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Film As Literature

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The Evolution of Comedy

INTRODUCTION

Some say that the true secret to life is finding humor and everyone and everything. However, what a specific person finds funny is personal and not always universal. While we all struggle to find the meaning of life in what feels like an ever changing abyss, the world of entertainment becomes our escape from the trials and tribulations of life. And perhaps, just maybe, we'll stumble across something that makes us laugh and lighten up a bit.

Comedy brings laughter, which can be good for your health. When we laugh, the brain releases 'feel good' neurotransmitters: dopamine, serotonin, and an array of endorphins" (Harvard University Mahoney Neuroscience Letter). Harvard further clarifies the difference between humor and laughter, stating that humor is the aftermath of story and shifting expectations while laughter is a social response (1). Whatever science concludes, universal truth informs us that many different types and genres of comedy exist to tickle our many different types of humor in a social or private setting.

COMEDY BEGINNINGS

Movies began as short scenes spun on a zoetrope and then morphed into single and double reel format thanks to W.E. Griffith. During the silent film era, Charlie Chaplin became

the father of physical humor and truly the founding father of comedic acting. Without words to help the story along, Chaplin relied on his physical humor, slapstick comedy, and subtle emotions. Many times, the audience would side with his character through his innate ability to arouse pathos (PBS.org). Chaplin inspired many generations of comedic actors and writers, thus contributing to the evolution of comedy. While mainstream comedy stakes its roots in slapstick, it has evolved into limitless sub genres and categories for everyone's viewing pleasure.

ROM COMS

Talk to anyone pre-1970, and the American Dream consisted of a mom and dad, 2.2 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence. For this dream to come true, two people would have to fall in love. Now, life is not all sunshine, boxes of puppy, and rainbows. Finding a life partner is hard, really hard. Luckily, romantic comedies or rom coms, exist to give us hope. A romantic comedy usually follows the struggle of two unlikely people falling in love. Maybe the protagonist is trying for someone out of his or her league, or maybe the two people in contention start as mortal enemies and somehow, through the magic of cinema, coming together in marital or relationship bliss. The 1990's and 2000's are revered as the Golden Age of contemporary romantic comedy.

Movies from this genre profit off of age old storylines and tropes. In the film *Bridget Jones' Diary*, a single woman in a love triangle must figure out who is the best suitor: her overly attractive boss or the awkward family friend. In *Pretty Woman*, an unlikely pair (a rich businessman and a charismatic prostitute) teach us that love can transcend stereotypes when these two fall for each other outside the "financial" arrangement. Even the youth enjoy a good rom com. *Ten Things I Hate About You* based off of Shakespeare's play, *Taming of the Shrew*, tells the story of a young arrogant man who pines for a beautiful teenage girl but is not allowed

to pursue her until he finds a boyfriend for her older, cantankerous sister, Kat. Of course, Kat falls for her suitor and hates him when she discovers she is a bet. This trope is painfully similar to teen flicks *She's All That* and other films. So many people enjoy rom coms, even with tired storylines because they are familiar, easily digestible, and an emotional journey with a happy ending.

Nowadays, the rom com has fallen in popularity but “TV shows have focused on female characters trying to establish their own identities—and their pursuit of romantic and sexual relationships illuminates that process, rather than serving as the ultimate narrative goal” (Chaney 70). Regardless, there are fans of this genre everywhere. It’s fun to laugh at unsuccessful romantic pursuits, especially when the two people find each other in the end.

PARODIES AND SATIRE

There’s an expression out there that states, “There’s no such thing as an original idea.” At least that’s true for parodies, or humorous imitations, and satires, social commentary pieces aimed to anger or elicit a certain response through comedy. One of the most famous comedy movies of all time is David Zucker’s *Airplane*. The movie parodies another movie called *Zero Hour* from the 1950’s. Many character names, the plot, and even some of the dialogue is lifted from that movie. However, Zucker’s team bought the right to this and added an average of three jokes a page. (One page of a screenplay roughly translates to one minute of screen time). Zucker and his team found inspiration for the film from a ton of material his sketch comedy group, Kentucky Fried Comedy Troupe, wrote and performed. Zucker went on to parody many other popular movies and directed such cringers as *Scary Movie 3* and *The Naked Gun* series. In an interview with Ms. Engelbert’s Film class, Zucker stated that “Real wit can get a really good

laugh,” meaning that really good writers need not depend up crass jokes or cursing to get a laugh. Zucker’s movie in particular play on cleverness and commentary. When it comes to satire and parody, the laugh comes from an old story reinvented in a humorous light or the careful examination of a social or political issue.

While satire doesn’t always grace the silver screen, television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* have created such memorable and satirical impressions of current politics such as Alec Baldwin’s portrayal of Donald Trump or Tina Fey’s impression of Sarah Palin. Television sketch continues to inspire modern movies such as *South Park The Movie*, *The Dictator*, and *Wayne’s World* to name a few.

FARCE

While very popular in Great Britain, the genre of farce can be best characterized as exaggerated comedy where “characters in a farce get themselves in an unlikely or improbable situation that takes a lot of footwork and fast talking to get out of” (Decker). *National Lampoons Christmas Vacation* is a perfect example of farce. Clark Griswold, the protagonist, but create the perfect Christmas holiday for his extended relatives, all with peculiar character traits. In a few scenes, Clark tries to bedazzle his home in Christmas lights, and he ends up falling of the roof, breaking his neighbor’s window, and blowing out electricity for the whole house. Clark also tries to get a Christmas tree with his family (sounds normal enough), but he makes his family track through sub-zero temps, cut down the tree in the forest, and then unsuccessfully put in in the house, which later almost burns the house down when a cat gets fried by electricity jumping on the tree. Farcical movies are great stories where what seems normal becomes a monumental and silly task. Other farce movies include *There’s Something About Mary* (remember the exaggerated

hair gel joke) and *Weekend At Bernies* (where a group of guys must escort a dead man around town and help him seem 'alive').

FACING A NEW ERA

No movie out there is the quintessential example of a particular type of comedy. *Airplane*, for instance, embodies elements of satire, parody, and screwball comedy. *A Christmas Vacation* has some dark comedic jokes on sensitive topics (homelessness and financial strain) mixed in with the slapstick scenes of characters getting into physical altercations with other characters and their environments. Nothing "pure" means the future of comedy may evolve into anything.

With attention spans shortening and options diversifying (the number of streaming services is increasing everyday), the future of comedy is anyone's guess. With the advent of YouTube, Vine, Snapchat, and Instagram, funny content can be as short as a few seconds or as long as a feature film. With so many options, comedy can now be even more individualized. Perhaps in the future, our television sets will simply communicate with our brains (without first recommending things we'd like in a way that NETFLIX does now) and produce content for us. At the very least, production companies will put out movies where you as the viewer gets to pick what happens next from a library of alternate scenes and endings similar to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of the late 70's and early 80's. The future is still yet to be unveiled to cinephiles everywhere.

CONCLUSION

And that's a wrap on the evolution of comedy. The term "evolution" means to grow and develop. Some might argue that movies have gone quite the other way. Whether a person's

comedic appetite is satisfied by high brow intelligent comedy like satire or wit or appeased by screwball jokes and physical humor, the meal being served is a choice. No one can judge what's most entertaining and funny to you but you. The End.

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