**The Kids are Absurd: *Man Seeking Woman*, *Broad City*, and the New Absurdist Comedy**

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In last night’s premiere of FXX’s new comedy Man Seeking Woman, a hapless young Chicago temp named Josh Greenberg gets dumped by his girlfriend, moves out, and begins to deal with life as a single person. His trials are typical—he goes on a blind date with a woman he finds unattractive, meets his ex-girlfriend’s awful new boyfriend at a house party, and manages to get a pretty girl’s phone number on the L. Pretty standard fare, except for a few details. The blind date, it turns out, is with an actual green-skinned troll named Gorbachaka who eats garbage, the new boyfriend is none other than 126-year-old Adolf Hitler, and the reward for getting a girl’s number is a MacArthur genius grant and a congratulatory phone call from President Obama.

The series based on the novel *The Last Girlfriend on Earth* by Simon Rich, a 30-year-old former *SNL* writer (the youngest in history) and *New Yorker* contributor who now writes for the show. In an [interview](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/14/trolls-hitler-and-japanese-penis-monsters-why-man-seeking-woman-is-tv-s-smartest-new-comedy.html) with *The Daily Beast,* he explained the origins of the absurd scenarios in the show:

*“I was trying to write about my own dating experiences in my mid-twenties. Whenever I tried to write them in a naturalist style, the always ended up feeling incredibly low-stakes and generic, because that’s what my dating experiences were: they were low-stakes and generic. I couldn’t figure out why the stories were so dull, because they were about the most visceral, emotional experiences of my entire life. So one day it occurred to me to stop writing about dating the way that it happened, and start writing about dating the way that it felt.”*

That quote is the key to understanding the off-kilter nature of that world, which can be off-putting to a viewer who isn’t used to anything but realism, even in comedy. Absurdity is a distortion of reality, but that’s not the *point* of it—the point is to comment on a real situation that a real person might face, which is why every surreal moment in the pilot episode of *Man Seeking Woman* can be tied in to a very human emotion. In that way, you can honor the actual feeling of the moment. The pain of being dumped is a lot like walking around on a sunny day with a funnel of rain falling on you, as happens to Greenberg in a device borrowed from *The Truman Show.* The disheartening feeling of being set up with someone you don’t find attractive can feel like dining with a troll, and the bastard who moved in on your old flame might as well be Adolf Hitler. You get the point—these are human emotions played real, heightened—but not changed—by the absurdities. If you identify with the emotional content, it doesn’t look very strange at all.

The concept of “playing it real” within those surreal enclosures is critical to pulling off this conceit. Greenberg himself is allowed to show surprise, but not disbelief—he can be thrilled that Obama is congratulating him on his coup with the girl, but he can’t treat it like you or I would, as something so unrealistic that it should viewed with suspicion. And those around him have to play it totally straight—when he tells his friends that Hitler’s former crimes make him a bad partner for his ex, they have to shake their heads and behave as if Greenberg were taking his sour grapes out on any other nice guy. It’s just his jealousy, they tell him, and his inability to accept that his ex has moved on.

Ditto for the date with Gorbachaka. In the moments after he sees her, the friend who set them up is nonplussed when Greenberg asks her if she’s set him up with a troll.

“Is that a problem for you?” she asks, on the verge of taking offense.

Greenberg, consumed like us all with being viewed as a “nice guy,” has to immediately backpedal and go through with the date. Even after he buys her a rose and incites her into biting his leg, he manages to offend the entire restaurant when he calls her a “troll.” In other words, the entire scenes are played straight—as though the troll is just a female he doesn’t like, and Hitler is just another dude. The specifics don’t matter to the characters—they only matter to us.

*Man Seeking Woman* may be the first American sitcom to fully commit to this level of absurdity in comedy, but it’s not a pioneer. It’s hard to pinpoint an origin, but absurdity has typically been the province of sketch comedy. Monty Python may have perfected the style with sketches like “The Argument Clinic.”

The most absurd sketch I’ve ever seen, though, came from the Will Ferrell era of *SNL*, and is called “Crazy Doctor.”

*Man Seeking Woman* doesn’t quite reach for those levels of absurdity—it’s more closely tethered to reality—but the idea is the same, in that exaggerations of reality shine a spotlight on a certain conflict. Even the Crazy Doctor sketch has a meaning—most of us have had dealings with an inconsiderate doctor, and the pain of those moments is a clear inspiration for Will Ferrell’s casual cruelty and arrogance.

Absurdity as a device has a long history in the theater, with practitioners like Brecht and Ionesco and Beckett, with the primary difference being that their usage of the trope was more political, and less specifically comedic. In the world of sitcoms, there are fewer examples, of which England’s *The Mighty Boosh* is one. Recently, though, there has been a huge wave of absurdist television in America. Two years ago, I [wrote](http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2012/07/the-half-light-the-genius-of-delocated-and-eaglehe.html) about *Eagleheart* and *Delocated*, but those were niche shows aired at odd hours. Today, with the emergence of *Man Seeking Woman* and even *Broad City*, the concept is getting closer than ever to the mainstream.

The question is, why? For that, we turn back to Rich’s quote about the generic nature of the interactions that felt richly emotional inside his own head. The only way to translate that into something compelling was to change reality in order to reflect the power of the emotions inside him. Thus an ordinary douchebag becomes Hitler. In the *Broad City* season two premiere, Ilana and Abbi go through a maze of seething humanity on the subway, all of them seemingly intent on stopping their progress as they move to the back of the train. Anyone who has spent any time in New York will recognize the situation, even though the particular details are inflated to surreal proportions. It’s a typical *Broad City* scene, where the moments of absurdity are brief and whimsical—a stylistic choice that contributes to the show’s light atmosphere, but is not an end in and of itself.

The philosophy of absurdism, especially as used in literature and the theater, is said to be a reflection of the meaninglessness of life, but as employed by these two shows, it’s less a philosophical outlook and more a way of adding magnitude to a character’s emotional life. In *Broad City* the absurdities heighten the comedy, while in *Man Seeking Woman* they serve the additional purpose of emphasizing the pain of everyday existence. In both cases, the technique is a way of telling the audience that these people *matter*—and we need convincing, too, because sometimes the circumstances themselves aren’t extraordinary. That might be the ‘why’ we’re seeking—the shows need to give the illusion of importance, but the truth is that middle-class Americans in the 21st century are only important in our own minds. When *Seinfeld* came out, the selfish, self-absorbed nature of the characters was something to be laughed at, whereas now it’s something to be justified and even celebrated.

That might encapsulate the conflict at the heart of this new absurdity. *Broad City* and *Man Seeking Woman* are both funny—the former more so than the latter, which I think will struggle to reach a second season—but the stories they tell small and internal. Like all comedy, they depend on intangible aspects of storytelling. *Broad City* diversifies a bit better—Abbi and Ilana are compelling enough on their own, and the absurd moments are just another tool—while *Man Seeking Woman* almost treats it like a crutch.

It’s a technique that should be treated with caution, since when done to excess it puts distance between the viewer and the characters and diminishes our chances of emotionally identifying with them. As a supplement, it can work beautifully, but as the engine of a comedy, it’s less capable. If the story can’t stand on its own, absurdity is nothing more than a garish window dressing—a pretentious distraction masquerading as meaning.