ASSAULT ON SOCIETY

Satirical Literature to Film

DONALD W. McCAFFREY

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by
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Dedicated to our two daughters, Marcy and Connie, who may disagree with my ranking of *M*A*S*H*, the movie, yet like, as I do, a wide range of comedy films.

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INTRODUCTION

As atomic bombs obliterated the world on the screen and Vera Lynn sang "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day" on the sound track, dark comedy film emerged to tower over fluffy, temporal comedies such as the repetitious, polite, predictable Doris Day pictures and the frenetic, bland beach party movies of the sixties. For in 1964 screenwright Terry Southern and director Stanley Kubrick created the irreverent *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* as an assault on the military-political establishment that seemed to be naively blundering its way into increased Vietnam involvement. Had this work been merely a dark, or as it is often called, black comedy, it might have been as playful as genre spoofs like the take-offs on the serious Western: *Cat Ballou* in 1965 and *Blazing Saddles* in 1974. As a brink of war film comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*, however, seemed to parody war heroics and the intrigue of cold war drama like *Fail-Safe* (1964), which proved to be an abrasive attack on the powers that control our destiny. As a result it created laughter with an undercurrent of grim consequences that made the work satirical.

When I first viewed *Dr. Strangelove*, I realized the indignation it would produce in some audiences. Since our party of four who attended the film in 1965 lived near a Strategic Air Command military base, we witnessed a mixed reaction. Our little group laughed raucously and sometimes painfully as the doomsday blunderers on the screen struggled vainly to prevent holocaust, only to further the annihilation of the planet Earth; others in the audience seemed stunned and finally indignant. It would appear that many of the members of the audience who were attached to the military base felt they were personally being ridiculed.

Obviously, one thing black comedy and satire have in common is the potential to aggravate professional and special interest groups that feel they have been attacked. Critics, in a different way, are irritated by a lack of clear-cut intent in the authors' social criticism and the lack of taste in the assault on society.

Since we are now several decades removed from the most concentrated creation of black comedy films, we can evaluate with more detachment than the journalistic cinema reviewers of the sixties and seventies. However, ambiguity still exists in any evaluator's ability to distinguish black comedy from satire. In fact, the two creative approaches seem to merge, and the intent of the modern author of social criticism, in contrast with some satirists of the past, seems difficult to comprehend. Journalistic film reviewers have faulted black comedy writers for not having the commitment of past masters of satirical writing. Molly Haskell, for example, objects to the efforts of Terry Southern in her review of *The Magic Christian* (*The Village Voice*, February 26, 1970, p. 60, cols. 1–4) because his work did not measure up to Swiftian satire. She called his efforts camp and set forth the view that his approach "lacks the passion or indignation to depict human enterprise as truly repugnant, and the profundity to seek the abiding rather than the fashionable aspects of human folly. Camp is out of place in a politically radicalized world. It supports, so it can parody, the status quo, closed society, sexual repression, snobbery, and gaucherie."

Haskell at least credits Southern with an attempt to gain "Swiftian horror" but questions the modern author's sincerity. The journalistic critic believes she can correctly interpret the intent of Southern—that he does not have the indignation to develop corrective comedy. However, I find it difficult and even questionable to expect the twentieth-century creator of black comedy and satire to adhere to the approach of past masters.

From our historical viewpoint of today, it is easier to detect the social correction universalities of past satirists. Aristophanes, Rabelais, Ben Jonson, Molière, Jonathan Swift, Voltaire were comic writers who attacked the faults of their society with humor that was intended to reform those ills. That is, they hoped their exposure of corruption would resolve some of the problems that existed in their society. Aristophanes, Rabelais,

and Swift were adept at lampooning politics, the arts, philosophy, and education. Jonson, Molière, and Voltaire touched on all these matters and were especially skilled in developing tales that exposed greed, pretense, and false moral values.

As readers and viewers of the modern, complex modes of the novel, play, film, television, or cartoon, we cannot expect twentieth-century writers to conform to the classical models of satire. We should also allow these writers lighter moments—buffoonery that makes the comedy palatable to a wider audience. Even the great playwrights of the past—Aristophanes, Jonson, and Molière—filled their satirical works with crowd-pleasing, lighter moments of comedy.

The black comedy and satirical films of the sixties and seventies are part of a modern literary movement—a movement concentrated in the twentieth century with some roots in the nineteenth. American and British novelists Mark Twain, Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell have been accepted by critics and the public as significant satirists. Least recognized is West, a writer who now has been acclaimed as the precursor of the nihilistic dark comedy; his short novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, created in the thirties, have been recognized by critics as a major influence in this movement. Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, penned in the late nineteenth century, and Orwell's *Animal Farm*, created in the forties, have a modern slant yet are more traditional satires concentrating on political and social issues. These two authors retain the traditional approaches of fantasy and the fable with these two works. Examining issues of the twentieth-century world with a realistic approach, Evelyn Waugh is best known for his dissecting of education in *Decline and Fall* and the funeral business in *The Loved One*, plus an unusual half satirical/half embrace of the upper class in *Brideshead Revisited*. Huxley, best known for his *Brave New World*, an anti-utopian novel, has concentrated more on the jaded world of the sophisticated in his other novels—which probably accounts for an author who has been almost ignored by the popular media, even though he was a screenwriter who adapted such works as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* in the forties. He adapted his short story "The Gioconda Smile," which was released under the title *A Woman's Venge-*

ance in 1948. It was not a box-office success, and plans to produce an adaptation of Huxley's famous satire *Point Counter Point* never materialized.

Ironically, both Aldous Huxley and Nathanael West were satirists who wrote in Hollywood with a degree of success, but could never succeed in adapting their own novels to the screen. Their vision of the world was too grim for the Hollywood of the thirties and forties. Both Huxley and West might have been responsible, however, for influencing the nihilistic view of society that evolved into a minor but significant literary movement of the fifties and sixties. Some of the writers of these two decades who became popular among the reading public were J. P. Donleavy (*The Ginger Man*), Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Terry Southern (*The Magic Christian*), and Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five*). These writers have been identified with a movement that employs dark comedy—a type of irreverent humor that discovers the risible in such serious subjects as death, racial and sexual taboos, and social and mental misfits. While I classify most of the efforts of these writers as satirical pieces, not everyone would agree. Also, I view the handling of such material by these authors as linked to a type of social comment that was the meat of Nathanael West's novels of the thirties. The above mentioned works by Heller, Southern, and Vonnegut have been adapted to the screen with varying degrees of success. They will be explored in the following chapters.

Most comic writers for the popular media engage in some type of comment on our culture, but even when they attack, there is often a spirit of play controlling their thrusts, which mutes their jabs at society. It would appear that they need to hold back the assault to avoid rejection. Such writers contain their lampoons of people's foibles in a way that states, "I didn't really mean it. Just kidding." Woody Allen and Mel Brooks seem to fit into this category. Both were writers for television comedians and eventually became not only writers but producers and actors in their own films. Allen has created many successful movies, such as *What's New Pussycat?* (1965), *Love and Death* (1975), and *Annie Hall* (1977); Brooks has been a popular filmmaker with *The Producers* (1968), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and *Young Frankenstein* (1974). As time has gone by, many critics have realized that Allen and Brooks may be good enter-

tainers, but they do not have much to say about society. We now realize that such writers burlesque the "hang ups," changing attitudes, and fads of society but are so topical they do not have a universal statement on the faults that exist in our world.

What is amazing to any evaluator of film is the body of satirical films that *did* emerge in the sixties and seventies which does make significant social comment. In most decades satire has limited acceptance. Hope reigns eternally in our optimistic culture. The "just kidding" tone of our popular entertainers tells us that things really aren't as bad as they seem—as if any stinging jab at a social fault is only a playful, temporary reprimand. Psychologically, such playful pokes allow us relief because we have inner feelings that tell us all is not well, but we would rather continue with the status quo in our culture after we have had our therapeutic laugh; we would just as soon ignore and forget the problems that plague us.

A test for the quality of satirical literature, film, or the cartoon might be the rejection such works receive from incurable optimists or conventional moralists. Both seem to view such thrusts as subversive to traditional values. As it will be shown in this examination, many creators of black comedy and satire are indignant social critics. They are not "just kidding."

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

BIRTH PANGS OF FILM SATIRE

BEFORE THE SIXTIES Hollywood filmmakers had little truck with satirical short stories, novels, or plays unless they could water down the basic material to an intriguing plot for a film drama with popular appeal. The film moguls were obsessed with the box office and the flow of cash, as was stage playwright George S. Kaufman—noted for co-authoring *You Can't Take It with You* (1936) and *The Solid Gold Cadillac* (1953)—who cynically observed that satire closed on Saturday night, meaning that a socially significant comedy would not live long enough to see one more night's performance. Kaufman probably would have liked to have written dramas with more substance, but was, of course, like the Hollywood Studio heads, interested in money.

By reducing the political satire to a children's fairy tale in an animated feature version of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in 1939, Dave and Max Fleischer were merely applying their cartoon skills to create a movie that would entertain people and bring them the returns Walt Disney was receiving from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Pinocchio* (1940). By far the most interesting rape of the stories from classic political satires was Hollywood's handling of Nikolai Gogol's play *The Inspector General* and Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, both released in 1949. These adaptations provided testimony on the filmmakers' creative process.

When first produced as a stage play in 1836, *The Inspector General* reaped considerable consternation from the Russian establishment and even suffered repercussions on the national

governmental level. Gogol had dared to attack political corruption in a provincial town and suggested that maybe even regional government inspectors might be easy subjects for bribery. In the plot material of the drama a traveling, ordinary clerk with a little education is mistaken for an official from a high governmental agency arriving to check on the quality of the town's governmental system. This picaresque character—a young man who gambles and drinks away what little money he has—is wined, dined, bribed, and even offered women. He readily accepts the attention of the officials and bilks them thoroughly until his true identity is discovered. The film version of *The Inspector General* would not cause the leaders in the United States to worry about their image in this 1949 movie as they had worried about the portrait of congressmen in Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a work created ten years earlier. The filmmakers who drained the Gogol classic of much of its substance had lightened the comedy to the point that it was merely a fluffy quasi-musical.

A check of the Warner Bros. file on *The Inspector General*, which is now housed in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, reveals the labored creative process that brought the adaptation of this famous play to the screen. First of all, a reader named Hawthorne read the play and developed a plot summary along with a hopeful, brief note that indicated the dialogue was "extremely amusing, could be used as is." Then, a well-developed script by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer appeared late in 1949, with the locale changed to a mid-European country that was not clearly designated. Since the United States was engaged in the cold war with Russia, it evidently was decided not to use any mention of that country or any character with a Russian name. The movie was designed as a vehicle for the comic talents of Danny Kaye. His wife, Sylvia Fine, became not only the composer of the lyrics and music for his songs, but also the associate producer.*

In her notes to the adaptors, dated December 12, 1947, she complained about the character of the officials of the town losing some dimension that existed in Gogol's original work—meaning, of course, that the satire was diminishing. She later

*Sylvia Fine is particularly noted for bright, clever lyrics and the patter songs that were the distinctive feature of so many of Danny Kaye's film comedies.

indicated that the role of the protagonist who had been changed to a cook from the French army of Napoleon had to be altered since comedian Kaye's comic French dialect was not as effective as his lampoon of a mid-European dialect. By February of 1948 the screenplay had a mid-European character named Georgi instead of Fefi, plus the title *The Happy Times*, evidently derived from one of the important songs designed for the picture. This title was dropped and the original title restored several times until the producers settled for the original. Other versions and revisions by Hecht and Lederer followed, but no one seemed satisfied, and other writers were brought into the project.

Five writers in various combinations struggled with the screenplay until the team of Philip Rapp and Harry Kurnitz received the final credits for a screenplay that was ready by August 1948. As late as June of 1949, obviously during the shooting of the film, Rapp added some silly slapstick scenes to provide a broader comedy than can be witnessed in the work conceived by the Russian playwright. Thus, the final adaptation of a satirical classic comedy was more Kaye than Gogol. Film critic Bosley Crowther realized this while recognizing the fact that some of the plot of the original play had been salvaged:

> The whole structure of this picture is carefully and cleverly designed to give unrestrained play and freedom to the talents of Mr. Kaye. And he, being nobody's wall-flower, makes much of everything that's put in his way. As a shill for a medicine-show barker—a harmless and illiterate tramp—who is presumed to be a great inspector general, traveling incognito, by the officials of a town, he brilliantly travesties the terror and then the bravura of this timid lout when he is fawned upon, lavishly feted and slyly bribed by the frightened councilmen. [*New York Times*, December 31, 1949, p. 9]

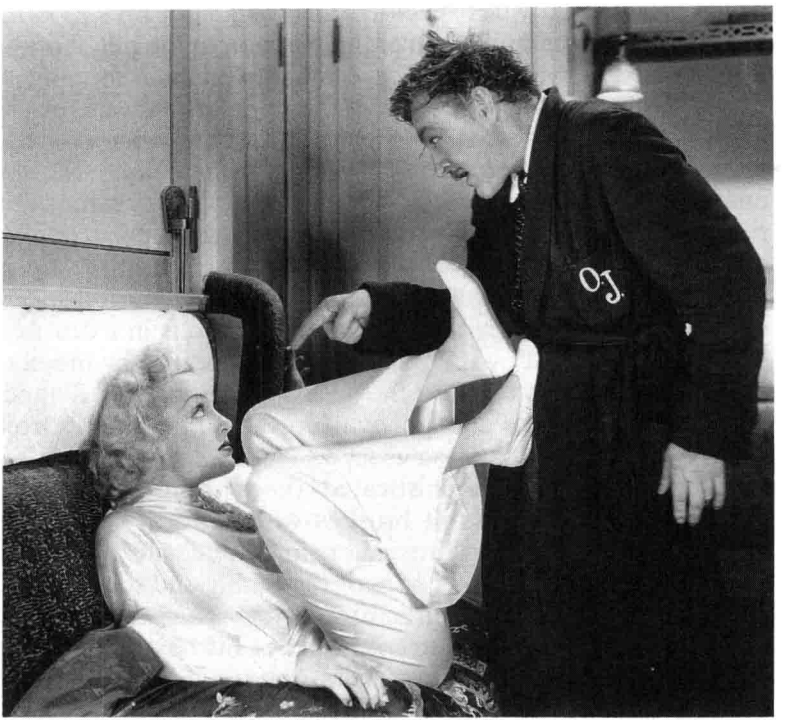
As this comment by Crowther indicates, the Ivan of the original work suffers a character inversion—he is no longer the rake; he is the innocent who is a fool. Not only is a character change demanded before Georgi can take advantage of the weaknesses of the councilmen, but the satire focusing on the protagonist of the original play is absent. Only the corruption

of the councilmen, handled as light comedy, remains as any semblance of satire.

Even less of Mark Twain's intent remained in the Bing Crosby vehicle of 1949, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Part of the emasculation of the original novel evolved from a different creative process than that witnessed in the creation of the filmed version of *The Inspector General*. The Twain classic was already stripped of its political and social comment by two previous screen adaptations. Most of the significance of the original was brushed aside in a silent screen version of 1921 starring Harry C. Myers and released by the Fox Film Corporation. This film displayed even wider variations on the plot of a modern-day man visiting the age of knighthood and chivalry than the sound version of 1931, which was designed to star Will Rogers. The Crosby 1949 restatement of the story deviated even further by turning the film into a quasi-musical providing Rhonda Fleming for the love interest. There is left a sequence drawn from the Will Rogers version showing Crosby battling the knights, using a lasso in the cowboy fashion of comical combat which Rogers had established even in some of his silent screen films. So, the 1949 version strays from the text not only by moving in the direction of the musical but also by drawing from previous versions.

While *The Inspector General* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* are two examples of what happened to satire in Hollywood before the movie capital came to a more firm grip with social comment in the sixties, some efforts in the thirties indicated a trend in this direction. The brush with corrective comedy seemed to manifest itself most in the sophisticated comedy of this decade, with some continuation into the forties. The sophisticated comedy had a great deal to say about the battle of the sexes, strained family relationships, plus corruption in some institutions. Among the most important comedies with these tendencies were *Twentieth Century* (1934), *Nothing Sacred* (1937), and *Topper* (1937)—three films that represented the range of the mode.

Twentieth Century, adapted from a New York Stage play called *Napoleon of Broadway*, focuses on the egocentricities of the artist, with John Barrymore playing the role of the flamboyant stage entrepreneur and Carole Lombard enacting



Carole Lombard and John Barrymore engaged in the male-female physical fight in *Twentieth Century* that was to be a common occurrence in the so-called screwball comedy of the early film satires.

the part of a temperamental star of stage and screen. The work comically reveals the hypocrisy of the theater people whose professional skills at depicting emotions become fused with their private lives—so much so that the false and the real emotions merge to the point of comic confusion. This clever film comedy by director Howard Hawks comes very close to being a penetrating satire on the theatrical institution, but is more successful in revealing the game of one person's manipulation of another and a kind of amoral battle of wits between the sexes.

Both *Nothing Sacred* and *Topper* seem to attack specific institutions in our society with even more directness. *Nothing Sacred* (a work to be examined in more detail in the chapter

which follows) provides specific social comment on sob sister journalism and the public's maudlin reaction to the plight of the unfortunate individual who is presumedly doomed to an early death. *Topper*, an adaptation from the popular fantasy novel by Thorne Smith, explores the institution of high finance and contrasting life styles of the rich. A high living couple, Marion and George Kirby, are killed in an automobile accident and return as ghosts to "do a good deed" for a millionaire banker named Cosmos Topper, who is uncomfortably entrenched in the work ethic and a staid social life. He is pressured into a swinging style of life by the Kirbys, which results in a drunken brawl and his arrest by the police. Shunned before by the elite of their social class because they are considered dull, Topper and his wife are amazed to find overtures for engagements from this group who view Cosmos' escapade fascinating and exciting. Such comments by the sophisticated comedy film of the thirties show that some significant brushes with satirical statements were being attempted by filmmakers in that decade.

Other conventions and codes of the family and society were deftly being attacked by director Preston Sturges, who combined light comedy and satire in some of his best films of the forties. By far one of his most interesting statements was made in the 1944 film *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. This work is a comic exposé of hypocrisy and mechanization in order to cover up the plight of an unwed mother—not usually for the benefit of the woman, but for the comfort of everyone else. Novelist-filmmaker Marcel Pagnol had used this subject, showing the French lower class's handling of the situation with incorruptible *savoir-faire* in the screen adaptations from the plays *Marius*, *Fanny*, and *César*, made between 1931 and 1936. Sturges, with his continental, urbane wit was creating a film before its time with *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* when he handled a taboo that would not easily fade from the culture, even in the wartime period of sexual laxness found in the forties.

The heroine of the Preston Sturges movie and the object of social consternation is a young, naive woman named Trudy Kockenlocker, who in one night gets drunk and impregnated by a soldier on leave whose name she can't remember. The comic complications develop when her family, relatives, and some people in their small town attempt to resolve the "embarrass-