

Freberg and the Postmodernist Responsibility

Walter Lowe

May 7, 2015



In 1962, syndicated columnist and social critic Marya Mannes asked the question “How Do You Know It’s Good?” as the title of an article. Mannes was in the midst of the shift from the “modern” to “postmodern” ages. She began by voicing the concerns that many felt in this transition time:

Suppose there were no critics to tell us how to react to a picture, a play, or a new composition of music. Suppose we wandered innocent as the dawn into an art exhibition of unsigned paintings. By what standards, by what values would we decide

whether they were good or bad, talented or untalented, successes or failures? How can we ever know that what we think is right?

http://members.tripod.com/karl_p_henning/old/itsgood.html

Dating back to the times of the early Greeks, the definitions of “acceptable” cultural and literary standards were established and revised through the generations with a general consensus emerging from the dominant culture of the time. These had an authoritative “voice” such as Plato, Aristotle, Wordsworth, [Matthew] Arnold, etc. as the spokesperson.

In the early 1900’s the “Modern” critical view dominated. Also referred to as “New Criticism” or “Formalism,” this continued this view of the “tradition” of good literature conforming to “formal rules” of structure, elements, and organization. The major difference was that this involved a variety of voices with none seen as the focal point.

In her article from over 50 years ago, Mannes notes that this multitude of voices caused a shift from the modern approach to the “postmodern” era where we firmly stand situate ourselves these days. Mannes points out that the period after WWII introduced a *just because it’s old doesn’t mean it’s good / just because it’s new doesn’t make it bad* approach that was transforming even further in jettisoning the “old ways.” As she says, “The word ‘new’ – in our country especially – has magical connotations. What is new must be good; what is old is probably bad.”

The global shift in post WWII culture offered the opportunity to review and enhance past traditional approaches. Self-reflection and self-confession became the norm as a pathway to self-knowledge and self-improvement. The shift was intended to improve the individual within the community and improve the community for the individual.

Thus, satire became a useful tool to disarm harsh criticism if we could laugh at ourselves and with ourselves. This would then be a avenue for understanding ourselves and our culture as a means to recognize the cultural reality while taking individual responsibility for our role in it.

One of the great masters of such self-reflective satire passed away during the month of April in the person of Stan Freberg. It only seems appropriate to reflect upon his creative genius at getting us to look at ourselves through the lens of satire and to reflect upon how this helped us see ourselves, individually and culturally, in a humorous and non-threatening way.

Freberg did this through his comedy monologues. Corporate powers recognized that he had his finger on the pulse of the American consumer, and they harnessed his talents.

Before the “reality TV” rooted in the daytime soaps was probably even a concept for prime time television, Freberg came up with a “reality TV commercial” series playing upon the recognition that the commercials used paid actors purporting to be users of the products. Freberg asked – Why not use that apparent weakness as a strength? Here’s an example done for Cheerios:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PauDwNFPucU>

Before diversity and multicultural awareness became buzzwords, Freberg was on it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4_fLIPAf0Y

Freberg made us aware of the hype used in our culture:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqx9zbdK9k>

Probably one of his most famous creations was the “St. George and the Dragonet” story, updated here with Claymation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT3QYb7AN6k>

Freberg’s genius was in getting people to react to the humor on the surface as a means to reflect on the reality below it.

Unfortunately, these days most people don’t have time to get very far below the surface. We have the technique but not the skill honed by responsibility.

As technology has changed the culture and old technology speeds up the shift to new technology, we have morphed into a type of Postmodern society with the focus on self for self’s benefit. In this approach, the emphasis is on finding fault and problems with any general status quo, which is then exposed through satire as ridicule. Somehow knowing how messed up things are around us is supposed to help our own self-esteem in a sort of “My life isn’t so bad after all” epiphany.

I often observe my children watching some pointless “reality” show (usually with people in dysfunctional relationships agonizing over how dysfunctional other people are), and I point out that this “reality” is scripted, offering nothing of substance to apply to the lives of the viewers.

“But Dad, It’s hilarious!” is how my children respond, having been well-schooled in the current Postmodern techniques used to answer Mannes’ original question, “How do you know it’s good?”

As for me, I still prefer to watch the commercials.