

Sketch Comedy, Bakhtin, and Hypertextuality

Tim Robinson's *I Think You Should Leave* (Netflix, 2019) is founded on the premise, much like most sketch comedy television shows, that familiar cultural forms can be pushed toward collapse for purposes of humor and commentary. One exemplary sketch from the show is the "Mitch Bryant" sketch from Season 1, Episode 1. At first, the sketch resembles exactly the type of lawyer commercial often seen on American television. All the aesthetic markers point towards this: the phone number, direct address, and Robinson himself dressed in a suit and foregrounding a library set-up. Within just a few seconds, though, Robinson's character shifts from professional, authoritative assurance to a rant about a (seemingly) personal grievance. The sketch works because it relies on the audience recognizing the lawyer advertisement as a *speech genre*, and then watching that genre come apart in real time. In this paper, I will use Mikhail Bakhtin's framework of "speech genres" and Gérard Genette's idea of hypertextuality to trace the sketch's humor.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Problem of Speech Genres*, defines speech genres as "relatively stable types of utterances" that develop in different spheres of human activity and communication (Bakhtin 60). He distinguishes between primary genres—simple, everyday speech, spontaneous—and secondary genres—standardized, highly codified forms that appear in institutions such as law, literature, and advertising. The lawyer commercial, a textbook secondary genre, signals legitimacy and professional authority. However, in "Mitch Bryant," we perceive a stark collapse of secondary speech into primary. It is important to note that while Bakhtin contends that primary speech is used within secondary genres, he claims that it is altered and assumes special characteristics that lose relation to actual reality. Here, though, the humor comes from Robinson's departure from that form of stratification of voice. The framing of the

secondary genre remains intact, but it gets populated with an inappropriate emotional outburst. This clash between stability and disorder dissolves the stability of the utterance, generating comedy from the dissonance.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism helps explain the humor. The sketch stages a collision of voices that do not sit comfortably together. On one hand, we hear the formal, persuasive voice of a lawyer and on the other we are faced with the primary genre of small-scale anger of someone who feels violated. Robinson makes us watch as one constantly undermines the other while keeping both registers intact as separable entities. The audience, meanwhile, becomes the third participant in this dialogic exchange marked by tension and contradiction. We are, as social beings, primed to recognize generic clues and when they collapse, we are subject to that disintegration. Bakhtin argues that speech genres allow the listener to decode intent and as a result formulate a response. That process here is subverted since, instead of providing clarity, the speech genre causes whiplash. Robinson's performance, sliding between professionalism and desperation, exemplifies Bakhtin's contention. As a result, the comedy arises from dialogic tension between the *expected* and the *unexpected*.

Expanding on this, we can utilize Gérard Genette's framework of transtextuality to help explain how "Mitch Bryant" situates itself for the audience. In *Palimpsests*, Genette defines transtextuality as the "textual transcendence of a text" beyond itself (Genette 1). Additionally, he outlines *five* key modes of transtextuality. For the purpose of this essay, we will call upon *three* of those modes. On a paratextual level—everything near the text, but not part of it—the sketch immediately signals a "lawyer commercial." As hypertext—a text derived from transforming another text—the sketch further transforms this culturally significant and established *hypotext* into an absurd reconception. Finally, on an architextual basis—textual significance derived from

its evocation of genre or category—"Mitch Bryant" depends on our immediate recognition of the genre so that its dissolution is instantly legible.

Most successful sketch comedy builds on recognizable cultural forms like talk-shows, advertising, news broadcasts, and game shows (notably, these are all rooted in secondary speech genres). The comedy then almost always comes from the rupturing of that structure through the intrusion of primary speech such as inappropriate emotions, casual talk, ranting, and awkward interactions. Additionally, sketches thrive on *dialogism*, by introducing absurd, surreal, or broad comedic logic into codified discourse. This form of comedy succeeds, then, by retooling familiar genres working through a large catalogue of cultural hypotexts. Robinson's show works this formula to a tee. Most of his sketches remind us that these institutionalized genres are often fragile. Once they begin to carry emotions or voices outside of their purview, they crumble. *I Think You should Leave* counts on that crumbling of convention in order to both make us laugh and reveal how unstable communication in daily life really is.

Works Cited

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