

Identity Construction in a Pwnage Video on YouTube

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Maiju Lindholm

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Languages
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Internet on viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana synnyttänyt lukemattomia uusia genrejä, joista huomattava osa pohjautuu vanhoihin, jo olemassaolleisiin genreihin. Toimintatavat, tarkoitukset ja saavutukset näissä genreissä ovat vielä melko tuntemattomia tutkimuskohteita kielitieteessä. Tässä tutkimuksessa toissijaisena tavoitteena oli selvittää uuden YouTube-genren, josta tässä käytän nimitystä <i>argument pwnage</i>, tyypillisiä piirteitä. Ensisijainen tavoite oli yhtä kyseiseen genreen kuuluvaa videota analysoiden tutkia, miten videon tekijän sosiaalinen identiteetti rakentuu pwnage-toiminnassa. <i>Pwnage</i> käsittää tässä yhteydessä vastustajan voittamista ideologisessa, yksipuolisessa väittelyssä, joka esitetään YouTube-sivustolla videoblogin muodossa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen teoriapohja on tietokonevälitteisessä viestinnässä ja diskurssintutkimuksessa, jotka yhdistyvät Herringin (2004) kehittämässä mallissa. Diskurssintutkimuksen osalta työ nojautuu identiteetin rakentumiseen vuorovaikutuksessa, ja sitä analysoidessa keskityttiin merkitykseen, rakenteeseen ja sosiaalisiin suhteisiin. Analysissa otettiin huomioon myös teknologinen näkökulma. Genreanalysissa aineistona käytettiin viittä YouTube-pwnage-videota, ja niitä tutkien selvitettiin videoiden yhtenäiset piirteet, joiden perusteella <i>argument pwnage</i> -genre voitiin tunnistaa. Identiteettianalysissa aineistona oli yksi video, jota analysoitiin sekä itse videon että sen transkriptin kautta.</p> <p>Tutkimuksesta selvisi, että pwnage-toiminta YouTube-sivustolla on pääasiassa ateistien harrastamaa, ja se käsittää vastapuolen, joka usein on uskonnon edustaja, näkemysten osoittamista vääräksi sekä vastapuolen suoranaista pilkkausta. Identiteetin rakentuminen korostui näiden toimintojen sisällössä sekä niiden kielellisessä esittämisessä, jossa käytettiin väitelauseita, epäsuoruutta ja sarkasmia.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Within the last few decades the Internet as a new type of communicative medium has provided linguists with a plethora of research topics. For linguists, there are countless possibilities of study because language is at the core of all communication, both offline and online. In linguistics, the term *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) has been used since the 1990s (Crystal 2011:1) for research that combines computer technology and language use, which today, more often than not, occurs online. The studies of CMC have covered, for instance, chatrooms, blogs, forums, online gaming, e-mails, and so forth, with points of view ranging from larger sociolinguistic phenomena to the analysis of the smallest units of structure. Multimodal content and/or communication have not yet been notably popular research topics, but a change in this can be expected. Due to advancements in technology, multimodal communication, particularly in the form of videos, has become an essential part of many websites and online services. From video phone calls to advertisements in video form, the Internet is transforming into a space of sounds and moving images. The video sharing website YouTube is one of the most popular websites today: For example, as early as in 2007 it was the most popular entertainment website in Britain (Burgess & Green 2009:1), which is a valid indication of a change in focus from text-based media to multimodal ones.

According to Burgess and Green (2009:43), YouTube is a place where over a half of the content is user-created, which means that the video material is produced outside of the mainstream, broadcast, or established media. Most of the user-created content can be categorized into vlogs (i.e., video blogs), in which people film themselves talking about topics ranging from everyday life to specific categories of interest. There are numerous types of different vlogs that form new genres and communities within the same topic; popular genres are related to, for instance, comedy, beauty, and technology. One of these communities is the loose network of atheist vloggers, to which the target videos of this paper also belong.

The targets of my analysis are six YouTube videos in which atheist YouTubers use argumentation, mockery, and comedy in an activity called *pwnage* to argue against claims made by people of opposing opinions, often religious, in other videos or material. This study is an empirical content analysis in which I will qualitatively analyze these YouTube *pwnage* videos using computer-mediated discourse analysis as my theoretical approach. The analysis is divided into two parts. Because this sort of ideological argument in the form of a YouTube video is a genre that has thus far been unidentified and unknown for the general public, in my secondary analysis, preceding the primary one, I will use genre analysis to determine what are the elements and practices that constitute this genre. This is needed because the activity type

affects the construction of identity: The genre and the identity are tied together on YouTube. In my primary analysis following the genre analysis, I will determine how an atheist's social identity is constructed in one of these videos. Based on the genre analysis, I will name this genre *argument pwnage*, which is a term not used before.

YouTube was founded only six years ago but has already managed to become the leading video sharing website. This has sparked the interest of researchers of different fields, including linguistics. Scholars have studied, for example, agency and controversy, participatory culture, response ability, networking, reactions to videos, and flaming in the context of YouTube. The YouTube community that is touched upon in this study, that is, atheist vloggers, has gained linguistic attention before: Pihlaja (2011) has studied the use of metaphors and antagonism in an atheist/Christian video thread, which can be seen to belong to the same loose group of YouTube users that my target character is part of as well. My perspective on atheist/Christian communication is different, but the setting is similar to Pihlaja's: He also studied how the atheist/Christian worldviews, which could be seen as identities, are revealed in interaction—specifically in how the users interpreted metaphors. The genre analysis in this paper concerns five videos of atheist vloggers, revealing their ways of behaving in the act of pwnage. In my identity analysis I will focus solely on one video and its atheist creator and analyze how his worldview, that is, his atheist identity, is constructed in the act of argument pwnage. There has been some research on identities online (e.g., Fägersten 2006, Upadhyay 2010) but identities in the form of videos, particularly in the context of YouTube, have not been explored extensively. Consequently, there is a gap to fill, and by analyzing such a strong identity as an atheist is a good starting point for further enquiry.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter I will provide reasoning for why this study is needed and where it is set within the field of linguistics, particularly of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and discourse analysis.

In my analysis I will combine CMC with a discourse analysis point of view, which is an approach developed by Herring (2004) titled *computer-mediated discourse analysis*. The CMDA approach is not a completely novel aspect in research but instead only a combination of the two fields. CMDA has three theoretical assumptions, two of which derive from linguistic, cognitive, and social discourse analysis: Repeated patterns and speakers' choices

are evident in the discourse. The third assumption is that technology in CMC may affect the discourse, and thus CMDA research should take into account “in what ways, to what extent, and under what circumstances CMC technologies shape the communication that takes place through them” (Herring 2004:4). In general it can be said that any empirical and textual study of Internet behavior is computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004:2). For my primary analysis of identity this approach is justified because the target of analysis is an online video, a vlog of one person presenting commentary about and arguments toward another online video, and I will analyze both the video and its textual transcript with focus on how the YouTuber’s identity is constructed in the content and linguistic presentation of the video. My secondary analysis of the video’s genre emphasizes the technological, specifically YouTube related, aspects of the genre, but focus is also placed on what these videos signal and how.

In the primary analysis I will concentrate on the social identity of the YouTuber and use the methods of analyzing social identity in discourse. One of the principles of discourse analysis is that meaning is continuously constructed through language use. Meaning is not naturally embedded in objects, people, and concepts, but we as language users negotiate and construct meanings in our interaction (Solin 2010). The same idea can be applied to the concept of identity in discourse analysis as well. People have an array of identities of which they choose, consciously and unconsciously, the appropriate ones that they wish to represent in different contexts, but more importantly, identities are constructed in other people’s minds in interaction. In discourse analysis the latter notion is termed *othering* and it implies that an identity has to be recognized by others in order for it to be established (Blommaert 2005:205). In this vein, Bucholtz and Hall synthesized that identity in its essence is “the social positioning of self and other” (2005: 586). Different identities can be expressed with a number of semiotic resources, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, that other people then interpret and make their conclusions. Identity is not a fixed concept because the expressions and interpretations of identity vary considerably in different contexts, occasions, and purposes (Blommaert 2005:203). For instance, in this study I am studying the target person’s atheist identity because it is the most salient one of his identities in the context of YouTube vlogs, but the same person undoubtedly uses different identities in other contexts; when he is offline, and not using this particular pseudonym. Thus the foregrounded identities vary in terms of different socially constructed categories; other times one’s gender identity is emphasized, whereas other times a professional or an ideological identity may be more salient, as is the case in the present study.

Additionally, whether we like it or not, we have a great deal of presupposed labels about people that can affect the construction of identities, but as it was noted by Blommaert (2005:205), these preconceptions are not usually reliable. Attention should instead be paid to how identities are manifested and performed in **interaction**. Because of the interactive aspect of identities, in discourse analysis identities are usually described as *social* instead of personal.

In computer-mediated communication or Internet linguistics identity has been studied in various contexts, for instance, in teenage blogs (Huffaker & Calvert 2005), message board interaction (Fägersten 2006), and reader responses in online media (Upadhyay 2010). Fägersten (2006) studied the construction of identity in a hip-hop message board and found the lexical content of posts and the linguistic positioning of self and other to be the most important aspects in the establishment of identities. In terms of lexical content, Fägersten found that the use of slang terms, taboo words, and nonstandard orthography at the appearance level contributed to identities. Additionally, the positioning of self and other was done mainly through the use of first and second person pronouns, which highlights that identities are negotiated in interaction. Upadhyay (2010) examined identity in reader's responses (text comments) to an online news story, an article, and an editorial, and found that impoliteness was rather frequent in expressing disagreement, different ideologies, and disbelief toward the main articles' ideas.

The above examples of identity analysis of online material are all based on written texts, which indicates that the Internet has conventionally been first and foremost a written medium. However, as mentioned before, the rapid advancements in technology have made it possible for the rise of multimodal content online, such as videos. Video blogs in particular have not received extensive scholarly attention, yet, possibly due to how new and marginalized the phenomenon has been thus far. In addition, observation of close analysis of multimodal material requires transcription of the material, which, particularly with large quantities of data, is time consuming. The study presented in this paper is thus a small step in the linguistic analysis of video blogs.

The main focus in this paper is on the analysis of identity in one specific YouTube video, but because the activity performed in the video plays such a significant role in the identity construction, in the secondary analysis I will provide an analysis of the video's genre. Therefore, a brief look into the theory of genre analysis is in order. Essentially, genre is a term used in discourse analysis to categorize texts into groups that share certain characteristics. In Fairclough's (1992:124–126) definition, genre is a discourse type that in hierarchy is above

style, activity type, and discourse. Genres can be seen similar to notions of different social practices because, covering the other discourse types, genres “determine which combinations and configurations the other types occur in” (Fairclough 1992:125). Similar texts belong to the same genre based on some of their external characteristics, but the processes of producing, distributing, and consuming the texts must also be comparable. Additionally, the sequence of actions and the participants are taken into consideration. With reference to the term *text*, in discourse analysis its meaning is extended beyond written texts to any piece of interaction. Thus, texts range from images and conversations to pieces of written texts and—as is the case here—to videos.

Furthermore, Fairclough (1992:126) determined that specific societies, institutions, and other communities have their own systems of genres that indicates how the different genres, and other discourse types, are related to each other. Along these lines, YouTube by itself could be seen as an institutional venue that has its own configuration of genres that build their own network of relations.

3 METHODOLOGY AND PRIMARY DATA

3.1 Methods Applied

The methods I use in the analysis are mostly based on Fairclough’s (1992) concepts of doing discourse analysis and Herring’s (2004) approach to computer-mediated discourse analysis. Analyzing discourse qualitatively involves, essentially, close and careful observation of the data, and it consists of both interpretation and description. What one chooses to analyze depends on the point of view, research objectives, and data. In this study, my objective is to find out 1) what constitutes the genre of argument pwnage, and 2) how the identity of a pwner is constructed in an argument pwnage video. For the first question, my data consists of the five first argument pwnage videos that appeared in a YouTube search for the word *pwnage*. As for the second question, which is the primary one, my data is Coughlan616’s video *CockFail Vs. DickWins*. I chose this particular video for the identity analysis because, firstly, Coughlan is an experienced pwner, and secondly, it is a good representation of both serious and humorous pwnage. I will use the primary data video as material in the first question as well.

For the genre analysis, I watched all of the five videos and made observations about the nature and manner of pwnage, and in the analysis section of this paper I will compile six unifying features for the genre. The identified features are social, ideological, and structural.

The identity analysis requires a more careful look into the data, so I transcribed Coughlan's video into text and will base my analysis both on the transcription and the video. My focus is mostly on meaning, so I did not need to include pauses, ways of pronunciation, or body language in the transcription—however, in a few instances in the analysis I do take into account the tone of voice and the general liveliness of the target person because they contribute to significantly to the construction of meaning. For both the genre and identity analyses I will observe how the technological features and the venue, YouTube, affects the implications of the analysis.

In Herring's CMDA approach (2004:3), as well as in other discourse analysis approaches, analysis can be applied to four levels of language: structure, meaning, interaction, and social behavior. In my analysis of identity construction my focus is mostly on social behavior because I am interested in how the activity of pwnage occurs and what the content of Coughlan's message is and how it relates to the target person. However, I also take into account structure and meaning as I look into the formation and choice of words and speech act types. In particular, I pay attention to modality and directness of expression. Modality is a part of the grammar that refers to the level of affinity of the proposition and it is associated with at least modal auxiliary verbs (*must, may, should*), modal adverbs (*probably, definitely*), hedges (*sort of*), and intonation patterns (Fairclough 1992:158–159). Directness, on the other hand, can be viewed as a pragmatic concept of how explicitly the uttered speech act conveys the meaning that the interlocutor had in mind. Three acts can be identified: locutionary act, which is what is actually uttered; illocutionary act, which is what is meant; and perlocutionary act, which is the message's effect in the listener (Levinson 1983:236). The perlocutionary act in this study is not observed because the focus is not on the audience's reaction. As regards meaning, the speech acts in this paper are viewed also from the point of view of sarcasm and irony, which are concerned with the differences between locutionary and illocutionary act. The level of directness and indirectness can also be related to politeness in that one might say explicitly direct insults in order to insult the other, thus being impolite, and on the other hand one might disguise insults into indirect speech acts in order to be polite.

3.2 Data: Description of the Primary Video

The data for my secondary analysis, which is the genre analysis, are described in detail within the analysis, so in this section I will only describe what needs to be known about the main data that I use in the identity analysis.

The target of the identity analysis is a YouTube video titled *CockFail Vs. DickWins* (see transcript in appendix) that was uploaded to YouTube on June 12, 2011, by the user Coughlan616. The video features the YouTuber Coughlan616 responding to another video on YouTube, titled *For the Record: Tattoos Are Evil?*, which, in turn, was uploaded to YouTube on June 20, 2011, by the user illuminativ. In the target video Richard Coughlan (not his real name), a 30-something British male, speaks to the camera in his bedroom in colloquial British English. Coughlan is a popular “YouTube atheist” with over 24,000 subscribers on his main channel (Coughlan616¹), and he has been making atheism related videos on YouTube since 2008. His videos include, among other things, pwnage, parody, commentary, and comedy sketches, many of which are related to issues of atheism/religion, politics, and human rights. Comedy plays an essential part in his videos, and he does stand-up comedy offline as well.

The video Coughlan responds to is titled *For the Record: Tattoos Are Evil?*, and it is an episode in a Christian YouTube show *For the Record*, hosted by Jason Mitchell, who is a Catholic Christian, a 30-something American male. The original video is 4 minutes 36 seconds long and it features Mitchell speaking to the camera in what seems like a professional setting: The video has background music, animations, and the colors are edited to create a cartoon-like effect. Mitchell’s performance is also professional and confident. Coughlan has previously made three video responses to episodes of the same show, and he always has targeted the videos personally toward Mitchell. Thus, those who are familiar their past have certain preconceptions about what another “Coughlan versus Mitchell” video will be like.

Because the video is a response to another video, Coughlan has embedded clips from the original illuminativ video to this one, which he answers to and comments on directly in the course of the video. In addition to filming himself and showing clips of the original video, he uses screen capture images of web searches two times in the video to support his arguments. The video is in total 8 minutes 23 seconds long and it is categorized as Comedy. Its tag words (i.e., descriptive words of the content of the video, provided by the video maker) include, for instance, *atheist, tattoo, conservative, Molotov Mitchell, pwned, owned, lol, ownage and Bible*.

In the video Coughlan responds to the original video by criticizing what Mitchell said and by pwning some of his arguments. The fact that Coughlan has made this video by himself has enabled him to choose the appropriate parts of the original video that he wanted to respond to, so the foundation of the video is from the beginning biased, in favor of Coughlan.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/Coughlan616>

The video is edited so that there are no silent parts left in between—they are cut out even from the middle of Coughlan’s sentences. This makes the pace of the video rather rapid, and combined with Coughlan’s lively and quick way of presentation and speaking, the overall feeling in the video is very energetic.

4 ARGUMENT PWNAGE – GENRE ANALYSIS

Pwn (/ˈpoun/; to pwn: a verb) is a word that has not been included in scholarly dictionaries yet but that has been featured in *internet language* or *netspeak* for years. There is no clear evidence of its origin, or when it was first used, but according to a few online sources it derives from the verb *own*, having turned into *pwn* due to a simple typing error since the letters *p* and *o* are next to each other on the keyboard (Wikipedia, 2012a; Urban Dictionary, 2012). The original verb *own* is also still used in the same meaning. According to Wikipedia (2012a), the word *pwn* means “to appropriate or to conquer to gain ownership,” and the Urban Dictionary follows the same lines by defining the word as “an act of dominating an opponent.” Both sources refer to online video games as the place of origin for this word where it has been and is used when an opponent is defeated. However, the meaning is not restricted to gaming anymore but it has broadened to other sorts of “dominating an opponent” type of actions as well, including argument pwnage. A YouTube search with the word *pwnage* gives about 223,000 result videos (March 8, 2012). Leaving out the results showing, for example, products or shows with the word *pwnage* in their names, the results include, for instance, pwnage in video games, funny videos of objects or things “pwning people” (e.g., bicycle accidents), pranks, and video bloggers pwning other persons and their arguments. The last category of pwnage is my topic of interest in this study.

Argument pwnage often involves an ideological defeating of an opponent with a different worldview, and it is a rather novel type of activity that has not been studied before. That is why for the purpose of this paper there is a need to describe and analyze what constitutes this type of activity and thus forms the genre of argument pwnage. It should be noted that this term has not been used before to describe these videos, possibly because there has not been a need for naming or distinguishing the genre. In the parts of YouTube where this activity occurs it is identified mostly on the basis of what people do in these videos. Sometimes the videos are labeled and discusses as *pwning* or *owning*, but often these words are not needed in conveying the message.

To construct the genre of argument pwnage, I will briefly present the first five argument pwnage videos that appeared in the search results for *pwnage* on YouTube (on March 8, 2012), and identify some of their unifying characteristics, which consequently create the definition for the genre of argument pwnage. To conclude this chapter, based on my findings I will present the reasons for why the target video of my identity analysis belongs to this same genre.

The first argument pwnage videos appear already on the first result page and they are both produced by one of the most popular atheist vloggers on YouTube, TheAmazingAtheist. In the first result video entitled *RACIST FAIL: Pwnage*, he responds to feedback he had received from a white supremacist, which was observed as being racist in nature and which “accused” TheAmazingAtheist for being a “jew.” His response to the accusations is that they were completely irrelevant and silly. The second result video, also by TheAmazingAtheist, is called *FEMINIST FAIL: Pwnage*, which in fact is only the introduction to the actual pwnage done in another video (*FEMINIST FAIL: Pwnage 2*). In this first part of the videos TheAmazingAtheist precludes his response to a feminist video that criticized men for watching pornography. As an answer, TheAmazingAtheist defends pornography and presents arguments about the differences between male and female sexuality, supporting some of the arguments with literature. The third video related to argument pwnage is a video by Couglan616, the same YouTuber who made my target video. Couglan616 has hosted the annual Pwnage Olympics on YouTube and this video, *The Pwnage Olympics 2011 – The Rules*, introduces the event and its rules for 2011. The contest has various categories from musical pwnage to 90 second pwnage and there are no restrictions on the topic, however, the pwnage has to be a response to a YouTube video. The fourth result video for argument pwnage is by a YouTuber called BionicDance and it is titled *Men Are Such Animals! [PWNAGE]*. It is a video response to a video by a Christian YouTuber in which the differences of humans and animals are discussed, and humans are raised above animals. In her video the user BionicDance debunks those arguments by giving scientific evidence for evolution and thus for humans being animals as well. Finally, the fifth result video is the first part (1/5) of a series of videos called *The Art of Pwnage: Elisha and the Bears. A Final Read*, by the user BrettPalmer, and the video is a response to a YouTube video by a Christian. In the video BrettPalmer pwns the biblical story of Elisha and the Bears by making rational and logical arguments against this story and the way it was presented in the other video by a Christian “apologist.”

Based on the results found with this search, my target video, and my personal observations on YouTube for the last three years, the genre of argument pwnage can be constructed by identifying the unifying elements that these videos share. First, the most essential unifying element is the video form and venue of publication, which set certain definitions for these pwnages. An argument pwnage video is usually produced (planned, filmed, and performed) by one person who has at least one YouTube channel and who actively follows and makes videos about atheism and religion related issues on YouTube. The videos can and often are labeled *vlogs*, that is, video blogs, but because the word *vlog* covers nearly all user created videos that include personal opinions, it could be regarded as an umbrella term under which also argument pwnage videos fall. In a general sense, the official dictionary definition for the word *vlog* seems to be a bit outdated. The 2009 *Collins English Dictionary* defines vlog as “a video journal uploaded to the internet,” but the reality is that a great number of *vlog* labeled videos are not journal types anymore—such as some of the argument pwnage videos.

In the nature of YouTube videos, pwnage videos are usually open for everyone to watch and comment, with the limitation of having to be registered and signed into YouTube to be able to comment. However, due to the relatively small number of people who are interested in and aware of these sorts of videos on YouTube, the audience is somewhat limited. The average number of views on the five pwnage videos and my target video is about 146,857, but this is not a good estimation about the general popularity of pwnage videos because TheAmazingAtheist’s videos in the search results had received hundreds of thousands of views, whereas the views on the other videos were usually below 10,000. Nevertheless, the venue and form of publication are unified, and availability is unrestricted.

Second, it seems that argument pwnage is an activity that particularly the atheists on YouTube practice. These atheist YouTubers can be seen to belong to a loose network of mostly Anglo-American atheist and/or skeptic video bloggers, who make videos about issues related to atheism. Their videos vary quite a lot in terms of topics, but these YouTubers have elevated their atheist identities to be the most salient ones on YouTube, by, for example, making this explicit on their channel page. Their connections to each other can be seen in various ways: They comment on each other’s’ videos, make video responses to one another, are subscribed to one another, and have each other’s’ channels featured on their channel page. They also make references to each other on their videos, give shoutouts (“advertise” other YouTubers’ channels on videos), and some spend time together outside of YouTube as well. What emphasizes the atheism relation in argument pwnage videos is that thus far I have not come across argument pwnage that does not involve atheists or atheism in some respect: Even

if the topic is not related to atheism, the person/persons involved are. With regard to the pwners' worldviews beyond atheism, there is, unquestionably, diversity between different atheist video bloggers. On a general note, however, observing their videos and topics of discussions it can be synthesized that they all share somewhat similar opinions about religion (they are atheist), politics (they are usually liberal and left-wing), and human rights (they are pro-gay and pacifist).

Third, the targets of pwnage often include representatives of religions, most commonly Christianity, but the range of target videos, issues, and persons goes beyond religion as well. As it was seen in the five result videos, other topics of pwnage can be, for instance, racism and feminism. Politics, gay rights, child abuse, and other human rights issues have also been covered. The form of the targets of pwnage also ranges from other YouTube videos to personal feedback to news stories and beyond, but a unifying feature is that the pwnage is always a video response to the target, despite its form. Some YouTubers are dedicated to targeting specific categories, for instance, a popular American atheist vlogger C0ct0pus² makes videos mostly as responses to the Fox News, which is an openly conservative and Christian television channel in the USA.

Fourth, the purpose of argument pwnage videos is simple: to present arguments against the target of pwnage and subsequently to refute the arguments presented in the target material; to pwn the target person, that is, to “defeat the opponent,” as it was said in the online definitions of pwnage. Hence I believe that the name argument pwnage is appropriate for this genre. The ways of arguing and refuting vary among different YouTubers who all have their distinct styles of pwnage. Some are more academic or scientific in nature and might support their arguments with scientific literature and research, and they also choose their targets of pwnage so that scientific or academic arguments against them can be found (e.g., TAA's *Feminist Fail: Pwnage*). On the other hand, there are those who make pwnage videos on the spur of the moment, spend less time on background research and base their arguments on instantly available resources, such as common sense or their personal opinions or experience about the issue at hand (e.g., BionicDance's *Men Are Such Animals!*). These sorts of videos involve humiliation of the target person or issue more often than the academic ones—however, there are also those who manage to combine scientific arguments to extreme humiliation, such as the most popular “scientist atheist” on YouTube, Thunderf00t, who has a whole series of videos titled *Why Do People Laugh at Creationists*³. The level of comedy in argument

² <http://www.youtube.com/C0ct0pusPrime>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAC3481305829426D&feature=plcp>

pwnage videos varies as well. It seems that some comedy and elements of play occur in nearly all argument pwnage videos: Of the five result videos, only TheAmazingAtheist's pwnage prelude video *FeministFail: Pwnage* does not include any jokes, but instead it focuses in a more serious tone on building up reasonable arguments against the target video. Its follow-up *FeministFail: Pwnage 2*, however, is more playful in nature. In contrast, for instance, the creator of my target video, Coughlan, is known for his comedic pwnages that often feature arguments that are clearly made up, invented only to make fun of the target person, or that are simply jokes. For Coughlan, the comedy is clearly in his nature because offline he is also an aspiring stand-up comedian. Nevertheless, adopting one style on some videos does not mean that is the only style that YouTuber is practicing. Both in the cases of TheAmazingAtheist and Coughlan, their styles of pwnage vary from the more serious videos to videos of absolute parody, depending on the target of pwnage: A lighter topic is often approached in a humorous way, whereas heavy and emotional topics require a more serious approach.

Fifth, the ways in which the pwnage is performed and the arguments are presented are not unified, but there are some similarities. As shown in three of the result videos (TAAx2, BionicDance), if the target of pwnage is in the form of a video, a common way of pwning is to film oneself speaking, embed clips of the target video into the pwnage, and then present one's arguments as responses to the claims made in the target video. If the target is not a video, the pwner can film him/herself speaking, quote the target material, and then respond to it, as was done by TheAmazingAtheist on *RacistFail: Pwnage*. Further, there are those who do not film themselves but construct their videos by using other means, such as images, animation, video clips, and other things—however, usually the pwner narrates these videos him/herself. A popular style is to compile the video of images that are simply depictions of the words the pwner utters that as such might have nothing to do with the issue at hand, and other times the images, or sometimes video clips, attached are directly related to the pwnage (e.g., BrettPalmer used both of these styles). These two types of constructing a pwnage video—either filming oneself or compiling the video of other images, videos, or animation—are among the most popular ones, but because the conventions are not absolute rules that the pwners must follow there are a number of different ways of doing argument pwnage. Some of these are highlighted in the categories of Pwnage Olympics (Coughlan616: *Pwnage Olympics 2011 – The Rules*): for example, 90-second pwnage, musical pwnage, and parody.

Sixth, related to how the pwnage activity is done, a significant restriction it has is that the target of pwnage, in the video, is just a video or another kind of inactive material, and in the

argument pwnage event they cannot defend themselves or come up with defending arguments. Thus, an argument pwnage video is not an argument in the way that a debate is, but instead a one-sided presentation of arguments where the target has no power to say anything. Consequently, this gives the pwner the position of control and power, in turn making it very easy to defeat the target. The free will to plan and execute the argument in as much time as the pwner wishes is also a significant factor contributing to the pwner's power to defeat the opponent. Nonetheless, if the target of pwnage feels necessary to do so, they can make a video response to or in other means comment on the pwnage and in this way defend themselves.

Additionally, an important point to make is that nearly not all YouTube videos that fall into the category of argument pwnage are directly titled or otherwise labeled as pwnage videos. My target video of analysis, Coughlan616's video *CockFail Vs. DickWins*, is not titled as a pwnage video, but the tags of the video include the words *owned*, *pwned*, and *ownage*, which by themselves are proof that this video can be categorized into the genre of argument pwnage. The pwnage videos that I used to construct this genre were chosen because they were clearly categorized by their creators to *pwnage*, but not all YouTubers use the words *pwn* or *own* at all in spite of making this sort of videos. It is a matter of personal preference; some people feel that the word describes well what they do, others prefer to use other words.

By identifying the six unifying elements of argument pwnage above, I will now determine that Coughlan's video *CockFail Vs. DickWins* does belong to the genre of argument pwnage. First, it is a YouTube video planned, made, and filmed by one YouTuber, and the video is open for everyone to watch. Second, the YouTuber in question, Coughlan, openly identifies himself as an atheist, and is active in the loose atheist network of vloggers on YouTube. Coughlan has been making YouTube videos for a number of years now, and from the beginning he has presented himself as an atheist. He interacts with other YouTubers frequently, both in good and in bad, and makes videos about issues related to religion, politics, and human rights, among other things. Third, the target of this pwnage is another YouTube video by a Christian YouTuber and it is about how Christianity and the Bible address tattoos. Fourth, the purpose of Coughlan's video is to defeat the target person and prove that his ideology, atheism, is better than the target person's, Christianity. Fifth, his ways of pwning include debunking the claims made by the Christian in the target video by, for example, presenting proof that the Christian in question is contradicting himself and his religion. He also aims for a degree of both comedy and humiliating the target person. And

sixth, in the end Coughlan declares himself the winner, which is easy because the target person cannot immediately answer the arguments.

In conclusion, in light of the arguments I presented in this chapter, it can be determined that there is a genre of *argument pwnage videos*, and that the target video of the analysis in this paper belongs to this said genre. The videos belonging to this genre share a “relatively stable set of conventions that is associated with, and partly enacts, a socially ratified type of activity,” as was synthesized by Fairclough (1992:126).

5 IDENTITY ANALYSIS

5.1 Coughlan616’s Social Identity on YouTube

The foundation of pwnage in the video *CockFail Vs. DickWins* is based on Coughlan’s social identity in the context of YouTube and other social media websites that he uses with this specific identity, such as Facebook and Twitter. He has made atheist videos on YouTube for four years, and those who have watched his videos before know that he identifies himself as an atheist. He would not have such a strong atheist identity without his viewers and without the network of other atheist YouTubers. As people watch the videos, comment on them, and communicate with Coughlan and with each other, the social identity of Coughlan616 in this context is constructed.

Coughlan’s username *Coughlan616* will give certain assumptions about him to those who understand what the number stands for. Coughlan’s original YouTube username was *Coughlan666*, which was even more stigmatizing than the current name because most people identify the number 666 as the number of the beast that is mentioned in the Bible. However, Coughlan’s original YouTube account was terminated due to violations of use, after which he created a new main channel with the number 616. According to Wikipedia (2012b), and according to Coughlan himself, the number 616 is the original 666, so he again openly connects himself to the devil, which is a concept that resists God and Christianity. Thus, even if the viewer is not familiar with Coughlan’s previous videos where his atheist identity is clearly visible, his username can give certain connotations that will in effect give the viewer clues about Coughlan’s antireligiousness.

5.2 Video Title

The title of the video, *CockFail Vs. DickWins*, does not by itself give any clues about the topic of the video. Those who are not familiar with Coughlan’s previous videos will not understand

what the video is about because the title is an indirect expression playing with intertextuality connected to Coughlan's identity and his previous videos about Mitchell. In terms of the pragmatic concepts of speech acts, the locutionary speech act in the title is *CockFail Vs. DickWins*, but the illocutionary act, that is, the idea behind the expression, is that Coughlan will win Mitchell in this argument pwnage video. Moreover, the perlocutionary act, the effect in the reader, is entirely dependent on how familiar the "reader" is with Coughlan's previous videos and whether he/she understands the illocutionary act.

First, for the title, Coughlan has created pseudonyms for himself and Mitchell. *Dick* is a short version of Coughlan's first name, Richard, and in this context Coughlan takes advantage of the other meaning of *dick* as a slang word for penis. The target person Jason Mitchell's nickname online is Molotov Mitchell, from which many people, Coughlan involved, will get the connotation of the word *Molotov cocktail*. Consequently, from the word *cocktail* derives another slang word for penis, *cock*, which Coughlan here relates to Mitchell.

Second, there is word play involved with these two synonyms for penis and the topic of the video: *Cocktail* is transformed into *cockfail*, which includes both the connotations to Mitchell and the result of the video; and *dick* simply is connected to *wins*, which is a combination that includes references to Coughlan and the result of the video. With the abbreviation *Vs.* for *versus* in between the words, there is the implication of a just battle, but the verbs in the names (*fail* and *wins*) already "reveal" the result of the video, that Coughlan will win. Interestingly, the words referring to Mitchell and Coughlan in the title are not similar in terms of conjugation: *Fail* is in the infinitive form whereas *wins* is the third person singular form of the verb. Perhaps the third person singular *CockFails* would have been too explicit and strong, and it would have taken attention away from the more obvious *cocktail* connotation. On the other hand, *DickWin* would not have been an option since *dickwin* does not resemble any other word in the way that *CockFail* resembles *cocktail*.

Third, what was not done in the conjugation of the words is done in the appearance of the words. *Cock* and *Dick* are written with capital initials, which on the one hand is not unusual in titles but on the other hand might give an implication that these words are used as proper nouns. In addition, *Fail* and *Wins* are also written with capital initials, despite the fact that they are embedded inside the words. The capital letters distinguish the verbs from inside the words and inform the viewer about the meanings Coughlan was intending for.

Hence, despite the indirectness of the title, the intended meaning of the title is intertextually constructed in the minds of the viewers who are familiar with the topic from Coughlan's previous videos. The viewers who are new to the topic will not understand what

the video is about on the basis of the title. For the title, Coughlan created completely new lexical items (*CockFail*, *DickWins*) that out of this context do not have meanings. With regard to Coughlan's atheist identity, the viewers who are familiar with Coughlan from the past and who understand the reasoning behind this title will be able to comprehend that an atheist, Coughlan, will defeat a Christian, Mitchell, in the video. Therefore, already the title works as a constructor of Coughlan's social atheist identity—even if only in the minds of those who are familiar with Coughlan's videos before.

5.3 Video Beginning

The video begins with an intertextual reference when Coughlan informs, with a sarcastic smile, that he recently watched *A Serbian Film*, which is a very criticized and in many countries censored movie involving brutal violence and sexual abuse (The Guardian 2010). He then compares the movie watching experience to the “horror” that he is about to put his viewers through in this video (line 3, appendix). The dramatic way of pausing after the word *horror*, with the continuing clause “I’m about you put you through” give the viewer a hint of the level of ironic comedy ahead: Surely, a YouTube argument pwnage video cannot be nearly as horrible as *A Serbian Film*. Hence, the introduction is an indirect statement and its illocutionary act is that the argument pwnage will be absolutely horrible, in an ironic sense. Already this statement establishes Coughlan's social identity of an atheist because he compares the Christian video pwnage to a horror movie and thus implies that he thinks pwning a Christian is horrible, and that his position is against Christianity. This idea is not, however, understood at the second that this statement is made in the video, but it is built in the minds of viewers later when they come to know what the video is about.

As Coughlan proceeds to introduce the target of the video, he addresses Mitchell as his “good friend” (line 5), which again is an indication of the indirectness and sarcasm that he uses throughout the video. Indeed, Mitchell is not his good friend, but on the contrary an opponent, at least in terms of ideology in the context of this video. Subsequently he also calls Mitchell “Molotov Cockfail” (line 6), admitting that he invented this name, and later in the introductory part of the video he refers to Mitchell with two derogative noun phrases: “a vile, horrible turd” (line 9) and “you big bald fuck” (line 15). By doing this, he establishes his position as Mitchell's adversary and informs his viewers what he thinks about Mitchell. The second insulting noun phrase “you big bald fuck” uses the second person singular pronoun *you*, which intensifies the insult as it is directly said to Mitchell. These two derogative expressions infer that Coughlan does not seem to think very highly of Mitchell, however, to

use a metaphor like “a vile, horrible turd” for this is not the most intellectual insult, so the tone is humorous. Even if the tone in what he says about Mitchell is sarcastically humorous and thus not necessarily taken seriously by most viewers, the mocking nature of these words is, still, rather harsh and it sets the foundation of this video to Coughlan versus Mitchell.

In introducing Mitchell, Coughlan advises his viewers to watch his previous videos about Mitchell instead of explaining who Mitchell is and what he does. Telling his viewers about his previous encounters with Mitchell, he builds up the sense of community between him and the viewers by addressing them with “as many of you might remember” (line 9) and “those of you who don’t remember” (lines 9–10). In this way he assumes that all of his viewers have seen the previous Mitchell videos before, but some of them just might not remember them anymore. In positioning the other in his speech, both Mitchell and his viewers, he is assuming that the majority of his viewers are on his side: Mitchell is described with derogative and sarcastically mocking expressions, whereas the viewers are addressed as being familiar with the issue beforehand. Interestingly, when he is speaking to his viewers, he takes a direct approach where the illocutionary act is explicit in the sentence, but both in speaking about and to Mitchell, he is very indirect. This emphasizes his identity’s social part and how it is built through the people who watch his videos: He acts as though his audience deserves to be addressed directly and explicitly.

Fägersten (2006: 31–32) discussed the importance of the use of second person pronouns in identity construction on a message board, and her deduction can be applied to this video as well. In the introductory part of the video, Coughlan’s use of second person pronouns in positioning the other (the viewers and Mitchell) underscores the interactive nature of the video. Even though Coughlan in the video cannot be in direct contact with either the viewers or Mitchell, by addressing his audience it is made clear that the purpose of this video is, nevertheless, interactional. It should be noted, however, that he speaks to the viewers only in the introductory part of the video and the rest of the video is mostly addressed personally to Mitchell.

The positioning of self in identity construction can be seen by observing the use of first person singular pronoun *I*, as was done by Fägersten (2006). The introductory and the concluding parts of the video are where Coughlan uses *I* the most. These are the parts where the argument pwnage happens least. Explanation for this will be discussed in more detail later. Here, in the introductory part, Coughlan uses *I* mainly in speaking to his viewers about previous encounters with Mitchell and what he will do in this video (“I’ll leave links... I thought I’d go through it...”).

5.4 The First Pwnage Point

The first pwnage point involves Coughlan attacking a detail about a name of a video Mitchell mentioned in his video, which was a response to viewer feedback. In the original *For the Record* video, a viewer (“Sam K.”) wrote to Mitchell about a previous *For the Record* episode titled *Gay*, to which Mitchell answers that they do not have a video with that title. In return, Coughlan points out that Mitchell used to have a video of that video because in the past Coughlan had responded to that video, but later they (i.e., Mitchell and his crew) had changed the video name to *Gay Politics*. Coughlan proves this by showing in the video a Google search for *For the Record: Gay*, which gives the original *Gay* video as a result because the cache memory had not, at the time, changed yet. Thus, Coughlan finds Mitchell telling a lie, and he attacks this by saying: “That’s lie number one. Just so you know, Jason. You’re a Christian. The ninth commandment is not an option” (lines 31–32). This is a very typical way that an atheist pwns a Christian in this type of videos: pointing out that the Christian is not doing what his/her religion dictates. In this case, it is a matter of obeying one of the Ten Commandments, which are essential for Christianity. The ninth commandment says: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor,” that is, one should not lie. Because Mitchell in his original video did not mention that they once had a video titled *Gay*, but instead he only denied the claim, Coughlan interpreted this as lying and as an action that is against the guidelines of Christianity. In terms of speech act types, Coughlan’s counterarguments are declarative clauses, which is evident in the verbs, and there is no modality: “That’s lie number one... The ninth commandment is not an option.” This confidence reveals that he is certain that he is right about the fact that a true Christian should follow the Ten Commandments and if one does not follow them, the Christian in question is contradicting him/herself. Coughlan’s confidence is again emphasizing his atheist identity, which justifies him being correct on the matter.

With regard to how Coughlan proves Mitchell’s alleged lie, the technological aspect of creating this video is of significance. On the account of the multimodal video form of this presentation, he is able to show a screen capture image of a Google search for the words *illuminantiv* (misspelled *illuminativ*) *for the record gay*, which clearly give the original videos (*Gay: Part 1* and *Part 2*) as the first search results. This is a more serious pwnage point in this video than the following ones because the proof behind Coughlan’s counterargument is explicitly presented and it is not based on a matter of opinion or a joke, in the way that the following pwnage points are. Despite this being the only pwnage point with actually serious

proof, this is not part of the actual pwnage that concerns the topic of the original video, namely, tattoos.

Related to both the forthcoming topic of the original video and Coughlan's first pwnage point, I will now briefly discuss a statement Mitchell made in his video about the type of arguments he often receives from his opponents, and how Coughlan reacted to it. Mitchell pointed out in the original video that he made the video not only to answer the one feedback he had received but also to "address the arguments that atheists and pro-gay marriage people will use if you don't agree with them" (lines 49–50). As an answer to this, Coughlan verbalizes the reasoning of his first pwnage point: "—what, bringing up things you're supposed to do, based on the fact that they're in the book that you claim to follow? A bugging annoying thing, ain't it?" (lines 51–52). This statement is expressed with certainty: Coughlan assumes that Christians are to follow the Bible in everything ("..you're **supposed** to do... book that you **claim** to follow"). However, the certainty is not as strong as in the previous pwnage point because here he uses some level of modality: the expression *things you're supposed to do* is more careful in expressing the nature advising or commanding one to do something, than a more declarative *things you have to/must do*. Similarly, although not using a modal verb as such, the phrase *book that you claim to follow* is more cautious than the declarative *book that you follow*. Furthermore, in this clause Coughlan transfers the responsibility of obeying the book to Mitchell: Mitchell *claims* to follow the book, but does not seem to do so.

Although not very modal, the second part of this phrase/speech act is again indirect and sarcastic. Particularly with the phrase "A bugging annoying thing, ain't it?" (line 52) Coughlan is not actually complying with Mitchell that these sorts of arguments by atheists and pro-gay marriage people are annoying, but instead the illocutionary act that he is implying is that this is a justified response to Christians not following the rules dictated in the Bible. Consequently, in this counterargument it can be seen that Coughlan interpreted Mitchell's statement "the arguments that atheists and pro-gay marriage people will use" so that in these arguments the atheists and pro-gay marriage people inform the Christians about the rules dictated in the Bible that the Christians should be following. This is, in fact, exactly what Coughlan does in most of his pwnage arguments—whether or not this is what Mitchell originally intended with his statement.

The use of second person pronouns in the first pwnage point differs from their use in the video beginning in that Coughlan uses *you* only to address Mitchell, and not his audience. The direction of interaction has thus changed from the viewers completely to Mitchell. Although,

interestingly, Coughlan does at line 36 briefly change the direction and speaks of Mitchell as an outsider, using the third person pronoun *he* (“...he has never admitted to that and he didn’t admit it...”). This was sort of a response to Sam K.’s feedback about Mitchell admitting to having a tattoo, which Mitchell denies. The reason for using *he* instead of *you* is not overt but perhaps Coughlan wanted to speak to Sam K. instead and be on his side, instead of attacking Mitchell personally all the time. Other than that, the direction of Coughlan’s message to Mitchell is often emphasized by the use of both *you* and *Jason* (e.g. line 31: “Just so you know, Jason”).

Because this pwnage point is not directly about the subject of the video but instead about a name of a video, and it could be refuted rather easily, Coughlan uses *you*’s rather frequently at the beginning of this point as he speaks to Mitchell about the video name in question (e.g., “you see, you used to have a video...”). When it comes to the use of first person singular pronouns, they are again used only in the “meta” part of Coughlan’s talk, that is, not in the actual pwnage arguments (e.g., “I like the fact that...”). Consequently, already the first pwnage point reveals that in presenting arguments, emphasis is taken away from Coughlan personally and instead added to the information grounding the arguments. In this way, it is highlighted that atheists ground their arguments on real facts instead of opinions. Even though this might not be the case, it is implied linguistically.

5.5 The Second Pwnage Point

Whereas the first pwnage point was about a detail concerning the name of a previously uploaded video, the second pwnage point is directed toward how Mitchell discusses the actual topic of the video, tattoos. In Mitchell’s viewer feedback mentioned before, the viewer why Mitchell has a tattoo when at the same time he opposes gay marriage, when the Bible does not allow either of these issues, at least not according to the viewer’s interpretation of it. Mitchell’s answer to this was that there is only one argument against tattoos in the Bible, and therefore it is not “an abomination”—Mitchell is of the opinion that it should have been mentioned more than once if God does not allow it. Coughlan’s reaction to this is laughter and disbelief: “Jason, you’re kidding, right, that’s your argument?” (line 57). With this statement he is suggesting that Mitchell’s argument is so absurd and weak that it might as well be a joke. Directing the message explicitly to Mitchell by using his name and the second person pronoun, this can be seen as an insult, lacking politeness. This speech act can be considered more direct than indirect because the illocutionary act is not significantly different from the locutionary act. The illocutionary act could be something in the lines of “Jason, I

cannot believe your argument is so weak.” However, this specific remark about the absurdity of Mitchell’s claim is not in itself part of the pwnage, but Coughlan proceeds and builds his response on differently grounded arguments.

In the original video, Mitchell presented the only passage in the Bible where tattoos are forbidden: “...this one obscure Levitical passage” (line 53), which is: “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:28). Interestingly, Coughlan does not comment on the Levitical passage, nor does he (or Mitchell) indicate that Leviticus is a chapter in the Old Testament in the Bible. The reason why Coughlan did not seize on this is not verbalized at any point in the video, but it might be a question of differences of opinion concerning the Old and the New Testament. General opinions of modern Christians about the Old Testament often are that its dictations should not be applied to today’s world, which might be why Coughlan decided not to even comment on the Old Testament passage. It is noteworthy that in this instance Coughlan did not feel obliged to follow his previous pwnage strategy, which was to inform the Christian about “things you’re supposed to do, based on the fact that they’re in the book that you claim to follow” (lines 51–52). The Levitical passage about tattoos is very explicit in forbidding them, but still, Mitchell does have a tattoo, so Coughlan could have easily accused Mitchell for not obeying the Scripture. Perhaps using this pwnage strategy and criticizing Mitchell about not following the rules of Christianity would have been too simple for Coughlan and he decided to use another technique.

Instead, he begins to build up his pwnage by introducing a completely different passage from the Bible, this time from the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 10:31, which dictates that “...whether you eat or drink or do whatever you do, do it for the glory of God” (line 60). Coughlan connects this idea to the issue at hand, tattooing, and continues: “So it [the Bible] doesn’t say anything about against tattoos but it doesn’t say anything for it either. So there’s no real evidence either way there” (lines 61–62). Thus, Coughlan builds the first part of his argument on his interpretation of the Bible—despite the fact that he is an atheist and does not believe in the Bible. Nevertheless, his sentences are again declarative: “...it **doesn’t** say... **there’s no** real evidence...” He could have hedged his arguments for instance by saying: “I **don’t think** it says anything about... There **doesn’t seem to be** real evidence...” but he did not, which again underlines his confidence in knowing that he is correct and that this is the truth. The implicit message in this argument might not be instantly obvious to the viewer because at the moment of presenting this argument Coughlan seems to be serious and not joking. There is no evidence of play, such as smiling. Nevertheless, later, at the end of the

video, it becomes evident that indeed he was not serious with this pwnage point, but was instead trying to prove Mitchell's religious beliefs as ungrounded by finding out proof in the Bible that would justify anything.

After this he constructs the second part of this pwnage point by reminding Jason that "according to your religion, your body doesn't belong to you, as neither does your soul. It will be redeemed by God" (line 64). Now, he is again telling Mitchell what his religion is about in an assuring manner, implying that he is correct in his interpretation of Mitchell's religion. The verb clauses used are declarative, and there is no modality: "doesn't belong... will be redeemed..." Subsequently, Coughlan combines this and the previous foregrounding pieces of information and presents his argument: "So unless you're doing it [tattooing] technically for the glory of God, out of faith, and God doesn't mind, he's given you permission, then there's nothing wrong with it. Did you ask God before... No" (lines 66–68). Thus, his argument about tattoos and Christianity is that because the Christian's body and soul belong to God, before tattooing he/she should ask God if he/she can modify God's property by tattooing it, and if God consents, it would be allowed, but only if it would be done for the glory of God. In concordance with this assumption, Coughlan inquires Jason whether he asked God's permission for the tattoo, and gives an answer to this on Jason's behalf ("No," line 68). Once more he uses declarative sentences without modality or hedging to reinforce his correctness on the issue. With regard to the nature of this pwnage point consisting of two different statements, it is based on Coughlan's interpretation of biblical guidelines, despite the fact that Coughlan is an atheist. From this, a viewer might first discern that this pwnage video is not the most intellectually or scientifically motivated, and Coughlan is probably not serious. As I stated previously, this does not become fully evident until the end of the video, where Coughlan verbalizes his reasoning. The justification for this is, namely, that he can make up any kind of arguments based on the Bible in the same way that the religious people do. Notwithstanding, even though he is contradicting himself, the argument side of argument pwnage is still there in this pwnage point because Coughlan refutes Mitchell's argument, even if he is not the one who is correct either.

As the second pwnage point is mainly concerned with a few Bible passages and not Coughlan's personal opinions or anything that would have required him to describe the procedure of finding out about this argument, he does not use the first person pronoun *I* at all. The absence of *I*'s means that the positioning of self in Coughlan's speech is not very overt, but instead, it is more built in what he says—in the actual pwnage. On the other hand, the interactional nature and the positioning of other become explicit in the use of the second

person pronouns in that Coughlan directs the arguments about religion toward Mitchell, for instance: “...according to **your** religion **your** body doesn’t belong to you...” (line 63).

5.6 The Third Pwnage Point

The third pwnage point occurs immediately after the second one. In the original video Jason denied that tattoos are forbidden in the Bible because the forbidding occurs only on one specific occasion. Coughlan proceeds to refute this claim by providing examples of other things that also occur only once in the Bible: “Uh, the creation of the universe, the world-wide flood, the virgin birth, and the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. These things only happened once, Jason. Do you mind if I throw them out the window too?” (lines 69–71). Thereby Coughlan argues that the reasoning for Mitchell’s claim is contradictory because there are other things in the Bible that are only mentioned once that Mitchell supposedly believes in. Coughlan presents this argument by listing, with a confident voice, four things that also appeared only once in the Bible, and then putting on a sarcastic smile and asking, indirectly and metaphorically, if Jason would accept the refutability of these points as well. The question at the end is portrayed as a polite and considerate question because of its modality (*do you mind*), but it is, again, sarcastic, which highlights Coughlan’s malevolently confident side in his atheist identity.

Nonetheless, Coughlan does not take into consideration the nature of these matters mentioned only once in the Bible. The Levitical passage forbidding tattoos is an explicit command (“Do not ... put tattoo marks on yourselves.”), whereas the things Coughlan mentioned are actual events that are described to have happened. Accordingly, these things are not necessarily comparable because they are different in nature. Coughlan’s word choice on line 71, “These things only **happened** once, Jason” reveals that perhaps Coughlan on some level was aware of the difference between things *happening* and *being mentioned*, but he did not express it explicitly because it would not have benefited his argument. Instead, he seized on what seemed like an easy statement to pwn: that everything mentioned in the Bible only once is not real. The use of the first person singular pronoun in the sarcastic question “Do you mind if **I** throw them out the window too?” is a rather strong manifestation of Coughlan’s identity because it highlights that it was Coughlan who proved Mitchell wrong in the tattoo issue, and he could do it again for other matters as well. However, when highlighting Coughlan’s identity, emphasis is taken away from the seriousness of this pwnage point: Coughlan himself “threw the proof out of the window” and it was not scientifically proven. Therefore, this time the emphasis is more on Coughlan than the reasoning behind the pwnage.

5.7 The Fourth Pwnage Point

The final pwnage point is also about tattoos, in this case specifically about the tattoo Mitchell has, which is the word *zealot* tattooed in his inner arm. According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, *zealot* (s.v.) is a noun and refers to *an immoderate, fanatical, or extremely zealous adherent to a cause, esp a religious one*. By having the tattoo on his arm Mitchell openly labels himself as a religious fanatic, in his case a Catholic Christian fanatic, and he admits to having a Christian tattoo. In response, Coughlan attacks the notion of a Christian tattoo: “You said it’s a Christian tattoo. Well, unfortunately I’ve got some news for you, mate” (lines 90–91). This statement is sarcastic and indirect because Coughlan does not actually think what he is about to say is unfortunate, but on the contrary, the illocutionary act behind the statement is that he is happy about the pwnage that he will do. In the following two sentences he makes references to his previous video about Mitchell: “You see, in a previous video I did expose you as a secret communist. Well, I’m about to go three steps further than that.” (lines 92–93). By this he is making implicit implications about the nature of the following arguments. Those who are familiar with the previous video to which Coughlan refers to, know that the arguments that led up to the claim that Mitchell is a secret communist were completely ungrounded, based on comic, random similarities found between Mitchell’s nickname *Molotov* and Russian communism. Thus, with the metaphorical expression “I’m about to go three steps further than that” it can be expected that what is to follow is even more ungrounded and funny, and not the least bit serious or intellectual. Indeed, the pwnage that follows is completely based on random similarities between the word *zealot* and Mitchell’s names’ initials. On line 93, Coughlan first begins by explaining the origin of the word *zealot*, which leads to ancient Jewish rebels who are used as one of the first examples of terrorism. From this information Coughlan draws a very generalizing assumption: “You’ve got a Jewish terrorist tattoo on your arm” (line 98). The deduction from the word’s original meaning to Jason’s tattoo is completely random and it is quite obvious that it should not be taken seriously, even though Coughlan expresses the statement with a serious tone. The nonseriousness of the argument was indicated already in the introduction to this pwnage point. Coughlan continues with this comic style by doing a Google search for the words *Jewish terrorism* and finding a website about Jewish terrorists who, in Coughlan’s interpretation, want to take over the world. Again, the search is made visible to viewers as its screen capture images are in the video. On the website he finds a list of Jewish communists, and on it a person by the name of *M. I. Gay*. Of this he draws another, even more ungrounded conclusion: “...M. I. Gay, which I think unquestionably must stand for Molotov Is Gay. ...

Irrefutable proof! Molotov Mitchell is a secret communist, Jewish closeted homosexual terrorist” (lines 107–109). To support this “proof,” Coughlan highlights it by flashing a picture of Mitchell after the *M. I. Gay* screen capture image.

In this final pwnage point, despite the obvious ungroundedness of Coughlan’s arguments, he presents his claims with a certainty that gives his presentation a humorous effect. The expression “Irrefutable proof!” (line 108) is ironically funny because the “proof” was anything but irrefutable. The proof was so ungrounded and random that it became funny, which was emphasized by Coughlan’s victorious exclamation. Similarly, for instance, he refers to the website about Jewish terrorists as “very reliable source, I’m sure” (line 103), when the source is clearly not reliable, at least in finding information about Mitchell. In general, this pwnage point can be categorized to funny pwnage that does not actually include counterarguments to the original video or person but instead is based on completely irrelevant, humorously motivated deductions meant to mock the target person. In this case, because the arguments are so unrealistic, the mockery against Mitchell is not very harsh—but on the other hand, the effect depends completely on the listener.

The humor in the pwnage is based on what Coughlan knows is perceived funny in the realm of his culture, particularly the culture of the YouTube atheist network. As regards, for example, the homosexuality accusation, to those who are familiar with Coughlan’s other videos know that he has spoken for gay marriage and the equality of different sexual orientations, so the accusation is not a mocking insult in the same way as, for example, the earlier “big bald fuck” insult (line 15). When using the homosexuality accusation toward Mitchell, he is using it possibly because he knows Mitchell does not approve of homosexuality and thus might be aggravated by such an accusation. Correspondingly, the other accusations might also be specifically targeted towards Mitchell’s ideology and not only made for general amusement—perhaps Mitchell has previously stated opinions against Jewishness and/or communism, and this is why Coughlan thought it would be more of a targeted insult toward Mitchell to call him a Jewish communist. However, this is only an assumption.

An overt positioning of both self and other can be seen in this pwnage point again with the use of second and first person pronouns, which in this case is rather frequent because Coughlan explains the procedure of coming to the pwnage conclusion. The second person pronoun *you* in addressing Mitchell is used more at the beginning of this point, where Coughlan addresses Mitchell in referring to their previous encounters. What is noteworthy in positioning the other and self, again, is that it is not done in the most essential part of the

pwnage (i.e., “Molotov Mitchell is a secret communicst, jewish closeted homosexual terrorist.”), but more in the metatextual part that is building up the final pwnage. This can be seen to indicate that leaving out the interactional nature of using *you*’s and *I*’s in the act of pwning makes the defeating of Mitchell more serious and thus more efficient.

With this final pwnage point, Coughlan is applying the same pwnage strategy as in the previous point: “proving” something right based on completely random deductions that he wanted to find, which is a strategy that he equates with Mitchell and his other religious opponents finding proof about anything they want based on their religion’s holy book. In other words, Coughlan seems to think Mitchell would find anything in the Bible because the rules in it are based on **interpretation**, so he also can interpret information in his own way and find “evidence” of anything he wants. The essence of this strategy is, thus, that because these proofs are not scientifically or logically motivated, they are not valid, and this is why Coughlan believes that atheism overrules Christianity. This pwnage strategy is a significant manifestation of Coughlan’s atheist identity because it highlights the fact that Coughlan knows he is the one who is right, being the atheist, and religiously motivated arguments are as good proof as jokes.

5.8 Video Ending

The concluding remarks that Coughlan ends the video with provide verbalized justifications for the pwnage points he made previously. He uses Mitchell’s final argument “And finally, if marking oneself is truly an abomination then why would God use the imagery of marking himself as a symbol of holiness in scripture?” (lines 110–111) to make the final conclusion. He begins by answering Jason’s question with: “Because maybe, just maybe, God isn’t there. Or at least the one you don’t think is there, or maybe the Bible is just full of shit. That’s just a throw out in the dark there, Jason” (lines 112–113). This answer can be seen as the most explicit manifestation of his atheist identity that is used in this video. It takes a different approach to the issue than his previous counterarguments by being clear both in terms of expression and message, and perhaps for the first time, being serious all the way to the neutral face expression. The sarcastic hedging elements, *maybe*’s, limit this a little, but the tone in which he pronounces them is clearly sarcastic and with this, the message of the possible inexistence of God is even more powerful. The overall tone of the statement is serious, which can also be sensed in Coughlan’s facial expression and in the lack of the liveliness that was present in the more humorous pwnage points. Previously, he did not at any point articulate that he is an atheist because he presumes that people who end up watching his videos already

know that his public image on YouTube is of an atheist YouTuber. Now, by verbalizing that he believes there is no God, and that he does not take the Bible seriously, the picture becomes clear.

Finally, Coughlan verbalizes the motivation for his counterarguments:

“But as I’ve just shown here. I can pull anything out of my ass just like you do, and make ev- you look just as bad as you want everyone else to look but the truth is, Jason, you are no better than the assholes I’ve mentioned to try and discredit you. They’re just as bigoted, they’re just as moronic and they’re just as evil, deep down in their heart” (lines 113–117).

Thus, as I mentioned a few times above, the reason why Coughlan’s counterarguments were so ungrounded and contradictory was that he thinks he created them on the same way that Mitchell created his, which in turn is Coughlan’s proof for Mitchell’s religion being wrong. Additionally, in this Coughlan expresses for the first time that he mocked Mitchell because Mitchell has mocked other people, in this case, apparently, his viewer Sam K. who sent the feedback to Mitchell’s show. This is indirectly expressed: “...and make... you look just as bad as you want everyone else to look...” (line 114–115), because the “you want everyone else to look” is a generalizing expression from Coughlan’s part. Possibly he refers to other people as well that Mitchell has criticized in his previous videos. With this, he keeps his serious tone that is growing to a degree of anger in the part where he accuses Mitchell of making everyone else look bad with his statements.

The video is ended with an angry remark that ends in a joke: “And that’s the great thing about people like you. Is watching you lot come along here and open your mouths. It’s like watching the movie Deep Throat. Eventually, you’ll all end up eating each other” (lines 117–119). Indirectly and sarcastically Coughlan expresses, presumably, that religious fanatics on YouTube always end up in a situation where the opponents are destroying one another. He uses a metaphor from a pornographic movie Deep Throat because the wording “eating each other” in the context of the movie refers to oral sex, but transferred to this context can be interpreted as destroying one another—thus the joke in it is based on sexual innuendo and word play. He might refer to himself as well in this statement because he is the opponent of Mitchell and did, in his own way, destroy Mitchell’s arguments in this video, but that is not explicit.

In the end, Coughlan concludes the video with his signature phrase that he uses to end all his videos: “Richard the Dick Coughlan, good night, may God be less” (lines 119–120). “May God be less” is based on word play from the original phrase “May God bless,” and because it declares the diminishing of God, it is directly related to Coughlan’s atheist identity.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the multiple new genres brought about by the video sharing website YouTube is the genre of argument pwnage, which involves an ideological, one-sided debate that is performed in the form of a video response. Argument pwnage is specifically popular among atheists on YouTube, who often target representatives of religions in their pwnages.

As I have shown in my analysis, the construction of atheist identity in an argument pwnage video occurs in a number of ways, and it is closely connected to the genre. In this specific video, the atheist character Coughlan's identity in the context of YouTube (and other social media) in general must be taken into consideration. He has made atheism related videos on YouTube for four years and has reached an audience of thousands of people who follow his videos, and he has reached a status of a popular YouTube atheist. The atheism is the most visible part of his image on YouTube, and it can be implied in, for instance, his user names, which features the number of the beast.

The video title *CockFail Vs. DickWins* will give an assumption of what the video entails and what position Coughlan has in it, but only to those viewers who have watched the previous videos and understand the intertextuality in the title. They will understand that in the video Coughlan will defeat Mitchell, that is, atheism will defeat Christianity. For a complete outsider the title does not give any clues about the social identity of Coughlan, or the content of the video.

The atheist identity is also built in how Coughlan positions the other in the interaction, the other in this case being his opponent and in the beginning the audience as well. The positioning of other can be observed in how and when Coughlan addresses the viewers and Mitchell. Coughlan speaks directly to his viewers but to his opponent, Mitchell, Coughlan speaks either rather indirectly and sarcastically, insultingly, or in such a serious tone it could be interpreted as anger. Hence, he is friendly to his fellow atheists but mean to his opponent, which emphasizes his position and identity in the video.

The three pwnage strategies used in the primary video included arguments about the target Christian contradicting himself in terms of his religion, completely random comical deductions made only to mock the target person and his opinions (such as homophobia), and exemplifications of being able to prove anything on the basis of different interpretations of the Bible, which is, in Coughlan's opinion, proof that Christianity is nonsensical. The last strategy was used in two out of four pwnage points, and it was applied in the comical strategy as well because the comical one also included making up "facts" based on merely subjective interpretation of things.

In terms of structure and meaning, the identity was manifested in the use of declarative speech acts, sarcasm, indirectness, and choice of words. The conclusion that can be drawn from the strategies and these elements is that the social atheist identity of Coughlan is highly dependent on antireligious arguments and sarcastic but humorous mockery that are built up with declarative speech acts and indirectness. The comedy is extremely relevant in Coughlan's identity and it can be seen as a framework for the other elements. Another framework is the ideology, atheism, that is present in everything Coughlan says, and that creates his determination to defeat the target, a Christian.

With this study I provided a closer look into a novel genre created online, argument pwnage, and ideologically based identity construction in a video belonging to the said genre. The study was grounded on discourse analysis principles and also took into account the technological side of the venue of publication. However, my focus was on the content and meaning of Coughlan's delivery, which excluded, for instance, extralinguistic factors contributing to his identity. In multimodal data, such as videos, facial expressions, intonation, and body language could be analyzed, but in this study I chose to leave those aspects out and focus on the content and linguistic presentation, which did provide understanding for why and how pwnage is done.

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8 APPENDIX

Transcript of the YouTube video Coughlan616: *CockFail Vs. DickWins*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZJX5Y3LyPk>

R = Richard Coughlan; J = Jason Mitchell

- 1 R: Hello ladies and gentlemen, Richard the Dick Coughlan. You know, earlier on, I watched a
2 movie, A Serbian Film.
- 3 R (0:08): But even that cannot compare to the horror I'm about to put you through. Let's go.
4 (0:12) ((For the Record intro plays))
- 5 R: Yes, it's my good friend Jason Mitchell, also known as Molotov Mitchell, or as I
6 christened him, Molotov Cockfail. I have in the past made several videos about him, there
7 were three primary ones, I'll leave links to them in the below bar. One of them is on this
8 channel, one of them is on my other channel, one of them is on the channel that mirrors some
9 of my videos. And he's a vile, horrible turd, as many of you may remember. For those of you
10 who don't remember, I highly recommend you check out some of the videos I did before
11 about the guy.
- 12 R (0:40): I was sent this video, which is called Tattoos – Are They Evil? Hmm. No, Jason, but
13 you are. And I thought I'd go through it because he makes some statements and he actually
14 makes references that can be linked back to some of my previous videos about him. So let's
15 go on, shall we. Come on Jason, you big bald fuck.
- 16 J (0:55): And now a bit of hate mail. Ooooh.
- 17 R: Don't act shocked that you get that stuff, mate.
- 18 J (1:01): "I've enjoyed Molotov Mitchell's series of Christian videos –"
- 19 R: What hate mail starts with "I've enjoyed"? My vid- my hate mail starts with "Hello, cunt
20 face. I hope you die in a car crash."
- 21 J (1:13): "But recently I've had a serious problem with him because in Molotov's video For
22 the Record: Gay" – hey, we don't have a video called For the Record: Gay.
- 23 R: Actually Jason, you're correct, you don't have a video called For the Record: Gay, at least
24 you don't have one anymore. You see, you used to have a video called For the Record: Gay, I
25 know because it was the first video of yours that I respond to. In fact, I respond to part one of
26 your videos called Gay. In that video, you made certain claims, such as "the murderers of
27 Matthew Shepard didn't do it because he was gay," even though they and their girlfriends
28 admitted to that. You've now retitled those videos Gay Politics. Even if you've changed the
29 title of those videos from Gay to Gay politics, if you do a Google search for *For the Record*

30 *Gay*, you'll see that this actually still comes up as being called *Gay* because the cache hasn't
31 changed yet. That's lie number one. Just so you know, Jason. You're a Christian. The ninth
32 commandment is not an option.

33 J (2:04): Anyway. "In the video *For the Record: Gay*, Molotov admits to having a zealot
34 tattoo –" By the way I've never admitted to having a zealot tattoo, I mean, I have it. ((shows
35 tattoo)) I don't admit it, I'm not like falling in the mercy of q-- I just have it. You can see it.

36 R (2:18): That is completely true. He has never admitted to it and he didn't admit it in any of
37 his videos. Believe me, I had to sit through and watch some of them. I don't remember who
38 wrote this hate mail, but fuck you. Just for making me have to sit through any more of this
39 bastard's videos. But I don't even think this is real hate mail. Simply for the fact that there's
40 just no swearing in it.

41 J (2:34): I also like alcohol and I don't have a problem with that. Jesus turned water into wine,
42 not grape juice.

43 R (2:39): ((facepalm gesture)) Oh god almighty... He also hung around with prostitutes, do
44 you do that as well? Don't answer, I don't wanna know what little boys you've been doing
45 things with. I've already watched *A Serbian Film*.

46 J (2:48): I've dealt with this from atheists for years, so -

47 R: I like the fact that he's now gone for "he's dealt with this from atheists," even though the
48 guy who wrote the letter was a "Christian."

49 J: For the record, this video is not really for Sam K., as much as it is to address the arguments
50 that atheists and pro-gay marriage people will use if you don't agree with them.

51 R (3:07): Aw, what, bringing up things you're supposed to do, based on the fact that they're
52 in the book that you claim to follow? A bugging annoying thing, ain't it.

53 J (3:16): First off, this argument against tattooing comes from this one obscure Levitical
54 passage. It's not mentioned in other parts of the Bible. If it was truly an abomination to get a
55 tattoo, as Sam seems to think it is, then it should've been mentioned more than once in the
56 scripture.

57 R (3:33): Wait wait wait... Jason you're kidding, right, that's your argument? Only occurs
58 once, therefore, it doesn't count! Now, the New Testament does not say anything about
59 whether or not a believer should or should not get a tattoo. First Corinthians 10:31 says: so
60 whether you eat or drink or do whatever you do, do it for the glory of God, or something like
61 that. So it doesn't say anything about against tattoos but it doesn't say anything for it either.
62 So there's no real evidence either way there. Evidence, in the Bible... But you have to
63 remember, Jason, that according to your religion your body doesn't belong to you, as neither

64 does your soul. It will be redeemed by God. It's technically a rental car. And when you tattoo
65 it, that's the equivalent to smearing a key along the side of it. (4:11) So unless you're doing it
66 technically for the glory of God, out of faith, and God doesn't mind, he's given you
67 permission, then there's nothing wrong with it. Did you ask God before, did you say, God, do
68 you mind if I can fuck this [inaudible] No. Also, this argument about things only
69 occurring once means they don't count. Uh, the creation of the universe, the world-wide
70 flood, the virgin birth, and the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. These things only
71 happened once, Jason. Do you mind if I throw them out the window too?

72 J (4:38): We should see examples of God, opening up the earth and swallowing cities of
73 people who corruptly mark themselves with tattoos. But we don't. We should see a passage
74 about a guy who took a spear and ran it through the one guy in the town who insisted on
75 getting these markings on his flesh, but we don't. And that leads into my second point.

76 R (4:58): So unless God kills people for things, they're not sins. Then what did God put them
77 here for? For laugh? God technically cannot lie. God technically cannot sin. But he does do
78 things he claims are sins if we do them. Doesn't that technically mean God could come down
79 here and suck a dick if he wanted? I'm just asking.

80 J (5:13): Sam's interpretation does not take into account the context of the passage –

81 R: Oh, context schmontext.

82 J: - which is specifically referring to demonic communion. Matthew Henry's commentary
83 corroborates this theory by explaining the ancient practice of tattooing the images of false
84 gods and demons at funerals upon the flesh of friends and relatives in order to earn protection
85 for the deceased in the afterlife.

86 R (5:40): Okay. Fair enough. I'll grant you that. You won this one. Hold on.

87 J: But Sam, getting Christian tattoos is probably not the sharpest way to bribe the demons into
88 being your bodyguards in the afterlife.

89 R (5:51): Aah! Christian tattoos. Well, that's where there's a problem here, sunshine.
90 Christian tattoos... You said you've got the word zealot tattooed in your arm. And you said
91 it's a Christian tattoo. Well, unfortunately I've got some news for you, mate. You see, in a
92 previous video I did expose you as a secret communist. Well, I'm about to go three steps
93 further than that. You see, zealotry was really a political movement in the first century's
94 second temple of Judaism, which incited people of the Judea promise to rebel against the
95 Roman Empire and expel them from a holy land. Most notably, during the great Jewish revolt
96 of the year 66 to 70, Josephus described zealotry as one of the "four sects" of its time. And in
97 the article I'll leave down there called The History of Terrorism, the zealots are used as one of

98 the first examples of terrorist organizations. You've got a jewish terrorist tattoo on your arm.
99 So, not only, Jason, are you a communist, but you're also a jew and a terrorist. We're not
100 doing very well there. So, what I did, just to see if I could find out any more about it, 'cause
101 you do a lot of stuff about gay people. I thought that was interesting. So I went to Google, and
102 I did a very simple bit of research, basic research, just typed in the words *jewish communism*.
103 And I came up to a website, very reliable source, I'm sure, it's the first one I found. It's called
104 Wake Up America. Nothing dodgy about it whatsoever. It's all about how jews, ah, jewish
105 communists are taking over. The planet, right. (7:09) I went to it and it would list all the
106 history of jews who were communists, or communists who were jews, which ever you prefer,
107 and there was a communist, jewish communist, called this: M. I. Gay, which I think
108 unquestionably must stand for Molotov Is Gay. [something] Irrefutable proof! Molotov
109 Mitchell is a secret communist, jewish closeted homosexual terrorist.

110 J (7:31): And finally, if marking oneself is truly an abomination then why would God use the
111 imagery of marking himself as a symbol of holiness in scripture?

112 R: Because maybe, just maybe, God isn't there. Or at least the one you don't think is there, or
113 maybe the Bible is just full of shit. That's just a throw in the dark there Jason. But as I've just
114 shown here. I can pull anything out of my ass just like you do, and make ev- you look just as
115 bad as you want everyone else to look but the truth is, Jason, you are no better than the
116 assholes I've mentioned to try and discredit you. They're just as bigoted, they're just as
117 moronic and they're just as evil, deep down in their heart. And that's the great thing about
118 people like you. Is watching you lot come along here and open your mouths. It's like
119 watching the movie Deep Throat. Eventually, you'll all end up eating each other. Richard the
120 Dick Coughlan 616, good night, may God be less.