

Dying Laughing

A Case for the Power of Comedy

“Laura! Clear out my schedule! I have to push a boulder up a hill and then have it roll over me time and time again with no regard for my well-being!”

“I feel like my life is just a series of unrelated wacky adventures.”

“You wanna know what I’m good at? I’m good at killing people.”

In 1999, HBO introduced the world to the world of Tony Soprano in their crown jewel TV show, *The Sopranos*. To date, it is one of the most influential series ever made, fifteen years after it ended. Though dates are nebulous at best, January 10, 1999, could be seen as the beginning of the third golden age of television in which we’re currently living – or ended a few years ago, depending on who you ask. In that time, the term “prestige drama” has become part of the vernacular of even casual audiences. *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, *Lost*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, and *Game of Thrones* could be counted among them; all game changers in their own way, massively popular, and not always the domain of premium cable or subscription services like HBO, as seen in *Lost* coming out of ABC. This new golden age has attracted big names; where once the worlds of movies and television were somewhat segregated, they are now melded, and A-list actors and directors have created brilliant works for the small screen, like JJ Abrams or Glenn Close. Similarly, the likes of Shonda Rhimes or Vince Gilligan cut their teeth in TV and have become creative powerhouses. When asked to list the best TV series of the last twenty years, no doubt most people would mostly name dramas.

This isn’t to say that comedy has been “overlooked”; *Bob’s Burgers*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Arrested Development*, and more are hugely popular, extremely influential, and critically lauded, each of them inspiring legions of fans, memes, and imitators. But they are allowed the grace – or, possibly not given the consideration to be anything other than what they are: comedies. Mostly light-hearted fare that is seen as very good and something to be experienced, but ultimately, it has nothing to say about itself or us. Where are the “prestige comedies”? Well, they get absorbed into headlines like this: “Barry Isn’t a Comedy Anymore. But It’s Become an Even Better Show.” As though being funny makes it somehow less worthy of reflection, or your time, or one’s consideration. It also is indicative of the overall low-quality state of internet journalism and black-and-white thinking. But that’s an entirely different essay. Like any drama, comedy can reach different depths, whether it’s holding your hand in the kiddie pool, or throwing you out a helicopter straight into Mariana’s Trench. The term “tragicomedy” was invented for these stories. Anyone can write the unrelenting tragedy porn of *This is Us* – it takes care to balance the pitch-black abyss of addiction, trauma, and death, with wacky cartoon hijinks, punny animals, and fart jokes. Comedy and drama come from flawed people. But what about broken people? Through the series *Bojack Horseman* and *Barry*, we’ll explore the vital need for black comedy, and the usefulness in calling these shows and others “comedy”.

“The View from Halfway Down”

Since the beginning of theatre, comedy has been used to address real-world issues. Satire gave voice to playwrights and speakers to criticize politics, religion, and social attitudes and fly under the radar of more straightforward social criticism. Stand-up comedians like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor gave an acidic and funny voice to growing discontent with the establishment

and represented beatniks and counter-culture attitudes that reached a fever pitch in the 60s. Lenny Bruce was referred as the “sickest of the sick comics” for fearlessly attacking religious institutions, questioning the uses of language, and indulging in controversial screeds about sexual perversion. He didn’t just open the door for mainstream comedy to satirize – he smashed down the wall that the door was set in. Shows like All in the Family, The Simpsons or South Park would run down this path. While South Park is more irreverent, filthy, and cynical, the other two manage to portray sweetness and the heartfelt dysfunction of people who love and want to understand each other. BoJack Horseman, a story about a washed-up actor from the 80s (who is also a horse man), could be something silly with heartfelt moments. It went for silly with bleak, real stories. It addressed deep-seated depression and the recurring, negative feedback loops of self-destruction. He is an addict of various substances and addicted to his pain, but not in the fun, adorable functioning alcoholic way of Homer Simpson or the characters of Cheers.

The world is dark and funny – in 2020, I was part of an intervention for my opioid-addicted brother. If you’ve never done one, how much do you think it sucks? You’re exactly right. And then, we went to Earl’s. We’re blue collar; Earl’s is fancy. To avoid an unrelenting torrent of misery and wallowing, it follows a half-hour format, is bright and whimsical, and it gives us unforgettable lines like "Life is but an endless series of missed opportunities, some involving Pottery Barn," or so-called word avalanches like "I would love to take down Hippopopolous and finally topple the acropolis of monstrous hypocrisy that ensconces us." BoJack Horseman didn’t just tackle the personal traumas of an individual, but wide-reaching abuses of power. The latter example takes place during an episode wherein the characters contend with the beginning of the #MeToo movement, the toppling of beloved cultural figures, in a clear parallel of Bill Coby’s fall from grace.

The above quote for this section, “The View from Halfway Down”, refers to the penultimate episode and a poem that a Freudian blend of his father and his personal hero, in which this character describes his own suicide. Immediately preceding that, is a dead Zach Braff rattling off a series of inane projects he never got to complete. Where big-screen Hollywood has largely failed to portray deep, complex comedy characters, these dark tragicomedies have succeeded. The beginning and end of these projects is to be funny – to portray the realities and dark moments of life, through the prism of humour.

“Know Your Truth”

Barry is a show about Barry Berkman, a depressed former marine turned hitman. If you stop the description there, it is a drama, or even a shallow action with Barry taking on contract after contract of generic bad guys, killing them in creative ways. With the last third of the logline, however, it becomes this: Barry is a show about Barry Berkman, a depressed former marine turned hitman finds new purpose when he joins an acting class in LA. Complete tonal shift. In the hands of Bill Hader and Alec Berg, it deftly avoids cliché and vapidness, by taking on the glossy veneer and narcissism of Hollywood. A lot of the comedy comes from Barry himself, a violent sociopath, attempting to live a “normal” life and navigate the unwritten rules and social morays of showbusiness. But it doesn’t use the background of PTSD, trauma, and murder as a throwaway. In a lot of media – TV, movies, games, and books, death is treated as trivial. The gravity and far-reaching consequences aren’t there. But with the central conflict, Barry attempting to reconcile the two sides of his life, the consequences to his actions are at the forefront of the story.

Now in its third season, Barry has gone darker than before. After the comforting lie of season two, we see Barry in a mental tailspin. He has pushed away those close to him, his unforgivable acts of previous seasons are back to haunt him; Barry can no longer fool himself or others into believing he is a kind, sweet man. He destroys lives. The first episode begins with a man digging his own grave – and in seconds, it turns into a darkly comedic moment that then immediately snaps back into violence and shows us how far-gone Barry is. And yet, it never loses its almost slapstick humour during an intense motorcycle chase when a criminal goes to hand off a machinegun, botches it, slaps it away, and crashes. It is able to brilliantly send up modern culture with a remote bomb app or provide a disturbingly hilarious scene in which he casually offers to psychologically torture someone who spurned his girlfriend.

Even though this is, on the surface, so far out of the scope of experience for most people, it is about cycles of abuse within personal relationships and power structures. It addresses #MeToo in its own way, as well as the very universal idea of trying to change one's own nature. "The heart in conflict with itself," as George RR Martin would say. Redemption, repentance, forgiveness; even if you've never murdered anyone (hopefully you haven't), we've all needed to make amends for something in our lives and end our own cycles and spirals of self-destruction and self-hatred.

My hope is that we can broaden and, in a way, legitimize the comedy genre in a more mature context. Laughter has the power to bring people together – you're open and vulnerable when you laugh. And to share happiness and sadness, joy and misery, the highest hills and lowest valleys, together with those we love, and those we need to understand, is a powerful experience. Or, at the very least, teach the internet that the term "tragicomedy" is a thing.