

Book Review

Marx, Nick. 2019. *Sketch Comedy: Identity, Reflexivity, and American Television*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 180 p. ISBN: 978-0253044167. E-book ISBN: 9780253044273

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The American sketch comedy – from *Saturday Night Live* to *Key & Peele* – is a commercial and cultural powerhouse the world over. In *Sketch Comedy*, Nick Marx takes us behind the laughter to examine “sketch comedy as a genre within the American commercial television industry and as a cultural forum for comedians to articulate myriad ideas and identities” (p. 2). Marx’s study pays careful attention to the production, competition, and political contexts that contribute to the creation of American sketch comedy in order to situate it as a cultural form within “the analytic domains of media text, industry, and sociohistorical context as mutually constitutive, [...] without [Marx hopes] sacrificing the details of what makes particular programs or comedians funny” (p. 5). This integrated approach makes use of methodology familiar to those in media studies, while also emphasizing the comic aesthetic as an essential aspect of sketch comedy production.

Through its detailed address of sketch comedy as a specific form, this volume helps to fill a void in existing studies of media humor. While not entirely novel, Marx’s sociohistorical approach and focus on American sketch comedy’s internal production and industrial factors suggest a wide-ranging lens for studying media in all forms. Additionally, Marx’s conceptual approach establishes American sketch comedy as a cultural forum that is “equally constructed by television texts and their discursive contexts, not as a monolithic artifact with stable, unchanging characteristics” (p. 6). In particular, Marx is concerned with how the combination of cultural reflexivity and production flexibility positions “sketch comedy [...] as] a sort of postmodern media literacy, an instruction manual for how to assemble meanings, representations, and identities out of the myriad cultural fragments increasingly cluttering our collective consciousness” (p. 150).

The chapters of *Sketch Comedy* are organized chronologically around “key [American] sketch comedy moments” (p. 5): with each chapter focusing on a handful of central examples that are indicative of popular sketch comedy of the different eras. Marx begins with an exploration of the early sketch comedy of the televised vaudeville *Colgate Comedy Hour* in Chapter One. In this chapter, he is primarily concerned with mediated and repeating comedy “as a site of identity

formation,” noting how the competing ideas of those in the production “have aligned or not aligned with dominant industrial and sociohistorical discourses along the way” (p. 58). For example, radio comedian Fanny Brice devised the “Schnooks strategy,” in which Brice’s “recurring baby character named Schnooks, [would feign] infantilized innocence as a way to slip in double-entendre and sexual puns” while also offering “critiques of patriarchal authority and bolster[ing] feminine cultural identities” (p. 43). Marx complements these textual analyses with detailed attention to production details and early sketch aesthetics in a largely readable and approachable fashion, although at times the excess of minutia can make for heavy going.

Jumping twenty years ahead, in the second chapter, Marx addresses the behemoth of American sketch comedy that is *Saturday Night Live*. Central to this chapter is an argument against “accounts of early *SNL* as a progressive, new comedic voice [that proceeds] by demonstrating how its cast members’ struggles for consecration ended up reinforcing—not undermining—existing social power inequalities based in race and gender” (p. 31). Marx outlines the prioritization of John Belushi and Chevy Chase and other straight white men, juxtaposed to “Gilda Radner, Laraine Newman, Garrett Morris, and Richard Pryor [...] who were marginalized by early *SNL*’s struggles for consecration” (p. 31). Marx does so with a commendable balance and nuance to his analysis, which some may not be willing to admit plagued – and still plagues – television production. However, his subsequent jump into film critics’ peevish objections to *SNL* actors in mainstream film is a little jarring and risks trivializing Marx’s above analysis.

Chapter three addresses the Generation X sketch comedy era and its construction of “the era’s oppositional-versus-mainstream tensions [...] as an identity based in consumerism, circumscribing its oppositional impulses and directing them to market based expressions” (p. 33). With the likes of MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *The State* (1993–1995), and CBS’ *The State*, Marx explores the back and forth “between risqué cable sensibilities and mainstream broadcast safeness” that troubled this era (p. 102). Marx does so with strong attention for detail, even if some of his titular grander points – identity and reflexivity – get lost in the denseness of the production notes and correspondence Marx includes alongside his analysis of selected sketch examples.

After much attention to sketch comedy of the broadcast era, in the closing chapter Marx turns his attention to the post-network internet era of American sketch comedy with the likes of *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Key & Peele*, and Comedy Central’s online distribution presence. In doing so, he directly juxtaposes these examples against those of previous chapters as examples of how “Comedy Central in the post-network era has begun courting more diverse audiences [...] What’s more, it is doing so without alienating the core viewership of straight, young, white

men so important to its brand” (p. 126). However, Marx emphasizes that this lack of alienation was driven by “Comedy Central’s promotion and distribution strategies [that] ultimately constrain those transgressions, tethering them to the tastes of straight, young men” to maximize their ability as “profit-seeking cultural products” (p. 134). In this manner, Marx’s analysis successfully shows that sketch comedy’s flexible identity politics “can serve as a powerful marker of difference, to paraphrase [Andy] Medhurst, ‘a prime testing ground for ideas about belonging and exclusion’” that “test the boundaries of its core [viewership]” (p. 145).

Overall, Nick Marx’s *Sketch Comedy* very much does what it sets out to do. Marx provides a useful introduction to the production process of American sketch comedy in a reasonably approachable fashion, although the assumed knowledge regarding American contexts and examples does mean there is a learning curve – especially in the introduction – for any readers outside of America. This approachability makes Marx’s further discussions around identity, specifically culture, race, and gender far more thoughtful, engaging, and well-balanced than they might otherwise have been. Moreover, Marx’s focus on case studies works well given the near impossibility of a more comprehensive focus in a work of this length: the chosen examples of *Colgate Comedy Hour*, *SNL*, *Key and Peele*, etc. are in the higher echelons of American sketch comedy and serve as cultural touchstones in tandem with the more diverse modern productions.

However, there is one noticeable omission, even if it is self-imposed: an absence of audience perspectives. The omission of any empirical account of audience activities, such as surveys or ethnographic work, is somewhat unfortunate given the weight that Marx puts behind the cultural reflexivity of sketch comedy. Instead, in its absence, there is a missed opportunity to give more nuance to “sketch comedy’s interpretive possibilities” in terms of the wider zeitgeist (p. 15). Yet, with that all being said, Marx ends *Sketch Comedy* with a positive and well-earned sign off that I will also leave you with:

Indeed, part of what attracts many producers and performers to sketch comedy is the sense that other cultural expressions are inadequate to capture their voices. As those voices multiply, and as they do so through sketch comedy, continued consideration of the myriad forces bearing on their creation will hopefully bring us together just as often as they keep us apart. (p. 150)