

Popular Culture Association in the South

"Blazing Saddles" as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

Author(s): Bill Hug

Source: *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (FALL 2013), pp. 63-81

Published by: Popular Culture Association in the South

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610152>

Accessed: 12-04-2018 00:49 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Popular Culture Association in the South is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies in Popular Culture*

Bill Hug

***Blazing Saddles* as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival**

“My work is unstructured, rambling, [and] vulgar”: so Mel Brooks happily proclaims (qtd. in Fleishman 8), and reviewers such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Vincent Canby heartily agree—though they regard these elements as significant flaws. Perhaps none of Brooks’s movies seems more unstructured, rambling, and vulgar than *Blazing Saddles*, his manic sendup of the western story. Anarchic as the film is, however, it is anarchy laced with a certain coherence and purpose.

An especially chaotic sequence early in the story might be taken as a touchstone for approaching the entire narrative. The Black hero, Bart (Cleavon Little), recounts for his friend, the Waco Kid (Gene Wilder), his family’s journey across the frontier, and the narrative enters flashback. Refused entry to a White wagon train, Bart and his parents follow behind, and are confronted by an Indian raiding party which has just attacked the Whites. In a zany incisive burlesque of one of the western’s icons of Manifest Destiny—virtuous pioneers in conflict with bloodthirsty savages—the sequence explodes one narrative convention after another, just as the film will. The native chief, garishly bedizened in war bonnet, war paint, and Hollywood buckskins, is utterly befuddled at finding Black pioneers, not White. He questions these swarthy settlers about their complexion, not in the pidgin English of Hollywood Indians but in a blend of Yiddish dialect and Hebrew endemic to Jews on New York’s East Side. “Schwarzes [the Yiddish equivalent of ‘darkie’] ?” he asks, and his braves raise their weapons to dispatch the intruders. Then, somehow sensing the common plight of these dark aliens and his own people, the chief stops the massacre—with a command in Yiddish: “No, no. Zike nicht meshugaas [No, no. Don’t be crazy].” Next, he bursts forth in Hebrew, offering to the skies a

Bill Hug

ritual plea for these strange newcomers, a plea echoing Moses, chief of the archetypal persecuted tribe—“Lo zem gayn![Let them go!]”—and sends Bart’s family on their way, with a farewell in Brooklynese and Yiddish: “Cop a walk. So right. . . . A Be gazin [so long as you got your health]; take off.” Finally, amazed at encountering Black pioneers on the western plains, the chief exclaims to his braves, again in Yiddish and Brooklynese, “Has ze gazein en eine leben [Have you ever seen anything like it in your life]? They’re darker than we are! Whuh!” and chief and war party gallop off.

In farcically mimicking a serious scene familiar in western narrative, the sequence subverts such scenes, as well as the parameters which govern them, the stories in which such scenes occur, and the assumptions on which these stories are based. Conventions governing the ethnicity or race of western heroes and villains are bluntly contradicted. Racist Whites become the bad guys; Blacks, an ethnic group not seen in westerns before the 1960s, are now their victims. Native Americans, the original western villains, crazily coalesce with Jews—an ethnic group entirely absent from western narrative—to express interest in and goodwill toward those who share their darker skins and White animosity. Conventions of plot are dismissed, too. The episode culminates not in what Richard Slotkin terms “regeneration through violence,” purgative conflict which affirms the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon and the westering process. Instead, as the Native chief sends the Black settlers on their way across the western plains—and Bart to his present predicament as Black sheriff of a White town—the episode emphasizes mutual acknowledgement among the three groups of Americans systematically victimized by Whites: Blacks, Natives, and Jews.

This is all kept from lapsing into smug superiority or moral condemnation by the audacity of its central figure, whom we might call the Jewish-Indian chief. This character’s wacky blend of Hollywood Indian and New York Jew explodes not only ethnic distinctions and the narrative conventions that express them; the figure embodies an anarchic energy which permeates the film and obliterates other parameters as well—distinctions between role and actor, and ultimately between filmic narrative and “re-

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

ality” or “life.” For the Jewish-Indian chief is also the film’s chief—its cowriter and director, Mel Brooks; who in real life is Melvin Kaminsky; who casts himself in other comic roles of authority in the film: as the bumbling, lecherous, slapstick governor, William J. Lepetomane; and, in a brief shot panning the various outlaws and deviants lined up to join the villainous Hedley Lamar’s gang, as a movie director. In effect, Brooks sets out to destroy the ethnic, the narrative, and even the “factual” boundaries delimiting not only the western but film itself, so that he may proclaim a vision free of all such strictures, a vision of the sort Mikhail Bakhtin called “carnival” or “carnavalesque.” As Bakhtin explains, “Carnival celebrate[s] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank and privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival [is] the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal” (*Rabelais* 10).

That Melvin Kaminsky, a.k.a. Mel Brooks, Jewish writer, actor, and film-maker raised on the streets of working-class New York, should make a carnivalesque revision of the western makes cultural and aesthetic sense. For the carnivalistic vision is, at its core, a vision derived from the people or, more properly, the folk or peasantry; a vision which comes from the streets and the marketplace (Bakhtin, *Problems* 105-106). And, as Irving Howe recalls in *World of Our Fathers*, the streets of Jewish New York, with their raw, anarchic energy and their rough give-and-take, were “training grounds for the Jewish actors, comics, and singers” such as Brooks, throughout the first part of the twentieth century: “[Here a] long-contained vulgarity, which had already come to form a vital portion of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe as challenge to rabbinic denial and *shtetl* smugness, now broke through. It was vulgarity in both senses: as the urgent, juicy thrust of desire, intent upon seizing life by the throat, and as the cheap, corner of the mouth retailing of Yiddish obscenities” (558). For boys on the streets, this display of irreverences, which Brooks himself fondly terms “the corner shtick” (Darrach 215), became the comedic means of both self-assertion and self-defense; Howe explains: “You mimicked the hoity-toity Irish teacher who recited Browning in high school, you mocked the snarling rabbis who bored you in Hebrew school, and it

Bill Hug

made your friends hop with glee. Especially if you were a little fellow and not so good at stickball you could gain attention by comic bits” (558). These were the situations in which Brooks discovered and developed his comedic talent. In his words, he “found it” in Brooklyn, “at South Third and Hooper” (Darrach 210). He recalls, in an interview with *Playboy*, his comic rendering of the rabbis who taught him Hebrew: “Hebrew is a very hard language for Jews. And we suffered the incredible breath of those old rabbis. They’d turn to you and say, ‘Melb’n, make me a bruche [perform a virtuous act]. *A bruuuuuuche!*’ You never knew what they said. Three words and you were on the floor because their breath would wither your face. There was no surviving rabbi breath” (Darrach 213). Brooks also recalls how barbed humor resolved his predicament as the “scrawny kid always the last to be picked” for stickball:

In Jewish neighborhoods, every kid could hit a mile. They could be on their back and throw a guy out at first. They were great and I was just good. But I was brighter than most kids my age, so I hung around with guys two years older. Why should they let this puny kid hang around with them? I gave them a reason. I became their jester. Also, they were afraid of my tongue. I had it sharpened and I’d stick it in their eye. I read a little more than they did, so I could say, “Touch me not, leper!” “Hey, Mel called me a leopard!” “Schmuck! Leper!” Words were my equalizer. (Darrach 214)

As the scrawny Jewish kid whose wit enabled him to survive and even to win amidst the visceral aggressiveness of the streets, Brooks had learned that through humor, one might assail the prevailing order of things and sometimes turn them topsy-turvy. He came to understand what Bakhtin calls “the characteristic logic” of carnival: —“the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out,’ (*a l’envers*), of the turnabout, of continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (*Rabelais* 11).

Such awareness is especially valuable for a person of Jewish descent, for as Brooks came to realize, the Jewish adult, particularly the Jewish artist, was often caught up in struggles for social, psychological, and creative survival. For Brooks, comedy became the means to both protecting and proclaiming himself as other, as marginal, and, ultimately, as Jewish. As

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

he explained to Paul Zimmerman of *Newsweek*: “You want to know where my comedy comes from? . . . It comes from feeling that, as a Jew and as a person, you don’t fit into the mainstream of American society” (Zimmerman 56). In projecting a conflicted sense of self as Other, Brooks expresses the psychological predicament familiar among Black people and other non-Anglos. Defined by W. E. B. Du Bois as “double consciousness,” it is “the peculiar sensation . . . of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (18). Perceived by Anglo-America as alien and inferior, the self becomes, in Du Bois’s words, “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one . . . body” (8-9).

And yet, as Werner Sollors has shown, the pain of double consciousness often rouses imagination and the creative urge in Black and in ethnic Americans: “Double consciousness, far from stifling American ethnic authors, alerts them to the possibilities of playfulness in their voices. Raising and thwarting initiation expectations, feeding the gullibility of readers and then pulling the rug from under their feet, or ironically undercutting the image of the presumably stable relationship between in group and out group are among the weapons in the rich arsenal of ethnic writers” (253). And, one should add, ethnic comics and film makers. The “possibilities of playfulness” borne of ethnic double consciousness often lead to carnivalesque trickery, whatever the venue or medium—print, stage, or film.

Of course, the carnivalesque has been familiar in movies since the film industry began. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note, movie history reveals “a vast repertoire of cinematic carnivalesque” in “diverse forms” (46). Much of the carnivalesque in American film derives from popular theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the bawdy, irreverent, often ethnic humor of vaudeville and burlesque (Trav S.D. [*sic*] 204-240, Allen 258-281). Being raised in Brooklyn, then doing comedy in the late ’40s Borscht Belt, Brooks knew this comedic tradition intimately. From it would emerge various makers of carnivalesque mayhem in American entertainment in the early and mid-twentieth century; among them, the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, the Three Stooges, Mae West, Phil Silvers, and Sid Caesar (Allen 258-281, Trav S. D. [*sic*] 204-

Bill Hug

240), for whose TV show a young Mel Brooks would become a writer.

Considering the anarchic energy that is carnival's essence, one can see why carnivalesque cinema has manifested itself in such a variety of ways, some edgier than others, and why Brooks, the Jewish comic, was drawn to it. Films like the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933), Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and *The Great Dictator* (1940) reflect the carnivalesque at its most flamboyant as they explicitly lampoon governmental and industrial power structures (Stam 113-114, Robb 96-97, Hansen 75-76)). The carnivalistic grotesque is vivid in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932); the film was banned in Great Britain until the 1960s. Stanley Kubrick employed the grotesque in carnivalesque fashion as well, in such films as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (Naremore 4-14). Kinder, gentler versions of carnival emerge in many musical comedies—the Bing Crosby/Danny Kaye vehicle *White Christmas* (1954) or Martin and Lewis' *At War with the Army* (1950), for examples. In films such as these, “oppressive structures are not so much overturned . . . as they are stylized, choreographed, and mythically transcended” (Stam 92).

In the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the cinematic carnivalesque has become so familiar and conventional as to be shopworn, and its fundamental meaning diluted still more. Amid the counterculture of the later 1960s, rebellion and protest—the wellsprings of the carnivalesque—emerged as prominent facets of American life, widely dispersed in the mass media (Ashby 349-393). And, while communal fervor for the Sixties' social or political causes has since cooled, the consumer appeal of the carnivalesque continues. To exploit this, television producers, advertising firms, and filmmakers have commodified the carnivalesque; one finds it everywhere in media—televised wrestling, music videos, even soft drink commercials (Shohat and Stam 44, Stam 225-227). In American film of the last forty years, the carnivalesque has become commonplace and often formulaic, from *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) and its progeny to the “stoner films” of Cheech and Chong and their many successors, such as the Harold and Kumar series. In these movies, carnivalesque elements—rebellion against and subversion of varieties of foolish authority; broad, perhaps gross, physical humor—are emphasized, though plots,

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

characters, and their motivations have frequently been reduced to conventions. Larger issues may be referred to, but, for the most part, they serve as cardboard plot devices rather than reflections of serious concerns. Still, in the work of certain filmmakers of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the anarchy and zest of the authentic carnivalesque remain—Woody Allen; more recently, Quentin Tarantino and Sacha Baron Cohen, for examples; and, of course, Mel Brooks. He is, in the words of interviewer Brad Darrach, “an American Rabelais” (208), and a “peasant type,” as friend and collaborator Barry Levinson describes him (qtd. in Tynan 54). Imbued with the earthy, subversive “folk humor” of carnival, Brooks brings to his films Rabelais’s carnivalesque fondness for “parodies, and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (qtd. in Tynan 54). And so, he takes the role of the Jewish-Indian chief in a film he calls a “Jewish western with a black hero” (qtd. in Tynan 54).

Perhaps no other genre of American film could have offered Brooks a more tempting target. As commentators from D. H. Lawrence to Richard Slotkin to Jane Tompkins have shown, the western story, in its classic form, constitutes the affirmation (*albeit* sometimes qualified) of the Anglo-American’s supremacy in his stoic resolution to conquer the continent. Lawrence’s description of the original western hero, Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the Leatherstocking, applies aptly to most of his successors: “[a]n isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white” (69). Typically, this hero, whose discipline and power seem to be products of the majestic frontier landscape (Tompkins 73), is thrust into what John Cawelti has called “the epic moment when society stands balanced against the savage wilderness” (45). Compelled by a seemingly innate moral code, the hero employs his wilderness skills in survival and violence to affirm White society’s dominance over the land and its native inhabitants.

The western’s avid Anglophilia is, from the viewpoint of a Jewish, New York street kid, not only absurd but dangerous; so, as Brooks suggests in the second half of his film’s title, “*Never Give a Saga an Even Break!*” he sets out to demolish every aspect of the western’s ritual assertion of Manifest Destiny. In its place, he proclaims a new, carnivalesque

order of things—one which is inclusive rather than exclusive—where in the Jewish peasant's zest for life obliterates Anglo-Saxon stoicism. Thus, in Bakhtin's words, "[t]he world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed. While dying, it gives birth. The relative nature of all that exists is always gay; it is the joy of change" (*Rabelais* 48).

At the broadest, most basic level, Brooks's strategy for bringing about this transformation is tantamount to carnivalesque "profanation"—peasant culture's earthy, irreverent dismissal of the dignity and status associated with a "sacred" belief, concept, or figure and its attendant rituals, by depicting them in profane, blatantly physical, even grotesque or scatological terms. As Bakhtin explains, "profanation" involves "a whole carnivalistic system of lowering of status and bringing down to earth," including "carnivalistic blasphemies . . . carnivalistic obscenities connected with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, the carnivalistic parodies of sacred texts and apothegms" (*Problems* 101). Portrayed with this profanatory physicality, even terror, violence, and ultimately death itself are comedically subverted. Terror is reduced to "comic monsters . . . defeated by laughter," "something gay and comic" (*Rabelais* 39); while "blood is transformed into wine; ruthless slaughter and the martyr's death are transformed into a merry banquet; the stake becomes a hearth. Bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses—all these elements are steeped in 'merry time,' time which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and the youthful" (*Rabelais* 211).

The peasant's love of profane physical and "organic" humor has always been vivid in Brooks's work, as he proclaimed in an interview published in *Maclean's* magazine: "Now I do like to run the gamut of the orifices. I think there should be talking and kissing from the mouth. I think there should be blowing of the nose. I think there should be cleaning of the wax of the ears. And I think there should be some attention paid to toosh functions. I could have been a great doctor" (Fleishman 10). Of course, "toosh functions" achieve particular prominence in *Blazing Saddles*, in the abundant posterior exhalations of the campfire scene; these, along with spitting, gum chewing, sexual hijinks, as well as frequent ob-

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

scenities—not to mention the curious presence of cattle in churches and theater lobbies—effectively “profane” the western’s stately formality.

Terror, violence, and death suffer similar debasement, as Brooks reduces them to movie clichés. By having the people of Rock Ridge build what is in effect a movie set on which the battle for the town will be waged, then spilling its slapstick anarchy into the filming of another extravagant cinematic contrivance—a production number reminiscent of Busby Berkeley—and, finally, reducing the battle of Rock Ridge to a pie fight among movie extras in the Warner Brothers studio canteen, Brooks reduces the western’s ritualized conflict between White civilization and its foes to just another piece of extravagant Hollywood artifice. The shootout, the ritual culmination of western violence, suffers similar debasement. When Bart finally catches up with Hedley Lamar, it is in the lobby of an iconic movie house, Grauman’s Chinese Theater, where famous actors and actresses have left imprints of their hands or feet, and where, as it happens, this very film, *Blazing Saddles*, is playing. Hero wounds villain not in the upper body, the head or chest—areas representative of his elevated, if corrupted, human stature, and of his mental and emotional commitment to evil—but in the belly, seat of the genitals and bowels, the carnivalesque and animalistic nether region. Hedley’s dying words emphasize neither the villain’s eternal commitment to evil nor his last-minute repentance; instead, they amount to an anticlimactic *non sequitur* stressing, again, movies. Lying on the lobby floor in Grauman’s, his fingers tracing the footprints of Douglas Fairbanks, Hedley exclaims with his dying breath, “How did he do such great stunts with such little feet?” Thus, Brooks’s western villain profanes his own death with a throwaway line associating it and the entire film with cinematic trickery: westerns and the social and ethnic assumptions underlying them are, by extension, flashy stunts as well.

In this carnivalesque profanation of western narrative, the director mounts one zany assault after another. Making Lamar a railroad executive enables Brooks to target yet another iconic image in western narrative: the railroad. The film opens with a burlesque rendering of this harbinger of White technology and progress. As Bart and other Black and ethnic laborers lay track in the brutal western sun, a Chinese

worker collapses in the heat: “Dock that chink a week’s pay for sleeping on the job,” shouts the buffoonish boss (Slim Pickens), Hedley’s chief minion. But the laborers manage to one-up their oppressors. The White foreman demands that Bart and the other Black laborers sing “a good ol’ nigger work song” like slaves sang; as an example, he and his henchmen go into “The Camptown Ladies”—a song composed not by slaves, but by a Northeastern White, Stephen Foster, mimicking Blacks for a White audience. Bart and his fellow workers, feigning ignorance of all such “nigger work songs,” even spirituals such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” instead do “I Get a Kick Out of You,” the wittily urbane tune by Cole Porter, a songwriter whose work epitomizes Anglo-Saxon sophistication. Predictably, the Whites are angry and nonplussed.

In treating the western story’s major icon, its hero, Brooks takes carnivalesque subversion to the extreme. Of course, the most flamboyant facet of Bart’s character is his Blackness. This is much more than a matter of color: it includes demeanor, perspective, Bart’s relations to setting, even his relations to the story itself. The White stoicism of the classical western hero is, in its stark earnestness, pure Victorian. It is as severe as the wilderness landscape to which the hero is allied. Bart’s Blackness, on the other hand, is portrayed in modern and postmodern terms associated with irony, sophistication, and the city. Brooks’s Black sheriff speaks an urban Black English utterly at odds with the western dialect or drawl. Recalling for the Waco Kid the Jewish Indians who attacked the White wagon train, he remarks, “They was open fa biz’ness, Baby.” The western hero’s typical pastimes involve poker and whiskey; Bart plays chess and sips white wine. His citified demeanor prompts the Kid to ask him, “What’s a dazzling urbanite like you doing in a rustic setting like this?”

But the most vividly parodic, and the most (post)modern of Bart’s traits is his periodic detachment from his western role and from western narrative itself. While most western heroes are thoroughly straightforward and earnest in their participation in their stories, Bart is ironic and dialectical about his involvement in his, traits constituting Brooks’s carnivalesque variation on Du Boisean double consciousness. For the Black sheriff is both inside and outside his western role and his western story. As Colin

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

Westerbeck notes, Brooks's hero has a certain mental and psychological "dexterity . . . that enables him to participate in a scene, then to stand aside and admire his own handiwork" (61-62). Thus, to keep from being shot by Rock Ridge's angry citizens the moment he arrives, the sheriff abruptly adopts the character of schizoid stage "darkie" intent on blowing out his own brains; then, safe inside the sheriff's office, Bart smiles into the camera and congratulates himself on his "performance": "Oh, Baby, you are so talented, and they are so dumb!" This ironic awareness of his own distance from his "western" situation is intensified by Bart's frequent anachronisms. Singing Cole Porter for the railroad foreman and the other Whites, comparing himself to Jesse Owens and Randolph Scott, using a turnpike toll booth to delay Hedley Lamar's gang of outlaws intent upon attacking Rock Ridge, rigging an exploding candygram for the cowboy Neanderthal, Mongo—all of these carnivalesque touches highlight Bart's predicament and the double consciousness with which he responds. They give the narrative a distinctly postmodern character: a contemporary Black hero parodies and subverts an archaic White "role" every bit as absurd as it is dangerous.

And then there are his clothing and transportation. If Bart's language, perspective, and allusions convey his psychological and cultural displacement within the narrative he inhabits, the flagrant flashiness of his outfit and his mode of transport subvert the role itself. Of course, within the context of the western, any image of a Black man in buckskins astride a tall horse is startling, but that is only the beginning. Given Bart's quandary as late twentieth-century Black obliged to "play the part" of nineteenth-century White, his flamboyant western attire becomes a carnivalesque "costume" or "mask" which parodies the character it signifies. Brooks, with a street kid's fondness for subversive hijinks and garish display, appreciates the powers and function of the mask within the context of carnival. As Bakhtin explains:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery, to familiar nicknames. It contains the

Bill Hug

playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (*Rabelais* 39-40)

In Bart's costume, his own "gay relativity" toward his predicament is crystallized, as well as the film's "merry negation" of western convention. While the traditional western hero's clothing—jeans, chaps, buckskins, etc.—reflects his ties to the wilderness landscape and the stoic Anglo-Saxon assumptions with which the narrative associates it, Bart's "costume" or "mask" reflects his—and Brooks's—"violation" and "mockery" of all this. Bart's buckskins are meticulously tailored, his saddlebags are Gucci, and both are complemented perfectly by the rich gold of his magnificent palomino. The West to which Bart is tied is not John Ford's Monument Valley, but Warner Brothers' Hollywood and Rodeo Drive. The scene in which he first appears decked out in all his "western" glory proclaims as much. As the designer-clad Black sheriff rides across the prairie toward the White town, the music is as startling as his outfit. To accompany the iconic image of the lone horseman on the western plains, one might well expect a plaintive melody on fiddle or guitar; rustic vocals by the Sons of the Pioneers, the Chuck Wagon Gang, Tex Ritter, or Red Sovine. Instead, the music is full-blown big-band, played by Count Basie and His Orchestra—all here, in person, on the prairies—having somehow come from the latter twentieth century to wish a fellow Black sophisticate well as he embarks, in designer buckskins, on his carnivalesque quest to tame the White West and stories about it.

Fortunately, Bart will not have to do so alone. Despite his marginal status, the Black sheriff, like many western heroes, and White heroes throughout American storytelling, has a companion, a sidekick. Like the companions of these earlier heroes, Bart's comes from a race other than his own. Leatherstocking has Chingachgook, Ishmael has Queequeg; Huck has Jim; Faulkner's Isaac McCaslin has Sam Fathers; of course, the Lone Ranger has Tonto; and Bart has Jim, the Waco Kid. For White heroes, their dark-skinned companions often serve as surrogate fathers or mentors who guide them away from prevailing White assumptions, values, and beliefs. As Leslie Fiedler has suggested, these dark companions

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

may tie the White heroes to nature and to the primitive unconscious (26, 211), in effect, becoming doubles who manifest the hero's primordial self. Doubling is a familiar element of the carnivalesque as well; as Bakhtin notes, "Paired images, chosen for contrast (high and low, fat and thin, etc.) and for similarity (doubles and twins) are characteristic of the carnival mode of thinking" (*Problems* 104-105).

In *Blazing Saddles*, the hero's companion serves the latter function, of double as twin. Neither surrogate father nor *doppelgänger* recalling the hero to the *id*, the Waco Kid becomes Bart's ethnic double, sharing marginal status because of his own ethnicity. For beneath the surface of the Kid's portrayal lies an ethnic subtext. The town drunk who was once the fastest gun in the West also has a head full of wiry hair protruding from beneath his black Stetson, and, arguably, a distinctly Jewish profile. Moreover, the comedic self-loathing with which the Kid recounts his career and its climax (he was wounded by a six-year-old boy whom he refused to fight—"Little bastard shot me in the ass") has a distinctly Jewish flavor.

Jim's inflated anguish echoes a characteristic Jewish "self-contempt," as Irving Howe terms it (569), a trait which Freud had noted, and found both fascinating and troubling. Pondering the history of Jewish humor, he remarks, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character" (112). In the Postwar years, the tendency—crystallized in the figure of the schlemiel—provided grist for comic writers and actors: Sid Caesar, Neil Simon, Woody Allen, and, of course, Mel Brooks. As Howe explains, "Stand-up comics of the fifties and sixties knew they might milk a laugh out of a snarling return to Jewish mothers and other shared embarrassments. Embarrassment was an important element in this humor as it had been in the humor of Jewish entertainers thirty or forty years ago; but now it became more needling, less innocent, given to malice" (569-570). In the Kid's case, "schlemiel's self-derogation" (Dorinson and Boskin 167) is given an ironic Western spin—one can imagine a young Woody Allen recounting the Kid's career. Thus the Kid emerges as Bart's ethnic double, a fellow victim of racial and ethnic marginalization. However, roused by the concern of his fellow ethnic outcast and by the new sheriff's predicament

Bill Hug

in the White town, the Jewish gunfighter sobers up, recovers his quick draw, and joins Bart's quest to defeat Western anglophilia: the cowboy *schlemiel* becomes, as he puts it, the Black sheriff's "deputy spade."

This friendship of sheriff and deputy is scarcely "the pure marriage of males—sexless and holy, a kind of counter matrimony" (Fiedler 211)—the bond that, in classic westerns, excludes the hero from intimate relations with women. In yet another carnivalesque reversal, Brooks's Black sheriff quickly and casually succumbs to the charms of saloon singer Lili von *Shtupp* (Madeline Kahn), the Dietrichesque vamp hired by Hedley Lamar to destroy Bart. Lili's surname—a Yiddish vulgarity suggesting insatiable sexual appetite (Whitton)—effectively conveys her character and her allure. But the Black sheriff (amply endowed, thanks to a stereotyped Black sexuality) defeats the Germanic temptress: he *outshtupps* Lili. "Is it twue?" she asks, in her darkened dressing room, undoing Bart's pants, "that you people are . . . ?" And then she finds her answer: "It's twue; it's twue."

In making his saloon singer a comic rendering of Marlene Dietrich, Brooks gives his carnivalesque western its most ambiguous element: part Dietrich *hommage*, part Germanic cartoon. Lili's character, her lines, and the staging of her scenes constitute a comic tribute to the German actress. In Madeline Kahn's Oscar-nominated portrayal, key moments from Dietrich's career are referenced: Lili's name echoes Dietrich's signature song, "Lili Marlene," down to the spelling. As a singer in a western saloon who answers her "dwessing woom" door with "Wilkommen, Bienvenu, Welcome"—the title of the opening song from Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972)—Lili alludes to two of Dietrich's best-known roles: to Frenchy, another saloon singer in love with another unorthodox sheriff (James Stewart) in George Marshall's *Destry Rides Again* (1939); and—via *Cabaret*—to Lola, the amoral, predatory cabaret singer much like Lili, in Joseph von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930); the role made Dietrich a major actress. As Lili's song, "I'm Tired," comically emphasizes her "power" over men and her boredom in wielding it, the tune parodies songs from two Dietrich performances: "Falling in Love Again" from *The Blue Angel*, and "I'm the Laziest Girl in Town" from Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950) (Whitton).

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

But the larger point of Lili's portrayal is her association with the Germanic will to power. For her character is embedded in visual and aural imagery associated with German imperialism. In this parody of a story form touting the Manifest Destiny of Whites as masters of the Western plains, the saloon singer's affiliation with the White master race becomes darkly meaningful. In Lili's first scene, the male dancers behind her as she performs "I'm Tired" are clad as German infantry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the era of the Second Reich—Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm, of the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War. Later, when Hedley Lamar, angry that she has fallen victim to Bart's charms, ties Lili up to interrogate her, she bursts into a garbled German anthem, at which point the disgusted Lamar slaps her, shouting, "Shut up, you Teutonic twat!" Finally, during the battle between Hedley's outlaws and the townspeople of Rock Ridge, Brooks inserts a brief shot of Lili sitting with Nazi infantry amidst the slapstick mayhem. Grateful to find respite from Jewish comedic chaos in the company of fellow Germans, Lili and the troopers raise their beer steins and take solace in a traditional German drinking song. This fabric of Germanic imagery Brooks weaves around Lili makes her more than a Dietrichesque temptress; she is a virtual bedroom walkure, one of many caricatures of the militant German character that populate his films. In placing this caricature of imperialist Germanic Whiteness in his parodic western, Brooks makes perhaps his most acerbic comment on the dangers implicit in the story form and its ethnic and racial ideology. And, when his Teutonic saloon singer succumbs to his Black sheriff, Brooks achieves carnivalesque payback: the archetypal White is defeated by a member of the darker races whom, historically, she has victimized.

Thus, the Jewish director and his Black hero dismantle Western narrative, its conventions and its themes. In doing so, they flirt with an even larger possibility—the subversion of order itself. Within the chaotic realm which Bart, Lili, the Waco Kid, and the Jewish-Indian chief inhabit, Brooks's flamboyant parody explodes not only the "order" implicit in westerns; it questions the very concept of order. In this respect, *Blazing Saddles*, like the carnivalesque films of the Marx Brothers and

Bill Hug

their screenwriter S. J. Perelman, embodies elemental anarchic brashness and energy, a disdain for artistic, cultural, and social proprieties that takes on profound implications. This “almost hysterical frenzy” is, in Irving Howe’s opinion, a characteristic trait of twentieth-century Jewish humor, and his description of this *motif* as it emerges in the Marx Brothers’ films to which Perelman contributed is relevant to Brooks as well:

Toward the pretensions of the world, [Perelman] adopted a strategy of ruthless deflation, something common enough among satirists, but here taken a step further, toward a demolition of the idea of order itself. This could lead to silliness, as it led to surrealism, but even silliness, the Marx Brothers showed, had a point. In these films, the disassembled world is treated with total disrespect, an attitude close to the traditional feeling that the elaborate structure of gentile power is merely trivial. The gleeful nihilism of the Marx Brothers made a shamble of things, reducing their field of operations to approximately what a certain sort of East Side skeptic had always thought the world to be: *ash und porukh*, ashes and dust. (566-567)

Something much like this happens in *Blazing Saddles*. Order itself—at least, the aesthetic and cultural order upon which western narrative is based—is demolished: Black sheriff and Jewish deputy spade destroy the West in order to save it. Rock Ridge disappears as the battle for the town explodes from its own set onto that of a bungled Berkelyesque production number, then into Warner Brothers’ studio canteen, and finally onto the Hollywood streets. This carnivalesque violation of the unities of time and space reflects the film’s ultimate subversion, not merely of order as it prevails in western stories, but the potential denial of order of any sort—social, political, moral, religious.

But we have been reminded earlier by Howard Johnson, one of the Rock Ridge elders, of Nietzsche’s words: “out of chaos comes order.” And so the film ultimately returns to Rock Ridge, now a kinder, gentler community, which Bart and the Kid have saved not only from governmental and corporate corruption, but from the ethnic and racial corruption implicit in western narrative itself—though this newfound liberality, a Hollywood happy ending, remains flimsy and tenuous. Still, order—of a

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

broader, more expansive, virtually prelapsarian sort—is renewed. And this is a crucial distinction between Brooks’s carnivalistic vision and the bleak, nihilist vision of Perelman and the Marx Brothers. For, as Howe notes, the latter leaves the world in shambles, in “ashes and dust”—a tendency Bakhtin regards as characteristic of modern parody which has lost touch with the carnivalesque spirit (*Rabelais* 11). But Brooks destroys one world so that he may offer the vision of another, better one—tenuous though it may be. In this, he proclaims the essence of the carnivalesque spirit: peasant culture’s intuitive awareness of the dialectical relations between chaos and order, destruction and creation, and ultimately, death and life. Through profanation and parody, the carnivalesque vision renews as it degrades. As Bakhtin notes, this process is central to carnivalistic parody based in peasant humor’s fertile bawdiness:

Degradation digs a bodily grave for new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of non-existence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down into the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. . . . [I]t is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (*Rabelais* 21)

In offering some glimmer of hope, some possibility of the world’s renewal, Brooks denies the blackness implicit in the comedic vision of Perelman and the Marx Brothers, and in modern and postmodern parody generally. As he explained to interviewer Brad Darrach: “My comedy is midnight blue. Not black comedy—I *like* people too much. Midnight blue, and you can make it into a peacoat if you’re on the watch on the bow of a ship plowing through the North Atlantic. The buttons are very black and very shiny and very large” (210, emphasis original). Shiny and large enough to reflect the light of the Jewish peasant’s carnivalesque vision upon a dark world, even as far away as Hollywood’s White West.

Bill Hug
Jacksonville State University

Bill Hug

Works Cited

- Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.
- Ashby, LeRoy. *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 2006. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. Trans. R. W. Rotsel. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973. Print.
- . *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968. Print.
- Canby, Vincent. "Screene [sic]: 'Blazing Saddles,' a Western in Burlesque." *The New York Times* 8 Feb. 1974. Rpt. in *The New York Times at the Movies*. Ed. Arleen Keylin and Christine Bent. New York: Arno Press, 1979. 29. Print.
- Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique: Sequel*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1999. Print.
- Darrach, Brad. "Mel Brooks." *Playboy* Feb. 1975. Rpt. In *The Playboy Interview*. Ed. G. Barry Golson. N.p.: Wideview Books, 1981. 208-234. Print.
- Dorinson, Joseph, and Joseph Boskin. "Racial and Ethnic Humor." *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. Ed. Lawrence E. Mintz. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988. 163-193. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Rev. Ed. New York: Dell, 1966. Print.
- Fleishman, Philip. "Interview: With Mel Brooks." *Maclean's* 17 Mar. 1978: 7-10. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1960. Print.
- Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. Print.
- Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Print.
- Lawrence, D. H. "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels." *Studies in Classic American Literature*. 1923. London: Penguin Books, 1977. 52-69. Print.

Blazing Saddles as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival

- Naremore, James. "Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque." *Film Quarterly* 60.1 (2006): 4-14. Print.
- Robb, David. "Carnavalesque Meets Modernity in the Films of Karl Valentin and Charlie Chaplin." *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 89-100. Print.
- Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr. "Chaplin's Flawed Successors." *Saturday Review* 4 Mar. 1978: 43. Print.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetic." *The Visual Culture Reader*. 2nd ed. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 37-59. Print.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973. Print.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1989. Print.
- Trav S. D. [sic]. *No Applause Just Throw Money, or, The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.
- Tynan, Kenneth. "Profiles: Frolics and Detours of a Short Hebrew Man." *New Yorker* 30 Oct. 1978: 46-50+. Print.
- Westerbeck, Colin L. "Black Comedy." *Commonweal* 22 Mar. 1974. 61-62. Print.
- Whitton, Steven J. Personal interviews 12 Sept. and 27 Sept. 2001.
- Zimmerman, Paul D. "Mad, Mad Mel Brooks." *Newsweek* 17 Feb. 1975. 54-58. Print.

Bill Hug is a professor of English and director of the writing program at Jacksonville State University. His publications and conference presentations have covered a variety of writers and genres including Robert Burns, Frank Norris, T. S. Eliot, James Baldwin, the western story, and the ethnic tenement tale. For the past several years, his particular scholarly focus has been the Danish-American photojournalist Jacob Riis.