The Cultural Set Up Of Comedy

AFFECTIVE POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES POST 9/11

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Chapter 1

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Look, I can appreciate this. I was young too, I felt just like you. Hated authority, hated all my bosses, thought they were full of shit. Look, it's like they say: if you're not a rebel by the age of 20, you got no heart, but if you haven't turned establishment by 30, you've got no brains. Because there are no storybook romances, no fairy-tale endings. So before you run out and change the world, ask yourself, 'What do you really want?' (Buddy Ackerman in *Swimming with Sharks* [George Huang, 1994])

This is a famous quote from a parody of Hollywood studio culture, *Swimming with Sharks*, starring Kevin Spacey in one of his signature performances as an 'asshole.' The film examines a cut-throat industry through the lens of a producer of Michael-Bay-like films named Buddy Ackerman. As he says while critiquing the sound editing in one of his projects, 'I told you, it's gotta be loud, loud, loud! The audience should feel their balls tremble, their ears should bleed!' His assistant (read: slave) is the Everyman, Generation Xer named 'Guy.' Guy believes that he can 'work really, really hard' and succeed honestly in Hollywood. Buddy schools him otherwise. The lead quote demonstrates a kind of political and cultural truism about American culture and its relationship to youth: that is, that young people are simply 'playing around' until it's time to get serious. The 'hard' reality of life eventually bears down on a person and they give up the soft dreams of 'fairy-tale endings' and 'storybook romances.' Just such an event was said to take place on 9/11 that was meant to force the entire country into a decisive and serious tone and ask the question: 'What do you really want?'[1] Instead, contrary to all the predictions of the anti-irony crowd who longed for seriousness in American cultural life prior to 9/11, the media did not 'return' to a sober, reflective mode of information transmission, politicians did not earnestly make policy designed to improve the lives of their constituents (by and large), and Americans did not demand intelligent, thought-provoking news and cultural programming. Instead, most Americans got exactly what they wanted: the Michael Bay version of America on a daily loop on Fox News and other competing networks. Students turned to Tom Clancy novels for answers about the terrorist attacks rather than actual history or foreign policy texts. Being 'dumb' was fashionable and humble, just like our president, George W. Bush, who never lived in Texas as a child, but developed an accent when he became governor of the state, and exaggerated it when he became president of the country. As Molly Ivins once said of him, 'Born on third and thinks he scored a triple,' George W. Bush was paradigmatic of the kind of leadership people throughout the country would come to emulate through their consumption

of media and information. A member of the patrimonial elite to his core, W. epitomized the new American dream: the person who pretends to have worked hard from nothing to 'earn' their guaranteed inheritance. People chose their president because he seemed like someone they'd like to have a beer with rather than because he had shown he could lead a country in a time of war. Once established in media and politics, this genre of information-sharing institutionalized both the 'expert' discourse of the pundit and the authoritative aura of the wealthy who patronized them. The only way to 'talk back' to such an establishment was indirectly through strategies of irony, parody and exaggerated imitations of what passed for 'common sense.' The media, enthralled by having access to this elite core of wealthy leaders, stayed on the path of unquestioning obedience. In doing this they equated wealth with justice as a hegemonic norm. Throughout this book, we will examine how comedy of the political variety attempts to maneuver its way through the hegemony of earnest political cronyism. Furthermore we will refer to this cultural hegemony that often passes as 'common sense' in the Gramscian tradition as:

> […] a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our sense and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture', but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (R. Williams 1977: 110)

In the absence of thoughtful political analysis and responsible journalism, political comedy emerged as the only strategy to challenge the hegemonic norm of earnestness and ignorance. The smartest thing about American cultural life was its comedy. Oddly, it was comedy that was covering serious news, rather than News covering news at all (McKain 2005). One reason for this, according to media scholars, is that news and entertainment had been blurred to such an extent that no one knew what objectivity meant anymore. So let's take a short jaunt through the recent history leading up to this pragmatic conjuncture where fact meets fiction.

Scholars of political entertainment mark the debut of the blurring of the lines between hard and soft news at the 1992 US presidential election, when candidates began to avail themselves of talk shows such as *Oprah* (and nowadays *The View*) in order to bypass the media filters and speak directly to publics (Holbert 2005: 441). Cartoon shows like the *The Simpsons* (1989–), which frequently feature parodies of political figures and celebrities, have been around for over two decades (debut half-hour sketches began in 1989). Blurring would be accelerated around 1995 by the duplication of information-sharing achieved by the Internet, and the technologies and applications that followed to enhance its communicative

capacities, such as Facebook, mobile web services, satellite radio, YouTube, and so on. A related trend in news media was the invention of the 24-hour news cycle. This cycle encouraged the transformation of the news anchor, a person charged with objectively presenting 'facts' to the American public at 6 p.m., with little or no affect, into an editorializing affect manager, whose goal was less to communicate information than to create controversy (Baym 2010). Around 2000, television struck back at declining ratings with 'reality-based programming,' the lure of which is to create reality on a sensational register using the same techniques as fictional television: editing and scriptwriting with actors. Its novelty was to present reality as outrageous, making otherwise banal lifestyle environments entertaining through post-production editing or by dropping ordinary people into extraordinary environments. Television genres replicated themselves throughout the world, creating the globalization of media (reality television, news parody, romantic comedy, 24-hour networks, etc.) which were copying each other at every turn. And finally, in 2004, the pronounced success of a long-time satiric news show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,[2] coincided with its coverage of the 2004 presidential election: 'the year that entertainment media became a permanent fixture of the American political landscape' (Holbert 2005: 436). Immediately following it in 2005, the debut of *The Colbert Report* introduced Americans to a parody of the long-running right-wing news coverage that had dominated newspapers and cable television in the form of the Fox News channel, a subsidiary of News Corp., and self-described 'fair and balanced' show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, featuring Bill O'Reilly. News Corp., owned by Rupert Murdoch, had for some time been blurring entertainment and news in Great Britain, Australia and Canada through tabloids.

Through all this, media, with consumers as willing accomplices, have blurred the boundaries between earnest communication of rationally presented facts and discourses of entertainment. A related theme is the confounding of the public interest by the intrusion of and into privacy. The model of communication that foments the democratic citizen, who sorts out the knowledge for him/herself and finally 'decides,' is replaced by the affect-driven, image-spliced simulacra of the world of infotainment. As societies verge toward the latter trend, we find narcissistic obsession with self and Other (celebrity worship as the route to self-awareness), consumption as a citizen activity, whether in the form of emulation of important celebrity figures or as a mark of class consciousness or political preference. The dominant narrative to emerge from this explains that, because of media conglomeration (Jenkins 2006), consumers lose the ability to discern important facts from the entertaining way they are presented, as corporations who run news companies have more of an interest in selling related products and airtime than they do in informing publics. Moreover, because ratings pay, it is important for television and other media formats to appeal to the individualistic and consumer tastes of viewers and listeners by giving them what they think they want. This presumes that the individual consumer knows what they want, and can discern with increasing sophistication the political narratives that enrich their lives and those that disparage them. Throughout the decade, politicians and the media have taken this credo to an extreme: 'You decide' has become the most important trope in contemporary media

and social politics, alongside the often muted assumption that once you decide you are also responsible for that decision. That's also why *Time* magazine made 'You' the Person of the Year in 2006. 'We' have no role to play; the semiotics of the social have been completely overtaken by social *media.* Rather than viewing our political activities as a relationship between citizens and government, we now view it as between consumers and media – the government being one player among many, often an adversary. Hence, in 2012, Eric Kain predicts that *Time*'s Person of the Year will be the 'slactivist' – someone 'doing something in support of an issue or cause that requires minimal effort' – a merger between 'you' and a 'protester' (*Time*'s 2011 Person of the Year). The slactivist is a trope on slacker/activist and it is more important for its generational implications than for its political consequences. Slactivist takes the participatory social politics of the baby boomers and marries it to the popular culture sensitivity of Generation X (who are known for nothing but popular culture) in order to produce 'youth' in the form of the digital media participant. The politics of the slactivist are important for understanding the role of political humor in fostering democratic pushback in any political debate. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the protests of the Arab Spring, which began in 2010 and continue to the present, were precipitated by social media organizers using Facebook and Twitter, avoiding government censors by using servers from outside the countries where they took place in the Arab world. Many of these protests used political humor, especially exploiting the irony of the political context between 'older' authoritarian discourses and 'youthful' movements for democracy. Many in the West, especially the United States, looked on these protest movements with apparent pleasure, often citing the main cause of them to have been the advent of social media itself forging a digital 'youthscape,' or the achievement of recognition between diverse online demographics who do not 'know' one another in an embodied, cultural way. While these are movements against governments, they are more accurately thought of as movements against governmentality: the notion that the government will think for you about how your life will be structured in order to best serve its own instrumental purposes and preserve its paradigmatic power (Bayat 2007). Some see this as the essence of the democratic experiment. Bassem Youssef, host of *Al Bernameg*, a copy of *The Daily Show* which airs on satellite television in Egypt, had this to say when he visited Jon Stewart on air in June 2012, several days before the outcome of the presidential elections in the country were to be announced:

> We haven't actually been speaking to each other for all these years. For sixty years. Because of the military regime there was some sort of a buffer, someone was actually dealing with everybody else and now for the first time we actually have to communicate and people tell me, 'When does it stop? We used to be one hand in the square.' And I tell them, 'Look at the American media. Look at MSNBC, Fox News CNN…they're cutting each other's throats. If you watch them, Americans, through the media you'd think that the apocalypse will come in like two days. That's normal. Everybody is opinionated.' They're just not used to a different kind of opinion to be in your face like this. (*The Daily Show* 2012)

Still others see political satire, especially that performed by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as no more than a necessary corrective to the failures of contemporary journalism (J. Jones 2009; Baym 2012).

In the United States, in recent years, citizens have come to feel threatened by government action to address even the smallest of bureaucratic tasks. The safety net of government is increasingly under attack as anti-democratic. Because media conglomeration has been the result of market deregulation (1996 Telecommunications Act, for example) and the increasing role that so-called privatization plays in determining both content and presentation of news media, those on the political right see no reason to criticize these blurred boundaries (indeed they often celebrate it, as in the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission 558 US 50* [2010] granting corporations the right to free speech). Indeed, the narrative fiction on the Right continues to be the old refrain about 'liberal media bias,' where the simple existence of government oversight or federal law implies progressive encroachment on formerly free speech and interpretation. In more extreme versions, it is labeled 'socialism.' On the Left, this conglomeration is seen as the gradual erosion of consumer rights to critical information that might persuade consumers of media to vote differently and make different consumer decisions. It is argued that important information is left out of news coverage or, if it hurts corporate interests, is reframed as benign and possibly repackaged as entertainment. Responding to the charge that the media is biased toward corporate interests, especially as they merge with political interests through lobbying groups, many who view themselves as part of a 'progressive' movement – though not always identified with the US Democratic Party – have come to view humor as a critical weapon in the ideological arsenal against hegemonic interests. Thus, popular audiences, scholars and citizens have grown accustomed to discussing political comedy as the sole progressive strategy for responding to both conservative hyperbole in the media and pro-corporate governing in congresses and parliaments.

In political science, the discipline from which I matriculate, political comedy is still viewed with suspicion. As a relatively conservative social science charged with educating young people about civic responsibility and studying the way citizens rationalize their political views, political science has been skeptical about humor's role in political thought because, for the majority of the past century, the discipline has been preoccupied with finding political truisms through empiricism and rationalism. A subset of the discipline, normative political theory has its roots in political philosophy and moral criticism, and uses texts from the canon to interpret contemporary political ideologies and social and political movements through the discourses of power and pleasure found in such thinkers as Plato and Hobbes, and even contemporary social theorists such as Foucault and Baudrillard. Political science rarely acknowledges that it has anything to say about political comedy. All the traditional theories of humor come from the canon of political and social philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Freud (by way of Nietzsche), and so on. And yet, few political science scholars examine political comedy, and when they do, they ask an outdated disciplinary question: does it promote civic engagement? Or, does it make citizens cynical toward government? (Morris & Baumgartner 2008). Usually the

proof of engagement is measured by some simple activity, like voting or participating in extracurricular political organizing activities. Political science has yet to embrace more affect-driven paradigms, and, outside of political theory, which remains, to some extent, exiled from the larger discipline, political science remains embedded in the rationalist, positivist paradigm. When political theory has engaged affect, it has not looked at comedy as an object of political analysis except to mention in passing the role of comedy in highlighting media manipulation of affect (Connolly 2011: 796). Most general treatments of political comedy have been by scholars interested in looking at how it impacts trends in their own fields. In the fields of communication, scholars look at how comedy transforms news media (Baym 2005, 2009; J. Jones 2009); in rhetoric and cultural studies, scholars have looked at the cultural influence of comedy in post-9/11 dark humor, as an ethical object and a generator of counterpublic narratives (Gournelos & Greene 2011; Lewis 2008; Day 2011, respectively); and in philosophy, humor has been analyzed as a reformer of social manners and as moral criticism (Willet 2008; Daldez 2011). While communications scholars have a close affinity to political theory because of their interest in the way changing media and political comedy have transformed information gathering and sharing in democratic republics, they offer little in the way of explaining how certain narrative forms of political comedy organize or disorganize audience political affiliation, and often fail to connect it to historical trends in thinking about the economy, culture wars, modern political parties and social movements. One study of the rhetoric of *The Daily Show* (*TDS*), for example, mainly focuses on the argumentative strategies deployed by the show, and debates the effectiveness of satire for provoking political alliances with progressive politics (Goodnow 2011). Another multidisciplinary approach, again focused on *TDS* and *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*) includes essays on the 'real impacts of fake news' with important chapters detailing, for example, how *TCR* and *TDS* have attempted to bring scientific thinking and research back into style (Amarasingam 2011). Most approaches have been limited to focusing on these iconic shows and assessing their role in making satire and parody a contending political strategy for producing social change through information sharing and knowledge production in convergence culture; that is, how they extend the rationalist paradigm. Rarely marked by historical or narrative analysis of tropes and common themes drawn in both the shows and the larger cultural drama of political comedy, they avoid the times when, as Amarasingam notes, comedy fails (Amarasingam 2011: 19). When it sticks in someone's craw, political comedy is controversial. As I teach my students, whatever is contested is political. Though many of the scholarly treatments of political comedy that precede this one have made valiant attempts to explain certain examples of satirical failure, rarely have they done so by looking at the mobilization of affect through cultural strategies that achieve a certain *tone.* Throughout most of this book, we will follow so-called cultural warriors and their adversaries to examine how they compete for affective impact with audiences using generational tone. Following Sconce (2002), I will argue that the success or failure of political comedy largely depends on meeting its audience with the appropriate tone in order to shift or reinforce political ideologies that favor genuine political courses of action. Comedic failure, then, would seem

on its surface to indicate a comedian's lack of engagement with audiences on an affective register. However, when we look more closely, we see it is difficult to generalize from failure as well. When looking at failure, the most commonly discussed one has been the cartoon on the cover of *The New Yorker*'s 21 July 2008 edition, featuring Michelle and Barack Obama in 'The Politics of Fear', also known as 'the fist bump.'[3]

'The fist bump' is a culture warrior's fantasy-space: making Michelle Obama into the Angela Davis-style Black Panther and Barack Obama into the generic 'Muslim' terrorist, the cartoon exploits the right-wing belief that equates the radical activism of the 1960s with Al-Qaeda style terrorism. This is all done through visual styling – no words are spoken in this context, simply the flag burning in the fireplace and the fists bumped to demonstrate 'solidarity.' Solidarity in what, though? This never needs to be stated. 'You' decide what this cover means; and the fact that critics feared that you would decide based on a *sincere* belief in the racial stereotypes exploited in it rather than a *smart*, sarcastic disbelief that anyone else could be that *dumb* sums up the politics of the current era. This is not a failure of comedy; it is a controversy of comedy. Earlier in 2006, apropos of the Danish newspaper cartoon scandal depicting the prophet Mohammad, one panelist at a roundtable on humor concluded that it is not so much the failure of humor that has explanatory power, but the attacks on humor that signify the politics of the moment. As one panelist concluded:

> To believe in the effectiveness of humor in politics means to believe that humor can inform, educate, unite – ultimately, it is to take the position of humor haters that humor can only be exonerated if it contains a serious message. (Lewis et al. 2008: 27)

Critics and scholars who examine comedic failure also tend to select stories that have gone viral or been remediated by conventional media, affirming the notion that popular taste via circulation is a sign of democratic authenticity. Finally, I think this tendency to go with popular segments derived from popular comedy (like *TDS* and less, as we shall see, *TCR*) is a symptom of a wish to find a democratic public that is outraged over the events of the past decade. Political comedy is the new Lenin, a vanguard movement to wrestle rationality and sincerity back from entertainment, capital and political corruption.[4] It does none of this, and that is not its intention. This is what I call the cultural set up of comedy.

Earlier theories about humor have isolated the laughing person or joke-teller as individuals and attempted to find the causal mechanisms at play in the funny business, as if to distill it down into a formula that could be applied by any performer to make an identical impact on each singular member of one's audience. Each attempt to explain the typologies of humor that elicit laughter have largely ignored the cultural context in which the episodes take place, with a number of recent exceptions (Gournelos & Greene 2011; Lewis 2006; Shouse 2007). There are two aspects to this environment: one, the play of power in the cultural scripts presented to the audience; and two, the context, which is the staged scene before the crowd and their interlocutor. The final assumption is that comedy is nearly always therapeutic in some way; that relief is brought about through laughter at a good joke

or physical comedy sketch. At the very least, we could agree with Kant that the laughter inspired by effective humor is healthy if only because it massages the inner organs (Morreall 2009: 14). By extension, political comedy remains very often un-interrogated for the way it brings into contention the often unstated implications of media messages. The flip side to comedy is not earnestness, rationalism or serious debate; it is imagination, construction, dialogue and resolution. Earnestness is a tone-deaf mode of communication in an era when being entertained is often the only thing left between competing political narratives.

As an example, the next section goes through a reading of Bernie Goldberg's response to an earlier skit by Jon Stewart on *TDS*. It begins with a common clip remediating strategy used by *TDS* and then moves on to a theatrical finish. The clip is here to showcase how *TDS* in particular, and political comedy in general, has recently marketed itself with a peculiar non-confrontational (that is, asocial) style. What is important about this development is that it is markedly generational in tone, and its content is directed at middle-class political and economic issues, particularly as they affect college-age youth. These two aspects are the result of decades of political transformations that, accompanied by economic and technological shifts, have altered our ways of seeing political 'community.' Among the themes examined following the *TDS* example below are: the era of 'dark times,' a reference to the last decade of political, economic and social decline that proceeded with little 'outrage'; the importance of the revolution in digital media, that allows audiences to view remediated clips of performances and news coverage in a variety of contexts, often without meaningful explanation or public discussion; and the counterpublics, said to have been created to respond to the failure of mainstream journalism to make sense of the diversity of political opinion showcased by digital media. In addition, my contribution to the existing literature on political comedy is to theorize how youth are mobilized in political discourses, the theories of political comedy most commonly deployed in these discourses, and the role of affect on political subjectivity in the contemporary era. Finally, the last section will look at the role of hegemonic media – that is, media that presents itself as 'offending no one' – in contrast to the cable networks and niche markets of counterpublics. First, it is instructive to look at Generation X squaring off with the baby boom.

A satirical example: 'Bernie Goldberg Fires Back' – clips from Fox News

As an example of the kind of Gen X comedy intervention, whose tone and style has a critical edge, it's best to look at *The Daily Show*. In one remarkable segment, Stewart addresses Bernie Goldberg, a commentator on Fox News. Goldberg appears on *The O'Reilly Factor* to dress Stewart down for having criticized him weeks earlier, even having told him [Goldberg] to 'Go fuck yourself' (bleeped out, of course, on Comedy Central, a network that does not ascribe to voluntary journalistic standards). In the earlier appearance, Goldberg had insinuated that Stewart was racist. In this second appearance, to which Stewart is responding, Goldberg issues a mea culpa on the racism charge, but he has a new message for Stewart, one that entices Stewart to get to the root of his television identity: 'If you just wanna be a funny

man who talks to an audience who will laugh at anything you say, that's okay with me, no problem. But, if, clearly you want to be a social commentator more than just a comedian, and if you wanna be a good one, you better find some guts [crowd 'oohs']'. Stewart's response: 'Okay, two things. One, not all of us have your guts, Bernie. It takes a tough man to walk into O'Reilly's lion's den and criticize liberal elites', he continues:

> And two, to say that comedians have to choose whether they're comedians or social commentators, *uh*, comedians do social commentary through comedy. That's how it's worked for thousands of years. I have not moved outside of the comedian's box, into the news box. The news box is moving towards me. I'm just doin' [applause] I'm just doin' what idiots like me have done for thousands of years. But, I assume that you have evidence that I've betrayed my craft.

It goes to a clip playing in the news box and Goldberg continues: 'When you have Frank Rich on your show, who generalizes all the time about Republicans and conservatives as being bigots, you didn't ask a single tough question. You gave him a lap dance. You practically had your tongue down his throat'. Stewart arches his back, cocks his head, with a quizzical look on his face, exaggerated for laughter. He looks around, and says, 'Guilty as charged!' in a high-pitched voice, waving his hand.

> Was that televised? Uh, I don't want to say anything but Frank Rich hasn't come to the show since 2006, [laughs] I mean since I gave Frank Rich that lap dance, I don't know if you noticed but I went back in the champagne room with Bill Kristol like *five* times. And if you watch this show, as it appears you have, you would have seen me and McCain fucking like bunnies [again, the bleep serves as emphasis]. But, I guess that's besides the point. Here's the point: You can't criticize me for not being fair and balanced. That's *your* slogan! Which, by the way, you never follow [hands pointed down at the desk to emphasize each word, pencil wedged between his fingers] Which brings us back to the essence of the whole 'Go fuck yourself' piece.

The shot shifts back to Goldberg's final remarks, 'Guess what? You're not nearly as edgy as you think you are, you're just a safe Jay Leno with a much smaller audience, but you get to say the F-bomb'. Stewart replies, 'Okay, that's gonna leave a mark, yeah that one stung, I'm not gonna lie on that one, I took that one right in the testicles. That was…'. (All this is clearly sarcastic, pretending he can't breathe, etc.) He quickly switches back to confidence:

> Look, here's the thing: whoever said I was 'edgy?' I never said I was 'edgy.' I never thought I was edgy. And number two: if you think I'm Leno with the F-bomb, you know less about comedy than you do about media and politics. This is Leno with the F-bomb [A clip of Leno doing his misspelled words in the newspaper routine shows him rattling off no less than 12 F-bombs, bleeped out, in exasperation].

Stewart responds, 'I guess that's why prime time couldn't handle him'. He then refers back to Goldberg's original clip, replaying the Leno slam and allowing the tape to continue, 'which gives your incredibly unsophisticated audience the illusion, the illusion [O'Reilly laughs uncomfortably, and says 'you're generalizing'] that you're courageous and that you're a renegade, but it's only an illusion'. Stewart pops up:

> Wait, wait! I'm not a courageous renegade? [fake emotion, high toned voice as if on the verge of tears] But I've always considered myself [pause] the Lorenzo Lamas of late night [aristocratic tone, Montgomery Burns fingers on chin imitation, picture of Lorenzo Lamas as Renegade, no shirt, leather vest]. And as far as my audience being considered unsophisticated…

There is an interruption from the audience, 'Balderdash!' Stewart says, 'Wait, who's that?' and the camera pans to a Monopoly board monocle-clad man with a cup of tea and a cigarette holder, wearing a tuxedo and sitting in the audience: 'It is I, your biggest fan, Toppington Von Monocle. Unsophisticated, how dare he? If I may quote Catullus, "*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*"'. Stewart: 'Mr. Von Monocle, I'm sorry I don't speak Latin'. He responds, 'It means 'I will sodomize you and face-fuck you [he lifts his hip and let's a long, loud sound system fart]'. After the laughter dies down, Stewart then addresses the camera and becomes serious:

> I know that I criticize you and Fox News a lot, but only because you're a truly terrible, cynical disingenuous news organization. Oh, wait, you know what? No, that's the wrong approach! [hands sweeping off 'no' in front of him as crowd cheers]. That's the wrong approach! [crossing his arms in front of him to signal 'no more'] That's not…I'm not gonna do this, I won't be confrontational. Let me take a moment to speak directly to Bernie Goldberg.

He turns in his seat, facing a new camera.

Theatrical response: Non-confrontation

Here, Stewart stages a theatrical response to Goldberg's claim that he is a fraud. Moving over to the next stage, and asking for the ever-ready for direct statement 'Camera 3', he begins his routine as the lights dim in the studio. Behind him appear choral singers in blue robes; music begins. Stewart waves his hands as he tries to step into the already begun choral refrain:

> Bernie Goldberg, I don't need to satisfy your version [Chorus refrain: 'He's got a point, now. He's got a point, now'] of what fair satire *is* or *should be*. I'm not fair. I'm not balanced [an individual in the chorus shouts out: 'He's unstable!']. That's not what I meant [Again the individual shouts: 'He's Coco Loco!']. Thank you. You're criticizing me for not living up to *your* tag line! Oooh, Lawd, and you dismiss any criticism as

further evidence of how the rest of the media criticize you, you like to pretend, Bernie Goldberg [and Fox News, under breath], [sassily sashays hips] that the relentless conservative activism of Fox News is the equivalent, ooooh, the equi*valent* of the disorganized liberal influence you find on MSNBC, NBC and CBS, but Fox News, you may be able to detect a liberal pathogen in their blood stream, however faint, but Fox News is such a crazy overreaction to that perceived threat [hands up in scary pose]. You're like an autoimmune disorder. I'm not sayin' the virus doesn't exist in some small quantity, but you're producing way too many anti-bodies….Fox News [piano: *glissandro*] you're the Lupus of news [music and singing stops, silence]. So, I guess, I guess what I'm sayin' is this [Chorus 'Goooo!'] As long as fair and balanced is how you sell yourselves [Chorus: 'Fuuck!' (bleeped out)], I guess what I'm sayin' is this [points to Chorus: 'Yourselves!']. [Music starts up, chorus and audience clap in unison, Stewart begins dancing and clapping singing out loud 'Go fuck yourselves!' over and over again to the beat of the rhythmic clapping]. (*TDS* 2010)

Witty, entertaining, historically accurate and deconstructive, Stewart has just used a parody of a religious sermon to criticize Fox News (and Bernie Goldberg). Sermons were originally seen as 'earnest' speech when compared to the satire people could consume instead, which is what makes the juxtaposition so funny. For the viewer, catharsis. If Stewart, or anyone, had just relayed this analysis of Fox News' ideological slant in a sober tone without comedic effects (hands swaying, dancing, music, intonation, etc.) they might have received a wry smile from the pompous Charlie Rose sitting across the table, because that's the only spot they'd get on television. Like John Dewey once said, 'Comedy is as genuine as tragedy'. Political comedy is, more often than not, the underscoring of the irony of political actors' positions, and is characterized by the widespread incongruities in meaning and intent often produced by free market liberalism. It mobilizes an indirect form of criticism, refusing earnestness on principle. As Stewart says in his performance to Bernie Goldberg, 'I'm not gonna do this […]. I won't be confrontational', meaning it would betray his signature style and lend credibility to the entire Goldberg narrative and Fox News constellation of meaning and affect. This refusal is absolutely necessary because it reinforces his oft-stated claim that he does not participate in the journalism craft or the world of politics as it stands. Attempts by Bernie Goldberg, Tucker Carlson and others have failed to bring Stewart 'out' of the journalism closet where he remains. This tone is an important critique of the establishment news and politics, and it allows Stewart to remain unabsorbed into the hegemonic media's frame of reference.

'Dark times'

Even though we are some thirty years past the debut of political entertainment, some critics rail against 'infotainment' – the merging of information and entertainment and soft news – while others see this gradual merging of facts and human interest as an opportunity for

community leaders to orchestrate action against oppressive forces in the media, particularly among groups with low political knowledge or casual interest in politics. Low political knowledge is not a disparaging phrase; it is meant to convey that more and more people do not have time to stay informed about politics as they work ever more hours for less and less pay and benefits (Reynolds & Webber 2003). The last thing someone who works all day wants to do is scour a newspaper to find out how much control Rupert Murdoch has (or now, 'had') over their individual lives through media manipulation. Political comedy is entertaining, but it is also a way of mediating the deadly serious. While the media and political culture have clearly moved to the right of center (perhaps too far to return), they continue to insist they are in the middle and provide 'balance,' which is equated with fairness or equality of opinion. The conditions for preserving the old paradigms of media have long ceased to exist, but news workers continue to pretend that nothing has changed. For critics of the MSM (mainstream media) it is the only way to respond to 'officialdom' or, as Bassem Youssef describes it in Egypt, 'the professional strategist' (Warner 2007; see Chapter 5 of this book). Many see it as a way to respond to news in 'dark times,' a reference to Hannah Arendt's examination of Bertolt Brecht's poem about a time with little sense of 'outrage' about injustice, duplicity in public figures and doublespeak from governmental authorities (Greene 1997). It has been seen as even more urgent to have a critical, or at least balanced, press during the past decade because of the spectacular events that have taken place: global terrorism (9/11, the bombings in Bali, the 2004 Madrid Cercanías attacks, the 7 July 2005 London bombings); the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; escalating natural disasters and human accidents (2004 tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, Haiti, European flooding, earthquakes in South America and Asia, the Gulf Oil spill and Tokyo reactor explosion); the selling off of government organizations and with it democratic accountability, blowing off objective standards and dispensing with legal protections for individuals working in them; and finally, market collapse, the response to which was to save corporations, whose malfeasance caused the crashes, with little oversight to replace them. The lack of outrage to all of these events has been noted by the media and comedians. Critical commentators have also noted what they perceive to be violent and fascist solutions to such problems ordinary people faced during the downsized decade, from lone wolf school shooters to Tea Party politics. An important trend that has been noted repeatedly by critical media has been that a massive transfer of wealth has taken place in the United States in the past two decades. This wealth transfer has been from the bottom to the top where only a few (the famed 1 per cent) control most of the wealth, as the futures of the many (99 per cent) increasingly look bleak, as their incomes and benefits have shrunk over the last two to three decades. The frustration from this oft-repeated injustice culminated in the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, where protesters believed that speculative investments by large banks resulted in financial meltdowns in US markets, which were then responsible for the growing gap between the rich and poor in the United States. Siding with consolidated interests, the US government has, in the minds of these protesters, ceased to represent the many in the interests of protecting the wealthy few. Since this book will take as its object the political strategies of the progressive Left to address

looming disparities and government failure through political humor, I will use the poster economist for this position, Paul Krugman, to advance the thesis that will structure many interpretations about the cultural set ups for comedy examined in this book. Krugman has long advocated government regulation of the economy, rather than simple bailouts for corporations. For over a decade, he has been the only vocal economist that is unabashedly progressive in his economic views. As Krugman and Wells write:

> America emerged from the Great Depression and the Second World War with a much more equal distribution of income than it had in the 1920s; our society became middle-class in a way it hadn't been before. This new, more equal society persisted for 30 years. But then we began pulling apart, with huge income gains for those with already high incomes. As the Congressional Budget Office has documented, the 1 percent – the group implicitly singled out in the slogan 'We are the 99 percent' – saw its real income nearly quadruple between 1979 and 2007, dwarfing the very modest gains of ordinary Americans. Other evidence shows that within the 1 percent, the richest 0.1 percent and the richest 0.01 percent saw even larger gains. (Krugman & Wells 2011)

This framing of the fall of the American middle class is centered on important economic explanations for middle class failure. The public knowledge of this fact is well known, and it is made painfully obvious in the humorous documentary films of Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, as well as being defended by self-confident Sean Hannity and Ann Coulter on the right. However, the average American, especially the younger American, witnesses another trend alongside this growing income equality: that the path to wealth and success is less about taking the meritorious route through developmental learning and professional training that liberals are always trying to sell them, and inheres more closely to the new patrimonialism identified by sociologist Richard Lachmann. As an aspect of feudalism, patrimonialism was described by Max Weber as a way for elites to make claims against rivals for access to dynastic goods. It is said to have dissolved when feudalism transformed into capitalism during the building of the modern nation state; kinship relations were no longer necessary to determine power and authority as capital and property (and taxation) remitted through state bureaucracy would become the sole means of determining hierarchies. However, Lachmann argues that patrimonialism is making an *ideological* comeback, and it is 'sustained or regenerated within bureaucratic and capitalist polities and firms' (Lachmann 2011: 207). Today, he argues, it is still around in many nation states, such as oil-producing countries with nationalization of that industry; oil money investment states and other socialist states like Libya, North Korea and Cuba; and the final state: the United States. Patrimonialism survives in most states or resurfaces in others where economic autarky is present, whether in the form of the nationalization of an industry, the concentration of wealth in financing an industry or in quasi-socialist states with centralized party control over resources or dictatorships. Lachmann points out that the nepotistic election of G.W. Bush in 2001 was in large part due to the ideological support he provided for abolishing

the inheritance tax, a bill passed in 2001 with bipartisan support. What we now have is a situation where elites agree on one particular thing: reducing taxes on the wealthy. This doesn't make much sense if we think about the spiraling downward of the middle class, the fact that reducing taxes on the wealthy has not led to job creation, and the fact that spending on social programs (so-called 'entitlements') and the military have remained the same or declined since the 1980s. What has changed? Lachmann argues that the previous competition that existed between elites in banking, finance and industry has now eroded. He notes the reform acts (we mentioned earlier from the 1990s, banking and telecommunications) which led to increasing mergers among these former competitors; now there is no opposed interests among elites but rather 'consolidated interests.' Such interests include reducing the payroll tax on the wealthy and clearing the way for the re-feudalization of the country. For some this may appear nonsensical since American folklore has always maintained that one of the key aspects that distinguished the US from Europe was its lack of feudal structure. Yet it has always had nepotism, even while it may have reserved a few spaces for those who, in Guy's understanding, 'work, really, really hard'. Lachmann's depiction of contemporary nepotism is intriguing and can be found nearly everywhere one looks.

His description of the nepotism in the US comes from Adam Bellow's book on nepotism, *In Praise of Nepotism*, itself an example of the social feeling it examines: the new nepotism is justified based on a reversal of entitlement, and must demonstrate that children work hard to earn their parents' wealth by carrying on their management traditions. As he quotes Bellow, the 'new nepotism' is 'the transformation of an ancient practice into a new and more acceptable form, one that can satisfy the permanent human impulses involved in nepotism without violating the American social compact' (Lachmann 2011: 218). He lists *Forbes*'s and *Fortune*'s 'wealthiest' lists as examples of a 'crude' journalism that demonstrates the peculiar kind of nepotism Bellow describes, in which clearly intergenerational inheritance is masked – wealthy CEO progeny are described as having worked to build the fortunes they inherit alongside their parents, or their corporations are rebranded as new entities, masking the fact they are built from inherited wealth. The two main ways this nepotism works are through hereditary wealth and office-holding, which, he argues, have been revived in the last 50 years. Alongside the examples of the inheritance tax and the operations of the new nepotism, his reading challenges us to think of the ubiquity of what he calls 'wealth porn' in the media, which include the *Forbes* and *Fortune* lists, as well as the general trend of celebrity worship, where people live through the daily ministrations of iconic media figures – usually actors, singers and sports stars – following their Twitter feeds, consuming minor details about their lives, likes and loves on entertainment websites, establishing 'connections' with them by buying their brands: all this, one thinks, in the hope of patronizing them at a distance. Political entertainment mediates our relationships to consumer objects and the wealthy subjects who peddle them. Of course this branding is not a new phenomenon in American culture; it has been interpellating viewers as consumers since at least the 1980s with the worship of rock music performers' 'lifestyles' through MTV. 'Interpellation' is a term coined by Louis Althusser to describe an ideological process where we (so-called 'individuals') are

'hailed forth as subjects' to some form of power that holds psychic and/or class-based sway over us. As subjects, we are literally 'subject to' a form of power we cannot extricate ourselves from through critical thought or agency. It is related, but not identical, to the way Jeffrey Sconce describes a central feature of 'smart films' that we will see have migrated over into political comedy as a way of being in popular culture and life. Sconce identifies the 'thematic interest in random fate' in such films, or, more properly, the central belief that we, as humans, are 'fucked by fate' (Sconce 2006: 435). We who watch are subjected to those who perform, with little or no agency to disrupt the performance. For example, we now believe that talent is genetic; not something anyone can cultivate, but something those who've inherited it can develop. What is new is our growing awareness of it alongside our collective decision that we are impotent to change it. We now believe we are impotent because this is the way it has always been. All that we get in return is the acknowledgement that we are being addressed by the powerful.[5] Textually speaking, we have lost an entire generation. This is a cultural problem and a generational one; rather, we could say that media has enabled and even created a cultural and generational response to what are properly economic and political shifts in wealth and political authority. As the middle class has pulled apart over the past two decades (and even further accelerated during the last decade by the Bush administration's policies), an abyss has appeared between two generations (Ortner 1998). As the media discourse says, the rich get richer and the (lower-) middle class drops into poverty. Even more interesting than what has happened at the top of the pulling apart of the social fabric is how it has made the bottom accept this fate. The decline of the middle class is not just a story about its economic depravity. It is also about its ideological adaptations to it and a moral absenteeism from political criticism. Middle class norms and political humor will be examined more closely in Chapter 4, where I discuss *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* as examples of middle-class moral criticism through strategies of 'incongruous uplift.' Why is Jon Stewart the only one who can say what we are all thinking? Or Sacha Baron Cohen in *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012), who in a parody of Gaddafi addresses Americans in this way:

> Why are you guys so anti-dictators? Imagine if America was a dictatorship. You could let 1 per cent of the people have all the nation's wealth. You could help your rich friends get richer by cutting their taxes and bailing them out when they gamble and lose. You could ignore the needs of the poor for health care and education. Your media would appear free, but would secretly be controlled by one person and his family. You could wiretap phones. You could torture foreign prisoners. You could have rigged elections. You could lie about why you go to war. You could fill your prisons with one particular racial group and no one would complain. You could use the media to scare the people into supporting policies that are against their interests. (Rea 2012)

Baron Cohen's monologue points to the 'consolidated interests' mentioned by Lachmann, who, in the absence of a check on their power, can dictate any policy to suit the needs of the wealthy classes' interests. In all this, more and more people are disenfranchised and turn to

entertainment as the sole source of identification and therapy, especially younger generations, who face a future with declining job prospects and withdrawal of governmental assistance. For those without a college education, the news is stark, as it means negotiating a hostile marketplace with few skills and little knowledge about how to do it.

Studies have shown that the only significant effect soft news or political comedy has had is with just such groups; those who possess four years of college or more may consume more political comedy but it produces negligible effect on their knowledge (Cao 2008: 59). These groups have been and will be growing in number as we witness the cumulative effects of economic recession and ten long years of No Child Left Behind, a federal policy designed to improve public education that paradoxically served to disenfranchise more young Americans than *any* public policy in the last 30 years. Some might call it the 'anti-GI bill,' since it has blocked the route of working-class Americans to college by de-funding K-12 public education for failing to meet certain standards, without assessing those standards or noticing that funding is directly correlated to goal achievement. Thus, as studies connect low political knowledge (which is also low historical, cultural and procedural/legal knowledge) to the impact of political entertainment, we can conclude that parodic news shows and satiric comedy, when targeted to the right range of existing knowledge, may yield progressive effects. While such studies provide valuable information about who is consuming political comedy, they say very little about how the landscape itself has been transformed by the way we discuss 'politics' in such forums, and the role political comedy serves in challenging this landscape. Very few students of politics, whether in the formal study of political science or the normative areas of political theory, have had much to say about it, preferring to leave that analysis to the formal study of communication. Important voices, such as Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones, teach us about how the field of communications has been transformed by such shows, even to the point of historicizing them in terms of their import as 'epistemic warrants', which are a kind of license for certain speakers – '(the presumption that what one says is true), to certain kinds of people and not others' – they rarely refer to, or overlap with, the changing identities of American parties and studies of ideology in these contexts (Baym qtd. in Baumgartner & Morris 2008: 25). Furthermore, we should point out that, '[W]hat's needed are ways of thinking about the new media environment which do not unreflectively adopt (or reject) the values of the collapsed Age of Broadcast News' (Williams & Carpini 2011: 185). In other words, Walter Cronkite, a product of a specific political and economic environment, cannot be produced today. He was, as Aaron McKain puts it, the 'mediating layer' through which our information came to feel real. Though we may celebrate *TDS* and *TCR*, or comedians who incorporate politics into their acts, as moral criticism, we may be unwittingly doing so as a form of nostalgia. This might be allowing us to forget that we need to rethink our political and cultural scripts in more forward-looking and imaginative ways, with an eye more on a realistic assessment of the present and how it can be shaped into a future we actually desire, rather than a past we never experienced. Indeed, how can we understand the political comedy of *TDS* without understanding the ideology and affective strategies of the GOP (Grand Old Party) or conservative media? The most *TDS* can do is point out omissions, inconsistencies in

positions (the infamous clip-mining made possible by the Internet, or as Stewart deceptively puts it, 'a video tape machine and a timer') or parody figures from the Fox News simulacrum (Glenn Beck). It can remind viewers with political knowledge of the ethical problems right-wing news presents, or reveal to those with low political knowledge or interest a person of corrupt character, but it cannot go further and explain the ideologies of those characters and their long-term effects without creating its own political curriculum, and that entails setting up the audience to understand the joke. It means schooling them in some way. In Chapter 4, I also examine how *TDS* uses cultural scripts to set up its comedy, and assess whether or not they are capable of truly challenging the public's mindset – in a word, if they are critical or conservative. By conservative, I mean do they simply hold at bay what some perceive to be the gradual decline of American rationality, of the social compact, of the ability to discern a challenge to one's own interests in public and corporate policies – in a word, the ability to be critical?

Part of the problem with addressing a public who lack critical skills, or the ability to define their interests or recognize basic unfairness and ethical violations, is that a performer or journalist must construct a narrative out of contemporary media memes, ones that are oftentimes irrational, lack validity and further muddle the lesson that is learned. One such meme is political correctness (PC). This meme is transferred vertically and horizontally. It is transferred between generations (from X to Y, and so on), while its meaning mutates to conform to new social and political realities. What stays central about this meme is that to deploy it in debate or conversation in the US automatically forces one's interlocutor to concede the argument. Politically-correct 'speech' especially, but also complicated or painful histories of people and ideas, come under this heading. PC is used to stop someone from defending themselves, usually those holding a minority view. As an example, the 'political correctness gone mad' type of humor does more work in this area than many others. As one commentator wrote, it is 'tired' and indeed it blocks any consideration of the importance of the cultural context of a humorous set up. This is covered in the use of the 'F' word in Chapter 2. Political correctness, a term whose utterance conveys the emotional anxiety and certainty that social expression in a diverse culture is censored in the service of a totalitarian ideology or liberal political project, is often invoked when real discursive threats of racial and sexual discrimination are deployed. Here it is important to underscore that memes are contextual. For many who identify as Generation Y, PC means having access to media closed by government regulation. The most important pieces of legislation for them have been SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act, 2011) and CISPA (Cyber Intelligence Sharing Protection Act, 2012). Both aim to regulate use of the Internet and redefine the relationship between information providers and consumers. Another interesting connection between PC and media memes is when it is identified with jealousy, or being a 'hater.' If one succeeds in American culture, it is inappropriate to ever say or write anything negative about them, even if their behavior or work is mediocre, elitist and fake. This is because American liberalism works on the assumption that we are not, as Mitch Daniels said, a nation of 'haves' and have-nots,' but a nation of 'haves' and 'soon to be haves.' Criticizing someone who has 'made it' is like criticizing oneself because it is impossible to separate the two: as John Steinbeck once said, 'Socialism never

took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires'.[6]

Digital media

Media presentation has changed drastically in the past 15 years with the increasing role of digital media technologies. News media can now splice images and clips to serve their own purposes and defend specious arguments. Politicians are now more than ever subject to the constant surveillance of the public through cell phones, digital recording, satellite imaging and other forms of monitoring, and they are aware of it. Hence, the increasingly constructed images of politicians packaged for public consumption and the weirdly fake outrage by audiences when the artifice is revealed. Whole careers are made out of finding and posting 'information' on websites and blogs about politicians and policies without the institutional support of network media. Digital media are ripe for a kind of infotainment sabotage we will call 'insinuation' for the remainder of the book. This is a key term and I borrow it from Craig Saper's discussion of 'scandalography' which:

> […] depends on the use of anecdotes, recipes and clichés. It follows the play of insinuation rather than supposed desire to unmask truth under the image. It tracks the train of insinuated and insinuating associations, without reference to chronology, factual evidence, or any separation of text and paratext […]. (Saper 1991: 97)

Examples of such media include blogs like Perez Hilton's, an example of the blending of entertainment and politics, whose audience is primarily 18–24-year-olds. Another recent digital media performer is Andrew Breitbart, responsible for using editing techniques and video splicing in the most recent downfall via scandalography of Anthony Weiner, Shirley Sherrod and ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now). A former *Drudge Report* associate, Breitbart was often dismissed as unintelligent or purposefully intent on confusing his audience with misinformation, but it really looks more like scandalography through digital media. Because digital media can be reposted without disturbing its function and without evidence of its origins, it is easily moved from one place to another on the web with little controversy. Information can appear and disappear on sites, and headlines are constantly changed and swapped out within hours, changing the implied meaning of an article and its importance to different users. Important in this respect is its modularity. David Gurney has surmised that viral comedy is especially given to recombination (especially given that comedy in general is recombinant, especially sketch comedy). One reason it works so well digitally is because of its modularity, which:

> […] describes how digital media objects tend to be built of parts that, though perhaps intended to act in concert, can often be removed or changed without destroying the entire

object. Take for instance, a YouTube video page on which the HTML code need not fall apart if one JPEG or Flash video file doesn't load. The modular nature of such objects makes them easy to move around and reconfigure […]. (Gurney 2011: 8)

This is because comedy itself is modular. Pointing out examples where the wordplay structure 'Who's on first?' passes into use in several different comedic contexts, Gurney shows how the module could be 'plugged into different settings.' This is one way that comedic viral video is 'intertextual' (it becomes more meaningful the more layers of intelligibility it has, and sometimes even more humorous) and it is easily 'remediated' from one site to another. The modularity of digital media allows remediation to occur in a more self-conscious way, and its effect is to construct for the viewer a specific way to interpret the event in question. While many have cited the paradigmatic essay on remediation by Aaron McKain, one senses that its original insights have been lost with the term's proliferation in media and texts. Remediation is not just when clips from so-called official news or fake news are framed by another media discourse. It is when this framing demonstrates the constructedness of 'official' news, or when it frames the news in such a way as to bestow upon it a kind of authenticity or place it into a genre. Most importantly, one must understand how the remediation either lends a modular clip its aura or strips it away. For example, much of what Breitbart did constituted remediation in the sense that he could take what McKain calls 'news' (small n, unofficial, unverified, speculative, rumored) and place it into a context where it appeared as 'News' (large N, official, verified, confirmed, known) for a certain period of time, in order to convince a segment of the news and blogger community to pick it up as 'News' and spread it. Even though it may not even be 'true,' the 'news' that turned into 'News' created a tsunami effect, where actors and policies featured in it are forced to respond. In this way, hunches can become news stories even when they lack verification (as did Anthony Weiner's sexting scandal). Yet there are other kinds of remediation, as when *TDS* remediates clips from the 'News' and demonstrates their constructedness, lack of verification and specious relationship to truth. As examples, McKain describes the way the fake reporter segments on *TDS* demonstrate not only how inauthentic or 'fake' news is when coming from a reporter standing in a bombed-out shelter in Ramallah, as it is when the fake reporter stands in front of a green screen with images projecting the 'real' Ramallah. But there isn't a one-way correspondence between fake and real placement of sources. The veracity of news is dependent upon the context in which the news source appears at that moment, as he notes that after 9/11, people could just as easily have dismissed actual news anchor Katie Couric reporting on 9/11 from a studio while speaking to Al Roker, an entertaining weatherman situated at Ground Zero, by saying, 'Why am I listening to her?' (McKain 2005: 418). For now, it is important enough to note that remediation is more than simply indexing clips as sources of news; the person telling the story and their placement in the fantasy structure of the audience matters most. We will examine this more in detail in Chapter 4, when we look at remediations of *TDS* clips and the authority of Jon Stewart as a news source.

As the landscape has changed, political comedy like *TDS* and *The Colbert Report* allow like-minded individuals to feel less isolated in dark times. They can form a counterpublic as a response to the lack of outrage that characterizes the period. As Amber Day writes:

> New technologies are enabling average citizens, professional entertainers, and political activists to respond to the political discourse around them, not necessarily to malign the political process or impugn the dignity of particular political actors, but often to make forceful political claims and to advocate action in the search for solutions to real problems […]. (Day 2011: 42)

We will discuss more this in Chapters 4 and 5, where we engage the politics of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as examine their extension into international form with spin-off shows like *Parazit* (USA/Iran), *Al Bernameg* (Egypt), and the failed *Alhurra*.

Counterpublics thesis

Over a long period of time, scholars of various stripes have contended with the rational public thesis presented by Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). The rational public thesis is the corollary to the assumptions made about our broadcast era: that people began to converse with one another using reasoned language in public in order to form arguments that presented a challenge to bourgeois authority, the so-called 'fourth estate.' In doing so, the public sphere that developed in Europe eventually became a bourgeois culture of consumption, where knowledge was ineffective; in fact, the public sphere comes to represent the public's 'consent' to ruling authority, and therefore the ruling order no longer has to function through coercion, but now operates through hegemony. As the blurring occurred between reporting and consuming, 'The sentimentality toward persons and corresponding cynicism toward institutions which with social psychological inevitability result naturally curtail the subjective capacity for rational criticism of public authority, even where it might objectively still be possible' (Habermas 1989: 172). Two main theses have emerged about irony and satire in the cultural studies literature. One argues that political comedy, especially alternative forms of it on the left, creates counterpublics that respond to and build community around opposition to 'offending policies' (Day 2011: 13). The second characterizes political comedy as a Bakhtinian carnival, where power is upended in favor of the downtrodden, at least temporarily, creating a possible space for the examination of alternatives. Let's examine each of these as they apply to the American politics in the past decade.

First, as already mentioned, Amber Day's book *Satire and Dissent* (2011), which lays out an argument for the effectiveness of political comedy at amplifying political participation, presents a counterpublics thesis. Day contends: 'As modes, parody, irony and satire, offer a particularly attractive method of political communication at this moment'

(Day 2011: 3). Day analyzes three main forms of political comedy: parodic news shows; satiric documentaries; and ironic activist groups. Her main focus is to see how they create counterpublics in contradistinction to the one-way channel of communication forged by network news and media. These counterpublics, and the means they use to communicate among themselves – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook sharing, and so on – allow publics to alter the political landscape, and shift the debate in ever-so-subtle ways to change the topic of discussion. In using the counterpublics thesis, Day makes several assumptions about public debate that depart from traditional democratic analysis. First, she clearly agrees with Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner that the publics created by rational discourse in the salons and coffee houses of eighteenth-century Europe were not representative of many people, such as women and other excluded groups. This critique begins with Fraser (1990) and finds a new interpretation by Warner in 2001, where his analysis carries the critique further to argue that discourses are not always expressed by certain kinds of people, but also circulate in texts to create new counterpublics. Similar insights have been provided by Nikolas Rose (1996; 2006), although he views the creation of such publics as the 'end of the social', where people are now governed by the mentalities forged in online and other discursive communities, that come to replace our previous social with 'community.' While Rose might agree with Day that people can belong to many such counterpublics at the same time, he does not view this as empowerment. Instead, he sees this duplication of commitment as a weakening of political agency, even a reinforcing of the effect of dominant narratives on subjectivity. As Day sees it, basing one's analysis of the effect of parody, satire and irony on the counterpublics thesis allows her to view their political effect as 'unified opposition to offending policies' (Day 2011: 13). No doubt, she places her historical focus on the years of the Bush administration, as she argues the doublespeak and lack of transparency during this time created conditions ripe for political comedy of all forms. She carries her analysis into the Obama era, citing Joan Didion's critique of the Administration for its continued lack of transparency and basic adherence to Bush-era policies. It seems the usefulness of comedy exceeds the dark times of the Bush administration, and extends far beyond the polarizing effects of the Republican Party. This is because the political environment youth currently face is determined largely by transnational forces beyond the control of immediate national governments – natural disasters spurred by global climate change; an eroded job market caused by the flight of jobs and lack of new industry to replace them; the Arab Spring in the Middle East – and as a series of unfolding democratic revolutions, the US government must respond to it with caution in order to maintain the legitimacy of its stated foreign policy goals, and corporate consumerist culture that regurgitates outdated scripts with new actors and presents them as 'originals.' Yet, Day's thesis only works if the dark times are confined to the Bush administration. Furthermore, the thesis no longer holds in the wake of the Obama Administration's decisions to uphold much of the Bush-era legacies. Thus, if there is a counterpublic created by political comedy, it is not a community that converses and debates with itself, so, therefore, it is not really a public. Also, if this counterpublic does exist, it is formed through affect, sustained with common textual strategies, stylizations and images that Day fails to examine very closely.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, the counterpublic created by *TDS* is episodic and progressive, but it has no outlet in public policy. Indeed, the many examples she uses for the counterpublics thesis surround the viral videos sent out in support of Obama during the 2008 election cycle; that is, they are mobilized for a single event – the youth vote.

Second, Day departs from traditional analysis of satire. In an analysis of Hutcheon (1985) and Bloom and Bloom (1979), who argue that satire is conservative in the sense that it is a form of public ridicule that serves to reinforce and affirm existing political norms and institutions, Day finds disagreement on two fronts. The first is that both make ahistorical interpretations, assuming the eighteenth-century uses of satire can be applied elsewhere in history. Their argument is that satire bred apathy because it was consumed in parallel and contrary fashion to the religio-political sermon, a form that was known to inspire activism, and thus it was consumed as leisurely entertainment (e.g. rather than going to church and being inspired to change the world, one watched/read satire in order to feel content doing nothing). Recall our earlier recap of Stewart responding to Fox News/Bernie Goldberg with a parody of a sermon. Day argues that these analyses assume a one-to-one causal relationship between the satiric act and the public outrage that should follow in the form of direct action or political opposition. Day argues, instead, that such satire can breed affirmation and reinforcement of oppositional views that can assume a community-building function: the communities that are built through consumption of parodic news function like Warner's counterpublics. This second critique then revolves around Hutcheon's assumption that irony is unstable. Writing about readers of *The New Yorker*, and their concern that people seeing it on newsstand might not 'get' the humor, she writes:

> Though the letter writers professed to 'getting' the joke, many expressed worry that others would not, betraying unease over what Linda Hutcheon refers to as irony's 'instability,' or the necessity of meaning making in two directions – from both author and audience – which inherently contains a possibility of misfire. Such is the danger of any form of satire or irony, particularly during something like a high-tension election, but I would argue that, in our era of niche media, we are becoming more accustomed to the form of earnest irony (evidenced in viral videos) that is targeted at a clearly demarcated audience, and so are less comfortable (as far as the political is concerned) with the type that is more potentially open to interpretation. What the viral videos succeeded in doing, and what the *New Yorker* cartoon was seen to have missed, was hailing their audience as member of a shared community, creating the pleasure of recognition, affirmation, and the empowering feeling of strength in numbers […]. (Day 2011: 41)

Here Day very succinctly identifies how, in Amarasingam's call, comedy 'fails'. Also, her analysis confirms Davies' contention that attacks on humor are the most important sticking points for theoretical interventions. Yet, did comedy really fail here? Or, did it leak? To a political theorist, someone whose intellectual interest in this controversy is neither purely formal nor cultural but centered on assessing whether or not it signifies the existence of a

functional political environment, this is a recipe for disaster. It's not that we should call for a 'common culture,' or even a culture of 'civility,' or even a common adherence to 'free speech' as our PC meme attests. It's that in the rush to celebrate our niches, we forget that the nature of community is problematic too. It is by its very nature exclusionary. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Ann Coulter's attempts at irony repeatedly fail in mainstream culture because her humor is offensive to our liberal humanist sensibilities. She called John Edwards a 'fag' on national television and most people in the live audience laughed (!), and she was admonished by political leaders for her tastelessness, but no one said anything about the people who might get her joke. Furthermore, even if we accept that these 'hailings' are episodic, what exactly are they designed to do? As we have seen, contemporary generations and even the style of most political comedy are not centered around activism. Consumed online and in private (television works here too), it does not in and of itself promote a 'community' in the traditional sense of the word. Here, I would alert the reader to Nikolas Rose's 1996 essay on the death/end of the social that we will cover in Chapter 4, where we look at *TDS* and *TCR* as a particular generational expression of satiric form that presupposes a rejection of what Sconce calls 'social politics'. Briefly stated, Rose sees online participation as the death of the era of the 'social,' and the birth of the community as an organized form of governmentality: 'Government through community' involves a variety of strategies for inventing and instrumentalizing these dimensions of allegiance between individuals and communities in the service of regulation, reform or mobilization (Rose 1996: 334). And later:

> Government through community, even when it works upon pre-existing bonds of allegiance, transforms them, invests them with new values, affiliates them to expertise and re-configures relations of exclusion. This does not make them 'communities' in some false sense. But it should alert us to the work entailed in the construction of community, and the implications of the logics of inclusion and exclusion, of responsibilization and autonomization, that they inescapably entail (Rose 1996: 336)

A similar theme is found throughout the literature on political comedy related to Bahktin's concept of carnival. Popular in cultural studies treatments of 'spontaneous' mass demonstrations and irreverent media interventions, carnival is a momentary suspension of the established order, which takes the authority of the ruler or ruling class and turns it on its head. Umberto Eco is a much noted critic of the concept, writing:

> Carnival can exist only as an authorized transgression (which in fact represents a blatant case of contradicto in adjecto or of happy double binding – capable of curing instead of producing neurosis). If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or *framed by the television screen*. In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule […]. (Eco 1984: 6, italics mine)

Or, in this case, they remind us that the 'niche' itself is a kind of rule. Even as the social moves from the streets to the television screen, strategies of affect are deployed to educate voters in certain ways and perhaps even make them more controllable through the media networks. The mediating layers on the screen affect a tone that caters to a niche audience, and they drop talking points and stylizations into their rhetoric that, through repetition, embed the message in the autonomous affective regime of people, most often by activating their libidinal theme, as in the thing that 'gets a person going'. They can, importantly, use already existing cultural scripts by re-packaging them in new media garb: in Chapter 5, homophobia is used to turn voters (audiences watching television at home in Egypt) against the street protests in Cairo, Egypt in January 2011. Media can also deactivate such scripts or dampen their effect on viewers by downplaying their role, calling on experts who explicitly reject the importance of an issue to the public debate. This is how one uses the television to turn audiences in favor of or against a revolution, political candidate or public figure. So, to say that any event can stand for itself without the mediating layer playing a role in foregrounding its reception makes it problematic to conceive of any carnivalesque event as surreptitiously relevant and impactful for audiences. The carnivalesque presupposes that there is space left for spontaneity in politics and social affairs, a space that our media saturates with meanings that give viewers the illusion of liberty. David Holloway has echoed these concerns when writing about political comedy in the 9/11 era: 'It is a convention, if not a cliché of contemporary cultural studies, that hilarity in public space is associated with the disordering energies of carnival' (Holloway 2011: 103). Against this, Holloway examines two examples of comedy that order our political attention in order to 'preserve' the integrity of certain civic norms. He discusses the 'disciplinary function of republican humor' in Michael Moore's documentaries that, through declinist narratives, 'indict' political elites and corporate capital for causing the faltering of the American republic (2011: 104). He uses a similar strategy for reading political humor by looking at what he calls 'postrepublican humorists', who agree with Moore that the decline begins when the people are shell-shocked, but argues that instead of calling for a restoration of the republic, they abandon all hope, collapsing potential progressive impulses into the same value stream of impotence and buffoonery with conservative warmongers. In short, he claims such films are properly 'nihilistic' because they do not offer an obvious difference of opinion or alternative course of action for their audiences. Here, he refers to the scenes where Trey Parker and Matt Stone's 2004 puppet film, *Team America: World Police*, features a dramatic death sequence for Hollywood 'political' liberals. All belonging to F.A.G. (Film Actors Guild), the activist actors such as Susan Sarandon and Alec Baldwin meet their deaths at the hands of Kim Jong-Il. Holloway's point is that, without any disciplinary narrative, the message of the film is: 'Why bother participating [sic] when all participants are equally ridiculous?' (Holloway 2011: 114). Republican Party humor, or the humor of American social conservatism, tends to have its own messages and codes of discipline, but they are usually projected outward onto people who imagine themselves as 'entitled.' In order to see oneself as the subject of social conservative disciplinary narratives, one must usually prefer listening over seeing (social

conservatives love radio: Glenn Beck, Christian rock music and, of course, Rush Limbaugh). This means television is not as important. One reason for this is that listening allows the audience to conjure up their own visual images to accompany the disciplinary political rhetoric the subject of the news is getting. Rooted almost exclusively in superiority theory, social conservative humor is a largely male enterprise, where the presenter finds subjects whose identities are always already 'questionable' – for their reason, immigration status, work ethic, sexual preference or skin color – and places them into a repetitive chain of signifiers (replete with alternating voice intonations meant to convey outrage and sure-mindedness). That specious reasoning is deployed contradicts none of the effect of the presentation; in fact, specious reasoning appeals to the radio social conservative, who gets most of their factual information from fishing trips on the Internet to cherry pick ideas that make them feel less personally responsible for the political sphere. They imagine themselves as hovering somewhere above or completely outside of it (a long-running elitist theme in American politics inherited from the British, where to be noble meant to be wealthy or well-bred enough to not have to descend to the depths of politics). In paying taxes, many believe they have the ability to criticize their inferiors (those in politics, and those subject to politics; that is, subjected to policy and figured as 'dependents') while retaining their sense of superiority. This sentiment has drifted over to the right (along with Dixiecrats and evangelicals), and informs the beliefs of those who work and invest in the market. In Chapter 4, I look at the comedic styling of *TDS* and *TCR* in particular, and the audiences created through their discourses, and find the ordering discourse that Holloway suggests. Although their audience is solidly middle class, *TDS* and *TCR* cannot affectively resonate with their viewers by identifying them as such (middle class) because this normative center is already occupied by the Right; instead they resonate with them as 'youth' through Generation X stylizations about the fate of progress (it's been threatened with doom). However, the discourse is not explicitly disciplinary (there are no alarmist narratives or threats of decline – this is a key element of its generational tone) and is not republican (small 'r'); instead they are discourses of progressive pathos designed to educate an already (largely) convinced audience that 'government' can be 'good.' It is an audience predisposed to governmentality that recognizes itself in images and discourses of popular culture and film, rather than in disciplinary discourses about civic responsibility and engagement. It seems political science is asking all the wrong questions in its insistence on civic engagement as an important component of political reflexivity. In order to understand this audience, we need to understand youth as a (largely) unknowable discourse in American culture that is mobilized by affect.

Gen X, Y or Z (insert terrible future here)

Most of the treatments of political comedy to date do not engage with youth as a subculture or as a 'radical' element of the social. Youth are best seen as an audience either for film (studios now cater most production to the 18–24-year-old male demographic through

action/adventure franchises), television (this is for women and everyone else) or social media. All of these place youth squarely outside any kind of 'social' in the traditional sense. As Sconce argues, the generations following the baby boom abandoned social politics (or, the 'street'), preferring instead to participate in criticism through mediated technologies, consumerism and by enacting a peculiar tone with regard to conventional culture, at the very least represented by the white, middle-class dysfunctional family and corporate America. In most treatments of political comedy, scholars are less concerned with the actual content of comedy and its implicit commentary on conventional social politics. They are usually more baffled with the 'why' questions: that is, why comedy and not earnestness or direct communication? Here we are concerned with the 'how.' How does comedy speak to a generational problematic? Day, for example, does not analyze the content of the political views expressed in the three forms of comedy she analyzes, but acknowledges that they are presumed to be 'leftist' in bent (and therefore redemptive at the very least). She also does not look at the pervasive comedy routines of stand-up comedians during the Bush era, nor does she look to the generational aspects of youth publics that consume political comedy either in North America or outside of it. These are differences of focus, not argument, from my proposed analysis. Where I do depart from Day is to argue that the analysis of what she calls counterpublics formed during the era of the war on terror (2001–present) can benefit from theoretical analysis provided by cultural studies frameworks amended to capture the realities of a televisual and digital age. These frameworks can help us to understand where youth gets inserted for middle class in political dramatizations, and where skepticism about social politics (indeed, even the community-building function itself) becomes a major barrier to grassroots organization. In order to understand whether or not political comedy shifts the discourse on contemporary political events, as Day contends, we need to understand the affect of the audiences and the cultural tropes and themes of the scripts they consume. We will explore that towards the end of this chapter. First, we must understand how the concept of 'youth' is mobilized in American popular rhetoric and academic discourse. To that we now turn.

In the US in particular, cultural studies frameworks have focused on how public cultures shape class identification and age-group affiliation. Another popular but academically dismissed view sees generations as recurrent cycles with characteristics that respond directly to the social realities of a particular American era (Strauss & Howe 1991). This view has been taken up by academic administrators in an effort to understand how the neo-liberal university can exploit the tastes and learning styles of a particular generation: the millennials (Strauss & Howe 2000; Hoover 2009). The notion of a subcultural explanation for the popularity of political comedy with youth doesn't yield ready explanation. However, the work on affect used in this volume is derived from the intellectual genealogy that begins with subcultural theory and moves onto cultural studies. Dominant in youth studies, the subcultural framework is derived from early British sociological studies about institutions encouraging youth reproduction of cultural norms and political views consistent with maintaining the status quo (Bowles & Gintis 1977), and the flourishing studies that followed which found youth resistance in subcultures of style (Hebdige 1979), stigma (Goffman 1963) and so on. These studies have been criticized for

their inability to reconceptualize youth as change agents in the larger political world, who, acting in aggregate, should be capable of altering it in significant ways. Rather, these theorists treated youth as a static category incapable of acting outside the confines of class, and the subcultures that formed as resistance to cultural reproduction were (while interesting) by and large viewed as politically ineffective. Furthermore, in subculture theory we find that youth are 'distinct from but related to the dominant culture', suggesting that young people are 'separate and unlike the majority of the population' (Blackman 2005: 2). Another way of studying youth has been to examine how discourses about actual young people are deployed by powerful institutions of surveillance such as schools, professional psychological and social work societies (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5), state welfare agencies, prisons and juvenile justice systems and courts, etc., where youth are often categorized under the general rubric of 'at risk' for X, Y or Z (insert terrible future here). These kinds of analysis have been popular in the US, where adult panics about youth routinely lead story development in the media. The same interpretive gesture produces 'at risk' literature because it is profitable. Government agencies and NGOs will fund studies that purport to show at-risk youth and find ways of mediating them back to productive participation in citizenship and economic life. Upon examining this 'at-risk' literature, one finds that youth does not exist independently of its production in these powerful expert discourses. According to Bello-Kano:

> […] 'youth', even where the concept is used with a referential intent, is rather the production of discourse, or, indeed, of those 'discursive practices' (discursive formations) we have identified above, from biological-physiological, psychological, familial, sociological, moral, historical, advertising, and masculine discourse. It is these discursive practices that have brought youth (both as collective and as a collective noun) into being; and it is these discourses that have sought to 'recruit' youth as a *subject* subjected to their goals, values, and interests; it is these discourses that have *disciplined* youth into a 'meaningful' concept (i.e. as anxiety, chaos, boundless energy, crime, market, life-style, vital resource, asset, subject-position, and whose sole relevance is the advancement of national and international market exchange, political-economic development, and modernization); and finally, it is these discourses that have formed 'the knowledge' with and within which youth becomes the *product* of the subjugation of objects ('youth bodies'). Which is to say, to follow an analogy from Foucault, that the discourse of youth not only imposes 'canonical bits of knowledge' on young people (as *youth)* but also uses them as a basis for construction of a 'science', a normativity that is beyond their grasp (Bello-Kano 2009: 59)

As Dana Burde writes, the global demographic shift has also made the production of these discourses an imperative in light of the 'youth bulge,' where the youth population in nearly every country exceeds all others combined. For many NGOs, this produces the:

> […] dual focus on youth 'at risk' and 'the risk' as early trends in the 1990s produced a sufficient 'coincidence of interest' that allowed NGOs to work toward their needs-driven

mission without questioning their role in the neo-liberal project, despite their relationship to the strong state's foreign policy. (Burde 2012: 300)

Thus, even as independent researchers and social workers could conceive of their youth projects as helping young people, they were simultaneously gathering information about them, and normatively conditioning them in ways that helps the state contain them, and the corporation target them, as consumers, patients (for drugs and therapies) and risks. As unfortunate as it seems to actually be young, surprisingly, it seems everyone wants to be interpellated as 'youth.' Youth culture is now a part of the study of aging! As noted earlier, the politics of the present era are almost entirely consumed with the decline of the middle class as not only an economic force, but as *the* source for moral values and individual integrity. Part of the economic comfort zone provided by middle-class status produced the expectation that one is able to prolong the life span but also participate in leisure activities just as a young person might. In addition, attitudes about youth that interpellated each successful middle-class generation do not dissipate in the march toward old age; they persist and inform adult culture as well. As one scholar writes, we might have a youth oligarchy on the horizon: 'stylistic and aesthetic practices once firmly associated with definitions of youth culture, as a category circumscribed by age, are becoming increasingly multi-generational' (Bennett qtd. in Bennett 2011: 31). And from this:

> […] the term youth culture can no longer be defined as an age-specific category; rather youth culture increasingly comes to describe a range of stylistic sensibilities and aesthetic practices acquired during youth-hood but worked on and developed over time in such a way that they become even more permanent features of identity and lifestyle over the duration of the life course […]. (Bennett qtd. in Bennett 2011: 31)

As an example, recall the Ameriprise investment commercial Dennis Hopper starred in a few years before he died of terminal cancer at the age of 74. In it he exclaimed, 'Your generation is definitely not headed for retirement. In fact, you could write the book on retirement', while music from *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) plays in the background. This investment ad clearly targeted baby boomers as 'youth.' While the onset of the recession in 2008 changed that narrative, there is still the expectation that middle-class generations do not age like those of the past – retreating into obscurity, and schooling the young who sit at their feet in awe at the wisdom of their experience. They charge forward into their own 'future,' all the while stemming off any signs of aging by participating in the globalized culture of social networking and consumerism. Thus, theories of progress and development are at their very core necessarily problematic. The category 'youth' is impossible to contain to an age demographic except in ways framed by media and expert discourses. A popular Honda commercial demonstrates a basic difference between baby boomers and the rest when a daughter reads an article about elderly people's declining social lives and laments that her parents only have 63 Facebook friends while she has 672. This voice-over commentary

goes on while her Honda SUV-driving-parents are seen mountain biking and hanging out with friends in 'real' time, while she worries about their social lives sitting in front of a computer monitor by herself.

There is also the idea that we have 'inherited' ways for knowing the young that are, in Kelly's words, 'increasingly governmentalized' (Kelly 2011: 48). Similar to Bello-Kano's ideas, and to Besley's, Kelly's argument is concerned with how discourses of neuroscience, combined with governmentality, are shaping up to justify government regulation of youth using evidence-based sciences:

> In the field of youth studies – as it has grown more sophisticated, and more attached to the problems imagined in the spaces such as education, health, justice and work over the past 20 years or so – this governmentalisation produces powerful incentives and demands to conform to the rule-bound, institutionalized and evidence-based knowledge practices that institutions, government departments, corporations and NGOs understand as being capable of telling truths about young people […]. (Kelly 2011: 48)

Drawing upon the use of Foucault by Nikolas Rose and Wendy Brown, Kelly is particularly skeptical of the causality implied by the use of new imaging technologies to study the adolescent brain. Studies that image the adolescent brain work through 'an apparent wow-factor related to the ability to graphically represent these processes and suggest/explain what they mean; and a widespread forgetfulness that these are technologically-mediated simulations' (Kelly 2011: 51). So, from these studies, researchers and professionals (doctors, social workers, family therapists, drug counselors, law enforcement and educators) come to assume that any socially questionable or morally problematic behaviors or practices by youth have the potential to disrupt their brain development during adolescence and compromise their 'future.' Kelly is correct to point out that because these are simulations that usually take place in a lab, and therefore do not replicate real world experiences, the visual images of brain matter displayed during them may not correspond at all to so-called 'risk' behaviors (like drink, drugs, sex) or situations (deviancy or family crises). These 'ways of knowing the young' through evidence-based science were given the high pass when the Supreme Court, in its 5–4 *Roper* decision (2005), argued against the death penalty for juveniles under 18. While the decision itself was hailed as a victory for youth advocates (myself included) it was the amicus curiae brief filed by the American Psychological Association that swayed the court's decision; particularly, Section 3 of the brief, which drew upon the neuroscience Kelly writes about entitled '[N]europsychological research demonstrates that the adolescent brain has not yet reached adult maturity', and which summarizes the research using MRI (Magnetic Resonance Technology) to map adolescent brain anatomy and function. They note that:

> Of particular interest with regard to decision-making and criminal culpability is the development of the frontal lobes of the brain. The frontal lobes, especially the pre-frontal

cortex, play a critical role in the executive or 'CEO' functions of the brain which is considered the higher functions of the brain [...]. (*Roper v. Simmons 2004*: 10)

Furthermore, 'disruption' of the development of this part of the brain impairs 'decision-making' that is in the 'long-term best interests of the individual' (*Roper v. Simmons 2004*: 9). From this simulated research, experts now routinely extrapolate the findings to justify interventionist and restrictive biopolitical government programs, or to expand the knowledge base and best practices of social service agencies and educational institutions that service young people. What Kelly has articulated quite clearly is that these findings, based on this brain imaging, may not simulate real-world experiences of young people; technological know-how, as he says, 'wows' the public and may in fact impede progress toward finding more reasonable ways to understanding youth behavioral challenges, or deciding they are not serious challenges at all. Furthermore, widespread and unquestioned acceptance of the CEO premise can become a pretext for any kind of at-risk intervention for all young people, as this acts as a 'narrative of becoming' and gestures at threats to the 'future' of youth and society. Such probabilistic thinking, Kelly concludes, makes youth 'an artifact of expertise' (Kelly 2011: 48). Here we witness increasing agreement between government, research and political advocacy and development for youth echoed above by Bello-Kano. The term 'youth' can be inserted into a panic narrative in order to shore up research and development funds by any number of interested parties who devise government funded projects that, in turn, advance/enhance the state's surveillance powers. As Lesko writes, these narratives move through time and space, specifically, panoptical time, and:

> [...] emphasizes the endings toward which youth are to progress and places individual adolescents into a temporal narrative that demands a moratorium of responsibility yet expects them at the same time to act as if each moment of the present is consequential [...]. (Lesko & Talburt 2012: 6)

In perhaps the strongest and most explicit way, Tina Besley has made the connection between the effects of a globalized niche market – that attenuates the consumer tastes of youth with the surveillance state that appears within it – to regulate desirable behaviors. In this 'changing economics of the self' she argues youth are increasingly seen as 'at-risk' in these surveillance schemes – a crucial point, since very few have made the connection between how the market enlists the help of state discourses of youth in jeopardy, at-risk and vulnerability in order to market new products to alleviate such social risks and threats. She writes:

> [...] while Western youth seem to be gaining more personal autonomy within familial and educational structures that is partly the result of new forms of income, they are not necessarily gaining increased freedom from centralized forms of state control based on the surveillance state and the dominance of the global multi-national market become ever more sophisticated in manipulating their needs [...]. (Besley 2009: 75)

Examples of this include recent memoirs by Generation Rx, a cohort of Generation Y, who are beginning to question and examine their extended use of psycho-pharmaceutical drugs to regulate mood and behavior disorders such as depression and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). The recent book *Dosed* examines the cultural impact of a generation who grew up on SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) in a country where few asked questions about the long-term effects of taking the medications and, indeed, government policy allowed pharmaceutical companies to mediate the public's image of mental health through direct advertising. As Kaitlin Bell Barnett writes:

> Direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising on TV, which the US Food and Drug Administration authorized in 1997, has allowed drug companies to define the public's understanding of mental illness and psychiatric medications – and this is especially true, I think, for young people who knew no other paradigm. Even as we grew up, though, immersed in the idea of an 'imbalance' of particular brain chemicals – an outdated theory that has not held up to the science – we have inherited the American ideal of self-sufficiency, of solving one's problems through one's own resourcefulness. As we've sought to forge our identities, we have often struggled to reconcile the two […]. (Bell Barnett 2012)

Generation Y has been the guinea pig for the brain revolution of the 1990s. The confluence of consumer marketing and government advocacy for at-risk youth has produced this peculiar political situation whereby youth are responsible for their choices even when those choices are at every moment scrutinized by larger public health and crime initiatives that worry over their future (mostly for a profit).

Foremost among the imperatives for educating young Ys and Zs is to reinforce the notion that they become extremely flexible with healthy brains.[7] The analogy of flexibility goes a long way toward explaining why such brain theories are popular: because they work so well with neo-liberal discourses which focus on the individual, who is responsible for adapting to the vagaries produced by the market. In other words, they erase accountability from the market, firms operating in it and the government from the poor health, lack of happiness and stability of whole populations, and make this the sole responsibility of the individual who is responsible and flexible. If 'you' are going to decide, 'you' had better have the best equipment for making decisions. The ability to be both of these vital things is dependent upon brain health and 'elasticity.' Thus, we have an increasing number of studies that do not only focus on the crucial time of 'youth,' which has now been extended long into the thirties (as some note, to keep them out of the job market and keep unemployment numbers artificially low, Generation Y has 88 million people in it); to be personally responsible and protect their brain health, people must also continue throughout their lives to protect its flexibility. Promotion of certain 'lifestyle' practices associated with 'health' and others with 'risk' 'increases individuals' reliance on expert discourses and the marketplace, both of which increasingly offer solutions' (Pitts-Taylor 2010: 644). Brain health is targeted at every stage of life through

'micro-political technologies of health' that condemn a subject for neglecting to take care of the brain. Similarly, many discourses of brain flexibility also construct the ideal of the self on 'neuronal terms', meaning that other kinds of practices of the self are deemed illegitimate. All of these discourses about youth are important for understanding the way we think about comedy in relation to politics. So, we can say that youth is a constructed category most useful to discourses of neo-liberalism that construct the personally responsible (asocial in every sense of the word) and flexible. It can be applied to persons not conforming to the age demographic 'youth' or to discourses about civic engagement. In fact, being personally responsible means not situating the self in a chosen social context. More often than not, it means situating the self in an already socially approved context. Hence, many scholars speak of Generation Y and Z as compulsive conformists who, in having most of the paths of their lives mapped out for them, whether by helicopter parents, school systems or behavioral health paradigms, would not know how to choose, perhaps considering this very act asocial.[8]As we shall see, both *TDS* and *TCR* increasingly question the validity of these approaches to self-management, highlighting their proximity to corporate branding and questioning their relationship to actual public health and democratic thought.

What kind of comedy can appeal most directly to this category? How is comedy 'mediated' by digital technologies and cultural warriors to affect political subjectivity? In order to understand that, we must learn about the three main theories of comedy, the analytic stakes involved in examining comedy from a chosen point of view and the kind of subject implied in each. While theorists who look at ironic 'smart' films of the 1990s locate a peculiar generational sensibility in them, the time that followed 9/11 is said to be 'post-ironic' in the sense that most of the irony mobilized in humor (especially political humor) is not as edgy, and certainly not as 'blank' (Sconce 2002, 2006; Thomas 2009). Irony in a cohort of films in the '90s presented a unique window into criticizing American liberalism, that over-arching narrative that covers ideologies as diverse as those of the Moral Majority to the Third Way. Thomas notes that these films produced diverse reactions, as does Sconce. By resisting the folksy urge to moralize openly about the often controversial themes presented in them, these films created enemies out of good liberals and good conservatives in the United States. As Thomas puts it, even with post-ironic forms of culture (*The Simpsons*, *South Park* [1997–], etc.), the controversies these shows provide in the US demonstrate its 'uneasiness with the aesthetics of irony' (Thomas 2009). Furthermore, as Sconce notes in a reprisal of his original essay:

> […] because the 'smart film' was, in its heyday, so closely tied to age, history and generational experience, its influence will no doubt continue to dissipate as the next generation (the 'millennials' or 'Gen-Y,' as they have been called) moves into prominence in the film industry. Described by many as more conservative and less cynical than the generation that preceded them, perhaps their ascendancy in the cultural marketplace will bring an end to the corrosive irony, black humour, an synchronistic fatalism so lamented by cultural conservatives […]. (Sconce 2006: 438)

Certainly, the 'corrosive irony' has migrated over to cable television and found a home in its niche markets. Irony has moved outside of mainstream movies in recent years, its place in the multiplex taken by the 'tent pole' action/fantasy franchises. However, critics have recently argued that those films dominate the theater for concession sales and for their overseas markets in China and India. They further speculate that there might be a future market for more 'adult' themed films as most baby boomers and Generation Xers stay home to watch cable series and programming like *The Daily Show*, *Louie* (2010–) and *The Good Wife* (2009–), continuing to consume their news and entertainment in separate networks (O'Hehir 2012b). The present programming set up allows for relatively uncontroversial viewing except in the rare case that a show's clip gets remediated into another context, where its content is highlighted and questioned, producing the 'uneasiness' that Thomas diagnoses. We will return to this uneasiness at the end, but first we need to understand how humor has been categorized by type and history.

Comedy theories

Many comedy theorists have made the point that though there have long been three theories of comedy, they are not mutually exclusive, and can often work together in a humor scene. They are 'terms of art and not names adopted by thinkers consciously participating in traditions' (Morreall 2009: 9). Others have pointed out that we use these theories as predictors of the effect of humor on individuals, rather than looking at them as having an explicitly social function (Shouse 2007). That there are elements of all the theoretical traditions in contemporary political comedy is clear. Still others point out that we might overemphasize rationality when looking at these theories, rather than viewing the effect of incongruity, for example, as being to close down critical thinking because it taxes the brain to resolve contradictions (Polk, Young & Holbert 2009). Like Gornelos and Greene's volume, Day's book is a retrospective on political comedy over the past decade. She sees the increase of political comedy as having an important community-building function by putting audiences together in shared predicaments who may not have previously existed, or known there were others 'out there.' Since Day is most concerned with showing how certain examples of political comedy on the Left have contributed to a progressive shift in thought over the past decade, she readily dismisses the common interpretation that puts leftist irony into the same camp with superiority and relief theory. Superiority theory generally falls under the heading of humor that takes its enjoyment at the expense of others, and has been treated by such thinkers as Plato, the Stoics, Hobbes and Bergson. John Morreall describes the essence of the theory as 'anti-social' as each of these critics saw humor at the expense of others as violating the need for a wholistic community. As Day writes, 'There seems to be a commonly held belief that where there is irony, parody or poking fun, there must be a smirking cynicism

and, by extension, political disengagement. This is an accusation that continually dogs irony in all its forms' (Day 2011: 28). However, she continues:

> […] there are currently a growing number of artists and activists who are looking to irony as the prime tool with which to combat indifference, to advocate for change, and to get others riled up. In other words, the opposing camp sees irony as a potential antidote to cynicism and disengagement, precisely the opposite of its detractors […]. (Day 2011: 28)

As for those who would emphasize the role of 'relief,' or letting off steam in irony, 'humor is not anti-social or irrational, but simply a way of discharging nervous energy found to be unnecessary' (Morreall 2009: 17). In Day's cases of parodic news, and others, she finds that political comedy is doing the work of community building, so she does not take relief theory to be playing much of a role in contemporary political humor. Having dispensed with both superiority and safety valve theories of comedy, Day is silent about incongruity theory. Incongruity theory, however, has the largest role to play in contemporary comedic delivery of information. In fact, Morreall expressly refers to the fact that most political comedy at present is of the incongruous type. Incongruity is perfect for a time of ideological and affective diversity because 'the core concept in incongruity theories is based on the fact that human experience works in learned patterns' (2009: 10). These are the cultural set ups that are exploited by contemporary political comedy. At a time when current events themselves are defined by their incongruity to our imagined histories (as Derrida said via *Hamlet*, 'The time is out of joint'), Americans might find relief in laughing off the irony. Minorities and women have always had their insider humor that often functioned as a safety valve – a way to siphon off the grief of always being the butt of the dominant discourse's jokes, blind spots, ignorance and power.

My argument is rather that we must not assume that the embedded scripts in comedy performances are progressive in the sense that they move history forward into new eras and understandings of social and political life. Rather, in many of the comedy scripts I read in the book, we find assumptions embedded in them that do little to challenge current interpretations of culture. Instead, many of them use outdated cultural and political set ups that presume contested events in history to be settled according to many conservative political norms. These are our 'mental maps', as Morreall refers to them, and they are not so much aggravated by political comedy and its parodic take on them as by the crushing blow political reality makes to them, and the way the mainstream media refuses to mark these moments of incongruity. All political humorists have to do then is point out what the media pretends is not happening. The peculiarity to the American political imaginary comes in with the type of content that can be masked, whereas in other contexts it will be a much different cultural set up. As many have noted, the use of social networking sites in Egypt produces a much different political environment and outcomes than their use in the United States, where many bemoan that extensive use of such sites makes people routinely depressed and apathetic (i.e. comparisons of life trajectories in Facebook postings). Thus, it is not the medium that is the message, the message is the message, and a culture is either capable of producing messages

that spur people to collective action or they aren't. This suggests the importance of culture, especially where it is understood as shifting and not as a kind of national fate neurosis. The ubiquity of comedy works in much the same way in the United States, as it becomes a means to cope with dysfunctional bipartisanship in the political process and the disaster culture that has followed 9/11. Furthermore, to assume that comic culture is 'leftist' does not mean it is transformative in nature; it could be conserving the political shibboleths of an old-guard Left or decrepit Democratic Party whose ideas are outmoded compared to existing political problems. Or, it could be, as Jon Stewart told *ABC News*, a comedy that is performed by a comedian with an ideological slant, but who is not an activist in orientation: 'People's sense of humor only goes as far as they're ideology' (qtd. in McKain 2005: 427). He does not have a talking points memo from the DNC (Democratic National Committee). But, he might hang out with a lot of members from that group. For many who look into the social and political effects of humor, an important starting point at present is to examine the social dynamics or external environment in which such humor takes place. The only theorist to date who has done this is Eric Shouse, whose work on stand-up put into question the idea that comedy is about influencing the individual rather than the group.

Shouse looks specifically at the mind-body connection when analyzing comedy. He likens the social effect of comedy in stand-up performances to that of attending a concert or hearing music. After a lengthy critique of each theory of comedy, Shouse argues that they are analytically limited because they focus on the capabilities of the individual mind. Since they all originate in western 'canon' thinkers, he argues, they have been elaborated upon in most recent attempts to understand comedy by theorists in western, post-enlightenment culture. As such, they ignore the embodied effects of humor and its situatedness in social settings. Shouse uses 'affect,' following Teresa Brennan (2004), to understand the embodied nature of comedy and uses live stand-up as his example. He argues:

> At any moment during a live humorous performance we are consciously aware of few sensations. (For example, during a stand-up performance few of us take stock of the color of the performer's shirt, or subtle shifts in her facial expressions or the brightness of the stage lights.) However, all of these things produce sensations that are registered at an unconscious level. Those sensations and hundreds of others are enfolded by our bodies and combine to produce our level of intensity in a given situation. This is affect. It is the body's way of preparing itself to act in a given circumstance by attempting to match the intensity of its context. Affect makes what our feelings 'feel' and, therefore, it is what makes humor seem funny […]. (Shouse 2007: 35)

While Shouse's critique of the three dominant comedic genres is important, and can shift our focus from studies that rely exclusively on the political content of the message or the tone of its messenger that produce laughter, it does not make much sense to limit our investigations to the live performance given that most people will be now enjoying comedy through digital media: on the web and, most likely, in isolation. Shouse's theory may even

give some performers an excuse to ignore controversy ignited by their stand-up performances when they are recorded and then posted on the web to be consumed by audiences not in live attendance (as happened in the case of Tracy Morgan's alleged homophobic rant during a live performance). For now, we wish to highlight Shouse's very cogent critique of individual theories of humor, and explore an expanded concept of affect that situates its workings not just within a live, embodied performance of the 'social,' but also looks at how televisual and Internet audiences are impacted by the workings of the external environment and affect and, moreover, how affect is mobilized by the screen.

Affect and subjectivity

In the last decade or so, scholars have been interested in understanding why rationality fails to link political awareness and practice in a way that produces progressive social change in cultural contexts. For decades, social thought has remained trapped in the binary logic imposed by positivist social science: if a subject is presented with rational discourses that explain why a course of action is against his interests, why does he persist in acting against himself (or his interest)? False consciousness was the usual answer, but a very unsatisfactory one, not least because of the arrogance of a superior claim, but also because the only remedy for it is further 'enlightenment,' suggesting one must figure out who lacks knowledge and then plan a way to get it into their individual mind in the correct organizational format, so it can be retrieved when triggered by correctly deployed environmental cues. Finally, the notion that knowledge alone can precipitate action has little explanatory power in an age where people are hyper-aware of injustice and inequality but remain powerless (and often indifferent) to imagine what to do about it. They may also participate in a widespread culture of denial that protects the asocial imperative of personal responsibility; each is preoccupied with his own role in the culture, and norms of community responsibility violate our notions of privacy and freedom of expression. It is in this era of the 'broken' subject that many have turned to affect. The 'affective turn' was generated by close readings of Deleuze, Spinoza and Bergson in political theory, and sustained elaborations in sociology by writers who, in bumping up against the limits of Bourdieu's 'habitus', Althusser's 'subject' and Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling' (Grossberg 2008; Ortner 1998), wanted to retain the structural elements of these thinkers while using sociological and anthropological studies to flesh out better explanatory frameworks. Some find the 'turn to affect' problematic because it seemingly dispenses with rationality, and it is likely thought unable to produce 'agency' – either political or otherwise (Leys 2011). Importantly, affect precedes emotion and shapes its outward expression. Affect controls the parameters in which the subject operates and is activated on the infra-sensible register by cultural cues and norms, what Connolly calls 'micropolitics' (Connolly 2002). These registers are particularly vulnerable to new media and old ideologies. They interpellate the subject on a non-rational plane of affect that conditions his/her emotions: among these are rationality, hysteria, and even 'blankness,' which can then emerge

as particular political responses. It can also shape the recognizability of affect; some political responses may be literally in words, while others can be read discursively through other formats such as images, intertextual referencing, and so on. Therefore, affect theory does not evacuate agency; instead it argues that affect's interaction with the external environment helps shape the path that agency can take. Thus, media manipulation of affect is different than the stirring up of emotions that might be calmed by rational thought. Glynos and Stavrakakis explain the difference between affect and emotion:

> If affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy, we could say that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers (or 'ideas' in Freudian terms). It is because of this, according to Lacan, that emotions such as depression or anger can deceive: their meaning and significance is a function not of their intrinsic properties, but rather of the subject's universe of meaning and the way that fantasy structures this. It is for this reason that Lacan cautions against the lures of emotions, paying special attention to the 'letter' of what is said and the displacements of affect. This suggests that a key aspect of understanding the significance of emotions in the organization of social practices involves trying to map them in relation to the *underlying fantasies* that organize a subject's affective enjoyment. (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008: 263, emphasis mine)

The duplication of media and its remediation make it possible that groups of people, or whole populations with their own separate 'universes of meaning,' can be affected by a particular instance of political comedy, like the Mohammed cartoon published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. Viewing publics become alternately enraged or curious what the fuss is all about. Each has a different underlying fantasy about how life is or should be enjoyed. As we shall see, for Bayat in Chapter 5, it often means abjuring 'fun.' Thus, there is no such thing as objectively offensive humor, especially in an age where more cultures and ideologies meet on a constant basis with little negotiation. As Davies writes:

> Let us return to the example of 'offensive' humor. As Davies contends, 'Humor does not *give* offense; its recipients *take* offense. The members of a group can choose to avoid humor that they know might offend them or they can seek it out and get angry. Agitators can use the mere fact of its existence as a means of inciting others to violence. *Taking offense at humor is not a simple individual response to be measured by psychologists but something socially constructed and used for a purpose.* Humor scholars need to study the external social, cultural and political settings that influence which of these is more likely to be chosen and also to note who has the power to stir up and mobilize or to damp down possible indignation […]. (Lewis et al. 2008: 6, emphasis mine)

Affect is how media, or humor in this case, hone in on the affective potentiality of each subject. I use the term subject because affect is mobilized prior to the formation of an individual or self, and is, importantly, subject to the power of not only discourse, but tone,

imagery and story-telling. At the moment subjects encounter such 'external social, cultural and political settings,' they are more or less powerless over the effect of media on their subsequent emotional reaction. As Grossberg says, 'I have always held that emotion is the articulation of affect and ideology. Emotion is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions' (Grossberg 2008: 316). This subject is the person prior to rationality; affective outlays may condition the path to reason. This is why some people are not prone to laugh, or others to believe in the inherent importance of seriousness. In the case of the affect mobilized by at-risk governmentality, it tends to create the referent 'youth' as a site of panic, enabling the subsequent agreement to make them subject to schemes of governmentality. Certain forms of youth cultural activity are affectively rather than structurally situated (Bennett 2011: 29). Affect is the new way of describing how emotion enters into public discourse and audience reaction, but it cannot be reduced to a conceptual understanding as it is inimical to logical reasoning. It mobilizes the future as a space of anxiety around which reassuring images of solutions can be marshaled to address the problem. The important function of the media here is to act as the layer that mediates the affect in a certain way to produce the coincidence of ideology and emotion. In the case of youth, they are referenced as a signpost or 'canary in the coal mine' of American declinist narratives. Importantly, in generational terms, this works because they are measured against a standard of progress or time period they do not inhabit. Grossberg describes this as the 'hypocritical position of baby boomers', and writes that they are those:

> […] who grew up living with the particular privilege of youth that partially constituted the dominant formation and embodied a slightly different structure of privilege in their own culture, who are now sitting by and watching the de-privileging of that same category for other generations because *somehow they've been the transition point*. I don't think boomers are to blame necessarily, but their lives have mapped out the changing regime of affect that is now, in part, disarticulating youth, affect and imagination. (Grossberg 2008: 322, emphasis mine)

Generation X was the transition point. Their discourse and the indirect mannerisms they've developed (and that Jon Stewart has refined and perfected) serve as the dominant formation for how to experience decline while being asked to *represent progress*. Much contemporary political comedy, especially *TDS* and *TCR*, act as a mediating layer for the youth caught between these contradictory imperatives. They exist in a world where most of the folks engineering the future and mediating its message do not recognize this mismatched affective conundrum. Recall the 'mediating layer' of information dissemination we analyzed (see p. 21) with Aaron McKain. As an example, Jon Stewart's opening dialogue with the 'lamestream' media on 20 June 2012 is a case in point. After showing clips of Fox News discussing how much better Ronald Reagan was at dealing with the then Soviet Union, they show clips of pundits discussing all the ways that President Obama is 'childish' in his relations with the then Russian premier, Vladmir Putin. First, a clip of President Obama is shown seated with

Premier Putin, and Putin looks grim and serious (as Stewart points out, the way Putin always looks). After showing a series of Fox News clips where Reagan is shown famously saying, 'Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall', in the most paternalizing way possible, amidst other clips of him smiling, joking and shaking hands with Mikhail Gorbachev and giving the impression that Reagan was a natural diplomat, Jon Stewart addresses his audience:

> And that's how it's done, my friends. You take a few seconds of Obama video and turn it into a rich soup of decontextualized images designed to bypass the frontal cortex and go straight to the amygdalas of old people, triggering cascades of dopamine and giving them all a giant [pause] Reagan [pause] boner. (*TDS* 2012)

And he adds before he walks off, about Fox, 'It's why they're number one!' Fox News has managed to tell its viewers, not through rational discourse or persuasive argumentation, what they already wanted to hear: Ronald Reagan was awesome and Barack Obama is an immature (amateur statesman) child. It has presented the 'underlying fantasy' of the Fox viewer (this keeps ratings up), and reinforces a belief about Reagan (in itself, harmless) that allows for the unfair critique of President Obama to stand as legitimate.[9] Fox News isn't 'winning' (like Charlie Sheen wasn't 'winning'; see Chapter 2); it is containing a demographic sector to vote for a particular political party that probably would not have come together were it not for the unifying efforts of the mediating layer. Fox holds them with nostalgic narratives of 'common sense' largely locked in a past not worth disputing using reason.

Hegemonic media: *Consumed*

> In Western Philosophy and science, then, the dominant view concerning incongruity is that a rational adult should, or even can, face it in only one way, by trying to eliminate it. To appreciate incongruity would be immature, irrational, masochistic, or all three […]. (Morreall, 2009: 15)

As we have noted extensively, it is not political comedy that makes the incongruities it exploits for laughs; it is the political and social world that we now inhabit, dominated by political and consumer branding on the one hand (which forces us to decide between our embodied selves and our virtual ones), and the increasing political and social contradictions we are forced to live in an age of declining economic growth. These are contradictions that must only be recognized by those that lose in the middle-class split and those that already live them as a repetitive cycle of poverty. Humor is not, in this scenario, a release of unnecessary energy. It is something else entirely, perhaps a way to put right one's perspective and imagine oneself in an audience of like-minded individuals. One thing this book does proclaim to do is to interpret how humor is mediated in televisual and digital contexts, something scholars have noted is missing in understanding the diverse forms of reception of

political humor (Lewis et al. 2008: 33). Taking note of our previous claims that the affect is not activated in live settings alone, but can be manipulated in televisual and Internet-mediated environments as well, we return to the counterpublics thesis. In Habermas's theory, the original (rational) bourgeois public sphere gets incorporated into the sphere of authority by consenting to be a member of it (after coming into conversation and bargaining with it).The public sphere, including journalism and media, then becomes absorbed by the hegemonic norms of the authority of the state. This produces our journalistic media as 'objective,' which was, contrary to most of the dominant thinking on this topic, already a handmaid to the political and economic establishment. As McKain notes of *The Daily Show*:

> [...] just as *TDS* models itself off televised News broadcasts, those TV news broadcasts were originally modeled after the nineteenth century's partisan broadsheets, which were then seen as the prototype for an informed democracy (Creeber 119). And now those same televised News broadcasts adopt formal components from online News sources while newspapers mutate to reflect both sets of adaptations. In fact, by current standards, it is the mediating layer's perceived neutrality (or degrees of separation from neutrality) that lends rhetorical heft to news and credibility to News. Even though people are aware that 'true' objectivity does not exist – the word itself was taken out of the Journalistic Code of Ethics in 1996 – they still pine for 'truth, accuracy, and comprehensiveness' (the words that replaced objectivity) in their News. (McKain 2005: 417)

He goes on to note that even though well over half of Americans polled do not believe the news is unbiased, the fact that researchers still waste time with this question 'betrays belief in an alternative' (McKain 2005: 417). He concludes that what all this means is that viewers know that the news is mediating information in ways they neither like nor approve of. It doesn't mean they believe in objectivity. So what does this mean for political comedy? Is it a way of coping with the fact that news is mediated and we no longer believe in the capacity to relay information about reality in an objective matter? Is this the response to hyper-reality, to settle into our niche mockings (markets)? Why have some been more vital to certain Americans than others? For if we proceed from affect we must look into the ways that comedy allows us to live with the contradictions of political life, and for some they will be different than for others. They will not only be dependent upon the universes of meaning available for mediating the subject in relation to neo-liberalism (the neuronal self, the elastic brain, the at-risk youth etc.) For example, what's at stake in believing in a war on Christmas? More importantly, what's at stake in believing there isn't? They also mediate the discourses on religion, publicity and tolerance.

McKain's insights are important. Remediation is a kind of genetic code that one who follows media closely can track and use to assess accuracy. Certain generations are better at this than others. From Generation X onward, generations are found in spectatorship and digital participation, not real life social politics and participation. To be sure, most often the subject of these news feeds are trivial by the standards of past generations. Benjamin Barber,

a democratic political theorist, remains disgusted by the American inability to 'grow up' in a democratic sense. His book, *Consumed*, details how most popular culture is infantile (the root of this word is *infans*, or Latin for 'without words'). I use this example of Barber because he's one of the few prominent democratic theorists who will actually engage popular culture. Plus, he's thoroughly Kantian in his confrontation with 'fun.' When faced with the rampant incongruities wrought by unchecked capitalist ideologies and the decline of the social (along with it the political groups that then form a response to power inequities), Barber prefers we 'grow up', and in Morreall's depiction of the anti-incongruity crowd, 'eliminate them'. Hence, we see the predicament that comedians often find themselves in when they proclaim to their audiences that the failure of the mainstream media and the political class in the past decade has been very good for their business. Stewart, Maher, Colbert have all acknowledged this conundrum in one way or another. They can point out the contradictions and make audiences think and laugh, but they cannot fix the problem or offer solutions. Our problem is in thinking that they can. Democracy doesn't work that way if that's what we think we want. It works through commitment to establish enduring solutions to boring and often complex political and social problems, to commit to listening to people we despise and even making concessions to them at times. Barber sees the problem in our rampant individualism that is exploited by consumerism. This individualism was once an ideology with a much different meaning that gets mapped onto the available discourses of the market and consumer choice. American 'individualism' (old-style) was not necessarily as unimaginative as our current market-driven ideologies of individualism. Our 'private choices' actually come back to hurt us because they leave us disenfranchised to question the options. Barber puts it this way:

> The public consequences of private choices are masked by brand-identity consumerism in which only the private preference and its subjective entailments are visible. The hidden social costs of consumer preferences are in fact notated neither in the consciousness of consumers nor the statistical indices of the US Treasury Department; or for that matter in the records of the World Trade Organization or the International Monetary Fund. The consumer here is radically individuated rather than socially embedded, and less rather than more free as a consequence. She is permitted to choose from a menu of options offered by the world but not to alter or improve the menu or the world. In this, the dynamics of consumption actually render the individual more rather than less vulnerable to control, much in the way the infant, for all its sense of power, is actually powerless in a world from which it cannot distinguish itself. In short, in almost every way, the full-time consumer as imagined by the aggressive marketing executive ideally acts regressively. More like an impulsive child than like an adult […]. (Barber 2007: 36)

Or, as Jon Stewart put it to Chris Wallace in 2011, from within a certain kind of ideological regime that doesn't permit the existence of free thought, it must be assumed that free thought is the enemy (e.g. our 'sense of humor only goes as far as our ideology') and this can only be

the case when we do not trust members of our own species to make prudential decisions. It can only be the case when we are encouraging our fellow citizens, as corporations, politicians and media figures, to enjoy the incongruity. In our niche mockings, we feel a comfortable distance is placed between ourselves and our adversaries. Ultimately, however, the problem with incongruity as a ubiquitous social condition is that it must eventually be resolved. I would not urge a return to Camelot-era fantasy structures, where the press omitted important facts about politics in order to avoid offending the white, heterosexual middle classes and pretended to uphold some weird innocent fantasy that Americans were always good especially in light of their lack of knowledge. Innocence should not be equated with victimhood and lack of responsibility except where actual children are concerned. I would hold that contemporary media, including political comedy, should hold its viewers to a higher standard, perhaps even attempting to stretch their imaginations a bit about what might be politically possible. Yet, the problem remains that today our niches are firmly ensconced in the cable network era, and they are not the result of the fading away of Walter Cronkite. As Louis Menand reminds us:

> It was always a battle getting controversial subjects and opinions on the air in the era of broadcast networks, whose motto might have been 'Offend no one.' Cable, which has a very different business model, is another story. Since cable viewers are billed just to watch, no matter which channels they prefer, opinion pays. The makers of cable news don't need to attract everyone; they just need to establish a loyal niche audience. A piece of your monthly cable bill payment goes to Fox News, whether you care for it or not […]. (Menand 2012: 94)

Hence, the phrase, 'it is not TV, it's HBO', a pioneering channel that does not censor and is paid for by subscribers. HBO hosts most of the stand-up specials we examine in the remaining chapters, as well as a show by Bill Maher, former *Politically Incorrect* host, who now hosts a political comedy opinion show called *Real Time with Bill Maher* before a live studio audience. His show is interesting because it can be seen as a kind of flashpoint over many of the extended culture wars that took place over the past decade.

On *Real Time*, Maher must continually cow his audience into a certain kind of objective or open-minded submission. Judging from Maher's comments, his live audience seems to him to be too far-left, and aggressively close-minded about opinions aired by known conservatives on the show. One particular instance of note occurred in 2007 and has Maher physically jumping out of his chair, flailing his arms and shouting to audience members somewhere in the back to 'Shut the fuck up!' The live HBO screening of the show muffled the audience members comments so to the at home viewer it seemed as though Maher were disciplining his usual progressive audience to listen to a conservative guest. The melee that follows has Maher asking, 'Where the fuck is the security on this show?' and jumping up to help the officers escort the audience member from the building as he exclaims, 'This is the problem with a live audience'. Maher's outburst cannot be understood by the viewer at

home; the confusion and anxiety provoked by his reaction to the outburst is disturbing. Unable to gauge Maher's anger because its precipitant is hidden and the sound is muffled from the viewer, the assumption is that he's had it with his monolithic 'PC' audience. Only later, we find out that the hecklers were regular loiterers outside the studio who beg Maher to attend the show and discuss how 9/11 was a conspiracy. As Maher told the panelists after the incident, 'It's the only time I defend Bush.' Another interesting slice of media confusion: Bill Maher on *Larry King Live* telling the host that it is well known that many of the staffers in the Bush administration are gay. 'Like who, for example?' asks King. Maher claims he's not the first to speak of it on live television. Later, the show is revealed to have edited out Maher naming Ken Melhman, Bush's campaign manager for the gay-baiting 2004 presidential election and chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC) from 2005–07. The documentary film *Outrage* by Kirby Dick would later demonstrate the CNN editing in side-by-side format, showing the clip of Maher naming Mehlman and then the actually shown clip of him not saying it. The narrators of the documentary interview Hillary Rosin earlier in the presentation, who notes that journalists are involved in a kind of conspiracy to not 'out' closeted politicians, fearing that doing so is harmful to their personal lives and public image. The 'official' broadcast and editorial news avoids editorializing or openly discussing gay politics (Don Lemon's self-outing excluded), and when it does discuss controversial topics, it presents them as 'you decide' topics with a 'for and against debate,' usually between one extreme side and another moderate. Thus, in many ways the media is no different than it was in the days of 'Tick Tock', when it followed politicians around and hid certain, agreed upon aspects of their personal lives from the public. The public believed it was getting an insider's play-by-play view of a politician's life, when in reality they were getting a post-production edition, not much different from reality television today. Rosin's statement now rings hollow. In 2013, if a politician cannot come out of the closet, then we have serious problems as a country. This means that the media are colluding with politicians to present a less diverse picture of the American political scene. It also means they are pandering to a fantastic construction created by the political class. Although as I write this segment, NPR (National Public Radio), which many on the Right would like to see abolished, has rewritten its handbook of ethics and vowed:

> In all our stories, especially matters of controversy, we strive to consider the strongest arguments we can find on all sides, seeking to deliver both nuance and clarity. Our goal is not to please those whom we report on or to produce stories that create the appearance of balance, but to seek the truth.
>
> At all times, we report for our readers and listeners, not our sources. So our primary consideration when presenting the news is that we are fair to the truth. If our sources try to mislead us or put a false spin on the information they give us, we tell our audience. If the balance of evidence in a matter of controversy weighs heavily on one side, we acknowledge it in our reports. We strive to give our audience confidence that all sides have been considered and represented fairly. (qtd in Rosen 2011)

This means they will not present an influential political and economic actor with interests on an issue as one side in the interest of balance. For example, when a study reveals that eating beef several times per week leads to cancer and heart disease, the media allow the representatives from the beef industry to claim that there is no evidence for the claim. Does the beef industry have studies to back this up? No. Is the beef industry being 'pleased' by the media? Yes. This is what counts for fair and balanced news in our dominant media to create the appearance of balance.

Yet the paradigm can also be reversed. *30 Rock*'s (2006–) second to last episode featured a live studio audience. Most of the show, however, focused on how *TGS* (*The Girlie Show*) would be abolishing a live audience, and whether or not Liz Lemon and Jack Donaghy would 'miss' it. They decide they won't and we (at home) are invited to watch a series of parodies of 1950s' live studio audience skits that actually serve to demonstrate just how inauthentic skits before a live studio audience had to be in order to arouse laughter. In one, Jon Hamm is dressed in black face with an over-the-top afro wig and overalls, and Tracy Morgan's character (playing Tracy Jordan) dressed respectably in a suit and tie meets him in the set of a 1950s kitchenette with a look of horror on his face (clearly, in 1950, or so he cannot believe the writers of the show would exploit black stereotypes for laughter) but they continue to do so – the scene makes very clear – because it pleases the live audience. The buzz around *30 Rock* is that it has always been an underappreciated show with low ratings but excellent reviews and several awards for writing and acting. The live show was a parody of *The Amos n' Andy Show* (1951–53), a real live show NBC once aired on its network using white actors in blackface to present stereotyped characters to live audiences. Entitled 'Alfie and Abner,' the skit polarized spectators with some criticizing its 'trafficking in racist stereotypes', while others praised its immanent critique of studio television's complicity with racial stereotyping.[10]

Morgan's character is obviously annoyed by Hamm's character in the scene, following a well-known ethical recipe for presenting controversial characters: there must be some measure of disapproval through incongruous presentation or pairing. In this case, Morgan's refusal to act with Hamm sets the scene for the implicit critique. In the debate about political comedy, it seems we (in this case, Americans) are worried about the laughter of those whom we don't imagine seeing the critique, and by that measure, getting the actual joke. This is the cultural worry about *South Park* and its effect on younger viewers, who may not understand many of the intertextual references to political movements, the struggles of the powerless within history and celebrity pasts presented in their parodies; or the worry that *Team America: World Police*, the movie with puppets playing American military superheroes that exploited several stereotypes (among them gay men and homophobic slurs, Hollywood liberals, the French, North Koreans and 'terrorists'), fails to impart on its viewer an overt political message when read in the context of its debut – 2005 – at the apex of the culture wars pitting neo-conservative elites of the Bush administration, who were pushing the war on terror, anti-gay marriage initiatives all over the country, and the slow-grinding pillorying of 'liberals' on Fox News (at its ratings height at the time). As David Holloway wrote, 'It is unlikely, in the heated

culture-war contexts of the time, that the only laughter provoked by this kind of material came from liberals chuckling at the film's witty self-referential irony' (Holloway 2011: 113). Steve Coogen schooled *The Guardian* readers about *Top Gear*'s (2002–) lack of humor after watching an episode where the hosts, Hammond and May, described the performance of a Mexican-designed sports car as if it were a stereotype of a poor Mexican:

> Hammond (left): […] Cars reflect national characteristics, don't they; so German cars are very well built and ruthlessly efficient, Italian cars are a bit flamboyant and quick, a Mexican car's just going to be lazy, feckless, flatulent, overweight... [laughter] leaning against a fence asleep, looking at a cactus, with a blanket with a hole in the middle as a coat.
>   May: It is interesting, isn't it, because they can't do food, the Mexicans, can they? Because it's all like sick with cheese on it, I mean... [laughter]. (Coogan 2011)

In his critique, he pointed out the importance of the assumption of audience knowledge (the British, he says, are too far removed culturally and geographically to know almost anything about Mexican people except inauthentic stereotypes), the identity of the performer (in this case as a well-respected role model and wealthy, older man) and the cultural importance of the medium (*Top Gear* is a more important and popular show to the BBC than even its news program World Service, overseas and is the 'public face' of the BBC). As Coogan sums up the lesson by referring to one of his own characters, Alan Partridge:

> If I say anything remotely racist or sexist as Alan Partridge, for example, the joke is abundantly clear. We are laughing at a lack of judgment and ignorance. With *Top Gear* it is three rich, middle-aged men laughing at poor Mexicans. Brave, groundbreaking stuff, eh? […] The Lads have this strange notion that if they are being offensive it bestows on them a kind of anti-establishment aura of coolness; in fact, like their leather jackets and jeans, it is uber-conservative (which isn't cool). (Coogan 2011)

Coogan's form follows Eco's rule very closely: in comedy, there is the violation of a rule (etiquette, for our purposes later in Chapter 2, US cultural memes about political correctness, etc.), but rule is Coogan's explanatory point: 'the violation is committed by someone with whom we do not sympathize because he is ignoble, inferior, and repulsive (animal-like) character' (Eco 1984: 2).

And yet, Simon Pegg has opined that Americans and Britons have a slightly different sense of irony. Americans must add that a dose of reassurance at the end of a joke, as with 'just kidding'. This add-on signifies the lack of trust we have for one another, or our 'uneasiness' with the aesthetics of irony, as Thomas put it. Pegg uses this example: 'If you don't come out tonight, I'm going to have to shoot you…just kidding', which he then explains thusly:

> Of course, being America, this might be true, because they do all own guns and use them on a regular basis (just kidding). Americans can fully appreciate irony. They just don't feel

entirely comfortable using it on each other, in case it causes damage. A bit like how we feel about guns […]. (Pegg 2007)

He relates this to Americans 'having a different approach to life', and are less reserved, 'more demonstrative' than the British. Of course this *Guardian* article was written to explain why his new movie would be a success in the United States and in England. Nevertheless, he pinpoints something that explains why the political comedy that I examine in the rest of this book will have a certain tone and style that is not confrontational, gives itself the benefit of being able to use doubt to correct itself when called out, and uses specific stylizations that allow it to communicate to specific 'youth' identified audiences. Furthermore, Pegg's exoneration of American satirical ignorance masks the fact that an important comedic rule is broken quite often in American cultural contexts. 'Irony means saying "~p" when, on the contrary "p" is the case. But if one asserts "~p" and immediately afterward informs one's interlocutor that "in fact, as you know, p is the case," the ironic effect is destroyed' (Eco 1984: 5). To the controversies incited by satire, parody and its misapprehension by American audiences we now turn. Chapter 2 presents the controversies over use of the 'f word' in stand up and its relationship to PC culture, Chapter 3 examines the recurring claim that women cannot be funny in American culture, Chapter 4 examines how *TDS* and *TCR* act as a mediating layer for youth using Generation X adaptive strategies I term 'progressive pathos' and finally, Chapter 5 looks at the role of *TDS* style comedy in other cultural contexts, notably Egypt and Iran in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Finally, I conclude with remarks about where comedy might be headed and its future in American politics.

Notes

1 This insight has been made in a number of recent books devoted to understanding the role of political comedy, including Day (2011), Gournelos and Greene (2011), Lewis (2007), and much earlier, Sconce (2002).

2 *The Daily Show* has been around since 1996, and was hosted by Craig Kilborn until Jon Stewart took over in 1998, before being renamed *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 1999.

3 Image can be found at: http://tinyurl.com/lbtof6e

4 Because Russia was largely agrarian and feudal, it was thought that the revolution needed an expert class of revolutionaries to lead the peasant proletariat to revolution. This is a vanguard party that successfully schools the proletariat to understand its place in history and servitude under capitalism. As for political comedy, many imply that it has a professional power beyond entertainment and relief for the masses of people who continue to be disenfranchised by corporate culture in America.

5 More broadly, 'interpellation' is the term I will use throughout the text. I want to underscore, however, that the term is incomplete. For example, Amber Day uses 'hailing' instead of interpellation, which is a synonym used by Althusser in the same essay to describe the process. As we look at affect later in this chapter, it is important to underscore that there are many

ways to describe this process, none of them entirely apt for contemporary political purposes. Lawrence Grossberg (2008) notes that he began to think about affect after he read Raymond Williams on the 'structure of feeling' (a term Sconce uses for smart films) though he never found it or interpellation adequate to the task of describing these processes. Williams never spelled out what he meant by 'structure of feeling,' and it has remained relevant to work in the humanities when looking at the feelings evoked when experiencing art, literature and film. I use interpellation to underscore the fleeting and momentary identification that takes place between a subject and a powerful media presence, whether celebrity or political pundit, although I reject the structuralism inherent in Althusser's theory of ideology, and see the process as taking place prior to cognition, much like contemporary theorists of affect do, such as Massumi, Grossberg and Connolly.

6   Thanks to Jeffrey Lawrence for this quote.

7   It is interesting, in this respect, to note the number of recent studies that make sweeping claims that conservatives are 'hard-wired' to think without progress on a number of issues including gay marriage, race relations (especially racial 'mixing'), and women's rights.

8   Many sociologists and psychologists view the inability of young people to adapt to existing social clubs and cliques as evidence of their being 'failed joiners' particularly in the case of random school violence and other destructive acts. However, I question the assumption that humans instinctively join existing organizations as a healthy behavior. Perhaps they might create new ways of thinking and organization if not for their perpetual interpellation as 'failed.' This goes against the Generation X tendency to 'refuse to signify' whether through dress, political viewpoint or tone of sociality (Sconce 2002: 355).

9   It is perhaps for this very reason that many on the right, including pro-family, anti-gay groups take out ads calling for 'non-cognitive elites' to spread their messages about the dangers of homosexuality to the US public.

10   For Abner and Alfie, see this link: http://tinyurl.com/l8x6mzd. Accessed 11 April 2013.

Chapter 2

Re-signifying the F-word: Comedy as Political Resistance or Entrenchment?

Society can and does execute its own mandates; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the social itself […]. (J. S. Mill 1989: 8)

Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity. (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 848).

Quit being a faggot and suck that dick! (Louis C.K. in *Chewed Up*)

As we have seen so far, political comedy is largely showcased on television, and has made a profound impact on post 9/11 politics. Another political trend that followed in the aftermath was the issue of gay and lesbian rights in the United States. Brought to the forefront of the American political consciousness largely by the social conservative wing of the Republican Party, several issues that highlighted the purported 'lifestyle' of gay and lesbian Americans were forced onto the table by initiatives seeking to oppose them: marriage, military integration, employment non-discrimination policy and public school access. Without giving an account of the detailed history, beginning with Anita Bryant's crusade against gay and lesbian teachers in public schools in the late 1970s and ending with the most recent attempts to amend the Constitution to ban gay marriage, I wish to foreground here that this history is intricate, complex, heart-wrenching and, in many ways, premature. As Craig Rimmerman has argued, it was the political Right who started this campaign against gay and lesbian Americans, and hoisted 'family values' as a threat onto the American people who were largely unprepared to have a mature discussion about it (Rimmerman 2008: 100–01). Sociologists describe the environment where people believe that homosexuals threaten their way of life and believe they will be misperceived to be gay as 'homohysteric' (Anderson 2011). A new body of scholarship which charts the decline of homophobia in young men in Great Britain, but also in the United States, is emerging and highly popular. This intriguing thesis has been picked up and amplified by the larger media who have not reviewed it in detail. Had they done so they would have seen that this decline does not translate into an acceptance of gender invariant performance; that is, an increasing tolerance for gender variant behaviors

by both men and women. It translates into an acceptance of same sex sexual preference for men and by men only. Indeed, it has little to say about women's acceptance of same sex preference in men, societal tolerance for lesbians and transgender people, and, most importantly for our forthcoming discussion in this chapter, for gender variance, especially when it violates expectations of idealized manly or womanly behaviors (Schippers 2007). Important translators of this acceptance have been comedians who engage the social and political aspects of the limits of gay tolerance in American culture. Chief among the most prominent supporters are Louis C.K., Chris Rock, Louis Black, Adam Sandler, Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*'s ongoing parody of intolerance.

This chapter explores recent attempts by satirists such as Ann Coulter, and the televised stand-up of comedians Chris Rock and Louis C.K, to re-signify or control use of the f-word ('faggot') in common usage. It will explore the political motivations for such re-significations after an in-depth exploration of masculinity studies on the topic of gender performativity and its relation to sexual orientation labeling. Second, the chapter will explore the political use of comic interventions in stand-up and romantic comedy as to whether they are acts of resistance or strategic invocations of gender conservatism. Referencing real events where the f-word has triggered acts of violence motivated by rage at gender injustice, it concludes by placing such comedic interventions into a narrative of contemporary masculinity.

The past decade has witnessed more public deployment of the words 'fag' or 'faggot' in order to shock and reassure audiences of various persuasions. There is no consensus about the use of this term at the level of the national imagination. It is deployed by different figures in different contexts with mixed results, its only sanction being moral or economic. The Supreme Court does not find the use of the term on protests signs obscene (e.g. 'God Hates Fags'), as they recently concluded in *Snyder v. Phelps 2010*. Although the court agreed that Westboro Baptist Church was using a private funeral to broadcast a public message that challenged the US' tolerance of homosexuality, they did not find it violated any sanctions that restrict the First Amendment. In fact, writing the lone dissenting opinion, Justice Alito did not argue that the Westboro Baptist Church's speech was homophobic. Rather, he argued that the Westboro Baptist Church's signs may have given onlookers the impression that the deceased soldier was gay, nearly conveying that to be a negative label. Furthermore, Roberts's majority opinion did not find obscene conduct: 'The protest was not unruly. There was no shouting, profanity or violence' (in Cotsirilos 2011). As hate speech laws are generally opposed in the US in law and public opinion, citizens are free to use what Judith Butler has famously called 'excitable speech' except where it can be proven to lead directly to harm or to a 'hostile environment,' two conditions nearly impossible to prove under existing legal statutes. Alongside the legal context of speech is the political context surrounding gay rights that has intensified in (mostly) negative ways since 2004, when eleven states passed legislation banning gay marriage, and President Bush called for support for a federal amendment to the Constitution banning gay marriage (even though DOMA [The Defense of Marriage Act] had already been in place since 1996 for the same reason).

While some argue this was simply a political wedge issue used by the GOP leadership to capture increasing votes from the party's far-right base, whose impact would be blunted by the Obama administration's rescinding of DADT ('don't ask, don't tell'), as well as the Justice Department's recent claim that they would no longer enforce DOMA in federal cases, the lasting effect of these battles lives on in American society and culture. To be sure, public attitudes show a remarkable shift as a majority (53 per cent) now support gay marriage (Murray 2013). As Republican strategist Mark McKinnon put it, 'The wedge has lost its edge' (Terbush 2011). This is in no way related, I would argue, to tolerance of homosexuality outside of marriage, or to the conditions of men and boys who do not perform the codes of hegemonic masculinity, or to women who seemingly do. In fact, for these people, especially ones without political representation, namely adolescent boys, such tolerance is wholly lacking. This raises more questions than it answers. Do media have a responsibility to refrain from inciting homophobia in populations that earnestly agree with parodies of public figures or satire about political candidates? In other words, what is going on in the minds of the 47 per cent of adults who don't support gay marriage? How do they relate to the deployment of the f-word? Furthermore, what about the citizens in training, K-12 students who routinely use homophobic labeling to enforce codes of masculinity in schools? Does the political education of child and adolescent peer cultures anticipate the humor of homophobic jokes in adulthood?

In many ways, the common culture in the US' nearly 85,000 public schools (and even in private ones) is a solid preparation for free speech culture later in adulthood. Completely unregulated speech surrounding gender norms is ubiquitous in such schools, as numerous studies have demonstrated over the last two decades (e.g. American Association of University Women's 'Hostile Hallways' series). Nearly every mass school shooting in the US between 1996 and 2012 was prompted by repeated public use of the term 'faggot' (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Webber 2003). Groups have created curricula to educate students about the harmful effects of bullying (e.g. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); The Safe Schools Initiative), but must be invited by schools to present their materials. Parents whose children are bullied usually resort to removing the individual student and home-schooling them to resolve the problem. Hannah Arendt analyzed the problem of harassment of racial minorities in public schools. As she argued, it is often provoked by the lack of adult authority in schools, informed by an American pedagogy that assumes:

> [...] that there exist a child's world and a society formed among children that are autonomous and must insofar as possible be left to them to govern. Adults are only there to help with this government. The authority that tells the individual child what to do and what not to do rests with the child group itself – and this produces, among other consequences, a situation in which the adult stands helpless before the individual child and out of contact with him. He can only tell him to do what he likes then prevent the worst from happening. The real and normal relations between children and adults, arising

from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in the world, are thus broken off [...]. (Arendt 1961: 500)

Arendt's larger point is that adults have declined to take responsibility for political problems and have left them to children to decide. Arendt's proposal was to expose the culture to racial sensitivity through marriage, rather than desegregation because adults marry. She suggested making interracial marriage legal. Leading GLTB (gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual) groups have followed this strategy by focusing on marriage as the top civil rights issue. Also, groups like GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network) have focused on image in media, pursuing shaming strategies similar to the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Articles in the *The Advocate* both defend and criticize this campaign. While it may seem to be 'policing' speech, it is not pursuing legal frameworks to limit speech. It is instead focused on forging a kind of sensitivity in American culture that prohibits use of the term, much like the n-word is largely shunned throughout mainstream culture. This argument is made elsewhere in her much criticized essay 'Reflections on Little Rock', where she argued that in the US, adults make children responsible for solving the essential conflicts in American society. Rather than taking the responsibility onto themselves, they shunt it to young people. I would go further and argue that the immaturity of much of adult political humor, satire and punditry also contributes to the lack of authority professional adults (teachers, principals, etc.) have or are willing to demonstrate to students in schools. Because of this, the current homophobic labeling drama in adult political and comedic culture and school culture is isomorphic. It is so not only because it is animated by the contemporary patriarchal context, one that is most definitely defined by present anxieties and fears about the state of masculinity, but because it shares a similar lack of principled leadership. Furthermore, this gender performance anxiety provokes the reflexive attempt to replace this lack of leadership with demonstrations of strength and toughness, which are to bolster the temporal sovereignty of a country whose power and influence is everywhere asserted, yet in decline. Masculine displays of competence, toughness and resoluteness become standard in a time of contingency and, as the US undergoes massive political declension, this mission becomes all the more urgent. In other words, we need the men in charge to be perceived as an idealized form of 'manly.' Homophobic labeling becomes a means to an end: producing the competent, sovereign statesman of the twenty-first century. He may be gay, but he won't be a faggot. This is because patriarchies repair themselves according to each progressive social, economic and political development. In schools they do the same. In the current milieu:

The patriarchal context makes 'fag' the stigmatized 'other.' Such ideological practices are supported by and support the social relations of gender persuasive in the wider society. In school, this is visible in how school authorities – teachers, counselors and principals give tacit support and sometimes even approval to the local practices and ideology of

'fag.' Tacit approval of the ideology was given when teachers pretended not to hear and, hence could ignore, the use of 'fag-baiting' language in the corridors and classrooms […]. (Smith 1998: 329)

Anderson Cooper would re-iterate this on *Ellen* when he said, 'If a kid in the classroom uses the n-word, a teacher will discipline that child […] A teacher will hear the f-word thrown around and do nothing about it' (qtd in Williams 2010). Yet, as Mary Elizabeth Williams over at Salon.com noticed, in not commenting on Eminem's use of 'bitch' in a Sunday interview, Cooper remains the 'moral compass of the nation's soul' in spite of this omission. This is important, she opines, as we (the East Coast liberal elite) 'are still wrangling with our criteria for what's acceptable, what's parody and what's hurtful'. Indeed.

The rest of this chapter presents several cases of use of the 'f-word' in different contexts than we've previously seen: stand-up comedy and political satire. The lines between them are increasingly blurred. Beginning with the case of Ann Coulter insinuating that John Edwards was a 'fag' at a Conservative Political Action Conference (C-PAC), the chapter begins exploring how and what audiences find so funny in Coulter's rhetoric and what some find deadly serious. Coulter's case opens our discussion because it showcases how such humor is received in mainstream culture. In the aftermath of her comments, it was de rigueur for politicians to condemn her words, but her live audience laughed. Next, the paper explores the comedy of Chris Rock and Louis C.K. in 2008, whose routines both featured jokes about the use of the word 'faggot' being determined by context. In both, the comedians present the jokes and then justify them by educating their audiences as to the importance of context when using the term. The chapter concludes by attempting to put the current definition of 'faggot' deployed by such humor in the context of the new masculine politics.

Ann Coulter's political 'satire'

In 2006, Ann Coulter called Al Gore a 'total fag' on *Hardball*, an MSNBC show presided over by Chris Matthews, and his only reply was to say he had to 'have her back on the show.' Critics pointed out that the mainstream media keeps the Coulter flame alight by inviting her to speak about her controversial statements (Media Matters 2007b). This episode included remarks about President Clinton being gay as well. As Coulter put it, 'I mean, everyone has always known, widely promiscuous heterosexual men have, as I say, a whiff of the bathhouse about them.' Excess sexuality, in this case extramarital sexuality, is associated with gay sexuality. Coulter's fans have insisted she is doing political satire, a genre of political commentary that entails mocking those in power because they are too powerful. There is confusion about Coulter because the media courts her words, but politicians condemn them as if they were part of legitimate political discourse. They are viewed as having an impact on public discourse about politics. While the media could ignore her discourse, they don't.

Appearing on television, Coulter is able to reach the largest audience and the least media literate in terms of critical abilities.

One commentator on Slate.com, Jack Shafer, argues that the mainstream media feels like if it doesn't condemn Coulter's speech and invite reply it will be viewed as sanctioning her rhetoric through silence. This should remind us of Simon Pegg's description of the difference between satire in the US and in the UK. In the US, he notes, there is always a moment of hesitation where the ironic performer must add 'just kidding' or give an explanation that relieves the listener of the burden of taking him seriously. This should also remind us of the 'transnational contingencies of satire' explored in Chapter 1, where satire in one national context fails in another, and possibly offends. Coulter is a satirist in the traditional sense in that she refuses to reassure her critics, *ever*. As we saw in Chapter 1, one of the reasons for this important qualifier is that the United States is diverse in many sorts of ways, not just in terms of race or ethnicity, but also morally. When appearing in MSM, political and social figures must take care not to alienate viewers with their opinions. Much like Leno, the game is to incite controversy while inviting the media to water it down to make it palatable to large viewing demographics. Coulter earns her reputation by refusing to give her interlocuters an opportunity to fix her statements; she speaks to a specific group of the public from the media pulpit. In doing so, she relies on her audience having a particular kind of knowledge: part Hollywood controversy and part conservative moral values. In 2007, she would return to *Hardball* and make more similar statements about political figures. There is a backstory to the Hollywood controversy she would rely on to use the f-word yet again.

It all starts in 2007, when Isaiah Washington, an actor on *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–) used the f-word during an argument on the set of the show with fellow star T.R. Knight. This episode created such a controversy that Washington reportedly went into a rehabilitation facility to repair his image. It is this incident that has sparked much commentary from comedians, some who argue it is possible to use the term in a certain context (Chris Rock, Louis C.K.), and some who argue it should never be used, like Adam Sandler vehicle and after school special, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007). Instead, we have seen pundits on the Right use the f-word for shock value to reassure a paranoid evangelical base that at least one party stands for heteronormative family values. Ann Coulter used the term to deride politically-correct culture (hereafter PC culture), and its inability to tolerate any criticisms she may have for 2008 Democrat primary candidate John Edwards at the annual C-PAC convention (Conservative Political Action Committee). The criticism of 'PC culture' is legitimized for the Right by reference to campus hate speech codes at private universities during the 1980s–90s. Not only is C-PAC important because it is a forum for the far-right in the United States, but also because the MSM covers it extensively: it brings together a cohort of causes from the NRA (National Rifle Association) to the Family Research Council, a social conservative think tank that believes homosexuality is a threat to the American family. Furthermore, there is no equivalent from the Left in American politics. C-PAC has been around over forty years; Ronald Reagan gave keynote speeches there twelve times, and its events are often broadcast in the mainstream media in a way that liberal groups' events

are not. In this speech she was talking directly to her own audience that shared her values about homosexuality. Here is the text of what she said:

> I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic Presidential candidate, John Edwards, but umm, it turns out that you have to go to rehab if you use the word 'faggot' so, [hair flip, eye roll, audience shocked laughter that builds] so, I'm kind of at an impasse, can't really talk about Edwards so I think I'll just conclude here and take your questions [...].[1]

As one so often thinks when they see Ann Coulter speak in public, one commentator at the bottom the particular clip cited asked, 'Which is worse, her words or the audience that laughed at them?' Coulter knows her audience and, more importantly, she knows what they know, the limits to their intelligence and the kind of statements they consider 'revolutionary'. While the video was obviously remediated over and over again – just as she no doubt intended when writing that last line – it brought Coulter even more attention as she then was able to appear on talk shows under the guise of 'explaining' herself for such a controversial statement. When asked to speak in her own defense she told Sean Hannity that her speech was about 'humor', and that it is part of her gimmick. As Media Matters reported:

> On the March 6 broadcast of his nationally syndicated radio show, Sean Hannity featured right-wing pundit Ann Coulter and Fox News contributor Pat Caddell to discuss Coulter's March 2 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference (C-PAC), in which she said she 'can't really talk about' Democratic presidential candidate and former Sen. John Edwards (NC) because 'you have to go into rehab if you use the word "faggot"'. Hannity said, 'Most of the speech was about humor. You were telling jokes the whole time here,' and went on to discuss *Grey's Anatomy* actor Isaiah Washington, who recently sought counseling after using the slur. Coulter responded by saying, '[T]hat's, of course, what I was referring to, and I don't think there's anything offensive about any variation of faggy, faggotry, faggot, fag. *It's a schoolyard taunt*. It means – it means wussy. It means, you know, Hillary giving a speech in a fake Southern drawl – that's faggy. A trial lawyer who weeps before juries is faggy. Lifetime-type TV, faggy.' Coulter then referred to the word 'faggot' as 'a totally excellent word'. (Media Matters 2007a, emphasis mine)[2]

Coulter's rhetorical style has been studied by political communication scholars, who see it as a form of 'diatribe', a 'public discourse generally characterized by combative, emotional and ideologically simple argument' (Klien & Farrar 2008: 10). They further analyze her gender-inconsistent rhetoric (as a woman deriding all gender norms and advancements that allow her access to the public sphere) as a strategy, and that it is 'by utilizing diatribe to appropriate performative traditions of cultural and Neo-conservatism, Coulter takes advantage of norms of diatribe to avoid the risks of internal self-contradiction and find a place of relative prominence in the US conservative power structure' (2008: 12). They note,

as do other scholars, that women have a difficult time being seen as authoritative in American political discourse, and therefore being heard for their political ideas. In order for conservative women to successfully integrate into the Fox News or MSNBC broadcast (ditto the C-PAC real-time community), some rely on shock value through diatribe that allows them entry into the public foray. This suggests that the American public does not anticipate hanging on the words of women, whatever their political persuasion. Rather, women in public life must constantly reverse the expectations that society has for their comportment using strategies of dress, speech, and deflection. In the case of conservatives like Ann Coulter, it is done through shock value.

From the Right, Andrew Sullivan would later take apart the logic of Coulter's 'joke' by writing that he understood the first part of it to be a comical stab at 'PC culture', reiterating that Washington had to go to rehab for using vile language. It was the second part, directed at John Edwards, to which he took offense:

> What Coulter did, in her callow, empty way, was to accuse John Edwards of not being a real man. To do so, she asserted that gay men are not real men either. The emasculation of men in minority groups is an ancient trope of the vilest bigotry. Why was it wrong, after all, for white men to call African-American men 'boys'? Because it robbed them of the dignity of their masculinity. And that's what Coulter did last Friday to gays. She said – and conservatives applauded – that I and so many others are not men. (qtd in Joyner 2007)

Coulter's defense was that she was explicitly not talking about gay men. As the theme of this chapter suggests, that justification for using the term 'faggot' in a derogatory manner is to apply it to straight men, or men who are acting out the social conformity of masculinity. Yet for one particular sector of the gay public (Sullivan) use of the term in any circumstance is anti-gay, even if it is not directed at a person. It is discriminatory because most of the common culture understands the term to be negative and only applicable to gay men, or men not acting out hegemonic codes of masculinity, the primary example for identifying/targeting this failure being the stereotypical conduct of gay men. As Burn puts it: 'Hearing heterosexuals insult each other by using the derogatory names for homosexuals also adds to the stigma and stress of being gay and makes gay people feel unwelcome in their own communities' (Burn 2000: 4). Noting that this is different from other forms of gay harassment because it is not 'directed at the gay person,' it nevertheless participates in a form of deceptive caricature of gay men that is an offshoot of inversion theory: a historically limited and discredited theory of sexuality that posits homosexuals as mirror images of opposite-sex heterosexuals (e.g. one partner is a 'man' and the other a 'woman' in either pairing that is presumed monogamous). Kimmel affirms this when he writes that a particular brand of homophobia, as displayed by Eminem, has become dominant where 'homophobia is far less about the irrational fears of gay people, or the fears that one might actually be gay or have gay tendencies, and more about the fears that *heterosexuals* have that others might *(mis)perceive them as gay*' (Kimmel 1994 cited in Kimmel & Mahler 2003). Central to perceiving them as gay is mostly to see them as

effeminate (e.g. John Edwards 'Open Letter to Himself').[3] This is the homohysteria that Anderson identified, and McCormack believes to be in decline, even, as he says, in spite of the fact that the culture wars created the homohysteria. However, I will argue throughout the rest of the chapter that while a certain kind of homophobia against gay men based on their sexual preference may indeed be in decline, there is a new problem on the rise: femhysteria. Examples generally follow the codes of masculinity, such as being unconcerned with one's looks (e.g. the Breck Girl violates this taboo) or to be accused of having your wife fight your battles for you (e.g. Elizabeth Edwards calling Ann Coulter on Chris Matthews show to confront her about her personal attacks on their family. Coulter would later imply this was being a 'wussy'). These are public behaviors that are isolated and used to humiliate particular individuals, or they are often associated with trends on the progressive end of politics and social life that emphasize a shared work effort towards and credit for accomplishments, whether children, marriage or career. They also often tend to set up men on the Left in politics to be called a 'fag'. Some political scientists have conducted research arguing that the failures of the Democrats during the past decade can be largely attributed to the way Americans gender policy issues. For example, foreign policy and the economy are seen as masculine policy objectives and have elected Republicans during these times, while education and social security, for example, are seen as feminine issues and appropriate for Democrats to handle. Not coincidentally, there is the famous debate between Carter and Reagan in which Carter had knowledge on his side and he repeatedly asked Reagan to respond. Reagan looked at the camera and said, 'Oh, no, there you go again.' And, Reagan eventually won the election. Insinuating that Carter was too smart and was 'nagging him' made Reagan appear more masculine than Carter and won him the election. The identification of a person's behavior as 'nagging' signifies a power inequity. As Amanda Marcotte writes, when discussing people's confusion over the so-called 'mysterious, unchangeable struggle between men and women' with regard to housework, there was never a more relevant example of the personal being political. Her analysis gets at the heart of the gender politics being deployed by Reagan during that debate, and by Coulter at C-PAC and on *Hardball*. As Marcotte writes:

> [...] 'nagging' is not an objective description of a behavior. For a nag to take place, it requires that the person being asked to do a household chore feel put upon. Without the recipient labeling it that way, it's not nagging. It's simply asking. The reason that women 'nag' more is because of the power difference between a woman and her husband in typical marriages; women don't have the social space to ignore requests or to procrastinate endlessly, creating a situation where the ask has to come up again [...]. (Marcotte 2012a)

It seems that men in the Democratic Party don't have the space either. Edwards would be further ridiculed for unmanly traits by having his wife defend him to Coulter. Coulter, knowing she had mainstream culture on her side, dropped the 'free speech' insinuation into her defense. In the debate with Elizabeth Edwards, whenever Edwards made a point about civility in American politics, Coulter repeatedly said, 'Okay, I'll stop writing books' or, 'Okay, you have

just told me I can't speak.' Edwards's response was that Coulter's language 'debases our political dialogue' and it 'lowers it precisely at the time it should be raised.' Coulter repeatedly brought the debate back to the issue of free speech, insinuating (again, this strategy relies on audience agreement, understanding and confirmation, which Coulter received from the crowd) that if someone asks you to refrain from personal attacks on their family you are somehow in front of a Supreme Court that is attacking your free speech. In reality, the only court was the audience of the show, where Coulter clearly had the upper hand. This is commonplace on the Right: support for masculinity and attacks against feminine attributes in men are great ways to defeat the political opposition in the media. Even Sullivan's critique of Coulter upholds this standard, as his issue is only that she says minority men are not 'men' or are emasculated. He is uninterested in the way that Coulter's diatribes trade on a debasement of non-butch gay comportment or the feminine. Rather, Sullivan is concerned with how Coulter 'robs him of the dignity of his masculinity.' By the end, we will look at what constitutes this 'dignity' and relate it back to recent scholarly work that argues the f-word has been re-signified, and that this was made possible by a reduction in homohysteria in both British and American culture. For now, let's continue our journey through American attitudes toward right-wing satire.

Whereas Sullivan's criticism is nuanced, separating out what he sees as Coulter's legitimate comedic performance about PC culture from her illegitimate ploy to get the audience at the C-PAC conference to affirm their homophobia by laughing at her emasculation of John Edwards, most of the prominent media and political criticism focused on it as inappropriate political language, for example, as an 'offensive slur.' This is important, since Coulter defines herself as a 'polemicist,' a calling not usually successful in countries with strong libel laws. In the US, we have public interest groups that focus on awareness of the role of language in defaming groups and individuals; such organizations bump up short against libel. One prominent group following Coulter's speech was Media Matters. Media Matters, a 'progressive research and information center dedicated to comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the US media,' was founded by David Brock, former Richard Mellon Scaife-funded author of *The Seduction of Hillary Rodham*, a right-wing attack on Clinton's true intentions as First Lady, and a later exposed lie about Clinton's relationship to Paula Jones. Brock later admitted to being paid to decorate the truth about the Clintons in the book and other publications in order to participate in a larger movement by the Right to impeach Bill Clinton during his years in office. During this time Brock was close to Coulter, as well as Laura Ingraham, another right-wing pundit. Of Coulter, Brock says in his book *Blinded By the Right*, she was angry in a way that he could not explain, whereas he knew that Ingraham had real personal and understandable reasons for supporting right-wing causes that may inadvertently discriminate against women (Brock 2005: 181–83). Coulter he finds to be a contradiction. The existence of Media Matters is relevant because it is only against a backdrop of serious discussion about the role of language or 'excitable speech' that diatribe is effective, and that political comedy incites the audience to laughter. Hence, without the serious backdrop provided by Media Matters (and the looming stereotype of 'PC culture' Americans believe they increasingly inhabit), Ann Coulter would be less effective at gaining

public access through diatribe. Media Matters is possibly unaware that it is the dead wood in a comedy duo with Coulter. Other groups and public figures provided the obligatory condemnation of Coulter's words, describing them as 'offensive' and 'anti-gay', including John McCain, Mitt Romney, GLAAD, Ted Kennedy, Howard Dean, etc. Coulter responded in an e-mail to the *New York Times*: 'C'mon, it was a joke. I would never insult gays by suggesting that they are like John Edwards. That would be mean' (CNN 2007).

On another register of the culture, one finds fans of Coulter in many gay men. They may disagree with Coulter politically, yet are nevertheless able to see her as the 'ultimate fag hag' and someone who, in calling politicians 'faggots,' is performing a self-parody. Far from the Habermasian seriousness of Media Matters, such queer fondness for Ann Coulter may participate in the knowledge that it is living in what Brett Easton Ellis has recently called 'post-empire': Ellis describes the term in an article titled 'Charlie Sheen is Winning' where he argues that Sheen's disregard for himself and his 'authentic' reputation is what makes for public approval at present. He writes:

> To Empire gatekeepers, Sheen seems dangerous and in need of help because he's destroying (and confirming) illusions about the nature of celebrity. He's always been a role model for a certain kind of male fantasy. Degrading perhaps, but aren't most male fantasies? Sheen has always been a bad boy, which is part of his appeal – to men and women. What Sheen has exemplified and has clarified is the moment in the culture when not caring what the public thinks about you or your personal life is what matters most – and what makes the public love you even more (if not exactly CBS or the creator of the show that has made you so wealthy). (Ellis 2011)

In post-empire, making a parody of oneself in public is the highest form of authenticity. Queer admirers of Coulter see her as just such a figure and are fans because of it. One fan on Jezebel.com wrote, in reference to the quote about John Edwards, 'While shit like this is why mirthless straights find Coulter boring already, we realized that "becoming a parody of oneself" seems to be the fastest route to reinventing oneself as a gay icon' (Moe 2007). And, after watching the clip of Coulter's C-PAC performance:

> For the first time I watched the YouTube clip of her calling calling John Edwards a faggot[4] at the Conservative Political Action Conference. *Not only did she not technically call him a faggot*, she made a pithy observation on the absurdity of Hollywood and celebrity using his country dandiness. And also, she has a point John Edwards is kind of faggy. Takes one to know! (Moe 2007)

Another blogger over at Gawker.com wrote:

> Really, we didn't think too much of it, just because ol' Annie has spent the better part of her life in the company of homosexuals. After years of standing by her gays – and

what right-wing woman hasn't done time with a gaggle of sniping queens? Hello, Nancy Reagan? – we figure Ann has basically earned the right to reclaim 'faggot' all on her own […]. (Choire 2007)

Concurring, comedy writer Steve Young argued that Ann Coulter's comments were a genius form of political satire:

The real brilliance is in the fact that in the joke she never told us where she would have used the word 'faggot' if in fact she didn't have to go to rehab. Similar to when Ann opined that, 'My only regret with Timothy McVeigh is he did not go to the New York Times Building.' Never did she say that McVeigh might do when he visited the Times. *That shows enormous respect for the audience*. That is what we call in the business, a gift. And that masterful crafting, along Ann's long and remarkable history of utilizing incisive satire to make a powerful point should exclude her from such harsh criticism […]. (S. Young 2007, emphasis mine).

And that is precisely the point. Coulter does not re-signify the 'f-word' by challenging its common use or meaning. Instead, she pulls back from using it directly and allows the audiences' laughter to confirm the 'new' definition of homophobia: a straight man who fails to live up to common codes of masculinity. It is, as Kimmel argues, 'The hate that makes men straight' (Kimmel & Messner 2003: 1446).

Not gay

In recent stand-up and comedy movies we witness an ongoing theme of re-signifying 'faggot' to mean something other than 'gay.' Trey Parker and Matt Stone's 2004 spoof on the politics of the war on terror, *Team America*, featured Hollywood actors protesting the war in Iraq and belonging to F.A.G., the Film Actors Guild of America. The puppet actors in the movie are portrayed as clueless about politics, actors who are unintelligent yet polemical and moralistic about complex geopolitical affairs. They represent the Hollywood PC culture referenced in Sullivan, Coulter and Young's similar defenses of free speech. Seeing themselves as public intellectuals, these actors decide the boundaries of legitimate speech and political action using their status as celebrities. Later, in 2009, *South Park* devoted an entire episode to having the kids (known for their lack of knowledge about the meaning of curse words) prove that 'fag'(făg) (n) means (1) An extremely annoying, inconsiderate person most commonly associated with Harley Riders (2) A person who owns or frequently rides a Harley. GLAAD criticized the episode and its writer and director, Matt Stone, for trading cultural insensitivities for humor. While GLAAD insisted that it understood the idea that words can be re-signified, it did not think the prospect of such a fate befalling 'fag' was likely in the United States in 2009. For progressives like Stone, Louis C.K. and Chris Rock, 'fag'

is only a word, and one that means incompetence or annoying-ness. Their ideological perspective is that the fact of being gay and owning that identity is now wholly different from the context in which 'fag' is usually deployed. They all make the point that context is the most important arbiter of the legitimacy of use. For all of them, heterosexuals can be faggots. (I guess they think this is a *new* deployment of the term they've discovered, especially since nineteenth- and early twentieth-century explanations for homosexuality relied on the idea that same sex desire was really about being an incompetent heterosexual.) Yet, staying within their argument about context, one never finds them calling women faggots. Rock says women can be called this in his performance but never manages to work it in. So, the point is that heterosexual men can be called 'faggots', and there's an imperative that one may call the heterosexual or gay man acting like a faggot out on it. Furthermore, Rock and C.K. are known heterosexual men, and they both trade on heteronormative stereotypes in their routines, especially the old standby form of 'women are terrible in this way and men are terrible in that way'. In order to stay within context, let's review some of their comedy routines.

Chris Rock

Chris Rock's 2008 performance *Kill the Messenger* featured a riff on 'acting like a faggot.' This performance aired on HBO, and was a compilation of three performances in New York; London; and Johannesburg, South Africa. Ostensibly, the part of this routine concerning the 'f-word' was about how, in the absence of knowledge about someone's sexuality (it is beside the point), someone can be labeled a 'faggot' where the word means something more like 'idiot'. Rock's treatment of the term begins after he references the (then recent) firing of Isaiah Washington from ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* for offending a fellow cast member, T.R. Knight, during an argument, after which he disclosed publicly his gay identity. Later, Washington claimed to have been provoked into using the 'f-word' in a fight with Patrick Dempsey, where he argued Dempsey had delegitimized his masculinity, making him feel like a 'P-word, B-word and the F-word.' When later asked at the Emmy's if he had used the word, he said, 'No, I did not call him a faggot.' Next, T.R. Knight went on *Ellen* to discuss it. After this, Washington was reported to have checked into a treatment facility for psychological testing.

Rock begins with discussion of Isaiah Washington being fired from *Grey's Anatomy*:

What if the person that he called a faggot...was acting like a faggot? You don't have to be gay to act like a faggot. You don't even have to be a man to act like a faggot. Anybody can act like a faggot. Let me give you an example: I love Gwen Stefani. I think No Doubt is one of the best groups in the world; I keep a No Doubt CD in my car and I sing that shit to the end. I'm like 'Don't speak, I know just what you're sayin', oh, please stop explainin'' I won't even get out my car 'til the shit's over. I'm like 'you know you're good, you know

you're real good…la-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la-la… [high pitched] Don't! Don't!' I fuckin' love me some Gwen Stefani! Now, if I'm drivin' my car, and I'm at the light, and you in the car behind me, and the light's red, and I'm just sittin' there blasting some Gwen Stefani and I'm like 'ain't no hollaback girl! Ain't no hollaback girl! Ain't no hollaback!' And you in the car behind me and the light's red – cool. But then the light turns green. And I don't see it, because I'm in Gwen Stefani heaven. And I'm just goin' 'Ain't no hollaback girl! Ain't no hollaback girl! Ain't no hollaback!' Now the light starts fuckin' blinking! It's gettin' ready to turn red again, and I *still* don't see it, and I'm in my car going 'This shit is bananas! B-na-na-na-nas! This shit is bananas! B-na-na-na-nas!' Now if you in the car behind me, and that light's gettin' ready to turn red, and I'm going 'this shit is bananas! B-na-na-na-nas!' If you in the car behind me, you have the right to go 'HEY, FAGGOT! The light's about to change!' Shit, even Elton John would call me a faggot at that moment. It's not the word, it's the context in which the word is bein' said![5]

So, a person (Chris Rock) is lost in a musical performance in the privacy of his car. Failing to notice how his lack of attention affects traffic and other people's ability to navigate the roadway constitutes the appropriate 'context' for being called a 'faggot'. The fact that even Elton John would agree makes his use of the term seem legitimate since the best known openly gay musician on the planet would agree that sexual orientation was not an issue in this case. However, background knowledge of recent media provides the audience with the ability to laugh at the joke since it was well known at that time that Eminem had in the past been criticized for calling musician Moby a 'baldheaded fag' who was 'too old, give in.' In addition, Eminem was using it in interviews and other public places, often insinuating it in song lyrics and visual displays in videos. The rehab that Eminem received came from Elton John in the form of image correction when they performed at the Grammy's together in 2001 (the same year of the Moby incident). Rehab is part of the set up as it is in Coulter's joke when she directly referenced rehab and Isaiah Washington's famous stint in one following his homophobic labeling incident. It segues to Rock's joke, and is an integral part of Coulter's.

Rock's insistence that the context in which the word is used matters may undermine his plea for tolerance throughout the performance. He thanks gay members of the audience for buying tickets, cites his gay friends, and emphatically insists that the 'f-word' can be used in ways that are not harmful to real gay people. However, other examples make his arguments about context fail the test of tolerance. It is these examples that generate the most laughter. At one point when discussing the *Grey's Anatomy* on-set controversy, Rock speculates that maybe T.R. Knight really was acting like a 'faggot,' at least according to the way Rock has now redefined it for the audience as incompetent or silly. He then suggests that if that were true, Knight's behavior may have made Washington mad. To that, he exasperates in solidarity with Washington, 'I've got to be PC even when I'm mad?' Rock 'speculates' about Knight's behavior in order to make the joke work. For comedians, this Hollywood incident is great comedic fodder because no one really knows what actually

happened on the set of *Grey's Anatomy* for sure. Other cast members declined to comment (e.g. Katherine Heigl, McDreamy), and Knight and Washington kept mum on the incident once the rehab was announced. T.R. Knight is, in fact, gay, but Rock never mentions this in the monologue. There is still a level of deniability for Rock, though, because Knight was not publicly out at the time of the incident, and so Washington may not have in fact known about his sexual orientation. One wonders, however, what the other gay employees on the set of *Grey's Anatomy* thought that day. Finally, there is a point that firing someone for an angry argument that gets out of hand is a bit extreme. Perhaps all these jokes and satire work for American audiences because the leadership and authority on issues of speech and harm is so irresponsible and immature. Scholars and legal experts on second generation discrimination agree that corporations and other important public leaders have found ways to appear progressive on issues of workplace bullying, and other forms of discrimination that stem from basic prejudices, without altering basic perceptions of the behaviors they are condemning. The rehab response is classic. *South Park* devoted an entire episode to men who go to rehab for sex addiction after Tiger Woods's divorce media event. Examples include workplace racism, sexism, heterosexism and extramarital affairs by high-ranking officials. The contradiction is exposed between doing something and doing it effectively in these cases. Politicians are forced to resign from office in 'shame' for extramarital affairs and go into rehab when these are personal issues. Celebrities and radio newscasters are fired for offensive language and 'slurs' without corporate leaders explaining why the slurs and language are offensive and why the punishment fits the offense. Corporate ignorance and fear of legal sanction become the only form of public working-through for complex issues of gender, race and heteronormativity. No wonder audiences find the few people willing to discuss them in a more complex manner are comedians. No wonder comedians have become so authoritative in American life. Louis C.K. is a longtime comedy writer whose jokes have appeared in monologues over the last decade of conservative retrenchment in American life. He is seen as very authoritative on issues regarding gender and sexuality.

Louis C.K.

Louis C.K. has emerged from the last four years in television and stand-up to become 'the funniest man on television' according to *Entertainment Weekly*. After a failed HBO show based loosely on his real life and stand-up career, he launched *Louie* on FX in the summer of 2011. This show is combined with numerous stand up shows (one in particular he broadcast to great success over the web, avoiding concert venues). He has been lauded as one of the greatest comedians of the decade, and he is much loved by the political and cultural Left, who see him as a poignant commentator on American life, especially the quirky social relations between men and everyone else. As a divorced father of two girls, with a co-custody arrangement in NYC, and as a successful stand-up, he meditates on his own life and makes it into comic fare. He has become something of a cultural bellwether for

straight men, especially Generation Xers, on how to think about sexuality and responsibility in middle age. For these reasons, I am highlighting his 2008 stand-up routine *Chewed Up*, because it opens with an edgy commentary on gay men.

Louis C.K.'s stand-up performance *Chewed Up* was given in 2008 at the Berklee Center in Boston, and echoed similar themes to Rock's show. In this Emmy-nominated performance, Louis C.K. opened with a segment called 'Offensive Words,' where he discusses how he 'misses' the word 'faggot.' This is after he calls out to an audience member, 'Hey, faggot.' C.K. begins by saying that he used the word all the time as a kid and had no idea what it referred to 'for real.' He argues it refers to other boys 'acting like faggots.' As a staple of C.K.'s humor, he begins by complimenting the group he is about to discuss. In this segment he says that he has a lot of respect for gay men because they can 'suck dick.' What follows is a short explanation of how he values their ability to do something he cannot, replete with hand gestures and facial grimaces to demonstrate how difficult it would be for him to give a blow job to a guy. He does say, 'I've put myself there in my mind. I just can't do it. Because I'm afraid, that's the only reason.' 'There's a strength in being able to do that, I believe,' he says. He then discusses how if he were to see two guys giving each other blow jobs he wouldn't call them 'faggots' unless 'one of them stopped and took the dick out of his mouth and started being all faggy, and annoying, and saying faggy things like, "People from Phoenix are Phoenicians," or something like that […].' The audience roars with laughter at this point in the joke. It is the most important part of it. If one pays attention to the tone of voice he uses, it is clear C.K. is trading on stereotypes of femininity, using a nasally voice, saying something silly, insisting on making a point, all while an audience shakes their heads in laughter – these are all effeminate qualities.

C.K. goes on to discuss other words he can no longer use because they've been used incorrectly to hurt people, like 'cunt', a word he describes as referring to something bad for most people that reminds him of a 'flower or a piccolo.' C.K.'s performance does not refer at all to the Washington incident, although it must be fresh in the audiences' mind in early 2008 having been referenced over and over again in different formats in the mainstream media. Part of his strategy is to frame the way his audience thinks about the word and its meaning. He allows the audience to laugh, but at gestures and imitations of behaviors, as does Rock. Being a 'faggot' in C.K.'s comedy is not only about being incompetent, it is also about having an annoying personality, something that interrupts the flow of manly desire and expression. Sucking a dick is masculine. In fact; C.K. is educating his audience to respect such masculine displays. However, the repository of disgust is channeled to the feminine interruption of respectable blow jobs; figuratively, this refers to male homosocial desire. Homosexual sex acts become part of the repertoire of acceptable homosocial relating. In this way, the 'f-word' is re-signified, but it only spells liberation for a certain kind of gay person, a man who 'gets down to business' and gives head. Any other behaviors that may be viewed as gender ambiguous are now properly assigned to the category of incompetent person. Over and over in interviews, C.K. praises gay men in contrast to straight men. Following an episode of his television comedy *Louie* in 2010, which featured a bunch of guys discussing the meaning

of the term 'faggot': 'If it's not the real explanation of the word faggot, I don't think it matters. The point of the scene isn't to be accurate. It's not a news show. It's an exchange between characters' (NPR 2010). Some leeway should be granted to sitcoms, I believe, as they act out stereotypes in order to condemn and transform the audience's attitudes over time if they force them to identify with the subject under discussion in some way or they hold a mirror up to private attitudes the way Carol O'Connor did as Archie Bunker. Stand-up is different in that the audience has come to see Louis C.K. and learn his opinions about what is funny, which, in a sense, means what he thinks is true or important about life. From C.K., Rock and Coulter's point of view, the goal is to see what they can get away with, just how far they can go. When they protest that their acts have been taken out of context (at least for Rock and C.K.), they are right because of all the work they've done in their acts that leads up to the point where they drop the biggest, most daring statements in, as when Rock asserts that 'even Elton John would agree' with him – he's already primed the audience with his earlier comments about PC culture and made them comfortable with nearly every comment he will make on the topic thereafter. No matter how much comedians can protest they are not really presenting their true opinions onstage, American culture has demonstrated it doesn't understand this point. The professions of political satire, punditry and comedy have become blurred. Nowhere is this more clear than on the topic of masculinity. What is at stake, however, in both Rock and C.K.'s performances, is heterosexual masculinity. It's about demonstrating the straight man's limitations to allow for a particular aspect of gay masculinity and feminine performativity to be seen as legitimate. While acts of sexual conquest, no matter what kind, are now entered into the canon of masculine identity, acts of incompetence, vanity or triviality – caring about one's on-camera appearance, insisting on semantic exactness, enjoying sex with lots of people (in other words, violating American standards of monogamy) or getting carried away by music – are the new femhysteric protocols, and they work best on men. In order for that to happen, behaviors seen as 'feminine' or 'womanly' must be abjected from homosocial desire. This is mostly accomplished through the celebration of gay men's sexual integrity,

> And it's funny because, you know, gay men have to – they're put sort of a crucible. And I'm speak – you know, it's not – I'm just taking liberty in saying this. Gay men have to go through something to own their – who they are. They get beat up. They get ostracized. Whatever they go through, if they survive it, they come out very confident people. They come out having been tested and having to really figure out who they are to get through it, because I think that's how you get through any kind of a test is by really finding your strengths and believing in yourself. So a lot of gay people who are still standing and still strong, that's who they are. Heterosexual men have never been put through that test. We don't get…nobody goes, oh, my God, you like women? And you don't have to defend it for your whole life. So we're not so sure about our sexuality. I think that's one reason why heterosexual men attack gay people or are afraid of them because they're now confident and they've gone through this, but we don't know who we are sexually. We're a mess.

So I think that that's why the two sides of the sexual barrier is such an interesting – it's such an interesting conflict. (NPR 2010)

Lacking such integrity or trial-by-fire confidence in their own sexuality, straight men are 'a mess.' In order to get to this conclusion, however, feminine, passive or camp ways of being and acting must be rejected, and masculine hazing as a ritual is affirmed as a necessary part of the developmental process toward becoming a 'real man'. As with Rock, gay men are affirmed for their competence, the seriousness with which they take to tasks, and the important factor is that they do not lose themselves in music or opinions. Loss of self-possession seems to be the most important factor that leads to losing one's right to be considered masculine, to being called a 'fag', or in Coulter's additional parlance a 'wussy.' C.K.'s gay men are tough: they are not the combination of 'wimp' and 'pussy.' Against the backdrop of deteriorating politics, the loss of individual sovereignty represented by the citizen in liberal democracies, and still celebrated no less than a decade ago by postmodern thinkers, we now have a gender conservatism that seeks to preserve or shore up masculinity for a new type of man. The definition of who counts as a man will be expanded to include gay men, but only if they continue to follow codes that eschew gender traits associated with femininity or passivity, and boldly take on the sexual variant of possessive individualism long dominant in Anglo-American culture. Andrew Sullivan will be invited to join the party; however, Ann Coulter, in following in the path of Phyllis Schlafly, will probably be ignored for her efforts. Along the way, a public campaign to limit the use of this injurious term will continue, and supporters of its use, even comedic ones, may succumb to the pressure. However, it will be fine as long as identity politics plays a strict role in determining who is included in masculine life.

If, as John Limon has suggested, Schopenhauer defined comedy as 'the revenge of the sensuous against the conceptual' (Limon 2000: 7), then we witness some evidence for this in the attempt to use and re-signify the 'f-word'. It is only against a backdrop of culture that believes its speech is under siege that the sensuality of gay men can finally be defended. Each performer examined in this paper has begun their comedic argument with the assumption that there are words that cannot be spoken or liberal regimes of censorship at work in American life. This is a socially constructed reality that contradicts the highest laws of the land surrounding free speech and the most commonplace acts of bullying in schools, bars, fraternities, workplaces and public spaces, at street lights or outside gay bars (except where corporate identity is at stake). The primary event that solicited these comedic performances was the workplace 'slip' involving Isaiah Washington that was not filmed or witnessed by the public. This event alone, while probably true and also injurious to T.R. Knight, erupted into a media storm, the likes of which should make Hollywood an object of scorn by comedians. After all, it is this culture that invented the rehabilitation model for bad behavior, as if most of their fans did not hear such words on a daily basis, use them in conversations with friends or know of their ubiquity. This event provides proof of censorship culture, and allows comedians like Rock and C.K. to enact the revenge of the sensuous against the conceptual:

the conceptual being the inclination to decide which words are allowed and which are not as if one were making a list; the sensuous being the psychic enjoyment of getting away with using a term that is often accompanied by physical consequences. George Carlin, following Lenny Bruce, is the comedy pioneer on this front with 'Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television' (those words: shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits). Performers like C.K. and Rock often mention Carlin as having influenced their comedy, but Carlin's performance was challenging ongoing judicial action against speech censorship. He was arrested for performing 'Seven Words' in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1972, and Lenny Bruce was arrested earlier in 1966 for saying nine words in his act (including the seven above, plus two more, ass and balls). Bruce was put on trial for violating obscenity laws in California (which he won). Carlin's performance was aired over the radio and led to a Supreme Court ruling overturning the laws in question which were a product of a localized conservative culture in the US where town leaders determined legal speech. I leave it to the reader to decide whether or not Rock and C.K. are taking on the same kind of conservative forces and contributing to truly progressive change.

One aspect of these performances by Rock and C.K. I have found disturbing is their bad conscience; that is, they uphold a popular progressive stance of toleration toward the sexual preferences of gay men while they denigrate gender performances culturally viewed as womanly. I have politely referred to them as moments of education for the audience, but they can also be viewed as a means of deflecting responsibility for redeeming the f-word and constructing a new definition for it. However, all they have accomplished really is the expansion of manly to include same sex preference for men. Specifically, they have no regard for the alienation and stigma of audiences who represent or perform the passive and/or feminine behaviors that will shortly be abjected from legitimate (read: masculine) conduct. Rock speaks directly to his fans before the joke begins and thanks his gay fans who he knows are in the audience, are his friends and who paid for the tickets to see the show. He warns that it is not the words but the 'context' in which the words are said. C.K. slams heterosexual men as a 'mess' to make the injury to some gay men seem less harsh (he doesn't even seem to be aware that this could hurt transgender people or women). This assumes a kind of equivalence between the injury to the feminine and the recompense of criticizing straight men. Ironically, Coulter came out of this analysis with the most integrity, even though her words, style and belief systems are conservative and add nothing to gender progress. Perhaps that is her appeal: while she confirms the fantasies of social conservatives, she does not apologize to anyone for her words. Squirming in a chair with Chris Matthews while debating Elizabeth Edwards, Coulter did not offer any apologies, nor did she attempt to separate her comments from their personal impact as Rock and C.K. did. Instead, she defended her speech as free speech; the subtlety and tact (or bad conscience) of so-called good liberals was lost on her. In this way, she does perform to the standard of irony set by Lisa Colletta in the sense that those who 'get' her joke 'cringe,' those who lack irony or shared insight agree in earnest, and a cohort of fans see her as performing camp drag; that is, Annie the Trannie performing a parody of femininity itself.

The decline of homophobia?

> [T]he desire to be associated with a hegemonic form of heterosexual masculinity has more to do with the personal avoidance of stigma than with the promotion of all men over women […]. (Anderson 2011: 80)

Earlier in the chapter, I referenced Eric Anderson's now popular work on the decline of homophobia in the US. Throughout the decade, he has conducted research with Mark McCormack, a British sociologist, who has conducted studies of grammar schools in England and found that homophobic language has declined. Instead he argues that as homohysteria, specifically defined as the fear of being labeled gay, has declined, young men feel more comfortable around other gay men, and have turned once stigmatized words like 'fag' into terms of affection for their new straight and gay male friends. As McCormack defines it, homohysteria, briefly stated, 'describes the fear of being homosexualized' and has three main variables: 'mass awareness that homosexuality exists in a static sexual orientation, (2) a cultural Zeitgeist of disapproval towards homosexuality, and (3) disapproval of men's femininity because it is associated with homosexuality (i.e. feminine men are thought gay)' (McCormack 2011: 87). Both McCormack and Anderson's research has been widely disseminated in the US, appearing on the Huffington Post, *The Advocate*, *The Economist* ('It's Getting Better!'), *Psychology Today* (Men 2.0), OpenDemocracy, *The Guardian*, and so on. However, the popularity of his thesis obscures the fact that the research says absolutely nothing about lesbian women or transgender persons. Furthermore, it says nothing about what 'feminine' behaviors are isolated for acceptance. Clearly, if homophobia can shift and change (perhaps decline), it can also mutate into a new form. Against this liberationist thesis, I propose that while McCormack and Anderson are correct that the stigma associated with homosexuality in men has lessened in the aftermath of the most tumultuous episodes in the culture wars, combined with a highly salient public relations campaign that included comic relief to educate the American public about gay and lesbian people, they are not telling the whole story in their research. Left out is the key insight as to where the hate went when it left the spectral figure of the gay man. We have not abolished the archetypal figure of the manly man; instead we have expanded our definition as a culture to include sexual preference at the expense of gender performance. Here it is instructive to recall that Raewynn Connell's path-breaking work on masculinity emphasized that the root of the problem with homophobia is not masculinity but patriarchy, or what men gain from the 'patriarchal dividend' that results from an unequal balance of power between sexes;

> […] the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order. The patriarchal dividend is reduced as gender equality grows. Monetary benefits are not the only kind of benefit. Others are authority, respect, service, safety, housing, access to institutional power, and control over one's own life […]. (Connell 2002: 142)

A much larger point could be made here or elsewhere in the essay, citing Connell on the 'short term cost of maintaining a long term privilege' (Connell 1995: 167); that is, in encouraging boys to develop a taste for competitive sports to the exclusion of all other activities, to tolerate hazing and bullying without assistance, to shun intellectual pursuits as feminine and to generally not develop their emotional capacities, society decided that these are the 'short term costs' that maintain the longer term privilege of patriarchy. In other words, girls will not be rewarded after high school or college with executive-level positions, or with a place in patriarchal establishments, yet boys must suffer in the short term to show their worthiness of holding the place they will one day assume. This means hazing and bullying are the litmus tests of masculinity and, by logical extension, the test of assuming a position of authority within American culture. This is a different explanation than the one provided by conservatives. For Christina Hoff Summers and Camille Paglia, the problem is feminism, and it is stifling boys from acting 'like boys': in other words, rather than homophobia, a fear of being not only misperceived as gay but also of being seen as womanly, it is feminism that encourages boys to go against their natural inclinations to be masculine (defined of course as natural attributes such as a lack of empathy, toughness, etc.). If McCormack's thesis from above is correct – that homophobia was more concerned with stigma than with maintaining a superior relationship over women – then why have womanly traits become such a powerful tool against political rivals and schoolyard adversaries in our emerging future? We will revisit this thesis in the conclusion by suggesting new ways of looking at how the political comedy and satire in the media frame gender in such a way that our previous analytic tools for diagnosing sexism and gender stereotypes have become much less useful.

Notes

1   Video link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MebGHNai8hE.
2   The photo of John Edwards posted to the article explaining the controversy on Fox News' website (Fox News.com (2011), 'Ann Coulter Fires back at Critics over John Edwards "Faggot" Barb', can be found at this site: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,256860,00. html. Accessed 13 April 2013.
3   This can be viewed at http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=fff_1184004046.
4   Video link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrWDyB8vfNg
5   See http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rock,_Chris. Accessed 22 May 2011.

Chapter 3

Breaking the 'Crass Ceiling': Women as Comedians

It seems like in the last couple of years, this question keeps coming up: Are women funny? If one woman makes a living being funny, then women are funny. That conversation is over. Can we please move on? […] Think about the female comedians you like. I would say 95 percent of the women that I love, I didn't discover them on Letterman. I discovered them on YouTube. Or she was doing some amazing website on her own. Or someone who started her own sketch group. Or something else. It was never waiting for that late night scene. So let it be the old guy dinosaur world. Let them have it. Who cares? We can do our own crap. (Lizz Winstead, co-creator of *The Daily Show* in Di Novella 2012)

Life is a tragedy for those who feel and a comedy for those who think. (Molière, often attributed to Margaret Cho)

'The planet is sexist,' Smithberg adds. 'At least in comedy we don't have genital mutilation. That we know of.' (Madeleine Smithberg, co-Creator of *The Daily Show*, in Carmon 2010)

Recent controversies over the status of women and humor give relief to American cultural standards for gender expression. As we have seen so far in this book, comedy is alternately viewed as subversive or conservative; capable of both challenging and confirming established stereotypes in politics and society. Women who challenge established political arrangements while securing audience laughter are not free from the constraints of societal gender expectations. They must conform to gendered stereotypes as well, often ones that reassure audiences by presenting a complementary femininity; that is, a femininity that performs as counterpart to the hegemonic masculinity we examined in Chapter 2. In keeping with our theme of niches, we analyze how women manage to be funny without challenging dominant norms of humor. The chapter examines how women succeed in venues outside the traditional ones (stand-up, feature film and late night television). Obviously, there has been an explosion of women in comedy: the web and YouTube comedians, Funnyordie.com, 'Target Women' on *Current TV* (Sarah Haskins, Kristen Schaal); venues such as BET (Black Entertainment Television) featuring Sommore and Mo'Nique; women's television programming such as *WE* and *Lifetim*e; and YouTube. Through these examples women are said to be chipping away at the 'crass ceiling'. A trope on the feminist concept of the 'glass ceiling', the crass ceiling would seem to be the invisible barriers to women making it to top positions in comedy, presumably ones with power and cache where they are making their own

franchises, writing their own scripts, etc. However, this chapter asks if this broken ceiling translates into resurgence in feminist consciousness. Can this make a difference in eliminating sexism without a robust women's movement to carry its message beyond the confinement of comedic contexts? Or does this signal women's inclusion into a previously masculine form of popular entertainment that leaves existing social and political arrangements unchallenged?

In confining our analysis to the English-speaking world, we find there has been controversy over whether or not comedy is exclusively a male genre, which is interesting since this political space is often invoked as the 'democratic' world, where the assumption is that most political conflicts have been settled within the pure view of political liberalism with its emphasis on representation and inclusion. In spite of this political tradition, we know that while laws have been passed allowing women to participate as citizens and workers, cultural norms have prevented women from challenging the stereotypes about their sex that continue to make it difficult for them to achieve unbiased inclusion in the political discussions that often take comedic form. Even more depressingly, women in the United States have been denied chances to challenge gender stereotypes by a host of factors in the contemporary scene, including relentless marketing that pigeonholes them into compliant subjectivities that must take concern with appearance over all other factors; a resurgent political fundamentalism that insists on traditional notions of femininity as the basis for the family, which they view as the cornerstone of society; and finally, postmodern journalism, which finds the regurgitation of old, settled controversies interesting fodder for 'debates' about whether or not women are 'funny'. Beginning in the recent past with Christopher Hitchens's (2007) claim that 'women are not funny,' and the responses to it by women writers and comedians, this chapter advances the thesis that while women are increasingly viewed as 'funny', the fate of funny women depends largely on a very necessary and important transformation of American culture. Comedy is alternately viewed as either subversive or conservative; challenging or confirming established stereotypes in politics and society. While Hitchens's interest in the debate was to defend a seemingly timeless argument about women's lack of comedic acumen, many of his critics have argued that the standards and venues of comedy have been transformed, making it easier for women to break the crass ceiling, and that the societal and cultural barriers that prevented women from producing their own material and connecting with audiences are eroding. Two main trends are said to have characterized this transformation. First, women who do actually challenge established political arrangements while securing audience laughter must increasingly conform to gendered stereotypes about physical appearance. Second, women who have succeeded largely outside the traditional comedic venues (e.g. studio films and stand-up) and instead have been allowed access to new audiences by the broadband revolution: cable television and the Internet have expanded the universe of comedy, allowing women to reach other women and non-traditional audiences with their material. The increasing number of women in comedy has led to the expectation that the 'crass ceiling' will ultimately be broken. Women demonstrate this by casting their close pals and associates, and, for some, getting away with actions that are culturally unacceptable for women, such as dating younger men or refusing marriage and heteronormative lifestyles without judgment. Like the presidency or the position of CEO, the ultimate position of comedic

power that a woman could ascend to and shatter the crass ceiling is to create and star in a blockbuster comedy film. In May 2011, Kristen Wiig seemed to do just that with the positive critical reception and commercial success of *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011). In what follows, the chapter discusses the two main trends associated with women in contemporary comedy while referencing the history of women's entry into commercial comedy through path-breaking performers like Joan Rivers.[1] Next, I review the Hitchens debate with Alessandra Stanley, along with other commentary by film critics and comedians. Finally, I review the film *Bridesmaids*, and especially the reception it has received, and make provisional determinations about whether or not women have broken such a thing as a 'crass ceiling'. The chapter ends by reviewing how American culture reacts to the women who challenge its rigid gender stereotyping, and urges scholars to follow more rigorous gender theorizing that focuses on the plural 'femininities' that should be given expression in American society and comedic contexts.

First, a definition of the crass ceiling. The 'crass ceiling' is the seemingly shifting invisible limit (or tolerance) for a woman's public mode of the expression of humor. It is a ceiling in the sense that women can be crass, but few audiences find them funny or reward them with laughter. Some audiences may even find crass women dangerous or offensive to public morality. Imposed[2] on women during the Victorian and Progressive eras, the 'crass ceiling' originally held that women were altogether humorless because of their unique maternal role in American culture (which at the time was presented as a 'natural' state). At present, women who are crass might be accused of 'having or indicating such grossness of mind as precludes delicacy and discrimination,' or of acting in a way that indicates a state of 'being beneath one's dignity' (Merriam-Webster). Usually this means speaking or acting in a way that is perceived as unfeminine (*see* 'feminine'). For this reason, men are rarely seen as crass when they act beneath their dignity, and are often rewarded with unlimited opportunities to produce trite and simplistic comic art in the form of franchises, discuss their comic appeal with 18–24-year-old boys on late night comedy shows *ad nauseam*, and write bad novels and run for Congress in their later years. (c.f. wit: when a woman is humorous but not crass i.e. when she uses her unusual intelligence to make quips and engage in repartee she is called angry, and usually incorrectly, a 'feminist' [by her friends she is called witty]). However, using wit means upholding her dignity at the expense of someone else's (superiority theory), and women are morally proscribed from doing this. Wit is dangerous for women. It has been known to lead directly to clinical depression, spinsterhood and early death (see Dorothy Parker and the main character played by Emma Thompson in Mike Nichols's *Wit* [2001]).

For 'feminine', see 'crass ceiling'.

The creation of the crass ceiling

The crass ceiling hasn't always existed, just as commercial forms of comedy haven't always existed and stand-up did not become a feature of American life until the 1950s. It did not exist until the film industry became a potent force in forging the American political

imagination concerning norms of class, gender, race and orientation. Before the birth of cinema, the seeds of it were sown in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society through the fabrication of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' (1820–60), which established that women were incapable of humor. As Kristen Anderson Wagner, a historian of early twentieth-century women comedians writes:

> The inherently aggressive nature of comedy is also diametrically opposed to the cultural ideal of femininity as defined at the turn of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on submissiveness, deference, and passivity. Comedians deliver punch lines and kill their audiences […]. (Wagner 2011: 37)

For a long time, then, she argues, people saw 'humor as antithetical to femininity,' and when women performers attempted comedy they 'downplayed stereotypically feminine traits and attributes' (Wagner 2011: 37). As this style of comedy for women continued, it became possible for women to be seen as capable of humor but of a distinct kind. Pointing to a *Harper's Bazaar* article in 1901 entitled 'Have Women a Sense of Humor?' Wagner notes that the author's argument is symptomatic of the trend toward recognizing a 'feminine humor' as distinct from humor proper. This new kind:

> […] reflects the long-standing correlation between women and nature, but represents a step forward from earlier thinking that completely denied women the capacity for humor. In this revised view, women's emotional and sensitive nature doesn't exclude them from humor; instead it informs the types of humor they appreciate and enjoy […]. (Wagner 2011: 38)

The birth of feminine humor represented a great leap away from the awful piety required of women under the 'Cult of True Womanhood'. This piety required that women act as the moral latch on the crass man. The new trend in allowing women to laugh also established that they would be able to enjoy the humor of vaudeville, and later Hollywood cinema. For women who performed comedy it meant they had to continue to protect femininity as a cultural icon. In order to do this, a woman could be funny to audiences if she made herself appear less feminine. Historically speaking, for a woman to be viewed as funny, she had to transform herself physically in order to mime the appearance of the stereotypically crass man. This would seem to be at odds with contemporary imperatives that women be conventionally attractive in order to appear in front of audiences at all. Once comedy became a staple of American cultural performance in the 1950s and 1960s on television, transitional women comedians began to set the standard for women's humor.

Performers like Phyllis Diller and Lucille Ball are noted for having gone out of their way to appear outrageous or unattractive in order to be received as funny. Joan Rivers is often cited as the game changer in stand-up for making jokes about her own appearance in order to accumulate a solid reputation as a funny woman in show business. Indeed, her comic career begins on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, a vehicle for many comics in later

decades. In *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* (Ricki Stern & Anne Sundberg, 2010), a recent documentary, she discusses herself as a transitional figure in comedy, as someone who has been working the stand-up circuit for many decades.

Although Joan Rivers would probably not qualify as a feminist comedian in the minds of many, her observation on this subject is of interest. Rivers vigorously denies that there is any such thing as 'women's humor,' yet she does see a gender-inflected distinction among audiences. She refuses to perform for all-male audiences, not because she does not want to be objectified for the male gaze, but because she feels men alone do not understand her humor. 'You need women to relate to because the men relate to you through the women they are with, and then they go forward' (Collier & Beckett, *Spare Ribs*, 8 qtd in Auslander 1993: 320).

Rivers's comment suggests a problem with translation. While women are now able to appreciate all kinds of (male) humor, men are either unable to see women as funny without an alibi (this seems more likely) or they don't get women's humor, itself a distinct genre that Rivers rejects. One possible reason for Rivers rejecting the idea of feminine humor is that she is primarily a stand-up comedian who performs for mixed gender (general audiences). Thus she is, in many ways, one of those 'dinosaurs' that Winstead mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. This means she will have to, in some way, make her jokes accessible to the greatest possible number of sensibilities. Trading on information peculiar to women will only alienate many parts of her audience. One part of Rivers's act that does jive with our concerns about feminine humor is how she incorporates her physical appearance into it. While Rivers refers to and pokes fun at her appearance and age endlessly, she is also known to have undergone more than 739 plastic surgeries. Rivers has remarked that she has felt insecure about her looks, and that these insecurities were reinforced by show business and its emphasis on physical appearance for women. However, Rivers stops short of other women comedians in that she does not believe the effort by women to perform in front of popular audiences is a feminist achievement, or one that can be aided by any such collective movement of women. Conspicuously absent from any interview with Rivers about her prolonged success in comedy is a credit to the women's movement for loosening the patriarchal bonds over women in cultural and educational institutions. Over and over again, Rivers emphasizes her hard work and dedication, her willingness to take any work and withhold judging her audience (an object lesson she is allowed to teach Louis C.K. on Season 2 of *Louie*). Rivers is the 'by the bootstraps' comedian whose sad complicity with (or cynical exploitation of) Hollywood norms of youth and cookie-cutter attractiveness have done little to challenge the hegemonic stereotype of femininity as vanity. In a recent interview about Anna Faris, Keenan Ivory Wayans argues that the barrier to women being funny is vanity. As he imagined a woman in Will Ferrell's character in *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003), 'If Will Ferrell was a girl, and she's got a belly and a hairy back, she's not running down the street naked' (Friend 2011: 56). Indeed, many argue that a woman's entry into comedy is now predicated on her physical attractiveness, not always the kind that approximates the ideal image, but some 'quirky' variant of it. Rivers even credits herself with having paved the way for attractive

comedians like Tina Fey. Since women now can be attractive and funny, the shift suggests that women must be attractive in a certain way in order to be funny (or at least be trying in a way not expected of many male comedians). We will return to this idea at the end of the chapter (comedy as a way to cover over a defect – not allowed to women, who are the original deniers of defect) but, for now, we must examine the article that started the recent conversation and the responses to it, keeping in mind our discoveries about feminine humor.

In 2007, Christopher Hitchens touched off a firestorm of debate by publishing an article in *Vanity Fair* entitled, 'Why Women Aren't Funny.' In the article, Hitchens presents the reader with the common Victorian-era stereotype of women as existentially serious, and juxtaposes them to men who realize that life is a joke and acknowledge in their crude humor that 'we are all born into a losing struggle' (Hitchens 2007: 59). The central thesis that Hitchens makes about comedy is that it is a function of evolutionary strategy rather than a calling. Ultimately, men need comedy to get women (laid); 'dykes,' he writes, need it for the same reason; Jews need it to express 'angst and self-deprecation,' which are both qualities 'almost masculine by definition' (2007: 58). 'Men are horribly unattractive,' he writes. The only true hope that men have of bedding women is to demonstrate how intelligent they are, and this is most easily done through making women laugh. It follows that 'humor is a sign of intelligence' and this means that 'it could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not rivals,' (2007: 56). This is the humorous portion of Hitchens's argument. All of this, in turn, is related to Hitchens's central claim that women's ability to have children and reproduce the next generation not only makes women serious, it also makes them more powerful than men:

> It gives women an unchallengeable authority […] you could argue that when men get together to be funny and do not expect women to be there, or in on the joke, they are really playing truant and implicitly conceding who is really the boss […]. (Hitchens 2007: 59)

And there it is: humor is a way for men to best women whose authority they cannot acknowledge. Oh, and it's a great strategy for getting laid. This line of thought, which he confirms through quotes from Kipling and H.L. Mencken, has been used throughout history whenever the supremacy of men in any institution has been questioned or challenged. It matches up with the moral superiority argument enshrined in the 'Cult of True Womanhood' as described by Welter:

> If, however, a woman managed to withstand man's assaults on her virtue, she demonstrated her superiority and her power over him. Eliza Farnham, trying to prove this female superiority, concluded smugly that 'the purity of women is the everlasting barrier against which the tides of man's sensual nature surge.' (Welter 1966: 156)

Hitchens makes the imperative to being funny about a kind of benign form of domination. One only tries to make people laugh in order to get into their pants. He's taken the Cult

formula of virtue, acknowledged that women are capable of laughing at but not being funny, and made humor the crucible on which a woman is now willing to give up this now temporary state of purity. She decides whether a man is funny or not. The argument that women are really in control because of a universally-recognized human symbolic function they hold ignores the reality that maternalism is an ideology (whose contours vary by culture just like gender expression), not an incontrovertible feature of the female human condition, and it stretches credulity. Perhaps this is why Donna Haraway (1990) made the liberation of woman contingent upon her total freedom from gestation. Certainly, Hitchens would have had to concede (if questioned further) that the reproductive function of women is entirely under the control of men, especially at the contemporary moment. American women have never been less in charge of the reproductive function, given over as it is now to the technological manipulation of Big Pharma, and the congressional, statewide and juridical scrutiny brought on by a resurgent social conservative movement. The only exception to this was in the nineteenth century, when abortion and contraception were criminalized and women lost control over their bodies to the male medical profession. As an important women's rights campaign makes clear, 'since 2010, 1100 provisions or legislative acts have been introduced in legislative houses addressing women's rights, with 68 percent restricting those rights' (according to an ad arriving at my office written by the activist organization Miss Revolutionaries 2012). There were many more introduced prior to that as well. Hitchens was wrong on the idea that women have any power over their ability to have children, how many and under what circumstances. And it is unfortunate the responses to his article did not address it, as we shall see in Alessandra Stanley's piece. He was, however, correct about a few things. First, he notes that men have an interest in keeping women out of the funny business except on certain terms: he cites Kipling, 'so it come that Man, the coward, when he gathers to confer With his fellow-braves in council, dare not leave a place for her' (Hitchens 2007: 59) Thus, he says that for women the question of being funny is secondary. This is just incorrect. For women, it seems more than ever, funny is a way to express and resolve, if only cathartically through laughter, the ever increasing mediations of their subjectivity in neo-liberal discourses of power. Humor is the sign of the times. Some reactions confirmed Hitchens's claims while others disagreed entirely. The reactions to what I see as Hitchens's cheeky argument are more interesting than the argument itself. One columnist for the Canadian paper *Globe and Mail* wrote about Hitchens's thesis after experiencing many serious women and silly men at baby showers:

> Here's my conclusion: Yes, I think, on average, women are less funny than men, and I think child-rearing might have something to do with it. But so does the urge to be pretty and feminine and non-threatening to the opposite sex – usually in the hope of getting married and bearing children, which only seems to widen the humour gap further. The point is, somewhere along the way women are taught that being funny isn't sexy. And that, in my opinion, is a crying shame […]. (McLaren 2011)

In Britain, the article provoked a writer for *The Independent* to remark that women doing comedy in the UK do not fare as well as their US counterparts:

> While in the US the likes of Fey, who achieved global fame with her impersonations of vice-president wannabe Sarah Palin during last year's presidential campaign, enjoy household recognition, here that success is enjoyed only by an older generation such as French, Saunders and Victoria Wood […]. (Mesure 2009)

Most recently, however, some are singing the praises of Caitlin Moran, a media figure and unabashed feminist, whose book *How to Be a Woman* has attempted to marry feminism to humor and make it less scary for many, many young women, while others accuse her of elitism (O'Neill 2012). Some, like Hitchens, see an enduring relationship between funny and masculinity that is linked to the relationship between women and childbearing/rearing, even if it is only how society responds to motherhood. As Anna Faris said in an interview, she is sixth on the list she keeps of women comedic actors who get called for big films ahead of her: Cameron Diaz, Natalie Portman, Katherine Heigl, Anne Hathaway, Kate Hudson and Reese Witherspoon. 'What's the name of that list? "Women I hope get pregnant"' (Friend 2001: 57). In other words, women who have children are limited in more ways than just their careers. Hitchens must have understood that this provocative thesis, if understood on its face, would be offensive to many women who fail to find humor in the catch-22 implied in his joke. Women are not biologically serious; they are compelled by society to be serious in the absence of much male responsibility. Just look at a woman politician in the Senate or the House – she is almost always run ragged trying to counteract the effects of the masculine 'rules of the game'. Here I would suggest the reader view any picture of Maria Cantwell during the Sandra Fluke hearings. She is an interesting figure. Plastered with the moniker 'Maria Can't Smile' during her 2000 campaign, she then provided the public with many smiles thereafter. When faced with a childish Senate however, she must show disapproval; it's a moral, feminine thing to do in this case. Will Cantwell ever get to crack a joke in Congress or will she always have to be serious? As I write this the Michigan House passes legislation outlawing the use of the word 'vagina' after a congresswoman used it in a speech in a sarcastic and funny way to debate control over women's bodies by government officials. One can also think about the rumors that circulate about Hillary Clinton having a great sense of humor *in private*.

Alessandra Stanley's reaction piece in *Vanity Fair* appeared in 2008, and featured an Annie Leibowitz photo accompaniment of Tina Fey, Kristen Wiig and Maya Rudolph riding in the back of a limousine decked out in big, sexy hair, wearing party dresses, chugging champagne and spilling it all over each other. It's not sexy for the male gaze; it's funny and sexy for the female gaze. It's a pre-*Hangover* parody, a still shot of the ongoing pre-event getting ready to party that women enjoy. For all the comparisons to *The Hangover* (Todd Philips, 2009), which Wiig rightly rejects, you would think that the only way into blockbuster success for women comedians was following the already existing

formulas set by male comedies. If this were true, there would be more of them because they make money. However, what critics don't get about this photo shoot, for example, is that it demonstrates that the women's version of *The Hangover* is not the actual party or event out on the town. Between women, the party starts at home getting ready, having a few drinks, singing and laughing and being silly. Cracking jokes and trying on ridiculous outfits, making fun of each other, and in the end, women come out the door looking really, really good (for each other). The photo is also a send-up of women going out to dominate on the town, which usually ends up being less fun or funny than the pre-party at home. Stanley's piece did not refute Hitchens or even engage his central premise, as he noted in a video shoot later entitled, 'Why Women Still Aren't Funny.' However, I think he made it nearly impossible to engage his argument by posing the question at the level of gender: 'Why aren't women, as a gender, funny like men are?' Well, Stanley could have served up anecdotes to prove him wrong, but they would have only resonated with women and a few men. She could not point to larger trends of the societal recognition of women as funny because as a society we don't formally register them. Instead, Stanley looks at the places where women are making comedy, and points to growing trends in the transformation of comedic institutions.

Stanley opens by alerting the reader to the fact that what has changed for women in comedy is not societal expectations for women, but the 'set up' or context in which women make comedy. Now, with expanding outlets created by cable and Internet, women dominate television, she notes, with the important caveat that they also, unlike the previous path-breakers they are often compared to, write their own material. She takes pains to note that women in the past performed scripts written by men (e.g. Mary Tyler Moore, etc.). For Stanley, the important question is not how many women are represented in the dominant comedic institutions (studio-produced romantic comedies, stand-up and late night talk shows) and less visible writers quarters of many television shows, but about the ways that women are making a rhizomatic transformation of the genre itself, in their own spaces. For many others this is an important distinction too. While television critics celebrate the number of women acting as lead characters on prime time situation comedies, they ignore the fact that women have always been allowed to play this role. The important distinction is twofold: are the women writing the comedy themselves? Do they have a history of doing successful stand-up or sketch comedy? Women's increased presence on television and the web has also expanded the comedic 'repertoire' of women which 'isn't limited to self-loathing or man-hating anymore; the humour is more eclectic, serene, and organic,' (Stanley 2008). There is even an allusion to the dying nature of these older comedic institutions: '*The Tonight Show*, now in its 53rd year, is a little like the American presidency – still sought after but sadly diminished in power and influence' (2008: 191). Quoting Fran Lebowitz, the article drives home the point that whereas in Hitchens's narrative men and women were averse to seeing women as funny, now 'the boys allow them to do this,' and as Amy Poehler notes about studio produced films, only if they're young and good-looking in romantic comedies. Stanley's reply does not refute Hitchens's claims; as he rightly states in his video

response, she sidesteps the direct question: why aren't women, as a gender, as funny as men? This is because in Stanley's reply to Hitchens there is the assumption that women who do comedy are fulfilling a certain kind of liberal feminist promise to make women an equal presence in the expanding comedic universe. In other words, Stanley's commitment to the feminist project precludes her from stepping back and taking a look at why Hitchens is correct about the numbers, but wrong about the reason why women aren't funny. It is the kind of commitment that says we just need to add women and stir and the humor will follow; this ignores the structural impediments in American culture to women being received as funny by audiences. This narrative of liberal feminist equality has been sutured to the celebrity of both Fey and Poehler, and the assumption is that women who simply 'do' comedy are performing feminism. Fey's book *Bossypants* points out the lack of imagination displayed by men in the halls of comedy; for instance, being unable to imagine a constructed social universe where women do not just play supporting roles or make up half the actors, or where parodies of women's culture simply do not register because they 'don't understand' things like feminine hygiene. For example, *30 Rock*, Fey's sitcom (for which she is the creator, producer and star, having also written the pilot and first series) has a thin following but remains on television (even in the important Thursday night NBC line-up) because it has won many, many awards, not just for writing but for acting from numerous performers on the show. The show routinely slips anecdotes and sayings into the neurotic dialogue between Liz Lemon (Fey's character) and Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin's character). For example, on one episode, when Jack needs Liz to pretend to be pregnant so that a snooping reporter at his girlfriend's network will not find out she's actually pregnant and go after her job as a network anchor, Liz goes all out: aping for the camera at a photo shoot with her belly hanging out (remember, she's not pregnant), asking for twice as much delivery food (even though she regularly orders double servings), etc. The key line is when she must reveal she is not pregnant and no one believes her, half talking to herself and whoever around her will listen, she says, 'How could I possibly be pregnant? I've had my period for sixty-one days' (30 Rock). Younger women and most men might not even get this reference; it is about perimenopause (look it up). Similar kinds of humor are found on the web; Sarah Haskins does a feminist version of culture jamming with videos about the way feminine hygiene and yogurt commercials speak down to or euphemize women's experiences. This spot, 'Target Women', was taken over by another much less funny comedian in 2010, and Haskins is apparently continuing to do stand-up around Los Angeles. While many of these funny women get off the ground on television or the web, they do not seem to be able to launch careers like men do, prompting Huffington Post editors and guest writers to speculate that studios and writers, even women journalists reviewing the performances of other women, are the problem (Huffington Post 2012). Stanley herself was called out by comedian Erin Gibson for continually describing women comedians' and actresses' physical appearances, and by placing them within a hierarchy of attractiveness where emphasized femininity stands above all others, in this case, comedian Lennon Parham on the short-lived sitcom *BFF* (*Best Friends Forever*):

The most insidious thing about Ms. Stanley's piece is that she seems to think she's doing something worthwhile by pointing out the plainness of the actresses. What it comes down to is that for it or against it, discussing either the attractiveness or the 'normalness' of a woman's looks still means that you're keeping it in the cultural zeitgeist. It's not relevant, dude! This is supposed to be a review about a half-hour sitcom, not a piece about beauty trends in TV. When was the last time a review of *Two and a Half Men* felt the need to go into how Jon Cryer is 'such a normal-looking man?' (Gibson 2012)

It should be mentioned that Stanley was chosen to respond to Hitchens (perhaps someone else, like Gibson, would have been edgier), and she writes for the *New York Times*. It should also be obvious that nearly all of these examples are white women, because the diversity is even more problematic when it comes to race on television, where the same supporting role logic holds sway over writers and producers. And yet, Fey has come out on top in television even though she does not represent the norm in television for women; rightly or wrongly she has been described as the female George Constanza. Her reflections on the way men in comedy think is instructive. Two particular cases stand out. In one, Chris Kattan is chosen over Cheri Oteri to play Rocky's wife Adrian in a *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) skit, presumably because men in drag are always funnier than women. Fey tells the story to illustrate the subtle changes that took place over a decade when more women's comedy became more popular:

But I tell this specific tale of Cheri being passed over for Kattan-in-drag because it illustrates how things were the first week I was there. By the time I left nine years later, that never would have happened. Nobody would have thought for a second that a dude in drag would be funnier than Amy, Maya or Kristen. The women in the cast took over the show in that decade, and I had the pleasure of being there to witness it […]. (Fey 2011: 135)

Notice Fey did not say a 'dude in drag would be funnier than a woman'; she said 'Amy, Maya or Kristen.' While the incongruity of men in drag has a long history in comedy, especially when women could not appear in comedy, Fey is pointing out how women in drag are just as incongruous because they can perform the now expanded range of feminine personas recognizable to the audience. This has no doubt been made possible by the expansion of female personalities in celebrity culture, as well as in politics and journalism. Another episode Fey recounts is about performing at *Second City*. It is interesting less for the importance that Fey places on it (that women have ideas too) than for the way it reveals the phantasmatic structure of the men, which did not include equal contributions from men and women in a utopian space, created by actors on stage for the purposes of humor: improv. As she writes on the 'Myth of Not Enough':

When it was suggested they switch one of the companies to three men and three women, the producers and directors had the same panicked reaction. 'You can't do that. There

won't be enough parts to go around. There won't be enough for the girls.' This made no sense to me, probably because I speak English and have never had a head injury. We weren't doing *Death of a Salesman*. We were making up the show ourselves. How could there not be enough parts? Where was the 'Yes, and'? If everyone had something to contribute, there would be enough. The insulting implication, of course, was that the women wouldn't have any ideas […]. (Fey 2011: 87)

A different interpretation is possible here. It doesn't seem from this passage that the idea of women having ideas or contributing even matters. It is more like the producers and directors thought, 'we have a utopian sketch comedy plot on default in our heads, and it never involves more than a minority proportion of women, or women as sidekicks playing the usual role of third term masking two men's desires or help mate'. This is a crucial point. In Faris's interview, Friend argues that the 'crucial imbalance' in studio comedies is that 'distinctive secondary roles for women barely exist' (Friend 2011: 55). This is important because it points to the same problem encountered by minorities and women in American electoral politics: the broken pipeline. Friend notes that actors like Owen Wilson and Kevin James used the well-written secondary roles in *Meet the Parents* (Jay Roach, 2000) and *Hitch* (Andy Tennant, 2005), respectively to parlay themselves into leading roles in studio comedies. Women are still written into these comedies as interchangeable parts: any actor can play them. Faris argues that they are hurtful to women in that they are 'destroying a generation of boys who think we'll forgive any kind of ass-holey behavior' (Friend 2011: 58). This may also be why, as we move into romantic comedy and studio films, the target demographic is young men aged 18–24, and the universe created by scripts must not disturb the fantasy space of this cohort. Because of this, *Bridesmaids*' commercial success did seem to put a crack in the crass ceiling.

In a review of *Bridesmaids*, A.O. Scott for the *New York Times* argued that most comedies had come straight out of stand-up and excluded women. However, things are beginning to change and may signal the reversal of this trend:

Which is that in recent years film comedy – unlike network television – has been notably inhospitable to women, or at least to funny ones. This is perhaps because popular comedies tend to draw heavily, for talent and themes, on the macho world of stand-up and group sketch work. They also cater, like most other movies, to an audience of presumed teenage boys, who are too scared of women to laugh at them. The female half of the movie audience, meanwhile, is believed to crave a steady diet of romantic comedies, most of which are as sweet, bland and indistinguishable as the cupcakes that women supposedly also crave. (Scott 2011)

Why the assumption that women only want this 'diet of bland romantic comedies?' Here I would like to take note of two separate themes explaining women's 'bland nature' that differ from Hitchens's thesis about maternalism. One, Laurent Berlant has written about

the 'women's culture' – a separate, 'intimate sphere of femininity' arising out of progressive corners in the 1830s, which she traces through soap operas and *Oprah* to a self-help culture that identifies women as always in need of an answer to a peculiar kind of complaint only understood by other women; and they 'tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place' (Berlant 2008: 2). It arises as a consumed culture, where women exchange ideas about the cultural effects/prospects of their subordinate status. It runs parallel to the creation of a market culture and industrial age, where men act in public and women consume for domestic use only; as she writes, it is 'juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds' (2008: 3), as women are creatures, who 'live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking' (2008: 1) – the 'female complaint.' It contains, but is not constituted only by, the age of humorlessness that Hitchens carries forward into the present (late nineteenth-century jokes remarked on how 'unfunny' and serious women were at the time). This period also coincides with the aforementioned 'Cult of True Womanhood' and a political maternity, the outcome of which was maternal labor laws banning women from public work during certain hours and in certain industries. Indeed, it was not only leading progressives and women but the Supreme Court who defined women's sole capacity as that of motherhood, and determined that any infringement of a man's right to work was to blight on his liberty (*Muller v. Oregon 1908*). The women's culture that gives rise to the female complaint contains all the elements that bland diets of romantic comedies serve up to women. As scholars interested in looking at political subjectivity and its impact on the ways in which some populations remain relatively apolitical about their circumstances have shown, it may be that this women's culture provides the ideal fantasy space to disavow this lack in terms of political rights and cultural expression which are highlighted by the women's movements of the 1970s but lost to the consumer culture of the 1980s and onward. In this space, women lose the right to be funny and to make fun of themselves in front of a general audience. If comedy 'hurts' or is an expression of a true inner pain recognized and made public, then the women's culture that Berlant identifies provides an alibi for large swathes of women to remain blind to their recognition of the human condition; one that Hitchens identifies as a properly male comedic object. Could it be that contemporary women comics are slowly undoing this women's culture, exposing it for the sham it has always been, and for the unrealizable fantasy it sustains: the myth of having it all, or some variant of this that continually asserts a 'natural' sexual difference, where women's half of the binary includes trading access to the symbolic order on self-appointed terms for a moral superiority rooted in motherhood and femininity? In other words, the liberal political discourse on women's equality in any particular thing centers on a rational discourse that confronts a contradiction it cannot resolve: why do women participate in their own subjection? We will return to this in our reading of *Bridesmaids* at the end of this chapter.

On a second note, some analysis of the political environment and its noted hostility to women's equality is in order first, especially among younger generations.

We can take the analysis even further by noting the intense pressure on young women over the last two decades to appear feminine and pleasing to the male gaze. The right-wing assault on feminism during and after the culture wars of the 1990s established in the public's mind the hidden script that feminists are masculine. Mostly the work of Rush Limbaugh (but others too, such as Ann Coulter), this narrative of feminism establishes that it is a rejection of femininity at the same time it evinces a pronounced hatred of men. This hatred for men is linked directly to the reluctance/indifference to exhibiting feminine style and behavior, an attitude whose sole purpose is to presumably make men feel less threatened (see A.O. Scott's comment above about 'an audience of presumed teenage boys, who are too scared of women to laugh at them'). Hence, study after study of young women's attitudes has concluded that while they reject the label 'feminist', they support generic descriptions of every policy initiative put forward by mainstream liberal feminist advocates (Aronson 2003). Women are on the defensive about being feminine. How can they prove they are?

During the latter part of the 2000s, the US was dominated by a curiously retrograde cultural obsession with weddings. Films and television shows like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) (to date, the highest box-office gross, even over *Bridesmaids*), *Say Yes to the Dress* (2007–), *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher, 2008), *Something Borrowed* (Luke Greenfield, 2011) et cetera; and their male versions: *The Hangover*, *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005) and *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007). While their counterparts in south-western Europe continued to refuse marriage and childbearing at increasing rates, and women in northern Europe have been supported by pro-natalist government policies such as paid child leave and subsidized day care, American women ratcheted up their love for the old-time institution, marrying and having children at higher rates in the only remaining G8 country (indeed industrialized country) that lacks a paid federal childcare policy. Two main answers are supplied for this curious American idiosyncratic situation: conservative family values and market flexibility. While American women are still morally encouraged to see maternity as a central part of their femininity, they are also not faced with a rigid job market that prevents them from re-entry after taking leave to have/raise children (Shorto 2008). The quality of jobs available has rightly been put under scrutiny, and may lead to the lingering disparity in wages between women and men in spite of women's high rate of employment (i.e. since women are still largely sequestered in the 'pink collar ghetto' of low-paying, low status-jobs that resemble public housekeeping, clerical work and restaurant serving). The work/family bind as it is called in the US is seen as the number one priority among women in terms of policy challenges. It is these serious problems that make fertile ground for comedy aimed at women. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that unmarried women with children make up the majority of mothers in the US, state and federal policy in the past two decades has focused on reinforcing the traditional nuclear family with welfare reform linked directly to market participation by women, combined with the incentive

to marry, wrapped up in TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a provision of the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Act signed by President Bill Clinton designed to 'end welfare as we know it'). Elsewhere in a resurgent evangelical culture and the predominant rhetoric of conservative and liberal political elites, the economic and psychological benefits of marriage are widely touted (e.g. 'We know…….about marriage' is a common refrain from the Right and Left in political commentary, with little or no stress to provide accurate statistics to document such sweeping generalizations). These commentators are given a 'pass' by reporters and interviewers, again, in spite of the fact that the divorce rate continues to increase (seemingly only affected by the affordability of divorce, not moral squeamishness), and that the majority of divorce petitions are made by women (upwards of 72 per cent).The unthinking celebration of marriage as a solution to problems of policy is bolstered by its consumerist appeal, and, prior to the onset of the 'great recession' of 2009, media culture was saturated with reality television shows, magazines and celebrity coverage of wedding ceremonies. Often the reality versions covered women as monstrous creatures whose egos were out of control, while others focused on the desperation factor: *The Bachelor* (2002–), *Bachelorette* (2003–), etc. all focused on several groups of men and women vying to marry a virtual stranger on television, going to outlandish lengths to please and shock viewers with their devotion to getting married. Finally, linked to marriage, as the old playground saying goes, is the immediate media focus on when the first child will be born ('First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes so and so in the baby carriage'). To say that media culture is obsessed with celebrity births is an understatement. A related theme is that American culture celebrates what Judith Halberstam calls 'reproductive or family time' even for those who do not have families. Such a conception of time and its use is the 'normative scheduling of daily life that accompanies the practice of child-rearing,' and is 'governed by an imagined set of children's needs as it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for child-rearing' (Halberstam 2005: 5). This conception of time is seen as natural, and therefore monopolizes the public value system concerning youth, modes of femininity (as always already linked to maternity), and most importantly, our coming of age rituals. People who do not marry or have children or who see whole parts of their lives as disconnected from these pursuits are viewed as pathological, pitiable or inconsequential. The US as an immigrant culture, lacks universal culturally-based rituals for marking the entry into adulthood, and has thus made the marriage contract the default ritual that establishes maturity and independence from social authority. This makes it an attractive option for women who continue to lack independent social statuses in American culture. This ritual is unique to the United States; such reverence for marriage does not exist in Great Britain, where a reasonable respect for public welfare and insurance has allowed young people to experience relative independence from authority without the need to formalize romantic and family attachments. However, the economic and social supports to sustaining family time is conspicuously absent within American culture, and women and men who engage in family time must do so without the subsidies present in other industrialized democracies. Whereas southern European women have faced the prospect of

family life with little or no public or familial support and expressed a resounding 'no,' American women charge forward into it sustained only by moral promises of the value of family that are made by social conservative politicians. In this context, it seems that the obsession with weddings and children becomes an opportunity for neo-liberal marketers to present such rituals as instances of emulative consumption; that is, if one does it they will achieve the same honorific status bestowed on celebrities they encounter in women's and popular culture. It was only a matter of time before the parodies and reality television shows made their debut. It is possible that films that make fun of maternity or that parody it are getting at a sad truth about what happens after the wedding and birth, when the attachments are revealed to be largely sustained by consumerist impulses and anti-authority sentiments. Furthermore, as cultural studies scholars have begun to embrace examining how media and popular culture influence the formation of subjectivity (that is, how a person responds to operations of power in his or her environment and how these powerful discourses and affects shape the resulting subject), it seems that many critics are still worried about identity and representation as crucial indices of women's empowerment. This is where Rosalind Gill's new femininity studies can explain some of these recent trends.

Gill describes the elements of a postfeminist sensibility as having three main characteristics: femininity as bodily property; individualism, choice and empowerment; and the reassertion of sexual difference. Linked to each of these are trend subsets to be explained in each context. First, femininity as bodily property inheres to the notion that to be properly feminine one must not view it as a property of the soul, or more contemporaneously put, as a moral standpoint. From this moral standpoint, social, structural and psychological theoretical understandings of femininity issued forth in past representational practices through notions of caring, nurturing and maternity. As she explains:

> Instead of regarding caring, nurturing or motherhood as central to femininity (all of course highly problematic and exclusionary), in today's media, possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness […]. (Gill 2007: 149)

As Gill highlights, this is an important shift in cultural emphasis: women are no longer subject to the power of an 'external male gaze,' and are now instead interpellated into adopting a 'self-policing, narcissistic gaze' (Gill 2007: 151). Interestingly, this new gaze produces women as the object of the heterosexual male pornographic fantasy. As Gill notes, this is evident in the fact that the effect of the internalized gaze produces a uniform woman subject: thin, young, hairless, and up for sex at all times with the caveat that such promiscuity is read only as evidence of one's self-confidence. Indeed, for Gill the key point is that the subject of this gaze assures herself and others that all choices resulting in the same outcome

are freely chosen, the very same ideological operation nurtured by neo-liberal market forces. However, the key role of this self-policing is the way it links up nicely with consumer marketing, as it encourages the self to 'transform oneself and remodel one's interior life' (2007: 155). This dovetails nicely with all the media out there that make good use of 'quasi-therapeutic discourses' to recover and remake this life: the makeover paradigm. As Gill concludes, 'it appears that the ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism is feminine' (2007: 156). The final 'element' of this postfeminist sensibility is the 'reassertion' of narratives of sexual difference in the media. New technologies allowing for the study of genetic markers indicating gender and sexual preference now dominate media in the form of the 'gay gene' and the 'battle of the sexes'. Debates assuming the validity of genetic determination allow for the resumption of older sexist attitudes with new implications. This makes for a healthy comeback for old stand-up comedies that assert incongruity of men and women as genders who fall into romantic relationships, and the resurgence of popular faith in the most unscientific of therapeutic and political responses to resolving such differences (e.g. John Gray's *Men are From Mars, Women Are From Venus,* etc.) Furthermore, Gill asserts, 'Thus, we also find the cultural expression of this difference in the widespread use of the term "female" instead of "woman" providing a static biological basis for women's subjectivity rather than a shifting, varied cultural or individual one' (2007: 158).

This point of inquiry in feminist studies would lead Gill down the path to eventually deciding that scholars should focus on 'femininities' that are constructed in media cultures (Gill & Scharff 2011). Like masculinity studies, which earlier in the decade isolated 'hegemonic masculinities' as scripts and actions that individual men take on and emulate from media and institutional cultures, using the analytic focus on femininities allows critics to avoid essentializing women as their cultural products, to separate feminist modes of inquiry from the category of 'women'. Drawing upon Wendy Brown and Nikolas Rose, who were inspired by Foucault's account of governmentality, Gill and Scharff seek to understand contemporary femininities as subjectivities forged in relation to neo-liberal workings of power; that is, as the working and reworking of the self in response to discourses of self, agency, power and scarcity. No longer tethered to the analytic category of identity, which creates all kinds of trouble when trying to explain why women can identify as women but not share the same political and social views, both Gill and Scharff's notion of femininities and Berlant's concept of the 'female complaint,' operating within the intimate public sphere of women's culture, will structure our reading of the film *Bridesmaids.* As we shall see, a wedding is the perfect institutional vehicle for examining the female subject as she encounters her own 'losing struggle'.

Bridesmaids

Hailed as the best comedy of the year, earning Kristen Wiig an Emmy nomination, SAG award nomination and numerous others for combinations of acting, writing and comedy, *Bridesmaids* has been largely received with little critical commentary in the mainstream

press, and has become a feminist rallying point, with journalists urging women to go see the film and take their boyfriends as a gesture of solidarity (James 2012). *Bridesmaids* ended 2011 at the sixteenth slot (out of 20) for highest gross at the box office ($288.4 million). It is the top rated female comedy rated R of all time, and the top grossing film ever for Judd Apatow, who also produced and directed *Knocked Up* (2007) and *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005). Though *Bridesmaids* is one of the first all-women vehicles in over a decade, its overt feminist message is clearly questionable, as we shall see. Over and over when reading interviews for the writing of this chapter, I came across a common anecdote that Hollywood producers and other cultural agents believe that women-driven films can only be done once every decade because they will not draw audiences. The common statement was: 'We did that already x number of years ago.' This is really kind of grossly unselfconscious because studio producers have no problem with box office flops, one after another, if they are comic book character-driven movies or franchises that appeal to their target demographic: 18–24-year-old men. I guess the rest of us are supposed to be happy with television.

The remainder of this chapter is a reading of *Bridesmaids*, co-written and starring Kristin Wiig, an actress hailed as the star of this film and breaker of the 'crass ceiling'. Beginning with a review of how critics and audiences have received and described the film, we then proceed to analyze it against the comedic theoretical backdrop provided by Christopher Hitchens (that women as a gender are not funny). Finally, we return to Gill's 'postfeminist' sensibility in order to contextualize this peculiarly American ideological obsession with femininity as heteronormative. Furthermore, a reading is offered about how *Bridesmaids* encourages its female viewer to align herself with inequality, however, with the warning that alignment is posed through the medium of the female complaint genre identified by Berlant, a justice framework separate from traditional symbolic.

Wiig received two Golden Globe nominations for *Bridesmaids*, one for writing and the other acting. This is a rare achievement for a comedian from *Saturday Night Live*, a weekly program whose stars typically end their careers in box office bust features produced by Lorne Michaels (*SNL*'s head producer) like *The Ladies Man* (Reginald Hudlin, 2000) or *MacGruber* (Jorma Taccone, 2010) (which Wiig starred in two years prior). There has been little criticism of this film. It has been hailed as the film that breaks the 'crass ceiling' in comedy. Unsure if this celebration is accurate or genuine, it is necessary to give a critical reading of it. First, a test is often performed to assess the women-centered nature of films. Named for lesbian cartoonist Rachel Bechdel, who created it in order to assess gender bias in films, the test asks: first, if there are women in it; second, if they speak to one another; and third, if they speak to one another about something other than men. On this front, *Bridesmaids* certainly fails; as a movie about relationships between women it is structured entirely around a wedding to a man. Almost no critics have accused *Bridesmaids* of gender bias. A *Ms.* magazine blogger argued that it passed the Bechdel Test 'since women talk to each other,' but did make the interesting point that 'the poor, loser lady without the ring thing has been done and done and done to the point of offensiveness,' but *Bridesmaids* she

found pleasantly surprising and funny (Winfrey Harris 2011). Eileen Jones, of Alternet, casts aspersions at all the fuss surrounding the film, arguing that film critics have long lost their credibility by being bought out by studio executives, pointing out that Judd Apatow 'commissioned' Kristin Wiig and Annie Mumalo to go write the film after the box office success of *Knocked Up*. The leading actress on that film, Katherine Heigl, called the script:

> [A] little sexist. It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys. […] I had a hard time with it, on some days. I'm playing such a bitch; why is she being such a killjoy? (Bennetts 2007)

In a review of this episode subtitled (appropriately) 'The Demise of a Female Slacker', Megan O'Rourke zeroes in the on the cultural and societal controversy Heigl has waded into with this correct comment on the 'Mommy Wars' in which:

> [I]n that proliferating literature of family friction, women's lives seem to shrink to a series of pragmatic decisions about achieving balance, while men are concerned with domestic stuff only to the degree that they choose to be. In this regard, *Knocked Up* is in keeping with the zeitgeist: If, as Heigl delicately put it, the movie is a 'little sexist,' that is because it is the natural product of a culture evidently sold on the notion that women are so focused on domestic mechanics that they simply don't know how to allow themselves the playful inner lives men do, whether they're free-associating brilliantly with their friends, or lazily absorbed in video games. (The trope cuts both ways, of course: It allows men to be comedic geniuses, but it also means that husbands get portrayed right and left as childish dopes.) (O'Rourke 2007).

As we shall see down the line in our reading of *Bridesmaids*, women are often cast purposefully as the killjoy (just as Hitchens casts women in his article, and Republicans cast feminists in political rhetoric) in order to provide the moral incongruity between men and women that makes most contemporary comedy conventional; in the words of Steve Coogan, 'conservative,' and that's not cool. Obviously, women will never be viewed as funny in their own existential right on these limited terms. What might have been different about *Bridesmaids* was that it took the men out of the picture almost entirely, and allowed women to be who they are (mostly) when men aren't around, kind of the way Hitchens described men being funny as 'getting away with something.' One such scene, in fact, the most startling and over the top, was said to have put *Bridesmaids* in a viewing category with previous male 'gross out' comedies: the diarrhea disaster at the bridal fitting. Apparently, Apatow added the excrement scene where all the bridesmaids suffer diarrhea and vomiting while trying on their dresses to lure men to see the film. Some might point to the shitting scene in *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (Danny Leiner, 2004) as a much more empowering scatological experiment. In this scene, Harold and Kumar, two

post-college professionals who are part-time stoners and room-mates, go on a quest to find White Castle in New Jersey to satisfy their post-smoke munchies. On the way, they stop at a college dorm to buy more weed and run into two beautiful co-eds who invite them back to their room to smoke. Both sets (Roldy and Kumar and the girls) make a detour into their respective restrooms. Unknowingly, the girls announce they both have to 'shit' while Harold and Kumar can hear and see them through the ventilation shaft in which they're hiding. At first, the guys are lulled by their fantasies about watching two girls in the bathroom, imagining that it is somehow a display that they will enjoy, that is 'made for them.' What happens subverts all their fantasies and expectations as the girls plop down on toilet seats in adjacent stalls and begin a rousing game of turd 'battleship'. Exclaiming, 'You sunk my battleship!' and enjoying the release women are so often precluded from in public, they have their own private shit session, much to Harold and Kumar's abject disappointment. The male fantasy is brutally destroyed, and it is very funny. These girls are not humiliated; they don't care or know of Harold and Kumar's existence. In *Bridesmaids*, however, the food poisoning induced diarrhea scene is about the abject humiliation of the women for the viewer's enjoyment. There is much to say about *Bridesmaids*, especially when contextualized within the narrow parameters of Hollywood production. The problem is that the context is often overlooked in the over simplistic celebration of its 'crassness' and the rare fact that women wrote it. And that is the essence of Jones's criticism: that it is being celebrated as a feminist film simply because there have been so few films with all female casts, written by women in the past two decades. She rightly concludes that this is no reason to celebrate the film as brilliant script-writing, acting or producing. I might be more generous and call it a good first attempt at an uncharted territory. As has been much noted, the breakout performance was by Melissa McCarthy, whose character is best described by Jones:

> The actors are good overall, especially Melissa McCarthy in a fearless turn as Meagan, the fat odd duck whose supreme self-confidence makes her recognizable as one of those people you meet now and then, generally on public transportation, who stun you into silence with their sense of command over the strange world they live in. (E. Jones 2011)

Based on Guy Fieri, McCarthy's character upends the usual media stereotypes about women. McCarthy was rewarded by the Academy voters with an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress, and Wiig and Mumalo with a writing nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

Bridesmaids opens with the main character Annie (Wiig), and surveys her pathetic life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Working at a jewelry store, living with two British sibling room-mates, and stealing yoga in the park with her best friend, Lil, Annie's life has mimed the economy. Opening a bakery during the recession, and dating a man with traits

resembling the host of *Tough Love*, Annie experienced the life regression that is hurtling towards 'rock bottom' throughout the film. The bakery, 'Cake Baby,' is now graffitied over to read 'Cock Baby,' with a phallus drawn plunging out of the lap of a drawing of Annie dressed in 1950s style apron holding a cake. Her job at a jewelry store has been secured only with the recommendation of her mother, who sponsors her boss in Alcoholics Anonymous. To make matters worse, Annie's life begins a series of repeated downturns after her best friend reveals her engagement to her long-time boyfriend, 'Dougie' (the name alone signifies how unimportant the audience should take him as a character, not even a supporting role or quirky male role, Dougie is not allowed to speak in the film), and although she doesn't say it aloud, Annie's face reveals the new depths of misery she is to experience while she watches her best friend's life elevate as hers declines (or gravitate elsewhere just when she needs her the most). This decline is precipitated by the arrival of a new friend for Lil, and decided rival for Annie, Helen. This challenge to Annie's 'one true friendship' presented by Helen, the wealthy and resourceful second wife of Lil's fiancé's boss, drives the moral lesson of the story: Annie must learn to celebrate the happiness and success of others even if her own life is coming unraveled. This is a common theme in the 'abyss' of middle-class separation: while some women have maintained friendships since childhood, their unmatched life and work trajectories threaten to jeopardize those friendships, as class rivalries and cultural differences once hidden beneath the veneer of middle-class sensibilities erode the bonds that held them together. The über-wealthy Helen presents a series of challenges to Annie's status as best friend: when Annie suggests a restaurant or bridesmaid's dress, Helen rejects her out of hand and suggests more popular solutions to the crowd of women that make up the bridal party (always because she can afford them). Annie is discredited because she is the slacker of the group, who can't get her life going despite her earnest attempts to do so. Hence, she is the heroine of this comedy. The remainder of the film sets up Annie's repeated challenge to not lose it and expose the basic unfairness she witnessed in her own life.

Two instances where Annie loses her composure with Helen stand out. The first is at the engagement party in Chicago (thrown by Helen) where Annie and Helen take turns at the microphone to demonstrate for the audience who is the better friend to Lil through a 'toast off'. The second is toward the end, when Annie, zeroing in on 'rock bottom', discovers that Helen has incorporated nearly all of her own ideas (previously rejected) into the bridal shower, yet through her wealth and connections has been able to pull off an ostentatious version that Annie could never have afforded, including party favors in the form of blonde Labrador puppies, a chocolate fountain and a giant cookie. The hilarious part of the film is when Wiig's talent for physical comedy and *faux* drama goes on display; she wrecks the cake but fails to wreck the cookie, while screaming out insults at Helen, accusing her of undermining her friendship with Lil and even, perhaps, having a secret lesbian crush on her. As she says of Helen's last act of generosity, which she reveals to everyone at the

shower, she plans to fly Lil to Paris to be fitted for her wedding dress by an exclusive designer:

Lillian: Paris? YOU GOT ME A TRIP TO PARIS?!!!

[Lillian jumps up and down, then grabs Helen and hugs her tightly. Annie watches them, then something (finally) snaps.]

Annie: Are you fucking kidding me?

Judy: Annie?

Annie: MOTHERFUCKING PARIS?!

Lillian: Annie, what are you doing?

Annie (to Helen): I told you she wanted to go to Paris. I told you Paris! I told you about ALL this stuff!

Lillian: Annie, calm down.

Annie: No! What, you're going to go to Paris with Helen now?! Are you going to ride around on bikes with berets and fucking baguettes in the basket of the front of your bikes? How romantic! What woman gives another woman a trip to Paris? Am I right? Lesbian! We're all thinking it aren't we?

[Rita and Becca are uncomfortable.]

Becca: I'm not.

Megan: I was.

Annie: Yes, we're all thinking it. Right? (Mumalo & Wiig 2010: 82)

Thus far, I have isolated the relationship between Annie and Helen, who are fighting over Lil (a character with little development or screen time in the film). What makes the moral lesson that Annie must learn stand out is the audience within the film that witnesses her breakdown: the ensemble cast of the bridal party. When Annie says, 'Who else was thinkin' it?' all the bridesmaids look down guiltily and mumble under their breath in tacit agreement. As Amanda Marcotte wrote about this scene on Slate.com:

> *Bridesmaids* worked so well because the jokes, however broad, rang true. Sure, few of us have gone to a bridal shower and destroyed a cheesy decoration in a fit of frustration with the unreality of it all, but who among us hasn't wanted to? (Marcotte 2012b)

Marcotte isolates the central point: the unreality of it all. *Bridesmaids* deconstructs the wedding. Does this make Annie's character a 'screwed up character?' Sure, that's what Marcotte says we should defend; Annie is the American woman's collective id. In a culture that represses the representation of a diversity of traits that might make women characters appear human, Silpa Kovvali by contrast urged readers at Feministing.com to see Annie as a celebration of the presentation of 'insecurities as an inherent part of womanhood' (Kovvali 2012). Kovvali worries that it doesn't challenge the representations of women held by men. This is evident when she cites director Paul Feig, when asked if the film challenged his conception of women, as saying, 'It reinforced everything I thought to be true' (Kovvali 2012).

Unlike Annie, whose problems are universal to middle-class Middle America (joblessness, small business failure, relationship failure, evident, ongoing fatalism, etc.), the women in the cast provide the viewer with a window into the array of 'female complaints' now possible in contemporary America, even for those 'happy' figures who've found marriage or career satisfaction. We find out later in the film that Megan works for the Department of Defense and makes lots of money, but did not have any friends in high school. Rita, Lil's sister-in-law, who is married and has three (boy) children, only wants to drink and get away from her family in order to have her own mental space. Then there's Becca, a younger and newly-married woman whose outward gestures reek of stifled pleasure wrought by the confining nature of a conventional union that is focused on outward appearances of happiness and stability: she and her husband had their wedding at Disneyland, they shower before sex, and sometimes never get around to the deed (too tired from all that clean-up). She envies Rita for her children and her opportunities for shameful sex without apology to which Rita responds, 'Sometimes I just wanna watch *The Daily Show* without him [her husband] entering me.' We see these same kinds of complaints from mismatched couples in masculine comedy films as well, but they are largely focused on the male characters escaping the nagging wife or girlfriend. In *Bridesmaids*, the women's concerns largely revolve around sex and friendship, and the incompatibility of the two, with each predicament more different than the last.

Bridesmaids takes a microscopic look at each event leading up to the wedding. A large part of the script is devoted to the maneuvering between Annie and Helen over how to plan each event. As Annie is the maid-of-honor, she feels it is her job to take the lead in planning each one while Helen's wealth, enthusiasm and free time (all of which hide her extreme loneliness in her unhappy marriage) enable her to block Annie's suggestions. The bachelorette party is the best example of why *Bridesmaids* is not a copy of *The Hangover* because the entire film is the bachelor party, while in *Bridesmaids* they never have the party. Instead, while Annie sends an e-mail suggesting a low-key girls' weekend at Lil's parents lake house, Helen

trumps her by calling the bridal party to suggest Las Vegas. Helen's suggestion wins the day, even though Megan had suggested they stage a fight club, complete with kidnapping Lil to start off the festivities (a nod to both *Fight Club* [David Fincher, 1999] and *Old School* [Todd Phillips, 2003]). While this phone sequence happens, we see flashes of Helen sitting in her 'beautiful home'; Rita in her 'new money kitchen straight out of *The Sopranos*'; Erin in her 'shabby chic office painting a front porch sign that reads 'The Whitmans'; Megan surrounded by a wall of computer and television screens, a 'technical haven that looks like NASA'; while Annie peers down at her $350 paycheck (Mumalo & Wiig 2011, 52–3). Since only the audience has a window onto this view, it understands when Annie sits in coach while the other bridesmaids sit in first class. As Helen claims, this is an unfortunate aspect of 'her pride' since she offered to pay for her to sit with the rest of the party in first class. This is a humorous diversion because we never get to Vegas in *Bridesmaids*. One wonders what might have happened on that trip that wouldn't be seen as another trip down the comedic beaten path well shorn by men? Instead, Annie's fear of flying disrupts the trip after she takes too many tranquilizers with booze and imagines a 'colonial woman' on the wing of the plane, announces it over the intercom, setting off widespread panic and causing the TSA (Transportation Security Administration) agent on board (who Megan has rightly sniffed out at the start of the flight, and flirts with mercilessly) to down the plane. They end up taking a Greyhound bus back to Milwaukee. There is no bachelorette party. *Bridesmaids* does tempt the viewer into thinking there will be a party but disrupts that fantasy space by sabotaging it, and reverses our expectations of women and comedy. Instead, the film will take its own direction, one that detours back to the central character, Annie, and the acceleration of her downward spiral. She will go back to Milwaukee and hang out with a cop and sleep with him. He will try to get her to bake the next morning as he is concerned about her happiness and, having eaten at her bakery, wants her to 'keep trying' even though she has already failed miserably. The most important part of this relationship is not that she finds a love interest, but that he's not American-born. Sporting a Scottish accent, Annie's new paramour likes her for 'who she is,' unlike the Jon Hamm character she sleeps with regularly who calls her 'his third choice' to her face and forces her to leave his house early in the morning by doing 'the walk of shame.' Hamm's American playboy drives a Porsche and calls Annie his 'fuck buddy' in front of Officer Rhodes. It is at this moment that Annie truly realizes how far to the bottom she has fallen, and the shine falls off 'Ted.' He's the bad decision every straight woman has made: good-looking, self-centered and clueless (basically, he's Colbert's character, an American imago, who is seen as the prototype for American masculinity, but is basically an asshole).[3] Here, on the side of the road with her 'fuck buddy,' Annie finally hits rock bottom. She returns home to settle into a deep depression, resigned to never attend the wedding.

At the engagement party, and thereafter at a series of pre-wedding events, we meet a string of women who exhibit very different femininities, or ways of managing the giant chasm between their true desires and the remote chance of their fulfillment. While none of them is as pathetic as Annie, each in her own way presents the viewer with a parody of the 'female

complaint'. This complaint, which resides as Berlant describes within the separate space of women's culture, never rises to the level of critique of the symbolic order; it is not an overtly political movie. We're not going to get equal pay legislation passed or universal day care. However, each character has social and familial obligations that have been bestowed on them through marriage that they resent or find stifling for compelling social and political reasons. And it is much more entertaining than the Mommy Wars. Annie, ironically, represents the largest demographic of women in the United States today: single, childless and career-focused. She is the opposite of the *Sex and the City* demographic in that she is the other side of the recession, the product of 'dark times'. As Annie says about herself, 'I'm the genius that opened up a bakery during the recession' (Wiig & Mumalo 2010: 9). Indeed, she was just doing what had been suggested by the news media and politicians for the past decade, realizing her 'American dream'. There is no redemption for Annie except in friendship as she and Lil patch things up in an oddly positive ending to a movie that memorializes (and makes funny) the downfall of the upwardly-mobile, hard-working American woman. We don't learn of her desire to have babies, or her need to settle for a man. We learn that being a human in Milwaukee trying to succeed is difficult, even more so when dealing with the surrounding environment's gendered projections and remarkable ignorance about social class.

If *Bridesmaids* does anything to challenge the notion that women are not funny it does so on a refined and subtle level: by presenting each woman character as confronting an existential dilemma that the film ridicules. The script's subtext is to entertain women who identify with these problems then remind them to laugh at their circumstances (or in Hitchen's phrase: 'Humor is merely the armor plate with which to resist what is already farcical enough' [2007: 56]). Annie is the example of a new, complicated woman,[4] or as Amanda Marcotte has argued, a 'screwed up female character.' The film's success was with 'an audience of presumed teenage boys, who are too scared of women to laugh at them,' as recalled earlier by A.O. Scott. As a blogger on Slate.com argued, it is important for men and boys to be able to relate to women that resist or stand outside simple stereotypes:

> One could argue that welcoming expanded character opportunities also leads to universally more appealing characters. Many men also seem to strongly relate to Liz Lemon. Having men and boys relating to female characters is also an important issue for equality. Girls and women have no problem with 'transference' – i.e. relating to male sports heroes, figures, etc. Not quite the same for boys and arguably men […]. (Marcotte 2012b).

Indeed, women have only been allowed 'socially responsive behaviors' to humor such as Hitchens's 'real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-teeth, involuntary, full, and deep-throated mirth' (Hitchens 2007: 54). Women are not to make humor but to smile and laugh when men do. Whether women do so because men are actually witty and intelligent, or because they are relieved not to have been yet again the butt of a particular joke whose outcome was unknown at its inception,[5] it is nonetheless true that women who make jokes will not be viewed as funny, except in juxtapolitical spaces, 'niche

markets' like those identified by Berlant. It is important to note that Berlant makes an implicit critique of the counterpublics thesis when advancing her claim about women's culture being juxtapolitical:

> Intimate publics elaborate themselves through commodity culture; have an osmotic relation to many modes of life; and are organized by fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacles that shape their conditions. But most nondominant collective public activity is not as saturated by the taxonomies of the political sphere as the counterpublic concept would suggest […]. (Berlant 2007: 8)

I see this as an implicit critique of both Fraser and Warner, whose conceptions of a counterpublic assume an automatic orientation towards politicizing common problems experienced by the group. What Berlant points to is the large swathe of women's culture that flummoxes political scientists when they claim they are explicitly not political, even while making political claims. In this, women who make women's social conditions a political problem are criticized for pointing out that some of the things women want are not that easy to come by, nor are they all that desirable in their realized versions. Sara Ahmed points out that the original killjoy is always conceptualized as feminist, just as the funny woman is assumed to be feminist in her masking of some deeper defect that gets read as failed heteronormativity (see the original definition at the beginning of the crass and witty woman). She asks, 'Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy […]' (Ahmed 2010: 582). Like bridal showers or weddings? Furthermore, Ahmed writes that:

> The subject in the room hence brings others down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained, by erasing the signs of not getting along. Feminists do kill joy in a certain sense: *they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places* […]. (Ahmed 2010: 582, emphasis mine)

Like conventional marriage? If the fantasy that marriage is the repository of happiness is disturbed by Annie in *Bridesmaids*, it is not catastrophic for the viewer, as it would be for say, Phyllis Schlafly. Lil recognizes on her own, after the shower, that she is unsure of what she is doing, and its relationship to happiness. She experiences what Ahmed calls 'uneasiness' where:

> We cannot always close the gap between how we feel and how we think we should feel. To feel the gap might be to feel a sense of disappointment. Such disappointment can also involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt ('Why am I not made happy by this? What is wrong with me?') […]. (Ahmed 2010: 581)

While it's no *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Bridesmaids* does achieve a certain level of awareness about the female complaint, presents the viewer with more than one

complex character, and hence displays 'femininities' rather than reinforcing the notion of women as a monolithic sex of serious nags, killjoys and wet blankets, whose existence in comedies is to serve as a foil for the truly funny men who star in them.

If *Bridesmaids* allows for femininities to shine through the silver screen (rather than the usual triumphant hegemonic feminine that acts as compliant counterpart to heroic masculinity), we should question the message when that presentation is largely white. Certainly *Bridesmaids* encounters Annie in her displacement by the economy (a slacker who tried hard or one of those women encouraged by Republicans to open small businesses), and she has to move in with her mother at the end, the 'ultimate Gen X nightmare' as you'll see. However, Annie and her new friends do not have to contend with the ways in which the feminine is marked by race, culture and sexual orientation, as for other women. An important theoretical consideration can be made here, especially when trying to understand the myriad acts now dominating the web and television featuring women. As Winstead said at the start of the chapter, let the old 'dinosaurs' have Hollywood; but there are several risks in this. What if, in the celebration of 'women' comedians, we are actually celebrating a hegemonic femininity that only serves to reinforce the predominance of hegemonic masculinity? That is, white heterosexual (and often, successful) masculinity, like that explored in the previous chapter, featuring mainly stand-up comedians? Furthermore, what if, in our societal-wide devaluing of the feminine, American culture has set women up to fail in comedy altogether? While we see women doing comedy, they are doing it in niche markets. For some reason, they do not get asked to host the shows that 'offend nobody' like Leno, Kimmel, Fallon and Letterman. Remember Arsenio Hall's attempt at late night? Remember Connie Chung's attempt to co-anchor the evening news? Joan Rivers was banned from Letterman for over 20 years, as she explains in *A Piece of Work*. At stake in this debate is the representation of universality in American culture. If we go forward and celebrate the decline of the white male (as some say we do in popular culture with shows like *Eastbound & Down* (2009–) and others), when do we ever elevate any other representational categories besides idiocy and wealth? Even more pointedly, critics have recently pointed out that the US film industry is going to have to begin catering to adult markets once again as Generation Xers 'practically reared on film studies and the movies' will demand a steady stream (not as O'Hehir puts it 'a big, indiscriminate dump of festival acquisitions at the beginning of Oscar season' [O'Hehir 2012b]) of weekly produced adult themed pictures (they could be and should be comedies) that deal with serious issues without resorting to the infantile strategies of Michael Bay; that is, literally conveying a story 'without words.' If Hollywood goes from catering to the hegemonic masculinity of 18–24-year-old men, how will it include other marginalized and subjected genders except as it has always done, as complementary figures?

Mimi Schippers's reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity in order to understand how a possible hegemonic femininity might work to uphold its mandates is instructive. She defines it this way: 'Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant place of men and

the subordination of women' (Schippers 2007: 94). In our discussion of comedy thus far, we have seen that women who do 'well' in comedy do so within the confines of the lesser paid and well-known medium of television. If they become popular on the web through skits, they sometimes get asked to do irregular skits on *TDS* or *SNL*, and often they will try their hand at unsuccessful pilots, only to end up back doing sketch comedy, small venue stand-up circuits or nothing at all. Lizz Winstead doesn't seem to think the marginalization of women to television matters; or she wants younger comedians to keep trying and to not be discouraged by the obvious unwillingness of both corporate media and the public to uphold this hegemonic masculinity in the dominant arenas of sports and politics, and the complicit masculinities we often find in comedy. Such complicit masculinities 'received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance,' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832) and they, coupled with hegemonic femininity, much like that portrayed by Alessandra Stanley in her reviewing of female comedy, uphold hegemonic masculinity which ensures the 'ascendency achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion' of men (2005: 832). In pitting women against one another, and against a larger cultural ideal that values looks and complicit feminine behaviors, we never get to see women. In Cho's words, we don't see women when they do comedy; that is, when they *think*.

Notes

1   I am partial to Lily Tomlin, but her signature style is the opposite of 'crass'.
2   Many women accepted and even encouraged the imposition of the crass ceiling as a means of proving women's moral superiority over men in American public life. Men were crass and women were the moral corrective to that crassness.
3   Hamm plays a version of this character on *30 Rock*. He becomes typecast as the generic 'man' in female comedies. Usually women are typecast in male comedies in this way. The fantasy woman (like Christy Brinkley in the Chevy Chase *Vacation* series). Hamm now plays the role of the fantasy man who is in reality a complete jerk.
4   Instead of the MPDG (Manic Pixie Dream Girl), Virginia Pasley writes that film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term in response to Kirsten Dunst's role in *Elizabethtown* (Crowe, 2005). He defined it as: 'That bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures' (Pasley 2012). As she points out in her article, 'These days, MPDG has come to mean every female role that's comedic or even the smallest bit quirky […]' (Pasley 2012).
5   Hitchens interprets a popular study on humor by referencing the fact that women were slower to get the punchline, but more intense in their laughter than men by allowing it to mean that women are slow to the joke. Marcotte and others point out that women (and other minorities) hesitate because they are expecting the punchline to include humor that is insulting to their identity.

The problem of sexist humor is yet another topic not taken up by this book. However, Woodzicka & Ford (2010) point out that sexist humor has indirect effects through 'the broader social consequences of exposure to sexist humor' and more direct effects through 'the immediate interpretations of and emotional reactions to sexist humor' including laughing at oneself, often through peer and environmental pressure. Their research points in the direction of analyzing the effects of so-called public comedians like Rush Limbaugh, and the uncanny identification with them by women on the Right. It might also shed light on that ubiquitous term deployed in the political media whenever a joke goes over badly as a 'gaffe.'

Chapter 4

The Tone of Political Comedy in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

'You know what's really frightening?' O'Reilly said. 'You actually have an influence on this presidential election. That is scary, but it's true. You've got stoned slackers watching your dopey show every night and they can vote.' (Associated Press 2004)

'Interrogate the hegemonic dogmas of corporate capitalism'? Dude, the '80s called. They want their academic jargon back. (Blog comment on Steven Almond's article, 'The Joke's On You', in *The Baffler*)

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NoraCharles
Wednesday, Jul 25, 2012 04:22 PM CDT

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Since at least the 1980s every young person in the US has been threatened with being called a 'slacker'. This term, which has deep resonance with laziness, idle pursuits and an aversion to work in the American psyche, has become something of a motivational term. Anyone caught 'slacking' has the right to be morally scrutinized, to have their personal status revoked and their right to any kind of empathy forever foreclosed. Why then does Jon Stewart's 'dopey' *TDS*, winner of sixteen Emmy awards and Two Peabody awards *nearly* command more respect than *The Factor*? Over the last four years, Stewart's ratings have surpassed the entire prime time and daytime ratings of the Fox News line up (2.3 million to 1.85 million). Fox lost viewers in the 25–54 demographic on every single show in 2011 (*Daily Mail* 2011). Glenn Beck, a popular radio and (short-lived) television presenter on Fox, had his show cancelled in April 2011, presumably due to sliding numbers (perhaps a result of the parody staged by Stewart during the 18 March 2010 episode, 'Progressivism is Cancer'). Followed by 'Conservative Libertarian' on the same date, the episode lampooned Beck's self-inflated rhetoric and messiah complex, especially his preoccupation with conspiracies inspired by progressives and the freedom provided by a conservative-libertarian worldview. The Beck segments were notable for being actual parodies of a Fox News figure by Stewart, something he rarely performs. The spin-off show, *The Colbert Report* (*TCR*), is a parody of Bill O'Reilly. The Beck segments allowed Stewart to present himself as a progressive in a way that previous news targets did not because Beck had taken the right-wing logic that associates state protection with fascism to an unprecedented level. That Stewart's comedic personality is the textual drive of the show is undisputed; he makes appearances elsewhere in the media as himself, hosts the Academy Awards, and so on. He also defends the legacies of the progressive civil rights movement, as in the 'Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,' a march on Washington D.C. in October 2010. This was billed as a response to Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin's rally to

'Restore Honor' on the mall in D.C. on the 47th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech. Beck and Palin had the audacity to attempt to rewrite King's legacy as one principally concerned with white people praying to restore honor to a supposedly disgraced America. Stewart's intervention here was important, with just over 200,000 attendees at the rally. While not that funny, it was for many an important dose of sanity in an otherwise hyperreal conservative media universe. And, for once, instead of being framed by the screen, he was actually in the street. In point of fact, *TDS* later highlighted a 'mistake' made by Sean Hannity where he used incorrect footage of crowds when covering a GOP anti-health-care march (narrated by Michele Bachmann). The crowd footage shown was actually from Glenn Beck's earlier 9–12 rally which occurred on a Saturday. Stewart's skit forced Hannity to later apologize for the error. One wonders where the 'stoned slackers' work; could it be Fox News? These events in particular allowed *TDS* to surpass Fox's ratings, but the path for this success was set much earlier.

If we backtrack to 2004, to when O'Reilly made this oft-cited comment about Stewart's show and his viewers, it has a kind of prophetic ring about it. *TDS* would go on to be cited as a critical factor in discrediting *Crossfire*, an MSNBC show that was emblematic of the partisanship Stewart regularly decries on his show. Also appearing in 2004 was *Indecision 2004*, a pun on network news show *Decision 2004*, whose coverage under this heading did much in the way of capturing an entire generation's angst and boredom over the media's attempt to whip up excitement about a presidential election that seemed to last forever. In the midst of all this media agony, *The Daily Show* provided many people with an outlet for their frustration with 'lamestream' media – media that does not call out politicians on their inaccuracies – and as the years wore on, the show would attract more and more attention from viewers. This chapter reviews what many critics have said about *TDS*, the assumptions they have made about its purpose, and whether or not Stewart's style as emblematic of satirical comedy for the decade can make a difference in the way that people view politics. Most of this work situates Stewart in a tradition of irony that is ahistorical; it is often unaware, whether it champions *TDS* or criticizes it, that most of Stewart's comedy is a continuation of the culture wars on a different terrain of action, not just in journalism but throughout the media. While he does not cause or prolong these wars in any way, *TDS* and Stewart respond to their continuation by news media in an effort to critically interrogate their accuracy. Others have already examined this in detail. A newer, better question might be: why does he do it and who is it for? I will take a different look at *TDS*, giving it a generational reading that attempts to apprehend the kinds of affect that Stewart is particularly adept at mobilizing, which I call 'progressive pathos': a generational affect that is fused through spectatorship and popular culture, and united in a healthy skepticism of 'objective truth'. A popular response to *TDS* under Stewart is to charge him with cynicism, and his viewers with apathy; but Stewart uses irony and parody to provide a tone that enables him to communicate this pathos without his performances deteriorating into a moralizing lecture about politics and history, particularly of the kind the Left is so often accused of when they 'bore' audiences. Television locates a generational audience that responds to ironic gestures – Generation X – and experiences

itself not as a demographic or community (as Day would have it) but as a 'spectatorship'. This includes any viewer who can be interpellated by the television experience; that is, who feels most at home not in the 'streets' but in front of the screen. A viewer who feels solidarity with others through watching, recognizing and knowing that any kind of direct response is futile, not just because television is a non-interactive medium, but because the culture-war politics of the past were too. This is a 'youthful' generation in the sense that it hasn't grown up to become rational, enlightened citizens who participate in civic activities in the streets.

As we saw in earlier chapters, established journalism and the mainstream media still bother with the pretense of 'objectivity' or 'balance' in their presentation of the news. Why? When, increasingly, generations of younger viewers find this outdated script of objectivity to be problematic, why do the major networks still bother? Amber Day's analysis of the counterpublic forged by the viewers of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* tends to presume that generational age is irrelevant when considering their political effects. But what if age or perceived age is the most relevant factor here? We have yet to take on how 'youth' interface with political comedy, specifically as an ironic performance. To that end, recall our earlier suggestion that youth is constructed through consumer references and nostalgic marketing so that even retirees can be interpellated into this demographic. Given *TDS*'s increasing market in younger viewers, and Jon Stewart's status as king of the slackers, it might be important to read this cable television show for its effectiveness at presenting irony to younger viewers, especially ones distanced in years from the so-called 'culture wars' of the 1980s and 1990s. This is important because younger viewers need to know the history of the arguments made by the cultural conservatives that Stewart routinely targets on the show. As McKain's arguments from Chapter 1 made clear, we see Stewart's explanatory commentary being drawn out in longer segments that often don't even portend to yield laughter. Instead, we might view him as educating his audience about the culture wars, and possibly demonstrating the appropriate social manners when encountering the racist, sexist and homophobic stereotypes earnestly mobilized by the Right. Toward the end of this chapter I will conduct a reading of a couple of segments on *TDS* that demonstrate this political curriculum of comedy, but first we must contend with some arguments about why television cannot be a vehicle for political satire, even though it is the perfect medium for it.

Younger generations, it has been surmised, do not understand traditional irony, instead relying on a postmodern irony theorized by Lisa Colletta. Traditional irony and satire is typically understood as intentionally isolating the earnest viewers' moral judgment of an issue. As the saying about it goes, it stings its object, and makes its witnesses cringe and rearrange their moral understanding of an issue/situation; traditional irony is cathartic and holistic. It presumes a stable set of meanings in the social world, or (if this helps) a common political culture. In the postmodern world, we deal with a proliferation of meaning where each person's opinion is made to seem as valuable as any other and such opinions may be the source of an identification that does not reinforce a stable identity. This has made for something called postmodern irony, which is a sensibility that is elicited by interacting

with visual media, like television. No longer bound to the text (for Colletta argues we must literally 'read' satire in order for it to be effective in the classical sense) postmodern irony is an 'awareness of constructions,' which has 'replaced awareness of meaning' (Colletta 2009: 856) that relies on a shared set of moral values. Rather, television is the best medium for this kind of irony because it projects many different meanings: 'A postmodern audience is made conscious of the constructed nature of meaning and of its own participation in the appearance of things, which results in the self-referential irony that characterizes most of our cultural output today' (2009: 856). Colletta goes on to argue that viewing politics becomes then a matter of a 'choice between fakes' that 'leads to a cynical lack of engagement,' and, most importantly for our understanding of its humor strategy, postmodern irony allows the viewer to feel superior (hence it is self-reflexive rather than moral). This is what many refer to as the intextuality of political comedy and, generally speaking, the relationship between texts on the web, television and the news. Unless a viewer of *TDS* is viewing the same news events, and has the same moral perspective, they will not understand the humor in a skit. As she writes:

> […] satire's efficacy relies on the ability of the audience to recognize the irony that is at the heart of its humor. Injustice, vice or polite cruelty have to be recognized as the object of the attack, and the need to be judged against a better moral standard […]. (Colletta 2009: 860)

Recall Coogan's comedy lesson for the presenters of *Top Gear* from Chapter 1. In his article, Coogan made it clear that if he said something racist in character as Alan Partridge, he was clearly presenting the racist view through the image of a reprehensible person. The assumption of a basic morality from which the Partridge character deviates is something Colletta might argue does not really exist in postmodern culture. In reality, we tend to celebrate the polite cruelty of our celebrities and wealthy figures, consume as enjoyment all revelations of their vices, and be relatively indifferent to most injustice when presented to us for appraisal. In all this, it can be difficult for viewers to realize they might have an authentic political opinion or viewpoint since all political positions are constructions, no one more meaningful than any other. This sense of irony is captured in the audience pose that specifically distances itself from authentic political gestures (Van Heertum 2011), as well as finds itself deeply suspicious of earnest forms of communication.[1] This is the standard conservative argument against irony: it is too precious for the young and inexperienced. Since they lack historical context for most political and social problems, they will be laughing for all the wrong reasons, most likely for literal reasons: Homer Simpson, Eric Cartman, George Costanza, Kenny Powers, Liz Lemon, Sarah Silverman and Stephen Colbert will all become our role models for behavior, and we will not take note that each of these characters represents either some form of morally reprehensible behavior or disrespectful conduct. What this says is not that constructions on television are the problem. It really says that we (Americans) are the problem. The conservative adult who fears the loss of authenticity

through humor has very little confidence that the American liberalism envisioned by progressives, with its emphasis on an ethics of pluralism and inclusion, will carry the day.

While all of this might be true about postmodern irony, it does not address the question of what kind of meaning is implied by *TDS* through its choice of targets, and its explanatory set ups. Certainly, some viewers may tune in to feel the superiority of recognizing that what Sean Hannity said last week doesn't match this week's editorial, but *TDS* is limited in its political message by the structural limitations of parodying the mainstream media (hereafter, MSM) and by its nostalgic (and therefore b ackward-looking) commitment to protecting Progressive-era politics and institutions from assault by right-wing media. This places *TDS* squarely within the leftist paradigm of news 'framing', which includes most MSNBC news programming (e.g. *Hardball*, *The Rachel Maddow Show* [2008–][2]) and other forms of entertainment like *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* [1999–], all of which use regular satire in many of their segments and scripts. Furthermore, research has identified that there is 'no statistically significant relationship between moderate or conservative cable TV news programming and viewing political satire' (Hmielowski Holbert & Lee 2011: 110). What does this mean? It means people who watch Fox News and evening broadcasts do not wish to find, nor will they find, satirical takes on news content in their programs. It means satirical television exists entirely on the Left in the United States. Earnestness in politics is a brand sold largely on the Right. While CNN might attempt it through figures and diagrams – the bells and whistles technology that *TDS* parodies constantly – the repeated exposure of their journalistic failures demonstrates how much they rely on predicting stories rather than reporting them. Thus, it is important to understand the entire debate over satire as a proxy for culture war inhering to widespread fear (and moral panic) that Americans, especially younger ones, will not take politics seriously. This progressive sentiment is contained to the Left. This does not mean that *TDS* is simply a 'mouthpiece of the Liberal Left,' as recent research has shown that *TDS* makes 'Democratic jokes' more often than 'Republican jokes,' and even more general jokes about media than 'Republican jokes,' at least in the period during 2008 when most armchair analysts claimed that Stewart 'won' the election for President Obama (Teten 2011: 79). What this means is that the stylistic approach to politics matters, and this is a function of the political cultures to which corresponding demographics coalesce. The sarcasm and irony on left-leaning news shows is similar to that on *TDS* and other cartoon comedies that feature political content, as research has effectively demonstrated (Hmielowski Holbert & Lee 2011: 111). We will examine these two aspects of *TDS*'s presentation of content for their cultural import and impact on 'youth' in the remainder of the essay. First, we must position Jon Stewart's *TDS* as a key 'node' in the network of convergence culture whose 'agency' can lead to transformation of the terms of debate in contemporary politics (Harsin 2010). The question for politics and culture, I believe, is neither about the power of irony to shape political energy nor the medium through which it arrives at its destination, but about the cultural content of its message. As long as *TDS* remains a mirror to the MSM it may re-invent journalism (Baym 2005), but this result will have little effect either on political representation or political practice, contrary to what Day and other optimists suppose. The

fourth estate has not operated as a critic of establishment politics for some time, if it ever did. In convergence culture, media often exist to segregate audiences while simultaneously keeping them hooked into the medium. This means that 'understanding how satire has been both used and abused is essential to following political trends' (Lewis 2006: 156). Media scholars have made comparisons between late-night comedy, specifically Jay Leno, and other more developed forms of comedy. They usually give Leno viewers the benefit of the doubt, arguing that his humor usually focuses on a simple knowledge of contemporary political personalities so as not to alienate a broad audience. However, Lewis sees it differently, viewing the simplicity of Leno's comedy as a problem of ignorance:

> Leaving ideology aside, for a joke to work with a significant percentage of uninformed viewers, they need to have in mind the ideas, facts, or images required in resolving the joke's incongruity (for instance that Ted Kennedy is a lush, Bill Clinton a lecher, and George W. Bush an inarticulate dope). Leno may meet what he sees as a fair representation of his audience during his famous jay-walking interviews with random people on the street who, though they probably know the names of Michael Jackson's gardeners, generally cannot come up with the name of a Supreme Court Justice or one of their own senators […]. (Lewis 2006: 157)

Leno is often taken as the example of the 'common culture' comedian. He assumes the least amount of political knowledge of his viewers, and resists making jokes that rely on audiences making inferences about diverse cultures. He doesn't really even assume a complex knowledge of pop culture; more likely his comedy trades on the enduring comedic themes of timeless forms of frustration (death, taxes) and inferences about gender frustrations. It should not be surprising that the theory of humor most appropriate to this present moment is premised on the failure of knowledge on the part of the mass public corresponding to the logic of the niche market, or as it is politely understood from within the paradigm of 'taste'. *TDS*'s audience, it has been shown, is primarily composed of college-educated youth. This means that a further limitation of *TDS*, beyond the policy content and political characters chosen by the MSM, is that the narratives used in the show to satirize media coverage are limited to the knowledge base of its college-educated audience, who do presumably know the name of at least one Supreme Court Justice. This audience, at present, is composed of young people who share a desperately generic sense of personal responsibility. Confronted as they are with a depressed job market, these students have been convinced that they must obtain a college degree as a passport to employment, even if it means amassing tens of thousands of dollars' worth of debt. As Besley writes:

> In the current neoliberal environment, to avoid and manage educational risk, a prudential rationality has evolved whereby youth are now expected to invest in their own education, taking out student loans and selecting educational courses at the best colleges – a self-investment that is forced upon them and aided by guidance counselors

and others. To understand this risk, we need to go beyond cultural studies to the changing economics of the self, to governmentality […]. (Besley 2009: 58)

My contention is that *TDS* fills an existential need: young and mostly college-educated viewers tune in to find coverage of stories that point out the stupidity of political characters, as well as the misguided policy proposals usually issued from the People's House (e.g. Colbert's 'Better Know a District'). Yet, it also hooks the viewer that is beyond youth in terms of actual age; anyone who wonders what is happening to the country and wonders why the mainstream media is not covering it. Up until Rachel Maddow came on television in early 2009, no one was fighting culture war on the Left in US media except for *TDS* with Jon Stewart. Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* had been expelled from ABC in 2002. This is an important historical point: at the height of dark times, the only possible critic of Fox News's 9/11 celebration on network television was Maher. He was cancelled (after winning an Emmy!) for taking a position on US foreign policy that has, in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, been shown to be a credible one, in the sense that no one would blink an eye at someone arguing that US foreign policy prior to 9/11 in some ways invited attack (indeed, even Fox News was arguing this very point not two years later when the subject was President Clinton's handling of Bin Laden during the bombing in Yemen). This said, youth in the contemporary US, along with their 'in the know' counterparts from the Left (according to some reports there may be some 'moderate' Republicans who watch too), rely on *TDS* for an alternative explanation of the culture wars, whether they impact on interpretations of foreign policy or birth control. *TDS* is the *only* example of a countercultural genre to emerge unscathed from 9/11, as is Rachel Maddow (eight years later), both introduced by Lizz Winstead. Countercultures do not by themselves inspire social action; they act as a holding pattern of sorts for alternative views. The point of political comedy like *TDS* is not, as many point out, to inspire such viewers to political activity, nor is it to change the way they view politics; in contemporary times, when most of US politics seems like farce, it makes them feel 'smart'. These viewers already know how they view politics, and, in this sense, Day is correct: *TDS* presents them with confirmation of others 'out there' in television land who see the insanity of ratings-driven news. However, no community can emerge from this shared viewing; not because of the technology but because social politics have been co-opted by advertising. Thus, the popularity of *TDS*'s 'snark' when it confronts branding in its opening segments by merging them with news reports. Commentators have pointed out that *TDS* commits the 'sin' of making its viewers cynical, but I disagree that this is the result. Rather it makes them feel superior in a necessary way. As Marteinson has theorized, a new approach to understanding humor would have an epistemological dimension. Looking at the ancient Greeks, he argues that 'in practice, ironic humour involves the portrayal of someone who demonstrably lacks a particular bit of shared knowledge that is most relevant to the social situation in which they find themselves' (Marteinson 2010: 175). The main focus of *TDS* is poking fun at *Fox & Friends*, particularly for their lack of knowledge, not only about themselves (e.g. Gretchen Carlson),

but also about their lack of knowledge/integrity about their show's topics. Since these shows have become so popular in the US, and the content of their messages has come to represent the political opinions of a majority of Americans, it is appropriate and necessary for Stewart to satirize their lack of self-awareness and knowledge about political topics. This lack of self-awareness is a critical component of their earnest and confident messages, but it is also, very importantly, a means to deliver what Colletta called 'polite cruelty'. They, by contrast, make people who feel superior by virtue of racist, sexist or most importantly, wealth ideologies (whether real or perceived) feel safe. Without this element, they would not be able to pull in their ratings. This serves to create the *TDS* audience as a group of people who 'know' and enjoy ridicule at the expense of others judged less intelligent than themselves: populists. This is particularly important when we consider that the role of ironic culture in the US is 'a consequence of a larger national mythology that has long valued plain speaking populism over ambiguous, clever (and suspicious) word-play' (Sconce 2002: 354). Their populist discourse presents 'a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter'(Kazin qtd in Savage 2010: 179). This populism on both sides of the media aisle has, in many ways, alienated most viewers from 'lamestream' media. On *TDS*, the shared knowledge on which much of the humor depends, the 'ideas, facts or knowledges required to resolve the incongruities' is situated squarely in an old progressive era understanding of government, social policy and more recent normative concerns about diversity and pluralism, detached from social politics. Social politics implied solidarity: that working together as formal equals to solve common problems might work. The problem is that social politics has been co-opted by media as they mapped frames of reference onto existing social impulses. Politicians do it too, as President Obama demonstrated through his online campaign donation strategy in 2008. This is an important point about *TDS*'s audience: they, as largely Generation Y, believe that each individual's personal commitment to diversity ('personal politics') – a commonly remarked-upon trait of this generation – will sweep equality into the social and political scene without any active, participatory effort.[3]To this end, *TDS* is a finger in the dyke holding back the tidal wave of ignorance that will inevitably lead to the complete erosion of a standpoint for truth in representation in media. At its worst, *TDS* is a pleasing form of distraction, a way of avoiding the painful experiences of a present in politics that offers no particularly imaginative inroads into the future. At its best, it is a stopgap on the assault on imaginative intelligence and critical thinking by mainstream media. In this vein, Stewart's show has been hailed as an important node in another sense: holding traditional broadcast news accountable in a postmodern era, where news content is determined by advertising and ratings rather than the public interest. Since government cannot regulate media because of the First Amendment to the Constitution allowing for freedom of speech, press and religion, and since the US lacks a national press council to ensure a free and fair press (as for example in Sweden or India) to hear complaints, it is left to watchdog associations (themselves catering to niche audiences) and entertainment shows to point out the media's

malfeasance (Painter & Hodges 2010: 265). Like the watchdog association we examined in Chapter 3, Media Matters, *TDS* is possibly the only television show that points out when the media do not meet their obligations to inform the public interest. Among the main infractions that *TDS* locates are: 'falsehoods', from faulty statistical reporting to character misrepresentation in newscasters' 'inconsistencies', notably when a network airs a public interest story about potential harm from a product for which they also provide advertising outlets, or airing stories that promote a product the network also sells or holds stock in; when 'inconsequential news is blown out of proportion,' a daily occurrence in contemporary politics and a definite part of the horse race election coverage; 'naming given to continuing coverage,' and this corresponds directly to the aforementioned horse race politics by punning on news media's propensity to set lofty, decisive, marathon-like goals for elections, as in 'Indecision 2008' for 'Decision 2004' (Painter & Hodges 2010: 269–71). As Painter and Hodges also argue, *TDS* schools its viewers (or rather reminds them) that media literacy is an important skill to apply when following the MSM. As mentioned just earlier, media literacy is not just about an 'awareness of constructions,' but having the ability to place one's own awareness of such constructions into a larger framework of political and economic relations, and 'read' out their implications for the consumer and the citizen caught within the matrix of convergence culture. As Jenkins explains, 'Right now, convergence culture is getting defined top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms' (Jenkins 2006). It's still true today; perhaps even more so than in 2006, with the explosion of Facebook as a social networking site, Twitter and other public forums used by marketers to advance a common agenda.

For some, media literacy is an ongoing project that has become the best we can hope for in the era of convergence culture. Blending a sensibility of understated 'common sense' that is only effective through a denial of importance/authenticity/objectivism, *TDS* restores its audiences' belief (largely white males between the ages of 18–29) that rationality/empiricism continues to have purchase on the interpretation of political events.[4] Off the bat, *TDS* does two main things to ensure its popularity. One, it denies that it is a serious show or has a serious mission. Blending a critique of the news with entertainment, as well as important punning on consumer and popular culture references, *TDS* under Jon Stewart proudly refers to itself as a show that airs on Comedy Central after puppets. The sure fire way to establish authority in American public life and popular culture, especially with generations coming after the baby boom, is to deny that you have any, whether through pointing to your lack of credentials, your tough struggle on the lower rungs of the ladder, or to refer to your lack of professional or formal training in any pursuit. George Washington (incorrectly) forever connected the association of the presidency with commander and chief of the armed forces by denying his interest in politics. He did this by retiring and refusing a salary. His 'disinterestedness' in public recognition for his achievements 'turns the heads of the people by exciting their enthusiasm,' as John Adams angrily wrote (qtd in Wood 1993: 289). This denial of importance is linked to another productive denial: of objectivity. As noted in Chapter 1, Stewart must deny objectivity because the majority of Americans no longer believe in it. As we mentioned

earlier, unburdened by professional ethics of journalism, *TDS* is free to wax political without being called out for bias. This is important because most people know there is no such thing as objectivity; instead they yearn for a construction of accuracy that they can believe in, possibly 'truthiness'? What stands in for accuracy is taste: did you like the *TDS* segment? Did it ring true to you? (i.e. make you laugh). In other words, did *TDS* replay for you the series of ridiculous statements you overheard (or missed but knew happened) on the MSM, that appeared in a nonsensical order with a heightened sense of affect (anxiety perhaps, or glee?) in the order that made sense to you; with a dampened affect, in logical or chronological order, so that the ridiculous statements stood out all the more clearly to you as *evidence* of just how obscene or irresponsible media figures and politicians are? If so, you are the *TDS* demo.

The demonstration of evidence presented mostly by men is another important factor. *TDS*'s audience is largely middle-class identified, white and male. *TDS*'s writing staff is a one generation removed mirror for its audience. *TDS* has the least diverse guest list of any late night talk show, although it should be pointed out that *News Hour* on PBS has a guest list 80 per cent male and 82 per cent white (this would presumably be the show *TDS* is least likely to parody). *TDS* has been accused of having a woman problem as evidenced by the show's one full-time woman reporter, Samantha Bee, as well as its writing staff. Although the show was co-created by Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg, both left after producing the first segment with Craig Kilborn and never worked directly with Jon Stewart. In 1993, Stewart hosted *The Jon Stewart Show* on MTV. While Kilborn hosted the show initially in 1996, Stewart made a name for himself through interviewing on *The Late Late Show* with Tom Snyder (part of the entertainment franchise owned by David Letterman, who liked Stewart). In 1998, Stewart and Kilborn switched gigs, with Stewart taking over *TDS* and Kilborn *The Late Late Show*. One can speculate about the reasons for the lack of gender and racial diversity on *TDS*, but since it's a parody show, its characters like its content could be limited. In addition, though the only regular correspondent is Bee, perhaps the one parody *TDS* is afraid its viewers really won't get is the one of Gretchen Carlson or any other Fox anchor like her: an exceedingly made-over blonde who reads the prompter and laughs at the smug cruelty of her co-hosts. They might have a legitimate fear here. I will explore this in the conclusion, but for now we will table the masculine aspect of *TDS* and view it as a filter problem, not something that is revealing about the politics it professes. Indeed, it is difficult to criticize *TDS* for its gender politics; the strongest source, Jezebel.com, has tried and largely failed in the attempt. Pointing out that only men work on the show is not evidence enough for its fans, and the women who worked on *TDS* at the time issued their own statement denying *Jezebel's* claims.

Throughout this decade, by contrast, Stewart earned the title 'The Queen of Nice'. As a counter-narrative to the polite cruelty of Fox News and other conservative politicians and cultural figures, Stewart has deconstructed their affective strategies in order to offer his audience a generation-based aesthetic that promotes a kind of progressive *affect* to counter it. Some critics are confused by this. For example, he has been accused of fostering cynicism on a different register than the one identified by Colletta; that is, about objects that have

seemingly resisted hyperreality, and so enjoy an aura of 'realness' – like politics. Hart and Hartelius argue that the news is the problem and somehow obscures our relationship to the political. What Stewart should be doing, they argue, is promoting 'skepticism' of the news rather than cynicism about politics. Accusing Stewart of a 'sense of smug superiority' and a 'sloppy science' of cynicism in his written work, the book *America*, as well as various *TDS* segments and personal appearances on network news, Hart and Hartelius argue that the skeptic, by contrast, believes that:

> […] because sensory powers are limited, appearances can deceive; because impulsiveness is dangerous, deep reflection about human affairs is best; because people are social creatures, and hence imitative, conventional wisdom is rarely wise; because people are fallible, one should never trust a single source of information; because most data are mediated, primary (not secondary) sensation should be prized […]. (Hart & Hartelius 2007: 271)

Stewart reflects already existing skepticism about the news but he doesn't really need to (as we've already established). For Stewart to do anything other than merely reflect such skepticism would make him look dumb, because, as we've said, earnestness is owned by the Right. As we have already seen, if there is cynicism about politics, he certainly was not the one who produced it. Fox News is not a *tromp d'oeil* that we must step back to decipher. Erin Burnett is not fooling viewers with tricky logic. The media and the political establishment (from politicians proper, to political action committees (PACs), to independent bloggers) have been co-conspirators in the manipulation of affect which occurs prior to cognition, and may even forestall it completely. What Stewart and *TDS* need to do is build an infra-sensible register of constituencies. William Connolly suggests that he already has. When questioned about how affect can be an important political resource to counter the violent, exclusionary politics of the Right, he said:

> [Y]ou can, first, expose through parody and example the tactics of those who promote a violent, exclusionary politics. You can, second, introduce counterstrategies of micropolitics attached to a more generous ethico-political agenda. And you can, third, publicize the latter experiments as you proceed, suggesting how they impinge upon the rich, affective dimensions of life. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert make a start on this first front and perhaps to some degree on others as well. It seems unwise to ignore the infrasensible dimension of politics in an era of twenty-four hour news, an American regime increasingly resentful about its place in the world, and large sections of the population primed to respond aggressively to any scandal invented by bloggers and Fox News […]. (Connolly 2011: 796)

In other words, it is not Stewart that is making people cynical about politics – they already are. Stewart must work against the hegemonic claims by Fox News and bloggers, who promote a kind of vicious naiveté that prompts world-weary viewers to aggressively oppose

social change and defend nostalgic violence. Still others place *TDS* within a counter-hegemonic discourse that apprehends the neo-liberal corporate and political culture of the US in order to shore up its own position as a mediator that tables the possibility of radical criticism of the culture industry (Fedechko & Vandenberg 2011). Indeed, one could place many situation comedies within such a framework that might even constitute a genre of television comedy marked by not only its generational style (X), but also its popularity at a particular historical juncture: the decline of the middle-class moral, social and economic contract that would be accelerated by 9/11, and the window of opportunity it provided for corporate interests, most notably Fox News and bloggers. Indeed television itself might be the medium that does present opportunities for a kind of micro-politics aimed at building a more open-minded, less aggressive take on social politics (and vice versa). What appears to Hart and Hartelius as a positive (in the rational, empiricist sense) problem may in fact be a strategy of affect. Because Stewart doesn't spell out a position of 'moral vengeance' for the viewer to vicariously identify with, or suggest a remedy of liberal therapeutics when he diagnoses media and political errors, he is seen as being irresponsible. However, they may be confusing Stewart's 'dampened affect' for 'moral indifference'. As Jeffrey Sconce has written, 'Within the larger debates over a decadent culture of irony, critics often confuse this illusion of authorial/narrational effacement with a sense of moral indifference' (2002: 361). When Stewart and other comedians 'fail' to provide a 'deep reflection' on the news coverage they present, it is often viewed as shirking civic responsibility, or the encouraging of self-referentiality in Colletta's terms (as in 'Hey, look at me, aren't I cute and funny?'). What they miss is the important stylistic shifts and cues, made possible by television and graphic media, sound and other techniques, that allow for subtle criticism without the need for an overt moral lesson. Cala Zubair argues that *TDS*, in particular, features many cast members and Stewart employing 'metalinguistic acts' that 'comment on the type of speech (or sign) being used and signal to the listener how that usage of language is to be interpreted' (Zubair 2011: 5). Furthermore, one particular register of note is 'stylization,' in which 'hyperbolized' use of stereotypical gestures and speech performs a genre and simultaneously interprets it. Adapted from Mikhail Bahktin's (1986) description of 'double-voicing,' stylization is a set of discourses he or she voices. On Zubair's persuasive readings (which, to date, no one has attempted), Stewart can correctly joke about being incorrectly identified as part of an Emmy 'genre' that features 'variety, comedy, uh, music, language, and uh children's programming, so […][audience laughs] uh we're delighted'. He further thanks the audience and reiterates his gratitude for being allowed to 'create a situation that has not been replicated in our uh "so-called" genre' (Zubair 2011: 1). These elements of stylization:

> […] include the violation of expected political news registers through hyperbolized volume and pitch, 'out-of-place' lexical items, emphatic stress through vowel lengthening, gesture, gaze and others. All of these features embody incongruencies with stereotypical news broadcasting, creating the humorous commentary the show is acclaimed for […]. (Zubair 2011: 5)

Moreover, as we shall see with *TCR*, the segment using 'The Word' quite literally makes use of a silent (leftist, ironic) narrator, who responds to the O'Reilly 'spin' performance. The silent narrator may even be the textual representation of O'Reilly's 'stoned slacker' who doesn't appear all that incoherent, he just doesn't have a mouthpiece. This is interestingly the paradoxical situation of Generation X and Y themselves: constantly defined by the words of the establishment (moral conservatism), they are muted by media. For when they do respond, they are called 'whiners' or are positioned as 'at-risk' for some moral failure. While some might characterize this as the ongoing problem of 'snark' (Denby 2010) or the 'tyranny of irony' (Wallace 1993), they mostly fail to see it as a response to a tyrannical cultural predicament and instead see it as an immature mode of sociality; again, siding with Benjamin Barber and the mature Democrats we met in Chapter 1. However, what if we were to see these stylizations as a political strategy that responds to a particularly reactionary media violence with the only sane response: a blank stare? The stare says, 'I'm not going to dignify your ridiculous or obscene antics or position on a topic with a response in words. My affectless stare should communicate to you to cease and desist this moral and political manipulation of my interest.'

Jeffrey Sconce identified a 'smart' sensibility in films of the 1990s that were presented as opposing features to the 'dumb' ones, mostly those produced by Michael Bay (sometimes we might wonder if Fox News is produced by Michael Bay, given its affective strategies). These films, mostly directed by Generation Xers, were packaged as indie alternatives to the major box office blow-up films (this is the same genre now exclusively produced and marketed by studios we examined in Chapter 3, which target the 18–24-year-old male audience). These films were 'born of ironic distance'; all that is not positive and 'dumb', and he isolates five main themes running across the genre that includes such films by directors such as Richard Linklater, Quentin Tarrantino, Todd Solondz, Spike Jonze, Richard Kelly, Alexander Payne, P.T. Anderson and so on. Films like *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson 1999), *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), etc. were all separate from an earlier style of film-making that reflected a generational preoccupation with social politics; that is with an overt political message and editing techniques that signified the importance of participation in society. Smart films, by contrast, were all targets for their lack of an overt moral or political message, and their focus on personal politics. Of the themes Sconce identifies, I have isolated two that I think are obviously found in most political comedy on television today, possibly indicating that a watered down version of this smart sensibility has made its way to cable programming. This is especially interesting given the film industry's abandonment of interesting, artistic film in favor of action franchises. The first that Sconce identifies is 'blank narration,' which we have already mentioned. He writes that many smart films are 'highly stylized' and:

> [...] attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing or bizarre, with a sense of *dampened affect*. Of course there is no such thing as truly blank style or

narration – only a set of strategies employed to signify an idea of blankness,' and this style is 'manifested most basically through framing and editing patterns […]. (Sconce 2002: 359)

The ironic 'position-taking' that Sconce isolates in smart films of the 1990s is again expressed, albeit in a more diluted form, in political comedy on television during the decade of dark times (more below). For now, it is interesting to note how Stewart himself is described by critics.

Writing in *Entertainment Weekly* in 2003, Ken Tucker opined: 'Stewart's favorite expression is the blank stare followed quickly by a wolfish grin: bafflement and outrage commingled' (Tucker 2003). Stewart also trades on 'authorial effacement' that is indicative of blank narrative, when he comments on obscene stories that other journalists are obliged to present seriously:

> And I guess while the cable news hosts are obliged to take those moments of idiocy seriously, Jon Stewart can give us that Jack Benny stare – Does anybody remember Jack Benny? – give us that Jon Stewart stare and let the hilarity of the moment sink in, often without saying a word […]. (Smolkin 2007)

To conjure up a dampened affect is to register disapproval without overtly stating it; it is tantamount to withdrawing approval, the very thing participatory politics relies on for its legitimacy. That everyone must participate in politics – as it is set up – is a dominant meme celebrated by the Left and Right in media. This paradigm of 'participation' is itself a disingenuous move by media because they are only interested in the kind of participation that boosts their ratings, or that they can frame in such a way as to increase their importance as news mediaries. Faced with such a paradigm, youth find a ready-made position and affective response in Jon Stewart. Stewart's dampening of the affect presupposed to be mobilized by mainstream media is what lures in his audience. In order to neutralize its sense of importance, this positioning consists of an ironic distancing achieved through the blank stare (which signifies: 'really, you want me to believe that?'), the snarky off-handed comment, or the sustained parodic imitation. O'Reilly's 'stoned slacker' comment was an attempt to neutralize the important effect of *TDS*'s politics: to short-circuit the paradigm of affective crises inspired by moral panics, sex scandals and manufactured attacks on the political process, something O'Reilly and other media performers from the Right, from Ann Coulter to Andrew Breitbart, have turned into a cottage industry. They have branded 'freedom', as we shall see at the end of the chapter, and it became the popular sentiment following 9/11 of freedom-loving, poor Americans, who voted against their interests and had critics scratching their heads in dismay. So, to Hart and Hartelius, for whom politics is some pure space routinely violated by news media, Stewart and his audience, indeed, the style he embodies as a 'slacker' comedian, demonstrate that the joke is not just about media or about politics, it's about the möbius strip of profit and arrogance that unites them. In other words, it's an

attitude wholly skeptical of 'pure politics or morality', sold to audiences by both corporations and the Right. This is obviously connected to the fact that they no longer convince publics through rational argumentation, but sell them on simple, disconnected talking points, making them feel warmth by making 'friends' with them, and appealing to baser instincts of selfishness and individualism. That is why advertising is so important to the Generation X slacker: they grew up on it as the first generation to encounter the limitless branding of every product they encountered.

TDS also features a 'recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity' (Sconce 2002: 358). The puns and logos that are visible as graphics as he recounts a news story or item of popular culture often trope off of the Generation X and Y sensitivity to marketing and advertising; more specifically, their inoculation against such strategies of branding and marketing. If we recall from Chapter 1 that Generation X is a subculture constituted specifically by media, we should see them as less a demographic (1964–75), or 'youth', than a 'performative subjectivity; that is, a category of historically enabled behavioral norms, linked in this case to visual culture' (Oake 2004: 90). This subject has a highly developed knowledge of consumer products and marketing techniques, often derided by our mature establishment types. For Oake, like Sconce, 'Cinema was singularly influential in the production and dissemination of Generation X' (2004: 85). Cinema in the '80s begins the product placement that would by the 1990s become ubiquitous to this performative subjectivity. In point of fact, most Xers recognize themselves through their affective connections to brands and characters. Remember *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and you remember Reese's Pieces. Branding, political theorist Jamie Warner explains, is when commercial marketers (and political candidates and their spokespersons in the media) rely on 'emotional rather than rational appeals', and 'attempt to achieve automatic, unreflective trust in the branded product, whether that product is a Popsicle, a Palm Pilot or a political party' (Warner 2007: 18). They repeat the same message in order to establish a relationship with the consumer. For political parties, this strategy inheres in talking points. Stewart's intervention is to remediate clips from (usually Fox News) but also across the news spectrum, where a chain of talking points is strung repeatedly.[5] The better media saturation they achieve, the closer they are to establishing themselves as the 'top' political brand (2007: 20). As she says, the consumer allows the 'brand' to do the thinking for him or her, and, like Connolly noted earlier, bloggers and Fox News seem to be better at it than Democrats or progressives. What *TDS* does in its news parody segment is to present these clips in an image-spliced crescendo and, following the well-established situationist technique of 'détournement', reverse the meaning, and hopefully inspire revulsion rather than loyalty. What is interesting is the way Warner describes *TDS*'s format as miming 24-hour cable news to establish the necessary 'familiarity' of the brand. Next, the tactical use of video by taking them out of order establishes the metacritique implicit in *TDS*:

> If the purpose of branding techniques such as talking points and saturation strategies is to repeat the same message unrelentingly over time with the hope that this message, because

of its familiarity, will be accepted as true, taking the talking points out of order temporally can have the opposite effect. The branding techniques are exposed as orchestrated techniques and so can be examined explicitly and critically, rather than operating in the background where they are most successful […]. (Warner 2007: 27)

Which is to say that *TDS,* through video arrangement, foregrounds the real message of seemingly separate media events, performing a valiant public service to viewers who cannot take in each utterance in real time on a 24-hour news cycle. Warner goes on to underscore how Stewart refrains from explaining what's happening or making judgments about it: 'he presides over the clips' (Warner 2007: 29). I would note also that this refusal to, as Warner puts it, 'moralize or sermonize' the clips presents one of Stewart's most remarkable 'smart' traits: blank narration. As Sconce puts it, 'Another principle in blank narration, found in practitioners of irony across the ages, is the tactical use of incongruity' (Sconce 2002: 361). Warner calls the strategies of *TDS* culture 'jamming'. Culture jamming is when,

> Through their own humorous version of news parody, *The Daily Show* writers and comedians disseminate dissident interpretations of current political events, potentially jamming the transmission of the dominant political brand message. Like other culture jammers, *The Daily Show* subversively employs emotional and aesthetic modalities similar to those employed by political branding itself, thus interrupting it from within. Unlike many culture jammers, however, *The Daily Show* reliance on a humorous version of parody means that they can add their voices to the conversation in a seemingly innocuous way. (After all, it is just a joke.). (Warner 2007:19)

Situation comedies like *30 Rock*, *The Office* (2005–), *Arrested Development* (2003–13), *Louie, Eastbound and Down* and many others have featured important examples of Generation X stylization, as well as politics. As television comes to replace film as an important cultural referent, we begin to see not only media awareness and literacy as a prerequisite for getting jokes in such shows, we see an increasing use of incongruous style and intertextuality (most of these shows refer to each other and similar cultural products in an ongoing fashion) applied to enhance a cohort of themes centered largely around dysfunction: of the family, the workplace, the career woman, the media, politics, the self-made man and the athlete. All of these characters and themes reflect in some way a downwardly mobile spiral away from the middle class through disaffection with its canonical values: hard work and self-denial. Meanwhile, all of them represent (mostly) white preoccupation with career failure or disaffection that is precipitated by their positioning within structural situations that render them impotent to challenge. To such a predicament, X has historically responded with a shrug, an ironic quip and change of topic, earning it the label 'slacker', and Jon Stewart has over the past ten years become the leader of this pack (as O'Reilly rightly surmises). Using *TDS* as a platform, Jon Stewart has honed and perfected his Generation X style in order to speak to his audience about the media's

role in obscuring the agendas of politicians, who line up with corporate interests to destroy this middle class. Stewart wants to save it and gives hope to those who sense it is a foreclosed possibility. He does this by taking what's left of the social contract – a belief in rationality and moral decency – in order to make the progressive Left creditable to young people. By showing them, their (now) mostly worthless college diplomas have some value as a passport to reading and understanding popular culture. In an age where participation is co-opted before it gets off the ground at the grassroots level, and marketing dominates our desires as citizens, youth can tune in to *TDS* and find a kind of inspired confidence as a response to hegemonic media culture. Before we can go further into this wormhole of American media, we must track the historical and cultural shifts that made Stewart's media intervention possible.

Stewart: 'Technically' a baby boomer

> Lets talk about the real world for a moment. We had been discussing it earlier, and I […] I wanted to bring this up to you earlier about the real world, and this is I guess as good a time as any. I don't really know to put this, so I'll be blunt. We broke it. Please don't be mad. I know we were supposed to bequeath to the next generation a world better than the one we were handed. So, sorry. I don't know if you've been following the news lately, but it just kinda got away from us. Somewhere between the gold rush of easy internet profits and an arrogant sense of endless empire, we heard kind of a pinging noise, and uh, then the damn thing just died on us. So I apologize. (Jon Stewart, 2004 Commencement Address at William & Mary)

Not only is Jon Stewart a comedic example of Generation X style, he is a baby boomer, or born on the cusp (1960) he himself overtly identifies as a boomer, but covertly performs as an Xer. He is, as the quote above from his oft-cited commencement address at his alma mater William and Mary shows, apologetic to young people, taking personal responsibility for the 1990s and beyond. This is another productive denial because Stewart's *TDS* persona certainly does not perform as a boomer. In fact, without an X sensibility his show would never have reached its epic popularity among youth. In this address he does kind of 'explain' what has been happening in politics to produce the situation where most of the audience at this commencement is unsure of whether they'll find a job, yet is probably certain they will face what Sconce calls 'the ultimate Gen X nightmare' and have to move in with their parents following graduation. In the address, Stewart also mentions that he was twelve blocks from the towers that fell on 9/11, making this a paradigmatic event for explaining why the graduates find themselves in this situation. He remarks at the end, though, that he saw a homeless man mumbling to himself on his stoop in lower Manhattan one day, and leaned down to listen more closely only to find the man was 'playing with himself.' On that note, he ends the speech remarking 'With that, I knew we were going to be okay.'

The rise of *TDS* as a cultural icon of the critical Left cannot be understood without reference to 9/11 and the conservative attacks on progressive institutions that followed it. In many ways, 9/11 did not 'kill' irony as many prematurely asserted (Graydon Carter, Jedediah Purdy) and usher in a new period of earnestness in politics. It could have, but it didn't. Instead, those in charge of the country (our patrimonial elites) used the opportunity to spend political capital dismantling public support for public education, infrastructural improvement, diplomacy and American involvement in international institutions, collective bargaining, individual rights and liberties for anyone other than corporations, science, etc. Most of this they accomplished through political branding; earnestness, the brand, was never the intended result of the politics but only a means to accomplish a refeudalization of the country. If politicians had been interested in earnestness, the conservatives in the Republican Party would have at least thrown a political bone to Democratic or progressive constituents, or waved a small white flag now and then to signify the commitment to civil society – to the 'rules of the game'. Instead, they charged full scale ahead through a semiotic war to change the rules of the game altogether (more on this at the end). Recall that both parties presided over the deregulation of crucial industries during the '90s. This in turn, led to widespread mergers among banks and important media outlets, including Viacom, which, by the way, owns Comedy Central. However, this assault was assisted by a lack of critical strategies on the part of the Democratic Party; indeed, one might argue the Democrats had largely dismantled and sold any of the defenses they had when they 'reformed' many progressive institutions during the 1990s. Furthermore, American over-reliance on the electoral system to solve every social and political problem has only exacerbated this trend toward privatization and reform. As Richard Sennett argues, the Left needed to become 'creditable' not just to the constituents of Democratic candidates, but to its would-be opponents: those who did not believe them. He writes:

> You become creditable when others take you seriously even though they may not agree with you. To be taken seriously, you need to know when to keep silent and how to listen well; you are then extending respect and recognition to others […]. (Sennett 2011: 24)

Sennett surmises that the focus on electoral politics has caused the Left to forget the social elements of progressive causes in local and grassroots politics. This trend has no doubt been exacerbated by the MSM and its 24-hour news cycle that focuses exclusively on electoral politics, or the personal and professional trials and tribulations of electoral candidates, the machinations of the parties and their operatives and the static 'issues' they fight over in the form of talking points. A return to social politics would include a grassroots effort to rethink the way parties present some of the issues and admit that this focus on the electoral process is morally inefficient, focused as it is on 'winning' and 'losing' over compromise and shades of grey (read an op-ed in your local newspaper about abortion lately?). Such a politics would engage civil society again, not just in speeches about 'hope' and 'change' at the executive level, but in real efforts to translate the effects of actual policy on persons living in small

towns and communities, urban slums and makeshift housing complexes, and to listen to what they had to say about how those effects matter or don't matter to them. At the risk of sounding hokey in a chapter concerned with 'cool' and 'smart' interpretations of humor and culture, it would mean arranging what Paulo Freire termed 'cultural circles' throughout the country, and the outcomes of these circles would then loop back to political parties at all levels. Substituting local agenda setting for polling data would undercut the role of political operatives like Karl Rove and David Axelrod. Sennet wants to do this for the Left, and implies that the Right has already done such community organizing. (Why else would they decide to spew such vitriol at Obama for having been a community organizer?) However, I would argue that two relatively minor diagnostics are off with Sennett's analysis. For one thing, a return to 'social politics' is not going to rebuild a civil society that has been decimated by a politics aimed at manipulating citizen affect at the personal level. The bridge back to anything resembling a 'social' under convergence culture, where people have more relationships with imaginary friends who agree with them on 'issues', and identify more with characters in franchise films, television series and video games than with their own family members, neighbors or co-workers is strapped with the TNT of *méconnaissance*. Recall our discussion earlier of Sconce's identification of 'smart' films as a response to the 'social politics' of the 1960s and 1970s that he locates in film. He argues that 1990s 'smart films' give way to 'ironic disdain' with consumer culture and the middle-class, as well as focusing on 'power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle class culture,' (Sconce 2002: 352). As a warning to my readers, Sconce is careful to warn his reader not to confuse the films as apathetic because their morality is conveyed not through narrative expression (as in the 1960s and 1970s), but through film editing strategies that signified strategic disengagement from the social field of politics. What critics on both the Left and Right, he argues, could not understand about smart film was its disinterestedness in either side's political and social agendas. In contradistinction to social politics, smart film, and by extension the 'smart humor' set up of *TDS* and others, is generally uninterested in motivating the self to situate itself in the very social context of 'explanation'. This would not only be a rational response (not the plane we're examining here in the infra-sensible realm) but also possibly moral (and therefore boring and elitist). Before the reader navigates back toward blaming generations who 'abandoned' social politics, it should be made clear that a preoccupation with the self is intrinsic to American identity and, by extension, promoted in consumerism. The assumption that we are somehow capable of finding agency and moving outside the sphere of consumer identity (or emulative consumption) is the fantasy of a truly one of a kind, and generally unrepresentative, generation in American history: namely, the boomers. The last film to really make a damning critique of exactly how – on the level of the psychological self – consumerism is linked to political possibility was the smart film *Fight Club*, and we all know how that ended for the film's, ahem, 'protagonists'. To return to Sennett, surely we need some kind of civil engagement to rebuild society, whether that will be a new form of online civic conduct or elsewhere. As one of the central tenants of convergence culture holds, we are not wholly in a place where we can abandon the paradigms

of the old media like face-to-face interaction. Thus, we find ourselves 'in-between', and this space not only discourages common meanings or civil society, but encourages an 'us versus them' mentality in television viewers and purveyors of culture. Hence, the function of news is now to please its 'fans' and its style and topics must not disappoint (Gray 2007). Yet, when a public culture was needed most, and a civic discourse to choreograph its challenges, it had vanished.

Humor in dark times; or, what we are doing after the orgy?

It was in this critical vacuum that irony flourished after 9/11 as comedians and satirists took advantage of the daftness of the Bush administration, Fox News and supporters and followers of the 'base' in 'red states' who clearly had no idea they didn't know anything. Following 9/11, progressives were creatively ill-prepared to deal with the conservative assault on existing New-Deal-era institutions and ideals (and some, in the truest sense of apathetic opportunism, gave in and profited themselves). Many referred to this time period, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, as 'dark times', where seemingly little outrage accompanied the alternating force of foibles and assault perpetrated on the American public and elsewhere by the Bush administration and the discredited Democrats who stood by and watched it happen in Congress. Generationally speaking, the boomers were in charge of both parties, and they mirrored each other in terms of priorities, creating an adversarial paradigm that agreed on only one thing: maintaining their power over American electoral politics. Generation X, a cohort of Americans raised with little wiggle room to challenge their forebears' socially stifling politics or 'culture wars', invented the 'blank stare' as a means of moral response, combined with a sensibility of 'affective disengagement' that was often mistaken for political apathy on the Left and moral bankruptcy on the Right (Sconce 2002). What the boomers had established, however, was a regime of political and social representation based largely on Hegelian premises: the orgy, as Baudrillard once put it, was over. Now all that was left was for subsequent generations to follow the lead of progressive institutionalists (read: Hegelian bureaucrats) and develop and follow (largely national) policy that enshrined the Democratic social revolution.[6] Never mind that most of this social revolution was not only unfinished, it was also increasingly unfunded (social security, etc.) and largely un-thought as to its implications for other kinds of institutions like the family and religion.[7] The Generation X response to this paradigm was to refuse to believe, as Sconce writes, 'in someone else's something,' a 'strategic disengagement from a certain terrain of belief, politics and commitment' (Sconce 2002: 369). In a word, the youth of X realized that the adult commitment to middle-class family was 'phony'. By extension, then, all the institutions that have nurtured it – social security, public investment in infrastructure, well-funded public schools and universities, investment in relevant scientific research – were to become pawns in the political shell game too. The last generation to be able to live the contradiction between a societal profession of faith in family values, alongside a ruthless

consumer and interest-based pleasure seeking individualism, Generation X knew that all that socialized risk wasn't going to extend to cover their future. But they had two advantages: one, they could still 'see' the disparate impact of conventional policies on their future in the contrasting visions of the culture war and partisan politics; two, they could still believe that they might survive the generational cut. Moving on to the generations following X, as they begin to come of age as political and social thinkers, one witnesses the emergence of a solid embrace of middle-class family ethos just as the social and political supports for it have nearly crumbled, combined with a completely cynical belief that all political action is the result of self-interested motivation. They exist in a Baudrillardian third order fantasy world, where discourse about the family, education and politics exists to cover over the fact that none of these institutions exist for them in a way they did for the previous two generations. As of this writing, 85 per cent of college graduates move home with their parents after graduation and have an average student loan debt of $25,000. Yet, they must continue to believe. Social theorists who reject models of youth based in sociological or psychological interpretive paradigms, as well as subcultural genres (whose subjects are informed by their participation in institutions like family, labor unions, etc.) have begun to discuss how contemporary youth must forge an entrepreneurial self that takes responsibility for the failure of socialized risk or rejects the concept outright. In other words, they've been handed the semiotic bag and it's empty. They have no constitutive outside to appeal to politically: the discursive force of all master signifiers has been exhausted. Democracy, the family, capitalism, progress, social justice, etc.: these terms have been co-opted by globalized media. Any attempt to construct a social politics that could respond to this situation will be absorbed the moment of its media inception. As argued in Chapter 1, the notion of a subcultural genre is relevant. Rather than looking at youth as a pre-existing clinical object, the important way to theorize this ironic position-taking is by identifying the media node of refusal around which an audience will coalesce. In the past decade, this has been in political comedy.

Youth in the United States are caught within a political paradigm that alternates between abandonment and predatory interest. They are still trapped in a discursive milieu that emphasizes how 'at-risk' they are for all kinds of generalized themes of long-term failure related to personal responsibility. So, while they admit that the future is bleak and politics is discursively circular, they are not allowed to drop out, except on the terms allowed to them by a libertarian sensibility, and this is achieved only by announcing that they are personally responsible. This allows them to disengage from conventional politics while still maintaining the recognizably American civic persona of the hard-working, self-reliant individual (and this is the only way to avoid being labeled 'at-risk', the new term that replaces 'slacker'). They no longer have to prove that they believe in 'someone else's something' – they just have to say it. What seems like incoherent position-taking to older generations, who shake their heads in disbelief that such young and politically immature Americans could simply discursively separate themselves from social politics while at the same time claiming to be personally progressive (or even conservative), turns out to be the only rational response to the structurally insane predicament in which they find themselves. Besley describes this as the

governmentality of youth drawing on Foucault. Within a post-Fordist milieu characterized by the withdrawal of public subsidies for the middle-class and the silly solution found in privatization, Generation Y and its followers are asked to actually live in the 'pay as you go' society that also routinely monitors their consumption, taste and behaviors for profit while telling them it is for their own well-being. Another interesting point here is that Stewart refers to himself as a 'libertarian', perhaps an attempt to co-opt the term away from the conservative media who define it as a celebration of selfishness. Yet the question remains, how did we get here?

Instructive here is Sherry Ortner's ethnography of the American middle-class in relation to Generation X. Reflecting on a series of interviews she conducted as an anthropologist in the US, Ortner argues that the identity of Generation X was largely framed by a public culture, which reflected boomer parental anxieties about its children's ability to reproduce itself after the onset of economic decline, and the gradual erosion of the public safety net. She recalls one important trait revealed in several studies of middle-class cultures: the fact that the middle-class is the only one that cannot pass on its class status to its children; it can only provide 'the means – economic, educational, and psychological – with which to (try to) reproduce their status. […] [U]ltimately, the children must do it themselves' (Ortner 1998: 428). The upper-classes have 'elaborate means of preserving money and status for their group,' and we can recall here Lachmann's thesis of patrimonialism, as evidenced in the political support for removing the inheritance tax, as well as the discourses of wealthy children who demonstrate how hard they work to inherit their status. The lower-classes find it relatively easy to pass on class status, and years of economic and social research have shown that poverty is in many ways a structural feature of capitalism itself. That means, in order for capitalism to succeed it most reproduce poverty. So, the politics of middle-class strife, as an incipiently white representation about 'youth and the future' in the US, are played out in these generational stylizations. Years ago, Stanley Aronowitz, for example, wrote about the decline of the middle-class social contract, where he explained that school shootings in the US by young, middle-class white men were the product of the suspension of this contract. In exchange for renouncing violence in the classic Lockean sense, middle classes agree to allow their conflicts to be mediated through bureaucratic means. As long as they feel they've had their say, he notes, they adapt to whatever circumstances prevail and fall back on their 'self-reliance,' which was a nice way of saying that they still had those institutions subsidized by the government and their taxes. However, as this contract breaks down with the withdrawal of state support and the increasing valorization of wealthy citizens, the middle class revolts through episodic, seemingly random forms of violence against its own members (Aronowitz 2000). Ortner goes one step further and describes a split in the middle class as the upper and lower pull away from each other, producing a social and economic 'abyss'. As Ortner writes:

It is to this widening abyss in the middle class, I would argue, that Generation X imagery is addressed. The most consistent aspect of the representations involves pointing at and

constructing the characteristics of the social and economic abyss. Since the abyss is in many ways real, it takes no sleight of hand for the representations to be convincing. What is elided by the idea of 'generation' however, is that people's relationships to the middle class abyss are very different. Depending on which edge one is standing on, the configurations of anger, fear, anxiety and resentment will vary. Yet all of Generation X can agree that it is 'there.' (Ortner 1998: 423)

Using Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling', Ortner probes the upper-middle class to find out how these anxieties produced a commonly recognized figure of the 'slacker'. The slacker is the child of upper-middle-class parents, who go out of their way to support him/her in order to ensure career success in a child who does not care. Ortner notes that another feature of Generation X identity is its preoccupation with work (Ortner 1998: 421). A common statement Ortner finds among lower-middle-class Gen Xers is 'They lied to me,' conveying that an enormous amount of societal pressure was placed on them to succeed when it wasn't really even possible. Ortner doesn't speculate about what this means, other than to place it within post-Fordist decline and the ever-precarious position of the middle-class status. However, the two generations preceding X were the most upwardly mobile in the history of the country, so it stands to reason that even with a declining economic future, the story of American progress would continue to be told as if it had reasonable chances of coming to fruition. This is precisely what politicians have been doing for two decades as they vie for middle-class votes to win elections. This is what Sconce means when he says that Generation X sensibilities enact an ironic tone in order to signify their unwillingness to 'believe in someone else's something,' that 'something' being not only the American dream, but also the unfinished social projects of the 1960s. Generation X women had to prove they could become educated equal to men, work at careers outside the home, delay, and then have families without the social safety net. As Tina Fey once said in *Parade Magazine*, 'I think my generation has been slightly tricked in that you're really encouraged to try to have it all [...] And sometimes your body will not let you wait as long as you want.' Or the most recent episode of *30 Rock*, where Liz Lemon gives up on having children and justifies her decision by recalling a woman wheeling a baby carriage through Rockefeller Center, mumbling 'It's not possible [to be a mother on your own]'. Tellingly, the title of the episode is 'Murphy Brown Lied to Us,' a play on a popular Generation-X-era show featuring a mid-career journalist, Murphy Brown, who continues to win Peabody awards, remain single, have a relatively satisfying and supportive work life, and a baby – all by herself. We can also cite the 'post-racial' politics narrative following the election of Barack Obama, where black Americans are taunted into proving racism still exists after the election of a black president. The fact that, as Ortner notes, no black popular culture icons could be found to acknowledge themselves as members of Generation X should tell us that this phenomenon is largely white and upper-middle-class anxiety over the victory of social politics (Ortner 1998: 421). Gay Americans have been asked to come out of the closet without any perceived structural support in the form of governmental policy (rescinding of DOMA; back-peddling on executive orders that

would protect federal employees). This is all on the premise that 'it gets better', presumably when one gets older. As we saw in Chapter 3, troping on maturity does not hide the politics of adult political humor regarding sexuality. When we look at Ann Coulter, Louis C.K. and the Family Research Council, it doesn't look much better. As is often said of X, they 'grew up with AIDS.' But that is not the important part of the story. Generation X witnessed the specter of all those dead men who lost their lives because the Mayor of New York and the President of the United States were homophobes who wouldn't fund AIDS research, and intentionally labeled it a 'gay disease.' Another item ignored among the media: among those who died in the Twin Towers explosions, the majority were from Generation X. Generation X has, in many ways, had to prove that the middle-class social contract paid off, and do it while 'resolving' all the contradictions inherent in it without much complaint. Is it any wonder that many of them felt lied to, or at least found in irony 'the ability to criticize someone without getting punched in the face' (Sconce 2002: 352). Some may call this 'passive aggressive', but with roughly 88 million Americans on either side of it, the 'sandwich' generation, as X is often called, has good reason to believe that any direct statement of its experience is going to be rejected out of hand. As Ortner demonstrated, when upper-middle-class Generation Xers failed to live up to the careerist ambitions of their parents, they were labeled 'slackers'. They did not invent slacker, it was projected onto them. Yes, Generation X invented the ultimate response to the pressure of conformity with boomer ideals as a passive one. Since I am here speaking of cultural politics and not necessarily a self-described artistic genre, I place *TDS* squarely within an affective comedic regime that responds to a larger boomer narrative in the news and entertainment media that continues to support this middle-class dream, but only in the most self-serving of ways. One of the most important facets of Stewart's comedic interventions is that they are motivated not by laughs alone, but by the ability to criticize not only the media, but also the boomers, and block the inevitable media punch and resist digital absorption. McKain argues that Stewart bypasses this by announcing his fakeness in advance. He also notes that *TDS* is able to increasingly assume the role of news, all the while disavowing the political intervention. As he writes, 'Setups are becoming increasingly drawn out, some with diminished punch lines seemingly inserted just to maintain genre compliance' (McKain 2005: 428). Indeed, this is what begins to happen following the banner year of 2004; *TDS* begins to educate its viewers in order to get the joke, but also in order to trick them into forgetting they're watching comedy. The audience does not even laugh, nor do they care. This most often happens when Stewart is presenting a news episode on the show and ends the segment with 'progressive pathos'.

TDS and progressive pathos

How does this work? Stewart, faithful to his own liberal arts education, explains to his audience the wrongness or deception of a political story told in the media. It can also happen when he draws out the implications of a stated policy presented by a popular media figure

or politician (usually but not always on the Right) in order to demonstrate that what the figure appears to be presenting as rational or pragmatic or egalitarian is, in fact, an elaborate construction of a scapegoat. First, what is a 'progressive', and how would one perform this discourse to effect vicarious identification with its premises? A progressive, Walter Nugent tells us, believed in the 'good society,' and believed a 'common good' should be sought in order to overcome social problems (Nugent 2010: 126). Contrary to what conservatives preach, progressive thought has not had much impact on public policy in the United States outside of the two decades following the first 'Gilded Age' of the 1870s (critics often speak of the last two decades as the second Gilded Age). After rampant market speculation and individualism, reformers noticed many problems that society needed to face following government retreat. As Steven Diner argues, 'Many middle class Americans concluded, therefore, that they had lost control not only of their society but also of their own lives' (Diner 1998: 8). Thus, the 1890s through the early 1910s were a period when social reformers littered the American landscape with proposals for the common good. One of the US' most prolific and famous progressives was John Dewey, who wrote about the public and 'its problems,' and the ways education and experience combined with a pragmatic understanding could achieve such a good society; that is, one that was useful to everyone in it. In contemporary political thought, a progressive believes that because the world is so complicated and interconnected (usually because of globalization, an accelerated stage of capitalism that has proceeded without government oversight) government can and must act as the agent of the good society to identify hazards to the common good. Furthermore, government has largely abandoned this responsibility, or been blocked from doing so by proponents of an unfettered free market. One particular issue that Stewart has used is the Wisconsin governor's suspension of collective bargaining under the 'pragmatic' assumption that cutting benefits to state workers will reduce debt. This most often happens when Stewart is speaking back to the images or story he's just told through a play-by-play of events happening between political actors in the media. Stewart's discourse begins to become less blank and less snarky following the 2004 election. He begins to identify a basic public interest: that the government should protect citizens. While pathos is traditionally understood to work through tragedy as a genre, on *TDS* it is the ironic distancing from obscene politics that allows Stewart to lure his audience in to examine closely the farce playing out before their eyes in politics. The reason it is tragic is because the *TDS* audience cannot disavow the fact that they are implicated in the tragedy playing out before them because they are citizens in a democratic country. The tendency has been to think about the genre of comedy as somehow separate from the form of government under which it thrives. As Day says of critics of irony, they tend to view it as ahistorical, flourishing and performed in exactly the same style in each era. However, as we have established thus far, political comedy has assumed a specific function following 9/11, in the sense that it can therapeutically mediate the bereft, abject middle-class youth-identified viewer; that is, a person who still believes they have a future but cannot see where it begins. Stewart's comedy is an ersatz form of progressive democratic praxis. Following an Althusserian line, we might call it a

form of practice. Recall Sconce's claim that the point of view of the smart film is also a profound skepticism of any kind of pure politics or morality. Instead, *TDS* is a deconstruction of the fake claims made by purist politicians and moral authoritarians. *TDS* offers, by way of comic sedative, a way to imagine living in a world teeming with contradictions without having to resolve them. This is progressive pathos; the government can, despite its flaws, look out for the national and citizen interest but only if it can be held accountable by its citizens. It is smart because it looks to the complicated picture of the political landscape rather than selling the dumb solution that widens the democratic deficit. Here are a few examples….

'Rape-nuts'

The entire edifice of conservative ideology exists to simulate the free market. When confronting the free market orthodoxy, for example, *TDS* remediates a clip about a story concerning rape by US contractors doing business in Iraq. In the news, reports were, and are, frequently made about employees (usually women) who have been raped by co-workers while working abroad for corporations who receive federal contracts. To get around US law, such firms have presented employees with contracts stating that they effectively give up the right to sue the corporation in US courts should they be sexually assaulted on the job. Instead they agree to arbitration, which is an informal mediation between the corporation and the victimized employee. In 2003, the Bush administration exempted Iraqis from being covered under law in Iraq if they were working for US funded contractors, which many dubbed a 'license to kill'. Eventually, a highly publicized and extremely vicious case of gang rape was exposed in the media when the victim, Jamie Leigh, went public after her attempts to prove she had been brutally assaulted and had to have her genitalia reconstructed in surgery after seven Halliburton employees repeatedly raped her and stuffed her in cargo storage. Leigh's attempt to find justice was repeatedly denied and many, many more women came forward claiming they had been assaulted under contractor supervision. Al Franken, himself a political comedian, won a contentious Senate seat in 2008 for Minnesota. In October of 2009, he proposed an amendment to a defense appropriations bill that would activate Title VII allowing victims of rape to sue the contracting corporation if their case is proven in a US court of law. Contractors lobbied Republicans and ranking Democrats, who receive lucrative campaign funds from contractors, to kill the bill if not to remove the contentious clause. To this clip, entitled, 'Rape-nuts', a pun on Grape Nuts cereal and directed at the thirty elderly Republican senators who opposed Franken's amendment banning contracts with private firms like Halliburton, who make their employees sign contracts stating they won't sue if they are raped by fellow employees, Stewart received a pronounced 'ugh!' from the audience. As Stewart argued, if the government had any job it would most certainly be protecting its citizens from rape and allowing them to take action against their attackers. Clips revealed Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL) on the floor, arguing that employees should use 'mediation and

arbitration,' the new euphemism and strategy for avoiding courts and federal law to protect corporate immunity. As Stewart schooled his audience, 'Yeah, these are disputes. That's kind of like saying [Jeffrey] Dahmer had a dinner time arguments.' Brought up close to the trauma of rape, the viewer is forced to contend with proof that elected officials would rather protect corporations than the citizens they are supposed to represent. Showing how Sessions represents an example of the free market purist who argues that corporations, in spite of whatever present moral contradiction they are presently embroiled in, will somehow 'mediate' the rape of an employee better than the US courts, Stewart forces the viewer to identify with the victim on an affective register by comparing such behavior to the cold, indifferent methodical torture of the serial killer. And they laugh! This exercise may not provoke the audience to rise up off the sofa and march to Washington brandishing torches, but this is because the smart viewer already knows that this would be futile. The challenge to contemporary politics does not happen on some old register of common culture, where we look at Sessions and ourselves and decide who's decent and who's not and 'Vote the bums out!' and that is because no one believes any one particular person running for office is 'decent' in the traditional sense of the word, because the problems we are confronted with in a globalized world are systemic and cultural. It is a set up. Therefore, the most important political interventions are made at the level of political affect, by confronting people with the emotional consequences of simple, that is, dumb thinking. It starts with realizing that this free market purity is toxic; that is, that the extremist wish for a simple solution to common existence is the true danger. Finally, this brand of political comedy does not aim to inspire citizen action,[8] it aims to transform the moral and cultural sensitivity of its viewers to take a different position on debates about political culture. Indeed, what is a necessary first step to rebuilding a democratic culture that has been nearly decimated over the last thirty years is to reform the affective registers in media around identification with fellow creatures; to soften the edge of polite cruelty that comes from market logic and extreme individualism in order to rebuild a new common 'sense' around rule of law, civility, positive freedom and pedestrian cosmopolitanism. This is a new kind of rationalism. A strategic manipulation of the right information will not return citizens to the fantasy of a past greatness or civility. We are on the terrain of affect now; it is not a problem of (re)cognition.

Unlike Hart and Hartelius, who argue that Jon Stewart is emblematic of television in that he produces cynicism in his viewers and encourages inertia in their political habitus, I would argue that Stewart, in his faithfulness to the middle-class norms, has indeed made 'the remote self the only self- worth living,' but only insofar as that self finds confirmation that their educational aspirations have merit (2007: 269). The generation of mostly college-educated youth who make up the audience of *TDS* was confronted with a profound want of being by the politics of the Bush administration: where would they fit into this new world of 'freedom' characterized by militarism as policy, the cultural hegemony of anti-intellectualism and the rhizomatic destruction of scientific belief? This corresponds to Sconce's isolation of central themes in American 'smart' films of the 1990s, of which I have already chosen two to apply to *TDS*: 'the cultivation of a "blank" style' and incongruous narration, and a 'recurring

interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity' (Sconce 2002: 358). Stewart has perfected these two aspects of the genre. When Stewart took over the show, this smart genre migrated over to television, where it could initially invoke a 'strategic disengagement with belief,' of all things 'Bush'. All three merge in the first third of the show focused on the figure of Jon Stewart, who parodies a stereotypical newscaster, which Baym refers to as 'satire news update.' However, Baym's focus (I take him as a trendsetter for the agenda of the larger field of media studies) is on the journalistic conventions that *TDS* is able to ignore in order to provide more (and possibly better) information about a given issue. My interest is in the way the tone provokes actual humor of these segments. As a copy of *SNL*'s 'Weekend Update,' Baym is correct in saying that *TDS* avoids the less political one-liners that characterize the broad audience on NBC Saturday; however, Stewart's presentation has a three-part structure: the satire is a product of Stewart's mostly blank presentation of material; the sidebar clips of news (whether C-SPAN speeches or Fox News commentaries, often several around a similar theme); and the labels underneath the clips, or at the end of them that Stewart pretends not to have chosen. True to his Generation X character, Stewart refrains from making overt judgments about the clips and logos, either waiting and laughing with the audience or staring at the images in slack-jawed wonder. Often he is caught saying, 'Oh, really, you like that one?' or when the audience rewards him with unexpected gales of laughter at silly or trite incongruities he responds, 'You're going to go with that one, eh?' At times, his attention is directed at the live audience and sometimes to the quote itself. What happens here is interesting because Stewart is not interacting with people (the audience), instead he is interacting with texts, with discursive arguments. He is literally performing the role of the spectator for the audience. He never takes aim at the person (their identity, as is the Fox News schtick), rather he takes aim at the ideas. Usually, the labels involve some kind of pun related to consumer products or humorous cultural references; for example, Nancy Grace's exposed nipple on *Dancing With the Stars* earned the title 'Areola 51,' a reference to a place no one is certain exists, near White Sands, New Mexico, the setting for a giant area of desert controlled by secret US agents and their alien captives. More often than not, however, these labels are puns of consumer products. Furthermore, the clips themselves are not merely representations of media coverage of an issue or someone speaking on the House floor, they are instances where the speakers in such clips are absolutely confident about the message they are delivering. What makes them 'funny' is that they have been taken outside the context where they might make sense (Fox News audiences), or where the speaker assumes no one is watching (congressional proceedings). Like 'smart' films, the political comedy of *TDS* assumes the position of not only irony, but a knowing irony, where self-assuredness is mocked and the speaker is unable (or unwilling) to think about their place in the mediascape. As Sconce writes:

> From within the prism of irony, however, many of these films suggest the futility of pure politics or absolute morality, concentrating instead on the prison-house of habitus and the politics of postmodern paralysis. As the fixation on quotation, distance, and consumer

taste suggests, *one thing this sensibility cannot abide is an inability to understand how one's tastes, gestures and actions 'read' in the larger cultural field* […]. (Sconce 2002: 368, emphasis mine)

This is precisely what Stewart's rabid satirical commentary in the first two-thirds of the show exposes. Viewers, as we have already argued in the introduction, are always interpellated by *TDS* as 'youth.' This process of interpellation claims viewers who identify as 'outside' the mainstream views of politics, who are turned off by the self-absorption of the media, or who are offended that the MSM would dare to pass itself off as critical journalism. In another clip showcasing Mattel's import of toys tinged with toxic lead from China, CSNBC correspondent Erin Burnett is featured. Stewart says:

> I think people should be careful what they wish for on China. I mean if China were to revalue its currency or if China were to start making toys without lead in them or food that isn't poisonous their cost of production is going to go up and that means prices at Walmart here in the United States are gonna go up too […]. (*TDS* 2007)

And Stewart responds, 'This is Erin Burnett for the "Save the Money Foundation," because every penny you save will help offset the cost of your child's long term debilitating health care needs.' He then uses a common device, which is to break up the clip so he can comment on how far the insanity of the commentary can go, and speculates that '[I]f I know Erin Burnett she's not done, I bet she can push her argument to some kind of illogical extreme.' It then cuts to the clip of Burnett: 'I would say China is our greatest friend right now.' At this, Stewart flashes his 'wolfish grin' and says, 'So, if you're wondering about America's place in the world right now, our best friend is poisoning us with lead' (*TDS* 2007). The importance of this clip is that it zeroes in on just how self-destructive the American public is expected to be while searching for affordable prices. Unfortunately, this logic is all too common in the US, where we face a Type 2 diabetes epidemic caused largely by the abundance of cheap and poisonous foods and other necessary products. *TDS* remediation of the clip shows just how much the media expects the viewer to be in sync with their own destruction. How does one respond to such an insane request? By mocking it. To argue with Burnett would amount to taking her ideas seriously for even a moment, and her idea is not worth taking seriously by any human being who cares for their own survival. The flip side to this is that if Americans don't buy toys from China (or shop at Walmart), China will not have a market for its crappy products and might be forced to improve its quality control methods. This is not stated by the *TDS* clip, it is implied. That's what makes people love Jon Stewart: he believes in them, and believes they'll 'get it'. Some might say: why watch the mainstream media then? Just turn it off. They have a point but it works kind of like a Fox News argument, or Nancy Reagan's 'Just Say No' campaign: the world and its problems are more complicated than that, and many people will watch Erin Burnett and be seduced by the simple purity of her argument, which makes no sense because it is motivated to achieve

immediate agreement through emotion, which as we've already defined is how affect and ideology are communicated outwardly.

In search of humor and continuity in public discourse, many college-educated younger (largely male) viewers tuned into *TDS* (and Comedy Central) for a break from watching the wrecking ball swing into every American institution they'd ever known (except war, of course). *TDS* then becomes a critical node in the network: Jon Stewart as an 'e-opinion news leader' can shift 'belief or confusion' in a certain direction (Harsin 2010). Trouble is Stewart's never certain of the direction he's going. This is not entirely Stewart's fault. As limited as he is by the topics covered in the MSM, he is also limited by their standard of 'balance.' As Martin Kaplan has opined:

> Straight news is not what it used to be. It has fallen into a bizarre notion that substitutes something called 'balance' for what used to be called 'accuracy' or 'truth' or 'objectivity.' That may be because of a general postmodern malaise in society at large in which the notion of a truth doesn't have the same reputation it used to, but, as a consequence, straight journalists both in print and in broadcast can be played like a piccolo by people who know how to exploit that weakness. Every issue can be portrayed as a controversy between two opposite sides, and *the journalist is fearful of saying that one side has it right, and the other side does not*. It leaves the reader or viewer in the position of having to weigh competing truth claims, often without enough information to decide that one side is manifestly right, and the other side is trying to muddy the water with propaganda […]. (qtd in Smolkin 2007, emphasis mine).

Still doubt my adaptation of 'smart' to Generation Y political humor? How else does one respond to the purveyors of information as they interpellate their viewers as hostages except to reject it all? Appropriately, Gen Y has largely divorced themselves from commitment to politics, with the perfunctory nod to get the establishment off their backs. *TDS* is the nanny Generation Y moves in with; is it any wonder that Stewart and Colbert launched the largely failed 'Rally to Restore Sanity'? Jon Stewart exists at the interstices of this cultural shift: he uses Generation X sensibility of dampened affect to mobilize humor about the conservative assault on progressive institutions. However, in defense of such institutions, Stewart leaves largely untouched any analysis that would imaginatively drive history forward. As with most Generation X social and cultural ambassadors, Stewart maintains custody of Generation Y but isn't sure what do to with it. Committed as he is to the rational reality identified by Duncombe that is a hallmark of the boomer progressive, Stewart cannot imagine anything beyond the Beltway, and he does not realize that the floor below him has shifted. He is not in reality, he is in hyperreality. In *TDS*'s world, we are encouraged to develop a 'prosthetic memory' filled with memories of experiences we never had much like a history class. When asked about Jon Stewart in an interview, Duncombe said this:

> *The Daily Show* is wonderful. One of the things that Jon Stewart has been able to do is he understood and tapped into this immense amount of disbelief in 'reality,' in quotes.

The only thing Jon Stewart has to do is put up a clip of President Bush saying something, and all of a sudden, the crowd starts cheering, because they know it's just a put-on. *The problem I have with Jon Stewart is that that's where it ends. You can watch Jon Stewart and then walk away from it saying, yeah, all politics is phony. They're all a bunch of liars. Isn't it funny? And we're smart. We know that they're all a bunch of fools.* That could lead to saying, well, let's create a politics which is different. Let's create a politics which is really about responding to people's needs, and about telling the truth to people. But it also can lead to believing that's all a game anyway. Let's go shopping. I think Jon Stewart rides right in the middle, and he should. He's not a political activist. He's an entertainer. But I think those of us who are interested in political activism and political advocacy need to take that sort of revelation and the fun that Jon Stewart traffics in, and move it in a more political direction. (Buzzflash 2007, emphasis mine)

What TDS manages to do spectacularly well is to make 'strategic gestures,' and effect an 'ironic tone' that 'bifurcates one's audience into those who 'get it' and those who do not' (Sconce 2002: 352). Those who get *TDS* are college-educated (and the studies bear this out), and find humor in their ridiculous predicament. Indeed, what Sconce calls the 'ultimate Gen X nightmare' has largely come true for most of Stewart's audience. Forced by a downsized economy to move back in with their parents following graduation, such is the bleak predicament of a generation whose future depends on the outcome of pointless electoral battles fought by boomers who can't/won't retire. It may well be that as many have called Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert the 'ultimate court jesters' of American politics, it is the Generation X sensibility they cultivate and perform that provided the blueprint for surviving such self-interested, pleasure-free politics (Fox 2011).

Lacking knowledge of most cultural production that facilitates progressive social and political change, up-and-coming generations cannot understand much of Stewart's satire without explanatory help. It was only with the introduction of *TDS* correspondent Jessica Williams, a college student, in early 2012, that we finally witness a parody of Generation Y's online proclivities in relation to news, where she doesn't believe anything unless it comes from her phone application, Sirli. By contrast, Colbert's performance, being largely a parody of Bill O'Reilly's self-referential logic, lacks an ironic gesture. However, it also fails to challenge current youngsters to action, perhaps even leaving them with a smug sense of self-satisfaction. In this way, Colbert's performances are identical in form to the character drawn parodies on *SNL*, which outside of the most celebrated examples such as Tina Fey's Sarah Palin impersonation, leave many older generations cold. As an accentuated ridicule of celebrities and political figures, most of whom are now almost indistinguishable in the mediascape, parodies come off as 'backhanded tributes to what was being ridiculed' (Wood 1993: 91). This is certainly the case with Colbert, as studies have shown that viewers of his program who are conservative generally view it as a literal confirmation of their beliefs, while liberals 'get' the joke. This might mean his parody of O'Reilly is seen by conservatives as homage to the great man, while liberal viewers receive it as a moral challenge to O'Reilly's

authority as a news reporter (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam 2009). After the election in 2008, Colbert's viewership went down (as did O'Reilly's and Fox News generally), while *TDS*'s audience grew (*Daily Mail* 2011). Colbert seems to have been attempting to increase the audience through his 'active audience' initiatives, and by taking his comedy into politics for real. In 2006, he gave the famous White House Correspondent's Dinner speech, he ran for president in 2008, staged the Rally to Restore Sanity in 2010 and 2012 saw the Colbert SuperPac. This guerilla electioneering has been theorized as another example of Bakhtinian carnival, a loose application of entertainment or 'fun' to political action (Bogad 2005). By contrast, Cynthia Willet's book on irony under empire (2008) argues that 'the irony in satire [sic] is not an idle source of pleasure; it is vital for free thought. Laughter can liberate us from various forms of cognitive and emotional baggage.' But Willet departs from the rationalism I have argued resides in Stewart's comedy. Rather, she writes:

> […] my contention is that the deeper glimpse that we have of social freedom in the United States is not in our liberal theory but in the pragmatic visions of solidarity and equality that appear in, say, our romantic comedies. *Freedom in the United States is less a principle or law than a style of speech or gesture* […]. (Willet 2010: 97)

Stephen Colbert parodies this figure, who is, as he says, 'a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot': that is, the model of American social freedom itself.

Colbert: Free to be 'dumb'[9]

> If we thought we added gravity to anything, we would feel that we had failed. *We're just trying to ease the pain of people who feel the world is going insane and no one is noticing.* We're like Cortaid, something not too heavy that is used for a rash or a bug bite. I wouldn't use it for a wound. (Stephen Colbert, on whether *TDS* 'injects gravity into late night' [Solomon 2005])

I view *The Colbert Report* as the second act to *TDS*. Beginning in 2005, Stephen Colbert, who was a *TDS* news correspondent for the previous eight seasons (two years before Stewart appeared) and created his correspondent segment and *Better Know A District* that he took with him to *TCR*, started his own show. Colbert was performing classic Generation X popular culture before and during his time at *TDS* with *Strangers with Candy*, a parody of the *ABC Afterschool Specials*, a lengthy series that ran from 1972 to 1997. *Strangers With Candy* begins in 1998, and we can only surmise it was created by Colbert, Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello as an homage to the end of a part of Gen X childhood that often included the Latch Key experience; that is, the public 'panic' about kids who had to go home by themselves after school, rather than having their mother at home. The *ABC Afterschool Specials* were part-time television babysitters there to impart important moral lessons to these 'abandoned'

kids, like 'don't smoke' and to explain why some kids' dads lived in downtown hotels. *Strangers With Candy* was definitely 'smart' television. Chronicling the life of a 47-year-old high school drop-out who goes back to high school to get her degree, the show was dark comedy at its best, poking fun at the simplistic politically correct culture of the '80s, while managing a damning parody of the American high school and the dysfunctional American family. Jeri Blank, the 47-year-old drop-out, moves in with her comatose father and evil stepmother and brother (the jock, Derrick), while she tries to participate as a regular high school student, in spite of the fact that she's lived the previous 20 years as a 'drug addict and a prostitute.' As Colbert admits, his character on the show, Chuck Noblick, is the same character he's always played, 'a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot'; only on that show, he was a history teacher who always got history wrong, but he did it with such confidence and a sense of authority that he was never contradicted, much like Bill O'Reilly, himself a former high school English teacher.

What *The Colbert Report* parodies is the freedom to be 'dumb'. The character that Colbert plays is a parody on Bill O'Reilly, or Papa Bear as he affectionately calls him. The lead-in to the show itself is a celebration of all the banal tropes associated with American freedom: a screeching eagle lunges at the viewer as a superheroic Colbert plunges an American flag into the bottom of the screen, all to the sound of a rousing, patriotic song. It could have been produced by Michael Bay. Babies love it (mine did). To be dumb in this sense is to restrain one's self from cognitive engagement with information; rather than resolving logical contradictions in political thought, conservative media lures and massages its viewers with slack representation. Let the flashing lights and bells and whistles do the talking. Not quite getting the story accurate, exaggerating truth claims, engaging in hyperbolic rhetoric about 'the Other', whether the poor, immigrants, women or queer people, it allows all that is 'dumb' in America (including the right to incorrectly refer to itself as 'America' rather than the United States *of* America), to lie back on the recliner and feel good about itself for doing nothing. This is media for the last man, who, rather than giving a blank stare of disbelief, blinks in approval. As is often noted about *TCR*, Colbert is in a better position to criticize such media because his character is a parody of conservative media. His clips cannot be co-opted for adversarial purposes by the Right, and his style is unique among political comedians:

> Colbert is in a much better position to really dig deep than any other 'political' comedian – even Jon Stewart. Because he's got this same-named persona, and because his very identity is somewhat ambiguous, he has a great deal of leeway to actually involve himself in the political process, not just stand outside of it and mock it, as Leno, Letterman, Johnny Carson, etc. have traditionally done, and even as Stewart seems somewhat obligated to do, in order to maintain the appearance of being an 'impartial referee.' Because Colbert plays a character that is no exactly 'himself,' he is unvulnerable to charges that he is just an advocate, or that he is just an entertainer who ought to 'shut up and sing,' or that he is being unfair to this candidate or that party. Whatever he's accused of becomes grist for further satire. (Peterson qtd in Mustich 2012)

In a comparison with the role of satire in authoritarian regimes, one often juxtaposes them with so-called 'free' societies where citizens have a relatively lax sense of expression. However, while such countries might enjoy freedom of speech, they still are characterized by a limited media (six firms own all of US media), whose effects can be as oppressive and arbitrary as those of an authoritarian regime. Moreover, in spite of all the celebration of *TDS* and Colbert's freedom to challenge news media, it could be that they are only co-opted by them later in order to undermine their status, dampen their critique and put them in their place as entertainment. This may even bolster the image of the professional media as more authentic. As one study argues, politicians who frequent talk shows, especially ones aimed at female audiences, are described by major news outlets as 'pandering' to certain audiences that need to be 'disciplined' *à la* Foucault for not taking their news from more authoritative sources. By remediating news clips and information from such talk shows, as *Oprah*, the news re-inserts itself into the media frame. As they write, 'Co-optation of newsworthy information from the talk show appearance allows journalists to reclaim their position as purveyors of political information, as the substantive information only becomes political once it makes it into the news' (Edy & Snidow 2011: 823–24). This analysis is interesting when we consider the journalistic news media as a set of discourses that:

> […] continuously reassert its social authority both to define authentic political discourse and to discipline social actors who challenge journalistic ways of knowing to maintain its institutional power. In doing so, the profession both creates knowledge and defines an audience that requires that knowledge […]. (Edy & Snidow 2011: 830)

If we recall from the introduction, then, at present many news outlets remediate clips from *TDS* in segments labeled 'political humor' by putting them in the larger company of Jay Leno, David Letterman and *SNL*, and put *TDS* and its audience back in their place as the non-serious afterthought on politics we enjoy on Sunday mornings. There is potential controversy here, as some commentators take *TDS* and *TCR* to be challenging and serious:

> The undeniable fact that the show is taken seriously enough for its stories to be routinely used on a wide range of 'serious' media and for Stewart to become a widely respected critic would seem to make it serious by definition […]. (Williams & Della Carpini 2011: 184)

Colbert, however, can avoid this, and his show is not often remediated by established media. Colbert parodies the affect mobilized by the Right, which is based on celebration of ignorance, cruelty and an insatiable need to feed off of gossip about the Left, figured as a celebrity culture. This is why most of the right-wing blogosphere operates like a *Star Magazine*, at once alerting its audience to sensational stories about celebrities and opposing political figures, especially as it relates to morality and sex. That is, it constantly whips up the scent of scandal in order to lure its viewers/readers into the hysterical desire to 'know' the 'truth' of political celebrity. A case in point was Andrew Breitbart (n.d.), a news blogger who

'broke' the Anthony Weiner sexting scandal via scandalography. Breitbart's strategy was to bracket rational media encounters by always prefiguring news as scandal. Discussing the Lacanian concept of a traumatic encounter with the Real via 'scandalography', Craig Saper explains how Lacan's *Rome Discourse* initiates a disruption in the neurotic's chain of discourse:

> The cause, in Lacanian terms, differed from Freud's notion of a primal scene, and became a cause with a retroactive force. Now the cause was the scandalized punctuation in a chain of discourse. The scandalized moment charged with significance had no necessary connection to factual evidence; instead it functioned as a surprise that had enough force of insinuation to change a subject's understanding and organization of the past […]. (Saper 1991: 87)

In order to sort out how this works, let's take the example of Shirley Sherrod, the Director of Rural Projects Development in Georgia for the Department of Agriculture, who was the victim of a Breitbart smear. He posted a heavily edited video (with many of Sherrod's qualifying statements left out) on his website, with an incendiary message insinuating that Sherrod was guilty of reverse racism against a white rural farmer. He notes that her speech is given before an approving audience of NAACP members. By the time the video had circulated the web, Fox News, CNN and NBC had picked it up without verifying any of it (even though Sherrod had already warned the Department of Agriculture that the spliced clips were available on the web), and Breitbart's 'force of insinuation' of reverse racism had none other than Glenn Beck asking, 'Have we transformed back into 1956 only the other way around?' In other words, the viewer and news networks(!) who unproblematically took this story at face value, saw it featured on prime time television and viewed the altered video were now in a position to be led to 'change their organization and understanding of the past,' so that, in fact, there was never a need for a civil rights movement(!) because important African American figures like Shirley Sherrod worked for the federal government(!), and denied basic civil rights to a white farmer(!). Breitbart's initial 'insinuation' of racism, along with his not-well-publicized gleeful Tweet to Media Matters exclaiming, 'Hey @ericboehlert & the mostly male Caucasian @mmfa "senior fellows": Get some rest. Tomorrow's gonna be long day & first of many in a row.' The strategy works because Breitbart could count on conservative media picking up the story without question, and, not wanting to be out of the loop on a breaking story and accused of 'liberal bias', CNN and other mainstream networks posted the story without investigating its claims. The Department of Agriculture Secretary asked for Sherrod's resignation. Later, when it was learned the entire scandal was doctored by Breitbart, Sherrod was offered another job by the Department of Agriculture, which she refused. Sherrod currently has filed a lawsuit against Breitbart that was accepted by the 12th Circuit Court. The sad part is that the damage is done, and this is precisely the point of the strategy of insinuation: the scent of reverse racism is appealing to many conservatives, who find answers to their own declining economic and social predicament in these discourses.

Even after the entire clip was aired, and it was revealed that Breitbart had created the very talking point about the video that 'context matters', context did not matter after all to viewers who merely wanted 'confirmation' of beliefs they had always held. This is the genius of the conservative meme.

Dreier and Martin refer to this as the 'echo chamber' of partisan groups. In their analysis of the downfall of ACORN, a nearly four-decade-old group dedicated to 'organizing a majority of low to moderate income people across the United States,' they found that, using social media, conservative consortia were able to discredit the group using insinuation. In his analysis of scandal, Craig Saper outlined the way orchestrated insinuation could change the very meaning and sequence of public events, leading to the downfall of celebrities and ruination of their careers. Dreier and Martin pick up on this media strategy, but do not explain how exactly the public loses its capacity to analyze the information in the media rationally. While they do argue that contemporary media conglomerates ignored fact-based evidence, and responded primarily to the fear that they lacked 'balance' in their coverage of stories, they still could not explain why the public would accept such farcical notions about ACORN. Saper's analysis can help in this regard:

> Scandalography depends on the use of anecdotes, recipes, and clichés. It follows the play of insinuation rather than the supposed desire to unmask truth under the image. It tracks this chain of insinuated and insinuating associations, without reference to chronology, factual evidence, or any separation of text and paratext […]. (Saper 1991: 97)

This is the postmodern irony that Colletta outlines, one that celebrates its own mastery of terms. The ability to 'connect' seemingly isolated (really choreographed) terms in the media becomes the formula for truth. Furthermore, the use of terms that appeal to affective sense rather than cohere in a meaningful way to produce a logical framework is frequent in headlines and lead-ins to stories, the bulk of which both *TDS* and *TCR* ridicule incessantly in their skits. As Andrew Kornecki pointed out while eulogizing Breitbart, he knew that most young people only read news online, and that 90 per cent of online news articles go unread – the users only scan the article titles to obtain their information. As anyone who's spent time revisiting an online news source throughout the course of a day knows, the headlines change every few hours and the information contained in them almost never matches the argument made in the text by the author. Breitbart's genius was to present materials to publics with the knowledge that they would not read beyond titles for fine print, contextual analysis or argument. His genius was to deploy allegations against public figures in a way that ensured they met with a swift and painful media death, sometimes relying on the established person's intuition that they must swiftly respond to allegations of malfeasance in order to calm the brewing storm of outrage in the public, as with the case of Shirley Sherrod. President Obama moved quickly to assure those plugged into media that they had fired her for comments spliced

into an untrue narrative sound bite produced by Breitbart (later, when cooler heads prevailed, it was understood that the administration had fallen into a trap set by Breitbart). In other cases, Breitbart preferred to toy with his victims, drawing them out slowly and seducing them to lie in public about allegations that, while true, would be personally and politically damaging if revealed but had the potential to be 'spun' another way, as with Anthony Weiner. Nowadays, with the explosion of sources of information, sites that wish to attract audiences must deploy words and phrases that evoke outrage on the part of readers. A personal favorite of mine is 'rips'. When a politician or celebrity responds to a false allegation or twisted storyline involving their image or conduct, they 'rip' the source. The two main phrases that Dreier and Martin pick out of the right-wing smear campaign were 'questionable election activities' and 'investigated for election fraud' (Dreier & Martin 2011: 8). The only way to counter this in the media is to give a long, detailed account of the chain of events that led to the exposure of the scandal, and, in today's media, the viewer has little time or patience for such lectures, as Breitbart and other conservative operatives knew. However, Colbert's parody is the only one that can address it in an entertaining way. In a peculiarly Generation X style, 'The Word' often does just this.

The Word

The Word is a perfect example of Generation X spectatorship. Colbert amps up his usual O'Reilly parody, as this segment is a parody of 'The Talking Points Memo'. The Word is:

> […] where Colbert's commentary is accompanied by statements projected onscreen, presumably unknown to Colbert, but viewed by the audience. Grounded in current events, the substance of the Word echoes stories covered in the mainstream press: politics, the courts, foreign policy and other national events. The style, however, spins conventional journalism in reverse, using irony to undermine and critique the stated text. The discursive organization of the Word assumes an inclusive posture towards audience members, where, as in the carnival square, 'everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 10.). […] Carnival laughter positions audiences as insiders, in contrast to their traditional roles as outsiders of official discourse and authorized modes of communication (Meddaugh 2010: 380)

I've used this paragraph to give a general description of how the Word functions. However, I disagree with Meddaugh that it is only a function of Bakhtinian carnival, and that the ironic text assumes the function of inclusivity alone, as if this were some kind of generic democratic celebration of universal disapproval. It is, rather, the text's blankness acutely signified by its silence that gives it its rich texture as a point of communication. This style, which inheres to *TDS* set ups as well, is an important generational difference in relating to

authoritative discourse. It mocks authority because it knows there are no simple solutions to complex problems. As well, it has a political content that is often overlooked in analyses that rely on the explanatory framework provided by Bakhtin's carnival. Who is this person speaking back to Colbert's discourse in an ironic, often snarky tone? Can everyone who dislikes media authority identify with it? It is a viewer that we presume cannot speak back to O'Reilly (since we know this is a parody), and that viewer is a progressive, or at the very least, a skeptic of conservative affect. The text refuses to believe in O'Reilly's/Colbert's discourse, but not just in a straightforward 'in your face' debate as could happen, and often does, when Colbert debates himself 'Formidable Opponent' or debates his guests in a parody of the 'Spin Zone'. The Word, by contrast, has a blank participant written into the sketch who, without offering another way of viewing the subject of the Word, uses irony to forecast his/her disbelief. Often it seems as if the subject of this text is like a sardonic, more tech savvy viewer, who is pointing out the risks to the public that Colbert's resolutely affirmative conservative political discourse expresses; often it sounds more like consumer protection, as in 'buyer beware', than a celebration of momentary fun. It presumes a spectatorship that is created in the viewing act. Moreover, in contrast to Colletta's skepticism about postmodern irony, it presumes a reader who 'gets' it. It is often scathing criticism. The presentation itself is so exclusive to the audience getting it that it could easily miss those viewers less attracted to snark and more interested in affirmation, who simply listen to Colbert's words. The Word forms a particular audience, one that is attuned to the reality that it is impossible to speak back directly to authoritative news without it ricocheting throughout the conservative echo chamber, only for it to return to its sender as a sound bite or meme. Fox News's style is that of the bully who takes his victim by the hand, balls that hand into a fist and then punches him in the face with it, asking mockingly, 'Why are you hitting yourself?'

Since Colbert has begun several campaigns, and his guerilla electioneering (fake runs for office in South Carolina, etc.) has driven much of his popularity, some scholars have suggested he is inventing not a Bakhtinian carnival space but an audience that works with him to construct the story. As Rebecca McCarthy argues, 'The Colbert Report encourages an improvisational space of creation where the audience is not only spectator, but text/content creator as well. Such improvisational reliance requires not only the host, Colbert, for its success, but the audience as well' (McCarthy 2009). The spectator now speaks back to the discourse, whether in creating the word, as in 'Wikiality' or 'truthiness', through the connection *TCR* has established between its program on television and its fans on the web. This space between the web and the television is the new 'street'. As we shall see in Chapter 5, protesters who organized in Tahrir Square in Egypt in January 2011 were surprised when the street occupation led to yet another election between status quo contenders a year later, between a Mubarark protégé and the Muslim Brotherhood candidate. As one protester remarked, 'We got the street wrong,' by which he meant they read the relationship between protest in the street and spectator perception at home. As we move on to the next register of political action, we still have those left off (or behind?)

the web who watch television. Central to this problematic is a critical reading of television that underscores the political stakes in the medium's message. As Gardner argues:

> For both the Left and the Right wings of politics, then, television serves as a medium whose ostensibly democratic ontology would seem to fortify the democratic claims of its content. As such, television becomes the battleground between explicitly conflicting conceptions of politics. More implicitly, however, both sides of politics have also rejected the once-influential criticisms directed toward television by the likes of Baudrillard. Television is presumed to be a medium of good faith, and one that reinforces and naturalizes its democratic content. But can those criticisms be so easily jettisoned? (Gardner 2010: 2)

Gardner's analysis takes us into the politics of television and its problematic assertions that 'this is what democracy looks like.' It moves away from the problematic notion of Colbert (or any other form of comedy or satire) as a carnivalesque ritual. This is important, because when scholars speak of the 'carnivalesque' when referencing political comedy, it is a simple way to avoid describing the content of the politics that drive the satire and celebrate the momentary strategies of the weak against the powerful. Eco offered us a compelling way to understand the carnival as a conservative, relief-inducing way of maintaining the status quo. This is precisely what the MSM does when it presents political activities as an unproblematic demonstration of democracy. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, the MSM can manipulate these images of the street protest to mean whatever they like, or whatever affectively appeals to their audiences. But there is a message in political comedy, especially in *TDS* and *TCR*, and it is embedded in a basic refusal to believe 'in someone else's something' (that should not be confused with nihilism). The refusal simply means that the presented options are unacceptable. So, to bring Holloway back into our discussion, there is always a political message of some kind embedded in the satirical performance, which must be read against the ideological context in which it appears. The problem, so far, with much analysis of political comedy, especially *TDS* and *TCR*, has been that it lacks a political reading. My suggestion has been that the most popular forms of political comedy have operated within the purview of a leftist slant in politics, focusing on tone to communicate resistance to earnest political language that seeks to covertly undermine the middle-class. In a review of L. M. Bogad's book, *Electoral Guerilla Theatre*, one commentator remarked:

> And although Bogad is careful, time and again, to point out the dangers of assuming an identification of satire and guerilla performance with a progressive political agenda, I, for one, was not convinced. Indeed, I found myself pondering the tendentiality of the stock reading of Bahktin: the camivalesque as being unproblematically good. When the progressive side of politics does not like what the carnival reveals, do we not tend to call it 'populism'? (Maxwell 2006: 124)

Indeed, but when done on *TDS* and *TCR*, it is done with a blank stare of resistance.

Notes

1   To counter this trend, many scholars have argued that restoring the confidence of media viewers is important. One way to do this is to teach them how to read media critically. As Doug Kellner writes: 'Critical media literacy involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to use media intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, and to construct alternative media […]' (Kellner & Sharp 2005: 372).

2   Lizz Winstead was also instrumental in finding and placing Rachel Maddow with MSNBC after her long stint on Air America.

3   It is in this spirit that many progressive organizations, like NOW (National Organization for Women) and NAACP have been recruiting younger leaders, even placing them at the helm of their groups in order to make a point of identifying with younger generations, thus stimulating their interest in participating at grass roots and other levels. They have been behind conservatives in this trend who self-consciously recruit young people and fund their political ambitions. An example is James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles who produced the ACORN video.

4   Some political events are not wholly rational nor can they be. This is evident in the way that *TDS* stays away from them altogether. I submit that *TDS*'s 'woman problem' is not limited to the show. Miming the MSM, Stewart is necessarily limited from engaging topics central to women because the MSM ignores them too. However, on the other side of the equation, his largely male audience also circumscribes the way that he can approach such issues when and where he does. Often his positions on reproductive rights and other issues sound like the party platform for the Democratic Party, essentially a thoughtless encounter with forced bureaucratic compromises.

5   A content analysis of the first one-third of *TDS* during the fall/spring 2007 presidential election demonstrates that contrary to popular (media) opinion, *TDS* is not skewed in favor of the political left; in fact, it spent more time criticizing Democrats than Republicans (see Teten 2012).

6   Or, in Baudrillard's words, 'Put on your clothes and go home.'

7   '"What are you doing after the orgy?" That is a question. There is no answer. The seduction, the paradox, the challenge is in the question itself. But we presuppose that the orgy is over, we are at the end, or beyond the orgy; the orgy as a model of total liberation and integration. After that, there is no more a question of freedom, liberation, and so on. That's all achieved – we are all liberated: liberated of needs, of language, of sex, but what is new after that? Maybe it needs no answer to this question. The orgy was an acting-out of all finalities, it was a model of the liberation of all things, a vanishing point. As a vanishing point it is very interesting, because after that we don't know what we are, but it's not very dangerous; to not know what we will and what we want and so on were the categories of Enlightenment and modern man. We are beyond that and maybe it's a chance. We are free from freedom, free from liberation, That's over. Maybe now there's another chance, not for a new servitude…but

maybe, maybe unknown models of servitude. We cannot have a radical moral judgment about these alternatives.' Interview at the European Graduate School, 'Between Difference and Singularity: an open discussion with Jean Baudrillard', June 2002, http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/between-difference-and-singularity/. Accessed 12 March 2012.

8   Even though the Senate did eventually pass the bill with Section VII intact, and it was signed by President Obama after he worked with the Department of Defense to make it actionable. As it was widely reported, it was passed only after 'public outrage'.

9   Refer to this web page for the image that inspired this subheading: http://tinyurl.com/lxejlsh

Chapter 5

Globalizing Political Humor

Before you are free, you have to be smart. You have to choose your battles. It takes nothing away from your courage that you are not able to speak about a topic. (Bassem Youssef, *Al Bernameg* presenter, at the American University in Cairo, 2011)

Youth culture in North America is one of the most important demographics shaping the landscape of the global future not only because of their vast spending power, but because they tend to lead as a primary source of global inspiration for many other youth markets. Internet access has created a whole new level of connectivity across cultures, which makes knowing what's shaping and influencing youth culture here, vital for where things may be heading across other youth markets around the world. (Gasperini 2011)

[Hand up] Ah, quick question, Jon Stewart, *Daily Show*: So, if two speeches and a media site was all we needed to spread democracy, uh, why did we invade Iraq? Why didn't we just, I don't know, poke them? So, who deserves the credit for this unprecedented wave of democratic uprisings? (*TDS*, 'The Rule of the Nile', 27 January 2011)

In this chapter, I will examine how political satire and comedy play a role in the discourses of democracy that surround media and intellectual coverage of the Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. I will also incorporate the important role that US democracy-promotion plays in the region, especially with its ties to neo-liberal governance. Most importantly, we will examine how a few satirical shows broadcast in the region play a role in attempting to foster democratic discourse, and what makes them succeed or fail in the attempt. In the American media, as the *TDS* skit above demonstrates, when covering the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa the obsession tended to be about the connection between the Arab Spring and virtually any American brand: was it Condoleezza Rice's speech at the American University in Cairo in 2005, as Fox News alleged; or was it President Obama's speech in 2009 in Cairo, as White House press secretary Gibbs claimed; or still yet, was it Facebook and Twitter, as Anderson Cooper gleefully asserted? It was none of those things, but that was all the media was covering in the US. Only *TDS* made fun of it and found a way to criticize the Bush administration in the process. Following the mock news reporter's sane and snarky question, the show features a round table parodying of all the self-serving American elitism that would foreshadow the coverage of the Egyptian uprisings, as well as Egypt's subsequent parliamentary elections in November of 2011, making fun of the fear-mongering about Islamist parties, and later in 2012, covering the presidential elections

that would eventually lead to the dissolving of the parliament by the Egyptian Supreme Court. As was mentioned in Chapters 2 through 4, a running theme in understanding the role of political comedy is in its adherence to a form of rationality in news media. As most comedians were apt to comment during the decade, the media kept them in business with outlandish coverage of politicians and events. Reality had really become, in the words of Paul Krassner, 'obscene,' especially during the 'dark times' we discussed at length in Chapters 1 and 4 (Krassner 2009: 14). In many ways, because of the Bush administration's urging of the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq by US forces to 'bring democracy' to those places, long after their declared failure the US media and public still find themselves connected to the Middle East in a proprietary manner. Indeed, claiming some kind of responsibility for regime change in many countries substituted for sane analysis of the regions' already existing demographics. In other words, the uprisings were already in the making and most definitely had very little to do with US influence in the region. Thus, the most important question was not what motivated the uprisings but where they started, and since similar trends had been present throughout the region, the chain reaction was far from shocking. From Ben Ali, leader of Tunisia, the people of the country heard a spectacular language in 2011:

> [Tunisian president Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali talked for the third time in the past month to the people. Something unprecedented, we barely knew this guy. Ben Ali talked in the Tunisian dialect instead of Arabic for the first time ever. (qtd in Liberman 2011)

Ben Ali's attempt to communicate 'I have heard you' to the widespread protests in the streets of Tunisia that began in December of 2010 fell on deaf ears. No doubt annoyed by his politically expedient use of the common language in an attempt to appear in solidarity with his people (who it is reported almost never understood his speeches in classical Arabic), Ali's transgressions in pilfering the state coffers for his wife's family and other relatives had been revealed by WikiLeaks weeks prior. Furthermore, as the street protests mounted after the self-immolation of a young man in Sidi Bouzid, a rural city, *Al Jazeera* kept the momentum alive by covering the protests while the rest of the international media largely ignored them. By the time Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January, Tunisians were widely reporting that their movement against him would touch off a string of protests in the region. For nearly a decade, the people had been living with declining circumstances and intense covert policing from Ali's regime, in stark contrast to the national promise they had been allowed to hope for under Ben Ali's predecessor. As one protester argued:

> 'We are the Bourguiba generation,' she said, referring to Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president and the father of its broad middle class. He poured resources into Tunisia's educational system and made higher education effectively free. He also pushed a social agenda of secularization, women's rights, birth control and family planning that, in contrast to most countries in the region, slowed population growth, keeping the job of public education and social welfare manageable. (Kirkpatrick 2011)

Although, we might doubt this protester's claim, as she is upholding one dictator over another whose ruling bargain was just as bankrupt as Ben Ali's, this statement reflects a profound disillusionment with the kind of promises rulers could make in the past decade while under the austerity measures imposed by international financial organizations. It also demonstrates the unique way that many of the people in these countries relate to political power.

As James Gelvin argues, what unites Arabs across countries in the Middle East and North Africa in spite of their profound religious, cultural and national differences is the Arabic language, which communicates 'a shared sense of history and experiences that school systems and intellectuals encourage' (Gelvin 2012: 3). Furthermore, a shared taste in popular culture and media, as well as in opposition to the US-led interventions in the region during the past decade, have at least provided the people of these regions with many common associations. *Al Jazeera*, based in Qatar (the wealthiest of Arab countries), prospered after 9/11 being the only region-based news channel to cover the US invasion through its offices in Afghanistan (since Afghanistan is not an Arab country it is not included in this analysis, though it does have a parody show, *Zang-e-Khatar*). *Al Jazeera* began its English language programming in 2005, with *Al Jazeera English* an important and controversial source of information about the happenings of the Arabic world for English-speakers, as well the other way around. *Al Jazeera* is the fifth most popular brand, and has been praised as having less bias than many of the US news outlets by none other than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in March of 2011 before a Senate Foreign Relations committee (Steven Brook 2005). In fact, Clinton called it 'real' news compared to the US networks, who are failing in comparison, and as she knows, viewers trained on US popular culture will not fail to note that she is implying that what goes under the title 'fake' news – *TDS* and *TCR* – are actually 'real'. While *Al Jazeera* has prospered in terms of news analysis to rival many of the less respected US venues like CNN or Fox, digital access has widened in most Arab countries, yet is restricted when political expediency is demanded by governments who control it. Under the Bush administration, the *Al Jazeera* offices in Kabul, Afghanistan were destroyed following 9/11; in 2003, the Baghdad office was also 'accidentally' shelled, killing a prominent reporter (the coordinates for its location were given to US intelligence by Qatar). Qatar was pressured by the US government to sell *Al Jazeera* in 2005 as reported in the *New York Times* (but to this date, has not). In 2005, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had at the time argued that the network's reporting was 'vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable,' because reporters showed live footage of the beheading of Americans in Baghdad. Here is a major difference between the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama: Bush prosecuted the war on terror using hard power (war, bombings, anti-terrorism efforts, economic sanctions, etc.) with a blasé and perfunctory approach to soft power strategies. The Obama administration, on the other hand, has turned to strategic soft power (and tactical drone invasions) in order to transform not only the Middle East but the entire landscape of the Arab-speaking world (admittedly at different rates) toward democratic openness. Rather than forcing regime change in certain countries, the Obama administration has focused on supporting

countries for opening themselves through social movements of people, rather than direct foreign intervention (except in Libya and perhaps, as I write this, Syria). This explains Clinton's embrace of *Al Jazeera*, as well as the new strategies of soft power diplomacy, as the location of US foreign policy shifted from Defense (hard power) to the Secretary of State (soft power). An important point to make here is that the people who rose up against their governments during the Arab Spring did not awaken to the corrupt nature of the regimes that ruled over them because social media, WikiLeaks and Barack Obama opened their eyes. While these are important events and technologies worked as mobilizing structures and resources that led to protests, by themselves they had no power. Rather, the people rose up because of a combination of strategic organizing by groups on the ground in those countries, who used non-violent protest strategies (often presented in entertaining ways through poetry readings, comedic slogans and basic grassroots politics) at the right moment (when a prominent case of human rights abuses by authorities became a public source of outcry), and because the WikiLeaks revelations made it possible for them to know that the US and other potential sources of support 'knew' their regimes were corrupt and had been relying on ineffective diplomatic back-channeling, mostly to protect their own careers and connections (Malinowski 2011). Thus, the Obama administration issued its statement of support for Tunisia a little too late: on 25 January, during the State of the Union address, Obama argued that the US 'stands with the people of Tunisia' and said little more.

President Obama is criticized for maintaining the status quo by not issuing a more declarative statement of support for the uprisings (it is not until May that he boldly stood behind them). While he has not continued all of Bush's policies and strategies in the region, his analysis of the power dynamics remains similar. What changed with Obama was *tone*. The administration 'elevated internet freedom projects around the world in US diplomacy and budget allocations' increasing them by 600 per cent between 2009 and 2010 (Stepanova 2011: 5). Most experts on this region agree the status quo had already begun to break down in most of these countries: as aging autocrats began to attempt to groom successors (often related to them), the people grew tired, as Donald Winnicott deemed (in relation to the Berlin Wall) an inevitable psychological feature of dictatorship that one finds repeated as a temporary outcome of conflict throughout the world: 'To some extent it could be said that the dictatorship breaks down because the fixed meaning of good and bad eventually becomes boring, and people become willing to risk their lives in the cause of spontaneity and originality' (Winnicott 1986: 225). Thus, it was the people who launched these uprisings and used social media and entertainment, serious organizing strategy and willful protest. In Tunisia they chanted 'Yes, we can' in Tunisian Arabic and wrote it in English on many of their protest signs. Before Ben Ali fled, they waved signs reading 'Game Over' and other humorous and snarky statements. In the end, the narrative that sutures those who use political comedy and other strategies in the region favors human rights and religious freedom and tolerance. These politics are paradoxical. Of the most important lessons celebrated by the western (especially US) media, none has been more thoroughly un-interrogated than the presumption that what should prevail at the end of the Arab Spring is democracy and

human rights. These lessons in 'sanity' were not just meant for the autocratic rulers who used state propaganda, censorship and political repression to maintain their power (often in the insane gesture of 'indefinitely'); they are mostly meant for the people who suffered at their hands for decades. What we learn from studies analyzing the Arab Spring is mostly about the importance of non-violent protest for social movements, but also about demanding the right to be subject to neo-liberal regimes of truth (There is no alternative [TINA], as we shall see). Such neo-liberal regimes emphasize the right of people to participate in the global economy in ways determined by global corporations, who are protected from scrutiny by neo-liberal forms of governance, the so-called 'good governance' provided by rights which tether the subject even more closely to this state, which is given the paradoxical task of 'reforming' itself (Mikdashi 2011). Such a state will make its people over into the kind of subjects demanded by neo-liberal economic policies: regular, sane, productive members of society. This is a progressive discourse of political reform because it implies that such people are not functioning at their most productive capacities and must be taught how to do so. They will overcome their own 'dysfunctional' cultural hang-ups to become predictable, pliant subjects ready to be served up to corporate developers of the future. Mikdashi calls this 'fork-tongued neo-liberalism' in that it calls western audiences to celebrate the defeat of neo-liberal economic policies as practiced by the likes of Mubarak, Ben Ali and others in the Arab world, whose ruling bargains with the people could no longer be honored under austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while championing the unspoken neo-liberal governance that is presumed to replace it. While previous forms of neo-liberalism were structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and World Bank, and that were mediated by dictators through their ruling bargains in the form of austerity measures (cutting back on food, health and education subsidies), they will now be replaced by the privatization model, where all services are contracted out to corporate entities, who compete with the government to offer the same services at for profit rates determined by market fluctuations; these are the neo-liberal regimes of truth – what is determined to be true is what is corrected for by the market. At the center of this strategy is 'youth'. As the quote at the head of the chapter indicates, youth markets are among the strongest globally, and they compete for young people's hearts and minds through social media, advertising and popular culture. As we saw in Chapter 1, the same strategy of capturing youth for consumer purposes flourishes in the United States, and has become cause for concern as education becomes the site of global marketing. In this, corporations and corporate interests become the new promise that replaces the ones the autocrats of the Arab Spring could not fulfill. Among those promises of the bargain were full employment, which most of the regimes in question subsidized using loans and national oil wealth (rent), rather than capital earned from legitimate taxation of productive, market-based industries. What sparked the uprising were in fact the levels of youth unemployment, the living conditions of young people (for example, housing conditions in Cairo), as well as the socially stifling cultural paradigm that young people were trapped in. With the highest rates of young people in the world, second only to sub-Saharan Africa (whose deposing of corrupt leaders in the 1990s led to

speculative comparisons between them and the Arab Spring), Arab countries across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Iran, are characterized by having a 'youth bulge'.

A 'youth bulge' occurs where rates of fertility have lagged behind improvements in mortality rates. Thus, most of the Arab countries were able to increase their people's standard of living by the policies of the ruling bargains (not only subsidizing the employment sector, but increasing rates of education; in some cases ensuring entire generations' access to education, especially higher education, food and basic health care). However, fertility rates did not begin to decline until after the 1980s, roughly two decades behind educational and health improvement, thus increasing the number of eligible college graduates seeking employment in a market with little or no industrial or corporate growth. As it is, the Arab world lags only behind Africa in terms of its youth bulge, with 60 per cent of its population under the age of 30. In Egypt, 60 per cent of young people aged 18 to 29 are unemployed, with women at 83 per cent (Gelvin 2012: 20). As we have seen in earlier chapters, 'youth' is a concept often mobilized for political or market purposes without any genuine attempt to apprehend the needs of actual young people. This is precisely the problem and what mobilizes youth to react against regimes that invoke them as 'youth' for moral panics. Often these panics center around the kinds of enjoyment young people prefer, and, like the parental panics covered in Chapter 4 about 'slackers', are really a projection of the ruling establishment's anxieties onto young people. In 'Islamism and the Politics of Fun', Bayat writes that under fundamentalist regimes, contrary to what many people think:

> […] fun appeals to almost all social groups (the rich and poor, old and young, modern and traditional, men and women), yet youths are the prime facilitators of fun and the main target of anti-fun politics, because youth habitus is characterized by a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, drive for autonomy, mobility, and change. Perhaps that is why 'fun' is often conflated with and identified by 'youth culture.' He goes on to note that older, poorer groups enjoy simple pleasures that constitute 'fun' but they are not subject to the same level of prohibitions as the young. For instance, whereas the elderly poor can afford simple, traditional, and contained diversions, the globalized and affluent youth tend to embrace more spontaneous, erotically charged, and commodified pleasures. This might help explain why globalizing youngsters more than others cause fear and fury among Islamist anti-fun adversaries, especially when much of what these youths practice is informed by Western technologies of fun and is framed in terms of 'Western cultural import' […]. (Bayat 2007: 435)

This element of westernization – the history of Western European colonialism in the Arab world and Iran, as well as its creation of the state of Israel (against noted objections) and US imperialism in these same regions throughout the twentieth century in an effort to access oil while balancing interests in the region – has created a very palpable and real distrust, if not outright hatred, of western culture as a tool for maintaining (and justifying) power among seasoned autocrats (such as Mubarak, Saleh, Gaddafi and the Iranian ruling clerics). The more

these 'western cultural imports' are identified with the United States, the greater the level of panic. Thus, young people are caught up in national angst over the nation's future, while they are similarly educated to bring some kind of progress to the nation. The literacy rates in many of these countries, as well as the number of graduate and post-graduate degrees, is at odds with the kinds of jobs available; there is not only a mismatch between skill sets and employment opportunities, but also little room for adapting to the situation. Bayat further argues that this is peculiarly troublesome for youth, and suggests a new way of conceptualizing youth based on the experiences of youth in Muslim societies:

> Rather than being defined in terms of the centrality of the young, youth movements are ultimately about 'claiming or reclaiming youthfulness.' And Youthfulness signifies a particular habitus, behavioral and cognitive dispositions that are associated with the fact of being 'young' – that is, a distinct social location between childhood and adulthood, where the youngster experiences 'relative autonomy' and is neither totally dependent (on adults) nor independent, and is free from responsibility from other dependents. Understood as such, the political agency of youth movements, *their transformative and democratizing potential, depends on the capacity of the adversaries,* **the moral and political authorities, to accommodate and contain certain youthful claims** […]. (Bayat & Herrera 2010: 28, emphasis mine)

Bayat's analysis of the politics of fun gets around some explanatory problems one faces when analyzing how comedy interacts with political progress or change. He asserts that prohibitions on fun, whether it be laughing or dancing, picnicking or smiling, are about a challenge to the moral and political authority of a particular paradigm. He writes:

> Fun presupposes a powerful paradigm, a set of presumptions about self, society, and life that might compete with and undermine the legitimizing ideology of doctrinal power when these ideologies happen to be too narrow, rigid, and exclusive to accommodate ethics of fun […]. (Bayat 2007: 455)

His broad picture of the normal expectations of living helps us to see how narrow the rules set by authorities are. Against Umberto Eco's claim that satire is a momentary release that may in fact consolidate the leader's power, an analysis of extreme limits set by authorities shows just how subversive fun can be, as he says, whether the challenge comes from jazz (in the former Soviet Union), sexuality outside of traditional marriage (Billy Graham) or singing (Iran). The point is that when the doctrine is narrow and merged with the state, '[T]he subversive effect of fun, at any rate, depends ultimately on the capacity of adversaries, the ideological frame of the moral and political authority to absorb and contain its adverse fallouts' (Bayat 2007: 458). In this case in particular, it is a 'frame of mind' that the doctrinal state needs to maintain in order to maintain its paradigm's legitimacy; one that is at its very core inimical to fun. The Bolshevik example is a particularly good point of reference, since

many early revolutionaries demanded a level of discipline in their followers in order to sustain devotion to the Iranian revolution, including walking on beds of nails and depriving oneself of simple pleasures like sleep and food. The relative autonomy that youth possess by virtue of their structural positioning is always going to square them against doctrinal authority, unless they have come to it out of choice. In the second generation after the revolution, that is not the case. As host of the VOA-funded satire show *Parazit*, Hosseini says:

> We use dark humor and angry dark comedy because for me, for my, my generation, even though we are angry and we are a product of the revolution that we had nothing to do with, we're trying to manage to control this anger, and try to talk back to, the Islamic Republic government and say, dude, what you are doing to us is not right and we need our freedom back [...]. (qtd in Semati 2012: 124)

The globalization of satire

Shows have replicated *TDS*'s formats. And *TDS* has been borrowing from and paying homage to shows over the last decade. In *Satire and Dissent*, Amber Day presents a detailed history of the debut of the genre in television over the course of the twentieth century and beyond; and since my point in this chapter is not to simply celebrate the proliferation of political satire and news parody, but to try to understand what it means for it to appear as a self-conscious attempt to copy *TDS* on television in the contemporary political climate of the Middle East, I am going to situate the cases here within the framework of a political reading. This reading might imply that *TDS*, as a 'smart' genre that engages the phony-ness of news with a style that deploys intertextuality and blank comedic presentation in order to foreground its political message, is one of progressive pathos. Does this mean that *TDS* is a peculiar manifestation of globalization, as most cross-border cultural objects get framed by academic discourse? What with news and information, especially as it is increasingly consumer-identified, going viral across borders through the Internet and social media, it certainly does mean a confluence of interests exist as a discourse of speaking truth to power (Baym & Jones 2012: 6). However, *TDS*'s cultural set up does not resonate everywhere. Although it does appear that satire is a global phenomenon, perhaps a response to old news paradigms, or the convergence of them with insights provided by new social media (Jenkins 2006), particular stylizations have been chosen to confront rigid and obscene news and political paradigms. Although Baym and Jones, in their introduction to the special edition of the journal *Popular Communication*, refuse to assign an ideological function to parody, they do say that news parody:

> [...] rejects the verticality and linearity of news – the built-in assumption that *they*, from positions of privilege, speak (down) to us, and that we, in turn, have little role in the process

but as passive receivers of their truths. Parody becomes a public response, sometimes through the 'talking back' it provides and sometimes simply as a means of 'talking to' and 'talking with.' Whichever way, news parody is a practice that invites communal challenge to both the form and substance of an authorized discourse so central to power […]. (Baym & Jones 2012: 6)

The volume features readings of 'Global Approaches to Parody and Satire' under the heading 'Not Necessarily the News.' While this volume is an important addition to the understanding of what one might call 'comparative parody' within cultures, it analyzes how parodic shows have developed from within nation states and does not focus on how parody reads across cultures. For example, *TDS* has been broadcast in 22 countries since 2002, and there is only one recent article that covers how it is received abroad. This article, as an example of the kind of scholarship that could be very important to international relations and communications, is by anthropologists working in Kenya who, in 2006, conducted focus groups that reacted to episodes of *TDS* and were able to explore 'transnational contingencies of meaning' (Haugerud et Al. 2012: 168). First, they noted the importance of the issue of political accountability in the US media; that is, that media is criticized for not holding political authorities accountable. Second, they noted the 'health of democracy and freedom of expression in the US (this will be an important theme later in the chapter as we look at the confusion on Jon Stewart's face when he meets Bassem Youssef on his show in late June 2012); and finally, possibly most important, the respondents reacted to the ethnocentrism of *TDS*, particularly in the show's unwillingness to provide a rationale for protesters motivations when covering the riots in France in 2005, as the authors note: 'Thus, departing from common American representations of *TDS*, these Kenyan viewers critiques place the programme within what many would term a hegemonic framework of empire – thereby illustrating the limits of Stewart's dissidence' (Haugerud et Al. 2012: 170). Writing from Canada, Ross and York point out that most academic treatments of *TDS* have 'subordinated comedy on *The Daily Show* in their eagerness to foreground the show's "serious" intent' (Ross & York 2007: 354). Indeed, their analysis focuses on Purdy's argument that 'one political effect of joking is to bolster conventionally sanctioned social hierarchies,' the most consistent use of which the subjects are 'generally constructed as low' in order to maintain what we have called elsewhere in this book superiority (2007: 354). Baym and Jones's volume does not cover the events of the Arab Spring except to remark that news parody has become a 'staple' across the 'non-democratic or emerging democratic states' like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. In Palestine a popular program on state-run television, *Watan Ala Watar*, was ordered off the air by the Palestinian Authority when it featured a parody of Gaddafi in military dress with Kit-Kat wrappers as medals. Widespread opinion was that Palestinian leaders cancelled the show because they feared that the parodists would turn their words and acts on them (Sienkiewicz 2012: 114). Another important fact the editors of the journal note is that the events of the Arab Spring occurred less on television than in actual poetry, music and comedy (Baym & Jones 2012: 13). However, following the deposing

of rulers, many cultural operatives are hopeful that news parody and satire on television will turn the political tide to democracy and openness, even arguing that television is the most important medium, as well as using the taped events of the uprising to keep it in the spotlight for the public to extend their memory of the uprising.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will highlight some of the uses of political satire in parts of the Muslim Middle East and North Africa by looking at two main areas: the countries of the Arab Spring, especially Egypt's Bassem Youssef and *Al Bernameg*, as well as events in Tunisia; and one non-Arab Muslim country that is the target of a *Daily Show* copy funded by the United States and broadcast in Iran, *Parazit*. I will compare these to *TDS* as well as to earlier attempts at failed soft power mobilization by the Bush administration by *Alhurra* ('the free one') in 2004. *Alhurra* is an important point of reference because it comprised the soft war component of the Bush administration's basic strategy in the Middle East and North Africa, which proceeded from the haughty assumption that the Arab world would flock to its news presentations, and not see them as an arrogant example of an invading superpower. This was the Bush strategy in a nutshell: believing that Iraqis would bum-rush 'freedom' and 'democracy' after a US-led invasion on their sovereign territory, they constructed no plan for occupation and reconstruction, except the ones that gave foreign contractors lucrative government-funded contracts (from security to curriculum development) and the belief (nearly religious in its overtones) that Iraqis would do anything to be like the United States. An anecdote about a Bush advisor sums this up. Karen Hughes, early communications director for the Bush White House and newly anointed undersecretary for public diplomacy at the Department of State, took a 2005 trip to Saudi Arabia (close US allies in the region living under a fake dynasty the House of Saud) to speak to a group of Saudi women. Hughes ascended to the podium jiggling her car keys and expressed concern that the women could not experience the freedoms she experienced as a woman, like driving a car. Dubbed 'Hurricane Karen' and 'Karen of Arabia' by ABC News, Hughes's stealth visit to the region as the third candidate in the position 'fell flat.' Her 'listening tour,' designed to mimic Hillary Clinton's tours as First Lady in the previous decade, went off more like a talking-down-to tour. This attitude and the projection of it as a key element of US power in the region, myself and my co-editor labeled 'global arrogance' (Leatherman & Webber 2005). It is an American form of Orientalism, in the sense that such an attitude presents a 'subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture' (Said [1979] 2003: 5). In the 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Said would explicitly state that the concept evolved into a foreign policy stance that justified a stronger power controlling a weaker one either for oil wealth, or on the pretext of combating the terrorists it purportedly produces for the geopolitical environment (Said [1979] 2003: xv).

Alhurra was debuted in this geopolitical context and orchestrated by these diplomatic players. Ignoring the fact that most people in the region were able to get satellite television news from either *Al Jazeera* (which the administration wanted to destroy) or *Al Arabiya* (a Saudi-owned network broadcast from Dubai; American presidential administrations support the Saudis as allies in the region in spite of the repressive monarchical government with an abysmal human rights record) or the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation),

which still bothers to post journalists in the countries it covers, the Bush administration pushed through an expensive project ($67 million start-up budget) to project an Arabic language news program into the Arab world (Linzer 2008: 3). It is worth noting here that CNN and other networks scaled back significantly on the posting of foreign journalists, so the parodies that *TDS* features of Jason Jones or Jon Oliver in front of a fake scene of a foreign country (or even an American monument or city) are literal parodies of the American news media's prominent lack of real-time reporting from around the world. Did most Americans know that the US media was doing this? Probably not. The parochial context in which the Iraq War and the war on terror took place precluded and was allowed for by the US population's general ignorance of geopolitics and culture.[1] While public diplomacy, itself an important element in the war on terror and American outreach to countries that lack free and balanced press (China, Russia and many Arabic-speaking countries), was part of the Bush administration's strategy, it was plagued by the same bureaucratic malfeasance that US citizens witnessed repeatedly during the eight years of that administration. Furthermore, it managed to effect a 'tone-deaf' presentation of the United States to the Arabic-speaking world, which actually undermined US strategic goals and objectives in many of the countries where it was broadcast (Lynch 2003). This emphasis on tone is important: more important than the content-driven criticism directed at it over its several categorical mistakes (airing a cooking show after the spiritual leader of Hamas was assassinated; showing part of a four-day conference on Holocaust deniers; a pro-Hezbollah slant to coverage) (Linzer 2008). Mired in partisan bickering, and bereft of a full-time permanent staff, the agency was finally headed by – guess who? – Karen Hughes for its last three years under Bush control. State Department complaints for three years running received little or no response as Hughes haphazardly commissioned week-long (read: perfunctory) reviews of its performance, preferring, she said, 'to focus on other aspects of public diplomacy such as exchange programs and did not want to wade deeply into the "mess" *Alhurra* was in' (Linzer 2008: 5).

Alhurra: 'Tone-deaf'

> Rather than targeting Arab rulers or overbroad categories such as 'youth', Washington should concentrate on engaging intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and other public figures who have become so instrumental in shaping Arab public opinion […]. (Lynch 2003)

Alhurra is an Arabic-language-based satellite broadcast funded by the US Congress under the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which also oversees Voice of America (VOA). The BBG was established in 1994 to keep US broadcasts 'free from political pressures from either end of Pennsylvania Avenue' (US Senate 2010: 5). As we shall see in the next section, VOA also sponsors *Parazit*, the Iranian broadcast copy of *TDS* that launched in 2009. However, *Alhurra* was created alongside a radio program, *Radio Sawa*, which plays only

popular music (a bid to appeal to 'youth'). They were both created under a different stream, the MBN (Middle East Broadcasting Network) and not Voice of America Arabic Service. Proponents of *Alhurra* state that to create it under VOA would have taken too long for it to get up and running (Tomlinson 2007: 5), while others complain that creating a separate agency allowed it to function outside of congressional oversight and enabled it to be more of a 'privatized propaganda enterprise based on outdated Cold War surrogate broadcasting models and mistaken marketing concepts, that would result in failure rather than reduce Anti-Americanism abroad' (Lipien 2008). *Alhurra* has been discussed as a widely understood failure. By 2007, Congress had spent over $650,000 (Linzer 2008). There are fans and critics of the station, but the problems associated with its approach, linked directly to the Bush administration's views of the role of public diplomacy, doomed it from the start. Some do not think it can or should ever be re-funded, yet year after year it returns.

Alhurra was launched on 14 February 2004 as a rival to *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia). For inexplicable reasons President Bush insisted it debut on Valentine's Day, which would become a source of ridicule of the station within the Arab world which, by and large, and except where commercially accepted, does not celebrate Valentine's Day as a cultural event. Part of Bush's 'freedom agenda' of 2003, which aimed to drain the swamp where terrorists dwell, *Alhurra* has been a joke. To date, every prominent person who knows about the Arab world has agreed that *Alhurra* is the most expensive diplomatic venture yet. While Bush made the mistake of appearing on *Alhurra*, President Obama stays far, far away from it. It is difficult to find non-partisan reviews of the broadcast within the United States. Prominent American pollster James Zogby, who owns the company Zogby International that supplies all the polling studies for Reuters International, argued it was a mistake from the beginning. He first recounts what we've already mentioned: the US government was acting like Arab countries were 'closed behind an iron curtain,' when in reality they were able to watch US programming through three Arab networks that bought rights to programs produced within the US. *TDS*, for example, airs a global version weekly within most Arab countries. Zogby makes two good points. One, that the BBC is 'a respected international brand with a seasoned staff of professionals' for which there is no American counterpart; why start from ground zero when the BBC could launch a much better Arabic channel? This would make the creation of a US channel look like propaganda, which it was (Zogby 2009). The second point was that while the 'American people' and 'American television' were polling favorably among Arab population, the 'American government' was at an all-time low (the people polled five times higher than the government!). Thus, he concluded, it made no sense to launch a program that would have to compete with some of our own best American products, television and the Americans who appeared on it. Others argue that Zogby simply wants to be able to take over the broadcast himself, allowing him access to poll one of the most interesting and least understood (to Americans) populations in the world (recall Malinowksi's fork-tongued neo-liberalism). Nevertheless, he makes good points in that by the time of his article (2009) the number of employees had risen from 167 to over 650. This is not government money well spent, especially when we review its reception.

In an article asserting that *Alhurra* was produced to provide 'humor against hegemony,' William Lafi Youmans interviewed several employees of *Alhurra* and surveyed its target audience: 'ordinary viewers and members of the "chattering classes," elites engaged in mass mediated public discourse' (Youmans 2011: 77). Initially, the author notes, he was interested in the subject of *Alhurra's* reception, not the humor surrounding it; but, as he quickly found, *Alhurra* became an object of political humor in the Arab world – a joke, that is. Youmans did not initially intend to conduct a study on humor in reaction to *Alhurra*, but as his interviews progressed he began to see the need to account for it with a theory of humor: disposition theory. This theory marries superiority and relief theory. The problem with *Alhurra* was that it did not have an audience, nor did it have an idea of how to get one. Youmans notes that it is problematic to 'guess' what Arab populations want since prior studies have shown that 'audience measurement mechanisms are underdeveloped' (Sakr 2007 qtd in Youmans 2011: 78). And, as Zogby noted, Arab viewers have plenty of options for popular culture and news already; any newcomer would have to have a real edge over the other options, including *Al-Jazeera* and the already existing US content broadcast through local networks. Indeed, in many countries where filtering is inconsistent, or at the very least easy to get around, people who have access to the Internet can view almost anything they like on the web. While many countries do use filtering, especially of the Internet, it should be noted that regions of the US have also used it to shut down protests: in San Francisco, California, for example, during the Bay Area Transit System strike to shut down the organization of planned protests. This kind of shutdown is called 'just-in-time blocking' and is also used by the UK government when it decides protests 'are plotting violence, disorder and criminality' (OpenNet Initiative 2012). Nevertheless, one thing that Youmans does isolate is that viewer skepticism of *Alhurra* arose from concerns about a state-run media, which they had known under autocratic regimes to be unreliable, if not outright deceptive, for a very long time. Thus when President Bush appeared on it the first day it aired, it was easy for viewers to dismiss it as an arm of the propaganda wing for the war on terror. Events in 2007 due to congressional oversight and bureaucratic mismanagement led to independent studies on the station, which aired from Springfield, Virginia, not the region it covered.

A major snafu occurred around 2007 with the managing editor resigning after the Government Accounting Office (GAO) conducted a study about the station's management and performance, in sum, finding serious problems with the station's evaluation instruments for audience and content. So, while every BBG report came through with shining evaluations of the station's performance and the increasing numbers in its audiences, the GAO came to different conclusions in its report to the House of Representatives:

> MBN's challenges include the fact that its Alhurra television station is currently competing in a market with over 140 other stations and also faces operational and programmatic competitive disparities, such as having fewer overseas bureaus than its primary competitors. In addition, its Radio Sawa service lacks FM radio coverage in certain

markets. MBN has begun a number of efforts and proposed initiatives to address some of its challenges, such as proposals for Alhurra to increase its hours of news coverage and current affairs programming and for Radio Sawa to increase the amount of local content it broadcasts to better compete with local stations. However, MBN lacks a shared vision of operations for Radio Sawa and Alhurra as well as detailed implementation strategies and related resource requirements for its proposed goals […]. (GAO 2006: 2)

Two further studies were commissioned: one by the MBG and the other by the Obama administration. The one commissioned by MBG found the station ran objective content and was functioning bureaucratically. The other study commissioned the University of Southern California Annenberg Center to conduct a thorough study of the station and the BBG who had reissued its funding. This report was very critical, according to Nancy Snow, and called for the station (which was resistant) to 'impose discipline in producing the news product to protect against personal and institutional biases that can infect a news product' (Snow 2010: 9). Thus, following this study and the release of it to the public, the network transformed itself and even began to produce a new show, *Al-Youm*, ('Today'), modeled on the *Today* show in the US, that presents an 'in-region feel' by acknowledging that '[I]t's not a matter of having Springfield, Virginia staff produce a program that covers the Middle East from afar. The rundown of each day's programs is coordinated among the worldwide staff in tandem across five countries' (Snow 2010: 12). Furthermore, sources inside the network confirmed that the change in presidency urged viewers to give the station a second look:

> Whereas some viewers may have viewed *Alhurra* as an extension of the Bush doctrine or Bush administration, after November 4, 2008, there was a shift in mentality. Not only was *Alhurra* still airing, but there was a new president and new team. If the US government could change direction so dramatically in who it elected president, then perhaps *Alhurra* could change its content to great focus on people in the Middle East. *Al-Youm* debuted six weeks after Obama's swearing in […]. (Snow 2010: 13)

By 2010, it seemed that *Alhurra*'s position in the region had turned around with it claiming 7.7 million Syrian viewers and its noted position next to the once banned *Al Jazeera* during US President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address in 2010, six months following his special address in June 2009 in Cairo entitled, 'A New Beginning'. However, one should not make the mistake of attributing the uprisings across the Arab world beginning in Tunisia and ending with (as I write this ongoing) bloodshed in Hom, Syria, to the influence of this speech. The Obama administration has the same interests in the region as the Bush one did: to create a balance of power in the region favorable to US interests. Those interests are stability of the region, survival of western-friendly regimes and easy access to oil. However, they realized that a paradigm shift was apparent all over the Arab world with many dictators nearing death desperately trying to maintain power by passing it on to their relatives and successors. The patrimonialism seems more obvious in these cases because they are largely

military regimes headed by families often installed to power during independence, or shortly thereafter, as populist figures. They remained in power through the support of the US or other previous colonial powers (Great Britain and France), together with the IMF and other international organizations that recognized their right to rule for decades as long as they followed the austerity measures imposed by financial regulators. So, a first step to understanding what democracy might look like in any Arab country dependent on the IMF or World Bank for loan restructuring is to understand that not much will change in terms of geopolitics. As James Gelvin instructs his readers, many of these leaders maintained their power through 'ruling bargains' with their people that emphasized government support for social welfare, not free enterprise. Because such states raised revenue largely through rent (from oil, natural gas, taxes on non-resident guest workers and transportation fees), they did not tax their citizens working in the free market, but instead used the rent to provide subsidies for employment, education and health for their citizens. For example, Tunisia's literacy rate at the time of the uprisings was among the highest of the Arab countries because President Ben Ali had ensured every young person the right to a university education. However, when Tunisia's IMF loans ran out the government began scaling back on its ruling bargain and people had no reason to back the regime. In fact, many young people were in positions like Mohamed Bouazizi, who was a fruit seller and college graduate who had been frustrated by being blocked from his work before his suicide by self-immolation on 18 December 2010 touched off the uprisings in Tunisia. Only 18, he was working to put his sisters through school and was told by a police officer he could not sell his produce without a certificate. When he went to the municipal offices in Sidi Bouzid, a female worker reportedly slapped and chastised him, setting him off to a local street where he set himself on fire in front of traffic. His mother explained that 'his death was an expression of frustration that could not be articulated' (Beaumont 2011). Bouazizi's story resonated throughout Tunisia and went on to animate the many 'Days of Rage' uprisings that occurred across the Arab world on Fridays, during prayers. His suicide, along with many copycats throughout the region, led to an 'articulate' form of uprising and protest using humor, satire and the underappreciated cultural talent of an entire generation, as well as the organizational skills deployed by established parties and labor unions, like the Muslim Brotherhood. Also fueling the protests was the real information contained in US State Department documents downloaded by WikiLeaks, in particular about Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia. The news about Ben Ali's regime was not 'news' to Tunisians, as Tom Malinowski sums up:

> The candid appraisal of Ben Ali by US diplomats showed Tunisians that the rottenness of the regime was obvious not just to them but to the whole world – and that it was a source of shame for Tunisia on an international stage. The cables also contradicted the prevailing view among Tunisians that Washington would back Ben Ali to the bloody end, giving them added impetus to take to the streets. They further delegitimized the Tunisian leader and boosted the morale of his opponents at a pivotal moment in the drama that unfolded over the last few weeks. (Malinowski 2011)

Indeed, much like Baudrillard's claim that Watergate changed our relationship to scandal in the US and led to our inevitable disbelief in media objectivity, Tunisians had lived with the Ben Ali regime's policies for a very long time. In fact, a more nuanced analysis of autocracy, perhaps even sidestepping this loaded empty-signifier altogether, would be more helpful in understanding exactly the kind of 'political economy of repression' Tunisians had been living with for a long time. Beatrice Hibou's *The Force of Obedience* lays out how ordinary Tunisians could, from an outsider's point of view, so shockingly consent to obey the autocratic regime. This is because only the top layer consisted of Ben Ali, and while his wife's family and even more relatives benefitted directly from the state's coffers through lucrative contracts and monopolies, the network of repression had already been altered in response to the human rights agenda. No longer did the regime torture and kill people openly; instead it deprived them of any means to make it worth living. This network extended throughout the country that has a 'net of fear,' as she described the police as a moral authority whose surveillance network is not just in the formal police, but also those who are allied with them as informants throughout the society. This is why Bouazizi represented every Tunisian (and later Egyptian) in their 'frustration':

> Since the end of the 1990s, the Tunisian authorities have come to realize this clearly: arrests and tortures, especially of Islamists, still occur but, in order to muzzle the opposition and the associations for the imprisonment, torture and trial than by delays in the legal process, confiscation of passports, telephone tapping, harassment, continual physical and moral pressure, and drying up sources of income. Faced with these methods, which are just as effective but all the more difficult to describe and above all to prove, the bureaucracies of democratic countries do not know how to bring their influence to bear, especially insofar as they are bogged down in their strategy of support for a reliable ally, one that is fully committed to the anti-Islamist struggle […]. (Hibou 2011: 102)

Furthermore, such policing can be represented as a ratio; there is, Hibou has found, anywhere from 1/67 or 1/122 ratio of police to citizens, which she notes is an extensive police force in a country of only ten million, especially when compared to France, the most heavily policed state in the rest of the world at 1/265 (Hibou 2011: 81). This policing mentality also infected the state's bureaucratic apparatus, something that nearly every Tunisian was subject to in one form or another given the economy, which largely consisted of tourism and loans. In her preface to the English edition, Hibou does not hold much hope that deposing Ben Ali has changed much in Tunisia given the extensive networks that keep the population obedient. In fact, she argues that it was merely a 'palace revolution' that 'was orchestrated by the general staff of the army and the power elite who had ruled for the past twenty years' (Hibou 2011: preface). In Egypt, as I will discuss more below while discussing Bassem Youssef, the Days of Rage began on 25 January, after a similar event: when Khaled Saheed's postmortem photograph was memorialized on the Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Saheed' by Wael Ghonim and reposted by thousands, earning him the title of author of the uprisings. They

began in Alexandria precisely because of Saheed's location and the activists there who organized early protests and wrote many editorials contextualizing Saheed's death at the hands of the brutal police regime of Hosni Mubarak. It was for this reason that the uprisings were orchestrated to take place on 25 January, a national police holiday, when the streets are cleared for the police to parade and receive flowers from little girls for their role in protecting Egyptian civil society. What the events symbolized was that civil society had its own ideas about how it held itself together, and they had nothing to do with the farce of power presented by the Mubarak regime, which by that time was well known for his corruption and the nepotism represented by his son, Gamal. It was widely rumored that he was being groomed to take over his father's role as leader of the country, suppressing anyone's hope for a democratic transition. Gamal was indicted on corruption charges and is known to have been awarded a lucrative contract. Reports speculate that Egyptians began to question Mubarak's interests in maintaining his patrimonial rule around 2000, when Bashar al-Assad took over for his father in Syria within hours of his death. Some scholars believe that the early seeds of the uprisings were sown in the Damascus Spring in 2000, when protesters rose up to challenge Assad's power grab in Syria. It was there that early organizing by groups under the heading 'Movement for the Restoration of Civil Society' took place (al-Azm 2011: 225). While many discuss the role of social networking technologies like Facebook and Twitter in the uprisings, it is true that these claims can be nothing less than a further attempt to co-opt the protests for Oriental libidinal investments. Obviously it was people who made these uprisings happen, and people who suffered and knew the cause of their suffering for a long, long time, and who are known for their own much longer histories of satire and comedy, political or otherwise. Another important point is that these uprisings were so well organized and demonstrated so much discipline that it is laughable to think of them as caused by social networking or by political humor or any other such medium. This is how the US media interpreted them, and this is how most of the US public will continue to view them. However, they did use comedy to great effect to amplify their message. They continue to use it to keep the revolutionary momentum alive and to challenge the affective regime of state-sponsored news, still-dominant political parties (Muslim Brotherhood) and the army (Tunisia). Libya, Syria and Yemen have experienced civil war, state-sponsored massacres and violence as a distraction and political secession in that order. The aftermath of all the uprisings is unique to that country's recent political history and more complex than any simple logic of revolution or technological quick-fix can convey. Where there is the relative autonomy of youth of which Bayat writes, there is an active effort by many to continue to push the civil societies in which they reside to think and feel differently about power.

It was these events, combined with WikiLeaks and protests against the 1 per cent in many North American and Western European states, that led *Time* magazine to name its person of 2011 the 'protester'. So far, uprisings in four states have deposed rulers: Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. It remains to be seen whether the performers can keep the revolution alive. To a few, we now turn.

Parazit

'We have 70 million correspondents,' said Arbabi, referring to Iran's population. 'They show us what the priorities are in Iran.' (Saman Arbabi, executive producer and co-creator, *Parazit*)

'I am proud to be considered in the fraternity of humorists that you guys are in […] You're like our show, but with real guts.' (Jon Stewart, *TDS*, 13 January 2011)

Saman Arbabi and Kambiz Hosseini host *Parazit*, a VOA-sponsored Internet news show broadcast into Iran that is a copy of *The Daily Show*. The show was launched in 2008 via the Internet just prior to the 2009 elections in the country that sparked the Green Revolution. The show was originally a ten-minute YouTube presentation that morphed into a thirty-minute production following renewed funding by VOA Persia. It is broadcast in Farsi, so it does not spread its message to the Arab-speaking world, but is mainly used to unsettle the regime in place in Iran, and is generally considered a soft-war tactic deployed against the Iranian government, much like *Alhurra*. It is noted to be popular, although because it is illegal in Iran there are no accurate estimates of its audience other than the number of visits to its Facebook page and its Internet hits. To date, it has over 200,000 Facebook subscribers and its parent network, Persian News Television, is estimated to be viewed by at least 19 per cent of the Iranian populace (Bahrampour 2010). Mehdi Semati argues that because the Iranian government opposes it and regularly tries to jam its satellite broadcasts ('parazit' means 'static' in Farsi) and has even created its own show to counter the comedy presented on it to Iranian citizens, this makes 'satire truly subversive' (Semati 2012: 120). Indeed, when we consider Bayat's notion of 'paradigm' it seems that *Parazit*'s format does indeed challenge the doctrinal authority of the regime. Because it is funded by the US government and referred to as 'the Iranian *Daily Show*,' it is an important counterpoint to *Alhurra* in terms of its strategic positioning as part of a soft-war effort in the Middle East. It is important to situate it within the 'globalized infrastructure of political humor' because of its intertextuality, and this is extensively covered by Semati. What I would like to look at, however, is just how such a show broadcast from the US succeeds where *Alhurra* programming previously failed, and continued to limp along even after restructuring. Yet, even more important than that is to examine the intertextuality deployed by Arbabi and Hosseini in the show that demonstrate which aspects of the political humor, the stylizations, media parodies and content covered diverge from and carry on the globalization of *TDS* through irony; that is, its blank style and presentation. Moreover, the stylizations on the show are reminiscent of the *TDS* format more than any other aspect, and they are the most important part. I will demonstrate this throughout the rest of the chapter.

First, I would take issue with a point that Semati makes in his highly informative and richly theorized article. He writes:

Unlike *TDS*, the source of humor in *Parazit* is not so much in professional writing of jokes as much as it is in pointing out the absurd elements in Iranian politics through a

juxtaposition of 'common sense' and 'officials' views of the world. Hosseini's comments are meant to be an average person's common sense reaction to the absurdities of politics in Iran in a stark juxtaposition. In political satire, juxtaposition is a generic element that casts the 'presumptions and pretentions of the politicians' against the 'intuitions and instincts of the commonplace,' (Street 2001, p. 69). A segment of the show features a series of video clips of officials, public figures, television personalities on state-run TV, and politicians in Iran who have issued statements that are either absurd intrinsically or patently out of touch with the reality of people's lives in Iran. That segment provides a treasure trove of comedy [...]. (Semati 2012: 124)

My issue is that this is exactly what *TDS* does and that most of the truly important humor in *TDS* does not come from the 'professional writing of jokes.' In fact, it's often the jokes the audience fails to laugh at that seem to have been professionally licked over like a sore on one's gums. When Stewart presents the viewer with a collage of Republican or Democrat talking points, for example, and we witness them all in different places throughout the country (on talk shows, in front of fundraising audiences, on the floor in Congress, at a rally or in the newsroom) saying the exact same line to counter or reinforce a particular political point or understanding, this makes the audience laugh because they can view the constructedness, or, if you like, the 'fakeness' of the political parties or news media's line. To make it even more enjoyable there is always the realization that one is watching 'fake' news while being shown how fake the News is, to use Aaron McKain's formulation. Semati's point may be to try to underscore that the politics in Iran provide so much source material or outrageous claims that *Parazit* doesn't even need professional writers. *TDS* really only needs them to mine the Internet for scenes of duplicity and duplication of idiocy that, when shown together, create the aura of common sense in the viewer. So, while I agree that *TDS* has more polish than *Parazit*, the force of affect is most keenly mobilized by both shows through intertextuality and clip-framing; that is, from satirical commentary on the duplicity and outrageous claims made by either mainstream or state-run television. These are examples of humor that Colletta finds lacking subversiveness; in fact, she might even venture to say that they invite the viewer to feel good about themselves for noticing, while at the same time evacuating the actual politics from the skit. If we recall our example from Chapter 1, entitled 'Bernie Goldberg Fires Back,' Stewart remediates clips from Fox to show what the audience already understands. The progressive part of *TDS* is that the three-part structure works together to form a coherent political narrative. First, Stewart's opening monologue usually looks at the fakeness of news or highlights a recent 'controversy' in American political discourse (always using visual clips or puns on consumer brands), or, in the best of them, responds to an attack by Fox News about his own show as when he criticizes them for 'producing way too many antibodies' to 'deal with a small trace of a disorganized liberal influence you find on CBS, MSNBC or NBC' (*TDS* 2010). In this we see that Stewart is not so much relying on professional joke writing as he is responding to a reaction by a network (Fox News) he's just told to 'Go Fuck Yourselves!' The problem for

Parazit would seem to be that they do not have a running dialogue in the media with state-run television in Iran. If they had, they could do much the same as Stewart and *TDS*. Recall Clinton's comments above on *Al Jazeera*. They are not really informative so much for what they communicate affirmatively about the Qatar-based station as they are for what they imply about CNN and other US news channels: they're fake and they're dumb. This is smart news/comedy because it does not speak back to its accuser directly as if in a meaningful argument or conversation. It is more like the youthful response to adult insistence on maturity through acceptance of 'the real world' or the 'way things are.' It is telling that the Iranian government show developed as a response to *Parazit* is not funny and is called 'Just for Your Information.' In this way, *Alhurra* could become a subject of comedy by viewers and workers overseas because it represented this same unbelievable discourse about the 'real world.' As Sconce notes, smart films demonstrate a 'focus on the white middle class family as the crucible of emotional dysfunction and miscommunication' just as *Parazit*, *TDS* and *Al Bernameg* demonstrate dissatisfaction with the 'dysfunctional media' more often than not when they attempt to represent the 'norm' in their given culture; that is, the part of the population that stands for or understands itself to be middle-class. One of *Parazit's* hosts, Arbabi, doesn't just dress like a 'grunge rocker', he looks and acts more like the folks Sconce describes in his article who were in the '80s often accused of being 'nihilists', with his black fingernail polish and Sex Pistols T-shirt! However, the state has used satellite jamming to block *Parazit*, which Iranians watch through illegal satellites, proxy servers and bootlegged DVDs. Both of the shows presenters have been criticized in Iranian state-run newspapers and the government's response show is said to have a relatively small audience (*The Economist* 2011). As well, the head of broadcasting at the BBG, Raina Kumra, reported that most Iranians 'who watch the show do not know that it is produced by VOA – or they don't care' (*The Economist* 2011).

Indeed, some of the more prominent examples of 'officialdom,' to use Jamie Warner's term, that *Parazit* takes apart have to be truly unbelievable to most Iranians, and sound a lot like the illogical sayings of the moral majority in the United States. In a much circulated clip, they report that:

> [a] the representative of the supreme leader at the University of Yazd said that since the skin of one's elbow is similar to the skin of a man's testicles, people should refrain from wearing short-sleeved shirts [He pauses] He really said that. (Bahrampour 2012)

This might remind some of Stewart poking fun at the news media's celebration of Rick Santorum as the front runner for the GOP nomination in February 2012; or much, much later, in March, his confusion at the leading Republican primary candidate's reaction to Rush Limbaugh's statements about Sandra Fluke, the young law student who made a speech urging Congress to approve coverage for contraception in the health care bill they were debating, when prominent Republican campaign donors made comments about women placing aspirin pills between their legs as a form of birth control.

Al Bernameg

Al Bernameg, or 'The Program' is a self-proclaimed copy of *TDS* that airs weekly on Egyptian satellite television, and was created and is hosted by Bassem Youssef. Youssef specifically hails the show as an antidote to misinformation spread by dominant media in Egypt. Unlike Jon Stewart, who denies that he is doing anything important on his Comedy Central show, Youssef believes that political comedy like *TDS* can educate the television audience and make them care not only about politics but democracy. He sees political comedy as an example of democracy in action. This is important because the media suffer the same malaise as in the US when they cater to politicians who refrain from asking important questions and obscure the public's relationship to truth. In all of these countries, the politicians and media gave entertainers plenty of fodder for satire. In Egypt they spread conspiracy theories involving the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant at the corner of Tahrir Square (that protesters were being given meals by the chain to stay in the square). As a well-known symbol of western influence 'Kentucky Chicken' is well-known in Egypt, yet as the *L.A. Times* reported during the uprisings:

> […] a meal at KFC can cost what locals make in an entire day or even a week, making it inaccessible to many Egyptians. And KFC became a proxy for anger about perceived Western interference. It's not the first time KFC has been in that position: In 2006, rioters in Pakistan burned down a KFC in the wake of the controversy over a Danish cartoonist's depiction of the prophet Muhammad […]. (Abdulrahim 2011)

Most theories surrounded the influence of the United States or Israel in fomenting the uprisings, leaving any person or protester who wanted to question the current regime open to popular criticism which could easily turn many against the protesters.

As one Damascus-based scholar wrote, 'President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen declared that the uprisings had been hatched from plans made by the White House and choreographed by Tel Aviv' (al-Azm 2011: 224). As one interviewer put it, Youssef is like Jon Stewart: 'The rational viewer's surrogate, who in desperate times is in desperate need of a laugh' (Siegel 2011). In the case of Egypt's Tahrir Square, an interview in *Egypt Source* outlines the important stakes in setting an audience straight on the goings on and goals of the uprisings:

> In the early days of the uprising, state media waged informational warfare against the protesters in an ugly smear campaign aimed at delegitimizing the objectives of the revolution. The airwaves were saturated with sensational, fabricated tales of debauchery and treachery by protesters: a young female girl confessed to having been trained by the CIA to instigate the revolution, while a popular actor claimed that protesters in Tahrir Square were engaging in group sex […]. (Revkin & Samaan 2011)

As Moosa contends, these uprisings were not political in the traditional sense; they were aesthetic and, I would note, affective. They appealed not so much to logic and reason –

having been wholly owned and controlled by state-run media and official political discourse:

> What completely undermined the sense of 'normality' that Arab dictators exhibited was the sobriety with which people made demands and claimed their rights. The Mubaraks, the Ben Alis, the Salehs and the Assads were outwitted by the non-violent and peaceful nature of the protests. All they could do was to retaliate with what they knew best – namely, with force-batons, bullets and beatings. So they manufactured violence in order to discredit their opponents. They could not have been more deluded in believing that their writ of governance was still in force (i.e. to counter ferocity with ferocity, an eye for an eye). This time there was no ferocity to stamp out. By which right of justice or governance can one punish non-violent protesters in Tunis, Cairo, Hama and Damascus? (Moosa 2011: 175)

The people defied the rules of the game but there was still the matter of the longevity of the uprisings. After Mubarak fled Egypt the army took over the country. After Ben Ali fled it was the prime minister. As they moved forward throughout 2011, the elections would be an important crucible in understanding the effect of the revolution. Many in media see it as their responsibility to push the boundaries further to disrupt the dysfunction left in the wake of state-run media and to challenge people to think critically about their news and politics. As Moosa argues, while the jury is out on whether a 'revolution' in the formal sense of the term has taken place – i.e. reforming institutions and systems of government – he can agree it was an aesthetic revolution, but it had been taking place for decades and came to fruition in January 2011. Now, it seems it is up to creative people to take the reign and transform the political culture through a combination of aesthetics and sense. This requires a tone that can reach people through the television screen, and as the quote at the head of the chapter indicates, it must be 'smart'. Bassem Youssef is one such person.

Al Bernameg and political satire in the Arab Spring

The stakes are high in Egypt for the aftermath of the revolution. As Gelvin notes, Egypt is a leader in terms of entertainment and culture for the Arabic-speaking world. A saying in the Arab world goes: 'Egyptians write books, Lebanese publish them and Iraqis read them' (Gelvin 2012: 3). Egypt produces many of the soap operas consumed across the Arab world, has had reality television for quite some time, and generally consumes the same genres of popular culture found throughout the West. *TDS* might be a new style of parody and satire in Egypt, but political satire has always existed in some form. In the remainder of the chapter, I try to isolate what it could possibly be about *TDS* that certain people find applicable to their own political predicaments. Is the media – globally – in crisis? Has this myth of objectivity caused audiences to overlook the idea that, at best, one gets 'truthiness' from

news media? As I write this, the Mayor of London appears on *TDS* and asks why it can't be broadcast in England more than once per week, to which Stewart responds, 'I don't know, I'm not in charge of international distribution' (more snark – the best response to such off-topic, business-like gushing praise). Contingencies of meaning become obvious when we compare how cultural groups respond and relate to forms of dark comedy, like some horror films. In a review of Paul Lewis's book, *Cracking Up*, about comedy after 9/11, John Limon makes a curious point about Lewis's reading of audience identification of murder and suicide in horror films (from the 1980s onward) as humorous. Lewis underscores, through detailed readings of *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, how audiences come to identify with Freddy Krueger's victims in the films and laugh at their demise (whether through suicide or murder). He speculates that audiences suspend species identification when they enjoy the destruction of filmic representations of actors who are mirroring them. We can see this going forward in the teen and college-age fan base of films like the *Saw* franchise (James Wan, 2003) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005). Limon's review casts this insight into a global framework:

> Lewis has written a book about American humor in a time of no essential divisions at all. That is, it is no longer possible to terrorize the world without the return of terrorism; it is no longer possible to pollute the world without wrecking one's own environment. It is impossible to wish for someone's death without it being your own. Victimizing and victimization have become cyclical. What Lewis may be writing about is the first epoch of the globalization of humor. If so, he is writing for an era whose greatest comic masterpiece may remain *Dr. Strangelove* […]. (Limon 2009: 314)

It is also impossible to make jokes without offending someone, especially in a global context. As we saw with the focus group reactions to *TDS* in Kenya, there were many criticisms but also many points of identification, where similar problems were seen to be had in the US and in Kenya, albeit on different levels of emphasis. Yet, the move to global parody of news, as the Baym and Jones volume in *Popular Communications* demonstrates, as well as the way global media seems to replicate itself in each environment, seems to indicate that most countries struggling with democracy (which is to say, nearly every country that labels itself as such and puts forth an effort to appear to represent its voting population) have the very same problems; they may only respond to them in different ways or ignore them as the case may be. However, the global franchise of *TDS*, alongside the indigenous eruption of parody television throughout the democratic world, tells us something about the globalization of humor – it occurs when democracy and capitalism reach a stage where they are indistinguishable from one another. As we saw in Chapter 1, patrimonialism sounds like an old 'colonialism' type of phrase, but it represents a feudal order where wealth and human worth were fused – the only difference being that they weren't rubber-stamped as authentic by something we now call democracy; then it was divine right. As I said in Chapter 4, when we are laughing with *TDS*, we have to laugh at ourselves because comedians and satirists are confronting us (the viewer) with our own lack of agency and deception by the media;

democracy dumps all of us together in a shared fate (that is the very meaning of 'popular sovereignty'). The only way to avoid being confronted with our fate is to go all the way into entertainment as pure fantasy and refuse to see it as a parable for contemporary times (some do, some do not). In Egypt, for Youssef and others, as well as those in other countries, the use of humor is a means to gently persuade people to turn away from such entertainment and to view the intellectual class as having something important to say. In a way, this is done by recreating the square on television by making fun of everyone. Stewart addresses the exact same problem when he uses humor in the first third of the show in order to soften up his audience in time for their introduction to the latest member of the cognitive class on the Left, the Right and in the non-partisan zone. This is what Bassem Youssef sees as important for Egypt, although his view of Stewart is somewhat different than the view that Stewart will acknowledge for himself (Colbert, in being a parody and using his own name, never has to confront the paradigm of duplicity as long as he remains in character).

Going against the tendency to lump all the uprisings in the Arab world together, it is important to underscore that major national differences will ultimately determine the outcomes in each state. What it is important to underscore is that they spread because of the common language (Arabic), the role of international media, initially *Al Jazeera* (which means 'island' or 'peninsula', signifying its independence), and the use of social networking tools. More commonalities include widespread disaffection with neo-liberal economic policies over the past decades, as rulers in each state have scaled back on government subsidies in certain sectors, producing what Bayat has called the 'middle class poor.' These are large swathes of the population within not just many Arab countries but, most notably, in southern Europe, where the crisis of the euro is currently being broadcast, as protesters in Spain, Portugal and Greece fight the roll back on subsidies and the austerity policies imposed on their economies to combat an impending depression. Another feature noted by Bayat is that each of these uprisings has demonstrated 'Post-Islamism', or a state where Islamic political parties and religious fundamentalists have not been prominently featured as actors, and when they have acted, it has not been to put religion back into the government but to ensure democracy and human rights. A tendency throughout these coalition movements is to argue for 'dignity' and 'basic rights' to act as social being (Bayat 2011).

To return to Egypt with that caveat in mind, Bassem Youssef's career begins with an Internet-based show, *B+* (a pun, which stands for his blood type), largely known for its outlandish comedy, including Youssef dressed as various heads of government. The show aired just prior to and during the Egyptian uprisings. The show began in a room of his apartment where he dries laundry with one camera. Youssef says that he was watching the events in Tahrir Square on 28 January (the uprisings began on 25 January) in a *Zeitgeist* presentation (available online), and says that 'up to the 18 days, I thought the country was having multi-personality disorder' and that 'there was the revolutionary personality in the square and there was TV' (Youssef 2012). When he went back to his apartment to watch the coverage, he saw that the revolution was being portrayed as a conspiracy between 'Hamas, CIA, FBI,' and there were reports that people were in the square offering

protesters '50 euros and KFC' to remain there demonstrating. There were reports of 'homosexual orgies,' a popular tactic of the powerful to scare the masses, who are stoked to view homosexuality as a western import smuggled to Egypt under the guise of democracy, which directly contradicts many of the hard-line Islamists' newly found positions on human rights and dignity. As one Muslim Brotherhood leader said, 'From my religious view, all the religious people, in Christianity, in Judaism, condemn homosexuality. […] It is against the whole sense in Egypt. The temper in Egypt is against homosexuality' (ILGA 2011).[2] The state-run news also made claims of other operatives in the square, like Mossad (Israel's secret intelligence force) for example. As Youssef comes to his final punch line about the obscenity of state-run television in Egypt during the protests a picture of Sean Hannity flashes on the screen, and he says, 'If there was one word to describe the state run media at that time, that would be Fox News.' When he launched the show after tending to the wounded at the Battle of Camel during the eighteen days of uprising, he hoped to land 10,000 views for his YouTube show which, as he says, used the 'gold mine' provided by the juxtaposition of political views between the official news and the streets. This contrast is very important to understanding what observers say is the struggle for the transformation of the media after the spring, of which Youssef considers his show an important part. During the uprisings, the government – while slow in doing so – shut down the Internet, and, using the state-run Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), aired images of calm instead of the protests occurring nearby (Peterson, M.A. 2011). Peterson's discussion of the nature of media prior to and after the uprisings gives an important nuanced reading for understanding the role of social media. As he argues, because the state misunderstood the momentum of the uprisings they were slow to respond. They began shutting down the Internet two days after the onset of organized protests in Alexandria, and had effectively shut down 91 per cent of the country's networks by the 29th (four days into the uprisings). Contrary to what many of the western media were reporting – that Facebook and Twitter somehow 'caused' the revolution[3] – he argues that it was when the state shut down the social media outlets that the protests became more tightly organized around word of mouth and the streets:

> In the absence of new technologies, people were forced to rely on traditional means of communication, including knocking on doors, going to the mosque, assembling in the street, or other central gathering places. Thomas Schelling won a Nobel Prize in part for discovering that in the absence of information, people will coordinate by selecting a focal point that seems natural, special or relevant to them. Given the protests, Tahrir Square was the obvious focus point. Blocking the internet, the government inadvertently fueled dissent and galvanized international support for the people of Egypt […]. (Bowman qtd in Peterson 2011)

Youssef himself suspended broadcasts of *B+* to go to the streets for interviews and to help people who were harmed. After the uprisings, he went back to shooting the show using

the live footage from the streets to highlight the differences between what the ERTU had been saying and what was actually happening during the protests, using *TDS*-style interviewing techniques. In three months he had five million hits on YouTube. He goes on to recount how, as the body count began to rise, they produced the show three times per week to 'expose the lies in media and politics.' He estimates that up to the date of broadcast on *Zeitgeist* the show had 75 million views on YouTube, making it the 'first successful convergence from Internet to TV.' As for an analysis of the role of social media, Youssef says that it demonstrated that television anchors were 'two steps behind' social media, and that youth primarily used 'cartoons, memes and smart slogans to attack the government, even the Islamist majority in parliament.' What ultimately changed, he says, is that 'people are no longer passive' and they 'watch more sessions of parliament than soap operas.' One might say, in Egypt after the revolution, they encountered the politics of 'convergence culture', where the struggle over the direction of the uprisings would put the knowledge class up against the new state media under SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), as well as in between the parliamentary rhetoric of the Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood and the old-liners of the Mubarak era. So, following the uprisings, Youssef joined this knowledge class in Egypt; those whom we might call 'cognitive elites' in the US, as opposed to the 'non-cognitive elites' that social conservative groups in the US routinely advertise to showcase their anti-gay, pro-'family' messages. Youssef embraces the tide to 'political accountability' mentioned by the Kenyan focus groups, and turned down a residency at a Children's Hospital in Cleveland and chose to stay in Egypt.

He began to host *Al Bernameg*, which occurs three times per week on Egyptian satellite television broadcaster, ONtv, owned by billionaire Naguib Sawiris. ONtv is part of private media in Egypt, which previously had been subject to intense scrutiny by the state in order to retain licenses if they presented content that the government considered questionable (Peterson 2011). Broadcasting on private television, Youssef is aware that he will be criticized for similar reasons as Stewart and *TDS* in the US, and be 'exposed' as a member of the liberal elite: 'We are against Islam, we do not want Egypt to be stable, we are the dogs of Naguib Sawiris, right? It's the same accusation as "liberal elite media' in the United States," he sighs' (Marx 2012). In a remarkably prescient analysis of state media, one that Stewart would never dare utter for fear of confirming his status as a member of the liberal elite, he remarks, 'let's just say I am shocked at how the people's ignorance is being used against them' (Marx 2012). Were Stewart or any other *TDS* figure to say this directly about Fox News viewers, they would be instantly downgraded from 'objective' media satirists to simply another player in the culture wars. While this is certainly what Stewart does imply, it is not what he will ever say aloud. As Brooke Gladstone observes, the greatest similarity between *TDS* and *Al Bernameg* is its 'resolute moderation,' as she cites examples of Stewart urging his fans not to carry signs comparing the far-right to Hitler at the Rally to Restore Sanity. As another source notes, Egypt had more trouble with state media than Tunisia (which has

a significantly literate population): in Egypt, 40 per cent of citizens are illiterate and neither read newspapers nor have Internet access. Thus, for them, television is the main source of their news. Youssef has characterized his show as finding a middle ground between two popular forms of media: 'in Egypt and the Arab world in general, you had these really serious talk shows, or slapstick, farce, ha-ha stuff. I can't be placed in either category. Our aim is to inform and entertain people' (Marx 2012). As he says of his writers and of comparisons to *TDS* in an interview on PBS:

> BY: The challenge was to find writers to work in this type of satire, as it is new to the Egyptian media. Most of them are only familiar with the regular serious talk shows and comedy shows. But *Al Bernameg*, a black comedy analytical show, is totally new to Egypt.
>
> So will you be the Middle Eastern version of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart?
>
> BY: This is our aim. Jon Stewart became what he is today after 12 years. *Today he presents himself as a newsman after being a comedian for many years.* He has an army of writers, interns and comedians. He is not a clown, dresses professionally and analyses US affairs.
>
> We are still right at the beginning of this genre of comedy in Egypt. Most people within our society are a bit confused about the show; not knowing whether to accept it or not. People still cannot categorise the programme. We have a message along with this satire; we use comedy to get to them. (Gladstone 2011, emphasis mine)

So the stakes are high *for Al Bernameg*. Youssef worries that the type of satire produced by *TDS* and Jon Stewart (and celebrated by Sconce as part of a 'smart sensibility': 'I can use irony to criticize someone without being punched in the face') will not be accepted in Egypt. In his National Public Radio (NPR) interview, he says he is panicked:

> Right now we are not actually voicing my opinion, but you can't just be in the middle being neutral. When you start, actually, to discuss current events, you will have to take a stand. You will actually have to piss some people. This kind of honeymoon will not last. Sarcasm here in Egypt, in the Arab world, is very new. Once you make sarcasm about certain person, this guy takes it very personally. You see Jon Stewart making fun of McCain and he's hosting him the next day, right. Here that doesn't work this way [then his producer interjects] We are five years away. We are five years away from this […] No, we're actually fifty years away from this, seriously […]. (Gladstone qtd in Siegel 2011)

By March, in interviews, Youssef says that he has come up against criticism:

> When you hit the SCAF stuff, people accuse you of being anti-military; when you hit on the Salafists they call you anti-Islam. The same thing happens when Jon Stewart and

Stephen Colbert in America – the right wing say they're anti-Christian. It's just that in Egypt the religious forces are a lot more powerful […]. (Zeitchik 2012)

In the same interview piece, the author notes that 'creating a Post-Tahrir pop-culture is harder than it looks,' and that much of the kind of censorship is the same. As Youssef said in May of 2011, 'If it doesn't take on martial laws and military rule, I am quite optimistic' (Montasser & Abdel 2011). Zeroing in on the nature of the problem, Youssef argues that the extreme censorship in Egyptian society was disrupted, as people were able to talk to each other in Tahrir Square in spite of their differences:

The thing about Tahrir Square is that it is the only place that people talk to each other. We do not talk to each other. The extreme Muslims and the frightened Christians and the uppity liberals, they don't talk to each other. Everybody thinks that he is right. If you think that it is only the Salafis or Ikhawanis or extreme Muslim's fault, no, it is the liberal's fault as well. We are as mistaken as everybody else […]. (Hassan 2011)

Still, at that point at least, he believed there was a 'middle ground between everybody and they can meet,' thus his strategy in Episode 7 to criticize all of them at the same time (Hassan 2011).

In Egypt, the revolution in 2011 first occurred in rural areas and Alexandria and then in Cairo. This occurred after Facebook and Twitter networking by social activists displayed the creative potential that had been suppressed by the Mubarak regime. As well, the polarity between opposing forces within the country became apparent once the movement took hold. Those forces include the political Islamists, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and SCAF who took power after Mubarak was deposed in March of that year. SCAF is the ruling power over the Egyptian military and they refused to fire on protesters in Tahrir Square, and sided with the protests. This situation led to international pressure for Mubarak to step down, as well as internal pressure, as the message from protesters focused clearly on getting rid of Mubarak and peaceful protest. However, in the aftermath of the uprisings, cultural producers say the nature of censorship has not changed much, and those seeking to transform the cultural atmosphere on television and in film are currently walking a fine line. Because of this, Youssef has said he draws a line at 'religion and sex,' taking aim only at the discourses of Egyptian media. In one translated presentation labeled 'Episode 7', Youssef is celebrated for his treatment of sectarian issues, a central problem in the politics of Egypt at present. Taking on stereotyping proved effective:

'They told us that they were used to liberals on TV attacking Islamists, and that they would never differentiate between Salafis, Ikhawanis, moderates and Sufis. There are liberal religious conservatives. There are fundamental Christians. There are also fundamental liberals. And what we tried to tackle in the episode was positively transformed to the masses,' says Amr Ismail, producer for B+ […]. (Helmy 2011: 53)

Furthermore, it became one of their most popular episodes and praised by religious conservatives:

> 'People came up to us and thanked us because they felt that they had been stereotyped for so long. The American media portrays them as terrorists and the local media doesn't cover them correctly. And that was the point of Episode 7,' continuing on Youssef says, 'Yes, it broke most of our norms: it was long, it wasn't as funny and it ended on a very serious and dramatic note. It was also really emotional. We criticized everybody, and then we made everybody feel good about themselves. What we tried to do was highlight a feeling of togetherness between the Egyptian people […]. (Helmy 2011: 53)

The parliamentary elections in November 2011 were celebrated as the 'flowering' of Egypt's democracy by *TDS*. The show featured a series of segments designed to 'educate' the American viewer about how to curb their own biases, with Stewart playing the role of un-self-aware American fearful that a group like the Muslim Brotherhood would dominate the elections ('a group with brotherhood in the title can never be good'). As Assif Maandvi playing the role of Egyptian reporter standing in front of the usual fake screen of an Egyptian street said back, 'Oh, come on Jon, what do you think they think of some of our groups like the Young Men's Christian Association' to which Stewart balked in his feigned average American manner.

For revolutionaries in Tunisia, comedy is a tool to keep free speech alive: 'We are complementing the revolution with this comedy because we don't want there to be any retreat in any way on the issue of freedom of expression,' Khubza said. As Youssef argued, before the uprisings they had a crack in the window of expression and after they had a ceiling, as he says in a video while he pushes his hands up to signify that that is what he is trying to do: to push the barriers against freedom of expression upward. Smart comedy, as a genre and a tone, allows the only sane response to the utter and often deadly seriousness of contemporary power brokers in media and politics. Caught between the dumb (or to use Youssef's term 'ignorant') and the powerful who lead them, whether it's Bill O'Reilly or any of the state-run media in Egypt, political comedians can respond to the serious misinformation they spread. To take them seriously would be to give them a platform for earnest discussion. That is why comedy is a means to transform culture at the level of affect: to challenge the audience entrainment that relies on shock value, moral panic and threat discourses […]. (Massumi 2008)

To predict the catalyst for the Arab Spring has become something of a cottage industry, where there is no lack of possible precipitants: Palestinian Intifadas, the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Lebanese Cedar Revolution (2005), the Green Movement in Iran against the fake election in 2009:

> […] we ought not to let the fascination with technology obscure the real character of the present uprisings. The youthfulness of the uprisings broke radically with the

deep-rooted Arab tradition, which requires the emergence of charismatic leadership being the necessary condition for achievement of revolutionary goals. This time, the 'charisma' of the revolutionary moment has shifted from the usual fixation on a single or unrivaled leader, to the flow and diffusion of the assembled masses in many Tahrir Squares across the Arab world, making their assembly itself the true charismatic locus of revolution and change. This important development is certainly new for us Arabs and for our modern socio-political history […]. (Al-Aszm 2011: 227)

And yet, this is not the message I would take away from these uprisings. They are important as a window into the importance of affect and aesthetics in responding to the decline of once vibrant cultures. Why does Bassem Youssef find Jon Stewart and *TDS* so important for Egypt? As I write this, Youssef tours the *TDS* studios in June 2012 and gives lectures in four cities throughout the US. He does appear on *TDS* and makes several important comparisons between Egyptian and American media. We will review that visit in our conclusion. For now, it is appropriate to take another look at the person that Youssef compares himself to, and how Stewart himself covered the Arab uprisings. Stewart has already interviewed Gigi Ibrahim, the leader of the youth movement during the uprisings; Stewart takes care to have her tell the audience how she became involved in the uprisings at such a young age: 'I took a class […] "Social Mobilization Under Authoritarian Regimes" at American University in Cairo.' At this, Stewart feigns incredulity because he knows that his audience is learning something that goes against any biases they may have had about Egyptian society. But, most importantly, the fact that she took a class on this topic and then participated in an uprising that Americans now celebrate as 'This Is What Democracy Looks Like' must stick in the craw of conservatives who believe that such courses, when taught on university campuses in the US, are preaching anti-American forms of treason. During her visit, Stewart also used the opportunity to criticize American investments in the outcome of the politics of the region in the aftermath of the uprisings: 'you're just trying to express your own democratic voices and it might not have *that* (vowel lengthening) much to do with us which, by the way, would be very hard for us to take' (*TDS* 2011). At the end of the segment, Stewart mentions how in the US 'every asshole' has an opinion show where he can say whatever he likes and we (Americans) take that for granted. This will be important when we get to Youssef's interview with Stewart in June 2012, a full year after the uprisings, and after his show debuts in the 'new' Egypt, one fraught with political controversy between SCAF, the Supreme Court, the media and the parliament. As the tide turned, even *Al Jazeera* lost their credibility (to some) by backing a party in the election – the Muslim Brotherhood.

Conclusion

It seems you can have it both ways, deploying both hard and soft power, as the Obama administration has done. The trick, it seems, is to make sure that you have a flunky out there as decoy. The US must continue to fund *Alhurra* to demonstrate what it is not doing (even

though it is doing it), which is fighting an ideological war for the 'hearts and minds' of the people of the Arab world while sometimes bombing the hell out of it, as they have done in Libya. Rather than rejecting an ideological ally based on their 'liberal' political agenda, the Bush administration might have been better off enlisting the help of *TDS* in fighting the war on terror, and a possible side effect may have meant people's movements would be able to take ownership of bringing down many of the autocratic regimes of the Arab world. This could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars. It would not have lined the pockets of all those private contractors and mercenaries. However, the Bush administration needed *TDS* to remain an example of the liberal elitism to contrast with the earnest, common sense values of Fox News. In other words, the domestic agenda really trumped the foreign policy one. This is a reversal of how the Bush administration is often viewed. Perhaps that's not really how it went down. Maybe the Bush administration would have liked to join forces with *TDS* and globalize its message of freedom using their parodic strategies, and *TDS* denied them, knowing that its main audience relied on it to counter fundamentalist tendencies within the United States: both religious/cultural fundamentalism and market fundamentalism. As many experts argue – and publics never seem to hear from them in the media – Al-Qaeda is not a state-sponsored terrorist organization. It argues that the problems of the Muslim world have been created by the western nation-state system itself, which through colonialism and war carved unnatural boundaries out of the Ottoman Empire in order to create what we now call countries like Iraq and Syria. Then, in many cases, it installed leaders that were favorable to its interests in the region, whether oil or shipping or other such commercial ventures. Many of these leaders are second-generation nationalists whose claim on power is legitimated by their (or their father's) participation in putting down the fake monarchies installed by European and American governments at the time of national independence. The exception is Iran, a country that forged its own revolution in 1979 against a US/CIA-installed leader, the Shah. (In 1953, these US forces ousted Mossadegh, a democratically elected leader who came to power and threatened to nationalize the Iranian oil industry.) Along with the kind of support supplied to Israel by the US, and the knowledge of the US interfering in the political affairs of the Middle East, most people suspect the US has selfish motives in the region and they are not wrong for thinking this. Central to any successful US foreign policy in the region will be transforming the image of the country in the eyes of many.

It may ultimately turn out that the battle lines being drawn over the next ten years in media are not over 'civilizations' or 'modernity' or 'religion', but 'dumb' versus 'smart'. Part of the politics of smart humor is an attention to the emotional aspects of intelligence; that is, where affect and ideology meet, to knowing context and designing stylizations to respond to it when it is affectively overwhelming or unresponsive. The Bush administration and the creators of *Alhurra* clearly did not understand this in their zeal to destroy *Al Jazeera*; they saw a 'war' and not a 'conversation' about whose truth claims could be the most persuasive. They saw a 'youth' market that would buy their products where there was, in reality, a youth movement largely trained on transforming its own internal affairs, remarkably unconcerned with the role it played in American fantasies of democracy.

Notes

1   US citizens cannot readily access any of the programming out of the BBG's office due to a 1948 Smith-Munde Act that prevents the US government from airing US propaganda (of any form) inside the US. Given the tense atmosphere in Congress at the time, many feared the State Department was under communist influence and wanted to make sure any of its efforts at public diplomacy were not broadcast inside the US. However, it's clear that the US government has long benefitted from the ignorance of the American population about the way its government frames its mission throughout the world.

2   Egypt was the subject of a well-known documentary, *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World*, which featured interviews with several of the men imprisoned in the Cairo 52 incident in 2002. ILGA speculates that the Muslim Brotherhood, who have operated for decades as the leading Islamist and hard-right political party in Egypt, intend to use homophobia as a wedge to consolidate their fundamentalist views with their new found language of human rights and democracy. This tactic is not dissimilar to the Republican strategies of using ballot initiatives at the state level in the US during the Bush years to encourage voters to not only vote Republican (as the only bulwark against gay marriage, in the US conceptualized as providing civil rights to normative gays and lesbians) but to also repackage themselves as representatives of freedom and liberty. Many Republicans use progressive anti-trafficking legislation as a foil for defunding government AIDS-related research and other causes.

3   Stepanova reports that the 'internet blackout was not total: both European-Asian fiber-optic routes through Egypt and the Noor Group/Telecom Italia routes used, among others, by the Egyptian stock exchange were left undisturbed, perhaps in the hope of re-opening the stock exchange as the protests were quelled. Nonetheless, the Internet shutdown and cell-phone service disruptions were major hindrances to Egypt's economy and debt-rating' (Stepanova 2011: 2). This may have been the real reason for Secretary of State Clinton's Internet freedom speech on 28 January, calling for the government to back down on Internet suppression. In the end, Mubarak would be found guilty of causing damage to the national economy and fined US $33 million in personal fines. These were the first of the charges handed down against him, as well as the charges for premeditated murder of protesters during the Tahrir Square protests.

Conclusion

After Comedy

The hegemony of affect works through media figures and personalities such as comedians and news presenters. While Jameson (1991) once bemoaned the 'waning of affect,' it might be necessary now to shift our attention on this topic and admit that affect is now a part of a deliberate strategy mobilized by the media and other cultural figures. Rather than viewing affect as something natural and spontaneous – as something like an aura – we might see it as another tool used in ideological struggles. On the Right, we have supposed that 'earnestness' is a brand they sell to their target demographic: hard-working, honest people who cannot be told their race makes them a bearer of a particular cultural norm that holds preference over all others. Hegemonic cultural norms of race and gender are particularly prominent in these cultural war narratives, which aim to uphold a particular vision of a white, middle-class, God-fearing utopia where social contradictions can be dissolved with simple platitudes from simple folk. On the Left it is humor, mostly satirical humor, that pokes fun at the construction of American cultural and political life as a giant theme park of consumer wonderment. But, at least in the case of *TDS*, it has isolated a middle-class reservoir of identification through its progressive pathos, a dramatic style of comedic presentation that works to shore up American liberalism, if only for saving New-Deal-era programs. It does not have a unique political vision to put forward that differentiates itself from past policies or that works with newly emerging problems and economic realities. This shortcoming is politically relevant because the consumption of such comedy may provide reassurance that there is indeed 'dissent'; to use Day's formulation, there is not much in the way of creative solutions to political problems experienced by average people. As such, most comedy, and *TDS* in particular, has no civic function. In reality, it tends to lead to a default assumption that either the Democratic Party or organized interests working with the government can pose relevant solutions to these problems. In sum, it endorses the kind of governmentality we have come to rely on in the absence of an actual democratic revolution. This means that market solutions, or neo-liberal policy, are given an unquestioned authority in American cultural life. Any counterpublic forged by *TDS* can only 'think' through the limited political possibilities presented by the two-party structure; an establishment thoroughly owned by corporate capitalism that reeks of the patrimonialism now saturating every bit of American culture. Many believe that technologies will pave the way for new political and economic solutions, not only by creating markets (and possibly jobs) but by widening our knowledge of important contemporary issues and exposing government corruption. As one critic argues, 'In instance after instance, technologies designed for daily communication or research have adapted to

a new task – exposing the malfeasance and incompetence of government and the increasing irrelevance of traditional media to the average person' (Moran 2012). This was certainly the case in the Arab Spring, as we learned there was a radical abyss in knowledge opened up between those who watched the uprisings on television and those who used technologies that feature social networking applications. So, the radical place to challenge political corruption and the media that hides it is on television – the new 'democratic' media of the present. And yet, this medium is so thoroughly contested and constructed we cannot take it at face value.

Part of the problem that was encountered in Chapter 1 and subsequent chapters is the assumption that comedy has some healing value because we tend to think of it only as amusement or relief. Rather, we have looked at points where comedy 'fails', or to use a better description, where comedy encounters diverse interpretations, some brought about by differences in culture and others by difference in educational orientation. This may be why many critics who write about comedy tend to gloss over the controversies in search of formulaic interpretations of its cultural value. The assumption that Colletta and others like Simon Pegg have made is that irony is cultural only to the extent that we assume national cultures are monolithic; in a diverse country like the United States, there is no assuming that everyone, in every context, will get or enjoy the joke, whether they read it or watch it on-screen. And, as Eco pointed out, once you have to explain '~p' you've lost the ironic edge you once put into position (as noted on page 48 in reference to irony). We have also seen that cultural analysis that continues to rely on pseudo-political musings about the 'carnivalesque' has very little explanatory value, especially in diverse cultures. As one critic writes:

> […] carnivalesque comedy only resonates deeply, or performs effectively its progressive social functions, when certain conditions exist: when it is not overly commodified; when it can find legitimate targets; and when it can challenge dogmatic societal rules, rigid gender roles, or blatantly oppressive social orderings. So here we can identify a core problem: in postmodern society, commercial and corporate cultures have largely commodified the carnival, effectively obscuring social hierarchies, post-Fordist style […]. (Soper 2009: 92)

One way that these hierarchies can and do stand in relief is through the tone of political comedy, especially when it goes for dampened affect and a non-confrontational style. The (mainly) middle-class critique shines forth on *TDS* and *TCR* through their generational stylizations, most clearly in *TCR*'s 'The Word'. Bassem Youssef does not view Jon Stewart as simply a 'comedian' – he calls him a journalist. One could argue that Youssef is mistaken, but I don't think so. Clearly, Stewart can only avoid the media death that inevitably follows a bold assertion of opinion or forthright political criticism by foiling it in irony (just as Colbert foils it in the parody of O'Reilly); that is, through what Sconce called the 'tactical use of incongruity.' Through such strategies, hosts like Stewart have the semiotic upper hand, as it is a way to react to social dysfunction or what Krassner called the 'obscenity of reality', or what we're calling 'dark times,' without engaging it as if it were legitimate. This is the most

important aspect of 'smart' cinema and the dampened affect mobilized by Stewart to respond to cultural and political critics and actors, and it has migrated over to television, our new democratic medium, a space where convergence culture plays itself out most readily. While the preparation for 'rumor bombs' and all other blogging strategies may occur on the web, the ultimate goal is to get the message into the network or cable news where it will be seen by voters of all ages.

Comedy failure: Rape joke

As Paul Lewis and the panel of comedic experts opined, we should look at where comedy is under attack for our cues to understanding its role and purpose in our cultural worlds. Rather than saying 'under attack', I will say 'incites controversy', as one important point that is overlooked in many comedic analyses is that in diverse cultures – that is, where there is no dominant cultural or ethnic value system – no one can exist without offense. However, what is even more clear in the contemporary culture wars in the US is just how laden with class distinctions such attacks are, and how many of the more earnest proposals on the Right mobilize racist and sexist stereotypes (sometimes even on the cultural Left, as we saw in Chapter 2). The more important question is: what kind of controversies pique the most public interest? How do publics respond to them? Do they lead to a political dialogue among relevant actors and publics, or are they instantly shut down with public relations antics or comedic set ups, as our 'politically correct' and 'rehab' scripts seemed to accomplish for many issues.

In the summer of 2012, Daniel Tosh, a Comedy Central favorite known for his show *Tosh.O*, made a massive comedic error. *Tosh.O* relies on web cam footage of people throughout the US doing stupid and tragically embarrassing things. Because Tosh's signature style is to humiliate the people in the footage, he tends to carry that persona over into stand up when engaging with his audience. *Tosh.O* has become enormously popular because of the risks Daniel Tosh and his willing victims are ready to take before a spectral audience at home in front of the tube. Tosh is a stand-up so he writes his own material (or at least has in the past and can therefore be defined as a legitimate 'comedian'). Before a live stand-up performance he found himself 'heckled', as the saying goes, by an audience member at a show at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, California. An essential component of any competent comedian's toolbox is having ready quips and throwback statements to shut down hecklers (presumably ones that rouse the rest of the audience to laughter at the heckler's expense and to the performer's side for the rest of the show). This is also part of the 'domination' essential to stand-up comedy. A comedian may be dominating his audience by making them laugh, but he or she also must do the work to get them in the laughing mood and keep them there. Part of this is managing hecklers, who can also be helpful props to get the rest of the audience into the ironic spirit. In Tosh's case, on this day he dropped the ball in his act. When the heckler yelled, 'Actually, rape jokes are never funny' after Tosh mentioned that

rape jokes are 'always funny', Tosh responded, 'Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her [...]'. The women's friend sent it out via Tumblr and Tosh was immediately forced to respond. Of course, though he apologized, he also argued that his remarks were taken 'out of context.' This is, of course, factually incorrect. Tosh failed to deal effectively with a heckler, and possibly should never have made the statement that 'rape jokes are always funny.' As many comedians pointed out later, sometimes they are (George Carlin, Wanda Sykes), especially if they are carefully constructed (set up) to leverage audience understanding. Both Tosh and the audience member are clearly wrong. The problem isn't a joke being 'taken out of context'; it's that it was dumb and patently offensive to many women (and probably men too). And, sometimes rape jokes are funny, when they're done out of the best of intentions; not to save one's own face before a heckler because your audience is young (and dumb) enough to agree with you without thinking.

So, let us admit one thing: comedy is about power, whether most comedians at present would like to admit it or not. It is about intangible, social and cultural forms of power that can be mobilized to change people's minds or reinforce their prejudices. It can be a way to inspire people to think outside the box: good comedy does that. And when it mobilizes understated intelligence, carefully set up to get its audience to the point, it's like a tug boat in a harbor: it must know every angle of the giant ship it is steering into park, and plan for its arrival with little concern for how it is affected, but it has to see the larger picture.

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The Cultural Set Up Of Comedy

AFFECTIVE POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES POST 9/11

Julie Webber

How do various forms of comedy – including stand up, satire and film and television – transform contemporary invocations of nationalism and citizenship in youth cultures? And how are attitudes about gender, race and sexuality transformed through comedic performances on social media?

The Cultural Set Up of Comedy seeks to answer these questions by examining comedic performances by Chris Rock and Louis C.K., news parodies like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, the role of satire in the Arab Spring and women's groundbreaking comedic performances in television and the film *Bridesmaids*. Breaking with the usual cultural studies debates over how to conceptualize youth, the book instead focuses on the comedic cultural and political scripts that frame them through affective strategies post-9/11.

'Webber's insight into the nuances of comedy and politics is required reading for those who understand the power of comedy … and the comedy of power. Clearly, cultural savvy in these times requires a provocation beyond entertainment and intellect … it demands we acknowledge the discourses and complexities of the political, and acknowledge comedy as an appropriate "read" for contemporary society.'

Shirley R. Steinberg, Professor of Youth Studies, Research Chair, The Werklund Centre for Youth Leadership Studies, University of Calgary

'With no role to play, citizens watch, as spectacle – the "daily show" – replaces public life, screens substitute for the public square … Like the metaphoric "tug boat" Webber invokes, this book also knows "every angle of the giant ship it is steering into park … it has to see the larger picture." Be sure to watch!'

William F. Pinar, Canada Research Chair, University of British Columbia

Julie Webber is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and Government and Women and Gender Studies. Her areas of inquiry are modern and contemporary political theory, feminist theory, GLBTQ studies and educational theory. Her work focuses on the intersection of politics and education in both tragedy and comedy.