

Blazing Saddles: The Western Parody

Danny Kremen

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McKahan

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Shepherd University

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In 1974, Mel Brooks helped write, direct, and play two roles in the movie *Blazing Saddles*. This movie is a typical Mel Brooks film, in which the main goal is to make fun of a certain genre or a certain type of movie. Other movies by Brooks include *Young Frankenstein*, *History of the World – Part I*, and *Spaceballs*. Of these four movies, all of them are parodies. Throughout this paper, I will go in depth on the movie *Blazing Saddles* and show the many examples of how it parodies the Western film genre.

In order to parody a genre, one must know what happens in a typical movie within the genre. According to Turner (2003):

Most scholars agree that the Western, in its most basic definition is set on the American frontier sometimes between the mid-1800s and the early 1900s. It typically is serious, often quite somber, and involves some kind of clearly defined dramatic conflict between the forces of good and evil, man and nature, or law and anarchy. The genre is composed of a complex set of codes and images, including the lonesome hero, moral justice enforced by violence, the coming of the railroad, the shoot-out, the open prairie, hats, horses, cowboys, and guns. (p. 218)

This set of characteristics laid out by Turner gives you a general idea of what goes on in your typical Western movie, however there is still more to it. The typical Western movie also has a standard landscape that is it supposed to follow. Schatz says “the Western projects a formalized vision of the nation’s infinite possibilities and limitless vistas, thus serving to ‘naturalize’ the policies of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny” (Schatz, 1992, p. 431).

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A great way of to think about the stereotypes of a genre would be to actually watch a movie within the genre. As an example, let's briefly look at a movie we watched from class, *The Searchers*, and line it up with the typical qualities of a western movie. In the movie, John Wayne plays as a cowboy who goes out with his adopted family member to find out what happened to his abducted daughter. In the end, they find her and they are able to rescue her from the Native Americans who had originally captured her. The end of the move shows John Wayne riding off into the sunset on his horse, in typical western fashion. It also shows a conflict, leading to the typical good versus evil (John Wayne being the good guy, the Native Americans being the bad guys), the standard western landscape (desert), and a "lonesome hero", even though John Wayne had a lot of help from his Martin Pauley (the adopted family member).

Now that the Western genre has been defined and broken down, we can analyze how *Blazing Saddles* makes parody of the genre. To begin this analysis, I will go into detail about the characters and the plot of the movie. After that, I will cite different examples throughout the movie that Brooks uses in order to create parody of the Western genre.

Blazing Saddles begins showing a bunch of African Americans working on constructing a railroad. One of the guys is Bart, who is the main character and protagonist of the film. After Bart knocks out his employer with a shovel, he is sentenced to death. However, a scheme is developed, and Hedley Lamarr wants Bart's life spared. Lamarr then meets with Governor Le Potomane (Brooks), and they agree to make Bart the sheriff of a small town called Rock Ridge. Lamarr wants to create a railroad that expands westwards, and in order to do so, he needs to tear down Rock Ridge. Lamarr's hopes were that the people would be so disgusted by having a black sheriff, that they would rebel and eventually leave the town, leaving him the opportunity to continue his railroad.

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After becoming sheriff, Bart's greeting to the town was less than stellar to say the least. The people of the town all drew guns on him, in which he was able to outsmart them by pulling a gun on himself, confusing everyone in comical fashion. Around this time, Bart meets Jim, A.K.A, the Waco Kid. Jim used to have "the fastest hands in the world", but got "shot in the ass", leading him to depression and a drinking problem. Bart and Jim become friends, and they both were able to benefit from each other. After Bart outsmarts Mongo, a huge guy with a small brain, the people of the town begin to like Bart a little bit more.

After Bart gains the people of Rock Ridge's trust and learns about Lamarr's plan to tear Rock Ridge in favor of the railroad, Bart coordinates a plan with everyone to create a replica of the city, as well as create a toll booth to fool Lamarr's less than intelligent men. The plan works, as the toll booth keeps the men distracted and there is a battle between the people of Rock Ridge and the people Lamarr has employed. The ending is quite confusing. It cuts to Lamarr being in a theater at the premiere of the movie *Blazing Saddles*, at which he and Bart meet. Bart finally ends all the madness by shooting and killing Lamarr. The movie ends with Bart leaving the city of Rock Ridge with Jim, riding off with their horses before separately getting off and getting into their own limos.

In a nutshell, that is the movie *Blazing Saddles*, however there are so many things that might go unnoticed the first time watching. Throughout the movie there are many instances of breaking the fourth wall, in which one of the characters talks to the audience. There is a scene when the town is in chaos and an elderly woman is getting punched in the stomach by two thugs. At that point, she looks at the camera and says, "Have you ever seen such cruelty?" Another quote from the movie was when Lamarr is trying to think of a new governor, and he says "Where can I find such a man? Why am I asking you?" Finally, to point out one more example of this,

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is when Bart draws a gun on himself and rushes him inside a building, he looks at the camera and says “and they are so dumb”.

According to Turner (2003), “A parody is a comical imitation of a genre that uses its existing codes to examine the subject in a humorous way” (p. 219). This is reinforced by Bonnstetter, who cites Gehrig’s definition of parody, defining film parody as “‘a comic, yet generally affectionate and distorted imitation of a give genre, auter, or specific work’ (p.1)” (Bonstettar, 2008, p. 23). The way I view parody is taking a genre, stripping it down, and finding ways to make fun of it in an attempt to make the target audience laugh. Mel Brooks has found success in many of his movies with this formula, but *Blazing Saddles* is one of the best examples of a parody movie within any genre. At this point, I would like to begin pointing out at certain parts of the movie in which Brooks parodies the standard Western genre film.

Turner (2003) believes that :

Although *Blazing Saddles* is specifically a parody of the Western, it is also a product of its time. The film’s deconstructivist techniques reflect the widespread turmoil of a nation dealing with Vietnam and Watergate. Just as people were questioning the things they once thought were fixed, Brooks questions and undermines every established convention of the Western. (p. 224)

This is part of Brooks’s genius. He wants to go outside the box and make people rethink a whole genre. Yes, not everything about *Blazing Saddles* matches up with the standard Western, but not every Western matched up with it either. Brooks wanted this film to be different and to make people laugh.

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At this point, I would like to begin pointing out at certain parts of the movie in which Brooks parodies the standard Western genre film. Maurice Yacowar goes into detail about many examples about how *Blazing Saddles* is an all-out parody. Yacowar states (1981):

The church scenes, the building of the railroad, the rescue by lariat, the saloon, the climactic free-for-all—everything in the saga of Rock Ridge has roots in the Hollywood Western. So do the characters. The fallen Waco Kid wobbles in from the tradition of Thomas Mitchell's drunken doctor in *Stagecoach* and Dean Martin's gunslinger in *Rio Bravo*. As the cool outsider who saves the town, Bart is a hipster Shane. (p. 101).

When it comes to *Blazing Saddles*, Crick says that it “isn't just working within the genre but deflating it, exposing its square-dance-and-prayer-meeting- small-town-innocence for the hokey Hollywood white-wash it is” (Crick, 2009, p. 60). To go in depth, let's look at the city of Rock Ridge and their reaction to Bart first arriving. The man who sees Bart coming from a distance is initially freaked out, and tries to tell everyone that the new sheriff is a “nig-” before being cut off by a bell. When Bart arrives to the town, what originally begins as a joyous celebration of the arrival of a new sheriff turns into shock, disbelief, and even anger. As Bart accepts becoming the sheriff, everyone pulls a gun on him, including an elderly woman who was being beat up in a previous scene. At that point, Bart draws a gun on himself and says in a different voice “Hold it. Next man that makes a move, the nigger gets it”. It works and the people of Rock Ridge completely change how they originally felt. One woman, who was originally pointing a gun at him, says “isn't anyone going to help that poor man?”

I'd like to reemphasize the previous quote, about the stereotypical western including “small-town-innocence”. This is one use of parody that Brooks uses in the movie. The people

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of Rock Ridge are happy and content with their lives, until a black man becomes sheriff of their town. At which point, they feel the need to all draw guns on him and act with hostility. When Bart tries to greet a woman, she replies “Up yours nigger”. Nothing more, nothing less.

Yacowar (1981) also states:

Bart and Waco do not fit into their Western genre because they do not fit into the conventional white racist society. In the conventional Western, Black Bart would be a dumb villain, not the cool, modern virtuous hero he is here. By transcending their genre, Bart and Waco affirm their character and humanity against the genre’s prejudices. (p. 107)

I believe that this part of the parody is because of the fact that at the time, it was not socially acceptable for an African American to be the sheriff of a western town like this. There is one line in the movie where Governor Le Potomane says that the movie takes place in 1874. In your standard western, the hero is typically a white cowboy. Brooks purposefully makes the hero an African American railroad worker turned sheriff in order to make a mockery of the typical Western film.

One scene that most people think of whenever they hear about the movie would probably be the “fart scene”. In the scene, a bunch of Hedley Lamarr’s men surround a campfire eating beans for dinner. Brooks wanted to give this scene as much realism as he possibly could, so what do you think of when eating beans? Flatulence. With each man there, Yacowar (1981) says that “His cowboys explode in a symphony of farts” (p. 102). With each cowboy, there was at least one fart, and each fart seemed to grow louder or longer when it went to the next person. This scene was very important for Brooks, and when asked about it, Brooks said:

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For 75 years these big, hairy brutes have been smashing their fists into each other's faces and blasting each other full of holes with six-gun, but in all that time, not one has had the courage to produce a fart. I think that's funny. (Yacowar, 1981, p. 103)

One of Lamarr's men is named Mongo. He is a very big guy, but is lacking in the mental department. Mongo acts more as comic relief. In a scene where he is terrorizing Rock Ridge, Bart comes in and delivers a candygram to him. Unfortunately for Mongo, there was no candy in there, and it blows up in his face. This is where the townspeople begin to trust Bart more, and one of the old ladies who called him a nigger before, delivered him a pie while he was hanging out with Jim. Bart keeps Jim chained up, and he gets the information from him about Lamarr building the railroad. There isn't really much to draw a comparison to a typical Western, he is just a typical movie character who helps advance the storyline.

The ending to the movie is very notable, not only for its humor, but for its evaluation in parodying the Western genre. Bart is able to convince the people of Rock Ridge to trust him, and they begin to build a replica of the town. As well as building a replica of Rock Ridge, they create a toll booth that confuses Lamarr's men, and it stalls them for an extended period of time. Once they finally pay off the toll, they are off to the replica of the town. Eventually, there is an all-out brawl between the townspeople of Rock Ridge and Lamarr's men. As the fighting goes on, the camera moves back and you can clearly see the studio in which the shot is being taken. In addition to that, the fighting spills over into another movie scene, in which there was a musical going on. Lamarr leaves and shows up at the premiere of the movie *Blazing Saddles*, in which he confronts Bart once again. Bart guns him down and saves the town. It is after that when Bart decides it is time to leave Rock Ridge, even though the people have finally accepted

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him for who he was. Bart and Jim both leave the town on their own horses, and as the movie ends, they both get off their horses and get into their own limos.

Turner (2003) says “the last sequence of the film is notable for its deconstruction of the Western” (p. 224). There are so many things to pick apart just from the ending. Looking at the scene where the brawl was occurring, the camera backs up to show the studio. In the typical Western, we know there is a final shootout and it takes place in whatever studio they are filming in. But in *Blazing Saddles*, they show the studio purposefully for comedic purposes. Then when the brawl spills into another studio, there are more laughs to come into that. There is one part where they show fighting and a random Adolf Hitler dress up is just making gestures in fast motion. Then Brooks throws a curveball at everyone, by having the movie *Blazing Saddles* within the movie. Such an idea seemed to be unheard of, but it was hilarious while watching for the first time. Finally, the very last scene was made just to make fun of the Western genre. In your typical Western, the hero rides off on his horse into the sunset. Instead, our heroes begin to ride off on horses before getting off and into limos. Since the movie takes place in 1874, it should be impossible for something like that to happen. However, because it is a parody, it does not have to make sense, and Brooks does a great job at creating an incredible ending.

There are other scenes in the movie in which it might not be a full on parody, but it does not match up with the typical Western. One example is when Bart is having a flashback to when he was a baby. His parents ran into some Native Americans, and the one who was talking (played by Mel Brooks), was speaking Yiddish. Obviously, most Native Americans do not speak Yiddish, and that is why that scene is funny.

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As another example, Yacowar (1981) writes “Against the usual innocence of the genre, Brooks emphasizes sexual corruption. Bewailing the disorder in town, the minister reports people stampeded and cattle raped” (p. 104). It goes against anything normal to report that anything getting raped, especially non-humans. It seemed like whenever there was a scene within the church, something would be said that would go against typical western logic, and that adds to the parody of the movie.

Another example I remember while watching the movie was right before Bart was originally scheduled to be hanged. It shows a man, who was about to be hanged, and after another conversation, it shows a horse about to be hanged. Now, typically, if someone is sentenced to death, it is just them that dies, not their horse. Brooks adds this subtle joke in, and while it is not a big deal, it is still funny. There is also another funny scene involving a horse. When Mongo arrives in Rock Ridge, he is walking around the town and instead of punching a man; he instead punches the man’s horse. The horse then falls over and is knocked out. Going against conventional logic is a common theme in the movie, but it adds to the comedy.

Turner (2003) argues that the western parody is a subgenre, saying:

The Western parody mocks the codes and conventions of a distinctively American cinematic genre while commenting—directly and indirectly—on the cultural and social issues of its time. Nevertheless, in the act of subverting those conventions and calling attention to their contractedness, the Western creates its own set of conventions that are closely allied to, and often rely heavily on, the conventions of the Western itself. (p. 234)

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If Western parody were classified as a subgenre, *Blazing Saddles* would be one of the headlining movies of the subgenre. It fits all of the qualifications and does a great job and following the majority of the qualities of a standard Western film.

At this time, I would like to bring back the main characteristics of the typical Western film. Just to bring back a few, the typical western is placed within the mid-1800s, has a defined dramatic conflict (good versus evil), a lonesome hero, the coming of the railroad, a standard western landscape including a small town, and a hero riding off into the sunset. It was said during the movie that it takes place in 1874, so that quality is matched. The dramatic conflict, or the good versus evil, takes place between Bart, Jim, and the whole town of Rock Ridge versus Hedley Lamarr and his group of cowboys who want to destroy the town to make room for a railroad. One difference would be the lonesome hero. Bart might be the true hero in all of this, but none of it would be possible without Jim and the rest of Rock Ridge coming together. The small town of Rock Ridge does fit the typical western landscape, and the hero riding off into the sunset, as typical in most western films, is totally changed up.

In conclusion, *Blazing Saddles* deserves to be classified as a Western parody. It fits the majority of characteristics of the stereotypical Western film and is able to make fun of them, as well as making fun of whatever other qualities that they did not match within the film. From the beans “fart” scene, to the movie theater ending, *Blazing Saddles* did as good of a job as you can get at making a mockery of the Western genre while maintaining tons of hilarious content throughout the movie.

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