

Tommy Schneider
Media Studies 149G
Paper 3, Question 5
April 26, 2017

Nathan for You: Parodying Commercial Function

Limitation is what defines an artistic medium. Much of the difference between movies and television, for example, is derived from how they function commercially. Most TV comedies have three acts, for instance, so that commercials can be suitably spaced apart. Television episodes are purchased in bunches, often seasons, as a compromise between writers, who need multiple episodes to develop a compelling narrative, and networks, which benefit from being able to cancel unsuccessful shows and extend the runs of successful shows. As TV is moving towards streaming services and online distribution, its commercial function is becoming more complicated, but is not disappearing. In an interview with Mike Wallace, Rod Serling, the creator of *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964), argues that these limitations are not so extreme as to prevent television from being art that is critical.

In the interview, Rod Serling tells how the process by which his teleplay “Noon on Doomsday,” a story about (or at least thematically and structurally resembling) the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, gradually becomes a watered-down version of the original story, stripped of all connections to the South where Till’s murder took place. Serling jokes that they had to encounter another commercial limitation—their costuming budget—to prevent the setting from moving so far north as to be in set the North Pole. In the end, Serling said he had a “clean, antiseptically, rigidly acceptable show” and “went down fighting, as most television writers do.” In the same interview, Serling boasts that in the first 18 episodes of *The Twilight Zone* there was only one “albeit ludicrous” line change, where a sponsor wanted to change a British sailor’s call for tea to one for coffee. The conclusion, Serling draws, is that writers should conform to outside pressures on trivial matters and should fight networks, producers, sponsors, and even the audience on when their requests are truly absurd. Comedy Central’s *Nathan for You* (2013–) approaches this

Tommy Schneider
Media Studies 149G
Paper 3, Question 5
April 26, 2017

problem differently, using the necessity of its commercial function as a fuel source and parodying the absurdness of that drive.

Nathan for You follows Nathan Fielder (Nathan Fielder), self-proclaimed graduate of one of Canada's top business schools, in his quest to help small business owners. The show is, ostensibly, a business makeover show; however, it operates under different modes as well. In a similar sense to how some reality shows are viewed ironically, *Nathan for You* is produced ironically, making fun of its own limitations (and, occasionally, its own power). Itself a commercial enterprise, it is situated perfectly to examine itself and its own commercial function: the show targets product placement ("Private Investigator/Taxi Company"), the moral hypocrisy of advertisers ("Toy Company/Movie Theatre"), and the addressing fan concerns ("Claw of Shame").

In his article "*The Twilight Zone*: Landmark Television," Derek Kompare states that "Serling learned his trade within the frameworks of network and station scheduling, as well as the unavoidable primacy of advertising....he regarded them as a necessary price" (301). While Serling's philosophy is to conform to the wishes of some advertisers, Nathan's is to incorporate them into his show's comedy. After exciting a coworker named Solomon with prospects of a blind date in "Private Investigator/Taxi Company," Nathan reluctantly informs him that Quiznos is a sponsor of their show, and that Comedy Central is making them stage the blind date in a Quiznos sandwich shop. This is a troubling prospect in for two reasons. Most immediately, blind dates are inherently awkward, and having a Quiznos representative force Solomon to shill their product is cringe-inducing. Taking a meta-step back, however, reveals another layer to the uncanny feeling. Viewers of the show know that a "blind date" is too low-concept of an idea for Nathan to pitch by itself. The viewer begins questioning: Was the entire product placement ruse

Tommy Schneider
Media Studies 149G
Paper 3, Question 5
April 26, 2017

thought of by Nathan? Did Comedy Central mandate unspecified product placement, and this is

Nathan's way of injecting creativity into it, thus maintaining his "integrity" as a writer (all that Rod Serling claims a writer needs maintain)? The answer is never made clear, but no matter what the audience member concludes, they are left critically examining the disruptiveness of product placement for art and entertainment.

In the Mike Wallace interview, Rod Serling claims that the audience is the ultimate content regulator. His example is that of a small batch of letter writers who are offended that they witnessed a puppy birth on television. *Nathan for You* upsets viewers not for the reasons most shows do (it is much less vulgar than most of Comedy Central's nighttime far), but because pranking real people, messing with them, can feel immoral.¹ In particular, Nathan remarks near the beginning of "Claw of Shame" that "some have been critical that I never take risks myself." The "some" are offended by what they see as Nathan picking on poor small business owners, tricking them into indulging him in his schemes. Nathan addresses these concerns in a most unsatisfactory way—performing a stunt that risks what is billed as a fate worse than death: becoming a registered sex offender. To do this, he performs a standard escape artist trick while a mechanical claw gradually takes off his pants in front of a group of children. Surely, Nathan is taking a great risk per the audience's request; however, the risk is clearly subverting the audience's intentions and expectations, in effect, making fun of them.

There are many parallels to draw between Rod Serling and Nathan Fielder. They both take ambiguous roles in the production of their series, for instance. Serling is a writer and producer, but also as a "product pitchman" (Kompere 302). All of Nathan Fielder's social media

¹ There's the additional problem of "in-ness" with regard to jokes that is discomforting. One of my favorite interviews, between Nathan the mom of the *Onion A.V. Club*'s head-editor, addresses this (Teti).

Tommy Schneider
Media Studies 149G
Paper 3, Question 5
April 26, 2017

output is also “in character,” and meant to promote his show (Reed). At the end of his essay, Kompare claims that the legacy of *The Twilight Zone* is more the endurance of Rod Serling’s attitude than the form of his show. *Nathan for You* certainly embraces its boundary-pushing attitude. Serling claims that his willingness to write television despite its commercial function makes him “not a meek conformist, but a tired non-conformist.” What, then, does Nathan’s total, paradoxical, extreme embrace of commercial function make him? An innovative and critical conformist.

Tommy Schneider
Media Studies 149G
Paper 3, Question 5
April 26, 2017

Works Cited

Kompare, Derek. "*The Twilight Zone*: Landmark Television." *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson, Jason Mittell, New York University Press, 2013, 299-307.

Reed, Kayla. "Nathan Fielder keeps sneaking pictures of a naked old man into his Instagram." *The A.V. Club*. 23 June 2014. Web.

Serling, Rod. "Rod Serling." *The Mike Wallace Interview*, by Mike Wallace. 22 Sept. 1959. YouTube.

Teti, John. "Nathan For You's star confronts the A.V. Club mom who scorned him." *The A.V. Club*. 15 Oct. 2015. Web.