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One-Hundred Years of Satire on Film.

Satire is an "artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform" (satire).

A satire is a very old way of mocking or bringing about reform. Satire is also a very loose term; just about any type of communication that mocks or brings about reform can be considered satire. 18th century dictionary writer Samuel Johnson gave a definition of satire that is still very appropriate today. He describes satire as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured." Using this as a working definition is helpful when identifying satire and constructing a thesis about the history and importance of that literary form. There are two forms of satire. The first is called direct satire where the narrator or filmmaker speaks directly to the reader, usually in the first person. The other form of satire is called indirect satire--the viewer is merely an observer to the mockery that is happening in the work and it is up to the viewer to use his or her cognitive power to understand that what they are observing is supposed to be funny and being mocked (Satire).

According to *Britannica*, film satire usually does a better job of conveying its message than theatrical satire because principles and social customs can more readily be exaggerated or contracted in film effects than on stage with dialogue alone. The film satire is also more effective at mocking subjects which could not be discussed openly if portrayed in a non-mocking or

non-satirical way. Two films that illustrate this are Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* which mocked Adolf Hitler and fascism; and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* which made fun of the nuclear military industrial complex of the 1960s. A specific example of how film is more effective at satire occurs at the end of *Dr. Strangelove* when the actor playing the President of the United States says "You can't fight in here, this is the war room," referring to a physical conflict between two of the other characters. Immediately following that scene the audience sees a series of mushroom clouds on screen. This type of contrast: showing primitive hand to hand fist-fighting directly before an atomic bomb explosion that could kill millions is what makes satire on film much more effective than satire on stage or in writing.

In this paper I will analyze how satire in film has been approached since the first satirical film was made in the late 19th century. How advances in film technology and changes in film rhetoric have caused this mode of motion picture satire to evolve. By looking at this evolution, I hope to better explain what makes satire funny or popular and its impact on society. Throughout this paper I will discuss major satirical works, elaborate on their plots and make conclusions about their satirical or rhetorical effectiveness.

The first instance of satire in film occurred in 1895 with a French film *L'Arroseur Arrosé* or in English *The Waterer Watered*. The film only lasted 49 seconds and was primarily produced to show the new technology of cinema. The slapstick plot was simple, and the camera remained stationary throughout the film, there was only one scene and no dialogue. The scene showed a man and a boy in a garden. The man is watering the plants and the boy comes up behind him and steps on the hose, causing the water to stop flowing. When the man raises the hose to his face to inspect it the boy removes his foot from the hose causing the water to flow and soaking the man. When the man realizes what happened, he chases the boy around the garden finally catching him

and spanking him.

L'Arroseur Arrosé was directed by Louis Lumiere, who with his brother Auguste are considered to be two of the earliest filmmakers. Two things contributed to the success of *L'Arroseur Arrosé*: first, it was an entertaining short. Previous movies were more documentary in nature. Also because copyright law was loosely enforced in the newly emerging field of cinematography, there were many imitations of *L'Arroseur Arrosé* made. This caused many people to watch it and established slapstick comedy and satire as viable genres in film (Cousins).

Charlie Chaplin was another actor and producer of the silent film era who was famous for his comedies. The first one was filmed in 1914 and called *Making a Living*. While developing his next film Chaplin began adopting the mode of costume which made him famous, according to Scott Siegel and Barbara Siegel writing in *American Film Comedy*. The second film was called *Kid Auto Races at Venice* Chaplin wore pants that were too big, oversized shoes placed on the opposite feet, a tight fitting jacket, a derby hat, and a small mustache. This look made Chaplin successful; he discovered that in the black and white silent film, it was important for comedic effect that he has a very atypical and vividly contrasting of appearance. Chaplain's most famous film was made near the end of his career, *The Great Dictator*, filmed in 1940. In that film Chaplin plays a fascist politician who was patterned after Adolf Hitler. To avoid having the film misinterpreted as being sympathetic to Nazi causes, neither Hitler nor the Nazis are mentioned in the film. All of the references to real life current events were through metaphoric comparison.

There is some debate about whether the work of Chaplin and other slapstick film comedians such as the Marx brothers are appropriately characterized as satires. Alan Dale, writing in *Comedy is a Man in Trouble* shows that many critics attempt to elevate slapstick comedy into satire. This is not a good tendency because slapstick and satires have different

goals: The purpose of most slapstick comedies is strictly for comedic effect, to make people laugh; where as the purpose of satire is to show a shortcoming and usually elicit some deeper reaction for the audience. The factual or satirical occurrences in slapstick comedies are merely props to make the next joke. A film that is obviously a satire like *The Great Dictator* is most praised for the scenes which are the least funny because the slapstick scenes such as when the microphones lean over because of the dictator's bad breath are funny simply because of that immediate reaction, it has nothing to do with the greater satiric purpose of the film. Another thing that causes satire and comedies to be easily confused is that both rely on the same types of set-up in order to be funny. As Jerry Lewis said, "I do not know that I have a carefully thought out theory on exactly what makes people laugh, but the premise of all comedy is a man in trouble the little guy against the big guy." Since this conflict of the insignificant against the Goliath also makes for a good satire often films that are merely funny with comedic happenings are transformed into satire in the audience's mind simply because of their intrinsic conflict-driven plot.

Another film which effectively uses satire to cause the audience to realize that real world issues have consequences is *Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. *Dr. Strangelove* was released in 1964, a time when there was considerable international tension as the public became aware of the ideology of assured-mutual-destruction. The idea of using nuclear weapons for war was in everyone's mind at that time. Issues such as the Cuban missile crisis were being reported daily on the news. *Dr. Strangelove* is about a mentally disabled military leader who decides to launch a first strike on the Soviet Union. In the movie this dire happening becomes funny because all of the people who can stop the nuclear attack either believe that the signals that the attack is happening are just preparedness drills or an order

given from above. Even though it has very dire consequences, no one considers them worthy of being questioned.

The character of Dr. Strangelove was added to the movie while it was being produced, according to James Earl Jones, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*. The movie was originally a straight-genre thriller, but as Director Stanley Kubrick worked on it, he decided to recast it as a satire. Among the changes he made were adding Dr. Strangelove and changing the names of the characters to comic book-like names, so that the audience would be very aware that it was supposed to be funny. Analysis of the Strangelove character is useful to analyze and when studying the satirical effectiveness of the film. He is a former NAZI scientist who the United States felt had useful information, so he was not punished as a NAZI war criminal. This suggested that the US nuclear-industrial complex might have some of the same goals as the Nazis. In light of the success of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, using a former NAZI gave the film a poignancy that assured its success.

Jones also points out that the movie is very relevant today. The Cold War ended without war but the nuclear weapons that were owned by the Soviet Union are now being distributed to many countries beyond the diplomatic grasp of the United States. Because nuclear proliferation is still very present in our world, *Dr. Strangelove* is viable as a satire today as it was when it was made. "Human history offers little evidence that we can learn to stop fighting wars, but we cannot stop trying. As Stanley would say after of retake that didn't work, 'let's try that again'."

Because satire holds public happenings up to ridicule it is important that a satirist have a pulse of what is important to the audience for which they're writing. The changing importance is exhibited when looking at famous satires and their settings, for example the first one:

L'ARROSEUR Arrose, was a farce. At the time it was produced there was a great deal of

innovation and invention, the world was relatively peaceful. As satires progressed to the time of The World Wars, satiric films became more violent because many people feared the war and directors were able to use that apprehension to entertain by showing a dictator gone mad or nuclear attack launched by a crazy commander, whom no one was willing to stop. The movie directors were able to evoke both the sense of fear and a sense of humor in the audience.

Richard Alleva, writing in *Commonweal* points out that from the 1950s to the 1970s satire shifted from the exhibition of high-stature to satire that was more crude and base. For example, film satires such as the *National Lampoon* movies and *Southpark*, television series. Alleva suggests that there are two reasons for this progression. Satirists wanted something new. In order to draw crowds they had to promise the audience an experience that they had never had before. Ideas of dictators or rolled military leaders just became too tame. "You must turn up the volume find a new blasphemy to utter, discover the certain something still unspeakable that you and you alone dare to say." Another thing that caused satire to become more salacious was the fact that after the Vietnam War, the military was generally unappreciated and people in the U.S. had become tired of the daily news accounts of the War. When they went to the movies, they wanted escapism. Focusing on Sex, interpersonal violence and crudeness such as blood and gore became a way to continue to make satire without relying on tired themes.

A movie that exemplified this trend toward salacious miss was *Tootsie* released in 1982 and directed by Sidney Pollack. The movie is a satire of the entertainment industry and also makes fun of the Equal Rights Movement. It is about an actor who struggles to find roles. The main character, played by Dustin Hoffman, also has a tendency to want to change things within scripts, further preventing his long-term employment. One day Hoffman's character learns that a female friend has been turned down as an actress, So Hoffman's character dresses drag and

heavy makeup and auditions for the role which the character gets. After he begins acting his female character is an overnight sensation.

Tootsie also satirizes the way that motion pictures are made, he falls in love with an actress but not wanting to give up his female role, he has to represent that he is a lesbian. It turns out that the actress whom Hoffman's character loves is dating the director of the project they are both working on. The idea that in order to be successful in Hollywood, you have to sleep with the movers and shakers is a long-term tried and true plot. *Tootsie* also effectively mocks the women's rights movement because the character is able to show that bringing acting skills as a man causes him to be turned down for roles, but as an ugly woman he is successful. Vincent Canby writing for the *New York Times* says that the film has a more serious message as well: "Dorothy (Dustin Hoffman's female character) may not be a beauty that she possesses the bigness of heart and in no-nonsense approach to our life and career that Michael (Dustin Hoffman's male character) himself lacks."

A 2008 film directed Michel Gondry *Be Kind Rewind* is a satire making fun of a more everyday occupation but like *Tootsie* involves Hollywood. *Be Kind Rewind* shows two VHS-only video store clerks as they work in a store that has yet to convert DVDs. This setting causes the viewer to understand as the store is somewhat down and out. The owner of the store also has to contend with civic redevelopment plans which are threatening to run it out of business.

The climax of the movie involves a farce like happening--one of the characters, as a result of an accident ends up having his entire body magnetized and the magnetism erases all of the films in the video store. Since the characters do not want to disappoint customers or have the store go out of business, they do the only thing possible in this farce. They remake all of the movies in the store using an amateur video camera, readily available props such as pizza boxes,

and use on location shooting in the neighborhood around the store.

Another way that the movie uses satire to make its point is by having the characters remake, in amateur form, actually movies that were originally professionally made, for example *Ghostbusters* and *Driving Miss Daisy*. By appealing to a sense of nostalgia in the viewer, both in the occupation of a video store clerk which is now largely nonexistent and by causing the viewer experience cherished movies of the past in a different way, makes this an effective way of convincing the audience that sometimes progress is not always good and perhaps things were better than the olden days (Scott).

Looking at the commonality as well as the differences in the movies discussed in this paper enables a description of satire and also gives insight on how satire has evolved in film over the last hundred years. All of the satiric films discussed in this paper seem to have several things in common: first of all, they're very personable, the viewer gets to see characters and their psychological makeup and actually gets to know them as people as the movie progresses. This acquaintance with the characters helps the audience appreciate the message of the satire on a one-to-one basis. It is easier to relate to the experiences of a single character as opposed to a group of characters or a movie where characterization is not overly vivid.

The movies have evolved since the first satire film. They have become more about everyday people and situations that an individual would be more apt in which to see themselves. Satires themselves have become less drastic we are no longer watching annihilation, instead they are showing what would happen if we lost a movie format or if the Equal Rights Amendment was applied in an unfair way. The scope of an individual satire also has changed from showing one single dramatic climax, like mass killing to now showing smaller sized things that people can more readily relate, such as falling in love with a coworker.

Satire will continue to be a viable way of bringing about change because it enables the viewer to be indirectly persuaded by actually observing an experience on someone else, and seeing the ramifications of that activity amplified. This amplification allows the viewer to more readily focus on the item that is being satirized and to address that scenario specifically, in relation to the other characteristics of the film.

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