

Sketch Comedy and the Deconstructive Work of Dialogism

Introduction & Theoretical Framework

To Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, communicative modes operate as genres. Everyday interaction, institutional authority, and cultural exchange are sustained through recognizable modes of address that regulate and cast affect, tone, and expectation. Furthermore, these genres designate certain socially accumulated forms of speech and communication that further coordinate interaction, making meaning among people intelligible. Put simply, they depend on stability during the dialogic exchange. As Bakhtin writes, in *The Problem of Speech Genres*, “each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of utterances” (Bakhtin 60). These utterances, consisting of either words, phrases, sentences, or monologic addresses, carry with them expectations regarding what may be said, how it may be said, and what kinds of responses are appropriate. The utterance’s stability, offered by these expectations, allows communication to progress smoothly; their operations invivibilized.

Sketch comedy interferes at this juncture by intensifying these speech genres until they crack, showing failure through collapse rather than rejection. Rather than opposing social norms from the outside, sketch comedy stages they implode by putting embedded genres under excess pressure. Comedy emerges when familiar communication is pushed beyond the capacity where meaning, affect, or authority can be extrapolated. What follows as a result is a procedural exposure of the ideological and affective labor that normally remains concealed within everyday and institutional, codified speech.

This paper argues that sketch comedy operates as a dialogic and cultural stress-test for social communication. In examining the various ways in which the mode destabilizes societal mores, it will further highlight the effectiveness of the form. Through parody and transtextual recognition, sketches destabilize speech genres and expose the ways in which cultural norms, moral seriousness, and institutional authority are maintained. Furthermore, the humor produced in these moments arises when obedience to genre is complicated and the mechanisms that sustain social coherence are revealed as performances rather than natural or self-evident dispositions. Parody is critical to this process. As Linda Hutcheon contends in *A Theory of Parody*, “parody...is repetition, but repetition that includes difference,” one that places the background text and the foregrounded transformation into critical relation (Hutcheon, *Parody*, 32). In this way, comedy sketches have a two-pronged purpose: to adapt, and to criticize. Sketch comedy depends more on this double-purpose than it does on mere mockery or ridicule. The viewer must recognize that parodied object before its deformation can register as adding something new or being meaningful. Without recognition, the failure of the speech genre cannot be seen as failure and as a result, exposure becomes impossible.

Parody, however, targets the narrative matter of a text. What comes further into light when examining sketch comedy is the mode’s reworking of genre expectations and framing devices. In his book *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette defines transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1). Sketch comedy exploits this system of relations between texts aggressively. Titles, formats, performance and oration styles, and platform conventions all operate as aparatexts that cue genre expectations before the actual sketch has truly begun. Sketches therefore, never need to explain what exactly

they are doing. Instead, they rely on the audience's familiarity with the genre they deal with to explain it to themselves.

More critically for the purposes of this argument, sketch comedy does destabilize these genres in the same way across all communicative spheres. Speech genres operate and implode differently depending on the kinds of authority, intelligibility, or seriousness they are tasked with sustaining. Accordingly, this paper examines sketches across broadcast television and digital platforms, and across national and transnational contexts, in order to trace the common mechanisms that produce different kinds of breakdowns. In each case, the sketch amplifies existing forms of social encounters until internal contradictions become self-evident.

By revealing how much of social life depends on performativity, on collective recognition, and on the maintenance of communicative stability, sketch comedy disrupts the authority and potency of these interactions over our lives. For brief moments in the duration of a sketch, constructed and collectively staged social norms are laid bare and destabilized.

***Saturday Night Live*, Codified Speech, and Bakhtin's Clown**

NBC *Saturday Night Live*'s Samuel Adams beer commercial parody first introduces itself as fully inhabiting the exterior of a conventional beer advertisement. The product is centered and carefully framed around branded graphics and logos as upbeat music underscores the visuals, and a sequence of testimonial-style endorsements affirms the beer quality and local authenticity. Boston, then, is invoked as a cultural specificity that is given a stamp of approval, anchoring the product within a recognizable discourse of regional working-class sincerity and taste. The "Jack-O Pumpkin Ale," as it is named, is real beer; so, the sketch, at this stage, does not signal deviation. The commercial's invoked secondary speech genre, in Bakhtin's sense, remains intact

and legible, operating through persuasive description, affective warmth, enthusiasm, and collective affirmation.

Bakhtin delineates secondary speech genres as forms that emerge within complex cultural spheres, acquiring stability through repeated social use and reception. Noting that “these genres are more complex, relatively highly developed, and organized communication,” he classifies secondary speech as having certain functions that it is highly attuned toward (Bakhtin 62). The beer commercial parody, then, is finely designed to account for variation in opinion, tone, and testimony while maintaining its authority as a persuasive mediator form. However, while irony and exaggeration are not foreign to the advertising milieu, they are often subordinated to and serving the form’s persuasive function. Advertising’s capacity for containment and its range of control over what is permitted to be viewed is simultaneously what makes it vulnerable when placed under pressure.

Comedian and guest star Bill Burr’s first intervention into this commercial parody introduces this aforementioned pressure. In spitting out the beer and cursing it on his first he, he gestures a momentary dissent; however, this still has not ruptured the commercial in its entirety. The sketch immediately cuts back to polished, rehearsed praise from other consumers, reinforcing the genre’s normative-affective rhythm. Burr, escalating his rejection, chugs the entire beer before reiterating his disdain for it. As the sketch progresses, his critique remains anecdotal and domestic, describing the beer as “the kind that sits in the back of the fridge for eight months,” effectively grounding his judgement in everyday working-class, masculine experience rather than aesthetic irony. Nevertheless, despite these moments, the advertisement continues uninterrupted as it cuts back and forth between other positive testimonials. The music remains upbeat, the dialogic framing remains promotional, and the commercial’s voice does not

punish or disable Burr's dissent. Herein, the genre persists even as its communicative logic begins to fail.

This failure, exacerbated by Burr's performance, is characterized by excessive sincerity rather than parody in its generally invoked sense. His dislike is emphatic, embodied, and unfiltered (beyond the occasional censor bleep). The cast on his left arm visually encodes age, physical wear, and injury, reinforcing his claim to authenticity and faithfulness to the very discourse the commercial aims to engage. His aggression, bluntness, and refusal tune his affect toward the commercial's goals enact what the sketch implicitly depicts as "real" Bostonian masculinity. The genre, then, collapses not because it is mocked or contradicted, but because it is taken too seriously.

Furthermore, this mode of rupture aligns with Bakhtin's carnivalesque logic as it appears in popular culture, wherein the clown figure is permitted to violate communicative and social decorum by refusing the affective disciplines that make official genres coherent. Mikita Hoy, in an account of Bakhtin's carnivalesque structure, contends that such a figure is granted "the right not to understand, the right to confuse...the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally...the right to rip off masks, [and] the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage" (Hoy 772). Burr's rage, then, can be seen as an outpouring of internal complication which is more faithful to human disposition, and he "rip[s] off [the] mask" that obscures promotional performativity. Moreover, in failing to 'act' correctly under the framework of a television commercial, Burr's sincerity becomes cultic and relatable, further making his affect uncontrollable. As a result, the commercial's regulatory systems prove ineffective.

The sketch's most obvious moment of this ineffectiveness is when Burr's product review transforms into familiar confrontation. After some already established tension, he, most likely intoxicated, turns to his adult son and asks, "is today the day you take a swing at your old man?" The exchange, then, escalates into physical violence—a scene that completely abandons any remaining trace of product promotion while still retaining the commercial's formal framing. The subtitle "Real Bostonians" appears, retroactively framing the violence as authentic local identity rather than a construction. So, in refraining from correcting or renouncing the breakdown, the genre absorbs it as branding.

Here, the commercial's affective authority is threatened. The beer advertisement is thus revealed as a genre that depends on disciplined emotional performance, rather than being supported by real-world attachments to or opinions of the product itself. Burr's rage and deviation from script exposes the ideological labor involved in maintaining the form's aesthetic and affective structure. Masculinity, authority, and regional identity emerge humorously as carefully managed and constructed results of compliance with genre. This collapse thus demonstrates how institutional speech fails under overload. By revealing how easily its authority can be destabilized, this sketch clarifies how much institutional speech depends on restraint, regulation, and collective acquiescence to function as intended. The commercial's authority as a secondary speech genre is not undermined by critique of mockery but by authenticity taken beyond the limits of the genre itself.

Gilly & Keeves, Transtextuality, and Charismatic Masculinity Destabilized

Comedy duo Shane Gillis and John McKeever's "Grill Sergeant" further extends this stress-test model, moving into an examination of masculine authority and its circulation through

genre and media. The sketch targets and fully adopts the “architext” of the contemporary food-travelogue show, a genre in which credibility is produced through charisma, exuberance, and ability to communicate enthusiasm. This authority, however, is carefully constructed and sustained through cadence, gesture, and reassertion of certain generic markers.

Toby Pitcairn, the “Grill Meat Connoisseur,” is introduced driving a convertible directly toward the camera. His persona combines food expertise with war veteran masculinity. However, while this initial fusion of archetypes can be perceived as absurd, within the logic of the food-travelogue, the affect and generic fidelity remains. As Gérard Genette contends, architextuality operates as “the entire set of general or transcendent categories...from which emerges each singular text,” and crucially, “determining the generic status of the text is not the business of the text but that of the reader” (Genette, 1, 4). The sketch heavily relies on this spectatorial determination by introducing the genre’s codes before narrative progression.

Within this schema, excess is absorbed by the genre’s general perception, in that Pitcairn’s physically aggressive and loud disposition is assimilated into it. The sketch, then, later escalates this pre-existing affect through his compulsive gestures and volatile behavior which only serves to heighten versions of this persona already existing within the genre. Aggression, herein, masquerades as enthusiasm and feigns compliance with expectations.

Inside the restaurant, where the hosts’s militarized masculinity collides with brutal violence, the dialogic and architextual stability is finally eroded. A casual remark described the dish as making flavors “explode” triggers a war flashback, resulting in a physical assault on the chef. The text, however, does not acknowledge this violence as a failure; producers off-camera normalize the event, and testimonial cutaways from customers praising the food continue

uninterrupted. The formal signifiers of the original hypotext remain intact and thus serve as comparative elements.

This insistence on keeping the genre stable through moments of absurdity exemplifies Linda Hutcheon's conception of parody at work. She emphasizes that parody is not defined by ridicule or moral sanctimony, contending that parody's "target is always intramural," and that reputation remains relevant to the discourse it engages (Hutcheon, *Parody*, 43). In sustaining the genre rather than satirizing it, "Grill Sergeant" makes the genre collapse under its now internal logic. The sketch intensifies the genre's own evocation of masculine authority to a degree where it becomes unsustainable.

Pitcarin's credibility never truly grounds itself in his culinary knowledge or taste-making abilities, rather his persona is reinforced by successful performance of dominance and confidence takes primacy. When he fails in maintaining that power over the frame, the genre exposes its own vulnerability in its attempt to repair the failure. After the violent encounter, Pitcarin abruptly resumes eating, his face gushing with blood. Additionally, he re-adopts the familiar cadence he began the sketch with. After delivering a positive review of the restaurant, he skirts accountability for his violent outburst by re-acquiring his original affect, reinforcing the idea that the genre continues to perform itself even through moments of instability.

The sketch ends with a final critique of Pitcarin's persona, as he exits the restaurant and gets into an aggressive verbal confrontation over his parking. This moment further reaffirms the genre's fusion of masculine bravado and legitimate food-critique. His claim that his life is amazing because he "eats pussy and sandwiches for a living" blatantly exposes the mindset implied by his on-screen persona. Violence and volatility become textures the genre absorbs, and

so the sketch heightens them to a degree where we can see the cracks in that formulation. As Hutcheon notes, modern parody “both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as a background material” (Hutcheon, *Parody*, 44). As a result, “Grill Sergeant”’s inclusion of the background material, the hypertext, as a comparative text rather than a norm that must be followed, frames it as one depending on restraint of its own characteristics: excess, hostility, and loud enthusiasm. The food-travelogue genre’s conventions and mechanisms are thus rendered highly fragile, remaining coherent under only controlled charisma rather than unfettered speech and communication.

Nate Stein, Parodic Adaptation, and Moral Overstatement

TikTok comedian Nate Stein’s sketch entitled “*every movie about an insufferable male lead who’s unhappy with his categorically good life*” positions this analysis toward moral seriousness in narrative genres, examining how emotional gravity is produced through speech and gesture, and how easily it collapses under disproportionate sentimentality and overstatement. The sketch adapts and modulates the narrative logic and tropes of contemporary prestige cinema. While the sketch does not parody a specific film, it does produce a humorous adaptation of a specific, recurring narrative template: one in which interior dissatisfaction is treated as intrinsically meaningful regardless of true conditions. Moreover, by reproducing the stylistic and aesthetic conventions of festival-oriented film trailers, the sketch exposes how this kind of self-seriousness itself functions as a genre explication.

Right from the beginning, the sketch activates its own generic framework. Film festival laurels are superimposed across the frame, and the protagonist is shown performing the visual markers of a stable, enviable life. His comfortable urban-suburban routine, professional security,

and social desirability are ironically highlighted to produce a mismatch between diegetic affect and objective reality. These images are accompanied by a voiceover declaring existential confusion. This disunity between narrative and visual evidence is framed sincerely, but the genre's demand for introspection wears thin and begins to seem unstable.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation, across contexts, operates via “repetition without replication,” relying on the audience's familiarity with prior forms and modes to generate meanings (Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, 7). This sketch adopts the narrative and emotional mask of millennial-angst, mumblecore cinema without invoking a singular text, but a knowledgeable audience will recognize the grammar it mobilizes. The contemplative pacing, restrained performance, and framing of middle- to upper-middle class dissatisfaction as depth all point to an adaptive-parody. Furthermore, sketch intensifies this pre-ordained grammar by imposing a voiceover that describes advantages, professional career, desirability, and social capital, only to interrupt itself with the question, “what about the other 1%?” responding to a statement that claimed “99% of people would kill for [his] life.” This question exemplifies the imbalance and tone-deaf nature of the genre. Moral gravity is introduced, but without proportional stakes. His subsequent outburst at his workplace and the fact of his “generational wealth” keeping him secure further exposes how the narrative maintains melodramatic seriousness while clearing it of any risk or stakes. The performance of angst is then invisibilized by the insignificant risk present within the narrative.

Parodic forms, as Hutcheon asserts, operate through imitation rather than caricature. By producing “critical distance” through internal reiteration of its building blocks, the hypertext also produces a “degree of engagement from the [viewer] in the intertextual ‘bouncing’ between complicity and distance” (Hutcheon, *Parody*, 32). The genre's imitative form, then, reproduces

the cadence, imagery, and emotional restraint of prestige trailers with complete fidelity, paradoxically exposing the impossibility of the genre's claims to profundity. The insertion of parodied critical film review and responses into the trailer furthers this exposure by integrating production and reception into the same textual dimension.

The vertical format of TikTok and Instagram Reels sharpens this effect in its entirety. The compression of duration and frame size denies the genre its typical reliance on narrative insulation and control. As a result, what might be read as ambiguity in a true feature-length film trailer registers here as targeted critique. Stripped of its scale, moral and emotional overstatement resembles a performative action rather than an earned, natural condition of the genre and its tackled premise. Furthermore, the comments section on such platforms function as "metatextual" extensions of the sketch. As Genette describes, the "metatextual" relationship, "often labeled 'commentary' ... unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing...[or] naming it" (Genette 4). This relationship consists of those discursive materials that circulate around a text and shape its interpretation without being attached to it. This can include reviews, interviews, other similar texts, and public commentary. Additionally, paratexts, everything near the original text but not a part of it, further supplements the discussions surrounding a piece of media (3). In the case of such short-form vertical media, the relationship between these disparate elements collapses into one, generating a site for all operations to occur simultaneously. Viewer comments appear alongside the video at the moment of consumption, thus actively participating in meaning-making during spectatorship.

In this case, the comments on the video invoke other tropes of the prestige-film genre such as the "manic pixie dream girls," the absent but implied repo-baby who wrote the film, or the unseen father who did, in fact, "greenlight this." These reactions to the parody extend its

potency by supplying more genre conventions the sketch leaves unstated. The critique, then, is retroactively completed by its consumers. The humor, then, migrates out of the video itself into a shared environment that adapts, remixes, and confirms the sketch's deconstruction of the genre.

Sketch Comedy's Deconstructive Work Across Media

The former cases survey sketch comedy across broadcast television, long-form digital video, and vertical social media, highlighting how even in the face of variations in scale, distribution, or modes of address, sketch comedy is broadly organized around certain common principles of destabilization and exposure. As the sites of sketch comedy change, so do the conditions under which speech genres emerge and break down. The common through line, however, remains the diagnostic, test-function of sketch comedy itself which intensifies familiar communicative forms until their contradictions and confounding elements become visible, and therefore, fragile.

Vertical platforms such as TikTok and Instagram dissolve the distinction between text and its reception, whereas broadcast or long-form digital sketches preserve a temporal and institutional distance between the sketch's performance and its appraisal, while vertical video circulates alongside their evaluations. The comment section appears, immediately, co-present with the text and participates in meaning-making at the moment of consumption. Therefore, the sketch's critique continues on even after it ends. Bakhtin's understanding of popular culture as fundamentally dialogic applies here. Hoy contends that Bakhtin's conception of cultural discourse sees it as consisting of "infinitely shifting heteroglossal stars...[which] reveals the artificial limits and constraints of" that discourse, and in which meaning is produced through interaction rather than the finality of the text (Hoy 765). Reinterpretation, repetition, collective

response, and remix all participate in an accelerated development of the textual idea, thus extending it beyond what was already apparent.

In broadcast television, dialogism, while present, is managed and controlled. *Saturday Night Live* functions under a tightly regulated institutional system wherein the laugh track performs the job of collective mediation. Laughter, then, becomes a signal that guides viewers towards what is understandable as humor and momentarily resolves ambiguity. So, when the speech genre or social framework does fail, its failure is appraised within a closed broadcast apparatus that preserves a separation between its performance and evaluation. The dialogic process is thus splintered and carefully curated while still remaining intact through the inclusion of laugh tracks, acknowledgment of those laughs, and network logos.

By contrast, long-form digital sketches such as “Grill Sergeant” and others by notable comedy groups like Almost Friday, CollegeHumor, or All India Bakchod, slightly loosen the contained nature of broadcast sketch comedy without fully abandoning control of the content. Distributed through platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, these sketches circulated beyond the highly controlled broadcast network systems while still retaining a boundary between the text and its audience. Comment sections and audience responses surround the sketch without actively participating in it, producing a form of layered reception that builds on the text’s meaning over time, sometimes years. This form of circulation participates in heteroglossia as well as by allowing multiple readings, judgements, reactions, and amplifications to coexist, but the sketch itself remains the primary source from which all of these “heteroglottal strata” originate from. Therefore, dialogism is additive rather than being co-present like in vertical social media sketches.

Conclusion

Across these various media environments, however, sketch comedy performs the same diagnostic labor. In intensifying familiar communication until the dialogic encounter's internal contradictions are laid bare, they all function as deconstructive forms of transtextual and dialogic play. All together, they demonstrate sketch comedy's capacity to destabilize genre through dialogic collision, parody, and transtextual rupture. Sketches depend on our recognition of culturally embedded forms and structures. These very structures, then, reveal themselves to be highly fragile and constructed. Therefore, regardless of the different production environments, all of sketch comedy relies on a similar mechanism of recognizable genre and formal cues, intensified structure and tonal signatures, and paratextual framing. The diversity of media that allow for sketch comedy speaks, then, to its fundamentally inter-medial status, along with its ability to travel across differing forms while maintaining its core logic.

By dramatizing the performativity of institutional and everyday social roles, sketch comedy further highlights their instability and fragility. What is revealed as a result is the belief that all cultural lies rely on a series of templates that can be easily reconstituted. sketch comedy's key dialogic and aesthetic upshots thereby lie in exposing and deconstructing the fragility of social mores by remixing the very inter-medial, intermodal, and socio-political forms that encoded them.

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