

OPINION

Battalion

Moony toons

Popular cartoons produce more cynicism than change with snide social commentary



BEVERLY MIRELES

Television is undeniably a significant part of American society. It is entertainment, scapegoat and, these days, our favorite critic.

Social criticism on television, in movies and in all forms of entertainment is nothing new. However, the more established satiric form of social criticism has given way to a slighting form of commentary. The "let's take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror" approach is now replaced by narcissistic evaluation. Most self-congratulating, criticism of society is a satire for the purpose of change is dead, exchanged for sheepish self-mockery.

Examples of this are not hard to find, but the most blatant vehicles of this type of criticism are the late-time cartoons that have infested the networks. At their best, they are similar to the wickedly funny "The Simpsons." At their worst, they turn into feeders for tired stereotypes, like "The P.J.'s."

Cartoons, though typically marketed for children, have always been harbingers of societal evaluation. Bugs Bunny cartoons are filled with war propaganda, and Betty Boop cartoons contain themes of equal liberation and aggression by women. However, no matter how suggestive the cartoons are — and they were pretty tame by today's standards — there were some things too sacred to be trampled.

Not today. In their urge to knock everything down, to take nothing at face value, people have modified their tastes from the subtle to the arrant. Not to say that shameless jibes aren't funny. Early, after a decade, "The Simpsons" still packs a punch. But even the best snide commentary doesn't catch up to subtly satiric jokes. Certainly, flagrant

cracks about religion can make the most conservative person laugh, but it is when the characters represent the more mundane aspects of society that the shows really hit their stride.

Take the "Family Guy," for example. For all of the crude jokes about sex, masturbation, race and the Kennedy assassination (just a sampling of the jokes from the first few shows), one of the funniest gags all season was when Peter, the no-brained, lazy, TV obsessed dad, is watching television and suddenly is overcome with excitement — "Oooh, oooh, it's the biography of the other guy from *Wham!*" Peter's character is our own; we are the ones who cannot get enough of inferior diversions, televised or not.

Perhaps it is the need to be entertained, to be shocked, that has changed social commentary from a useful tool into fodder for water-cooler jokes.

Audiences' shortened attention spans have changed the way entertainment is marketed to the public. Movie trailers, prime-time television advertisements — all are meant to tease and entice the viewers into watching.

As self-involved as people are, shows catering to their need to make fun of themselves in a quick, wisecracking manner are definitely more popular than those with plots containing the subtle intricacies of conventional satire.

The new sniping brand of satire is only good for a cheap laugh. Shows like "The Simpsons," "Family Guy" and even "The P.J.'s" can bring in the viewers, but their use of intentionally harsh humor will only serve to make the public more willing to accept the mediocre.

Selling out on social commentary and leaving nothing sacred will eventually trivialize more than just the cartoons themselves.

After all, a society that flippantly recognizes their defects and shrinks from correcting them is one that will make unnecessary behavioral allowances.

Social criticism and humor do go hand in hand. Often, humor is the best way to get an audience to



MARK MCPHERSON/THE BATTALION

listen about problems in society.

But cartoons and other mass audience forms of entertainment have allowed the public to gorge on criticism so much that it has become trivial.

As television critic Gregg Camfield wrote in *New Directions in American Humor*, "Television rarely really 'brainwashes' consumers into believing the claims of commercial messages; instead it works so insistently on breaking down any faith in the efficacy of any kind of activity besides criticism that it

leaves audiences hungry enough to try, or buy, anything as an alternative."

Consumer history has proven him correct. Criticism is a great instrument of change, but when nothing is considered sacred, cynical passivity creeps into that void. And, as far as cynicism is concerned, society's quota is already full.

Beverly Mireles is a junior microbiology major.

Calls for R-rated movie enforcement confirms political stalemate



CALEB MCDANIEL

The battle lines have been clearly drawn.

Political reactions to the errors of recent school violence have lit into two distinct camps. On the one hand, there are those who believe guns are to blame. On the other front, fingers are pointed at Hollywood.

The salient features of both schools of thought are pretty clear. Those who blame the guns exonerate the media. Those who blame the media extol the virtues of guns. Consequently, the positions both have been rendered logically and politically incompatible,

the type of stalemate that is customary in Washington.

Legislators themselves seem consciously aware of the dichotomy they have created. This week's move by House Republican leaders to cleave gun control from a larger bill on juvenile crime perfectly captures the spirit of divisiveness so characteristic of the school violence debate.

Not only do the Left and the Right fail to meet in the middle, they refuse to even talk about the media and guns except as entirely separate issues.

But as long as both camps remain so hopelessly intransigent, the juvenile violence problem will remain hopelessly intractable. At the present impasse, every proposal satisfying one group will necessarily displease the other.

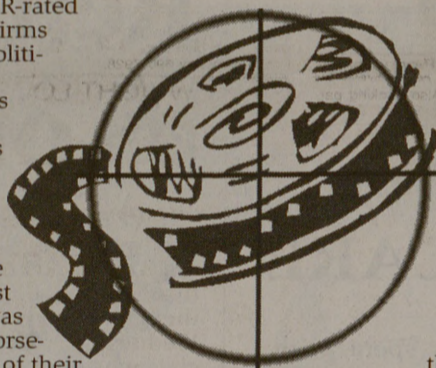
Reaction to the Clinton administration's call for heightened enforcement of the age restrictions at R-rated movies confirms this bleak political truth.

Defenders of the right to bear arms were, of course, delighted at this crack-down on the arts, not least because it was a token endorsement of one of their biggest gripes. Spearheaded by the National Rifle Association, gun advocates have argued that instead of adding

more gun laws to the books, the existing laws should merely be enforced better.

What better way, then, to attack the media problem than by increasing enforcement rather than increasing legislation?

Not surprisingly, the anti-gun lobby was not impressed by this logic. Predictably, they have howled and sneered at attempts to enforce R-rated movies. Articles such as one that appeared in *The New York Times* on June 15



have even interviewed underaged teens vowing to break the 17-and-under rule.

"Interviews with dozens of teen-agers at movie theaters near Miami, New York, Los Angeles and Detroit indicated that they had little trouble getting around it," the *Times* article said.

In its eagerness to point out the wily ingenuity of kids who sneak into movies they are not supposed to see, the article stopped just short of giving them ideas about how to do it.

Media defenders have almost gloried in the alleged impracticality of keeping kids out of illegal movies. They seem to say, with a collective thumb of the nose, "Just try to enforce this, you ninnyes."

And so, alas, the stalemate returns. A proposal that pleased one

side made the other side chuckle with self-satisfaction.

The political rumblings to come on gun control will likely follow the same pattern. No consensus will be reached, because no compromise is given.

One of the camps must budge, because meanwhile, as anti-gun and anti-media adversaries stare at each other across a political gulf, the problem of violence remains unsolved. The comments of 15-year-old Amy Solomon to *The New York Times* place the issue squarely where it belongs.

In response to a question about her thoughts on the violence in R-rated movies, she said, "Violence? You see it on the streets."

Caleb McDaniel is a junior history major.

MAIL CALL

Breaking ties with China harmful

In response to Tom Owens' June 13 column.

Surely, shutting the United States off from China would be a self-loose situation.

The United States would lose a country rich in history, art and philosophy, and China would lose a country from which it can learn better policies for human rights and democratic government.

Owens' stepwise plan to "avoid another Cold War" is remarkably similar to what one might think are steps for creating a Cold

Maternity leave proposal flawed

In response to Tom Owens' June 14 column.

What about the father?

A woman would not have to feel the "sudden, unexpected moment when women find their insides shredding the first day they return from maternity leave, having placed their infants in a stranger's arms" if the kid weren't left with a stranger, but with a stay-at-home dad.

Tonya Abna
Graduate Student

lies would be the only ones who could afford for a mother to stay at home for five years without pay. The working class must work to survive.

In fact, Owens' genetic argument verges on Nazism. He implies that women who stay at home are stupid and having more children than women who work.

If he is truly interested in the institution of families, he needs to consider things like affordable and on-site day care, paying fathers and mothers for family leave and providing support systems for new parents.

Katie Kendall
Carol Walther
Graduate Students

Megan C. Wright
Class of '01

Owens dismisses all individuals who are not economically well off. Upper and middle class fami-

Alexander Schwarm
Doctoral Student

Hatred does not justify more hate

Watching coverage of the murder trial of Jasper resident James Byrd Jr., it is impossible not to notice that the defendants have entered and left the jailhouse wearing bulletproof vests. Obviously, there are members of the law enforcement community who are scared someone will mete out "justice" before Lawrence Russell Brewer or John William King are found guilty in a lawful manner. The kind of thinking that would lead to these actions is not only illegal but is also disgustingly hypocritical.



CHRIS HUFFINES

Before anything else, a few facts need to be established.

First, racism and prejudice are not good. In fact, they are bad. The majority of Americans who do not have eyeholes in their bed-sheets agree on that fact.

Second, free speech and fairness, within reason, are good things. The entirety of the United States' government is based in part on those two principles.

Finally, there is a difference between opposing something and fighting against it. For example, the Republican Party opposes the Democratic Party, and vice-versa. That's not a problem until they begin actively fighting each other, which leads to partisanship, politicized votes and the general breakdown of government Americans live with continually.

Simple opposition would, and has, worked much better. For ex-

ample, last year a Ku Klux Klan rally held in Ann Arbor, Mich., home of the University of Michigan, was being successfully ignored by the local populace, who were doing a good job denying the Klan the press it needs to get its message out. This act of ignoring was being aided by a peaceful rally in another location, when the "Smash the KKK" anti-racist demonstration sparked a small riot which succeeded only in causing some minor property damage and completely destroying the credibility of the involved groups, the National Women's Rights Organizing Coalition and Anti-Racist Action. And they gave the Klan some good press. "Smash the KKK" did not come out on top for one simple reason: They became so determined to stop the Klan that they forgot that the ends do not justify the means.

Organizers of "Smash the KKK" defended their actions with some rather blatant rationalization. Organizer Jessica Curtin said, "all hatred is not the same. The hatred of the black community towards the Klan is not the same as the Klan lynching black people. It's worlds apart."

As a piece of propaganda, this statement is quite good. As a factual argument, quite a bit is left to be desired.

How is an action (lynching) equal to an emotion (hating)? Ms. Curtin obviously believes she is morally justified in her actions and the actions her organization took because their hatred is different. But there is no difference in emotion, because hate is hate. The difference Ms. Curtin was attempt-

to highlight is that the Klan has a longer and much more bloody history than either "Smash the KKK" or its parent organizations. So far.

A group thinking their actions are acceptable because their emotions justify them has led to moral high points in history like the sack of Jerusalem during the Crusades, attempted genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia and Germany, the Vietnam War, and Japanese atrocities in World War II. It has also led to the bombings of abortion clinics, the shootings of abortion doctors, the militia bombing in Oklahoma City, police torture in New York, the dragging death in Jasper, and the existence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Aside from the fact that extremist movements like the Klan and "Smash the KKK" are bred mostly from fear, this kind of justification is missing an extremely vital point. Hate is hate. Violence is violence.

By using the violence the Klan uses, even against the Klan, "Smash the KKK" became no different, and just as bad, as that which they despise most. By shooting abortion doctors, extreme pro-lifers are taking a human life, the exact thing they are protesting. The hypocrisy goes on and on.

One Ann Arbor resident told reporters he was videotaping the protest and subsequent disturbance because, "I wanted to record it and show it to my kids later, to show them ignorance on the side of both white and black."

Chris Huffines is a senior speech communications major.



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Mike Luckovich
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