Sun." In the battle for truth and integrity, Debbie Gibson -- "that little mall-creature" -- must be chopped into little pieces of "mall-cordwood" by a raging Jimi Hendrix: the soul of America depended on it (D). "They're putting music to AIDS germs, putting a drum machine behind 'em in a metronome beat, and Ted Turner's colorizing 'em. These aren't even people, man -- it's a CIA plot to make you think malls are good. Don't you see?" The price of losing the "art war" was nothing less than the virtual lobotomization of the world at the hands of American commercial interests: "You do realize that by the year 2000 all malls in the world are going to be connected. There's going to be a subculture of Mall People who have never seen daylight -- born, bred, and raised in the malls -- and sent out to the wafting tomb of Debbie Gibson to become happy

consumers" (SM). Consumerism and infantilism went hand in hand; and through their spending, the consuming public were just as culpable for their own infantilization as the corporate "artistes" and their marketing agents: "I mean, who buys that shit? Is there that much babysitting money being passed around right now?... When did we start listening to pre-pubescent white girls? I must have missed that meeting" (D). For their complicity, the buying public set themselves up for the same Swiftian solutions that Hicks offered to the sold-out performers: "'I'm a happy consumer! And you know, I'm concerned about what my children consume! I'd like to consume the barrel of a twelve-gauge shotgun right now -- blam!'" (SM).

Here, then, was a profusion of ironies. In his quest to be heard and to inform, Bill Hicks had to master the very hypocrisies he condemned in more inept confidence men. He wanted to sell his comedy albums: they needed to be advertised and marketed -- even in malls. He didn't want to die by drugs nor see anyone else do so: yet in the interests of "the whole story" he had to advocate knowledge and experience that he admitted could prove fatal. He wanted maximum exposure: he had to court Letterman and his censors on 'Lucifer's Dream Box.' He wanted to tell the truth: he had to lie with the implicit grin of the comedian. Richard Belzer identified the overarching irony that so characterized Hicks's predicament: "[I]t's very frustrating for somebody like Bill, whose antennas are always up. He lays himself open, his heart and his mind, to see all the hypocrisy and the contradictions [between] what we could really be and what we are" (IJR). Inevitably, "the hypocrisy and the contradictions" that Hicks saw outside of himself were often precisely those that he had to accommodate and utilize, as a comedian, within. His frustration remained until the issue was taken out of his hands altogether.

Chomsky with dick jokes

One of the most memorable passages in Albert Goldman's biography of Lenny Bruce is the description of the last New York appearance, performed in defiance of the ban imposed on him by the New York Criminal Court in 1964. With his cabaret card revoked and his name effectively taboo among intimidated club owners, Bruce had stormed onto the stage like "a man who had nothing to lose, a performer without hope, a show-biz kamikazee." He had become "the Jewish equivalent of James Brown, stripping down his mind to the bare bone just the way the rhythm-and-blues cats tear off their clothes and scream out their guts and finally regress to tribal totems drenched in sweat. Soul, not jazz, was Lenny's final aesthetic."72 Yes, Bruce had been released; but he was not yet a man with "nothing to lose." By his own admission, he may no longer have been a comedian; but he still had his life. When Bill Hicks taped his last performance in November, 1993, he knew that he was dying -- had known it for five months. Only his family and closest friends shared that knowledge with him. Unlike Bruce, he was still a comedian. To view the film of that performance, however, is to witness a transformation akin to that of his predecessor. Hicks, too, is stripped down -- physically, by the cancer inside him; but also in another way. No longer the chubby-faced, sleekly groomed, black-garbed "Prince of Darkness," he is more like a world-weary Rasputin -- bearded, mystical, lank-haired. There is also a change in his musical aesthetic: he comes onstage to the rock tune of Hendrix, and leaves to the rap tune of Rage Against the Machine. Upon first viewing, it is difficult to tell whether the film signifies a wretched degeneration or an exhilarating release. Hicks inscrutably maintained that nobody could touch him now -- not Letterman and his censors; not Leno, stung and angered by the criticisms of an early protégé. If the American mainstream was forever out of his grasp, he was out of it's grasp just as well. "I'm at peace with myself," he said. "I don't really care anymore."73 He told John Lahr, "As Bob Dylan said, the only way to live outside the law is to be totally honest. So I will remain lawless."74 His banning from Letterman was, he said, "a badge of honor"; and following the New Yorker exposé, he could write to Lahr: "Somehow, people are listening in a new light. Somehow the possibilities (creatively) seem limitless."75

But they were not limitless; for even at the end of his life, frankness, at least, was not at Hicks's disposal. He was still a comedian, and as yet unreleased from the constraints that that identity entailed. He still had Chomsky on his mind, quoting him to Lahr: "'The responsibility of the intellectual is to tell the truth, and expose lies.' While I do not consider myself an intellectual by any stretch of the imagination, his quote, coincidentally, is the same way my parents taught me how to live. So in honor of them, I'll continue doing what I've been doing, the best way I can."76 But Chomsky had also told him something else: "'The Emperor wears no clothes, but he doesn't like to be told.'"77 Thus, for Hicks to continue what he had "been doing" meant to continue being less than frank; it meant being at the mercy not only of comedy's lies, but the unspoken assurance of comedy's lies. Richard Jeni may have felt that comedians "probably have more license to tell the truth than anybody. Most of them don't take it. Bill took it, and you have to admire that about him" (IJR). But it is precisely the comedian's "license" that implicitly negates the truth: Bill Hicks had no more license to tell the truth than any other comedian has. He knew this, and it could indeed gall him: "As H.L. Mencken said, America's biggest failure is its inability to take comedy seriously. Some people go: 'You're a comic. Tell me a joke.' I'm a clown to them."78 Yet half of him -- the unavoidably lying half -- had been obliged to protest, "Bob, they're just jokes." Could America be blamed for its failure to take comedy seriously, when comedy gave it just that license not to take it seriously?

In one of his last interviews, Hicks elaborated on the conflict in which he had been placed by virtue of his particular ironic identity. Comedy, he said, was "like a mistress. It beats the hell out of me sometimes, but it's actually saved my life, too."79 To save the life of the truth-teller by removing the truth from the telling: Hicks accepted this ironic fix. Here, for instance, is one example of what he wanted to say, most likely in

earnest, during the tirade of his last performance: "There ain't no battle over fucking NAFTA; that's a fucking charade, like our elections are a fucking charade; and tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, they're selling your fucking life out from under you. And don't you fucking forget it, either." But here is what he had to promise in the next sentence: "There's dick jokes coming up. Please relax" (I).

On the eve of his release from everything, including comedy, Hicks said, "I've never been more happy or at peace about it. It's been a long enough road, but what is length in the context of eternity?"80 At various points along that road, however, he had, like Lenny Bruce before him, intimated clearly enough through comedy his frustrations with comedy: "It's great to be here. I thank you. I've been on the road doing comedy for ten years now, so bear with me while I plaster on a fake smile and plow through this shit one more time" (IJR). "You gotta bear with me -- I'm very tired of travelling, and very tired of doing comedy, and very tired of staring out at your vacant faces looking back at me, wanting me to fill your empty lives with humor you couldn't possibly think of yourselves. Good evening!" (RC). "It's great to be here, it really is. I love my job, and I love being here performing for you.... It's the greatest job in the world, for one very simple reason -- and it's not the sharing of laughter and all that horseshit. It's the fact that I don't have a boss" (RV). Comedy was play; he had serious things to say: "You know all that money we spend on defense and nuclear weapons every year -- trillions of dollars, correct? Instead -- instead -- just play with this: if we spent that money feeding and clothing the poor of the world...." (SM). Hicks knew that he was under an obligatory contract to play with both his audiences and the truth. In the film of his last performance, his contempt for that obligation is almost palpable, although, unlike Lenny Bruce in extremis, he honors his part of the bargain: "Folks, here's the deal. I editorialize for forty-five minutes. The last fifteen, I pull my chute, we all pull our chutes, and float down to Dick Joke Island together." On that island, his audience will be offered the contemptible license to dismiss all that he had wished to be heeded: "We will rest our weary heads against the big purple-veined trunks of dick jokes, while bouncing on our spongy-scrotum beanbag chairs, and giggle away the night like good American comedy audiences are supposed to, goddammit" (I). At this point, he is practically spitting; but he knows he has signed his name to the contract.

So he plays the game to which he is committed one last time, repeating the banned Letterman set, reducing Rush Limbaugh to a "scat muncher" and his followers to dittoheaded children ("What are you all looking for -- a new Dad?"); hammering into the War on Drugs, the Waco assault, the bombing of Baghdad, Christian fundamentalism, the sanctity of childbirth ("Do you mean to tell me you think your child is special, because one out of two-hundred-million sperm connected?"), and -- with the greatest vituperation -- the state of American comedy. "This is the material, by the way, that has kept me virtually anonymous in America.... Meanwhile, they're draining the Pacific and putting up bench seats for Carrot Top's next Showtime special. Carrot Top -- for people who didn't get Gallagher." Gallagher: the comedian who made his name by "destroying good food with a sledge hammer" at the end of his show. "Gee, I wonder why we're hated the world over. All these fat Americans on the front row -- 'Haw, haw, haw, haw, haw. Now, this is comedy. Ho ho ho. That Bill Hicks is just bitter.... Why can't he hit fruit with a hammer? He's just jealous he didn't think of it.'" Hicks is indeed bitter, at least enough to dramatize his bitterness: "Folks, I did think of that. I was two at the time.... I could have been the young Gallagher in diapers, walking around being a millionaire, franchising myself -- but no. I had to have this weird thing about trying to illuminate the collective unconscious and help humanity. Fucking moron" (I). It is not quite the self-conscious martyrdom of Lenny Bruce.

For all his fidelity to the ironic charade, however, Bill Hicks's final gesture on the American comic stage is a dramatic act of defiance against the very demands of play to which his more popular competitors have acceded. He has finished his last performance and disappeared into the dressing room amidst the applause. Onstage there sits a watermelon on a stool, waiting for the next Gallagher to come and smash it, signifying the depths to which popular American comedy has sunk. The sound system is blaring out the music of Rage Against the Machine, with their call to "take back the power." Hicks returns to the stage for his final bows. In his hands, the mike stand becomes a sledge hammer. He raises it to smash the watermelon.... But the song being broadcast behind him -- for the benefit of Letterman, his producers, and his censors; for Leno, who had said, "Look, just get on TV"; for the confidence men in the standards-and-practices offices and the advertising agencies; for the sell-out performers; the viewers; the listeners; the consumers of infantile American comedy -- for them, the song repeats the refrain: "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me to." Hicks drops the "sledge-hammer," kicks the stool over, and leaves the stage forever -- not because he his giving up as a comedian, but because he is going to die. The watermelon drops to the floor, but it remains whole.

NOTES

1. Bill Carter, The Late Shift: Letterman, Leno, and the Network Battle for the Night (New York: Hyperion, 1995).
2. John Lahr, "The Goat Boy Rises," The New Yorker (November 1, 1993), 113-121 (p. 113).
3. "It's Just a Ride," produced by Rupert Edwards, in Totally Bill Hicks (Tiger Aspects/Channel 4 Video, 1994). Hereafter cited in the text as (IJR).
4. Mike Sager, "The Gospel According to Hicks," GQ (September, 1994), 288-95 (p. 290).
5. Letter from Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of The Nation, to Hicks's co-manager, Colleen McGarr, October 31, 1993. Quoted courtesy of Katrina vanden Heuvel.

6. Bill Hicks, "Revelations," in Totally Bill Hicks, op cit. Hereafter cited in the text as (REV).
7. H.D. Rankin, "A Modest Proposal About the Republic," Apeiron 2 (1968), 20-22 (p. 21).
8. D.C. Muecke, Irony and the Ironic (London: Methuen, 1982), 45.
9. D.J. Enright, The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75.
10. Bill Hicks, Relentless (Invasion Records, 1992). Hereafter cited as (RC).
11. Rankin, 21.
12. Quoted in Edwin M. Good, Irony in the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 23.
13. Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 47.
14. James Wolcott, "The Dennis Menace," The New Yorker (June 6, 1994), 87-89 (p. 89); Mark Edwards, "The Grin Reality," The Sunday Times (May 21, 1995), 4-5 (p. 5).
15. Bill Carter, "Lots of Political Humor, and No Morton Kondracke," The New York Times (February 27, 1994), Section 2, p. 33. This article appeared the day after Bill Hicks died.
16. Quoted in Lahr, 113.
17. Sager, 290.
18. Edith Sorenson, "In the Outlaw Area," Houston Press (June 3, 1993), 21, 23 (p. 21).
19. Compare Bill Hicks, Sane Man (Sacred Cow video, 1989) and Dangerous (Invasion Records, 1990) with Denis Leary, No Cure for Cancer (video and album conceived in 1990; recorded 1992). See also Doug Stern, "Profile: Bill Hicks," The Austin Comic News (February, 1993), 7; and Anita Sarko, "Bill Hicks is the Missing Link American Comedy Has Been Looking For," Ray Gun (August, 1993), 5.
20. Dennis Miller, on The Dennis Miller Show (syndicated), October 15, 1992.
21. Bill Hicks at Igby's Comedy Club, Los Angeles, November 17, 1993. Unreleased video footage provided by the Strauss-McGarr Entertainment Agency. Further quotations from this source will be denoted by (I).
22. Carter, The Late Shift, pp. 280-81.
23. Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell K. Davis and William M. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 142.
24. Ken Auletta, "Late-Night Gamble," The New Yorker (February 1, 1993), 38-46 (p. 39).
25. Quoted in Carey Goldberg, "Welcome to New York, Capital of Profanities," The New York Times (June 19, 1995), B2-B3 (p. B3).
26. Quoted in Jack Boulware, "Bill Hicks: High Plains Jester," The Nose (March, 1993), 28-31 (p. 29).
27. Hicks on the Howard Stern Show, WXRK Radio (New York), October 7, 1993.
28. "Comedy Mission," 48 Hours, CBS-TV, October 4, 1991.
29. Quoted in Barry Koltnow, "The Face of Humor to Come?", The Orange County Register (June 8, 1993), "Show" section, p. 4.
30. Hicks to John Lahr, October 9, 1993.
31. Hicks on Capzeyze, ACTV (Austin), October 30, 1993.
32. Quoted in Lahr, p. 115.
33. Quoted in Jeff Rubio, "Bill Hicks: A Comic of Ideas," The Orange County Register (November 7, 1993), 4.
34. Quoted in Lahr, 115.
35. Hicks to Lahr, October 9, 1993.
36. Ibid.
37. Hicks at the Comedy Corner, West Palm Beach, Florida, October 5, 1993. Broadcast on The Texas Radio Program, KUT (Austin), March 11, 1994.
38. Hicks recorded his version of the banned set in his letter to John Lahr of October 9, 1993, which formed the basis of Lahr's New Yorker exposé. This letter is virtually identical to an unpublished essay written by Hicks the same month, entitled "Bill Hicks on Television ... Sometimes." I am grateful to John Lahr and Colleen McGarr for providing me with copies of the letter and the essay, respectively, upon which my reconstruction is based.
39. Hicks, "Bill Hicks on Television ... Sometimes," 1.
40. Ibid., 31.
41. Quoted in Auletta, 46.
42. Ibid., 40.
43. Hicks on The Howard Stern Show, op cit.
44. Hicks, "Bill Hicks on Television," 30.
45. "Bill Hicks: The Serious Side of Comedy," Campus Activities Today (January, 1994), 31-46 (p. 46).
46. Hicks to Lahr, October 9, 1993.
47. The Texas Radio Program, op cit.
48. Lahr, p. 121.
49. Sorenson, 33.
50. "Bill Hicks: The Serious Side of Comedy," 36.
51. Hicks, "Bill Hicks on Television," 28.
52. Hicks on The A List, Comedy Central, repeated throughout 1992.
53. Quoted in Gerald Nachman, "Beware the Bark and Bite of Bill Hicks," San Francisco Chronicle (November 7, 1993), B3, B7 (p. B7).

54. Quoted in Dennis McLellan, "Hard-Line Look at Humor," Los Angeles Times (June 10, 1993), 6-7 (p. 6).
55. Hicks on The Howard Stern Show, op cit.
56. Quoted in Boulware, 31.
57. Quoted in McLellan, 6.
58. Bill Hicks, Relentless (Video, Tiger Aspects, 1992). Hereafter cited as (RV).
59. Quoted in Boulware, 29.
60. ACTV Public Access video footage provided courtesy of Kevin Booth.
61. William Keough, Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 194.
62. "Bill Hicks's Humor," Bryan/College Station (May, 1992), 9.
63. "Bill Hicks: The Serious Side of Comedy," 37.
64. Bill Hicks, Dangerous (Invasion Records, 1990). Hereafter cited as (D).
65. Quoted in Koltnow, 4.
66. Hicks on Night After Night, Comedy Central, repeated throughout 1992.
67. Bill Hicks, Sane Man (video, Sacred Cow/Bula Bula, 1989). Hereafter cited as (SM).
68. Hicks, "Bill Hicks on Television," 29.
69. Bill Hicks, One Night Stand, HBO, January 15, 1991.
70. Hicks, "Bill Hicks on Television," 29-30.
71. Quoted on The Texas Radio Program, op cit.
72. Albert Goldman, Ladies and Gentlemen ... Lenny Bruce!! (New York: Random House, 1974), 269.
73. Hicks on Capzeyze, op cit.
74. Quoted in Lahr, 115.
75. Hicks to Lahr, November, 1993 (date unspecified). Letter provided courtesy of John Lahr.
76. Hicks to Lahr, October 9, 1993.
77. Hicks on Capzeyez, op cit.
78. Quoted in Rubio, op cit.
79. "Bill Hicks: The Serious Side of Comedy," 33.
80. Ibid.