

Morton Marcus: The rude and crude 'New American Comedy' can't stand up to the old.

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For the fourth-straight week, "Blades of Glory" hovers near the top of the box-office charts. Its star, Will Ferrell, is the latest success story of what I call "The New American Comedy," whose roll call of stars includes Jim Carrey, Adam Sandler and Mike Myers. For me, they represent an indelible sign of the disintegration of American life during the past 25 years.

I'm talking about the general dumbing down of our society, a term that takes its name from the 1994 film "Dumb and Dumber," the first identifiable expression of the New American Comedy. I'm not referring to the dumbing down of opera, Shakespeare or George Bernard Shaw, but of popular culture, the peoples' culture, of which film and TV have been the foremost representatives during the past hundred years.

The New Comedy consists of exaggerated mugging, toilet and shock humor of all sorts as its basic ingredients. Audiences have paid large sums of ticket money to shiver in fascinated titillation as they watch their screen heroes act out their crudest childhood fantasies. So entrenched has this new rude, crude comedy become in the past 15 years that many young people — a number of whom are now in their early 30s — think that's what comedy is.

Not so. There are several kinds of comedy that for convenience I'll divide into categories of high and low. High comedy mostly consists of dialogue, exquisite verbal jousts in which language delights and astonishes. It is exemplified in the films of directors Ernst Lubitsch, Billy Wilder and Woody Allen. Low comedy is mainly physical, full of pratfalls and madcap antics. Its prime examples are Charlie Chaplin's pantomime and Buster Keaton's athletic stunts. Since the coming of sound to film, cinema comedy has been a combination of both high and low, with the low taking over in the past 15 years.

An offshoot of both high and low comedy that comes closest to the New Comedy is the irreverent, at times anarchic, comedy of the Marx Brothers, which superficially resembles but, in the end, proves to be in contrast to the New Comedy's meaningless mayhem. The Marx Brothers' tomfoolery literally left society in shambles at the end of their films. But make no mistake, there was meaning to their madness as their writers — George S. Kaufman, S.J. Perlmutter and Harry Ruby — the foremost American humorists of their time, made sure.

The Marx Brothers' best films were guided by the idea of exposing and ridiculing one or another of society's shams and pretensions. In other words, they were satires and the brothers were our surrogates in giving the pompous and self-important a kick in the pants. "Horse Feathers" 1932 dealt with the staid, snooty world of higher education, "Night At The Opera" 1935 with the self-importance of the upper classes, and the brothers' masterpiece, "Duck Soup" 1933, with the stupidity and absurdity of politics and war.

Each of the brothers had his role to play. Groucho's high-comedy use of language to achieve his corrupt intentions — a direct shot at polite society's corrupt use of language — was undercut by Chico's immigrant mispronunciations, which almost always foiled Groucho's plans. In fact, Chico's basic honesty was the reason he could interpret the actions and communicate with the third brother's, Harpo's, mimed, madcap pranks. Harpo was the innocent child, the idiot savant, whose inability to speak was in direct contrast to Groucho's conman patter. Harpo's anarchic actions were shocking and outrageous as he ripped the fabric of polite society to shreds. But if Harpo is like today's new comics, he shows his difference by the imaginativeness of his mayhem and his satiric intentions.

Go to the video store and see what I mean. Pick up any of the Marx Brothers films I've mentioned, or Ernst Lubitsch's "To Be or Not To Be," "Ninotchka" and "Trouble In Paradise," or Billy Wilder's "Some Like It Hot," "Sabrina," "One, Two, Three" or "The Apartment" The laughs are on me.

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