

[Clip from *The Little Train Robbery*] [Music]

Miriam-Webster defines a parody as “a piece of writing, music, etc., that imitates the style of someone or something else in an amusing way” (Miriam-Webster). However, it also goes on to state that parodies are “a bad or unfair example of something” (Miriam-Webster). While parodic film had its start in the movie industry as a subset of comedy, it has evolved through time in its purpose. Through the passage of time, parodies have served as a vehicle for humor, homage, critique, and social commentary. **As with all forms of media**, the social constructs and climate of the time served to influence the creative expression – both in theory and in fruition – of film. Today, we can look at the evolution of film and we can assess it **not only for its creative content and its historical merits** dating as far back as Edwin Porter’s *The Little Train Robbery*, **but also for its implicit and explicit messages**. Are these messages just a way to convey humor? Or are parodies essentially transforming from innocuous mockeries into covert mics by which to perpetuate discriminative social norms?

[Clip from *The Little Train Robbery*] [Music]

People have always wanted to be entertained. The arts as a whole have fed into this desire. **In this endeavor**, much can be said for the world of film. To take it a step further, the release and relief found at the end of a good round of laughter can be exquisite. **Tension dissipates, stress is lifted, energy is shared, and, particularly for us women, a few more wrinkles have been spared.** [Image of wrinkled eyes] [Canned laughter]

It is not a surprise, then, that the art of comedy as in film would naturally come about. While parody first began as a way of mimicking another film, whether because the former had been a hit at the box office or, perhaps, to make changes in the first and cross over into a different genre, this quickly stopped being the case. In parody, not only do we exercise that wonderful relief we receive through laughter, **but we also get a chance** to voice our grievances and our dissatisfactions – perhaps about our jobs, the political climate, the state of the economy, and even love. In this way, it is a double winner.

[Clip from *Why Girls Leave Home*] [Music]

The American film industry has never been a stranger to parodic film production. Dating back to the early years of film making, the initial introduction of “special” effects, and this burgeoning interchange between stage and film as different dramatic presentations, film producers piqued their audience’s natural interest for making a mockery of the outdated, the “challenged”, the ill-equipped. In *Why Girls Leave Home*, a parody of the Victorian and Edwardian stage, “The film stands as ... critique ... ever striving for striking stage illusions and ‘sensations,’ became increasingly dependent upon machines to achieve these effects” (Mayer, 576). Throughout the play’s four acts, the audience is bombarded with awkward performances, disorganized scenery, and faulty effects and machinery. “... (A)nd in the sheer imbecility ..., we

witness a satiric subtlety that, although not declaring itself, becomes obvious to the viewer” (Mayer, 577).

[Clip from *Hollywood Steps Out*]

As the development of parody underwent its natural progression, producers have experimented with its adaptability across different genres. Tex Avery did not express any misgivings when he introduced his exaggerated caricatures of Hollywood society. In *Hollywood Steps Out*, Avery depicts a scene at an elite restaurant wherein all the socialites of the star industry are out for the evening. In the midst of them sit producer, Leon Schlesinger, and manager, Henry Binder, looking quite pretentious and very conspicuous. “... (T)here are several levels of social criticism inherent in the caricatures of Schlesinger and Binder. It confirms the celebrity, reinforces the popular recognition of the subject’s ‘star’ persona (even if represented as a villain)” (Crafton, 204). Quite obviously, Schlesinger and his “henchman” would not be welcome guests at this gathering as producers were still quite adept at running their production “factories” like well-oiled machines, with stars little more than just another contracted worker. “... (T)he caricature acknowledges the discrepancy between the bosses’ extravagant dining habits and the long hours and low pay of the animators, writers, inkers, painters, musicians and inbetweeners” (Crafton, 205).

[Clip from *Big Bang Theory*]

“Superheroes... **Who wouldn’t want to be one?!**” (Brown, 131). **They fly, they climb, they swing, they leap. They’re smart and strong; they’re hot and oh, so cool.** Once comic books, then Saturday morning TV legends, now blockbuster hit after blockbuster hit. But, what exactly *is* a superhero? He’s muscular – yes. He’s sharp – yes. He’s ultra-cool – yes. He’s strong – yes. He’s always there, right in the nick of time. If we look at it a little more closely, perhaps, we can say a superhero is master of his world... and, maybe, mine? He truly is a **SUPER** man. Ok. And, then we have Leonard, and Sheldon, and Howard, and Raj (remember our “caped” crusaders?) – are they super men? [Clip from *Big Bang Theory*]

The idea of hegemonic masculinity is not a new one. “...‘hegemonic masculinity’... has been ... used as a simple synonym for whatever ideal examples of masculinity reign at a given time in this culture” (Brown, 132). Superhero parodies perform on two separate levels: 1) it ridicules our geek friends and their fascination with their Superman (who society claims they will never be), but, more importantly, 2) it actually reinforces the original message of masculine dominance and power upheld in the superhero genre. “Superhero parodies do not just model paragons of masculinity as the mainstream superhero films do, (they) ridicule it, they criticize it, they invite viewers to laugh at it... and then they confirm that it is still a state that even the lowliest of males can and should achieve” (Brown, 132).

[Clip of *The Producers*]

While we're going down that road.... Let us end with a look at *The Producers* by Mel Brooks, who is inarguably one of the most well-known parodic producers of modern times. "When I asked the students what they thought of the criticism in the film... (they) insisted that the film is 'just entertainment' and that the 'Springtime for Hitler' sequence is present only for shock value" (Bonnstetter, 18). Shock value. **Shock value??** Since when is anything (even art) in support of Hitler or Nazism or in mockery of the Holocaust 'just entertainment'? Film, just as any other art form, leaves much open to interpretation. As such, audiences need to attend to and understand not only the scene for its comedic and ironic interpretation, but also for what is playing out behind the scenes. What is the message? "Failing to understand this and instead reducing such actions to merely 'entertainment' can at best result in non-action, a reinforcement of the social problems as ... systemic ones, ... a reifying of racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, or otherwise hegemonic ideas" (Bonnstetter, 18).

A parody is "a bad or unfair example of something" (Merriam-Webster). Parody is its own specific art form. Because of the elimination of the Hayes Code, it is now recognized as such and protected as free speech just as any other form of media. Parody is its own form of comedy relief – at times harmless, at others biting. As the boundaries of free speech and interpretation continue to expand, when do we draw the line between social commentary and systemic discrimination?

### Cites Sources

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