

FAKE NEWS, REAL HIP: RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS
OF IRONIC COMMUNICATION IN MASS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the growing genre of fake news, a blend of information, entertainment, and satire, in main stream mass media, specifically examining the work of Stephen Colbert. First, this work examines classic definitions of satire and contemporary definitions and usages of irony in an effort to understand how they function in the fake news genre. Using a theory of postmodern knowledge, this work aims to illustrate how satiric news functions epistemologically using both logical and narrative paradigms. Specific artifacts are examined from Colbert's speech in an effort to understand how rhetorical strategies function during his performances.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On April 29, 2006, Stephen Colbert appeared as the featured entertainer at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, an event that Ryan McGeough argues is "intended to reaffirm the humanity of all and provide one evening a year for the press to 'go easy' on the president" ("The Ego has Landed" 2). Colbert was commissioned to give a speech that typically serves as a light roasting of the president, but his performance did little to reaffirm "the humanity of all," and he certainly did not "go easy" on the president, who happened to be seated a few feet away from him; the members of the press who were present certainly received their fair share of critique as well. Instead, Colbert spent the duration of his speech insulting, mocking, and questioning the practices of both the president as well as the press corps. The first half of the speech focused on George W. Bush while the second half of the speech, featuring a mock audition tape to become the new White House Press Secretary, attacked the press corps directly.

Colbert was speaking through a character that he had created as part of his nightly fake news program, *The Colbert Report (TCR)*; his literal message was not genuine. Colbert's blatant critique of the president and the press goes virtually unquestioned during the performance because he disguises criticism in the form of praise, claiming that it's his "privilege to celebrate the president," loudly emphasizing the word "celebrate" ("Correspondents"). An abundance of scholarship that deals with the performance of irony focuses on situations where the speaker is

unaware of the irony of the situation; typically, only the audience is aware of the ironic situation. During Colbert's speech, however, the speaker is completely aware of the irony performed.

For the first half of the speech, Colbert's identifies with President Bush; he says, "We're not so different, he and I. We both *get it* . . . we're not brain-iacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the fact-onista. We go straight from the gut, right sir? That's where the truth lies" ("Correspondents"). After identifying with Bush, Colbert's character makes ironic statements about himself that make the President seem comic, even foolish. Colbert continues to "praise" Bush, defines what the two have in common, particularly outlining their common values, and makes absurd self-references that allude to commonly known information about the president. Not only does Colbert's persona utilize Bush's language, but he also aligns himself with other well-known conservative viewpoints. Colbert, claims that he's a "simple man with a simple mind . . . [who holds] a simple set of beliefs that [he lives] by" ("Correspondents"). Taking a stab at the conservative ideal small government policy, he says, "I believe the government that governs best is the government that governs least, and by these standards we have set up a fabulous government in Iraq," critiquing the Bush administration's newly established government in Iraq. Attacking the American dream, he says, "I believe in pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. I believe it is possible. I saw this guy do it once in Cirque du Soleil. It was magical," implying that this myth can only come to fruition during the surreal theatrics of the carnival. Finally, he says that although he is "a committed Christian, [he believes] that everyone has the right to their own religion, be it Hindu, Jewish, or Muslim . . . there are infinite paths to accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior," implying that although one might profess the importance of freedom of religion, he might secretly believe that there is only one true religion.

During the speech, Colbert's unique brand of performative contradiction questions Bush's intelligence, criticizes the war in Iraq, discusses Bush's poor approval rating, and calls Bush ineffective, uncompromising, and inflexible while standing a few feet away from him. This is possible because Colbert's unique brand of irony frames criticisms of Bush as self-deprecation or praise for the president. The constant identification with Bush provides protection for Colbert from counterattack because he can claim that he really does agree with Bush, as his literal message indicates. But as Colbert repeats himself, his statements become increasingly polyvalent, and he forfeits this protection. He loses the ability to negotiate his true meaning, and the conclusions that he wishes the audience to reach become increasingly obvious. As the audience becomes aware of the irony of the situation, members of the audience become increasingly uncomfortable. Watching the video footage of this event, the viewer finds this quite apparent. The few hesitant laughs that escape from the audience gradually become silent as the speech progresses.

In the second half of the speech, Colbert dissociates himself from the press. Addressing the audience, Colbert first describes his show, *The Colbert Report*; he tells them that every night, he gives "people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument. I call it the No Fact Zone. Fox News, I wrote a copyright on that term," taking a stab at the Fox News Network's show *The No Spin Zone*. Directly addressing members of the media, he says, "Over the last five years, you people [of the media] were so good. Over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew" ("Correspondents"), implying that there was plenty investigative research to be done, but that task was not completed. Insinuating that the press does little to interrogate unchallenged power, Colbert reminds the press how to perform their duties: "Let's

review the rules, here's how it works: the president makes decisions, he's the decider. The Press secretary announces those decisions and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home" ("Correspondents"). He encourages them to go home, spend time with their families, and perhaps "write down that novel you have kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know, fiction!"

In the aftermath of the speech, television news coverage of Colbert's performance was non-existent. Though Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times* did manage to write 1,000 words on the Bush impersonator that directly preceded Colbert, she failed to mention Colbert's performance at all. Despite the mainstream media's apparent avoidance of Colbert's performance, fans and bloggers reposted the performance, and the YouTube version managed to reach 2.7 million views in two days. For three weeks, the audio was the most downloaded file on Apple's iTunes site. Google purchased the video from C-Span three months later. The video has been viewed over 3.5 million times on Google Video, and a clip of the cold, terse exchange between Colbert, the president, and the first lady immediately following the speech has been viewed over 500,000 times. These numbers are most impressive when one considers, as McGeough points out, that no other White House Correspondents' Dinner clips have ever been posted by these video-viewing sites ("The Ego Has Landed" 3).

Whether or not the public *should* reference satirical news programs as a source of information is a matter often debated; the bottom line is *they do*. Whether the individual completely misses the sarcastic spin and mistakes the satire for truth, recognizes the irony and disagrees with the ironic message, or empathizes and laughs with the host, in each case, the individual is processing information from the comedic source. The genre arguably grew most

strongly in popularity about a decade ago, with the rise of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's satirical television shows: nightly programming that mimics the traditional television news format. This thesis will examine the role of satiric news sources, specifically analyzing *The Colbert Report*. This work will attempt to understand how satiric news functions epistemologically as an individual's source of information as well as a part of a larger body of news media. I will rhetorically analyze *TCR* as a new genre that combines entertainment, information, and satire to demonstrate the show's ultimate aim is to parody news and punditry.

A middle ground exists between the constructed reality of mass journalism, the purely objective, and pure farce, and it is the goal of this research project to analyze this medium: contemporary political satire. In chapter two, I will set up a working definition of satire and a contemporary mode of ironic communication in an effort to understand how they function in the fake news genre. In chapter three, I will explore a notion of post-modern knowledge as a marriage of both narrative and scientific (or rational) paradigms, as well as the rhetorical functions of narratives and humor. In chapter four, I will identify significant rhetorical strategies that are commonly used by Colbert. In the final chapter, I will analyze a recent commencement speech given by Colbert speech that reconstructs a normative historical narrative in an effort to understand the contemporary state of American political ideology and visualize where we should be heading.

CHAPTER II

ON SATIRE AND IRONY

On Satire

All satire, Northrop Frye argues, has two essential components, “wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd” and “an object of attack” (Frye 224). Satire clearly addresses moral norms and takes the higher path; furthermore, satire clearly illustrates what normative behaviors are immoral and attacks those vices (Frye 224). Satire is, in Frye’s words, “the comic struggle of two societies, one moral and the other absurd . . . reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy” (Frye 224). The element of fantasy is essential to satire, Frye argues (Frye 224). Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin reinforces the importance of fantasy in satire in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Bakhtin claims that fantasy is the most important element of satire. The fantastic serves to create

extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth*, embodied in the image of a wise man, the seeker of this truth . . . the fantastic here serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it. (114-115)

“in this sense one can say that the content of the menippea is the adventures of an idea or a truth in the world” (114-115). Stephen Colbert’s political news show would be best understood as a satiric story. In his own words, Colbert describes his “entire show as a single scene” (Jones *Entertaining Politics* 224). Though *The Colbert Report* has run for several years, Colbert thinks of the sketch comedy show as a single narrative that’s been woven over time (Jones *Entertaining*

Politics 224). Colbert's program is extraordinarily fantastic, with a satiric edge that pushes the show far into the realm of absurd. From the over-the-top, heavily-produced introduction to Colbert's absurd interviews with congressional candidates, the audience might frequently ask itself if the events at hand are truly happening.

In satire, the speaker or narrator identifies immoral behavior and speaks out against the issue, utilizing fantasy, irony, and a heavy hand of humor (the degree to which each is played out varies from piece to piece). The purpose of the humor is not solely to produce a laugh. In "Interrupting the Machine: Cynic Comedy in the 'Rally for Sanity and/or Fear,'" Ronald A. Placone and Michael Tumolo argue that Kenneth Burke's comic corrective is a way of understanding the function of satire. Satire, according to the two authors' reading of Burke, "directs attention simultaneously in two competing directions . . . it invites its audience to reflect on the absurdity of the status quo" (19). By deflection, "satire allows the audience to see how norms of appropriate thought or behavior operate culturally, not naturally . . . by inviting audiences to see how particular norms are produced, it creates the possibility of establishing a new understanding of normative thought and behavior" (Placone and Tumolo 19). By inviting the audience to understand how cultural norms are created, satire provides an avenue for audiences to create a "new understanding of normative thought and behavior" (Placone and Tumolo 19). Once satire has deconstructed culturally accepted thought and behavior and rendered it absurd, it can then invite the audience to reconsider those culturally established norms.

Satire is often critiqued, as Leonard Feinberg states, for its inability to "offer satisfactory alternatives for the conditions it criticizes" (*Satire* 14), but Feinberg does not blame the satirist. Instead, he argues that "the mind which sees the faults in society is rarely the kind of mind which

visualizes adequate solutions. . . When satirists try to offer alternatives, they usually fail miserably . . . The satirist has work to do but planning the ideal society is not part of that work” (*Satire* 14-15). Usually, Feinberg argues, the satirist is telling two truths: that there are many problems in the world, and the attempt to correct them is futile (*Satire* 258). One reason that satirists fail to “achieve important results” is that they take issue with “hypocrisy, dullness, snobbishness, and folly and to avoid such issues as the political and economic structure of their specific” (Feinberg 256). Stephen Colbert’s work, and the fake news genre at large, has a tendency to critique poor journalistic format and political ideology at a surface level without offering significant alternatives to the broken systems. Though there are significant limits to satire’s effectiveness, I contend with Placane and Tumolo’s ultimate thesis, that comedic satire *invites* the reader to rethink “normative thought and behavior,” and Stephen Colbert’s comedy can “pave a path for civic mindedness” (21). The genre is not a universal solution to any of the problems that it criticizes, but its initial critique invites the reader to imagine a world outside of normative behaviors and ideologies that serve to divide the body politic, rather than unite them. The purpose of the press is to serve as a watchdog of the government, but this traditional role has changed to “lap dog,” scholars argue,¹ citing the loss of credibility from traditionally respected sources as networks seek to expand their pocketbooks rather than the scope of their investigations. Ideally, the news should include both summary and analysis: a summary of the event that took place and an analysis of the significance of the event (Kahane 234). The analysis portion of the event is essential for the viewer audience, because it allows the individual to understand how events are rooted in historical contexts and it also helps the viewer predict or prepare for future events (Kahane 234). This presents a double-edged sword: without the analysis

¹ Day, Jones, Kahane.

portion of the news story, the viewer may not understand the significance of the events reported, but network television² also has a tendency to over-exaggerate events in an effort to earn better ratings (Kahane). The extreme analysis serves to illicit emotionally charged reactions from viewers; it is not designed for the purpose of checking government power.

Satire's basic principles and limitations are played out in contemporary political and journalistic critique. Stephen Colbert practices a special brand of political satire known as "fake news." Fake news is a comedic brand of programming, a type of political satire that narrates and simultaneously critiques the daily news. While a variety of political satire genres are produced for the masses³, I wish to focus on the "parodic news show," or "fake news." Day defines fake news as "a television show that is framed as if it were a straight news or current affairs program, but is understood by its audience to be a comedic send-up of the format" (*Satire and Dissent* 6). Satire is the genre that Colbert's narrative takes, and the constant source of mainstream journalism's political discourse provides fodder over time. Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Rick Mercer, and Stephen Colbert are all masters of this genre, but I will focus on Colbert's program, *The Colbert Report* (TCR) because, I believe his unique approach defies and crosses boundaries in a genre that already teeters on liminal spaces of political communication and popular culture.

Typically, a fake news show is hosted by a genuinely ironic figure; Colbert is an insincere, ironic host. Jon Stewart, for example, is appropriate for comparison as Colbert's closest counterpart. Stewart offers, much like any other major news network's anchor, a synopsis of the day's events in the political sphere. Along with the synopsis, Stewart offers his opinion:

² I am primarily referring to opinionated news shows, talking heads programs, 24-hour news channels, and generally any network news media source that privileges emotional tactics to draw in a large viewership over true investigative journalism. Not every mass media news outlet functions this way, but many do.

³ Amber Day cites "parodic news show," "satiric documentary," and "ironic activist groups" (*Satire and Dissent* 5-6),

typically a critique of unethical policy of political candidates and poor journalism methodology by the press. There is little or no filter between Stewart as a journalist and Stewart as a concerned citizen. Stewart's political ideologies are unabashedly presented to an audience – presumably of the same political persuasion. The difference between Stewart's program (*The Daily Show*) and another other “legitimate” news journalism program is that Stewart does not purport to tell the truth, but instead openly identifies as a comedian critiquing the press, as any concerned citizen might do, for obscuring the truth behind confusing political rhetoric. Stephen Colbert, on the other hand, does not present himself as a genuine citizen: he is a self-absorbed “super-human,” obsessed with his own ego and celebrity status. Parodying the style of major political pundits such as Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh, Colbert has created a disingenuous conservative pundit. Stewart's approach is a bit different from Colbert's. While Stewart ironically deconstructs the news, Colbert claims that he, himself “falsely *construct[s]* the news and [is] ironically *attached*” (Charlie Rose). Colbert's character is “not detached at all. I'm passionate about what I'm talking about and Jon may point out the hypocrisy of a particular thing happening in a news story or the behavior of someone in the news. I illustrate the hypocrisy as a character” (Charlie Rose). On Colbert's weeknight show, he plays a pundit who offers his opinion to the masses on various subjects, typically dealing with the political sector. Punditry programming typically lacks any deliberative discourse, but instead, relies on entertaining appeals to draw in and keep an audience.

Colbert's character is based on a variety of talking heads on various other news networks. Colbert's fake news program purports him as a conservative news pundit, and he adheres strictly to this form, parodying those who take this form of journalism seriously. When he created his character based on other popular pundits, Colbert “was thinking of the idea of passion and

emotion and certainty over information” (Charlie Rose). Colbert’s character professes “truthiness,” a term that he coined: “Truthiness is what you *want* the facts to be as opposed to what the facts are. What feels like the right answer opposed to what reality will support” (Safer). Verbally, Colbert expresses a conservative viewpoint, but he pushes his opinions to a degree of absurdity, at which point, liberal bias becomes apparent. Colbert invites guests on the show including political figures, musicians, celebrities, authors, and anyone who might be important to public and political discourse. He remains self-centered throughout the interview, establishing himself as the most important person in the room. Colbert is unconcerned with the guests, not hospitable, and rarely polite. He openly disagrees with guests, unless the guest is a conservative figure; with right-leaning guests, he agrees and adds more conservative opinions, which increasingly become more absurd with each jest. Through parodic satire, Colbert illuminates that the state of punditry is a great farce. Colbert, the person, not the personage, is operating under the premise that punditry offers false notions of the truth. *The Colbert Report*, operating as classic satire, first illuminates moral corruption, mocks or mimics the manner in which it has been presented, and offers a new way of thinking or seeing while simultaneously providing a laugh.

Hipsterdom and the Realm of Ironic Mass Communication

The Colbert Report is categorized and understood as a medium of fake news because of its ability to mix genres and blend modes of communication. *TCR*’s appeal relies heavily on its ability to weave satire, parody, journalistic form, and punditry, all with a humorous edge. But its greatest asset comes from its high saturation of irony, specifically what Richard Van Heertrum refers to as the “dominant affective state of youth today,” (“Irony and the News” 117). In “Irony

and the News: Speaking Through Cool to American Youth,” Heertrum argues that *TCR* and *TDS* (The Daily Show) have gained critical acclaim and popularity with youth because of an “underlying dynamic” that relates directly to a majority of the young generation’s political stance: “a critique of the current order of things connected to cynicism about the possibility of real change” (Heertrum 117). The show essentially speaks the language of today’s American youth, a generation that has grown skeptical of “authentic” language that promises the possibility of meaningful change (Heertrum).

Everyone does not endorse irony as a legitimate means of communication, however. In November of 2012, Christy Wampole wrote an opinion piece for *The New York Times* entitled “How to Live Without Irony” in which she calls the “hipster” a mere “symptom and the most extreme manifestation of ironic living” (How to Live). Walpole’s opening line reads, “If irony is the ethos of our age — and it is — then the hipster is our archetype of ironic living.” The “hipster,” according to Walpole, is a “contemporary urban harlequin” that inhabits “every city street and university town” (How to Live). The hipster is contemporary America’s most prevalent, sub-cultural identifier for 20-somethings; the title of hipster is either ironically donned, or willfully denied. Walpole argues that irony is the hipster’s main form of communication, as indicated by “advertising, politics, fashion, television: almost every category of contemporary reality” (How to Live). Walpole may be picking up on an ironic mode of communication that Amber Day addresses in *Satire and Dissent*. Day believes that audiences are increasingly pulled to ironic humor because of contemporary life’s manufactured quality (*Satire and Dissent* 3). An ironic mode of communication that posits the entire identity of the self as an ironic entity critiques a constant barrage of inauthentic, superficial communication from various

forms of media: on television, in advertisements, political campaigns, the world of journalism and so on.

Walpole, addressing irony directly says that “irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise. To live ironically is to hide in public” (How to Live)⁴. Hiding does not imply a lack of care, but it may certainly point to a desire for defense. Maria Bustillos argues that while irony has its uses in moderation, it is also an “absolutely necessary tool for maintaining what passes for sanity in the modern world” (“Irony is Wonderful”). Irony, Bustillos argues, does not impede an individual’s ability to hold “passionate convictions.” (“Irony is Wonderful”) Bustillos claims that

the habitual degree of irony is *barely adequate* to comprehend the disappointment, the distance, the pitch-black comedy, the anger, between the disgrace of how the world is, how we ourselves are, and how we might like things to be. Without such tools, without the ability to concentrate and register our disillusionment and pain, how on earth will we separate ourselves from it all enough to envision a better way? (“Irony is Wonderful”)

Bustillos continues to argue for the use of irony; she claims that irony recognizes the individual’s “justifiable feelings of insignificance” and can show that he “[understands his subjectivity].”

Furthermore, ironic speech demonstrates that the individual understands that he is not “the center of the universe” and demonstrates that one’s mind can “hold opposing ideas,” demonstrating that one understands that he exists in a larger world (Bustillos “Irony is Wonderful”). Irony, Bustillos argues, is “instinctive, ‘sincere,’ a natural function of the well-developed adult mind” (Bustillos).

Ironic cultural communication is a rhetorical tool that recognizes a dominant narrative and

⁴ Jonathan Fitzgerald of the Atlantic disagrees with Walpole’s assessment of hipster insincerity and detachment. He cites a “recent Knights of Columbus-Marist Poll survey,” which “found that among Millennials, six out of 10 prioritized being close to God and having a good family life above anything else” (“Sincerity, Not Irony”). Fitzgerald does note another key difference between Millennials and GenX: “the second priority was not spirituality—it was making a lot of money” (“Sincerity, Not Irony”).

critiques; the hipster speaks ironically in an effort to distance himself, not because of cynical apathy, but because he desires a new narrative. Furthermore, irony used as the primary mode of communication does not necessarily indicate that young people are “dodging their responsibilities.” They may, in fact, be more involved than critiques of ironic communication have guessed. As Heertrum argues, “irony, in the space between figurative and literal meaning, defines a separation from deeper emotional or political commitment, a space for cool detachment” (Heertrum 117). Whether the genre has adopted contemporary language to capitalize on the appealing language, or millennials have adopted the ironic jargon since its mass dissemination in the post 9/11-era is simply a chicken-and-egg question. What goes without question is that irony -- this particular form of irony that seeps into “life itself” -- has become a pervasive form of communication for young people all over America.

The term “hipster” has moved beyond the obscure, beatnik sub-culture that it previously sought to describe; “hipster” has become a catch-all term that describes, according to NPR people of “all stripes and all political persuasions” (“The Hipsterfication of America”). In “The Hipsterfication of America,” Linton Weeks argues that “not everyone who is hip is young, and not everyone who is young is hip. Hipsterishness is a state of mind” (“The Hipsterfication of America”). The lifestyle is part of a universal culture that “dominates fashion, music and lifestyle. It crosses borders of ethnicity, socio-economic status and sexual preference” (“The Hipsterfication of America”). This catch-all term describes a group of individuals who exhibit one or several of a number of lifestyle choices that may be associated with “hipness.” Among these choices, an overall ironic mode of communication is usually present, if not an accepted

universality⁵. Contemporary American adults are practicing what Amber Day refers to as “ironic authenticity.” Humans are becoming comfortable interacting with virtual world through computers and screens. Political actors and corporate spokespeople are pervasive in reality as well, and the populace is highly aware of this spectacle through its increased exposure to media (3). Amber Day questions the prevailing theory that irony and earnestness are diametrically opposed (4). She writes:

In a highly stage-managed, mediated discursive landscape, then, earnestness can seem suspect. It is the very quality that politicians and other overproduced public figures bend over backward attempting to convey, while there is something about the unabashedly personal, ironic, tongue-in-cheek perspective that appears refreshingly authentic. (*Satire and Dissent* 3)

As Amber Day notes, our present situation is a “media-saturated world of manufactured emotion” in which earnestness cannot be considered always believable. In this world, “the personal and ironic can offer a more comfortable way of getting to authenticity” because it seems more honest through its conscious perception of its own flaws (32). The fake news genre, recognizing that mass media journalism utilizes a flawed language, enacts this same inaccurate language to make its appeals. That the Obama administration quickly lost approval with its biggest supportive demographic, is testament to the loss of belief in “authentic” language, especially following a campaign run that promised “hope” and “change” (Heertrum 117). Responding to a system that has ridden them of the belief in the possibility of change, ironists today enact that same ironic language that has been spoken to them through mass media outlets: false sincerity with a hidden agenda, an inauthentic language ridden with critique and cynicism.

⁵ Though the ironic mode of communication suits contemporary Americans of all ages and political persuasions, scholars generally associate high usage of irony and Stephen Colbert’s fan base with young audiences (Amber Day, Baumgartner and Morris, Heertrum, to name a few).

In the classic manner of satire, ironic commentary performs like a mask: a mirror held up to the “world of manufactured emotions,” reflecting its own hypocrisy.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty describes two types of citizens who are in direct opposition: the metaphysician and the ironist. The ironist is essentially a meta-structuralist, acutely aware of language’s distance from reality. Rorty argues that ironists are in a position known as “meta-stable:” they are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (73-74). He is in direct opposition to the metaphysician, who “assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence” (Rorty *Contingency* 74). The metaphysician utilizes a final vocabulary that he assuredly believes represents some essence of his reality, whereas the ironist believes that “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence . . . a term like ‘just’ or ‘scientific’ or ‘rational’ in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice of science or rationality will take one much beyond language games of one’s time” (74-75).

While the Socratic dialogue is a means of finding the truth through conversation, this dialogue, as an ironist would see it, is still a mere language game, the terms of which are set and defined according to the accepted truths of one’s own time and therefore are subject to change. I am not suggesting that we should not stop searching for truth using this dialogic method, only that the ironist is aware of the disconnect that will still exist between language and reality, even after a truth value has been established. Colbert, operating as an ironist, reveals that our established truths are subject to change, our ideologies can be fallacious or ridden with

hypocrisy, and we often are not aware of this until we begin to “play” with our language, or in this case, hear someone else play with our own language.

As Rorty argues, “ironists have to have something to have doubt about, something from which to be alienated” (*Contingency* 88). Consider the appeal of ironic language for millennials. The youth are not willfully ignorant; many are instead highly invested in current events yet ultimately distraught with the current state of affairs. To profess that one is detached from a particular issue, one must first *be* attached. One cannot adequately critique or distance himself from an issue unless one first understands the issue and finds that sincere detachment is a suitable response. Pervasive ironic language provides a buffer between the severe harshness of the public sphere and the emotional, private life. If the individual may indeed lead separate private and public lives, there is no reason that the hipster cannot construct an ironic identity while simultaneously authentically concerning himself with the political matters of the day. The most likely scenario is that the identity of an individual is neither completely private nor completely public; we are all constantly teetering in and out of the private and public sphere.

Common vocabularies must be established before hopes can be determined. Rorty argues that societies are bonded together through “common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically parasitic on the hopes -- in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices” (*Contingency* 86). The tension between the ironist and the literalist develops because a common vocabulary does not exist. Bipartisan discourse in America⁶ posits many citizens on opposing sides of a discussion in virtually all aspects of public and private American life. The ironist will not use a literal vocabulary; the hidden meaning must be inferred from his discreet language.

⁶ See discussion of Sharon Crowley, chapter III.

This may cause tension within the metaphysician, who utilizes and desires a literal vocabulary. Both parties presumably want to be presented with a language they can believe in; the ironist simply doubts that a genuine language exists mass mediated discourse. A language game that appeals to both modes of communication, then, is desirable for cooperation between citizens. “Solidarity,” Rorty argues “has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it” (*Contingency* 94). All narratives require a counter-narrative. Solidarity will most likely be found when multiple voices are allowed to speak, positions are heard, and all points-of-views can be considered.

Since mass media journalism typically offers one narrative, or a highly polarized narrative in more partisan sources, multiple opinions cannot be heard. The fake news genre provides a possibility for coming closer to a consensus through language. While most outlets in the genre practice blatant critique, *TCR*'s ironic critique provides a narrative that fosters communication that encourages understanding across demographic groups with differing ideologies. While traditional partisan news outlets provide information with a biased slant, Colbert's simultaneous presentation of two polar opposite American ideologies⁷ provides the listener with information (both private and political) from not only his own ideology, but also his opposition's. Colbert's meticulously created character illustrates how the individual's life *is* a balance between public and private affairs.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the joke as a basic building block humor and its ability to simultaneously present two or more ideas, providing the listener with a choice, rather

⁷ Though Colbert is presumably advocating a liberal ideology, he still presents both conservative and liberal values simultaneously.

than offering a unilateral narrative. While some scholars⁸ have argued that fake news genre fosters cynicism, Heertrum argues that “their popularity relates to an underlying irony and cynicism that resonate with those youth drawn to the show. This seems particularly true given studies that find both that DS/CR audiences are as or more informed than more mainstream sources and more educated” (Heertrum 117). While fake news media is not a solution to a larger problem with political communication in the American media, the form should be seriously considered and recognized as a genre that has encouraged political engagement and awareness in an age group that is often criticized for having little or no concern for the public/political sphere.

⁸ Namely Baumgartner and Morris.

CHAPTER III

KNOWLEDGE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE GUISE OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH

A New Citizenship

In *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, Sharon Crowley claims that discussion “of civic issues stalls” in America because it “takes place in a discursive climate dominated by two powerful discourses” (2). Crowley defines these “two powerful discourses” as “liberalism and Christian fundamentalism” (“On (Not) Arguing” 2). Crowley explains the differences between the two discourses:

The vocabulary of liberalism includes commonplaces concerning individual rights, equality before the law, and personal freedom . . . Fundamentalist Christians, on the other hand, aim to “restore” biblical values to the center of American life and politics. (2-3)

The mass media exaggerates this divide; it does not remedy. Portrayal of our contemporary political climate posits Americans as a highly polarized body politic with opposing ideologies that rip a seam straight through the fabric of our culture. It is highly probable that all Americans – liberal, conservative, or otherwise, want to conduct their individual lives freely, with purpose, but the specialized discourses that dominate the seemingly polar-opposite ideologies only serve to divide the nation into a collection of communities, each of which communicates complacently within its own borders, rather than a unit that functions as a whole. Crowley writes that “tactics typically used in liberal argumentation – empirically based on reason and factual evidence – are not highly valued by Christian apocalyptists, who rely instead on revelation, faith, and biblical interpretation to ground claims” (Crowley 3). We are speaking different languages, with marginally different codes and symbols, all based on differing modes of rationality, truth-making

methods, and constructions of reality. The belief systems of individuals (and groups) are governed by burdens of “proof,” (dictated in specialized languages) that govern the way they speak, and serve to divide their understanding of world views that do not match their own perspective. In a society with so many ways of knowing, understanding, and believing, why would the individual limit himself to a language that isolates him into his own world?

The Trouble with Journalism

The age of objective journalism in America’s mass media is over, if it ever did exist. In

Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters, Jonathan M. Ladd writes

Once, the media landscape largely consisted of a few national television news networks, local television news, and newspapers. The vast majority of these journalists were committed to a style of ‘objective’ journalism that rose to prominence in the early twentieth century. As a result, there was little diversity in coverage styles. Media choices have greatly proliferated in the past 40 years. News options include political talk radio, cable news channels, Internet news and opinion sites, as well as many entertainment-oriented media options. These choices offer a great variety of news styles, including more partisan and tabloid-oriented approaches. (Ladd 1-2)

The golden age of American journalism was an exceptional time period – not an historical norm, caused by “a unique historical circumstance, where civil rights constituted a salient national issue while remaining separate from the main partisan and ideological cleavages” (Ladd 7). As a result of the decline in objective news, American trust in journalism has greatly decreased. In 1956, roughly 78% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats thought newspapers were fair; in 1964, 71% and 61% respectively thought that networks were fair. News anchors were the “noble defenders of democracy and the public interests” (Ladd 1). A poll taken in 1972 found that “72% of Americans trusted *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite” (Ladd 1). Today, Americans have about the same amount of confidence in national news media as they do in lawyers (10%

and 9%, according to a 2004 Chronicle of Higher Education poll) (Ladd 1). In 2008, 45% of Americans had “hardly any confidence” in the press (Ladd 1). Ladd argues that our former “independent, powerful, widely respected news media establishment is an historical anomaly. Prior to the twentieth century, such an institution had never existed in American history. We should not misinterpret this circumstance, whatever its merits, as the historical norm” (Ladd 6). Ladd goes on to suggest that journalism has always had a biased perspective since the invention of the printing press. Businesses who report the news have always operated to make money and push political agenda. Today, conservatively-minded citizens critique a liberal bias; liberally-minded equally condemn an over-arching conservative world view, so members of both parties find themselves drawn to media outlets that create or reinforce their previously held ideologies. Still, there exists a smaller faction of American citizens who, recognizing the new brand of televised mass media journalism for what it is – a construct of truth, an incomplete reality, a *story*, designed largely to entertain or fill time, especially on 24-hour news channels – flock to more unbiased forms of information. With a world of knowledge and high communicative capacities, citizens and organizations have gained the ability to obtain and share information in an unbiased manner. While Americans have access to unbiased sources of information on the Internet, the majority is not necessarily drawn to tedious, lengthy research and reading because, as I aim to suggest, purely objective information simply does not appeal to the average citizen. Ladd argues that the market demands partisan and entertaining styles of news:

Even when journalists desire to produce informative, nonpartisan, nonsensational news, which can enhance the profession’s respectability and trustworthiness, the market for this style of news is limited. It is difficult to find a large audience willing to regularly consume this type of news when other options are available. In this way, market pressure leads to more sensational and partisan forms of news. Both reduce trust in the institutional media, the former directly and the latter by transmitting partisan media criticism. (Ladd 6)

Major news networks draw in the masses because it offers exactly what citizens are searching for: a narrative that explains the individual's unique place in the world in an understandable, entertaining manner. Humans want to be entertained, and while many critics of this notion might cite new technologies, hyper-mediated realities in mass media, or an entertainment industry based on mass consumption as the source of blame, I contend that humans have always been a story-telling, story-consuming creature, and much of our knowledge and understanding of the world comes from our ability to tell, listen, and participate in narratives.

Individuals are drawn to televised journalism for the same reasons they are drawn to any other form of television: entertainment. The problem with too much consumption is not the fact that we are being entertained, but that we fail to remember, specifically with broadcast journalism, that we are *only* being entertained, not necessarily informed. The form of entertainment that television takes, as Barry Brummett suggests in *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, is highly narrative, including educational and documentary programming (13-14). Narrative structures suit the medium of television most aptly because, “unlike books and magazines, which stop from time to time, television runs continuously” (Brummett 13-14). The “continuous stream of images” requires a neat package for the consumer to digest. Furthermore, TV narratives are brief, so any problem posed by television narratives must be resolvable in a short amount of time (Brummett 14). As a result, audiences may build expectations that all issues can be easily resolved (Brummett 14). Viewer preference for a brief, solvable narrative

is also found in news broadcasts, for news coverage of an event tends to be intense and saturated for short periods of time, followed by utter neglect of the issue. In short, the narrative structure of television induces in an audience pattern-making modes of thought, a motive to see problems and issues in terms of story forms. (Brummett 14)

This highly emotional form of narrative provides no resolve, possibly inducing stress in the viewer. This journalistic form also asserts that we should govern our decision-making with emotionally charged opinions.

The individual gravitates to news journalism that follows a narrative to which he can relate. Brummett suggests that, “television articulates the most central meanings and beliefs of a culture” (Brummett 14). This presents a variety of implications. Mass media journalism is designed first and foremost to entertain (whether it informs and the truth-value of its information will be a subject of this research), and it does so by offering an easy-to-follow narrative. Commentary on this narrative will either construct or question the viewer’s worldview. Crowley writes that people will usually “invest in [a belief] system because it is all they know, or because their friends, family, and important authority figures are similarly invested, or because their identity is in some respects constructed by the beliefs inherent in the system. Rejection of such a belief system ordinarily requires rejection of community and reconstruction of one’s identity as well” (Crowley 4). If the narrative deconstructs the viewer’s worldview, he will be more likely to turn to programming that reinforces his own previously held ideologies.

Research on selective exposure has engaged sociologists and psychologists since the 1960s; influential reviews of the literature (Freedman and Sears 1965, Sears and Freedman 1967) that did not support the phenomenon caused a sharp decline in the phenomenon in the following decades (Stroud). A diverse, thriving, contemporary media, however, has given new life to the topic (Stroud 342). In “Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure,” Natalie Jomini Stroud cites Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey’s research, which supports the notion that people are often “biased in favor of previously held beliefs, expectations, or desired conclusions” when seeking new informative sources (qtd. in Stroud

342). Similarly, Mutz and Martin (2001) argue that as "the number of potential news sources multiplies, consumers must choose among them, and that exercise of choice may lead to less diversity of political exposure" (qtd. in Stroud 342). Furthermore, Stroud argues that if the availability of partisan news is widespread, "the public may develop more polarized, or extreme, attitudes in the direction of their political predispositions (Mutz, 2006 and Sustein, 2001). Stroud uses the Iraq/Al Qaeda example to suggest that partisan coverage of significant events may cause people to "develop different beliefs about the world" (Stroud 343). Stroud notes that Americans, particularly those exposed to FOX news during these events, were more likely "to believe in both the link [between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda] and the weapons while those watching PBS and listening to NPR were less likely⁹" (Stroud 341-342). I contend with Stroud's conclusion that thesis findings are quite "troubling"

Different patterns of news exposure may lead people to develop different impressions of what is happening in the world around them. Without a shared base of information, it is difficult to imagine citizens agreeing on matters of public policy and it is easy to envision citizens developing highly polarized attitudes toward political matters. ("Media Use" 342)

Other researchers argue that individuals do not necessarily gravitate toward sources that reinforce their ideologies. Stromer-Galley (2003) argues that in such a diverse media landscape, people may choose to expose themselves to "diverse viewpoints and learn more about perspectives with which they are unfamiliar" (Stroud 343). Many researchers agree that individuals do tend to choose information supporting their beliefs,¹⁰ while others have conducted experiments, finding evidence that viewers don't always choose sources based on previously held

⁹ Kull, S., Ramsay, C, & Lewis, E. (2003-4). "Misperceptions, the media, and the Iraq war." *Political Science Quarterly*, 118.4: 569-598.

¹⁰ Adams 1961; Barlett et al. 1974; Chaffee and McLeod 1973; Donsbach 1991; Mills 1965a; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006

beliefs¹¹. One reason for the conflicting results may be a result of the diversity of topics that have been researched. Stroud points out that everything from cars, parenting techniques, personal care products and political preferences have been researched (Stroud 344). Significant beliefs regarding a person's identity or relevant interests, however, are more likely to guide exposure decisions. Political partisanship is likely to guide "selective exposure" because "political beliefs are accessible and personally relevant" (Stroud 345). Additionally, people may chose varied "exposure to political information in order to obtain or maintain a desired emotional state or as a response to a distinct emotion" (Stroud 345). Particularly, viewers with who feel more attached to their political beliefs will avoid media outlets that produce a "negative affect and approach media outlets producing [a] positive affect" (Stroud 345). As new ideas are presented, the individual's worldview is influenced by the source, since the particular media source has already been established as a trusted source of information. Since the network has been validated by the individual's mind as a true construction of reality, new ideas are likely to be accepted. The narrative is always sensational, rendering the counter-narrative absurd, and further dividing the individual from his neighbor, who might ascribe to a competing perspective. Though the two hold competing ideologies and construct reality differently, both are expected to live and cooperate in the same world. I suggest that citizens speak – and listen – to a diverse array of discourse to bridge the extreme gap between the far left and the far right. Since political discourse can be such a difficult practice, Crowley argues that we avoid "talking politics for fear relationships will be irreparably strained in the process" (2). One way to relieve the pressure of uncomfortable discourse would be to open ourselves up to a worldview that allows us to understand the universal human condition as inherently flawed, ripe for ridicule as well as

¹¹ Feather 1962; Freedman 1965; Meffert et al. 2006; Mills et al. 1959; Rosen 1961.

laughter.

The fake news genre, a blend of entertainment and information, unpacks complex political information and presents ideas to audiences in an easy-to-digest manner: a humorous narrative. Contemporary political satire, which Amber Day argues in *Satire and Dissent* has grown tremendously since the 1990s, has “become complexly intertwined with serious political dialogue” (3). While remaining apart from traditional news media, the genre and its major satirists “[blur] the traditional categories of entertainment and news, art and activism, satire and political dialogue” (Day 2). Day, along with a number of other scholars¹², notes the most recent flourishing of the genre as coinciding with George W. Bush’s eight years of presidency. Day argues that:

His administration greatly expanded presidential power while simultaneously limiting transparency and access . . . his staff became particularly skilled at using political doublespeak designed to obscure. (*Satire and Dissent* 4)

Day goes on to argue that the “terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, produced an atmosphere in which the mainstream press was reticent to appear adversarial” which left “official language and policies” of the Bush administration unchallenged, especially leading up into the Iraq war (*Satire and Dissent* 4). The lack of critique, Day argues, warmly invited ironists in and outside of the US to question the Bush administration’s “uninterrogated discourse” (4).

As several scholars argue, the fake news genre is a medium that blends “entertainment” and “information” to create a third genre, “infotainment.” Critics of the genre, such as Baumgartner and Morris, argue that information may get blurred or confusing during the business of entertaining, but as Jeffrey Jones convincingly argues in *Entertaining Politics*, the division between entertainment and information is “an extraordinarily limited conception of the

¹² Gournelos and Greene (2011), Gray, Jones and Thompson (2009).

relationship that exists between audiences and political communication, undervaluing what a variety of political narratives can provide, as well as what audiences need from such narratives, extract from them, and do with them” (207). Perhaps more significantly, Jones argues that, “such strict segregation of entertainment and political content in television was partly the product of broadcast programmers’ usage of news as a means for fulfilling licensure obligations . . . the purpose of the binary, though, has less to do with properly labeling this content than in highlighting and critiquing the audiences who consume it” (208). This preference of logic, reason, and scientific knowledge over that of narrative paradigm is a binary that exists to give privilege to the powerful few at the center of public discourse, the guardians of accepted notions of truth and knowledge, and oppress the means by which the larger body politic shares knowledge through everyday communication processes.

Postmodern Knowledge and the Myth of Scientific Truth

That privileged discourse is controlled by political power is not a novel concept. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that “the general paradigm of progress in science and technology” is a “natural complement” to “economic growth and the expansion of sociopolitical power” (7). The privileging of scientific rationality over other ways of knowing is a process that is propagated by western imperialism (*Postmodern Condition* 27). Lyotard claims that scientific reasoning has increasingly taken precedence over other ways of knowing in the postmodern world:

scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity. (*The Postmodern Condition* 7)

and he defines the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Since we cannot know absolute truth, both science and narrative are ways of knowing; they are both necessary. Rather than accept science as the only way of knowing, we should connect our accepted truths with that which we know, but cannot prove. Lyotard argues that “drawing a parallel between science and nonscientific (narrative) knowledge helps us understand, or at least sense, that the former’s existence is no more – and no less – necessary than the latter’s” (*Postmodern Condition* 26). While the scientific method may be arguably the most efficient means of understanding the world around us, it is still an approximation to the truth. Man, that “clever beast¹³,” in an effort to understand the world around him, developed the scientific method and the laboratory to explain it. The laboratory, an approximation to the natural world, is created from the perspective of man, and its collected results, also reported through the narrow perspective of man, must be validated by a consensus of his peers. Regardless of what we know or how we know it, “true knowledge” Lyotard argues, “is always indirect knowledge; it is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy” (*Postmodern Condition* 35). As Lyotard suggests, the consensus usually occurs when the group of peers begins adopting the same language game as the scientist, and abandons the old, rendering the “concrete” scientific data and evidence as an insignificant to the acceptance process and validation of new knowledge.

Where absolute truth is accepted, the art of rhetoric is seal of. Persuasion will not change the mind of the listener once the truth has been accepted. One who seeks to persuade must find another way of knowing, something complementary or supplementary to the truth that science offer. Science along, after all, will never offer a moral path. It is the interpretation of our

¹³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.”

accepted truths that build of foundations of a just society. Truth and morality are not mutually exclusive, but both agreed upon by a consensus, decided by us, simultaneously or as a result of one another.

Narrative and Science as Complementary

Mass media journalism, like science, requires a general consensus to validate its stories. The “facts” are usually irrelevant, and stories tend to be over exaggerated by news anchors (where science is part of the story, global warming for example, the conversation becomes a questioning of objective truth. Ironic, no?) When multiple news networks pick up the same story, the story becomes legitimized simply because the journalism community validates its legitimacy by repeating it. Sharing the story is not enough to move the masses to belief: the news anchors must embellish, and often begin to use similar key terms that jar meaning into the minds of the masses. For example, in “Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse: Is there no ‘Truthiness’ in Humor?” Priscilla Marie Meddaugh cites Colbert’s coverage of the stimulus package, a story that several major news networks picked up and exaggerated with fear mongering rhetoric. In this segment, Colbert streams a series of video clips mashed up from news sources reporting, “carnage across nearly all sectors of the US economy . . . economic devastations . . . economic meltdown . . . if we don’t pass this thing, it’s Armageddon” (qtd. 385). The camera cuts back to Colbert, huddled under a desk, whispering, “Oh my God. The end is near. Jesus, I’ll meet you at the Arby’s where I suppose we will both be working” (385). Meddaugh argues that Colbert is not technically practicing journalism, but that he does make “valuable contributions to its practice by acknowledging news as representation rather than reality” (386). However, Meddaugh cites Borden and Tew’s definition of journalists: those who seek knowledge “through a discipline of

verification, providing epistemologically defensible standards for creating and communicating knowledge about the social world” (qtd. 386). By these standards, Colbert *is* practicing journalism. Colbert’s team of writers (and by and large the entire fake news genre) is a group of skilled researchers¹⁴ who sift through vast amounts of information to create and understandable narrative about the social world for the viewer audience. The narrative is not as clear-cut as traditional journalism, however. Where traditional journalism aims to tell the viewer the truth about the social world, Colbert’s program demonstrates that we should be seeking the truth. He communicates that the social world that has been created by news journalism is not reality, only a narrative poised to communicate a certain reality.

Common Sense and Social Knowledge

Sensory perception cannot be verified by traditional rationality, but neither can social knowledge. Much like scientific knowledge, “social knowledge rests upon a peculiar kind of consensus. That is to say, it rests upon a consensus which is attributed to an audience rather than concretely shared” (Farrell 144). Groups of people communicatively believe rather than concretely know. Farrell argues that social knowledge cannot be “discovered nor verified through the detachment which observation demands. Instead, social knowledge depends upon an ‘acquaintance with’ . . . or a personal relationship to other actors in the social world” (“Knowledge” 143). When we make decisions, we, according to Farrell, “presume a kind of knowledge which depends upon our direct or indirect experience of collective ‘others,’ and which applies an interest to these others which is generalizable” (“Knowledge” 143). Much of

¹⁴ True investigative reporting techniques by major news networks are often not used because they tend to require significant amounts of “time, effort, and *money*” and the media are in the “business to make money, not lose it!” Kahane, Howard. *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*.

our social knowledge is presumed rather than known. The individual's method of self-identification and identification with others is based on a contextual presumption about the individual's particular place in time, or a historical narrative. The state of the union, at any particular time, is based on the individual's understanding of this historical narrative, which is based on memory and imagination and not willed to the senses or verifiable through any method of traditional rationality. One cannot even know the story of his family's history unless it is told to him; once it is told to him, he must simply accept it as truth, as it can never be proven or disproven. We know that social knowledge is not natural, because it is not based on immediate perception of the outside world by our senses; it is told, heard, shared and believed. Since social knowledge is not provable, it is highly subjective to individual and group interpretation, making it superbly ripe for the art of rhetoric. We must accept social knowledge to communicate effectively, but our accepted notions of what constitutes social knowledge varies from individual to individual, making it difficult to form a consensus on moral truths. There is no universal, unifying social knowledge. The individual divides himself from his fellow man based on that which he believes, and that which he believes influences the way he performs and the way he believes others should perform as members of the human community.

Farrell argues that "social knowledge" must be accepted if "rhetorical discourse is to function effectively" (142). This is the premise of mass media journalism; it takes that which we "know" and accept as true, and sets it to a narrative that sensationalizes reality. This re-telling of truth and narrative become mutual parts of a greater truth-telling scheme, and separating the two becomes increasingly difficult, rendering reason and rationality as moveable, changeable, open to interpretation. As Fisher writes, "The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amendable to all forms of human communication" (Fisher

266). If reason and rationality are not fixed conventions, and if the essence of reality is open to interpretation, the narrative model presents a unique method by which to constitute that which we believe we know to support that which we believe to be true, or what the spokesperson tells us is true.

Take for example, mass media's two dominant voices in the contemporary, heated issues concerning the implications of legalizing same-sex marriage. The voice that Crowley refers to as "liberalism," would argue same-sex couples should be allowed the same rights and privileges as heterosexual couples. The opposition, what Crowley refers to as "Fundamentalist Christians," would argue that men and women were created as complementary creatures and this purposeful creation should be respected in this civic issue. That homosexuality is a biological anomaly has not been proven by scientific consensus, and if it could be, the validity of the scientific reasoning would come to question because the opposition has already developed a social narrative about issue that is highly connected to their worldview. Since traditional proof is not within the scope of contemporary reasoning, it leaves the debate open to individual and group interpretation, all highly mediated by various narratives. We cannot know the truth about this aspect of human nature, just as we cannot know many things about our own nature, but we can choose to believe certain narratives that attempt to explain this piece of our existence.

Regardless of the preferred narrative, when one ascribes to either narrative, one is telling the opposition that his worldview is informed by a truer, more just narrative. Furthermore, those morals that constitute the other's worldview are based on a false narrative, leaving the opposition to question not only his identity, but also the collective human identity. Thomas Farrell writes that when "we are asked to endorse or condemn a person, action, or policy, it is likely that we are also being asked to conduct ourselves as members of a human community" (Farrell 143). Each

decision is “an act which gives increasing form and specificity to our relationship with others as social beings” (Farrell 143). We come together or we move apart, depending on each decision that we make and each opinion that we form. Colbert’s *TCR* does not offer a single true, just narrative; the show offers, instead, the ability to see both sides of the same argument. His ironic commentary serves as a universal critique of all sides of an argument, as well a critique of our inability to see the perspective of the other.

The way we make sense of the world is based on previously held ideologies, much of which are constituted by cultural norms, practices, beliefs. Those ideologies are reinforced by accepted values of truth, both scientific and narrative. Much of what we believe about the world constitutes not only our identities, but also the identities that want to see in our neighbors. The failure to accept different cultural norms and practices of the other is largely due to the inability to see the world outside of one’s own ideology. What mass media has essentially done is taken this argument to extremes; it has pitted individuals against each other, conservative against liberal, irrevocably divided

With such an array of strong convictions and beliefs among the body politic, the individual conducts his life in the moral manner that suits his worldview. He may also, just as fervently, condemn or feel offended by a multitude of non-believers, or those who walk a different path. The great hum of mass journalism’s many narratives may also cause him to feel anxious, particularly if the repeating mantras aim to obstruct or offend his worldview, and this may discourage the individual from consuming journalism, a practice long-viewed as an integral part of democratic citizenship. As Crowley suggests, “when citizens fear that dissenting opinions cannot be heard, they may lose their desire to participate in democratic practices, or . . . they may

replace their allegiance to democracy with other sorts of collective identifications that blur or obscure their responsibilities as citizens” (On (Not) Arguing 2).

“Obscuring” responsibilities does not imply a complete loss of those responsibilities, only a changing, caused by frustration, a lack of voice, or a number of other unnamed reasons within the individual. Some scholars suggest that consumption of fake news is a redefinition of citizenship and appropriate or accepted forms of discourse. I, too, argue that fake news is redefining citizenship practices. The individual’s identity is complex, so a definition of suitable democratic practice should be flexible. Democracy implies the possibility of options, of openness, of a shifting identity and nation based on what is best for the people. The individual should have the ability to enact his citizenship in the best way that she sees fit. As Jeffrey Jones writes in *Entertaining Politics*, “citizenship is more than membership in a society, or the rights and obligations associated with such membership. It is also a component of our identity, and like other aspects of personal and communal identities, is a cultural phenomenon that is conceived, negotiated, assembled, fought over, and so forth, through our everyday interactions within that society” (210). The multitude of questions that a citizen can pose may not be answered by the narrow, limited scope of television news journalism. The “changing media environment” to which we are exposed, argues Jones, shape our identity and participation in both the public and private sector. We can no longer separate “citizenship from consumption, public from private, rationality from emotion, and so on” (Jones 210). In the same way that one’s private and public life cannot be considered separate acts of participation in a democratic society, the marriage narrative and rationality in the mind of the individual is an integral part of everything that she knows and serves to form her complete identity and a participant in a larger community.

Man's Fantastic Narrative: The Multi-Dimensional, Playful Mind

In “Narrative as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” Walter R. Fisher defines narrative as “a theory of symbolic actions – words and or/deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them (Fisher 266). A narrative, therefore, “has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination” (Fisher 266). Man creates his own reality, and this created reality might encompass traditional rationality, social knowledge, sensory perception, accepted truths, or even imagination. With all these modes of understanding, storytelling can be a means to sort through the complexity of the mind. As Apostolos Doxiadias argues in “Narrative, Rhetoric, and The Origins of Logic,” “storytelling is instrumental in ordering a complex and often chaotic environment” (82). If living in a chaotic environment does not pose a great enough problem for the individual struggling to make sense of the world, the form of a story poses more complex problems. The “world of action,” in the words of Doxiadias, presents “manifold possibilities,” but the “mental models of [the world] are like complex, multidimensional maps, representing not just objects but also relations, in webs, of immense connectivity” (81). Since narratives typically “flow linearly in time,” listening to a story is like taking a “specific path through these worlds” (Doxiadias 81). The narrative gives the individual a “partial, linear [view] of nonlinear environments” (Doxiadias 81). Doxiadias argues that ability to translate the “nonlinear world of action through the linear medium of narrative to the nonlinear world of representations is a fundamental... innate, human cognitive skill” (Doxiadias 82). While this is an impressive, fascinating mental procedure of the human mind, the narrative paradigm seems restrictive if we accept that the world is full of infinite possibilities and that the mind could process any or all of those actions. The linear narrative guides the mind through a single pathway of knowing, but the mind is not necessarily designed to process time linearly. Since the narrative

guides the mind down a specific pathway, it is probably that the mind could take several pathways if the story offered multiple, simultaneous meanings. The mind processes a narrative in much the same way that it processes a joke. This is especially pertinent to the discussion of Colbert's work, because the persuasiveness of the show relies heavily on its humor.

Why do we laugh?

Keeping in mind that Colbert's show is a narrative, it is pertinent to remember that *TCR* is a narrative framed by a series of jokes. In this respect, it is a humorous narrative, and laughter must be explained to understand how the humorous narrative functions. Laughter, Arthur Koestler argues in *The Act of Creation*, is simply an involuntary reaction to mental and physical stimuli. While laughter's biological function is not clearly apparent, there is some evidence that it benefits us, like other involuntary bodily functions such as the "knee-jerk or pupillary contraction," in the "service of survival" (Koestler 31). Koestler writes:

On the evolutionary level where laughter arises, an element of frivolity seems to creep into a humorless universe governed by the laws of thermodynamics and the survival of the fittest. (31)

In *The Comic Vision in Literature*, Edward L. Galligan expands on Koestler's Darwinian theory of laughter. Galligan's theory takes into account also the work of Freud, who argues that, "jokes serve the purpose, often well-hidden, of venting aggression" (Galligan 4-5). Aggressive emotions, argues Galligan, prepare us to "strike out at the world . . . they work by triggering the adrenal glands, which in turn set off powerful and complex physiological reactions" (Galligan 5-6). Taking a cue from Koestler, Galligan argues that

the function of the laughter-reflex is to dissipate harmlessly the physiological reactions touched off by self-assertive or aggressive emotions when those reactions are no longer safe, desirable, or sensible. (Galligan 6)

While establishing power is necessary for the individual's survival, man decided somewhere along the course of civilization's evolution that physical aggression was undesirable, so he developed the joke and decided to "laugh instead of fighting or fleeing" (Galligan 5-6). In short, men make jokes instead of physically confronting one another to assert power over one another. Jokes, laughter, and comic relief, then, are a way for men to approach one another civilly with one another while still finding a way to negotiate power.

In *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, Thomas Conley also suggests that insults, specifically humorous insults are a way to establish power. Conley argues that insults are typically exchanged from "superiors to inferiors" (3). In order to maintain a power relationship, for example, an Untouchable in Indian society must "insult himself when addressing a member of a higher caste" (3-4). Also, derogatory insults pertaining to women and minorities are far more common than insults that target men and serve to further "other" and strip power and further marginalize those groups (Conley 18-26) Galligan writes, "The role of rationality in joking is certainly glaring. A joke that we do not like is 'stupid' and so a person who does not 'get' a joke we do like (11-12). We admire the sharp-tongued comic and think poorly of the friend who fails to properly deliver a punch line. We are all familiar with the phrase "inside joke," which refers to a joke that alludes to specialized, inside information. So, while a joke can be made at someone's expense and can negotiate hierarchies of power, the joke forms alliances of power, or specific discourse communities. A joke welcomes friends and creates enemies.

What makes a joke funny?

Koestler argues convincingly that the mind is arranged into matrices of thought, rather than linear patterns, and that each matrix is governed by a set of codes. The code is a set of rules that govern the movement of thought within each matrix. Koestler explains the phenomenon through a chess analogy. When one sits down to play a game of chess, he has a variety of options that he must consider. Mentally moving through the variety of possible choices is the matrix. The set of rules that governs each piece's movement is the code (40-42). A joke occurs when two incompatible matrices converge. Koestler argues that if a rook would move like a bishop, this would be decidedly "funny" (42). When the normal thought process (conscious or unconscious) is interrupted or questioned, we find humor in this incongruity.

Here I would like to take up another chess analogy, one utilized by Jean-François Lyotard to explain the function of *language games*. Based on Wittgenstein's theory of language games, Lyotard describes language games as the proper way to "play" with utterances using certain rules. The language game has three major properties: (1) the rules of the game are an "object of contract, explicit or not, between players" In other words, speakers and listeners "invent the rules," (2) without rules, "there is no game". Slight changes in utterances and rules can change the entire game, and (3) "every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game" (*Postmodern Condition* 10). Lyotard argues that:

to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing. . . This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention. . . But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary – at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation. (10)

Put simply, a joke is a very short story – a humorous narrative – with a twist ending that either confirms or contradicts the individual’s ideology. One might tell a joke to exercise his power over another, or she might simply tell a joke for the sheer joy evoked by a joke’s poetic form. Even if one simply plays for pleasure, though, Lyotard suggests that the pleasure found in performing a joke will depend on that “feeling of success” when one exercises power over another.

The fondness for a specific joke depends on the individual’s response to the stimulated matrix of thought. Thoughts conjure up a variety of mental response in the individual: irrevocable belief, indisputable knowledge (or the illusion thereof), sheer distaste, and so on. Galligan writes:

If a person lacks either the experience or the intellectual capacity to deal with the matrices of thought involved, he will not laugh. . . Or if the material arouses emotions he feels he must repress, he will not laugh. If he is tone-deaf to words and inflections, if he cannot understand a gesture, if he lacks a sense of timing, if the joke offends his values or his taste, and so forth, he will not laugh (*Comic Vision* 14).

A non-white person will probably not laugh at a racist joke or a joke that insults a minority group; a woman will typically not laugh at a joke that degrades women. No one will laugh at a joke that insults a moral stance with which he empathizes. But, one will likely laugh at a joke if it insults a person, idea, or group that one takes a high moral stance against.

Galligan further argues that “laughter is not [humor’s] only goal. . . humor is greatly concerned with the meanings uncovered by its jokes. Certainly jokes are meaningful, all jokes. [The dual association] of matrices of thought which makes us laugh also makes us think” (*Comic Vision* 17). Thomas Conley argues, too, that humorous insults have one other critical function:

they establish truth. I would argue, however, that the insulting joke only sometimes reveals truth, but it always attempts to establish truth and it sometimes reveals a distorted version of the truth or a falsity masked in truth. I contend that the humorous insult *negotiates*, rather than establishes, the truth. Colbert's nightly show functions similarly; he navigates through the real and unreal to help the viewer make sense of highly complex political discourse. On the surface, Colbert's language criticizes one ideology, but embraces another. Below the surface of Colbert's ironic language, he demonstrates who we are and who we could be with imagination. Meaning, he teaches with imagination, and beckons the viewer to imagine a more ideal society. This ideal image of society is based on Colbert's perception of the unjust and validated by a consensus of the viewer audience.

CHAPTER IV

SIGNIFICANT RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

This chapter aims to identify some rhetorical maneuvers utilized by Stephen Colbert, relying narrative theory, the function of the humorous narrative in illustrating multiple, simultaneous perspectives, and the theory of post-modern knowledge. In “Rhetorical Maneuvers: Subjectivity, Power and Resistance,” Kendall R. Phillips describes the rhetorical maneuver as a type of performance in which the speaker chooses, who possesses a variety of subject positions, chooses to violate a accepted, normative subject position by speaking from a an alternative subject position. The rhetorical maneuver functions as an interruption of an accepted discourse and aims to disrupt an established power relation. Stephen Colbert, utilizing his celebrity status, poses as a pundit on his televised program. Since opinionated, talking heads style of journalism is legitimized by its popularity, Colbert’s program is automatically legitimized and accepted as a source of entertainment journalism. Coverage on other news networks paired with a slew of celebrity, political, and public figures as guests further legitimizes *TCR*. Colbert, therefore, is working with multiple subject positions (journalist, entertainer, satirist, concerned citizen, etc) and can choose which subject from which he speaks to temporarily disrupt power relations. The initial, visual legitimization of Colbert as a source of journalism is essential, though. As Phillips writes, “the same power relations that impose a position and form on the subject also provide the space from which an altered subject form can be articulated” (“Rhetorical Maneuvers” 317).

The Catachresis Crisis

During the pilot episode of *TCR*, and during the monologue of subsequent installation, Colbert establishes his character's identity as a contributor to the world of punditry, but also uniquely separated from the established conversation. Regular viewers of the show know that the phrase "The Colbert Report" is not phonetic; the *-t* ending in both "Colbert" and "Report" is silent (coal-bare re-pour; or rapport, signifying conversational banter). Colbert gives his true name, but the mispronunciation of his name clues in the audience: Colbert is a genuine person with an ingenuous façade¹⁵. Colbert's true identity has been questioned on numerous occasions, but most persistently and abrasively during his appearance on Bill O'Reilly's show *The No Spin Zone*, in an interview that was part of a larger series of segments referred to as "Culture War." Though this artifact is not directly part of *The Colbert Report*, the interview is part of an agreement between O'Reilly and Colbert; the two agreed to appear on each other's show on the same day. The interview on O'Reilly's show is also appropriate for critique because the interview has become an iconic for the public that follows the two personalities, but mainly Colbert's followers.

O'Reilly addresses the pronunciation of Colbert's name directly:

O'Reilly: Colbert, that's a French name, is it not?

Colbert: It's a French name, just to get the cultural elites on my side, Bill. I'm as Irish as you. I'm a Tormie, I'm an O'Neal. I'm a Tuck. I'm a Phee. I'm a Connolly.

[...]

O'Reilly: I talked to your third grade teacher, Miss Crabtree. She said back then you were little Steve Coal-bert. Is that right? [. . .] But you, once you got here to Manhattan from South Carolina, changed from little Steve Coal-bert to Stephen Colbert.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Colbert Bush, Stephen's sister and Democratic Party nominee for South Carolina's first district in 2013, pronounces her name with a hard *-t*.

Later, O'Reilly brings the subject of Colbert's name again. He says,

O'Reilly: Now, your middle name is Tyrone.

Colbert: It is.

O'Reilly: How could that possibly happen?

Colbert: Because I'm Irish, Bill. Have you ever been — have you ever been...

O'Reilly: There isn't one Irish named Colbert.

Colbert: Have you ever been — have you ever been — Colbert. Com Coal-bert of the east rebellion...

O'Reilly: Now you're Colbert again.

Colbert: I thought you had good researchers.

O'Reilly [shouting]: Who are you? Are you Coal-bert or Colbert?

By constantly alluding to Colbert's name and their common ancestry, O'Reilly seeks consubstantiation with Colbert, but he is baffled that liberal critics, who despise him, admire Colbert. Adding insult to injury, O'Reilly verbally acknowledges that Colbert is imitating his on-air personality. The two mutually, verbally establish that they are similar.

O'Reilly constantly alludes to the idea that Colbert “owes” his success to him, as Colbert’s punditry is based on O'Reilly’s character:

O'Reilly: It is tough being me. Is it tough being you?

Colbert: It's hard for me to be you. I'll tell you that much.

[. . .]

O'Reilly: But every left-wing critic loves you. Why? Is it because you're French? Is that why? . . . You must be doing something. You must be doing something.

Colbert: I'm doing you, Bill.

O'Reilly: They hate me. The New York Times hates me, but they love you.

Colbert: It's the New York Times, Bill.

O'Reilly: Well, what's the difference? You're imitating me!

Colbert: They hate George Bush. Of course they're going hate you. They're haters, Bill.

[. . .]

O'Reilly: Owes his whole life to me, and I'm happy to give it up for him. Next Bernie and Jane are back. They'll analyze why Mr. Colbert is so popular. It's inexplicable. And I'm not.

O'Reilly refuses to accept Colbert's disingenuous self-identification process. By identifying his persona with O'Reilly's, Colbert demonstrates that the two of them are both disingenuous figures, unworthy of the public's trust. The refusal to claim a certain birth rite or identify his origins also serves to create Colbert as an archetypal hero figure. The nature of this rhetorical maneuver positions Colbert in two places. The ironic identification as a conservative pundit identifies him as anything but a hero. His message, which attempts to disillusion his audience posits him as exactly the hero that he does not claim to be: a bringer of truth. At the beginning of each show, Colbert Reminds the audience of his ("and other news pundits' positions") when he repeat the familiar introductory mantra, "and this... is The Colbert Report," his voice lingering and exaggerating the final *-r* sound, reminding the audience that the role of the journalist and the packaged, half hour news program are highly produced. Since he is a known ironic figure, Colbert's simultaneous identification with O'Reilly and refusal to identify himself serves to render O'Reilly as a disingenuous figure. By asserting that his very identity is not rooted in absolute truth, Colbert demonstrates that since O'Reilly's ethos cannot be trusted, thereby disenfranchising his ideologies and political affiliations¹⁶.

¹⁶ When Colbert's figurative mask comes off, the audience sees a genuine figure (see "Genuinecomium"), but when O'Reilly's mask comes off, such as in the blooper reel that was leaked in 2008, we see a genuinely self-absorbed, unkind individual. "Bill O'Reilly Goes Nuts." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_HyZ5aW76c Uploaded: 13 May 2008.

Initial Assertion ("Setting the Stage")

Before feigning critique of a policy or idea, Colbert occasionally states the idea with rigorous confidence. On July 26, 2013, Colbert addresses the Supreme Court's ruling of DOMA as unconstitutional confidently: "The Defense of Marriage Act is dead" ("Bill Moyers"). While most coverage of the event shortens the phrase to the acronym "DOMA," Colbert utters the entire phrase, vocally stressing the significance of the event. His voice is loud, his eyes are stern, and his gestures are strong, his hand striking through the air vertically with each metered verse during the utterance. He does not smile, he does not even feign jest with his face, and when the audience cheers and applauds, he sternly nods his head yes and claps along with them. The audience, however, knows that Colbert's character is conservative, so the viewer should expect ironic critique following the initial assertion. The jest follows. Colbert says, "Yes, like my audience, I clap when I'm afraid. Traditional marriage is now as defenseless as a freshman frat pledge about to go through the spanking machine. So straight married people listen up: if a *gay* charges your marriage, you're going to want to puff yourself up, make yourself seem bigger, *try to frighten it off* by talking in a firm loud voice about pleated denim or Jimmy Buffet" ("Bill Moyers"). Colbert goes on to iterate that DOMA "was passed in 1996 to guarantee that traditional marriage was between one man and one woman for the sacred purpose of getting Bill Clinton re-elected." The ridicule in this skit is heightened because Colbert's initial statement is such a strong declaration. What is particularly interesting about this particular instance of assertion is the claim that the purpose that DOMA was initially passed to get "Bill Clinton re-elected." Here we see a prime example of a simultaneous critique of liberal and conservative policy. Colbert asserts, in one fall swoop, that Bill Clinton, the former Democratic president, was more concerned with furthering his own political career rather than protecting the liberal values

that he claimed to protect. DOMA, at the time it was passed, was simply not “hip” enough; the issue was too divisive. By calling out the universal hypocrisy of the situation, Colbert’s performance serves to critique conservative ideology, liberal political policy of the past, and it leaves the viewer questioning whether or not this repeal of DOMA was carried out by the current office because same-sex initiatives are so “in” at the present moment. Initial Assertion seems to be a maneuver reserved for the biggest, most divisive news stories. Perhaps the only technique used more often than Initial Assertion, the key opening line for introducing important news stories, are his grooming habits.

Self-Grooming

Colbert’s narcissistic character is grossly concerned with his appearance. Colbert often grooms himself while looking into the camera. This includes rubbing the eyebrows meticulously, brushing his hair gently with his fingertips, adjusting his glasses, tapping the bottom of his chin or neck, straightening his collar, and so on. On occasion, he has extracted a handheld mirror from his desk and examined himself in it. He often makes verbal allusions to his attractive physique. This self-obsessive reference to the myth of Narcissus is a maneuver that serves to remove the God-like illusion that audiences can develop about on-air personalities and celebrities (“even political candidates. Colbert’s mock campaigns for office are a commentary on this aspect of American life.”). The celebrity is highly primed before public appearance; the public simply never sees this process during the performance. By showing the self-obsessive grooming process, Colbert reminds the audience that the appearance of the pundit is highly controlled to exude the appearance of perfection. Colbert’s insecurity reveals that the pundit is also imperfect. In

"Rhetoric and Civility: Human Development, Narcissism, and the Good Audience," Harold Barret suggests that narcissism can inhibit meaningful communication and cooperation in a democratic society. Colbert's ironic appeal complicates this notion. As a narcissistic character, Colbert's character reveals that we should not be too self-obsessed, and we should recognize when others are. We must concern ourselves with the other, too. The pundit is concerned with his own appearance as well as his own opinion; he speaks into a mirror, or camera, most likely with the help of a teleprompter. He does not have a conversation with the audience; he simply speaks to an audience. He gives a story that is closed off to interpretation; he is unavailable for questions. As a leader, Colbert instructs the audience to follow: be concerned with yourself. Do not simply follow or accept the constructed image of the pundit and his one-sided narrative. The viewer has agency, and should ask herself to consider her own narrative, not simply take the face value of the pundit's.

Over-exposure to television can prohibit the development of interpersonal communication, as well as the development of self-awareness. Perhaps we can reconsider the narrative of Narcissus: after all, did he know what he looked like before he caught a glimpse of himself? He would have loved himself no matter what he had seen in his own reflection. Did he know that he was seeing himself, or did he encounter a stranger? Marshall McLuhan argues that the notion to believe Narcissus knew he was falling in love with himself is "indicative of the bias of our intensely technological and, therefore, narcotic culture" (*Understanding Media* 41-42). We believe that Narcissus fell in love with himself, because we understand the function of the mirror. McLuhan argues that we use technology as extensions of the self; the television is one such technological extension. While the "electric media" is "the age of the unconscious and apathy" it is also "the age of consciousness of the unconscious" (*Understanding Media* 47). We

should understand that the television is an extension of the self, but not the self. It is a method by which we communicate, but interpretation must come from within, and must not be completely willed to us by an outside source (in this case, the pundit). Too much self-pride can be debilitating, but so can a complete lack of it. The pundit, always speaking to an audience that shares his ideology, is a narcissistic character. The individual, meaningfully interacting as a self-aware individual with others through the process of identification and consubstantiation, is not. When confronted with adversity, a truly Democratic society should be able to consider a variety of faces in front of him, whether the faces happen to be a source of opposition or his own reflection. The moral fiber of a society is built on a consensus between the self and others.

The Absurd Prop-position

An absurd sense of carnival is highly engrained into *TCR*. In “Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse: Is there no “Truthiness” in Humor?” Priscilla Marie Meddaugh argues that The Colbert Report is a “contemporary appropriation of the carnivalesque” that challenges the center of discourse, is traditional news media outlets (376). Meddaugh argues that playful political rhetoric allows citizen participation to inaccessible, confusing political rhetoric. The fake news genre allows citizens to “observe and acknowledge the success and failures of political processes that govern their personal lives” (378). Above all, playful political rhetoric gives citizens an opportunity to simultaneously understand and critique through laughter. Meddaugh’s thesis is based on Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, a social space outside of official life and everyday order in which structures of hierarchy are temporarily suspended and dominant knowledge, “the center of discourse,” is “challenged by multiple voices on the carnival square” (379). Bakhtin saw the time of the carnival as a time of liberation from “prevailing truths” (379).

Carnival's primary agents are parody and satire, which simultaneously bring together and juxtapose "the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (qtd. 379). Parody in particular allows "profanation" and "blasphemies" that are not sanctioned in everyday life (qtd. 379). The parody of sacred and "revered texts and official discourse" is of particular interest to carnival parody. The entire carnival is a "reverse of the world" in which "sanctioned dieties – government, industry, and religion – provide fodder for carnival as cultural critic" (379). M.D. Fletcher, Meddaugh notes, expands Bakhtin's theory of the carnival to include all instances and situations in which the single voice of authority is questioned, especially when other languages are present. Meddaugh argues that Fletcher's theory is particularly salient to *The Report* since Colbert plays "multiple roles – comedian, caricature, and critic" (379). Colbert's show, which Meddaugh argues is "a contemporary appropriation of the carnivalesque" bears "witness to the shortcomings of the political realm" (379). The show challenges the center of discourse, in this case, traditional news outlets. Audience participation – "carnival laughter" positions audience member as insiders, rather than outsiders in "official discourse and authorized modes of communication" (379). *TCR* operates, according to Meddaugh, as "a critic of the press, as well as a unique site of media literacy education" (379). Occasionally, Colbert bring in absurd props, all seemingly normal and based in some understanding of an accepted reality, but all functioning in the realm of the fantastic: mutant wheat crops that grow from behind his desk during a piece on Monsanto's latest controversy, a ham with glasses to represent Karl Rove, sparklers, a collection of academic papers, etc.

During the formation of his super PAC, Colbert invited Trevor Potter, former FEC chair and his personal lawyer onto the show for a series of interviews that aimed to explain the legal process by which political candidates allocate donations to 501c4s. In a skit entitled "Super PAC

– SHH! Secret Second 501c4" ("named to indicate that his super PAC can raise a "ssshh-t load of money") Colbert utilizes a few simple props: a cheque, a manila envelope, and a small box that fits into the palms of his hands. This episode follows the announcement that Colbert is pulling out of the election ("Colbert admits at another time that he never intended to fully commit to the election process"). Colbert admits that he's raise 800,000 dollars and wants to keep it all, so he asks Potter for his legal counsel. Potter informs him that he can keep it all. Addressing Colbert, he says, "you can even write yourself a cheque for that whole amount. . . only problem is that everyone will know because you report that on the FEC report for the super PAC" ("Secret Second"). In protest, Colbert exclaims, "the whole point of having a super PAC is secret money and using it anyway you want, Trevor. Is there any way [. . .] Can I somehow give the money to myself and thereby hide it forever from all eyes and use it in the way that I wish?" When Potter responds that he can, Colbert enthusiastically encourages Potter to explain. Potter informs Colbert that to transfer money from his PAC to 501c4, Colbert must write an agency letter that tells the c4 exactly how to use the money. The IRS doesn't consider this the c4's money, so it "doesn't end up on the tax return" ("Secret Second"). Since Colbert's work has been so public, Potter suggests that Colbert set up an anonymous c4 to receive his donations, rendering his funds untraceable. Colbert clarifies the process: "Let me see if I can make clear what's happening" ("Secret Second"). Colbert pulls a manila envelope from beneath his desk and says, "I've got a 501c4 called Colbert super PAC SHH." The manila envelope is labelled to reflect his speech. Colbert places a cheque into the envelope. "I take the money from the super PAC. I pass it *through* the 501c4." We realize now that there's a hole in the bottom of the envelope. He immediately pulls the cheque through the bottom of the envelope with his other hand and says, "into a second *unnammed* 501c4." His movement matches his speech: "I place all the money

[short pause] inside that second unnamed 501c4.” Colbert moves the cheque to the box and says, “and through the magic of your lawyering and the present federal tax code, after I close this and *lock* it, that money is gone forever and no one ever knows what happened to it?” He physically closes and locks the box during this last sentence and Potter replies, “You’ll know it, but nobody else will.” Colbert opens the box and shows it to the audience; it is empty. The crowd “ooohs” and applauds. Colbert turns the box upside down, shakes it, and runs his fingers through the inner space, ensuring that it has disappeared, a smirking look of pleasure and disbelief on his own face.

The introduction of the absurd prop, the easy-to-digest visual reference to the everyday world, unpacks the complicated political rhetoric that exists to obscure the truth hidden by language. The object, which looks normal but clearly does not function like other identical artifacts, illustrates that television's reality is constructed; the television world is not a true representation of reality¹⁷. Furthermore, the objects that he does use serve to remind the audience of the narrative later. When an audience member encounters a field of wheat later, an academic paper, or a blank cheque, he is reminded that these artifacts can be used as tools of power, and while each object may not have previously held significance for the individual's worldview, he now sees the significance of everyday, mundane object. Outside of *TCR's* absurd spectacle, Colbert does reserve some moments for the genuine.

¹⁷ On September 25, 2013, Colbert artfully asks guest Joseph-Gordon Levitt, “Our images that we get from Hollywood, none of them are realistic, right? Isn’t everything giving us a false view of what the world is like?”

Genuine Encomium (Genuinecomium: An Authentic Method of Ethos Building)

Colbert has created such an ironic character that the audience and opposition are always searching for a glimpse of the *real* Colbert. This maneuver exposes the real Colbert and gives him more credibility with his audience. *Genuinecomium*, the rarest of the maneuvers identified here, may be the most revealing of Colbert's rhetorical strategies, because, in direct opposition to his usual ironic message, this genuine gesture solidifies the irony inherent in his typical routine. By comparing these two opposing methods of communication, the audience can more succinctly understand Colbert's usual critical dialogue. Colbert's encomium is typically a delivery of praise ("I've not yet discovered an example of genuine blame"). Colbert steps out of character and offers non-ironic monologue, which requires him to move out of his carnivalesque arena. During Colbert's moments of genuine praise, he clearly lifts the safety afforded by his character and the show and makes references to the *Report* itself, in a move that posits the show as a play-within-a-play, a method for truth-revealing.

In a recent episode of *TCR*, Colbert delivers a touching tribute to his mother at the beginning of the show; he separates this speech from his normal routine by distinguishing it with the word, "Before we start the show" ("Remembering"). Colbert informs the audience that he's "been away from the Report for a week, because today week ago today my mother... Lorna Tuck Colbert... died" ("Remembering"). He then begins a personal, heartfelt narrative about his mother's life; his cadence is strained and his words are choked throughout, on the verge of tears. When he finishes the tribute to his mother, Colbert moves away from the personal narrative, and turns to a different camera ("he's addressed only one during this opening monologue") and reminds us, with the usual line, "...and *this*, is The Colbert Report" ("Remembering"). Colbert shifts away from the world of personal narrative back into the world of ironic political punditry.

Colbert introspective, narcissistic voice is not present during the segment. He is not constantly showcasing himself as the most important person on the show. This particular gesture, which shifts attention away from the self and onto the other, is a method of ethos building that instills trust in the viewer. This maneuver is in direct opposition of the Self-Grooming techniques. During instances when Colbert showcases the importance of another individual, he illustrates the importance of genuine interaction with the other.

Simplification and Extraction

These two techniques are used when issues are complex. Colbert breaks down the complicated issue or idea so he can easily extract the most pertinent information. This technique is largely suited to transfer information to the audience, and is often performed with sincerity. While simplification and extraction are the main premises of the fake news genre, the techniques can be analyzed with ease on a smaller scale to understand how they function as part of a systematic routine.

In one episode, Colbert invites Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google onto the show to discuss his most recent book, *The New Digital Age*. Colbert reads the first sentence of the book aloud, “The Internet is among the few things humans have built that they don’t truly understand” (“Eric Schmidt”). Colbert then directly addresses Schmidt, asking him, “Do *you* understand the Internet?” to which Schmidt replies, “I do not. No one does” (“Eric Schmidt”). Over simplifying the matter, Colbert incredulously asserts that the “Internet is a series of tubes. Of course we understand it” (“Eric Schmidt”). Schmidt attempt to explain:

The Internet is really a collection of what people do, and people are not predictable. People do all sorts of wild and crazy stuff...The Internet is a connection of everybody together and the next few years, five billion people are going to join the two billion of us who are already on it . . . When those five billion people show up, all sorts of stuff is going to happen. (“Eric Schmidt”)

Colbert continues to demand answers to his questions: “Who are those people? Where are they living?” (“Schmidt”). When informed that “these people,” 5 billion of them, currently live in “Africa, Asia, the poor parts of America...” Colbert retorts, “Was that so hard?.. I’m just gonna leave and *Google* these answers if you want.” Schmidt interrupts during Colbert’s brief pause (indicated by the ellipses above), “Yes, it’s incredibly difficult.” This exchange signifies that the questions are plentiful, but the answers are difficult to understand, sometimes unknowable. Colbert later asks about the nature of privacy in the new age that we the world is entering: Will I be anonymous in the future? Will my identity be threatened? These overly questions are simplified for the audience. At the heart of his character’s message, Colbert’s true questions are: How is a larger conversation going to affect the individual? Who are we going to *be* in the future? The audience can extract a miniscule idea from this exchange: the near quadrupling of voices on the Internet in the next few years will greatly affect the conversations we have, the people we are, and the way we exchange and make meaning.

“Logical Representation”

Colbert’s work demonstrates how we can sift through confusing political rhetoric in search of truth while still providing the entertaining narrative that the audience desires. Geoffrey Baym’s article “Representation and the Politics of Play: Stephen Colbert’s *Better Know A District*” supports this notion. Baym argues that Colbert’s segment *Better Know a District*

(BKAD), in which he interviewed members of the House of Representatives from October 2005 until mid term elections in 2006, was a type of political play that questions the “logic of representation” (359). Given TV journalism’s focus on the executive branch, and the American public’s ambivalence about the legislative branch, Baym argues that it is “remarkable” for a late night comedy show to devote so much time to interviewing 435 congressional districts. Even more remarkable is the mixing of genres during the interviews. Baym argues that the comedic interviews were a melding of the notion of the political normative (a modern “arena of cultural and discursive practices” that assigns questions of “social organization, resource allocation, social value”) and the aesthetic-expressive, “the domain of art and affect, pleasure and play” (361).

Baym argues that as the line between informative and entertainment disappears, more people are drawn to the “infotainment” genre as sources of information. In an age where boundaries are not clearly defined, “one can never be entirely out of bounds” (361). On one hand, Baym argues that the segment serves as an instrument in relaying political information as well as a method by which representatives can strategically influence “electoral and policy processes” (361). Culturally, the segment serves to fulfill what Jeffrey Jones calls the “pedestrian pursuits of pleasure, distraction, curiosity, community, sociability, and even happenstance” (qtd. 361). Viewers are drawn to sources of information that simultaneously provide pleasure. The segment thus has the potential to connect the viewer audiences’ “life worlds with the increasingly foreign sphere of formal policy and legislative process” (362). The segment is therefore both a source of information and a symbolic text that articulates “a particular range of civic imagination, values, and dispositions” (362). Baym’s analysis suggests that BKAD “works on multiple and at time contradictory levels” (362). This process of information relay serves as a

type of post-modern play and poses questions “about the connections between words and meaning and between spectacle and reality,” which some critics fear has fosters “a cynical, ironic disengagement from politics” (362). Baym argues, however, that BKAD is more kin to “an ironic challenge to a right-wing, and quite post-modern” appeal that dominates “contemporary political discourse” (362). The title of the segment, Baym argues, suggests that one will come to more fully know a district, and that one should know their own district, fulfilling the purpose of public affairs media and its promise to share “democratically useful” information (362).

The BKAD segment extends the trend of interweaving information and comedy while simultaneously, and more importantly, providing an avenue for Representatives to make significant, affective connections with a young audience. Numerous Representatives were willing to be interviewed, and many played along with Colbert’s jokes, because they all understood the personal character of the politician is a vital determinant for the decision making-process in voters.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the spring of 2013, Stephen Colbert was invited to deliver the Valedictory Address at the University of Virginia. Colbert addresses the crowd with his usual, ironic tone, but there is something uniquely genuine about his speech; the absurd is absent from his tone. He recounts his own lonely, college experience during college, recounts his failure to gain admittance into UVA, due to his own failure to submit the qualifying essay, and offering up his speech as the final piece to his unfinished application: he throws around a few arbitrary SAT words¹⁸. Colbert praises the students as well as the school's reputation; he names several famous political and celebrity figures who have graduated from UVA, the most famous being "your founding father, Thomas Jefferson: TJ, Pres. Tommy Jeff, the Freckle-y Anti-Federalist, Louisiana Purchy, Old Bible Slicer... or, as most Americans know him, the inventor of the six-inch cipher wheel" ("Stephen Colbert Salutes"). Colbert continues with a unique alternative narrative of the historical figure; he takes issue with Jefferson's beliefs, criticizing them for being "too broad." Colbert claims that today, Americans prefer that politicians fit into near categories of "conservative or liberal," but insists that wherever the beliefs of the individual lies today, he can find something that Jefferson "said that backs it up":

If you don't trust the financial industry, he said, "I believe that banking institutions are more dangerous to our liberties than standing armies." If you're suspicious of the federal over-reach, he said, "When the government fears the people there is liberty when the people fear the government there is tyranny." If

¹⁸ Isolated and without meaning, Colbert reminds us that meaning is rhetorical, and is contingent upon context.

you question religion, he wrote, “In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty” (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”).

The quotes that Colbert has chosen to share demonstrate that the distinctions between conservative and liberal political ideologies are arbitrary; the divisions have changed over time from a single, more unified ideology, a more open mode of thought designed to serve a greater range of individuals. While members of all political parties may follow the ideologies set forth Jefferson, or any number of historical figures, individuals may also pick and choose which parts of history to celebrate or contextualize. We may forget, or simply never read or uncover a complete history of our own nation, and simply choose to celebrate ideas that serve our own purposes in any given context. Ideologies can be removed from their original historical and linguistic intent, and re-appropriated for a variety of purposes, but this is not an inherent evil. Ideologies must be re-appropriated to serve a dynamic society over time. The trouble with removing, extracting, and even forgetting linguistic or historical context, is that when a single ideology is divided into several ideologies to serve different discourse groups, the groups may forget that their ideologies were once part of a single, unifying ideology that held diverse points of view, designed to unite rather than divide. Colbert’s careful choice of quotes illustrates to the crowd that our dreams of the perfect America are all rooted in the same vision.

Colbert continues, dons his sarcastic mask again, and reminds us of the simultaneous hypocrisy on which our country was founded (implying that power still operates in this manner). Colbert says that we remember Jefferson’s public life as the “embodiment of the white male patriarchy,” but in his private life, he was “known for, shall we say, embracing diversity...very affirmative in his actions... am I right? I am right; they did the DNA tests. I’m right on that one” (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”). For this portion of the speech, Colbert quickly accompanies this lesser-celebrated historical narrative with verifiable truth.

Colbert moves on to the “advice section of the speech.” Skeptical, Colbert implies that the young generation may not take his advice, however. He holds up a copy of *Time Magazine*, and says, “This week’s *Time Magazine* called you ‘lazy, entitled, narcissists’ who are part of the ‘Me Me Me Generation’” (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”). He critiques the young people in the audience, claiming that it upsets “Baby Boomers, because it’s kind of our thing” (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”). He falsely praises his own generation for their level of self-absorption, which over the last 50 years, has allowed them to “[Take all the money. Soak up all the government services . . . and deep fry nearly everything in the ocean]” (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”).

While it seems that “all that’s left for the current generation is unpaid internships, Monday to Tuesday mail delivery, and soon, with global warming, semester at sea will mean sailing the coast of Ohio” Colbert assures the crowd that this assuredly difficult path will provide an immense opportunity for rebuilding society:

You may learn sooner than most generations, the hard lesson, that you must always make the path for yourself . . . the true secret is your life will not be defined by the society that we have left you . . . Society has no more idea of what you are than you do, because ultimately it only has your brains to think with. Every generation must define itself and so make the world that suits itself. So, if you must find your own path, and we have left you no easy path, then decide now to choose the hard path that leads to the life and the world that you want. (“Stephen Colbert Salutes”).

Here, Colbert speaks with appropriate ethos. Far removed from the theatrics of late night, fake news television, he addresses the graduating class, (with the knowledge of the power of his own celebrity status, he surely knows that this footage will be widely circulated within days) urging them to recreate society in the way they see fit, particularly if they see that the foundations of society are crumbling. The power of Colbert’s argument rests on the on-going nightly critique that is *The Colbert Report*. *TCR* functions as a the statement for Colbert’s case; public

appearances such as this one, the Correspondents' Dinner, interviews with other legitimate news sources, and so on, serve as the proof. In other words, *TCR* functions rhetorically as a set of ethical, emotive, and logical appeals. With a strong ethos built up over time, Colbert's public appearances serve to legitimize the set of claims that he has already made.

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