ABSTRACT

THESIS: From Scat to Satire: Toward a Taxonomy for Humor in Twentieth Century American Media

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Obvious differences exist between the comedy styling of, for example, Jack Benny and Benny Hill. Terms like “highbrow” or “lowbrow” are often used, but there is no functional method yet that could feasibly be used to qualify all of the single jokes, let alone the broader work. Currently loose classification systems are used, but they don’t claim to be all encompassing. They are either too vague or too exclusive.

This thesis selects several movies from the AFI list of the 100 funniest movies of all-time. In order to have a broad selection across time, it uses the highest-ranking movie from every decade beginning with the 50s. The movies are: Some Like it Hot (1959), Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964), Annie Hall (1977), Tootsie (1982), and There’s Something About Mary (1998). Each movie is scrutinized, and each joke notated and analyzed. Once the analysis is complete on each individual joke from each individual film, the jokes are then sorted and organized. Patterns and characteristics are then sought and notated.