

Tempering Democratic Disillusionment: taxonomy of political comedy
Jeanette Castillo, PhD
Florida State University

I begin with the assertion that democracy is the best method yet devised for the equitable distribution of political disillusionment. An agonistic political competition always results in winners and losers. In every electoral competition, there is a loser who feels disillusionment: with a candidate, with a campaign or party, or with their fellow citizens. At the end of each election, citizens have the opportunity to re-illusion themselves, resetting their sights, revising their goals, knowing that the next battle is already planned, and this time, they might win. The democratic system accepts and contains conflict in order to preclude outright antagonism (Mouffe, 2000). We choose agonism and the possibility of temporary disillusionment to the certainty of long-term hopelessness. The United States, with its Declaration of Independence, set a profoundly ambitious goal of *equality*. The continuing struggle to live up to this ideal creates a state of disillusionment that is arguably both intractable and inevitable. At the same time it represents both motivation and inspiration, conferring dignity and nobility to the struggle for human rights and equality, no matter how futile that struggle may appear at a given moment.

The study of comedy and humor has been approached in various ways by various disciplines. Lynch (2002) points out that scholars have generally approached comedy from either a rhetorical standpoint or a functional standpoint. This study will present a narrative theory of humor that attempts to address both function and form by situating comic narratives as expressions of resistance to power. While my focus is on the integral relationship between comic narratives and democratic attitudes, the focus on power also suggests that the theory might

have applications beyond the political, in any venue that involves communication among and within groups.

I argue that comedy and comic narratives are essential to the process of illusionment-disillusionment. I will provide evidence that they were in fact present at the birth of democracy, and play an essential role in the emergence and maintenance of democracy. Through an examination of current political humor as expressed both in content on the Internet and in the discourse of popular comic news hosts Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, I will outline a theory of political humor/comedy that proposes three categories which are defined through their function as power moderators in political discourse. These categories, which I call Jester, Trickster, and Bully, help to shine light on the ways in which comedy contributes to, reinforces, or hampers efforts to create a more robust democratic culture.

Comedy and Democracy

The introduction of Comedy at the Dionysia is associated with the ascendancy of the demos (Rusten, 2006, p. 57).

Comedy, as a narrative form, emerged with democracy. In his analysis of two of Aristophanes' comic plays, John Zumbrennen summarizes the role of comedy, recognizing Aristophanes' "complex view of democracy." His comedies targeted the foibles of elites while both celebrating and acknowledging the "limitations of individual citizens and the demos as a whole" (Zumbrennen, 2004). Kenneth Burke (1937) pointed to the comic frame as the most constructive "attitude toward history," and when we must accept tragic outcomes, Burke suggested that the tragic narrative frame with a "comic corrective" was in order. Comedy precludes appeals to the cosmic forces that influence the epic (heroic) narrative. It also discourages the targeting of "others," usually minorities, in the service of what Burke would call

mere “humor,” a form that is dependent upon a shared sense of superiority for the source of its laughter. Throughout this analysis I will employ Burke’s distinction, categorizing this type of political humor as the realm of the bully, where the joke’s effectiveness depends on identification with an “in” group, or at least agreement as to which group is “out.”

In contrast to humor, comedy is distinguished by the assumption that “in” or “out” does not determine one’s potential to play the fool. In comic narratives, the powerful and the weak have an equal probability of filling that role. Moreover, the comic protagonist exercises agency, and does not receive divine intervention. As Burke (1937) reminds us, the comic narrative is one of forensics. The protagonist gets him/herself into and out of situations through his or her own wits, with perhaps a little luck at times. The comic protagonist may do the wrong thing for the right reason, or the right thing for the wrong reason, but above all she must survive by her wits. Comedy emphasizes fallibility over malevolence, and stupidity over iniquity.

This equalizing effect is what makes comedy the most democratic form of narrative. Moreover, in an ongoing agonistic competition, the power of comedy to temper disillusionment and even despair is essential to the perpetuation of the system. It is the only narrative of “acceptance” that is sustainable over the long term (Castillo, 2008). Congruent with Kenneth Burke’s argument about the “comic corrective,” sociologist Hans Speir highlighted the power of comedy to ease suffering (using the term humor for what we are calling comedy) while also pointing to the role of comedy in the acceptance of conditions of inequality.

Humor accepts both nature and the world of affairs. Humor does not change the circumstances that it illuminates, although it is able to lessen the discontent and even the despair that these circumstances produce. It does not alter the life meanings of people or the forces that control them. It helps one only to bear somewhat better the unalterable; sometimes it reminds both the mighty and the weak that they are not to be taken seriously (Speir, 1998).

Mark Twain wrote, “Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.” Unpacking this quote reminds us that a key characteristic of the afterlife in Christian theology is the existence of true equality among those admitted to heaven. In fact, in most religious narratives of the afterlife, the rich and the poor, the mighty and the weak, are judged independent of their status on earth. In a place where we might imagine that nobody falls down, or plays the fool, there will indeed be no need to laugh. Thus we might conclude that under conditions of full equality, comedy would no longer be necessary.

Back on earth, in the realm of the political, comedy helps mitigate the difficult realization of unpleasant truths, the disillusionment of unfulfilled promises or the disappointment of losing an electoral battle. As Speir (1998) notes, “the diverting political joke not only influences the course of dispute, but also the desire for conflict among the participants. The joke changes them, so to speak, as it deemphasizes the conflict.” Comedy gives expression to ambivalence, points to incongruities and constantly inverts, revealing and even celebrating the complexity that underlies human motivation. The connection between comedy and agonistic democracy has been explored by scholars in political science (Zumbrunnen, 2004; Basu, 2007), who note the importance of comedy as a venue for the citizen-protagonist, and its importance in keeping agonism from devolving into antagonism.

The comic protagonist

Aristophanes introduces us to the character of Diceapolis, whom we first meet outside the assembly. Diceapolis is a member of the demos. He delivers a monologue of complaints about the ongoing war and the ineffectiveness of the Athenian political body at resolving the conflict. He tells the audience he is going to go to the assembly and disrupt any speaker who does not

speak of, and for, peace. At the assembly, he heckles the returning envoys from Persia whom he derides as “peacocks” for their fancy dress, and heckles everyone else as well, and still the Athenians will not speak of peace. Diceapolis then tricks the assembly into adjourning, and taking matters into his own hands, he negotiates a “private peace” with the Spartans and retires to his home in the countryside, believing he is free of both war and politics. And of course he throws a party. But his fellow citizens interrupt his party (in the form of the chorus). They don’t want peace; they want revenge. Now Diceapolis must make his case. First he changes his clothes so that he looks like a bum, deducing that impersonating a citizen of lower status will only emphasize the cleverness of his argument. He makes his case with great rhetorical skill, and through his wit and oratorical prowess, attains power for himself. Once he has secured this position of power, he proceeds to become what he previously derided, pursuing politics as if it were only a game of wit, completing the democratic cycle of illusionment-disillusionment.

Aristophanes introduces the “clever citizen” to demonstrate the potential of democracy. Yet in true comic form, he tempers his heroic narrative with a warning against pride. Deification of elites is not permitted in comic narratives, and neither is deification of ordinary citizens. Aristophanes’ plays are the first manifestation of the equalizing force of comedy. The privileging of “cleverness” above all is key to this dynamic (Zumbrunnen, 2004). Cleverness, after all, is a quality that is independent of any other factors. Indeed, cleverness by the weak, as demonstrated by Diceapolis’ disguise, heightens the effect of comedy. A direct hit is always most impressive when achieved by the marksman who is furthest from the target.

In previous studies I have found a strong emphasis on cleverness in the political messages posted by citizens on Internet forums. The blogosphere places a high value on the pithy comment, and the political corners of the web are the sites of a robust competition of cleverness

(Castillo, 2006, 2008). The emphasis on cleverness is at the heart of a democratic system, from Aristophanes to the modern political discussion board, it is the leveling force that allows the citizen protagonist to compete in the battle of narratives under conditions of social or economic inequality. In popular media culture, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are representatives of the clever citizen, and they have found a public that is enthusiastically receptive to their comic narratives about U.S. political events and actors. Through an examination of their discourse, as well as political discourse from the Internet, I will outline the categories of Jester, Trickster and Bully. These categories are intended to function as taxonomy for the analysis of power dynamics inherent in comic political messages. They are not restricted to democratic discourse in their application, but I intend to use the taxonomy to suggest that, consistent with Burke's privileging of the comic as the proper "attitude toward history," (1937) the comedy of jesters and tricksters is essential to democratic discourse, while the bully represents humor and reinforces inequality.

Jester, Trickster, Bully

There are many reasons why human beings laugh. Ambivalence, incongruity, ambiguity, superiority, even fear, aggression or frustration – all of these emotions can produce laughter. It is often an expression of tension or subversion. It can also be an act of aggression against those who are perceived as inferior, or a method for expressing aggression without threat (Boskin, 1997). The critical principle that underlies the proposed taxonomy of political comedy is this: every joke has a target. The concept of target defines the categories of jester, trickster and bully. There is always one who tells the joke, one who listens, and one who is the joke's target, or victim. These categories can overlap, as in self-deprecating humor, where the teller

and the target are the same, or in the case of peer-targeted jokes, where the target and the audience are the same, inviting us to laugh at ourselves.

The upward or lateral target is the hallmark of the jester. In the days of monarchy, the jester had the ability to criticize the most powerful, with the understanding that the jester would ultimately “play the fool.” The jester protected the status quo. Carnival and masquerade traditions allowed those of lower status to experience the thrill of the jester under limited and controlled circumstances (Achter, 2008), but in a democratic system, the jester must temper every interaction. The status quo that the jester defends is not an individual nor an ideological position, but rather, the social contract for self-governance that defines the rules of the competition.

The jester points out incongruities, inequalities, and mocks the pretensions of the powerful. The jester does not provoke the laughter of superiority, but the recognition of universal fallibility in human endeavors. The jester prompts us to see our own disillusionment as impermanent, for if we can laugh at an opponent, we can maintain a perspective that acknowledges them as human beings, and avoids the assignment of evil. We do not laugh at what truly threatens us. And so the laughter of political disillusionment makes a double move, accepting a temporary defeat without succumbing to the tragedy of loss, expressing hostility without violence, and without the imprecation upon cosmic forces to take sides in the struggles of “man in society” (Burke, 1937).

The choice of a target that is of lower status than the joke-teller defines the distinction that is being drawn between the terms “humor” and “comedy.” As previously noted, the terms are often used interchangeably, but in the analysis of target the importance of the distinction becomes clear. Specifically, humor refers to jokes that establish identification and provoke

laughter through feelings of superiority. The laughter of humor is the laughter of humiliation. The target is the less fortunate soul, who is generally a victim of circumstance. Humor accepts through exclusivity, and rejects through prejudice. It requires agreement with a set of assumptions about the target and the teller. Examples such as ethnic or sexist jokes require identification with an “in” group and agreement on who is the “out” group in order to share in the laughter.

Humor is characterized by a “malicious enjoyment” (Speir, 1998, quoting Suss, 1966) at the suffering of those who are perceived as weak or powerless, disabled or physically unattractive according to popular standards. These jokes were prominent in the mid-eighteenth century, circulated widely among both the lower and the upper classes as “Jestbooks.” The humor found therein was “pitiless” (Dickie, 2003). It mocked the blind, the deaf, the hunchback and the indigent (categories which often overlapped) who were subjected to cruel pranks played by aristocratic youths. In cultures that privilege an ethic of equality, the humor of humiliation, evoking the laughter of superiority, has come to define the bully. In terms of target, the bully shoots downward, from the powerful to the less powerful.

The trickster has a long tradition in a variety of cultures, and an integral relationship to the struggle for power (see Hyde, 1998; Ivie, 2005). For the purposes of this taxonomy, the trickster is defined by the ambiguity of target. That is, the trickster offers no clear identification of target. The trickster move is rare, and not always intentional. As Hyde tells us, the trickster narrative complicates our understanding. It does not tell us what to think, but rather, just forces us to think. Trickster narratives are characterized by a multiplicity of possible interpretations, some productive, some destructive. The laughter that the trickster evokes is often the laughter of ambivalence, discomfort, and confusion. The trickster forces the audience to do the work of

making meaning out of the narrative, humbles through confusion, and ultimately thwarts expectations. In fact, for the trickster, the expectations themselves are often the target.

The anatomy of a political joke

A political joke that has endured over time presents an example that can be used to illustrate the importance of target to the effectiveness of a comic narrative. The first iteration comes from Speir (1998) and dates to approximately a century ago:

When Theodore Roosevelt was campaigning, he was once interrupted by a man who seemed to be drunk and kept shouting: "I am a Democrat." Eventually, Roosevelt, who was a Republican, stopped in annoyance to ask: "Sir, why are you a Democrat?" The man answered: "Because my father was a Democrat and my grandfather was a Democrat." Roosevelt said: "And what would you be, Sir, if your father had been a jackass, and your grandfather had been a jackass as well?" The man shouted: "A Republican!"

The second iteration comes from YouTube, in a video titled "Hilarious Obama Jokes."¹ The video presents the joke as text on the screen, and it reads as transcribed below:

A teacher asked her 6th grade class how many of them were Obama fans. Not really knowing what an Obama fan is, but wanting to be liked by the teacher, all the kids raised their hands except for little Johnny. The teacher asked little Johnny why he has decided to be different.

Little Johnny said, "Because I'm not an Obama fan."

The teacher asked, "Why aren't you an Obama fan?"

Johnny said, "Because I'm a Republican."

The teacher asked him why he's a Republican.

Little Johnny answered, "Well, my Mom's a Republican, and my Dad's a Republican, so I'm a Republican."

Annoyed by this answer, the teacher asked, "Well if your Mom was a moron, and your dad was an idiot, what would that make you?"

¹ The video was accessed on 11/3/2010 at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKAmijuhjFk>

With a big smile, little Johnny replied, “That would make me an Obama fan.”

The first iteration of this joke exemplifies the jester and the democratic-comic attitude. It is succinct, and contains amusement for audiences across political orientations. It celebrates the rhetorical competition. The narrative begins with the powerful (Roosevelt) exhibiting his cleverness in a play on words (jackass) that targets the drunken heckler’s party. But the citizen-protagonist gets the last laugh, targeting the politician’s party with an even cleverer reply that offers the surprise of an inversion. The joke is told without embellishment, with the only description being that the citizen “seemed to be drunk.” The inclusion of this detail is important. The comic protagonist is always tempered by fallibility, lest he descend into heroics. Perhaps the citizen’s drunkenness is the source of his courage; perhaps it is his usual condition. That Roosevelt declines to make an obvious joke targeting the citizen’s drunkenness demonstrates political sportsmanship. Neither combatant is out to humiliate the other personally.

The contemporary version of this joke maintains the power relationship of the target, at least in part. The teacher is a powerful figure in a child’s life. But the other children are targets in this joke as well, and while a child delivers the punch line, we still have the sense of an adult narrator. Thus we also are told that Johnny has “decided to be different,” establishing his superiority over both the teacher and his classmates. He is an independent thinker. This version of the joke is considerably more verbose, in large part because of the extensive description, not just of physical actions but also internal motivations, such as “wanting to be liked.” The result is a more labored narrative, and rather than the clever play on words, we are offered the substitutes of “moron” and “idiot,” personal insults that have not been credibly established as truth.

The second version of this joke would fall into the category of “bully” narratives because it requires agreement with a set of assumptions to appreciate it as comedy. The assumptions

include agreement that supporters of President Obama are mindless, perhaps even brainwashed, as well as sympathy for the view of public education as liberal indoctrination, a common narrative in current discourse from the right.² In the Roosevelt telling of the joke, no assumptions are required for enjoyment of the narrative. You do not necessarily have to identify with either character, as the target is partisanship, and both parties acknowledge, enthusiastically, their partisanship. Even the choice of insults is telling. As an insult, “jackass” generally refers to behavior, while “moron” and “idiot” are conditions.

The Roosevelt joke ultimately functions as a “jester” move that celebrates political tension in comic form. The joke acknowledges that the agonistic system provides a way of vehemently disagreeing while simultaneously seeking agreement. There is productive energy in this tension (Mouffe, 2000) and comedy provides a point of conversion for disillusionment and aggression. It wards off the panic of seriousness, marking the other as mere fool rather than “evildoer” and acknowledges the pleasures of rhetorical battle for its own sake. This is the pleasure that goes to Diceapolis’ head in Aristophanes’ tale of the clever citizen. And as soon as Diceapolis’ delight in the game became more important than the goals of the demos, his role shifted from teller to target.

Jon Stewart as Jester

The 2010 midterm election featured numerous rallies in Washington DC, most notably two that were organized by cable television personalities. On August 28th, Fox News television host Glenn Beck held a “Restoring Honor” rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The rally was widely discussed across media outlets, and viewed by some as evidence of an insurgent

² Recent examples of this narrative include “Indoctrinate U” by Evan Maloney, and “Expelled” by Nathan Frankowski, and featuring Ben Stein. Both of these are documentaries based on the premise that higher education and public education in particular, has become indoctrination from the political left.

populist movement among conservative citizens in the U.S. The rally drew tens of thousands of attendees from across the country, many of them Christian-right members of the Tea Party Movement.³

Enter Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, hosts of Comedy Central's late night comic news lineup. The Daily Show and The Colbert Report offer an hour of political comedy every weeknight, and their programs have been found to be not only entertaining, but also demonstrably informative (Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007). Jon Stewart is perhaps the most prominent jester in contemporary U.S. culture, mocking both the media and political elites. He is the questioning anchorman, interrupting his news readings to react to incongruities others would read without affect. He is particularly critical of cable news channels, and often hones in on Fox, and Mr. Beck, who offers an easy target with his highly sensationalized take on the threat posed by "liberalism." At his "Restoring Honor" rally, Mr. Beck called for a return to a more heroic narrative, deliberately raising the level of his rhetoric to the cosmic:

Something beyond imagination is happening, something that is beyond man is happening. America today begins to turn back to God.⁴

Curiously, Beck asked attendees not to bring signs, the ubiquitous form of individual expression at political gatherings of any size. This is of note both because it seems to represent a mistrust of the clever citizen, but also because citizen-generated messages were to feature prominently in the counter rallies that followed.

Shortly after the Beck rally, Stewart and Colbert announced their intention to hold a rally, but the conceit from the beginning was that they were competing rallies. Stewart proposed to

³ Freedomworks, an organization founded by Dick Armey, explicitly links the tea party and the Beck rally here: <http://teaparty.freedomworks.org/events/glenn-beck-82810-restoring> Accessed on 11/20/2010.

⁴ This portion of Beck's 8/28/2010 speech was accessed online 11/6/2010 at the Associated Press YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-p6ABs74lk&feature=related> The quote is found at the :43 mark.

“Restore Sanity” and Colbert, who anchors his show in a conservative persona, vowed to “Keep Fear Alive.” The rally was scheduled for October 30th, 2010, only days before the midterm election, and featured the dueling narratives of Colbert and Stewart, pitting fear against “reasonableness” and tolerance. The large crowd was festive, and their numerous signs made the rally a celebration of the “clever citizen,” demonstrating collective sanity and good humor. Examples included “Make Awkward Sexual Advances, Not War,” “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take anymore than is reasonably tolerable,” and “It’s a sad day when our politicians are comical, and I have to take our comedians seriously!”⁵

The deliberate good-naturedness of the crowd and the counter-narrative of Colbert’s “keep fear alive” theme allowed Stewart to navigate a very treacherous position. He was teetering on the brink of seriousness. If the jester drops his jest, and becomes *sincere* in his presentation, his audience senses danger. Rather than tempering tragedy, the comedy suddenly threatens to betray the audience by *becoming* tragedy. The jester joins the plaintive wail of the many, abandoning the liminal position from which he pulls the powerful down to the level of the powerless. Although Stewart’s closing remarks, focusing on the cooperative spirit and productivity of the average American were quite eloquent, he walked a fine line.

We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is -- on the brink of catastrophe -- torn by polarizing hate and how it's a shame that we can't work together to get things done, but the truth is we do. We work together to get things done every damn day!

The only place we don't is here or on cable TV. But Americans don't live here or on cable TV. Where we live our values and principles form the foundations that sustains us while we get things done, not the barriers that prevent us from getting things done. Most Americans don't live their lives solely as Democrats, Republicans, liberals or conservatives. Americans live their lives more as people that are just a little bit late for something they have to do -- often something that they do not want to do -- but they do it -- impossible things every day that are

⁵ Examples of signs from the “Restoring Sanity” rally were accessed online 11/3/2010 here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/the-funniest-signs-at-the_n_776490.html#s169297

only made possible by the little reasonable compromises that we all make.⁶

Stewart celebrates the clever citizen who does “impossible things” every day, the “compromising” citizen. Unlike the sharp critique he offers on *The Daily Show*, his argument included a very muted critique of the powerful. His target is somewhat vague, and in refusing to define them he threatens to implicate himself. The “polarizing hate” of cable news is the fodder for his “Daily Show.” He is one who lives on cable TV. He is well-paid, and moves among the powerful in his role as a television star. But a jester is one who lives between the camps of the powerless and the palace of the powerful. He is resigned to this in-between space, and the rhetoric of “us” and “we” is antithetical to that role. The key to the power of the jester is that he inhabits a place where he can both lift the powerless, and bring the powerful down a rung or two.

For his part, Colbert presented a satirical treatment of “fearmongering” in the media, a theme that was elaborated to greatest effect by a montage of news clips. The clips featured cable and local news anchors warning viewers about a variety of threats that may be “coming to your neighborhood.” He introduces the clips with “unleash the media!” The montage included everything from apocalyptic scenarios (“the end of the world!”) to terrorism to killer bees to the dangers of that ubiquitous summertime footwear, the “flip-flop.”⁷ Ultimately, Colbert allows himself/fear to be vanquished, and seems to maintain his comic persona until the closing musical number.

The Stewart-Colbert rally led to discussion in the popular press about the role of comedy, and comedians, in the public discourse. Fellow comedian Bill Maher criticized Stewart for not

⁶ The transcript of Stewart’s closing remarks was accessed online 11/5/2010 here: <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/Rally-to-Restore-Sanity/a/Jon-Stewart-Rally-Sanity-Transcript.htm>

⁷ The video was accessed on 11/3/2010 at the following URL: <http://youtu.be/bu3m3Gh5LAI>

being more specific with his target.⁸ He accused Stewart of “false equivalency” for his deliberately bipartisan critique. Other critics, like Bob Samuels, argued that Stewart and Colbert made that which should be serious, “unserious.”⁹ At the Washington Post, in a piece titled “Who does Jon Stewart think he is?” Paul Farhi asked, “And so, a mass gathering with the stated aim of being nice. Is that a role a satirist can really play?”¹⁰

The answer to this question is that it may not be the role of the satirist to mobilize people to rally for civility, but it is well within the role of the jester, which encompasses more frames than just the satirical. Just as in the monarchy, where the jester’s ultimate loyalty was with the royals he served, in a democracy the jester’s loyalty is to an ideal. It is the measuring stick he uses to calculate and report the gap between our stated goals and where we are in the moment. While the dangers for Stewart and Colbert were real, and ultimately the rally may not be remembered for the brilliance and bravery of their critique, they did inspire a large demonstration in support of citizen cleverness, with other citizens celebrating that cleverness through television rebroadcasts and Internet posts.¹¹

Colbert’s entire on-camera identity is a media critique, as he often points out the most outrageous conservative media rhetoric by pretending to agree with it. He is also a figure who has, on occasion, played the trickster. This happened most notably early in his career, when

⁸ “Bill Maher vs. Jon Stewart : Maher takes on Rally to Restore Sanity.” Accessed online 11/5/2010 at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/06/bill-maher-vs-jon-stewart_n_779944.html

⁹ “Why Jon Stewart is bad for America (and why you will dislike this article). Published 10/25/2010 at the Huffington Post. Accessed online 10/27/2010 at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-samuels/why-jon-stewart-is-bad-fo_b_773483.html

¹⁰ “Just who does Jon Stewart think he is?” was published online 10/25/2010. Accessed 10/29/2010 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/24/AR2010102402645.html?wprss=rss_print/style&sid=ST2010102102281

¹¹ An example of Internet propagation of the clever citizen can be found here:

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/the-100-best-signs-at-the-rally-to-restore-sanity>

some were confused by his persona.¹² More recently he testified before Congress during hearings on illegal immigration. His appearance “in character” provoked controversy, but near the end of the hearing he dropped his character for a moment and offered a glimpse into his own motivation:

I like talking about people who don't have any power. It seems like some of the least powerful people in the U.S. are those who come to the U.S. and do our work and don't have any rights when they're here. And then we ask them to leave. ... I don't want to take anyone's hardship away from them or diminish [the widespread effects of the recession] ... but migrant workers suffer and have no rights.¹³

The jester (in this case, Colbert) recognizes that from a comic perspective, the least-privileged citizens live in the most target-rich environment. From this position, there is nowhere to shoot but upwards. Thus the role of the jester becomes critical in a political system striving for equality. In such a system, seeking the joke, the jester will naturally align himself, or herself, with the most powerless. No matter how “unserious” the presentation, the true comic narrative always has a very serious underlying message that is understood as *who* is laughing at *whom*. The jester mocks meanness, and seriousness, pretention and paranoia, thus warding off fear; we are comforted by this signal that we are safe for the moment. We are still able to laugh.

Internet Bullies

Steven Crowder is a “comedian, columnist and political commentator”¹⁴ residing in Los Angeles, California, who produces short videos of his political commentary which are regularly

¹² An example of this was his performance at the 2006 White House Correspondent’s dinner in Washington, D.C., where, in character, he openly criticized President Bush and the media. A transcript of his “roast” of President Bush can be accessed online at:

<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/stephencolbert/a/colbertbush.htm>

¹³ From an account in *The Atlantic*. Accessed online 11/6/2010 at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/09/stephen-colbert-testifies-in-congress-in-character/63507/>

¹⁴ From Mr. Crowder’s official website, accessed 11/4/2010 at <http://www.stevencrowder.ning.com>

linked from popular conservative political websites such as HotAir.com. He regularly appears on Fox News as a commentator, most notably on the Sean Hannity program. Having ended the discussion of the jester with the topic of immigration and immigrants, it seems appropriate to present the same topic from the perspective of a comedian who does not align himself with the powerless. Steven Crowder's video "Illegal Aliens! (Featuring the Jimenez Brothers)" offers an example of the downward targeting of a bully, presenting humor rather than comedy.¹⁵

Mr. Crowder's video takes the form of a monologue, with narrative inserts that consist of characters played by him (and sometimes others) in various costumes. He opens by asserting that conservatives are afraid to talk about illegal immigration for fear of being called "racist." Conservatives have no problem with immigration, he says, "But we do have a problem with illegal immigration. Notice the difference. If you want to come on over, folks, ring the bell and come on in through the front door, like everybody else." Spliced into his monologue at this point are scenes of Mr. Crowder as a stereotypical "redneck" character, listing off all the groups Republicans supposedly hate in an exaggerated rural American accent, "Lithuanians, Albanians," etc. He then presents himself in a migrant laborer costume, with poncho, straw hat and dirt-smudged face, enacting the part of a service worker at a fast food restaurant who only speaks Spanish. To be more specific, the character only speaks one word of Spanish: "si."

Mr. Crowder (as himself) shouts, "Assimilate! There is no room for hyphenated Americans. Multiculturalism has not worked and cannot work." He goes on to describe the experience of his own mother, who he tells us was "French-Canadian," and made an effort to learn English upon immigrating to the U.S. After making his point, Crowder moves on to discuss solutions for illegal immigration, including a border fence on the US-Mexico border. He

¹⁵ "Illegal Aliens! (Featuring the Jimenez Brothers)" was accessed online 11/4/2010 at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/stevencrowder?blend=1&ob=4#p/c/D4D67C0C404DCFCC/28/F4WZC8K71a4> Quotes transcribed by the author.

continues, “I think America should build its own wailing wall. It’ll show America’s appreciation for its Jewish people and confuse the crap out of the Mexicans.”

We then see Crowder, in an interpretation of Hasidic dress, kneeling in front of a fence. An audio track of prayer is heard, but then transitions into the Mexican hat dance as we see Crowder, now in poncho and sombrero, crouched on the other side of the fence. As the “Mexicans” scale the fence, they are indeed confused, but even though the first “Mexican” reports to the second that “they’re all Jews” and they aren’t sure it is America, they decide to climb the fence anyway. Mr. Crowder comes back to wrap up, “Bottom line is that there are a lot of Americans who want to preserve and protect our country and we shouldn’t be seen as unsympathetic or demonized because of that.”

The numerous stereotypes portrayed in this narrative would be enough to classify it as bully humor. Rather than tempering the message with comedy, they reinforce Crowder’s position of superiority, even over the rank and file “Republicans” who are also portrayed in stereotypical fashion. Interestingly enough, the same dirt-smudged face that is part of Crowder’s “Mexican” costume is also part of his “redneck” costume. The “appreciation” shown to Orthodox Jews ultimately makes them a target, both through stereotypes and offensive caricature of their beliefs and traditions (build a wall and they will wail). In fact, all of Crowder’s alter egos are portrayed as inferior to his wholesome, all-American “real-life” persona who delivers the explication. Crowder protests that those who share his point of view are unfairly characterized as racists, a point he seems to contradict in his efforts at demonstration.

Bully humor can be seductive, as it features a teller who conspires with an audience against an external target. It is anti-democratic for the same reason. It seeks to justify inequality rather than to equalize. It requires explanation, and this explanation serves to rationalize and

justify prejudice. In the example of “Illegal Aliens!” this is seen through blatant stereotyping, but also in the confusion of Mr. Crowder’s apologia. He initially states that he is not against immigrants, just illegal immigrants, but then this distinction is lost in the command to “assimilate!” which would seem to apply to both legal and illegal immigrants, and seems targeted at culture rather than legal status. Thus the bully speaks against the ethic of human fallibility, preferring to justify inequality on the basis of the superiority of one group to another.

The YouTube Trickster

As noted earlier, the trickster is rare. The trickster move is characterized by a confusion of target as perceived by the audience. The trickster may or may not be intentionally obscuring the target. Comedian Andy Kaufmann, who often obscured his target intentionally, was a trickster (see Zmuda, 2001). But in the world of politics, a clearly identified target is essential to getting the message across. While political actors may sometimes benefit from ambiguity, they seldom want to be seen as creators of ambiguity. To create ambiguity is to force the audience to do the work of making meaning. Both in entertainment and in politics, this is rarely appealing.

I have chosen a YouTube video by user “hmatkin” that represents an example of tricksterism in the form of a “mashup.” The video is titled, “Clinton and Cruise – on the campaign trail.”¹⁶ Mr. Hugh Atkin, who lists himself as the creator of the video and the YouTube channel on which it appears, is apparently a citizen of Australia. The mashup was created by editing three elements into a montage of approximately two and a half minutes duration. The first element is excerpts from a video of Tom Cruise testifying about Scientology. This video was produced for internal use by the Church of Scientology and subsequently leaked

¹⁶ “Clinton and Cruise – On the campaign trail” was accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/waTomCruise?v=I3enFIPvnFg>

to the Internet. Although the church was able to have the video removed from many websites through threat of legal action, some websites still host it, often with messages of copyright resistance and protest of the controversial standing of Scientology as a religion.¹⁷

The second element is a clip from ABC News, covering an episode that occurred on January 8, 2008, during the presidential primaries of that year. The clip features Hillary Clinton answering a question from a supporter in New Hampshire, which was widely covered by the media as an example of Senator Clinton “getting emotional.”¹⁸ The third element is background music similar to, or perhaps even taken from one of Mr. Cruise’s action movies. Mr. Atkin begins his montage with the question that inspired Senator Clinton’s emotional answer. The question is from a woman in the crowd, who asks, “My question is very personal. How do you do it? How do you . . . how do you keep upbeat and so wonderful?”

At this point the music begins, and the video begins to cut back and forth from Senator Clinton to Mr. Cruise. The sound bites are brief, and echo each other, “You see me every day,” Clinton says, and Cruise echoes “every day.” As the video cuts between the two, the “bug” or graphic that identifies the broadcaster switches from the Scientology logo to the ABC News logo. The sound bites offer a parallel narrative of passionate commitment: Cruise to his religion, and Clinton to her political beliefs. Both express a belief that they have a special insight. Senator Clinton says, “I see what’s happening,” and Cruise says, “You see things the way they are.” Cruise talks about how this insight comes with a responsibility to help. He says, “I think about those who are depending on us.” Clinton says, “It’s about our kids’ futures.”

There is no editorial content from Mr. Atkin beyond the mashing up of the two

¹⁷ One example of this is Gawker.com, a gossip website that was still hosting the video at: <http://gawker.com/5002269/the-cruise-indoctrination-video-scientology-tried-to-suppress> as of 11/25/2010

¹⁸ The soundbite used by Mr. Atkin, minus the initial question was accessed at <http://youtu.be/6qgWH89qWks> on 4/7/2011

celebrities, one from the political world, and one from the entertainment world. The video has been viewed almost 170,000 times on YouTube. The comments from viewers are generally positive, most admiring Mr. Atkins' production skills, but many who view this video may have the same reaction as SiouxBwoi, who wrote, "Wow, what the fuck was this video about?" This is the reaction the trickster provokes. Whether or not Mr. Atkin set out to be a trickster, his video is being perceived as a trickster move by many viewers.

The video produced by the Church of Scientology was created to the highest production standards, and the inclusion of the "network" graphic, or bug, in the lower-right hand corner of the screen adds institutional credibility to the interview. The Clinton footage, while ostensibly more spontaneous, nonetheless inspired discussion between those who saw sincerity and others who saw weakness or insincerity.¹⁹ But it is the rhetorical parallels that raise the larger question. Mr. Atkins' mash-up implicates us all. The narrative of the enlightened elite raises questions about American culture and how we view the roles of celebrity, politician, and religious leader. In true trickster fashion, Mr. Atkin complicates our perception in a way that goes far beyond the influence of Senator Clinton and Scientologist/actor Cruise.

Credibility, certainty, and sincerity: the trickster undermines all. In trying to make meaning of the mashup, the viewer is forced to confront the ambiguity of elite roles and our relationship to them. The trickster doesn't give us a roadmap. He offers questions, not answers. How does the messianic language of the campaigning politician and the religious zealot/movie star reflect on our culture? How do we evaluate their claims of "seeing" that which others cannot? Both Cruise and Senator Clinton present themselves as epic heroes. They sacrifice themselves for a higher cause. They act out of pure, patriotic/divine motivations. While the

¹⁹ For example, John Edwards, one of Clinton's opponents in the primary, suggested her emotional display was a sign of dangerous weakness. Accessed at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/01/07/hillary-tears-up-on-the-c_n_80254.html

inciting question for Mr. Cruise was “why are you a Scientologist?” Senator Clinton’s question was “how do you stay so wonderful?” The fact that the answers to these questions strike so many parallels brings the whole structure into question, threatening to debunk (Burke, 1937) long-standing cultural frames.

The trickster narrative complicates, but it also opens up space for a broader perspective on human conditions and motivations. The trickster specializes in questions and not answers. He does not refer us to the cosmic, nor does he demand that we remain grounded in reality. Rather, he points to our own autonomy/agency, shines a light on our assumptions, and humbles us with the magnitude of what we don’t understand. While the jester is essential to democratic discourse, the trickster also fills a role of critical importance. If the comic narrative keeps our focus on “man in society,” the trickster narrative calls upon us to consider what society is, where the boundaries are, and how they are shaping our point of view.

Conclusion

This taxonomy is meant as a tool for the exploration of comic narratives in political discourse. It is intended as a way of conceptualizing the power relationships inherent in comic political narratives. Although I have attempted to establish the symbiotic relationship between comedy and democracy, I would also argue that the categories of jester, trickster and bully transcend political systems. In non-democratic systems, comedy still serves an important function. If speech is restricted, the clever citizen does not go away, but rather tells her jokes in a whisper, and likewise the jesters who are allowed to speak in the public sphere will be those who uphold the established power dynamic.

Another important consideration in the analysis of comic narratives is the influence of

cultural differences. Determining the directionality of a target requires a familiarity with the prevailing view of the status of various groups within the culture, not to mention an understanding of the history, art and idioms of the teller and the audience. Differences in cultures and political systems invite comparison, and cross-cultural comparison of comic narratives informed by a depth of knowledge about the culture will produce an even richer analysis.

The role of comedy in empowering clever citizens and tempering democratic disillusionment is an under examined area of political communication. Future study of comic-democratic political narratives could shed light on the ways in which citizens in a democracy use comedy as an equalizing force, and how comic narratives are used to navigate the liminal space between political idealism and political cynicism. The categories of jester, trickster and bully offer a tool for analyzing the power relationships in comic narratives, and differentiating between democratic and anti-democratic comedy. Although what makes us laugh is often complex, situational and culturally specific, there are some basic rules of the democratic comic frame that can be identified, and the fostering of a rich comic culture in democratic systems can enhance both the project and the process of self-governance.

Works Cited

- Achter, Paul. (2008) Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25: 3, 274 — 303.
- Basu, Sammy. (2000). Dialogic Ethics and the Virtue of Humor. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. Vol. 7, No. 4, (378-403).
- Boskin, Joseph. (1997). *Rebellious Laughter: People's humor in American culture*. Syracuse, NY. Syracuse University Press.
- Brigham, John. (2005). Anti-Anti Terror: Color Coding and the Joke of "Homeland Security." *New Political Science*. Volume 27, Number 4.
- Burke, Kenneth. (1937). *Attitudes toward history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Castillo, Jeanette (2006). The argument clinic : Argument, abuse, and George Lakoff's *Moral Politics* on the Yahoo News Message Boards. Thesis (M.A.)— Indiana University.
- Castillo, Jeanette (2008). Agonistic democracy and the narrative of distempered elites: An analysis of citizen discourse on political message forums. Dissertation (Ph.D.)— Indiana University.
- Dickie, Simon. (2003). Hilarity and Pitelessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humor. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Exploring Sentiment (Fall, 2003), pp. 1-22.
- Dmitriev, Anatolii Vasil'evich. (2006). Humor and Politics. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*. Vol. 44, no. 3 (Winter 2005-6) pp. 64-100.
- Fox, Julia R., Koloen, Glory & Sahin, Volkan. (2007). No Joke: A comparison of substance in The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the

- 2004 Presidential Election Campaign. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. JUN2007, VOL. 51, Issue 2, p213-227.
- Hyde, Lewis. (1998). *Trickster Makes This World*. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ivie, Robert L. (2005). Democratic dissent and the trick of rhetorical critique. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 5(3), 276-293.
- Lynch, Owen. (2002). Humorous communication: Finding a place for humor in communication research. *Communication Theory*. Vol. 12, Issue 4, November 2002, pp. 423-445.
- Mouffe, Chantal. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Nabi, Robin; Moyer-Gusé, Emily & Byrne, Sahara. (2007). All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages. *Communication Monographs*. Vol. 74. No. 1. March 2007, pp. 29-54.
- O'Rourke III, Daniel J. & Rodrigues, Pravin A. (2004). The *Onion's* Call for Healing. *Society*. November/December 2004.
- Rubin, Jr., Louis. (1998). The Great American Joke. In Walker, Nancy A. (Ed.) *What's so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. (pp. 107-119). Wilmington, DE. American Visions.
- Rusten, Jeffrey. (2006). Who "Invented" Comedy? The Ancient Candidates for the Origins of Comedy and the Visual Evidence. *American Journal of Philology*. Spring 2006, Vol. 127, Issue 1, p37-66.
- Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

- Smith, Chris & Voth, Ben. (2002). The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How “Strategy” and “Lockboxes” Changed a Political Campaign. *Argumentation and Advocacy*. 39 (Fall 2002): 110-129.
- Speir, Hans. (1998). Wit and Politics: An essay on laughter and Power. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 103, No. 5 (March, 1998). 1352-1401.
- Twain, Mark. (1989). *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*. Mineola, NY. Dover Publications.
- Zmuda, Bob. (1999). *Man on the Moon*. London. Little, Brown.
- Zumbrunnen, John. (2004). Elite Domination and the Clever Citizen: Aristophanes' "Archarnians" and "Knights". *Political Theory*. Vol. 32, No. 5 (Oct., 2004), pp. 656-677.

APPENDIX A – Transcript of Clinton and Cruise: on the campaign trail

HILLARY CLINTON: You know,
TOM CRUISE: You know
HILLARY CLINTON: I think
TOM CRUISE: And I think
HILLARY CLINTON You see me every day
TOM CRUISE Every day
HILLARY CLINTON it's not easy. It's not easy
TOM CRUISE I don't care if someone thinks it's hard or easy
HILLARY CLINTON It's not easy. And I couldn't do it.
TOM CRUISE Okay, am I gonna do it or am I not gonna do it?
HILLARY CLINTON If I just didn't passionately believe it was the right thing to do
TOM CRUISE Do it right.
HILLARY CLINTON I just don't want to see us fall backwards. This is very personal for me.
TOM CRUISE: It's not just me.
HILLARY CLINTON: It's not just political
TOM CRUISE: It's not just Dave Miscavige
HILLARY CLINTON: It's not just public
TOM CRUISE: It's not just the orgs
HILLARY CLINTON: I see what's happening
TOM CRUISE: You see things the way they are
HILLARY CLINTON: And some people think elections are a game, they think it's like who's up or who's down.
TOM CRUISE: Every day. And I think about those people who are depending on us
HILLARY CLINTON: It's about our country. It's about our kids futures.
TOM CRUISE: And uh, I think about that.
HILLARY CLINTON: It's really about all of us, together.
TOM CRUISE: We have a responsibility.
HILLARY CLINTON: Some of us put ourselves out there and do this against some pretty difficult odds.
TOM CRUISE: And there's that moment when you go, you know, I have to do something, don't I. Yes, I have to do it because I can't live with myself if I don't.
HILLARY CLINTON: And we do it, each one of us, because we care about our country.
TOM CRUISE: It's like, we're here to help.
HILLARY CLINTON: But some of us are right and some of us are wrong.
TOM CRUISE: You can just see the look in their eyes.
HILLARY CLINTON: Some of us are ready and some of us are not.
TOM CRUISE: Either you're on board or you're not on board.
HILLARY CLINTON: Some of us know what we'll do on day one, and some of us haven't really thought that through enough.
TOM CRUISE: Man you're either in or you're out.
HILLARY CLINTON: So I'm going to do everything I can.
TOM CRUISE: I do what I can.
HILLARY CLINTON: Make my case.
TOM CRUISE: The way I do everything.

HILLARY CLINTON: And then the voters get to decide.

TOM CRUISE: There's nothing part of the way with me. It's just (makes explosive sound).