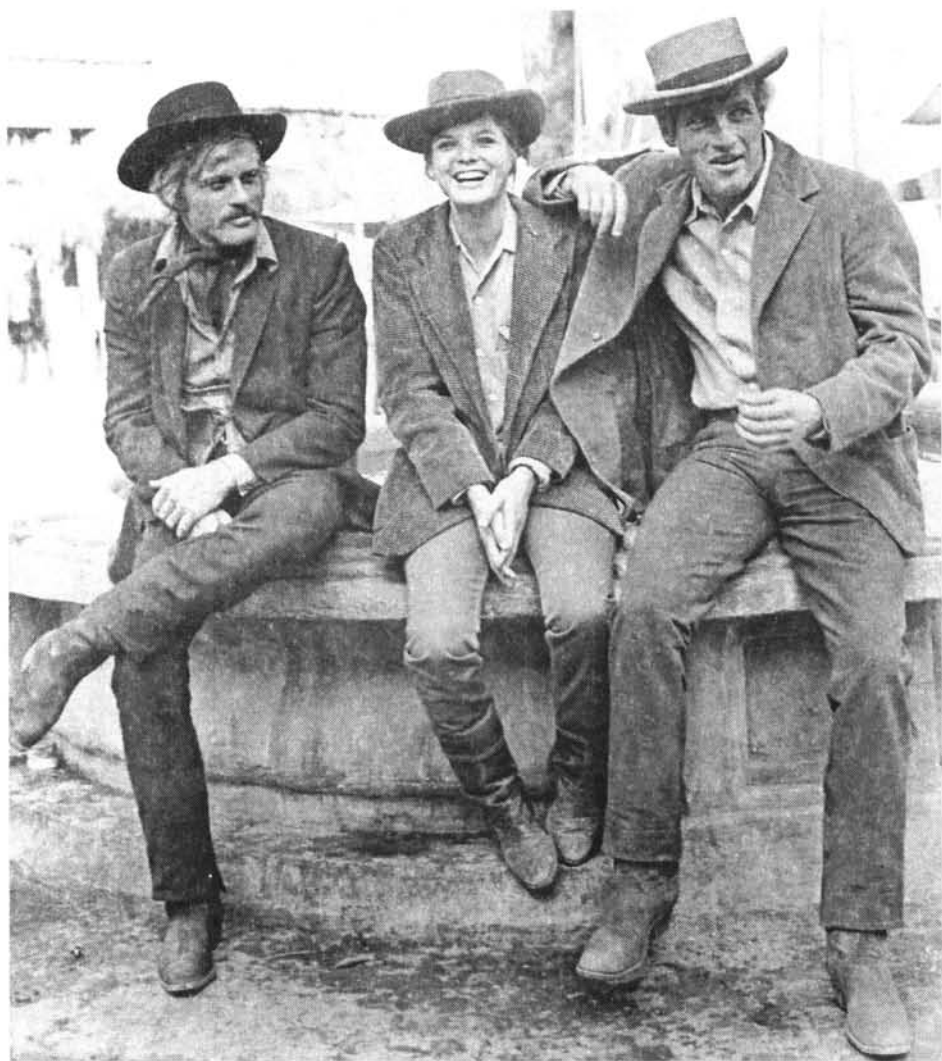


PARODY AS FILM GENRE

“Never Give a Saga an Even Break”

Wes D. Gehring

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An informal moment on the set of the classic reaffirmation parody *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), with Robert Redford, Katharine Ross, and Paul Newman.

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Foreword by Scott R. Olson

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To
Joe & Maria Pacino

BLAZING FRANKENSTEIN

In the world according to
Babbling Brooks, parody is
Merely “anarchy by accident,”
Or “Jewish novocaine.”

If Mel had been around
To collaborate with D. W. Griffith,
America’s first epic film would
Have been *Mirth of a Nation*.

Still, thanks to one scene
In *Blazing Saddles* Brooks
Had several critics calling
Him “the Farter of his country.”

Dig deeper and *Blazing Saddles*’
Sideswiping of violence and
Racism show us how
Far we haven’t come.

Or, chill out to Dr. Frankenstein
And his creation donning top hat
And tails to perform “Puttin’
On the Ritz,” or is it “The Monster Mash”?

Think sci-fi spoofing and Mel’s
Space Balls beams up . . . but his
Whole oeuvre might be called
The Invasion of the GENRE Snatchers.

Wherever Brooks’ time-tripping takes
Us bank on a Mel milieu in which
Things are never what they seem
And too far is just far enough.

—Wes D. Gehring

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Foreword: Puncturing and Reaffirmation

You're about to read a very important book, because dominant genres reveal a lot about culture. Ours is a time of parody. Wes Gehring's timing couldn't be better, since parody is often associated with the end of a genre's natural life cycle, the step right before it arises like a phoenix from its own ashes. After all, *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992) somehow followed the devastation of *Blazing Saddles* (1974). We're now at the *fin de siecle* of not only a century, but of a millennium, and the parodies are coming fast and furious. The phoenix may mutate, but it doesn't die.

Part of that mutation is a blurring of the definition of what parody is. Dr. Gehring makes an important distinction between the parody of overt puncturing and the parody of reaffirmation that gets to the heart of the current vitality of the parody form. This is a critical difference, because it separates films and television shows that are clearly spoofs, such as those of Mel Brooks that broadly skewer the idiosyncrasies of their target, from that fuzzier breed of media that adores its object even as it mimics it, such as one sees in *Scream* (1996) or *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995). As Dr. Gehring demonstrates, overt puncturing has been with us for a long time. But that other creature, the reaffirmation, seems to be coming into its own just now.

Pastiche, the affectless, nonsatiric, and seemingly random appropriation of intertextual material, is the main device of reaffirmative parody. It's important because the parody of pastiche is considered by many cultural critics to be a major symptomatic condition of the postmodern age (Jameson 1992). When Disney parodies its own film *The Lion King* (1994)

at the end of its film *George of the Jungle* (1997) by having George ascend Pride Rock to present his newborn child to the animals, its goal is not to provoke a response of “Boy, is that film convention stupid,” so much as “Hey, I recognize that!” *The Lion King* is reaffirmed, not punctured. It helps sell more videos.

So although puncturing is still around, there’s a lot of reaffirmation on television and in the movies. Television has always been a haven for parody since before Milton Berle and *Texaco Star Theater*, but the sort of parody one sees now on television is more focused, less broad, and more subtly referential, more respectful and even reverent toward its targets. One good television example of postmodern reaffirmative pastiche is the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (Fox), which is difficult to appreciate or even follow without specific knowledge of the source material it targets. In one episode, Homer and Marge hire Sherry Bobbins, a British nanny whose name prompts one character to say, “Don’t you mean Mary Pop——?” before being cut off. That truncated line of dialogue makes the reference clear without miring Fox in a lawsuit with notoriously litigious Disney. In contrast to the restorative family therapy enacted by the eponymous character in the film *Mary Poppins* (1964), Sherry Bobbins fails to improve the Simpson clan, causing a self-satisfied Homer Simpson to sing in a parody of a Sherman and Sherman tune that

I’d rather drink a beer
Than win “Father of the Year.”
I’m happy with things the way they are!

Another episode parodies the Superman character through the attempts of a Hollywood studio to shoot a film called *Radioactive Man* in the Simpsons’ hometown. The actor who plays Radioactive Man, a caricature of Arnold Schwarzenegger called McBain, has an Austrian accent so thick that he can’t get the character’s signature line right; despite extensive directorial coaching, he keeps saying, “Up and at them!” instead of the important catchphrase “Up and Atom!” In another episode, the science fiction film *The Planet of the Apes* (1968) is affectionately sent up as “Planet of the Apes—The Musical!,” which concludes with actor Troy McClure singing a Lloyd Webber style, pull-out-the-stops finale called “You Really Made a Monkey Out of Me!” in front of the ruins of the Statue of Liberty. There is no derision or social criticism here, though—it’s only wistful affection, as if the folks at Gracie Films wished that once in a while a Disney protagonist couldn’t overcome adversity, or that there really was a superhero sidekick called Fallout Boy or a simian spectacular up for a Tony. One never gets the sense that the producers of *The Simpsons* have any feeling but love for the pop culture icons they parody.

The very meticulousness with which some parody is crafted bespeaks the

affirmative motives behind it. Perhaps the best of all the television parody shows was *SCTV* (syndicated, NBC, HBO), which parodied not only other television programs, but also television networks themselves. Interwoven with its lampoons of cooking shows, news shows, game shows, and soap operas was the behind-the-scenes chaos of the *SCTV* network and its colorful executives and talent. In one memorable episode, a Soviet television satellite maliciously co-opts *SCTV*'s broadcasting band and begins showing "Three-C-P One Russian Television" to startled Americans as a kind of reverse cultural imperialism. Each of these CCCP-1 programs is a parody distortion of some American genre; the Russian game show is a Cyrillic alphabet soup patterned after *Scrabble* called "Uposcrabblnyk," and a bland, amiable, laugh-tracked Russian sitcom is called "Hey, Giorgy!" The precision of this parody is so fine, it can be hard to tell if one is supposed to laugh or not. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1990) has argued that at the end of the twentieth century, the line between an original and its simulacrum is getting pretty fuzzy. For him, the social condition created by that blurred division between what is real and what is mimetic is the most distinctive component of American culture. One could argue that affirmative parody is the very thing that makes American culture American.

What sets postmodern parody apart from its modernist precursor, then, is its razor-close aesthetic proximity to the thing it parodies. One of Milton Berle's overt parody commercials could not be easily mistaken for a real commercial, but the "Itchy and Scratchy" cartoons on *The Simpsons* or the horror spoof *Scream* (1996) look an awful lot like the real thing, and in some ways they *are* the real thing. A lot of young people I know who have never seen *Psycho* (1960), *Halloween* (1978), or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) were completely oblivious to any spoofing elements in *Scream* whatsoever, but no matter; it worked for them just fine as a horror movie. It is hard to imagine anyone mistaking the overt lampooning of *Blazing Saddles* (1974) for a real Western, even if they had never seen a Western before, but then, Brooks has the aesthetic distance of a Modernist. The essence of postmodern parody lies in its inability to distance itself.

That affectionate proximity can be evident even in more overt parodies such as *Police Squad!* (ABC) and its cinematic sibling *The Naked Gun* (1988). Consider, for example, the casting of Leslie Nielsen as Detective Frank Drebin. Unlike Uncle Miltie or Mel Brooks, Nielsen is the real thing, having starred in straight dramas such as *The Man Behind the Badge* (CBS) in the 1950s and *The New Breed* (ABC) and *The Protectors* (ABC) in the 1960s. He plays the character of Frank Drebin straight, like any other cop role. This lends a weird authenticity and verisimilitude that one doesn't find when watching the Marx Brothers in *Go West* (1940) or Mel Brooks in *High Anxiety* (1977). It's as if Clint Eastwood had starred in *Blazing Saddles*. The use of actors such as Lloyd Bridges, Peter Graves, and William Shatner in the *Airplane* movies or Charlie Sheen in the *Hot Shots!* films

lends a similar authenticity. Milton Berle (or Jerry Lewis or Mel Brooks or Rick Moranis) in the same roles would have had a rather different effect.

As Dr. Gehring points out, satire is often wrongly equated with parody. They aren't the same thing, but puncturing parody often makes use of satire. Reaffirmative parody almost never does. Reaffirmation is incompatible with the derision and contempt that satiric parody shoots at its target. Postmodern parody relies instead on metafiction and intertextuality. Paradoxically, *Scream* as much epitomizes a slasher film as parodies one. It takes to a new level the interest director Wes Craven exhibited in metafiction in the film *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), a nonparodic reworking and culmination of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series that blended real life with the fiction. *Scream* is not satire. It's adoration. Rather than make fun of the slasher subgenre, *Scream* (and Craven) enshrine and worship it in a pure, elemental form.

The same can be said of the film version of *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995) or *A Very Brady Sequel* (1996). Can something so reverent to its source material be considered a parody, even a reaffirmative parody, or is it just a further and purer iteration of the original? These two films are so faithful to the original text, that apart from cast changes and anachronism gags, there is little difference between the simulation and the original. Plot lines and dialogue from the series are transferred whole and verbatim to the "parody." It would, after all, be hard to parody any show with spin-offs such as *The Brady Brides* (ABC) and *A Very Brady Christmas* (ABC). Merely quoting them is sufficient.

Blurring the line between the real and its spoof even further is the rock group Spinal Tap, spawned from the film *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), Rob Reiner's parody of heavy metal bands and the "rockumentaries" about them. Spinal Tap defies almost any attempt to define them as something other than an actual band. Although the film refers to numerous phony Spinal Tap albums, the band has since then actually released five albums: "This is Spinal Tap" (1984), "Christmas With the Devil EP" (1984), "Bitch School EP" (1992), "The Majesty of Rock EP" (1992), and "Break Like the Wind" (1993). It has done two national concert tours. It has produced several music videos. It did a corporate endorsement for IBM. By most definitions, Spinal Tap is at least as "real" as the nonparody synthetic bands The Monkees or The New Kids On The Block or Milli Vanilli or Spice Girls. At least Spinal Tap writes and performs its own music.

In short, parody is the literary form that most embodies postmodernism, and therefore best exemplifies the fuzzy, mutating, recombinant times in which we live. Like many other aspects of our environment, parody is at heart a language game. *Ilinx* is a term Roger Caillois (1962) uses to characterize dizzying and disorienting games, and elsewhere (1987) I've talked about the *ilinx*-like games found in the postmodern media. It is a descriptive label to slap on most of the parody found in the media today. Hitch-

cock liked to play this game, of course, as Thomas M. Leitch (1991) has pointed out. But as the game speeds up, as the references and intertextuality get more complex, the game is making us all dizzier. After all, *George of the Jungle* was supposed to be a parody of Tarzan. What's *The Lion King* doing in there? Trying to keep track of the pastiche in *Scream* or *The Simpsons* is a stupefying and vertiginous challenge. The essential postmodern question of "what's real?" is getting very hard to answer.

Because parody is such a representative literary form for our time, Wes Gehring (a pseudonym for Wes Craven? Note the lengthy discussion of *Scream* in this book . . . has anyone ever seen Wes Gehring and Wes Craven together at the same time?) does the world of film studies a service by taking a careful look at it. Knowing and understanding parody's devices is essential for informed and critical media viewership. Dr. Gehring is in a great position to do that needed analysis, given his extensive writings about film comedy and film genres. I suspect that when you finish the book, you'll be better able to make sense of these postmodern times. Since Dr. Gehring is passionate about helping us understand movies, the parody genre is likely to survive his scrutiny and dissection reaffirmed, not punctured.

Scott R. Olson

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Preface

In *Hot Shots!* (1991) pilot Topper Harley (Charlie Sheen) cannot believe his psychiatrist and eventual lover Ramada (Valeria Golino) is grounding him. When he tells her she must be joking, she replies, "Look, if I were joking I would have said, 'What do you do with an elephant with three balls? [Topper has no response.] You walk him and pitch to the rhino.'" "

In 1988 my *Handbook of American Film Genres* was published. The catalyst for this volume, for which I was editor and chief contributor, was the chance to write chapters on what I saw as the five comedy genres—personality, screwball, parody, dark, and populist. I had been influenced by a statement from comedy theorist Jim Leach. With amusing insight he observed, "A genre which encompasses the visions of Jerry Lewis *and* Ernest Lubitsch is already in trouble."¹ Leach was encouraging a more ambitious look at *multiple* comedy genres, noting what most disciples of laughter have long believed: "If a genre is defined too loosely [as in the case of comedy], it ceases to be of any value as a critical tool."²

Accomplishments frequently beget new accomplishments, or at least greater aspirations. When the *Handbook* was published, my goal became to write a genre book about each of the five comedy types previously noted. With the completion of the text in hand, I have reached that objective.

The examination of American film parody that follows is divided into five chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1 both scrutinizes the genre's nu-

merous components and provides a historical overview of the spoofing tradition in American movies.

Chapter 2 studies the manner in which several pivotal comedians addressed Western parody at the height of America's golden film age, the years just prior to the country's entry into World War II (1941). The Western slant is important both for its significance at that time and its ongoing premier status (among genre targets) throughout the history of American movie parody.

The movies perused in Chapter 2 include Laurel & Hardy's *Way Out West* (1937), W. C. Fields and Mae West's *My Little Chickadee* (1940), and the Marx Brothers' *Go West* (1940). Besides these traditionally broad spoofs of the Western, the chapter also examines a film from the period, *Destry Rides Again* (1939), which assumes a more complex take on burlesque. The latter approach, called parody of reaffirmation, balances comic deflation with an eventual celebration of the genre under affectionate attack. The chapter closes with *Destry's* comparison to the ultimate Western reaffirmation burlesque, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).

Chapter 3 focuses on the central American parody artist prior to Mel Brooks—Bob Hope. His spoof career is briefly surveyed before the chapter quickly moves to analysis of my Hope trilogy: *The Road to Utopia* (1945), *My Favorite Brunette* (1947), and *The Paleface* (1948). *Utopia* is the best of the seven *Road* pictures he made with Bing Crosby, which burlesque action adventure movies. *Brunette* is a takeoff on film noir, and *Paleface* parodies the Western. Consistent with the latter genre's importance in spoof history, as reviewed in Chapter 2, *Paleface* was *the* critical and commercial hit of Hope's career. That portion of the chapter also compares *Paleface* with its very popular sequel, *Son of Paleface* (1952). This Hope portion of the text closes with a look at the comedian's number one parody disciple, Woody Allen, and his film *Play It Again, Sam* (1972).

Chapter 4 chronicles the burlesque misadventures of the genre's unofficial king, Mel Brooks. After an overview of Brooks' parody roots, the chapter closely examines his two greatest works, *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974). Of particular interest, with regard to the preceding chapters, is the watershed Western parody nature of *Blazing Saddles*, especially Brooks' comic mining of what Italian director Sergio Leone had stumbled into with his 1960s spaghetti Western trilogy.

Chapter 5 views spoof films in the 1990s by way of two representative works—the traditionally broad burlesque, *Hot Shots! Part Deux* (1993), and the parody of reaffirmation, *Scream* (1996). A special chapter slant addresses the genre's self-referential tendencies. Though this direction did not start in the 1990s, deconstruction is now both more apt to occur, and more ambitious in scope.

These chapters are followed by an Epilogue, a brief summing up, in

which I reiterate some key points and add a few closing reflections on parody. On the heels of this are a selective bibliography and filmography.

Besides being driven by a fascination for all things comic, alluded to in my opening comments, this text has also been an attempt to balance a theoretical take on parody with a look at several special parody auteurs. Although cognizant of theorist Scott R. Olson's insightful warning about subsuming genre within authorship, I feel it is also essential to scrutinize those artists whose films help define, and/or redefine, whatever genre is under the microscope.³ Parody, like all genres, is forever a work in transition. And theory must always find symmetry with the important practitioners.

Because parody plays upon—spoofs—a pre-established artistic structure, it often does not receive the recognition visited upon other comedy genres. My closing wish for the text in hand would be that it helps redress this misconception. Funny here is just as special as funny elsewhere.

NOTES

1. Jim Leach, "The Screwball Comedy," in *Film Genres and Criticism*. ed. Barry K. Grant (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 75.
2. Ibid.
3. Scott R. Olson, "College Course File: Studies in Genre—Horror," *Journal of Film and Video*, Spring-Summer 1996, p. 74.

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Acknowledgments

In Woody Allen's science fiction parody *Sleeper* (1973), he awakens 200 years in the future and is asked to join a revolution. His character responds, "I'm not the heroic type. I was beaten up by Quakers."

Film comedy has always held an honored position in my family. My dad and both grandfathers loved all things comic, and happily both my daughters, Sarah and Emily, are also predisposed along these lines. Thus, family tradition helped me get here, as well as providing an ongoing pleasant working environment for finishing the book in hand.

Some would suggest that examining comedy, whether parody or populism, destroys the magic. To them I would respectfully say, "Poppycock," or words to that effect. A better understanding of what makes you laugh enhances your hold on life. No one ever gets out with all the answers, but a handle on humor makes the stay much more palatable.

Besides family tradition and encouragement, there are several professional colleagues to thank. My department chairperson, "Dr. Joe" Misiewicz, assisted with both securing release time for me and facilitating university financial help. I greatly appreciate the ongoing support of Ball State University Provost Warren C. Vander Hill, as well as the backing of Earl Conn, former dean of the College of Communication, Information, and Media. Janet Warner, my local copyeditor, was forever available and insightful. The computer preparation of the manuscript was done by Jean Thurman. And teaching friends Joe and Maria Pacino and Conrad Lane

were often helpful, as was my new Dean of Communication, Scott R. Olsen, who wrote the foreword.

Research for this book also involved several important archives and their invariably helpful staffs. These include the New York Public Library System, especially the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center; the Film Stills Archive of the Museum of Modern Art (New York); the Archives of the Performing Arts (Doeheny Library) at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles, with a special thank you to head archivist Ned Comstock); the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Beverly Hills); and Ball State University's Bracken Library (Muncie, Indiana). In writing a dozen film comedy texts prior to this one, I was also able to draw from a large private collection of movie files and stills.

Coming back full circle to family, a special thank-you is in order for both my daughters and my parents. Their love and support make demanding book projects like this possible.

Wes D. Gehring, Ph.D.

1

Parody Overview

After the appearance of a giant chicken in *Sleeper* (1973), Miles (Woody Allen) asks Luna (Diane Keaton) if 2173 has any weird futuristic animals—“like something with the body of a crab and the head of a social worker.”

When *Young Frankenstein's* (1974) monster (Peter Boyle) stops making love to the doctor's fiancée (Madeline Kahn), she says, “Oh, you men are all alike. Seven or eight quick ones and you're off with the boys to boast and brag. Well, YOU BETTER KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!”

American film parody is a comic, yet generally affectionate and distorted, imitation of a given genre, auteur, or specific work. These parody variations are best demonstrated by the 1970s Pied Piper of the genre, Mel Brooks. His *Blazing Saddles* (1974) is an inspired takeoff on the Western genre. *High Anxiety* (1977) parodies the mystery/thriller work of auteur Alfred Hitchcock. *Young Frankenstein* (1974) is largely a comic undercutting (or should one say distortion?) of the classic horror film *Frankenstein* (1931) and some of its sequels, especially *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

There is nothing inherently new about the genre, whether one goes back to Aristophanes (448?–380? B.C.) spoofing the writing styles of Aeschylus and Euripides in the *Frogs*, or Cervantes' undercutting of the medieval romance genre in his early seventeenth-century novel *Don Quixote*, whose title character argumentatively is Western culture's greatest comic figure.



Cleavon Little and Gene Wilder make with the liquid happiness in Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974).

Unlike other American film comedy genres, such as the 1930s Depression birth of screwball comedy, or the front and center emergence of dark comedy in the 1960s, parody has been a mainstream part of American film comedy since the beginning. It was, in fact, a pivotal ingredient in the works of Mack Sennett, America's film comedy father. This comedy pioneer was at his best when spoofing the melodramatic adventure films of his mentor, D. W. Griffith. For instance, Sennett's *Teddy at the Throttle* (1917) is a delightful takeoff on Griffith's propensity for the last-minute rescue, such as the close of his celebrated but still controversial *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

In this chapter's examination of seven basic characteristics of parody, Sennett's significance to the genre is underscored by frequent references to his work along with those of other pivotal directors, such as Brooks, or the director/writer team of Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker (commonly known as the ZAZ team) of *Airplane!* (1980) fame. First, parody should be funny even without viewer expertise on the subject under comic attack. An example would be the extended bean-induced farting scene in *Blazing Saddles*. For decades cinema cowboys have been gobbling up this gas-producing meal without one reference to its natural powers. (Brooks accepts the nickname "vulgar primitive."¹) Yes, parody often has one foot in reality. It should be obvious, however, that the genre is progressively more entertaining the greater one's familiarity with the subject