

“The Case for Menippeanism: *The Meaning of Life*” by Pete Porterⁱ

I. Introduction

Menippean movies and their literary kin are welcome friends known singly without recognizing the family resemblance. Those who have delighted in the books *Gulliver's Travels*, *Candide*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, or in the movies *Duck Soup* (McCarey, 1934), *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (Jones and Gilliam, 1983), and *The Big Lebowski* (Coen, 1998) have appreciated the peculiar charms of Menippeanism. These and other Menippean works set out spectacular banquets of incongruous elements that suggest the incompetence (or whimsy) of the author as their lone constructive principle. Further scrutiny, however, reveals a commodious form that encourages such oddities: an aesthetic of parody and violating decorum, storytellers who are ridiculous, burlesques of language and learning, a fantastic setting, and the theme of the wisdom of common sense (Relihan). Of course, these elements appear singly in an enormous number of works but the presence of the entire syndrome indicates fidelity to the ancient form of Menippean satire. The absence of an element or two need not exclude a work from the parameters of the Menippean norm (Relihan, 35), but an understanding of the form grows less germane as elements diminish and the work shades off into other forms. At issue is nothing less than our understanding of *The Meaning of Life*. A cognitive approach to menippeanism emphasizes how this various form insists that viewers abandon the search for grand meaning in favor of more immediate sensations, an experience that menippean characters share.

A significant barrier to appreciating Menippean works is the contemporary tendency to view them in terms of a proximate form such as postmodernism. Though they

might share some elements (the postmodern is a notoriously plastic concept), such as a taste for irony and contrast, the postmodern may be viewed as a derivation of Menippeanism that favors pastiche over burlesque, reduces its jokes at learning and typically abandons the burlesque of language. Menippeanism also identifies specific motifs of plot where postmodernism typically does not. Perhaps most tellingly, the Menippean preference for the common life contrasts with postmodernism's tendency to prefer nihilism and meaninglessness. In *A Hand to Turn the Time* (1990), Theodore Kharpertian argues for reconciling ancestor and offspring, claiming that Menippeanism was rediscovered, revived, and reworked in the postmodern era because it boasts a two millennia history of challenging dogmatic views of the world and ossified forms of art. A less conciliatory approach comes from Robert Stam, who observes in *Literature through Film* (2005) "that the very fact that we can see Cervantes as postmodern suggests that the term itself is somewhat inflated and ahistorical; what postmodern discourse presents as 'new and exciting' is in fact not new at all" (54). Both Kharpertian and Stam would likely agree with Joseph C. Relihan's claim that "much of what is strange in modern fiction has an excellent and antique pedigree" (8). Significantly for an inquiry into Menippean movies, Relihan offers a definition of ancient Menippean satire that locates what texts in antiquity share and thus it need not be troubled by the specter of duplicating postmodernism. Insofar as postmodernism resembles ancient Menippeanism, the invention of the former was superfluous, an ironic instance of Jameson's famous phrase "historical deafness" (Qtd. in Landy, 4). In all likelihood, however, the postmodern will retain some uses even after recognizing Menippeanism as a distinct and prior form clarifies both its novelty and ancestry.

In addition, a clearer understanding of Menippeanism promises to disentangle the haphazard category “comedy,” into which is often tossed any work where humor prevails. Humor also belongs to many Menippean works, where it leavens the serious and contributes to the impression that the author has failed to control the tone of the work. Admittedly, these are unwieldy and sprawling films. Northrop Frye’s observation regarding Menippean literature applies equally to Menippean film: it has “baffled critics” and few under the influence of the form have escaped being “accused of disorderly conduct.” The accusation is true, the dismissal that frequently follows unjust. All of these works suit perfectly their chosen form; what remains is for viewers to appreciate them on their own terms, the terms of Menippeanism.

II. Review of the Literature

The filmic arts have been conspicuously absent from most efforts to define literary Menippeanism, such as those of Northrop Frye (1957), Mikhail Bakhtin (1963), Juanita Williams (1966), Philip Stevick (1968), Philip Holland (1979), Eugene Kirk (1980), F. Anne Payne (1981), H.K. Riikonen (1987), Kharpertian, W. Scott Blanchard (1995), Relihan (1995), Edward J. Milowicki (1996), Carter Kaplan (2000), and Howard D. Weinbrot (2005). All ground themselves in literary Menippeanism, sometimes restricting themselves to specific eras, authors, or works. For example, Kharpertian analyzes postmodern Menippean satire, Relihan limits his study to ancient Menippean satire, Blanchard investigates Menippean satire in the Renaissance, Holland considers Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* as Menippean, and Payne considers Chaucer as a Menippist. Only Kaplan makes much mention of film, and then mostly in passing.

For its part, film studies has responded by ignoring most of the theory and criticism of literary Menippeanism. Menippeanism has entered into film studies mainly through the model of “the menippea” offered by Bakhtin. For example, Robert Stam (1989) and Cristina Degli-Esposito (1996) cite Bakhtin exclusively. Although Porter (1999) attempts to collate the literature on Menippeanism, it skews toward Bakhtin. Porter (2003) is somewhat more even-handed in this regard. That P. Adams Sitney (1997) analyzes *The Falls* (1980) as belonging to “the menippea” suggests the influence of Bakhtin’s model, as does the diversity that Sitney defines for the form:

The filmic menippea in America has... at least two parallel tracks that do not interact with each other: an avant-garde tradition with roots in the films of Sidney Peterson and Christopher Maclaine culminating in Hollis Frampton’s *Hapax Legomena* and Michael Snow’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, and a vaudevillian strain of mainstream comedy that has come to be massively dominated by Woody Allen. (45)

Finally, Sitney contrasts this American menippea with “less demanding British menippea, such as the Monty Python films” (45). Such an account largely recalls Stam’s, which subsumes the menippea to Bakhtin’s “carnival” and spans the avant-garde and works that, for example, parody high art or satirize institutions (1989, 97-121). This is predictable; as Relihan remarks, Bakhtin “casts his net very wide” (6) in an effort to suggest the extensive influence of the form, a fault also criticized by René Wellek (1984).

The preference to include works that might apply rather than to exclude those that don’t has been the rule in studies of a form that tends to defy restrictive definitions. An unfortunate consequence of this approach, however, has been a failure to distinguish between Menippeanism, the works it burlesques, and the contemporary forms it shades off into, such as postmodernism and the Theatre of the Absurd (Stam 1989). Disentangling these forms and their influence in the filmic arts is admittedly difficult. A solution to this

problem comes from Relihan, who appeals to consensus about which works from antiquity constitute the Menippean tradition in order to yield a more restrictive and precise definition of the form. The case for Menippean movies put forth here is therefore less about tracing an uncontaminated line of influence and more about understanding how works, such as *The Meaning of Life*, activate the elements of the earliest Menippean works, works untroubled by contemporary influences.

Since the introduction of the term “Menippean satire” to describe a literary form rather than a particular work in 1581 (Relihan, 12), scholars have struggled to define it precisely. Most fundamentally, “Menippean” means simply in the style of Menippus the Ancient Cynic and “satire” means what the ancients often meant by satire: a form of medley or miscellany. Unhappily, medley in the style of Menippus is problematic as his works now exist only as fragments and were not homogenous to begin with (Kirk; Relihan). In broad terms, Frye proposes “the impression of shapelessness” (313) and Blanchard suggests the “form of formlessness” (18). For his part, Bakhtin insists on “the deep internal integrity of this genre” (119) while adding that each subsequent age has tended to favor its own variations. In response to such problems, Relihan returns to the extant works of antiquity frequently counted as Menippean in order to specify the essence of the form:

... the genre is primarily a parody of philosophical thought and forms of writing, a parody of the habits of civilized discourse in general, and that it ultimately turns into a parody of the author who has dared to write in such an unorthodox way. What I see as essential to Menippean satire is a continuous narrative, subsuming a number of parodies of other literary forms along the way, of a fantastic voyage to a source of truth that is itself highly questionable, a voyage that mocks both the traveler who desires the truth and the world that is the traveler’s goal, related by an unreliable narrator in a form that abuses all the proprieties of literature and authorship. (10)

All of these admit of specific motifs and broader purposes, such as the mixture of prose and verse, which functions as part of Menippeanism's "indecorous mixture of disparate elements, of forms, styles, and themes that exist uneasily side by side" (Relihan, 34).

Complicating the issue of identifying any work as Menippean is that this indecorous mixture derives from "three essential parodies, all of which are to be related to the theme of the fantastic voyager in the land of ultimate answers, whose experience champions the values of common sense" (Relihan, 31). From the *Odyssey*, Menippean satire took the episodic adventure plot and a central character who is "a thoroughly unreliable narrator of his own adventures, and is part charlatan, part shaman... a master of lies, whose tales of the fantastic are never certainly true..." (Relihan, 11). From Old Comedy, Menippean satire adopted a preference for common sense over "philosophers and all dogmatic systems," the admixture of "strange languages and a great variety of styles," the free use of "personifications and abstractions," the mixing of sublime, obscene and fantastic elements, and "specific plots" such as journeys to heaven and hell. In contrast to Old Comedy, however, Menippean satire finds that "fantasy is rarely liberating: in insisting on the value of what is commonplace and commonsensical, Menippean satire creates fantastic worlds that are suspiciously like the flawed real world, which the voyager has foolishly left behind" (Relihan, 10). The third parody, the work of Plato, is for Menippean satire "as much a source of plot and device as an emblem of philosophical sophistication itself, in all its suspicious appeal" (Relihan, 32). In addition, "Plato's place in the history of Menippean satire is not just as the author whose dialogue form and whose *Symposium* are so frequently parodied within it, but as the theoretician who advances the value of falsehood as a heuristic device" (Relihan, 180). To sum up, Relihan proposes that

“What transform Old Comedy into Menippean satire are the parody of the narrator and the narrator’s quest (a gift of the *Odyssey*) and the parody of philosophical thought and philosophical genres, particularly those of Plato” (34). The parodic fusion, not elements singly, distinguishes the ancient Menippean form from its sources.

Menippeanism is a parasitical form that refreshes our perception by infecting our responses to familiar forms with a variety of incongruous elements. Menippean movies mix these freely and without warning; menippean movies become exercises in perceptual and interpretive flexibility. The admixture of forms, styles, and languages challenges the audience to activate and apply various schemas to make sense of the work. By including features that characterize other forms, menippeanism challenges the audience not to be fooled into thinking that a menippean movie is something else. Menippeanism is thus a taxing form, one that demands flexibility of perception on the one hand and a broad knowledge of cultural forms on the other.

III. *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*

The definition of ancient Menippean satire and its attendant elements that Relihan offers explains perfectly *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*. This becomes evident through a study of the film that adopts Relihan’s movement from analyzing definite motifs, such as prose-verse and other grotesque mixtures, to noting their larger function and attendant themes, such as the parodies of philosophy, civilized discourse, and the authors themselves.

A form that abuses proprieties can take many outward shapes, but “the most obvious *formal* characteristic of the *satira* (hash) which is Menippean satire is its mixture

of prose and verse” (Relihan, 17), an enduring feature of the genre that most scholars identify as significant. Relihan finds this element definite, but notes that it occasionally belongs to non-Menippean genres, such as romance and the diatribe. What distinguishes prose and verse mixtures in Menippean works is “characters who do not merely quote but actually speak in verse, and of a narrative whose action is advanced through separate verse passages” (18). In Menippeanism, what matters is that “speaking in verse is itself a parody of the conventions of rational and civilized discourse” (18) and “the creation of verse parodies, put in the mouths of people who are ridiculous because they speak in verse” (19). These conditions sometimes apply in movie musicals, such as *Duck Soup*, *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), *Head: The Monkees* (Rafelson, 1968), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), *True Stories* (Byrne, 1984), *Fear of a Black Hat* (Condeiff, 1994), *South Park* (Parker, 1999), and *Human Nature* (Gondry, 2001). A contemporary variation of the verse motif is evident in *The Big Lebowski*, where non-diegetic songs function as ambiguous fantasy-dream interludes that advance the plot and roughen the narrative. Additionally, each of these movies admits of further Menippean elements such as the fondness for parody, ridiculous storytellers, burlesques of language and learning, the journey (usually fantastic) of air, and the return to common sense.

In *The Meaning of Life*, these motifs coalesce around verse that advances the plot, makes characters ridiculous, and parodies standards of civilized discourse. From the perspective of its seven songs, *The Meaning of Life* looks an awful lot like a musical, but its preference for un-musical subject matter likely kept popular critics from calling it one (none of them did). The first song, “The Crimson Permanent Assurance,” is a pun-filled ditty in praise of accounting that burlesques language. The remaining songs mix parody

with faux instruction, faux because it tends to undermine its own authority as Menippean songs typically do, often as part of their fondness for jokes at the expense of learning (Relihan, 28). “The Meaning of Life” sets the tone of the film by juxtaposing two discordant views of life that often collide in Menippeanism, a lofty God view and a base scientist view:

Why are we here, what is life all about?
Is God really real, or is there some doubt?...
While scientists say we're just simply spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA...

The song ends by promising that “it will all be made clear,” a pledge that essentially mocks anyone who might entertain such a possibility.

Few critics failed to mention the scene of “Every Sperm is Sacred” as a burlesque of similar scenes of poverty from *Oliver!* (Reed, 1968) and *Annie* (Huston, 1982). The scene also drew mentions of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” as it involves a destitute Roman Catholic father (Michael Palin) who decides to sell his abundant flock for medical experiments. The chorus reduces Catholicism to a prohibition against wasting sperm:

Every sperm is sacred,
Every sperm is great,
If a sperm is wasted,
God gets quite irate.

Parodying musical convention, the song expands to include the children and the mother, finally exploding to include neighbors, nuns, Roman Catholic Cardinals, Roman Catholic artifacts, and men peering out of toilets.

The next use of verse, “Oh Lord, Please Don't Burn Us,” is a parody of a school prayer. After a sermon by the Headmaster (John Cleese) and a prayer by the Chaplain

(Michael Palin), a boy's school congregation sings a plea to not be eaten:

Oh Lord, please don't burn us,
 Don't grill or toast your flock,
 Don't put us on the barbecue,
 Or simmer us in stock...

Parts protest, plea, and psalm, this verse is a gory encyclopedia of how one might cook the members of the congregation. It is, of course, completely out of keeping with the spirit of most prayers.

“The Galaxy Song” contains elements of philosophical instruction, as when it ponders the universe and the place of humans in it. The accompanying visual is a fantastic walk through space as a singer in a pink tuxedo (Eric Idle) serenades a woman in a bathrobe (Terry Jones):

The Universe itself keeps on expanding and expanding
 In all of the directions it can whiz
 As fast as it can go, at the speed of light you know,
 12 millions miles a minute, and that's the fastest speed there is.
 So remember when you're feeling very small and insecure
 How amazingly unlikely is your birth
 And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space
 Because there's bugger all down here on earth.

The final couplet of “The Galaxy Song” is an abrupt shift that undermines its pretenses toward instruction. Here, the song shifts from a physics lesson to a jab at the intelligence of life on earth, a category that includes both author and audience. The final judgment implies that the astronomy lesson offers data but not intelligence, a typical Menippean parody of learning that rejects science as cultivator of understanding.

The sixth song, “The Penis Song” is set in an upper-crust restaurant. Its burlesque of language illustrates the Menippean fondness for neologisms, coarse vulgarity, and catalogs, all of which contribute to its jokes at the expense of literature and learning. A

smartly dressed lounge singer (Idle, performing the role that the credits call “Noël Coward, but not *the* Noël Coward”) adds light piano flourishes for emphasis as he sings:

So three cheers for your Willy or John Thomas,
 Hooray for your one-eyed trouser snake,
 Your piece of pork, your wife's best friend,
 Your Percy or your cock,
 You can wrap it up in ribbons,
 You can slip it in your sock,
 But don't take it out in public,
 Or they will stick you in the dock,
 And you won't come back.

Rather than being aghast at the vulgar catalog of male anatomy, as might be expected, the crowd applauds. A man exclaims “Oh what a frightfully witty song!” to complete the parody of civilized discourse.

The final song, excepting the reprisal of “The Galaxy Song” over the closing credits, is “Christmas in Heaven.” The Python vision of Heaven is a grotesque parody of Holiday Inn and Las Vegas with female angels who are part Santa Claus and part Playboy bunny. According to the credits, Tony Bennett not THE Tony Bennett (Graham Chapman) does the honors:

It's Christmas in Heaven...
 There's great films on TV...
The Sound of Music twice an hour
 And *Jaws I, II and III*
 There's gifts for all the family
 There's toiletries and trains
 There's Sony Walkman Headphone sets
 And the latest video games!

As “The Meaning of Life” juxtaposes a God view and a scientist view, “Christmas in Heaven” juxtaposes Christmas, Heaven, films, TV, and consumerism. Halfway into the song, Tony Bennett lifts off with an umbrella, a la Mary Poppins. He floats past dancing men in tuxedos who one by one plunge into a hotel swimming pool. The camera wanders

to show a nativity scene with a manger surrounded by toys and gadgets and the three wise men pushing metal shopping carts that overflow with gifts. Combining these incongruous motifs burlesques the Christian utopia and contemporary consumerism in typical Menippean fashion. That “it’s Christmas every day in heaven,” as Gilliam’s Little-Bo-Peep-esque character points out, suggests an eternity of Hell-like repetition that, as S. T. Asma suggests, is “ridiculous and hardly worth striving for” (99).

Another extended use of verse is not a song but a poem recited by a cleaning woman (Jones) in a restaurant who claims to have “worked in worse places...philosophically speaking.” She then details the places of learning where she has worked, such as Academie Française, Prado, Library of Congress, Bodleian Library, and the British Museum, all of which failed to teach her anything. She closes by offering her philosophy:

Cause you see I feel that Life's a game
You sometimes win or lose,
And though I may be down right now
At least I don't work for Jews...

Her speech, ostensibly about the significance of place in understanding the meaning of life, seems reasonable until she reveals her anti-Semitism. The film thus initially appears to condone her view but ultimately rejects her as a source of information.

In these major uses, *The Meaning of Life* clearly satisfies the three conditions of Menippean verse: advancing the plot of the meaning of life, making characters appear ridiculous, and parodying standards of civilized discourse. In one way or another, all tempt the audience with answers to the meaning of life but then insert some parodic material that makes the speaker ridiculous. As Relihan explains, “the persistent use of verse will remind the reader that it is at odds with the instruction that the narrator, who

shows himself to be confused, wants to offer” (19). For example, *The Meaning of Life* promises that “all will be made clear” in the opening song, but renders no such clarity and meanders on a fantastic voyage that comes no closer to grand answers. Instead, confusion and digression reign. After “Part III: Fighting Each Other,” a Zulu steps in front of the camera, unzips his latex Zulu costume to reveal a man in a tuxedo (Terry Gilliam), who announces “Welcome to the middle of the film.” The film then cuts to “The Middle of the Film,” where a woman (Palin) encourages the aquarium of fish and viewers to play “Find the Fish.” Finally, *The Meaning of Life* ends unceremoniously with the Woman from the Middle of the Film lackadaisically reading the meaning of life from a slip of paper. All of this refusal of civilized discourse undercuts the seriousness of the topic at hand and implies a ridiculous author—the Pythons themselves (Chapman, Cleese, Gilliam, Idle, Jones, and Palin). A more fitting illustration could hardly be found for Relihan’s prediction that in Menippean works will be found

no fixed point of view. Such plot as there is is very simple...the genre strives for effect through impropriety, the author of a Menippean satire accuses himself of a lack of respect for taste, tradition, and decorum, and this is usually translated into self-parody when the author identifies himself with his narrator. (35)

Of course, the notion of a unifying author is challenged here outside the work as well—all of the Pythons scripted and Jones and Gilliam directed. *The Meaning of Life* offers a variation on a theme as it creates the inconsistent Menippean point of view by offering multiple ridiculous authors with divergent views rather than by implying a ridiculous unified narrator with no consistent point of view. This self-parody extends even further as the Pythons also perform the humorous characters that they authored. In short, the author does not merely identify himself with a ridiculous narrator; in *The Meaning of Life*, the

authors *are* the narrators and the performers, all of whom have conspired to create a work that revels in impropriety.

In terms of the consequent narrative, *The Meaning of Life* is an indecorous collection of parodies of civilized discourse. *The Meaning of Life* parodies current cinema tradition by opening with “Our Short Feature Presentation” called *The Crimson Permanent Assurance (CPA)*, a 17-minute segment directed by Gilliam. Placing *CPA* at the front essentially opens the film with a digression from the topic of the meaning of life promised by the title. *CPA* refuses to remain separate, however, and later interrupts the main feature in a hostile take-over bid. Few moments illustrate so vividly the tendency of any Menippean work to be in conflict with itself and to be a medley of contradictory elements as Relihan specifies (34). After the *CPA* credits roll, “Our Feature Presentation” opens in earnest. In its ongoing parody of cinematic decorum, *The Meaning of Life* bursts at the seams and refuses to fit inside a conventional shape, a tendency that characterizes most of the Pythons’ work in the filmic arts. Scenes interrupt other scenes. Animation abruptly ends others. Fantasy mixes with what Bakhtin calls “slum naturalism.” All of these indecorous combinations forge a grotesque mixture that “abuses proprieties” as Relihan puts it.

The Meaning Of Life would seem to contradict Relihan’s identification in Menippean works of “a continuous narrative” (10) were it not for the constant presence of the Pythons as performers in every scene. Roughly speaking, *The Meaning of Life* follows the seven ages of life, a loose framework that allows for inserting nearly every conceivable material, from a restaurant aquarium full of

philosophical fish (Chapman, Cleese, Gilliam, Idle, Jones, and Palin) to optimistic ditties about the nature of the universe. Even the seven ages of life schema, a commonplace of Ancient Cynic philosophers (Holland, 84), cannot contain it.

Such a shape fits Relihan observation that

Menippean satires are often constructed in their broadest outlines as parodies of other genres of literature or types of discourse... Within (which) are parodies in passing of other distinguished authors, authoritative works, and sober modes of discourse. (25)

Accordingly, the seven ages scheme provides the broad outline that *Meaning of Life* stuffs with parodies. “The Miracle of Birth” seems reasonable, as do “Growth and Learning,” “Middle Age,” “The Autumn Years,” and “Death.” But “Fighting Each Other” and “Live Organ Transplants” are certainly not ages of life on par with the others. As the analysis of its songs demonstrates, its episodes overflow with “parodies in passing” as Relihan predicts.

Ostensibly, the narrative of *The Meaning of Life* pursues the philosophical question of the meaning of life in response to fish in a restaurant aquarium who wonder what it’s all about after they watch Howard, a fellow fish, being eaten. The first half of the film, however, largely postpones the questions raised by “The Meaning of Life” song in favor of making jokes at the expense of learning and those who claim to have attained it (Relihan, 29). Part I: Birth lampoons callous medical professionals in a hospital birthing room, the Catholic father who sells his children for medical experiments, and an outraged neighbor who advocates his own Protestantism because it offers the freedom to use birth control:

That's what being a Protestant's all about. That's why it's the church for me. That why it's the church for anyone who respects the individual and the individual's right to decide for him or herself. When Martin Luther nailed his protest up to the church door in 1517, he may not have realised the full significance of what he was doing. But four hundred years later, thanks to

him, my dear, I can wear whatever I want on my John Thomas.

Part II: Growth and Learning takes place at the school and includes the church service and ridiculous authority figures (Asma, 93), an in-class coitus lesson, and a rugby match in which the boys are mercilessly trounced as their teachers cheer. This scene match cuts on Biggs (Jones) in the mud at the rugby match to him as a soldier in a trench, the scene that opens Part III: Fighting Each Other. The trench scene involves soldiers (all of the Pythons) celebrating Biggs' birthday: everyone has bought him a clock, each one grander than the last and all of them irrelevant; the scene ends with everyone dead. The scene becomes an instructional film in a briefing room where the hand of God strikes down a recruiter (Chapman) who claims that we'll always need an army. This scene cuts to an exterior at the base where a drill sergeant (Palin) releases his troops from marching up and down the square because they all have something better to do. The final parts of the segment involve a doctor (Chapman) who diagnoses a missing leg as the result of a virus but then admits his lie. A search for the missing leg ensues—they might sew it back on—but finds only two lunatics (Palin and Idle) wearing a tiger suit. This gives way to the Middle of The Film and the game of Find the Fish that contains no fish. All great Menippean digressions to ridicule pretenders to authority and knowledge, none of these scenes might clarify the meaning of life for the fish.

Eventually, however, the fish complain that the film hasn't really said much about the meaning of life. Digression and the journey of air mean that *The Meaning of Life* places its events and agents entirely at the service of parodying matters philosophical and learned, moving from episode to episode on a fantastic voyage that promises answers but delivers only common sense. According to Relihan, the Menippean narrative undertakes a

journey to fantastic lands that hold the promise of insight but which render either conditional truths or a truth that was known before the “journey: the simple life is best” (22). As Relihan argues, journeys to fantastic lands, such as heaven, hell, and utopias, “are a pursuit of wind, a search for truth where it is not to be found” (23). Truth in these places often turns out to be truths *of* these places; returning home renders them useless to the traveler. The fantastic journey of air might be global as well as local; digressions “with a life of their own,” as with the *CPA*, are also common (Relihan, 27).

The fantastic journey to assemble answers begins when the fish discuss the meaning of life in grand philosophical terms. But as they complain at the Middle of the Film, *The Meaning of Life* seldom mentions the meaning of life. Instead, it digresses to assemble episodes that, taken together might begin to answer the question but that don't directly address it. An exception occurs later during “Middle Age” in a scene that is parody of both decorum and of philosophical discourse. A middle-aged couple sits in a hotel restaurant, but with a grotesque medieval dungeon theme, as the waiter explains a menu, not of meals, but of different conversation topics:

MR. HENDY. What's this one here?

WAITER. That's philosophy.

MRS. HENDY. Is that a sport?

WAITER. No, it's more of an attempt to construct a viable hypothesis to explain the Meaning of Life.

FISH. What's he say, eh? (Insert shot of Fish in aquarium)

MR. HENDY. Oh that sounds wonderful... Would you like to talk about the Meaning of Life, darling...?

MRS. HENDY. Sure, why not?

WAITER. Philosophy for two?

MR. HENDY. Right...

WAITER. You folks want me to start you off?

MR. HENDY. Oh really we'd appreciate that...

WAITER. OK. Well, look, have you ever wondered just why you're here?

MR. HENDY. Well... we went to Miami last year and California the year before that, and we've...

WAITER. No, No. I mean why we're here. On this planet?

MR. HENDY. Nope.

WAITER. Right! Have you ever wanted to know what it's all about?

MR. HENDY. No!

WAITER. Right ho! Well, see, throughout history there have been certain men and women who have tried to find a solution to the mysteries of existence.

MRS. HENDY. Great.

WAITER. And we call these guys "philosophers."

MRS. HENDY. And that's what we're talking about!

WAITER. Right!

Despite the conversation cards, the eminently common Mr. and Mrs. Hendy find little value in the philosophy discussion and accept the waiter's recommendation of the specialty of the house, "Live Organ Transplants." This is another digression, which itself gives way to the fantastic journey digression that is "The Galaxy Song" about the nature of the universe and personal responsibility.

A similar evocation and evasion of the meaning of life occurs in the scene at The Very Big Corporation of America, where Harry reports to the board about "Item 6 on the Agenda, the Meaning of Life":

what we've come up with can be reduced to two fundamental concepts....
 One...people are not wearing enough hats. Two... matter is energy; in the Universe there are many energy fields which we cannot normally perceive. Some energies have a spiritual source which act upon a person's soul. However, this soul does not exist ab initio, as orthodox Christianity teaches; it has to be brought into existence by a process of guided self-observation. However, this is rarely achieved owing to man's unique ability to be distracted from spiritual matters by everyday trivia.

The board responds by asking "What was that about hats again?" Harry answers, "people are not wearing enough." The Chairman is aghast. Another member of the board asks, "When you say 'enough', enough for what purpose?" After a few more exchanges, the Crimson Permanent Assurance accounting firm makes its hostile take-over bid. Such moments demonstrate the journey of air, the burlesque of language (25), and jokes at the

expense of learning (28) that Relihan finds central to ancient Menippean satire.

Its adherence to Menippean principles culminates in the conclusion of *The Meaning of Life*. The heavenly chorus line of “Christmas in Heaven” abruptly reduces to the vanishing dot of a switched-off television screen, before which sits “The Middle of the Film Lady” (Michael Palin), who states bluntly “Well, that’s the end of the film, now here’s the Meaning of Life.” Accepting a golden envelope from a woman who reaches in from out of frame, she skims its contents and casually informs the audience, “Well, it’s nothing very special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.” This meaning of life is the final slight to the philosophical fish who have endured a series of explanatory episodes that involve human rather than marine characters. Similarly, these closing moments deny the audience any definitive ground other than the prosaic. The abrupt shift from the bright fantasy and joyous song of heaven to something resembling the set of a public access talk show creates the sort of disjunction that Menippeanism favors. Finally, the nonchalant response to the ultimate question of the meaning of life is defiantly slight and would be common sense were it not prompted by contemplative fish. Such a conclusion certainly fits the prescription that Menippean works terminate in a “highly questionable” source that mocks the voyager who desires truth. That *The Meaning of Life* revels in such messiness and offers such common sense answers, for us humans at least, indicates its fidelity to the forms and themes of Menippeanism.

IV. Conclusion

Whether the work of Monty Python might generally be “eminently postmodern”

(Stam 2005, 57) or one of “postmodernism’s unwitting forerunners” (Erickson 2006, 120) exceeds the current inquiry, but *The Meaning of Life* is eminently Menippean and one of Menippeanism’s, perhaps unwitting, followers. In *The Meaning of Life*, Menippean elements delight the competent viewer who appreciates its parody of discourses philosophical, artistic, and social. Like other Menippean movies, *The Meaning of Life* challenges the audience to follow a various plot that collects allusions on a journey of air that ultimately prefers common sense to grand interpretations of existence that omit too much from experience to be of much practical use. Not surprisingly, this hodge-podge of elements frustrates, thwarts, and diverts attempts to infer grand resolutions from the incompatible data that the film collects. The Menippean movie is a push-me pull-you collection of paradoxical impulses whose resolution is to insist on the abandonment of grand resolutions, for both its characters and its audience.

In cognitive terms, menippean movies summon from the audience the ability to activate multiple generic schemas and to juggle multiple philosophical approaches to the world. Menippeanism is a form without form told by an author who cannot control the work and who makes no final claims about the nature of reality—the world is too flexible and incomprehensible to be articulated finally. The chief cognitive outcome of such a mess is to “unresolve” typical answers and to “undermine” generic backgrounds by introducing material that contradicts audience expectations, in short, to make strange and defamiliarize our habituated perception, as Victor Shklovsky (1917) proposed the poetic should.

Menippean variety is a strategy for returning pleasure to experience by refreshing it. Menippean movies promise grand meaning but withdraw the offer. By frustrating

attempts to discover grand meaning, menippean movies insist that viewers abandon the search for meaning but console themselves with more immediate experiences. Menippean messiness only feigns chaos; it is instead intelligent disorder for the sake of refreshing the perception and interpretation of the audience. In an age that insists on meaning, menippean movies recommend experience. Coincidentally, this same movement structures the experience of menippean characters, who typically search for meaning but abide the discovery of less lofty understandings of reality. They embark on fantastic journeys only to return to their humble beginnings. They learn only that they should have stayed put in the first place. This is ultimately the solution of *The Meaning of Life*, which retreats from meaning in favor of simple acts like walking, reading, and being kind.

The persistence of Menippeanism since antiquity indicates its significance as a tool for understanding reality; the lessons of Menippeanism remain compelling responses to age-old questions of existence whether the outlet is theatre, literature, film, or television. Admittedly, Menippeanism has mutated since its origins but a definition of the form as it existed in antiquity aids the study of Menippean movies by disentangling the genre from contemporary forms that resemble it. Postmodernism might adopt Menippeanism's fondness for parody and questioning of authorship, but it says little about fantastic journeys of air, jokes at learning, or burlesques of language and literature. Similar qualifications apply for comedy. Recognizing the Menippean syndrome of essential elements, many of them already parodies, is an essential first step toward grasping its vast influence in movies.

ⁱ Correspondence should be sent to Pete Porter, Department of Electronic Media, Theatre, and Film, Eastern Washington University, 104 R-TV, Cheney, WA 99004. Email: pporter@ewu.edu. Thanks to Les Brill, Jackie Byars, Daniel Marcus, and Larry Miller for their guidance on this work when it was part of my dissertation at Wayne State University. The essay also benefited from suggestions by Murray Smith at the 2004 Center for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image conference. Feedback from students in my Menippean movies seminars at EWU also prompted changes.