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Paul Lewis

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We are an international community of people of many faiths calling for social justice and political freedom in the context of new structures of work, caring communities, and democratic social and economic arrangements. We seek to influence public discourse in order to inspire compassion, generosity, non-violence and recognition of the spiritual dimensions of life.

Few comedians test comic theory as forcefully as Sarah Silverman, who recently brought the outrageous shtick she has been honing for years to a Comedy Central sitcom that seems both conventional and odd. Conventional because it revolves around a fixed set of friends who make up a sitcom family. Odd because, while smiling and winking, Silverman's character expresses not just wrongheaded or irritating but contemptible ideas and impulses. Blinded by narcissism, unrestrained by decorum, and hopelessly unable to love or be loved, Silverman's character raises questions about the violation of social norms and the functions of shock comedy. In this year of laughing dangerously, one need not be Don Imus to wonder how she gets away with her sugarcoated version of empathy-starved humor.

Show Silverman a taboo about sex, excrement, or the body and she'll show you how it can be transgressed in a punch line. Examples from *Jesus is Magic*, her 2005 feature film, include:

"Strippers should be role models for little girls, if only for the fact that they wax their assholes."

"I was licking jelly off of my boyfriend's penis and all of a sudden I'm thinking, 'Oh My God, I'm turning into my mother!' "

By demonstrating that dirty jokes can provide moments of liberation from sexual repression, Freud went some way toward explaining the appeal of this material. But these jokes are not only naughty; each is also imaginative and clever. Figuring out how strippers could possibly serve as role models for little girls is an unusual challenge; using a graphic account of oral sex to revisit the common anxiety grown children feel about falling into their parents' unappealing patterns of emotional response is astoundingly original. Taken together, these jokes deviate radically from widely shared assumptions and concerns about inter-generational influence.

Three other qualities, frequently combined, define the humor Silverman is bringing to her sitcom: a reworking of the Jewish American Princess (JAP) stereotype, an anti-PC instinct for mocking minority groups, and an anti-sentimental response to suffering and religion.



Again, from *Jesus is Magic*:

"The best time to have a baby is when you're a black teenager."

"When God gives you AIDS—and God does give you AIDS, by the way—make lemonAIDS."

"[My niece] called me up and she's like, 'Aunt Sarah, did you know that Hitler killed sixty million Jews.' And I corrected her and I said, 'You know, I think he's responsible for killing six million Jews.' And she said, 'Oh yeah! Six million! I knew that but seriously, I mean, what's the difference?' 'Uh, the difference is sixty million is unforgivable, young lady!' "

A hundred years ago Henri Bergson noted that humor frequently requires a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" that numbs the listener's pity for the comic butt. Elaborating this idea, Bergson invited his readers to conduct an experiment that is remarkably close to the spirit of Silverman's comedy: "Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said or done ... feel with those who feel ... give your sympathy its widest expansion," Bergson suggested, and you will find yourself immersed in "gloom." But if you then "step aside [and] look upon life as a disinterested spectator, many a drama will turn to comedy." Horace Walpole had something like this in mind when he suggested that "the world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel." Likewise, Mel Brooks commented, "Comedy is when you break your leg. Tragedy is when I stub my toe."

In pushing beyond broken legs all the way to teen pregnancy, terminal disease,

and the Holocaust, Silverman takes comic disinterest or detachment to an extreme, inviting her audiences to suspend empathy for those who most clearly deserve it. In a world of global suffering—in which images of famine, war, and pestilence are broadcast 24/7—this invitation can provide relief or provoke outrage.

The Sarah Silverman Show, recently renewed for a second season, creates dramatic contexts for this comedy of detachment. Each show follows a day in the life of its star. Between opening and closing scenes that have Sarah talking to her dog Doug, something happens to get her going, competing, acting out or up. In episode two, “Officer Jay,” Sarah is irritated when she learns that her sister’s boyfriend is going to be given a humanitarian award for his work with blind children. Determined to outdo him, she takes in a homeless man. In episode five, “Muffin Man,” she meets an attractive lesbian and decides that she, too, is gay.

The energy she brings to recreating herself to fit these temporary identities manifests itself in amusing moments that include self-aggrandizing interactions with “her” homeless man and her performance as a lesbian singer-song-writer in a café. In other episodes, she opens an AIDS awareness office, helps a girl who looks like a younger version of herself win a beauty contest, and has a one-night stand with God. At any moment, but especially when expressing the most edgy ideas, she is likely to break out into a ballad or show tune that provides inappropriate, and therefore amusing, treacle. An example of this comes early in the first episode, when Silverman, sweetly and with great sincerity, sings the following lyric to a little boy on a tricycle:

I really like my life and I'll also tell you what/If I find a stick, I'll put it in your mama's butt/And pull it out and stick the doody in her eye/And pull it out and stick the doody in her eye.

Except for the infantile emphasis on poop, the show reminds one of sitcom precedents including the narcissism of a Jerry Seinfeld or Larry David, the bigotry of an Archie Bunker, the impulsiveness of a Homer Simpson, and the manic creativity of a Lucille Ball. At her best Silverman is edgy, startling, hilarious.

And yet, when asked in a recent *Maxim* interview whether she is trying “to offend as many people as possible,” Silverman insisted that her character, and not she herself, “is the ignoramus.” For the most part, this seems as valid a point to make about her as it is about Sacha Baron Cohen and Stephen Colbert, comedians who also work with extreme comic personas. But then there are moments when Silverman’s contempt for empathy risks causing real pain. In *Jesus is Magic*, for example, she performs a song called “You’re Gonna Die Soon” in front of a group of demented and seemingly entertained nursing home residents. Though they listen idiotically, appreciatively—with little apparent comprehension and no sign of protest—the same response was not shared by three elderly members of the audience who got up and walked out of the theater at this point in the screening I watched at a local art house. At moments like this, Silverman seems less in control of her material than Cohen or Colbert, more likely not just to startle but to wound.

Paul Lewis is the author of Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict.

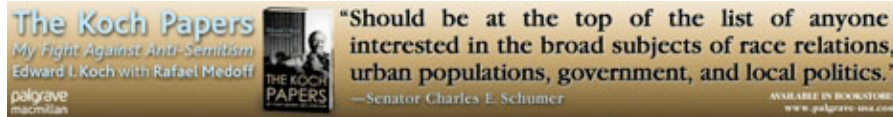
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