

An Understanding Of Mass Mediated Comedy Entertainment's Reflection Of Social Classes

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Comedy, Popular Culture, and the Representation of Social Class

The classification of individuals into social groups is reflected in within popular culture in the new contemporary social institutions. Comedy is a persistent feature of popular culture that apparently demonstrates social class differences, and yet sociologists have ironically overlooked the importance of the art of comedy. The present essay aims at developing an understanding of mass-mediated comedy entertainment's reflection of social classes and its importance in the cultivation of social identities.

The lacking part of sociological research is how comedy can create an understanding and environment where race and class apparently can be spoken about, which is harsh often. Ethnic and racial comedy serves as a reinforcement of social, ethnic, and racial stereotypes, differences and similarities. The comedy acts often utilize social themes strengthening the stereotypes and perceived truths, sometimes, ethnic comedy is offensive towards other social classes. Self-proclaimed colourblind societies have comedy as a facet of a popular culture heavily drowned in social classification.

Bourdieu in 1984 explained that children of dominant upper-middle class and middle class are oriented towards "legitimate" tastes of cultures, and a way of seeing art is cultivated in them by instilling them dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984). These perceptions and tastes, when activated in social life, act as signals for symbolic differences among social classes.

Television Humour and the Critique of Class Identity

Television comedy has often been found ridiculing the characteristics and complexities of social classes, structures and identities associated. Television comedy has constantly been used as a significant channel through which questions, anxieties and serious concerns about social identities of classes are contested and constructed in the viewers' minds.

A study conducted by Freidman has shown that people belonging to the middle class use comedy to assert a sense of cultural superiority. It is concluded in the study that working class people usually everyday life observational humor that serve gratifications for them, such comedy is generally straightforward punchlines. Complex and sophisticated comedy is a preserve that the middle class holds, claim experts. A sociologist from the University of Edinburgh carried out the study suggesting that an individual's taste in comedy, to a certain extent, indicates his or her social class identity. He posits that "Far from illustrating crumbling class hierarchies, the increasing popularity of comedy among the middle classes simply shows how the privileged are now using their superior cultural skills to distinguish themselves in pop culture as well as the high arts." The researcher claimed in the study that middle-class people's taste of comedy is underpinned by their social class standing, elite education and a privileged family background.

In American comedy films, the portrayal of social classes has always been a topic of debate among sociologists and anthropologists. From the comedy in silent movies to today's films of comedy and humour genre, comedy has focused on common issues of contemporary social classes in America. For instance, the famous comedian from the Silent Era movies, Charlie Chaplin, has been shown as a man belonging to a lower-middle class who struggles to cross the lane of social class and reach a better position in society.

Costume, Performance, and the Imitation of Higher Status

He dresses like a person from a higher social class in an attempt to give an appearance of holding high social status. He ties to an outfit like a gentleman from a high class but gets ridiculous as the clothes do not fit his body well, and it gives a comic look to his character. In his another film "Immigrant" he is shown as an European who arrives in America and struggles to adopt a new life, he is poor and attempts to appear as from high social class and impress the woman. Such portrayals indicate a cultivation of thoughts about lower-middle-class people struggling to climb the ladder in order to reach the upper class.

The pattern of the movies shows that the comedians belong to the lower class and try to impress women from a higher class, such as the characters of Charlie Chaplin and Mrs Moneybags, Peter Warne and Ellen Andrews, and Groucho and Mrs Claypool. The conflicts and breakups between lovers and other characters are also shown based on social class differences and issues.

The portrayal of minorities in comedy entertainment has also been under study since the emergence of new mass media and contemporary society. For instance, African -Americans have always been portrayed in comic roles that are totally the reverse of their portrayal in the violent action genre. Such representation has evolved a general stereotypical concept about the blacks in the mass audiences as comic figures. One of today's most famous African-American comedians, Chris Rock, seems to have attempted to build bridges between the two racial social classes, "whites" and "blacks".

Race, Stereotype, and the Social Divisions of Comic Representation

However, the critique says that his portrayal of blacks contributes only to the strengthening of negative black stereotypes in society. His comedy has even divided the black into two social classes “blacks” and “niggers”. While directing to the non-black audiences, his works define niggers as blacks who are the troublemakers within the black community and the society overall. Though the comedian tries to convey that not all blacks are as they are stereotyped, it only reinforces the existing stereotypes. Comedy by Chris Rock and some works of the Hughes brothers, when speaking to racial relations, need to highlight the positive images of blacks and their culture in society and give proper identification to the criminals in the black community as the causes of these social problems as did the movies of Eddie Murphy and John Singleton.

Comedy entertainment has a relatively lower representation of women in leading comedian roles; this is hardly the case for women who do stand-up comedy, for instance. There is an interesting phrase posited in an article by Smith in “Global Comment”, “TV comedy has a woman problem”. Women’s representation in comedy is depressingly low in general, specifically in television comedy entertainment programs. Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave in 1986 asserted in their “Women in Comedy” “that female comics are a rare commodity”. There is a general stereotypical perception behind such assertion that *“women are just not funny...they don’t laugh at jokes, nor do they create them.”* The audiences generally don’t expect hilarious performances from female comedians and such expectations are based on their strong beliefs and prejudice about women’s social and entertainment roles.

On a conclusive note, comedy is a form of entertainment that provides a platform where social class boundaries can be stretched and broken. The case is truer in stand-up comedy acts where the stereotypical norms of society are ridiculed and contested. The prevailing conventions of social classes and their stereotypical identities are generally ridiculed in stand-up comedy acts. Race, social status, background, sexual orientation and impression of the audience are very important to stand-up comedians. The comedians have a strange power to construct and deconstruct the social identities of classes in society with their words, as apparent in the case of Chris Rock’s works. Mass-mediated comedy entertainment programs are powerful vehicles that carry the potential to cultivate social classes and associated symbolic identities.

References

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