“What, Me Worry?”
Teaching Media Literacy through Satire and *Mad* Magazine

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Teaching media, like teaching anything else, can lead to some very difficult discussions. It’s always possible for students to get bogged down or confused by new material, but when approaching media literacy specifically, students can become especially fatigued. Not only are there literally countless media texts and volumes of relevant criticism for student consumption, but much of that criticism damns students’ everyday, and pleasurable, experiences with media like television, film, and radio. Therefore, discussions of media literacy often feel to students like personal attacks rather than academic explorations. Moreover, students who do begin to examine their relationship to mass media and their unquestioning acceptance of many media messages may start asking themselves some very hard questions about unconscious values they’ve adopted and choices they’ve made. Although they may learn some very important things about themselves, the lessons can feel discouraging. For all of those reasons, students may find the study of media to be very personally trying.

To help things run more smoothly and to alleviate some of the “heaviness” that the topic can bring, teachers may wish to inject some humor into their classes, as I began to do several years ago. I began integrating humor primarily with media literacy and criticism, although it is important to note that not every type of humor was effective. What I discovered (after several “egg on the face” moments) was that satire seemed to be the most effective way of using humor in class. I found that it helped my students pay more attention, remember examples more often, and recall examples from previous semesters over a longer period of time (“Hey Mr. Stark, remember last fall when you talked about the subjective camera perspective?”). Generally, I have found that satire is a very effective supplemental tool for teaching media literacy; more specifically, as a classroom teacher I have found *Mad* magazine a particularly useful resource, in part because it so often satirizes the media.

The Nature and Pedagogical Value of Satire

Researchers, including Kirman (1993), Bogel (2001), and West and Orman (2003), all agree that satire must contain certain specific elements to be effective: It must be relevant, it must be humorous, and it must poke fun at a person or position of authority. Although this should be obvious to the seasoned media literacy teacher, several other characteristics of satire, which teachers may not have considered, might make satire a more relevant and effective tool in their classrooms.

For starters, it makes sense to borrow a page from the study of political satire when considering satire in an educational setting. According to West and Orman (2003), “[Satire] is a way to boost public interest in a subject about which many Americans are not deeply absorbed. The idea is that politics doesn’t hurt as much if you are laughing at public officials” (98). Although it may seem unlikely that students are not deeply absorbed in the mass media, the statement nevertheless is relevant to using satire in the teaching of media literacy. This is especially true if one substitutes some words in the statement—“student interest” for “public interest,” “critical media analysis” for “politics,” and “a familiar film, television show, ad, or

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song" for “public officials,” so that it reads thus: Satire is a way to boost student interest in a subject about which many students are not deeply absorbed. The idea is that critical media analysis doesn’t hurt as much if you are laughing at a familiar film, or television show, or ad, or song.

Used in this sense, satire raises student awareness about media-centered issues just as effectively as it does social, political, and economic ones. Satire can be thought of as a cognitive “bucket of water in the face” for students, helping to startle them into a new awareness of media messages and a new understanding of themselves. Such awareness is a prerequisite to media literacy, and satire can be an effective trigger.

Once satire has increased awareness among students, it can help students take the next step—critical analysis of what they see and hear. Kirman (1993) claims that satire is useful as a means of “giving people power . . . [as] a tool that can help to make them effective critics of politics and society” (139). In this sense, satire gives students the power to more critically engage mass media texts and gain more control over their consumption; thus, media literacy itself offers to students the gift of critical thinking habits in relation to their daily lives. Arguably, viewing the world through a satirical lens may even lead to positive social activism later in a student’s life.

Essentially, then, satire can potentially help a student see the world in a different way and even spur the student to work for change. The link between the concepts of awareness and power should be obvious: satire is useful in helping students gain not only further knowledge, but also the potential to do something with that knowledge in the world at large.

Several media texts with satirical content popular with students clearly demonstrate the strength of satire with younger audiences. Television programs such as Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, and South Park constantly poke fun at current events, politics, fads, and social issues in satirical ways. For instance, in a recent episode of South Park, the entire planet earth was turned into a “reality” television show for an intergalactic television network, thereby calling attention to a recent plethora of cheaply produced and patently absurd reality shows that have been thriving on network television (Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire? or Survivor, for example). Called Earth! by the network, the show was created after the aliens took various races and species from other planets and put them on an unpopulated earth many years ago and subsequently broadcast the show to the rest of the galaxy. In the alien programming executive’s words, “Watching Jews, Asians, and moose all try to live together has been great for our ratings.” Once humans learn that their existence is one big reality TV show, however, earth is slated for “cancellation” by the aliens—to be saved only when the regular South Park characters catch two of the alien TV executives in a compromising, Hollywood-style scandal and so can force the network to renew Earth! for another season (Parker, Stone, and Craden 2003). However little viewers might have thought about serious issues surrounding peaceful multicultural coexistence, the motivations of television network executives, or both, it’s hard to miss the relevant issues and questions this storyline raises.

Because texts such as those are already familiar to students, it is worthwhile to consider using them as examples of satire in a media literacy course. As theorists and teachers agree, familiarity with a topic or a text leads to more active learning and deeper understanding when that text is used as a building block for other topics and concepts. In this sense, students who are familiar with a text like South Park might well be more open to considering learning about other examples of satirical mass media texts and other media literacy issues.

As they begin incorporating satirical elements into the study of media literacy, teachers might even consider using a more collaborative approach to capitalize on the expertise students bring with them to class. A basic tenet of collaborative learning is that “students bring ideas and experiences to learning situations that advance and enrich understanding for everyone else” (Matthews 1996, 102). Even though I am personally familiar with the programming on over fifty cable channels and the Internet, as well as new releases in music and film, I am the first to admit that I have a tough time keeping up with my students when it comes to what’s currently popular. From the simplest standpoint, then, students can be encouraged to discuss their favorite films, music, and television programs, functioning as collaborators in generating course materials and discussions, and helping the teacher and other students stay up to date on currently popular media texts.

Aside from simply helping teachers “keep up with the times,” however, a collaborative approach may help both students and teachers see aspects of media literacy from a different perspective. This occurred to me several years ago when several African American students informed me that my lectures weren’t “reaching them” because, unintentionally, my references were predominantly from white and Anglo media sources. Admittedly, my students had a better understanding of African American media at the time than I did. I encouraged them to bring this topic up for discussion in the next class period and to then provide some examples from African American media texts to help make the connection between their point and the media topic being discussed. After the students made their presentation, I realized that they helped provide the rest of the class with a different perspective that
enriched the entire learning experience for everyone. In addition, they provided me with a fresh insight into a familiar topic that I was able to use in subsequent semesters.

As my experience suggests, some students may be more knowledgeable about a text or genre and may therefore be able to bring a more current and credible perspective to a discussion. Collaborating with students in identifying relevant satirical media products can be a very powerful tool serving a variety of purposes: to ensure the inclusion of popular media texts; to provide different “takes” on media content, making class discussions more diverse and lively; and to raise students’ awareness of issues, helping them develop a sense of power and control.

**Guidelines for Incorporating Satire in the Classroom**

There are at least two considerations that teachers must keep in mind when using any kind of humor, much less satire, to make a point or teach a topic. These should be obvious, but because I’ve managed to ignore them myself at times, I offer these reminders to help the reader avoid any egg on the face moments such as the ones I’ve experienced.

First, remember that for satire to be effective, students need to be able to understand the joke and the reference. Examples that are too old or too obscure will not be effective. Bogel (2001) argues that for satire to succeed, the audience and the satirist must be familiar with the satirized object. This framework is comparable to a media literacy classroom, in which it is important for the teacher and the students to be on the same “wavelength” regarding the topic. If the audience and satirist are not familiar with the satirized object, then the satirical comment is nonsensical. Bogel describes this relationship as “the triangle of satire” (see figure 1).

A second thing for teachers to consider when using satire is to not overdo it. Using satire too often may decrease the seriousness of the topic or devalue the learning process. In their discussion of political satire, West and Orman (2003) consider the harm humor can do to the political process:

> Rather than using humor to engage the public in serious substantive issues, humor deflects from substance and draws our attention to personal or trivial aspects of the political process. When voters form impressions based on comedian monologues, it risks debasing the civic discourse. In these ways, then, humor has political consequences that can affect campaigns and governing. (98)

Again, minor rewording of the point makes clear its relevance to satire in the classroom: Relying too much on satire to engage students with media literacy may deflect their attention from serious substance, trivialize aspects of the critical process, and jeopardize the educational goals of the teacher.

However, teachers who, like me, decide that it’s worth the caution and effort necessary to start incorporating satire into their classes will find that they have a plethora of media texts to choose from as supplement material. One text I believe particularly useful is *Mad* magazine.

**Going *Mad* in the Classroom**

*Mad* has unabashedly satirized everything from politics, to sports, to everyday life for over fifty years (Reidelbach 1991), and during all of those decades it has excelled in satirizing the media. Over the years, the pages of *Mad* have featured film and television parodies, wordplay with advertising, and biting commentary on our relationship with the media in general, making *Mad*’s potential for use as a satirical classroom tool tremendous. For example, educators will find that *Mad* provides satirical material for teaching media history (*Original Finger Painting by J. Fred Muggs* [Muggs 1958]), advertising (*If Advertisers Made Use of the Old Masters* [Jacobs 1985]), television programming (*How TV Networks Can Work Simpson Trial Updates into Their Regular Program* [Boni 1994]), and audio production (*What Disc Jockeys Say . . . and What They Mean* [De Bartolo 1982]). This is a very small sampling of the many pages of *Mad* magazine that target critical media literacy topics. For example, in figure 2, Jacobs is satirizing advertising on several levels. On one level, the figure represents the way advertisers continually repackage old material (*The Thinker*) to sell new products (toilet tissues). Many critics will argue that in the world of advertising, nothing is really new—it is just packaged and sold differently to appear new. On another level, however, this spoof advertisement also points out the triviality of advertising. It can also be argued that advertisers will stop at nothing to sell a product, trivializing a cultural icon like *The Thinker* to sell more toilet paper. Even as it provokes laughter,
Mad's satire can call consumers' attention to deeper issues beneath the surface of media texts that are so common that they may routinely provoke little, if any, critical thought.

If the magazine offers such a rich mine of material, then what are some ways to incorporate its material into the classroom? One of the easiest ways to use Mad is as a straight supplement to the material used in a lesson plan. Simply making an overhead or a handout of an article is easy enough. After conducting a lesson discussing the issues and concerns of video game violence, for example, a teacher may wish to wrap up on a satirical note by displaying Mad's "Heart-stopping New Improvements Planned for the Next Grand Theft Auto" (Mad 2002; see figure 3). One option is to run people over with a vehicle that leaves heart-shaped tire tracks, allowing the player to grimly and bloodily kill with love. Satirical material can also be used either to help introduce new material or to help conclude a lesson.

Given Mad's rich history of media satire, teachers might consider taking time to explore beyond the latest issue of the magazine; classroom relevance of Mad's materials has held steady for well over a decade. For example, ideas that teacher Robert Perrin developed in 1989 remain worthwhile. Perrin suggested that teachers use Mad as an introduction to a topic, and then use examples from the magazine for projects and in-class activities. Perrin himself used a Mad article titled "Why Are We Always Impressed By . . . ?" to help his students explore the values underpinning major media events. In this piece, Mad artists and writers wondered why we're always impressed, for example, by "a movie that wins 'The Academy Award' even though the Motion Picture Academy is filled with the same idiots who gave us 'Ishtar,' 'Shanghai Surprise,' 'Back to the Beach,' 'Blind Date,' and 'The Carebears in Wonderland'" (49).

To push his students' thinking about values, as an in-class exercise Perrin asked his students to come up with their own satirical comments about "recent fads, current topics, and popular fashions" (49). Perrin describes teaching another interesting exercise based on a Mad parody of the film Dirty Dancing, still familiar to many teens. Called "Dorky Dancing," the parody lists classic clichés from the film such as "Rich girl meets boy from wrong side of the tracks," "Hero accused unfairly," and "Impromptu dance turns into a slick, choreographed production" (50). Using "Dorky Dancing," Perrin has his students come up with their own list of clichés from recent movies. The exercise


seems particularly useful in calling students’ attention not only to clichéd language but also to the functions of convention within any genre and to the heavy reliance of the media (as well as other texts) on audience familiarity with predictable traditions. A particularly astute class might even approach the question of what makes a film or other text “art” as opposed to entertainment, and whether/how the purposes of art and entertainment might intersect.

Perrin’s main point, however, is sufficient to argue for such activities: They are useful in helping students see past the hype of much mainstream media, and they can ultimately lead students to deeper understanding of how media texts are produced and consumed, letting them see familiar media texts in new and different ways and helping them to “assess the originality (or lack of . . . ) in current films” (50).

Perrin’s experience and suggestions reinforce a point made earlier: Media analysis is best done collaboratively, with teacher and students all active in analyzing texts. The student interaction and activity being suggested here has been discussed by many researchers as an effective means of learning (Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin 1998; Leamnson 1999; Nilson 1998). When students actively “dissect” a media text, they simultaneously engage in “critical thinking, honest and candid evaluation, and thoughtful though irreverent responses to life’s absurdities” (Perrin 51).

With the potential for such pleasurable and productive classroom activities as well as for nurturing such important growth in student thinking, who should worry, then, about inviting satire—and particularly the iconic Mad magazine—into the classroom?

Key words: media literacy, Mad magazine, satire, humor, mass media

NOTES
1. Teachers who are interested in using Mad in the classroom do not need to invest their life savings in acquiring a paper copy of every issue. Broderbund Software released a package of seven CD-ROMs that contain every issue of Mad through 1998. Up-to-date information on Mad can be found on its Web site <http://www2.warnerbros.com/madmagazine/home.jsp>.

Figures that appear in this article were obtained from Broderbund Software’s 1999 release “Totally Mad: Every issue of Mad magazine on CD-ROM.”

REFERENCES