

Kiss My Aztec: The Functions of Satire

by Micah Berger

*M*ass media like a published newspaper disseminates information to an audience of at least a few thousand people. In most cases mass media like newspapers are put out by a group of people working together or a corporation. This corporation, or group of constituents, then uses some kind of mechanism to reproduce its message. (Severin 8). An example of this kind of mass media would be the *San Diego Union Tribune*. A commercial newspaper like this one has a few general functions. Harold Lasswell, a scholar of communication and a professor of law at Yale, has separated these general functions into four categories:

1)Surveillance of the environment. This means that the publication provides news about elements of the economy, weather, and military 2)Correlation of parts of society in responding to the environment. This is the specific opinion that a society has concerning the news being presented 3)Transmission of social heritage from one generation to the next. This increases social cohesion and helps outsiders integrate into the society reflected by the newspaper 4)Entertainment, which consists of art, music, editorial columns and other leisure material (Severin 212-14).

While mass media tries to objectively portray news events, there is often a conflict of values. Warren Breed, a former newspaper reporter and Tulane University faculty member, believes that the media tends to sacrifice accurate reporting of significant events for the sake of “respect for convention, public decency and orderliness” (Severin 222). Another mass media theorist, John Downing (2001), agrees that self-

ensorship by mainstream media leads to the “unquestioning acceptance of standard professional media codes” (16). Downing (2001) also believes that “mass culture, the product of the commercial industries of advertising, broadcasting, cinema, and print media, is a spurious and implicitly even fascistic rendition of the public’s needs, asphyxiating the questioning spirit” (4).

This “asphyxiation of the questioning spirit” is not a problem that has gone unattended to. The response has taken the form of “radical media.” According to Downing (2001) “Radical media has a mission not only to provide facts to a public denied them but to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public’s sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change” (16). Radical media is also simultaneously a part of “popular culture.” Popular culture can be defined as a “mixed phenomenon” because it can be radical in some respects and not in others. Another attribute of popular culture is that it can be elitist, racist, misogynist, homophobic, and ageist. And furthermore, this culture is free to express these views in inventive and attractive ways. (Downing 5) The producers of popular culture are free to do this because they are not claiming to maintain any standard social codes of morality.

In the following discussion I will examine the relationship between the *Daily Aztec* and the *Kiss My Aztec* as a response to this kind of conventional public communication. First I want to determine the function of the *Daily Aztec* as a form of mass media. Second I will try to understand the ideology of the satirical *Daily Aztec* parody called the *Kiss My Aztec*.

The *Daily Aztec* is a San Diego State University publication that is modeled after any generic city newspaper. The front page consists of headlines, a few eye-catching pictures and a brief table of contents at the bottom of the page. This table of contents also contains a brief synopsis of the weather. As a former columnist for the *Daily Illini*, the newspaper published by the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, I can say that the formats of both college publications are nearly identical. Both are primarily about social and political events taking place at the college of their publication. And both have the appearance of a real newspaper from a distance of six or seven feet. The only dead giveaway is that these college newspapers seldom use colors or colored graphics in any of their publications. Just as a national or city publication includes stories about political figures and prominent members of the community, their collegiate counterparts include stories about the president of the university and prominent faculty members and students. These collegiate publications present their school, a small part of national society, as the dominant community. This technique further emphasizes the legitimacy of these publications as formal kinds of mass media that more or less obey the same pre-

cepts and serve the same functions as their national counterparts like the *Union Tribune* or the *New York Times*.

In a chapter on media criticism by Barry Brummett (1994), he comments on the function of “media logic.” Media logic is “the assumption that as people become accustomed to a technology and to the social uses to which it is put, they internalize certain ways of thinking and perceiving it” (139). This means that the medium the information is presented on has a strong affect on the way that we perceive its value. Because of this, an article that you would read in the *National Enquirer* would be received in a much different way from an article that you might read in *Time* or *Newsweek*. This is because magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek* portray themselves as accurate forms of journalism while the *National Enquirer* makes no such claim. By graphically designing the *Daily Aztec* to look just like a regular national newspaper, its creators partially succeed in transferring the media logic of a respectable newspaper to their own collegiate publication. And to take this transfer a step further, *The Kiss My Aztec* has the same relationship with the *Daily Aztec* as it tries to look like the respected college newspaper that the student body has come to internally recognize.

Another distinction that can be drawn between media publications is the difference between first and third world views of nationalism and cultural production. According to Frederick Jameson, the main difference between the two is their economic means of production. He believes that “first world postmodernism reflects multinational capitalism, the most advanced stage of postindustrial capitalism, while third world texts reflect ‘primitive or tribal’ societies based on precapitalistic modes of production” (Bennett 178-79). The *Daily Aztec* exhibits qualities of a first world publication, just as a national newspaper does. It confines itself to acceptable social precepts of the community, and is “commodified” in such a way as to promote the dominant capitalist institutions that surround it. Examples can be seen in promotions for events that are taking place in the San Diego area, advertisements for non-profit special interest groups, and other associations with the dominant culture of the San Diego community. Also, because the *Daily Aztec* is distributed to thousands of students daily, it can be influential in the community just like other forms of first world texts. The *Kiss My Aztec* exhibits qualities of a third world text as it is not bound to any national regulations that are found acceptable to the community. It contains fewer advertisements, and limits itself to local commentaries that do not attempt to figure into the identity of a national community. For instance, the bulk of most *Kiss My Aztec* publications consist of grotesque images and misogynistic humor. I don’t know of any respectable national community in San Diego that accepts these community values as representatives of their

own. In addition, the means for production of this text are severely limited in comparison to the production of the *Daily Aztec*. While the *Daily Aztec* is distributed from bins located all over campus, the *Kiss My Aztec* can only be found in a few select areas on campus. In these ways this parody of a campus newspaper represents a primitive local view of a community that it does not completely belong to. But despite these drawbacks, there is still a rising population of students (myself included) that looks for the next edition twice a month. In this way the *Kiss My Aztec* portrays the attitudes of radical and popular media.

Mikhail Bakhtin defines this kind of radical third world text as a discourse that seeks to represent an “active polyglot word.” This is a process that Bakhtin calls a dialogization, or the process by which a language user enters into a dialogue with other people’s language in an effort to populate it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention . . . forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents. (Anderson 293-94)

Here we are beginning to see the functions of parody in mass media. In Bakhtin’s words, the function of a parody is to open a channel of communication between the standard social norms and the minority views of that same community. In another text, Robert Bennett (2000) quotes Bakhtin’s views on parody texts. “Bakhtin emphasizes how language can be reaccentuated through literary parody of past literary conventions and popular carnivalizing of authoritative social and linguistic norms” (184). Here Bennett is hinting at the way parody is able to pave the way for a new cultural ownership by a community located on the fringes of the “normal” social culture. Bennett (2000) also believes that this “modern cultural form” functions in a way that unifies opposing cultural beliefs (185).

This perspective looks at parodies as a method of bringing together communities with opposing values in an exchange of cultural opinions. If we see parody in this favorable way, it becomes easier to respect it as an “engineer of constructive change” (Downing, 2001, 16). But at the same time we must also consider the *Kiss My Aztec*’s function as a kind of popular media, which we know is not concerned with respectable social values that can be found in radical media. The most objectionable quality of any form of popular cultural media is that it reserves its right to be nasty and hateful just for kicks. An example of this type of discourse can easily be found on any page of the *Kiss My Aztec*. Some example headlines of this publication read: “Top Ten Excuses From David Westerfield” or “Figuring Out Women.” In the article about women there is a brief description of female personalities. It reads: “You can tell a lot about women by the drink they order. For example, if a girl orders a vodka cran or a gin and tonic, then she’s probably a whore.

But if she orders a Bud Light or a Coors Light then she's probably a whore!" (March 2002).

Here we see that the *Kiss My Aztec* is also a representative of a grotesque carnivalized look at mainstream culture and media, specifically the *Daily Aztec*. Another example of the relationship between the two publications is the current mascot debate taking place on the San Diego State campus. A discussion of this debate in the *Daily Aztec* appears in an article entitled "Mascot ideas center stage at forum." In the *Kiss My Aztec* this same debate has been twisted into a misogynistic joke. In an article entitled "Mascot Suggestions" there is a mascot named "Megan The Coke Slut." Besides offending women, this article is designed to offend anyone who has taken this racist mascot debate seriously. At the same time, it appeals to irreverent jerks who don't really care that much either way about the fate of our school mascot (May 2002).

The grotesque satire of the *Kiss My Aztec* can be seen from a Rabelaisian perspective. There are two major components of what Bakhtin calls "Rabelaisian laughter." They are the carnivalization of existing traditions and the illustration of abstract ideas through grotesque imagery. Bakhtin discusses the purpose of laughter from the perspective of Rabelais. In his description, we begin to see the socially redeeming qualities of humor as it presents itself in satirical literature:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality . . . Such is the function of laughter in the historic development of culture and literature. (Bakhtin 123)

Here we can see the purpose of satirical representations of serious discourse. By poking fun at the powers that be, Rabelais feels that he is able to liberate the minds of people who are restricted by social norms. His idea is that parody causes us to see through the traditional concepts of propriety in our social institutions. This allows us to judge our world using our own moral standards rather than those that have been imposed upon us as a culture. In other words, Rabelais believed that satirical laughter strips the object being parodied of its "false verbal and ideological husk" (Bakhtin 237). The ability to derive personal judgment from humor was viewed by Aristotle as a valuable part of social insight. "According to Aristotle, a child does not begin to laugh before the fortieth day after his birth; only from that moment does it become a human being" (Bakhtin 69). Here Aristotle is describing the cognitive developments in the brain that allow a person to laugh at their sur-

roundings. These developments further indicate the ability to form ethical and moral judgments about the environment.

An example of a socially enlightening source of laughter in an issue of the *Kiss My Aztec* can be seen in a brief statement about the Starbucks Coffee chain. There is a graphic of the Starbucks logo with the phrase "Black coffee for white people." And above this graphic is the statement: "Don't get Starbucked, boycott the monopolists" (March 2002). This humorous commentary makes the reader think about the racial and social implications of the popular coffee chain. Not only does it make a statement about our modern economy, it also makes people evaluate their own racial stereotypes. In this way we can see how laughter contributes to our social perspective of our surroundings.

While this kind of statement causes us to evaluate our existing society, what Rabelais terms "carnivalization" paints a clear picture of a society turned upside down by satire and humorous criticism. In Rabelais' time there was a widespread practice in Medieval France called the "Feast of Fools," this festival was described as having "a reversal of the hierarchal levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the 'feast'" (Bakhtin 81). This "feast of fools" that Rabelais so enjoyed embodied his desire to "destroy the official picture of events" (Bakhtin 439). A perfect example of this destruction of the official social picture through a reversal of roles can be seen in the *Kiss My Aztec* article entitled "Win The Ultimate St. Patrick's Day Date" (March 2002). With a headline like this, a reader would imagine the prize to be a date with a sexy person that they would like to meet. But instead there is a picture of the *Kiss My Aztec* editor, J. Rhodes, looking unattractive in a pair of tighty-whites. By turning around the ideals of sexual appeal, this advertised contest has turned the laughable court jester into an even goofier king. Even though Rhodes is looking quite ridiculous in the picture, it still qualifies as an instance of what Rabelais would call "bringing down the high and raising up the low." (Bakhtin 177). This is another case how he seeks to undo the habitual pictures of the world that dictate our social structures.

The other aspect of "Rabelaisian Laughter" is the depiction of the grotesque. According to Rabelais: "The body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, diseases, and dismembered body parts . . . there is still an eruption of these images into literature, especially if the literature is gay or abusive in character" (Bakhtin 319). In an excerpt from Rabelais' book *Pantagruel*, he shows us just how grotesque his image of the human body can be: "I have observed that the pleasure-twats of women in this part of the world are much cheaper than stones. Therefore, the walls should be built of twats, symmetrically and according to the rules of architecture, the largest go in front"

(Bakhtin 313). The purpose of this grotesque image could be to comment on the social status of women. Or it could have been to help men see how poorly they treat women as they objectify them for their parts.

The *Kiss My Aztec* also contains grotesque imagery of dismembered body parts. Incidentally, it is the same dismembered part of the female anatomy used in Rabalais' text. The depiction of the vagina in the *Kiss My Aztec* does not have a role as socially symbolic as in *Pantagruel*, but may be just as grotesque. It is an article entitled "Cameltoe Classifications." This article has names and corresponding pictures of the female anatomy that depict it in a very crude way. Some of the disgusting classifications of the grotesque disembodied depictions of the female anatomy are "Baked potato, Barroom ashtray, and Big Bird's wishbone." (*Kiss My Aztec*, May 2002). The only positive social message that I can see coming out of this editorial is the realization that women's bodies are too often objectified by our collegiate community here at San Diego State.

In this way, the satirical publication appeals to the values of popular culture which is free to express its beliefs that appeal to any social group. The *Kiss My Aztec* is full of other grotesque articles that serve little or no satirical purpose. I would also classify them as products of a disturbing popular culture. Some of these articles include a picture of J. Rhodes, the Editor of the *Kiss My Aztec*, urinating on someone's living room floor; an article entitled "Warning: Don't Put Nads in Your Asshole;" and a discussion of how to make an organic ink that is safe to use when making a print with the underside of your penis. This print was also included on the front page of the last *Kiss My Aztec* publication (May 2002).

All of the topics of this satire of the *Daily Aztec* are a product of grotesque humor. And some serve as a more obvious form of social criticism than others. This is the difference between a mass-produced print of the male genitalia, and a caption that reads: "Father Weber implements new male only G-string policy. Says he will personally enforce the strict code" (*Kiss My Aztec*, May 2002). This second example is a commentary on the news story of a local high school dress code involving thongs and an invasion of personal privacy by a teacher.

In the Master's Thesis entitled "Breaking Through: Carnavalesque Discourse as Therapy," Cynthia Dudley discusses the "laughing truth" which is a synonym for insight. Dudley says: "the temporary removal of social and political restraints provides carnival participants the opportunity to examine, understand, and compare their internal and external existence (6). I believe that she is talking about the personal role that each person perceives as theirs in the world that they live in. From

this explanation, we can see the *Kiss My Aztec* is an outlet for students who question the social restrictions that surround them in campus life.

But the *Kiss My Aztec* does more than function as a symbol of social dysfunction. It also represents some of the crass pleasures of popular culture. In this way it reminds us that not every gross thing you see is the product of a sincere social concern. Instead, these things can be seen for what they are, the perverted ideals of an irreverent minority in the San Diego State student body. In other words, a print of the underside of a man's penis made from a thick mixture of water and instant coffee contains no valuable social commentary. It is just a sign of the moral perversion found in popular culture that has infiltrated our collegiate communities.

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