

Grounds for Dismissal

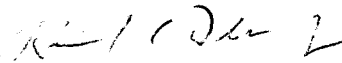
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of **Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television**
at
The Savannah College of Art and Design

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A SERIOUS LOOK AT THE SOURCE OF MY COMEDY GROUNDS FOR DISMISSAL

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the **Film and Television**
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of **Master of Fine Arts** in **Film and Television**
Savannah College of Art and Design

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Grounds for Dismissal

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Date

March 2013

This written thesis is focusing on the comedy inspirations used in my thesis web-series "Grounds for Dismissal." It focuses on the television, film and cultural influences which guided my creation of various characters, story styling and setting structure. With emphasis on the successful episodes of programming which inspired my choices, I make direct parallels to parts of my own series as a choice of emulation in design.

A Serious Look at the Source of My Comedy

Thousands of years ago, in a cave in modern day Turkey, a caveman approached his fellows with an account of his hunting partner's mishap. While attempting to spear a deer, his partner threw his spear too early, lancing a tree. In his haste to recover his weapon, he ran head first into the shaft, knocking himself out cold. Thus the first "man walks into a bar" joke was told. This of course, is unsubstantiated, but it's entirely plausible.

While ancient historians are unclear when the first joke was created, what is definitely known is how important comedy quickly became to ancient cultures. Notable examples include the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes, whose work "The Clouds," thoroughly tore apart the city of Athens' most prominent figures and government. Not only did his work play an important part in providing insight into the city's way of living but it entertained the people to the point they would call for entire festivals of works of comedy.

As human history marched forth with accompanying sounds of construction and war, the sounds of laughter could be heard with equal measure in almost every culture that would spring upon this Earth. While the technology and the landscape would change, writers like Dante Alighieri of Florence and William Shakespeare of London would

answer the demand of the people and attempt for at least a moment, to take them out of their lives, exchange their worries for laughter, their furled brows for smiles. It is with similar objective that I sought to follow the great comic writers of history and to continue the tradition of trying to show the world as I see it; absurd.

My own concepts of comedy are as varied as any person, but there have been a number of notable influences that have colored the odd palette of my comedic style. These influences have had a very specific effect upon the styling of my thesis web series, "Grounds for Dismissal." As both the writer and director of the series, I had the opportunity to see elements of my vision translated onto the screen and many of these elements have sources in modern day television and films. I will be examining these sources, focusing on my uses of designing a script that utilized ensemble casts, referential humor, memorable characters and wit. I shall also be focusing on my designs of camera, editing pacing and sound effects as a director.

While some of the early examples of television comedy included one or two main characters for the stories to revolve around, such as "I Love Lucy" and "The Dick Van Dyke Show," many of these programs would eventually include a wider cast. By the time of the 1980's and 90's, several larger cast comedies such as "Seinfeld" and "Friends" had consistently made their way into the television screens of much of America. While there are multiple reasons for the success of both of these programs, the

strength of these shows lay in their ability to utilize an ensemble cast. "Seinfeld" was a show that was named for the titular character of Jerry Seinfeld, a standup comedian in New York City. The episodes would often open and close with excerpts from the character's standup routine, but the meat of the show was the interactions of Jerry and his friends as they were living their "normal" lives. Many stories would start focused on the character of Jerry, however the action would often splinter off to focus on his friends stories, often only bringing them together for specific points in the story arcs. A fine example of this style of storytelling is the infamous "The Contest"¹ episode. The episode begins with the entire main cast entering into a challenge with each other over controlling their sexual desires and the audience follows each of them as they attempt to stay true to their pledge. We see the cast coming back together again in their revealing of contest updates, but each of them has their own story that's still related to the main theme. As an audience member I found this style of storytelling to be incredibly engaging. It kept my attention because of the different story lines being presented. It was with this goal that I wanted to find a setting in which I could rationalize multiple story lines in a confined space. When I set out to write a story for my thesis, I focused on a coffee shop because it fit several criteria. One, it tied in with a theme of clichéd workspace for my college educated, but sadly out of work generation

¹ Seinfeld. "The Contest."
Directed by Tom Cherones. Written by Larry David.
NBC, November 18, 1992.

and two, it most importantly had room for multiple spaces of conversation. Within this space, I was able to design several spheres of conversation that a cast of seven primary characters could bounce from area to area, to constantly move the stories along, without jarring the audience between multiple far flung locations. The characters would occasionally make their way into each other's stories spheres, add their flavor to that story and then return to move their own story along, very much in an identical pattern to the characters of "Seinfeld." When I started writing, I looked to this well-crafted story style created by "Seinfeld's" writer Larry David. I knew however, to create this ideal story structure I needed the right ensemble cast.

One of the most memorable casts of the 1990's in television comedy is that of "Friends." "Friends" is a story about a small group of twenty some-things living in the city who because of their friendship in an overwhelming city, become as close as family. Monica, Chandler, Joey, Phoebe, Ross and Rachel are names almost as well-known as Snow White's seven dwarves. For my generation they were a power cast, characters that had the chemistry to keep the show going. From watching the success of this series I further understood as a writer, the importance of a varied ensemble cast. Like the Commedia dell'arte of the Italian renaissance, each character fills an important archetype which fits the cultural zeitgeist of the contemporary generation. Each of my characters had to fit very specific demographics, not in a racial or religious sense but in a lifestyle and social ideological position. The challenge to this is in the short form execution of a web series.

With only six or seven minutes for a pilot episode, each of these characters have to be introduced and easily understood as representatives of their respective ideology. Like the Godfather's use of the wedding to introduce the Corleone family, "The Pilot"² of "Friends" used the Central Perk café as the perfect platform to introduce the characters. I will hang a lantern on the obvious emulation of the café as a setting of introductions for "Grounds for Dismissal" and cite that it is still a very effective setting to quickly establish characters. With the setting right, each of the many characters are quickly able to give the audience the flavor of what kind of person they are within their first few lines. From Sean's sweet and eager naiveté, to Mira's "in your face" direct attitude, the characters telegraph their quirky character types to the audience to establish themselves. Because of the diverse nature of each character, the audience can see people they know in each "Grounds for Dismissal" character. This method was a major part of the success of "Friends" as many viewers would make connections between the characters and people from their own lives.

I wanted "Grounds for Dismissal" to be an amusing inspection of the current state of young adult America in job hunting and dating, which is of course, screwed up. In order to accomplish that, the cast needed to be different examples of my generation and they needed to establish that point quickly. The story had to keep attention however, to

² Friends. "The Pilot."

Directed by James Burrows. Written by David Crane and Marta Kauffman.
NBC, September 22, 1994.

do this, I looked to other well established television styles for instruction in referential humor.

Over the last three decades, a great deal of comedic television has attempted to utilize this concept of referential humor. Referential humor is often viewed as humor that draws from life, a specific person, place, idea or other story. There are varying degrees of referential humor, one such is Matt Stone and Trey Parker's show "South Park."

While the show focuses on four foul mouthed elementary school boys and their crazy antics, most of the story ideas are designed to lampoon current events. Every week the writers and their production team meet to discuss the current events and in a matter of days they create an animated episode in which the story line is often criticizing the events of the world. The characters become involved in the crisis or they have them approach similar ethical or social dilemmas that are prevalent in the news. While their method of comedy often involves harsh criticism and foul content, the core of their humor is in this referential ideal. They set out to take a real world event or cultural concept and turn it on its head to point out the absurdity. A prime example of this type of humor is the episode "Best Friends Forever."³ In the episode, the character of Kenny becomes comatose and is kept alive in a persistent vegetative state. Hoping to gain inheritance from Kenny's last will and testament, Cartman attempts to petition to

³ South Park. "Best Friends Forever."
Directed by Trey Parker. Written by Trey Parker.
Comedy Central, March 30,2005.

congress to get his feeding tube removed, meanwhile Kenny's true friends don't want Kenny to die. While this debate is undergoing Kenny's soul is helping Heaven fight off the forces of Satan, but every time the feeding tube is put back into his body, he's sucked back into his comatose body and prevented from saving Heaven. While the story is presented in an absurd manner, the heart of the story is the circus that was the Terri Schiavo case. The success of this episode was the humor that satirized the media's coverage of the Schiavo case and how the country was sensationalizing it. Because of this show's focus on the current trends, it keeps the content fresh which has clearly kept a very loyal and amused viewer base. I attempted to embrace this concept by hanging a lantern on the current events of my day. Hundreds of thousands of students in debt, unable to pay their mountainous loans because the jobs their degrees would steer them to, are unable to be found. The character of Eve in "Grounds for Dismissal" is actually based on a friend of mine who lived this very reality for several years, she was a Biology major who had gone to a pharmaceutical school and to make ends meet worked at a Starbucks for several years. Sadly, it's a story too often heard, it's my generation's story. Like with "South Park," I attempted to use characters like Hank, the jerk boss, to bring some humor to the hurting job market, as he is an exaggerated caricature of the awful bosses we often find ourselves working under because we're desperate for work. The other side of "Grounds for Dismissal" is the dating side, and like with "South Park" the way that characters like Karen and Sean interact is my critique on the online centric

dating world that much of my generation is flocking to. They are so timid to act on what's physically in front of them they attempt to solely use online mediums. I have found a lot of people have gravitated to this web series simply out of their agreement of the work and dating satire.

Another level of referential humor that I have made usage of in my web series comes from several other sources predominately. Two in particular which I have found to be most influential include Matt Groening's "Futurama" and Joss Whedon's "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." "Futurama" is an animated series focused on the absurd futuristic adventures of a delivery crew in the year 3000 C.E. While the setting couldn't be further from "Grounds for Dismissal" the concepts of referential humor remain the same. Often the characters make references to films, television and well known people of the current century. Despite it being a thousand years in the future, the character regularly make jokes or comments that pertain to pop culture, for instance, in the episode "War is the H-Word"⁴ the main characters volunteer for the Earth military and are sent off to war, after being wounded, they are taken to a Red Cross camp that is clearly a reference to the MASH 4077 unit from the 1970-1980's television series "MASH." The "Futurama" episode goes as far as evening having a robot surgeon named "iHawk" imitating the "MASH" character of Hawkeye Pierce. This sort of humor is a double edged sword for

⁴ Futurama. "War is the H-Word."
Directed by Ron Hughart. Written by Eric Horsted.
FOX, November 26, 2000.

writers, with these sorts of references, those who get the jokes feel a closer link to the show because they understand the references. Understandably, it can also alienate viewers who don't get the references. For "Grounds for Dismissal" I tried to strike a balance, the character of Sean makes several film references which are very funny if the viewer understands them, but most of the pop culture references in the show are either very well known or explained by the characters in story.

While I have been watching a great deal of comedic film, television and theater during my life, the work of Joss Whedon has made a particular impression on me. While the title name of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" is often seen as too absurd, the writing for this show was perhaps some of the greatest examples of referential humor integration to date and a major contributor for my own interests in writing. The show itself focuses on a young girl magically empowered with enhanced strength to protect the world from the monsters that roam. What's wonderful about this show is the referential integration on both levels previously mentioned. A perfect example of this is the episode "Band Candy."⁵ In the episode, the town's grown ups start to regress in maturity to their teenage mindsets because of magically drugged candy. Like "South Park," this episode touches on the real world topics of young adults sometimes behaving more mature than the grown ups who are meant to be examples for them. It tackles this well known adult

⁵ Buffy the Vampire Slayer. "Band Candy."
Directed by Jane Espenson. Written by Michael Lange.
Warner Brothers, November 10, 1998.

critique and turns it completely on its head as the drugged adults go on drunken rampages through the streets behaving much worse than their current high school children.

This episode is a classic example of the regular use of my favorite referential humor, classic. Like with "Futurama," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" regularly made references to pop culture in their episodes, but they were often very well known, for instance, this episode featured the kids making references to "Death of a Salesman" when conscripted to sell the band candy for the school:

"Buffy: I'm sure we love the idea of going all Willy Lomen, but we're not in the band."⁶

Other characters would have lines referencing "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," "Welcome Back Kotter," and "A Christmas Carol." While the episode would also make a reference to MTV's "Real World," most of the references were appropriated dated so a larger demographic had a chance to pick up and understand the references being used. Not only that, but the manner in which the references are made, not only funny, but funny with wit and delivery. Each reference was not designed to stop the show, but designed to be funny and keep the story going. It is from this technique I feel that my referential humor is mostly pulling from. In the second episode of "Grounds for

Dismissal," the character of Kat explains that she is a paralegal, to which Sean compares

⁶ Buffy the Vampire Slayer. "Band Candy."
Directed by Jane Espenson. Written by Michael Lange.
Warner Brothers, November 10, 1998.

his job as “not as John Grisham exciting as your job.” It was this style of slipped in, classy reference humor I was looking to embrace and throughout the web series, more of these references can be found.

Much of the comedy style that I scripted for this series were directly inspired by these sources, examples of wonderful comedic techniques that I wanted to utilize. In the history of comedy television there have been a number of unforgettable, and unique characters. The kind of characters who stand out, not just because they are larger than life characterizations, but also because what they say and do is built to be rude, aggressive and at the same time hilarious. Several characters I designed for “Grounds for Dismissal” were modeled after this very style of aggressive humor.

There is a word that many comedy writers love to kick around; schadenfreude. Schadenfreude is German for “happiness at the misfortune of others.” While the notion sounds terrible to some, most people understand this sentiment, anyone who has ever enjoyed the Three Stooges enjoys a bit of schadenfreude. There are certain television shows however, who feature characters that embody mankind’s love of the concept of schadenfreude. These characters take no prisoners, are often walking the line between good guy and bad guy, and more often than not are regularly laughing at the bad things happening to the other characters in show. Two wonderful comedies “Scrubs” and “Archer” feature such characters.

Of the many hospital shows that have come out in the last fifteen years, a small handful have been comedies, even fewer than have been consistently funny. Out of them all, only "Scrubs" had the characters of Dr. Perry Cox and Dr. Bob Kelso. Both are the old guard of the hospital, teachers and administrators, guiding and reprimanding the main characters. They also are both horrible people in their own right. Each man is no nonsense and very honest, never caring for others feelings or for dissenting opinions. For seven seasons, Dr. Cox repeatedly belittled the main character of Dr. Dorian, always trying to challenge him to be a better doctor but always ready to knock him down a peg. Dr. Kelso is a vile, bottom line curmudgeon. The penultimate cranky old man, he's always ready to make a character feel bad and soak himself in their tears. Yet as awful as they are, they are both hilarious. They are designed to be the perfect mediums for the most terrible thoughts or actions which need to be conveyed or done to the main characters. Though they aren't people anyone would want to invite to their home, viewers gleefully watched them on "Scrubs" because of how hilarious they are. The pilot episode "My First Day"⁷ is the perfect example of setting the stage for these two antagonistic characters. On Dr. Dorian's first day, he desperately looks to both older doctors as a mentor, what he receives is constantly being addressed as a girl by Dr. Cox and the understanding that Dr. Kelso only cares about patients who have money.

⁷ Scrubs. "My First Day."
Directed by Adam Bernstein. Written by Bill Lawrence.
NBC, October 2, 2001.

Eventually it's seen that both are very human and caring doctors but they use hostility to deal with the stress of their jobs. Both are difficult characters but they are a lot of fun to watch. When designing characters for "Grounds for Dismissal" I wanted several antagonistic characters that felt like they were human inside, even vulnerable. Both Karen and Mira are both characters that I designed to be very blunt, to the point of being completely disregarding of the other characters feelings. They are not only incredibly fun to write but equally fun to watch as I tried to allow them to embrace a no-filter personality.

The animated spy comedy, "Archer," features two characters that provided direct inspiration for the arrogant café manager Hank in "Grounds for Dismissal." In "Archer," the main character of Sterling Archer is a young spy who's overbearing and controlling mother Mallory runs the spy agency he works in. Both are completely selfish, narcissistic and often willing to screw over their colleagues to get a leg up. While they are terrible people, it's very funny to hear them be so awful and even funnier when bad things happen to them. In the episode "The Rock,"⁸ Sterling berates the company's spy tech support workers and Mallory refuses them a cost of living adjustment, resulting in Sterling being blinded while on mission from faulty night vision goggles and Mallory being trapped in a malfunctioning elevator. They are such

⁸ Archer. "The Rock."

Directed by Adam Reed. Written by Adam Reed, Boswell Cocker.
FX, March 4, 2010.

terrible people that we as the audience enjoy their comeuppance. It was with this sort of design that Hank came about. I wanted to design a café manager who didn't even show up to work. A boss who took credit but put no real time in. Someone who would cook any book, take back any verbal deal yet still remain funny because he's such a parody of a terrible boss. Hank was the perfect amalgamation of these two "Archer" characters, he has the pizzazz that keeps him funny but the awfulness that demands he be defeated.

In the ever increasing digital and computer animation age, many movies have relied on effects to make a story interesting instead of having them add to the piece as they were designed to do. When designing "Grounds for Dismissal," I considered what I wanted my style as a director to be. I looked at a plethora of film and television and I realized that while the show had a certain sitcom feel to the concept and story line, the sitcom look was not representative of my generation. Instead I looked to the work of Edgar Wright, in "Scott Pilgrim Versus the World."⁹ This was a film that while it was an adaptation of a graphic novel, instead of detaching itself from the source material and embracing the film look, it had a unique pacing in both action and editing that spoke to its graphic novel heritage. Additionally, as it was a world in which video games were a major theme, sound design played a large part in the action and setting of the film. The film focuses on Scott Pilgrim, a boy living in a world mixed with video games, who falls in love with a girl only to be forced to battle her seven evil ex-boyfriends in order to

⁹ Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. Directed by Edgar Wright. July 27, 2010. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2010, DVD.

date her. It's a quirky tale that is made both entertaining and humorous in embracing a fast quick motion and dynamic joke delivery. I quickly realized after finishing writing "Grounds for Dismissal" that a great deal of the show was focusing on people either standing or sitting in one place and talking. From my experience in theater, I understood the dangers of motionless dialogue being boring. I chose to embrace a more fluid camera style still using many dolly and steady-cam movements in order to simulate the idea that we, as the viewer, are a patron of the coffee shop and like the characters, we are moving from conversation to conversation. To re-enforce this concept I worked with my editors to attempt to speed up several of the movements to emphasize the push into the next conversation, visually propelling the audience into the next part of the story. Like with Scott Pilgrim, there are a number of conversations in "Grounds for Dismissal" that feature quick repartee that I wanted this emphasized with quick edit cuts, to create in some conversations, a Wimbledon feeling between the speaking characters. To add to the comedy we played with pushes and pulls zipping the viewer about in order to bring out the gag of the moment.

Of equal importance was the concepts for the sound design. I worked closely with my sound design artist to come up with many funny moments to increase the electronic feeling of the web series. I felt strongly that a show that summed up the feeling of my generation would be filled with the sounds of laptops and iphones, almost like the lives the characters are living are apps on a phone themselves. While music occasionally

comes up in the show, the focus of music in the series is that of leitmotif. Themes for people and concepts instead of general show music. I felt this spoke more to the ipod, hundreds of songs at your hip, generation.

Ultimately, there is one inspirational source for this series that trumps the rest, the British sitcom, "Coupling" by Steve Moffat. While this show didn't have a great deal of success with its American adaptation, the original show in England was an amazing example of a well written and well directed hilarious sitcom. The show focuses on a group of single thirty some-things as they attempt to form lasting relationships and avoid making the classic blunders that have kept them single thus far. Episodes of very well crafted excellence such as "Sex, Death and Nudity"¹⁰ bring about a culmination of all the sources of inspiration which I channeled for my web series. In the episode, the ensemble cast is roped into attending a funeral for the main character Steve's, ex-girlfriend and hilarity ensues. The episode involves multiple story lines, cultured film references and several very memorable characters. Perhaps one feature that "Coupling" has more than any other of my sources of inspiration is wit. True wit is sadly lacking in a great deal of comedy. To do it properly, it requires a perfect marriage between the written word and the director getting the setting and the talent to the right pace to deliver the line just right. "Coupling" regularly produced this blend of humorous

¹⁰ Coupling. "Sex, Death and Nudity."
Directed by Martin Dennis. Written by Steven Moffat.
BBC, May 26, 2000.

harmony that raised a regular wave of laughter from the audience. While directing, I spent a good deal of time with my actors before we were in front of the camera to attempt to prepare them for this perfect pitch of wit we were going for. Like any production, some elements came out perfect, some close. While all the other parts make for a very funny series, I have found that people remember the wit, more than anything else and we shot for it with each episode.

My thesis project was incredibly arduous in certain parts, as long as the days of production had been, the longest times have been the post process. Unfortunately as my skills in film school focused on learning to be a better writer and director, I had to rely on other artists for nearly all of the post process. Doing the post process in itself isn't problematic but doing it from long distance requires a great deal of patience, time and money. However, when I see the footage align, hear the effects in place, I smile all over again and it's like I'm enjoying the humor for the first time. There are many points of comedy that I attempted to bring to bear for this project. From the use of an ensemble cast, the multiple story lines, the referential humor, the rude characters and the wit, I attempted to craft a piece that was to be the humorous short form sitcom for my generation. Something that would make them both laugh and relate to the world we live in. The characters, the setting, the camera movements and even the sounds were carefully planned and filmed attempting to weave both a believable world and an efficient world to tell a story from. So many artists and talented individuals worked to

make the project come together and if the laughs they were having on set is any indication, the comedy I strove to channel from the television and films I love, has made its way to "Grounds for Dismissal."

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