

EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF TABLOID DISCOURSE(S)

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ABSTRACT

The Weekly World News has graced the stands of supermarket aisles since its birth in 1979. Throughout its colorful history, I argue the Weekly World News is an example of pastiche, parodying diverse discourses from mainstream newspapers to other tabloid magazines, all the way to mainstream media. It is the goal to illuminate the nature of parody I observe within the Weekly World News. By analyzing several articles in different issues of the Weekly World News, I aim to show how this tabloid uses parody in order to ridicule, ironically comment on, and poke fun at a variety of subjects in order to make political and social arguments as well as attempting to push for change.

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It is time for me to defy gravity and see where it takes me.

INTRODUCTION

Most people recognize tabloid magazines as supermarket reading material, often found near the check-out counter. It is here readers may become enchanted with the different tabloid magazines. Whether readers want the latest gossip on the hottest celebrities or information on the paranormal, there is a tabloid for everyone.

Theron Britt in his article, “Reversing the Romance: Class and Gender in the Supermarket Tabloids,” says that while tabloids reached a peak in circulation in the 1980s, production of these magazines has increased (440). Elizabeth Bird, a popular culture analyst says presently, the combined circulation of the top six tabloid magazines (National Enquirer, National Examiner, Weekly World News, Star, Sun, and the Globe) is around 10.5 million people and that is just those with subscriptions (Bird 1). While these six tabloids range in popularity, I am going to discuss the Weekly World News.

The Weekly World News tries to be everything a newspaper is not. Mainstream newspapers want to appear respectable, a place for readers to get the facts of a story, whereas the Weekly World News simply wants to make readers laugh. Similarly, the Weekly World News is an alternative to mainstream media because it features the over-the-top and absurd stories often overlooked or dismissed by them. I contend the Weekly World News is a parody of both mainstream newspapers and media.

In the book Parody: Critical Concepts Versus Literary Practices, Aristophanes to Sterne, Joseph A. Dane defines parody as the “imitative reference of one literary text to another, often with an implied critique of the object text” (4). Parody often uses “an exaggerated imitation of style in order to satirize or ridicule” (10). In my opinion, no tabloid magazine succeeds in exaggeration better than the Weekly World News, evidenced in the crossover success of their

most popular character Bat Boy and their continuous claims as the most reliable and trusted name in news.

I argue, the Weekly World News is an example of pastiche, a kind of parody that Daniel T. O'Hara says in his book, Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency After Foucault, "uses diverse forms of discourse drawn from a variety of sources" as the basis for critiquing mainstream newspapers, other tabloid magazines, and the media. This tabloid mocks popular images, parodies the use of quotations to validate a story, parodies the apocalyptic headlines of mainstream newspapers, and even parodies other tabloid magazines. The Weekly World News uses parody as a form of critique, using this sophisticated form of humor, to comment on mainstream newspaper and media's constructions of reality. Through parody, this tabloid imitates mainstream newspapers, other tabloids, and the media in order to ridicule, ironically comment on, and poke fun at a variety of subjects in order to make political and social arguments as well as attempting to push for change.

The Weekly World News is a reflection of popular culture preoccupations and reflects and contributes to current modes of discourse. The objective of this study is to closely examine tabloid news, specifically the Weekly World News, as a sophisticated form of parody and to illuminate the nature of the parody observed regarding tabloid news. To accentuate my argument, the concept of parody and forms it has taken will be addressed by providing several examples from different issues of the Weekly World News. It is my goal to provide insight into the way tabloids like the Weekly World News use parody as a platform for critique. I first discuss the history of tabloid magazines.

TABLOID HISTORY

Tabloid magazines have a history tracing back to the 17th century when broadside ballads and news books contained stories of unusual and bizarre events (Britt 436). At first, *tabloid* was a term for structure. “Coined as a trademark for condensed medicines in 1884, the word was applied, in rapid succession, to smaller-than-average newspapers, compact airplanes and efficiency yachts, and the linguistic condensations of slang” (Osburn 508). In a 1903 judicial hearing, *tabloid* was documented as a term meaning “a compressed form or dose of anything” (Sloan 508).

In the early 1900s, Alfred Harmsworth, an early pioneer of tabloid magazines, created a publishing empire of halfpenny papers. He rescued failing newspapers and transformed them to reflect popular taste, which yielded him colossal profits. Harmsworth is best known for using his tabloid to influence public opinion. For example, through his persuasive writing, he helped bring down the wartime government of Prime Minister Henry Asquith during the Shell Crisis of 1915 (“Tabloid”).

By 1919, the first accomplished daily tabloid, the New York Daily News became a “runaway success” (Sloan 223). Founded by Joseph M. Patterson and Col. Robert R. McCormick, this original tabloid magazine became popular due to a condensed format and cheap price. Readers relished the stories and loved the new format. The New York Daily News revolutionized the world of journalism by taking the beloved aspects of newspaper articles and offering a new spin. For example, the New York Daily News printed apocalyptic headlines accompanied by dramatic pictures. From 1920-1991, the New York Daily News was known as “New York’s Picture Newspaper.” One of the New York Daily News’ famous covers stories

features a picture of the execution of Ruth Snyder who was put in the electric chair for the murder of her husband. The headline for that 1928 issue reads, “Dead!” It was the New York Daily News’ use of dramatic pictures and apocalyptic headlines that made this tabloid popular.

In 1976, Rupert Murdoch purchased the New York Post. His tabloid brought the brash style of the British tabloid to America. This was the first tabloid that focused primarily on scandal and celebrity gossip. The New York Post paved the way for other tabloid magazines that thrive on celebrity antics and over-the-top stories. Soon after the success of the New York Post came similar celebrity-focused, gossip-filled tabloids like National Enquirer, Star, Globe, National Examiner, Sun, and Weekly World News. These tabloids represent the latest trend in tabloid magazines, the supermarket tabloid.

Observing the history of tabloid magazines, tabloids originated from mainstream newspapers. Tabloid magazines tweaked and pruned elements of mainstream newspapers in order to create a new journalistic style. Through the evolution from halfpenny papers to celebrity-focused periodicals, tabloid magazines have become complete parodies of their original counterpart, the newspaper. However, there is one tabloid in particular that is more absurd and bizarre than the rest. The Weekly World News is the epitome of a mainstream newspaper parody.

THE EXTREME TABLOID

Sensationalism is the reliance on stories intended to shock and thrill, rather than inform and educate. The Weekly World News, I argue, uses sensationalism in a grander sense compared to the other more celebrity-obsessed tabloids. The Weekly World News thrives on

shocking audiences with absurd stories of the paranormal and occult. The Weekly World News is the embodiment of sensationalism.

When it was launched in 1979, the magazine made a commitment to provide the newspaper-reading public their version of the truth, “whether is be about alien abductions, the secret of the Loch Ness Monster, or the garden-variety supernatural phenomenon” (Perel 6). Elizabeth Bird said that while there was a time when the Weekly World News printed “semiserious” stories and positioned itself as “the sort of news people might believe,” it now has become more about the absurd and sensational (Gridlin). The Weekly World News is a blank parody, using the skeletal form of mainstream newspapers and placing it in a new context. The Weekly World News interlocks the idea of providing truthful news stories with absurdity and sensationalism, thus becoming a parody of mainstream newspapers.

The Weekly World News intentionally tries to be everything a newspaper is not. Newspapers are dedicated to bringing readers the truth, using fact checkers and reliable sources within their articles. On the other hand, the Weekly World News wants to make readers laugh and question the unknown. The only “reliable” sources for the Weekly World News are unknown “scientists” and “doctors” whom appear in countless articles to validate bizarre scientific finds. The editors do not try to make their stories seem plausible; they do not want to save the world, just make fun of it.

TABLOID READERS

The editors of the Weekly World News insist they aim their discourse towards two specific types of readers: Reader A and Reader B. Readers A include people who read the

featured stories for truth. Perel states, “Reader A is a believer, someone who is more likely than most to own a probe-resistant tinfoil helmet, belong to the Bigfoot Field Researcher’s Organization, or argue with himself, *sotto voce*, in public” further saying this group “believes that the universe is utterly chaotic, both expanding and imploding simultaneously” (6). Readers A believe and get wrapped up in the sensational fantasy world presented by Weekly World News. They are looking for answers to the questions they think mainstream media is hiding from them involving aliens and other conspiracy theories. This percentage views tabloids as “an alternative, a way of knowing about the world that is not offered in other media” (Glynn 157). This group, unlike those who read tabloids for playfulness, sees tabloids as respectable publications which offer valuable knowledge.

The other group of readers, Readers B, consider themselves smarter than Readers A, but tend to be more cynical. “S/he reads Weekly World News to laugh at the stories contained within, but also to marvel at the thought of all the Readers A out there who really believe what they are reading” (Perel 6). It is this group of people who pick up this magazine for entertainment. They are not searching for answers to lingering questions; they are looking to have a good time. This group treats tabloids as brain candy.

Popular culture analyst Elizabeth Bird gets more specific about tabloid readers. In an interview with The St. Petersburg Times in Tampa Bay, Bird says “the market for the Weekly World News these days is predominantly young men - teenage boys and college students” (Gridlin). She continues, saying “they read it for a laugh and think it’s funny, and they feel superior because there are actually stupid people out there who believe all that stuff. But most likely, nobody does” (Gridlin). When asked about the Weekly World News, Bird says that

“at one time it was semiserious, in the sense that it positioned itself as the sort of news that people might believe. But over the years, it’s evolved into this complete parody of itself” (Gridlin).

The Weekly World News is “a product of its culture and it affects that culture in return” (Tyson 280). Along with other, more respectable publications, Weekly World News is “part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning” (Tyson 288). The Weekly World News is a legitimate cultural artifact, one worthy of rhetorical analysis, that represents a postmodern form of parody on everything mainstream. Our culture produces the Weekly World News, which means it serves a specific purpose.

With millions of readers, the Weekly World News succeeds in its use of parody. In the following sections, I analyze several Weekly World News articles in order to highlight the ways this tabloid uses parody to ridicule, ironically comment on, and poke fun at mainstream newspapers and media.

TABLOIDS AND POLITICS

Parody is closely related to satire and is often used in conjunction with it to make social and political points. The Weekly World News, within numerous sensationalistic stories offers political and social constructs. An example is the January 7, 2003, article, “German Scientist to Clone Five Deceased U.S. Presidents.” Corey Michaels, a Weekly World News contributor, writes an article proposing loyal readers of this tabloid should cast their votes as to which deceased presidents should be cloned.

This article is satirical in nature, playing on past cloning stories that have made the news.

When Dolly, the famous cloned sheep, made headlines, the idea of cloning received considerable amounts of press. In this particular article, the Weekly World News parodies past cloning stories and offers a fresh twist. Rather than simply read the same story about Dolly that ran in every major newspaper on the news consistently, the Weekly World News actually invites readers to contribute their opinions and willingly participate in the cloning phenomenon by casting votes for which presidents should be revived.

The article begins, “a German geneticist has offered to replicate five of America’s all-time favorite presidents and the lucky cloning candidates will be chosen by Weekly World News readers” (Perel 10)! This very article parodies our culture’s disappointment over our current president. With George W. Bush’s approval ratings plummeting to dangerously low numbers, this article pokes fun at the current president by implying that Bush is not a “favorite” president, while insisting cloning past presidents could be beneficial to our society.

In a sidebar noting, it says, “bringing back dead presidents such as J.F.K. and Abe Lincoln could really do a lot for the morale of this country, particularly in these troublesome times” (Perel 11). Through humor, this article insinuates the morale of the country is down because of policies of the current president, including Bush’s stance on the war in Iraq. The “troublesome times” refers to both the 9/11 attack and the state of war our country is in now. By implying that cloning the five best past presidents is a good idea, the Weekly World News suggests our culture is worse now than in the past. Such an article demonstrates our culture is *not* improving over time.

Continuing, the article mentions the German geneticist “offered” to clone the five most popular presidents. Using the word “offered” implies Germany is behind the idea of cloning

better presidents to take over the presidency in our country. Through parody, this article hints that other countries, like Germany, are not happy with the leadership of this country and are demanding a change. This article barely mentions the logistics behind a cloning experiment; instead, it is two pages insisting this cloning experiment needs to be performed. The article says, “[German scientists] have contacted the Presidential libraries of all of America’s late leaders, and they have granted us access to any papers and personal effects that the subjects may have touched and left DNA on during their respective lifetimes” (Perel 10). In the eyes of this scientist, this cloning experiment is good to go. By parodying scientific articles, the Weekly World News actually subliminally offers political opinions, implying that our country needs a change of President because of our sinking morale, and that other countries like Germany want similar changes considering they are the ones behind these cloning experiments.

Besides the implication that our current President should be replaced, this article as an example of parody, also offers political opinions on the subject of cloning. The article states, “such as experiment [cloning] could never happen in the U.S. with the Bush administration’s staunch anti-cloning stance” (Perel 11). The article even includes a snippet of a speech George W. Bush gave on April 2, 2002, to reaffirm his solid belief against cloning technology. Bush claims cloning “is a step toward a society in which human beings are grown for spare body parts” and called for a ban against all human cloning in the United States. Through this article’s over-the-top nature, it represents an example of the Weekly World News parodying mainstream newspaper articles that deal with scientific technology like that of cloning and pushes for further experimentation.

This article introduces Bush’s quote by announcing the President’s speech took place in

front of a small audience of only 175 people, many of whom were pro-life activists. Of course, pro-lifers more than likely would not be in favor of cloning as they tend to fall on the more conservative side of things. Corey Michaels includes this detail to point out the absurdity of Bush's anti-cloning stance. He writes, "the rest of the world is making the bold scientific leaps that Bush is afraid of" (Perel 11). For this article to be included within the Weekly World News, shows that this periodical is in favor of cloning and pushes for further testing. To say that President Bush is afraid implies cowardness.

The article concludes, "I too would be nervous if I thought there were a chance Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln might be running against me in 2004" (Perel 11). This quote implies that Bush's anti-cloning stance is personal. The article implies Bush is intimidated by the thought of better, more popular presidents coming back and taking over. Bush's fear of his decreasing popularity is evident, as his stance against cloning (and the cloning of past presidents to take over) is solid.

Of course this article is a complete parody, knowing the impossible nature of cloning past presidents. However, the article is able to make some political strides. Michaels addresses and parodies the notion of Bush's lower-than-average approval ratings by creating this story of cloning popular past presidents to run against President Bush. Through parody, this article blatantly undermines Bush's anti-cloning stance insisting other countries are making scientific leaps forward, while our country is stuck at a stand-still. Finally, by using parody, this article speaks about the low morale of our country blaming President Bush for the negative feelings many of our culture feel towards the current administration. Without specifically speaking out against President Bush's anti-cloning stance, this article through humor and parody pushes for a

change in who is President and a change in the current administration's conservative views on cloning.

TABLOIDS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Not only does the Weekly World News use satire in conjunction with parody to make political points, but it also makes social points. Now that mainstream newspapers have begun adopting the techniques of tabloidization; that is, according to Rod Brookes, in his article, "Tabloidization, Media Panics, and Mad Cow Disease," "submerging hard information within a morass of human interest 'victim' stories, apocalyptic headlines, dramatic typography and photography, excessive editorializing, and constant juxtaposition with 'trivial' stories such as sex scandals about royalties and television personalities," the Weekly World News pokes fun at the rise of these trivial stories especially when it comes to the reporting of celebrities (196).

One of the most popular celebrities often featured in mainstream newspapers is Paris Hilton. Articles on Paris Hilton are so popular, that on February 13, 2007, the Associated Press released a press release stating they were never going to stop featuring stories on Hilton for a while. Before then, Paris Hilton was written about repeatedly, with articles focusing on her dog, her multiple car accidents, her feud with Nicole Richie, her failed music career, and her sex tape. Almost everyday there was at least one article written about Paris Hilton.

The Weekly World News caught on to this phenomenon and actually spoofs the Paris Hilton trend. In an August 2, 2004, article "Alien Body Snatchers Reject Paris Hilton," writer Nick Jeffries pokes fun at the ridiculousness of the immense amount of articles written about this socialite by offering his own ridiculous article about alien body snatchers that reject Paris Hilton

out of annoyance. In the article, Jeffries writes “wild-child socialite Paris Hilton was abducted by aliens and minutes later, they opened the spaceship door and kicked her out” (Perel 110).

Within mainstream newspapers, articles on Paris Hilton often focus on her wardrobe choices, the parties she attends, and her physique. Jeffries tackles each of these topics, except in a humorous way. He writes, “[the aliens] wanted to question this Paris about her life on Earth, but all she did was smile and pretend to pose for paparazzi pictures” (Perel 110). This quote parodies the very essence of Paris Hilton and what she is known for. In mainstream newspapers, anytime Paris Hilton attends a party or even pumps her gas, there is a colossal group of photographers following her every move asking her the lamest of questions. In fact, Paris Hilton is famous for simply being famous and the Weekly World News understands this and pokes fun at the attention she receives.

Mainstream newspapers report on anything and everything Paris Hilton. The Weekly World News also does this, but parodies the Paris-related articles by pitting her with the absurd, thus revealing the absurd nature of how trivial Paris Hilton articles in mainstream newspapers can be. The article says, “[Paris Hilton] began extolling the apparently infinite perfection of her flawless no-tan-lines body,” all after “she began criticizing [the alien’s] wardrobes, hairstyles, and makeup” (Perel 11). This quote spoofs all the quotes featured in mainstream newspapers of Paris Hilton talking negatively about other celebrities. By parodying all the Paris Hilton articles in mainstream newspapers, the Weekly World News actually imitates the work of mainstream newspapers in order to ridicule the subject, in this case Paris Hilton.

Another example of Weekly World News using parody to make a point about the social constructs of our culture is an article from the October 7, 2003, issue. The article is entitled

“Lose 70 Pounds in 15 Days With Flesh-Eating Bacteria.” Currently our culture is obsessed with diets and being skinny. During commercial breaks, there are advertisements for weight-loss supplements, within newspapers there are advertisements for the best ways to lose weight, and media outlets like newspapers and television shows all reinforce the stereotype that “thin is in.” Celebrity-focused tabloids and newspapers alike all comment and critique celebrities and television personalities on their weight, spawning a weight-loss epidemic that is sweeping the nation. The Weekly World News seems aware of this problem and addresses the obsession on weight loss to achieve perfection by ridiculing the diet articles and advertisements seen on television, in the news, and in magazines and newspapers.

The article, written by Mike Foster, uses a variety of cruel words to satire the overusing of words like “fat” and “obese” in the mainstream. Some of the words he uses are “tubby” and “hefty.” Part of the problem in mainstream media is the negativity associated with being overweight in this society. Kirstie Allie, a Jenny Craig spokeswoman, tells the camera she is tired of being fat, in a commercial for the weight-loss program. For Mike Foster to address the impact using such negative terms has on our society by parodying the very use of the terminology in his article, he spotlights the cruel nature of such hurtful words and their lasting effects. After all, the women in Foster’s article turn to flesh-eating bacteria in hopes of being as thin as celebrities.

Articles dealing with weight loss often can make readers feel insecure about their own bodies. Considering the average woman is a size 12, it can be assumed that the majority of our society have imperfections when it comes to their bodies. The Weekly World News parodies mainstream media’s dwelling on the body’s imperfections within the article. Mike Foster writes,

“well-to-do tubby folks are lining up at doctor’s offices around the country for the new procedure, in which the flab-munching bacteria is injected directly into ‘problem areas’ such as beer bellies, love handles, thighs and hips” (Perel 26). This quote exemplifies the essence of mainstream media’s assertion that having a belly, love handles, or thighs and hips is a “problem” by parodying the very statement and placing it within the context of the bizarre. The Weekly World News points out the absurdity of the weight-loss epidemic by suggesting our culture would be willing to use flesh-eating bacteria if it could be medically proven to help clients lose weight.

Furthermore, the article says, “the voracious bug cuts through fat like a buzz saw eliminating an incredible three inches of ugly, unsightly flab per hour” (Perel 26). This statement parodies the ways in which mainstream media frowns upon the overweight. Often mainstream newspapers and tabloids alike will print pictures of the best and worst beach bodies. Always, the best beach bodies are the women who are thin and the men who are ripped; whereas, the worst bodies are always women with cellulite and men with bellies. Sometimes those pictured with the worst beach bodies have their faces blacked out as if being overweight is unsightly. Mike Foster parodies this phenomenon by blatantly describing the flab being cut as “unsightly” and describing the fat as “ugly,” just like mainstream media does. However, the sheer silliness of this article highlights the ridiculousness of our culture’s obsession with weight loss by spoofing all the weight loss articles and advertisements prominent in our society.

Advertisements for weight loss drugs or centers almost always feature a before and after picture of someone who “successfully” lost weight using whichever drug or diet that is being sold. The before picture is always the same. It features either a woman or a man striking an

unflattering pose that pokes out their belly, all while frowning. The after shot is of the same man or woman (at least that is what we are told) smiling, looking happy, and striking a more flattering pose. The Weekly World News lampoons this advertisement by featuring captions under each picture of what they feel the advertisements in mainstream want to say, but do not. Under the before picture, the caption reads “WHO wouldn’t trade this flabby body, with its unattractive and uncomfortable pounds of flesh...” The statement continues to the after picture where the caption reads “for a trim, sexy shape like this one? Maybe that’s why lard-butt ladies and gents are lining up for the new weight-loss bacteria shots” (Perel 26). These quotes are an exaggeration of the quotes in diet commercials, newspapers, and celebrity-obsessed tabloid magazines.

The Weekly World News even spoofs the notion that no one is sure whether or not the before and after pictures are of the same person by featuring two completely different people in both shots. One has naturally straight, shorter hair, while the other one has naturally curly, longer hair. By parodying both articles and advertisements about weight loss, the Weekly World News ridicules mainstream media for being part of the growing problem of weight-loss obsession.

TABLOIDS AND TRUTH

The Weekly World News is distinctly postmodern seeing that it rejects the master narratives ran in mainstream newspapers. This tabloid rejects modern thought by writing about the paranormal and occult. Lester Faigley, author of Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition, argues that postmodern discourses have “no eternal truths, no universal human experience, no universal human rights, and no overriding narration of human

progress” (6). These ideas differ from mainstream newspapers and other respectable journals that have accuracy as a goal. The Weekly World News is postmodern in their choice to “entertain the masses, not enlighten them” (Sloan 18). The Weekly World News thus parodies mainstream newspapers that claim to only print the truth because there are no eternal truths.

Mainstream newspapers almost never discuss the possibility of alien life forms. Even though our culture knows of the existence of Roswell, the subject of paranormal life is hardly written about in the mainstream. On the other hand, the Weekly World News features at least one article every issue. Aliens are such a prominent fixture in the Weekly World News that David Perel’s book Bat Boy Lives!, a compilation of all the popular Weekly World News articles, devotes an entire chapter to tales of the paranormal.

The Weekly World News’ audience are transported to a fantasy world where the stories are sensational and far-fetched. Cultural critic Elizabeth Bird states, readers view tabloids “as an alternative, a way of knowing about the world that is not offered in other media” (157). This means that a percentage of the readers of Weekly World News read the magazine for knowledge not offered by mainstream newspapers. Readers may be lured to the Weekly World News because they claim they are the world’s most reliable paper. The editors proudly tout their tabloid as most reliable because in the Weekly World News’ twenty-seven years, the editors never issued a retraction or correction. This is ironic considering retractions are a common staple in most mainstream newspapers. The notion that a supermarket tabloid can be the most respectable ironically comments on the absurdity of mainstream newspaper’s claims to print the truth.

Nearly every day, mainstream newspapers print retractions; some newspapers call them

corrections. They are printed for a variety of reasons. Mainstream newspapers may misspell a person's name, list the wrong job for someone, or completely print the wrong information. For example, the March 2, 2007, issue of the New York Times issued a total of eleven corrections. One correction listed the wrong date for a picture taken; the newspaper originally printed February 12th, but the correct date was February 18th. Also, the New York Times, on the front page misstated the amount of long-term care insurance benefits for home health care aides as \$63.3 billion, instead of the correct amount of \$3.3 billion. In addition to wrongly listing the amount by \$60 billion, the New York Times also misstated the name of the organization involved. The New York Times is supposed to be one of the most trusted newspapers; however, eleven corrections in one day is a lot.

The Weekly World News appears more credible than mainstream newspapers because they are retraction-free. The Weekly World News advertises, and appears, as the most reliable and claim their sensationalistic stories are “potentially believable,” which parodies the notion of printing the definitive truth (Bird 157). The Weekly World News makes no effort to define truth; being an example of a postmodern discourse, this tabloid believes truth is individually created.

In the words of editor David Perel, the Weekly World News is “the world’s most reliable newspaper” (Marcotle). Perel says, the Weekly World News is comprised of a staff of “dedicated journalists” who are here to “seek out the truth wherever it may be” (7). This has a negative effect on respectable journalism because mainstream newspapers consistently have to print retractions, which compared to the flawless history of the Weekly World News weakens mainstream newspapers’ credibility. The Weekly World News as the most reliable parodies

respectable newspapers and other areas of media because the world's most reliable paper, in the editor's eyes, is a sensationalistic, supermarket tabloid magazine. By successfully pulling off a sophisticated parody of mainstream newspapers, the Weekly World News succeeds in respectability by not caring to be respectable.

TABLOIDS PARODY RELIGION

In his article, "*The X-Files* and the Aesthetics and Politics of Postmodern Pop," Douglas Kellner studies how *The X-Files* applies a postmodern subversion to modern media culture. Borrowing this idea, the Weekly World News "mixes a heavy style and high seriousness with irony and parody" (165). For example, an article entitled, "Adam and Ed! Gay Couple Were First Humans," demonstrates this postmodern subversion of mainstream media's aesthetic forms that are used throughout every issue of the Weekly World News. This article is the January 17, 2005, cover story. Reporting on religion and the origins of life is a serious subject, one that is covered in publications other than tabloids. However, the Weekly World News puts an ironic twist on the traditional Adam and Eve story.

Rather than focusing on a man and a woman as the first humans and following the usual forbidden fruit storyline, the Weekly World News mocks the serious topic of religion by parodying this classical story. In this case, the Weekly World News abandons the assumption that Adam and Eve were the first two humans on the planet, which rejects universal Christian philosophy and encourages readers to question what mainstream newspapers are presenting them in terms of religion. Using Ed, whose name strikes a close resemblance to Eve, the Weekly World News enacts a postmodern subversion to the usual aesthetic forms adopted by mainstream

media in terms of religion.

In the postmodern understanding, there is no scientific, philosophical, or religious truth that explains everything for everyone. The Weekly World News is postmodern in that it allows readers to pick and choose what to believe. David Perel writes, “in today’s polarized political climate, perhaps no topic is more heated than the divide between church and state. But Weekly World News never hesitates to tackle the touchy issues head-on. That’s because we...know there is a God--and she is an alien lesbian” (112). In terms of religion, this very statement is a complete spoof on the traditional religious point-of-view. Mainstream newspapers and media reinforce the image of God as a male. For the Weekly World News to claim God is actually a lesbian makes fun of the subject of religion, hinting that what culture has been led to believe may in fact be false. The identity of God is not the only area of religion that the Weekly World News spoofs; this tabloid also lampoons mainstream’s constructions of both heaven and hell.

The Weekly World News abandons assumptions such as definitive meanings of heaven and hell. Mainstream newspapers imply that hell is where evil people go. It is thought to be below us, full of fire, run by Satan, and an overall horrible place to spend the after life. However, the Weekly World News parodies this notion and promotes hell as a fun place. In a May 10, 1994, article entitled, “Hell is Great! It’s the Playground of the Naughty,” editors reject mainstream assumptions that hell is a place of eternal damnation. The article states “Satan’s kingdom is full of fast cars, free booze, babes in bikinis, slot machines, hookers, greasy fried food and other amenities” (Perel 118). Johnny Carazzo, the 51-year-old who went to hell and back says hell was so terrific that he did not want to return to his normal life. In this case, the Weekly World News lampoons the definitive definition that hell is for sinners and the sinners

will pay a horrible price by being there. Using a postmodern lens, by parodying the idea of what hell is, the Weekly World News succeeds in rejecting the universalizing of religion.

TABLOIDS MOCK POPULAR IMAGES

John Schilb, in his book Between the Lines, offers what he feels are the common traits of postmodernism. He argues postmodern discourses, “rather than try to mirror reality, press us to reflect upon our particular frameworks for it, especially the images and discourses with which the media now bombards us” (107). In today’s culture, media overwhelms with images of war and terrorism. Often, our culture is subjected to stories of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. We are told these men are evil terrorists. Their faces plastered on television news programs and newspapers become the faces of terrorism. The Weekly World News, rather than “mirror reality,” uses images and names about which media bombards the public and makes fun of them. An example comes from the October 2004 spread in the Weekly World News “Saddam and Osama’s Gay Wedding.”

Using the two biggest names in terrorism and imagining them as two gay lovers eschews reality, while requiring readers to “reflect upon [their] particular frameworks for it” (Schilb 107). The editors transport readers into a fantasy world where Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are actually lovers, not war criminals. As the article says, “it was bound to happen. After making tender gay love in a Pakistani motel room...Bin Laden and Hussein have tied the knot in a hush-hush but otherwise opulent wedding somewhere in Northern Iraq” (Perel 171). This article takes the images (of Bin Laden and Hussein) and discourses (war in Iraq) associated with reputable news sources and offers a weird sarcastic spin, one that makes no attempt to mirror

reality.

John Schilb explains that postmodern discourses “often appropriate, parody, and/or refreshen earlier achievements in the same genre” (107). The above article parodies all the serious war stories that have been printed over the last few years. Where the New York Times may run a story about the execution of Saddam Hussein, the Weekly World News instead offers a souvenir photo album to accompany the story of the Hussein-Bin Laden wedding. The Weekly World News includes the wedding picture, which pits Bin Laden as the husband and Hussein as the wife. The article goes on to mention other terrorist names. The article says, “and there to celebrate with the starry-eyed psychos were a veritable Who’s Who of terror kingpins and assorted good friends” (Perel 171). Some of the names included are PLO chief Yassir Arafat, Muammar Qaddafi, and Kim Jong Il. Names mentioned in the article are names that have been reoccurring in the news. However, the Weekly World News gives readers the chance to reject the seriousness of the terrorism and laugh. By parodying the images of two terrorism masterminds, rather than make readers feel threatened and scared about the current nature of terrorism, the Weekly World News allows readers the ability to make fun of both Hussein and Bin Laden, and maybe laugh about the current situation.

Rather than reporting the truth of the war, the Weekly World News refreshes the earlier achievements of other newspapers by creating a new type of story. The Weekly World News offers absurdity and humor, while mainstream newspapers offer fear and seriousness. Not only does this story appropriate news bits provided by the media, but it also parodies other tabloid magazines.

TABLOIDS PARODY TABLOIDS

The article about Bin Laden and Hussein's wedding not only parodies respectable newspapers by featuring terrorists as two smitten lovebirds, but it also refreshes and parodies the earlier achievements of other tabloid magazines in terms of celebrity wedding coverage.

Tabloid magazines like People and Star often feature weddings of famous celebrities. These tabloids try to scoop other tabloids by running exclusive pictures and quotes from those being featured. As example is coverage of the Tom Cruise/Katie Holmes wedding in People magazine. The December 4, 2006, cover features the wedding photo of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes; the cover photo featured is the same one that later appears on every entertainment television show and other tabloid magazines. The picture of the two (Cruise and Holmes) strikes a resemblance to the wedding photo of Bin Laden and Hussein. The Weekly World News parodies the more celebrity-focused tabloids, like People, by using an extreme example for a wedding exclusive to show the absurdity of the over-the-top coverage tabloid magazines enact for celebrity weddings.

People quotes famous celebrities, lucky to be invited to the wedding celebration. Actress Jenna Elfman, says, "the first dance--I was bawling" ("Tom"). Similarly, with the Hussein-Bin Laden wedding, an unknown source, only known as "he," says of the terrorist wedding, "we know that some guests lined up to kiss the bride while Osama regaled others with tales of the 9/11 terror attacks on Washington and New York" (Perel 172). In this case, the Weekly World News mocks the use of exclusive quotes. The idea being that no one will question the quotes provided because of their vague nature. A guest crying during the first dance will almost definitely occur; similarly, Osama Bin Laden talking about attacking the

United States will almost definitely occur. The Weekly World News mocks the use of exclusive quotes to further show the absurdity of the colossal coverage of celebrity weddings.

Providing a souvenir photo album is a rhetorical device usually reserved for an exclusive celebrity wedding. The People magazine article features dozens of photos. There is a picture of the bride and groom cutting the first piece of wedding cake, a picture of the intimate first dance, and several pictures of the guests, which is more like a who's who of Hollywood. In the Weekly World News, there are six pictures featured. They include Bin Laden holding bride Hussein in his arms, the two newlyweds riding a rollercoaster on their presumed honeymoon, the two riding teacups at Disneyland, the two cutting the first piece of wedding cake, the bride arriving by carriage to the nuptials, and the actual wedding picture. Similar to People's mentioning of all the Hollywood A-Listers who attended the wedding, the Weekly World News' exclusive on the Bin Laden/Hussein wedding mentions the names of other terrorists and leaders who are estranged with the United States. By using the images of both Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein and integrating those images with the beauty and lavishness of a wedding, the Weekly World News parodies other tabloid magazines. The editors use the antithesis of committed love between Bin Laden and Hussein to shed light on the absurdity of celebrity weddings and the exclusives other tabloids provide.

TABLOIDS PARODY USE OF QUOTES

The editors of the Weekly World News parody the use quotes to suggest reliability, seeing mainstream media uses quotes to validate a story. The Weekly World News parodies the Cruise/Holmes wedding with their version of the big celebrity wedding; in this case the Bin

Laden/Hussein wedding. The Weekly World News, through parody, exemplifies how quotes can be manipulated to better a story. The quotes given by Jenna Elfman could easily be forged. The Weekly World News points this out by adding validated quotes to their coverage of the terrorism wedding. After all, to refute a story when the editors use quotes from several sources almost “seems” inappropriate. But, of course, it is never inappropriate to remain a critic.

Another prime example of tabloids parodying the use of quotes is the Bat Boy stories. Bat Boy first appears in the June 23, 1992, article, “Bat Boy Found in West Virginia Cave!” Within the first sentence, special correspondent Bill Creighton writes, “scientists claim to have found an astonishing ‘bat boy’ in a West Virginia Cave” (Perel 33). While at first glance the article comes across far-fetched, the story seems that much more credible since Bat Boy was discovered by Dr. Ron Dillon, a respectable “zoologist” (Perel 33). The article explains the creature’s discovery occurs during a “study of subterranean life in a previously uncharted cave east of Seneca Rocks in the Shenandoah Mountains” (Perel 33). Writing about the discovery of Bat Boy in an “uncharted” cave enables the writers to elude the truth. Since the cave is “uncharted,” is less possible to prove the writers wrong because, before this discovery, the cave never existed. All the readers know is a new species is uncovered in an area recently discovered. Without access, it becomes almost impossible to prove this story false.

If the Weekly World News is able to quote scientists to prove the existence of Bat Boy, then mainstream newspapers can follow suit and quote unreliable sources. Many people will not have the patience to prove a story false, like this Bat Boy story, so they accept what they read as truth. The Weekly World News’ Bat Boy story shows accepting what you read as truth can be dangerous because if a scientist or doctor cannot be trusted, then who can? The Bat Boy

example proves how quotes can be used to manipulate readers into believing what is being presented to them is truthful.

TABLOIDS AND TABLOIDIZATION

With mainstream newspapers and media adopting the aesthetics of tabloidization, it seems appropriate that the Weekly World News also parodies this trend of reporting on more shocking and scandalous stories, while submerging hard information within the stories themselves.

An October 2001 Weekly World News article entitled, “Bat Boy Volunteers! Half-Human Creature in Training with U.S. Marines” is an example of “submerging hard information within a morass of human interest ‘victim’ stories. Bat Boy is a beloved creature in the eyes of Weekly World News readers. He is the epitome of a human interest story. David Perel says, “Bat Boy has been featured in dozens of cover stories, became the subject of an Off-Broadway musical [Bat Boy: The Musical] that toured worldwide, and is rumored to be the focus of a major motion picture currently in the works” (7). Bat Boy is so popular, in fact, that David Perel credits his story as the one to bring Readers A and Readers B together. He says, “Readers A and B both gobbled up information about the half-boy/half-bat, fascinated by the twisted, tragic, and ultimately uplifting tale of a downtrodden freak who, when life handed him a crate of radioactive lemons, brewed a potent batch of superstar-quality, mutant lemonade” (Perel 7). David Perel named his book, the compilation of Weekly World News articles, Bat Boy Lives! At first, Bat Boy was loathed, described as a dangerous creature” (Perel 59). In this sense, he is a victim of circumstance. However, along the years, readers fell in love with Bat Boy, even proposing he

run in future presidential elections.

The article, mentioned above, is an example of a human interest victim story, one that the editors of Weekly World News parody by submerging hard information within a sensational article. Notice the date, October 2001. This article was written one month after the attacks on the World Trade Center. The nation was in a state of mourning and fear. Everyone felt like a victim of the terrorist attack. Since it is the Weekly World News' goal to entertain rather than inform, the editors use Osama Bin Laden, who is in mainstream newspapers regularly, and place him in a story with one of their most beloved and remembered characters, Bat Boy. The Weekly World News parodies mainstream's focus on fear and revenge by tackling the touchy subject with their beloved icon.

According to the story, Bat Boy was found clutching a newspaper that had a photo of Bin Laden on the cover. The article continues, "[Bat Boy] held [the newspaper] up, pointed to the picture and said, 'Bad man...lemme get him...bite him up'" (Perel 176). Readers feel a connection to the hatred Bat Boy feels towards Bin Laden; also, readers feel a connection to Bat Boy's quest for revenge. Readers may see themselves in Bat Boy's shoes. When Bin Laden's face graces the pages of mainstream newspapers or television screens, the audience can relate to Bat Boy's reaction to the picture of Osama Bin Laden. Bat Boy represents the victim in all of us, and the anger and hatred the country felt towards this evil man who attacked our country.

Readers may connect to Bat Boy because he volunteers for the army. At the time when the article was written, the country felt great admiration for all who signed up for the armed forces. All the soldier's bravery was highly regarded. Many still feel this way. The Weekly World News' use of the 9/11 attacks and America's hatred for Bin Laden is the "hard

information” Rod Brookes describes. This story is a victim story because Weekly World News readers, similar to Bat Boy, were victims of the 9/11 attacks. Even if they were not in New York, the entire country was victimized. This article takes place one month after the 9/11 attacks, a time when readers still feel like victims of terrorism. While mainstream newspapers primarily ran stories of the increasing death toll of those in the twin towers, the Weekly World News uses the devastating situation and aligns it with one of their most beloved icons, Bat Boy.

The Weekly World News, through parody, offers readers hope and solutions for the war on terrorism. They say, “[Bat Boy] can go places and do things no normal soldier can. His hearing is 10,000 times more acute than an ordinary human’s and he can track smells like a bloodhound” (Perel 176). Readers may be drawn to this story because, at the time of the 9/11 attacks, Americans want leaders to capture Osama Bin Laden. Readers may feel a strong connection to Bat Boy’s strength and will. The Weekly World News’ parody of tabloidization, in this case, offers readers odd or strange hope during a time of crisis. By parodying the serious terrorism stories that induce fear, the Weekly World News offers support and relatable emotions. For readers to feel a connection with Bat Boy, they are able to escape the seriousness of the situation and be rewarded with humor.

Mainstream newspapers do not try to blend or hide hard facts within victim stories; instead, they report facts. Articles on the war in Iraq focus on the specifics, reporting on roadside bombs, politics of war, and death tolls. Readers are presented a “ceaseless flow of fast changing and barely explained events-news bites-which roll over each other with bewildering speed” (Newton 578). For the Weekly World News to write about the same circumstances, in this case war, from the character Bat Boy, readers may become more invested in what the tabloid

says rather than mainstream newspapers because it is reads less threatening and humorous, two things our culture needs after a terrorist attack.

Lois Tyson says, “tabloids fill a need for moralistic tales and gossip, for stories of human gore and human interest, for sensational and intrigue-ridden narratives about both everyday life and the unreachable world of the celebrities” (x). The Weekly World News, within victim stories, offers morality stories. Rather than writing about the “hard information” like mainstream newspapers, the Weekly World News presents the “hard information” within a humorous, far-fetched story. Putting the “hard information” about terrorism and war within the sensationalism of the Bat Boy stories diminishes the seriousness of the situation. After all, “the charges of sensationalism are implicitly linked with excess, irrationality, and hysteria” (Brookes 197).

Another example is the January 2004 article, “Bat Boy Led U.S. Troops to Saddam...Gotcha!” According to the article, “thanks to the mutant freak’s highly sensitive nose-and Saddam’s failure to bathe for several weeks, it was a piece of cake for Bat Boy to find him” (Perel 178). In this case, the Weekly World News parodies the capture of Saddam Hussein. While more mainstream newspapers often report about the trials and tribulations of the war on terror, the failures of the U.S. army to find Osama Bin Laden, and the intense nature of seeking out Hussein, the Weekly World News parodies the intense search for Hussein by claiming Hussein was scared of the two-foot-tall creature. A picture accompanies the headline showing Bat Boy with his arms raised in accomplishment, directly under the word “Gotcha!” Saddam is in the bottom right corner of the picture, looking helpless. The Weekly World News spoofs mainstream’s portrait of Hussein as the one of the world’s most notoriously dangerous man by portraying Hussein as a coward. The article brings Hussein down to a more personal level,

exposing him as shameful, weak man, thus parodying the mainstream assumption that he is the epitome of evil.

The Bat Boy series are also good examples of Weekly World News' parodying of apocalyptic headlines, dramatic typography, and bizarre photography. The stories of Bat Boy are popular because of the combination of apocalyptic headlines and dramatic photography and typography. The subtitles for the headline, "Bat Boy Found in West Virginia Cave," read, "Creature Has Huge Eyes" and "There May Be Thousands More Like Him." The Weekly World News uses strong words to create a buzz. The article describes Bat Boy as "astonishing," saying, "he looks like he came from outer space" (Perel 33). He is also described as "ferocious" and "bizarre" (Perel 61). The Bat Boy series, as it goes becomes grander by the article. The Bat Boy series has legs.

Some articles featured over the years include October 1992's, "Bat Boy Escapes!," January 2003's, "Bat Boy Steals Car-And Goes on Three State Joy Ride!," April 2004's, "Bat Boy to be Knighted," and August 1997's, "Bat Boy Captured!" The positive responses to Bat Boy, as proven with the ongoing coverage and countless articles, suggests millions of readers find him humorous. Otherwise, the Off-Broadway show "Bat Boy-The Musical" would have bombed and David Perel would not make him the cover story for the book that provides the Weekly World News' most popular articles. Since the book is a compilation of popular articles, Bat Boy appears most popular. This is another example of parody, as the Weekly World News in this case parodies all the mainstream stories that grew legs. There is the story of the runaway bride, the Laci Peterson case, the Anna Nicole Smith baby paternity fiasco, among others. The Bat Boy stories are complete parodies of all mainstream stories that grew legs and became part

of popular culture.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the Weekly World News was created in 1979, the editors have been poking fun at a variety of subjects within the articles of their tabloid. The articles are often so sensationalized and over-the-top that no one ever questions what is being written; this has allowed the Weekly World News to appear respectable because the editors are not trying to be respectable. The Weekly World News is and continues to be a success.

The Weekly World News is a legitimate cultural artifact worthy of rhetorical analysis. The Weekly World News is a postmodern example of a sophisticated form of parody that ridicules, ironically comments on, and pokes fun at a variety of subjects in order to make political and social arguments, all the while attempting to push for change. Some of the subjects parodied by the Weekly World News include mainstream newspapers like the New York Times, other tabloid magazines like People, cable news shows, and other aspects of media like advertisements. By illuminating the nature of parody observed in the Weekly World News and providing examples of what is being parodied, not only do I address the concept of parody and the forms it takes, but I also sketch the tabloid as a platform for political and social change. As an example of a type of parody known as pastiche that parodies a variety of subjects, the Weekly World News succeeds in pointing out the absurdity of mainstream's constructions of reality.

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