
Family Guy: Undermining Satire

Nick Marx

From the original edition of *How to Watch Television* published in 2013
by New York University Press

Edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell

Accessed at nyupress.org/9781479898817



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) (CC BY-NC-ND).

 **NYU PRESS**

838 BROADWAY, 3RD FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10003 • www.nyupress.org

19

Family Guy Undermining Satire

NICK MARX

Abstract: With its abrasive treatment of topics like race, religion, and gender, *Family Guy* runs afoul of critics but is defended by fans for “making fun of everything.” Nick Marx examines how the program’s rapid-fire stream of comic references caters to the tastes of TV’s prized youth demographic, yet compromises its satiric potential.

The *Family Guy* episode “I Dream of Jesus” (October 5, 2008) begins with the type of scene familiar to many fans of the series. Peter and the Griffin family visit a 1950s-themed diner, one that accommodates a number of parodic references to pop culture of the era. In a winking acknowledgment of how *Family Guy* (FOX, 1999–2002, 2005–present) courts young adult viewers, Lois explains to the Griffin children that 1950s-themed diners were very popular in the 1980s, well before many of the program’s targeted audience members were old enough to remember them. As the Griffins are seated, they observe several period celebrity lookalikes working as servers in the restaurant. Marilyn Monroe and Elvis pass through before the bit culminates with a cut to James Dean “after the accident,” his head mangled and his clothes in bloodied tatters. But, in characteristic *Family Guy* narrative logic, the episode stuffs more comedic fodder into the premise. Cleveland Brown, the good-natured black character of the cohort, enters the restaurant only to be blasted away by police officers with a fire hose and attack dogs. “Oh, that takes me back,” Cleveland flatly remarks after being expelled from the restaurant.

The scene works according to the comedic logic of the “rule of three,” setting up the gag’s structure with Marilyn Monroe, reinforcing it with Elvis, and, finally, breaking the pattern in an unexpected way with James Dean. At first glance, Cleveland would simply seem to be further elaboration of the original joke, an

extra punchline characteristic of the show's edgy approach to humor. But one of these punchlines is not like the others. By trotting out Monroe, Elvis, and Dean—all of whom died ignominiously—*Family Guy* makes fun of the supposed virtuousness commonly seen in cultural hagiographies like Time-Life's *Rock & Roll Generation: Teen Life in the 50s* and *The American Dream: The 50's*. Cleveland's inclusion, however, jarringly places celebrity scandal alongside civil rights conflict in the scene's range of comedic targets, suggesting that both are safely part of a past about which it is now permissible to joke. This has become the show's modus operandi: everything from television sitcoms to advertising mascots to systemic social inequalities are lampooned within a rapid-fire feed of flashbacks, cutaways, and perfunctory plot events. But is it all equally funny?

This question pervades much of the popular dialogue about *Family Guy*. Fans defend scenes like the one described above as “just a joke,” while interest groups like the Parents Television Council protest that the program goes too far all too often. But before rushing to judgment, careful analysis of the show's industrial and aesthetic contexts helps us better to account for the wide range of responses it elicits. The question, then, might not be “Is *Family Guy* funny?” but “How and for whom does *Family Guy* create humor?” In many ways, *Family Guy* reflects television's present proliferation of comedic modes of social engagement. Situation comedies continue to dominate reruns, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* filters the news through comedic satire, and even the appeal of many reality shows is based on taking a schadenfreude-like pleasure in seemingly “real” scenarios. The humor of *Family Guy* shares similarities with these comedies, but its differences from them point to shifts in the ways we watch and understand television.

Family Guy is emblematic of what might be called a growing “click culture,” the aesthetic and industrial practices of comedy that are both creating and created by television networks' expansion online, increased user-control of television content, and the integration of that content into social networking practices. The television industry strives to create as many iterations of *Family Guy* as possible, allowing loyal viewers to interact with the show through merchandising, spin-offs, and web forums, as has become a standard practice for many shows today. Aesthetically, however, *Family Guy* departs from many of its generic brethren by structuring most of its humor and episode plots around the unpredictable, non-sequitur nature of click culture. The program's compulsive habit of targeting—through flashbacks, cutaways, and narrative digressions—elements outside the Quahog storyworld give it both a distinct comedic voice and a problematic mode of representing and reproducing power relations. Indeed, animated sitcoms from *The Flintstones* to *The Simpsons* to *South Park* have made strategic use of reflexivity and extra-textual references for satiric purposes, but none to *Family Guy*'s extent. And when the jokes pile up so quickly, the program's ability to create meaningful satire becomes compromised.

If we remain critically aware of this dynamic—if we recognize that there is a difference between joking about a celebrity death and joking about the violent racist oppression of millions of Americans—we see how *Family Guy* represents dominant views about new comedic tastes being cultivated by the technology and lifestyles available to young viewers today. As the television industry has moved away from courting broad audiences by programming shows with mass appeal, it has been increasingly willing to risk alienating certain audience segments in order to target others. In the contemporary era of digital convergence and trans-medial movement of television content, the most valuable target audience has become young men aged 18–34. In addition to discretionary spending and trend-setting powers, this demographic is seen as susceptible to the siren song of non-television media like video games and the Internet. These “lost boys,” as *Wired* dubbed them in 2004, “hunger for ‘authenticity,’” and “like things fresh, unpredictable, and uncensored.”¹ Resistant to television mainstays like thirty-second advertisements and conventional sitcoms, these viewers instead seek content that flatters their media hyper literacy and (self-declared) hip sensibilities.

Accordingly, the television industry has made every effort to bring these “lost boys” back into the fold. Cable channels like G4 target young men with programs about Internet trends, while Spike has staged an annual awards show for video games since 2003. Broadcast networks package television spots with advertising opportunities across their web and cable holdings, acknowledging that viewers—particularly young men—increasingly consume media in a multiscreen environment. In the industrial practices of click culture, these trends have been particularly acute. Comedy Central’s *Tosh.o* pairs viral videos with comedic commentary, accompanied by frequent exhortations from host Daniel Tosh to engage with the program in a variety of digital media and live performances. Cartoon Network and HBO have also developed comedic television programs from the Webby award-winning *Children’s Hospital* and FunnyorDie.com, respectively.

The low development costs of many comedic formats, along with viewers’ ability to consume them in bite-sized chunks, make them amenable to the transmedial strategies of distribution and consumption so prevalent today. *Family Guy* embraces these practices, having spawned a number of spin-offs and ancillary products in video games, merchandising, and home video. Moreover, comedy—from *The Simpsons* to *Beavis & Butt-Head* to *South Park*—has always articulated an “edgy” appeal directed at the young-male demo, but *Family Guy* has pushed this risqué sensibility to new limits. Before uncritically accepting the pairing of *Family Guy* and young male viewers as a successful strategy, however, we need to consider what this industrial practice leaves out. That is to say, not all males aged 18–34 (let alone viewers of *Family Guy* outside this age group) share the same racial, ethnic, or sexual

identity, come from a similar socio-economic background, or even have equal access to the technologies driving transmedial mobility. The growing danger of click culture as seen in the aesthetic and industrial practices of *Family Guy* is that it can reinforce the social power of already powerful audience categories, further excluding historically marginalized viewers whose tastes might not match the industry's demographic assumptions. How exactly, then, does click culture function, and how does *Family Guy* articulate these practices?

Think of reading the rapid-fire stream of jokes in *Family Guy* in much the same way you do items in a Facebook or Twitter feed. At any given time of day, you might encounter a friend posting a link to a tawdry gossip column, immediately followed by another friend who posts a link to a petition asking for signatures in an upcoming recall election. The respective roles that these two items play in your life are not as different as you might like to think, and both are brought to you by an information delivery mechanism that presents the stories contiguously. But clicking through to engage further with them requires different, though not mutually exclusive, critical sensibilities. The gossip column might be something you quickly repost for friends to see; the recall petition might inspire you to contact your neighbors and join a local rally. Facebook and Twitter do little to distinguish between the two items, but each inspires a range of uses. Even when events from the two seemingly disparate domains of politics and pop culture collide—as they do whenever a politician is caught in a sex scandal—we implicitly understand that there is no necessary connection between them.

Instead of affording consumers a similar range of responses to information and entertainment discourses, *Family Guy* flattens their significance to the same level and naturalizes their meaning under the aegis of everything being “just a joke.” Where social networking sites loosely organize disparate stories for users, *Family Guy* reproduces the aesthetic experience of newsfeed navigation and organizes it much more rigorously according to the logic that everything appearing onscreen is equally capable of being lampooned. This aesthetic is driven by contemporary television's economic imperative, one that (in the case of *Family Guy*) places more value on the commodity audience of 18–34-year-old males and thus prizes this group's presumed response more than that of other audiences. But the quick-hit aesthetics of click culture programs like *Family Guy* belie their industrial motivations, creating the illusion that all audiences can find everything equally funny and constructing a false sense of comedic pluralism that elides the power differentials among comedic targets and audiences. In doing so, *Family Guy* rarely trades in critical takedowns of the powerful by the powerless—the very goal of satire; instead, it tends to reaffirm the politics of the status quo.

In one example from the episode “No Meals on Wheels” (March 25, 2007), Peter is annoyed at Mort Goldman's requests to borrow his personal belongings, calling him

a “bigger mooch than the Mexican Super Friends.” The ensuing cutaway begins with an exterior shot of the “Mexican Hall of Justice,” a parodic reiteration of the headquarters of the Saturday morning cartoon *Super Friends* (ABC, 1973–1986), a show perfectly in tune with *Family Guy*’s fixation on the American television heritage. As the scene moves into the hall, we see dozens of anonymous Mexican characters dressed in superhero garb milling around, with “Mexican Superman” conspicuously lazing with a beer and his feet up. A white landlord enters and confronts him about the number of people living in the hall, initiating a short vignette in which he and “Mexican Batman” deceive the landlord and defuse a prospective eviction.

The ostensible gag of the cutaway, running just over thirty seconds, is that the *Super Friends*’ Hall of Justice is as overcrowded as a typical Mexican home, and the bit evokes a number of commonly circulated stereotypes about Latino/a populations in the United States as indolent, duplicitous, and freeloading. Moreover, the images play with the longstanding representational tradition in Hollywood film and television of caricaturing Latino/as as stock types like the “bandido” and “Latin lover.”² Whereas this tradition often placed caricatured representations of marginalized groups within the narrative—by having the white cowboy defeat the sneaky bandido, for example—*Family Guy* compulsively directs our attention beyond the narrative by recreating the aesthetic experience of newsfeed navigation that it presumes its “lost boy” audience enjoys. In our above example, the Mexican stereotypes are not contextualized, undermined, or reinforced with any clarity in the episode. Instead, they become one of any number of referents plucked from the pop cultural ether and placed alongside another one—the *Super Friends*—in the creation of a cutaway gag. This practice elides the history of the stereotypes and the vast power differentials between the two referents, suggesting instead that both are simply fodder for jokes. In doing so, *Family Guy* naturalizes the notion that its audience’s everyday lived experience is one in which everyone and everything is capable of being made fun of.

Indeed, *Family Guy*’s complexity as a site of analysis is the same trait that makes its popularity so problematic. On the one hand, the program’s formal adventurousness has influenced everything from *30 Rock* to parody films like *Scary Movie*, *Date Movie*, and *Epic Movie*. One early notable gag that climaxed with the Kool-Aid man bursting through a courtroom wall, for example, had critics comparing the show to everything from *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* to the magical realism of Latin American authors like Gabriel García Márquez.³ On the other hand, *Family Guy* foregrounds this formal adventurousness in a way that obfuscates its economic motivations and consequences. It appears to make the same accommodations of disparate discourses that social networking sites do, but it is more rigidly structured according to the transmedial pursuit of “lost boys,” aping their (presumed) simultaneous consumption of everything from stereotypes to comics under the idea that



FIGURE 19.1.
An angry landlord con-
fronts the “Mexican
Superfriends.”

they are all equally funny elements of a continuous comedic feed. Clearly, crucial differences exist between social networking sites and television programs.⁴ But by toying with the conventions of the latter to look more like the former, *Family Guy* forecloses many of the powerful representational possibilities unique to television.

Family Guy's formal play manifests most prominently in its emphasis on seemingly extraneous material over conventional sitcom narratives driven by character and plot. Some episodes are more driven than others by characters' particular goals and plotting, but a common complaint of the show is that its Quahog storyworld and the characters that inhabit it exist as little more than jumping-off points for cutaways, flashbacks, and nonsensical extra-textual references. This critique found a particularly explicit articulation in *South Park*'s (Comedy Central, 1997–present) “Cartoon Wars” episodes (April 5 and 12, 2006). In them, bigoted firebrand Eric Cartman rails against the inexplicable narrative logic of *Family Guy*, upset that the other boys think he would like the show because it jibes with his raunchy sense of humor. But Cartman retorts: “Don’t you ever, ever compare me to *Family Guy*! When I make jokes, they are inherent to a story—deep, situational, and emotional jokes based on what is relevant and has a point, not just one random, interchangeable joke after another!” *South Park* has long commented on current events by incorporating them into its storyworld, and the “Cartoon Wars” episodes go on to ridicule extremist rhetoric about the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoon controversy by explicitly playing out *South Park*'s censorship battle with Comedy Central. The episodes climax when the *South Park* boys discover *Family Guy* is written by manatees that choose “idea balls” containing pop culture references and run them through a “joke combine,” a process that results in a nonsensical cutaway gag about Muhammad delivering Peter a salmon atop

a football helmet. *South Park's* critique of *Family Guy* is thus less about its seemingly scattershot sense of humor than how that sensibility prevents *Family Guy* from engaging in dialogue with broader discourses in the contextualized manner that *South Park* strives for.

Perhaps the discourse *Family Guy* has engaged most explicitly and controversially in recent years is that of “post-racial America,” the idea that issues of racial prejudice, persecution, and discrimination no longer matter as much as they once did. These talking points have been taken up by both ends of the political spectrum during the presidency of Barack Obama, and *Family Guy* has articulated them in feuds between the left-leaning Brian and the conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh (“Blue Harvest,” September 23, 2007, and “Excellence in Broadcasting,” October 3, 2010). The episodes hint at a *South Park*-like critique of hyperbolic political rhetoric, asserting that neither side can accurately claim the complex machinations of race relations for its own purposes. Yet representations of race, ethnicity, and religion—from Jews (“When You Wish Upon a Weinstein,” November 9, 2003) to Arabs (“Quagmire’s Baby,” November 15, 2009) to the above-mentioned examples of African Americans and Mexicans—repeatedly undercut this reading. By equating the comedic value of racial/ethnic representations with that of other pop culture ephemera, *Family Guy* appropriates discourses of “post-racialness” more than it subverts them.

Creative personnel involved with the show have tried to discourage readings of its racial/ethnic humor as reinforcing the power of already dominant social groups. Instead, they claim, everyone is made to seem powerless because everyone is made fun of equally. Creator Seth MacFarlane has defended the show as an “equal-opportunity offender,”⁵ a sentiment echoed by black voice actor for *The Cleveland Show*, Kevin Michael Richardson: “If it was just the blacks, we’d have a problem. But the fact that it offends everybody, I can laugh.”⁶ A public endorsement from a black actor affiliated with MacFarlane would seem to ameliorate the effects of offensive humor on *Family Guy*, yet it conflicts with how the show has been represented in other publicity materials. In 2010, for example, MacFarlane and company sent a brochure out to Emmy voters that featured Peter Griffin in a tableau parodying the overweight, black lead actress from the movie *Precious*.

At the time of this brochure, the film—an intense drama about a teenaged girl abused by her mother and impregnated by her father—had become something of a critical darling, going on to garner six Oscar nominations and two wins. At first glance, the mailer is mocking the tendency of awards institutions to laud “issue” films like *Precious*, ironically and reflexively commenting on *Family Guy's* decidedly unserious take on matters of social import. But in typical *Family Guy* fashion, the mailer asks voters to celebrate the program’s diversity, noting that it is “written by 8 WASPS, 6 Jews, 2 Asians and 1 Gay.” This information presumably explains the tagline at the bottom of the mailer, “Vote for us or you’re racist.”

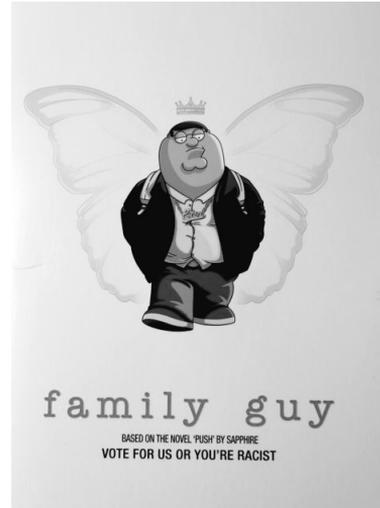


FIGURE 19.2.

A brochure sent to Emmy voters invokes diversity in a parodic (and problematic) plea for recognition.

Many comedic traditions have a history of appropriating racial/ethnic imagery and using it to satirize, among other things, the politics of representation. But the mailer effectively neuters this broader critique by reducing both *Family Guy* and *Precious* to the racial/ethnic/sexual identities of their respective creators. Indeed, part of the joke is pointing to how Oscar voters might be conflating their own white guilt with the artistic value of a film by black creators. But in equating its own diversity to that of *Precious*, *Family Guy* overlooks the differences in power relations between them, as if to say that both exist in a moment when equality is no longer a concern. In other words, if the racial identities in *Precious* are enough to garner critical acclaim, the same should go for other “diverse” media like *Family Guy*; if race is not the basis for the awards-show success of *Precious*, then diversity should not be an issue at all. The mailer strives to satirize “post-racial” discourses, yet overlooks their complexities in the name of humor, as well as unwittingly positing the show as existing in a “post-racial” moment. In doing so, it risks replacing the real world efficacies of diversity efforts with a sense that they no longer matter.

Of course, racial categories, televisual representations of race, and social structures built upon racial/ethnic identities still matter. But their importance does not preclude the possibility of finding humor in the way that we talk about and live racialized experiences in America. Indeed, humor can be a very powerful element of racial discourses. Yet it is important to recognize the complex nature of this power and bear in mind that it is not uniform across all forms of humor. Humor manifests in a range of comedic formats on television, some that speak from positions of the already powerful, others that elevate marginalized voices to take

down the powerful, and many that fall somewhere in between. *Family Guy* flattens this range of power relations and elides differences among them, all in the name of “making fun of everything.” It privileges this seemingly equalizing use of humor, just as the contemporary television industry privileges the “lost boy” audience. But it is up to viewers from all audience categories to maintain a critical sensibility toward click culture in a way that acknowledges the already powerful, heeds the marginalized voices, and strives for an engagement with television that closes the gap between the two groups.

NOTES

1. Frank Rose, “The Lost Boys.” *Wired*, (August 2004), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.08/lostboys.html>.
2. See Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 66–86.
3. See Alison Crawford, “Oh Yeah!: *Family Guy* as Magical Realism?” *Journal of Film and Video* 61, 2 (Summer 2009): 52–69.
4. For a fuller discussion of click culture, *Family Guy*, and representational strategies, see Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, “Click Culture: The Perils and Possibilities of *Family Guy* and Convergence Era Television,” under review.
5. Maria Elena Fernandez, “Sarah Palin vs. ‘Family Guy’: Seth MacFarlane responds (sort of),” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2010/02/sarah-palin-v-family-guy.html>.
6. Dave Izkoff, “Spinning Off Into Uncharted Cartoon Territory,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/arts/television/30itzk.html>

FURTHER READING

- Crawford, Alison. “Oh Yeah!: *Family Guy* as Magical Realism?” *Journal of Film and Video* 61, 2 (Summer 2009): 52–69.
- Dobson, Hugo. “Mister Sparkle Meets the Yakuza: Depictions of Japan in *The Simpsons*.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39 (February 2006): 1.
- Sienkiewicz, Matt, and Nick Marx. “Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in *South Park*.” *The Journal of Film and Video* 61, 2 (Summer 2009): 5–18.