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Senior Project

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Senior Project Process Paper: The Laundry Thief

Sitcom episodes do not always have to end where they started, so long as the story stays interesting. In a way, my project ends at the same place it started. There's minimal character development, and it ends in the same place it starts, the main character's dormitory.

The sitcom is contemporary, and takes place in the midst of the COVID19 pandemic. The plot embraces the struggles of the pandemic in a lighthearted way, and focuses on the trivial everyday aspects of the pandemic. It chronicles the process of outcasting oneself to feeling good about oneself again.

I was inspired by Martin Scorsese's 1985 film *After Hours* and the short satire novel *Candide* by Voltaire, written in 1759. Both these works showcase characters going through an increasingly intense and at times comedic set of events. Both works conclude with the character ending up in a place similar to where they started, with the idea embedded in the audience that the characters are different because of their experience.

The sitcom format allows me to express my true passions, filmmaking and comedy. Since I was eleven, I've taken small steps to increase my familiarity with the tumultuous world of filmmaking. Comedy, in stand up form, has been something I've loved all my life, and has also

been an activity I've pursued myself the past six years. The art of stand up comedy and comedians typically intertwines with sitcoms, like in *Seinfeld* or *The King of Queens*.

The inspiration for this project comes from stories that end in generally in the same place they start, with a re-appreciation for ones for their environment. I embedded themes of communal college life by incorporating typical college scenarios, such as dorms, lecture halls, laundry rooms and dining halls.

In the sitcom, my stance is morally ambiguous. In the article by Dale Johnson, the notion of selective perception is applied to the 70's sitcom *All in The Family*, due to its raunchy sentiments regarding race that violated the Standards and Practices Department's definitions of "good taste" at the time. On the other hand, some thought the show was cathartic in being satirical. Some worried that the show reinforced prejudice rather than satirized it. "The Laundry Thief" embraces selective perception by being dumb, and morally ambiguous. One could either agree that my character is right and COVID19 is "just a big fuckin' hoax," or that my character is the prime example of someone who makes wrong choices.

I came into college inspired by over the top YouTube satire like h3h3productions and The Filthy Frank show. These channels helped me to understand styles of contemporary humor better. While in college, I gained knowledge and respect for the art of screenwriting. Screenwriting is a craft that encourages the writer to merge real life experience with imagination. Satirization gave me both insight and critiques into an aspect of life I knew nothing about. My aim for this project was to paint an exaggerated picture of the pandemic, and being a college student.

The script is also inspired by the hectic night portrayed in *After Hours*. The scenes of Paul, the main character, running from place to place on an eerie night in Manhattan is an

exhaustion one could feel through the screen. As the night goes on, things only get more chaotic. In both *After Hours* and “The Laundry Thief,” we see the main character change emotionally as his environment throws him through a loop. As the things that happen to the main character in both my and Scorsese’s projects get worse, so do the actions of the main character. I wanted to give my character a good reason to act irrationally.

As a film minor, I’ve drawn upon invaluable information from my classes such as how to tell an engaging story. To accomplish this, I utilized aspects of real life experiences to craft the script. Specific situations were made up, like my laundry getting stolen or getting broken up with over an “I Love Covid19” t-shirt. But the subject matter, like using the laundry room, sharing vapes and going to lectures were all aspects of college life familiar to me.

Curb Your Enthusiasm is inspired by both the traditional scripted sitcom and improv comedy. While my show was scripted, largely to help the actors see the scene through, I still allowed for off the cuff improv if it allowed the scene to flow more naturally. For example, we thought it’d make for a better laundry room scene if I recounted all the reasons I needed to use the dryer. This naturally gives Alandra’s character the impression that I am in fact flustered and bogged down. The directorial decisions were made with the end goal in mind to make the episode as enjoyable as possible. A lot of these small decisions were made by Director of Photography, Stephen.

For research I watched shows like *The Honeymooners* to see where the format got its start. There were parts that aged well and parts that didn’t. Fascinating to me was its appeal to blue collar workers. Ralph Kramden, a bus driver, is the main character. The principles of the sitcom appealed to me, as they originated as an over the top comedic response to the loss of male

power following WW2. The sitcom takes on an adapted version of the binary husband / wife trope, where almost everyone plays a small part in being the voice of reason. For example, not all the male characters are dumb characters: Jack plays a smarter role within the project as someone who gives lectures as well as sound advice, despite his unkempt tendencies.

To create a fast paced and chaotic environment in my project I had to utilize a multitude of locations. I included scenes of me running to and from these places to emphasize how exhausted the character must've been feeling, similar to *After Hours*. Sitcoms usually take place in only a few locations and utilize a three camera set up. My sitcom broke this norm because I wanted to recreate how college feels, floating from place to place, with a multitude of unique interactions. Other sitcoms such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* break tradition of the three-camera set up, as well.

I wanted to grow a beard and have the beard be a part of the sitcom to add a sense of realism to it, by incorporating something physically grown and attached to me. The beard was a symbol of me feeling comfortable about myself. My girlfriend in the sitcom disrupts that comfort by comparing me to Ted Kaczynski, and asking me to "clean myself up."

The music featured in the project was composed by SUNY Purchase Jazz major Marty Scott. The music, composed by Scott and his jazz quintet, went hand in hand with the school's architecture, which is brutalist and simple.

The editing process was cathartic. Using Adobe After Effects, I broke down the clips messily but also carefully. The mix of tasks and challenges was enticing. Editing has been a side hobby of mine since high school. The countless hours I've spent in the past troubleshooting things on a slow laptop makes editing today on my more optimized desktop a joy. Some of the

editing got done in my dorm, and some of the editing got done in my moms house over Spring break. The change of environment was nice.

Works Cited

Abbott, Edwin. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Penguin Classics, 1999.

Flatland is a satirical novel first published in 1884 as a satirical critique of Victorian culture and rigid class structure. Despite the book being confined to a time and place much different from today, *Flatland* is still an exemplary tale that urges its readers to grapple with complex ideas that feel inconceivable, but are really just scenarios constructed to allow the audience to imagine something that feels genuine.

When dealing with topics as all-encompassing as dimensions, *Flatland* exists in a space where one might have to challenge the core of what one knows is true. This applies to what I aim to achieve in my senior project in conveying a presentist world where things that define us can start to unfold. The humor in *Flatland* can be perceived as dry, which is not without fault, due to the complex and interesting setting in which Flatland sets itself.

Flatland goes into great detail to distinguish itself while also being succinct as possible. For example, the way the story carries on into the dream sequence, the Square dreams about Lineland, it is almost meta in the way the story starts to work with the audience first by conceiving of a universe with only lines. From there, the story works forward and the main character undergoes a change through which he feels only he can understand.

Curb Your Enthusiasm. Created by Larry David, HBO Entertainment, 2000-Present.

Feltmate, David. "It's Funny Because It's True? The Simpsons, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 81, Issue 1, March 2013, pp. 222–248.

This article has proved helpful in unpacking the intricate layers that go hand in hand creating satire that regards specific facets of society, such as religion. Humor can be used as a revelatory force with regards to religion. The article dissects Ned Flanders as not only a moral crusader, but also a model of compassion, generosity, and neighborliness. Nonetheless, through his character, *The Simpsons* can engage in a more intertextual, realistic depiction of evangelicals as whole. *The Simpsons'* humor is based on pre-existing knowledge of American religion. The show is not based on any ideology, and rather comes across as a group project with a plethora of different ideas.

Critical intertextuality is socially beneficial, it can help to dismantle a hegemonic status quo. When religion is parodied, it unfolds some cosmic truth. Ned's character, although purposefully resentful at times, is still a character used to critique evangelism as a whole and can be widely understood.

There are both good and bad aspects of Ned Flanders, and that allows his character to feel more than two dimensional, and therefore is received as an authentic parody of evangelism. It is important for something to cover good and bad angles of every aspect of a thing intended to be parodied, so it can be more understood, and thought about more critically by the audience.

The Honeymooners, Created by Jackie Gleason, CBS, 1955-1956.

Johnson, Dale W. "THE RELATIONSHIP OF DOGMATISM SCALE RESPONSES TO THE DETECTION OF THE SATIRE OF TELEVISION'S ARCHIE BUNKER AMONG AN ETHNIC MINORITY." *Northern Texas State University*, 1976, citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1080.5984&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

The article makes an important notion crucial to the understanding of sitcoms and the broader entertainment industry. This is the notion of selective perception. *All in the Family* suggests that their show works to combat prejudice by having it be on the show in a satirical way, claiming that the audience understands that Archie is clueless. The show struck a chord with many in the 70's due to the show's breaking of Standards and Practices Departments definitions of "good taste." Despite *All in the Family* aiming to be a satirical show, selective perception suggests that viewers with prejudiced opinions will perceive the prejudice on the show as true, as opposed to satire, despite the show's intentions.

"If satire is to be effective, the audience must be aware of the thing satirized." The issues regarding *All in the Family* are that of context, in deciphering if it is on the right or wrong side of history, and whether or not it was ultimately effective in its intent to satirize prejudice. This article has given me a mental framework through which to write my script. In short, I will use this knowledge and ask myself the following in the writing process: "Does this promote the thing I intend to critique? Are there multiple ways to interpret the

character thus far?” When my sitcom is produced, it is important that the audience sees how I see the world, but is also something thoughtful.

The King of Queens. Created by Michael J Weithorn, CBS Productions, 1999–2007.

“Riley Wuz Here.” *The Boondocks*, created by Aaron Mcgruder, season 1, episode 12, NBC, 2006.

The commentary on art in this episode of *The Boondocks* is essential to what I aim to create for a few reasons. There is a pathos ascribed to the way the show's imagined audience perceives art, that the actual audience then gets to perceive as flawed. Here, it is largely up to the viewer to bring a level of critical thinking to understand the episode. A discussion of art as a social concept is also something I aim to achieve in my project.

The show parodies the likeness of Bob Ross, and in a very respectful way, reinterprets him in a respectful, fascinating way. Bob Ross sees Riley spray painting his house and instead of getting angry or calling the cops, decides to mentor him. Bob then proceeds to encourage him to continue practicing his art elsewhere. Meanwhile, Riley is still treated like a delinquent at home, as per his character's reputation. When one of Riley's art pieces gets acknowledged, Riley tries to claim the work as his own, but people, not even his own grandfather, believes him. Riley finally proves to only his grandfather that it is him behind the art, when he paints a mural of a photograph his grandfather had kept from long ago.

I would like to use this episode's plot as a framework through which I can guide the emotional stakes of my project. The episode is dynamic in the way it relies on a mixture of personal relationships versus one's relationship with society. There is a sense of passion portrayed through labor which I wish to convey as well. I'm most struck by the episode's capacity to grapple with work as a means of fulfilling an inner purpose rather than a means to an end or a means to get by in society.

“Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish.” *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening, season 2, episode 4, Fox, 1990.

Bart discovers a 3 eyed fish. Story gets out. Mr Burns learns it's going to cost 56 million to repair the plant. Mr Burns in this instance is seemingly finished, crying in his car. Homer passes the idea to Burns that he should run for office, and Mr Burns takes and attempts to run for governor. To do this, he hires a team of “professionals” speech writers, spin doctors etc. Burns runs on a purposefully vague platform that promises to lower taxes.

This is a landmark episode in terms of setting the bar for socio-political sitcoms. The episode is interwoven with pop cultural references, while also creating iconic references of their own, like the three eyed fish, Blinky. The show features themes of environmentalism. The scenario that Mr Burns finds himself in is not unique, and is a critique of our government and elections at large. The episode is a detailed look at how campaigns can be executed by powerful

individuals with lots of money running purely for their private interests. The episode is clear in what it critiques, and simplifies what seems like complex scandals into something digestible and humorous. It may be worth my time to research a tyrannical process that happens in college, or rather, make an effort to showcase a flawed process, such as losing keys, getting in trouble for drinking, cigarettes etc is handled.

Voltaire. *Candide*. Raleigh, N.C.: Alex Catalogue, 1998. Web.

Candide is a satire written in 1759 is a commentary on optimism. The main takeaway from the book is that we must all cultivate our gardens. This takeaway only is realized after a fast paced and erratic adventure full of death, riches, and everything in between. This is important to my project as I aim to create a fast moving environment where things can change on a whim to serve a greater purpose in storytelling. The aforementioned takeaway of the novel, that we must cultivate our garden, does not serve any specific philosophy, but speaks to this idea that once our adventures are said and done, we can go back to contributing to society in a non grandiose way.

With the book being split into thirty chapters across the span of eighty to ninety pages, the book gives excellent insight into how to quickly pace and embed lots of short adventures and morals in the span of a fifteen to thirty minute project. The book arcs its characters well across the span of the book, and allows for an enjoyable read where no moment is wasted. Across the chapters, the main character, Candide shifts his view on optimism. Embedding a shift in a main character's philosophy could be a difficult thing to pursue, but can be powerful if addressed carefully.

The book in the first ten chapters sees its main character experience horrifying tragedies so often that the shock of them all wears off, and at times even becomes humorous. The worn off shock allows for the audience to engage more easily with the work in a critical way. The same way readers can acknowledge Voltaire for more than what it describes, I aim for my project to have exaggerated scenes that contribute to a greater purpose.

Wells-Lassagne, Shannon. "Short and Sweet? Structuring Humor and Morality in American Sitcoms." *Angles*, no. 1, 2015. Crossref, doi:10.4000/angles.2096.

This article highlights an important aspect of morals and creates a timeline through how sitcoms morally position themselves. Through the rigid structure of the 1940's to the morally ambiguous turn of the millennium. My project aims to flesh out a moral that is intentionally loose, like in examples of *The Simpsons* or *Home Improvement*. I want there to be a clear line establishing what the protagonist can and will understand.

The timeline which this article constructs will be essential to how I will come to embed different sitcom tropes into my project. I aim to do my project with no laugh track, so one aspect of sitcom tropes I can investigate is dead space in places where there should be a laugh track. I would like to investigate how to generate situations that are funny only to the viewer, in cases such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where Larry's ongoing rants are there to serve the audience but bother everyone else around him.

While postmodern aspects of sitcom production are most interesting in what they present, I would like for my project to take the shape of something more grounded in the sense that the story has a clear purpose. On the other hand, the character I aim to portray is to be only tolerable, and border between likable and unlikable. The most important takeaway from this journal in relation to my project, will be to create an easygoing viewing experience. How I approach that goal will be largely inspired by embracing sitcom formats and tropes people would be contemporarily comfortable with.