

# Esquire

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## The Mathematics of Comedy

**Comedy=Tragedy+Time**

**By: Shalom Auslander**

Recently, I overheard an angry complaint about a simple joke. The joke was about Holocaust revisionists, and though the complainer was not an offended revisionist, his opinion was that, simply, "the Holocaust should never be joked about." Is that true? Never? Why not? And more important, how did this guy know that? What all this points out is the increasing need for some sort of equation with which we can safely determine what can and cannot be joked about.

**Doctor:** Well, Mr. Epstein, your wife has either AIDS or Alzheimer's.

**Epstein:** What should I do?

**Doctor:** Drop her off out of town. If she comes home, don't fuck her.

Funny? Or, Hey, That's Not Funny? Let's begin.

The only attempt at devising a reliable formula for the determination of funny has been by a Dr. Melvin Kaminsky, who observed the following:

### Comedy = Tragedy + Time

or  $C = Tr + Ti$ . On the surface, this seems like a reasonable theory. Take slavery, almost always tragic. According to the theory, the greater Time (Ti) since said slavery (Tr), the greater the likelihood of C, Comedy. Black slavery, not funny; Jewish slavery, funny. (Egyptian Soldier 1: What do you call an Israelite with a medical degree riding around in a golden chariot pulled by the pharaoh's own camels? Egyptian Soldier 2: A fucking kike.) Thus: slavery, sometimes funny; Holocaust, not yet funny; Alzheimer's, never funny (barring a cure--then wait a couple hundred years and break out the Don't Fuck Her joke).

But Kaminsky's theory was quickly refuted by what is known as the Kennedy Conundrum.

## THE KENNEDY CONUNDRUM

Depending on where, south-to-north, you find yourself in this country, the death of JFK is or isn't funny. But Jackie O. is always funny, despite her having died more recently than JFK. Ted Kennedy isn't even dead yet and he's already a joke. In fact, it seems that in Hyannis Port, the theory works in reverse.

Perhaps, then, Time isn't related to Comedy. O. J. was funny immediately. Manson? Funny. Dahmer? Come on, eating homosexuals in Milwaukee? That's funny. But Kosovo isn't funny. Ethiopia isn't funny. So now what?

The problem is, not all tragedies are equally tragic. It will take a lot of  $T_i$  to make some kinds of  $T_r$ 's  $C$  at all. To reference an earlier example, the Jewish enslavement by Egyptians has only recently been deemed funny. That's a  $T_i$  of almost five thousand years, which means African slavery won't be funny until the year 6000 at the earliest, the Holocaust won't get a laugh until 6940, and Alzheimer's, barring a cure, must never be joked about. (In a Yankelovich survey, 90 percent of respondents who were asked the question "When will slavery be funny?" responded by calling the researcher an asshole [Yankelovich, September 1999].) Which brings us to the Theory of Humorous Relativity.

## THE THEORY OF HUMOROUS RELATIVITY

### The Theory of Humorous Relativity states, "Comedy is inversely proportional to its proximity to me."

To put it more simply, her Alzheimer's is funny, yours isn't. Thus,  $C = (T_r + T_i)/P_x$ . But this theory is refuted not by sound mathematical deduction but by bad television. On black shows, the jokes are about white people. On white shows, the jokes are about gay people. Gay people joke about straight people, and everyone jokes about the Jews. But whites can't make black jokes, men can't make women jokes, heterosexuals can't make gay jokes, and, according to Abraham Mermelstein of New Jersey, no one can make Holocaust jokes.

It's all so simple when you look to science. Clearly, nothing is funny.

The corrected joke, using the above equations, is thus:

**Doctor:** Well, Mr. Epstein, your wife has either AIDS or Alzheimer's.

**Epstein:** What should I do?

**Doctor:** Proceed with the recommended treatments and remain a faithful and loving husband in your wife's time of need.

What a relief.

SHALOM AUSLANDER WRITES ESQUIRE'S DUBIOUS ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE WEEK, AT [ESQUIRE.COM/DUBIOUS](http://ESQUIRE.COM/DUBIOUS).

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