



COMEDY AND MORALITY

Satire, Censorship
and Dirty Words

with David Misch

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What’s the relationship between comedy and morality? Is there one? Should there be?

That’s the question we’ll explore in this talk, which looks at professional humor’s role in defining, and defying, society’s moral boundaries.

From the satirists of ancient Rome to last night’s “Daily Show”, comedy has never been shy about taking on the moral issues of its time. In satirizing and illuminating society’s hypocrisies and immoral behaviors, though, comedians are frequently accused of “crossing the line”. Generally, they don’t care. George Carlin: “It’s the duty of a comedian to find out where the line is drawn and then step over it.”

But one thing is sure: wherever you draw it, your line won’t be in the same spot as your neighbor’s. So how do we as a society decide when comedy goes too far?

We’ll explore this question with clips and commentary examining satire, taboos and censorship, from forbidden farts in Afghanistan to the silencing of a South African puppet, not to mention W.S. Gilbert, W.C. Fields, Steve Martin, the Russian Orthodox Church, “Charlie Hebdo”, Billy Wilder, Monty Python, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and two outrageous “Saturday Night Live” sketches written by U.S. Senator Al Franken.

A significant point of discussion will be Mel Brooks’ movie (and play and movie) “The Producers”, a touchstone for controversy from the moment it appeared. To some a hilarious put-down of Hitler, to others a horrifying diminution of the Holocaust, what Brooks actually achieved is still hotly debated.

The talk won’t presume to find “answers” to any of these issues but will try to discuss the questions in a way that gets people to examine their assumptions and presumptions, and realize that comedy’s relationship with morality is as complex as morality itself.

Time
Place