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"Keep your facts, I'm going with the Truth": Toward an Ethical Perfromance of Satire in the Age of Hyper-Polarization and Culture War

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"KEEP YOUR FACTS, I'M GOING WITH THE TRUTH":
TOWARD AN ETHICAL PERFORMANCE OF POLITCAL SATIRE IN THE AGE OF
HYPER-POLARIZATION AND CULTURE WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

Satire is having a unique cultural moment. Conversations about what constitutes satire, why it should be performed, and how can it be done ethically are abundant in American popular culture. As with many forms of art and entertainment, satire has become a major subject of discussion in the great American Culture Wars: the conflict between the highly stratified ideological poles of right and left over the dominance of each's closely held social values, political ideals, and aesthetic sensibilities. Divides, real and imagined, in the American public have given popular discourse a sharp and biting edge, driven by growing political polarization and rampant misinformation, spurred by completely new forms of online communication, and exacerbated by a publicly ineffectual government. The use of art as political propaganda is nothing new; what is unique is the degree to which taste culture and artistic preference are now markers of identity and allegiance. The stakes of the discourse surrounding nearly all art and entertainment feel considerably higher than in other recent periods in America's history.

Satire's strengths lie in its ability to wound its target and reveal truth to its audience. Thus, is the form an answer to our collective crisis of national dividedness? A means of dispelling the fog of fraudulence and holding to account those responsible for its existence? Or is satire kindling for the Culture Wars' blaze: an accelerant to America's growing mean-spirited, bad faith, point scoring political actors? Through utilization of several modern and historical theoretical perspectives on the form in performance, as well as a personal reflection on my own work producing and acting in a reading of C.J. Hopkins play *The Extremists*, I seek to probe satire: our understanding of what it is, how it works, and if it is useful.

"Above all else, the Devil cannot stand to be mocked."
-C.S. Lewis

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In a 2015 interview on ESPN radio, Jerry Seinfeld discussed the growing trend of comedians avoiding shows on college campuses declaring that he would never play a college venue again. Seinfeld's stated issue with colleges was their overwhelming sensitivity and the widespread adoption of a "Politically Correct" campus culture that, in his view, stifled the creative expression of comics looking to address edgy and potentially offensive topics. "They [the younger generation] just want to use these words. That's racist, that's sexist, that's prejudice. They don't even know what they're talking about" (Schramm) This statement was slightly undercut by Seinfeld's position as perhaps America's most famous and critically lauded comic performers; it was and remains unlikely that many universities have an activities budget large enough to cover his appearance fee. However, the comedian's argument – that there is a growing culture of overwhelming sensitivity around oppressed demographic groups, which has a chilling effect on artistic speech in a way which degrades collective society's ability to engage with difficult but necessary topics – has grown in popularity in the years since this interview. This criticism of "PC Culture" was not first articulated by Seinfeld, nor is this line of argument used solely when discussing comedy; but I believe the statement represents a watershed moment for dissemination of the "PC Culture" trope in the discourse surrounding American popular culture. The opposite opinion, a critique of Seinfeld's line of argument popular on the political left, is that humor can often be wielded as a tool of otherization, or "punching down." In other words, jokes at the expense of someone less fortunate, an oppressed demographic minority, or an individual who lacks the ability to joke back without fear of retribution can be outright dangerous as they reiterate oppressive tropes and make the target of jokes the other. The world's

richest comedian, an entertainer whose last name is synonymous with the television sitcom, and most importantly a performer with wide cultural appeal across demographic and ideological lines - perhaps unknowingly - took a side in the Great American Culture War.

This thesis seeks to probe satire, a comic form which has been enveloped by, and grown alongside, the current iteration of America's Culture War. Satire is a performance genre uniquely capable of interacting with society on multiple levels. Satire is very often *P*olitical – having to do with government and policy – and always *p*olitical – having to do with where power and influence reside in a social system. Satire can be dispatched to address topics of broad importance to everyone in society, as well as issues of particularized meaning to small in-groups. Examples of Political satire on television are relevant here because of their mass audience and wide popularity. In comparison to theatrical satire, which both enjoys and languishes in a place of relative cultural obscurity, television satire is at once more widely seen and more readily integrated with other media forms; new developments in the culture war (as well as reiterations of old battles) are more swiftly circulated on television than in the theatre. Though I believe theatre's lack of a pressing need to generate content, as well as the catharsis possible from witnessing live and embodied performers to be a boon for satirical artists, I do not wish to imply that television satire necessarily lacks comparative nuance or artistic merit. Satire is a comic form which is usually (though as I will describe in a later chapter not necessarily) funny, making its use appropriate in lighter and more populist entertainment such as sitcoms. The form's use in popular entertainment does not bar it from artistic works of complexity. On the contrary, the ability of an artist to demonstrate their understanding of social issues satirically can denote that a work is of a heightened sophistication. In summation, satire's comic nature and frequent use of parody and irony gives it the ability to communicate serious political messages in the guise of

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unserious entertainment. Satire is dually useful in this way as its presence can artistically elevate a work viewed as otherwise pedestrian, while failing to alienate a mass market audience; Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers,* for instance, contains subversive anti-fascist messaging and a satirization of American militarism but these themes are communicated in the shape of an adventuresome science fiction action movie. In this thesis, I will principally probe mass-market television satire in order to gain an understanding of non-live or somewhat-live performance techniques and will compare the effect of this form to that of theatre. These comparisons will increase our awareness of how satire is used and misused, and how we may perform it with clarity.

Given the clear benefits of using satire (that it allows an artist to transmit biting criticism in an audience-friendly comic shell), it is perhaps no wonder that its use has exploded on American television in the last twenty years. There is a history of satire on television; programs like *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) have consistently applied a satiric take on the day's news and political happenings since it premiered during the Ford administration in 1975. *SNL'*s satire was often edgeless, due to its need to attract a diverse national audience to ensure network success. Later in the age of cable television, as new networks were free of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) standards oversight, which forbade crass speech, controversial themes, morally deviant behaviors, and political messaging outside of the perceived ideological center. This deregulation economically encouraged networks to pursue smaller, more ideologically and culturally consistent audiences, political satire entered a boom that continues to this day. Of note is the early 2000s programming of the Comedy Central channel, which built a brand around a stable of satirical comedy shows for smaller but more devoted audiences. *South Park* began as foul mouthed, brutally derogatory animated parody of child-centered sitcoms, and quickly

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pivoted to satirizing pop culture, national politics, and other contemporary television shows.
Chappelle's Show was a sketch comedy program not wholly dissimilar from *SNL,* but with a
prerogative to challenge and problematize race relations from the perspective of its Black
namesake and host Dave Chapelle. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* – the show's most
directly involved with "capital-P" Politics as well as the most critically acclaimed entrants to the
Bush-era Comedy Central lineup – were faux-news programs that sought to ridicule, if not
outright condemn, the news media status quo. These programs lacked the universality of their
network counterparts but kept their niche audiences engaged by displaying a level of political
sophistication, outright vulgarity, and a willingness to comically discuss contentious social issues
with a frankness explicitly disallowed in network television (Gray et al 14).

The story of the popularization of television satire is not uncommon. The dynamics of
media fragmentation seen in early millennium cable comedy shows are reflected in the rest of
consumer entertainment and journalism. As broadcast technology became cheaper and more
accessible, the economic demands to maintain a successful media venture became less severe.
The market became proliferated by new channels and more production companies.
Specialization, or distinguishing a channel as carrying unique programming for a bespoke
audience, became the defining business tactic of the post-network age. This shift – from an
America of several hours of news broadcasting across a couple channels and a handful of FCC-
approved television shows to an America with one-hundred-plus channel cable packages and a
24-hour news cycle – took place over half a century and had profound effects on the lived
experience of the country's people. Not only had the average American's media diet diversified,
so too had the themes and perspectives easily available to them. This environment self-
reflexively elevated satire to a place of supreme cultural importance.

In a post-modern world, awash in a polyphony of semiotic complexity that defies our collective ability to define a set of universally held beliefs, satire's ability to *tell the truth* distinctly, brutally, hilariously is lauded as an artistic feat of social critique. This is especially true when that truth is spoken to power. The satirist of the 2000's could clearly distinguish that the increasing democratization of media merely reshuffled and obscured the traditional centers of power in American society. The elite are not gone, says the satirist, they are hiding. *Chappelle's Show* was in many ways a reaction to the growing Clinton-era elite consensus of color-blindness: a social movement which sought to combat racism and symbolically unify racial groups through a refusal to "see" racial difference and advance an extreme ethic of equal fairness, a negative effect of which was the failure of whites to engage critically with the larger social systems that enforce racial difference and create inequality. The sketches reflected a growing dissatisfaction on the part of Chapelle with White America's commitment to displaying a language of racial cohesion while hypocritically enforcing policies which advanced a project of Black subjugation (Haggins 238). *The Daily Show'*s satire used the aesthetics of news media to drive home a sharp indictment of the ways in which politicians could exploit journalism's commitment to objectivity and the 24-hour news cycle's inherent hunger for drama to obscure their bad behavior. Though it is a widely known fact and a relatively uncontroversial position now, host Jon Stewart's clear-eyed skepticism of the Bush administration's mendacious claim that Iraq was building weapons of mass destruction was a far cry from the mainstream media's confused and politically deferent coverage. Even *South Park,* a show frequently criticized for displaying a shallow understanding of many of the topics it lampoons, forced viewers, parents, and cultural critics to reconsider the strict standards of social decorum constituting television's hegemonic control over language. Satire demonstrates itself to be a natural fit for the era; it flourishes in a specialized media

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environment because of its ability to entertain and gains cultural relevance through its function as a truth-based antidote to the sickness of postmodernism (Colletta 866).

In the years since the first television satire boom, the forces that drove media fragmentation have become supercharged. The titanic advancements in technology and culture, as well as the reciprocity of their relationship, that changed the media landscape of the nation over the course of half a century have been dwarfed several times over in a decade and a half. The widespread adoption of the Internet as a constantly present informational tool and disembodied second home for social interaction is changing the very way we engage with the world around us. Moreover, the proliferation of smartphones has majorly increased the pace at which information is presented and dispersed. Social media is, appropriately enough, a completely new type of media as different from film or television as those are from a painting. Though it uses elements of and has similarities to other media forms, social media is decidedly distinct from its predecessors. Television and film have had their economic models once again upended by the invent of streaming. The breadth of written and video news, television, film, books, political opinion, reality programming, pictures of friends, video essays, six-second clips of teenagers dancing, and personality quizzes available to the average American at all times of the day is staggering.

As these diverse media forms widen, they also flatten; the distinctions between any of the bits of entertainment or news with which one can expect to engage are fading. Geoffrey Baym describes the blurring of boundaries between genre, media, as well as political and nonpolitical speech as "discursive integration" and James Caron partially attributes this phenomenon to the success of the faux-news television satirists ("The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness" 155). Anything and everything can be observed on the same device at the same time and is therefore

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given nearly equal weight in our personal perceptions and in culture (Martin et al 123). That discursive integration is exponentially increasing is, I propose, evidenced by the widespread adoption of the word "content;" a somewhat shockingly vague term which can refer to any number of created things which may engage one's attention and make money from said engagement. A news story in the *New York Times* is *content*; a self-produced makeup tutorial posted to a young woman's Facebook page is *content*; the Oscar-award winning film *Parasite* is *content*; Internet pornography is *content*; a picture on Instagram is *content*; the song "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X is *content*; a GIF of Lil Nas X in the music video for "Old Town Road" is *content*. The benefit of the discursive integration's content mélange is another expansion of the voices present which can seriously influence American society. The media's economic need for new content is never ending and the Internet gives every user the tools to communicate with as wide an audience they can reach. If the fragmentation of media in the latter half of the 20th century demanded that the power brokers and gatekeeping systems of popular culture meet the demands of the populist masses at their door, the technological advancements of the first twenty years of the 21st century have blown a massive hole in the side of the gate.

Political satire has morphed and adapted to this new media landscape. On television, it is easy to track the evolution of the programs of the 2000s cable satire boom. It paints a microcosm of the diversification of media forms occurring in the last decade. Familiar tropes and trends in satire are repeated with slight variation: fans of *Chappelle's Show* can watch several culturally minded gonzo satirical sketch shows (many of them on Comedy Central), such as *Key & Peele, Inside Amy Schumer, Alternatino,* and *I Think You're Interesting*; the popularity of *South Park* preceded a wave of crass adult animation; *The Daily Show* has spawned a host of offspring faux-news political satires. These shows nearly all feature former writers and performers from

Stewart's program, taking the base formula of his show and changing it slightly to capture a distinct point of view or allow for a somewhat different type of satiric commentary. For example, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* attacks the news from a largely feminist perspective, while *Patriot Act* and *Last Week Tonight* forgo nightly programs that make jokes about the news of the day for weekly offerings that devote their runtimes to the satiric dissection of one larger political topic. These shows, as well as the current post-Stewart iteration of *The Daily Show,* also represent the increasing desire for demographic diversity on screen. Of the four hosts of these shows, half are non-white, one is a woman, and three are first or second-generation immigrants. The social benefits of this expansion are as palpable as they were in the first television satire boom. One can expect to find greater variation in aesthetic presentation and ideology as well as a more accurate representation of the actual demographic diversity of the country. This is one of the major strengths of the content boom more generally; it is not only possible, but quite probable that one can find a piece of media which speaks directly to them: something which features creators that look like them, a view of the world which closely matches their own, and a comic aesthetic that makes them laugh.

The emergence of new media technologies and hyper fragmentation has closely tracked with the expanding dynamic of political polarization in America. The interaction of these trends is concerning, but not wholly unexpected. Political polarization has been steadily gaining intensity in the United States for much of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is the process of the nation's populace becoming more closely aligned around two ideological "poles." The full historical and sociological reasons for polarization are numerous, highly contentious, and well beyond the scope of this work. However, its effects are easily observable and keenly felt by people up and down the political hierarchy. One of the very material results of

polarization, for example, is an increasingly inactive Congress. The American legislature is an institution which all but requires cross party compromise to make law; in a highly polarized time, the likelihood of finding a common agreement on any issue that both parties can stomach, let alone confidently craft legislation around, is very unlikely. Deprived of an actual lawmaking function, symbolic gesture becomes a Congressperson's main means of public political expression. Signaling a set of vague values and hypothetical policy preferences in a way that connects emotionally with voters has been a constant feature of the political class, but the importance of the practice seems to be on the rise. Distinguishing oneself from more or less ideologically aligned members of one's own party as well as utterly othering members of the opposite party is not only easier than acting in tandem for the coequal betterment of the country, it is often the only rational option available to a politician.

Behavior on the part of the elite is mirrored in the common members of the polity in that political identity formation involves negative identifiers; what you *are not* just as if not more important than what you *are.* Media fragmentation and discursive integration transform and exacerbate negative identification. The boundaries between political news media and all other media are so thin they are effectively nonexistent. Political identity becomes inextricably wrapped up in personal identity. This statement is, on its face, nothing new. All aspects of personal identity inform one's political beliefs and, more broadly, the ways someone is permitted to interact with and influence the dominant political hierarchy. But this linkage, reinforced by an attention-based media system and shone through the lens of polarization, has stratified the country along a dual set of realities. This is not postmodernism, but meta-modernism; we do not lack a singular set of truths but suffer from an abundance of well-defined unalterable belief systems at odds with one another.

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These cultural conditions are the battlefield on which the modern Culture Wars are fought. These conditions both influenced Jerry Seinfeld's statements about political correctness on college campuses and turned them into a binary line across which another political battle may be fought. Whereas the tensions inherent in satire – a tool that plays with and ridicules popular discourse while simultaneously advancing anti-hegemonic and anti-oppressive social goals – demand nuance and reflection on the part of both practitioner and audience, the polarized landscape encourages a form of discourse that too often disallows nuance. Seinfeld's statement unintentionally lies along the fault line that distinguishes the growing consensus view of comedy on the political right from left.

Thus, does satire require a fixed sense of reality to operate? We say satire is good when it speaks truth to power, but how do we define power? What is satire's imperative? Is it moral? The invocation of artistic truth in the face of a veil of elite control seems to describe a sort of populist moralism attributed to satirists like Jon Stewart by his fans. Whereas this form of satire seemed a corrective to postmodernism, will the ever-increasing polyphony overwhelm its capacity for truth? Can any form of expression based on ridicule be morally uncompromised?

As an actor interested in comic performance and the power of satire, I am concerned with its relevance in modern society. While I do not wish to confine the form to premature obsolescence, I feel a profound anxiety regarding its use. I posit that satire occupies a multivalent position, but an understanding of the form is as important a consideration for the satirical artist as the content of said work. As a theatrical actor writing in early 2021, one year into the Coronavirus pandemic, I have come to more greatly value the efficacy of art when it is delivered to an audience that has the tools and contextual knowledge necessary to engage with it. The loss of shared experience, enabled in part by technological revolution and political division and now

supercharged by the Coronavirus pandemic, may prove a death knell for satire. Yet I remain hopeful that collective expression and the live, in-person quality of theatre may revivify the form.

In this thesis, I will probe satire through research, case study, and practice. Chapter 2 provides a detailed definition of satire through examining the aspects inherent to the form and those which leave room for change. This chapter will provide the reader with a basis of knowledge and influence their interpretation of the following chapters. In Chapter 3, I present two case-studies of modern television satire for the purpose of examining how political satire is frequently performed in modern America. I follow with an analysis of piece of live theatre and discuss the satirical possibilities present to theatre which are absent on television. These works all demonstrate acting performances which inform a viewer as to the satirist's intent. This chapter will provide examples of the ways satire can bring about positive social change as well as inflict harm, and the means through which an actor's performance can be understood or misunderstood by their audience. I seek to investigate satire's ethical dimension and bring greater elucidation as to the question of satire's ability to positively affect political discourse in modern America. Chapter 4 recounts my experience producing and acting in a reading of C.J. Hopkins' *The Extremists.* I document the ways I approach the satirical material as an actor given my research of satirical performance as well as the context of the show's performance almost eight months into the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter 5, I discuss the conclusions of my research and practice, the ways I have expanded my conception of satire as a dramatic performance form. I conclude with several ideas for future projects based upon this research and inspired by my belief in the restorative potential of live performance.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

I will discuss the possibilities and social responsibilities of satire, both through recounting personal experience as well as through examining some popular outside texts which both elucidate and problematize popular conception of satire. First, however, I should define some terms and concepts and their contexts. In this chapter I will first give a brief overview of the historical precedents of Western satire in ancient Greek theatre. Then, I will present research which elucidates the multivalent definition and uses of satire and gives us a common language with which to discuss applications of the form in a modern context. I organize this research using George Test's four parts of Satire and then discuss research which problematizes Test's parts in the chapter's final section.

Satire, simply put and in a modern context, is a comic art form using mockery to critique aspects of an individual, a group, or a society. I will elaborate on this definition of satire in much greater depth in this chapter and discuss some of the ways this definition has changed through history or is commonly misunderstood. Satire is derived in part from the Greek satyr play, a theatre form based in traditional Greek religious rites. The satyr play was distinct from Greek tragedy, though it mixed a few of tragedy's generic conventions with tropes from Greek comedy, such as ridiculous situations and happy endings. This is a hugely simplified explanation of the ancient precursors of modern satire, but it helps to highlight two aspects of it that are important to recognize. Firstly, satire is a historically amorphous genre of art. It has been adopted by different cultures at different times to accomplish related but distinct effects upon audiences of the day. Satire's multivalence extends into the present (early 2021 as of the time of this study's publication) in which there is a robust debate, both academically and amongst the public, around

what counts as satire. Secondly, despite the range of differences, modern satire retains a version

of the dualism present in ancient Greek iterations. Satire stylishly blends comic and tragic,

serious topics with laughable humor. This inherent structural and aesthetic ambiguity is likely the

source of its popularity, but I would also argue the cause of many of its negative externalities.

Satire's duality, and the problems stemming from it, will be discussed in greater detail

throughout this thesis.

Rather than burdening satire with a strict definition, it is perhaps more helpful to think of

it as a form bound by a set of rules delimiting how it occurs. In his book *Satire: Spirit and Art*,

George Test provides four parts of satire. These are Play, Judgement (sometimes called

Critique), Aggression (sometimes called Mockery), and Laughter. These parts are understood to

usually occur in the order I have written them, beginning with Play, and ending with

Laughter. Following this, I will present several critiques problematizing Test's parts in ways

which are important to understanding satire's role in the modern world. These are a widely

adopted means of defining and examining satire, but other scholars have questioned, expanded,

and made important adjustments to these four parts (qualms I will examine later in the chapter).

Play

Play refers both to a general state or space in which the text is presented or more

specifically the way in which a single action from that text is carried out. It is the cue telling the

audience what they are observing or about to see is not meant to be understood seriously. Jon

Stewart's performance in *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1999-2015) provides an example

demonstrating the mechanisms a satirist may use to cue their audience into the realm of the

unserious. The format of Stewart's show is not inherently funny or satirical; it is a half hour

political talk show featuring discussions of the week's major news events and interviews with

politicians and notable public figures. Rather, its structure is designed to feel nearly identical to

an opinion program one might find on MSNBC. It is a simulacra of a television program

Americans have expected to see every night since the inception of television news: a reasonably

handsome and charismatic white man with gelled hair sitting behind a desk and telling his home

audience the news. What separates *The Daily Show* from the realm of serious journalism and

ultimately plunges it into satire is the myriad of visual, auditory, and performance cues indicating

to audiences that Stewart is *playing* (Day 88).

Frequently, there is not one single cue, but rather a collection of semiotic indicators and

performance nuances which, in aggregate, create a space for text to be performed playfully,

without the burdens it might carry if spoken seriously. Consider the production design of

Saturday Night Live, which utilizes the limitations and embellishments of stock sets, props, and

costumes to disentangle humor around the week's events from their context in reality. A live

recreation of events such as a contentious presidential debate or Supreme Court Justice Brett

Kavanaugh's controversial Senate hearing would not be viewed as inherently laughable

performances. However, bright studio lighting, minimal set designs, and creatively cast

(reappearing as different characters across multiple scenes or portraying real life people of wildly

different gender, build, height, and look) comedic actors render *SNL*'s portrayal of these events

humorous, a cartoon approximation of the world, and not the real thing. The visual "aesthetic of

play" cultivates an air of "unseriousness" that is apparent to an audience before any single joke is

told (Jones 41). While this live sketch show format and exaggerated production aesthetic is often

popularly attributed to *SNL* in modern American culture, it is far from unique to that show. *SNL*

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is here a reference point for a collection of "cues for Play" massively influenced by the collected history of live, theatrical sketch and improvised comedy. Sixteenth century Italian *commedia dell'arte* performers, for example, utilized many of these cues (stock sets, silly costumes, exaggerated physical humor, and comic bits) to slyly satirize the society and power structures of their day.

The conjuring of a unified comedic aesthetic of play is intimately related to the carnivalesque, a foundational concept coined by Russian literary critic and philosopher, Michael Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World*. Rather than relating to modern street carnivals containing food vendors and brightly colored children's rides, Bakhtin refers here to the carnivals of Medieval Europe. These, according to the critic, were Bacchanalian celebrations of moral disregard and hedonistic pleasure, in which members of all social strata masked their faces to dilute the boundaries between castes and social roles. The very notion of hierarchy and difference is momentarily upended with a shared sense of ridicule aimed at society and the self. Shame is forgotten entirely or converted, through the act of laughter, into pleasure. *SNL*, with its exaggerated and ludicrously dressed simulacra of public figures engaging in playful parody, invokes the carnivalesque for its studio audience and viewers at home. The show's performers assume a persona which is not their own and, in doing so, are able to blur the lines between social rank for comedic effect. Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin is funny due to Fey's skilled, well observed performance, but it becomes carnivalesque because it disregards how a serious and powerful person is "supposed" to be portrayed. In other words, through the very act of comically portraying a powerful individual, an actor impresses upon their audience the notion that the hierarchical boundaries present in business, government, and culture are enforced by a socially agreed upon set of norms and expectations which can, at least temporarily, be artistically

subverted. Within the carnival, the king is a fool, the priest is a dunce, and the politician is a clown. This act of normative upheaval induces a feeling of anarchic pleasure in the audience, which can permit them to consider the world differently. The satirist, through Play, indicates to the audience that they are entering the carnival, a comic space in which the normal rules do not apply, and satire is possible.

<div align="center">Judgement</div>

Judgment, or critique, occurs after the satirist has revealed their intent to perform a text comically. It is the point the satirist, or satirical text, communicates their intention to engage in a critique of a system, social norm, policy, or individual. By identifying their chosen subject of critique as a satirical target (or more colloquially, "the butt of their joke"), the satirist seeks to subvert the audience's attention from amusement to critical thought. This aspect distinguishes much of modern American political comedy from parody. Though parody and satire are often used interchangeably in common parlance, they are two definitionally distinct forms of comic art. Parody involves the near-replication and purposeful exaggeration of a known cultural artifact for the purpose of entertaining an audience and moving them to laughter. Satire does not need to express though parody, though parody is often used in tandem with satire. Examples of art which is comically parodic without satirical judgement abound in media. Films like 1980's *Airplane!* or 2014's *What We Do in the Shadows* exaggerate, skew, and deflate generic conventions in unexpected ways to produce humor, but lack much in the way of social commentary or political polemic. *Airplane*'s farcical mixture of disaster action, romance, and contemporary cultural reference or the tonal absurdity of juxtaposing monster horror and confessional documentary

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found in *What We Do in the Shadows* are certainly funny, but the parody is not employed for the purpose of making a critical point about those genre conventions, commercial culture, or society at large and is therefore distinct from satire.

As previously discussed, *The Daily Show* functions as both satire and parody of the news because it invokes the image of a serious news program and then subverts that image with Play, creating the possibility for laughter. Television news' use of flashy graphics and eye-catching headlines, its subtly enticing camera movements, and its suit-wearing, desk bound hosts are visual signifiers *The Daily Show* replicates and then comically exaggerates. The show is not, however, generically defined as parody because it does not solely wish to make its audience laugh. The parodic deviations *The Daily Show* makes from its referent are humorous but, more importantly, they clarify the show's political arguments. Satiric exaggeration occurring due to parody often carries an inherent critique of the thing its parodying, conveyed beside or outside of the text of the performance. Stewart's visual replication of news media makes the audience laugh, but then absorbs a critique of the way prime time news obscures content and nuance behind a veil of impressive graphics, slick camera moves, and charming talking heads. Unlike "pure" parody, satirical parody does not treat its subject as critically neutral fodder for jokes. Rather, it encourages its audience to think critically about the power structures, cultural trends, and social systems that create the identifiable tropes, stereotypes, or archetypes it makes fun of.

<u>Aggression</u>

Aggression, or mockery is perhaps the most immediately visible part of satire, likely because it is socially and interpersonally disruptive. It is also the most morally dubious aspect,

which draws the ire of many critics. After inviting their audience into a state of unserious play and identifying a social ill worthy of discussion and thought, the satirist engages in a mockery of their comedic target. Though it is often an effect, inflicting harm upon the subject of the satire's aggression is not the sole purpose of engaging in mockery. Rather, the goal of mockery, and often the goal of satire, is truth. Through mockery the satirist reveals something inherent to the target's being (whether the target be a person, group, or idea) otherwise obscured to the audience, such as *The Daily Show's* parodic critique of the news. This is one of the reasons that satire so often makes comic observations of politicians, celebrities, and cultural stereotypes. They are well known entities who exert active influence over the lives of satire's potential audience. This very influence gives elite members of society a great amount of control over the image they project into popular culture but, as in the case of Fey's Palin, it also provides satirists with a host of recognizable characteristics to be parodied and commented upon. The dissolution of the popular image and its replacement with a mockable joke leads the audience towards possibility for greater understanding of social structures, hierarchies, and cultural stereotypes (Duffy and Page 560).

Beth E. Bonstetter provides a means of further examining the mockery employed by the current cadre of popular political satirists and satiric works. She introduces a dichotomy separating satire into two forms, split by qualities of their mockery: Satire as Burlesque and Satire as Comedy. Though Aggression is often applied viciously by satirists (a truth communicated intrinsically by the very term used to describe this part of satire) there is a necessary clarification to be made as to the degree and intent of mockery. Mockery is employed by all satiric artists and art, but an audience would likely either actively consider or passively notice there is a difference between the mockery present in Boots Riley's anti-capitalist Sci-Fi

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comedy film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) and David Wain's satirical parody of American summer camp blockbusters *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001). Whereas *Sorry to Bother You*'s mockery of corporate culture feels tonally pointed and aggressive, *Wet Hot American Summer*'s mockery is so airy as to feel farcical rather than satirical. Defining differences in the ways these works use and perform mockery grants us a more nuanced means of critically determining how they operate and if they are effective. Bonestetter's dual description of satiric mockery describes why this aesthetic difference is present and what it communicates to an audience.

Bonstetter uses Kenneth Burke's concept of Poetic Frames of Acceptance and Rejection as the basis for her analysis and then uses the films of Jewish-American comedy film director Mel Brooks as an initial means of demonstrating the application of her dichotomy (Bonstetter 19). Of note is Bonstetter's appropriation and reimagination of Burke's work to reflect a modern understanding of satire (one in line with the definition I use in this thesis). Burke's "satiric frame of poetry" requires that a satiric text be essentially and almost ceaselessly ironic. Burke would assume that *The Colbert Report* is satire, but *The Daily Show* is not. The former program is centered around an ironic burlesque of its satiric butt, whereas the latter only occasionally uses irony as a tool for defining the edges of a sincerely communicated thematic message. Though initially described in the terms of narrative structures found in film, these categories can be used to describe non-narrative satirical texts.

In Satire as Comedy, mockery is deployed to reveal a shared absurdity. Villains and antagonists demonstrate bad behavior because they are stupid, lacking natural intelligence or social understanding. The villain's behavior, rather than their character, is deserving of judgement and the audience is meant to understand that the social, political, or cultural problem being identified and highlighted by the text is essentially external to the characters who embody

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it. Through this frame, the satirist proposes that everyone is worthy of mockery, because no one perfectly understands the ultimate truth of any given situation. They suggest that there are no bad people, or bad groups, but instead bad systems. Bonstetter's major example for this frame is Brooks and Richard Pryor's *Blazing Saddles*, a film that parodies the style of the Hollywood Western to satirize race relations in seventies American. The film presents racism as a harrowing and absurdly evil system that must be painfully navigated by the film's protagonist, the newly minted Black sheriff of an all-white frontier town (portrayed by Cleavon Little). The principal villains of the film are the townspeople under Little's protection and the bandits looking to take over their land, who perpetrate the racism haranguing our hero but are ultimately redeemed despite their complicity. Much of the film's comedy comes from the townsfolk's inability to see Little's character as a human being and legitimate lawman, even when failing to doing so is wildly against their best interest. Their racism is a cloud of ignorance because of their limited life experience in the West and imposed upon them systemically by their equally foolish Governor (played by Brooks). The end of the film sees a happy ending, with our comic hero saving the day and the townspeople symbolically cured of their ignorance and racism. As is the case in Satire as Comedy, mockery ultimately heals and reconciles. The white audience is invited to sympathize with the villains of the story, see themselves reflected in their ridiculous visage, and learn from their mistakes.

Whereas Satire as Comedy fundamentally accepts the flawed humanity of its targets, Satire as Burlesque rejects and others. Burlesque is like parody in that it involves a performer taking on the characteristics of a non-comic subject and exaggerating them for comic effect. Bonstetter proposes her second form of satirical mockery as a combination of Burke's popular interpretation for the burlesque – in which a burlesque involves an exaggeration meant to

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convince an audience of something's wickedness and undesirability – with his definition of satire, which limits the form to solely comic embodiments of a specific person or archetype meant to reveal the subject's ridiculous aspects. In Satire as Burlesque, the satirist uses mockery to create distance between them and the target. The target of the text's satire is embodied in its antagonists. Villains are portrayed as essentially evil and disgusting to the point of inhumanity; they are laughable because they are unusually vile. By assigning a collection of characteristics representative of the social ills to an individual and then mocking them, the satirist instructs the audience of a moral corrective in the negative. The audience wishes to avoid being ridiculed and will thusly avoid behaviors which have been assigned to the satiric butt.

Aggression is the aspect of satire most important to its form. Though satire succeeds when it engages in entertaining its audience, usually by making them laugh, it is distinguishable from other comic forms such as farce, because of the discursive damage it inflicts on its subject. This is apparent when one considers the intensity of language popularly used to describe a successful bit of satire. Satirists do not clown on, lampoon, or play with; they "rip apart", "destroy", or "blast" ("Satire and the Problem of Comic Laughter" 176). The permission society grants the satirist to openly mock is what draws frequent criticism upon the form as uncouth and offensive, but simultaneously gives it the power to metaphysically degrade the authority of corrupt systems and powerful individuals.

<u>Laughter</u>

Laughter is a common human experience, but deceptively complex when observed critically. Test distinguishes that the laughter accompanying satire is "comic", meaning it is

expressed vocally and brought about as the result of experiencing something humorous like a joke or a visual gag, rather than "pathological," meaning laughter occurring as a mechanical reaction to physical or emotional stimulation such as through tickling. There is a typological difference in the case of comic laughter between "ridiculous" and "ludicrous" ("Satire and the Problem of Comic Laughter" 173). Ridiculous laughter is that which is understood to follow satire as it is a laughter at the expense of its subject which seeks to improve it. Ludicrous laughter follows a humorous event that ultimately evokes pleasure in the viewer and validates and exalts the foolish qualities of its target.

In *The Pleasure of Fools*, Jure Gantar describes the overwhelming consensus throughout history among a range of theological, philosophical, academic, and popular schools of thought which condemn comedy and comic laughter as disgusting and immoral acts for a variety of reasons. Gantar proceeds to outline the diverse historical opinions of laughter and the cadre of reasons for its existence and carefully examines the question of laughter's ethical validity. His exploration finds the core ethical problem of laughter is that it is rooted in perceived difference between the target of laughter and the person laughing: that finding something or someone humorous necessarily involves a person assuming a set of ontological differences between self and other. Laughter is inevitably applied, intentionally or not, as a value judgement on some aspect of human behavior or lived experience and which implies, sometimes with incredible subtlety, that laugher is superior to its target. This value assignment makes laughter a feature of everything from childhood bullying to oppressive social regimes. Satire, with its ridiculous laughter based on delighting in the aggressive mockery of a target, represents the otherization that results from all laughter taken to its logical conclusion. The otherness of the satiric target is actively reinforced by ridiculous laughter, though Gantar recognizes the value of satire's

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mockery as a populist tool of carnivalesque upheaval as well. Given their status, satire's mockery may be the only means aggrieved underlings have of holding the powerful to account. Gantar concludes that laughter presents an unsolvable ethical conundrum (157).

Beyond Laughter

Whereas Mockery is perhaps the most widely agreed upon definite feature of satire amongst scholars, a modern conception of the form recognizes that Laughter is extraneous to the success of a satirical work. James E. Caron recognizes the usefulness of Test's elements of satire but problematizes his conception of laughter. Whereas Test's four parts assume that satire is a comic artifact because it produces "laughter", defined as the uncontainable physical reaction one has in response to perceiving something funny, in its audience; Caron offers a more holistic and expansive definition of Comic Laughter which more closely describes the variety of responses one might have to an artistically valid piece of satire. Under this definition, satire can exist without the need to produce "laughter," as in the uncontrollable physical response of rapid unstructured sound production and heavy breathing. Caron remarks that it is a common experience to recognize the comic nature of a piece of media, understand its satirical critique, find the implication of its use of mockery to be pleasing or even funny, and still not laugh outwardly. This is a kind of interior laugh Caron deems "non-laughter" ("Satire and the Problem of Comic Laughter" 177). The existence and identification of non-laughter reveals that the response of an audience can in some sense be attributed to factors outside of the satirist's artistic control. Caron borrows the phrase "unlaughter" to describe the experience of fully understanding a piece of comic art, but still refusing to laugh for reasons within the control of the audience

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member, perhaps to express an ideological disagreement or to prove one's sense of decorum. Unlaughter may be a moral or psychological corrective to the physical response of what Caron calls 'cringe laughter," a vocal laughter that occurs in spite of one's better angels or ideological leanings. This is a laughter that might follow or precede a sigh or moan of empathetic recognition as one takes stock of how much pleasure they have just gained at the expense of someone in a painful position. The existence of cringe laughter perhaps deepens the ethical conundrum of Gantar's take on laughter. Being laughed for exhibiting difference or weakness hurts, and taking part in that laughter can reinforce that difference or perceived weakness is something to be mocked rather than to be understood or empathized. Laughter has the possibility to emotionally harm its target in the near term as well as degrading its relative social reputation in the long term (this in turn, makes future emotional harm more likely) but can simultaneously accompany a reminder of one's own belief in the immorality of reducing certain topics to something that can be laughed at ("Satire and the Problem of Comic Laughter" 176).

Caron fails to appropriately draw a distinction between his use of "cringe laughter" and the hugely popular online use of the term "cringe comedy," which further problematizes the moral dimension of comic laughter. "Cringe comedy" is like – and is often confused with either purposely or otherwise – satire because it principally relies on mockery to produce. Unlike satire, however, cringe comedy often lacks a purposefully constructed social critique and is rather a form of mockery free of any messages other than its target is worthy of mockery because it is being mocked. Cringe comedy is a significant and unusual comic form primarily for its lack of intentionality as well as its prevalence in its native domain of the internet. A self-uploaded YouTube video of a teenager awkwardly singing a well-known pop song wildly out of key, for instance, may be considered "cringe." The juxtaposition of an element which commonly

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understood to be embarrassing or laughable (aesthetically unpleasing singing) and the confidence demonstrated in purposefully sharing said element can lead an audience to laughter. The laughter is directed, not necessarily at the singing itself, but at the apparent shamelessness exhibited in the video's presence on a publicly available video platform. This may inspire an audience member to simultaneously laugh and cringe, the physical reaction, which is cringe comedy's namesake, in an empathetic response to the target of their laughter. This dual reaction of mockery and empathy occurs because the target of laughter is freely demonstrating behavior that the audience knows is laughable and that "well-adjusted" members of society know to avoid performing in ways that will get them mocked.

Cringe comedy is a subset of "anti-comedy," which is a postmodern response to satire's implied modernism (Aspray 157-158). Anti-comedy accepts that in a truly postmodern world, satire has indeed lost its ability to provide any useful critical discourse or distinguish truth from fiction. It is then a reactive form, as it takes as a given the impossibility of morally instructive comic performance as a given and then tries to engage in transgression for its own sake. Anti-comedy's humor is cyclical; the joke is always that a repulsive or horrifying thing is being treated as a joke. Anti-laughter (the intended result of cringe humor) is like Caron's cringe laughter in that both require an audience to understand the moral incorrectness of making a joke about the subject of mockery. Cringe laughter, however, occurs in spite of the laugher's beliefs or ethical considerations as a result of the comic's humor: one may know that it is not moral or socially acceptable to laugh at a teenager singing poorly because it could emotionally hurt them, but does so anyway. Anti-Laughter occurs *because* the laugher finds funny the notion that the comic would make a joke about something repugnant or disturbing. One could argue that anti-

humor may accompany satire, though its lack of purposeful social or political critique bars it from classification as satire.

All of this is to say, satire's modern definition is somewhat more expansive than its historical meanings (even history as recent as Test's work in the early 1990's) or its popular conception outside of academia. Understanding this definition, as it stands, with an amount of ontological precision allows us a greater level of critical understanding of the form and gives us a more robust language with which to describe audience reactions, personal or collective, to satirical art. Critical understanding of the media one consumes is important aspect of gaining political and culture awareness, especially if one is an artist. Given the fraught nature of modern American political discourse, one engaging in an act of satirical expression should be able to identify the message they wish to communicate and understand how to employ the tools satire contains (irony, mockery, parody, burlesque, humor) to communicate it. Despite some disagreement, which I have described, there is widespread academic deference to many of the assumptions made by Test's categories, which I agree provides a diagnostic map for satire based in language that would not alienate most people who have any passing understanding of the form. Of note as well is the agreement that satire's use of mockery is its most defining feature. The principal tension of satire perhaps comes from this reliance, as we have discussed and will explore further in the nest chapter. Accordingly, Bonstetter's division between Satire as Comedy and Satire as Burlesque will be a helpful mental model for classifying satire as we continue. Caron's problematization of Test's Laughter category is, I believe, of particular importance to our current culture moment, as much of the disagreement surrounding satire stems from disagreements about what subjects are okay to laugh at and in what way that laughter can be expressed.

CHAPTER THREE: COMPARITIVE EXPLORATIONS OF SATIRE

I have examined what constitutes satire, the ways it can uncover the transgressions of the powerful, as well as the ways satiric forms adapt to instruct morality in a postmodern world. I have also touched upon critiques of satire, the inherent otherizing effect of mocking laughter, and possibility to foster offensive misunderstanding and division. These critiques, when considered seriously, paint a picture of satire which makes one question its ability to be a force for good. The invocation of the word "good" brings up several philosophic and linguistic questions that are well beyond the scope of this work. I thus present a working definition for satirical "goodness" based on a consideration of its functionality and morality. I use "functionality" in terms of functionalism in social science; thus, does satire serve the purpose of helping society? Can it not be replicated by other forms or institutions? On the nature of satire's morality, leaving aside ontological considerations regarding good and evil, I aim to problematize the popular conception of the form as a tool of ethical purgation. Does satire stop or reduce immoral acts or strip power from immoral actors? Can satire successfully engage in its ideal effect of revealing truth and inspiring good behavior in its audience?

In this chapter, I first consider these questions through the lens of a case study of segments on two satirical television shows, Showtime's *Who is America* (2018) and *The Colbert Report.* These shows are markedly similar because they are both parodic satires hosted by left-leaning white men whose performances rely on ironic portrayals of characters who do not share their real-life political ideologies. Both hosts display a commitment to staying in character throughout the runtime of the show so strict that it occasionally results in in-character public

appearances. These notable similarities make the differences in approach and execution between the two more noticeable and these dissimilarities greatly affect the way an audience understands the political positions satirized by the shows. Following these studies, I will analyze the way Jackie Sibblies Drury's play *Fairview* utilizes the satirical techniques we have previously investigated. I offer that *Fairview* demonstrates the ways live theatrical performance can provide audiences with a sense of communal catharsis through shared experience.

"You must use your voice as a weapon:" *Who is America* and Speaking Truth to Power

On July 24th, 2018 Jason Spencer, Republican member of the Georgia House of Representatives, announced his resignation from the body and, as of Spring 2021, has not yet attempted to reenter political office or public life. Spencer's recent behavior, proving himself to be racially bigoted personality and mendacious legislator, made it certain that his flight from politics inspired no elegies on the part of his constituents or fellow lawmakers. After weathering several years of fierce (often bipartisan) scrutiny from his fellow lawmakers as well as past demands for his public resignation, Spencer finally relented. The most recent outcry, which sufficiently shamed the politician into ending his career, was not caused by his successful attempts to block Medicaid expansion or his Facebook post warning a Black attorney that she may end up dead in a swamp in reply to her opposition to Confederate Monuments in Georgia. Rather, it was five-minute-long segment on television comedy show *Who is America,* in which Spencer is tricked into taking off his pants in front of the actor who played Borat. Spencer's downfall came not at the hands of investigative journalists, activists, or news broadcasters but from Sacha Baron Cohen: a man whose most enduring artistic work in the public consciousness

features himself clad in an undersized American flag G-string and an oversized mustache intoning "my wife" in a purposefully wildly inaccurate Kazakh accent. The fall of Spencer gives credence to the notion that satire remains a vibrant and morally constructive artistic form. Examining this incident exemplifies satire's ability to mockingly tear down the powerful by comically revealing their bad behavior. Indeed, Spencer's downfall elucidates how Cohen's performance methodology towards his satiric work led to a positive social outcome.

In *Who is America* Cohen once again utilizes a method of comically absurd quasi-guerilla theatre to trick the subjects of the show into engaging in ridiculous, morally dubious, and occasionally outright violent acts. This is a format Cohen has returned to over the course of his career, first in the British interview program *Da Ali G Show* (give years) and to greater commercial success in mockumentaries *Borat* and *Bruno* (Alonso 593-597). Though those projects were purposefully satirical, they were marketed and lauded for their maximalist approach to absurdity. Cohen intended the character Borat to be a satirical representation of an amalgamation of nativist fears (notions that foreigners are inept, dirty, lecherous, discriminatory, lacking in moral character and civility) present in the American public, but that fact has been frequently erased in audiences' perceptions of the film. Often overlooked are the scenes in the film in which Cohen's performance elicits an admission of ugliness on the part of his unknowing "scene partners." Disarmed by Borat's foolishness and goaded on by his blend of retrograde misogyny and anti-Semitism, real people will bear the extent of their personal bigotries to a film crew and then give written permission to display their bad behavior to the public.

In a series of segments modeled aesthetically around recognizable reality television archetypes, Cohen dons elaborate disguises and takes on outrageous personas such as a suave and mysterious lifestyle guru to the rich and famous, a hardened but reformed former convict

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making his way through life on the outside, or a soft-hearted liberal college professor traveling

the country to understand America's political divide. He never breaks character and engages with

his subject as though they are on a "straight" reality television program rather than a semi-

scripted satirical comedy. *Who Is America* (as well as 2020's *Borat* sequel, subtitled *Subsequent*

Moviefilm) represents an extension and natural evolution of the satirical project Cohen began in

Da Ali G Show; its most cutting segments demonstrate the power of satire to speak truth to

power and give its audience inspiration to engage in the political process. This is not to say that

Cohen's evolution of style towards a comedy which is more openly satirical, and engages in

more expressly political subject matter, dilutes the show's humor. At times Cohen indulges the

degenerative shock humor definitive of his early work, separating comedy from any sort of

cogent satirical critique. A viewer sympathetic to Cohen's political entertainment project would

have a difficult time identifying the satirical target of segments in which his character convinces

a massage therapist to help him expel a baby doll from his anus or tries to trick OJ Simpson into

admitting to the murder of his ex-wife. This tendency to find comedy in toilet humor and base

tricks can distract from the show's satirical edge. However, the exaltation of bodily functions and

shocking disregard for social norms is one aspect of the carnivalesque that demonstrates a text's

disregard for hierarchy and can increase the potency of its satiric mockery. Spencer's underpants

and bare legs are an important comic device that semiotically depositions him in the audience's

internal sense of social hierarchy. The program's willingness to blend buffoonery and real

political intelligence grants the work a cultural immediacy and unity of purpose demonstrative of

why satire remains a popular entertainment form in modern America.

The segment of *Who is America* that resulted in the end of Spencer's career came from

the show's second episode and was released online prior to its premiere on Showtime, where it

received widespread attention among fans of Cohen's work as well as a range of national news outlets. In it, Cohen portrays Captain Erran Morad, an Israeli national, current host for the "Anti-Terror Network," who proclaimed himself as formerly "...in the Mossad for, I mean, *not* in the Mossad for thirteen years" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). Morad is a large physical presence; Cohen is made taller by a pair of lifted combat boots and given greater musculature by a bodysuit worn under his shirt. Tactical camouflage pants, a buzzed army-style wig, and facial prosthetics sharpening Cohen's bone structure complete the look of a military-minded anti-terrorism expert and tough guy. Like many of Cohen's characters, Morad is somewhat believable; the actor is not made so ridiculous that the targets of the show's satire would instantly recognize he is a joke and thus blow his cover. Morad's Israeli accent, for instance, is convincing enough for the purpose of fooling his American targets, though Cohen makes linguistic flourishes (unnecessarily dragging out the guttural "R" sound present in Israeli dialects or pausing in the middle of sentences at odd places) to further demonstrate the apparent ignorance of his targets and inspire laughter in the audience. The character is based upon a referent existing in reality: a sort of hyper-masculine military tough guy from Israel who does not care about liberal American views on cultural sensitivity, but as with all burlesque these traits are taken to the extreme. Morad is willing to break cultural norms and civil liberties alike in the name of the "threat of terror," engaging in wild flights of imagination regarding highly unlikely scenarios, such as ISIS forces invading an office park in New Jersey or MS-13 freely engaging in wanton pillaging of *quinceañera* parties of Mexican-American girls. To Cohen's knowing audience (those let in on the joke by both their knowledge of his comedic persona as well as the blown-out comic framing of the show), the character reads as a cartoon version of the sort of individual post-911 security hawks want to influence American foreign policy. Morad's apparent identity as

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a hardened Israeli intelligence operative can project a sense of immediate understanding around conflict in the Middle East without having to discuss the current state or history of the region, while simultaneously feeding sentiments of American nativism without the burden of being beholden to domestic American political disagreements. Spencer's ignorance, wanton bigotry, and willingness to expose himself on television are the main comedic target of the segment, but the nature of Morad's burlesque portrayal acts as a clue as to the ultimate target of Cohen's satire: that is, a pervasive strain of American conservatism (particularly that upheld by the Trump-era Republican Party) which perpetuates a largely imagined threat of external security to advance a domestic policy agenda defined by racial stratification and xenophobia .

Whereas most forms of burlesque performance involve a satirist parodically reducing their target to mere caricature to be more easily mocked, *Who is America* engages in a form of "shared burlesque" in which satirist and satiric target sympathetically produce a performance which mockingly exaggerates a series of social interactions to serve as synecdoche for a larger social system. This, in turn, is a departure from the liberal burlesques of conservatives popularized by *The Colbert Report*. Colbert's character on that show is the butt of most jokes. As a parody of a right-wing pundit, Colbert can express pastiches of popular conservative talking points with the understanding that his persona draws the audience's ire and ridicule. On the other hand, Cohen's game, exemplified here by Spencer's interactions with Morad, is different in several ways amplifying the effects of his satire. As is the premise of most of the program's segments, Spencer is seemingly unaware that Morad is a character played by a comedian. However, the former state representative seems to be informed and wholly aware of the encounter being filmed; he is cheating out to camera, wearing a personal microphone, his face is not blurred and "Captain Morad" introduces him to the presumed audience. There is no

indication in the framing of the shot or the pair's interaction indicating that Spencer did not affirmatively consent to his presence on Erran Morad's Anti-Terror Network.

The segment invites Spencer into a large warehouse-style boxing gym (Morad's usual base of operations across many of the character's segments). An offsite intro by Cohen in character gives the audience the awareness that Morad is an exaggerated character not to be taken seriously. The, there is a cut to the gym, where Morad introduces Spencer. The live segment is briefly interrupted by a series of news reports, informing the audience of the controversial streak in Spencer's career as a State Representative, particularly highlighting a law recently proposed by Spencer as a "burqa bill" which critics say would ban the practice of religious face coverings worn by Muslim women and the representative is defending on the grounds of fighting terrorism. These clips are immediately juxtaposed with Spencer answering a question regarding the law: "I don't call it a Burqa Ban. I call it an anti-masking statute… to win in the legal system, you cannot, you cannot be against the first amendment. See, this is how the Muslims in the country are using our first amendment against us" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). This quote is a seemingly direct and clear-headed admission that the lawmaker's support for the bill relies on bad faith rhetoric and his true intentions involve at least some racial or nativist animus. There is nothing inherently funny about this admission, though its framing is humorous and satirical. Cohen does not give Spencer the gift of journalistic objectivity, but rather sets his subject up for ridicule by creating a juxtaposition between media spin and admitted fact (much in the vein of John Stewart). Unlike Stewart, however, Cohen does not cease playing a character, revealing himself to be the satirist. In this segment, there is no audience surrogate present to bridge the gap between the subject of satire and objective reality. The audience is only aware of the distinction between the two because Cohen has cued them to his

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comedic play, but Spencer does not have the luxury of understanding. For this reason, the truth Cohen's satire reveals about Spencer feel more potent than the truths revealed about a politician in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, a nobleman in a Commedia dell'arte show, or a king in Bakhtin's medieval carnival. Spencer is not being *portrayed* as a fool by a comedian, he *is* one in real life.

As the segment continues, the situation becomes more unusual and openly laughable. Captain Morad has asked Representative Spencer to learn a series of self-defense and anti-terror techniques. The remainder of the segment assumes that the audience understands that, like the character played by Cohen, these methods are fake; a prank device contrived by a writer's room rather than an example of a real-world anti-terror technique. Morad, somewhat referential to the politician's "anti-masking statute," presents Spencer with a hypothetical; can one tell the difference between a "...terrorist in a burqa, and a normal woman in a burqa?" Spencer admits, "I cannot tell" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). Morad teaches Spencer that one can easily determine the identity of a would-be terrorist by using a selfie stick to discreetly take a nonconsensual photo of the person's undergarments beneath their full body covering. The Captain produces a selection of pictures of women's crotches as well as one of an exposed penis next to a concealed firearm, implying to his trainee the photos were taken in the field in Israel, perhaps mere moments before a terrorist event. Spencer accepts the validity of Morad's photos at face value and agrees to try the method himself with his own selfie stick. Morad directs Spencer to attempt a picture beneath a standee wearing a full body covering; before doing so, however, Morad doubles down by suggesting that the politician emulate a "Chinese tourist" to justify his use of the selfie device, explaining that the "Chinese are always taking selfie" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). Spencer understands the directive, accepts the racial stereotype, and goes about

completing his assigned task. He begins walking around, intoning a faux pan-Asian accent – a mix of unstructured sounds drawing upon the very worst of western Orientalist yellowface performances and a collection of largely Americanized, Chinese and Japanese words – before "distracting" the burqa-clad volunteer by pointing upward and away. He then forcibly inserts the selfie stick up beneath the garment. "Good," Morad approves, before taking the device from Spencer and confirming that the blurry photo of a pair of women's legs and underpants from inside of the veil is "not a terrorist" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer").

The occurrences contained in that portion, just over a minute long, are intended to inspire both moral outrage and a sort of disbelieving anti-laughter in the audience. Spencer shows he is willing to violate a woman's privacy, right to religious freedom, and civil liberties by taking a photo of her underwear without her consent. Though the public might reasonably expect an elected official would outright refuse to engage in such obviously invasive and wrongheaded behavior, Spencer does not ask any questions nor express any discontent as to the ethics, legality, or even effectiveness of Morad's technique. As the segment continues, Spencer continues these transgressions at the slightest behest of Cohen's character. First, he repeatedly shouts a racial epithet after Morad suggests he could distract his potential terrorist foes by shocking them with "the N word." After which Morad reveals that the intended word was "noony" ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). Then, Morad explains that Islamic terrorists will stop attacking if they are afraid he will touch them with his rear and "turn them into homosexuals," Spencer removes his pants and boxers and chases Morad around the room ("Official Clip ft. Jason Spencer"). As Morad, Cohen demonstrates that by putting this politician into a controlled environment and repeatedly providing a modicum of approval, he will fall into a comedic trap and continuously

prove himself to be more and more open to suggestion and comfortable with acts of outright bigotry.

As previously established, Cohen is performing an unconventional burlesque. Morad is an exaggerated, often laughably funny character, though the portrayal does very little to reveal much about Israeli intelligence officers (to the degree that an actual Israeli could understandably take offense to the way their cultural signifiers are misappropriated to negatively comment upon Americans). Rather, this segment and *Who is America* more broadly focuses the butt of its satirical joke on the people with whom Cohen is interacting. Morad is a larger-than-life character who confirms the perceived fears and biases of Cohen's targets, providing a seemingly safe venue in which they are coerced into performing socially unacceptable behaviors as self-burlesque. This performance reveals the target to be worthy of laughter and derision, both because they act foolishly and because they prove themselves to be a person gullible enough to trust what an audience can clearly see is an actor in a costume. The actions Spencer is willing to take on the show as well as his willingness trust in Captain Morad bare equal weight in revealing the politician's true beliefs and motivations. Cohen does not need to create a character (a cartoon copy of a white southern lawmaker who embarrasses himself by violating basic privacy and shouting racial slurs) to burlesque and ultimately satirize Spencer. Rather, it is more effective to simply point a camera at the real-life man and let him embody that character himself. The powerful people (in this case Jason Spencer) Cohen's show seeks to satirize are invited to enthusiastically confirm the suspicions the show assumes its audience already has about them.

<u>"I mean *everything* I say:" *The Colbert Report* and the Problem of Irony</u>

Whereas Cohen's ironic burlesque produces at outcome which clarifies Jason Spencer's character and resulted in his purgation from the halls of power, the ironic satire of Stephen Colbert is often misunderstood and as such can lead to negative social outcomes. The maxim stating that "satire requires a clarity of purpose and target lest it be mistaken for and contributes to that which it attempts to criticize" is frequently invoked in Internet discussions of popular culture, comedy, and satire. This maxim enjoys a peculiar form of online status, employed in a variety of settings from a serious rhetorical tool to a semiotic artifact invoked in Dadaist memes. Its ubiquity on platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook reflect the notion that many of satire's past failings and inherent flaws have become particularly visible in the modern political age. The saying is a prescriptive theory for the practice of ethical satire, invoked either as a conceptual sounding board or a discursive trump card. Rather than originating from academia, it is a piece of online apocrypha which has achieved a place in the popular lexicon of satirical critics both on- and off-line. The theoretical model conveyed by this meme provides a genesis point for a critique of satire inflected by this cultural moment in the American polity.

The adage uses the word "satire" (seemingly referring to "all" satire) as synecdoche for conception of satire upheld by Burke's poetic frames – that satire involves an author pretending to parodically take on a position they do not believe and using sarcasm to communicate their true thoughts on the position to their audience. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this is a useful but outmoded definition of satire. The implication is that a non-parodic satiric text, which in no way risks being mistaken for the subject of its ridicule, does not require a clarity of purpose and target. The maxim is inadequate as a prescriptive theory for the form as it only addresses a

certain subset. However, the phrase still reflects an important critique about *much* of our parody, irony, and sarcasm-infused modern satire on television and in film. We might express this more concisely by transforming the Internet adage from a prescriptive model of satire into a descriptive one: "a sarcastic text constructed for the purpose of satire may be mistaken for and contribute to that which it attempts to criticize if is not made with a clarity of purpose and target." This transformed adage will be a helpful discursive base for judging the foundational issues that plague satire's use of mockery, irony, and sarcasm explored in this section. One could easily contend that producing sloppy satire bolsters the very societal ills it wishes to ridicule. This reversal of intent may lead us to define such satire as "bad", or at least functionally inert. If the audience does not recognize the satirist's intended target of ridicule, it is therefore highly unlikely to wake up to a revealed truth about society and engage in transformative thought or even cathartic laughter ("The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness" 156). This diagnosis assumes that "good" satire would be at least reasonably clear and closed to an alternate interpretation. Put another way, an observer would have to be acting in bad faith to claim they misunderstand the intention of such a text. We may then ask ourselves; how can we determine that a satirical text is sufficiently "clear"?

Stephen Colbert's performance on *The Colbert Report* provides a productive example for the exploration of satire's clarity, or lack thereof. *The Colbert Report* can be viewed as Platonic ideal of Burkean satire in twenty-first century America by show satirizing a style of conservative television media popularized by Fox News' primetime block of opinion shows from George W. Bush's presidency, particularly *The O'Reilly Factor*. Like its spiritual progenitor and "sister satire" *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* takes care to ape the aesthetic sensibilities of the programs it parodies. Its live set and graphics are gaudier and more exaggerated forms of Fox

News' slick, red, white, and blue-coated version of the prime-time "man at a desk" opinion show. Colbert's persona is on the level with his set as he performs a burlesque of ultra-conservative political commentator: bending his description of politics and the news into ridiculously obvious logical fallacy for the end of preserving an untarnished view of American greatness, celebrating his own shameless ignorance as virtue, and angrily equating the notion of social progress as sinful deviation from a prelapsarian (usually meaning after the presidency of Ronald Regan) moral order. Unlike Stewart's mockery of the TV News, in which Stewart's persona is that of the reasonable satirist who defines the lines between joke and reality through parodic polyglossia, Colbert's performance is an all-consuming parody. Stewart's resemblance to a TV news host is ultimately an invitation to the audience into the carnivalesque, where sarcasm is a possible means to the end of telling a joke. However, Colbert's commitment to staying in character on screen and in public during the ten-year run of his show makes his satire more fundamentally dependent on irony. The difference between the real-life left-leaning comedian Colbert and the far-right O'Reilly-esque Colbert of the show is vast. Unlike Cohen, who uses portrayal of a parodic character to reveal truths about the people and society with which the character interacts, Colbert seeks principally to find political and social truths in the irony of his own performance. The show's humor, as well as its satire, lies entirely in the sarcasm of the comic saying something that the audience knows he does not believe. By understanding this truth, that Colbert is lying for the sake of comedy; the audience *should* understand his satiric intentions (Baym 126-128). Using our Internet-appropriated maxim we can ask: does Colbert's performance have a clarity of purpose and target? The answer should determine if Colbert's satire succeeds.

In late March of 2014, #CancelColbert was a trending topic on the social media app Twitter. The hashtag facilitated widespread discussion, criticism, and disownment of *The Colbert Report* among Twitter's users and garnered mainstream media attention. On the Monday, March 31st episode of Colbert's Show the host, as always in character, responded to the media flurry inspired by the hashtag ("The Colbert Report-Who's Attacking Me Now?"). The response came in a recurring segment entitled "Who's Attacking Me Now?", a segment in which Colbert comments on mentions of him or his show in the news while satirizing right-wing cable hosts' tendency to perceive critical engagement with their ideas of actions as a form of personal attack. This edition of the segment displays the confounding problems inherent to parodic satire, as Colbert's irony leads to a mass misunderstanding that has real social costs in the form outlined above by our maxim: it reinforces a racist trope its attempting to expose and subvert. The segment begins with a review of the media surrounding the hashtag as well as Colbert's recounting of the incident inspiring it. Whereas the host explains the events in a non-linear order, starting at the media frenzy and working backwards, the explanation which follows relays pertinent information in the lead up to the hashtag in a linear fashion for the sake of clarity in this format.

In the early 2000s Colbert jokingly performed an "Asian" character called "Ching-Chong Ding-Dong" through the course of his show. Though the character was an attempt at satire, criticism from Asian viewers of *The Colbert Report* led to its discontinuation. More than a decade later – in an episode of his program aired the week before the "Who's Attacking Me Now?" segment – Colbert was discussing the new non-profit venture started by Dan Snyder, the majority owner of the Washington Redskins football team. Though Snyder claimed the non-profit "The Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation" was an effort on behalf of

himself and team management to send direct aid to underprivileged members of Tribal Nations living on reservation; many saw the foundation as an attempt to quell outrage in response to the then prevalent (and ongoing) controversy surrounding the football organization's use of a racial slur for its team name. An aspect of Colbert's satirical coverage of the events was to declare, in character, that he saw Snyder's foundation as a valuable and morally righteous way to aid the peoples hurt by the ongoing use of the Redskins name and that he would be following in the owner's footsteps to start his own charity: "The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever" ("The Colbert Report-Who's Attacking Me Now?"). Following the end of that episode, a reference to the fake charity, without a clip or any surrounding context, was posted to *The Colbert Report*'s Twitter and Facebook pages. Following the post's dissemination online, it quickly garnered attention and inspired the "CancelColbert" hashtag.

Colbert recounts the history that led to the social media post and reveals the poster to be an unidentified social media staffer. Colbert reasserts the context of his created reality and responds to his critics by slyly explaining he is playing a character that is not only fundamentally unserious, but often does and says things which the actual person Colbert finds to be horrendous. But, without dropping character, how does the actor Colbert express that he is playing an ironic parody without that statement itself being taken as sarcastic and false? Colbert navigates this paradox through something akin to a linguistic magic trick. The comedian, Stephen Colbert, ironically playing the conservative host "Stephen Colbert" makes it known that "Ching-Chong Ding-Dong" was a character "Colbert" played, claiming that character expressed racist ideas in character and should therefore be understood as not belonging to the person of Stephen Colbert. Colbert the comic actor claims that "Colbert" the host is the real person, whereas Ching-Chong

Ding-Dong is the persona saying, "he [pointing at a picture of Ching-Chong Ding-Dong] is a character. He is not me. This [pointing at himself] is the real Stephen Colbert. I mean everything I say on this show" ("The Colbert Report-Who's Attacking Me Now?"). Through comic framing, the audience understands that Ching-Chong is a metaphor for the character "Colbert," the conservative host, whereas the "Colbert" of the show's fiction stands in for the real-life actor.

Given the host's explanation, the audience is meant to understand the primary issue with the social media post was its lack of context. Outside of the comic frame of the show and separate from Colbert's performance, it would be almost discursively impossible for defenders of the show to describe the social media posts as anything other than an endorsement of a fake charity with a confusing and racist name. Whereas within the context of show's constructed reality the post that inspired #CancelColbert is an unfortunate but unintended offshoot of a joke that satirizes the racism in the Redskins charity. After establishing this, Colbert states that some people are still criticizing him for making the joke the post was based on, despite their knowledge of the context in which it was made. Colbert notes that Ching Chong understandably offended some Asian viewers, despite occurring in the context of a performance; the host empathizes with the offended viewers by describing how, as a man of Irish descent, he was offended by Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (while #CancelSwift flashes on screen) ("The Colbert Report-Who's Attacking Me Now?"). Provided they understand his last metaphor (Ching-Chong represents the character "Colbert," while "Colbert" is comic satirist Colbert), the audience should quickly understand this one. Swift's essay is itself an ironic satire of the bigoted views the 18th century English aristocracy held about the Irish poor and is a stand in for the *The Colbert Report* ironic satire of the bigoted views of modern-day white Americans hold toward Indigenous Peoples and Asian immigrants. The message is clear: only someone as willfully

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ignorant and intellectually uncurious as the character Colbert plays on his show would take his ironic performance at face value. The real-life satirist Stephen Colbert explains his own methodology without ever stepping outside the fiction of the comic frame.

Colbert's argument is essentially an answer to our earlier inquiry regarding the clarity of satire. If Swift's satire is understood as comic mockery of bigotry, then Colbert's fake charity is as well. Paradoxically, this reference implies that what Colbert is doing is not meant to be taken seriously but requires knowledge which cannot be universal: it is unreasonable to expect that everyone who may be affected by Colbert's speech is aware that "A Modest Proposal" is satire or that it even exists. This belays two broader questions about the sort of ironic satire produced by the host: what level of engagement and understanding is reasonable to require of a potential audience? And who is person defining the boundaries of "reasonable?" Complicating these questions that Colbert is a Liberal parodying a Conservative, which is the cornerstone of his irony, but not something that one may be able to immediately glean from his performance. In response to this quandary, Heather LaMarre and her coauthors tested what messages are received by Colbert's performance. They find support, with a great degree of confidence, for the argument that individuals watching Colbert will read their own beliefs onto him. Liberals who watch the program understand his satirical parody of Conservatives, but Conservatives assume that his character is a clownish takedown of Liberals (LaMarre et. al 226). Given this, how can one reasonably assume that any of Colbert's irony can be effectively parsed by an audience as broad and diverse as everyone who may see or hear about the show's Tweet? Additionally, is it reasonable to ask someone who was offended by content of the Tweet or the its inspiring segment to simply curtail their offense?

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Colbert's performance on "Who's Attacking Me Now?" satirizes the situation and reasserts context around the statements earning him public ire. It was successful in that it was an entertaining and thematically whole argument with a strong central claim that demonstrated an awareness of its own discursive blind spots. It fails in that said entertaining argumentation is not equally available to all critics. Taking Colbert in good faith requires a level of knowledge of his previous work (as well as a range of other subjects) and competency understanding irony that cannot be universal. These requirements are not extraordinarily outside of the bounds of most, if not all, ironic comic art. That a work of art requires prior knowledge, education, or a certain cultural context to be effective is not a radical claim, but the possibility for harm wielded by a satire based in controversial topics (in this case that a racial group is emotionally degraded by the circulation of racist caricature), means that it is not unreasonable to expect accountability and thematic clarity from the satirist.

"I've been trying to talk to You:" *Fairview*'s Cathartic Satire and the Benefits of Liveness

In addition to the baseline issues irony presents for the clear digestion of satire by an audience, these difficulties are compounded when an audience's experience with a satirical work is un-collective and asynchronous. The constant availability of (particularly film and television) satirical media is beneficial because it allows art to reach a wider and more diverse audience but suffers from a number of negative externalities. Frequently remarked upon, both in and outside of academia, is the emotional reckoning of revisiting a piece of comic art from a previous era and discovering that it uses offensive or hurtful tropes that have fallen out of favor with a modern audience. Jokes that were considered "okay" even a handful of years ago may now be on the

edge of or outside the realm of moral acceptability, though it bears mentioning that there is a necessary and vibrant discourse reflecting on how hierarchical systems allowed those in dominant sub-groups to classify certain speech as "okay" without input from subordinate groups. That is, the range of acceptable speech is often bounded by the powerful, but the fractious and intersectional nature of the modern media reality rarely provides unadulterated examples of clear lines of power. Rather, a nuanced criticism of art, both historical and modern, requires an awareness of the multitudinous centers of power within society and engagement in the work of mapping out their relational existence. Satire may then derive cultural value from putting otherwise hidden hegemonies into stark relief, or by comically simplifying a system such that it can be understood.

Herein lies s great tension: satire seeks to create simplicity out of the chaos, but its creation is a product of artists who are enmeshed in systems of power, personal bias, and moral indeterminacy. This implies a postmodern, cyclical relationship between society, audience, and satirist. Each attempting to elucidate or discover truth but finding themselves caught in the trap of context. Look no further than Colbert to see that well-intentioned satire can be compromised by interrogation from the simultaneous polyphony of critical voices and its own reliance on irony and mockery. The technologically variant modes of interacting with art increase the possibility of audience exposure to ironic satire, even viewers lack the contextual knowledge necessary to parse the piece in good faith. Satire can illuminate systems of oppression, condemn bad actors, and speak truth to power in a way which has measurable real-world effects (see the fall of Jason Spencer). Contrariwise, it is difficult to identify the extent to which satire may inflict emotional harm or degenerate the quality of public.

The theatre offers a possible means of alleviating the pains of satire's volatile interactions with social media, the fractious cultural landscape, and extreme discursive integration outlined thus far. Theatre, as an artistic form, is lacking in several of the qualities which make other forms of mass media more susceptible to the negative outcomes of the trends I have identified. I do not wish to claim the theatre is a discursive paradise where political upheaval and bad faith argumentation are unable to prosper; rather, I hope to examine qualities it contains which may lead to a healthier satire. I will note that one aspect of theatre which heavily mediates its relationship with the Culture Wars is its comparative unpopularity. Individual theatrical works are less likely to be swept up in unproductive argumentation on social media. The existence of theatre as a niche art form compared to the relative ubiquity and dispersibility of television, film, or music creates for a discursive cohort (both academically and otherwise) with a greater degree of specialized knowledge. Additionally, the current economic reality of theatergoing has confined the availability of high-quality live theatre to largely upscale, urban settings. These economic conditions mix with political polarization of rural and urban settings to ensure that theatre's entrance into the Culture War is a signifier of class and political affiliation. One's appreciation of theatre colloquially implies a educated, middle or upper class Liberal identity much in the way that one's enjoyment of Starbucks or yoga does. That is not to say that one must be an upper-class Liberal to enjoy theatre, but the form's cultural entanglement with this implied identity (as well as the economic reality creating this perception) has a salient effect differentiating the "general audience" of theatre from television.

Aside from a comparatively constrained audience, theatrical satire benefits from the form's liveness, ephemerality, and immediacy. A productive example of this effect can be observed in Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2019 Pulitzer Prize winning satire of the white gaze

Fairview. Much like the subject of the previous section, *Fairview* cleverly navigates several layers of ironic reality for comic effect and satirical punch. However, the play's approach to parody and irony differs from *The Colbert Report'*s in several ways. These differences crescendo in a moment of meta-theatrical disruption which, I argue, demonstrate live theatre's unique ability to create a cathartic satire.

Fairview is separated into three acts, each of which takes place in a new level of meta-reality derived from its relation to the previous act. Meaning is constructed through reiteration of characters and tropes as presented in new contexts. This is the bread and butter of parodic satire, but *Fairview* is distinct from previously discussed satirical works in that the act of reiteration changes the audience's perception of previous sections; in other words, they may not be aware that the beginning of the play is a form of satirical parody, since it only becomes so in relation to the work as a whole. To wit, *Fairview*'s first act appears to be a banal, formulaic family drama adhering strictly to the aesthetic and plot conventions of modern American realism. Whereas a satirist would usually exaggerate or comically skew tropes so that an audience notices, the play's early scenes are remarkable in their strict coherence to convention. *The Colbert Report,* for example, includes aesthetic markers as cues as to the show's comic nature, but the potency of *Fairview's* thematic point requires the audience to be unaware that what they are watching will ultimately be revealed to be parody. The plot and characters are not strange or absurd in the slightest: the Frasiers, a middle-class African American family, prepares to host a dinner party for members of their extended family. They discuss their relationships, difficulties at school and work, and their expectations for the future. The story has conflict, but it is told with the breezy tone of a television sitcom.

Act II begins exactly as Act I did. The family matriarch, Beverly, peels carrots in her kitchen preparing for the dinner party and is surprised when her husband flirtatiously sneaks up on her. This occurrence – as well as every other plot point, piece of blocking, sound, and light cue thereafter – is a direct repetition of the first act. Act I's *mise en scene* is repeated, unaltered, save for the addition of four new characters. These characters are not seen but heard speaking to one another over the action of the play. The characters on stage do not interact with these voices, but continue their exact repetition of Act I. Given both the nature of their disembodied voices over the action of the play and the occasional references to what has occurred on stage that comes up in their dialogue, the new voice characters are implied to be audience members. They are sitting somewhere alongside the real-life audience observing the play and having a conversation that, especially when heard in tandem with the action onstage, creates a ridiculous burlesque of the way white people talk about race. That these characters are revealed to be essentially evil representations of the social ills the play wishes to satirically criticize, marks this as a work of Satire as Burlesque.

Though these characters are not embodied until the play's third act, the whiteness of the four voices in the audience is apparent early in their conversation. The dialogue begins with one voice asking another if they "could choose to be a different race, which would they be?" (Act II, scene 1). This question is asked with a flippancy implying the people asking it are engaging with racial identity as a matter of sport: something fun to play with but which is ultimately unserious. They identify themselves as white, not by self-disclosure, but implied by the way they all answer the question with a complete lack of awareness as to their own place in the racial hierarchy. This blindness of white people to their place in racial hegemony or as arbiters of racist oppression, as well as the manner in which that blindness self-reflexively propagates said hierarchy and

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oppression, is the principle theme which pervades the play. The voices discuss racial identity via racist tropes reiterated throughout history: "to be Latino is to be wild sexual deviant," "to be a Black woman is to be a sassy caretaker," "to be Asian is to be over-achieving and mathematically adept" (Act II, Scene 1). The voices reduce the lived experiences of real human beings into harmful caricatures and seem to enjoy the possibility of putting on and taking off those caricatures like costumes. Their wanton indifference toward the way their words might be taken were they not speaking privately implies a total disregard for the humanity of people of color, and this dehumanization is made comically absurd and more satirically pointed by its context as a dramatic element laying on top of an otherwise lighthearted story about a middle-class Black family. The effect is a sort of overstimulation: the audience is made to pay attention to voices at the expense of the narrative laying out on stage. We transition from domestic family drama to a realm of the comic in which the audience is meant to understand that these characters are speaking with a level of irony in relation to the play: the play does not harbor these attitudes but is imposing them onto clownish caricatures to give the audience a means to laugh at them. That the first two acts are layered in this manner clarifies just how ridiculously immoral this conversation is, and transcends it into clownish heights, giving the (real life) audience permission to laugh at their indiscretion. The satirical message is that the repetition of racialized tropes by white people obscures or effectively erases expressions reflecting the real lives of people of color; this message is literalized with the blunt but elegant technique of the vocal overlay.

In Act III, *Fairview*'s narrative and meta-narrative collide, furthering its satirical theme and making it more literal and absurd. The narrative action of the family getting together for dinner continues where it left off in Acts I and II. The Frasier family gathers around, still waiting

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on the arrival of several of its members. "Mama," the grandmother and respected elder who has until now been much discussed but never seen, enters for dinner. A white woman enters wearing a ridiculously ornate costume and soaks in a moment of excessive, unrealistic praise from "her" waiting family; we realize this is "Mama." Almost immediately, the audience will simultaneously recognize her as Suze; the source of one of the last act's disembodied voices and a character who frequently attempted to empathetically valorize the struggles of Black people in a nakedly egotistical and paternalistic way. Previously, Suze professed her admiration for the resilient grace and tough wisdom she assigned to older Black women and has appropriately taken over a character allowing her to perform these qualities. The scene of the dinner continues and one by one the missing members of the Frasiers are revealed to be the white interlocutors from Act II. Each is dressed in an exaggerated outfit and performing to invoke the racial stereotypes they invoked in the last act: one wears a gold chain and raps as he enters, another is dressed "like a drag version of a Black teenage girl" (Act III Scene 1). The white interlopers perform as clowns dressed in costumes of their own retrograde bigotries, which juxtaposes with the Black actors, who are all still immersed in the reality of their domestic family drama and treating the new entrants as though they are the actual members of the family they report to be. This juxtaposition is important to identifying the subject of the play's mockery is the white characters and what they represent, and comedically effective, liking producing something akin to anti or cringe laughter in the audience. The ownership of Black experience the white audience members discursively claimed in the previous act has expanded into an embodied theft. Equal parts more hilarious and horrifying, the voices are playing at being Black in the way their conversation in the previous act would imply they might: not as real people but as cartoonish buffoons. Act 2 was in some senses more subtle, but the utter absurdity of the physical performances should

entertain the audience and make them laugh because they recognize how immoral these character's actions are. In the meta-textual guise of the newly arrived family members, the white characters then begin steering the narrative in ever more outlandish and toxic directions.

The conflicts between this middle-class family are transformed into those an ignorant white person might stereotypically assign to an impoverished Black family: the husband is on crack and the daughter is pregnant and failing out of school. The Black characters' lived reality in this act is completely overtaken and transformed to suit the egos of the bigots among them. "Black pain" becomes dramatic fodder to keep the whites engrossed and "Black joy" is appropriated to keep the whites entertained. The concept of the white gaze, or the lens through which mainstream white audiences see and expect to see stories about Black experience, is embodied as a group of invaders who comically stretch the very limits of the realistic genre. The play crescendos as the white characters fully derail the narrative momentum of the story so the plot falls apart completely, giving way to clowns' havoc. This metaphorical destruction is also embodied as the characters (all participate, but the whites are the agitators) engage in a messy food fight that literally destroys the play's dining room set. In the aftermath, the character Keisha, the family's ambitious daughter and the only Black character who has broken the conventions of realism with asides or exhibited any reaction to the profound absurdity around her, pulls the focus of Suze, the white woman play-acting her Grandmother, and their engagement quiets all other characters present for the food fight.

In the play's concluding dialogue, the already frayed edges of the fourth wall dissolve completely. First, as indicated by the stage directions, "everything stops, or gets let go" (Act Scene). The other actors focus their attention on Keisha as she takes control of the conversation with her false grandmother. Keisha implores that her Grandmother listen to her questions but

struggles to ask them. Keisha says she cannot hear her own thoughts while Suze is near her – that the woman's ego, her judgmental gaze, and the weight of her expectations are *loud*. Keisha's wants and needs are obscured to her by the metaphysical cacophony of Suze's being. The conversation stops making sense in the context of the play as it was experienced in Act I and can only be parsed as an aspect of act II and III's realm of abstracted reality. The actor playing Keisha effectively sheds the persona of Keisha and becomes the embodied voice of the play's response to its white characters. She speaks to her false grandmother Suze, who is in turn divorced from her character and metaphorically assumes the role of personified white gaze. The pair falter, unable to continue either the play or the play-within-the-play as "Suze" limply defends herself and askes for guidance "Keisha" is unable to give.

When the construct of the play, its internal context, and interlocking semiotic messages reaches the zenith of their potential usefulness as a tool to satirically instruct its audience, the actor playing Keisha stops acknowledging the fourth wall and collapses the distance between art and audience. She ponders to the actor playing Suze if white people would switch. At first an audience may understand this question as an extension of the ongoing metaphor: the personified play askes the personified white gaze if white people would hypothetically accept a role reversal. Yet this is not the case. The actor playing Suze falls silent and her scene partner continues in a monologue extending beyond the end of the play. That the play has ended is made explicitly clear by the former Keisha, as is the literal nature of her question from the play's conclusion. Will the white members of the audience switch with her? Will they, right now, exchange locations in physical space with her and the other Black members of the cast? She asks the white audience to sit on the stage where the Black actors once were and to be observed. Provided the audience follows her instructions, as they are highly encouraged to, the white members of the

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real-life audience are given the opportunity for role-reversal that the actors playing white audience members flightily wished to have.

The white audience would ostensibly experience, rather than the comical adventure of racial appropriation enacted in act III, some semblance of the anxiety of being identified, observed, and called out as the Other. The live occurrence of this profound role reversal demonstrates the play's critique of the white gaze more immediately than any fictional narrative could. The white gaze, and whiteness more expansively, continues as a feature of society because it is invisible to those who possesses and reinforce it. Given their historical place at the top of the racial hierarchy, white people have had the power to constitute what is normal and expected behavior in art, politics, and media. Deviations from the normative assumptions assigned to people of color by whiteness are often discounted, distorted, or forcibly corrected. As demonstrated by Suze and her friends in the third act, blindness to one's own complicity in the white gaze inevitably ends in the dehumanization of people of color. Rather than continue a story which has been forcibly run amok by the expectations of the white hegemony, Drury chooses to end the play entirely and engage the audience in a moment of shared understanding. Putting the white people on stage, surrounded by the dramaturgical and real mess the white characters have made, might make them consider the ramifications of internalized racism as real a matter of real people in the real theater from whom they are standing apart.

Fairview is a dense text that encourages multiple viewings. Fully grasping the breadth of its satirical critique of whiteness requires both careful observation and a considerable emotional openness on the part of its white audience (of which I am a member). Drury's willingness to leave her audience in a moment of intense anxiety and to deliver the play's final bit of satirical judgement in the form of a somewhat abstract deconstruction of the formal expectations of

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theatre demonstrate the effectiveness of live interaction inherent to theatrical performance. Perhaps such liveness can be a tool for combatting our fractious media ecosystem. It is entirely possible that a white audience member will fail to pick up on Drury's satirical intent, or may angrily refuse to empathetically engage with her ideas; but for willing participants to come onstage and feel their own whiteness comprises both a political act against the institution of white supremacy and an artistic experience inducing an experience that may stick with someone more deeply than a traditional narrative. Ideally the swapped observation of the white gaze would produce, in audience members and artists of all races, a communal sense of catharsis. In addition, a white audience actively refusing to attempt a physical acknowledgment of their own biases also reinforces Drury's theme. In identifying and physicalizing the sources of racial inequity, all participants in the work could see their own relationship to it and gain a sense of understanding and emotional contentment. White people can see the personification of their whiteness, observe that it is a clownish burlesque, and ceremonially disown it by taking their place on stage as the observed other. Audience members of color can have their experience of otherization at the hands of the white gaze validated and see the embodied expression of whiteness symbolically quieted. Communally, the participants in *Fairview* engage in a more physically realized version of the purgation satire can achieve.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMING SATIRE IN *THE EXTREMISTS*

This thesis arose from the ashes of a live performance project that was considerably more ambitious than the performance elements included in this work, but which never came to be. At the end of January 2020 I solidified an idea to mount a collection of scenes sourced from several satirical plays with the intention to display several distinct dramatic styles; this was intended both to communicate a sampling of the various stylistic forms satire has taken throughout theatrical history and to challenge myself as an actor. I would be performing Molière, Ionesco, and Brecht: playwrights who conveyed their ideas through wildly different lenses but saw satire as a comic form capable of challenging dominant ideologies and hegemonic systems of their day. It was my contention that many of these systems, while operating in vastly different ways in a modern context, are still present in today's America. Moliere's playful mockery of the French priesthood in *Tartuffe* became a commentary on the sexual misconduct of powerful male religious officials in a post-#MeToo world. Ionesco's absurd burlesque of oppressive domesticity in *The Bald Soprano* is evergreen in an America that continues to valorize the nuclear family structure of the 1950's even as that way of life withers and changes. Brecht's satirical comparison of Hitler's gestapo to a comically inept gangster squad in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* feels somewhat prophetic in a world rife with a new class of authoritarian strongmen ascending across the globe. My production took mostly from Bruce Norris' 2017 revival adaptation of *Arturo Ui,* which links the eerie prescience of Brecht's work directly to Trump-era America. Given a clear-eyed and stylish performance, I thought the satire would be understandable and entertaining to an audience of educators and college students in 2020 Central Florida.

On March 6th, 2020, I flew home to Ohio to spend UCF's spring break with my family. My project was in a good place; I and several other graduate students in my cohort had planned a short theatre festival of sorts, in which we would perform our self-produced works several times over the course of a long weekend at the end of the semester. We had the space and access to several student technicians. I had cast a dozen or so talented student-actors in my project, and we had blocked about half the show. Away from the pressures of school for the week, I was getting off book and playing with the ways I would differentiate the characters I was portraying, developing Arturo Ui's unbalanced walk and Tartuffe's chipper Joel Olsteen-esqe facade. The rhythm of Ionesco's language gave me difficulty; in blocking the *Bald Soprano* scene before my entry I'd encouraged the actors to maintain an unnaturally steady tempo. The text seemed to be written in a constant 4/4, broken up only by awkward pauses. This was easy direction to mandate for my fellows, but tough to personally maintain. Norris' Ui was an obvious Trump analogue, and the play's text called out specific aspects of his physicality to be parodied (his tendency to exaggerate his height by bearing down on individuals, the slow and steady gait while his entire body balanced forward over his toes, his choppy but direct vocal delivery), but I agonized over how to craft the portrayal. It is my belief that no one does a particularly accurate Donald Trump impression, as his cadre of trademark physical gestures and speech patterns are so widely parodied and incredibly easy to overdo that any attempt to perform them usually feels lifeless or like a copy of a copy, and I was not about to try my hand. I was stuck on a balancing beam, neither dipping into an Alec Baldwin "comedy impression" nor casting off the identifiable physical markers of Trump's persona entirely. Brecht's (and Norris') play reads like a satire-as-burlesque. The things which make Ui buffoonish also make him repulsive and dangerous. The audience is meant to ask: how could a nakedly power-hungry man with such a zero-sum, dim

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view of human relationships rise to power? Brecht's answer lies in an economically devastated society, lacking a democracy or a political system that affirmatively advances it, which creates for its citizens a harsh reality in which clowns are as heroes and fascists are as liberators.

On March 11th, I was celebrating my 24th birthday in a restaurant with my mother and grandparents. On a television behind the restaurant's bar, an anchor rapidly delivered a series of breaking news reports: the NBA season was cancelled; Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson were diagnosed with Covid-19 in Australia; the World Health Organization had declared a pandemic. I flew to Orlando on an uncannily empty flight a few days later, returning to my apartment for two weeks of mandated isolation. To any readers who actively remember this time in history, the rest of the story is hugely typical. Two weeks of pandemic isolation turned into a month, then two months, then a year. My fellow cohort members creating the year-end festival for thesis projects met virtually and realized we'd be unable to get the shows together just before we received an email from our department formally axing it. As with nearly every other aspect of our public and interpersonal lives, our ability to perform live theatre disappeared overnight.

Months later, recognizing that a return to the pre-COVID state of live and in-person performance was part of an agonizingly distant future, I began conceiving a new project to replace my revue of satire from the previous semester. I still wanted to engage with work that would give me some first-hand experience with performing satiric parody – something that would test my ability to communicate the satirical intent of an artistic work. I was already familiar with *The Extremists* by C.J. Hopkins, a 2010 two-person play which satirizes the American media's treatment of the war on terror to reveal the absurdity of the ideological constructs imposed on the public. The play suggests these constructs to be a necessary result of American Capitalist Neo-Imperialism and highlights the government's unjust and unequal

application of violence. The play is, somewhat like *The Colbert Report,* an ironic parody of prime-time television news. The two characters, Dick Hedgerow and Norman Krieger, are sarcastically twisted versions of two archetypes that frequently appeared on the television news of the late Bush administration; the former is the faux-news show's inquisitive, but easily duped, host and the latter is the show's guest, a deceptively inconsistent "anti-terrorism expert".

My interest in *The Extremists* began early that year and I planned on performing a short selection of it in my revue of satire, but it struck me as a good choice for a post-quarantine format. By this late into the pandemic, I had attended and even performed in a few virtual play readings on video chat platforms like Zoom and I was well aware of, and extremely frustrated by, their artistic limitations and dissimilarity to in person theatre. I was in no way alone in this assessment. Zoom was, to its credit, a hugely impactful tool which helped keep *some* form of theatrical performance alive in a time when traditional live performance was medically unimaginable (and in some states outright illegal). Much of the impact of live theatre is rooted in the visceral experience of witnessing the ephemeral drama created by physical interactions between performers in a shared imaginative space. Zoom crushes all this. Actors are largely unable to engage in complex and visually compelling blocking, which can make a play less aesthetically pleasing to an audience. Not solely a tool of aesthetic construction, live blocking can additively create nuance and subtext in a performance that is underexplored or simply not present in the script. Theatrical actors are hobbled by the lack of physical interaction available to them on video chat. The basis of most modern realism-based acting techniques, including those in which I have been trained, is the external expression of internal desire in the form of physical action which seeks to affect another actor. My graduate studies have all uniformly advanced the notion that art of acting is the art of vulnerable listening and truthful reaction to another actor's

physical impulses. Zoom and other video chat platforms tend to flatten the immediacy and danger of physical human interaction by literally putting up a screen between people.

The Extremists presented me with the possibility to subvert or at least diminish what I perceive to be the negative aspects of virtual performance. This is because the entirety of the play encompasses a single conversation between the two characters and has one location, the studio of Hedgerow prime time political talk show "Issues in Focus." The simplicity of the play's format would be a strength on Zoom. The action of the play already exists in an almost unbodied, highly mediated space: broadcast television. Reducing the actor's full range of physical motion and reaction to a box containing a talking head may deepen the ironic verisimilitude of the play's setting, especially amidst a pandemic that required many television interviews be conducted over video chat. The characters are flat, lacking any sense of realistic texture. Much of the show's satire and humor lies in the ability of the actors to vacillate between the dramatic reality of the interview and the meta-textual reality of the performance. I played Krieger, the anti-terrorism expert, who quickly switches between engaging in a sincere burlesque of conservative foreign policy experts and delivering comic statements that demonstrate the character's detached self-awareness of his role in the media ecosystem and the play. I hoped this would mitigate the damage of Zoom on acting technique and reinforce the play's satirical potency. If the media is a sort of theatre – advancing an internally consistent set of themes and conflicts played out by easily identifiable stock types – media-men are akin to actors and may be expected to demonstrate an emotional distance that is almost Brechtian. The distance created by Zoom would both present something recognizable to the audience and simultaneously demonstrate its quality of false-ness.

The implosive facade of television media present in *The Extremists* felt particularly relevant to me in my quarantine-bound state and would, I thought, exist in conversation with the current state of television political satire. This artistic connection was something that interested me in the material of my previous project, but the pandemic made the method by which I chose to perform *The Extremists* referential to the current form of faux-news satire as well as its content. After some productions went on brief hiatus following the first round of quarantine orders, they all came back in dramatically different states. While the shows that sprang from *The Daily Show* had all strayed from the faux-news aesthetic of their forebearer, their quarantine editions were now fully divested of any sense of visual parody. Samantha Bee's colorful and blocky TBS set was replaced by a stretch of flat land in the host's backyard. Trevor Noah delivered his comical take on the political issues of the day from his couch. Stephen Colbert broadcasted from various locations around his home: an outdoor fireplace, the garage, a full bathtub. John Oliver, one of the few late-night hosts to fail to give his audience a view of somewhere in or around his house, continued hosting *Last Week Tonight* from a studio in a visually uncluttered white void. In turn, Oliver consistently drew parallels between his "void" and the collectively mind-numbing state of boredom and repetitiveness induced by stay-at-home orders and other social distancing measures.

The problems virtual shows present for theatrical actors were on glaring display in the late-night satire of the early months of the pandemic. Even for hosts not playing a distinct character like the Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*, this form of satirical television has also encouraged a somewhat theatrical performance style. Hosts like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, Jon Oliver play to a live audience and that performance is recorded very shortly before wide broadcast, which disallows the use of large number of cuts or the means

to engage in complex filmic language. The interactions between host and audience, host and guest, or even host and fellow comedian in a pre-written skit lack the full immediacy and ephemerality of theatre but have demonstrated those qualities considerably more than edited television. The late-night of the early pandemic was lacking not just in production quality and writing polish, but in efficacy of performance. Robbed of an audience, guests, and fellow performers, hosts were left in a situation in which they had to personally manufacture impulses rather than generate them in the space between audience and actor. Even in segments in which guests could call in over video chat, the shows were rife with a feeling of awkward unease not unfamiliar to anyone who has watched a play (or engaged in any social interaction usually accomplished in-person) performed over Zoom. This resulted in a problem for satire in that it became awkward and less entertaining. Satire does not need to inspire laughter to communicate, but it usually does, and the effect of a satirical joke delivered poorly can inspire a feeling of real apathy on the part of the audience.

In early October of 2020, I began re-cutting the portions from *The Extremists* pulled for my previous project. While we had only be performing about half the show, I wanted to present a cut that would give the audience an overview of the play's strange arc from news parody to satiric deconstruction and not unintentionally confuse Hopkin's intent. Though I found the play's satire of the media of the Bush years to be distressingly applicable to 2020, I made cuts there and added several bits of dialogue with an eye towards digestion by a modern audience. I communicated my intentions and reading of the play's themes to Sammy Pontello, my acting partner portraying Dick Hedgerow, who assisted me greatly by acting as a sounding board for my choices as an adapter and actor. Over the course of several weeks of sporadic rehearsal, we practiced reading the play with the intention of producing a low-tech recording of our efforts

ahead of streaming a lightly edited version of the show on Facebook. We started first by going

through the text and coming to consensus as to the aim of each of Hopkin's jokes. We discussed

the "butt" of each joke and how we might perform the dialogue in such a way that contributes to

the show's overall satiric vision. This was a considerably more constrained process than either of

us were used to. In live theatre, I place major value on discovering character through the process

of running scenes and defining the performance of my character in relation to what other actors

are discovering as scenes are rehearsed, this process was more goal-oriented. We would play

around with different line readings and how they affected the meaning of the text, rather than the

evocation of the character. As previously mentioned, these were not round characters with arcs

and emotional depth; they are archetypes designed to subvert their own existences. As such, the

performances could afford being overly technical at the expense of realism, especially on Zoom.

We also practiced techniques to overcome some of the technical limitations of Zoom,

even while we gave into the platform's reductive format to communicate the play's message

more clearly. My choice to record a video rather than performing it truly live was both an artistic

nod to the "live-ish" nature television satire and late-night comedy and a recognition of the

possibility for technical failure. A broken Wi-Fi connection or some other unplanned occurrence

could completely ruin the performance, whereas a recorded reading would be categorically

unable to experience those issues. Zoom's audio lag was also of significance; the time it takes to

record a person talking and then play that audio in someone else's video chat window is typically

fairly imperceptible for the vast majority of the platform's users, but it can destroy the rhythm of

dialogue and comic timing. Our standard for the performance became starting a line of dialogue

about a second before the other actor had finished their last statement or from 2 to 4 seconds

before in the case of a line of dialogue written as an interruption. This standard is indicative of

much of my approach towards this performance because it enhances the audience's experience of watching a Zoom reading, but feels wrong from the point of view of a theatrically trained actor.

On November 1st, 2020 I streamed the reading on Facebook. It was sparsely attended by a handful of family, friends, and colleagues who seemed to enjoy the work, but whose reactions I could not gauge in the way I had become accustomed to as a theatrical actor. No audience laughs or gasps, no subsequent performances to compare to the first. Given that I could not measure the performance's comic potency in real time, I focused my efforts on asking watchers if they "got it." I tried to elicit as indirectly as possible, to avoid putting my fingers on the scales, if the satire had a sense of clarity. Lacking a methodology for formally gathering experimental data on the results of my questions, I am left with only anecdotal answers. Upon reflection, those answers seem to reinforce certain aspects of satire I have come across in my research. No one had a wildly divergent interpretation of the performance's politics, but they focused on points that suggested to me they saw what they wanted in the show. My Democrat father complimented me on the show's disdain toward the Republican Party and my socialist friends all highlighted its critiques of global Capitalism. My somewhat politically ambivalent mother said the show really captured why she tries to avoid the 24-hour news cycle. Rather appropriately, the performance failed to drastically shake up my thoughts about political satire but did greatly reinforce many of the truisms I have learned in the course of my acting training. In the absence of live performance, I was made to appreciate how important other people are to my work as an actor.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Future Lines of Inquiry

Given the time and skill to expand this work, I would attempt to fill in several gaps in my representation of satire's possibilities on television and to more truthfully describe the polyphony of satiric points of view that are influencing American culture. I have severely limited my perspective by focusing primarily on satire delivered from comedians who are White and Male. This is partially the result of an entertainment, artistic, and political ecosystem built on the twin bedrocks of white supremacy and patriarchy as well as my own white male identity. Ironically (or perhaps appropriately given my focus on irony in this thesis), as a white man, my analysis of *Fairview*'s critique of the white gaze is limited by my own cultural context. White men have, until very recently, enjoyed strictly inequal access to positions of prominence in the entertainment industry and still exert a hugely outsized share of control over the center of gravity in popular culture. Due to this, most of the satirists that have graced and irrevocably affected the American television landscape are white men and that is reflected in my personal preferences and scholarship.

Lines of inquiry which would deepen my scholarship because of demographic diversity are infinite, though there are several that immediately spring to my mind that would interact with my work in fascinating dimensions. I am interested in the ways satire is delegitimized when it comes from a female performer. Samantha Bee's show *Full Frontal* is an offspring of *The Daily Show* and the ways in which language is policed and decorum is unequally enforced because of her gender drastically change what Bee is and is not allowed to say in comparison to Stewart. The social norm of docility and deference to male authority inflicted on women often seems to

result in a skewed public perception of satire performed by a woman. Aggression is, as discussed in this thesis, an inherent element of satiric construction but aggression is a trait that is coded masculine. Female aggression often provokes a sexist response and my expectation is that fact would be borne out in a dissection of the public's reaction to Samantha Bee's satire, and the knowledge of that response likely changes Bee's performance in ways both obvious and subtle. I would be interested to research this inequity in relation to the content of this thesis. Has hyper-fragmentation and political polarization helped or hindered Bee's ability to effectively wield satire? Does the democratic party's and more broadly the American political left's, adoption of feminism as a core norm in their political project changed the valence of female-presented satire in popular culture?

Similarly, possible research veins surrounding race abound. An obvious case study is the changing of the guard at *The Daily Show*. The middle-aged, white, New York-born and bred Jon Stewart left the show and was replaced in 2016 by the young, mixed race, first generation South African emigrant Trevor Noah. Examining the changes in production and reception of the Noah-helmed *Daily Show* would raise a host of questions. The show lost an aesthetic element present in its earlier incarnation, that Stewart's whiteness more closely mimicked the image and presentation of the historically White news anchor. Comedic deviations from that trope were an aspect of the show's satire. Given both Noah's identity as a mixed-race man as well as the evolution of *The Daily Show's* position in popular culture, the current incarnation of the program's production design is as much in conversation with the audience's expectations for the Stewart-hosted show as that show was with the audience's expectations of the opinion news. Noah is a victim to social norms that police his behavior and expression as a man of color, which, like Bee, alters how his satire is constructed and received. Examining the changes made

following the passing of the reins at *The Daily Show* would likely reveal both the effect racial identity has on comic performance, as well as the how the expectations an audience has for the genre of satirical faux-news have altered in the time between the Bush and Trump administrations.

Resolution

This project sits in the intersection of several of my areas of study, interests, and obsessions. Acting in the pursuit of parody provides a set of vexing challenges that I consider frequently. I have a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, and I have tried my best to remain an informed and politically active American citizen. I am fascinated – as a former social scientist, artist, and fan of popular culture – by the multitudinous ways that polarization and media consolidation have utterly transformed American society. Fundamentally though, I took on this project because of my deep and abiding love for satire, particularly that of many of the artists I chose to examine in this thesis. My mother's side of the family has developed a style of colloquial communication inspired primarily by Mel Brooks and the Coen Brothers: *Young Frankenstein* and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* were required viewing experiences by the time I reached adolescence. One of, perhaps *the*, influence on my early sense of humor and attitude towards politics was *The Daily Show*. I began watching Jon Stewart I think in 2007, near the end of the Bush Administration, with my father and uncle. It was not my choice to watch the program, but my dad would often let me stay up late with him on my weekend visits, provided I found he and his brother's television preferences palatable. This was not always the case; I was a meek child who became easily overwhelmed by crass "adult" humor. *The Daily Show*, however,

transfixed me. I did not understand two-thirds of the jokes and considerably fewer of the references to contemporary politics, but the way Jon Stewart delighted, enraged, and impassioned my George W. Bush-hating father and uncle struck me as unique. I wanted, nay *needed*, to understand everything he was saying and why it had such an effecgt. This desire led me to observe politics more closely and deeply consider comedy and performance. I wanted to understand Stewart so one day I could *be* him. This quest greatly influenced my decision to study Political Science and Theatre. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that I would not be an actor or politically minded individual without *The Daily Show*. This thesis is a direct extension of my childhood wonderment at the inner workings of political satire.

In modern political discourse, I am witness and enabler to a tremendous amount of time spent analyzing media objects in a depressingly binary way. This is one of the many negative externalities of polarization; all aspects of a thing are evaluated as either advancing or denying the total domination of one political tribe or the other. The exponential growth of discursive integration leaves less and less room between political and non-political speech. Social media exacerbates all of this, making in group identification a more noticeable part of one's identity, ensuring constant interaction with media and popular culture, and encouraging a form of debate that fundamentally lacks the level of depth and nuance possible in other forms of communication. The excesses of both ideological poles were not only formed in the forge of this media ecosystem, but they also feed off each other. The divisions in America have in some ways been materially much worse in past eras, but now they *feel* more all-consuming.

My reaction to this feeling was the core influence that sparked my analysis in this paper. I approached the project thinking, rather naïvely, that satire's paradoxes were a puzzle to be solved. That there must be an almost algorithmic means of determining if a piece of satiric work

is ethically *correct*. Knowing that, I hoped that this knowledge would influence my work as an actor, citizen, and artist. I would be able to joke in the most morally and ideologically optimal way, increasing my artistic output's social value in an almost hedonistic manner. These fantasies are the natural logical conclusion of being a young, progressively minded, artistically hungry man in 2021 America. Ironically, my search was unintentionally plagued by the very discursive flattening I was trying to solve; I could not abide the thought that satire is not something that is either inherently good or bad, left or right, Progressive or Conservative, a tool of upending oppression or empowering fascism. I failed to find the answer to my question because the question was flawed. I have discovered the absurdly obvious truth that satire contains multitudes and that art by its very nature defies strict moral categorization. I have achieved the goal of this project in that I have increased my own understanding and internal methodology for the performance, categorization, and critique of satire and – I hope – problematized its common understanding a way that grants readers a new perspective and encourages them to ask their own questions. My sincerest wish is that my efforts in some – certainly profoundly small – way contributed to an emergent popular discourse which encourages contemplation over judgement, a political system that is truly and unwaveringly committed to benefiting the common cause of human thriving, and a society ripe with an abundance of laughter.

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