Film Comedy and the American Dream

“In Film Comedy and the American Dream, Zach Sands takes the history of American movie comedy seriously as a source of a sustained and evolving critique of that elusive yet indispensable cultural concept, the American Dream. Through careful, insightful, and witty analyses of crucial movie comedies over the course of American movie history, Sands traces the promise and dashed hopes of the American Dream in relation to economics, gender, and neoliberalism, taking on sex comedies, bromances, and zombies along the way.”
—John Alberti, Northern Kentucky University, US

Film Comedy and the American Dream is an examination of national identity in the era of the American superpower as projected in popular comedic films that center on issues of upward mobility. It is the story of what made audiences laugh and why, and what this says about the changing shape of the American Dream from the end of the Second World War through the first part of the twenty-first century. Through a combination of narrative and thematic analyses of popular comedic films, contextualized within a dynamic historical framework, this book traces the increasing disillusionment with this guiding ideology in the face of multiple forms of systemic exclusion. It argues that film comedy is a major component of the discourse surrounding the American Dream because these movies often evoke humor by highlighting the incongruities that exist between the ideals that define this nation versus the actual lived experiences of its citizens.

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Film Comedy and the American Dream

Zach Sands
For progress.
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1 The Pursuit of Happiness

Don’t Try This at Home

The first narrative film ever produced was a comedy. In 1895, the Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arroseur Arrosé*\(^1\) earned the distinction of being the first motion picture to tell a story, complete with a beginning, a middle and an end. Prior to this, the motion itself was the novelty. With a runtime of just over a minute, *The Waterer Watered* offers its audience exposition, conflict and resolution in the familiar form of a setup, complication and punchline. The rudimentary plot consists of just this one joke, that of a man being tricked into spraying himself in the face with a hose and then spanking the culprit, so we can safely presume that its central purpose was to elicit laughter from an audience. Over the past 120 years, cinema has proven to be remarkably effective in this regard.

Throughout the history of motion pictures, comedies have commonly found vast resonance with mass audiences, often outperforming their more celebrated and spectacular counterparts at the box office. Despite these considerations, comedic films tend to receive significantly less scholarly attention and critical acclaim. Case in point: since the end of World War II, as of this writing, only three comedies have won the Academy Award for Best Picture,\(^2\) which reflects a widely-held prejudice that if it makes us laugh, then it is not to be taken seriously as a work of cinematic art. However, as one of the broader goals of this project seeks to make clear, to understand the appeal of popular comedic films is to gain valuable insights into the cultures that consume them.

Anecdotally, I can attest this to be the case. Many years ago, I saw *Jackass: The Movie*\(^3\) while in my final semester as a film student, which is to say that I was fully prepared to hate this movie in no fewer than 500 words. On the other hand, it is also reasonable to consider this Spike Jonze–produced docu-comedy to be the modern equivalent of *L’Arroseur Arrosé*, as both involve pranks being pulled on unsuspecting people with the audience in on the joke. *Jackass* simply reflects how far the envelope had been pushed up to this point. That in mind, had I not viewed this film in a dark, crowded room that was almost constantly filled with laughter, then I might not have found the on-screen antics so entertaining. To
view a motion picture in its theatrical exhibition can certainly be a com-
munal experience, and for eighty-seven minutes, I found my comedic
sensibilities unexpectedly aligned with a room full of strangers. Despite
the diversity of our perspectives and life experiences, we were an inside
group.\textsuperscript{4} Each utterance of laughter was a voice in the choir.

In widescreen and surround sound, we witnessed the rules of
civilization being flagrantly disregarded for the sake of cheap laughs,
but by the time the end credits rolled, it was evident that those rules
exist for a reason, if only so that nobody gets hurt. When we left the
cineplex that afternoon, the world we entered was one in which every
decision we made seemed wise by contrast. Consider that this is a film
and a franchise that effectively draws the bulk of its humor from people
doing things that they are not supposed to do, whether for their own
welfare or for the continuity of a civil society. As an audience, while we
were explicitly advised to not try this at home, we were then invited to
laugh at these “jackasses” who break the rules and behave like juveniles.
Through these fearless personas that were presented as larger-than-life,
we had just participated in the projection of commonly experienced
anxieties about maturity expressed through comedy.

Some might call it a catharsis.

What’s So Funny?

The ancient Greeks believed that laughter is the breath that animates the
soul. Aristotle claimed that it was on a baby’s fortieth day of existence
that the miracle of laughter transformed this creature from a human
into a human being.\textsuperscript{5} Just as babies develop an awareness of their
surroundings, they begin to laugh. This is not a coincidence. Even at
this age, humor requires a familiar context, which is then interrupted
by a sudden, unexpected contrast. As noted by scholar and screenwriter
David Misch, “Peekaboo is everybody’s first comedy routine.”\textsuperscript{6} It is a
momentary rupture in a baby’s perception of reality. When this reality is
suddenly restored, the infant laughs.

Anthropologists believe that the reason human beings laugh at
all is because it served as a prelinguistic form of communication, just
as it is with infants. Similar behavior in chimpanzees has also been
well-documented.\textsuperscript{7} Involuntary laughter, which is mimicked in social
laughter, is a way of signaling to others that a moment of tension has
passed, that an intellectual incongruity has been resolved. Essentially,
it is a way to let others know that everything is okay. An evolutionary
remnant of this is tickling. When people are tickled, they laugh because
they subconsciously recognize their own vulnerability to attack while also
maintaining an awareness that they are not in any immediate danger.\textsuperscript{8}

Comedy prompts a similar physiological reaction because it too
commonly draws from very real anxieties, perceived weaknesses in
ourselves or in the cultures to which we belong that are exaggerated for effect while rendered harmless to the intended audience. To understand what makes people laugh can therefore tell us a great deal about the reality that has been disrupted, as well as the dominant underlying concerns of a society. For these reasons and more, comedy proves to be an invaluable resource in the study of cultural history.

As Misch suggests, “Surprise is the key to all humor,” as well as “the key to all art and entertainment.” If art fails to surprise us, then it is a cliche. In comedy, this translates as a stale joke. In order for any work of art to intellectually engage its audience, it must offer an unexpected perspective of something familiar. With comedy as with peekaboo, we laugh at the incongruity between our expectations and reality. A skilled practitioner of comedy sets us up to expect one thing and then presents us with something else. This leads us to make connections where they did not previously exist, which causes us to incrementally adjust our perceptions of the world. This is comedy and this is art.

As it pertains to this study, I am particularly interested in film comedy because it is shared by a broad audience and functions as a complex historical archive of dominant cultural anxieties. Comedic films can be thought to function as time capsules of what was in the hearts and minds of their audiences. While laughter is indeed a strange involuntary response that is more or less the same in every language, humor often requires a dynamic exchange of ideas between an individual and the social environment to which that person belongs. As such, not only can understanding comedy tell us something of what it means to belong to a particular culture at a specific time and place, but it can also yield fascinating insights into that fundamental question of what it means to be human, offering uncommon perspectives of the humanity behind the humanities.

As Scott Weems notes in his recent study on laughter, “Humor isn’t just about being funny; it’s also about how we deal with complex and contradictory messages.” He also claims, “It is a process of conflict resolution.” Comedy, in this light, can be seen as a coping mechanism through which we attempt to make sense of our world. In a joke, we engage with two or more concepts that appear to be incompatible but which are then connected by the punchline in a way that only makes sense in retrospect.

Often, these contrasting ideas represent some fundamental difference between one’s sense of reality and the world encapsulated within the joke. In the real world, for example, we all know that it could not possibly take that many academics to screw in a light bulb. It is our existing neural pathways that prevent us from expecting the punchline, but when the payoff is delivered, this creates another connection within the vast network of the human mind. It is our knowledge of reality that allows us to identify with the joke while keeping the punchline hidden, which may in turn augment our sense of reality. This is why people are much more likely to laugh at a joke for which they have a frame of reference but have
never heard before. It also explains why laughter is a common reaction to a magic trick or a horror movie. Much like tickling, these things all represent benign contrasts between our subconscious expectations and the reality with which we are presented.

Comedy shows us another way of looking at what we think we already know, which is precisely why it lends itself so well to political discourse. Politics, I would argue, is the art of ideological alignment, and comedy is one of its most valuable instruments of persuasion. This also accounts for why if people participate in enough racist or sexist jokes, then they might start to believe them. Every punchline represents the synthesis of an intellectual incongruity between conflicting realities, which is why research in this field offers such fruitful terrain in the study of American culture. By connecting history with comedy, we can solve for $x$.

In the United States, audiences of comedic films commonly anticipate a happy ending while witnessing the protagonist’s recurring moments of tragedy. These everyday antiheroes are often painted with broad strokes, their flaws fully on display. This allows audiences to vaguely identify with them, but because of the emotional distance that comedy allows, viewers are never truly concerned for their immediate well-being. The Three Stooges, for example, never sustained any serious eye injuries and audiences knew it, but they did achieve the height of their popularity during and immediately after the Second World War: a time when many Americans were trying to reconcile the absurdity and the reality of “good” violence. More often than not, comedy represents a culture trying to make sense of itself.

While the world within a comedic film is never quite reality, a keen observer may note that it does bear a rather striking resemblance, and as I shall explain, it is within these overlaps between subjectivity and objectivity that a movie’s themes are typically articulated, just as with a punchline. As we will see, the most popular of these films are often exaggerated tales of sacrifice and fulfillment, and comedy, as a mode of presentation, allows for an emotional detachment from big ideas. Once the laughter has been expressed, all that remains is the idea.

Building upon these assertions, I seek to examine the discourse of the American Dream as represented in film comedy in order to highlight the ways in which the Dream has remained steadfast over the years, as well as how audience perception of it has evolved in relation to a changing social context. At its core, this is the story of how comedic films that center on issues of upward mobility reflect prevalent anxieties about the shifting fault lines that exist between reality and myth, which is one of the characteristic contradictions that define the American experience.

The Good Life

The American Dream is the promise of opportunity to pursue a better life. It is an idea, an ideal and an ideology through which this nation has historically defined itself, often in contrast to some other political power,
whether the British monarchy or Soviet communism, to cite just two examples. Although the term was first coined in the depths of the Great Depression, the Dream had existed as a concept since the first English settlement in the Americas. In its earliest incarnation, it represented the Puritans’ hope for what they believed could be an ideal society, one that promised a better life for their children if not themselves. In the New World, they were free to pursue and ultimately attain success as they defined it. For them, as with the Quakers who soon followed, this meant living in accordance with their interpretations of the Bible, unshackled from the corrupt institutions of their homeland. Their Dream was that of a better future.

In reality, that future brought with it an increasing number of Europeans who crossed the Atlantic in pursuit of another kind of success. Optimistic entrepreneurs and adventurers with nothing to lose dreamt of fast riches through the exploitation of the continent’s vast resources. America was heralded as a land of opportunity, but as these early settlers quickly learned, hard work was also an implicit component of the Dream. As political scientist Cal Jillson notes, “If they came as adventurers in search of quick wealth, they were almost invariably disappointed. Most died anonymously or returned home without leaving much of a trace.”

Nevertheless, the Dream persisted, aided in no small part by the slave trade that allowed landowners to reap the bounty of the earth without the investment of their own labor. An added dimension to the American Dream therefore indicated that while hard work was indeed a virtue, it may in fact be trumped by the authority to delegate such labor to stronger, more capable hands. Access to the Dream has historically been afforded to the privileged few through the exclusion and exploitation of the disadvantaged many.

In spite of this, by the mid-eighteenth century, these ideas of opportunity and meritocracy were so entrenched in the colonial ethos that Jefferson included the phrase “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, building upon the work of John Locke in proclaiming these to be our fundamental human rights, as well as the core values of this embryonic nation. In 1,458 words, Americans claimed for themselves the inalienable rights of life, liberty and (not the promise, but) the pursuit of happiness. Historian Jim Cullen refers to this document as the “charter of the American Dream” and posits,

If there is one constant in the Declaration of Independence, it lies in the way no version of the status quo is ever completely acceptable. It provides us with (often imperceptibly shifting) standards by which we measure success but simultaneously calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience.
The American Dream is the proverbial carrot on a stick that incentivizes its believers to move forward. It is the creed of the middle class, the vague hope of a better future. As Cullen notes, “Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals.”\(^{16}\) It is precisely this ambiguity that has allowed the Dream to readily adapt to changing cultural contexts, taking on new meanings for different times while maintaining the core principles that make it so resilient.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the American Dream came to represent the glorified aspirations of the common man, as figures such as Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln helped expand the idea of the Dream within the public imagination to include the prospect of upward mobility through their mythologized representations of this ideal. In their own ways, both of these men were seen as extraordinary products of the ordinary citizenry, and so the United States was celebrated as a place where any mother’s white protestant son could achieve greatness.

After the Civil War, however, notions of equality regarding race, religion and gender increasingly became a part of this discourse as more people vocalized concern over just whose Dream this was. While the Statue of Liberty promised a “golden door” to the “tired, poor and huddled masses” who were “yearning to breathe free,” for many immigrants who passed through Ellis Island, the opportunities to pursue a better life simply did not exist.\(^{17}\) Granted, there were always exceptions, individuals who exemplified the realization of the American Dream, including Andrew Carnegie and many of the pioneers of early Hollywood, who did in fact achieve astonishing financial success in this country despite their humble beginnings in other lands, but this was by no means the norm. Still, the Horatio Alger story was indeed a reality for enough Americans that the mythology of the Dream lived on. Sadly, Alger himself died in poverty and relative anonymity.\(^{18}\)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the urbanization and industrialization of the United States brought with them a more dynamic economy, and as the old frontier disappeared into statehood, new opportunities for sudden wealth appeared in the stock exchange. The American Dream became deeply entangled in the corrupt machinations of high finance and laissez-faire economics. By the end of the First World War, optimism mixed with speculation and easy credit, which led to an unregulated economic boom that we can now see was all but certain to bust. In the decades that followed, the Great Depression and World War II brought with them a concerted drive for a unified national identity, and after the war, this translated to a mindset of conformity that was fueled by the perpetual threat of Communist infiltration and nuclear annihilation.

The postwar American Dream thus emphasized ideals of home ownership and limitless consumption in contrast to the second-world propaganda of the Soviet Union. It also served as redemption for
sacrifices made, both before the war and during. Consumerism came to be seen as the ultimate expression of freedom, and this version of the American Dream was increasingly marketed to the working and middle class as an equal-opportunity enterprise: a journey of self-improvement. It was a storyline made for Hollywood, and it is here in postwar era that our story begins.

For many at this time, the Dream came to mean that America was a place where anyone could accumulate vast wealth and achieve happiness through consumption. Consumerism was linked with patriotism in the public imagination, while success was increasingly viewed as a relative term. The United States was not just producing cars, prefabricated homes and household appliances after the war; the booming advertising industry was also producing consumers with voracious appetites. The “American Century” predicted by Time/Life publisher Henry Luce back in 1941 had officially commenced. According to historian Lizabeth Cohen,

As each family refurbished its hearth after a decade and a half of depression and war, the expanded consumer demand would stoke the fires of production, creating new jobs and, in turn, new markets. Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation.19

This period also marked the first time that the concept of the American Dream achieved relative consensus in the public imagination. This was due in large part to media representations, but also because the Dream seemed to validate all that made this country exceptional as the United States redefined its role in world affairs. Just as John Winthrop had declared theirs to be a “City upon a Hill” that could serve as a shining example for those who followed, by the end of the Second World War, the American way of life was already being pitched as nothing less than the greatest achievement of human civilization. When the American dollar was fixed to the price of gold as a result of the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, Britain effectively passed the torch to the United States as the world’s dominant economic superpower.20

The United States aimed to rebuild the war-torn world in its own image. American corporations eagerly exploited the opportunities opened by the Marshall Plan, while the Truman Doctrine effectively catalyzed what his successor would refer to as “the military-industrial complex.” Cultural scholar Donald E. Pease claims that,

After World War II, the US government propagated the belief that America was the fulfillment of the world’s aspiration for the ‘Nation of Nations’ by constructing the threat to the attainment of that ideal in the image of the Soviet Empire.21