

# Childhood's Funeral



Halloween in Isla Vista

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**Prelude:  
Finding Nemo on Del Playa**

**October 31, 2003.** It's approximately 11 p.m., and Isla Vista's Del Playa Drive is swarming with costumed revelers, the vast majority of whom are between the ages of 18 and 25. In fact, it's so crowded that maneuvering has become markedly difficult, the flow of traffic often slowing to a crawl or stopping altogether, particularly when some spontaneous theatrical occurrence erupts, such as an impromptu striptease or some other brand of sexual exhibitionism, a bit of comical drunken buffoonery (whether intentionally comical or otherwise), or a brawl of some kind. This is unquestionably a mob scene, and the presence of police officers – some mounted on horseback, some mingling among the throng – does little to abate the palpable threat of a stampede. In fact, the officers appear to be very much a part of the equation, a key ingredient in the atmosphere of chaotic excitement and rebellious excess that pervades the scene. The symbolic presence of authority serves as a constant reminder of the volatile, often hazardous potential of this annual gathering.

Unlike other annual festivals, there are no planned events here on Del Playa: no parades, no contests, no organized games to play or ceremonies to attend. The traditional activities, such as dressing up in a provocative costume, or going door to door in search of alcohol (the Isla Vistan perversion of traditional “trick-or-treating”), are few, and the rules of engagement are largely tacit and extraordinarily flexible. That is not to say, however, that nothing is *happening* here: on the contrary, there is drama unfurling in every direction. There are no designated “performers” to watch – every participant is at once entertainer and spectator, exhibitionist and voyeur, constantly engaging fellow

participants (and in this I include police officers, uniformed and otherwise), and being engaged by them, into parodic sketches of varying lengths. The subject of these sketches varies wildly, but most often hinges on three favored topics: sex, alcohol, and general disobedience. Examples abound; a quick survey of the nearby area reveals the following: a young Latina woman in a skimpy ‘Snow White’ costume is singing a sexually explicit song to a group of young men dressed as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, while her friends – a ‘cat’, a female ‘boxer’, and a ‘gangsta girl’ (so it says on her cut-off T-shirt) – cheer her on. Nearby, a ‘doctor’ is attempting to convince his ‘nurse’ that it’s “o.k.” for her to remove her shirt because he is a licensed “boobyologist,” while she counters that he has been drinking too much to be practicing medicine at the moment. Up on a balcony, a scantily-clad, tiara-topped ‘Princess’ is mooning the crowd below, where a man dressed as ‘Speedy Gonzales’ in an exaggerated poncho and oversized sombrero, is chanting “Turn around! Turn around!” and encouraging others to join him. On the sidewalk nearby, a young man in a flannel shirt is arguing with the police officer who is handcuffing him, protesting that he had only joined the fight in order to save his brother, who was “seriously getting his ass kicked”; an unidentified passerby calls the officer a “pig” and tells him to, “leave the poor guy alone.” An apparently intoxicated young woman in a Girl-scout uniform of exceedingly short length is arguing belligerently with an un-costumed friend, who is attempting to convince said ‘Girl-scout’ that she has had enough tequila for one evening. “Ffuckyou,” the ‘Girl-scout’ is slurring at her friend, “it’s fuckin’ Halloween, and I want another shot!”

Suddenly, from the midst of this “sea of humanity”<sup>1</sup> a piercing cry arises. “NEMO!” a male voice calls out, “It’s Nemo!” The crowd shifts as an Asian ‘sailor’ holding a video camera wades over toward where a young man dressed as “Nemo,”<sup>2</sup> is facing the opposite direction. “I have to find Nemo,” he explains to those he must push out of the way, some of whom turn to follow him, joining the quest. Having arrived, he calls out once more, “Nemo!” at which point the orange-and-black fish head turns to face the searching ‘sailor’ and his camera, revealing Filipino features, a loose-fitting orange tank-top, and an open container of Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Whiskey. “Oh my god,” declares the newfound ‘Nemo,’ “you fuckin’ found me, Dude!” The two strangers hug to the tune of a communal “awwwww”: a conscious, collective parody of so many sentimentalized Hollywood-ending reunions. Having played out their scene, the two unceremoniously part, carried off in opposite directions by the chaotic currents of the chuckling crowd.<sup>3</sup>

At a first glance, these overlapping performances may appear disconnected, incongruous – a chaotic collision of unrelated phenomena unnaturally forced to exist within the same time and place. Why are Nemo and Snow White sharing sidewalk space with strippers and pimps, drunken brawlers and arresting officers? Closer examination reveals common themes which begin to form a (semi-)coherent narrative: rebellion against authority through the carnivalesque arts of rule-breaking and taboo-twisting; the flagrant foregrounding of sexual desire, discovery and experimentation; the parodic

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<sup>1</sup> This image is taken from a quote by Sheriff’s commander Geoff Banks in William Overend, “Working to Tame the Wild Party,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 October, 2003: “It’s just a sea of humanity, a tide that flows back and forth, up and down Del Playa.”

<sup>2</sup> “Nemo,” a black and orange striped fish, is the protagonist of Pixar’s 2003 computer animated film *Finding Nemo*, directed by Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich.

<sup>3</sup> These images of the 2003 Halloween celebration have been compiled from video footage taken by UCSB student Bruce Gordon, and by the Isla Vista Foot Patrol, and from anecdotes shared by participants.

perversion and degradation of childhood games and fantasies; an exaggerated indulgence in alcohol and other substances forbidden to Americans in childhood; and a pervasive preoccupation with the creation and documentation of a sufficiently outrageous Halloween experience to carry into the increasingly isolated space of American adulthood. What once appeared to be an ordinary – if particularly popular – college party, is thus revealed as a ritual enactment of the transition between adolescence and adulthood in American society. At once a celebration of the fleeting freedom allowable before the onset of post-college productivity, and a lament over the loss of childhood innocence, Halloween in Isla Vista is much more than a gathering of costumed college students: it is a rite of passage to be enjoyed and endured, and above all emblemized as a pinnacle moment of what are commonly regarded to be “the best years” of an American’s life.

In fact, this is only one of the multiple meanings assigned to this vital cultural (and, at times, counter-cultural) performance: as I will argue, Halloween performs a variety of disparate, and at times contradictory, functions within the Isla Vista community. Yet this complex, multilayered college carnival is largely met with condescension – if not outright condemnation – from non-participants, who tend to dismiss the event as being little more than an annual excuse for binge drinking and destructive behavior. In this paper, I reclaim Halloween in Isla Vista, and the college culture of which it is a product and a reflection, as serious subjects of inquiry. Research on student culture has thus far primarily regarded manifestations such as the Del Playa street party (when it has regarded them at all) as problems to be solved, or as radical counter-cultural gestures to be glorified. I argue that they should instead be considered

cultural performances from which a great deal can be learned about the needs, desires, and fears of this increasingly vital sector of American society.

### **Halloween In Isla Vista: More Than Just a Party**

*“Halloween in Isla Vista is part Mardi Gras, part riot and part police state, with wholesome family fun lurking on the edges, trying to look brave.”*  
- Brendan Buhler (Staff writer, *Daily Nexus*)<sup>4</sup>

As UCSB (University of California, Santa Barbara) graduate Tiye Baldwin put it in her article for the *Daily Nexus*, “Party Like it’s 1989,” Halloween in Isla Vista is “more than just a party.”<sup>5</sup> Despite continual opposition from local authorities, University officials, and Isla Vista residents, this high-profile annual event has become a significant space of convergence for college students in search of entertainment. Rumored to have been listed as the number one place to spend Halloween by *Playboy* magazine in the 1980’s<sup>6</sup> the street party on Del Playa has at times attracted as many as 40,000 – 50,000 revelers over the course of Halloween weekend, most of them from University campuses in California and Arizona.<sup>7</sup> This enormous, outdoor costume party, the most prominent features of which are the conspicuous consumption of alcohol and rampant sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Brendan Buhler, “Why Are There [So] Many Cops In Isla Vista? A Brief History of Halloween in Isla Vista,” *Daily Nexus*, Wednesday, October 16, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Tiye Baldwin, “Party Like it’s 1989,” *Daily Nexus*, October 31, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Despite varied reports of a *Playboy* article published “in the late 1980’s” purportedly singing the praises of Halloween in Isla Vista, apparently stemming from mention of a “recent article” in *Playboy* in *The Daily Nexus* on November 2, 1987, I have ultimately concluded that this rumor is unfounded. After carefully combing through each and every issue of *Playboy* from the years 1985-1991, I can safely say that if such an article exists, it is certainly not obvious, even to those folks who do indeed read *Playboy* for the articles. Incidentally, UCSB did *not* appear – even as an honorable mention – in the January, 1987 *Playboy*’s list of the “Top Ten Party Schools.”

<sup>7</sup> The largest Halloween crowds recorded by the *Daily Nexus* were in 1987 (see Skelton, Veronica, “Halloween: What it is: What it Was: What it Shall Be,” Friday, October 28, 1988), and 1992 (see Epler, Kimberly, “Condoms, Cows, and Cretins,” Monday, November 2, 1992), and 2003 (see Daniel Haier, “I.V. Weekend Draws Diverse Crowd, Crime,” Monday, November 3, 2003). Notably, in all three cases, October 31<sup>st</sup> fell on a weekend.

promiscuity, is often cited as the origin of UCSB's current reputation as a "party school." As Cal Poly student Nick Hopping wrote in an editorial (the point of which, interestingly, was that Cal Poly ought to be working harder to maintain its Party School image):

At UC Santa Barbara, or the University of Casual Sex and Beer, one can cruise down to Isla Vista on virtually any night and find something to do (usually including a keg and scantily-clad ladies). It's impossible to even drive on Del Playa past 9 p.m. because the strip is packed with college students. That's why they're ranked No. 22 on [Playboy's] list [of the Top 25 Party Schools in the Nation].<sup>8</sup>

The university has worked tirelessly, and largely in vain, to dispel this Party School reputation.<sup>9</sup> "If our students are portrayed or perceived as behaving in irresponsible ways, it harms the reputation of our campus community," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. Yang goes on to say that he believes the majority of students are "disturbed" about the media coverage of the Isla Vista party scene because "they know we are a serious academic institution, and they know they are working hard to achieve their academic goals and to ensure future success in their chosen careers."<sup>10</sup> Isla Vista business owners are similarly quick to blame Halloween for the booze-and-sex-soaked reputation of their community. As Riccardo Fundament, owner of Dublin's Restaurant on Pardall Road put it: "Isla Vista gets a bum rap. Halloween gives it a stigma for the rest of the year that it doesn't deserve."<sup>11</sup> Current UCSB students and alumni, however, are quick to defend the Halloween celebration, and even the "party-school" reputation that accompanies it. Said Francis Burns, a political science major then residing on Del Playa,

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<sup>8</sup> Nick Hopping, "SLO Stops Party Before It Starts," *Mustang Daily*, October 16, 2002. To see Playboy's current list of the Top 25 Party Schools, go to: <http://www.playboy.com/on-campus/partyschool/04.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Haier, "Officials Urge Safe Partying to Protect Students, Reputation," *Daily Nexus*, Friday, October 31, 2003. NOTE: concerns over UCSB's reputation have been compounded in recent years by concerns over professional pornographers who have infiltrated the UCSB campus, throwing free beer parties in order to videotape students engaging in sexual activity (see William Overend, "Working to Tame the Wild Party," *Los Angeles Times*, Thursday, October 23, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Haier, "Officials..." *Daily Nexus*, Fri. Oct. 31, 2003.

“Halloween is part of our culture here... [it’s] just part of I.V.”<sup>12</sup> Alumnus Baldwin goes even further, stating that

It's hard to explain, but Halloween was more than just a party; it was our flagship event. I.V. was ground zero for fun and everybody in the world seemed to know it. It was a thing of pride - not just your average partiers, we tore the roof off. As my friend Dan Umana put it, "UCSB reveled in its reputation as a party school; we were in the top three party schools." That's competitiveness on a national level.<sup>13</sup>

These and other attitudes and opinions reflected in *The Daily Nexus* over the years suggest that anxiety over UCSB’s reputation, and Halloween’s part in it, is much more pronounced among university administrators than among students or alumni. Students may be quick to complain that “wandering up and down Del Playa... [gets] old super fast,”<sup>14</sup> however, they are equally quick to defend their party from accusations that it is no longer the raucous romp it once was. Said current UCSB student Tyler Whalen, “I hate how everyone older is like, ‘it’s bad,’ ‘the party’s over’... I don’t see what’s wrong with it. Everyone is there to party and have a good time. That’s all it is.”<sup>15</sup> Though Halloween parties thrown in the bars and night clubs of downtown Santa Barbara’s State Street have begun to offer viable competition to the Del Playa street party, the relative crowd density at the 2003 Isla Vista celebration suggests that the open-air festival is still the preferred way to spend the holiday (particularly for those who are not yet 21 and are therefore barred from entering the downtown clubs).<sup>16</sup>

Despite ongoing concerns over the impact of the annual Isla Vista bash on UCSB’s reputation, the university’s official stance regarding Halloween remains

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tiye Baldwin, “Party Like it’s 1989,” *Daily Nexus*, Thursday, October 31, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Questionnaire, “Courtney”.

<sup>15</sup> Questionnaire, Tyler Whalen.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Adams, “Downtown was Refuge from DP,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, November 1, 1991.



ambiguous. When asked for an opinion about Halloween in Isla Vista, most university officials will proclaim themselves to be in favor of a “responsible” celebration. “The bottom line is that we are concerned for the safety of our students,” Associate Dean of Students Carolyn Buford told *Nexus* reporters, but insisted that no one was trying to keep anyone from enjoying the festivities.<sup>17</sup> Said Chancellor Yang, “We do not wish to dictate our students’ behavior or to prevent the people of Isla Vista from having a good time on Halloween; We do want to protect our students by promoting a safe and law-abiding environment where everyone can be free to enjoy themselves responsibly.” In fact, two years earlier, Yang told *Daily Nexus* reporter Marisa Lagos that he and his wife, Dilling “have been walking on Del Playa every Halloween since we’ve been at UCSB. We always look forward to it.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, local police paint a generally rosy picture of their relationship with UCSB students. “Well over half of our contacts and interaction with groups are positive,” Isla Vista Foot Patrol Sgt. Tom Walton said. They, too, profess as their major concern the safety of the revelers, aiming not to shut down the party altogether, but merely to make it less dangerous, more controlled. Said UCPD Corporal Molitor of the 2003 Halloween party: “There were a lot more people who we could have cited or arrested, but because of the crowds, safety came first.”<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to this ubiquitous, laissez faire rhetoric, however, apparent steps have been taken toward shutting down, or at least severely restricting, the Halloween festivities. In 1988, for example, the Office of Residential Life instated a policy limiting the number of guests allowed during Halloween weekend to 100 per residence hall, as

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<sup>17</sup> Devon Flannery, “I.V. Halloween Review Faults Visiting Revelers,” *Daily Nexus*, Wednesday, November 12, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Marisa Lagos, “Foot Patrol Anticipates Big Crowd,” *Daily Nexus*, October 31, 2001. Footage of Chancellor Yang and his wife on Del Playa can be seen on I.V. T.V.’s “Halloween [2000]” episode.

opposed to the previous policy of one guest per resident.<sup>20</sup> Other policies intended to control the influx of out-of-towners, who are often blamed for the increased crime rate during Halloween, include parking restrictions, warning letters sent to 115 colleges throughout California and Arizona, and barricades around Del Playa and nearby Sabado Tarde, which can only be crossed by providing proof of residency.<sup>21</sup> Following the 1992 Halloween celebration, which attracted an estimated 40,000 revelers, local police drafted a “Five Year” plan to reel in the rowdiness. A “No Tolerance” policy was adopted that year, asserting that anyone caught breaking the law must be arrested, and the University inducted the help of the media to warn potential partygoers from out-of-town of the stricter policies in place.<sup>22</sup> The No Tolerance policy was still in place on Halloween, 2003, though police ceased to refer to it as the Five Year plan after its seventh year of successfully curbing attendance. As one Isla Vista Foot Patrol put it in an inspired statement that could easily pass for the opening lines of a rap song: “Safe and sane, you know, keep it home grown that’s the name of the game; keep the out-of-towners away and let’s just have a lot of fun, that’s all I have to say.”<sup>23</sup>

Though the majority of the university’s efforts have been placed on reducing the number of out-of-town visitors, direct action has also been taken to discourage UCSB students themselves from attending: in anticipation of increased crowds due to a Friday-falling Halloween in 2003, the Office of Student Life sent out a university-wide email

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Haier, “I.V. Weekend Draws Diverse Crowd, Crime,” Monday, November 3, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Maxwell C. Donnelly, “Halloween Antics Bring Fun and Danger: Isla Vista Revelers Get Just a Tad Bit Wacky,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday, October 30, 1989: 4.

<sup>21</sup> Devon Flannery, “I.V. Halloween Review Faults Visiting Revelers,” *Daily Nexus*, Wednesday, November 12, 2003; Allen Cottrell, “Officials Hope Precautions Lead to Safe Halloween Weekend,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, October 28, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Sato, “Police, UCSB Attempt to Ward Off Invasion: Media Helps to Spread ‘No Tolerance’ Message,” *Daily Nexus*, Thursday, October 28, 1993: 1. “College Media React to Weekend Laws,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, October 29, 1993: 3.

attempting to discourage students from participating in the Del Playa street party. The email, whose subject line read “The party is over,” sought “to inform [students] about possible fines, penalties and county ordinances and laws that [students] may very well face if [they] are in Isla Vista for Halloween this year.” In the second paragraph was written, “There is NO party.”<sup>24</sup> Ironically, this ostensible “cancellation” of the Halloween party appears to have fueled determination of the revelers. Current UCSB student Christina Ossa noted that, prior to receiving the e-mail, which she described as “threatening” in tone, she hadn’t yet decided whether or not she wanted to go to Del Playa for Halloween. After reading the email, however, she became determined not only to go, but to talk her friends into joining her.<sup>25</sup> Sophomore Carrie Awalt echoed this sentiment during a recent interview, saying that the email brought out her inner “warrior”: although it is stated in her lease that guests are not allowed during Halloween weekend, she decided, after having read the email, to invite friends in from out of town. When asked how she thought most students reacted, she replied, “I think pretty much everybody deletes it.”<sup>26</sup> Judging from informal discussions with other students, I would have to agree with Awalt’s assessment: the warning was largely ignored, if not taken as an outright dare.

The persistence of the Isla Vista Halloween party in the face of continual contestation is significant, in that it parallels the history of annual street parties in other parts of the world, notably the Trinidad Carnival. In sifting through the archives at *The Daily Nexus*, UCSB’s student-run newspaper, I was repeatedly struck by a dual sense of

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<sup>23</sup> I.V. T.V., “Halloween (2000)”.

<sup>24</sup> Haier, “Officials...” *Daily Nexus*, Fri. Oct. 31, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Questionnaire, Christina Ossa.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, February 19, 2003.

*déjà-vu*: the continual complaints from authorities and community members about the raucous festivities, the repetitive, nostalgic declarations that this year's party was no match for the celebrations of "years past," and the endless struggle to regulate the more violent and vulgar aspects of the celebration were all strongly reminiscent of the history of the Trinidad carnival, as documented by authors such as John Cowley and Richard D.E. Burton.<sup>27</sup> As Halloween in Isla Vista has not yet collected the kind of historical legacy characteristic of the world's best-known carnival masquerades, it lacks both the semiotic richness and the organizational infrastructure under-girding events like the Trinidad carnival and the Mardi Gras festival in New Orleans. However, I will argue that Halloween in I.V. takes root in the same carnivalesque tradition that produced these older, more established festivals, and that by studying the particularities of the Isla Vista festivities, we can begin to grasp the specific ways in which the carnivalesque manifests itself in contemporary American popular culture.

The notion of the carnivalesque was most famously theorized by Russian writer Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) as a celebration providing "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" that "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival," wrote Bakhtin, "was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed."<sup>28</sup> He argued that through "gay relativity," or the temporary suspension of social hierarchy, and "grotesque realism," or an exaggerated emphasis on the materiality of the physical body, carnival is able to provide participants

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<sup>27</sup> John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay, and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Richard D.E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup>Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968): 10.

with a “second life,” one “organized on the basis of laughter,” and capable of challenging the sanctioned reality of the first.<sup>29</sup> By exploring various aspects of the legendary street party enacted every year in Isla Vista, I hope to provide readers with a clearer understanding of how this event functions, within its particular cultural and geographical context, as a carnivalesque festival.<sup>30</sup> To facilitate this endeavor, in addition to my exploration of the theoretical debates surrounding the carnivalesque, I have done extensive archival research at *The Daily Nexus*, conducted interviews with participants, distributed a questionnaire (which I have included here as Appendix A), reviewed video footage of the event, and of the Isla Vista party scene more generally (some taken by students or alumni, some taken by police officers), and followed news coverage of similar events around the United States. I have also participated in the Halloween festivities, once in Isla Vista (2001), and once in downtown Santa Barbara (2003), for comparative purposes. It is my hope that this research will help to clarify the purpose of this much-misunderstood and oft-maligned event, by articulating the needs it appears to fulfill for the Isla Vista community.

**“It was great rioting with you”:  
Evolution of a Ritual Rebellion**

*“Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible.”*

- Umberto Eco<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid: 8.

<sup>30</sup>Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne explain in *Masks of Play* (New York: Leisure Press, 1985) that carnivalesque festivals provide a useful metacommunication about the society of which they are a creation and a reflection by producing an “inverse text” of the community’s norms and standards through their exaggerated reversal. A useful image here might be a photographic negative: although the color scheme has been inverted, the picture remains intact. This conceptualization of carnival as a direct reversal of social norms is, however, of limited use in this case, since, as we shall see, Halloween in I.V. is also read as a necessary rite of passage and a ritual contest between chaos and order, youth and authority.

<sup>31</sup> Umberto Eco, “The frames of comic ‘freedom’,” in Umberto Eco, V.V. Ivanov, and Monica Rector, *Carnival!* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985).

The Halloween scene on Del Playa in 2003, when 100 police officers were reportedly on duty, 20 of them on horseback, belies the reality of a time when the police presence at this annual event was minimal. As Tiye Baldwin wrote of her late-80's Halloween experience:

Sure, there were police back then. There was even a police command post and paddy wagons set up on El Colegio, but you wouldn't get to ride in one merely for public intoxication. In fact, I never knew anyone who got in trouble. When I read about how many people got arrested and did bad stuff back then, I don't remember that part. Either I got lucky and missed it, or was having too much fun to notice.<sup>32</sup>

Although there have always been some police patrolling Del Playa during Halloween, the number of officers on duty has drastically increased in the past 25 years. Before exploring how and why this change occurred, and how the increased police presence has affected the Halloween celebration over the years, it will be necessary to understand the symbiotic relationship of authority and the carnivalesque.

Although the carnivalesque has always been connected with rule-breaking and (temporary) reversal of authority, there is long-standing debate as to whether it ultimately undermines or reaffirms the existing social order. Bakhtin saw the inversions, subversions, degradations, and exaggerations of carnival as revolutionary in spirit, able to liberate participants through the ritual reversal of accepted order.<sup>33</sup> This potential has been questioned by critics such as Simon Dentith and Umberto Eco, who instead see the temporary reversal of order allowed during carnival as an ultimately conservative force. Dentith, for example, emphasizes the mainstreaming function of many carnivalesque celebrations such as the medieval *charivari*, whose focus was on humiliating those who had transgressed the norms of a given community. “The carnival inversions, the world-

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<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, “Party...” *Daily Nexus*, Thurs., Oct. 31, 2002.

turned-upside-down of these festivities, were clearly not aimed at loosening people's sense of the rightness of the rules which kept the world the right way up, but on the contrary at reinforcing them."<sup>34</sup> Eco echoes this sentiment, and extends it to encompass all carnivalesque activities:

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm to appreciate their transgression. [...] The prerequisites of a 'good' carnival are: (i) the law must be so pervasively and profoundly introjected as to be overwhelmingly present at the moment of its violation [...], (ii) the moment of carnivalization must be very short, and allowed only once a year [...]; an everlasting carnival does not work: an entire year of ritual observance is needed in order to make the transgression enjoyable. [...] In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, according to Eco, the authorized transgressions of carnival serve to reinforce authority. This is illustrated, he argues, by the compliance of those in power: by agreeing to be parodied, they are in fact affirming their dominant position. If, on the other hand, those in authority are taken by surprise, or some *unauthorized* carnivalization unexpectedly occurs within the space-time of the "real" – i.e. quotidian life, "it is interpreted as a revolution," and quickly shut down.

Interestingly, the first example of revolutionary activity listed by Eco is "campus confrontations," followed by "ghetto riots."<sup>36</sup> Isla Vista's political demonstrations of the late 1960's and early 1970's, notably the burning of the Bank of America in February of 1970,<sup>37</sup> have earned the community a reputation for unauthorized transgression not soon

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<sup>33</sup> See Bakhtin, 1968.

<sup>34</sup> Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 74.

<sup>35</sup> Eco, 1985: 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*: 7.

<sup>37</sup> During a politically motivated riot on the night of Wednesday, February 25, 1970, UCSB students set fire to the Bank of America in Isla Vista. For more information on this incident, and the protest culture in Isla

forgotten, nor forgiven, by local authorities. Furthermore, the heavily student-populated community of Isla Vista suffers from overcrowding, low median income, chronic neglect, and rampant petty crime and sexual assault. Professors Catherine Cole and Harry Nelson, co-chairs of UCSB's "Isla Vista Action Group" wrote in a recent editorial encouraging their fellow professors to take action to improve the quality of life in Isla Vista that:

The overall crime rate in I.V. exceeds that of the surrounding area by 500 percent, and the rate of reported sexual assault is 400 percent higher. There are 22 liquor licenses in I.V. where much of the population is not of legal drinking age. The quality of the building construction in rental units is often substandard, and students complain of high rents, termites, unfairly seized deposits, and noise pollution that is unbearable.<sup>38</sup>

In short, despite the fact that many of the (temporary) residents are from upper-middle class families, the "ghetto" label does in fact fit.<sup>39</sup> Therefore all "authorized" transgressions in Isla Vista are only grudgingly granted, with a great effort made at containing and controlling the festivities.

The threat of Halloween in Isla Vista degenerating into a riot is an idle one: the 1978 and 1979 so-called Halloween "mini-riots" set a historical precedent for violence against police officers, one which has found contemporary reflection in rioting at similar events on other college campuses.<sup>40</sup> On Saturday, October 28, 1978, the 4 officers on duty in Isla Vista were called in on a routine complaint of loud music. When the officers asked to speak to those responsible for the music in question, someone from the crowd

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Vista during the 1970's more generally, see Malcolm Gault-Williams, *Don't Bank on Amerika* (Santa Barbara: Malcolm Gault-Williams, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Cole and Harry Nelson, "Faculty Must Become Part of I.V.'s 'Solution'," *93106*, Vol. 14, no. 12, March 1, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> The ghettoization of Isla Vista is a topic currently being addressed by the Isla Vista Action Group, co-chaired by Professors Catherine Cole (Dramatic Art) and Harry Nelson (Physics).

<sup>40</sup> In 2003, rioting broke out at the University of Wisconsin, Madison's annual "Killer (Halloween) Party," and at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo's Mardi Gras. This connection is explored more explicitly in my conclusion.



threw a bottle at one of the officers, grazing his head. More bottles followed, and additional police were called in, decked out in riot gear. The crowd was ordered to disperse around 11 p.m., much to the confusion and bewilderment of the majority of the revelers, who had thus far remained blissfully ignorant of the situation. Although eyewitness reports vary, the following events do appear to have been corroborated: one officer was injured by a bottle thrown from the crowd, and many of the revelers taunted the officers and threw various objects at them; an officer pulled a young woman out of her car by the hair and threw her up against the side of said vehicle; two officers broke the window of a house and dragged out a young man suspected of throwing bottles at the officers; and two young women were pulled from another house in “a very brutal manner.”<sup>41</sup>

The most interesting aspect of the 1978 riot, however, was not so much what actually happened, but how it later became contextualized by those who had been involved. The issue of the *Daily Nexus* immediately following the riot (Monday, Oct. 30) offered diverse, and often conflicting, readings of the event, roughly divisible into two major camps: those that framed the riot as a form of political protest, and those that emphasized its theatricality, preferring to read the event as yet another moment of Halloween mayhem.

“It was the old story of US against THEM,” wrote *Nexus* contributor Marnie Webster, “the innocently idealistic college students against the regimented, law abiding cop. What sixties fanatic could ask for anything more?” Whether or not Webster actually considers herself to be a “sixties fanatic,” she does appear to equate the ’78

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<sup>41</sup> Kim Kavanagh and Kim Green, “Disagreements on Accounts of DP Mini-Riot,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday, Oct. 30, 1978.

Halloween riot with Isla Vista's late 1960's political protests. In fact, Webster claims to have heard rioters shouting "why not burn the bank?" as the crowd advanced and retreated, alternately chasing, and being chased by, the police. Noteworthy also is her depiction of the event as a clash of dichotomous forces: that of innocent idealism versus law-abiding regimentation. Other descriptions feature similar dichotomous framing, liberally sprinkled with direct comparisons between the Halloween riots and political protests at UC Berkeley and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, coverage of Halloween in *The Daily Nexus* appears to be contingent on the absence of overt political activity. For example, in the 1969, 1970, 1974, 1976, 1982 and 1984 October issues of the *Nexus*, all of which are saturated with political content, offer little or no coverage of the Halloween festivities in Isla Vista.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, even when it is not explicitly contextualized as a politically motivated event, Halloween in Isla Vista does appear to be understood, within the lore of the UCSB community, as an event imbued with an anti-authoritarian energy potentially equal to that of political protest.

These readings take rioting to be what James C. Scott referred to as "a privileged peek backstage... a rupture in the performance" of the *public transcript* – "a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" – that is daily played out between police officers and Isla Vista residents.<sup>44</sup> As such, this reading paints the student population not as willing conspirators in their own oppression,

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<sup>42</sup> Kim Kavanagh and Kim Green, "Del Playa Becomes a Halloween Riot," and "Disagreements..." *Daily Nexus*, Monday, October 30, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> The 1969 Halloween issue is preoccupied with the arrest of several student protesters in Berkeley, and despite a brief historical exploration of Halloween as a holiday, no mention is made of the Isla Vista celebration. Halloween isn't mentioned at all in the 1974 and 1976 issues, which again are preoccupied with stories about political protest. The Monday, November 1, 1982 issue of the *Nexus* features a cover story entitled, "Students Picket at IV Market." Halloween is not mentioned until Wednesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when a photo page is printed with no additional commentary. The 1984 October 31 issue is preoccupied with upcoming elections, and again offers no coverage of Halloween festivities.

but as clever performers who are well aware of their situation, but choose to wait for the opportune moment – for example, Halloween night – to express their normally-disguised indignation and rage. The implication, then, is that the “masquerade” of Halloween is in fact *less* of a masquerade than the everyday social reality of these students, the endless stream of requisite prostrations and subjugations to this often archaically hierarchical system of academia. I would warn, however, that the temptation to view the Halloween rioting as a hidden transcript made public is one that should be resisted: there are many aspects of the event that suggest that this, too, is a public transcript. As Scott notes, “the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall.”<sup>45</sup> Although Halloween in Isla Vista generally, and the riots more specifically, do create a space and a time during which the struggle between hidden and public transcripts can publicly battle for visibility, I am skeptical that the two can be so easily extricated from one another. Indeed, the mutual aggression expressed between officers and students often appears to be the public, rather than the hidden transcript: an anticipated interaction between “radical” college students and “regimented” police officers. The hidden transcript would then be their complicity and their interdependence, occasionally glimpsed in moments when officers and students forget to play their respective roles and begin to enjoy themselves in unison. That the desires of those in a position to dominate are perhaps not so far from the desires of the subjugated is, I would argue, a far more subversive notion than the rather trite diametrical opposition of youthful libertinism to law-bound conservatism.

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<sup>44</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990): 4, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

The second, and ultimately more radical reading of the Del Playa street-theatre, views it as capable of subsuming even the “real” opposition between the authorities and the marginalized revelers into the sweeping scope of its pervasive pretense. *Nexus* staffer Meg McCandless’ observation that, during the Halloween riot, the confusion had been compounded by “a lot of party goers dressed as policemen, as the Beverly Hills Police,” suggests that the theatricality of the Halloween setting made it difficult to distinguish where play ended and genuine conflict began. “It was hard to tell the real police from the costumed police,” said McCandless.<sup>46</sup> Mitchell M. Gaswirth’s editorial, “Night on the Town,” goes even further, arguing that the riot was quickly and easily re-contextualized by the revelers as an exciting, and not altogether undesirable part of the festivities.

People were out there for fun before the cops arrived; but they were out there for excitement afterwards. People were truly bummed when the cops high-tailed it down Camino Del Sur. A few bottles followed the retreating cars, but people were hoping they’d return, maybe with tear gas so we could have a real riot. As the crowd at the corner of Sabado Tarde and Camino Del Sur sipped and smoked their separate ways, one could tell that the whole arrangement was just a joke. Hey, somebody hired those guys to dress as cops for a Halloween party, right? “Later man, it was great rioting with you.” “Right, see ya in history.”<sup>47</sup>

By calling into question the “reality” of the riot, Gaswirth is able to reframe it as an eruption of spontaneous drama which, although unprecedented, was hardly incompatible with the spirit of the celebration itself. In doing so, he is not only subverting the official reading of this event as a genuine conflict between the authorities and the revelers, but actually re-contextualizing it as a successful Halloween prank, perpetrated and enjoyed by the revelers themselves. The authorities are thus written out of the equation

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Although the “history” Gaswirth refers to here is likely a class he and his interlocutor will attend together the following Monday, the phrase provides an interesting *double entendre*: although the two appear to doubt, at least on some level, the reality of the event in which they have taken part, they are nonetheless aware of its significance. They are, in fact, “in history” now, along with everyone else who took part in that riot. Mitchell M. Gaswirth, “Night on the Town,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday October 30, 1978.

altogether, their presence having already been consumed and digested by the voracious imagination of the party-going public.

As if the '78 riot's theatricality were not already sufficiently apparent, the following Halloween, it was given a repeat performance. In contrast to the spontaneous eruption of the '78 disturbance, the '79 re-enactment appears to have been an intentionally staged, and much-anticipated event: flyers were actually printed up and distributed at SBCC and local high schools inviting students to "come to a mini-riot on Halloween." Revelers did in fact throw rocks and bottles at police, but, predictably, they were met with more organized resistance than the year before, and were quickly shut down. Twenty people, including five juveniles, were arrested during the 1979 Halloween weekend, and the trouble was later blamed on "drunk high school students," who were apparently trying to mimic the UCSB rioters from the year before.

Since that time, the police presence at Halloween in Isla Vista has risen steadily, and the tension between officers and revelers has become an anticipated part of the festivities. Concerns over "the role of law enforcement in our (Isla Vista) community," such as that expressed by Paul Brown in an editorial first published on Thursday, November 6, 1980,<sup>48</sup> have become standard fare in *The Daily Nexus* at Halloween time, and made frequent appearances in the questionnaire responses I received.<sup>49</sup> The major complaints students lodge against the police appear to be, first, that they are too quick to

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<sup>48</sup> Citing the "over-exuberance" of alcohol-related write-ups, particularly during Halloween, Brown insisted that local police must recognize the different needs of the Isla Vista community, as opposed to Goleta or Santa Barbara. Paul Brown, "OPINION: Halloween," *Daily Nexus*, Thursday, November 6, 1980, longer version printed on Monday, November 10, 1980.

<sup>49</sup> Christina Ossa, for example, said that although she was "glad to see the security precautions taken," she "did have more concern about the authority Halloween weekend. My roommates got busted this year with MIPs when they were bringing the keg for our party and I saw several people receiving citations. I also witnessed a fight, which the officers failed to break up or even notice."

give alcohol-related citations during Halloween, second, that their presence comes off as being more threatening than comforting, and third, that they are unable, or unwilling to alleviate the real problems of Halloween (i.e. sexual assault, vandalism, and stampeding).

I cite the following statement made by a UCSB student regarding her experience during the 2003 Del Playa street party:

On Halloween I went out with some friends to Del Playa. [...] There were huge crowds and the only way to get down the street was by going with the flow of traffic. The night was fine until my friends and I got to an area where a girl was stripping on top of a car. This caused people to stop moving and we were stuck where we were. Soon this area became bottlenecked and no one could get out. A panic followed as people realized they were trapped. People began to push and even hit. Others were still coming into the area and forcing people out of their way, causing even more of a problem. I found myself smashed against a car. At one point I was kicked and the only reason I didn't fall to the ground was that the bodies were so close to me that they held me up. Then I was slammed into the car again. I felt myself get elbowed and I began to fear that my legs would get seriously hurt. I heard people screaming and I saw a guy in a Superman costume jump on top of a near by car. He yelled as loud as he could "Get off of my girl! You're crushing her! Let her out!" I felt several bodies land on top of me, crushing my body against the car so that I couldn't breathe. I screamed. Finally someone on the other side of the car helped me to get over it and onto the side walk. I started to head out of the area. I saw some police officers standing together by one of the lights they had put up. I told them that people were getting hurt and panicking nearby. I was so scared at that point that I was shaking and near tears. They shrugged at me and said "We can't do anything about that." I ended up going home without a clue where my friends were and very angry at the people who said they were there to protect us.<sup>50</sup>

It should be noted that although the author of this testimonial clearly blames the police for failing to protect the revelers, the story does provide compelling support for the need to reduce crowd density, which has indeed been the focus of most of the policies and planning by local law enforcement and the University.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Taken from an email forwarded from Catherine Cole; the student's name was not included.

<sup>51</sup>I can't help but note that the crowded conditions on Del Playa, which law officials cite as the most dangerous aspect of the celebration, is at least partly due to the surrounding community's desire to see Halloween corralled; in other words, kept out of the backyards of the (largely wealthy) population of the city of Santa Barbara. Downtown festivities are thus confined to the commercial space of bars and clubs, while the Isla Vista celebration, like the "Isla Vista problem" more generally, has become quarantined onto two parallel streets: Del Playa Drive and Sabado Tarde (though the major concentration of people is still on Del Playa). If an effort were to be made to spread out the festivities, say by offering sanctioned

There is apparently little agreement among community members as to what local police should and should not be doing in Isla Vista, particularly on Halloween, and how they ought to be going about it. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the police presence has become thoroughly absorbed – if not wholeheartedly accepted – into the structure of the Halloween event. As easily as it can be read as a costume party, or as *anything*, for that matter, Halloween in Isla Vista can be understood as a ritual drama enacting the clash between youth and authority. In addition to the various *Daily Nexus* contributors who have chosen to frame the event as staged resistance to authority, the authorities themselves largely appear to have adopted this same reading. The majority of the (uniformed) officers in attendance apparently approach the moment of Halloween, and their role therein, with a gravity that often seems out of place on such a festive occasion. “I don’t find much of what went on funny at all,” Sergeant Bill Turner of the Santa Barbara Sheriff’s department told *Nexus* reporter Jeff Lupo, “There were years when we were outnumbered 300 to one... It was very scary at times.”<sup>52</sup> V.V. Ivanov’s description of the carnivalesque as “moments in the seasonal cycle” during which people “occupying inferior position, exercise ritual authority over their superiors,” includes the following caveat: “The latter in turn (...) must accept their ritual degradation with good will.”<sup>53</sup> Whether or not they can be said to be doing their job as peacekeepers, the officers patrolling I.V. during Halloween, with a few notable exceptions,<sup>54</sup> certainly do

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entertainment in nearby Anis’q Oyo park, the danger of stampeding would be considerably lessened, and officers would be better able to circulate among revelers and assist those in need of attention.

<sup>52</sup> Jeff Lupo, “Halloween in Isla Vista,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, October 29, 1999: 4.

<sup>53</sup> V.V. Ivanov, “The semiotic theory of carnival as the inversion of bipolar opposites,” trans. R. Reeder and J. Rostinsky, in Umberto Eco et al, 1985.

<sup>54</sup> I did witness a handful of officers who appeared to be enjoying themselves, and even a couple who were willing to take pictures for groups of revelers if asked nicely. There appears to have been considerably more good humor among officers in the past -- for example, in the Wednesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1982 issue

not appear to take the ritual opposition of the revelers with the requisite “good will.” Current UCSB student Jenn Lotz, who has only recently relocated from her hometown of New Orleans, noted that local police, in stark contrast to the mounted officers patrolling Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras, seemed, “very serious [and] very much on guard. None of them seemed happy about the situation at all.” Lotz went on to say that the police officers in Isla Vista “didn’t seem as friendly” as in New Orleans. “You felt like more they were your enemy than they were your friend,” said Lotz; “There just seemed to be a lot of animosity toward the college students.”<sup>55</sup> This “animosity” appears to be more or less mutual, as evidenced by the following impromptu student rap, captured on I.V. T.V.: “Come on party people, put your finger in the air, and yell out FUCK THE ISLA VISTA FOOT PATROL AND WE DON’T CARE!”<sup>56</sup> Judging by the cheering that followed, this attitude would appear to be a popular one on the streets of I.V. However, as Lotz noted, women do appear to be more tolerant regarding the presence of authority figures, probably due to their sense of physical vulnerability, often exacerbated by revealing and/or restrictive costumes.<sup>57</sup>

The effect of that animosity is an ambient tension that permeates the whole event with a sense of epic, ongoing conflict; every interaction between police and participants is charged with a volatile energy rife with violent potential, and heavy with history. As in all carnivalesque celebrations, the enjoyment of the Halloween festivities comes through

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of the *Nexus*, a photo page features two police officers who are holding up score cards to indicate their opinions about the various costumes, and looking very jovial indeed.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, Wednesday March 3, 2004.

<sup>56</sup> I.V. T.V., “Halloween [2000]”.

<sup>57</sup> Costumes are discussed in more detail in the following section. Here I should note that the threat of sexual assault is a very real one in Isla Vista, particularly during Halloween: the rate of forcible sexual assault in Isla Vista exceeds that of the county by a factor of four (Catherine Cole and Harry Nelson, “The Isla Vista Action Group,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, February 20, 2004). This puts female revelers in the



ritualized disobedience, a communal breaking of rules which are respected for the rest of the year. In Isla Vista this translates as a large scale role-playing game of which the object is to indulge in as much excess, and get away with as much misbehavior, as possible. The presence of police officers provides a physical manifestation of the rules being broken, the authority being temporarily reversed, so that Del Playa becomes the stage on which these conflicting forces enact both their ongoing enmity and their interdependence. “Mike,” a UCSB student who asked not to be identified by his last name, likened his Halloween experience to playing a video game: “Because [...] the cops were like these obstacles you had to avoid [...] to get your points by getting more drunk and [...] if you got enough points, you’d get the princess, you know like in Super Mario Brothers.”<sup>58</sup> This game, however, is not being played on a television screen, but in the public space of Isla Vista, raising the stakes not only for the players, but for the officers, as well as the surrounding community.

As an art borne of transgression, the success of carnivalesque events relies heavily on the artful flouting of social taboos.<sup>59</sup> In Isla Vista, the taboos in question are primarily tied to childhood, and to the protestant work ethic with which current students will have to contend upon graduation from college. Anti-productivity, irresponsibility, wastefulness and hedonism are the values evoked in this communal performance, a clear reversal of the ethos of corporate culture. The most obvious Halloween “tradition” in Isla Vista is public indulgence in excess, particularly an excess of those things which have come to represent the end of childhood in American society, namely alcohol/drugs and sexual

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awkward position of wanting to join in the ritual rejection of authority, and yet being dependant on the presence of authority figures for their personal safety.

<sup>58</sup> Questionnaire response, “Mike.”

experimentation. In fact, excessive indulgence becomes an endurance event at Halloween: the physical discomfort and/or mental anguish which often follow revelry are also absorbed as an accepted part of the experience. Tales of excruciating hangovers and other unfortunate “morning-after” experiences are as ubiquitous as Halloween-night stories themselves, and are commonly recounted with an equal amount of pride, and even nostalgia.

Police citations, and prison stays, on the other hand, are regarded not so much badges of honor as points lost in the game of transgression. During an informal interview on Tuesday, February 17, 2003, a sorority member who asked not to be identified recounted her experience of having been arrested the previous Halloween. She described how, although she had been “partying” with a group of her sorority sisters, she was quickly abandoned once it was clear that the officer was going to “bring [her] in.” Lacking the requisite bail, she was forced to spend the night in jail. “Here I was, lookin’ all hella fine in my tiny-ass ‘pirate wench’ costume, surrounded by these skanky-ass guys from, like, SBCC. It was so awful.” In the morning, having hitched a ride with the aforementioned SBCC students, she arrived at her sorority house, only to receive the following, rather cold reception:

So we drive up in this fuckin’ ghetto-ass car, and my sisters are like, “Oh my god, you look like hell,” and I’m like, “the fuck do you expect me to look like, I spent the night in fucking JAIL.” So then they all just kind of give me this look, like, “Yeah, cuz you got CAUGHT,” right? Like I’m this total loser. I mean, I love my sistas, you know, but I still get pissed off when I think about that.

Her assessment of having been regarded as a “loser” is probably not far off the mark: although law-breaking and officer-baiting are among the most prevalent Halloween

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<sup>59</sup> Eco would call this transgressive art “comedy,” while Bakhtin sees it as an expression of political resistance.

activities, actually getting into trouble for engaging in them is tantamount to the adolescent nightmare of being punished (read: disempowered, humiliated) in front of one's friends.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the ritual disobedience enacted during Halloween can be read, in a psychoanalytical sense, as a working-through of the repetitive childhood trauma of powerlessness. By rebelling against surrogate parental figures – i.e., the police, the university administrators, etc. – revelers are able to affirm their ability to disobey, and therefore to claim their independence as adults.

It should be pointed out, however, that what these twenty-somethings are celebrating does not appear to be “adulthood” *per se*. Because they so flagrantly reject the expectations placed on adults in American society, i.e. productivity, responsibility, moderation, and so forth, their performance can be read as a celebration of their freedom not just from childhood dependence, but from the social norms to which they will soon need to conform in order to be considered productive members of society. Thus Halloween is not merely a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, but a celebration of participants' liminal status as young adults.

### **Sleazy Beauty and Pimp Charming: Degraded childhood idols on parade**

Nemo isn't the only animated character to be found on Del Playa drive: the past three years' celebrations were awash in cartoon characters, fictional heroes and heroines from television and movies, and more general incarnations of childhood games and fantasies. In fact, the roll call differs very little from the cast of characters one might find at a grade-school Halloween party or trick-or-treating in a middle-class residential neighborhood: girls are mainly dressed as angels, fairies, cheerleaders, cats, bunnies,

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<sup>60</sup> For an interesting discussion on the place of reputation in Caribbean Carnival, see Richard D. E. Burton,

princesses, dancers, movie stars, and cartoon heroines, while the most popular costumes for boys are cowboys, firemen, athletes or sport heroes, Vikings, gangsters, rock stars, movie stars, cartoon characters, and sailors or pirates.

These costumes, however, are no longer direct replications, but exaggerated and degraded parodies that foreground the hidden subversive transcript of this kind of childhood lore. At Halloween in Isla Vista, ‘Nemo’ is no longer a lost and innocent fish, but an irreverent reveler who is apparently more interested in finding his way to the bottom of a bottle of Jack Daniels than in finding his way back home. Likewise, the childhood game of “playing doctor” returns to the young adult repertoire for this one evening, its covert transcript of sexual exploration exposed and amplified. Costumes that appear at first glance to be nostalgic throw-backs to days gone by are often revealed, upon close examination, to be vulgarized versions of once-beloved figures, as if these heroes must be degraded, revealed as chimeras and shams, before being definitively laid to rest.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the trend of dressing up as vulgarized versions of childhood idols has been present from the earliest Halloween celebrations in Isla Vista, though it certainly appears to have gained popularity in the early 1990’s. Judging from the infrequent photo-spreads and/or descriptions provided in the *Daily Nexus*, it appears that the most popular costumes of decades past were those involving religious parody, such as male ‘nuns’ reading copies of Penthouse magazine, partly-undressed ‘monks’, and ‘religious zealots’ proclaiming that “the end is near – party while you can!”<sup>61</sup> Another recurring theme is the ‘kissing-booth’ costume, the giant penis, and I can’t help

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*Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

but note the repeat performance, first in 1985, then in 1992, of the “fallopian tube swimming team,” a group of men dressed as sperm squiggling their way through the crowd.<sup>62</sup> At certain politically-charged moments of history, political parodies have come to the fore, though these moments are infrequent and limited in scope.<sup>63</sup> So although sacrilege and sexuality have always been accentuated, the primary subject of the sacrilege does not appear to shift from religious (and sometimes political) figures to childhood idols until the early 1990’s, when figures such as a marijuana-smoking Cat in The Hat and a licentious Oscar the Grouch begin to take over where the Penthouse-perusing nuns of yesteryear left off.<sup>64</sup> This trend has steadily continued throughout the last decade: the 2003 celebration yielded few religious or political parodies, the vast majority of costumes instead parodying childhood games, idols and fantasies.<sup>65</sup>

Weather not withstanding, the copious amount of bare flesh displayed on Halloween also appears to be of central importance. After a stroll down Del Playa on October 31, 2003, UCSB Physics professor Harry Nelson said he was “struck by just how pervasive skimpy costumes were for women.” Said Nelson:

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<sup>61</sup> Doug Arellanes, “Halloween Revelers Crowd Del Playa,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday, November 4, 1985; photo, *Daily Nexus*, Monday, October 27, 1980; photos, *Daily Nexus*, Thursday November 1, 1990.

<sup>62</sup> Note also that the most often-rented costumes in 1977 were cited by Sarah Elizabeth Glover, owner and manager of “The Costume Rental Shop,” once located at 501 Chapala in Santa Barbara, as the gorilla suit for men and belly-dancer garb for women. The implications of this provocative combination surely merit a separate study, but for my purposes suffice it to say that images of Animal House, I Dream of Genie, and King Kong immediately spring to mind. Rachel Weintraub, “Halloween Costumes Link Kids to Gloomy Past,” *Daily Nexus*, Friday, October 28, 1977: 2. Chris Wyland, “Checking Out the Scene on All Hallows Eve,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday, November 2, 1987: 10; Cover photo, *Daily Nexus*, Monday, November 2, 1992.

<sup>63</sup> For example, during the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was a frequently lampooned figure (Charles Hornberger, “Fright Night: I.V.’s Costume Party Calmer Than Saturday,” *Daily Nexus*, Thursday, November 1, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> Dan Hilldale and Chris Ziegler, “I.V. Residents, All Gussied Up, Descend on Del Playa Drive,” *Daily Nexus*, November 1, 1991.

<sup>65</sup> One notable exception: a number of students did hold up picket signs in imitation of the long-suffering grocery workers, who had recently gone on strike in Southern California, and who would remain on strike until late February, 2004.

80 or 90% of the women wore [skimpy costumes]. They tended to band together in knots of 2 to 10 for solidarity (sometimes in coordinated outfits), but the outfits were revealing to an embarrassing degree. I wish there had been even one Venus or Serena Williams, or Dianne Feinstein, or Martha Stewart, or Mother Theresa, or even Madonna costume... there were hundreds of Playboy Bunny outfits.<sup>66</sup>

Even participants themselves are quick to note the pervasive tendency to sexualize otherwise innocent costume choices. One woman in attendance at the 1999 celebration calling herself a “Charlie’s Angel” aimed her plastic revolver at passing women, and proclaimed that she was “slut hunting.” “But I’ll never be able to shoot them all,” she lamented, “there’s just too damn many of them.”<sup>67</sup> Jenn Lotz also shared with me a running joke between herself and a friend about this phenomenon:

We’d be like, oh, what are you dressing up as tonight? And some girl would be like, ‘I’m gonna be a pirate,’ and then me and my friend would go, ‘a *slutty* pirate.’ And then someone would be like, ‘I’m gonna be a bumble bee,’ ‘a *slutty* bumblebee.’ [...] Because, it was true, every single girl [...] skankified their little outfit.<sup>68</sup>

There is, however, more to this “skankification” than meets the eye. The women are not, by and large, simply masquerading as something or someone inherently sexy. Instead, the overwhelming trend is to take something inherently innocent, and to sexualize it. It is not enough to dress as, say, Cinderella – that would be “childish” and therefore inappropriate to the occasion. Instead, one must *play at* playing Cinderella, hacking off her ball-gown to miniskirt length and plunging her neckline to blush-worthy depths, so as to invoke Cinderella’s fetish value without actually inhabiting her (now outmoded) persona. The American media’s rather disturbing tendency to link girlhood innocence with sexual desirability is writ large at Halloween in I.V.: angels become Victoria’s Secret angels, bunnies become Playboy Bunnies, and Disney princesses are revealed as

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<sup>66</sup> Excerpted from an email forwarded by Professor Catherine Cole.

<sup>67</sup> I.V. T.V. “Halloween [1999]”

sex symbols. Also popular are sexualized versions of the catholic school girl, the Girl-scout<sup>69</sup>, and the pig-tailed ‘toddler’ in leg-revealing baby-doll dress. On one level, these young women are indeed playing into the paradoxical, media-endorsed fantasy of the forever-young virgin-whore.<sup>70</sup> On another level, however, by exaggerating and often mocking the paradox, they are also challenging the image and emphasizing their new-found sexual agency. The revealing costumes and raunchy behavior of the revelers constantly undercut the coveted virginal innocence of their personae, and this provocative incongruity serves to isolate and to comment upon the media’s fetishization of girlhood.

As an example, let us examine more closely the Latina ‘Snow White’ described in the introduction. Though her costume was recognizably that of Disney’s Snow White, the “skirt” was in point of fact more of a large ruffle: the entire length of this Latina coed’s burnished-copper legs stood in ironic contrast to the covertly racist appellation of Disney’s original milky-white heroine. Furthering the parody were the sexually charged lyrics she sang to her audience of ‘Ninja Turtles’: “My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard / And their like is better than yours [...] I could teach you, but I’d have to charge...” Again, the “milkshake” image provides an ironic reference to Snow White’s milky white skin, and the suggestion of prostitution and sexual prowess subverts her requisite virginal naïveté, perverting this symbol of racial and sexual “purity” into an emblem of subversive power and sexual liberation.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview, Wednesday March 3, 2004

<sup>69</sup> One “troupe” of women wearing Girl-scout uniforms called themselves the “Sexy Scouts” and showed off the merit badges they had earned in such areas as “blow jobs,” “bong packing,” and “’69.”

<sup>70</sup> To be fair, I must implicate myself in this phenomenon: on Halloween, 2003, I dressed as Pippi Longstocking, the 9-year-old heroine of a 1973 film (based on a Swedish children’s book by Astrid Lindgren) that was subsequently remade as Disney’s *The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking* (1988). Although my costume was fairly “authentic,” the tension created by my 27 year-old body in a dress intended for a pre-pubescent girl does fit the above-described pattern.

For males (and some cross-dressed females),<sup>71</sup> machismo is both emphasized and mocked; through humorous exaggeration, the male reveler is able to come to terms with the impossibility of ever achieving his childhood fantasy. Instead, he contents himself to play at being a cowboy, a pirate, or a superhero, while at the same time openly mocking such a fantasy as childish and unrealistic. Nelson described the men's costumes as being "wacky," and the outfits most often retrospectively praised by participants are those that were primarily aimed at provoking laughter. Much of that humor, though, is overtly sexual: a 'compulsive masturbator' with an enormous fake phallus in his faux fur-lined palm, pretending to have gone blind; "Trojan Man," a giant condom; a man dressed as a vagina who told passersby, "I'm a big pussy"; and several salacious, over-endowed Santa Clauses, to name just a few examples. Here I should also mention a noteworthy addition to the childhood repertoire: the pimp. A significant perversion of the male childhood hero, the pimp figure foregrounds the hidden heteronormative transcript of so many socializing narratives: that a successful man is one who is able to have unlimited sexual access to, and to maintain control over the sexual activities of, multiple women. One 2001 reveler, calling himself "Pimp Charming," illustrated this process by combining elements of the classical Disney prince (the white suit, complete with gold buttons and a plastic sword), with the Hollywood conception of a 1970's pimp (fuzzy, wide-brimmed

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<sup>71</sup> Cross-dressing, a phenomenon which has been given much attention in other explorations of Carnival celebrations worldwide, appears to be the exception rather than the rule at Halloween in Isla Vista. Most women dressed as "male" characters do little to de-emphasize their femaleness, and in fact often exaggerate it, blatantly undercutting the implied machismo of such personae as 'gangster,' 'boxer,' 'superhero,' 'fireman,' and so forth. (One notable exception: a woman at the 2000 gathering in "homeboy" garb wore a T-Shirt reading "Whatz up, bitch?" and proudly displayed a realistic-looking fake penis hanging out from 'his' open fly). Men dressed as women likewise seem little interested in actually appearing to be female, but rather play up the comical and subversive incongruity between their female attire and their (often fervently heterosexual) maleness. One cross-dressed man, for example, hung a stuffed beaver between 'her' legs so that it was clearly visible beneath 'her' miniskirt, and asked passersby, "You wanna see my beaver?"



hat and long, frilly coat, copious gold jewelry and platform shoes). “Has anybody seen Sleazy – I mean, Sleeping Beauty?” he asked passersby, and added – accompanied by a none-too-subtle grinding of the pelvis, “I’ve got something here that’ll wake her right up!”

This kind of sexually suggestive humor, even to the degree of blatant propositioning, is rampant during the Isla Vista Halloween carnival: according to the surveyed participants, if there is a central goal in mind for most of the Halloween revelers, aside from getting excessively intoxicated, it is to find someone with whom to engage in some kind of sexual activity, preferably well within view of one’s friends. This is true for both men and women, but whereas the women (with a few notable exceptions, some of which are listed below) tend to rely solely on the sexiness of their costumes, the men are more likely to formulate a humorous gimmick of some kind. “College is [...] your prime,” Lotz noted during our interview, “most of [the revelers] are out to get ass [Halloween] night.” A successful Halloween seems to be measured by the amount of desirable (sexual) attention one receives versus the amount of undesirable attention, either from fellow revelers or from police.<sup>72</sup> The ploys adopted in order to achieve this goal are often astonishingly creative. Among the cleverest of these witnessed (either by myself or my informants) over the past five years are: the

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<sup>72</sup> Responses to question #5 of my questionnaire, “What is your fondest memory of Halloween in I.V.” were overwhelmingly sexual in nature. A few examples: “Bringing like 10 girls from the street up to my buddies’ balcony, having all my BEST friends cheering me on as I did so, then making out with the hottest one of the group!” – Tyler Whalen; “A woman in a gothic-looking costume walked up to me and said, ‘come.’ ‘Where?’ I asked her, so she told me, ‘In your pants.’ I told her I was going to need some help on that one, and she started unbuttoning my pants, when suddenly someone called to her and she took off running. I was like, ‘no, dream woman, come back!’ But alas, she was gone.” – Bruce Gordon; “Boyfriend’s and my first kiss.” – “Briana”; “Making out with Satan. Too bad he doesn’t go here, he was really fucking hot.” – Carrie Awalt; “Last year I kissed my boyfriend – now ex – for the first time. This year, getting carried around by a guy dressed like Braveheart.” – Christina Ossa; “This year I got a lap dance from two chip and dale [*sic*] dancers.” – Colleen Bingham.

aforementioned 'kissing booth' costume; a 'Superhero' who went around "saving" female revelers from certain danger; a group of topless 'firemen' who doused attractive women with water, saying, "You are just too hot!" and the like; a group of female 'firefighters' wearing tiny white T-shirts reading "We find them hot and leave them wet"; a man dressed as Inspector Gadget who announced "to all the ladies in the crowd," that they were welcome to "inspect [his] gadget"; a young woman in pigtails whose baby T-shirt read "I been bad," and who invited passersby to "punish" her (usually in the form of a spanking); a man dressed as a baby who attempted to get passing coeds to breast feed him; a fellow dressed as TV's 'Crocodile Hunter' whose (live) pet snake provided endless fodder for licentious humor; and a man wearing a shower curtain who encouraged everyone he met to "save water" by showering with "a friend" (preferably himself, we assume).

The costumes at Halloween in Isla Vista serve as an outstanding example of what Bakhtin referred to as "grotesque realism," or "the essential principle of grotesque degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their dissoluble unity."<sup>73</sup> One would be hard-pressed to find a more emblematic representation of Bakhtin's concept than the Halloween revelers' manipulation of the idyllic images offered them in childhood. Through the blatant foregrounding of the bodily, sexual, and scatological aspects which are underplayed, disguised, or erased outright by the mainstream media, the unspoken is not only made manifest, it is magnified to a grotesque extreme. Bakhtin goes on to explain the function of grotesque realism as being one of necessary destruction that makes way for new growth. He writes:

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place.<sup>74</sup>

Thus the revelers' willful destruction of childhood fantasies through the device of degradation is equally an act of regeneration. As these old fantasies are being laid to rest, new fantasies are being created and enacted; myriad possibilities presented by the onset of independence are envisioned and rehearsed within the ceremonial space of the Isla Vista Halloween carnival.

**“Take Pictures”:  
The enactment of anticipated memory**

One curious feature of the Halloween celebration in Isla Vista is a pervasive awareness of the ephemerality not only of the event, but of the college experience it comes to represent for the revelers. Participants are quick to point out that this is their appointed moment to revel, and many of them express anxiety over the anticipated onset of adulthood and its implied imperatives of responsibility, productivity, and behavioral moderation. Likewise, many of the alumni who offer advice to current students emphasize the centrality of Halloween as a treasured memory of their now-past college days. This heightened awareness of the connection between the event and the treasured moment of post-pubescent youth infuses Halloween in Isla Vista with a kind of anticipated nostalgia that transforms the Del Playa party into a collection of consciously enacted memories-in-the-making. In other words, rather than a mere re-enactment, Halloween also becomes a pre-enactment, a carefully crafted experience to be passed on as evidence of a well-spent youth.

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<sup>73</sup> Bakhtin, 1968: 19-20.

In the Halloween 2002 issue of *The Daily Nexus*, alumnus Tiye Baldwin wrote an editorial entitled, “Party Like it’s 1989.” This nostalgic retrospective of her Halloween experience at UCSB emphasizes Baldwin’s disappointment with the current state of Halloween in Isla Vista (a popular subject among alumni editorialists), and her regret that she is no longer able to participate in the festivities. She writes:

I might be getting old, but ahhh, the memories. Halloween Night 1989, sophomore year for me, and I was there, riding along the massive wave of out of control youth on D.P. - pure chaos, our own little pocket of inebriation, full of inhabitants and visitors simply ecstatic to be participating in Bourbon Street West. Shoulder to shoulder in the spirit of intoxication. Waking up on Halloween was like waking up Christmas morning, only instead of presents you got drunk. I hold back a tear when I think that no one will ever again know the unadulterated joy of the party that was Halloween in I.V. [...] I must admit, however, that 14 years after the fact, my rosy colored, beer-stained goggles are a bit foggy. I assure you, 14 years from now, yours will be too. So take pictures. Go all in. [...] I’m a mom now, and I can’t even party anymore. But I’ll always have those cherished, if hazy, memories[:] I was there.<sup>75</sup>

In the course of this editorial, Baldwin’s nostalgia, so palpable in her opening and closing lines, becomes transformed into a kind of plea to current students. “Take pictures. Go all in,” she urges them, implying that they, too will find themselves, 14 years from now, wishing they could again recapture the “unadulterated joy,” they now have the opportunity to experience.

This “seize the day” attitude appears to have infiltrated the psyches of many a current UCSB student. When I.V. T.V. interviewees were asked to share advice with incoming freshmen, the responses were nearly identical: “Freshmen, get out there and party while you can,” “Party as hard as you can,” “It’s the craziest year of your life so party as much as you can, just go nuts have a great time,” “Hook up with whoever you

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid: 21.

<sup>75</sup> Baldwin, “Party...” Thurs., Oct. 31, 2002.

possibly can because, you know what, it only happens once in your life.”<sup>76</sup> Respondents to my “Halloween Questionnaire” often expressed similar sentiments and anxieties, reflecting an acute awareness of the fleeting nature of this, their allotted party time. When asked to provide adjectives describing Halloween in Isla Vista, a majority of respondents included “memorable” in their list, and all of my interviewees at some point expressed a determination to enjoy their college experience, parties included, while it lasts.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, this sentiment appears to have been present for quite some time. Sheri Ledebur, who was a junior at UCSB in 1985, told Nexus reporter Doug Arellanes:

I’m looking forward to next year’s Halloween. I’ll be a senior, and as that will be my last Halloween here, I’ll be able to put everything else aside and devote myself entirely to doing Halloween as it should be done: you know, the getting twisted and dancing in the streets routine.<sup>78</sup>

That “routine” appears to have altered very little, despite fluctuations in attendance numbers (which can be easily correlated to fluctuations in police policy and University regulations). Dressing up (or rather, dressing down), getting intoxicated, and going out in search of attention and (primarily sexual) adventure appear to have been the principal goals of Isla Vista revelers reaching back to the earliest articles on Halloween printed in the *Daily Nexus*.<sup>79</sup>

The consistency of the Halloween enactments points to a specific Halloween experience which participants are “supposed to” be having. This is problematic in a number of ways, the most obvious among these being the implicit links of the requisite experiences to underage drinking, public drunkenness, sexual battery and/or assault,

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<sup>76</sup> I.V. T.V., “Self Seduction.”

<sup>77</sup> “This is what college is all about!” – Questionnaire, “Bob”; “This is our prime, we got to flaunt it while we got it, right?” – Interview, Jenn Lotz; “There is a lot of pressure to participate. People keep saying it’s now or never, but I don’t want to believe that’s true.” – Questionnaire, “Sarah.”

<sup>78</sup> Doug Arellanes, “Halloween Revelers Crowd Del Playa,” *Daily Nexus*, Monday, November 4, 1985: 3.

<sup>79</sup> Friday, October 28, 1977 provides the first features treating Halloween as a newsworthy event.

AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and violent and/or destructive behavior. Ironically, the one event that *is* consistently re-enacted on Halloween is the tragic death or serious injury of a reveler or revelers who stumble off the cliffs bordering seaside Del Playa Drive, commonly known as “cliff divers”. Thus each year a reveler or two is deprived not only of the anticipated raucous Halloween memory, but of the dull, uneventful, party-less future from which they might someday wish to recall it.

Equally problematic is the matter of the festival’s implicit link to the pornography industry. Revelers appear to have taken seriously Baldwin’s advice to “take pictures”: cameras, both video and still, are common accessories at the contemporary celebrations. In past years, enterprising students have cashed in on this kind of “party tourism,” selling T-shirts to commemorate the event, and even, on one occasion, setting up a giant fiberglass wave complete with surfboard on which revelers could have their picture taken.<sup>80</sup> Although this preoccupation with documentation would be innocuous in another context, the explicit nature of the festivities invites exploitation. Many of those carrying cameras on Halloween night, 2003, were masquerading as cameramen for “Girls Gone Wild,” yelling, “show us your tits!” to any young woman who passed by.<sup>81</sup> Whether or not these young men were actually working for “Girls Gone Wild,” or some similar “reality porn” operation, is beside the point: even in *masquerading* as pornographers, they were manipulating the exploits of the (mostly female) revelers whose images and activities they captured on film, simply by positioning them as commodities to be

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<sup>80</sup> This carnival-style photo op. was apparently transported from Venice Beach for the 1989 Halloween celebration in I.V. Maxwell C. Donnelley, “I.V. Bash Does Not Rival Past Years’ Rowdy Affairs,” *Daily Nexus*, November 1, 1989.

<sup>81</sup> The pornographic equivalent to Reality T.V., Girls Gone Wild is a series of videos (and digital footage available over the internet) shot “on location” at college parties and festivals (Spring Break is particularly popular), capturing “real” coeds in the act of exposing themselves and engaging in sexual activity. The

collected, and possibly sold. Also present at the 1999 and 2000 festivities was the camera of Sevan Matossian and Greg Shields, two film studies graduates who created a public television show called “I.V. T.V.,” the stated mission of which was “to capture and display the unique culture of Isla Vista with raw authenticity.”<sup>82</sup> The material they aired was notoriously sexually explicit: nudity was fairly commonplace, and interview topics were inevitably sex-related.<sup>83</sup> On Halloween, however, there was apparently no need to introduce sexual topics or to encourage exhibitionism: all Matossian and Shields had to do was show up with a camera, and the revelers provided the rest.

Recently, the community of Isla Vista became notoriously acquainted with the so-called “reality porn” industry. In 2003, in the wake of reports that professional pornography companies were throwing parties to which students were lured with promises of free beer, and subsequently filmed engaging in sexual activity with porn stars and with each other,<sup>84</sup> alarmed University administrators sent out a letter warning students about the exploitative nature of these “porn parties”:

We in the UCSB administration have no desire to monitor or regulate your private lives. We do, however, believe you should be warned about an exploitative new 'business' practice that might impact you or your peers -- reality pornography companies that target college communities across the nation. [...] All this is said to remind you that decisions you make now, which may seem harmless enough, can negatively impact your career, reputation and life forever. Let's be clear: These films are pornography for sale, and these companies are exploiting students for their profit.<sup>85</sup>

Halloween in Isla Vista’s link to pornography, however, goes much further back than this relatively recent scandal. Legend claims an alleged article in *Playboy* magazine as the

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Girls Gone Wild website boasts: “REAL GIRLS: You won’t find any used up porn hags here!” (<http://www.girlsgonewild.com/tour.php>).

<sup>82</sup> For more information on I.V. T.V., you can write to Sevan and Greg at [islavistatv@hotmail.com](mailto:islavistatv@hotmail.com)

<sup>83</sup> A few examples: “How often do you think men masturbate?”; “What’s your favorite position?”; “Spit or swallow?” and so forth.

source of the event's notoriety, and this rumor continues to be circulated with apparent pride some two decades after the "fact". This link to pornography does create a sense of pressure to be conventionally "sexy," as evidenced in the costume choices described in the previous section. However, that pressure is already fairly well integrated into the everyday lives of the current generation of college students, some of whom have already partaken of various types of plastic surgery in an attempt to enhance their physical appearance – or, to use the Hollywood term, their "fuckability factor". Notably, the women with breast implants tended to be the first to expose themselves to strangers. One example: upon seeing the I.V. T.V. camera, a woman dressed as an "angel" immediately pulled up her top, showing off an unnaturally perfect pair of breasts. When someone commented that they were "very nice," she replied, "they better be fuckin' nice, I paid \$4,000 for these things!" Another proudly displayed a pair of "double D's, Baby!" and told the television audience, "they were my graduation present."<sup>86</sup> It is as if, in order to get their money's worth – or their parents' money's worth – these young women felt the need to show off their purchase to anyone within eyeshot. "If you bought it, flaunt it": a new adage for the age. This seems to be equally true of young men (and women) who have visibly poured considerable time and effort into shaping their bodies through more traditional means, such as weight training and aerobic activity. Halloween in Isla Vista provides an opportunity for young men and women to display the often hard-won results of their body-shaping efforts.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> On November 2, 2003, NBC's *Dateline* aired a report on this practice, focusing its investigation on Isla Vista.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in William Overend, "Working to Tame the Wild Party," *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2003.

<sup>86</sup> I.V. T.V., "Halloween [2000]".

<sup>87</sup> For a fascinating discussion of contemporary shifts in the concept of agency and the circulation of pornographic imagery, see Heywood, Leslie & Dworkin, Shari L. *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon* (Sport and Culture Series, Vol. 5, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).



The apparent model for such display is the mainstream media – more specifically, pornography, be it of the soft- or hardcore variety. In fact, Halloween in Isla Vista is in many ways a live enactment of the fantasies constructed through the pornographic American media. The Halloween experiences these students so carefully construct and document for themselves – the sexualized costumes, the stylized encounters, the pervasive exhibitionism (and its necessary accompaniment, voyeurism) – closely resemble the narratives commonly found in such venues as *Penthouse Forum*, or, even more appropriately, mainstream “softcore porn” films marketed to the high school and college crowds, such as *Animal House*, *Porky’s* or *American Pie*. From this perspective, the “skankification” of the women’s outfits, and even the campy, or, as Harry Nelson put it, “wacky” quality of the men’s costumes, can be understood as an imitation of the pornographic sensibility: sexualizing childhood idols and spoofing popular culture are time-tested traditions within the genre, particularly pornographic films. The pornographic sense of humor presents a peculiar paradox: though reliant on the transgression of social norms and taboos, it is very often socially conservative in effect. By reproducing images and narratives that support a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity-centered view of sexuality and gender relations, mainstream pornography can preserve and protect the existing social order while simultaneously providing audiences with a titillating illusion of transgression.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The role of humor in pornography appears to be relatively uncharted territory at this point. There is, however, plenty of material available on pornography and its social implications. The following is a short list of recommended reading on the subject: Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (eds), *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (London: BFI, 1993); James Elias (ed), *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds), *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (eds), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

This transgressive illusion is central to the structure of Isla Vista's party scene.<sup>89</sup> While it may at first appear that "anything goes," particularly during Halloween, this is patently not the case. Any deviation from what is considered "sexy," and "provocative" in a fairly mainstream way, gets an immediate, and strongly negative, reaction. A few examples: when a woman whose friend had just flashed the crowd refused to follow suit, she was booed and heckled rather viciously;<sup>90</sup> when a man grabbed another man's derriere, he was threatened with violence; a woman in fairly convincing male drag was called a "dyke" and pointedly antagonized by a group of males.<sup>91</sup> "I.V. is so homophobic," noted UCSB graduate Angie Eng back in 1991, "It doesn't get worse on Halloween, there's just a lot more people."<sup>92</sup> Thus, for all its taboo-twisting pretensions, in practice Halloween in I.V. appears to be quite conservative in its conformity to the fantasies manufactured and distributed for popular consumption by the mainstream American media, making the event much more closely linked with consumer culture than many UCSB students would care to acknowledge. The connection to commercialism is further exemplified by the pervasive presence of product-related costumes, such as the women dressed as "Budweiser Girls" or "Playboy Bunnies," and the men dressed as beer cans of various marks, or in fast-food related costumes such as "Ronald McDonald," "Jack-In-The-Box," and even a box of Wendy's French Fries.<sup>93</sup>

To sum up: in its recycling of, and contribution to, standardized pornographic images and scenarios as idealized enactments of American youth, Halloween in Isla Vista

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<sup>89</sup> For audiovisual documentation of the I.V. party scene more generally, check out Sevan Matossian and Greg Shield's I.V. T.V. footage.

<sup>90</sup> From video footage taken by the Isla Vista Foot Patrol on October 31, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Witnessed on October 31, 2001.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Adams, "Downtown Was Refuge From DP", *Daily Nexus*, Friday, November 1, 1991.

<sup>93</sup> I.V. T.V., "Halloween [1999]", "Halloween [2000]".

raises some rather disconcerting questions regarding the links, implicit and explicit, between pornography, American youth culture, commercialism, and the carnivalesque.<sup>94</sup> The “product” Halloween in Isla Vista offers these young consumers is a ready-made memory of the illicit, explicit, outlandish youth that they are endlessly instructed to enjoy “while it lasts”.

**Conclusion:  
‘Carnival Goes to College’ or ‘College Goes to Carnival’?**

Although the mainstream pornographic aesthetic reflected in the revelers’ performance tends to be conservative in effect, there is one aspect of Halloween in Isla Vista that still manages to radicalize these images and scenarios: the fact that they are being enacted live and in public space. Although pornographic images have long since invaded public space through commercial culture, the massive, simultaneous presence of near-naked bodies actually enacting those images is a noteworthy rarity in contemporary North American society. Therefore I argue that Halloween in Isla Vista, whatever its link to the pornography industry and the commodification of youth culture, remains a carnivalesque reversal of accepted social norms by virtue of its willful high-jacking of public space.

This invasion of public space is noteworthy: aside from the persistent traditions of Mardi Gras in New Orleans (along with a host of copy-cat festivals, such as the one in San Luis Obispo, California, to which I will return in a moment), and The New Year’s Day Mummers’ Parade in Philadelphia, the carnivalesque in the United States has been increasingly relegated to virtual space. Rule-reversal and outrageous behavior is generally experienced vicariously through film and television, and the act of

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<sup>94</sup> For further reading on the link between commercialism and pornography, see Paul Rutherford, *The New*

masquerading mostly takes place over the internet, in “chat rooms” where identity is obscured and inappropriate interactions are safely allowable.<sup>95</sup> As public space shrinks and behavior within it becomes increasingly regulated, the place of the carnivalesque gets pushed even further toward the margins of society, and increasingly quarantined within spatially limited, relatively controllable areas. As Umberto Eco notes, “If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern, mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen.”<sup>96</sup> I would argue that the modern “mass-carnival” circulates among those marginalized spaces, recycling ideas and images back and forth between the television screen and the designated areas and moments of carnivalesque enactment. To question whether this is a case of life imitating art or art imitating life is moot: not only is it obviously both, it is also a challenge to the idea of “art” and “life” as differentiable categories. “When we no longer classify certain entertainments as vulgar,” writes James B. Twitchell in *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America*, “we will also be unable to classify their opposites as art.”<sup>97</sup> The carnivalesque is the point at which art and the vulgar, simulation and reality, are shown to be indistinguishable: therein lies its inherent danger. The marginalization of the carnivalesque – be it temporal, spatial, or both – is therefore necessary to the survival of the concept of an authentic reality on which art is based. The current “reality T.V.” craze in the United States (“reality porn” included) suggests that the separation of “art” from “life” is being rapidly redefined. This may partly serve to

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*Icons? The Art of Television Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

<sup>95</sup> Credit for this insight goes to Professor Leo Cabranes-Grant of the UCSB Dramatic Arts and Spanish departments.

<sup>96</sup> Eco et al, 1985: 6.

<sup>97</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995): 2.

explain the fervor with which the carnivalesque is suppressed in this country's public spaces: as the dividing line between the real and the virtual grows fainter, and the relationship between art and the vulgar is readjusted to suit consumer demand, the desire for a clearly delineated separation between the theatre as a place of pretense, and the street as the domain of the real, becomes increasingly palpable.

Thus, carnivalesque energy most often resurfaces within already-marginalized spaces and time-frames. The American college campus is only one such space; however, the frequency and the vehemence with which it surfaces there, coupled with the strong reaction it receives from those who are highly invested in keeping the separation between "art" and "life" well defined, make this particular space one that is worth exploring further. This paper is intended as an initial step toward the larger goal of better understanding the relationship of college to the carnivalesque in the United States. In following news coverage of other well-known college carnivals, notably the University of Wisconsin, Madison's annual "Killer (Halloween) Party," and Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo's Mardi Gras (often referred to as the largest Mardi Gras celebration West of the Mississippi), I have discovered some noteworthy parallels among them. All three events made the national news this academic year (2003-2004) due to rioting or the threat thereof, and the rhetoric surrounding the riots, and the events more generally, is suspiciously homogenous.

What needs are these celebrations fulfilling for participants, and why do they incite such vehement opposition from local authorities and school administrators? I have endeavored to answer this question in the case of the I.V. Halloween party. For many participants, it is a rite of passage marking their transition from childhood dependence

and family-based morality to independent thinking and free experimentation, as well as an expression of their liminal status as young adults, a state which provides temporary exemption from the norms of American adulthood (i.e. productivity, responsibility, and social restraint). It is also a live, public enactment of the media-constructed, sexually-charged fantasy of post-pubescent youth that is relentlessly sold to the American public – an attempt, as it were, to consume the highly-advertised product labeled “youth,” which is supposedly within the grasp of these students for a limited time only. For local authorities (and some students), it is a ritual confrontation between the violent, chaotic impulses of youth and the orderly social structure upheld by the law – a confrontation which always has the potential to turn violent and/or excessively destructive, and which is often equated with political and/or ideological opposition. For University administrators, it threatens the institution’s reputation, and, more abstractly – though ultimately more seriously – it imperils ideas about “art,” “culture,” and the imperative of productivity which are fundamental to the American system of higher education.

For the surrounding Santa Barbara community, Halloween has become mythologized as a dangerous nuisance, and essentially quarantined into the already-marginalized space of Isla Vista. Said Professor Nelson of his Halloween experience: The feeling of ‘nobody cares’ was pretty intense... IV felt like it was especially abandoned by adults, leaving just the peace officers and students.”<sup>98</sup> The sense that “nobody cares” is certainly not confined to Halloween weekend: the adult presence in Isla Vista is virtually non-existent, particularly on evenings and weekends. The absence of adults who are not in uniform and carrying firearms unquestionably contributes to the rebellious energy coursing through the Halloween celebration. The question remains

however, as to the precise relationship between the two: are the students acting out simply because they are relatively unsupervised and therefore believe they can get away with it? Or are they seeking to capture the attention of a community that largely ignores or even belittles them for the remainder of the year? My sense is that, although both impulses are present, it is the latter that comes across most strongly. The revelers, who make no attempt to disguise their activities, but rather leap eagerly in front of whatever camera is presented to them, apparently *want* to be seen. They want their picture in the paper, want the whole community to recognize them as “the priests and priestesses of party,”<sup>99</sup> but also as sacrificial victims, offered up by those who are no longer permitted to indulge in carnivalesque play, except through the purchase of a commodified, vicarious carnivalesque experience which has been divested of any actual danger or consequence (i.e. mainstream pornography). Although revelers don’t actually want to be cited or arrested, they *do* want to be noticed, to have their needs and their efforts acknowledged, even if the reaction they receive is overwhelmingly negative.

Gerard Aching, in his exploration of the political subtext of masking in Caribbean carnival traditions, *Masking and Power*, argues that carnival masquerades are not so much intended to conceal identity as to induce recognition of the social reality in which the masqueraders exist year-round. When black Caribbean revelers smear their face with molasses and soot in order to enact the traditional characters of the *negue jardin* (“garden” negro or domesticated servant) and the *jab molassi* (from the French *diable molassié*, literally the “molasses devil,” or parody of an off-the boat African “heathen”), they are not disguising their marginalized condition, but rather exaggerating it. The

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<sup>98</sup> Email communication, forwarded from Catherine Cole.

effect, according to Aching, is “demasking,” described as “an unexpected and undesirable self-recognition (...) that is brought on by contact with a masked subject.”<sup>100</sup> This demasking is a means of foregrounding those issues which are given little attention during the remainder of the year, forcing the community to confront those realities it would rather ignore. This theory seems particularly relevant to Halloween in Isla Vista: the grotesque realism of the costumes and behavior of the revelers serves to remind the community at large that the marginal – or, put more positively, “alternative” – existence of these young adults is continually ignored, their needs neglected and their opinions silenced. As Aching reminds his readers, “Bakhtin’s grotesque realism is not simply an aesthetic category based on elusive and subversive exaggerations, but a politically inspired overdetermination that was meant to counter a hegemonic socialist realism.”<sup>101</sup> Although one could question whether Halloween in Isla Vista is (consciously) “politically inspired,” its effect, as measured by reactions in the local press (and even, this past year, in the L.A. Times), is indeed one of recognition, a sudden awareness of the conditions existing year-round in Isla Vista, as well as a challenge to the hegemonic “reality” perpetuated by the University system.

It would appear that other large-scale college parties serve a similar function for participants, and stir up similar fears and “demasking” reactions in authorities and administrators, but more investigation is needed in order to draw a convincing parallel. Should such a parallel be discovered, it could yield important insights, first, about the relegation of the carnivalesque to the domain of youth culture in the United States, and

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<sup>99</sup> During an informal discussion, one of my students (who has asked to remain anonymous) used this phrase to describe UCSB students.

<sup>100</sup> Gerard Aching, *Masking and Power: Carnival and Popular Culture in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 6.



second, about the role of higher education and University culture within American society. More specifically, understanding carnivalesque performances staged by and for college students would clarify the role of the American college campus as a site of contestation, where the prevailing ideologies and aesthetics of contemporary American life can be explored, challenged, and reconfigured. It is no coincidence that college campuses are so often the site of oppositional demonstrations and radical performances: the paradoxical position of the college campus – simultaneously on the margins of society, and frequently at the center of attention – creates a space uniquely suited to fertile disruption. I argue that carnivalesque reversals such as Halloween in Isla Vista are among the most vibrant and eloquent expressions of this unique social space, wedged between conformity to the imperatives of family life, and to those of corporate culture. Indeed, what better medium could be found to express the parenthetical, often paradoxical existence that is American college life, than the liminoid enactments of the carnivalesque?

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid: 13.