

“On Post-Racial Satire and ‘Responsible’ Scholarly Worry”

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Comedic satire has long served as a political tool of the oppressed. From Jewish humor to African American humor, the “satire of the oppressed” cultivates resistance and community by targeting the dominant culture, as well as in-group members *and* dominant stereotypes of the minority culture. In other words, minority satire is complex and ambivalent and often difficult to distinguish oppressive forms of satire. To take but one example, immediately following the Civil War, African American theater troupes began touring the country and performing minstrel shows for African American audiences in blackface.

My concern in our discussions of “post-PC satire,” including post-racial satire, is that our tendency to “worry responsibly” (Brunsdon, 2000) about the effects of television representation risks misinterpreting and even silencing resistive forms of satire by conflating them with hegemonic forms. Ultimately, the distinction between resistive and hegemonic satire is always one of interpretation; it can never be decided by appeals to rigid hermeneutic rules or the final authority of the audience interpretation and uptake.

This inability to predict decoding practices is, I think, what makes critics and scholars nervous, what makes us worry responsibly about contemporary racial satire. The concern dates back at least to Vidmar and Rokeach’s (1974) study of the impact of *All in the Family* on racially prejudiced viewers, where they found that certain highly prejudiced viewers reveled in Archie Bunker’s racist language and failed to read the show’s satirization of the character. Likewise, today we worry that unsophisticated viewers will fail to read the satire of racial stereotypes and accept the stereotypes as accurate.

But the basic intellectual flaw this perspective is that the problems that satire faces are the same as the problems that representation in general faces: we can never guarantee that the audience

gets it, whether “it” is a satirical joke about racial minorities or a straightforward, straight-faced policy argument in a current affairs show. To use Stuart Hall’s (1993) originary terms here, there is no way of ensuring that the decoding of the message matches its decoding. I would suggest that racial satire only *seems* to be a riskier textual strategy than rational argument (or, for example, realistic portrayal).

All of this, then, is to say that I think we do ourselves and minority communities a disservice when we worry responsibly about the impact of satire on unsophisticated viewers. Which is not to say we shouldn’t critically interrogate satire in an effort to distinguish hegemonic from resistive uses.

What tools, then, are available to us to interpret the cultural politics of satire? There are worse places to begin, I think, than with Jerry Palmer’s (1988) book on television and film comedy, *The Logic of the Absurd*, in particular his methods for analyzing the butt of a joke. Palmer writes that comedy comes from the incongruity of two contradictory syllogism coming to the fore, one plausible, the other implausible. In racial satire, the implausible syllogism can help us identify the object of satire. Let’s take for an example a *Chappelle Show* skit, in which Dave and Wayne Brady, a “safe” an inoffensive actor for white viewers, hang out together for an evening. Much to Chappelle’s dismay, Wayne Brady shakes down drug dealers, pimps prostitutes, and performs a drive-by shooting, all on the way to dinner. The scene is *implausible* because Wayne Brady is a successful actors/singer who plays middle-class, inoffensive characters, and would not pimp, murder, and do drugs. The scene is *plausible*, however, because, as Wayne Brady is black, he could, at least theoretically, be involved in these pursuits. However, there is another possible plausible syllogism here, and one that I would argue is far more dominant in the text and therefore more likely: because Wayne Brady is a black *actor* and because black actors are often *cast* as thugs and pimps, the scene is nominally plausible. In the first reading, black men and their penchant for violence would be the

object of satire, while in the latter reading, it is the media system and its tendency to stereotype that gets satirized.

I give this rather extended analysis in order to demonstrate two things: first, that careful textual analysis of specific instances of racial satire is a necessary first step before condemnation or approval and, second, to demonstrate that, when it comes to the semiotic structure of satire, the plausible syllogism is often multiplied, which is what makes pinning down its precise object impossible. In fact, given the growing complexity in narrative structures and modes of address in current television comedies that deploy racial satire, such as *Modern Family* and *Community*, it seems to me that post-racial satire may possess even and greater multiplicity of reading positions than earlier comedic forms.

Nevertheless, I think that we can specify at least three distinct targets, or butts, of contemporary racial satire on TV: the minority group itself, the majority group, and the program, film, or source itself. While resistive forms of minority satire traditionally engage at least the first two of these, much of the hegemonic racial satire of today includes the first and third, leaving the majority group largely unscathed. When included, moreover, members of the majority group who *are* satirized are often subtly different than the core demographic of the series. Let me take two examples to illuminate both of these trends.

The “Squabbit” episode of the new Comedy Central series *Brickleberry* features a brief vignette satirizing an imaginary Native American news channel, in which every reporter speaks in stereotypically broken English. During the weather report, a rain dance suddenly changes the forecast and the weather reporter, confused about the chance of rain after the dance, nevertheless confirms that the chance of offensive Indian stereotypes appearing in the series “is one hundred percent!” In my opinion, this is a clever and common strategy of post-racial satire, in which

satirizing the program itself (self-satire, in a sense) makes the satirization of the minority group seem acceptable, while avoiding satirizing the dominant group, its institutions, and its bigotry.

As an example of the latter tendency to ridicule certain segments of the dominant group while letting the core demographic of the series off the hook, consider *Modern Family*. In many ways, it is fair to say that the series satirizes everyone, from gay individuals and parents to teenage women to rich businessmen to young(ish) parents. *Modern Family* frequently ranks near the top for both 18-49 and 18-34 demographic segments, and arguably a big part of its success and critical acclaim come from its ability to maintain a connection with hip, young, urban viewers. And, while well-off, straight, white male characters certainly get ridiculed in the show, they are either older or married. Young, single straight men do not get ridiculed.

In many ways, it is this final form of satire that concerns me the most, especially because such programs are frequently celebrated as “equal opportunity” ridiculers. But on careful inspection, it is usually racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities and women who get satirized, along with certain “safe” targets within the hegemonic group.

References:

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