



universität
wien

DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

„American Ethnic Humor in Prime Time Animation,
Comedy Film, and Television Sketch Comedy“

Verfasserin

Katrin Al Jezany

Angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2013

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt: A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt: Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuerin: Privatdozentin Mag. Dr. Astrid M. Fellner

HINWEIS

Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen der Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich, mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Es wird gebeten, diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has provided me with support and encouragement throughout my research. Words cannot express how much I appreciate what you all have done for me, but I will try to sum up my thoughts and gratefulness. Foremost, I would like to express my immense gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Astrid Fellner for giving me the opportunity to do this project on the topic of American Ethnic Humor. Her support, kindness, and extreme patience helped me throughout the process of writing of this thesis. I can not imagine having a better supervisor for my research. In addition, I would like to thank my examiner Prof. Dr. Carmen Birkle for her guidance, as well as for going above and beyond her duties as a professor by travelling from Germany to Vienna to examine me.

I am also thankful to my family, especially my mother Marija Al Jezany for never having doubt in me, as well as her constant support, motivation, and encouragement to complete this paper. My father, Hussain Al Jezany who has rendered financial support at all times for the successful completion of my thesis, as well as my studies. Last but not least I would like to thank my friends and everyone else who helped me gather information, stimulate new ideas, learn through shared advice and knowledge, fine-tune my arguments with their editing skills, and guide me from time to time in bringing this project to fruition.

With deep appreciation,
Katrin Al Jezany

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
INTRO TO THE MAKING OF THIS PAPER	3
AMERICAN HUMOR	5
DEFINITION AND FUNCTION OF HUMOR	5
THEORIES OF HUMOR	7
ETHNICITY	9
ETHNIC HUMOR AND SOCIAL LAUGHTER	11
HUMOR AND ITS FUNCTIONS	12
CULTURAL CODE	17
AMERICAN IDENTITY	19
THE IMPORTANCE OF AMERICAN HISTORY	22
DEMOCRACY	23
VIOLENCE IN HUMOR	24
HUMOR IN MEDIA AND ITS FUNCTION IN AMERICAN FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRY	26
TELEVISION	28
SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE	31
SNL BEHIND THE SCENES	31
THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE	33
POLITICAL HUMOR AND SATIRE ON AND OFF THE SHOW	34
POLITICS IN SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE AND ITS INFLUENCE	38
CHRIS ROCK AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF “ONE NATION UNDER GOD”	40
CHRIS ROCK’S INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN ETHNIC HUMOR	41
THE COLD OPEN – ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE	44
AND THE NOMINEES ARE	46
BUSH AGAINST THE WORLD	49
OLD MACDONALD HAD A FARM AND THE SYMBOLISM OF ANIMALS	51
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION	52
PUBLIC PERSONAS	54
FAMILY GUY	57
TABOOS FOR OTHERS, A CHALLENGE FOR MACFARLANE	57
ANIMATION+DOMESTIC+SITCOM = ANIMATED DOMESTICOM KNOCKING DOWN TABOOS	58
CHILDREN VS. ADULTS, PRIME TIME AND DOUBLE-CODING	60
PARODY, SATIRE OR A LITTLE BIT OF BOTH?	63
WHAT’S TELEVISION GOT TO DO WITH IT?	66
ADVERTISEMENT – YOU SCRATCH MY BACK AND I’LL SCRATCH YOURS	68
NUCLEAR “DYSFUNCTIONAL” FAMILY	70
R-E-S-P-E-C-T	73
BRAIN DAMAGED HORSES CAUSE HOMOSEXUALITY	74
GOD BLESS AMERICA AND ITS RELIGIOUS DIMENSION	78
ABSURDITY OVER THE TOP	82
POP-CULTURAL REFERENCES	82

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY	85
WHAT IS IT ABOUT MARY?	85
SHORT PLOT.....	88
GOOD COMEDY OR BAD TASTE?	88
SLAPSTICK	90
GROSS-OUT COMEDY	92
BODY AND SLAPSTICK	95
WHY ARE HOMOSEXUAL STEREOTYPES FUNNY?	100
TREATMENT OF ANIMALS	101
DISABILITY AS A LAUGHING MATTER	104
POLITICAL CORRECTNESS.....	108
CONCLUSION.....	111
BIBLIOGRAPHY	114
VIDEO SOURCES	114
PRIMARY SOURCES.....	114
SECONDARY INTERNET SOURCES	122
INDEX.....	124
APPENDIX 1	126
APPENDIX 2	127
ABSTRACT	129
ZUSAMMENFASSUNG.....	130
CURRICULUM VITAE	131
EDUCATION	131

Introduction

One society permits, indeed welcomes, critical humor; another restricts, indeed represses, particular forms of comedy. Such thinking naturally has led to the conclusion that the United States is one of those rare societies in which the eloquence and experience of humor is an axiomatic byproduct of its devotion to freedom, nurturing as well as exacting. (Boskin, *Politics*, 474)

The American humor canon has unquestionably increased in the 20th century, which indicates its important role in the American society. While in the past when humor was found primarily in literature, today's expansion of popular culture and mass media is responsible for the increase of the humor canon. "The sheer bulk of humor, good and bad, threatens to overwhelm us all. In addition, time contributes to these difficulties in two ways: tastes change over time; and much humor is topical or time specific and therefore ephemeral" (Stauffer, 233). It has been in recent decades that American humor became an independent field of study and not merely a subgenre/subcategory of other studies, such as folklore or literature to name a few. Since the beginning of the movie and television industries, comedy has played a significant role. The comedy genre started to emerge in the 19th century in the era of vaudeville theatrical stage entertainment, forerunner of silent movies. The humor used in silent films was visual and based on physical comedy, also known as "slapstick comedy" for its use of practical jokes, as well as exaggerated and violent actions that occurred to its characters. In addition to film, animated cartoons became popular in the 1920s. After the introduction of sound into movies, verbal humor became more prominent.

The topic of my diploma thesis is the analysis of American ethnic humor in media, in particular within different genres of contemporary comedy. It is a topic that deserves analysis as "comedy plays a large role in everyday talk, and hence provides us with reasons to store it. Sharing jokes is a popular component of friendly talk, and of creating a common ground between oneself and others" (Gray, 87). For my in-depth analysis of American ethnic humor, I have selected three different genres which are all concerned with different controversial topics that are representative of ethnic humor. Each examined genre also includes humor reflective

of different minority groups, such as African Americans, homosexuals and the disabled. This was incorporated because “minority laughter affords insights into the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status” (Boskin & Dorinson, 97). A focus on these particular controversial minority topics is relevant in this time and era because these same topics remain a very delicate issue in an American society where unity of the people is significant and was even emphasized in the Pledge of Allegiance that proudly states “one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all”¹. The importance of unity and equality of all men is not a recent phenomenon. Even if we go further back in time to 1776, the American Declaration of Independence laid the foundations for Human Rights which commenced with, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”². These statements lay the basis of the so-called American Dream. Today, more than two centuries later, this is unfortunately not always the case when it comes to equality for American minority groups, including homosexuals, the disabled and African-Americans. Therefore, it can be argued that the extent of American ethnic humor is a consequence of democracy and the American Constitution with its Bill of Rights that made publicly expressed opinions possible with “freedom of speech”. We should not underestimate the power of democracy when it comes to the expression of humor in media in the United States because it has encouraged people to voice their opinions publicly.

Throughout American history there have always been controversial topics that would divide the American society based on their emotions and beliefs. Even though the United States is commonly referred to as a melting pot of various ethnicities and cultures, there is still an American ethnic humor unique to itself. “Humor in the United States reflects an idiosyncratic array of ethnic and gender groups, social interests, and political concerns” (Boskin, *Rebellious*, 1). The development of American ethnic humor correlates with the country’s historical events, such as the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the movement for homosexual equality, among many

¹ See The Pledge of Allegiance: a Short History.

² See The Declaration of Independence. In Congress, July 4, 1776: The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

others. While the primary purpose of humor is amusement, entertainment and gratification, it can also reflect public's anxieties and be used as a tool to raise awareness. Nowadays, humor is a part of American folklore and therefore a good example of American culture. The production of humor changed throughout history because it has been influenced by social, economic, as well as political changes that occurred in the United States.

Intro to the making of this paper

In the introduction I outlined my goals and introduced the readers to my topic, whereas in the following chapters I will comprehensively describe concepts and theories relevant for my work.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate what is considered to be American ethnic humor, its characteristics, its development and how it is used in audiovisual media. Also, I will investigate the American culture and its relation to the background of the humor used in the individual genres. I will examine three different genres of American media and investigate the difference in how American ethnic humor is represented in each one of them and the ethnic features it portrays. My paper will include theories, various concepts and an analysis of the three genres and the corresponding humor used in them. One of the aspects that can be observed regarding American ethnic humor is the significance of real life events that provide a humorous representation typical of American society. Whether political, celebratory, or even tragic, comedy can be cathartic release from the emotions felt from real life events. Over time history has had an influence on humor and particular events will be included in the discussion within this paper. My research question is also how American ethnic humor conveys sensitive topics, stereotypes, social values, racial issues, and everyday problems. In addition, I will analyze the traits that make certain types of humor either accepted or rejected by society. American ethnic humor, as will be demonstrated, comes in different forms and categories, ranging from parody, satire, slapstick and many others. Following the theoretical section, the focus will be on the analysis of distinct scenes and dialogues/monologues.

“American humour, whether in literature or in film, has always been connected to the problematic nature inherent in the American Dream. Ethnic humour in particular has subjected the ideals of the nation to ironic play” (Fellner & Heissenberg, 161). All analyzed genres represent the essence of American ethnic humor. The analysis of humor will be based on the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), the lighthearted Farrelly brothers' movie *There's Something about Mary* and Seth MacFarlane's animated television series *Family Guy*. While the analyzed monologue from *Saturday Night Live* is a typical political satire that is based on criticizing politicians and political decisions throughout American history, the movie *There's Something About Mary* epitomizes humor about disability, slapstick and the portrayal of the human body. While describing “slapstick’s status as specifically cinematic – and, as is often assumed, specifically American – form” (Paulus & King, Introduction, 8), it was necessary to include this genre in my analysis. Since “slapstick comedy provided the means for inscribing the body as a central term of cinematic pleasure” (Paulus & King, Introduction, 12), the human body and disability will also be included in my analysis. *Family Guy* comprises of different conflicting beliefs and views of homosexuality as well as absurd humor. Animated shows, such as *Family Guy* that have dealt with controversial themes have changed American television history because they have transgressed the barriers of animation being solely aimed at children to being targeted at educated adults.

American humor

Definition and function of humor

There are many different definitions of humor based on several scholars studying American humor. "A sense of humor and the ability to laugh and to speak make human beings unique in the animal kingdom" (Apte, 13). Humor is a part of communication and according to Boskin, humor is "a type of cultural language" (Prism, 19). In order to understand this social phenomenon as a form of expression, we also have to understand its properties. An example of which can be that "one can also ruin a joke when one has to explain it to someone who did not understand it" (Speier, 1362). Walker writes, "humor-that is, the ability to smile and laugh, and to make others do so-is a nearly universal trait" (Walker, 3).

With many types and forms it is apparent that humor is boundless. "Most of us enjoy humour in its diverse appearances as witty or comic expressions, jokes, parodies, ironic asides, sarcastic remarks and so on" (Erichsen, 27). While occasionally people say funny or comedic things intentionally, on other occasions humor can be unintentional. The definition of humor and whether it is deemed funny or not depends on one's personal taste and sense of humor. People's tastes are individual in nature and relative. "It is argued that person's taste is intimately related to his education, social class, and culture" (Berger, 29). An important characteristic of every individual is the degree of his or her sense of humor. "Nothing in the whole field of humor is more common than the observation that a situation which is uproariously funny to one person will serve only to amuse someone else mildly, and will leave a third party blank and uncomprehending" (Burma, 712). While someone finds a particular type of humor funny, other people might find it offensive distasteful or disgusting and react to it emotionally, such as in a form of anger. As Davis points out, "to become angry about jokes and to seek to censor them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is" (Davis qtd. in Schlote, 182). Humor also has an undeniable social role as "societal consensus in America seems to be that a personality with a sense of

humor is more sociable, easier to get along and to work with, innovative, and capable of facing adversities and overcoming them, and is therefore more desirable than one without" (Apte qtd. in Boskin, *Rebellious*, 3). As mentioned before, personal taste is very important when analyzing humor. According to Walker, "humor, like all forms of communication, requires *context*: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values" (Walker, 4). But as Schein states in his essay, "there is humor for every class of society and for every level of intelligence" (Schein, 24). Humor does not only pertain to trivial issues but also with contemporary conflicts and different topics deemed as taboo, which is important for this social process. While "humor in general serves the purpose of entertainment and pleasure" (Apte, 145) it also has other functions such as informing about current affairs in society as well as criticizing those involved through a comedic backlash.

If foreigners want to learn about American culture and ideals, they will understand these topics with more depth if they understand the American humor, since it mirrors all of these aspects.

Humor [...] has a traditional license to deal with all sorts of different important topics, many of which are taboo, in a sense, or more commonly dealt with in covert, restricted, or restrained ways. Humor might be the best source of insight we have into sexual mores, beliefs and practices, or family structures and other interpersonal relationships, and into popular, "unofficial" social, political, and cultural attitudes, dispositions, hopes, and fears, if we can learn how to decode it and to appreciate its relationship to the other modes of expression. (Mintz, *Rev. of Humor and Laughter*, 339)

Therefore, when wondering "what is really on a people's collective mind, there is no more direct and accurate way of finding out than by paying attention to precisely what is making people laugh" (Dundes qtd. in Boskin, *Rebellious*, 200). However, in order to do that, one must focus on "discovering attitudes, values, and forms of behavior distinctive to certain groups" (Rabinowitz, 28). There have been, and still are a lot of discrepancies between American ideals and the American reality. One might ask though, why analyzing American humor would be important to interpreting the American mentality. Likely because, as Walker notes, "the study of humor becomes yet another way of understanding social history, cultural institutions, and the development of both a sense of national identity and threats to that identity" (Walker, 5). Why people tend to use humor is explained in the theories of humor.

Theories of humor

There are three different types of humor theories, namely superiority theory, relief theory, as well as incongruity theory. All three theories appear in the analyzed genres.

Based on Hobbes theory, “humans are in a constant competition with each other, looking for the shortcomings of other persons. He considers laughter as an expression of a sudden realization that we are better than others, an expression of ‘sudden glory’” (Mulder & Nijholt, 3), while according to Plato, “humour is some kind of malice towards people that are being considered relatively powerless” (Mulder & Nijholt, 3). For an example, every time the viewer laughs at the mishaps of a character onscreen it is because of the superiority theory. “This theory can explain the fun of some humorous television programs, like sitcoms and talk shows, and successful Hollywood movies like *‘There’s Something About Mary’*” (Mulder & Nijholt, 4), as well as mishaps and idiocy of the protagonists of the animated series *Family Guy*. We gain insight into this concept by understanding “theories of humour based on the notion of superiority – that we laugh at the misfortunes or incapacities of others as a way of asserting our own, distanced, superiority” (King, 10). It essentially means, laughing at someone because they tripped and fell among many other misfortunes. Witnessing other peoples’ mishaps makes us feel better and superior because we were not the targets. However, superiority theory does not only include physical comedy but also affects an individual’s understanding of jokes. Even when jokes include an unfortunate character that is made to appear as if lacking intelligence or other desired qualities, we laugh at that character because of a perceived feeling of superiority.

The best way to explain relief comedy theory would be through Freud’s interpretation on,

how laughter can release tension and “psychic energy”. This energy continuously builds up within the human body, has no further use and therefore has to be released. This release is spontaneous and expresses itself in laughter. [...] Freud explains that this “psychic energy” in our body is built as an aid for suppressing feelings in taboo areas, like sex or death. When this energy is released we experience laughter, not only because of the release of

this energy, but also because these taboo thoughts are being entertained. (Mulder & Nijholt, 4)

In the show *Family Guy* and sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, taboo subjects provide the majority of the comedic material and therefore challenge the social norms set by the society. Consequently, viewers of the previously mentioned shows are exposed to every taboo subject imaginable, which may actually help them overcome some prejudice or at least give them a different perspective on certain issues. Relief theory includes repressed thoughts and topics that people do not feel comfortable talking about in public. Therefore, by viewing humor addressing taboo subjects, it causes a release in people and helps them cope with these particular sensitive issues as well as reduces unpleasantness.

Sigmund Freud investigated the relationship between humor and offensive topics [...], which, [...] permit the expression of inhibited impulses about taboo subjects by evading psychic censorship. He hypothesized that the joking topics of the highest psychic significance are found in hostile jokes (serving the purpose of aggression, satire, or defense), obscene jokes (serving the purpose of exposure), cynical jokes (serving the purpose of attacking institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, and ideas) and skeptical jokes (serving the purpose of attacking the certainty of our knowledge itself). (Smyth, 251)

As we will see in the following chapters, jokes referring to race, gender, disability, sexual preference as well as homophobia can be deemed funny even though the actual issues are still problematic in today's society. However, joking about these subjects has a specific purpose in reality. Furthermore, what should not be forgotten is that there are also many different topical jokes, most of them based on some form of tragedy (such as space shuttle Challenger jokes or 9/11 jokes among others). These types of jokes are not usually found as a laughing matter due to the real life tragic circumstances they are based on.

Lastly, there is the incongruity theory. "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and the laugh itself is just an expression of this incongruity" (Schopenhauer qtd. in Mulder & Nijholt, 4). Incongruity theory could be summed up as unpredictable jokes or when something is funny because it did not turn out the way we expected it to be. The effect of

incongruity theory is a surprise, which makes us laugh due to the perceived unusualness in a certain situation.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity plays an important role in American culture and everyday life. However, it is necessary to understand what exactly ethnicity is. Schermerhorn defined an ethnic group as,

a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic events defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic events are kinship patterns, physical contiguity [...], religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or any combination of these. (Schermerhorn qtd. in Lowe 440)

Already in the 18th century, America was referred to as the melting pot and “the land of opportunity and of broader freedoms” (Kohut & Stokes, 61), where immigrants (individuals of different races and nationalities) are melted into a new race and become Americanized. Since the 17th century, millions of people from all over the world migrated to America - also known as the New World. People imagined it to be a land of opportunity and economic prosperity, especially later on during the Gold Rush and the Industrial Revolution. People not only left their homes to follow the dream of having a better life, but also because of the domestic wars that forced them to leave their homeland. Nevertheless, when in a new country, immigrants tend to form communities where they can preserve their national identity.

Ethnic groups can be said to have several basic characteristics, such as ascribed status, shared cultural traits and values, some degree of internal cohesion and interaction, and self-awareness. [...] the most frequently mentioned attributes of ethnic groups were: common national or geographic origin or common ancestors; a common culture or customs; religion; race or physical characteristics; and language-in that order. (Apte, 111)

Ethnic preservation, however, is not that simple since the process of Americanization transforms individuals of various ethnic groups into a new ethnic group – Americans.

While today we have one American nation, it is still difficult to distinguish who real Americans truly are based on the diversity of sub-cultures within. The first settlers in the United States were English and eventually formed the dominant group of the

population. They laid the foundations of American ethnicity and society, whereby traditions and customs played an important role. However, this did not occur without internal conflict.

Yet ethnic and racial diversity in the United States has also produced a bitter history of oppression and exploitation, of hatred and discrimination, not only among rival groups of immigrants from Europe, but also between those immigrants and the people of colour whose ancestors came to America from Asia, Africa and South America. (Lipsitz, 121)

Even though, almost everyone in America was an immigrant, the dominant group of Americans (white English settlers) feared the influences brought by the newcomers, such as new traditions, cultures, and languages among other attachments. While Americans were the ones who brought people of different ethnicities to their country because they needed a strong workforce, they also abused this diversity. Although America was initially presented to the immigrants as the Promised Land, the reality could not be further from the truth. Immigrants had to go through a lot of hardships to succeed in their new country.

America, from its earliest years, has been largely a nation of immigrants, which brings former residents of many countries together. This circumstance gave rise to humor dealing with ethnic groups, highlighting customs, accents, and other characteristics which served to distinguish one group of settlers from another. Of course, ethnic humor can be quite negative when it is used to disparage people perceived as “different”; those who feel themselves to be superior to blacks, Jews, the Irish, or any other group have used humor as part of the process of stereotyping them. On the other hand, members of racial and ethnic groups have also developed their own forms of humor as a way of coping with such discrimination, and these traditions have contributed to the complexity and distinctiveness of American humor. (Walker, 7)

During the assimilation of immigrants, humor was targeted at the ethnic groups since “humor is one of the mechanisms rather frequently pressed into use in the racial conflicts of America” (Burma, 715). People of all different races and nationalities had to become accustomed to living side by side. Therefore,

throughout the history of minority-majority group relations in this country the set of techniques which we may denominate by the general term humor has played a definite role in inter-personal and inter-group relationships. Apparently all minority groups suffer derogation in this manner, and apparently all use the same weapon in return. (Burma, 710)

It was common for people to try to address different ethnicities and assimilation of cultures by using humor. As establishing a life in a new country included many

hardships including trying to fit in to a new community, perhaps coping with these troubles was easiest with the use of humor.

To be funny indicates a lack of seriousness. Perhaps for this reason, histories and studies of ethnicity, assimilation, and ethnic literature have frequently ignored a vital aspect of their subject; for although minorities have often entered into full citizenship through long and arduous struggle, this procedure has sometimes been both shortened and sweetened when they have made up their minds to enter laughing—using the more delightful aspects of ethnic-generated humor to win friends, acceptance, and material success. This happens in spite of, and in reaction to, the darker, better-known side of ethnic humor: jokes directed against the out-group by the in-group, or by one out-group against another, or »self-deprecating« jokes told by members of the group itself. (Lowe, 439)

Ethnic humor and social laughter

“Laughter [...] presupposes shared worlds, shared codes, and shared values” (Reichl & Stein, 13), therefore people sharing these characteristics would understand ethnic humor. In addition, “the collective laughter of a race will reveal its most secret qualities” (Bradley, 46). Clearly, people who share ethnicity, background and national identity also share their understanding of ethnic humor whether they agree with it or not. “The concept of ethnic humor is operationally defined [...] as a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity” (Apte, 108). One cannot understand a joke if they do not understand its background nor the characteristics of its subject. People commonly use humor in order to express their feelings, relationships, interests, concerns, fears, and share beliefs³. “As a device of social analysis [...] humor illumines the expectations and contradictions of society, its anxieties and confusions, and offers perspective into any historic moment” (Boskin, Prism, 20). Therefore, people using humor “have considerable freedom to depart from conventional behavior and to parody activities that are strongly disapproved in normal everyday social interaction or are even taboo” (Apte, 155). In addition, American ethnic humor is not defensive, on the contrary, it is very critical of the American society, its culture and the depiction of the American Dream. While occasionally humor has a sole function and that is “to amuse” (Walker, 3), it can also

³ “To understand and appreciate ethnic humour, people must know the values and practices of a culture.” (Nilsen, 132)

be used as an effective and understood platform for “serious purposes” (Walker, 3) in order to “influence public opinion on important issues” (Walker, 3), since “humor confronts reality by wrapping it in a showy package, disguising its contents” (Boskin, Prism, 20). As mentioned by Reichl and Stein, “laughter and humour can release some of the tension and relieve some of the potential aggression” (Reichl & Stein, 9). Especially in the case of ethnic humor, its use can also “indicate cultural differences and uncover cultural stereotypes” (Erichsen, 28). Because the United States has been perceived as the melting pot of different cultures and ethnicities,

humor that deals with various ethnic groups and nationalities, members of religious, racial, linguistic, cultural, or national groups [...] has been common in America. Generally speaking, ethnic humor is made by members of in-groups about members of out-groups – those different from the person generating the humor. But in some cases ethnic groups tell ethnic jokes about themselves. (Browne, 419)

Ethnic humor might seem cruel in reflecting racial, social and political issues, but it is still important because it can portray public opinion.

Intercultural contacts and interactions have led societies to formulate opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about peoples who are culturally “different.” The “images” developed in turn become the bases of “ethnic humor,” [...]. The concept of ethnic humor is operationally defined [...] as a type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity. (Apte, 108)

While there is nothing funny about being considered an outsider, ethnic humor plays a significant role in the assimilation process. “Just as humor has been used as a weapon of insult and intimidation by dominant groups, so has it been employed for resistance and retaliation by minorities” (Boskin, Rebellious, 145). Laughter brings people together and therefore we could refer to it as social laughter. “Societal laughter [...] mirrors both personal and generational mindsets, transcending time and place and at the same time reflecting time and place” (Boskin, Prism, 18).

Humor and its functions

Ethnic humor reflects social issues in American life. In other words, “humor mirrors the expanse of American culture, its dreams, anxieties, conflicts, styles, and posture” (Boskin, Prism, 20). In the United States a large volume of ethnic humor

relates to minority groups, which can be produced either by members of minority groups or the majority. In both cases humor has distinctive functions and characteristics.

When talking about ethnic humour, distinctions are sometimes made as to whether the humour comes from the inside or the outside, the idea being that when self-deprecating humour comes from the inside, it pushes out the boundaries of acceptable or expected behaviours by making fun of one or more of the group characteristics known to the insider. Complimentary humour coming from the inside works to increase group pride and satisfaction. In contrast, jokes coming from the outside are more likely to be critical or insulting. And even if they are no more critical than insider jokes, they are viewed more negatively, as their effect is to tighten the boundaries or freeze the stereotypes because the outsider is not in a position to bring about group change. What these distinctions ignore is that insult humour is only one kind of joking. It is the kind that most resembles the “all-American” idea of teasing and joking that developed as frontier settlers used jokes to test the gullibility of newcomers or to teach them about social mores and expectations. (Nilsen, 135)

The origins of American ethnic humor can be found in issues of race and social class because of the many different ethnic groups within the American population attributed to immigration. As Burma accurately depicts, “many jokes become “race conscious” or “racially humorous” merely by the addition of color to the persons involved” (Burma, 711).

As already mentioned before, ethnic humor, also referred to as wit by Stephenson has various functions.

Functional analysis has been conducted at three levels of abstraction: physical, psychological, and social. At the physiological level, wit has been considered both as a primary human emotion which humor functions to exercise and as a derivative function of other more fundamental physiological processes such as the release of kinetic reaction. Psychological functions have received a variety of expression, including ego assertion, inhibition release, and the conception of humor as a mechanism of aggression, projection, and displacement. Social functions have been interpreted largely in terms of intergroup conflict and social control. (Stephenson, 569)

Racial discrimination of minority groups and equality issues based on gender and disability played an influential role in the development of American ethnic humor, whereby “it is significant that certain situations and groups receive more attention than others. This is especially evident in jokes using ethnic or racial minorities as subjects, and analysis of conflict and control functions is here confined primarily to

these groups” (Stephenson, 570). As stated before, ethnic humor can be expressed through different methods depending on the function it has.

The conflict function of humor is expressed largely by means of irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, parody, burlesque, and the like. The particular adaptability of humor as a conflict weapon lies in the fact that humor may conceal malice and allow expression of aggression without the consequences of other overt behavior. In this capacity, analysis of humor is particularly revealing of tensions and attitudes which may not be expressed in any other form. Conflict humor not only functions to express aggression but serves to strengthen the morale of those who use it and to undermine the morale of those at whom it is aimed. (Stephenson, 569)

Not only conflict functions but also control functions are essential when it comes to humor. According to Stephenson,

the control functions of humor may be expressed in a wide variety of humor types. As a means of social control, humor may function to express approval or disapproval of social form and action, express common group sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes, relieve awkward or tense situations, and express collective, *sub rosa* approbation of action not explicitly approved. Humor as expressed in the controlled laugh or smile may serve as a means of communication, signaling the intent and nature of the communicating parties. In this capacity it functions as a means of approach to interpersonal contact and interaction, indicates safety or friendship, and signalizes approval, disdain, and other forms of attitude and feeling. (Stephenson, 570)

However, nowadays ethnic humor is not only related to different ethnic groups, but also minority groups such as homosexuals, disabled people, and other groups with special interests. “Humor lends itself particularly well to use as a conflict device because of its almost boundless limits in subject matter, and because its nature is such that it often contains more or less well concealed malice” (Burma, 710). Ethnic humor comprises of jokes and stereotypes of all the previously mentioned groups as well as groups of different ethnicities. The social function of humor is to mediate conflicts between different ethnic groups, to integrate immigrants into dominant culture and to shape their self-identification. Moreover, the social function of humor can be used to gain insight into the American way of life and provide analysis on the society.

Humor seems infinitely adaptable, and jokes can be shaped and reshaped to fit any potentially dangerous intergroup situation. Humor also helps to dispel animosity by bringing cultures together, using shared human failings as a common denominator. As such, it plays a doubly useful social function. Ethnic humor, so frequently used to maintain hegemony by the group in power, can, through inversion on the part of the oppressed, become a weapon of liberation. At times it can be used aggressively to serve the purposes of

revolution, but it can also serve as a mode of communication and conciliation, thereby furthering “peaceful” revolution. (Lowe, 442)

Another general function of humor is the informative function, where people gain information about a certain subject through jokes or other means. This function can educate and inform people because the information used is typically based on real facts. American ethnic humor is “usually an outgrowth of publicly debated issues or controversial institutions” (Dudden, *American Quarterly*, 8). Therefore, much of the American humor is based on real life events. “Ethnic humor tends to reflect negative attitudes” (Apte, 148) especially towards American ideals and politics. Let us take a look at Freud’s concept of ethnic humor in order to better understand the its use and how it influenced American ethnic humor. He “posited that humor is wholly a social process wherein the shared actions of the participants allow them to aggress and/or regress together” (Boskin, *Prism*, 18). Freud himself studied the relationship between the use of humor and ethnicity based on his personal experience. “Freud’s key perception here is that jokes succeed in liberating and otherwise suppressed, or “censored” thought via the disguise of humor, thereby releasing energy and creating joy” (Lowe, 442). In other words, “for Freud, humor functioned as a sort of release from the rule-bound superego that he believed regulated human social behavior” (Walker, 5). Freud implied that ethnic humor is aggressive, rebellious, and also liberating. His theory in relationship with American ethnic humor “addresses the concepts of oppression by the dominant culture, of creative subversion, and indeed, of revolution, and also suggests that Freud would have objections to a classification of his analysis of humor as merely aggressive” (Lowe, 443). One of the assertions based on this statement of Freud’s theory is that ethnicity plays an important role in popular culture.

According to Dudden, in the past “religion, politics, and customs of rural, village, or wilderness life interposed themselves between the races and sexes to supply grist for humor’s native mills” (Dudden, *American Quarterly*, 8). Humor in America is not only directed against different social groups, but also against American values. “Humor mirrors the expanse of American culture, its dreams, anxieties, conflicts, styles, and posture” (Boskin, *Prism*, 20). Nevertheless what is really unique about American ethnic humor is the ironic commentary and satire of the United States national ethos “The American Dream: an ensured middle-class status buttressed by

durable goods and entitled services” (Boskin, Giant, 188) and the way humor challenges significant American ideals such as family and religion. “For [...] immigrants, appearing after the founding of an impossibly Utopian “American Dream” and the myth of the lady with the lamp, unfulfilled expectations became the inevitable norm, and the constant topic for American jokes” (Lowe, 446).

American humor has certain characteristics, such as “American humor prefers to strike first” (Bradley, 47) because “Americans like to play jokes on the unwary” (Bradley, 47). Also important, American humor is not defensive but observational and very critical of the American society and culture, which can be seen from the mockery of many aspects of American life. “Another element noted in our humor by the critical is its endless capacity for exaggeration” (Bradley, 51), a characteristic from the time of early settlers.

The earliest settlers sent back descriptions to Europe of a vast wilderness, new and strange plants and animals, and encounters with what they largely regarded as uncivilized people. Such accounts, because of ignorance and from a desire to impress those on the other side of the Atlantic, often exaggerated the physical features of the new land. This habit of exaggeration led to the creation, in the nineteenth century, of one of the distinctive forms of American humor—the tall tale, which is “tall” because of the larger-than-life depiction of man’s encounter with the natural world. (Walker, 7)

However, in order to publicly express humor that criticizes American ideals or individuals, the authors of that humor require courage as humor can expose fears. “Courage and necessity were the original sources of our especial variety of humor. It lined the faces of men and women who were crossing prairies, and conquering forests, and building cities” (Bradley, 54). In today’s American society, there is a need to publicly express the opinions of the audience through humor. This can be accomplished through criticism of America and its ideals, as this is an example of what ordinary people are thinking but do not have the courage to say publicly. Occasionally humor may even soften the more severe issues of the society, especially when addressing delicate subject matters. Lastly, “a principal trait of American humor is its anti-romanticism. We love to puncture an illusion, to burst an iridescent bubble of hot air. Pretensions of grandeur, false family pride, snobbishness, or conceit annoy us, and we enjoy destroying them with the sharp weapon of irreverence” (Bradley, 48). According to Jimerson, “Boskin asserts that all humor expresses rather than represses contemporary conflicts and anxieties.

Therefore, when people want to stifle dissent, they will label certain types of jokes as sick or racist, as unworthy of being told or heard. Thus, political correctness spurs rebellious humor or laughter” (Jimerson, 1204). American humor can be irreverent towards the subject matter or sometimes even to the audience.

Even though modern American ethnic humor has evolved from its past forms, “the components of alienated and self-detached humor were always present. These included the skeptical, the sardonic, the mocking, even the deliberately cruel. Such humor was frequently racist or sexist” (Dudden, *American Quarterly*, 9). However, “a joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open courses of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud qtd. in Boskin, *Prism*, 150).

Cultural code

In order for a person to comprehend American ethnic humor they have to understand the culture code of the United States. Both culture and society are closely related since culture is also a reflection of a society’s identity. Cultural code is a result of different elements such as language, ethnicity, and history, among others.

As universal as humor is, it is bounded by a culture code. (..) the code is the nexus of communal awareness, the elemental factor in the structure of humor. For to be understood and possess meaning, humor must relate to the customs, symbols, and experience of the people. The code creates categories dividing those who are privy to its purpose from those who are outsiders. In the United States, the code is a complex arrangement, molded by regional, ethnic, race, class, and gender interests and buttressed and enlivened by people’s chatter. (Boskin, *Prism*, 19)

Every country in the world has a cultural code, “a system of rules and expectations that every human being acquires simply by being a member of a particular sociocultural system” (Farb qtd. in Boskin, *Rebellious*, 13). Understanding the American cultural norms is therefore a predisposition for American identity.

Familiarity with a cultural code is a prerequisite for the spontaneous mental restructuring of elements that results in amusement and laughter or for the recognition of such restructuring in the sociocultural reality. Individuals are not conscious of this requirement, because they already possess the cultural knowledge to which they compare the humor-generating stimuli. An individual

who is not a member of a specific culture and therefore has not internalized its behavioral patterns and value system may not experience humor, lacking the necessary standard for comparison. (Apte, 17)

This highlights the question of what influences this cultural archetype in America. In actuality, every aspect of American life, starting with history and culture, influences the culture code. People grow up in a society with certain ideals and values through learning from that countries' context. Culture code presents images that people receive during their adolescence that they store within their subconscious. This helps to make up a person's identity over time. Although the understanding and appreciation of the concept of humor is universal⁴, ethnic humor of a particular country is mostly understood by its society that shares values, beliefs and also practices; "people's humor frequently serves as a warning system of emerging social issues" (Boskin, Rebellious, 204). The American culture code has not been constant throughout history because some events have influenced its change.

Because the culture code of every country is different, ethnic humor cannot be translated into different languages because it loses its meaning. However, the jokes can be adapted by borrowing certain characteristics from another ethnic group. Some rudimentary jokes become ethnic jokes through modification, either with the change of the character or the change in characterization typical for a certain ethnic group. According to Berger, "humor can be "used" to gain valuable insights into the ethos and worldview of other cultures" (Berger, 29). Culture code also encompasses stereotypes associated with that particular culture, or even in some cases subcultures. However, people with knowledge of another culture code might respond to certain jokes and stereotypes differently. Therefore, to highlight through an example, Slovenes might not understand American ethnic humor because they possess the knowledge of the Slovene culture code and not American. In addition, there is another consequence when sharing the same culture code in relation to comedy.

Due to the sharing of comedy through talk, comedy can spread exponentially, traveling from one person who actually witnesses the comic element to numerous people with whom this person might share the joke. Within a group with similar cultural codes, travel is something that comedy does extremely

⁴ Compare with Berger, 28.

well. In its frequently small and easily memorable form, it becomes remarkably portable. (Gray, 88)

American identity

If one understands American ethnic humor, it is reasonable to assume they also possess some knowledge of the American culture and what being an American represents. Understanding the concept of being an American is the key to understanding American ethnic humor. “Ethnic humor has always formed a significant part of the world of American folklore and culture, partly because it provides pleasure, and partly because of its connection with mythical concepts of aggression, struggle, and our national passion play and ritual, “Americanization”” (Lowe, 439).

Since the beginning of what we know today as the United States of America, the ethnic demography changed drastically because of immigration. America is a country that features liberalism, is a symbol of freedom, and a model of liberal democracy and opportunity that attracts many immigrants. However, it is also “a country built on contradictions” (Bigsby, 9). While the population of the United States is rapidly changing and becoming increasingly diverse as a nation, they still perceive themselves as “one nation under God”. “Moreover, it goes without saying that America is exceptional in any number of positive ways. The United States has unparalleled wealth, unrivaled military power, a unique immigrant heritage, and is blessed with land and natural resources that few other nations can claim” (Kohut & Stokes, 8-9). As many people are convinced “American ideals and practices ought to be those of all civilized people” (Boskin, Politics, 474). Correspondingly, what used to be known as American identity changed because of several multicultural influences. As Fellner and Heissenberg point out, American ethnic humor is “fuelled by the discrepancy between the cultural ideal and the daily reality [...]. This incongruity is emblematic of the American experience: on the one hand, there are the ideals of freedom, equality, and economic success, and on the other, there are racial and ethnic subordination, inequality, and poverty” (Fellner & Heissenberg, 161). As Walker writes,

while the concept of a single “national character” has been wisely abandoned, it is nonetheless true that certain widely shared values, such as the freedoms put forth in the Bill of Rights, stand in contrast to our many differences, and this leads to a final conclusion about American humor: the paradox that while humor declares nothing to be sacred, Americans have used it to press for those ideals of equality, opportunity, and freedom that often seem to gleam elusively in the distance. (Walker, 64)

The above-mentioned ideals are also the same that have been promised to them through the American Dream. However, “Boskin insists that what makes American humor unique is its ironic commentary on “The American Dream” (Jimerson, 1204). The American Dream originates, as mentioned in the introduction, from a “promise” written in Declaration of Independence by a Founding Father of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. This attractive promise was in many cases the reason why people chose to immigrate to the United States. “From the very beginning, American humor and the American Dream have been symbiotically entwined. Optimism and despair, tolerance and abuse, refinement and tastelessness, faith and skepticism-these polarities have defined thinking and laughter” (Boskin, *Rebellious*, 15). What was once perceived as the American Dream, can presently not be further from the truth for many Americans.

A great deal of American humor, whether overtly political or not, has pointed to the discrepancies between the grand promises of equality, prosperity, and fulfillment and the actualities of socioeconomic class differences, discrimination, and corruption. One of the most common purposes of humor is to point out such distinctions, and American culture has provided a particularly fertile setting for this development. (Walker, 8)

America is a country where poverty affects nearly 50 million⁵ of its inhabitants, and where immigrants and people of different races won the battle of equality only about half a century ago. It is also a country of natural resources, but as of late, has been a target of speculation for initiating wars in oil-rich countries to help preserve their natural sources and supplies. There have been contradictions about American culture in relation to several aspects. It is a Puritan society where religion plays an important role because of the freedom to exercise religion according to the First Amendment of the Constitution. It is religiously diverse country, which is a consequence of immigration. Even though the United States is a seemingly conservative country, especially when it comes to nudity, it seems contradictory that

⁵ See Poverty in the United States: A Snapshot.

it is also the country where Playboy magazine was founded. While America celebrates the myth of a traditional family, many marriages end in divorce. In addition, according to the Second Amendment⁶ of the Constitution, U.S. citizens have the right to possess firearms but condemn the sale of firearms when people die as a result of gun related crime, massacres or suicide. In connection with this, people become aware of the reality and ideals that were once promised to them.

Based on the Declaration of Independence, which protects the rights of individuals, such as life and liberty⁷, it is ironic that the United States imprisons more citizens than any other democratic country⁸ and also enforces capital punishment, also known as the death penalty. If the American Dream is a promise of material prosperity and wealth, the poverty rate provides a contradiction. One of the reasons for such poverty might be the American health care system. If an American has money to purchase health insurance they can receive exceptional treatment. However if they do not have enough money for health insurance, they can find themselves in a position of inadequate health care or perpetual debt to cover health expenses out of pocket. Many people have filed personal bankruptcies because of medical debt. Essentially, if you are poor, you cannot afford to get sick. In relation to humor, not many jokes deal with poverty, but if they do it is for a certain reason. "Where poverty is the subject of humor, it serves as ironical commentary on the lack of charity of the rich or the absence of initiative and ambition in the poor" (Stephenson, 572). In addition, "joking about money has been one way the culture has grappled with its greedy tendencies" (Boskin, *Rebellious*, 21). What formed American identity and "uniqueness" is definitely

its national history: Americans are descended from people who came from everywhere, and since 1814 they have not been invaded nor have they ever been conquered. The United States is the first country founded on the basis of an idea: the primacy of the individual. American is a historically unique hegemon, with a fearsome and unrivaled military. But it has largely conquered not with tanks but blue jeans, Big Macs, and movies-and, of course, the country's founding ideals. (Kohut & Stokes, 64)

⁶ See U.S. Constitution.

⁷ See The Declaration of Independence. In Congress, July 4, 1776: The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

⁸ See Zakaria.

The importance of American history

“In origin and development, ethnic slurs are best understood in historical context” (Boskin & Dorinson, 83). Especially because “American humor has changed over time. Humor, like all forms of communication, requires *context*: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values, which are subject to evolution from one century or even one decade to the next” (Walker, 4). American history has been significant in the development of American ethnic humor because the changes that happened throughout the past influenced the development of humor. “Even as the image of America changes, the role of public opinion itself is also changing, in the United States and elsewhere” (Kohut & Stokes, 4). As Boskin writes, “humor responds to swift and unsettling changes that have characterized American society throughout its history” (Boskin, Giant, 187). American people seem to incorporate humor as part of their coping mechanism with respect to serious matters. Some of the most prominent influences of which are: immigration, wars, Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, Chicano Movement, American Indian Movement, and Feminist movement, all demanding equal rights and opportunities in every domain within the society.

The unbroken sequence of catastrophes and historic transformations of everyday circumstances, beginning with the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War, diverted American political humor's characteristic manifestations [...] by comedians of all sorts against government's proclivity for corruption, errors of judgment, bankruptcy, inhumanity, or warfare. Issues of race relations and racism, sexuality and sexism, arising from civil rights and liberation movements, supplemented traditional topics with new targets for political humor's aim. The new political humor exceeded previous levels of antidemocratic mockery by its universally derisive tone, even when its aim was intended to improve the society's downtrodden elements, most notably women and blacks. (Dudden, 60)

While all of these previously mentioned events caused suffering in many people's lives, joking about them helped to relieve the stress which people had to endure. “One gains from American humor's acidic strain a sense of the nation's true history, in the movement of humor from its early American formulations toward its contemporary manifestations” (Dudden, *American Quarterly*, 9). People tend to loosen up through laughter to forget or at least minimize their problems. When minority groups in the United States were fighting for equality, “an explosion of jokes

about race and gender told by women and men of all colors (including whites) coincided with Civil Rights and feminist movements in the 1960s. Jokes about success and failure, minorities and majorities, and cities and rural areas are American staples” (Jimerson, 1204).

Democracy

The early beginnings of the American democracy were in the 18th century at the time of American Revolution during which Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Years later, the phrase from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech indicated what American Democracy was really about by promising “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (The White House. Our presidents: 16. Abraham Lincoln 1861-1865). American Democracy was a model for other countries that eventually adopted this form of a government.

Contributing to America’s uniqueness as a nation is its institution of a democratic form of government [...]. The fact that democracy encourages the participation of its citizens in the development of its institutions allows those same citizens freedom to criticize both the nation’s leaders and its laws, and such openness has no doubt contributed to the long American tradition of political humor. (Walker, 9)

According to Boskin, “it has long been argued that democracy is best sustained by a boundless, unimpeded, egalitarian humor” (Boskin, *Rebellious*, 71). Since publicly expressed humor is a consequence of democracy, it also criticizes democracy, specifically the ideals and rights it provides, such as equality and freedom. When these basic rights are disrespected it is common for humor to take over. Whereas according to the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights that “all men are created equal” the actual situation is not always the case. There is a plethora of inequality based either on gender, race, or even social class. Thus the difference between the glorified American Dream and the harsh reality is the most typical subject of American ethnic humor. “Since the beginnings of nationhood in the late eighteenth century, the existence of freedom of speech and a free press has allowed and encouraged people to openly circulate their views about institutions, policies, values, groups, and individuals” (Walker, 64). What was once regarded as hate

speech has now developed into ethnic humor that is subsequently increasing awareness of the society, regardless of political correctness.

Although a consciousness of occupational and economic differences is demonstrated in stratification jokes, this is neither the focus nor the point of the humor. Rather, the tendency is to minimize these differences and their effects on social structure and to maximize the expression of American values as embodied in concepts of equality, ambition, initiative, opportunity, enterprise, and the like. (Stephenson, 571)

We should also acknowledge the fact that America has freedom of speech, which undeniably influenced the extent of humor in media. "The nation's comparative freedom of utterance explains its public displays" (Dudden, 69). Although there is freedom of speech in other democratic countries in the world, Americans seem to be the exception in that they have unconditional freedom when it comes to expressing public opinion in media.

Violence in humor

"Believing that a culture's humor mirrors its real values and preoccupations, Keough argues that the physical and verbal violence that marks American humor should come as no surprise in a society that not only allows but also celebrates violent behavior" (Keough, 133). Violence in the United States has become a daily reality. Keough also notes that people in the past "expressed shock at the rawness, cruelty, and lack of restraint of American humor" (Keough, 135). However, it is important to note about violence in humor that "although the aggressive content of ethnic humor makes it unpleasant for the group being ridiculed, ethnic jokes may often be seen as a functional alternative to physical aggression and violence. Ethnic humor is, then, a means by which some people express their hostility and anger verbally rather than physically" (Browne & Browne, 419). However, violence in humor portrays American reality and it is portrayed in numerous different expressive materials such as Hollywood movies, news, song lyrics and many others. The beginnings of violence in humor can be found in the violent American history. Keough's statistics are a good indicator of the role violence plays in American every day

Between 1882 and 1927, 4,950 lynchings were recorded, lynchings, mind you, and rough estimates double that figure. Further, a simple body count suggests

that American society has promoted a gun culture without parallel among all other nations. American domestic firearms fatalities during the twentieth century total more than 265,000 homicides, 333,000 suicides, and 139,000 gun-related accidents—a figure twice the number of Americans killed in all this century's wars. Our homicide rate consistently runs eight times that of Japan and four times that of any European country. In 1988, there were 900,000 Americans incarcerated in prisons (the majority for violent crime) and 3.2 million (one out of every 55 adult Americans) under some sort of correctional supervision; and experts are expecting this figure to double in the next ten years. Sexist violence—date-rape, bedroom rape, just plain rape—abounds. Nationwide there are hundreds of centers servicing the estimated 500,000 women battered every year, as well as thousands of homes for abused children—figures which suggest that the American home itself is too often a battleground. (Keough, 138)

Not only is violence punished in the United States by prison sentence, but also in extreme cases with the death penalty. There is a certain irony in punishing violence with violence. In addition, violence was the crutch America fell on as it started its war on terrorism. Again, this shows an example of attempting to solve the issues of violence by using additional violence as the American government is sending their soldiers to wars all across the world. But even in the past, Americans have a history of internal wars such as the Revolutionary War, Indian Wars, Civil Wars and many other wars⁹ where Americans “offered” their services for battle. “What is most exceptional about Americans is not the voluminous record of their violence, but their extraordinary ability, in the face of that record, to persuade themselves that they are among the best-behaved and best-regulated of peoples” (Hofstadter qtd. in Keough, 139) and as Keough sums up, “in other words, we *think* we are nice, peaceful folks because we say we are” (Keough, 139). These above mentioned facts contrast the American ideals since “this native humor reflects the more menacing aspects of American society, and lampoons certain of our most cherished assumptions, such as the natural goodness of man and the inevitability of progress” (Keough, 139).

As discovered in the analysis of the genres I researched, there is the occurrence of violence in all three different examples. *There's Something about Mary* features police violence and shooting at the end of the movie, in *Family Guy* there is recurrent domestic violence between the main characters of the show, and even though the violence is not portrayed visually on *Saturday Night Live*, Chris Rock mentions

⁹ See American History Timeline: American Involvement in Wars from Colonial Times to the Present.

several violent occurrences in his sketch, such as lynchings, as well as the shooting and burning of African Americans. It does not really matter which genre we are analyzing, violence is a common characteristic shared by all different genres.

Humor in media and its function in American film and television industry

Ethnic humor is portrayed in various types of media, not only written media but also visual media, such as films, animation, stand-up comedy and many others.

Throughout the twentieth century America's humor has migrated to new arenas to take advantage of opportunities afforded by new sponsors and media. The comic strips, ethnic comedians, and silent movies spectacularly widened American humor's horizons [...]. Mass circulation of newspapers, periodical magazines, the stages of vaudeville and burlesque, the standup comics of nightclubs, the talking motion pictures, radio programs, and, ultimately, television have steadily converted humor into a multinational business enterprise with manifold models and outlets. (Dudden, 9)

The function of media and its influence has always been to shape, re-shape, and express public opinion. In the 1950s when television became commercialized and became a regular feature in many households, it led to the rapid growth of new genres to attract new audiences. It is a medium that brought families together in their own living rooms. In the 1950s, television provided novel opportunities for humor to influence the audience. Not only is television a means of entertainment, but also communication, which directly influences viewers. "Other forms of humor emanating from institutional arrangements – stand-up performers, radio and television sitcoms, cartoons and comic strips, and filmic comedy – clearly illuminate attitudes and enlarge people's repertoire" (Boskin, Rebellious, 1). After the World War II, television started reinforcing the ideals of the American Dream with its programming. But it was not long until obscene humor made its way into American popular culture.

In the 1960s the United States abolished the Production Code, which dealt with censorship¹⁰ guidelines and determining what was morally acceptable in motion

¹⁰ "As early as 1909, prominent American producers answered criticism concerning the moral and social impact of their movies by voluntarily submitting all their products to the scrutiny of an independently constituted committee of respectable citizens, called the National Board of Censorship.

pictures for the U.S. audience. Physical comedy which relied on gross-out humor and humor dealing with disgusting bodily functions, became a popular trend and almost the standard for American comedy films. As Mintz notes, “television is the most powerful communication medium of our popular culture” (Mintz, What’s so funny, 273). In addition, “television is the medium that brings humor into American homes on the most consistent basis” (Marc, 249) and throughout history “comedy-entertainment of a primarily humorous nature-has always been an essential, even dominant, ingredient of American commercial television programming” (Marc, 249-250). As early as the 1970s television “attempted to appeal to a specific audience demographic: urban, 18-49, liberal, professional and culturally educated” (Johnson, 58), an audience that would respect comedians and the topics addressed on certain comedy shows including the current political situation. With the rise in popularity of television media “the networks began to target their programmes at differently defined (although not necessarily mutually exclusive) ‘niche’ markets” (Johnson, 60). In the competitive television industry with its already established and newly founded networks “the display of a distinctive visual style was a means by which the networks differentiated their programmes from the competition and attracted specific audiences defined in terms of their tastes” (Johnson, 60). The success of a program or a movie depended on ratings and the audience. While the reality distanced itself from the image of the American Dream, it actually coincided with the use of humor. “Nothing appeared sacred any longer as »sick« humor broadly canvassed a spectrum of taboo subjects – intolerance and racism, religion, abundance and malnutrition, thermonuclear bombs and devastation, sex and venereal disease” (Boskin, Rebellious, 55). These types of taboo subjects, which were deemed unacceptable to some, were made more tolerable by disguising them in entertaining genres. It also holds true that inequality and dissatisfaction of minority groups caused a change in the use of humor. “In the latter half of the century, the flow of people’s humor accelerated exponentially. Reacting to rapidly changing social mores and institutions, ethnic/racial/gender conflicts, technological disasters, and other national events, people deluged the electronic airwaves with a raillery rarely seen in American history” (Boskin, Prism, 24). Furthermore it is evident that mass media played a helpful role in relieving racial tensions. “Although there still remains much work to be

The Board considered the effects of movies in terms of their treatment of such sensitive subjects as sex, violence, crime, drunkenness, vulgarity, moral outcome” (Vasey, 219).

done in achieving real world racial tolerance, on television the topic of accepting racial difference has been repeatedly portrayed by the vaguely feel-good politics of mainstream media” (Smith, 108).

Humor addressed the current problems of American society and was also very accurate. “The popular media of the United States have had such an extraordinary influence upon the nation’s image of itself, and upon the face it has presented to the rest of the world, that it is has become virtually meaningless to attempt to distinguish between the creations of the media and “reality” in contemporary America” (Vasey, 213). Of course, with the help of democracy, freedom of media, and freedom of speech “in America, agencies of popular entertainment have been allowed to define the nation’s identity and values to an unparalleled extent” (Vasey, 213). If humor is an American characteristic from the past, it expanded its breadth after the emergence of media creating the opportunity to reach a broader audience. “In the twentieth century, humor played a crucial role in America’s cultural life” and the television with its selective programming “exhibited the nation’s craving for humor” (Boskin, Prism, 23). In addition, there has always been a relationship between stereotypes and media. “Film and television have provided Americans with a variety of ethnic images, and while the pictures change, stereotyping has been a consistent feature of prime-time ethnic-American ones” (Holte, 101).

Television

While NBC (National Broadcasting Company) became very popular with the emergence of the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s, Fox became a very important broadcast network in the late 1980s for the genre of animation during prime time viewing hours. Fox aired some of the most popular animated shows during this time, starting with *The Simpsons*. In the 1990s, Fox branched out from the animation genre and gained success through its diverse programming. This helped the network “extend its demographic range into the 18-49 age group” (Johnson, 61).

The fan base plays an important role, influencing the longevity of television shows. With regards to the two shows that are subject to my analysis, a strong supportive fan base helped NBC keep *Saturday Night Live* on the air for over three decades and were influential in bringing *Family Guy* back to Fox after the show was initially cancelled. “The fan audience is valuable to a network such as Fox, attempting to break into an increasingly competitive environment, because of the loyalty of fan viewers” (Johnson, 62). The audience has always played a vital role in media, especially through its influence on programming. “The genre of the ethnic comedy can be seen as one attempt of today’s television programme makers to respond to demographic and cultural changes as well as to tap into mostly young, consumer-oriented segments of the audience for their advertisers” (Schlote, 179). Because of the success of the above mentioned shows, there have been several other programs attempting to imitate¹¹ the initial product of that particular genre, likely because “imitation of successful formulas is central to the structure of popular films and television” (Holte, 104).

Humor in media plays an impactful role in shaping the American national character and understanding of the American Dream. “Ethnic humor, like all humor, reveals a good deal about the political arrangements and the preoccupations of various groups and subcultures in societies” (Browne & Browne, 419). When using humor one might wonder how farfetched it is and whether it is an accurate reflection of reality. In order to attract an audience from a certain demographic group, the comedic television show has to deliver an interesting, maybe challenging commentary. While “parody articulates an attitude of superiority and knowingness [...] that is exact the opposite of the dumb ignorance of which the slapstick audience was often accused” (Joyce, 57). There are always people who are offended by certain skits and try to prevent such commentary, but based on Lorne Michaels’ (creator of *Saturday Night Live*) experience there are also people in the audience who agree and admire such a daring point of view. Although certain topics might incite disapproval, usually the targeted minority groups have nothing against different perspectives and the exercise of free speech.

¹¹ In the case of *Saturday Night Live* the imitations are shows, such as *David Letterman*, *Jay Leno*, and *Conan O’Brien* among others.

Throughout television's history, there have been a great number of public appeals to either change or cancel particular shows. These appeals have been proven ineffective due to large and supportive fan bases. As mentioned before, a television show's humor attempts to confront the seriousness of society's issues through prime-time entertainment. While the creators of these shows are primarily trying to address the realistic problems of the society and attract different audiences, the humor used is sometimes complex or intellectual and therefore attracts the "educated" audience. While humor can occasionally be quite complex and difficult to understand for an average person, there are also instances when simplistic humor will provoke greater laughter through its absurdity. As Schein well describes it, "to say dirty words is funny because it is a crime that is not punished. It is funny when the clown is beaten up because we are not being struck. Custard pies do not land on our faces; we do not slip on the banana peel" (Schein, 25). People often perceive something as funny as long as they are not directly affected by a certain event nor feel threatened that their own qualities are being depicted in a humorous way. While the majority of comedy programs on television serve the purpose of entertainment, they can also be the source of information.

There will always be organizations protesting against controversial subject matter on television shows as well as people blaming the shows for inciting real life incidents that are not necessarily related. The viewers of the analyzed media have to be quite liberal and open-minded in order to not be offended by the humor used in the previously mentioned genres. It is recognized however, that some viewers or minority groups might find the jokes or sketches insulting or offensive. In addition, the audience should also be quite culturally savvy and educated because of all of the references to American pop-culture. A portion of jokes might be complex and difficult to be interpreted as comedy without specific knowledge. Humor used in the analyzed media is self-directed, namely, the creators make fun of American beliefs and values as a reflection on society through comedy.

Saturday Night Live

SNL behind the scenes

After the reruns of Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*, the NBC network decided to create a late night show as a substitute during the Saturday night timeslot. The management invited Lorne Michaels to join the network and to create a show. The late night show *Saturday Night Live* made its television debut¹² on October 11, 1975. "Nixon had just resigned, the Vietnam War had just finished-and we lost it-and America wasn't laughing. And this show came along and said it's okay to laugh, even to laugh at all the bad stuff. It was like a huge release" (Shales & Miller, 60). The show itself, which was based upon improvisational sketch comedy, was a breakthrough since nothing similar had existed, and to date "it has served as a trendsetter in American humor and had a remarkable effect on American mores, manners, music, politics, and even fashion" (Shales & Miller, 7). As comedy writer, Rosie Shuster notes in an interview, "comedy writing was all about flirting with taboos and seeing how far you could push it. Not just gratuitously, though; it had to be funny. It had to make you laugh" (Shales & Miller, 149). The show included sketches, music acts, comedic news updates, guest stars, and featured a cast of future renowned comics, such as Bill Murray, Eddie Murphy, Steve Martin, and many more. In addition,

the structure of SNL has remained essentially constant since its first episode. Together with a "guest host" (a celebrity of some kind, generally from within the world of entertainment), a regular group of in-house performers present a series of comedy sketches, live, in front of a studio audience. These are interspersed with occasional prerecorded comic short films and commercial parodies, and performances from at least one musical guest. (Whalley, 2)

¹² Even before the shows first airing the network knew this new genre would be daring, therefore, "On the first show, [...] the network planned to use a six-second delay so that anything unexpected and obscene could be edited out by an observer from the Department of Standards and Practices (the censor), who would theoretically flip a switch in the control room and bleep the offending material before it went out naked onto the American airwaves" (Shales & Miller, 44).

The show consists of several different elements¹³ and one of which is a “cold open”, also known as a teaser, which will be analyzed in this chapter. As a recurrent host, actor Tom Hanks noticed,

the secret of being the host of the show is to concern yourself only with the monologue. Because if you have a good monologue, everybody thinks the entire show was great. If you have a poor monologue, it means you have to go and win back the favor of the people who are watching at home. (Shales & Miller, 427)

In the case of *Saturday Night Live*, the cold open is a monologue at the beginning of the show followed by the opening credits. The cold open always ends with the host saying “Live, from New York, it’s Saturday Night”.

With its controversial comedic skits, *Saturday Night Live* was unlike anything the American audience had ever seen before. It does not come as a surprise that after nearly three decades of being on air, *SNL* has the status of being one of the most popular television programs of all time. A central reason for this is because it has always “offered socially conscious and politically satirical sketches” (Boskin, Prism, 23) which attracted the viewers.

With the arrival of *SNL*, the TV generation, at least for ninety minutes a week, could see television not just as a window on the past or a display case for the fading fantasy figures of their fathers and mothers, but as a mirror – a warped fun-house mirror perhaps, but a mirror just the same, one reflecting their own sensibilities, values, and philosophies. (Shales & Miller, 12)

Even though the show has almost been cancelled several times, Lorne Michaels, the creator and executive producer, always found a way to rejuvenate the show and bring it back to life. This flexibility and creative programming highlights that “the show’s fortunes have been closely tied to the ways in which it has responded to and incorporated each new generation’s outlook and values” (Whalley, 188).

A very important aspect of the show is how it undeniably changed political humor forever, and “hugely expanded the parameters of what was “acceptable” material on the air, bringing it much closer to the realities of everyday American life” (Shales &

¹³ Weekend Update is an important long running feature on the show. In this sketch anchors, members of the shows’ cast, report about the current world news, spiced up with some edgy humor. As mentioned in Purdum’s article “from the very beginning, the show’s sheer immediacy [...] and its decision to feature the “Weekend Update” faux-news segment made it the natural repository for a new, edgier kind of political satire that quickly got under the skin of a generation that had come of age in contentious and cynical times” (Purdum).

Miller, 8-9). All of the comedians who were featured as cast members on the show share the quality of being very daring for addressing sensitive topics publicly.

The comedian publicly witnesses or reads about socially enacted behavior. However, he exaggerates or distorts his observations as a participant observer talking to people in his own society about the familiar cultural rules and behavior patterns in *their* and *his* own society. The audience may hear their own behavior described as if it is an alien culture in the sense that they knew that information all along but no one ever said it like that to them before. However, even though the comedian and his audience share culture, part of the cultural knowledge with which they operate is tacit (that is, hitherto unspoken). (Koziski, 92)

By using real life events for sketches, “the comedian can provide a healthy release of tension, discomfort and anger” (Koziski, 109).

The role of the audience

What is important to comprehend about *Saturday Night Live* is that, “from the ground up it was built to be new, unusual, arresting, surprising, and attractive to baby boomers, the largest generation in American history” (Shales & Miller, 8). Television became prominent in the 1950s as a mass media and soon evolved into a commercialized and flourishing broadcasting medium. “SNL offered the spectacle of a small group of individuals with baby boom values challenging and changing television form and content” (Whalley, 189). Baby boomers, which were the generation born between the 1940s and 1960s, grew up watching television. The key qualities of this demographic group were that they demanded social change, were not trusting of politics, and rejected traditional values. Acknowledging the traits of their audience, shows such as *Saturday Night Live* “included more liberal values and more explicit and experimental content” (Whalley, 2). Baby boomers, with their post - World War II values were considerably influential in mobilizing different social movements (Civil Rights Movement, Feminism and others) that took place in the 1970s when the liberal baby boomer generation entered adulthood.

“The way people talked on television was becoming closer to the way people talked in everyday life; a longtime boundary was being erased” (Shales & Miller, 106). Since the bulk of the sketches on *Saturday Night Live* are based upon real-life events taken from politics, culture, and media, the viewers require a minimum base

of knowledge in order to understand the humor. *Saturday Night Live* has become a vital part of American culture and its reflection upon itself; “the experience of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behavior” (Mintz, Dudden, 88). One of the writers, James Downey, from the beginning of *Saturday Night Live* notes,

to me it was always, number one, to do comedy about things that are going on in politics or the culture, and do it without confusing or offending the smarter people. I always thought that if comedy is going to confuse anybody, by rights it should be the stupider people. You shouldn’t be punished for knowing more. (Shales & Miller, 416)

However, in order to fully comprehend the jokes and references used on *SNL*, the audience must not only possess general knowledge but also be acquainted with popular culture. “If the joke listener is too unfamiliar with the context, s/he may not be able to decode the joke text” (Leveen, 37). In addition, the public’s opinion also matters when it comes to writing sketches for the show since key comedic vehicles such as character impersonations are predominantly based on how people perceive particular public figures such as politicians. While the subject matter is predominately ethnic and typical for American culture, non-Americans might not understand the humor.

On television *SNL*’s real impact came from its first five years. The Not Ready for Prime Time Players presented comedy that extended what was allowable for network broadcasting. Previously taboo subjects, language, and opinions were regularly aired. *SNL* indicated that whatever gap in tastes and values had developed between the networks and baby boomers could and would be overcome. (Whalley, 188)

Because today’s comedy is “more socially and politically satiric or insightful” (Mintz, Dudden, 93), this type of “humor is a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon” (Mintz, Dudden, 85).

Political humor and satire on and off the show

As political humor and satire are the prominent types of comedy used on the show, I will provide a more in-depth analysis of the two.

Humor on the topic of politics has been a familiar vehicle for popular disdain or even opposition throughout American history. Politics has afforded abundant targets for wits, satirists, and comedians at which to aim their scorn. [...]

humorists focused their talents on the indigenous resources at hand to poke fun at foolish or knavish political figures. (Dudden, 51)

Although political humor has changed over time, certain characteristics provide typical and constant qualities for American political humor. As Boskin notes,

its historical dimension is boundless, its character egalitarian, its breadth all-encompassing, and its expression open and innovative. An oft-stated remark is that political irreverence is, and persistently remains, a distinctive American trait that subjects every form of power to humorous scrutiny and/or comedic skepticism. (Boskin, *Politics*, 473).

Political humor has been present in the United States for centuries, which is not a surprise since United States provided its citizens with democracy and freedom of speech with the First Amendment¹⁴ of the Constitution. In addition, “the majority of people believe their national humor is as democratic as their politics” (Boskin, *Political*, 473). It was not until the 1960s when political humor became more daring and intense. What made American political humor possible in its current form is that,

rulers in democracies are usually unable summarily to punish the people who devise and direct humor at them. More important, in many democracies, is the tradition and practice of free speech, the most famous expression of which in the United States is in the Constitution. Because of all these factors, the making and purveying of political humor becomes a less risky undertaking for its originators. If commercially successful, it can be a source of affluence, even influence. (Paletz, 484)

The origin of this new bold type of political humor can be deduced because “beginning in the 1960s, satire could become more direct, more savage, and more explicitly cruel, without fear of censorship, stigma, or punishment. Such openness also enlarged the possibilities of humor directed specifically against public servants” (Whitfield, 139). In addition, certain events of that time influenced the development of political humor. “Eventually the civil rights struggles of the 1960s reconstituted political humor’s vitality by escalating the intensity of confrontation” (Dudden, 66).

While “offering abundant targets to laugh at and about, authority is a perpetual source of humor” (Paletz, 483). Every politician, political decision, election, and scandal has provided boundless material for humorists. “Indeed, nothing, no matter how sacred, is immune: assassination attempts, successful or unsuccessful, on presidents; the women’s liberation movement for equal rights; the personal, private

¹⁴ See U.S. Constitution.

sexual proclivities and preferences of presidents and presidential candidates” (Paletz, 483). The phenomenon of political satire in *Saturday Night Live* can be credited in part to the comedian Chevy Chase and his portrayal of President Ford. It brings up the question whether the impact of this sketch transcended entertainment and had an influence on future American politicians as well as elections. The answer would be that “American politics hasn’t been the same since 1975, when *Saturday Night Live*’s Chevy Chase turned President Gerald Ford into a national punch line” (Purdum). Political satire has been a “vital part”¹⁵ of humor used in *Saturday Night Live*.

No one watching the new show, called NBC’s *Saturday Night*, could have known, but American political humor would never be quite the same. And for nearly 36 years, the institution that was soon rechristened *Saturday Night Live* has been inextricably interwoven with the ups and downs of the post-Watergate presidency and American politics. (Purdum)

The satire uses remarkable impressions of politicians, their mannerisms and their actions. It is important to note that “some political cycles simply provide better material than others” (Purdum). Since the beginning of *Saturday Night Live* several talented performers have impersonated¹⁶ different American presidents.

What will be analyzed in this chapter is comedian Chris Rock’s monologue, which is also an “example of political satire, a form that treads an uneasy line between comedy and more obviously ‘serious’ and contentious material. Satire is comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political in some way. It can be relatively light and playful, or in deadly earnest [...]. Satire is sometimes used as a way of voicing criticism” (King, 93) and that was exactly Rock’s intention regardless of how radical it

¹⁵ The only time politics did not play such an important role on the show was in the years 1980-1985 when Lorne Michaels was not the producer on the show. Therefore Reagan has never really been the target of the joke on the show until after Michaels’ return. It is said that upon his return “the show edged into what may have been its golden age of political parody” (Purdum).

¹⁶ “That a show that started by parading its “Not Ready for Prime Time Players” would come to loom so large on the cultural landscape, and that its fictional politicians would so often seem more vivid than their real-life counterparts, might once have seemed improbable” (Purdum). During last elections Amy Poehler impersonated Hillary Clinton and Tina Fey impersonated Sarah Palin. Tina Fey has actually been invited back on the show just because of her resemblance to Palin. One might wonder if Fey’s resemblance to Palin had any influence on the voters. As Tagliere argues in her article “the clips are funny, and they are not, technically, showing most people anything they don’t already privately suspect about the candidates. The problem is that the sketches of late have been so faithful to some of the candidates’ real appearances, that there are groups of people out there who may not realize that the real Sarah Palin never said that she could see Alaska “from her backyard”. “When the line between reality and satire has blurred to that extent, those SNL sketches begin wielding an unhealthy power to sway the minds and loyalties of people who will be heading to the polls soon” (Tagliere).

might sound. In addition, it is “a form of comedy that also widens the scope for social/political criticism in the relatively mainstream [...] products of more ‘liberal’ societies such as the United States” (King, 94). One might question the true value of using satire and its desired effect on the audience, but occasionally “comedy of a satirical variety might be the *only* way in which internal social or political criticism can reach an audience” (King, 94).

Throughout the history of the United States, “political humor matured [...] to become American humor’s mainstream” (Dudden, 9). The target of political satire is almost always political authority which,

exists on five levels: the individual seeking or occupying an authority position; the policies that person espouses, promotes, is identified with, takes responsibility for; the authority position itself [...]; the institution housing the position [...]; and the political system as a whole, including its dominating ideas and assumptions-which in countries such as the United States would include democracy and the notion that people possess the capacity for self-government. (Paletz, 485)

Based on the previously mentioned levels, politicians themselves are most commonly targets of political satire. However it is particularly interesting to note that, “humor aimed at particular office-seekers and –holders tends to be directed at their foibles and proclivities rather than at more damaging characteristics” (Paletz, 485).

Either American humorists have targeted their material to politician’s personal traits (speech, intelligence), or certain scandals politicians were directly involved in. As Ronald Reagan was famous for his wit and considered to be the funniest president ever, Bill Clinton was the target of everyone’s joke after his relations with Monica Lewinsky. However, we should not forget George W. Bush. In my humble opinion humor directed at him deserves a whole subchapter. “When a comedian makes an allusion to some event which is politically embarrassing to the government, or to some individual, the allusion has power only because it is connected to historical experience and because Americans (and many other people) find embarrassment humorous” (Berger, 29). After the Bill Clinton presidency, the cast of *Saturday Night Live* had created so much satirical material that they could literally publish a book with the sketches. The book *SNL Present: The Clinton Years* illustrates to the reader how often the cast made fun of not only Clinton’s affair but

also his presidency. However, in the case of Bill Clinton, it was not the humor based upon his characteristics that damaged his reputation but his actions. The same can be said for George W. Bush. The focus of political humor is different for every politician who is subject to it.

Politics in Saturday Night Live and its influence

With the increasing commonality of using politics as the focus for comedy routines “entertainers would fire off barrages broadside at whatever public scandal or governmentally inspired disaster chanced to be provoking the people’s indignation at the time” (Dudden, 52). Politics has always had a great influence on humor because the subject is representative of what people are concerned about.

The unbroken sequence of catastrophes and historic transformations of everyday circumstances, beginning with the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War, diverted American political humor’s characteristic manifestations away from solo performances by solitary talents towards spasmodic yet synchronous outbursts by comedians of all sorts against government’s proclivity for corruption, errors of judgment, bankruptcy, inhumanity, or warfare. (Dudden, 62)

This leads to the question of how significant public opinion actually is if expressed through political humor? While in some cases it provides pure entertainment for people, in other cases it can serve as a critique¹⁷ of the politics or politicians and cast influence on the voters. Although *Saturday Night Live* is “just” a sketch comedy show, its influence on viewers might be greater than people give it credit for. There have been numerous articles published regarding how some people are not able to distinguish fake news from real news.

The morning after a presidential (or vice presidential) debate, one would expect the news shows to open with clips from the actual debates, but as sketch after sketch aired on SNL lampooning Palin (and to a lesser and occasional degree, McCain, Biden, and Obama, as well as Clinton), many morning news shows were actually opening with clips from the SNL debates instead. The sketches themselves were being seen, and regurgitated on news shows, almost as often as the real debates themselves. (Tagliere)

¹⁷ “Unlike in many other parts of the world, polls and public opinion have been an integral part of American politics for decades. But it is only since the American defeat in Vietnam, which owed as much to the lack of public support at home as to events on the battlefields of Southeast Asia, that public opinion has been accorded a strong seat in foreign-policy decision-making councils” (Kohut & Stokes, Introduction, XV).

Even major networks such as CNN have analyzed how much truth and accuracy there was in *SNL* skits and questioned if the sketches were simply harmless humor or actually played a role in damaging politicians' reputations. When examining the facts and material used in a skit, the conclusion was drawn that even though most of the skits were not true, there were some that were very believable, and therefore persuasive when portraying a politician or political event. An example of this would be when *SNL* used a real interview from the CBS Evening News between Katie Couric and Sarah Palin as the basis for a sketch. In the *SNL* sketch, Amy Poehler as Katie Couric and Tina Fey as Sarah Palin reenacted the whole real interview word for word. While in the original interview, the audience might try and find some sense in Palin's answer to Couric's question because she is a renown politician, in the *SNL* spoof the audience becomes aware of how much illogical nonsense has been said in the interview and Palin's incapability to address the actual question. Despite *Saturday Night Live's* status as a comedy show, it can be considered an important medium as viewers can become up-leveled on politics and current real world events. "There absolutely are voters who are gullible enough to be swayed by whatever they hear or see on television, especially if what they are watching is popular and funny, gullible enough not to realize that what they are watching is satire, not reality" (Tagliere). Let us keep in mind that there is a direct correlation between criticized political decisions and the likelihood they will be parodied on a show such as *Saturday Night Live*.

Real politicians have been featured as either hosts or guest stars on *Saturday Night Live* since the show's inception; "presidents and politicians from Ford on have been conspicuously good sports about the show, and most of them have turned up" (Purdum). If one doubts the importance such a show can have on the audience, keep in perspective that all of the candidates mentioned in Chris Rock's monologue have actually appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, either as hosts or in cameo appearances, some of them on more than one occasion.

Going on a non-news program such as *The Daily Show* or *SNL* shows the public that the candidate is a "regular person," someone with a sense of humor, and the public likes that quality in its public officials. It shows humility, and the public likes *that* quality in its public officials. It takes away from the perception that a candidate is arrogant or uncaring or unfeeling. It shows that the candidate is just like the rest of us, someone we can vote for with confidence. (*Saturday Night Live* and the Election Cycle)

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both appeared on the show in 2008 during their presidential campaigns. As previously mentioned, a comedy show with such high ratings can undeniably influence the public's opinion on certain candidates. There are certainly voters who decide to vote based on politicians' performance in media. Further proof is the fact that politicians actually make appearances in such shows during their political campaign, indicating that they must believe themselves that their appearance has an impact on the voters. "Even if all other attempts at livening up the show failed, it was almost guaranteed a new burst of energy every four years when election time came around. [...] Politicians who were roasted over a spit on Saturday Night Live would nevertheless appear on the program themselves if given the opportunity" (Shales & Miller, 365).

Chris Rock as a representative of "One nation under God"

What makes Chris Rock a unique comedian is his ability to point out the problems of American culture, society, and politics in his humor routines. He is known for taking on the areas of American culture that others avoid. Most of Rock's humor is based on the controversial subject of racism, "as black stand-ups performed in mainstream entertainment venues, they strove to impart the gnarled history of race relations" (Boskin, Rebellious, 161). However, "the question then arises as to why Rock turns to potentially controversial humor in his comedic acts. [...] Much of his bold and perhaps even reckless courage in choosing his subject matters comes from his own personal experience" (Chung, 92). During his childhood years he was the victim of racism while attending schools in predominantly white areas of Brooklyn, therefore "Chris Rock feels entitled to poke fun of both blacks and whites because he experienced racism directly" (Chung, 92). In his comedy he tries to share ethnicity and his own ethnic background since "ethnic speakers celebrate identity by telling jokes about their own ethnic group" (Leveen, 30).

Rock is considered a provocative comedian, and as mentioned in the article *The Role of Black Comedy in Supporting Stereotypes of Black Intellectual Inferiority*, his audience is divided when it comes to appreciating his performance. While "African Americans were the only ethnic group whose history was grossly distorted and

virtually eradicated” (Boskin, *Humor Prism*, 145), he ridicules the past and points out the influences of racism in American society from his perspective. Although he might sometimes seem to be exaggerating in his routines, his knowledge about the issues of minorities is undeniable and is expressed in his own manner. While some of the American societal issues that he addresses may seem invisible to a portion of his viewers, Chris Rock is known for bringing them out into the open. As Mintz describes, his routines are “purest public comic communication (Mintz, Dudden, 85).

Nevertheless, what is the function of a standup comedian such as Chris Rock? According to Koziski, “the comedian as licensed spokesperson can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or reluctant to openly acknowledge” (Koziski, 99). The stage is “the social environment in which a standup comedian shares his views of reality with an audience. [...] The comedian’s basic thrust as he or she stands before an audience [...] is to be entertaining rather than to elucidate culture theory” (Koziski, 92). In essence, stand-up comedy is a comic dialogue performed in front of an audience. In addition,

standup comedy in America operates within a universal tradition, both historically and across cultures, that it confronts just about all of the profoundly important aspects of our culture and our society, and that it seems to have an important role allowing for expressions of shared beliefs and behavior, changing social roles and expectations. (Mintz, Dudden, 96)

Chris Rock’s influence on the development of American ethnic humor

Because Chris Rock is such a versatile¹⁸ celebrity he has the ability to influence and attract a bigger audience. As mentioned before, most of Chris Rock’s material is based upon his life and experiences. “With his painfully honest and often angry humor of the plight of the black people, Rock upholds the traditional African-American humor that originates from the days of slavery, and he pioneers that humor to a new direction with his conscious efforts to portray the diversity of Black America” (Chung, 88). With Rock himself being a member of black community, the black

¹⁸ Chris Rock is not just a comedian known by his stand-up comedy routines but also a Hollywood movie star working in front and behind the camera, as well as television star and an author.

audience feels less threatened and attacked since he is one of them and shares the same historical background. "The sadness associated with some of Rock's observations about the class structure involved with race seems almost inappropriate as humor, but [...] Rock fulfills the traits of African-American humor not only in his rhetorical devices but also in his choice of scathing content as well" (Chung, 90). He might be perceived as a courageous comedian for using the sensitive topic of race relations as the material for his humor. This is notably highlighted through Chris Rock's *Saturday Night Live* sketch where he compares the life and historical relationships of black Americans with the life of white Americans, particularly white women. As King mentions, "it can be harsh and biting, assuming a particular moral or political standpoint" (King, 94). The sketch however does not only portray the racial situation of today, but also underscores its development throughout history.

While subjects of his humor have been "universally recognized but politically taboo" (Mintz, Dudden, 91), there are likely people in the audience who might feel discomfort or disagreement with him. However, by laughing at Rock's jokes, the audience proves that there are no taboos when talking about race relations and other controversial subjects used in his routines. In today's world it is important, if not even a necessity for a comedian to publicly express the opinion of their audience, ultimately reflecting upon the thoughts and mentality of ordinary people. Nonetheless, as Goldsby points out, "he has something to say about things that really matter and often says them memorably and well" (Goldsby, 88). Rock points out the superiority of the white race in several of his sketches by comparing how much better it is to be a white American than to be a black American. Rock's humor stems out from, and draws attention to the harsh situation of black population in the past such as slavery. "Three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation" (Boskin, Prism, 147). As Boskin notes, "extracting from communal memory and embellishing from community banter, black comedians delivered a running commentary on white culture, all the while drawing attention to their own exclusive history" (Boskin, Prism, 154). In addition, as Goldsby writes,

he disturbs some whites who are terrified that his highly specific indictments will be mistakenly generalized by the less sophisticated or provide ammunition for the bigoted. It is possible that there are whites (and blacks) who are

uncomfortable because his comments reflect their own privately, but not proudly, held views. (Goldsby, 88)

Chris Rock, while addressing the subject matter familiar to the audience, does so by using everyday language in his humor. As an entertainer, this is how he can connect with the audience and make it possible for the audience to identify and connect with him. In the analyzed sketch, he does not attack race issues directly but uses a lot of parables in relation to elections, celebrities and popular culture. With the arrival of Barack Obama as a black presidential candidate and widely known politician, the situation itself opened the door for Rock's racial comedy on a larger scale. Therefore,

ethnic humor allows the ethnic speaker or writer to develop a context in which issues of ethnicity-and of the prejudice that prevails against the ethnic group and its members-may be introduced. When confronted with an ethnic joke, particularly one told by a member of the ethnic group to which it refers, members of the dominant group are forced to consider the topic of ethnicity. (Leveen, 46)

Rock is not only attempting to persuade the audience through his comedy, he also attempts to express and explain his own beliefs. As a black American with an ancestral tie to slavery, he is able to find common ground with most of the black population in the United States.

Whereas in the past such humor had served as a quiet vent of anger and aggression for blacks who acknowledged white superiority in the open, Rock shared that humor with his fellow African Americans in a medium that white audiences could observe but not play a role, and the result was that much of the black inferiority complex associated with African-American culture was absolved. (Chung, 96)

Not only does he create a dialogue about slavery, but also other landmark events in American history, such as the Women's Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement relating to voting rights and racial discrimination. He can be perceived as a representative of black Americans and "he holds a significant role in the debate over sociopolitical issues of race that rage across the nation" (Chung, 87). He uses humor as a mechanism to express resentment and aggression, as well as to entertain the audience. One typical characteristic of his rhetoric skills is his capacity to over-exaggerate as well as to be controversial in his jokes. However in the core of the jokes, the expressed ideas are still truthful and reflect common values and beliefs. As mentioned by Goldsby, even in the past "the voices most listened to belonged to the guys who said the funniest, truest, meanest things" (Goldsby, 88).

This point, in combination with his consistent appearances in different media, has enabled him to reach more followers regardless of race and expand his audience. Since the majority of his comedy routines are based on his own political views, his dialogue can be described as a political commentary that might give influence to people's political awareness and democratic decisions.

Because Rock has become a well-known celebrity over the course of his career, the audience may already be aware of his views on race and politics. Rock re-uses some of his material and also adapts it for his various performances. The jokes do change but he is consistent in his method by including the same content, characters and events. Chris Rocks' comedy routines have been consistent over the years, especially by remaining faithful to the subject matter of ethnic humor. Chris Rock is no different than other humorists, since "many humorists remain consistent in their treatment of politics over the years" (Paletz, 492). In addition, Rock does not only direct his humor at blacks, but also at whites, which makes it clear that nobody is safe from being a target of his humor. Thus Chris Rock in his treatment of humor "carries with him the burden of carrying on the tradition of a painful yet treasured humor that has long been intricately woven into fabric of African-American culture" (Chung, 98).

The cold open – Road to the White House

The material for the *SNL* monologue or the cold open is commonly a depiction of current political affairs. In the cold open that aired March 17, 2006 (season 32, episode 15), Chris Rock calls attention to the upcoming election and the potential presidential candidates, which eventually transforms into a racial discourse.

As a licensed spokesman he is permitted to say things about our society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done so without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character he can represent, through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to, and to renounce through laughter. (Mintz qtd. in Boskin & Dorinson, 218).

As previously stated, the political debate is intertwined with the historical context of African Americans, as well as with recent events in popular culture. In addition, he points out the past and present flaws of society.

In interethnic discourse, it's not the joke text that matters as much as the way the entire joke act proceeds. The same ethnic joke told different ways-by different tellers, in different circumstances, and to different listeners-may become increasingly or decreasingly volatile, and the participants in a specific joke act must judge these factors in order to determine the meaning of a particular joke. (Leveen, 35)

Since the performer is Chris Rock, people have become accustomed to his routine and expect its material to be about racial discrimination. However, because it is *Saturday Night Live*, a show famous for its political commentary and satire, the cold open exerts a combination of both racial and political comedy. The traits that influence perception of humor on a show such as *Saturday Night Live* are "the setting in which the humor is presented, the humorist's delivery and body language, the extent to which they communicate a sense of complicity with the audience, the amount of hostility they express and how openly, and the show's production values" (Paletz, 487). Although it is apparent that he is exaggerating through his humor, the basis of the events and the facts expressed in the monologue are true. "The comedian finds, frames and edits reality into an artistic construction-the comedy routine" (Koziski, 95). Most of the humor in this sketch has been used before in Rock's comedy routines. The jokes encompass racial relationships from the past and present political situation, as well as events from popular culture. Thus it is discernable to the audience that Chris Rock has an extensive amount of knowledge about these topics. The argument can be made that Chris Rock is one of the most popular stand-up comedians of all time and "one of the forerunners in shaping American's perception of African Americans as a race [...] tearing down the stereotypes that both whites and black have of each other" (Chung, 88). Let us look into details of the above mentioned sketch. I have consulted the *SNL* website¹⁹ for the transcript, however, please note that because the transcript is from a verbal monologue, I have made small grammatical modifications to make it easier to comprehend from a literary standpoint.

CHRIS ROCK. Good evening! Good evening, good evening! Now, in six-hundred and seventy-four days, we're gonna have a new President. And the field is just so crowded. On the Republican side, there's McCain and Guiliani. Now, is it me, or wasn't McCain too old eight years ago? And then we have Guiliani. Now, Guiliani's

¹⁹ See *Saturday Night Live Transcripts* (Season 32, Episode: 15). *SNL Special Report: Road to the White House..... Chris Rock.*

great. He's great, in a crisis. But, in uh real life, Giuliani's kind of like a pit bull. He's great when you have a burglar - but, if you don't, he just might eat your kids. Then, we have the Democrats. And everybody's saying the same thing, Hillary or Obama? A black man, or a white woman. It's so hard to make up my mind! You know, as if it's a suffering contest! And, even if it was, how can you compare the suffering of a white woman to the suffering of a black man?! It's not even close! I mean, white women burned their bras, black men were burned alive! I mean, sure, white women couldn't vote for a minute, so they'd march, and protest. You know? And when they had to get on the BUS to go to and protest, who do think gave up their seats? You know how much better Seabiscuit's life was than my grandfather's? I mean when they put a horse... When a horse can't run any more, they put him out to stud; when a black man can't run any more, he gets shot fifty times! I mean, how can you compare the pain of a white woman to the pain of a black man? They used to hang black men just for looking at white women! I mean, nobody ever lynched a white woman! No white woman's ever been assassinated! Everybody loves white women! White men love white women; black men really love white women! I mean, did you see Anna Nicole Smith's funeral? She had SIX black men pallbearers! I thought Farrakhan died! I mean everybody loves white women, except white women! White women are the majority of the country, and they've had the right to vote for almost a hundred years, and still they've never elected a white woman President! What are you bitches waiting for?! If black people were the majority of this country, there'd be a new Black President every day! Okay? Every year, a new Black person would get a term to be President! Obama would be President; Oprah'd be President; O.J.'d be President; Flavor Flav, Halle Berry'd be President for half-a-term! And for that very reason, that's why I predict that Barack Obama will not only be the Democratic nominee for President, Obama will be the next President of the United States, okay? And for those doubters out there who keep asking the question, "Is America ready for a black President?" I say, "Why not? We just had a retarded one!" "Live, from New York, it's Saturday Night!"

And the nominees are...

From the beginning of the sketch the audience is aware that it will be about the election because of the title *Road to the White House*. We should keep in mind that "throughout some of the lowest points in our country's history, SNL, the popular sketch comedy show, has helped us once a week, through the gift of laughter, to forget our troubles for a time, and never with such hilarity as during presidential campaign seasons" (Tagliere). Chris Rock talks about and compares the candidates running for election. "Saturday Night Live has a long history of satirizing political campaigns" and as mentioned in Tagliere's article, recently "their sketches may be wielding a greater influence on undecided voters than ever before" (Tagliere). However, the subject of an election is only addressed at the beginning and the end of

the sketch, whereas all the other topics mentioned are regarding the historical background that brought people to where they are today and the decisions that they have encountered.

In the earlier years of *SNL*, the sketches about politics were rather innocent compared to show's more recent trend of presenting edgier humor that is more critical about current political affairs. The humor in the past campaigns was "hilariously but respectfully, if not downright affectionately, highlighting the weaknesses of our leaders and potential leaders" (Tagliere). Let us examine the candidates running for the president of the United States in the presidential elections in 2008. The jokes about the politicians include John McCain's age, Rudy Giuliani's actions, Hillary Clinton's marriage, and Barack Obama's "blackness"²⁰. In this particular sketch the joke about George W. Bush provides a laugh about his intellect, which has been a subject of many jokes throughout his presidency.

Laughter has yet to be extended to certain decision-making institutions or their representatives in the political firmament. Rather, it concentrates upon the most visible and vulnerable unit in the structure: the political official. In contrast with those powerful sectors that remain hidden to humor's scrutiny, the person on the stump has had nowhere to hide. It is precisely at this place on the stage, on the spotlighted self, that America's humor illuminates its political democracy. (Boskin, Political, 482)

If a politician is not "famous" for a physical characteristic, the humorists find specific actions or notable policies that they can make fun of; "the humor, while growing sharper with every campaign cycle, was still essentially good-natured and did what good satire is meant to do: highlight the absurdities in an otherwise not very humorous situation" (Tagliere).

In his sketches, Rock does not express his mind solely on an individual level, but also as a representative of the people since he uses the word "we" when referring to beliefs. In the sketch, he challenges people's values on what qualities they find important about the next American president, either his or her race, age or intellectual abilities. Although he started the sketch representing the voice of all Americans regardless of race, he continues by transforming into a member of the

²⁰ Also during the 2012 presidential elections campaign, Rock performed a monologue on the *Jimmy Kimmel Show* that is exclusively about Barack Obama's "blackness" or in this particular case better said, his "whiteness" (see Appendix 2).

minority group, namely that of the black community. “Ethnic slurs in joking form have reflected the tensions of social difference in America, and they continue to serve important, though sometimes distasteful, functions in American life” (Boskin & Dorinson, 205). At the conclusion he then again personifies the voice of all Americans.

In the beginning of the sketch Rock discusses the “flaws” of the two Republican presidential candidates and continues to discuss the absurdity of racial, as well as gender relationships by comparing the supposed suffering of white women to the actual suffering of black men. The humor used about McCain’s age²¹ is nothing new in Rock’s stand-up routines since he has used this material on other occasions as well. Even if looking past these jokes, the fact is, that if McCain had been elected he would have been the oldest²² president of the United States. There has never, in the history of the United States, been a president older than the age of 70 at the time of the presidential election. However, Rock is not the only comedian addressing McCain’s age. It seems his age is the consistent link between many jokes concerning him. A previous politician who was targeted with jokes about age was Bob Dole, another Republican presidential candidate. Some of the jokes are essentially the same, however only slightly modified for McCain because there are also a lot of other similarities between the two politicians, such as both of them being members of the Republican Party, cancer survivors, and war veterans. John McCain is aware of his perceived age “flaw” and is comfortable joking about it himself²³. However, the humor becomes more daring and ruthless when joking about Rudy Giuliani and his crisis management skills.

²¹ Chris Rock included jokes about McCain and his age in his other stand-up routines, as seen in a documentary of his comedy tour in London, New York, and Johannesburg, such as:
CHRIS ROCK. How you gonna make decisions about the future when you ain't gonna be here?
CHRIS ROCK. When you die at 72, no matter what you die of, it's natural causes. Even if you get hit by a truck, it's natural causes. Cause if you was younger, you'd have got out the way!
CHRIS ROCK. I don't need a president with a bucket list!
(Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger – London, New York, Johannesburg).

²² Of all the former United States presidents, Ronald Reagan was the oldest candidate to be elected at the age of 69. In essence, Rock is only stating the facts about McCain being old.

²³ When McCain appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in May 2008, this is what he said about his age, McCain. I ask you, what should we be looking for in our next president? Certainly, someone who is very, very, very old. (John McCain To Appear on Saturday Night Live)

One might find it intriguing that Rock does not mock Hillary Clinton²⁴ in the entirety of this sketch. However the humor is implied about Hillary as he targets the American white female population in the sketch. Hillary, as a white woman candidate is only included in the introduction to a speech about racial relations. However, people familiar with his comedy implicitly understand his views about her being a presidential candidate. Also, there is no need to discuss the inclusion of Obama in this sketch because just like Hillary, he is the representative of his race, namely African Americans. During the elections even the humorists noted that Obama and Clinton, both being the democratic nominees, were not represented equally by comedians.

After all is said about the other candidates and racial relations in the United States in a historical and modern context, Rock has made it obvious to the audience that Obama is the right candidate for the US president. With all of the comparisons pointed out in the sketch, Rock's aim is to persuade the viewers why, in his opinion, America is ready for Barack Obama, the first black president. As mentioned in Chung's essay, Rock's "comedy becomes a powerful agent to advance blacks on the social ladder" (Chung, 96). Let us not forget that in the end, Barack Obama did actually become the president of the United States, with Chris Rock's "help" or without.

Bush against the world

Rock finishes his speech with one single closing remark about the former president George W. Bush that represents the popular belief about him. "The forcefulness of every joke, whether political or nonpolitical, depends on how it surprises the listener. The unexpected statement surprises the listener depending on its brevity" (Speier, 1361) – this could be said for the unsuspected answer to the question Chris Rock poses at the end whether America is ready for a black president and he retorts "we just had a retarded one". It is very effective since the audience

²⁴ On Hillary Clinton: "I think America's ready for a woman president . . . just not that woman. Being married to somebody doesn't make you good at their job. I've been with my wife 10 years now. If she got up here right now, y'all wouldn't laugh. At all. You get on a plane tomorrow, you want the pilot's wife flying you?" (Chris Rock Kicks Off Stand-Up Tour at MSG)

does not expect such a controversial answer, rather possibly an answer about the “readiness” of the American nation for a president of a different race, not necessarily intelligence. Well before this sketch, George W. Bush provided humorists with bountiful material through his public speaking errors and is also responsible for the phenomenon called “Bushism”²⁵. There are several books and websites dedicated to publishing Bushisms, a term used for describing blunders in Bush’s public speeches. Comedian Will Ferrell presented Bush as a “harmless, amiable dunce – a man who answered “strategery” when asked to sum up his candidacy in one word” (Zengerle). Although Bush never actually articulated the word “strategery” as it was a concocted word by Ferrell, the audience found it likely to be something Bush would actually say. According to Purdum this one particular word Ferrell created “quickly came to sum up the 43rd president’s scrambled syntax and “decider” persona” (Purdum).

George W. Bush has been portrayed in several media as a “stupid” president, either based on his actions or public performances, especially public speeches. George W. Bush himself even appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and poked fun at his invention of new words. Later on in his presidency, impactful incidents such as 9/11 and the Iraq War influenced the portrayal of Bush in media and comedy. A suitable example of that would be the treatment of George W. Bush in *Saturday Night Live*.

“To mangle a presidential line, the state of the George W. Bush joke is mean and partisan. [...] jokes about the president are much harsher than were the jokes about his father or Bill Clinton, or even the jokes that were circulating when George W. Bush first took office. Back then, the president was teased about poor syntax and low I.Q. Now many Bush jokes portray the president as an irresponsible, duplicitous menace. In part, this change is due to an increasingly unpopular war and an unsteady economy.” (Zengerle)

Based on this quote, humor and the treatment of President Bush changed over time because of his politics, foreign affairs and other politically related actions²⁶. “A great many political jokes place individuals or figures of political life in everyday comical situations or attribute to them certain characteristics, such as stupidity or boastfulness, in order to ridicule them” (Speier, 1372). Consequently the jokes

²⁵ Bushisms are words made up by the US former president George W. Bush in the public speaking, such as “misunderestimated”. Bushisms are not only words but also errors in the usage of English language, as well as unconventional phrases.

²⁶ CHRIS ROCK. George Bush has fucked up so bad, he made it hard for a white man to run for president! People are like “give me a black man, a white woman, a giraffe, a zebra... anything but another white man! That last one fucked up my roof! (Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger – London, New York, Johannesburg)

became more “unapologetically political, directly criticizing the administration and its actions” (Zengerle). As mentioned before, not always have presidents or presidential candidates been treated equally. Some of them were chastised for being too old, some of them too corrupt, some of them too lustful, and some of them, as seen from the Bush case, just too stupid.

Old MacDonald had a farm and the symbolism of animals

There has been a lot of criticism about Rudy Giuliani’s politics while he was the mayor of New York. Giuliani is described as a pit bull politician, which does not have a positive connotation. This metaphor, of a potentially dangerous canine breed, is mostly used in politics. Pit bulls are a dangerous, potentially aggressive dog breed, which gives stark analogical insight into Giuliani’s style when approaching politics. He has been described in media as a pit bull on several occasions, such as being a “pit bull of a federal prosecutor” for being a merciless attorney who locked away many criminals, a “political pit bull”, in 2008 he was “McCain’s pit bull” and recently also “Romney’s pit bull” for attacking Obama’s 2012 presidential campaign. Even though Giuliani has gained public’s support after the terrorist attacks²⁷ in 2001, he had not been a popular mayor before the tragic events. In addition, the former New York City mayor has been a supporter of BSL (Breed-specific legislation)²⁸, which consequently affected his popularity and losing dog owners’ votes. While on one hand, the comparison of Giuliani with a pit bull, a banned dog breed is an insult to all animal lovers and dog owners, on the other hand it seems to be a very accurate description of his ruthless and vicious persona as well as his style when delivering a speech. In my opinion, I cannot imagine that the voters would prefer a politician characterized as a pit bull in a leading governmental position compared to someone who is more of an even-tempered people person.

Giuliani’s similarity to a pit bull is not the only comparison Rock uses between an animal and a person as he also juxtaposes a horse, Seabiscuit, with a black man. Seabiscuit was a champion racehorse in 1930s in time of Great Depression. It is a

²⁷ CHRIS ROCK. Everybody says he was so great on 9/11, but what about 9/10? 8/15? 7/11? Pick a date. (Thielman)

²⁸ Breed-specific legislation (BSL) bans OR restricts certain types of dogs based on their appearance because they are perceived as “dangerous” breeds or types of dogs. (StopBSL)

well-known fact that in the United States Seabiscuit was a symbol of hope since he was an unlikely champion with remarkable achievements despite his small stature as a racehorse.

During the Great Depression Seabiscuit was a symbol for most common people. He was a symbol of hope and faith. When people were down they could look to him to find joy. Since he was like the little guy that became a winner and kept with it even when times got rough he helped people a lot. When they were having problems they saw how he pulled through and realized they could do it too. (Facts About Seabiscuit: About Him)

The impression Seabiscuit left on American folklore was that “Seabiscuit was the equine Cinderella. An ungainly and boxy scrapper that became one of the most remarkable thoroughbred racehorses in history” (Lovgren). This horse’s legacy is substantial as the result of his story being portrayed through many adaptations, such as a documentary, a movie and even before that, a book, among many others. It is also true what Rock said about Seabiscuit’s life after the retirement. The horse was put out to stud at the Ridgewood Ranch where he spent the last seven years of his life. “In 1938, at the peak of his career, Seabiscuit was the biggest newspaper story in the United States, receiving more column inches than anyone else. President Roosevelt ranked second, and Adolf Hitler was third” (Lovgren). No wonder why Rock compares a horse to a man. The horse had a man-like popularity²⁹.

Racial discrimination

When Chris Rock mentions the relationship between a white woman and a black man as a “suffering competition”, the viewer can again perceive the ridiculous comparison. However, alike like black population, women were also subjected to inequality throughout the history of the United States. The sketch aims to present the social status of African Americans from the past until the present. As Burma writes in his essay, “an obvious division of “race-conscious” humor into four categories immediately presents itself. That is, the joke may be 1) by Negroes and pro-Negroes; 2) by Negroes and anti-white; 3) by whites and pro-white; or 4) by whites and anti-Negro.” (Burma, 711). Rock’s position is evident in this division that he is pro-Negro when it comes to the election of a new black president of the United States. It is also

²⁹ See Lovgren.

apparent that he is comically anti-white as he mockingly speaks about the historical progress of women's social status and a white female nominee for a presidential candidate. "In any event, most Negro-white wit makes one race or the other appear as the butt of the humor" (Burma, 711) and in this particular sketch it is definitely the white people.

Issues of race relations and racism, sexuality and sexism, arising from civil rights and liberation movements, supplemented traditional topics with new targets for political humor's aim. The new political humor exceeded previous levels of antidemocratic mockery by its universally derisive tone, even when its aim was intended to improve the society's downtrodden elements, most notably women and blacks. (Dudden, 62)

In this sketch he questions women's beliefs and values from the past and present. During the 1960s feminist movement the symbolic bra-burning term appeared which Rock mentions in his monologue. At least this described action is what the majority of the people believe. However in reality, bra-burning is only a myth. The only related action that actually happened during this era was the throwing of bras in the garbage amongst other women's apparel. It was an act of rebellion that served as a critique of the beauty culture of that time. When talking about the Women's Rights Movement, Chris Rock not only refers to bra burning but also their right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment³⁰ of the United States Constitution in 1920 granted women the right to vote.

In addition, "the Civil Rights movement began to strongly influence and change the status of Negroes in the 1960s [...]. A major aspect of Negro humor is its preoccupation with the Negro's relationship with whites" (Apte, 124). One might wonder if black people were really preoccupying themselves with the relationship between blacks and whites or just trying to raise awareness of racial discrimination. "But it was the black experience in the New World, first of slavery and then of segregation, that shaped in a major way the format and tone of black laughter" (Boskin, 147). Although Rock does not specifically mention slavery when describing the suffering of black men, he still alludes to their painful past. "The history of Black America is a well-known struggle against the oppression and domination of White America" (Gordon, 254). In addition, "American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in

³⁰ See U.S. Constitution.

which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd” (Gordon, 256). The Fifteenth Amendment³¹ from 1870 grants every citizen of the United States, regardless of race, the right to vote. However, the Southern States prevented the black population from voting and it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964³² that all of the black population was granted the right to vote. Rock mocks women for being the majority of the country yet have not imposed their ability to elect a female president. When he reminds the audience of racial segregation on the public transit system, he is pointing out “the injustices that blacks suffered during the heyday of the civil rights era” (Chung, 88). When on the bus, black people were required to stand or surrender their seats for white people until the Montgomery Bus Boycott³³ of 1955. Another comparison Chris Rock mentions is that white women have never been lynched unlike black men. Lynching, a consequence of the Civil War and abolition of slavery, was a type of execution by shooting, hanging, or burning. Even though, as mentioned before, black people had the right to vote since 1870, lynching was used to discourage black people from voting and was also used as a means of oppression of the black population. “By discussing the psychological effects slavery has had on the white superiority/black inferiority complex, Rock proves himself to be a keen social observer who understands that the origins of the damaged black psyche greatly affect African-American thought and its angry humor” (Chung, 91).

Public personas

In the sketch Rock mentions several African Americans who he muses about as potential presidents if the black minority had the majority of the vote. Of course, O.J. Simpson could not escape being mentioned in this sketch. On February 25, 1978 O.J. was the host of *Saturday Night Live*. At that time Simpson was considered a sports idol as a popular NFL football player. However, after a lengthy and well-publicized murder trial that saw him fighting the charges of murdering his ex-wife and her friend, he became the subject of humor. A mere four days after his acquittal, *Saturday Night Live* included his character in one of the sketches (see Appendix 1),

³¹ See U.S. Constitution.

³² See The Civil Rights Act of 1964.

³³ See Trueman.

at the end of which it is hinted that “he did it” in reference to the murders. Andy Breckman, one of the writers, commented on the reception of the sketch as “the place exploded like – I’ve never heard a reaction in my life like that, ever. It exploded, but it wasn’t just laughter, it was almost a release – like, of course he did it, you know? And thank God somebody said it out loud” (Shales & Miller, 459). During the court case which was also dubbed as the trial of the century, people and media were divided, especially because the issue of race. This was during a time when race tensions were high after the Rodney King case that pitted blacks against whites. It is believed that race played a role in O.J.’s case as he seemingly had more support from the African American community compared to the white population. The popularity of this event can be measured by the fact that more than half of the American population had witnessed the verdict, which at the time was the most watched event in the history of American television³⁴. Therefore since it was such a popularized event, there was no possibility for this event to escape from being a reference on many shows and throughout pop culture humor.

Chris Rock has used O.J. Simpson’s incident and trial on numerous occasions during his stand-up routine³⁵. When Chris Rock used the reference of seeing O.J. as a potential Black American President, it was a complete mockery and became even funnier by mentioning O.J. Simpson in the same sentence as Oprah Winfrey - an African American woman only described in superlatives, Halle Berry – a well-known African American beauty, and Flavor Flav – another “multi-talented” African American. However, the common link is that these people are all black celebrities who are well known in American popular culture.

The sketch also features another reference to a black man/white woman combination, namely that of Louis Farrakhan and Anna Nicole Smith. Anna Nicole Smith was a Barbie-like American actress and model, who died at the age of 39 in 2007. Even though, she actually does have something in common with O.J.

³⁴ See Linder.

³⁵ CHRIS ROCK. Britney Spears, boy. Even OJ kept his kids, and he even killed their mother. Britney went and messed up her dance moves at the MTV awards and they took her kids away. Go rehearse and get your kids back. (Chris Rock Kicks Off Stand-Up Tour at MSG)

“CHRIS ROCK. That shit wasn't about race. That shit was about fame. If O.J. wasn't famous he'd be in jail right now. If O.J. drove a bus, he wouldn't even be O.J. He'd be Orenthal the bus driving murderer. (Jokes4us)

Simpson, namely that they both starred in the same movie, *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult*, and that after her death he claimed he might be the father of her daughter, she has absolutely nothing in common with Farrakhan. Louis Farrakhan Muhammad Sr. is an African American leader of the Nation of Islam religious movement. He is a very prominent member of the African American community known for his extremist and racist views about Whites and Jews. When Rock mentions these two celebrities in the same breath, it is because Smith's funeral included black pallbearers whom were carrying her casket and it seemed logical to him that this could only be the case at a prominent African American's funeral.

In this sketch, Chris Rock plays the role of a critic and a humorous observer of the political circumstances of the era when the show was aired on television. One might ask what are the significant factors for someone to understand this type of humor and the answer would be "one's understanding of political jokes obviously depends on one's understanding of politics" (Speier, 1354). Even though this particular sketch is about politics, it is not directed against the government but rather against America as a society. According to Purdum, "the show's approach is not unlike the best journalism, which aims to make complex issues understandable to the broadest possible audience, without offending the experts" (Purdum). Basically, Rock highlighted the political situation in America and lets the audience analyze and decide what they want to do with the newly acquired knowledge. Although the sketch included merely his observations, it could still greatly influence the society, especially the section of society that draws conclusions and opinions from comedy shows. After more than three decades of airing the show, it is apparent that *Saturday Night Live* is a significant part of American popular culture. "When *Saturday Night Live* is at its best, it not only amuses us, it reflects well on us. One nation, under God, with liberty and laughter for all. Live. From New York" (Schales & Miller, 556).

Family Guy

Taboos for others, a challenge for MacFarlane

The brain behind *Family Guy* is director and executive producer Seth MacFarlane, who also voices numerous characters on the show. While studying at the Rhode Island School of Design, he created a cartoon with a talking dog and his good-for-nothing owner. The preview of the series was aired in January 1999 after the Super Bowl and “includes an allusion to the Super Bowl [...], thus indicating early on the extent to which *Family Guy* would carry on a dialogue with the television and pop cultural context in which it appears” (Booker, 82). Fox started airing *Family Guy* regularly in April 1999 after *The Simpsons*, in a time-slot intended for a new animated series. Even though the show gained popularity, it was cancelled twice in its infancy. The first time the show had been cancelled was after the second season followed by another cancellation, which occurred after the third season in 2002 because of low ratings. Many attribute this to irregular timing by airing the show on different days as well as different time slots. The show was brought back to Fox's prime time lineup in 2005 because of the unbelievable success of DVD sales, reruns on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, and persistent fans requesting the show's return. It is similar to *The Simpsons* and *South Park* in terms of content, but slightly more controversial, rude and daring. What has been said for *South Park* is also true for *Family Guy*, namely that “the controversy stemmed from the show's content, which privileges violence, profanity, and scatological humor, as well as racial and ethnic slurs” (Ott, 220).

The setting of *Family Guy* is placed in a fictitious town of Quahog, a suburb of Providence, Rhode Island. It is “a sort of microcosm of America that in some episodes seems to be a typical American small town and in others to be a big city” (Booker 49). What makes *Family Guy* funny³⁶ is not only the characters in the

³⁶ Even though, *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* have the same format, same family structure, and also very often same content, the talking dog and baby is what makes it primarily different from *The Simpsons*.

featured Griffin family, but also a myriad of attributes such as a sarcastic dog, vicious baby, celebrity cameos, musical inserts, satire, puns, and last but not least stupidity and its ability to transgress boundaries. Even though the show commentates on important social issues, it is hardly done on a serious level. “Animated programming has been an important element of American television [...], no doubt in large part because animated programs, mostly aimed at children, have been a crucial part of the experience of American childhood” (Booker, ix). It criticizes America, uses excessive violence towards its characters and is tolerated by society for it is only a cartoon.

The themes depicted through animation do not seem as real as they are in other genres even though they are actually based on real events. The show includes different controversial issues such as gender roles, marriage, sex, homosexuality, show business, politics, racism, immigration, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, legalization of marijuana, religion and religious intolerance. It is important to be aware that viewers of *Family Guy* do not watch the show to gain information, but solely for the purpose of entertainment and/or seeing things from a different humorous perspective.

Animation+Domestic+Sitcom = Animated Domesticom knocking down taboos

Even though it belongs in the genre of animation, *Family Guy* is an animated domestic sitcom. This type of animation began with the ABC's prime time animation show *The Flintstones* and was again reintroduced in the 1990s with *The Simpsons*. “*The Flintstones* no longer spectacularizes TV, nor stretches its limits. All its major innovations – the refined limited technique, the half-hour format, the “human” characters and “remote” setting – have become the norm for much subsequent television animation” (Farley, 156). Prime time television animation emerged from general cinematic animation with the Disney brand as a standard. However, the genre of a sitcom was a product that developed from vaudeville and radio. Also “the situation comedy has proved to be the most durable of all commercial genres” (Marc,

253). Because of the integration with other genres, animated sitcom is therefore a hybrid genre.

The characteristics of the structure of sitcom is, as Mintz describes, “the program opens with the characters in a state of normality, that is, going about their business in their usual place, manners, and roles” (Mintz, What’s so funny, 274). In *Family Guy* the show predictably opens with a scene from the Griffin’s home with all the characters appearing as “normal” people, usually until someone opens their mouth. Soon thereafter, a consistent theme finds the family being challenged by some kind of a “threat, problem or opportunity” (Mintz, What’s so funny, 274), which in the case of my analysis will be the patriarch’s sudden turn to homosexuality after being injected with the a so-called gay gene. Throughout the show “the plot thickens until there is a miraculous, unexpected, almost always unearned rescue; the situation is resolved [...]. All is explained, all is corrected, all is forgiven, all is restored to the condition of normality” (Mintz, What’s so funny, 274) or in the case of analyzed episode, the patriarch’s turn from medically induced homosexuality to the old heterosexual proclivity. As Gray mentions in his work, “rarely if ever has an episode ended with total misery and/or sting” (Gray, 59).

In sitcoms, “urgent continuity rarely exists between episodes. Instead, climaxes occur within episodes” (Marc, 254) and in *Family Guy*, every episode starts from the beginning with a new subject matter and is therefore not a continuation of any of the previous episodes. Certain events³⁷ that happened on the show indicate a linear plot-line, however, the characters have not aged (Stewie is still a baby) because they “have a unique sort of family stability in that, as animated characters, they all remain essentially the same age year after year, creating a sense of continuity that is rare in the rapidly changing landscape of American culture” (Booker, 49). Typical for this animated series as well as others is that “nobody [...] ages, and any change in a character’s look will be made solely for the purposes of comedy” (Gray, 68). Unlike other domestic sitcoms, *Family Guy* “must rely on its wit and humor for popularity, not

³⁷ One of the events that indicated a change on the show was, their neighbor Bonnie giving birth to a daughter Susie after being pregnant for seven seasons. In addition, another neighbor, Cleveland, gets divorced and moves away.

on the good looks, sexy or chic clothing, and designer consumables of its characters” (Gray, 68).

As a genre³⁸ “american family sitcom has served as a prime huckster selling the American Dream and its related notions of family, home, and suburb” (Gray, 49). Marc notes, “the sitcom is a representational form, and its subject is American culture: It dramatizes national types, styles, customs, issues, and language” (Marc, 254-255). While “the domesticom has served stalwart duty as a mouthpiece for a contemporary fairytale of patriarchal, middle-class, consumerist suburban morality and for the myth of the American Dream” (Gray, 53), *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* were “famed for its satire of American suburban life and for its parodic engagement with American popular culture, especially the television culture of which is itself a part” (Booker, 48).

Children vs. Adults, prime time and double-coding

Before the emergence of *The Flintstones*, cartoons were designed and aimed at a mass audience of children. “So although afternoon programming is oriented towards children, and late-night programming is oriented towards adults, prime time is imagined as the time when “families” watch together” (Farley, 149). Television channels began airing cartoon programs during prime time because they were aimed at this desired mixed audience.

Why cartoons appeal to different age groups can be explained with the theory of double-coding, which notes, “the theory of double-coding argues that such texts have one “layer” of meaning – usually aligned with the simplistic humor in relatively unsophisticated visuals – which appeals to children, and a second “layer” – usually aligned with the verbal jokes in the soundtrack – which appeals to adults” (Farley, 151). The split between these two different levels of appeal, such as unrealistic animation and silly humor is what influences the success of certain animated sitcoms. While double-coding disregards contextual factors, it focuses and “explains

³⁸ When in 1950s television industry started gaining importance, animation among other products of film industry appeared on television rather than in movie theatre. The result of that was that television became more family oriented, while theatre with its adult social situations aimed at adult audience. With the decline of cinema, animation became a television genre.

the appeal of texts solely in terms of taste; that is, in terms of what people like” (Farley, 152). Nonetheless, people have different tastes.

Taste in this scenario is causally related to the age of viewers, regardless of influential factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic background, or education. Adults are assumed to enjoy a show intellectually; to appreciate clever cultural references and smart dialogue, but to actively dislike cartoons' rudimentary drawings, slapstick, fantasy, noise and vaudeville elements. Children, on the other hand, are constructed as indiscriminate viewers. Their fondness for noisy, slapstick, simplistic and farcical cartoons is seen not as a legitimate taste but as a deplorable absence of intelligence to be corrected with “educational” programming. (Farley, 152)

However, there are problems with double-coding, namely “false binary oppositions” (Farley, 152) with dividing the audience (adults vs. children) and “between a text's form and content” (Farley, 152). Dividing the audience into two different groups with assumingly different tastes as well as intellectual ability “makes it tricky, if not downright impossible, to imagine a single text successfully addressing both – hence the self-fulfilling “problem” of conceiving successful prime time animation” (Farley, 152). In addition, not even members of the same audience or demographic have the same taste, knowledge, and intellectual ability because of different personal influences, such as social factors. Even after maturation and one becomes an adult, it does not necessarily mean that their childhood taste and appreciation of animation will change.

In claiming that “children” and “adults” appreciate different aspects of the text, double-coding theory implies that a cartoon's formal aspects (the silly drawings, wacky sound effects, flat perspective, and lurid colors) have no impact on the way it constructs meaning. Semiotically speaking, this is an untenable position. *All* the elements of a text contribute to its meaning, including the signifier or “vehicle”: a cartoon's attractiveness depends not just on its content, but also on the imagination of its visual style, how it sounds, and the comic tension between sound and image. The form is not just a neutral bearer-of-meaning but is itself loaded with culturally and historically specific meaning. (Farley, 152)

What is important for the success of a cartoon? The broad term would be “animatedness” (Farley, 153), which encompasses audiovisuality, consisting of the visual style (design of animation), the movement of the characters, and the relationship between sound and image³⁹.

³⁹ See Farley, 154.

Not only has the ideology of animation changed, but also the audience since the genre of animation was not only intended for children but also for adults with its complex humor. With controversial topics intended for adults, the genre changed from being family-friendly. In recent times, the content of animation has been likened to a commentary on American society. Since the first wave of prime time animation ended in 1966 with the last episode of *The Flintstones*, there was a presumption that the animated sitcom format was not appropriate for the aimed adult audience. After 23 years, in 1989, cable network Fox started airing *The Simpsons*, a series that made prime time animation popular again because of the successful high ratings and audience acceptance.

The growth in popularity of prime time animation in the 1990s emerged primarily because of the demand from the adult audience that watched animation in the 1960s. As mentioned before, prime time referred to a programming time-slot from 8-10p.m. EST and the targeted audience was the family. However, in 1975 the prime time time-slot was changed to 7-9p.m.⁴⁰ EST. In addition, another important term of animation is the concept of Adult Swim, which transformed animation that was targeted at adults on television. It started in 1992 when the Cartoon Network emerged on television and provided a 24-hour schedule of animated programming. Because of their late night animated programming they had a chance to reach a broader audience, especially with after hours adult-oriented animation. Adult Swim has a time-slot from 11 p.m. until 6 a.m. when the most controversial animated shows are aired. It is not the same as prime time, since it has a different time slot, but it did include reruns of certain prime time shows such as *Family Guy*. "Adult Swim's original programs have been among the most innovative animated programs on television, so the block has become a major source of potential new directions for prime-time animated programming" (Booker, 166).

Fox as a network targeted their animated programs at adult audiences, starting with *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill* and after a decade, *Futurama*. After *Futurama*'s garnered its highest ratings, Fox signed a contract with Seth MacFarlane for the sitcom *Family Guy*. The advantage of the genre was its new, bold, complex humor

⁴⁰ See Farley, 148

and satire aimed at adults. Because *Family Guy* was aired on Fox, a cable network, the show had limited restrictions and was given more flexibility regarding the content. Through this Fox made it possible to satisfy the needs of its audience. Consequently, Fox has a different audience than the broadcast networks (*South Park* aired on Comedy Central in 1997, which is perhaps the biggest rival for the show) because Fox “can target their programming [...] for much more limited “niche” audiences, which means that programs [...], intended for a hip audience of relatively well-educated young adults, can include material that a broader audience might consider gross, vulgar, and offensive” (Booker, 186). MacFarlane’s specific humor, as well as the show’s references to popular and high culture, make recurring themes in *Family Guy*, which makes the show adult-oriented.

Parody, satire or a little bit of both?

In *Family Guy*, American ethnic humor is used in a form of parody and satire to mock American ideals, to express political opinion, political incorrectness, and problems of society, such as dysfunctional middle class families. If “family sitcoms are supposed to remind us constantly of the strength of family to overcome all problems” (Gray, 52) that is not always the case with *Family Guy*, and as Gray mentions in his work, the moral of the show is “of the family’s ineffectivity” (Gray, 52). If one wants to mock the American Dream in animation, what better way is there than to use parody and satire. Nonetheless, “the real target of the satire seems to be self-serious people who have no sense of humor” (Booker, 95).

While “we might consider the American family sitcom as a form of modern fairytale” (Gray, 52), a functional, happy, nuclear family living in harmony, *Family Guy* has a function “as its parodic echo” (Gray, 52). *Family Guy* is a parody⁴¹ of the family sitcom genre, which holds true for several other shows including *Married with Children*⁴², *Roseanne*, and *The Simpsons*. While “the American family sitcom as genre has a notably conservative history, desperately trying to hold onto and present the American Dream of suburban nuclear families living in a predominantly white,

⁴¹ According to Dirks parody, spoof, or satire are “specific types of comedy [...] usually a humorous or anarchic take-off that ridicules, impersonates, punctures, scoffs at, and/or imitates (mimics) the style, conventions, formulas, characters [...], or motifs of a serious work, film, performer, or genre” (Dirks).

⁴² Also, *Married with Children* was originally aired on Fox network.

middle class consumer world” (Gray, 62), the show mocks these ideals. The show starts with the whole family performing a musical act – theme song, and that is already when the parody starts.

It seems today,
That all you see,
Is violence and movies and sex on TV,
But where are those good old-fashioned values,
On which we used to rely?
Lucky there's a Family Guy,
Lucky there's a man who,
Positively can do,
All the things that make us
Laugh and cry,
He's a Family Guy.

If one is looking to find old-fashioned values in *Family Guy*, they are looking in the wrong place. Almost every episode of *Family Guy* includes violence, insinuations about sex and sexuality and mocks old-fashioned family values. Parody, satire and amusing material are what keep the show successful and engaging for the audience.

In addition, it became apparent that *Family Guy* is not a conventional animated sitcom targeted at a family audience because of the use of profane language, such as "Son of a bitch", "Fuck" and all the other derivatives of this particular word, which were bleeped out. The use of (domestic) violence is also an indication that the show is meant for a mature audience – Stewie beating up Lois and the other way around, and Stewie setting Brian on fire, to name a few. Political correctness is also not something viewers can expect from the show, which is pronounced in the episode *Family Gay* when Peter calls a horse jockey a midget. This is not even the worst example of political incorrectness. Before, horse jockey is involved in another encounter, when he is approached by a local Quahog pedophile, Herbert.

HERBERT. Hey there, little fella!
HORSE JOCKEY. I'm 48
HERBERT. This whole place is a giant mindfuck!

In addition to parody and slapstick, MacFarlane uses satire on the show. A feature of his satire is routinely “the use of animation as a vehicle in which to raise issues of political sensitivity” (King, 97). The reason why satire is that effective in animation is because “it tends to be taken less seriously than ‘live’ action, often being associated culturally and historically with works designed for children. This, plus the

status of the animated world as one coded more obviously as fantasy, makes it a relatively safe arena for satirical or other comic and allegorical interventions” (King, 97) or in other words “animation softens the blows on the viewer’s moral sense, highlighting that ‘it’s only a cartoon’. Animation’s distance from reality allows us a few steps back, and with that, allows the writers a few steps forward, and beyond what their live action counterparts are capable of” (Gray, 67).

The difference between satire and parody is the target. As King writes,

the line drawn between satire and parody is usually marked by a shift of target. The target of satire is social or political. Some kind of reference is implied, more or less explicitly, to institutions of the real world, a fact that is responsible for its potentially more serious modality. The target of parody tends to be formal or aesthetic. Familiar conventions, representational devices or modes of discourse are the subject of humorous assault or exposure. (King, 107)

In *Family Guy* one of the most obvious sources of parody is *Star Wars*. Seth MacFarlane admitted in interviews he is a great fan of *Star Wars* and musicals. However, the source of parody for MacFarlane can be attributed to everything in American pop-culture, such as movies, music(als), advertisements, different television formats and many more. “Parodies mock their targets, but in doing so they pay an effective form of tribute to the originals. To become a target for parody is to have achieved a certain status, even if the parody is of less affectionate variety” (King, 112). The titles of *Family Guy* episodes include parody of other movie titles, such as, *There’s Something About Paulie*, *Emission Impossible*, *Deep Throats*, parody of the movies, such as already mentioned *Star Wars*, *The Sound of Music*, and many others, among them *Road to...* episodes, which are parodies to the Bing Crosby and Bob Hope series of movies.

Individual film targets are usually titles that are particularly well known, as a result of significant box-office success and/or broader cultural prominence. Parodies that aspire to mainstream commercial success have to be based on targets familiar to a sufficiently large audience for the parodic effect to work, for the relationship to the original to be detectable by a reasonably large proportion of viewers. (King, 112)

For viewers to find parody funny they must possess some knowledge of the original, otherwise they would not understand it or even be aware a reference is being made. “A popular form of recent parody takes one individual film or genre as its principle target while scattering references more randomly to other recent or classic films”

(King, 108). In addition, to understand the clever verbal humor on the show “a certain education level is required to follow the joke” (Gray, 85). Parody can be the exaggerated version of the original, or a similar (parodic) version of the original with an unexpected outcome. Because *Family Guy* works with different types of humor, “if viewers laugh, often these laughs will be not just at its parody, but also at its irony, at slapstick, at wordplay, at screwball or zany elements, and/or at its more grotesque moments” (Gray, 12).

What’s television got to do with it?

The entire Griffin family enjoys watching an excessive amount of television, especially Peter and Stewie. Therefore, television plays a vital part on the show. A considerable amount of parody on the show includes the parodic view of television and the products of the television industry. “A significant proportion of the series’ humor therefore derives from its celebration of television” (Farley, 155). The show is a parody of the news, commercials, films, and the Fox network including its current and past cancelled shows. The show “has parodically attacked seemingly all major televisual and cinematic genres, from cop show to talk shows, kids’ television” (Gray, 49) and many others. The television genre that the show mocks consistently is news broadcasting.

The news plays a key role in bringing the rest of the world and information on the state of it to our TV sets, so that we might know of the world, and thus its importance cannot be understated. The news is seen as where we learn what is going on around us, what political, economic, and/or social forces are shaping our lives, and is (thus) a crucial component to the construction of ourselves as active citizens. (Gray, 95)

Quahog Channel 5 News⁴³, the local television program featured in the show predominantly broadcasts local news and events. The show’s news broadcast parody never concentrates on worldwide news. In *Family Guy* “not only does the news [...] pander to silly, tabloid material, but also it is incapable of drawing a distinction between matters of real importance [...] and slightly amusing trivialities” (Gray, 98). In *Family Guy*, “the news [...] is anything but an earnest attempt to

⁴³ Besides Tom Tucker, Diane Simmons co-anchors the news but it later replaced by Joyce Kinney. Other reporters who work on the news are Asian American on-the-scene reporter Trisha Takanawa and African American weatherman Ollie Williams with his Blaccu-Weather Forecast (another parody of Accu-Weather Forecast).

inform” (Gray, 98) the viewers. The absurdity and parody of the news often includes character Ollie Williams with his in-depth analysis of weather, news, or traffic.

TOM TUCKER. We now go live to Ollie Williams in the Channel 5 traffic-copter. What’s the scene Ollie?

OLLIE WILLIAMS. Everybody looks like ants!

TOM TUCKER. That’s probably because you’re up so high.

Even when the news could be serious it turns out ridiculous through the nonsensical news coverage.

TOM TUCKER. Some new developments in the flight 209 drama. Recently discharged pilot, captain Glenn Quagmire, is apparently talking the plane down. Ollie Williams has the story. Ollie?

OLLIE WILLIAMS. I’m at the wrong airport.

TOM TUCKER. Ooops. Well, thanks Ollie.

When making fun of media on the show, the FOX broadcasting company plays a special role as a reoccurring target. The Griffin family mocks cancelled⁴⁴ Fox shows, not yet cancelled Fox shows, Fox News Channel, and nearly everything that has anything to do with the Fox organization. In *North by North Quahog*, the first episode of the fourth season, MacFarlane addressed the issue of being cancelled for a second time with Fox during the episode’s opening scene⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ In the episode *Family Guy* all the horses at the Quahog Derby are named after cancelled Fox shows, except *Til Death*, which was still aired at that time.

LOIS. Is there a reason all the horses are named after cancelled Fox shows?

ANNOUNCER. Kitchen Confidential is in the lead, followed by The Wedding Bells, followed by Happy Hour, followed by The War at Home, followed by Drive, followed by The Winner, followed by Life on a Stick, followed by The Loop, followed by Head Cases, followed by Standoff, followed by Vanished, followed by Free Ride, followed by Method and Red, followed by Tru Calling, followed by Quintuplets, followed by Stacked, followed by Justice, followed by North Shore, followed by Back to You. And bringing up the rear, but somehow, still in the race, is *Till Death*!

⁴⁵ All the shows mentioned by Peter were actually cancelled by Fox, which according to Peter made room in the program for Family Guy again after being cancelled for three years.

PETER. Everybody, I got bad news. We’ve been canceled.

LOIS. Oh no Peter, how could they do that?

PETER. Well, unfortunately, Lois, there’s just no more room on the schedule. We’ve just got to accept the fact that Fox has to make room for terrific shows like Dark Angel, Titus, Undeclared, Action, That 80’s Show, Wonderfalls, Fastlane, Andy Richter Controls the Universe, Skin, Girls Club, Cracking Up, The Pits, Firefly, Get Real, Freaky Links, Wanda at Large, Costello, The Lone Gunmen, A Minute With Stan Hooper, Normal, Ohio, Pasadena, Harsh Realm, Keen Eddie, The Street, American Embassy, Cedric the Entertainer, The Tick, Louie, and Greg the Bunny.

LOIS. Is there no hope?

PETER. Well, I suppose if all those shows go down the tubes, we might have a shot.

Advertisement – You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours

Even though it is very rare for American humor to involve corporations from the industrial sector, *Family Guy* addresses this subject comparably to all other “taboo” topics. One such example of this is the episode “concentrating on the ethics of advertising to children” (Gray, 82) about El Dorado Tobacco Company with its infamous Baby smoke-a-lot. The episode includes the mockery of capitalism by directing the humor at stereotypical greedy executives without morals, corrupt politicians and other issues that are connected to today’s corporate world. As unbelievable as it might sound one can actually buy a ceramic smoking baby in the United States. If viewers find an animated Baby smoke-a-lot on the show distasteful and disrespectful, how absurd is it that such a product is not only a cartoon invention but also real life merchandise. In addition, tobacco manufacturer Philip Morris threatened to sue the company producing smoking babies. However, it is not because of the ethics of advertising but because the baby is smoking what appears to be Marlboro cigarettes. “These examples depict a world with even less (or no) advertising ethics than our own, but it is clearly a world born of our own, and the critique is directed toward a genre that shows little sign of moral sense, instead looking at everywhere as a potential site for advertising, and everyone as a potential buyer” (Gray, 82). The show “parodically criticizes the advertisement and the whole culture of consumerism that advertising begets” (Gray, 71).

Some of the ad parodies that have occurred on the show are the Maxell Hi-Fidelity ad from 1983, a Cheeto’s commercial, a Chevron car ad, and Kool-Aid ads. But “while they might mock advertising [...], in the world of the ad break, they often hawk products themselves” (Gray, 92), such as for salty snacks Wheat Thins, where Stewie and Brian fight because of Stewie’s pronunciation of the product. The show,

succeeds by constantly making ads appear fundamentally unnatural, foreign, and invasive. To laugh at many of these jokes is to accept and share the criticism of advertising’s modes of address, for the jokes are not just on the internal absurdities but also, externally and intertextually, at ads that we have all seen before. (Gray, 82)

While the analyzed *Family Guy* episode does not include any ad parodies, there is still a connection between the American Family Association (AFA), advertising

industry and a taboo subject dealt with on the show – homosexuality. Not only did Pepsi help sponsor the show but also placed advertisements during the show (so did some other companies). However, only Pepsi was accused of having a homosexual agenda⁴⁶ according to the AFA. Let us have a closer look at why AFA would suppose this notion. Pepsi is a company that supports and helps to protect gay and lesbian equality with evidence stemming from its membership in the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce⁴⁷. The company contributed \$1,000,000 to associated charities including the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) as well as to Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). On another occasion, Pepsi contributed \$500,000 to defeat California Proposition 8, which was a governmental motion against same-sex marriages. Also, “Pepsi requires employees to attend sexual orientation and gender diversity training where the employees are taught to accept homosexuality” (Reinhardt). I personally find it unreasonable that churches, bars, and other institutions have boycotted⁴⁸ Pepsi because some have interpreted the company’s values as anti-family.

Although this animated series attempted to present liberal as well as conservative viewpoints on homosexuality, people who found this subject offensive should consider whether the creators of the show have been more offensive on this particular show than on the other episodes. In addition, I believe that if anyone should be offended by this show, it should be the lesbian and gay community, for being labeled with typical and politically incorrect stereotypes. If Rush Limbaugh, a polarizing conservative personality who opposes same-sex marriages could be a guest on Family Guy, maybe other conservatives should concede that this is not a pressing issue. Nevertheless, people who are against homosexuals are also discriminating a minority.

⁴⁶ See Reinhardt.

⁴⁷ A number of world-wide known companies are members of the NGLCC, such as: American Airlines, IBM, Burger King, FedEx, HBO, Target, and many others (see NGLCC Corporate Partners).

⁴⁸ I was surprised and also shocked to see the results of Internet search on the numerous associations, such as conservative parties and religious parties appealing to people to boycott Pepsi products.

Nuclear “dysfunctional” family

“The nuclear family (husband and wife, with or without children) has been the norm in western society since the Middle Ages” (Rabinowitz, 35). The portrayal of subversive families in animation started with *The Flintstones* in the 1960s and was followed by *The Simpsons* in the 1990s. These shows represent an American working-class family coping with the changes of contemporary American society and social issues. *Family Guy* often challenges the ideals of the American Dream. “The ideology of the situation comedy is an interesting contrast to the idea of the American Dream as one of achievement, opportunity, growth, mobility. Here such volatility is seen only as threat, as a dream which cannot be realized, which creates only conflict and disappointment” (Mintz, What’s so funny, 276). According to the 1950s domestic sitcoms and conservative politicians,

the traditional family includes a male dad, a female mom, and, ideally, a son and daughter. They are white, middle class and live in the suburbs rather than the city or country. African-Americans, immigrants of all ethnicities and races, and gay men and lesbians mainly do not exist within this vision. The father is the »breadwinner« [...], the mom stays at home, the sons are strong, and the daughters are good. (Stabile & Harrison, 7)

Since it can be argued that the domestic sitcom was a worn-out genre, audiences enjoyed the bold, new animated sitcom, which distorted the concept of traditional family to a more interesting dysfunctional family that seemed closer to reality.

An advantage of animation is that “animation increased the opportunity for much more physical comedy, rapid dialogue, and plot twists than live-action comedy could ever manage. It also offered a new view of family life” (Tueth, 139). The animated sitcoms of the 1990s began challenging traditional values and offered “the subversive view of the American family” (Tueth, 133). In addition, they helped portray the ideology shared by the American culture. With its family-friendly programs, television shows focus on domestic life whereas the genre of animated sitcom gives the audience a liberal, subversive view of the family life and idiotic families.

Family structures changed after World War II and the audience welcomed the change in the portrayal of alternative family structures that are not representative of traditional ones. Sitcoms of the 1990s, as well as *Family Guy* were “presenting

visions of dysfunctional family life and thriving on the comedy of insult, anger, irresponsibility, and outrageous behavior” (Tueth, 138). *Family Guy*’s family structure greatly resembled that of *The Simpsons*, the show that “created room” (Gray, 13) for other “outstanding television parodies” (Gray, 13) dealing with dysfunctional families.

Family comedy on television had evolved from the depiction of normative family life, even with less-than-traditional arrangements, to families that were problematic if not indeed dysfunctional [...]. When animation invaded television, however, the discourse of television comedy was finally free to pursue a more subversive function. (Tueth, 139)

Family Guy can be considered an “ironic commentary on the family values” (Stabile & Harrison, 7) and traditional family structure. Peter is an overweight, unintelligent, beer drinking, television watching, yet faithful husband and dad with occasional talents. While “sitcom fathers have often been goofy, but ultimately have remarkably little to learn” (Gray, 58), Peter is goofy and has a lot to learn. “Disruptive, childlike and playful trickster-type characters are usually male” (King, 129). He has not finished elementary school, has problems with reading, his IQ implies he has a developmental disability, and often gets into trouble. His character is presented well in the opening scene of the analyzed episode *Family Guy*. While Lois is providing instructions to Peter about going to the grocery store, she treats him like a child and attaches money to his shirt before he departs to the store so he would not lose it.

LOIS. Now remember Peter. Don’t touch this money until you get to the grocery store. Then buy one can of beans and come straight home. Do you understand?

If one wonders about his slow-witted, child-like level of understanding of instructions, it becomes apparent how unintelligent he really is after being gone for several hours and returns home with a cognitively damaged horse. Peter has problems following simple tasks and his decisions are sometimes completely absurd. Peter’s mishaps as well as his intellectual deficiency are comical and his stupidity is nothing short of limitless⁴⁹.

In the case of a man who frequently makes mistakes or is regularly wrong in his judgment, we are dealing with a natural fool [...]—with a weak-minded, credulous dolt, a superstitious or disturbed person. Also forgetfulness [...] belongs in this category. Lack of judgment, whether sporadic or regular,

⁴⁹ At one point Peter even has the idea of selling his daughter Meg to marry a Jewish boy for settling the bill at the local pharmacy.

becomes comical in proportion to the absurdity of its consequences. (Speier, 1375)

Female characters in sitcoms are portrayed stereotypically; most of the married women do not work but are stay-at-home moms – housewives. Lois has the traditional female role in the family and is a stay-at-home housewife, a mother of three children who gains occasional jobs. She is very similar to Marge in *The Simpsons* in that she,

seeks projects outside the home in an effort to expand her horizons, though she usually has to do so without the cooperation of the rest of the family. She is also vaguely civic-minded, and occasionally becomes a political activist in the support of specific causes, though usually because those causes have a specific benefit for her family. (Booker, 50)

At times she tries to depart from her traditional mother role, since she could supposedly make a career in show business with her ability to sing and play the piano. However, every time she attempts this, everything goes awry. Her other mishaps, such as bulimia, her addiction to gambling, drugs, and theft distance Lois from the image of a perfect mother figure. Chris is their chubby, teenage son, who intelligence-wise is a younger version of Peter. They also have a teenage daughter, Meg, who is a constant target of ridicule from the other family members. The youngest family member is Stewie Gilligan Griffin, a diabolical, mischievous baby, with a football shaped head, who does not resemble anyone in the family. He is shown to be a genius who strives for total world domination and his “rebellion is several steps worse than the average sitcom mischief mastermind” (Gray, 59). He despises all the other members of his family, including Brian, the anthropomorphic dog. Brian is an intelligent dog who acts like a human being and has a drinking problem, smokes heavily and occasionally abuses drugs (cocaine and marijuana). Brian, the talking dog, is a family pet with his own ambitions of launching a novel. Even though he is a dog, he plays an important role in the family dynamic, sometimes being the voice of reason “who makes things right, who makes key familial decisions, who dispenses ‘parental’ advice and help” (Gray, 58).

Even though the family is portrayed in a dysfunctional way, the audience can relate to their moments of normality, where Peter acts like a good dad, Lois like a caring mother, Meg and Chris like every other teenager, Stewie like a normal baby and not like a mischievous master-mind and Brian like a dog with the occasional

need to lick himself, bark and sniff around. Even though Family Guy “attacks the domesticom version of the family, the show is by no means ‘anti-family’, nor does it radically destabilize the family unit itself” (Gray, 59).

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

While in traditional sitcoms members of the family treat each other with respect, the whole Griffin family, and in particular Peter, treat Lois disrespectfully on numerous occasions.

PETER. listen Lois, I know you’re a feminist and I think it’s adorable, but this is grown-up time and I’m the man.

In the episode *Family Guy* that aired on March 8, 2009 (season 7), Peter decides to buy a brain-damaged horse. In this scene and also in many other shenanigans throughout the episode, Peter’s “immense comic appeal is his infant-like conception of the world, which just as often sees him as the struggling hero” (Gray, 58). When Lois expresses her opinion about having a horse as a house pet it is like any other time, she “is regularly ignored, humiliated, and under-appreciated” (Gray, 58). Even though, she is a smart and most importantly a reasonable woman, she gets treated with disrespect.

LOIS. Peter, there’s something off about that horse.

PETER. You have an eye for animals, Lois. This horse is brain damaged. That’s why I got it so cheap.

LOIS. Peter, I don’t think it’s wise to have a brain damaged horse as a house pet.

PETER. Shut up! You don’t know nothing, about anything.

LOIS. Whatever Peter. Fine, keep the horse.

PETER. Good. This family works much better when we’re unified. You’ll see, this horse will be a fine addition to our family.

Peter is sexist and also degrades other women in addition to Lois. In his opinion, according to his statement from the episode *I Am Peter, Hear Me Roar*, “women are not people, they are devices built by our Lord Jesus Christ for our entertainment”. When he decides to leave Lois for his gay soul mate Scott he gives orders to his son,

PETER. Chris, you’re the man of the house now. Take the lessons I’ve taught you and be the best leader of this household you can.

Apparently the lessons Chris has been taught from his father are how to degrade women with physical abuse just like his dad. Examples of such abuse include crudely

passing flatulence in his sister's face and by knocking Lois out by punching her in the face. While some people would find this very offensive, people who appreciate *Family Guy* simply find that funny, regardless of the gender of the audience.

Brain damaged horses cause homosexuality

As mentioned before, the analyzed episode is about the Griffin family having to deal with the consequences of having a brain-damaged horse as a house pet. To pay off the debt for damages caused by the deranged horse, Peter decides to volunteer as a subject for medical experiments. MacFarlane is "always making fun of things like disability, homosexuality, religion, consumerism, America, and Fox television" (Wisnewski, 1) and this episode is not an exception. "The series does address a number of important and potentially controversial issues that impact the daily lives of ordinary Americans" (Booker, 70).

Not only this particular episode but "almost every episode revolves around a delicate issue in contemporary culture wars, often expressing both sides of the arguments in a tasteless a form as possible" (Tueth, 145) and in this case the prominent topic is homosexuality fueled with a hint of religion.

When homosexuality became a contested public issue, as it did around the issue of legalizing gay marriages in the United States in 2004, the intensity of religious belief fueled anti-gay sentiment. A slender majority of the American public supported civil unions for homosexuals, and support for gay marriage had increased, though it remained a minority position. (Kohut, 107-109)

As Mintz observes, "homosexuality is a significant phenomenon in our culture and society. It cannot be ignored and it need not be faced with anger, fear, or scorn" (Mintz, What's so funny, 281). The topic of homosexuality is not foreign to *Family Guy* for it has been alluded to in several episodes. The topic of homosexuality is also related to different societal issues as displayed in the episode *You May Now Kiss the... Uh... Guy Who Receives*, where the discussion is about homosexuality as well as gay marriage. However, the analyzed episode *Family Guy* is about homosexuality and whether it is a result of genetics and not the environment. This episode also expresses different views about homosexuality, ranging from liberal to conservative.

DOCTOR. All right Mr. Griffin. At this time we're going to inject you with, what we believe, we've isolated as the gay gene.

PETER. I don't understand.

DOCTOR. Well, if we're correct, we will have successfully proven that homosexuality is genetic and not a matter of choice or environment.

PETER. Are you crazy? I don't wanna take a chance on being gay.

DOCTOR. We'll give you a 125 dollars.

PETER. All right, I'll do it.

When Peter is injected with the gay gene the homosexual agenda starts. The episode "relied on broad gay stereotypes for much of its humor" (Melloy). After Peter is vaccinated with the gay gene, he becomes very flamboyant and talks loud and proudly about his homosexuality. The family is devastated about Peter being gay with the exception of Stewie who is trying to be supportive. Lois is again trying to be reasonable. While she sees Peter being gay as a problem, Peter seems to be very comfortable in his skin.

PETER. I don't see what the big deal is? I like myself this way.

LOIS. It's a very big deal. You'll be treated differently.

All the characters "personify a certain subculture" (Tueth, 144). Peter and his new boyfriend Scott are proud homosexuals, Lois and Brian are liberals and Stewie and the camp counselor from straight camp are conservatives.

Peter's homosexuality is extremely stereotypical. "Ethnic humor generally involves techniques such as stereotyping, insult, imitation, ridicule, and the use of dialect. This humor focuses on alleged personality traits, physical characteristics, beliefs and common behaviors" (Browne & Browne, 419). Peter becomes very flamboyant and starts wearing a purple bandana and other colorful clothes. "Stereotypes in general tend to be overgeneralized conceptualizations of ethnic groups" (Apte, 130). Other stereotypical homosexual characteristics of Peter include his body language where he displays limp wrists, flamboyant laughter, amongst many other traits. Not only is Peter portrayed as extremely and stereotypically gay for the purpose of entertainment but also because,

if a homosexual should appear on television, the only way to identify him is if he is effeminate. Connected to this is the fact that because there are rare occurrences of homosexuality on television, when they do become present, there is a flamboyancy that may not be necessary. It is simply the idea that because airtime for homosexuals is so little compared to heterosexuals, one must see as much as possible of the gay man in the short span of time. This makes for a broad stereotype, where flamboyancy and feminine traits are linked to homosexuals at all times. (Jones & Gelb)

After Peter's attitude has changed and he shows off his cooking skills and bakes muffins, Lois starts liking the idea of Peter being gay. He also spoils her with sexy lingerie and addresses her with a new feminine-like attitude. Eventually though, Stewie's prejudice comes out to the surface.

STEWIE. (*mumbles something incomprehensibly*)

BRIAN. What?

STEWIE. I said homosexuality is wrong.

BRIAN. Are you, are you being serious right now?

STEWIE. Just keep it in the bedroom, you know? I mean I'm not all in your face with my heterosexuality.

BRIAN. Ah, no you are not.

What makes Stewie's prejudiced opinion comical is that there have been suggestions of Stewie's own homosexuality since the beginning of the show. Stewie, himself is sometimes flamboyant, and when he wants to relax he goes to a gay dance club (in the episode *Screwed the Pooch*). He even says several times that he could possibly be gay. Even though, he is occasionally portrayed as heterosexual, he has predominantly homosexual tendencies.

BRIAN. So what happened?

STEWIE. Well, you wanna know what I learned this week? Being a grown-up sucks. Women, Brian, what a royal pain in the ass. It's like, it's like why, can't you just hang out with guys, you know, just live with someone of your own sex, just do what you would do with women, but with your buddy. You know, why, why don't guys just do that?

BRIAN. They do. It's called being gay.

STEWIE. Oh, that's what gay is? Oh, yeah. I could totally get into that.

Also, when Stewie wants to join the Royal Air Force in the episode *Road to Germany* and is asked about his qualifications, his response is

STEWIE. I have a British accent, I'm possibly homosexual, I never brush my teeth, and my wife is ghastly.

When in the episode *Saving Private Brian*, Stewie and Brian want to get kicked out of the army and believe they will be successful if pretending as if they were gay. When they start making out,

STEWIE. Wow, look at how gay we are. I am so gay with my gayness.

BRIAN. Me too. I'm, I'm a homo.

BYPASSING SOLDIER. Any room for one more?

STEWIE. Hell, yeah.

BRIAN. (*slaps Stewie in the face*)

Some homosexual stereotypes are used when Chris is having a hard time with math and Peter helps him out with his “homosexual” solution that includes glory holes and circuit parties, both typical gay stereotypes.

CHRIS. Why is math so hard?

PETER. Well, you know, it doesn't have to be. One trick I used to use is turning things into a word problem. For example, if there are three glory holes in the bathroom at the club and 28 guys at the circuit party, how many rotations of guys will it take before everybody's had a turn?

CHRIS. I don't know.

PETER. Nine, with a remainder of Brent.

CHRIS. Oh!

PETER. (*sings*) Cause Brent can't fit in the glory hole, and that's why we all like Brent.

Not only did the creators of the show “make” Peter gay but they also changed the language behind some well known phrases such as “a penny for your thoughts” into “a penis for your thoughts”, when Peter wants to know what his gay lover Scott is thinking about,

PETER. I am so gay for you, Scott.

SCOTT. I'm so gay for you, Peter.

PETER. Penis for your thoughts.

SCOTT. I just... You complete me. You know that. You just make me wanna be a gayer man.

After this declaration of love they start kissing. Most of these scenes “would tend to offend viewers if presented in graphic realism, but by their very exaggeration in animation they become ludicrous and beyond offense” (Tueth, 142). Such as the example when Peter comes back from the straight camp and Scott prepared a surprise for him

SCOTT. Guess what! I have a welcome home surprise for you.

PETER. Oh! Dish, dish, dish.

SCOTT. Remember how you told me your ultimate fantasy was to have an eleven way?

PETER. Oh my god. Yes I do and you so did not even.

There are several instances on this episode where Peter and his gay lover are making out where it is indicated that Peter's wish of having eleven-way sex almost came true. While reading the criticism of the show, many of the people who found it offensive blamed it on the explicit sexual content, undoubtedly another reason why this animated series is not targeted towards children and has experienced continual problems with the Parents Television Council. “The Parents Television Council has a

point. *Family Guy* is an offensive show, and it mines for laughs nearly every culturally sensitive topic imaginable” (VanArragon, 16). In this episode, in addition to the contentious gay sexual content, we see the brain-damaged horse licking Peter’s rear end while he is sleeping as well as Lois attempting to fool around with Peter who rejects her with the explanation that he is gay. However, while very controversial and explicit homosexual content, such as rear end-licking, glory-hole math problems, gay kissing, and eleven-way sex acts were condemned on the show, I have not come across any complaints through my research about implied sexual acts that took place between a wife and husband in this particular episode. Perhaps for some viewers, sexually explicit behavior between a husband and a wife is acceptable while a homosexual relationship is not acceptable – even in animation.

God bless America and its religious dimension

The treatment of religion, which is a common subject in *Family Guy*, also occurs in this particular episode. “*Family Guy* regularly lampoons religious practitioners, doctrines, and objects in a way that goes beyond almost anything else found on broadcast television” (VanArragon, 16). There are several references to God, Jesus Christ and the Bible. The writers even make fun of religious expressions, such as “for the love of God”, which expresses impatience or frustration. This phrase becomes controversial when Peter changes it to “for the love of penis”, when interrupted while reading a book and watching television.

“Religious conservatives rose up in indignation due to the show’s “anti-Christian” content” (Melloy). Christians believe the show portrays offensive content including Peter’s homosexual attitude, his lifestyle, explicit sexual behavior (same-sex kisses and eleven-way orgy), and nudity.

The depiction of Peter as a caricature of a gay man may well have given offense to gays as well as conservative straights. But it wasn’t just the presentation of gay stereotypes of effeminate mannerisms and promiscuous sex that raised conservative hackles. Rather, it was the equally inevitable commentary on fundamentalist Christian attitudes toward gays that riled up religious right pundits, who promptly denounced the show, its sponsors, and the Fox network. (Melloy)

As mentioned before, Stewie, the only member of the Griffin family who has alluded to having interest in homosexuality, and admitted to gay tendencies, is ironically the only relative who is prejudiced about Peter. More humor is interjected when he tries to justify his argument with religion. Because of his resentment towards Peter for being gay, he turns to religion and the Bible, quoting verses to justify his opinion.

LOIS. [...] so, we're all just gonna have to get used to this and learn to accept your father for who he is now.

STEWIE. Oh, great plan Lois! Hey, here's another idea: Ever read the bible? Leviticus 18:22!

BRIAN. Stewie, you're judgmentally quoting bible verses and you don't even know how to read!

STEWIE. Welcome to America Brian.

In the scene, Stewie is quoting the Bible verse Leviticus 18:22, which says "thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination" (Leviticus 18:22) or according to the King James Version of the verse "do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable" (Leviticus 18:22). Stewie defends himself in this case by implying that even though he does not read the Bible, he still knows that homosexuality is wrong because of his perception of how other Americans are, namely in not reading the Bible and still being prejudiced. However, there were hints in some previous episodes that Stewie⁵⁰ does indeed read the Bible, including when he takes interest in its content,⁵¹

STEWIE. My my, what a thumping good read. Lions eating Christians, people nailing each other to two-by-fours. I'll say, you won't find that in Winnie the Pooh.

While Stewie is presented as a diabolic baby, it seems true what Kohut and Stokes write in their book, that Americans believe "it is necessary to believe in God in order to be a moral person and have good values" (Kohut & Stokes, 105).

BRIAN. God, I feel so bad for Lois. She really misses Peter. I just wish there was something we could do.

STEWIE. Well, there is Brian. I looked into it. Straight camp!

BRIAN. Straight camp?

STEWIE. Yeah, it's where gays go to get cured.

BRIAN. This is dated last year.

⁵⁰ Even though, Stewie is the most read member of the family when it comes to the Bible, he is also the one who shows disrespect to religion. In the episode *Holy Crap* Stewie expresses his opinion of God

STEWIE. I love God, he's so deliciously evil!

STEWIE. You know, I rather like this God fellow. Very theatrical, you know. Pestilence here, a plague there. Omnipotence. Gotta get me some of that.

⁵¹ From the episode *Holy Crap*.

STEWIE. Oh, yeah. I just, I, I, I just had it lying around.

If you believe straight camps are just a joke, think again. Ted Cox, who is a heterosexual reporter describes his experience on taking part at such a camp, ““Journey into Manhood,” or JiM, a 48-hour weekend retreat designed to help gay men become straight” (Cox) but of course without the violent treatment. There have been camps organized in the United States by homophobic Christians who are convinced that such retreats can convert homosexuals. Whereas we have the Doctor who injected Peter with the gay-gene and Lois on one side of how to look at homosexuality, judgmental Stewie and Tony, the Camp counselor have the opposite perspective and believe homosexuality is wrong. In addition, they both refer to the Bible when explaining their beliefs.

TONY. Welcome to Straight Camp everyone. You’re all here because you’ve made a choice to renounce your evil, sinful ways and redeem yourselves in the eyes of your lord and savior Jesus Christ, who hates many people but none more than homosexuals. And through our carefully structured program, you will succeed. All right men, this is Harry, the homosexual. Say hi to everyone Harry.

HARRY. Hi fellas, I sure do love being gay.

TONY. Harry’s choice of lifestyle is wrong, so we’re gonna beat him up for it. Now take these baseball bats and get to it. All right, good so far. No, no, no, don’t use the bats like that. No, no, don’t use them like that either. All right, look, just put them down and use your fists. No, no, no, not like that.

The solution of the camp counselor to convert Harry, the gay guy, is to beat him up “reminding us that violence has always been a part of the long and distinguished tradition of cartoons in American culture” (Booker, 56). Surely, that would be the case in this particular scene. “Not only, though, does animation allow for greater use of exaggeration or literalization, but also its distancing ensures that the show can get away with it” (Gray, 67). While this violent behavior at the retreat is unimaginable in real life, it is deemed funny in a cartoon form. In the episode, gay men are not only taught on how to behave like heterosexuals in straight camp but they are also trained on how to talk like straight men. When Lois finds out Peter was taken to a straight camp she decides to get him out of there and return him back to his lover Scott, because,

LOIS. A person’s sexual identity is no more a choice than the color of his skin. This is who you are. I can’t change you and it would be wrong for me to try.

Even though Peter is her husband, Lois is still being very understanding and supportive about Peter's sexual orientation.

Nevertheless,

Family Guy's treatments of religion are definitely offensive. But in what way? That's easy enough: they are offensive at least in the straightforward sense that they are inclined to offend people, by subjecting to ridicule practices that many people take very seriously and by mocking persons and deities whom many people believe ought to be treated only with the deepest reverence. (VanArragon, 20)

The show's writers presented both views of homosexuality, the liberal one and the conservative one. While Lois and Brian are the voices of the liberal community, baby Stewie and the straight camp guide are the representatives of conservatives. Through these symbolic sides, it becomes apparent that "religions have a nasty tendency to try to force their views on others rather than accepting the freedom of thought that is supposedly a central part of the ideology of America" (Booker, 140). The influence of religious beliefs on American society plays a special role.

Throughout the nation's history, great political and social movements-from abolition to women's suffrage to civil rights to today's struggles over abortion and gay marriage-have drawn upon religious institutions for moral authority, inspirational leadership, and organizational muscle. But for the past generation, religion has come to be woven more deeply into the fabric of partisan politics than ever before. [...] The U.S. debates about abortion, end-of-life decisions, stem cell research, and homosexuality are all driven by the public's religious beliefs, or lack thereof. (Kohut, 76)

The animated characters are therefore the mouthpieces of public opinion. While I agree that people might find the show sometimes offensive the things said on the show (negative or positive) portray the public opinion in real life. It is my feeling that the show is seemingly pro-gay, however perhaps it is the gay people who should be offended by this show because of the excessive stereotyping used. The show only brought forward the problems of the homosexual population in today's modern America, especially their treatment of being viewed as outcasts in society. Sexual orientation is still considered a taboo in the American society. On one hand, "perhaps one way that this offensive material can benefit believers is by moving them to lighten up a bit, to learn to laugh at themselves. And surely there would be some good in that! The world would probably be a better place if people took themselves less seriously" (VanArragon, 21). On the other hand, the creators of the show "aren't forcing anyone to watch" (VanArragon, 24) *Family Guy*.

Absurdity over the top

“There are two opposing theories of humor. According to one, we laugh at the absurd because we know that it’s not true. According to the other, we laugh at the absurd because we know that it *is* true” (Kaye, 74).

LOIS. Peter, where have you been? You left for the market six hours ago. Did you get the beans?

PETER. Lois, I got something better. You know how you always wanted a real diamond engagement ring?

LOIS. Oh, my god!

PETER. That’s right. I bought a horse.

Maybe this is funny because the jokes are so absurd that people cannot possibly relate to them. Why people find absurdity and gross-out humor funny, like a baby eating cereal with what might not be milk as depicted below, is because this absurdity is definitely not a part of our everyday reality.

LOIS. Peter, why are there so many bottles of milk in the refrigerator?

PETER. Oh, thanks for reminding me. Everyone, some of the milk in the fridge is not milk. It’s horse sperm. I’m a horse breeder now.

Sometimes the substance of the actual jokes is funny but in other cases the absurdity, exaggeration, and controversy invokes laughter. An example of this is when the announcer at the derby comments on the accident, when Peter’s horse ran and crashed into the stands.

ANNOUNCER. Dear God! I could describe the horror I am witnessing, but it is so unfathomably ugly and heart-rending that I cannot bring myself to do so, although I do possess the necessary descriptive powers. Ah, well at least the horse ran past the class of visiting deaf second-graders. Oh no, Dear God! He’s going back! Oh, I know you can’t hear any screams, but I assure you they are signing frantically just as fast as their little fingers can shape the complicated phonemes necessary to convey dread and terror.

One cannot miss the absurd humor about disabled children. While the audience is aware that laughing at disabled children would not be tolerated in reality, the scene is funny because nothing so absurd would ever happen in real life.

Pop-cultural references

“Every episode is complete with allusions not only to familiar television texts, but also to films, theater, popular music, literary classics, politics, and history” (Tueth,

144). When the horse is breathing behind Stewie's head he asks Brian if it is Paul Sorvino who is doing that. The joke reflects the breathing exercises Paul Sorvino as a former asthmatic recommends in his self-help book. Peter has a really good feeling about his horse-breeding career even though the horse is brain damaged. He believes he has a sixth sense about certain predictions,

PETER. Remember when I predicted the ending, to *Wild Hogs*?

In the following scene representing a flashback, we see Peter and Brian in the movies and Peter's prediction is "this movie's gonna suck". *Wild Hogs*, a movie with a renowned cast, opened in 2007 and received mainly negative reviews. In the episode there are also references to other movies, such as *James Bond* when played by Sean Connery and *Blazing Saddles*, which includes a very homosexual dance act to the song

Throw out your hands!!
Stick out your tush!!
Hands on your hips
Give them a push!!
You'll be surprised
You're doing the French Mistake!!
Voila!!

With MacFarlane being an avid musical enthusiast, other music references are to the *Sound of Music* and the musical *Rent*. On the sign where the Quahog Derby is announced, it says *Today: Quahog Derby, Tomorrow: Terrence Trent D'erby*, referring to a singer famous in the 90s. The joke is in the misspelled singers stage name whose correctly spelled name is actually Terence Trent D'Arby.

In the episode we find out that among Peter's numerous jobs he also had a job being Matt Damon's neck. When Matt Damon and Peter get into an argument, Peter throws in a comment.

PETER. Ben Affleck married Jennifer Garner but you married a bartender with a kid. These are facts.

Among other actors, there are also references to Seth Rogan and Meredith Baxter, who even voiced their characters on the show. Meredith Baxter who is also homosexual came out as a lesbian in public several years ago. Peter also names in his own defense some, in his opinion, gay celebrities and politicians, such as Tony Randall, Rock Hudson, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, among which only

Hudson was reported to be gay. There is a parody to a summit Gorbachev and Reagan attended.

REPORTER. Mr. President, did you reach a missile pact?

RONALD REAGAN. Well, you could say that. There was a missile and something definitely got packed.

Missile pact alludes to Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, an agreement signed by the two presidents, but in this case it indicates the nonexistent, homosexual relationship.

This animated series makes fun of everything and everyone, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, status in the society, disability and more. As argued, the importance of this genre is immense simply because it challenges the notion of what is acceptable, and how it becomes more flexible when portrayed in a child-like animated format of comedy. There are absolutely no exceptions to the lengths the show will go to create humor.

There's something about Mary

What is it about Mary?

Movies have always been an integral part of American culture because “they have simultaneously reflected *and* shaped changes in American society” (Ross, 1). Box office hit, *There's Something about Mary* is an American comedy film released in 1998. It was directed, produced, and written by Peter and Bobby Farrelly. Just like Seth MacFarlane, the Farrelly brothers are from Rhode Island, which also serves as the setting for many of their movies. In addition, they include other real life personifications in their films – their mothers name is Mariann and was paid homage to with the variants of her names given to some of their leading female characters such as (Rose)Mary. Also, it is reported that their relatives and friends are given minor roles within their movies.

They rely on a repetitive pattern of comedic characteristics that are evident from their body of work, such as political incorrectness and gross-out gags among others. Also,

films such as *Dumb and Dumber*, *There's Something About Mary* and *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000) revolve around familiar tales about losers or no-hopers who eventually achieve success, of one kind or another, even if they do not always get the girl in the end (as in the former): very familiar Hollywood narrative stuff. (King, 69)

The leading actors play an important role for their movies because they have casted Jim Carrey, who has acted in two Farrelly brother's movies as well as Ben Stiller - both famous comedians with legions of fans. “The characters of the film rather quickly tell us if the climate is comic. If a familiar comedian plays the central role, we can be *almost* certain that the climate is comic” (Mast, 231). Already in the first scene of *There's Something About Mary*, the first appearance of Ben Stiller as Ted Stroehmann is outrageously funny as his character sports a retro hairstyle and braces. Ted is only one of many characters featured in the Farrelly brother's movies where the movie develops around a traumatic event in the leading character's past. Their movies also continually include love stories infused with taboo subjects.

The movie could be described as a romantic comedy, but it is not appropriate for children because of the adult subject matter, the language used, and lastly, the sexual content. Besides belonging to the genre of romantic comedy, the movie is also a hybrid of several other genres, such as screwball comedy, teen comedy and features so-called toilet humor and slapstick to entertain the audience. In the slapstick comedy movie genre, movies such as *There's Something About Mary* typically garner its laughter through visual humor, however the component of verbal humor must not be ignored. The majority of the humor in the movie is expressed through the gross-out scenes, with which the Farrelly Brothers had experienced a successful formula with through past movies. "Gross-out films often feature, and are primarily targeted at, groups or individuals located at the border between adolescence and adulthood" (King, 90). While many gross-out scenes shock the viewer, those particular scenes are also the source of laughter. This variety of movies appeals to a more specific audience.

The mix offered by the gross-out comedy in Hollywood might be explained by factors of gender more than social class, for example. The gross-out and/or sex-chasing elements of films such as *There's Something About Mary* [...] appear to be designed to appeal principally to relatively young male audiences. Elements of romantic comedy are more likely to be targeted at a female audience. A combination of the two offers the prospect of the industrially attractive 'date-movie', aimed at a teenage and young adult audience and with something to satisfy the expectations of both genders (King, 73).

In consistent form with other movies made by the successful Farrelly duo, *There's Something About Mary* includes many controversial topics by focusing humor on issues of mental and physical disability, interracial relationships and (homo)sexuality. With their movies, the Farrelly brothers commonly transgress the boundaries of what is acceptable in comedies, with political correctness being the major topic. As it is completely inappropriate to ridicule a disabled person, one cannot help but recall a scene from their movie *Dumb and Dumber* where the two main characters sell a dead bird (with the head duck-taped to its body) to a blind child in a wheelchair who in the next scene strokes the bird and attempts to teach it to talk. Theoretically it should not have been funny, however this scene is an audience favorite.

The choice of music plays an important role in setting the comedic tone to *There's Something About Mary*. The music performed by the guitarist Jonathan Richman and drummer Tommy Larkins works as a musical commentary on the story's plotline. There are definitely noticeable "shifts in musical modality" (King, 13), while the songs are happier in the beginning and the end of the movie, the songs played by the two-men-band in the middle of the movie include some sad tones, especially because it indicates the development of the story. Even the titles of their songs give the viewer hints about the situation. The movie starts with the song "*There's Something About Mary*" and is a fitting intro to the movie by explaining background of the romance through its lyrics. The second song performed by the duo is "*True Love Is Not Nice*", and the last one towards the end of the movie is titled "*Let Her Go into the Darkness*". The lyrics of the three songs are very descriptive of the situation and straightforward.

Even though, Mary is not the most comical character in the movie, everything surrounding her and her situation is seemingly funny. Mary Jensen is the typical pretty girl in the movie that every guy falls in love with. Not only does Mary have a mentally challenged brother, who is involved in most of the hilarious scenes, but also her mother is married to an African-American, and as Lowe wrote, "mixed marriage motifs and narratives, for example, are an important staple of ethnic humor, and clearly operate to release psychic and sexual fears" (Lowe, 445). The movie opens with nerdy looking Ted (Ben Stiller), followed by a slow motion scene of Mary, who is depicted as a heaven-like creature. When you see the female protagonist Mary, you instantly know there really is something about Mary. Throughout the movie the viewer realizes she attracts all different kinds of men. One could argue this particular issue is also the theme of the movie. As the title suggests, Mary is the center of this comedy, however her character is the least funny leaving the comic relief to Ted and Healy as well as other male characters. Ted is definitely a romantic character who pursues the woman he loves.

The movie incorporates all different kinds of humor, everything from slapstick, verbal humor, physical comedy through accentuating the characteristics of the characters and more. There are some scenes and dialogues that would provide the viewer with an insight into American ethnic humor, which, as mentioned before is

known for its slapstick style and also for jokes that do not exclude anyone including minorities and disabled people. In this chapter I will analyze (in my opinion) the funniest scenes and dialogues in the movie. While “Peter and Bobby Farrelly are men obsessed with the body and its attendant leaks, noises, odors, and malfunctions” (LeBesco) that is also what many scenes from the movie are about.

Short plot

Rhode Island, 1985 - Ted meets Mary in high school after helping her mentally challenged brother who was being attacked by a bully. Mary, being grateful for Ted's kindness and help, invites him to the prom. When Ted picks up Mary he experiences an unfortunate incident and the story fast-forwards to 13 years later. While still having Mary on his mind and because he lost touch with her after the prom, Ted decides to hire a private investigator, sleazy Pat Healy, who not only finds her but also falls in love with her like many other men. In the beginning, the spying Healy undertook on Mary was solely for the investigation he was hired for. However, it soon took a course of its own when he develops an infatuation of his own for Mary. Mary is now an orthopedic surgeon, living in Miami with her friend Magda. Healy tries to do everything imaginable to win Mary's affection but Mary's friend and former patient, Tucker, who is also a fraud, eventually circumvents his intentions. Ted drives to Miami with his friend Dom and reunites with Mary and realizes that the feelings he had for her are mutual. However, their happiness is short-lived because of an anonymous letter Mary receives. After being confronted with all her “stalkers” Mary chooses Ted and after many obstacles and comedic situations, they finally have their happy ending.

Good comedy or bad taste?

“As one of the most popular genres of American film production [...] film comedy is an intriguing instance of a popular form that provides moments of genuine social critique while also fulfilling its primary function as a source of mass entertainment” (Beach, 3). It does so with either the use of visual humor, verbal humor, or both types of humor combined. The creators of comedies decide what audience they want to

target the movie at and consequently, which kind of humor that will be involved. "Comedy is generally a relatively inexpensive form, capable of producing healthy profits at low cost. In Hollywood, for example, in the summer of 1998, a number of \$100 million plus special effects-oriented blockbusters were outperformed by the modestly budgeted *There's Something About Mary*" (King, 1). The genre of comedy has a very large audience. "Comedy was one of the most popular formats in the early years of cinema and has remained so ever since" (King, 1).

The comedy as a genre can deal with a wide range of subject matters, including taboo topics among others. "Because of the nature of comedy as a genre that is perceived "lighter" and thus as less threatening to society, the kinds of transgression permitted (often in the form of satire or parody rather than in the form of explicit statement) tend to be greater than in other genres" (Beach, 10). Also comedy seems to be ever evolving by changing drastically in the last decades. While slapstick comedy has been around for about a century, the new subgenre of gross-out comedy has been a more recent phenomenon.

The social and historical roots of gross-out are traced [...] to wider cultural movements in the second half of the twentieth century, from the 1960s especially, involving a shift in the boundaries between what was considered acceptable in public rather than private discourses. This shift was institutionalized in the cinema by the development of the ratings system in America in 1968. A situation in which all films faced censorship of problems of distribution unless deemed suitable for a general audience, of any age group, was replaced by one in which the bounds of the permissible were loosened. This provided an important marketing device for Hollywood, encouraging the production of more explicit sexual, violent and otherwise potentially 'offensive' material to differentiate its product from that of broadcast television. (King 73-74)

There's Something About Mary is a provocative comedy because it challenges the viewers with topics that people normally feel uncomfortable voicing out loud. For that reason, "comedies not only provide entertainment or suggest utopian solutions to social problems; they also explore the underlying tensions and contradictions that exist within any modern society" (Beach, 211). The movie addresses unconventional controversial issues, among them nudity, disability and toilet humor. The use of tasteless humor undeniably makes this movie even funnier.

Aristotel felt that the very essence of comedy rested in some defect. Now, the most basic defect of humans is some kind of bodily problem. [...] deformity, [...] stammerer, [...] fat people [...], along with many other infirmities. In our

supposedly refined and respectable society, we do not laugh about such defects. Yet people still do laugh, and laugh uproariously, when they see such deformities of certain sorts presented on stage or in film. (Speier, 1372)

The movie includes several characteristics of American ethnic humor, such as exaggeration and violence. There is an abundance of violence in this movie and "laughter is, of course, the direct effect and first objective of these displays of violence" (Andrin, 230). What else could be expected from two masterminds also behind *Dumb & Dumber*, *Me, Myself and Irene*, *Kingpin*, *Shallow Hal* and others. The use of language in the movie, as already mentioned, is one of the qualities that explicitly earn this comedy an R (restricted) rating.

PAT. We had a deal! You said, you wouldn't fuck me and I wouldn't fuck you until we got this fuck out of the fuckin' picture.

Because of the use of inappropriate language, some of the characters being politically incorrect throughout the movie, gross-out scenes and many other gruesome characteristics, I strongly believe the movie is inappropriate for children. However, it can be a laughter-filled comedy for adults who do not get easily offended, can look past the political incorrectness, and just enjoy the movie as another Farrelly Brothers comedic masterpiece.

Slapstick

Even in the beginning of 19th century, "people's mishaps were already a well-established source of joy to the film public" (Schein, 26). Slapstick⁵² as a form of a comedy was primarily used in silent films and it "poked fun at farcical situations of physical mishap and indignity, usually in pratfalls, practical jokes, accidents, acrobatic death-defying stunts, water soakings, or wild chase scenes with trains and cars" (Dirks). Slapstick is a comedy form involving exaggerated physical violence or activities.

Although slapstick tradition has its roots in other countries and cultures, it was the American film industry that introduced and popularized the genre to audiences

⁵² "This is a primitive and universal comedy with broad, aggressive, physical, and *visual* action, including harmless or painless cruelty and violence, horseplay, and often vulgar sight gags [...]. Slapstick often required exquisite timing and well-honed performance skills" (Dirks).

worldwide. What people laugh about and find funny in the slapstick genre are the mishaps that happen to characters and the physical impairments to their bodies. In *There's Something About Mary* the mishaps largely happen to Ted. "The comedy of situation in which a person temporarily loses his dignity because nature plays a trick on him is inexhaustible. Some psychologists suggest that laughter at the man who slips on a banana peel and falls on his nose is a kind of relief that such an accident did not happen to those laughing" (Speier, 1378).

What is really humorous in slapstick is the strategic use of exaggeration, which is as mentioned before one of the characteristics of American ethnic humor. "Slapstick laughter plays on the spectator's insensitivity by allowing no time for healing or commiserating, submitting the character to a deliberately excessive and constant assault. [...] exaggeration produces a comical effect when it is extended and especially when it is systematic" (Bergson qtd. in Andrin, 229). As the slapstick routines have changed over the years in this particular type of genre, "another kind of spectacle is at stake for the spectator, now torn between sharing the pain and, more cruelly than before, laughing at it" (Andrin, 234). However, "we laugh only at quite special forms of malevolence. It is not permissible for the malevolence to be true" (Schein, 26), since "in a too obviously realistic milieu we cannot identify with a complete idiot and, thus, have nothing from which to be liberated" (Schein, 26). Schein notes, "in other words, in order to be funny, the maliciousness must be original. We must attack someone who is not usually attacked. The fun must be audacious in order to be amusing" (Schein, 26).

The most important feature of slapstick is the body, which will be analyzed in one of the following chapters. "The life of slapstick bodies is far from peaceful. Faces are hit by pies, bodies suffer slaps and blows, they tumble, fall, collapse, are dropped, ejected, or thrown from cars or trains at full speed, are run over by buses and knocked down by fists, bricks, frying pans, or mallets" (Andrin, 226). However, it should be highlighted that the realm of slapstick comedy makes us laugh and we seem to "forget about (or conveniently put aside) the extreme violence they display, the darker side of an apparently joyful genre" (Andrin, 227). When analyzing what it is that makes us laugh when watching slapstick film it "calls into question our

relationship to others and reveals our repressed desire to humiliate other human beings” (Andrin, 227).

Gross-out comedy

In the beginning of the movie the viewers are introduced to the events that happened in Cumberland, Rhode Island, in 1985 between Ted and Mary. This is also when the best-known scene from the movie occurs, when Ted suffers a mishap to his private parts in relation to the zipper on his pants. Even though the scene is side splittingly funny, the viewer cannot help but feel Ted’s pain. Exposing Ted’s genitalia on screen is unpleasant and is therefore an example of gross-out comedy. This scene will be analyzed in further detail in the chapter about slapstick and body.

Gross-out films – or gross-out sequences in films that otherwise conform more generally to formats such as romantic comedy or college/high-school comedy – seek to evoke a response based on transgression of what is usually allowed in ‘normal’ or ‘polite’ society. They test how far they can go, William Paul suggests; ‘how much they can show without making us turn away, how far they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of “Oh, gross!” as a sign of approval, an expression of disgust that is pleasurable to call out’ (1994:20). What is involved here, from a sociological perspective, can be seen as a testing of cultural boundaries and restrictions. (King, 67)

Comedy in film comes in many different types and forms, such as the gross-out comedy of Farrelly brother’s movies. “Gross-out as a distinctive format – in the mainstream Hollywood films of Peter and Bobby Farrelly, for example [...] – is based largely on the promise of gross-out *frissons* offered to, and sought out by, the audience” (King, 69). The origin of the gross-out genre takes us several decades back in time where several things influenced the genre, such as the rating system.

Another factor helping to promote the production of gross-out-style comedy was the post-war baby-boom, an increase in the birth rate from the late 1940s that created a large teenage population in subsequent years. Teenagers and younger adults gained a greater centrality in the culture at large and became a key target market for Hollywood, especially from 1970s. The teenage audience of today includes many second-generation products of the baby-boom, the offspring of the original boomers. (King, 74)

In the movie there are some scenes that reveal nudity, such as Ted’s genitals. In addition, Magda’s ludicrously tanned and odd-shaped breasts are shown because it is something the creators of the movie use as a reoccurring punch line. However in

Mary's case, her breasts are not shown to the audience when she is changing clothes. Of course in a comedy that is of the conventional gross-out genre, creators choose not to show young Mary's breasts and opt for Magda's saggy breasts that traumatizes even Healy when seeing them through his binoculars.

Comedy that presents a transgression of dominant cultural norms can tell us a great deal about the conventions of the society in which it is produced. The emphasis in contemporary gross-out comedy on matters of the lower bodily regions (their functions, excretions and shifts of the latter from low to high) suggests the existence of a broader cultural environment in which the functions of the body are to a large extent repressed, or at least confined to the realms of the private and hidden. (King, 71-72)

The United States has been thought to be quite conservative when it comes to public indecency with an example being the illegality of the act of indecent exposure. Not only has nudity been controversial in real life, but also in the movie industry. However, in this particular movie the audience has not only been exposed to nudity but also, "Projectile vomiting. Explosive shitting. More explosive shitting. Semen dangling from ear; semen in hair. [...] 'Gross-out' has become one of the most lucrative elements in contemporary film comedy: comedy based on crude and deliberate transgressions of the bounds of 'normal' everyday taste" (King, 63). Because Ted is feeling nervous about his date with Mary, Dom suggests to him to masturbate before the date in order to relax.

DOM. All right, I think you're all set. So just go clean the pipes and let's go.

TED. Huh?

DOM. You know? Clean the pipes.

TED. What do you mean clean the pipes?

DOM. You choke the chicken before any big date, don't you? Tell me you spank the monkey before any big date. Oh my God, he doesn't flog the dolphin before a big date. Are you crazy? That's like going out there with a loaded gun! Of course that's why you're nervous. Oh my dear friend, please sit, please. Ah, look, um, after you've had sex with a girl, and you're lying in bed with her, are you nervous?

TED. No.

DOM. No, you're not, why?

TED. Cause I'm tired...

DOM. Eh, wrong! It's 'cause you ain't got the baby batter on the brain anymore! Jesus, that stuff will fuck your head up! Look, the most honest moment in a man's life are the few minutes after he's blown his load. Now that is a medical fact. And the reason for it is that you're no longer trying to get laid, you're actually... you're thinking like a girl, and girls love that.

TED. Holy shit! I've been going out with a loaded gun.

Ted of course, maybe because of his naivety or Dom's "logical" explanation, obeys Dom's advice. However, when he is done with the task and wants to clean up the bathroom, the discharge is nowhere to be found. After Ted investigates the whole bathroom, including the ceiling and under the magazine he gives up on his search. "The extreme form of vulgarity and undignified behavior is the unrestrained performance of bodily functions. Such instances, when they occur, are often funny in an entirely simple and natural way, so that no additional joke is required to produce mirth" (Speier, 1390). When Mary comes to pick him up for their date the audience realizes that when Ted is talking to Mary, the missing discharge is actually hanging from his ear.

The major *frissons* and talking-point moments in *There's Something About Mary* [...] concern the insufficiently controlled or inappropriate emission of semen and, especially, an inversion of the high and low regions of the body. In the former, the semen of Ted ends up dangling from his ear after masturbation and is mistaken by Mary (Cameron Diaz) for, and used as, hair gel. (King, 65)

Ted's self-pleasuring marathon and search for his missing semen all over the bathroom is one of many hilarious scenes. However, the next scene where we see Mary, who mistakenly used Ted's semen as hair gel, is unforgettable. "The comic effect, however, is based on familiarity with the norm. It is the departure from the norm, and our awareness of the precise extent of that departure, that generates the comic *frisson*. Semen used as hair gel is comic because it is absolutely not meant to be found in such a place" (King, 68). It is not only the fact that Mary used semen without hesitation to style her hair, but her hairstyle as a consequence of using a really "firm" hair gel, that is gross and consequently very funny. Her bangs namely, after applying what she thought was hair gel shoot straight up in the air. "A fluid associated both with the lower regions and with procreation is brought up to the top of the body, the head, in an act the explicitness of which in *There's Something About Mary* is transgressive of representational norms for anything other than explicit sex films" (King, 66). Since Ben Stiller as a comedian is "specially qualified" (King 64), it adds to the reason why the scene is funny and acceptable to the audience. While the scene is in a way disgusting, it is also funny at the same time as "transgressions of the kinds found in gross-out comedies can provoke a number of reactions. For some viewers, they might be offensive rather than comical. [...] The gross-out comedy aims to achieve a balance between disgust and comic pleasure, however, rather than unalloyed disgust" (King, 68).

Although we can expect to see gross-out scenes in most of the Farrelly brother's movies, it is still not that widespread phenomenon in the movie industry,

explicit semen-out-of-place gags are a relatively recent phenomenon in Hollywood, becoming common currency in the late 1990s. Hollywood, being innately conservative for commercial reasons, in the sense of being keenly aware of the dangers of alienating audiences, tends to go through periods of consolidation after such breakthroughs in what is allowed to reach screen, however, rather than continually pushing back the boundaries. (King, 76)

If nothing else, *There's Something About Mary* paved the way for other comedies that included gags with men in awkward situations. "The focus of many gross-out moments on activities such as farting and shitting, or on substances such as faeces, urine and semen displaced to the upper regions, suggests an indulgence of the anal and oral drives described in the Freudian account of pre-Oedipal sexuality" (King, 89) and King notes,

from a Freudian perspective, the pleasure of comedy lies in its potential to release forces that are usually repressed, for one reason or another; a return to 'primal' pleasures, which might include those of the kinds of bodily functions highlighted in gross-out comedy; *unsocialised* behaviour that bursts through the restraints of normally acceptable conduct. (King, 92)

Body and Slapstick

Although there are countless humorous scenes in this movie, my analysis will chiefly focus on the ones that involve the human body. I have to agree with Andrin when she writes, "I have always been amazed and somehow frightened by what human bodies have to endure in slapstick comedy" (Andrin, 226) and yet remarkably in the movie, nobody gets injured or perishes.

Slapstick bodies play an essential part in the action, yet they do not operate as human organisms with predictable physical reactions; they quite literally *are* the *slap-stick* – the instrument that gave its name to the genre, a club-like object composed of two wooden slats that produce a loud smacking noise when struck together. [...] bodies are instrumentalized, used as props or tools to induce laughter through their exposure to and actual confrontation with cruelty and physical threat [...]. They deliver violence but are also its ideal target or victim, the intensified effects of the original blow coming back at its owner like a boomerang. (Andrin, 230)

No matter how badly or in what method characters get hurt, the audience is aware that most incidents are not realistic. As previously mentioned, the viewer gets an idea of what to expect in the very early scenes of the movie. The victim of slapstick in *There's Something About Mary* is nearly always Ted. In the beginning of the movie Ted is involved in an unpleasant situation where he zips his genitals in his pants by mistake. "In sadistic pranks and jokes, the victim is placed in a comical situation so that his laughable qualities, for example his stupidity, anxiety, superstition, or helplessness, become especially visible" (Speier, 1389). This particular scene is probably one of the most horrific scenes for the male audience and also the most famous, embarrassing, slapstick scene in the movie. Even though the movie does not show a close-up of his wounded manhood, it flashes a small amount of flesh, which is more than enough for the audience to get an idea of what they are looking at. Therefore, "comedians seem to derive laughter less from the display of violence itself than from the pain and suffering caused by violence. [...] in *There's Something About Mary* (1998), the by-now-infamous scene in which Ben Stiller gets his manhood stuck in his zipper delights the audience *because of the character's pain*" (Andrin, 233). However, it is not only Ted and his reaction that is funny, but the whole scene that seems ridiculous to the audience. The fact is that Ted is really helpless in not knowing what to do in this situation. If he does not come out of the bathroom, Mary's family will start to assume that he is either masturbating or something is wrong. After Mary's step dad enters the bathroom and tries to assist him, the situation spirals out of control. When he puts his glasses on to evaluate the damage, Mary's stepfather is appalled at seeing what really happened to Ted and his reaction mirrors this.

CHARLIE. Oh, my God in heaven, save him!

By holding his own crotch, a preview for the audience is given before they can see themselves what the entire commotion is about. In true comedic fashion, the situation grows out of proportion by including Mary's mom, a police officer who appeared at the Jensen's house because he claimed he heard a girl scream, the fire department, the rescue team, and a crowd of spectators. The physical comedy is complemented by the dialogue, which is completely absurd, such as when Mary's mom comes into the bathroom because Charlie thinks she could help Ted.

CHARLIE. Don't worry she's a dental hygienist, she'll know exactly what to do.

Rationally, as a dental hygienist she is clueless on how to deal with the situation since they cannot even distinguish if the flesh that is stuck in the zipper is either “the sausage or the beans”. The only person who actually thinks he could help Ted is the police officer. After some “encouraging” words,

FIREFIGHTER. Son, relax. You already laid the tracks that’s the hard part. Now we’re just gonna back it up.

SHEILA. Teddy, be brave!

POLICE OFFICER. It’s just like pulling off a Band-Aid. A-one, and a-two, and a...

The police officer apparently pulls the zipper down but that is not shown to the audience. In the following scene we see Ted on a stretcher, with a paramedic screaming, “we got a bleeder”. While running towards the ambulance and Mary keeping the pressure on Ted’s crotch, Warren is yelling out repeatedly to the crowd gathered in front of the Jensen’s house that “he was masturbating” among other overheard phrases. The whole situation is very painful but in a bizarre way, extremely hilarious to the viewer.

Very few comedies go so far as to expose the potential for malice in an audience’s response to human suffering, a potential unleashed here by the ordinary circumstances out of which that suffering arises, and by the prolonged way it mushrooms absurdly with the gathering crowd and the final dash to the ambulance. (Clayton qtd. in Andrin, 234)

In the end when Warren starts uttering “sausage and beans”, his innocence and inability to be aware of what is happening makes the whole situation even funnier. I believe this particular scene is of a great importance because it paves the way to other jokes and slapstick scenes that occur later in the movie. “Slapstick [...] bombards us with violent images that the body politic would rather have repressed; yet the slapstick body remains unaffected by the kind of violence that, in reality, would cause death and suffering” (Andrin, 232). What makes these scenes improbable is the fact that the character involved in the hurtful incident is perfectly fine in the next scene; there is no visible consequence (scaring) of the mishap. While this incident would not necessarily cause Ted’s death, it definitely would cause a lengthy degree of suffering because of the severity of the traumatic event. No wonder the movie fast-forwards to a scene that is happening 13 years later in 1998. The audience witnesses Ted in a psychiatrist’s office still reminiscing about Mary.

Even before the “zipper” scene there is another occurrence of slapstick, namely the “piggyback ride” scene. While Ted is walking Mary and Warren home, Warren offers to give Ted a piggyback ride. Ted accepts the offer but is not aware that in return he will have to give Warren a piggyback ride. Ted beforehand mentioned he had a disc problem in his back, so when Warren, who probably weighs double of what Ted weighs, jumps on his back, the audience hears a cracking sound.

Normal rules of physiological causality do not always apply [...]. This style of comedy owes much to that of animated cartoons, where the world can take on a fantastic plasticity in which both normal narrative plausibility and the laws of physics can be overridden at will. In the classic routine in which cartoon characters keep running in midair, until the moment of realization that no ground lies underfoot, the rule of the subjective comes to dominate over objective reality. The physical consequences of actions are frequently ignored, including those involved in the vertiginous drop that follows the running-in-the-air gag in Road Runner cartoons and elsewhere. Bodies spring back into shape after being subjected to every conceivable distortion. (King, 21)

In several scenes, the pain caused by putting someone in impossible circumstances provokes laughter from the audience. Ted gets beaten up on several occasions, either by people at school, by Mary’s brother in the Jensen’s home or by the police. Ted gets drawn into a fight on two occasions because of Mary’s handicapped brother Warren, either trying to protect him or surprising him with a present without knowing that he should not touch his ears. When making a joke, pretending to perform a magic trick and finding a baseball behind Warren’s ear, Mary’s brother gets extremely upset and starts throwing Ted all over the place. “We laugh at violence when violence is so extreme that it assures the comic purpose of exaggeration. Moreover, we are more likely to laugh if we don’t actually see the effect of violence on the body” (Andrin, 231). In this particular scene, even though Ted was thrown around the Jensen’s living room, even breaking the coffee table, he still manages to get up after Warren calms down. The fight ends with Ted having a tiny bit of the blood on his lip. It should be noted that during the scene where his genitals get stuck in the zipper, the lip injury is already nonexistent. As Andrin quotes Sufrin noting “that in slapstick bodies are paradoxically “all beaten up but unharmed”” (Andrin, 231), continuing that “finally, the slapstick fairytale dimension prevails. Despite the violence, chases, slaps, malformations, gunshots and all the improbable violations of natural laws, no one is hurt, no one suffers, no one is hungry, no one

cries and no one ever dies. They teach us a lesson without pain and suffering” (Sufrin qtd. in Andrin, 231).

Ted really has to endure a great deal in his quest to reconnect with Mary. While driving to Florida, an unfortunate coincidence leads to his arrest for what he believes is soliciting sex. Ted is taken to the police station for interrogation. After being cleared on the charges for soliciting sex, the scene starts getting funnier. He believes he is being interrogated because of an innocent offence for offering a ride to a hitchhiker, but in fact he is interrogated for being a suspected serial killer as the police found a mutilated body in his car, unbeknownst to Ted. Ted unknowingly admits to everything he believes he is being charged for. He confesses not only to one offence but several, making the police believe he is a psycho serial killer. The misunderstanding goes so far that Ted even gets physically beaten up by one of the police officers.

Getting his lip punctured with a fishhook while on a date with Mary and her brother is yet another incident of Ted getting injured. Although the audience can actually see Ted’s lip being punctured, the image is again, gross but somehow strangely funny. I believe the whole audience feels Ted’s pain and can only imagine his agony. Even though Ted’s lip is punctured by a fishhook, we do not see any bleeding or any evidence of the mishap in the next scene. It is obvious that there is definitely not enough time within this transition for healing and as mentioned by Andrin, in slapstick, bodies really are “invincible” (Andrin, 232). The same thing occurs, when Ted is attacked by a dog in a scene that will be described in one of the following chapters. Even though he gets bitten in the face by the dog, he does not wear a bandage or have any scarring the day after when running errands with Mary. Therefore, “the remarkable absence of injury and/or any other effect on the body brings us back once again to the “slap-stick” itself, known to produce a great big noise but very little damage. The slapstick world is a perfect place for instant healing” (Andrin, 231).

After witnessing all of the horrible things that happen to Ted we must agree that, “despite its human and more or less realistic appearance, the slapstick body constantly defies gravity and matter, seems invulnerable, conveying a vital power

that no shock can actually diminish” (Andrin, 231). In other words, Andrin compares slapstick with “the world of children’s dreams where actions can be performed outside the realm of social conventions” (Andrin, 231).

Why are homosexual stereotypes funny?

The scene after Ted’s horrendous, traumatic, teenage experience occurs 13 years later with Ted explaining the story to the less than qualified psychiatrist. During their session the psychiatrist secretly exits and goes out for lunch while Ted is completely unaware of what is happening behind his back. Even when the psychiatrist sneaks back into his office he is shown to be completely uninterested in listening to Ted’s story. The only time the psychiatrist demonstrates interest by paying attention and commenting on Ted’s problems is when Ted mentions stopping at a rest area on one of the occasions. Possibly, because the psychiatrist is a homosexual himself.

PSYCHIATRIST. You know, rest areas are homosexual hangouts.

TED. Hm?

PSYCHIATRIST. Highway rest areas. They’re the bathhouses of the ‘90s for many, many, many, many, gay men.

This, of course is a typical stereotype about homosexuals. Incidentally or not, singer George Michael was arrested in April 1998 for lewd act in a public rest room in Beverly Hills. However, the joke about rest stops does not end there. When Ted is driving to Florida he stops at a rest area in South Carolina because he needs to go to the washroom and take a break from a chatterbox hitchhiker, whom we later find out is a serial killer and a mental patient. While walking around Ted trips over something and blacks out. Suddenly the lights come on and he is in the middle of a police raid surrounded by homosexuals with a penis in front of his face giving the appearance that he was performing oral sex. Surrounded by police, helicopters and cameras, the audience sees Ted on television reality show (*Live on*) *Cops* with its theme song *Bad Boys*. Once again, the same homosexual stereotype about gays and rest areas is indicated.

Treatment of animals

The gross-out humor popular in contemporary comedies are examples of how far you can stretch the bounds of good taste in the name of a big laugh. Drinking urine [...], mishandling sperm (*There's Something About Mary*), and public defecation [...] are scenes that would not make the cut in most movies, yet in comedies, they are all par for the course. Other taboos frequently broken in comedies are perpetuation of racial stereotypes [...], making fun of the handicapped and mentally impaired (*There's Something About Mary*), objectifying women [...], and cruelty to animals (*There's Something About Mary*, once again). (Indick, 60)

Another character who suffers just like Ted is Magda's dog Scruffy. "The dog is one of the few animals widely kept in close proximity to the 'normal' domestic scene [...], figured as a sniffer-out of undesirable qualities in characters in [...] *There's Something About Mary*" (King, 88). However, the life of this particular dog is everything but easy. One day he is drugged, set on fire and resuscitated, the next day drugged and jumps out a window. As mentioned in the chapter *Body and Slapstick*, the day after the incident between Ted and the dog, we see Scruffy in a full body cast, however in the next scene the dog is again perfectly fine and normal, as if nothing happened. Again, as on other violent occasions "the near total absence of injury on the slapstick body is indeed quite striking; burlesque characters do not bruise, bleed, or die. Pain and suffering exist, yet they are portrayed in an excessive, unrealistic manner" (Andrin, 231). Therefore, not only the human characters but also the dog featured in the movie, goes through considerable pain and suffering.

In the movie there are two incidents with the dog. While these particular scenes might involve actions deemed as animal cruelty, it is obvious that the makers of the movie did not use a live dog all of the time, instead a fake stuffed dog was used for dangerous stunts. All of these things happened to the dog just because he can figure out mens' personalities. We learn that on one of the previous occasions when Mary's neighbor and dog-owner Magda mentions,

MAGDA. Puffy used to bark his balls off whenever he saw him. And you know that Puffy, he only barks at the bad people.

The audience is being prepared on the role of the dog. When Mary decides to go on a date with Patrick and is not sure what he is like, Magda assures her

MAGDA. My little Puffy here is gonna tell you everything you need to know about that guy in about 2 seconds flat. If Puffy starts yapping uh-uh, he's a loser. If he likes him, honey, then you've got yourself a keeper.

Of course, because of the spying stakeout on Mary, Healy is aware of what awaits him if he should ever come across the dog. For this reason he gives the dog some doggy treats through a door opening that are spiked with sedatives. The dog starts gnarling just by seeing Healy's hand and smelling him. Of course later on, with the dog being sedated, Healy can hold the dog in his arms while stroking his belly. The ladies are amazed especially because,

MARY. He doesn't like anybody, he never usually likes guys.

and Magda corrects her

MAGDA. He doesn't like bad guys.

The first incident starts after Healy notices that Puffy the dog experienced cardiac arrest because of a sedative overdose. With Mary and Magda out of the picture, Healy tries everything to bring Puffy back to life. The scene is ridiculously funny when watching Healy perform CPR on the dog while at the same time giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In addition, Healy's panic attack coupled with his screams at the dog

HEALY. Stay away from the light!

and his fury as he shakes the dog like a rag doll, makes the scene hilarious. After Healy performs CPR with chest compressions, mouth-to-mouth breathing and because still being unsuccessful, he tries with defibrillation by trying to jump start the dog by pulling an electrical cord from the lamp, which resulted in setting dog on fire. Healy, trying to extinguish a fire, pours water from a vase on Puffy. By the time Mary and Magda come back from the kitchen, the dog has regained consciousness and Healy is holding the dog, wrapped in a blanket like a baby to hide the evidence of the commotion.

The fact that Healy is not an animal person becomes obvious in one of the scenes where Healy is talking to his friend Sully. Knowing that Mary will overhear the conversation, he goes on and on about him being such a great and compassionate person.

HEALY. I'll be honest with you. I'm a selfish prick. I get a high from helping all God's creatures...

and in that same instance as he finishes the sentence, he kills a fly with his own hands, which proves he definitely is not the guy who "wouldn't even harm a fly".

In the second incident, Healy drugs the dog again, however, this time with amphetamine, also known as speed because he wants the dog to be hyperactive when Ted visits Mary in her apartment. Again, he exaggerates with the dosage and not only drugs the dog but also Magda by accidentally throwing speed into her drink. While throwing doggy treats through the window he realizes that maybe he and his accomplice in crime, Tucker used too much of the drug.

HEALY. Wait, how many is this?

TUCKER. Um, four.

HEALY. Four? It seems like an awful lot of speed to give one little pooch. Are you sure it won't kill him?

TUCKER. I never said that.

When Mary and Ted walk into the apartment after their date and see hyperactive Magda cleaning and running all over the place they notice the dog is missing. Because the dog was drugged and acted hyper, Magda decided to lock him into the bathroom. Even though the dog is tiny he almost knocks the bathroom door down and makes Ted believe it must be a big, strong dog behind the door. As soon as Ted opens the door, he feels relief upon seeing the actual size of the dog and starts talking to him until the dog attacks him. Puffy jumps at Ted's face and the "war" begins. The night ends up with an over-the-top violent fight between Ted and a deranged, drugged, dog from hell, Puffy. During the fight, the dog goes straight for Ted's throat and drags him across the apartment. Poor Ted wrestles with the dog until Puffy bites him in his crotch. The situation is solved when Puffy accidentally jumps out the window. However, the hilarity does not end there. The next day the audience sees Ted carrying Puffy with a whole body plaster cast. While getting in the car, Ted forgets about the dog, resulting in the dog being left on the roof for the journey, with Ted only realizing the mishap once getting out of the car. While the audience is aware of the animal cruelty in these scenes, the whole situation is too ridiculous and outrageous to be true. Of course there is no intellectual factor in both gags involving Puffy, however it is funny because of all the senselessness and exaggeration involved in the scene.

Disability as a laughing matter

In shaping our vision on the promises and problems of American life, movies matter the most about the things which we know the least. People who had little daily contact with [...] various minority groups were most likely to be influenced by what they saw on the screen – especially if they were exposed to the same kinds of images over and over again until they came to assume the appearance of “reality”. (Ross, 2)

There are viewers who found some of the scenes offensive, especially the politically incorrect treatment of the disabled minority, which is in reality the largest minority group⁵³ in the United States. This is possibly because “when people with disabilities are portrayed as unfortunate victims of fate instead of a minority class, they are kept in their place as recipients of charity, not civil rights” (Sandahl, 194). There are many characters with disabilities in the movie, such as Mary’s brother Warren and his friends from the Neary Center for Exceptional people and Ted’s boss’s brother who is in a wheel chair. Sandahl believes that “the film contains numerous characterizations of people with disabilities, and too many acts of violence and ridicule against them to count, not to mention violent acts motivated by homophobia and misogyny” (Sandahl, 193). However, I believe that with Mary being a very compassionate woman character, who cares deeply about disabled people as well as others who have or had some kind of hardships in their life, this should not be the case. Her attitude as well as Ted’s is a counterweight to Healy and his making fun of the mentally disabled. Also, with being aware that American ethnic humor does not really have specific limits, it should not be a surprise, how the disabled are portrayed and that they are also the target of humor.

A comparative examination of the box office receipts of all seven Farrelly brothers films reveals that their most offensive films—those that continue to make jokes at the expense of people with disabilities—were their *most* profitable ventures, with *Dumb and Dumber* earning over \$127 million in 1994, and *There’s Something About Mary* raking in nearly \$177 million in 1998. (LeBesco)

The movie includes several different types of disability since no disability is sacred. One might ask, when did it become acceptable to laugh at physically challenged people? Their exposure to society may play a role. “It was no longer

⁵³ See Disability Stats and Facts.

taboo to gawk at people on wheelchairs and crutches, especially when they put themselves on public display in Special Olympics and other sports events” (Barrick, 201). Mary's brother Warren is disabled as well as some other characters in the movie. “Next to bodily infirmities, intellectual deficiencies are an important source of humor” (Speier, 1374). Mary's brother is mentally challenged, Ted's boss's brother is confined to a wheelchair, Mary's friend Tucker is on crutches – a consequence of a broken back injury, and last but not least, the mentally ill hitchhiker. In all of these previously mentioned examples, handicap is also a source of laughter. Such as in Warren's case, being sensitive about his ear space, or in Tucker's case, when the audience cannot stop laughing at his stunt of trying to pick up his keys while holding crutches. Warren's ear space plays an important role in the movie. “Warren becomes enraged when anyone touches his ears. When Ted mistakenly violates Warren's “ear space” on the fateful prom date, Warren beats him to a pulp. Even though Ted is bleeding from the attack, Mary's family consoles Warren as the victim and berates Ted as the perpetrator” (Sandahl, 194). After Warren hits Healy for touching his ears, Mary tells him,

MARY. Listen, you can't touch his ears until he trusts you.

At the end of the movie the audience, as well as Mary realize that the only person Warren trusts is Ted because he touches his ears without being attacked by Warren. Even though, in the beginning of the movie this was what tore Ted and Mary apart, in the end of the movie, this is what brings them back together. Sandahl writes in her paper,

also, a barometer of morality, Warren's reactions to Mary's suitors determine whether she will find them eligible for her attentions. She dumps her only other serious boyfriend, Brett, when he is accused (falsely, we later learn) of considering Warren a burden. At the end of the film, Mary chooses Ted over Brett (who has reappeared) partly because Warren likes Ted best. (Sandahl, 193)

Another reoccurring joke related to Warren's disability is his misinterpretation of what he hears, “jokes about the deaf have a long history in folk literature, but most of them are based on mishearing or misinterpreting what is said rather than on an outright inability to hear at all” (Barrick, 204). In the beginning of the movie, when Warren is introduced to the audience he is seen walking around Mary's school, looking for his baseball. Some guys tell him a girl has it but that it is called differently. After which, Warren is asking people “Have you seen my wiener?” not being aware what that

even means. Also, as mentioned before, when Ted has his zipper accident at Mary's house, Warren repeats several times "frank and beans" and "he was masturbating" while laughing at the same time. However, the way Warren, a person with disability, is portrayed in the movie makes it slightly more acceptable.

Films such as those of the Farrellys hedge their bets on issues such as this, however, a typical characteristic of mainstream productions that do not want to give too much offense to potential viewers. A Key measure of virtue in *There's Something About Mary*, for example, is a positive attitude towards Mary's brother Warren (W. Earl Brown), a character with learning difficulties. (King, 75)

Although Warren is portrayed as a mentally challenged character in the above-mentioned scenes, the audience sees him earlier in the movie at home trying to solve the rubix cube. In the next scene the rubix cube is completed. The role of the rubix cube in the movie is contradictory to the belief that Warren, because being mentally challenged, is not smart. It could even be said that this particular scene establishes Warren's intelligence, which must be high. People trying to solve rubix cubes usually possess knowledge of algorithms and permutations. The rubix cube was very popular in the 1980s, when *There's Something About Mary* is taking place.

As mentioned before, not only is Mary compassionate towards people who are different, Ted is shown to share the same quality.

After this scene, the Farrellys immediately cut to a quick, and classic, scene of kind Ted (Ben Stiller) helping a grouchy disabled guy to move. Ted literally bends over backwards to carry heavy furniture for an ungracious man whose wheelchair bumper sticker reads "How's my driving? Call 1-800-eat-shit." Ted, the *good* character in *There's Something About Mary*, in contrast to Healy, treats Mary's brother Warren well, and is kind to disabled people and small animals. (LeBesco)

Later on in the movie, when Ted spends a day with Mary and Warren he wants to include Warren in the activities, such as playing baseball in a batting cage. This ends with Warren's black eye as a result of being hit by a baseball. Also when they try go-karting Warren gets into an accident and becomes caught in fire. Not only Warren's understanding, but also his behavior is child-like because he likes to play, dress up in costumes and also requires supervision.

The audience knows from the beginning about Ted's compassionate attitude towards disabled people from his experience with Warren. It is quite funny when a

disabled person insults him “because Ted complains about his back in the presence of a man who cannot walk” (Sandahl, 194). Ted is being used to carry ridiculously heavy furniture around for his boss’s brother when he injures his back. Because he mentions the pain he is experiencing, he is verbally abused by a man in a wheelchair, the owner, who follows him around yelling at him and making Ted feel terrible as if it was his fault the owner is handicapped.

BOSS’ BROTHER. Hey, dipshit, be careful with that thing will you.

TED. What?

BOSS’ BROTHER. You heard me. You already put a fucking nick in my piano.

TED. I’ll try to be a little more careful.

BOSS’ BROTHER. What are you a baby? Are you fading out on me?

TED. Nah, It’s just this is a little bit heavy, that’s all.

BOSS’ BROTHER. Heavy? What I wouldn’t give to know what heavy feels like you insensitive prick.

TED. No, I didn’t, I didn’t mean that.

BOSS’ BROTHER. Yeah, yeah, I’m going down the street to get some coffee.

TED. Ok. No, wait, I’ll go get you the coffee. You just... Hey, I’m sorry.

Unlike W. Earl Brown who plays Warren in the movie, Dan Murphy, who plays, the guy in the wheelchair is actually a quadriplegic. Although the Farrelly brothers often deal with disability in their movies, it is also worth mentioning that they actually include disabled actors. “For centuries, people with disabilities have been the target of offensive and degrading humour, but we now see disabled people and their advocates carrying on an active discourse about the benefits, as well as the attendant complications, of using humour to deal with disabilities” (Nielsen, 134). Danny Murphy played minor roles in three movies made by Peter and Bobby Farrelly. He is also an active member in organizations and programs that advocate for those with disabilities. His mission is to help other disabled actors make it in the movie industry. If the part of the audience who dislike the movie based on the offensive treatment of handicapped people knew that Dan Murphy, a friend of Peter Farrelly, actually encouraged the producer to include a person in the wheelchair, is it still as offensive as it was before? “A healthy attribute of any human, disabled or not, is the ability to laugh at themselves and their unique circumstances” (Baum). I believe this fact could make people see things from a different perspective. “The cathartic effect of erasing the pity normally felt toward the disabled, so that the joke-teller and his listener now accept these people on equal terms” (Berrick, 205).

Another instance of making fun of handicapped people is when Tucker visits Mary at her office. While trying to pick up the keys that fell on the floor he wiggles all over the place on his crutches, however, not in a way someone with a history of a broken back would. It is a scene that actually repeats itself once again in her reception office. Even though, as mentioned before, Mary is a compassionate person, she does not help him in trying to pick up the keys that fell on the floor again, but slowly closes the door. There are instances in the movie where something is funny because of mockery of mentally challenged people. "Varying degrees of mental limitation, incapacity or illness are major elements of Farrelly Brothers productions" (King, 75). While this is not the only case of using disability as a laughing matter in Farrelly brother's movies I also doubt it will be the last.

One might wonder, what the role of disabled people in this particular movie is, "the main function of the characters with disabilities is to parallel and amplify Ted's vulnerability, a quality that initially provides obstacles to winning Mary, but that eventually makes him the most successful suitor" (Sandahl, 193).

Political correctness

Dom, Ted's friend, gives him an advice on trying to look Mary up, possibly by hiring a private investigator and this is how sleazy Pat Healy gets involved. After spying on her in the beginning and realizing how attractive Mary is, spying turns into stalking. When Pat meets up with Ted after his trip to Miami, the audience realizes the kind of a politically incorrect idiot he is and that he is possibly also a pathological liar when it comes to Mary. He lies to Ted about Mary, telling him she is nothing like how he described her.

PAT. Was Mary a little big-boned back in high school?

TED. Big-boned? No, no. Not at all. No.

PAT. I guess she packed on a few pounds over the years.

TED. Oh, yeah. So she's a little... she's a little chubby?

PAT. Oh, I'd say about a deuce, deuce and a half. Not bad.

TED. Oh, my. A deuce and a half.

PAT. You know, you shit out a bunch of kids, you're bound to put on a few pounds.

TED. Oh, so she's, um she's married?

PAT. No, no. She's never been. That's the good news

TED. Huh?

PAT. Four kids, three different guys, but no rock. Hyperactive little fuckers, too. Tough to keep up with in a wheelchair, I bet.
TED. She's in a wheelchair? Mary's in a wheelchair?
PAT. I thought that was part of your kick.

Even though Mary is described completely opposite of her real-life appearance, Ted still wants to meet her and possibly help her out. Healy, however, knowing that Ted did not lose his interest in Mary despite what he told him still tries to convince him of the opposite.

TED. Well, listen. I've been thinking about what you said and I still want to look her up.
PAT. Who, rollerpig? Are you nuts?
TED. I thought you said she was a real sparkplug.
PAT. No, no, I said buttplug. She's heinous.

In the scene where Healy is trying to impress Mary about his work with the disabled, it becomes obvious how politically incorrect his opinion about disabled people is. However, Healy knows how important it is to Mary to work and help the disabled community, therefore he tries to impress her. Healy does not only have lack of intelligence but also a lack of feel for how to talk about people who are in one way or another disabled. This is also when Mary's people skills and her compassion shine. Healy is not being politically correct with his insensitive remarks about handicapped people, he does not even know what politically (in)correct means, showing how ignorant he really is.

PAT. My real passion is my hobby.
MARY. Really, what's that?
PAT. I work with retards.
MARY. Isn't that a little, politically, um, incorrect?
PAT. Well, to hell with that... no one's going to tell me who I can and can't work with, right?
MARY. No, I mean...
PAT. We got this one kid, Mongo... He's got a forehead like a drive-in movie theatre, but he's a good ship. So we don't bust his chops too much. So, one day Mongo gets out of his cage...
MARY. What? They keep him in a cage?
PAT. Well, it's just an enclosure...
MARY. No, but they keep him confined?
PAT. Right, yeah.
MARY. That's bullshit!
PAT. Well, that's what I said! So, I went out and I got him, uh, I got him a leash.
MARY. A leash?
PAT. Yeah, one of those ones you can hook on the clothesline, and he can run back and forth and, uh, there's plenty of room for him to dig and play. That

kid is really, uh, he's really blossomed. You know? Now I can take him to movies, baseball games, you know, fun stuff.

MARY. Sounds cool.

PAT. Oh yeah, it's cool for them but for me it's much more than that. For me it's heaven, you know. Those goofy bastards are just about everything I've got going in this crazy world.

In one of the later scenes when he is spending a day with Mary and other exceptional people from Warren's care center the audience is listening to a song playing in the background with the title *Is she really going out with him*. While Healy hangs out with disabled men from the Neary Center for Exceptional People, he comments on them after knocking everyone down during football by saying "Exceptional my ass". Also, while playing checkers with Warren, he cheats and takes Warren's money for losing. Healy is a fine example of a character who is ignorant about disability.

Humor became more daring in recent times because of the transforming genres that continuously transgress boundaries of what is appropriate such as the theme of disability as featured in the Farrelly brother's movie. In order not to find American ethnic humor offensive, one must not take it too seriously.

CONCLUSION

The definition of humor and how people perceive it depends on one's personal taste, and people's tastes are individual and relative. In order to understand ethnic humor, people should have the same or at least similar values and beliefs, as well as share the same cultural background. While foreigners are perhaps not acquainted with the events from American history, American culture and references to popular culture, they will not likely perceive something as funny in the same way an American would. We cannot fail to observe that the use of humor in media has become trend based on the emergence of shows that use laughter in relation with hardships of real-life and the way people are striving to achieve the ideals of the American Dream ethos. Today we can claim with certainty that not only is television influenced by popular culture, but also that television as a medium is in itself considered popular culture and as Robert S. Alley well described it, "for the majority of American people television is a friend, and has become, as well, a critic in comedy [...] of the flaws in our society" (Alley, 1376). The increase of shows and movies that convey controversial topics is due to the demand from the public. It is easier to stimulate people and their public opinion through the use of humor, specific topics, such as politics, homosexuality, religion, disability, and others treated in media. Some viewers also use these shows as a source of information. The characteristics of American ethnic humor in the analyzed genres are: exaggeration, embarrassment, pride, offence, stereotyping, incongruity, and violence. Freedom of speech is definitely the central theme of all the analyzed shows.

Testing and transgressing the boundaries is a characteristic of the humor used in all my analyzed works. All three genres include topical issues of the American society from the past and present. Also, all three genres confront topics surrounding minority groups. *Saturday Night Live* deals with the African American minority, *Family Guy* with the homosexual minority and *There's Something About Mary* with the disabled minority. The analysis has produced results that mirror the actual state of society and their perception of the minority groups as well as the politics behind these issues.

Nonetheless, each genre uses different techniques to incorporate these issues and make them comedic.

The three genres I analyzed serve as examples of American ethnic humor. In the analysis a certain repetitive pattern can be observed. Specifically, all three genres include exaggeration, violence and stereotypes in its humor. Even though, the image of the minority groups generated with humor might seem offensive to some people, the creators aim to transgress the borders of these taboo topics in society. In addition, people who are open-minded understand such humor and are able to laugh at it instead of perceiving it as offensive.

Saturday Night Live has always included politics and criticism of politicians on the show. Chris Rock in his sketch compares the black and white population as well as the relationship between men and women. Therefore, he not only compares ethnicities but also manages to parallel that with gender roles with the use of political satire. He uses the upcoming elections and several pop cultural references to address this particular subject. While his humor is very controversial and racist, regrettably most of the things he talks about, especially about African American minority in the past, are actually true. In the sketch comedy however, Chris Rock is the sole representative of African-American community. Therefore, the situation of the minority group is presented only from one point of the view.

Family Guy often, if not always addresses subject matter that is also relevant in real life. *Family Guy* is certainly crossing boundaries set by previous conventions of cartoons. The show explored how tolerant the audience would be of their humor by challenging the viewers with satire, crude humor, and controversial societal issues. Humor, on one hand, is unpleasant and criticizes American society, and, on the other hand, can raise public awareness about certain issues the shows depict. The homosexual community has been striving for equality for years. They have been targets of hate crimes because of negative publicity from religious conservatives. Even though we live in modern times when people should embrace diversity, many people still do not accept homosexuality, especially people with strong religious beliefs. While some of the humor used on the show is offensive, the creators usually balance out offensive humor with a meaningful message. *Family Guy* highlights the

contradictory views, whereby including a liberal and conservative point of view about homosexuality.

In *There's Something About Mary* the most prominent subject matter is the treatment of the disabled and different disabilities. Perhaps that is the reason why the Farrelly brother's included several characters with disabilities, either mental or physical. Also in *There's Something About Mary* the two opposing characters, namely Ted and Healy are both representatives of how people perceive members of the disabled community. They show that some people want to include them in their life while others treat the disabled in a cruel demeaning manner. In the case of this movie it is also the gross-out scenes that cause laughter and helped it become a trendsetter in the American movie industry.

Even though all of the analyzed genres are based on harmless humor, it still affects the audience and is talked about and analyzed. All works used for this thesis have addressed controversial topics, and by doing so have risked losing the audience through humor, deemed offensive by certain groups. Moreover, the sense of humor of the audience has been addressed and how the knowledge of American history, as well as popular culture - both known as cultural code, is a necessity in order to understand and laugh at this type of humor.

When talking to friends and acquaintances I realized that even their personal opinions were divided when it comes to finding these genres either funny or offensive. "Laughter and humour are essentially subjective and whether we find something humorous, funny, comic, whether we laugh at it heartily or don't even manage a smile, depends on a variety of factors, among them our cultural background and identity, our politics and aesthetics, and our location and current state of mind" (Reichl & Stein, 5). I believe that if people did not take humor so seriously they could actually laugh at it. I see myself as a very tolerant, open-minded person who accepts all kinds of people. I do not judge people based on the color of their skin, their sexual tendencies or their disability. Because the stereotyping of these minorities is extremely exaggerated in the analyzed shows I laugh at these scenes because I know this portrayal could not be further from the truth, or at least, my truth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Video sources

Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger – London, New York, Johannesburg. Dir. Marty Callner. DVD. HBO Home Video, 2009.

Family Guy. *Family Guy, Volume Seven.* Dir. Pete Michels and Peter Shin. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Saturday Night Live: The Best of '06/'07. Dir. Don Roy King. DVD. Universal Studios, 2008.

SNL Special Report: The Road to the White House. *Saturday Night Live.* Television. NBC, March 17, 2007.

There's Something About Mary. Screenplay by Ed Decter, John J. Strauss, Peter Farrelly and Robert Farrelly. Dir. Peter Farrelly and Robert Farrelly. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 1998.

Primary sources

Alley, Robert S. "Television." *Handbook of American Popular Culture.* Ed. Thomas M. Inge. Vol.3. 2nd ed. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989. 1367-1404.

Andrin, Muriel. "Back to the »Slap«: Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence." *Slapstick Comedy.* Ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King. New York: Routledge, 2010. 226-235.

Apte, Mahadev L. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach.* New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Barrick, Mac E. "The Helen Keller Joke Cycle." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America.* Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 195-207.

Bartlett, James. 2007. "Seth MacFarlane – he's the 'Family Guy'." 10 October 2010. <<http://greatreporter.com/mambo/content/view/1383/11/>>.

Baum, R. Bruce. "Humor and Disability." *The Bridge* 8(4), (1998): 3-5.

- Beach, Christopher. *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*. 1st ed. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. "What Makes People Laugh?: Cracking the Cultural Code." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 28-29.
- Bier, Jesse. *The Rise and Fall of American Humor*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1968.
- Bigsby, Christopher, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Booker, M. Keith. *Drawn to Television: Prime-time Animation from The Flintstones to Family Guy*. Westport [u.a.]: Praeger, 2006.
- Boskin, Joseph. *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997.
- *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.
- "African-American Humor: Resistance and Retaliation." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 145-158.
- "The Giant and the Child: "Cruel" Humor in American Culture." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 187-194.
- "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos." *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique* 11.4 (October, 1990): 473-482.
- Boskin, Joseph and Joseph Dorinson. "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival." *American Quarterly* 37.1 Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985). 81-97.
- Bradley, Sculley. "Our Native Humor." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 46-54.
- Browne, Ray B. and Pat Browne, eds. *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 2001.
- Burma, John H. "Humor as a Technique in Race Conflict." *American Sociological Review* 11.6 (December, 1946): 710-715.
- Callaghan, Steve, ed. *Family Guy: The Official Episode Guide Seasons 1-3*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005.

- Campbell, Neil and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Chapman, Anthony J. And Hugh C. Foot, eds. *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1996.
- Chung, Jack. "The Burden of Laughter: Chris Rock Fights Ignorance His Way". 2002. *Essays from the Program in Writing and Rhetoric: Boothe Prize Winners and Honorable Mentions*. 31 August 2011 <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/undergrad/cgi-bin/drupal_ual/sites/default/files/common/docs/pwr_bootheprize_02.pdf>.
- Cox, Ted. "Undercover at a Christian Gay-to-Straight Conversion Camp". 2010. *The Good Men Project*. 30 September 2012. <<http://goodmenproject.com/ethics-values/undercover-at-a-christian-gay-to-straight-conversion-camp/>>
- Creeber, Glen, ed. *The Television Genre Book*. 2nd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Dale, Alan S. *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*. Minneapolis, Minnesota [u.a.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Davies, Christie. *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- DeRochi, Jack. "What Have You Learned? Considering a New Hermeneutic of Satire in Family Guy." *Studies in American Humor* 17 (2008): 35-48.
- Dirks, Tim, ed. *Comedy Films*. *Amc Filmsite*. 14 September 2009 <<http://www.filmsite.org/comedyfilms.html>>.
- Dudden, Arthur Power, ed. *American Humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- "American Humor." *American Quarterly* 37.1 Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985): 7-12.
- "The Record of Political Humor." *American Quarterly* 37.1 Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985): 50-70.
- Dundes, Alan. *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987.
- Erichsen, Ulrike. "Smiling in the face of adversity: How to use humour to defuse cultural conflict." *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*. Ed. Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005. 27-41.
- Farley, Rebecca. "From Fred and Wilma to Ren and Stimpy: What makes a cartoon 'prime time'?" *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Ed. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 147-164.

- Fellner, Astrid and Klaus Heissenberger. "I was born in East L.A.: Humour and the displacement of nationality and ethnicity." *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*. Ed. Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005. 161-176.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Wit and Its Relation to the Uncconscious*. London: Routledge. 1999.
- Furtado, Filipe. "The Farrelly Brothers' Body (dys)functions." 14 September 2009 <<http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue10/farrelly.html>>.
- Gidley, Mick, ed. *Modern American Culture: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. New York: Longman. 1997.
- Goldsby, Richard A. "The Role of Black Comedy in Supporting Stereotypes of Black Intellectual Inferiority: Social Satire Aimed at Ignorance." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 40 (Summer, 2003): 88.
- Gordon, Dexter B. "Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression." *Journal of Black Studies* 29.2 (November, 1998): 254-276.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, parody, and intertextuality*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Hill, Doug and Jeff Weingrad. *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. New York: William Morrow, 1986.
- Hilton.Morrow, Wendy and David T. McMahan. "The Flintstones to Futurama: Networks and prime time animation." *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Ed. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 74-88.
- Holte, James Craig. "Unmelting images: Film, Television, and Ethnic Stereotyping." *MELUS* 11.3 (Autumn, 1984): 101-108.
- IGN Movies. 2007. "An Interview with Seth MacFarlane: The creator of *Family Guy* discusses his career." 10 October 2010 <<http://movies.ign.com/articles/429/429628p1.html>>.
- Indick, William. *Psychology for screenwriters: building conflict in your script*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2004.
- Inge, M. Thomas, ed. *Handbook of American Popular Culture*. 3 Vols. 2nd ed. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- Jimerson, Jason B. Rev. of *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*, by Joseph Boskin. *The American Journal of Sociology* 104.4 (January, 1999): 1204-1205.

- Johnson, Catherine. "Quality/Cult Television: *The X-Files* and Television History." *The contemporary television series*. Ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 57-71.
- Jones, Mike and David Gelb. Homosexuality in the Media. *Utah State University*. 19 October 2012 <<http://ocw.usu.edu/english/introduction-to-writing-academic-prose/homosexuality-in-the-media.html>>.
- Joyce, Simon. "Genre Parody and Comedic Burlesque: Keystone's Meta-Cinematic Satires." *Slapstick Comedy*. Ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King. New York: Routledge, 2010. 49-66.
- Karnick, Kristine Brunovska and Henry Jenkins, ed. *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. New York [u.a.]: Routledge. 1995.
- Kaufman, Gerald. "All in the Worst Possible Taste." *New Statesman*. 25 September 1998: 65-66 .
- Kaye, Sharon M. "Mmmyeze: Stewie and the Seven Deadly Sins". *Family Guy and Philosophy: a Cure for the Petarded*. Ed. Jeremy J. Wisniewski. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 74-86.
- Keough, William. "The Violence of American Humor." *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998. 133-143.
- King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002.
- Kohut, Andrew and Bruce Stokes. *America Against the World: How We are Different and Why We are Disliked*. New York: Times Books, 2006.
- Koziski, Stephanie. "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic." *The Humor Prism in 20th-century America*. Ed. Joseph Boskin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 86-114.
- LeBesco, Kathleen. "There's Something About Disabled People: The Contradictions of Freakery in the Films of the Farrelly Brothers." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 24.4 (Summer 2004). 7 September 2012 <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/895/1070>>.
- Leveen, Lois. "Only When I Laugh: Textual Dynamics of Ethnic Humor." *MELUS* 21.4 (Winter, 1996): 29-55.
- Lipsitz, George. "Race and Racism." *Modern American Culture: An Introduction*. Ed. Gidley, Mick. 3rd ed. New York: Longman. 1997. 120-141.
- Lowe, John. "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing." *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986): 439-460.
- Marc, David. "Television Comedy." *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998. 249-271.

- Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- "Comic Films." *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998. 225-248.
- Melloy, Killian. Gay 'Family Guy' Episode Provokes Christian Right. 30 September 2012. <<http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=news&id=88405&sc=&sc3=>>
- Mintz, Lawrence E, ed. *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.
- "Ideology in the Television Situation Comedy." *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998. 273-284.
- Rev. of *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, by Mahadev L. Apte. *The Journal of American Folklore* 99.393 (Jul.-Sep. 1986): 339-341.
- "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation". *American Humor*. Ed. Arthur Power Dudden. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. 85-96.
- Mulder M.P. and A. Nijholt. *Humour Research: State of Art*. Netherlands: Centre for Telematics and Information Technology, University of Twente. 2002.
- Neale, Steve and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Nielsen, Jakob Isak. There's Something about Comedy Theory. P.O.V. No.26. 7 November 2011 <http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_26/section_1/artc8A.html>.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace and Don L.F. Nilsen, ed. *Encyclopedia of 20th-century American Humor*. Westport: Greenwood, 2000.
- Nilsen, Don L.F. "Just how ethnic is ethnic humour?" *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 38.1 (Spring 2006): 131-139.
- Ott, Brian L. »Oh my god, they digitized Kenny!«: Travels in the South Park Cybercommunity V4.0. *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Ed. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 220-242.
- Paulus Tom and Rob King, ed. *Slapstick Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Paletz, David L. "Political Humor and Authority: From Support to Subversion". *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique* 11.4 (October, 1990): 483-493.

- Power Dudden, Arthur, ed. *American Humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc: 1987.
- Purdum, Todd S. "S.N.L.: The Skyscraper of Satire". *Vanity Fair*. 20 October 2011. "<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2011/04/todd-purdum-saturday-night-live-201104>".
- Rabinowitz, Howard N. "Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Pluralism in American History" *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*. Ed. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams. Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983. 23-50.
- Rappaport, Leon. *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor*. Westport: Greenwood/Praeger, 2005.
- Reichl, Susanne and Mark Stein, ed. *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005.
- Ross, Steven J., ed. *Movies and American Society*. 1st ed. Oxford [u.a.]: Blackwell. 2002.
- Sandahl, Carrie. "Disability and Comic Violence in There's Something About Mary." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 19.3 (Summer, 1999). 192-195.
- Schein, Harry. "What is Film Humor." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 11.1 (Autumn, 1956): 24-32.
- Schlote, Christiane. "The sketch's the thing wherein we'll catch the conscience of the audience': Strategies and pitfalls of ethnic TV comedies in Britain, the United States, and Germany." *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*. Ed. Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005. 177-190.
- Shales, Tom and James Andrew Miller. *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live*. 1st ed. Boston [u.a.]: Little, Brown and Company, 2003.
- Shoemaker, Michael and Scott Weinstein. *SNL presents: The Clinton Years*. New York: TV Books, 1999.
- Sloane, David E. E., ed. *New Directions in American Humor*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998.
- Smith, Greg. "Serial Narrative and Guest Stars: *Ally McBeal's* Eccentrics." *The contemporary television series*. Ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 102-122.
- Smyth, Willie. "Challenger Jokes and the Humor of Disaster." *Western Folklore* 45.4 (October, 1986): 243-260.
- Speier, Hans. "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power." *The American Journal of Sociology* 103.5 (March, 1998): 1352-1401.

- Stabile, Carol A. and Mark Harrison. ed. *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Stauffer, Donald Barlow. "Teaching a Text-Based Humor Course: »You can't get there from here, stranger«." *New Directions in American Humor*. Ed. David E. E. Sloane. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998.
- Stearns, Peter N. Rev. of *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, by Daniel Wickberg. *The Journal of American History* 86.1 (June, 1999): 282-283.
- Stephenson, Richard M. "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor." *The American Journal of Sociology* 56.6 (May, 1951): 569-574.
- Sun, Douglas. "Change It! This Sucks!": Beavis and Butt-head, Idiot Savants of Cultural Criticism." *New Directions in American Humor*. Ed. David E. E. Sloane. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998.
- Tagliere, Julia. "The SNL Effect-Satire or Something More?". *Buzzle Web Portal: Intelligent Life on the Web*. 20 October 2011 <<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/the-snl-effect-satire-or-something-more.html>>.
- Tallack, Douglas. *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context*. New York: Longman. 1991.
- Tueth, Michael V. "Back to the Drawing Board: The family in animated television comedy." *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Ed. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 133-146.
- VanArragon, Raymond, J. "Family Guy and God: Should Believers Take Offense?" *Family Guy and Philosophy: a Cure for the Petarded*. Ed. Jeremy J. Wisniewski. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 16-26.
- Vasey, Ruth. "The Media." *Modern American Culture: An Introduction*. Ed. Gidley, Mick. 3rd ed. New York: Longman. 1997. 213-238.
- Walker, Nancy A., ed. *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998.
- Walker, Nancy A. and Zita Dresner. "Women's Humor in America." *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1998. 171-184.
- Whalley, Jim. *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture: From Chevy Chase to Tina Fey*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Whitfield, Stephen J. "Richard Nixon as a Comic Figure". *American Humor*. Ed. Arthur Power Dudden. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.138-161.

Wickberg, Daniel. *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Wisnewski, J. Jeremy, ed. *Family Guy and Philosophy: a Cure for the Petarded*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Zengerle, Jason. "The State of the George W. Bush Joke". *The New York Times*. 20 October 2011
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/22/arts/television/X22ZENG.html?pagewanted=all>>.

Secondary internet sources

American History Timeline: American Involvement in Wars from Colonial Times to the Present. About.com American History. 13 August 2012
<<http://americanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/bltimelineuswars.htm>>.

Baer, John W. The Pledge of Allegiance: a Short History. 28 October 2012
<<http://oldtimeislands.org/pledge/pledge.htm>>.

Chris Rock Kicks Off Stand-Up Tour at MSG. *Hiphop-elements*. 13 April 2012
<<http://www.hiphop-elements.com/article/read/4/13359/1/>>.

Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger – London, New York, Johannesburg. *IMDb*. 20 June 2012
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1213574/quotes>>.

Disability Stats and Facts. Disability Funders Network. 30 September 2012
<<http://www.disabilityfunders.org/disability-stats-and-facts>>.

Election 2012: *Saturday Night Live* and the Election Cycle. *University of Southern California Media Relations*. 5 June 2012
<<http://politicsandsociety.usc.edu/2008/05/saturday-night-live-election-cycle.html>>.

Facts about Seabiscuit: About Him. 13 June 2012
<http://old.bpsd.org/ims/Tech_Ed/8th%20Grade/Webpages_05-06/2nd-9wks_files/pd2/poploski.colleen/about_him.htm>.

John McCain To Appear on Saturday Night Live. *People Magazine*. 13 August 2012
<<http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20237160,00.html>>.

Jokes4us. 20 June 2012 <<http://www.jokes4us.com/>>.

Leviticus 18:22. *Biblos.com: Search, Read, Study the Bible in Many Languages*. 1 September 2012 <<http://bible.cc/leviticus/18-22.htm>>.

- Linder, Douglas O. A Trial Account. Famous American Trials: The O.J. Simpson Trial, 1995. 13 August 2012 <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Simpson/Simpsonaccount.htm>>.
- Lovgren, Stefan. From Nag to Riches: The Story of Seabiscuit. *National Geographic*. 13 June 2012 <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/07/0728_030728_seabiscuit.html>.
- NGLCC Corporate Partners. *NGLCC: National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce*. 10 October 2012 <<http://www.nglcc.org/>>.
- Poverty in the United States: A Snapshot. *National Center for Law and Economic Justice*. 13 August 2012 <<http://www.nclej.org/poverty-in-the-us.php>>.
- Reinhardt, Frederick. AFA Says Pepsi sponsors homosexual agenda on “The Family Guy”. *The Examiner*. 10 October 2012 <<http://www.examiner.com/article/afa-says-pepsi-sponsors-homosexual-agenda-on-the-family-guy>>.
- Saturday Night Live Transcripts (Season 32, Episode: 15). SNL Special Report: Road to the White House..... Chris Rock. 14 April 2010 <<http://snltranscripts.jt.org/06/06orock.phtml>>.
- StopBSL. 7 September 2012 <<http://stopbsl.com/bsloverview/>>.
- The White House. Our presidents: 16. Abraham Lincoln 1861-1865. 13 August 2012 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/abrahamlincoln>>.
- The Declaration of Independence. In Congress, July 4, 1776: The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America. 28 October 2012 <<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>>.
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964. *United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary*. 13 August 2012 <<http://www.judiciary.senate.gov/about/history/CivilRightsAct.cfm>>.
- Thielman, Sam. Chris Rock rolls at Gracies: Sykes receives award for her ‘Sick’ special. *Variety*. 20 June 2012 <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117967328?refcatid=38&printerfriendly=true>>.
- Trueman, Chris. Montgomery Bus Boycott. *History Learning Site*. 13 August 2012 <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/montgomery_bus_boycott.htm>.
- Tubbs, Gregg. Movie Review: Seabiscuit. *The United Methodist Church*. 13 June 2012 <<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=732>>.
- U.S. Constitution. *FindLaw*. 13 August 2012 <<http://constitution.findlaw.com>>.
- Zakaria, Fareed. Incarceration Nation. *Time Magazine*. 13 August 2012 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2109777,00.html>>.

INDEX

- Abolition 3
- African-American humor 46
- American Constitution 2
- American culture ... 3, 7, 10, 14, 17, 20, 21, 22, 37, 38, 44, 65, 66, 78, 88, 93, 120
- American Dream ... 2, 4, 13, 17, 22, 23, 26, 29, 30, 32, 66, 69, 70, 77, 120
- American ethnic humor ... 1, 2, 3, 4, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 46, 69, 96, 98, 99, 113, 119, 120, 121
- American history ... 3, 4, 24, 27, 30, 36, 38, 48, 120, 123
- American ideals 7, 17, 18, 21, 28, 69
- American Revolution 25
- American society .1, 2, 3, 4, 13, 18, 24, 27, 28, 31, 45, 68, 77, 89, 93, 121, 122
- Animated show 1, 4, 31, 68
- Animation...1, 5, 28, 31, 64, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 77, 78, 85, 86, 88
- Baby boomers..... 36, 37, 38
- Bill of Rights 2, 22, 26
- Body..... 4
- Bushisms 55
- Civil Rights Movement 3, 24, 37, 48
- Comedy 1
- Cultural code..... 19, 20, 123
- Declaration of Independence 2, 22, 23, 25, 26
- Definitions of humor 5
- Democracy 2, 21, 25, 26, 31, 38, 41, 52
- Disability 4, 9, 15, 78, 81, 92, 94, 98, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 119, 120, 123
- Double-coding..... 66, 67
- Ethnicity ... 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 45, 47, 77, 92, 121
 - American ethnicity* 11
 - Ethnic groups* .10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 45, 47, 83
- Exaggeration 18, 85, 88, 90, 98, 99, 107, 112, 121
- Fans 32, 33, 63, 72, 93
- Folklore 1, 3, 21, 57
- Freedom of speech ... 2, 26, 31, 33, 38, 39
- Freud, Sigmund . 8, 9, 17, 19, 103, 104
- Functions of humor 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 16, 28, 29, 45, 52, 70, 78, 97, 101, 104, 117
 - Conflict function* 15
 - Control function* 15
 - Informative function* 16
 - Social function* 16
- Gender 3, 9, 15, 19, 25, 26, 30, 53, 64, 67, 76, 81, 92, 94, 121
- Gross-out .. 29, 90, 93, 94, 97, 98, 100, 101, 103, 104, 109, 122
- Hobbes, Thomas 8
- Homophobia 9, 113
- Homosexuality 4, 64, 65, 76, 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 87, 88, 89, 120, 122
- Human rights 2
- Humor canon 1
- Humor theory 3
- Media 2
- Melting pot 3, 10, 13
- Minority groups ... 2, 12, 14, 15, 16, 25, 30, 33, 45, 96, 112, 121, 123
 - African-Americans* 2, 28, 45, 48, 49, 50, 54, 58, 59, 60, 77, 121, 122
 - Disabled* 2, 16, 90, 94, 96, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122
 - Homosexuals*... 2, 16, 77, 82, 83, 88, 109
- Monologue 4, 35, 40, 43, 49, 50, 52, 59
- Montgomery Bus Boycott 60
- National identity 7, 10, 12, 31
 - American identity* 19, 21, 23
- Parody. 4, 6, 13, 15, 32, 35, 40, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 76, 78, 92, 97
- Physical comedy 1, 8, 77, 96, 105
- Plato 8

Pledge of Allegiance.....	2	Silent movies	1
Political correctness	18, 26, 94	Sitcom.....	8, 29, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 71, 77, 78, 79, 80
Political humor... ..	24, 25, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 58	<i>Animated sitcom</i>	68, 77
<i>Bush, George W.</i> ..	41, 42, 52, 54, 55, 56	<i>Domestic sitcom</i>	77
<i>Clinton, Bill</i>	41, 56	Slapstick	1, 4, 32, 67, 71, 72, 94, 96, 97, 99, 100, 104, 106, 107, 108, 110
<i>Elections</i> ..	39, 40, 44, 47, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58, 121	Social laughter	12, 14
<i>Giuliani, Rudy</i>	52, 54, 56	Stereotypes ...	4, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 31, 50, 76, 82, 83, 84, 86, 89, 108, 109, 121, 123
<i>McCain, John</i>	42, 50, 52, 53, 57	Taboo ..	6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 30, 34, 38, 46, 64, 75, 76, 89, 94, 97, 109, 113, 121
<i>Obama, Barrack</i> ...	42, 44, 47, 50, 51, 52, 54, 57	Taste	6
<i>Politicians</i> ...	4, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 52, 53, 75, 77, 91, 121	Television ..	1, 4, 5, 8, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 43, 46, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 68, 69, 72, 73, 78, 81, 83, 86, 90, 97, 109, 120
Political incorrectness.....	69, 71, 93, 98	<i>Advertising</i>	75, 76
Popular culture	1, 17, 29, 33, 37, 47, 49, 50, 61, 62, 66, 72, 120, 123	<i>Fox</i>	31, 32, 63, 68, 69, 70, 73, 74, 81, 86
Prejudice	9, 47, 83	<i>NBC</i>	31, 32, 34, 40
Prime-time ...	31, 33, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69	<i>News</i>	27, 35, 42, 43, 44, 73, 74, 118
Production Code.....	29	<i>Television networks</i>	30, 38, 43, 69
Public opinion ..	2, 13, 16, 18, 24, 25, 26, 29, 37, 42, 44, 47, 49, 89, 120	Theories of humor	7, 90
Race ..	9, 10, 12, 14, 19, 24, 25, 26, 44, 46, 47, 48, 50, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 67, 74, 92	<i>Incongruity theory</i>	7, 9
Religion ...	9, 10, 13, 17, 22, 30, 61, 64, 76, 81, 82, 86, 87, 88, 89, 120, 122	<i>Relief theory</i>	7, 8, 9
<i>Bible</i>	86, 87, 88	<i>Superiority theory</i>	7, 8
Satire ...	4, 9, 15, 17, 35, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 49, 52, 63, 66, 69, 70, 71, 97, 121, 122	Topical jokes.....	9
Seabiscuit.....	50, 57, 58	U.S. Constitution.....	22, 23, 39, 59
Sense of humor	6	Vaudeville	1, 29, 64, 67
Sexual preference	9	Violence.....	26, 27, 28, 29, 63, 64, 70, 71, 88, 98, 99, 100, 104, 105, 106, 107, 113, 121
		Women's Rights Movement.....	48, 59

APPENDIX 1

[Jimmy Kimmel] As you know the Presidential election is on Tuesday, according to the polls Obama and Romney are still neck and neck, both campaigns made their like final push today – Romney has a very strong lead among white voters but some prominent Obama supports are looking to chip into that and our friend Chris Rock is one of them. Chris Rock is from Brooklyn and tonight he's recorded a special message for us targeted specifically at undecided voters of the caucasian variety. So listen and decide for yourself.

[Christopher Julius "Chris" Rock III (February 7, 1965)] Hi, I'm Chris Rock with a special message for white people. In times like these you need a President you can trust and that white president's name is Barack Obama. Lets take a look at the facts: for the first two thirds of his life Barack Obama was known as Barry which is the third whitest name on earth. Right after Cody and Jeff. And these are the white people who raised Barry. Madelyn and Stanley Dunham. Their so white they have to wear sunglasses because they are hurting each others eyes. After college Barry went into black neighborhoods in Chicago to try to organize people. How white is that? Black people don't have to go into black communities, we don't have to; we are already there. Look at him; playing golf, body surfing, wearing mom's jeans, dancing with Ellen. Barack Obama supports gay marriage. Most black men don't even support straight marriage. President Obama has a dog but is it a Pitbull, is it a Rottweiler? No! It's a Portuguese Water Dog. And he named it: "Bo." After one of the Dukes of Hazard. And lets not forget Barack Obama is whiter than Snooki, the tanning mom and Tara Reid. Even Mitt Romney is blacker than Obama. This is Obama's family and these are the Romney's. Look at that: Kids, Cousins, Aunts, Uncles. Mitt Romney's family has more people in it than Tyler Perry. And if your still not convinced check this out:

[Barack Hussein Obama II (born August 4, 1961)] I Barack Hussein Obama do solemnly swear I am a white guy so help me god.

[Chris Rock] If you want a white president. I have a polo wearing, Hawaii living, home beer brewing, league bowling guy for you – Barry Obama! He's juuuuuuuuuust WHITE.

Paid for by Chris Rock The Vote

[Jimmy Kimmel] Thank you Chris, he made some good points.

Source: <<http://lybio.net/tag/chris-rock-message-for-white-voters-transcription/>>
(November 30, 2012)

APPENDIX 2

The NFL on NBC

Bob Costas.....Darrell Hammond
Mike Ditka.....David Koechner
O.J. Simpson.....Tim Meadows
Marv Levy.....Will Ferrell

Saturday Night Live Transcripts

Aired on: October 7, 1995

[title animation plays on the screen]

Announcer: This is "The NFL on NBC." For week 6, with Bob Costas.

[dissolve to Bob Costas in the game booth]

Bob Costas: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Bob Costas, and we've got a full slate of games for you. *And!* With me, as always - Mike Ditka. [wide shot reveals Mike Ditka in the booth with Bob Costas]

Mike Ditka: Good to see you, Bob.

Bob Costas: Those of you on the East Coast, you'll be getting our featured game - the New York Jets visiting the Buffalo Bills. *And!* Reporting from the sidelines in Bridge Stadium today, back with us once again - O.J. Simpson. Juice. Juice, welcome back. [cut to O.J. Simpson standing on the sidelines, holding up his microphone with a gloved hand]

O.J. Simpson: Yeah, well, thanks, Bob! Well, the Jets -- [the audience cheers wildly] Well, as you know, Bob, well, the Jets, they've gotten off to a rough start. But you've gotta throw off the one-loss record, because there is **no** love lost between these two teams! [O.J. nonchalantly waves his other hand to reveal a missing glove]

Bob Costas: Okay. By the way, O.J. We're all sorry about your.. year-and-a-half incarceration.

O.J. Simpson: Yeah, well, thanks, Bob. And, by the way, if anyone knows, or has any information about the identity of the murderer, just call 1-600-MURDER. It's important that we find the murderer -- [the audience cheers wildly again] It's important that we find the murderer. After all, if *I* didn't do it, that means someone else *did*. Alright, well, the teams are almost ready to take the field, and, Bob, they look pretty pumped. Right now, I've got Bills coach Marv Levy here. [Marv Levy steps forward] Marv, you guys are 3-1 - you must be feeling real good right now.

Marv Levy: [nervous about being interviewed by O.J.] Uh.. sure, we feel okay.

O.J. Simpson: Now, Marv, the last time you guys played the Jets, you really **killed** them! I mean, you guys really went for the **jugular**!

Marv Levy: Well.. we did win the game..

O.J. Simpson: Yeah, but you know, these two teams, they have a long **ugly** history. It was only a matter of time before you **destroyed** them. A lot of people saw this coming for a long time. I mean, all the **warning signs** were there!

Marv Levy: [confused] What?

O.J. Simpson: Well, you know, like you were **out of control**, or something. You guys were hitting late. You committed one crazy **face mask** penalty, but.. you got away with it. It was like you just put aside the rules and put matters into your own hands. Like, it was the kind of brutalizing effort that must have made you feel **good**, but kinda bad, too.

Marv Levy: Uh.. uh.. I-I-I wouldn't say that, I don't think..

O.J. Simpson: But, you know, who could blame you? You guys were on a **frenzy!** I mean, once the adrenaline gets going, you're not responsible for your actions! Oh, by the way - did you black out at any time?

Marv Levy: I-I'm sorry..?

O.J. Simpson: Now, in the second half, it was **brutal!** I mean, it was the kind of game where, afterwards, you just want to take off your uniform and dump 'em in a duffel bag, and just get rid of 'em before you catch the Red out of Chicago.

Marv Levy: Uh, we-we never played Chicago..

O.J. Simpson: Well, whatever. But, I guess the real question is: Marv, you beat the Jets, but, in a weird way, do you still love 'em?

Marv Levy: Uh.. I-I can't answer that, O.J.

O.J. Simpson: Alright, guys, you got any comments?

Mike Ditka: Yeah, sorry we didn't make it to your, uh, Not Guilty barbecue, O.J., but we're, uh, glad to have you back on the sidelines and not in the booth.

O.J. Simpson: Okay, well, let's go the telestrater now. Here's a play that your offense has been going over a **lot** this year. [takes out pen and draws on telestrater] Now, you lined up your halfback right behind your quarterback -- [draws a line going up on the center of the upper part of the screen (l)] -- your tight end has been running a curl pattern -- [draws a line going down and around on the far right center of the screen (d)] -- Now, when Kelly fakes play action, the defense is frozen.. [on the bottom right of the screen, he draws a line going up and a line going across it for the block (T)] -- allowing you a Wide open to be open on the other side -- [draws a squiggly pattern on the far left center of the screen (d)] -- opening a hole in the middle.. [draws a line on the bottom of the screen (l)] -- and a seam on the left -- [draws final line in the middle (l), spelling the words "I DID IT" on the telestrater]

Marv Levy: [stunned, appalled and scared] **I really gotta go! I gotta go!** [runs away]

O.J. Simpson: Okay! Well, I'll just watch from a distance, alright?

[cut to Bob Costas in the booth]

Bob Costas: O.J., O.J. Why don't you just.. come.. right out and say it?

O.J. Simpson: Alright. It hurts to admit this, but, "Live from New York, **it's Saturday Night!**"

Source: <<http://snltranscripts.jt.org/95/95bnflonnbc.phtml>>
(September 26, 2011)

ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates how ethnicity has influenced humor in the United States. The characteristics of ethnicity are investigated, as well as where different types of American ethnic humor can be found and how it is portrayed in various formats. The arguments within contrast the real-life inequality of certain minority groups in American society, with comical portrayals of these issues in different comedy genres.

The in-depth exploration on this theme is based on three different genres that were selected because they represent a cross-section of ethnic humor, providing examples of comedic devices such as absurd humor, parody, political satire, slapstick and gross-out comedy among others. The analysis concentrates on both the visual and verbal ethnic humor contained in certain comedy works. For this purpose, a study is conducted on the long-running sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. Because of the show's tendency to depict political events as subject matter, the analysis is based on the use of political humor in the form of satire. Political humor is investigated, specifically on how it incorporates the African-American minority, political figures and certain events from American history. The second analyzed piece is the recent controversial animated sitcom, *Family Guy* and its parody of popularized concepts, such as the stereotype of the nuclear family and traditional family values. In the analyzed episode the creators of the animated show incorporated taboo topics in the show's content, such as homosexuality and religious dimensions. Lastly, the analysis concentrates on the Farrelly brother's movie *There's Something About Mary* with its slapstick and gross-out humor in relation to the body and bodily functions, as well as the portrayal of the handicapped minority.

The American ethnic humor emphasizes possible "imperfections" of the American society and the notion of the American Dream. American humor has strong influences from democracy and freedom of speech. It is used to voice public opinion and to address taboo topics through exaggeration and stereotyping. Although its main purpose is to entertain, it also has an informative role for Americans and is therefore a significant indicator of the changes that are needed in the American society.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vorliegende Arbeit behandelt den Einfluss von Ethnizität (Volkszugehörigkeit) auf den Humor in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Dies geschieht anhand einer Untersuchung der Charakterzüge von Ethnizität und durch ein Beleuchten der Regionalisierung verschiedener Arten ethnischen Humors, sowie dessen Darstellung in ausgewählten Unterhaltungsformaten. So findet man in unterschiedlichen Comedy-Genres eine kontrastreiche Darstellung jener Ungleichbehandlung, mit der Minderheiten in der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft häufig konfrontiert werden.

Die genauere Erkundung dieser Thematik basiert auf drei Genres, deren Auswahl darauf beruht, dass sie einen Querschnitt solch humoristischer Gattungen wie des absurden Humors, der Parodie, politischer Satire, Slapsticks und schockierenden beziehungsweise auf Ekelgefühle anspielenden Humors bilden. Die Analyse behandelt ethnischen Humor in visueller und verbaler Form. Zu diesem Zweck wird die seit langem laufende Comedy-Sendung *Saturday Night Live*, in der vor allem politischer Humor in satirischer Form dargeboten wird, einer Studie unterzogen. Hier interessiert die Art und Weise, in der die afro-amerikanische Minderheit, politische Persönlichkeiten und Ereignisse aus der amerikanischen Geschichte einbezogen werden. Das zweite untersuchte Fernsehformat ist die Zeichentrick-Sitcom *Family Guy* und die darin vorgefundene Verarbeitung populärer Konzepte, wie jene des Stereotyps der Kernfamilie ("nuclear family"), sowie traditioneller Familienwerte. Die analysierte Episode beinhaltet tabuisierte Themen wie Homosexualität und religiöse Belange. Der analytische Teil schließt mit einer Abhandlung über *There's Something About Mary* (*Verrückt nach Mary*), einem Film der Farrelly-Brüder, in dem Humor sowohl über Slapstick, als auch mittels auf Ekel anspielende Elemente und der Darstellung von Personen mit Behinderungen funktioniert.

Der amerikanische ethnische Humor betont Mängel der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft und des amerikanischen Traums. Aufgrund seiner starken meinungsäußernden Natur und der steten Verarbeitung tabuisierter Themen anhand von Übertreibung und Stereotypisierung ist diese Art von Humor stark mit Konzepten wie Demokratie und Redefreiheit verbunden. Neben der Hauptaufgabe des Humors, nämlich der zu unterhalten, funktioniert seine ethnisch-basierte Spielart als ein Marker für notwendige Veränderungen innerhalb der amerikanischen Gesellschaft.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: Katrin Al Jezany
Place of birth: Maribor, Slovenia

Education

2000 - 2013	University of Vienna • English and American studies - focus on American literature and media/culture studies • Romance studies - Spanish • Oriental studies - Arabic • Romance studies - Portuguese • Romance studies - French
1996 - 2000	IV. Gymnasium High school, Ruše, Slovenia
1992 - 1996	Franc Rozman Stane Elementary School, Maribor, Slovenia
1991	George Anderson Primary School, Toronto, Canada
1988 - 1991	Franc Rozman Stane Elementary School, Maribor, Slovenia