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Sitting in the Seat of Mockers

Christian youth and the contemporary ironic turn

Ken Badley

Why have some of my Christian university college students memorized more lines from *Zoolander*, *Princess Bride*, *Dodgeball* and *Wayne's World* than they have from Scripture?

Why are my own university-age daughters able to jump from any key work in our dinner conversation into an extended rip from *Spaceballs*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *A Knight's Tale*? And why do they think the world's largest teapot in a nearby town is so outrageously funny?

If you think about questions like these for very long, you will notice the heightened sense of irony in our time compared to earlier generations. And if you "get it," as my daughters would say, you will know that pink flamingoes on the front lawn can be interpreted on more than one level.

Senior citizens may take their flamingoes straight up. But for members of GenX and GenY, flamingoes symbolize the massive gap between generations and the difference between ironic and serious.

This shift find many expressions besides flamingoes. Many cartoons exhibit a level of self-consciousness and irony unknown two decades ago. Cartoons will now contain references to themselves and to other cartoon strips. One recent cartoon, for example, featured a truck full of typing correction fluid that had spilled over the cartoon, covering part of one panel and some dialogue.

Characters in contemporary cartoons say things like "I'm freaking out, I'm stuck in a cartoon strip!" According to one recent *Doonesbury* strip, the strip itself had allegedly been rented out to a third party. Another recent strip, *Zits*, featured Jeremy's mother attempting to pull a "Thank you" dialogue bubble out of Jeremy's mouth. Traditionally, the dialogue bubbles in cartoons were used for containing dialogue. In this *Zits* panel, the bubble worked its way into the narrative itself.

Cinematic ironies

Films share these ironic and self-conscious sensibilities as well. In *Wayne's World*, Garth regularly talks to the camera, incidentally reminding his viewers not to get pulled into the film's narrative too thoroughly.

The opening credits of *A Knight's Tale* feature the lyrics to Queen's hit song, "We Will Rock You," still well-known two decades after its first appearance. There's no irony in that, but set the scene before a Medieval jousting competition, paint some attending the tournament like drunken NHL fans, and you have seven centuries worth of anachronism.

These more recent films are not the first to dig in these directions for laughs. Mel Brooks has used self-referential jokes for three decades. In his film, *Young Frankenstein*, Brooks had a camera break window, getting a laugh by pulling his viewers momentarily out of the secondary world of the story and into the primary world of movie-making.

He repeated the joke in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993). In *Spaceballs* (1987), he has a cameraman injured, on camera, by the participants in a light-saber fight, itself a satire on the Luke Skywalker/Darth Vader fight from Star Wars. Brooks' most over-the-top self-reference consumes the last several scenes of *Blazing Saddles* (1974). His two protagonists ride off the Hollywood set of their western movie, into the set of a Broadway dance and music number (which they trash), then off the movie lot altogether and out onto the streets of Hollywood, finally discovering a cinema to see how the story ends.

Perhaps by ending *Blazing Saddles* this way, Mel Brooks is just having fun. It is, after all, his film. But perhaps he is shouting at his viewers: "This is just a movie; I've made it and I'll let you see a camera so that you don't forget that it's a movie."

Internet sites such as YouTube and The Onion offer lots of garden-variety satire, much of it welcome in a society as characteristically false as ours. Recently I found the clearest illustration of the reach of ironic and self-referential sensibilities in a Wikipedia article called "metajoke."

Besides its helpful discussion of the contemporary ironic turn, that article includes a number of jokes along this line: "A Priest, a Rabbi and a Leprechaun walk into a bar. The Leprechaun looks around and says, 'Saints preserve us! I'm in the wrong joke!'"

Try to imagine telling this joke in 1950, or even 1960. "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" went on the air in 1968. "Monty Python's Flying Circus" went on the air in 1969. By 1970, the Priest, the Rabbi and the Leprechaun would have got a laugh. In 2007, one could extend the Wikipedia metajoke article almost ad infinitum with such jokes. Without doubt, our culture has taken an ironic turn.

The roots of the ironic turn

Perhaps this newfound irony indicates simply our culture has discovered its old sense of humour (if that had been lost). Or perhaps we have come into some new sense of humour. If Harold Bloom is right and a sense of humour is required to get irony (*How to Read and Why*), then a generation with this many ironies in the fire may not be as lost as some think.

More sobering genealogies abound, some of them seeming intuitively correct to anyone sensing that western society's ground has shifted in the last several decades.

Perhaps we have raised a whole generation or two suffering from deep uncertainty about whether anything can be taken seriously anymore. After all, Susan Sontag identified the "failed seriousness" of camp sensibilities in her essay, "Notes of Camp," in *Partisan Review* a long time ago—1964.

And Stanley Fish published his now-famous book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, almost three decades ago (Harvard, 1980).

Perhaps we suffer some deep loss of confidence about what we know, so we move from capital letters we find in books published before 1940 (Love, the People, Art, etc) to the quotation marks we find now ("art," "truth," "the world's largest teapot").

Something certainly has shifted. How sinister the shift is, we may have to wait and see. Perhaps irony is simply a way to participate without communicating. I chuckle as the Lenin statue and the troll in Seattle, the town in which I now live and I could enjoy the alien landing pad in Vulcan, Alberta. These are intentionally ironic.

I can't resist thinking that the massive, fiberglass Hanson Buck in Biggar, Saskatchewan, one of dozens of cheesy sites in various prairie towns, illustrates what GenXers mean when they say, "It's so bad it's good!"

But I have a photo of myself with the Hanson Buck. If I take the photo ironically, I get to have it all-both the photo and the sense of superiority that comes from knowing I would never support such a silly, campy idea were I to live in a town contemplating the construction of such a thing.

Where does this irony lead?

Should we worry about the heightened ironic sense in contemporary life? Is this shift sinister? To its credit, irony does remind the viewer or the reader to be playful. Life is serious enough; we need to laugh more. If *Starky and Hutch* (2004) or *Thank You for Smoking* (2005) can make us laugh, then good.

This increase in irony may also increase a feeling of tentativity throughout our whole culture. We may all end up sensing that we can be sure of little that behind what we see and take for real is just another production.

Ultimately that suspicion leads to the kind of cynicism C.S. Lewis reveals through one of his characters in *The Great Divorce* (1945). Before finishing his day-tour of heaven, Lewis's cynic concludes that heaven is simply another sham put up by the people trying to get tourists' money.

Contemporary irony does have a certain unbearable lightness about it, as opposed to the stuff with weight and meaning that people need.

Some wise responses

Some of us do need to lighten up and laugh a little. That could be our first response. But we can do more.

Those of us near persons with an overactive sense of irony need to live with integrity. This, of course, is not the reason to live with integrity, but it is an effect of such living.

All of us need to help those around us find anchors with weight, with gravitas. We need to support the search for friendship and community of young people in particular. They are the ones most likely to have an abundance of this kind of cheese in their diet.

Those heavily influenced by mass media need to have more unmediated experiences such as hiking, writing and face-to-face conversation.

Genuine religious faith is an obvious antidote to irony. Too often, those naming Christ lose the capacity to laugh, when we should have an increased ability to detect and laugh at the falseness that surrounds us. Let us recover our ability to laugh, and then let us laugh with those who do.