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THE RHETORIC OF PARODY AND PERSONA: THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
DONALD TRUMP THROUGH PARODY IN THE 2016 ELECTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

James R. Lyle

May 2021

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James R. Lyle

2021

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DONALD TRUMP THROUGH PARODY IN THE 2016 ELECTION

By

James R. Lyle

Approved March 19, 2021

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Pat Arneson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Communication  
(Committee Chair)

---

Richard H. Thames, PhD  
Associate Professor of Communication  
(Committee Member)

---

Anthony M. Wachs, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Communication  
(Committee Member)

---

Kristine L. Blair, PhD  
Dean, McAnulty College and  
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

---

Ronald C. Arnett, Ph.D.  
Chair, Department of Communication &  
Rhetorical Studies

## ABSTRACT

# THE RHETORIC OF PARODY AND PERSONA: THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF DONALD TRUMP THROUGH PARODY IN THE 2016 ELECTION

By

James R. Lyle

May 2021

Dissertation supervised by Pat Arneson, Ph.D.

The intent of this dissertation is to explore the rhetorical nature of parody in the context of the American electoral process. This work draws on existing research in the field to show how humor is an important method for engaging the public sphere. This project develops the rhetorical nature of humor, works through existing research on conceptualizations of humor and its importance for societal dialogue, and then addresses the specific contributions to the study of parody offered by Mikhail Bakhtin and Kenneth Burke to demonstrate the potential for parody to act as a form of rhetorical illumination of existing rhetorical texts and styles. After documenting the contemporary research that has further articulated the significance of parody in understanding American political engagement, the final chapter offers a case study of parody surrounding the campaign of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 presidential election. The dissertation concludes that parody had important implications for how Donald Trump's character was expressed and

understood by the media and the electorate, facilitating a more acceptable perception of who Trump was as someone who might be presidential.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER 1: RHETORICAL HUMOR.....  | 1   |
| CHAPTER 2: FORMS OF HUMOR.....  | 32  |
| CHAPTER 3: A BAKHTINIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PARODY.....                          | 64  |
| CHAPTER 4: BURKEAN NOTIONS OF COMEDY.....                                     | 92  |
| CHAPTER 5: POLITICAL PARODY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.....                    | 118 |
| CHAPTER 6: TRUMPIAN PARODY: A CASE STUDY OF CANDIDATE<br>DONALD J. TRUMP..... | 148 |
| WORKS CITED.....  | 190 |



## Chapter 1: Rhetorical Humor

On June 16, 2015, Donald J. Trump came down the escalator at Trump Tower and made the announcement that he would be seeking the Republican nomination for the 2016 presidential election. While the announcement was deemed unorthodox in terms of the optics of the situation and the content of his announcement speech, in many ways that day was resurrected over and over, as then-candidate Trump did very little during the run-up to the 2016 presidential election that experts considered to be of the norm. This willingness to step outside the norms of expected behavior may be a reason Trump was able to identify with a number of voters who had grown tired of business-as-usual in Washington. While most candidates with his lack of political experience have never moved the polling needle, he managed to jump to the top of the polls in a relatively quick fashion and essentially never fell out of the top spot amongst the Republican field of contenders.

One thing that stands out as interesting about Trump as a presidential candidate is that he embraced his place outside of the traditional political box while simultaneously claiming that he could fit in the box when the moment called for it. During the campaign he regularly stated that he could be more presidential than the other candidates and decried the demand to act traditionally presidential as “boring as hell” (McCaskill). He even went on to say that being presidential would be easy and that what he was doing as an outsider, looking to shake up the establishment, was much more difficult work (Trump, “Pres. Trump Says”). History shows that Trump is not the first person to try and position oneself as the outsider who could play the part of insider when necessary, but he is one of the few people who has successfully used that strategy of rhetorical identification.

In addition to Trump's own endorsement of his place as an outsider, another phenomenon was taking place in the media world. He was regularly critiqued and ridiculed by late night television, including comedy sketch shows such as *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, news comedy programs including *The Daily Show*, and other programs. *The Simpsons'* animated comedy even mocked the infamous escalator announcement a mere three weeks after its occurrence (Moos). While these shows regularly lampooned then-candidate Trump for his unorthodox campaign, the reality is that the hosts, casts, and producers of these programs also thrived on the candidate's words and actions, which regularly served as fodder for jokes, skits, and other comedic commentary. One of the most prominent forms of comedy employed by these outlets was the use of role-play skits that parodied the words and behaviors of the candidate and those around him.

If the idea that any publicity is good publicity is true, then these entertainment programs provided a major service to Trump through their relentless parodying of his speeches, tactics, and overall campaign strategy. Many people may wonder if such constant negative exposure would undermine a candidate for political office. Thomas A. Hollihan notes that historically, candidates and their staffs have feared such image attacks from these programs (90). Robert Denton and Benjamin Voth describe the negative commentary provided by various comedic outlets regarding Sarah Palin as deleterious to John McCain's campaign in 2008 (120). However, such parodying of Trump's communicative behavior, especially when combined with his own self-identification as an outsider to both Washington and politics-at-large, may have been a valuable resource in allowing him to successfully construct the image as someone who could cut through politics-as-usual while simultaneously proclaiming an ability to adopt the traditional presidential persona when the moment warranted it. The fact that Donald J. Trump made appearances on television programs like *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and *SNL* is evidence

that the candidate's campaign certainly believed there to be benefits from participating in the comedic ridicule while also condemning it.

This dissertation will take up the question of how humor, as delivered by comedians on television, may have impacted the electability of Donald Trump. While it is easy to think of late-night comedy as mere entertainment, the fact that candidates and their campaigns have recognized the potential of such programs to help shape a candidate's image demonstrates the rhetorical potential of humor to impact politics. Hollihan adds that as the electorate has increasingly become cynical of the conduct of politicians and traditional news people, appearances on these programs have become 'a must,' allowing a candidate to share ideas with a wide swath of potential voters (134). Furthermore, it is not just the politicians who recognize this rhetorical power, as comedians have understood the ability of their comedy to be an extension of politics and messaging about a comedian's political beliefs (118-120).

This project considers how humor, in particular parody, functions rhetorically, and examines the phenomenon that was the 2016 candidacy of Donald J. Trump as a case study through this lens. This dissertation explores the rhetorical power of humor to shape our understanding of political rhetoric with focus on the role of parody. The goal is to consider how parody may be interpreted by audiences. Given the nature of parody, an illumination on the future through a reflection rooted in a prior text primarily performed in humorous ridicule (Morris 465), this means developing a sense of how parody reflects, through exaggeration, the original and how the rhetor uses the exaggeration to speak to a given audience. The project therefore asks how the intrinsic nature of parody not only communicates the specific and direct message/s contained within itself, but also a message/s about the 'primary text,' which here refers to the source material that is being parodied. Within this framework, this dissertation

investigates how the rhetoric of parody that surrounded Trump, and was even used by Trump, allowed him to successfully navigate the political waters and help win him the United States Presidency in November of 2016. This dissertation examines the rhetorical power of parody to better its function with respect to a number of examples of parody directed at candidate Trump during the 2016 election.

The chapters of this dissertation are to be organized as follows. This chapter will consider how humor can function as rhetoric and will explore the rhetorical purposes and functions available to humor. The second chapter will look at different forms of humor with the aim of situating them within a larger framework of humor as rhetorical. Chapter three will extract what is believed to be one of the more prominent forms of rhetorical humor, parody, and use the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to consider how parody functions. Chapter four continues the look at the scholarship by unpacking Kenneth Burke's work on the rhetorical potential of comedy to function as cathartic or derisive. Chapter five will continue the examination of parody by developing notions about how parody has functioned in facilitating audiences' understanding of the world they inhabit by looking at specific tactics that have been used to convey parody's aims in the modern era. The sixth chapter will be the case study that looks at how parody has been deployed and functioned in the context of the candidacy of Donald Trump.

This first chapter explores the relationship between rhetoric and humor. Specifically, the chapter begins by explaining rhetoric. This explanation includes a definition of rhetoric and a discussion of how rhetoric, or the potential for rhetoric, exists in situations. Second, I situate humor and comedy as occurring within the rhetorical tradition. This includes a discussion of what humor is definitionally and then shows why this construct can be, and should be,

understood as a rhetorical device. Finally, I sketch some of the general rhetorical features of humor by working through specific purposes and functions of humor.

### Rhetorical Situation Defined

The history of rhetoric as a subject of study is deep both in terms of age and in ways of thinking about rhetoric and its function in the public sphere. Lloyd Bitzer offers a useful way to think about rhetoric in “The Rhetorical Situation” by noting that rhetoric “is a mode of altering reality ... by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action ... discourse of such a character that the audience ... is so engaged that it [rhetoric] becomes mediator” (“Rhetorical Situation” 4). He supplements this definition by noting that rhetoric is a pragmatic effort that aims to be persuasive. While this definition does not explicitly identify the social nature of rhetoric, it is clear that Bitzer is attempting to navigate the ‘socialness’ of rhetoric. Rhetoric is what brings persons together to understand and share meaning about the world so that we can act together in that world.

Other scholars have offered comparable insights. Kenneth Burke explores the nature of rhetoric in *A Rhetoric of Motives* where he notes that rhetoric is fundamentally about the use of symbols to generate human cooperation in a given moment: “*For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past conditions of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*” (43). Gerard A. Hauser highlights that this cooperation is not just mere agreement but can be conceived of as agreement to “coordinate social action” (*Introduction* 3). Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith add importance to the idea of human agency in rhetoric by stressing that this role of rhetoric as a “making known” is directed both at one’s self and those with whom the world is shared (348).

Bitzer goes on to note that rhetoric can be properly thought about as existing within a larger situation. This “rhetorical situation” exists as the potential for a communicative response to an exigence, or need for the use of rhetoric: “Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer, “Rhetorical Situation” 6). People exist in the world in relation to one another in moments where there is a need for understanding or resolution of the exigence or urgent need to be managed or achieved through the use of communication. This rhetorical situation does not always result in the successful deployment of discourse, or any deployment for that matter, to address the moment that is at hand, but it is a situation that could benefit from rhetorical discourse to facilitate attitudinal alignment or action.

Rhetorical situations or opportunities for symbol-induced coordination, however, do not just naturally emerge. They are instead called into the world through the act of human agency. As Richard Vatz notes, the manifestation of a moment as a situation is made known in terms of significance and potential in a moment due to the choices called upon through a human agent who identifies and highlights aspects of the world as meaningful (157). Scott Consigny likewise criticizes Bitzer for over-attributing the ability of a rhetor to find an exigence but also criticizes Vatz for over-attributing the ability of a rhetor to create an exigence (178). While there has been spirited debate between Bitzer, Vatz, Consigny, and others over the nature of the relationship between the rhetor and the exigence as determinate forces, Bitzer does end up agreeing that rhetors play a role in determine the reality of a situation because of interests that may lead them to certain conclusions (Bitzer, “Functional Communication” 22).

While it has been noted that this shift in Bitzer's thinking about the nature of the situation partially addresses the criticism posed by Vatz and others, scholars have noted that this revision was too limited in that the factual nature of exigence largely remained intact (Garret and Xiao 31). Donna Gorrell adds that Bitzer's revision remains too concerned with functional interest and proximity of the speaker in relation to the exigence and excluded concern with more artistic factors (399). Both Garret and Xiao and Gorrell find themselves more in the camp of Consigny by endorsing the idea that there is an art to identifying and discussing an exigence. The key for these scholars is to recognize that while there is a degree to which the exigence is defined by the speaker, as per Vatz, there is also a limit or range on the rhetor to speak about the subject at hand. Garret and Xiao argue that complex of rhetor, exigence, and audience is always contextualized with different elements emerging as preeminent in a given moment. They note that what is lost in the Bitzer versus Vatz debate is the role of the audience: the needs of the audience as a factor in the exigence, and the expectations of the audience as a constraint on what is possible (Garret and Xiao 39). Gorrell supplements the discussion by also speaking to the interrelationship between the parts of a situation and adding that it is the interrelationship between a speaker, audience, and need that allows the parts to come more clearly into the picture as part of a creative or artistic process (405).

Craig R. Smith, in a later work with Scott Lybarger, continues to develop the idea that the "making known" of reality is shaped by the fact that the speaker and the audience(s) are capable of seeing, and perhaps likely to see, a situation differently (209). There are perceptual factors with regards to both the rhetor and the audience that further shapes and imbues meaning into a given context. A rhetorical situation is actually a complex of multiple exigencies and audiences. Smith and Lybarger note that while (1) a rhetor may select a particular exigence as "controlling"

for a situation, (2) the audience of the speech may select another facet of the need (or a different need), and (3) those implicated in the situation but not the speaker or the audience (the subject of the rhetoric if the need is distinct from the speaker and the immediate audience) may have choose another. Smith and Lybarger highlight this problem of competing interests as there are likely to be multiple audiences who confront a given act of rhetoric, and perhaps at different times:

With slight modification, Bitzer's notion of situational audience allows for the analysis of many audiences thereby providing another way by which rhetorical critics can deal with contemporary fragmentation ... Each of these groups perceived the exigence differently and to differing degrees each shared the ... perception. They meet Bitzer's standard of a rhetorical audience because they were capable of modifying a perceived exigence ...

Bitzer's model can also accommodate criticism of speakers who marginalize the wrong audience ... felt interests, congruity, and word choice which brings us to the question of constraints. (207)

A situational audience is characteristically fluid, the ability of each party to an exigence to identify and define it is distinct, in potentially conflicting and contradictory ways, and the notion of a rhetorical situation is important because it highlights the role of agency in leading to determinations of what constitutes a rhetorical situation and therefore rhetoric. If one person sees a situation as requiring the intervention of discourse to achieve resolution but another person does not, then it may be possible for the first to identify the attending discourse as rhetoric while the other sees it as mere communication. The consequence of this is that meaning can emerge from a multiplicity of social and linguistic locations. While it may be more common to think of Aristotelian notions of formal deliberative speech as rhetoric, rhetoric is better conceived as



coming from a more dynamic range of sources given the ability of the speaker and the audience to individually select, identify, and interpret events as meaningful. One such form of rhetoric is humor.

### Humor Defined

While people may laugh for several ‘reasons’ based on one’s responsiveness to aspects of the physical and social world, this work is concerned with a speaker’s intentional use of rhetorical devices to generate humor in an audience member that evokes laughter. Humor, for the purposes of this dissertation, is the use of various communicative devices to bring about a state of amusement, which is most commonly thought of as resulting in laughter. Dineh Davis notes that humor can be understood to be “any sudden episode of joy or elation associated with a new discovery that is self-rated as funny” (547). She writes that this “episode of joy” is often manifested physically in reactions such as a smile or laughter but observes that one might find something to be humorous without showing it through such outward expression.

While the above definition may leave one wanting more precision to the boundaries of what humor is, there is a degree of ambiguity in the nature of humor that cannot be overcome. On the question of laughter as a demand to humor, Jeroen Vandaele points out that the feeling that results in a laugh may be present even if the laughter is not (222). Salvatore Attardo’s research on the nature of humor leads him to comparable conclusions. Like Vandaele, Attardo makes the claim that laughter is not a prerequisite for humor, as laughter is the effect and not the cause of humor (*Linguistic Theories* 11-12). In addition, Attardo also says that the specific forms of/at humor are so broad and culturally determined that it is hard to pin something down as humor through an essentialist lens (*Linguistic Theories* 9). Social groups can assign different values to styles, content, contexts, authorship and so on, which can lead to one person or group

seeing humor and another group seeing something else altogether. In fact, it may be through a consideration of failed humor, or unintended humor, that we may be able to more clearly get to the rationale for the broader and more subjective notion of humor advanced in this dissertation.

When one uses humor, they are intentionally doing things orally and physically to provoke a certain form of response in the audience. While it is hoped that the intended audience will react as planned, it is quite likely that the effort to amuse falls flat or goes over in unanticipated ways. It is certainly possible that one may attempt to use humor and fail to be humorous, or at least fail to get the desired response from all or some of the audience. Clearly jokes have been told that failed to deliver the desired or expected outcome. Other conditions may also exist as a constraint on the ability to laugh even though someone finds humor in a particular moment. It is also possible that someone may be perceived as humorous to an audience member even though they have not deployed humor. Much like an action can be persuasive without being an effort to persuade, an action can be humorous without being an effort at humor. Likewise, people are often amused at things that they observe in the world that are not humorous. An adult may find a child's facial expressions as the child observes something new and bewildering to be amusing, but that does not indicate or necessitate that the child has used humor to create the emotion state of the adult. It is also possible that an act of humor can produce a reaction perceptually consistent with the intended function of the humor, but the reaction is in fact the result of some other processing within an audience member that results in a smile, a chuckle, or a laugh. For instance, a young child may attempt to use humor by telling a knock-knock joke at the dinner table, but the joke is completely nonsensical and illogical, and the adults at the table laugh (even sincerely) because the joke failed. Observably it seems that the attempt at humor has been

successful, but the reality is such that audience members are laughing not at the humor but at the humorist.

Mordechai Gordon's *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing* offers a useful commentary on this relational nature of humor that is embedded within the definition of humor. Gordon notes that in addition to the idea that one can make an attempt to use humor as a way to bring about a state of amusement in others, it is important to highlight that people possess a sense of humor, which is "that capacity that enables us to identify ironical, cynical, sarcastic, witty, ludicrous, and generally funny expressions, comments, or actions" (5). While this is important as a way to distinguish the 'cause and effect' relationship between the use of humor and the potential for one to react with a smile or laugh or other physical expressiveness, it also helps get at the difference between humor and other forms of amusing behavior, such as engagement with song or activities such as dance. Humor is a way of strategically communicating with others to better manage social relationships and contexts by connecting to another's sense of humor.

Gordon goes on to therefore note that our use of humor is a social effort:

It is a social effort in that humor's effectiveness may be generally thought of to be more powerful in a social setting where a comedian performs for an audience. It is also a social effort in that the intent is often to say something about the state of affairs that we find ourselves in. Humor can be a way to make it easier for people to live together and come together by allowing individuals to laugh at one another through a social acknowledgment of our limitations. (5)

Humor as a social effort may be intended to ease a conversation between people.

John Morreall adds to the conversation by highlighting the role of humor as a "social lubricant" that can make it easier to come together in the face of uncertain and unsettling news

(“Philosophy of Humor”). It is the case that many persons do not immediately think of humor as a way to walk into an uncomfortable or emotionally negative situation, but instead think of humor as a playful way of entertaining others through a good laugh. That said, humor can be a way of “engendering trust and reducing conflict” and “provide delight that reduces or even blocks negative emotions” when one is confronted with bad or unsettling news (Morreall “Philosophy of Humor”). Why does one often preface bad news with a friend or associate by saying “Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” This can be a way to make the situation a little lighter, hopefully elicit a laugh, and make one realize that things are not all bad.

Additionally, it should be noted that there are usually multiple, and different, persons involved in and with the humor. There is a speaker telling the joke (or other form of humor), the direct audience listening to the joke, and content of the joke. It is also possible that there are multiple audiences listening to the joke, and only some of these persons are intended recipients of the amusement or are capable of sufficiently understanding the effort. Beyond this it is also possible that the multiple subjects of the content of the humor are in differentiated roles, which may make it such that some of the subjects are at the center of the joke while others are just part of the story that is unfolding. There is also the possibility that all, or some, of the audience to the performance of the humoristic effort (as well as the performer of the humor) are subjects of the joke itself. This complex of persons and the accompanying multiplicity of roles means that all are not relationally equally implicated in the process of humoristic action. As a result, there are forms of humor where the audience does not laugh at the joke or the action, and that is very much the intent of the humorist (largely because the humor is not intended for an observed direct audience but instead for some other audience, perhaps even the humorists themselves). In an instance such as this, it may be the case that the audience, which has perceived themselves to be

the recipients of the humor, are, in fact, part of the effort at humor almost serving as an unknowing assistant to a magician.

A final definitional observation about humor is that humor is regularly referred to as ‘comedy’ in the modern era. Asa Berger, along with other authors, uses ‘humor’ and ‘comedy’ as interchangeable terms. Berger, who is credited for his work in developing typologies of humor (Buijzen and Valkenburg 149), uses the terms as comparable in his *An Anatomy of Humor* (2). Technically, comedy may be understood as a form of humor where the humor has been institutionalized in ritualistic performance (Morreall “Philosophy of Humor). However, it is commonplace in contemporary society to refer to the use of humor as ‘comedy’ being performed by a ‘comedian’ who may be ‘comical.’ Furthermore, it is comparably uncommon to hear of one being referred to as a ‘humorist’ though we do speak of events as ‘humorous’ and consider an individual’s ‘sense of humor’ in gauging their likelihood to appreciate a specific form of comedy. What is worth noting about comedy here, is that the creation of this literary form of delivering humor extends the idea of using humor to speak socially. Morreall, in his effort to compare comedy with tragedy, writes that the two forms deal with comparable moments in life but present different ways of responding to them. He argues that tragedy “valorizes serious, emotional engagement with life’s problems,” and “embodies an anti-heroic, pragmatic attitude toward life’s incongruities” (“Philosophy of Humor”). Tragedy is situated within the heroic tradition, where one fights for what they value against an obstacle or barrier that inhibits the achievement of those values in day-to-day life. Comedy, on the other hand, is anti-heroic and makes fun of the institutions and values that may lead one to fight against insurmountable odds and instead embraces a more pragmatic response to conflict such as “deal-making, trickery, getting an enemy drunk, and running away” to solve a problem (Morreall “Philosophy of

Humor”). Morreall also differentiates the characters of a comedy from those in a tragedy. While tragedy focuses on characters associated with elites in leadership positions, comedy draws on a much larger pool of individuals from different backgrounds as the protagonist. Because the agents of the comedy lack the power of the elites, and do not respond to situations based on an impulse driven by some ideal or value, Morreall argues that characters within comedy think their way through problems with “emotional disengagement,” which teaches adaptiveness as a social good: “While tragic heroes are emotionally engaged with their problems, comic protagonists show emotional disengagement. They think, rather than feel, their way through difficulties. By presenting such characters as role models, comedy has implicitly valorized the benefits of humor that are now being empirically verified, such as that it is psychologically and physically healthy, it fosters mental flexibility, and it serves as a social lubricant” (“Philosophy of Humor”). While the more basic value of the observation of the intersection between ‘humor’ and ‘comedy’ is to realize that many scholars use these terms synonymously, the relationship also brings us back to the point that humor is not just a way to generate mere entertainment. Humor, or comedy, functions as a social good. We use humor as a means for understanding the world in which we exist and to share that understanding with others. To return to the language of Lloyd Bitzer, humor can be understood to potentially function as a discursive response to an identified exigence in a rhetorical situation. Humor is rhetorical.

#### Humor as Rhetoric

Comedy and humor have long been looked upon as rhetorical devices capable of serving as vehicles for delivering social and political commentary dating back to the ancients, who both argued for humor as a rhetorical device and demonstrated its effectiveness in practice (Becker and Waisanen 164; Benacka 1). Although humor was used as a vehicle for influence in stage

plays and jokes in antiquity, there was little extended treatment of the subject by the Greeks and Romans in their writing, and disdain for its potential by a large number of those scholars, the evidence is clear that the potential of humor has been noted for centuries. The Sophist Gorgias was noted by Aristotle for remarking that an orator should use laughter to counter seriousness and use seriousness to respond to laughter (Grant 18). Diogenes the Cynic, a founder of the Cynic movement, rejected accepted social norms and his primary means of subverting these traditions was through the use of comedy manifested in forms such as ridicule and obscenity (Bosman 103-4). Plato, who looked down on the use of humor, used humor a good bit and with effectiveness (Sherwood 45). Even though Aristotle spoke poorly of the use of humor as mocking and jeering language that can incite one into a state of anger (*Rhetoric* 73), he also noted in *Rhetoric* that efforts to evoke laughter can be pleasant (52). Because of the pleasant and calming potential of laughter he declared efforts to generate laughter to be an effective means to appeal to an audience (*Rhetoric* 169). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle declared that those who use humor with good taste can be deemed “witty or versatile,” which denotes that they are people of character (104). Mary A. Grant’s work on ancient rhetorical theorists shows that although most ancient theorists did not set out to develop a theory of humor, sketches of a theory emerge that show how most rhetors advocated its use to ease the audience, but also advocated restraint to avoid attacks on the less fortunate (139).

This love-hate relationship with humor and comedy occurs due to the content of comedy: comedy stands against normative cultural expectations for social and physiological behavior. Humor is a primary way for people to speak about subjects that we often declare to be taboo in normal everyday conversation (Nilsen and Nilsen 3). Comedy has routinely focused on issues of social controversy and clash such as class, gender, and race issues. Humor has also regularly

taken up subjects of deviance, perversion, disgust, and the grotesque. Sometimes these issues are discussed for their own sake to produce crude jokes, and sometimes these issues are used in concert with other more socially significant matters to make a statement about economic, political, or social relations.

Not only is humor a way to discuss subjects considered to be off the table in many social circumstances and conversations, but it is also a way to communicate in ways that normally are deemed unacceptable because they flaunt social conventions (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 3). People are usually taught in human communication and English courses focusing on the development of speaking and writing skills to stick to the point, avoid exaggeration, stay away from the use of profanity and other derogatory language, and follow commonly accepted notions about turn-taking in conversational speaking. Comedy and humor allow for all these norms to be moved to the background in governing practices of communication. This by no means suggests that disregarding social norms makes the comedy humorous. Resisting social norms also does not mean that abandonment of social norms is required for humor. In fact, it may be that an effort at humor is developed around excessive reliance on social expectations and the literal meaning in language.

The position of humor as outside of social convention is that it often aims to produce physical reactions that one would not describe as generally desirable or healthy. In other contexts, we would think of the characteristics associated with the physical onset of laughter as indicative of an ailment or other physical issues. Morreall provides an excellent account of the physiologically unusual nature of laughter that comes from the successful use of humor:

Of all the things human beings do or experience, laughing may be the funniest – funny strange, that is, not funny ha-ha. Something happens or someone says a few words, and



our eyebrows and cheeks go up, as the muscles around our eyes tighten. The corners of our mouths curl upward, baring our upper teeth. Our diaphragms move up and down in spasms, expelling air from our lungs and making staccato vocal sounds. If the laughter is intense, it takes over our whole bodies. We bend over and hold our stomachs. Our eyes tear. If we had been drinking something, it dribbles out our noses. We may wet our pants. Almost every part of our bodies is involved, but none with any apparent purpose. We are out of control in a way unmatched by any other state short of neurological disease. And – funniest of all – the whole experience is exquisitely pleasurable! (*Comic Relief* 3)

This understanding of the physically reactive nature of comedy and humor actually can be traced back to the idea of the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm) as expressions of emotion (Attardo, *Linguistics of Humor* 19-20).

The rhetorical significance of humor comes from the requirement that the audience to the comedy ‘buy into’ or ‘play along with’ the humorous nature of the commentary. Because of this, Steve Sherwood goes as far as to note that humor is much more than a mere rhetorical device and can instead be thought of as a rhetorical enterprise given the burden of the speaker to persuade an audience to laugh (44). Meyer also highlights the audience or perception-centered nature of humor as the audience is largely the arbiter as to the presence of humor and its function. He remarks that what is deemed humorous is highly situational or contextual. What one audience (member) finds funny may be different than what another finds funny.

An audience may judge the content of humoristic communication to work in one moment but then find the same content ineffective or inappropriate for another. This may be due to a proper understanding of the background and other context cues in the rhetorical situation that allow a joke to resonate in one instance, but insufficient recognition of the variables that make

the content humorous in another. Meyer states that the audience “must choose to appreciate the humor, and not to be angered, irritated, or afraid, or to feel another strong emotion” (316). The emotional intensity of humor can ebb and flow over time. Both the emotional intensity can wane as well as the recognition of the effort as humor in the first place.

As a humorist repeatedly deploys humor, both in terms of content and style, the effect of humor may wane and eventually cease to exist. Regarding the importance of surprise, Meyer continues: “because surprise ... is important for humor to be perceived, the concepts that create the humor must be only mildly familiar.... If the concepts that create the humor are so familiar as to be already known ... the audience cannot ‘get’ a joke because the sudden perception of a new perspective is lost” (316). Insufficient distance from knowledge at play in the joke jeopardizes humor’s effectiveness because the ‘aha’ moment is already recognized by the audience prior to the joke.

Sherwood develops the idea of humor as rhetorical by showing how integral Aristotle’s concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos are to the functioning of humor. Humor can help or hurt an audience’s sense of a speaker’s ethos since the speaker’s most immediate goal is to evoke pathos, and its purpose is often to expose the irrational through laughter (Sherwood 46). Most efforts at humor work precisely because symbols and shared meaning work largely within the realm of logos to craft an anecdote or story that feels familiar and predictable—only to then have a moment of rupture that breaks our sense of expectation. This break or surprise works due to the use of logos to create meaning and through the use of pathos to generate a sense or feeling within the narrative that helps establish tone; the break then presumably creates a new pleasurable and amusing emotional response in the audience. While the use of pathos is clearly integral to evoking a state of amusement with members of an audience, the reasoning at play in conjunction

with the emotional connotations of the rhetoric combine to spur a sense of rupture in the audience and create amusement within the audience. The use of pathos varies given the context and nature of the comedic effort. Finally, ethos is present in the both the credibility that the speaker brings to the delivery of the humor which is then enhanced or undermined based on an audience's or person's reaction to the humor. We may find the speaker to be ridiculous or witty or even mean-spirited depending on how the joke is received by audience members.

Furthermore, audience members enter the communicative moment with an expectation of a comic delivery, which assists in preparing us for what is to come. Or, the audience may not have an expectation of rhetoric functioning as humor, which fuels the revelation or surprise that propels the effort into the realm of being humorous.

All of this comes back to the idea that the working of humor is rhetorical. Humor is dependent on a relationship of understanding between the rhetor and the audience regarding the purposes or exigences driving the interaction. Humor also only works if the rhetor is able to select the appropriate content and ways of delivering that content for a given audience. In other words, humor is a situational response to moment where discourse is needed to achieve some form of social meaning or action.

#### The Purposes and Functions of Humor

If humor works through a relationship that exists between the humorist and the audience, then it is important to understand how that relationship may work. While there are many observations about a relationship that exists in each moment of humor that cannot really be understood absent the details of that moment, there are some general contours that are worth considering. It has already been stated that a comedian brings certain aims and intent to his or her use of comedy. There is something about the social or physical world that has been observed and

deemed important, which warrants communication to share and acknowledge the event. However, while a humorist may seek to bring a perspective to light, it remains to be seen whether audience members will consume the humor as intended and then react in the desired way. In other words, a speaker will bring a purpose to bear through the use of humor and the result will be a functioning of that rhetoric in the world with audiences. This section of the chapter therefore offers some definitional contours for the two concepts of the purpose and function of humor and considers how they relate with each other in a rhetorical manner.

### *Purposes of Humor*

Humor is a way for a speaker and an audience to relate to one another on a given issue. While some of this relationship is tied to the fact that humor only brings about the intended state of amusement if there is a shared background between the speaker and the listeners that enables the humor to function (Conley 67), an important question exists about what this relationship might look like. While there are varying lists of purposes of humor advanced by scholars, three of the theories regarding the purposes of humor as a rhetorical message that connects an audience with the rhetor are relief, incongruity, and superiority (Buijzen and Valkenburg 147; Meyer 312; Morreall “Philosophy of Humor”). Each of these theories has their proponents and their critics but it should be noted that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another as the purpose of humor can draw on aspects of multiple theories (Buijzen and Valkenburg 148; Vallade et al. 232). In fact, as research evolves and evidence for one theory versus the other is highlighted, it is common to see research move to a given purpose and explore how moderating forces can provide nuance to the theory (Walter et al. 344).

Theories related to humor providing relief for an audience speaks to the ability of laughter to temporarily address the stress and pressure created by some issue (or exigence), or

even the joke that is being told (Bardon 468). The humorist either speaks to an issue that is creating stress for the speaker and audience and relieves the tension created by the issue by temporarily disarming it, or the humor is built in such a way that it creates tension that is then relieved in some manner (Meyer 312). Social situations, specific human relations, legal and social regulation, and so forth may create circumstances where a member of the audience is rendered uncomfortable for some reason or another. This discomfort results in the building up of tension that is incapable of being properly addressed in ordinary conversation. Humor towards that issue or situation can function to allow the energy to be released or relieved (Gordon 89). Berger describes this purpose of humor as a way to “let off steam” (*Anatomy* 135). While several theorists find versions of this theory problematic as there is no actual release of energy and the theory is too hydraulic in nature (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 20), or that people may be more inclined to laugh when they are more relaxed (Bardon 472), there is evidence that the theory does hold in the presence of a controversial or difficult social issue where the laughter can provide a temporary freedom from the social constraints of the day (Bardon 475; Meyer 316; O’Donnell-Trujillo and Adams 188). For example, when a politician broaches a difficult moment by trying to highlight some small way to make light of it, the purpose of the humor is not to reinforce the difficulty of the moment but to try to relieve some of the stress and tension that has built up amongst some members of the audience. Politics is often considered to be a sensitive subject in many circles because of intense political polarization, but humor about politics, such as a skit on *SNL*, may be considered to be an enactment of the relief premise where the goal is to temporarily make it a little easier for people to think about the political situation through laughter.

The incongruity theory of laughter says that laughter emerges out of the unexpected and surprising (Morreall “Philosophy of Humor”). This is the method of evoking laughter in traditional jokes where a comedian is using a story or anecdote to build to a punch line. The punch line brings the joke to a conclusion and the surprise of the punch line is what makes the rest of the content funny. Incongruity is the result of an ambiguity or an uncertainty that is resolved through suddenness or surprise (Sprowl 53). While there is surprise in the punch line or ‘aha’ moment, these moments are generally safe and playful, and, according to Meyer, this is largely what makes them work (313). While John Sprowl notes that a good deal of research into incongruity has focused on children’s reactions to humor (54), Meyer observes that the incongruity purpose is quite common in political humor:

Politicians use humor from incongruity to portray opponents’ actions as irrational. In 1992, President George Bush tried to portray opposing vice presidential candidate Al Gore as “Mr. Ozone,” alluding to his advocacy of strict environmental regulations. Ten years earlier, President Ronald Reagan pointed to incongruities in governmental attempts to control crime: “We have the technological genius to send astronauts to the moon and bring them safely home. But we’re having trouble making it safe for a citizen to take a walk in the evening through a park” (Reagan, 1982). Another Reagan commonplace that used incongruity for humor recurred frequently during his campaigns: “A federal program, once started, is the nearest thing to eternal life you’ll ever see on this earth” (Reagan, 1976). He placed “eternal life,” something usually associated with religion, in the context of government programs, an unusual association and hence an incongruity. (314)

Incongruity is also commonly deployed in sitcoms and popular television programs that depict everyday mishaps and accidents in life that could happen to anyone. Animal humor, such as the infamous dogs playing poker paintings, may also be described as a depiction of incongruity to highlight the absurdity of life in a rather playful manner (Gordon 24).

Another way humor is designed to precipitate laughter is by revealing superiority (Meyer 314). People may laugh at actions and behaviors that they find to be beneath them or outside of acceptable norms of behavior. As Morreall notes, this is not just laughing at things most people describe as “ignorant,” such as adults laughing at childish behavior, but also people laughing at themselves for mistakes that they have made or people laughing at the demonstration of skills that are beyond them, as with Charlie Chaplin (“Philosophy of Humor”). Berger identifies this approach to humor as a desire to release “hostile aggression generated by a sense of superiority” (*Anatomy* 69). While the superiority purpose is something that has not been advocated by rhetorical scholars as a reason to use humor, due to its negative and discriminatory orientation toward the world and the difficulty people may have laughing at others (Sprowl 55), the theory retains value as a way to understand how humor can be, and is, used. As Roger Scruton and Peter Jones note, “If people dislike being laughed at it is surely because laughter de-values its object in the subject’s eyes” (208). While there may be moments when one is willing to admit that they have done something worthy of being laughed at, most people do not enjoy their personal character or actions serving as ‘the butt of a joke.’ Additionally, it is easier for many people to laugh at the mistakes of others than to consider their own mistakes (Gordon 89). Meyer also suggests that this form of humor can work as a social corrective that brings a group of people together, even if the joke does not manifest in a publicly outward display of laughter (314-5). Evidence of demeaning and belittling humor in response to perceived unwarranted superiority

has been very common in American social and political history. Jessalyn I. Vallade, Melanie Booth-Butterfield, and Lori E. Vela note the prevalence of belittling humor as a means for controlling interpersonal relationships by reinforcing power differentials (245). Meyer identifies such insulting humor use through humor targeted at demographics such as race and sex to establish social hierarchy (315). Saul Alinsky regularly stressed the use of belittling humor to attack opponents of social protest (Stewart et al. 318-9). These are just a few of the purposes for which one might introduce humor in communication with other people.

It is possible that there are other reasons one might engage in the use of humor. It is also possible that there are additional observations that can be made about the ethics that underpins the rationale one draws upon in deciding to resort to humor as a rhetorical device. Most people are familiar with experiences where the intentional use of humor was designed to evoke a laugh as a way to deal with the difficulty of given moment in life (relief), the unexpected situation (incongruity), or the desire to laugh at another as a strategy of belittlement (superiority).

Understanding these purposes are an important part of understanding comedy or humor, but they are just a part of that understanding. While a humorist presumably considers the desires of various members of an audience in deciding to call upon comedy, the purpose is ultimately some (potentially) unspoken thing that resides within the rhetor and exists pre-enactment. Given that an understanding of humor is enhanced if critics and observers are able to gauge one's purpose in order to better determine if the effort at humor hit the speaker's intended comedic and social marks. However, there is also a need to look at how the effort at humor works with the audience, or between the speaker and the audience. What happens once the humor comes into being? Does the audience laugh? Does the audience laugh in the way that was intended? What does this laughter (or other expressiveness) do to the relationships between the comic, the audience, and



the world they all inhabit? Answering these questions demands that I consider how humor functions once a speaker's desire to be humorous moves from an impulse or thought to language and action.

### *Functions of Humor*

From these purposes for which humor originates, there are several potential functions of humor as a means for connecting individuals to one another and to the world they inhabit. As has already been noted, there is a lively debate amongst theorists as to which purpose of humor is best suited to explain specific instances of humor. Unfortunately, there is not a correct answer as it is quite possible for any of the above purposes to explain how rhetoric works in an individual instance of humor. Because of the multiplicity of explanations possible, Meyer argues that scholars must go beyond mere purpose and ask what function humor serves for the humorist and the audience. A person's perspective changes based not just on the social location of those directly involved in a particular moment of humor but also the "theoretical sunglasses" one wears in trying to understand how humor may have worked (315). As is discussed above regarding the rhetorical situation, rhetoric works when there is a connection and sharing between the rhetor and the audience. A rhetor's purpose can be explained in a number of ways but if there is not the intended understanding by the audience then that discussion of purpose is rendered obsolete. Theory therefore needs to account for not just purpose but also function. To demonstrate this claim, Meyer provides an example that shows how theorists can work from any of the purpose perspectives to explain the humor (or lack thereof) in a given moment:

For instance, one printed announcement ... noted that "Weight Watchers will meet at 7:00 p.m. Please use the large double door at the side entrance." If one experiences humor from this written remark, relief theory proponents could argue that the humor

stems from the tension released when receivers realize that the juxtaposition of the meeting announcement and reference to the large door was not directed at the receiver personally. Incongruity proponents could claim that the humor results from the surprise at seeing such a recommendation for entry following a serious announcement for a group of people concerned about their weight.... Superiority theory proponents, in turn, could argue that the humor originates simply from the implied put-down of overweight people by reference to their particular problems (i.e., needing larger doors). (315)

Meyer's example demonstrates that it is possible to read a situation in a variety of ways. Simply trying to ascertain the purpose behind the humor and then assessing it is part of the demand placed upon the critic, but knowledge of purpose is therefore insufficient. To supplement this there is a need to also look at what emerges out of the effort at humor to identify not just the purposes but also the functions of humor.

Meyer, as well as other scholars, argues that there are four functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. The first function of humor is identification between the speaker and audience members. One of the most basic functions of humor is to allow a speaker to develop a sense of commonality with the audience (Martin et al. 51; Meyer 318). Owen H. Lynch describes this function as an in-group action to establish a sense of identity and is "used as an expression of—or establishing the power structure of—a culture" (434). Meyer suggests that an identification strategy is designed to show that the speaker and the audience are connected as part of the same group and to give that group a sense of superiority or belonging. Sometimes this means using humor to express a common feeling on an issue; sometimes this means using humor to reveal that the speaker is on the joke with the audience.

Eric Romero and Anthony Pescosolido add to all of this by noting the impact of such humor on positive affect, psychological safety and cohesiveness within a group or organization (406-8).

The second function of humor offered by Meyer is that of differentiation. If humor has the power to create a bond between the speaker and the audience, then it is obvious that the counter-potential is also a possible function of humor. In fact, an effort at identification of an in-group necessitates an identification of an out-group, which essentially means that the use of identification or differentiation explicitly requires the other to exist implicitly. This is why Lynch considers the two functions together (434). Both identification and differentiation often work towards a similar end since the only reason to say that 'we' are together is because there is an 'us' and a 'them' lurking out 'there.' Likewise, the value of marking 'them' is because they are not part of the in-group or 'us.' The primary difference therefore is the way that the distinction is marked: which group is explicitly identified and how. Differentiation humor works to highlight distinctions between groups. Differentiation creates markers of certain distinctions through criticism and ridicule, which allow members of one group to laugh at another group (Meyer 322). While there is a technical difference between differentiation humor and humor that more openly speaks to social norms and hierarchy, such as that which is associated with the enforcement function discussed below, Thomas E. Ford and Mark A. Ferguson state that differentiation rhetoric and humor "functions as a means of social control, allowing members of the dominant group in society to maintain their privileged position" by creating and reifying degrees of power (80).

The third major function of humor is clarification, which allows the speaker to make his or her position on an issue clear to the audience (Meyer 319). The interjection of humor works to make an event or issue memorable for the audience, making a comment that functions to reveal

where one stands on, or how they perceive, a given matter. The intention here is usually not to differentiate some aspect of one group from another group, or to enforce a corrective, but instead to merely establish where one stands. While this function is not the same as identification (for identification works to create the relationship and clarification establishes the clarity of the bounds of the positions within the relationship), both differentiation and clarification can work with one another in that both serve a larger unifying function (Meyer 323; Miczo et al. 445).

Meyer argues that the final major function of humor is that of enforcement (320). A rhetor may use humor to speak to the value, or lack thereof, of social norms. Lynch offers a comparable breakdown of functions and says that this sort of humor is designed to control or compel others to follow social norms or to actively resist those (435). Consistent with the theory of superiority as one purpose of humor, enforcement is a divisive function and one where the strategy is to create humor that targets someone to generate a “laughing at” as opposed to “laughing with” others (Hirzalla et al. 50). When adults laugh at a child for the child’s refusal to keep quiet on a matter, the humor works to reinforce the idea that there are issues of appropriateness that govern how and when we speak. Sometimes humor is benign and merely highlights an action as being outside of prominent social norms. Other times, humor has a more degrading nature, for instance if an adult mocks the childish actions of another adult, which is meant to serve as a call for correction in behavior. This can render humor as aggressive and threatening if there is a failure to change (Martin et al. 54).

Humor can clearly work in several ways. Some of those ‘ways’ may be expected by the performer of the comedy. Some may be unintended consequences based on a joke failing to land with the audience as the performer anticipated. Further, certain kinds of humor will work for some humorists but not for others given that everyone involved in the playing out of the comedic

effort exists in a unique social location. While one audience member feels an identification with the humorist and the content of humor, another may feel that they have been marked as different and therefore react in a disinterested, or even negative, way to the performance. As mentioned throughout this chapter, the use of rhetoric-at-large is an effort to share and create meaning between individuals coping with the day-to-day obligations of living in the world, and sometimes the desire of the rhetor does not match the understanding of those receiving the rhetoric. This seems particularly true for humor where the breaking from social norms regarding how to communicate and what to communicate about makes it perhaps even harder to control the connection between purpose and function and warrants discussion of how the aims of the speaker and the results in the world come together.

#### *Interrelationships of Purpose and Function*

The purposes and functions of humor are not exclusive of one another. For instance, an effort at humor could rely on efforts to create relief or demonstrate incongruity to achieve a purpose of showing superiority or lack thereof (Meyer 313). A speaker may use humor to signify their place within a given group (identification), to establish what it means to be within a given group (enforcement), and simultaneously to ridicule those outside of that given group (differentiation) all through the same instance of humor (Meyer 323). The reasons for the mixing of humor's purposes are again rooted in the rhetorical nature of humor. The most effective proofs or appeals in a joke are contingent on a given audience. As was noted above, both regarding rhetoric-at-large and humor-as-rhetoric, different audience members receive and interpret rhetoric differently. While it may be the intent of the rhetor to engage in humor that functions to create an identity and define what it means to be part of an in-group (the group that is not the target of the humor and is encouraged to laugh at something) those persons associated with the

out-group will interpret the message in a potentially radically different way, potentially perceiving a message of exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, if the humor creates an emotional response of positivity, pleasure, and amusement, then there is a good chance that those who are excluded from the humor will have a feeling of unpleasantness generated by the implicit distinctiveness embedded within the rhetoric.

Thomas Conley's work on insults as humor highlights the need to be attentive to the propriety of the humor relative to the audience (Conley 69). Failure to properly understand a purpose or function relative to the audience's receptiveness makes the performers' use of humor rhetorically dangerous and risks backlash from the audience. The reason humor is a "double-edged sword" is found in how Meyer describes the potential to cross a line as perceptions of humor from social "lubricant" to "abrasive" (317). This is all consistent with work in the area of political comedy that shows that exposure to political humor can develop bonds between the humorists and the audiences such as a politician using of self-deprecating humor to increase identification with potential voters (Hollihan 94). Political humor can be deployed to shape or create issue awareness (Becker and Waisenan 170) and/or expectations of behavior in the public sphere (Denton and Voth 114). If rhetoric matters, and the evidence is clear that it does, then people need to recognize that what is funny to some people may not just be unfunny to others but may also suggest a lurking danger or threat as humor as a form of rhetoric establishes what is important, what is valuable, and what is expendable. While the humorist may work to claim there was no desire to incite an audience in a threatening manner, which may certainly be the case, the audience's ability to take control of the humor and use it for purposes and functions they deem relevant can become incredibly difficult to control.

## Conclusion

While it is certainly likely that a survey of people, academics and otherwise, about what constitutes rhetoric as well as the nature of humor would generate varying responses, there is a deep connection between the two concepts. Humor is often used as a way of mediating individual and collective understandings of the circumstances of living in the world. Humor can be something that occurs for mere entertainment, but it can also be a way for people to address subjects that otherwise are considered off the table in ordinary conversation. Humor can also be a device for easing into a conversation on other subjects that may be uncomfortable for some people to address. Furthermore, humor can be a tool for rendering judgment on an issue of social significance in the world. These potentialities of humor are present more often than not because the aims of the rhetor or humorist may not match the desire or understanding of the audience. While a humorist may not intend to speak about an issue of social significance or intend to speak in a particular way about an issue, the audience may process and interpret the message differently and impart social meaning on their own.

This chapter has revealed that humor is rhetorical. It is a ‘social lubricant’ that one can attempt to use to address or create social needs of the day. As a form of rhetoric, a humoristic situation or statement includes the basic elements of rhetorical situations (speaker, audience, message, and context). Additionally, the potential divergence of the purpose of humor from the functions of humor demonstrates the importance of attentiveness to the relational nature of act between the rhetor and the audience(s). Scholars of rhetoric need to understand the role of humor as a rhetorical device. Further, the study of humor as well as its purposes and functions, and the multitude of specific forms humor can take, will increase our understanding of the specific contributions humor can make in social interaction.

## Chapter 2: Forms of Humor

As the opening chapter illustrates, one issue associated with humor is that a receiver cannot always determine when humor is being used by a speaker. There might be intent on the part of the rhetor to use humor, but the audience may not understand the rhetoric to be humorous. Alternatively, an audience may perceive one's words or actions as humorous, but the intent of the speaker may be something else. The nature of the humor being used may be misunderstood due to a flux in the meanings of a given word as well as the number of purposes and functions that humor and comedy can be set toward. If a comedian is not able to craft a joke that resonates with the audience as humorous, then it may be said that the comedian told a bad joke, at best, and did not even deliver a joke, at worst. While the opening chapter helps in determining humor as a form of rhetoric, why we might use humor and how it can function in general terms, a question remains: what does humor actually look like in terms of its specific enactment? Phrased differently, what are the rhetorical devices through which a comedian may achieve the purposes and functions described in Chapter 1?

While it is important to consider humor as a unified form of expression or rhetoric, and to understand how humor functions as a category, it is clear that there are a wide range of types of comedy and comedians. The ways in which the comedian performs both works to give the comedian an identity as a type of comic and to help guide how audiences are likely to receive the humorous content as funny (or not). As previously discussed, it is certainly true that audience members can react in different ways to a comedian's performance. It is also true that comedians can achieve humoristic ends in terms of purposes and functions by using devices that are not commonly associated with those devices. However, it is the case that many persons enter a humoristic interaction with an understanding that certain forms of expression constitute an effort



at humor, such as a knock-knock joke, and that these certain forms of humor have likely outcomes in terms of understanding, such as an expectation of light playfulness and social insignificance associated with most knock-knock jokes.

This chapter overviews various rhetorical forms in which humor can be packaged. The hope is that by classifying, defining, and describing the significant rhetorical forms that one can draw on to generate humor, a better understanding of how each form works can be ascertained and considered in context of the assorted purposes and functions of humor that are available to a given rhetor. While there several vehicles for delivering a humoristic message, this chapter will work through available typologies of humor to identify specific devices and show how these devices may be clustered into categories. The chapter will then take up limitations of these typologies and conclude by advancing the importance of understanding how these devices can function metaphorically.

### Origins of a Humor Typology

While there has been a fair amount of literature examining the rhetorical nature and impact of humor and comedy, both in terms of theory and practice, there has not been a robust effort to identify and classify particular rhetorical devices for use in comedic delivery. There is a lack of consensus regarding specific forms of humor and associated typologies that classify these forms (Buijzen and Valkenburg 148). Despite the typical research process, which would call for identification and understanding of forms of something before it could be analyzed, this has generally not been the case with the study of humor. Most research either examines humor as a general tool that a rhetorician can draw upon or tries to explain its purpose and function, as discussed in chapter one, or the research works toward developing an understanding of a specific form of humor or comedy.

Amongst the ancient rhetoricians and scholars, there were limited efforts to develop an extended discussion of the forms of humor that exist for one's rhetorical use. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which has been attributed to Cicero but was likely written by another scholar, lists 18 ways (or forms of humor) to produce a laugh out of the audience:

If the hearers have been fatigued by listening, we shall open with something that may provoke laughter — a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion on the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naïvety, an exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a comparison, a novel tale, a historical anecdote, a verse, or a challenge or a smile of approbation directed at some one. Or we shall promise to speak otherwise than as we have prepared, and not to talk as others usually do; we shall briefly explain what the other speakers do and what we intend to do.

(19-21)

This list is well-developed in that it covers a wide range of the forms in which a communicator may introduce humor into a situation, but unfortunately the work does not attempt to clarify the nature of the various devices. The point of the observation in the *Herennium* was not to work through the definitional horizons of the forms of humor but more to point out that there may be moments when a speaker can benefit from amusing an audience into listening because other means of getting them to be receptive to a message are failing.

Elizabeth Benacka, in *Rhetoric, Humor, and the Public Sphere*, highlights that Quintilian also developed a sense of ways that one could employ humor. She noted that Quintilian offered six forms of laughter that one can use if the moment is appropriate: “urbanity, charm, salty, facetious, jokes, and wit” (5). Unfortunately, this list is not so much a typology of the forms available to a humorist, but more a description of general rhetorical approaches that may be

taken to convince an audience with humor, if it is the called for. The fact that “salty” and “facetious” are not nouns but adjectives points to the limitations of Quintilian’s categories as a way of classifying forms of humor. What is significant, however, about these lists is that they return us to the notion that humor can be rhetorically significant by working in line with the notion that a rhetorician should use all the available means of persuasion to convince an audience. In fact, Benacka points out that even Aristotle, who as previously noted in Chapter 1 expressed disdain for the use of humor at times, saw different rhetorical effects emerging from particular humoristic devices such as buffoonery (not desirable to use) and irony (potentially desirable to use) (2). The idea that a specific practice of humor may be useful, or even important, to rhetorically accomplish a specific purpose or a specific function in communication, stands out as a significant reason for developing a typology of humor. Though one cannot simply build a formula involving purpose, function, and form to achieve comedic success due to the uniqueness of the interpretative potential embedded within a particular rhetorical situation, it also seems clear that there may be ways to sketch some general contours of a relationship between these concepts because there are general senses of comedic potential in a situation that one may draw upon. With that recognition in mind, there are a pair of available typologies with which to begin: those of Arthur Asa Berger and then Moniek Buijzen and Patti Valkenburg who take Berger’s work and update it for the purpose of studying comedy deployed in audio-visual formats. After working through these typologies, and it should be reiterated that there is a lack of other typologies to examine, the chapter will discuss some of the limits of the existing work and offer a solution that culminates in conceptualizing humor metaphorically.

## Berger's Typology of Humor

One researcher noted for his significant efforts to build a typology identifying forms of humor is Arthur Asa Berger (Buijzen and Valkenburg 149; Rhea 119; Wood et al. 183). Berger has done extensive research on the question of what humor is, why it works, and the forms humor can take. He has concluded that humor can be classified into one of four categories: language, logic, identity, and action (*Anatomy of Humor* 17).

Humor about language is verbal and uses various forms of wordplay to try to get an audience to laugh. Logic-driven humor is ideational and takes ideas and the ways in which people think about them and places them as the locus of the comedic effort. This form is concerned with generating laughter by working against the identity of a person or thing as the person or thing normally exists. While the categories of language, logic, and identity are all verbal, the fourth category, action, is physical or visual comedy. This includes the use of nonverbal cues to evoke a laugh.

Based on years of research, Berger developed a list of forty-five specific forms of humor ("Why We Laugh" 212) and then, while admitting a lack of complete satisfaction with the results, placed each of those into one of the four categories listed above (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 18):

| <u>Language</u>  | <u>Logic</u>    | <u>Identity</u> | <u>Action</u> |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Allusion         | Absurdity       | Before/After    | Chase         |
| Bombast          | Accident        | Burlesque       | Accident      |
| Definition       | Analogy         | Caricature      | Speed         |
| Exaggeration     | Catalogue       | Eccentricity    | Time          |
| Facetiousness    | Coincidence     | Embarrassment   |               |
| Insult           | Disappointment  | Exposure        |               |
| Infantilism      | Ignorance       | Grotesque       |               |
| Irony            | Mistakes        | Imitation       |               |
| Misunderstanding | Repetition      | Impersonation   |               |
| Over literalness | Reversal        | Mimicry         |               |
| Puns, Word Play  | Rigidity        | Parody          |               |
| Repartee         | Theme/Variation | Scale           |               |
| Ridicule         |                 | Stereotype      |               |
| Sarcasm          |                 | Unmasking       |               |
| Satire           |                 |                 |               |

Understanding the specific forms or techniques that are used by comedians and humorists is important, as Berger notes, because we can understand the specific reasons a given effort at persuasion may have worked by uncovering how the form of humor persuaded one to laugh (or not) and functioned in terms of *memoria* (Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants* 53). Furthermore, examining the forms of humor that a person consistently draws on can impact our understanding

of that rhetor's ethos, by allowing us to get a sense of the humorist's "voice or style:"

"Humorists establish an identity for themselves, based in part on the subjects they deal with but mostly based on the techniques they tend to use most often in their work" (Berger 57). To demonstrate his point Berger uses the example of Woody Allen's work in *The New Yorker*, to show how Allen's stories employ eccentricity within a form of parody to speak about the world and give us sense of what it is that makes Woody Allen distinctive as a humorist (57-9).

### *Language-based Humor*

While Berger identifies a number of forms of language-based humor in his work, this chapter will work through the more general and popular styles of language-based humor will be identified. Prominent examples of the language category include "allusions" and "exaggeration" (Berger, "Coda" 234). Allusions and exaggerations may be common, but they are also somewhat more sophisticated language strategies given how they refer to something unspoken when compared with insult which is a much more direct, and hostile, technique (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 40). "Satire" is another common form of language-based humor. Whereas allusion and exaggeration are more playful efforts at humor for Berger, satire generally holds a sting and is of an attacking nature.

Allusions are the 'bread and butter' of a significant amount of everyday comedy and humor. An allusion is a use of language to reference events such as scandals, gaffes, and mistakes without directly naming them (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 21). According to Berger allusions are light-hearted cues to these mistakes in life. Allusions also commonly address subjects of a social or political nature. Allusions regularly involve language that highlights a subject indirectly, for instance sexual allusions do not explicitly name sexually related subjects but do so through a reference that is understood to be of a sexual nature. It is also often the case

that the naming of a person or event can function as an allusion to some scandal or unusual occurrence without requiring a direct naming to recall the past. A scandal is not overtly evoked in the moment of humor, but the naming of the persons connected to the scandal is generally known. The indirect reference calls the scandal forth in the minds of the audience with the hope of evoking a laugh. Berger notes the importance of shared cultural knowledge for an audience to understand an allusion. The absence of such context makes it impossible for the audience to connect the comedian's language back to some other event that is implicitly acknowledged. Berger writes in "Comic Techniques in Dramatic Comedies" that "The play is a *figure* and the society in which it is found is a *ground* and if we don't know this *ground* we miss a great deal of the humor" (8). Berger's statement about the nature of allusions highlights the importance of how the audience perceives as a factor in allowing rhetoric to work as humorous.

Allusions are generally brief in the number of words that are required, but exaggeration may be short or long-winded in development. Furthermore, exaggeration can be an attempt at humor, or it can be a more serious endeavor at embellishment. While it is possible for exaggeration to exist as the use of individual words, exaggeration also is commonly deployed through more specific devices such as a tall tale or comic lie that signals the comic nature of the exaggeration (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 33-34). While allusions and exaggeration are just two of the many specific forms of humor in Berger's language category, they demonstrate a common theme, which is the use of language where the specific words used really attempt to create the humor based on their status as language.

An additional significant form under Berger's language category is satire, which he identifies as one of the most important forms of humor given the widespread use of the form for

centuries (*Anatomy of Humor* 49). Satire is renowned as a strategy of attacking or resisting the status quo through comedy:

Satire is a rather general technique of humor that makes use of many of the techniques discussed in this glossary: ridicule, exaggeration, insult, (invidious) comparison, and so on. Generally speaking, satirists attack specific individuals or institutions or happenings.... The satirist is critical and implies that the social order need not be as it is and that many people (in the professions and in positions of power) are really fools and cranks... Satire is often moral (and by implication, political) but it is often directly political as well. (49-50)

Satire is a foundational form of comedy or humor given its general nature. The content of most comedy is about persons and events in the world, which allows a comedian to develop a successful connection to the audience, which means there is a tendency to laugh at those persons and events. This lampooning of things is satire. An overwhelming majority of stand-up in-person comedy routines, performances on televised programs such as *SNL* and late-night talk shows, adult-oriented television shows such as *Veep* and *South Park*, and comedic films are of a satirical nature. The range of satirical political films that have been produced reveals just how prominent satire is as a form of humor. *Bob Roberts*, *Bulworth*, *The Campaign*, *The Candidate*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Election*, *Primary Colors*, *Thank You for Smoking*, *Vice*, and *Wag the Dog* are but a few. These films attack a wide array of elements of the American political process such as specific politicians, the political campaign (both electoral legislative lobbying), and the power of the executive (specifically as it relates to the use of the military), and more. Even a more light-hearted film like *Dave* satires the corruption and deception associated with politics.



These three forms of language-based humor are not the only forms identified by Berger. That said they are regularly used in American culture, highlighting the importance of language as a device of humor. The words that are selected by a comedian are of rhetorical importance in shaping what the humor is about and how the humor is to be processed by members of the audience. Sometimes the words are playful and evoke a light-hearted laugh at a gaffe that any number of persons might make. Other times the language signals a more biting posture where the ‘making fun of’ is intended to attack someone or something because of the way that the words cue memory for the audience. In addition to what Berger defines as language-focused forms of humor, another prominent category of humor centers on how the comedian’s reasoning plays out for the audience. This logic-based form of humor shall be considered next.

#### *Logic-based Humor*

Like the language-based category of humor, the logic-based class also encompasses a number of specific forms of humor. In this grouping, Berger has included those forms that operate based on the connection that a comedian’s reasoning plays out in the humor as compared to what one would expect in their day-to-day life. Berger’s category of logic includes the use of forms such as absurdity, reversals, and variation on themes. These forms may draw on elements found in the other categories, but the locus of the comedy comes from the relation of the ideas in the comedy to what the audience knows and expects in everyday life. David Gurney notes that it is often the rupture with the day-to-day, such as is found in the absurd, that makes humor both comedic and palatable emotionally to an audience (5).

First, while absurdity and the associated forms of nonsense and confusion may initially seem to be simplistic, Berger notes that this form of humor can be more complex as language plays with the logic and reasoning process:

Absurdity works by making light of the "demands" of logic and rationality as we traditionally know them. This absurdity doesn't necessarily take the form of silliness (though in many children's jokes it does) but may be an example of a relatively sophisticated philosophical position.

If life is absurd, as many existentialists suggest, then the humor of absurdity can be seen as a means towards realism: an understanding of humanity's predicament and our possibilities in an irrational universe. (*Anatomy of Humor* 19)

Absurdity and nonsense commonly play with the intelligibility of order, our general sense of the reasoning process, and then the possible and the probable.

Second, Berger explains how reversal takes logic to its end to show how the opposite of what was intended may occur and demonstrate the comedic potential contained within the structure of logic that society operates with. This form can often rely on the use of the absurd as well to make its point. Berger includes the following definition of "an edible," drawn from Ambrose Bierce, to demonstrate: "Good to eat and wholesome to digest, as a worm to a toad, a toad to a snake, a snake to a pig, a pig to a man, and a man to a worm" (*Anatomy of Humor* 47). Reversal takes the logic many members of an audience might take for granted and highlights it to reveal a hole in the logic or the circularity of the logic.

Third, variation as a form of logic-based humor emphasizes a theme to show the complexity of life. This often means using people or things of different groups to say something about values and beliefs. Unlike absurdity and reversal, which are enactments of more specific techniques, variation is a more general form where other techniques might be employed within the development of the theme, such as exaggeration or insult. Berger provides the following example as a typical effort at variation:

An Irishman was digging a ditch in a notorious red light district when he noticed a Protestant minister entering one of the houses of ill repute. "So what I've heard is true," he thought. Then he notices a rabbi entering the house. "Six of one, half a dozen of another," he thought. Then he saw a priest enter the house. "Must be someone sick in there," he thought. (*Anatomy of Humor* 53-4)

The use of people of different orientations, religious and otherwise, is a common tactic in developing variation. The idea is to show people or things which are similar, yet different, in an unusual context to make a humorous commentary about social expectations.

As is the case with each of the forms discussed here, the common thread across the logic-based forms of humor is that there is a use of a story or anecdote that explains the world and in it is in the break from the expected logic, or a revelation that only makes sense given the larger framework of the narrative, that produces the 'aha!' moment for the audience. Logic-based humor can take a variety of particular forms. These forms highlight the ways in which people think about how the world works and turns those expectations and norms upside down. While logic-based forms of comedy are about the expectations people hold for how people should act in the world, a related set of forms plays with the expectations that people have about other persons in the world. Identity-based forms do not target the world people operate in as much as they target the people in the world and offer humorous takes on those identities.

#### *Identity-based humor*

Identity-based humor encompasses those forms of humor in which the humorist targets the target's sense of self-identity, or a thing's nature, that is accepted by at least some in society, usually by describing a known identity in a unique way (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 17; Ismail et al. 165). These forms of humor seek to exploit an accepted sense of identification by copying

varying degrees of attributes that are deemed significant in the construction of one's identity.

While imitation and impersonation are fundamentally the same type of action, Berger differentiates them along the human/non-human line (*Anatomy of Humor* 37). As should probably be obvious, effective use of a number of these forms of humor usually includes use of other forms of humor to allow the sense of identity offered by the humorist to stand apart from the actual identity that is being played with. Furthermore, the lines between one style and another can get blurred. For instance, it is possible for a caricature to become parody.

While caricature is generally thought of as a simplistic, and visual, depiction of someone, an identity-based use of caricature humor is a more complicated endeavor to successfully pull off than most think. Caricature is an effort to paint the image of another person with a particular feature exaggerated to the extreme. Caricature is fundamentally an exercise in comparing and contrasting aspects of a subject's identity, but to work there must be a good sense of that what is being depicted (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 26). Failure to properly establish what is being caricatured and develop a relationship in terms of likeness can render the humorist's efforts unintelligible.

Mimicry is very similar to both caricature and impersonation, where impersonation is an effort to pretend to be another person. Mimicry is an effort to act like another person without shedding one's own identity, for instance Rich Little mimicking Richard Nixon (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 42). The idea behind impersonation is very much about 'becoming' the other person whereas the idea of copying in mimicry is known and part of mimicry itself.

Parody is another significant form of identity-based humor. While it is in many ways a form of mimicry, parody is understood as the mimicking of the style of a well-known writer or form (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 44). Of paramount importance for a parody is that the original

subject is well-known; if not, the parody risks becoming just another example of the original style. An awareness of the distinctiveness between the original and the parody is at the crux definitionally of parody as a form of identity-based logic. The film *Spinal Tap* is a well-known mockumentary, or a film that parodies the form of the documentary. Although *Spinal Tap* is not a direct parody of a specific rock and roll band, the film draws on a number of other techniques of humor, such as satire and exaggeration, to both parody the form of the documentary and the popular beliefs that many held about the behaviors of a number of popular musical groups. The film works comedically not just because the performances and the story are good on their own, but because we come to the film with a sense of how rock and roll artists are known to behave. This example, and others like it, highlight the depth of production required for successful parody and its reliance on specific enactments of other forms of humor within the overall structure to be successful. Parody's importance cannot be overstated in the grand scheme of humor given its prominence, and this leads Berger to note that "Parody is probably one of the most powerful and commonly used technique for generating humor and some theorists of comedy claim that all humor stems from parody" (*Anatomy of Humor* 44). Berger's claim stands as evidence that while there are several forms of humor, they do not all exist as co-equals. As shall become clear in the later chapters of this dissertation, parody is widespread in both its usage by humorists and in terms of its impact on social dynamics.

There are several different forms of comedy that examine issues of identity of individuals in the world. Some of these forms are more playful and others are more pointed in highlighting an identity, to challenge an aspect of one's identity and the acceptability of that aspect of identity. Although Berger does not make the claim that identity-based humor is the most important form, a case can be made that it would be, since comedy is rhetorically an effort to

facilitate the ability of people to understand and connect with others in the world. While there are forms of humor that examine the words people use, and the logic people employ and rely on to make sense of the world, at the end of the day those things do not make sense if there are not people involved. A final category of humor also examines how people exist and function in the world. While the quantity of forms of humor are not as great as other forms, these approaches to comedy play with the ways in which people engage with the world through physical action.

#### *Action-based humor*

Whereas there are more than ten forms of humor under each of Berger's categories, there are only four forms of action humor: chase, slapstick, speed, and time. These four forms of humor are visual in nature and are often presented together. While there is regular interaction between different forms of humor, the action forms of humor are thought of as being coupled because they rely on exaggerations of body language, facial expressiveness, and physical movement as being funny unto themselves. Visual forms of humor also tend to draw on the verbal forms of humor; visual humor often includes verbal humor through excessive, or exaggerated, expression or action. They also tend to highlight physical awkwardness, clumsiness, and error. These forms are also not intrinsically humoristic but their use in a given context, such as a chase or playing with time, gives the event humoristic status.

Berger's typology of humor is one of the first, and only, endeavors to identify all the various forms that humor can take and place them in a set of organized categories. Berger identified basic groupings that his forty-five forms of humor generally can be placed in: language, logic, identity, and action-based humor. Some of these categories are larger and well-developed, for instance the language category which includes forms such as the allusion and the exaggeration. On the opposite of development, and even significance for Berger, is the action-

based category that includes only a handful of forms, such as slapstick and playing with time. Berger also argued that not all forms exist equally and independently. Parody, an identity-based form of humor, is one of the most prevalent forms of humor for Berger. It is also the case that Berger noted the regularity of interaction between forms of humor and described how forms would be used together to get a laugh out of an audience. A more recent typology of humor has been developed that takes the framework put forward by Berger and modifies it to more properly account for how humor emerges on television.

### Buijzen and Valkenburg's Typology of Humor

Moniek Buijzen and Patti Valkenburg, communication scholars working from a behavioral and cognitive studies approach to investigate media effects, recently developed a typology of forms associated with humor. Their purpose was to ask whether Berger's system of organization applies to the mediated environment. While Berger built his cataloguing of forms of humor around an analysis of jokes, Buijzen and Valkenburg took Berger's list of techniques, analyzed humor in television commercials, and through observation of television shows, and conducted research from audience members who viewed commercials that appeared within a show. They offer a comparable list of 41 techniques (Buijzen and Valkenburg, "Developing a Typology," 2004, 153-4):

|                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Absurdity         | Coincidence         |
| Anthropomorphism  | Conceptual surprise |
| Bombast           | Disappointment      |
| Chase             | Eccentricity        |
| Clownish behavior | Embarrassment       |
| Clumsiness        | Exaggeration        |

|                      |                 |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| Grotesque appearance | Peculiar voice  |
| Ignorance            | Pun             |
| Imitation            | Repartee        |
| Impersonation        | Repetition      |
| Infantilism          | Ridicule        |
| Irony                | Rigidity        |
| Irreverent behavior  | Sarcasm         |
| Malicious pleasure   | Scale           |
| Misunderstanding     | Sexual allusion |
| Outwitting           | Slapstick       |
| Parody               | Speed           |
| Peculiar face        | Stereotype      |
| Peculiar music       | Transformation  |
| Peculiar sound       | Visual surprise |

What both Berger's and Buijzen and Valkenburg's lists of forms of humor techniques highlight the range of means available to deliver humor for the purposes and functions identified in the first chapter.

### *Comparing Typologies*

There is a similarity between Berger's typology and Buijzen and Valkenburg's typology in that 30 of the forms offered by Buijzen and Valkenburg come directly from Berger's earlier work. Differences in the typologies were attributed by Buijzen and Valkenburg to have emerged from audience research and the fact they were analyzing humor in a mediated context, namely television commercials (152). The emphasis on television in the new typology led Buijzen and



Valkenburg to include new forms of humor such as the use of “peculiar music” and “visual surprise.” These additions make sense given this emphasis and stand as important changes in the strategy of evoking a laugh given the prevalence broadcasted programming on mediums such as television that are comedic.

Another significant difference between Berger’s work and the research conducted by Buijzen and Valkenburg is the finding that types of humor fall into seven larger categories, instead of four, and that a number of the types are sufficiently general that they can find placement into more than one of the larger categories. Buijzen and Valkenburg propose that forms of humor fall into seven larger categories: “slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody” (162). Slapstick is a physical, attacking form of humor. It is probably best thought of both literally and figuratively as “pie-in-the-face type of humor” (162). Clownish humor is a physical humor and involves chase and exaggerated physical behaviors, such as arm movement. Surprise is in many ways the verbal and cognitive complement to clownish behavior involving “sudden changes of concepts and images” (162). Misunderstanding is a laughing at others; what they refer to as “victim humor” (162). Parody is a more complex method of engagement through humor as it demands that the audience have a pre-existing understanding of another work, style, or genre. While parody can clearly be hostile, Buijzen and Valkenburg ascribe a more intrinsically hostile stance to satire and irony (162). They define satire as making fun of well-known things, events, and persons (154), while irony is defined as saying the opposite of what one means (153). They offer the following breakdown for how to best map forms into larger categories:

Slapstick: Clumsiness, Coincidence, Slapstick, Malicious pleasure Peculiar face and voice, Repartee, Ridicule, Stereotype

Clownishness: Anthropomorphism, Chase, Clownish behavior, Speed

Surprise: Conceptual surprise, Exaggeration, Transformation, Exaggeration

Misunderstanding: Disappointment, Ignorance, Misunderstanding, Peculiar Sound

Parody: Absurdity, Bombast, Infantilism, Parody, Rigidity

Satire: Irreverent behavior, Outwitting, Peculiar music, Satire

Irony: Embarrassment, Irony, Puns, Sarcasm, Scale

Miscellaneous: Eccentricity, Grotesque appearance, Imitation, Impersonation, Repetition,

Sexual allusion. (Buijzen and Valkenburg 158-60)

This system of organization also allows one to see how the various purposes of humor might make themselves manifested through the use of particular humoristic devices, even though it is possible for multiple purposes to connect back to one of the seven categories (Buijzen and Valkenburg 162-3).

Buijzen and Valkenburg also sought to determine what forms of humor are best received by individuals of particular ages whereas Berger simply aimed to catalogue the tropes used to accomplish the ends of humor, particularly through a spoken narrative format. Through their research, Buijzen and Valkenburg determined that as people move from childhood to adulthood their potential to properly understand efforts at humor evolves and more sophisticated techniques, such as irony, satire, and parody, become functional for the audience (157-161). This does not mean that the older one gets the less likely more simplistic humor, such as slapstick and other visual/physical humor, is at being effective, but Buijzen and Valkenburg merely point out that as one ages cognitive abilities develop and the sense of social location grows which drives one's appreciation for humor.

### Limits of the Typologies

In addition to the more procedural limitations of Berger's work that Buijzen and Valkenburg highlight in the course of their own research, there are a couple other significant criticisms of their work that require attention. The typologies of Berger and Buijzen and Valkenburg fail to sufficiently account for the connection between humor and power, specifically in the sense that persuasion works as an expression of power. They also fail to consider the importance of understanding how an audience's understanding of a particular form of humor influences their conception of it.

First, a charge against Berger's system of categorization, and one that probably applies also to the work of Buijzen and Valkenburg, is that his system fails to speak to the relationship between the forms of humor and how persuasion as power works. Research by Majken Jul Sorenson as well as Simon Weaver address limitations in each of these two humor typologies. Sorenson, for instance, notes that while Berger's categorization is useful in understanding what the techniques of humor are, his work fails to account for how power plays out with specific uses of humor (71). For Sorenson, Berger's system (and presumably Buijzen and Valkenburg's) is good in that it allows one to look at an instance humor and identify the traits in it so that it can be said that "comedy X was a form of Y and it was successful because the audience members laughed." What is missing according to Sorenson is that the cataloguing provided by Berger does not then work to determine what the use of Y meant in contributing to a relationship between the comedian, the audience, and the world they share.

Simon Weaver, while agreeing with the comprehensive and technical nature of Berger's typology, also identifies limits of Berger's approach when it comes to serving as a vehicle for the rhetorical analysis of humor's persuasive power. Berger gives us the tools to interpret the

presence of a trope, but does not assess the value of those tropes as instruments that gain wider persuasive effect:

Despite this potential, and although Berger donates a methodology for the rhetorical analysis of humor, at no point does Berger employ the theory of rhetorical humor for the criticism of disparagement humor... This then ignores the extent to which humor itself can be persuasive and laughter generating. This is a point that seems all the more necessary to address because humor relies on rhetorical devices at the semantic level. There are also limits to the analysis that can be developed with Berger's typology. The above joke is unpacked well enough but this is where the analysis ends. Nothing is said about the context in which humor appears, or the wider social discourses outside of the tropes used. (Weaver 6)

An understanding of the purposes and functions available to the humorist can be helpful in filling in some of the gaps created by scholars' failure to consider the rhetorical power of tropes with particular audiences. This understanding would allow a critic to say, for example, that comedy X's use of form Y functioned to create difference for the purpose of demonstrating superiority. However, the application of the purpose and function remains untailed to the specific forms of humor and tropes in play.

A second limit of Berger's typology of humor forms is that he focuses on how the use of a form in a particular moment has consequences in lieu of also considering how a form of humor works as a general phenomenon. In fact, Berger specifically names parody as an example of an undertheorized form in admitting this limitation of work in building the typology (*Anatomy of Humor* 18). For instance, Berger's analysis of Woody Allen focuses on how Allen uses parody in a particular scene and why that was successful, as opposed to working through why and how

parody may be successful as a general rhetorical strategy for humor. Weaver explains that an analysis of how the forms work generally allows for a focus on how the form assists in evoking laughter instead of focusing how the tropes might function as persuasive tools regarding the subject at hand (5). The use of a particular form of humor may be important for audiences because there is not just context and understanding created by the subject of the comedy but also potentially by the form drawn upon by a comedian. It is important to study how a specific moment of humor works with a given audience and to judge that rhetorical enactment as a success or a failure. Additionally, it is also important to ask how the selection of a form of humor says something about the nature of the form independent of a particular moment. If comedians consistently select a particular form of humor to accomplish a general end, for instance political influence, then there is a need to study that form regardless of whether a particular enactment served a more progressive end as opposed to a reactionary one. In fact, while Berger does not develop the notion that parody has effect as a genre (he is instead concerned with humor in the way that it is structured within forms), he does acknowledge that parody as a form is concerned with mimicry of a particular style or genre (*Anatomy of Humor* 44). Buijzen and Valkenburg did not study forms such parody from a perspective that asks how parody functions as a generalized style either. They also remained concerned with the consequences of use of a particular form in the context of a particular instance, that of the television commercial. A point of note, however, is that Buijzen and Valkenburg provide a broader sense of what parody is by classifying the use of the particular forms of parody, bombast, rigidity, absurdity, and infantilism under the larger umbrella of enactment of parody (160). A second point of note is that Buijzen and Valkenburg did not concern themselves with discussing parody at length given their work investigated the use of humor in commercials, and their results revealed that parody was infrequently used in

commercials. This infrequency was attributed to the complexity of parody as a form and the limited time available for a commercial to develop such a relationship with the viewers (162). While the contingency of parody's reliance on a prior text or genre may not render parody as a genre itself, it does illuminate the potential of parody to be understood as something more than a form.

These criticisms are important because they speak to the rhetorical nature of humor developed in the first chapter. While it is important to understand the forms of humor that may be used in rhetoric, it is more important to understand how those forms function to create and explain persuasion which requires an effort to situate the humor in a larger sphere that places the humorist and the audience in a relationship. Given that the rhetorician or humorist is attempting to convince the audience and persuade them to be aware of or to do something, even as simple as laugh (but probably to laugh at something about the world), this is not a power-free relationship. The joke or the allusion or the tall tale that is being used explains the world in a given way. The joke leads the audience to develop an orientation to the matter at hand. The form of the joke, or other humoristic device, exists as part of a larger context drawing on other elements of a rhetorical situation, and then feeding back into future situations. One way to help bridge the gap between typologies such as those offered by Berger and Buijzen and Valkenburg, is to consider humor as metaphorical.

Over the years, there has not been extensive research and theorizing on the typologies of forms of humor. While Berger's groupings have been considered to be one of the first and most comprehensive efforts to identify and classify forms of humor across lines of language, logic, identity, and action, the updated classification presented by Buijzen and Valkenburg is significant because it takes the work conducted by Berger and aims to consider how the presence

of audio-visual mediums such as television impact the number of forms of humor and their classification. Unfortunately, there are a pair of significant limitations present with both of these typologies. Neither really asks how the use of a particular form of humor functions in facilitating a power dynamic between the rhetor, the audience, and the content of the comedy. Furthermore, both systems of classification focus on how a particular use worked in a given moment instead of asking how the forms might work on a more general basis. What is therefore needed is to consider these issues identified in the limitation by examining how humor can be conceptualized as a more general rhetorical strategy for addressing a subject and an audience and then considering what rhetorical consequences are associated with the use of forms of humor.

#### Humor as Metaphorical

Humor is fundamentally a metaphorical way of looking at the world. A specific instance of humor may contain metaphorical and non-metaphorical content. If a segment of humor is considered simply based on its own internal logic, not in Berger's sense but as a way of sense-making, we risk missing that humor can be a way to address complex and controversial subjects through less than traditional means. While it may be more common for one to develop an effort at persuasion through traditional argumentative structures and explicit calls for changing the world, it is more than possible for humor to provide an alternative avenue for broaching subjects of social significance. That said, in addition to humor functioning metaphorically, it should also be noted that humorists often rely on literary devices such as metaphor in constructing jokes (Fatima 38; Weaver 6). An effort to use humor can be an attempt to explain a person, subject, or event in what some would see as a less serious fashion than might be associated with an explanation using pure logic, drama, or tragedy. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* says that a rhetor should turn to humor when these other methods of persuasion, such as deliberative speech, are

ineffective with an audience. This prerequisite for intellectual exhaustion by the audience is clearly not a demand by all advocates of humor, but there is a recognition that one should use humor as a form of appeal that is most likely to be effective with an audience in a given moment. Humor thus briefly replaces the deliberative advocacy with a reference that is comparable in content but more relatable. Humor may therefore function as potentially more persuasive for a given audience than a more traditionally structured persuasive message if they find the humor as more appropriate way of tackling a subject.

Weaver explains this metaphorical potential in rhetoric by noting that it makes humor a part of syllogism:

If we accept the centrality of metaphor in rhetorical communication, we can use Palmer's account as one that explains the functions of humor as wedded to communicative rhetoric. He identifies the 'peripeteia' (Palmer 1987: 39–40) of the joke, or the point of incongruity, surprise or contrast that allows the joke to move in a different or unexpected direction. Palmer explains that a peripeteia is constitutive of the joke. A peripeteia is positioned between two syllogisms or premises, which he describes as the major and minor premise.... Some humorous incongruities are resolved in jokes although some are not. It is this metaphorical potential in humor that directs us to its meaning making capacity. (4)

While Aristotle lacked enthusiasm for humor as a rhetorical device, he recognized the use of metaphor as a way to relate different objects. He found metaphor to be akin to the incongruity theory of humor, and his tepid acknowledgement of the potential effectiveness of humor (as wittiness) is grounded in that same view (Palmer 94).



This proposition that humor functions metaphorically has important implications for how the speaker and hearer of humor can construct shared meaning. Benacka adds to the idea of humor as metaphor by highlighting how the demand for audience involvement in humor takes an enthymeme and completes it. For Benacka, humor functions as an enthymeme because the logic that develops as the rationale for the comedy is unspoken. To effectively unpack the comedy the audience must figure out the humorist's rationale for the comedy is they are to laugh for the reasons intended by the comedian. This works to create community between the humorist and the audience:

I argue that this adds to the persuasive potential of humor because of the audience involvement required in order to properly interpret and locate the objects of ridicule. Persuasion is heightened when audiences are involved in the co-creation of meaning, as they must be when discerning the focus of a given satire, parody, and irony. This audience involvement directly relates to Aristotle's discussion of the enthymeme, the building block of all rhetorical argument...The co-creation of interpreting enthymemes also helps advance a sense of community in that the rhetor and audience view the world in the same way and thus can use a kind of shorthand in advancing arguments. And when one disagrees with the assumed premise or conclusion left out of an enthymeme, then both argument and arguer are disregarded. Given the previously established connection between and among comedy and rhetoric, it should be no surprise that humor also relies on the enthymeme as a means of establishing a connection between audience and speaker and in advancing an overall argument. (15)

This unspoken construction of meaning creates a bond between the speaker and the hearer. While a comedian needs to consider the preexisting knowledge and understandings of the

audience members in the effort to build a moment of humor that resonates, preexisting knowledge is insufficient. The hearers must recognize the knowledge or understandings that the humorist is attempting to access and then integrate the content of humor as it is formed onto this knowledge in order for the connection to take hold.

This sense of community is not just a coming together of the rhetor and the audience in a moment of understanding but is something more intimate. Palmer notes that the demand for both the comic and the audience to have prior knowledge of the subject or style at play in the comedy creates a degree of privacy for comprehension ability because those who are not in on the joke are by nature excluded from the moment of understanding:

As Cohen says, jokes and metaphors – among other purposes - serve to create intimacy through mutual comprehension (Cohen, 1979: 6-10). This they do through the role of presuppositions inherent in them, the ‘background knowledge’ they always mobilize in their structure, without which they are incomprehensible. This background knowledge is part of the culture which joker and appreciative listener share. To share something like a joke or metaphor, something whose presence in a culture is by no means predetermined, and which is not shared by others, no doubt creates an even greater degree of intimacy, especially if those who do not share it are the butt of it as well as not understanding what is going on. (*Taking Humour Seriously* 153)

Not only is the relationship between the comedian and an audience intimate but is one that is consensual. The audience must assent to the joke being a joke. Even if they understand the content, the lack of audience approval means that the humor does not take and the bond between the speaker and the audience is nullified (Howell 18).

If a comedian tells a joke that uses satire, exaggeration, and insult to discuss a person or matter and the audience does not agree with the sentiment, then the audience may determine that the comedian did not tell a joke but instead was just being mean. This assessment may result in the audience refusal to laugh or even outward hostile expression to the comedian. The comedian may try to explain, in the moment or after the fact, that they were just ‘telling a joke’ but in the end such clarification may not matter as significant portions of the audience had made up its mind regarding what was heard. The relationship between the comedian and the audience at that point of conclusion was terminated. A classic example of such a failure was Gilbert Gottfried’s telling of tsunami jokes in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011 which led to immediate condemnation from his audience and commentators as well as his dismissal as the spokesperson for the insurance company Aflac. While Gottfried got into comparable hot water following his telling of a joke called “The Aristocrats” weeks after September 11, 2001 at the roast of Hugh Hefner, the tsunami jokes escalated the criticism of his style and completely derailed his career for years as the jokes were deemed to be in bad taste too soon after the tragedy (Vadala “Gilbert”).

This emphasis on the metaphorical nature of humor is important not simply because it speaks to humor-at-large, but also because there may be specific rhetorical entailments associated with a particular technique of humor. Not only is it true that a humorist develops a voice or a style, but most people have a sense of style that they associate with a particular trope. Individuals have a sense of how an allusion may proceed. There is a sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable content, and that sense is very contextual to the teller, the audience, and the moment in time governing the constraints and opportunities associated with the comedic effort.

Again, this comes back to the importance of understanding how the audience understands both the content of the humor but also all the other trappings that are brought to the table with it.

While the audience of a joke is most clearly the complex of persons who are present to take the comedy directly in, it is also possible to say that the humor has the subject of the comedy as an additional audience. It may be that a comic tells a joke that explicitly goes after someone in a very negative manner and the overtness of joke is intended. For one audience the joke may be received with a slightly more playful sensibility but for another it represents an unacceptable verbal attack that is not even to be considered a form of humor. It is also possible that a comedian tells a joke that goes after someone but does so with a degree of nuance and subtlety that renders the criticism fairly invisible to the intended target. The joker knows there was a joke, the audience knows there was a joke, but the subject does not. Perhaps the target knows there was a joke (and maybe even about them) but does not understand what the joke was. It might be said that the humor has an audience of inclusion and an audience of exclusion.

This understanding is particularly important for forms of comedy such as satire and parody. Both forms of humor require a specific target in order for their logic to make sense with the audience. A sexual allusion does have a subject that it draws on to enable the hearer of the allusion to understand the intent behind the words, but this subject can be very general. Satire, on the other hand, has a clearer institutional bullseye that it is after. Parody has an even clearer bullseye or else the efforts to exploit and mock the distinctiveness of an existing text is completely lost. The 1992 mockumentary *Bob Roberts*, where Tim Robbins portrays a charismatic businessman and folksinger named Bob Roberts running for the U.S. Senate on a very right-wing agenda, only works if there is the clear and defined target of the right-wing politics that many observed taking off in the 1980s. Parody and satire are then targeted efforts to

highlight, and often attack, a very specific set of conditions or structure. This means that all the parties involved in the development of the humor (the comedian, the audience, and the subject of the content) should be aware of the nature of the rhetorically attacking posture because that is the very purpose being called upon by the rhetor.

While parody may aim to generate laughter in the immediate presence of an audience, there is also something deeper going on given the referential nature of the parody back to a preceding text(s). Benacka argues that in the case of satire this pre-existing structure is important because the satirist draws on it but also educates about it:

The public nature of this art form is important to note since an audience would have to be aware of both the general and particular elements for a work of satire to be properly interpreted. In examining the persuasive potential of satire, Edward and Lillian Bloom argue that satire's main goal is to unite readers in order to actively address the object of mockery contained within a particular satirical text. In some cases, this requires the satirist to function first as a teacher to educate an audience concerning matters of civic importance. (9-10)

Benacka adds that this education is provided with a corrective intent, "Satire operates on two levels simultaneously: one is a ridiculous world created by the satirist meant to elicit laughter and the other is the real world meant to invite reflection on how society might correct ridiculous habits or people in real time" (11). Benacka offers a comparable observation about the power of parody to function as a critical discourse that takes aim at the object of the past for the moment of the present and future:

In her examination of parody, Linda Hutcheon defines the trope as a form of "inter-art discourse" that traffics in "transcontextualization" as a means to provide a critical

distance between the object/subject of ridicule and the work of parody that elicits critique and laughter. Hutcheon further argues that “irony’s edge gives parody its ‘critical’ dimension in its marking of difference at the heart of similarity” ... for parody to function rhetorically both historically and contemporarily. (14)

Parody, and satire and irony, is a form of humor that creates distance between itself and the object being parodied, Parody does this in way that makes that distance noticeable, often by the ridiculous and the absurd, to amuse and evoke a laugh from members of the audience. While there is a recognition of the distance between the parody and the object, however, there is also a sense of connectedness. That connectedness is understood as a rhetor’s effort to use the parody to speak critically about the object.

While humor can clearly exist in a minimalist sort of way where the goal of its use is to amuse an audience just for the sake of generating a laugh, it is also clear that humor can function as something more. It can work rhetorically as a metaphor for something else. It is often the case that people find themselves in uncomfortable moments where an exigence calls for a need for human intervention through discourse. However, social conventions and norms may make it very difficult to speak. Humor can work in such an instance metaphorically as a substitute for some other way of addressing the situation. Humor can ‘take the edge off’ of addressing the situation through the power of laughter while simultaneously providing critical commentary that emerges through the intimacy of the relationship that is required for the rhetor to successfully convey their thoughts to the audience. If the rhetor’s use of humorous rhetoric is successful, the audience understands the playfulness of the joke but is also able to work back enthymatically to the critical posture of the rhetor.

## Conclusion

Similar to the large number of purposes of humor and ways in which humor functions, the form of humor also does not exist in a single modality. There are several ways to present ideas and information using humor. A person may tell a joke, use puns, engage in physical comedy, put together a skit, or convey a message through humorous rhetoric in another form. Beyond these types of humor are countless others. Some types of humor are unsophisticated, such as the pun, and others are more complex requiring an investment of time in both the verbal and nonverbal sense to develop an idea and execute the humoristic purpose and function, such as metaphoric humor. These more complex versions of humoristic expression also tend to utilize forms of humor within a form of humor. Parody, for instance, may have elements of mimicry, imitation, and satire as well as other comedic elements buried within its structure. Additionally, tropes can exist on their own in a definitional sense and also be reclassified into a larger form or category. For instance, parody, satire, travesty, and caricature can all be defined as forms of burlesque even though we traditionally think of the burlesque as a theatrical production relying on sexually provocative words, songs, and action (Berger, *Anatomy of Humor* 26). If a parody, and satire, exploits the identity of a particular subject or genre, then it may be the case that parody can be conceptualized as genre-esque and that nature of parody may be something worth considering and studying. One scholar who has taken up that cause and theorized extensively on the subject is the Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin.

### Chapter 3: A Bakhtinian Understanding of Parody

The importance of understanding how humor can generally work, and what constitutes the forms of humor, are of critical importance and developing a sense of the rhetorical power of humor. As has been already noted, humor can serve several purposes. It can be a way to make light of a situation and provide a sense of temporary relief for the speaker and audience. It can be a way to inject power into a situation to create a sense of superiority or inferiority with regards to a particular subject or group of people where the goal is not to laugh with others as much as to laugh at others. Humor can also be a way to highlight unpredictability of the world by bringing attention to these moments when expectations did not hold and did not hold in a way that brought amusement to an audience. Beyond these purposes there are ways in which humor can function. Humor can be a way to unite or divide, a way to clarify and illuminate, a way to differentiate, or a way to highlight and enforce social conventions. To make these purposes and functions manifest, humor can take several forms ranging from knock-knock jokes to puns to allusions to complex devices such as parody.

What becomes most clear in this analysis is that humor functions rhetorically. Humor can be a way to share meaning on matters of social importance and shape the public sphere to induce action. While there are certainly moments that naturally emerge and amuse us, for instance a relatively minor physical mishap, humor as a device needs to be understood as strategically selected way of relating to others through the act of communication. It has also become clear that humor, as Benacka states, can be thought of something that can function metaphorically because of its potential to speak to moments and situations that are controversial or difficult to address through conventionally accepted form of address. Humor can substitute for other forms of rhetoric that may be considered inappropriate or socially problematic.



Humor's enthymatic nature allows a speaker to successfully take up a perspective on a subject that might otherwise not be available, presuming that the audience is able to create a form of reasoning that is embedded within the enthymeme. One rhetorical form of humor that a person can look to for assisting with this construction of meaning with audiences is parody. As noted in the preceding chapter, a parody is a redeployment of a prior text and altering how the speaker and audience approach the text through a comic transformation. One theorist who has addressed this potential of parody at length is Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin argues that parody is a particularly powerful form of rhetoric because it both speaks to an existing text while simultaneously speaking against it. The reconfiguration can then be understood to give metaphorical power to the original text but with the ambition of subverting the original meaning of the text through an act of linguistic mirroring.

This chapter will examine parody as rhetoric through the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. While perhaps best known for his notions surrounding the importance of the utterance as a unit of communication, Bakhtin is one of the more powerful voices in the history of the academy on theories of genre. He worked to develop an understanding of how various genres in literature operate, such as the epic or the tragedy or the novel. He then dedicated significant portions of his work to developing a conception of the parodic as important to understanding the development and evolution of genres of parody. Marko Juvan notes "Bakhtin stands not only as one of the greatest (literary) theoreticians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... but also—in more specialized circles—as the most influential theoretician of parody" (195). This chapter will examine the contributions offered by Bakhtin on parody's rhetorical power and then develop the connections between Bakhtin's work and the field of rhetoric.

## Bakhtin's Theory of Parody

Bakhtin developed his thoughts on the parody in several books. While most of his theorizing on the subject is concentrated in a couple of those works, the depth of his thought on the concept continued to evolve as he wrote. Bakhtin's primary fascination with the idea of parody comes from his effort to understand the novel as a genre of literature. He saw the novel as parodying earlier forms of literature and was intrigued by the novel's place in the hierarchy of literary works, not just as a newer form of literature, but as a lower-status production. Bakhtin argued that this status led to its devaluing by scholars and consequently led to it being overlooked as a site of social significance.

In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin developed the importance of the novel because of how it took features of earlier developed genres of literature and represented those styles in a mocking or critical fashion. In so doing, he exposed how some literary strategies and forms have subjectively privileged at the expense of other forms of literature. The novel then does not exist as true genre onto its own but instead operates as a parody or a doubling of these original texts. Parody takes the style and language of a preceding text and utilizes it in a comedic fashion to provide commentary on the original and its underlying values. The parody does so, however, without explicitly announcing itself as 'a parody' and relies on the knowledge and awareness of the audience members to recognize and appreciate the reflexivity between the parodied and the parodying forces. This doubling harkens an interpretation of the original from a different perspective and therefore challenges the original interpretation using the words or style of the original in manner quite different from the original's intention. At the same time, the parody's use of a prior text reintroduces that text into public consciousness and therefore revitalizes the original text in some manner, as the parody is dependent upon the original. To

destroy the original text though an act of critical reflection and refraction would not only destroy the original text but also obliterate the existence of the parody for what it is, a mirroring of an already existing structure.

This section will reveal how particular entries in Bakhtin's catalogue of thought assist in the construction of this idea of mirroring and add depth to it in terms of meaning and consequence by viewing his work through a rhetorical lens. The section begins by reviewing two particularly significant works, *Rabelais and His World* and *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, and then moves to highlight additional contributions contained in other texts by Bakhtin.

### *Rabelais and His World*

*Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin 1984) is a detailed exploration of how Francois Rabelais' (c. 1483-1553) novels function not as mere obscenity but as both a parodic response to the previously established forms of writing that had defined preceding historical epochs as well as the social conditions of Rabelais' time. While much of the text in *Rabelais* is committed to a specific analysis of the writings of Rabelais, Bakhtin makes several theoretical contributions to a theory of parody in this work.

Bakhtin opened *Rabelais* by discussing the importance of the carnivalesque in the Renaissance and Middle Ages as a cultural force of expression. He stated that during this era life was highly regulated and controlled under a system of political, feudal, and religious power. Despite this, or even sanctioned by this system, festivals and spectacles emerged that were draped in the comic. These laughter-based rituals stood as "sharply distinct from the official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 5). Bakhtin stated that these carnivals were an important opportunity for people to come together and through the use the power of role reversal and absurd mirroring to laugh at the dominant social

forces. During carnival, a term Bakhtin used to generally describe an array of festivals and rituals that varied in length but generally lasted for a few days, people were free from outside law and the only law that mattered was the law of the carnival which required all persons involved to be both actor and spectator. Bakhtin wrote:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all of the people ... It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

Carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). Carnival, through its performance of parody and other comic styles, created an opportunity for everyone to temporarily take a new social position and invert the dynamics of the prevailing social structures by injecting a grotesque realism into social consciousness that exposes the subjectivity of convention. The use of grotesque realism works to degrade “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract” into the material, the earthly, and the bodily (19). Grotesque realism in the comic frame is also different than other uses of the grotesque in how the two offer a different role and purpose for fear. While most uses of the grotesque seek to evoke fear in the audience, the comic grotesque seeks to destroy fear by presenting in a mocking and parodic fashion. For example, while madness is inherent to the grotesque and is used to generate fear, here in the comic frame “madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth.’ It is a ‘festive’ madness” (39).

What is interesting about this freedom from the existing order that was generated by the carnival and other carnivalesque moments and rituals, was that the stepping outside of the order was a sanctioned part of life. Entities such as the church would participate and host these events. The folk humor of the carnival, manifested in pageants and feasts and the performing of parodies and other linguistic acts, utilized an abusiveness of language through insults and profanity. This abusiveness, while in one respect was humiliating and offensive, was also considered to be a way of renewing and revitalizing the existing social order. Bakhtin wrote that the act of degradation is not an act of obliterating something or disposing of it but instead is an effort to bring the thing back “down to earth” because it is “to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better...it has not only a destructive, negative aspect but also a regenerating one ... conception and a new birth take place” (*Rabelais* 21).

While Bakhtin discussed parody and its connection to the grotesque and carnival in the remainder of the monograph, he did so merely in describing how it worked in connection to the writings of Rabelais and does not offer additional commentary about the general nature of parody. In fact, he made it a point at the end of the introductory chapter to state that the goal of the work is to focus on how the novels of Rabelais functioned on their own terms against the larger body of literature that was dominant at the time and not to reduce Rabelais’ work into a means for understanding a more general phenomenon (*Rabelais* 58). While Bakhtin finds Rabelais to be important literary author, and the author of what he considers to be the first novel—a form Bakhtin will go on to define as a parodical response to other forms of literature, a fuller understanding of how Bakhtin defined and situated parody requires examination of several of his other works.

### *The Dialogic Imagination*

*Rabelais and His World* is a vitally important work in developing an understanding of Bakhtin's notion of parody. However, Bakhtin more clearly elucidated his ideas about parody in the essays contained in his work *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981). In that work, he provided a more detailed sense of what constitutes parody and offered extended commentary about the general development of the novel as a parodic response to the more historically defined genres of high literature, such as the epic, the drama, and the heroic poem. He noted in the very outset of *The Dialogic Imagination* that the novel is fundamentally an effort to parody other genres "precisely in their role as genres" (5). Furthermore, it is this understanding of the novel, born out of his assessment of the writing of Rabelais, that drove Bakhtin and prompted much of his theorizing about parody. His work "exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language, it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others" by "reformulating and re-accentuating them" (*Dialogic* 5).

While the first essay "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* is important for its efforts to situate the novel and establish it as a parody of other genres of literature, it is in the second essay, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," where Bakhtin does his definitional work regarding parody. Although Bakhtin never clearly states, 'this is what parody is,' his essay establishes his view that a parody is a use of language that uses an original text in terms of style and then reflects on it. A parody is what he describes as a "stylistic hybrid" that draws on an original text and speaks back to it as a "intentional dialogized hybrid" where "styles actively and mutually illuminate one another" (*Dialogic* 76). Bakhtin also noted the interplay of several forms of humor as contributors to the act of parody, continuing the trend of form flexibility offered in the previous chapter by Berger as well as Buijzen and Valkenburg. Bakhtin's analysis of parody

is more nuanced than the scholars that have been previously cited. Bakhtin he regularly speaks of parody as a more general act in the sense that he includes forms such as mimicry, irony, and satire in what he constitutes as ‘the parodic.’

The act of parody is an interplay of two languages or styles that exist in conversation with one another and become “crossed with each other” (*Dialogic* 75). There is the language of the original text which is being parodied and then the language of the parody itself which is “invisibly present” in the act of parody (75). The point here is to highlight the fact that a parody has a goal of differentiation and signification with the original text that is formally unspoken. The point of the parody is embedded in this unspokenness: to make the audience aware of a connection to an existing text but to do so in a way that reveals a critical perspective towards that original and offers an alternative way of understanding the world. Though the goal of the parody may not end up being apparent, it is the case that the parody aims to expose the characteristics and values of the original text:

It is the nature of every parody to transpose the values of the parodied style, to highlight certain elements while leaving others in the shade: the parody is always biased ... dictated by the distinctive features of the parodying language, its accentual system, its structure – we feel its presence in the parody and we can recognize that presence ... it is possible to sense and recognize in any parody that “normal” language, that “normal” style, in light of which the given parody was created. But in practice it is far from easy and not always possible. (75-6)

Although a parody is not the same stylistically as the original text that is being parodied, a successful parody will look like the thing that is being mimicked. Not only does the parody look

like an example of the original style, but it should be recognized as intentionally aiming to look like the original style.

Bakhtin further observed that parody occupies a unique space where it is neither the same as the original nor is it something distinctly different. What one ends up with when they confront a parody is something that intentionally looks like and acts like another text. The audience to the parody is assumed to recognize the connection to the original text. But the audience is supposed to also recognize that what they are looking at or listening to is also not the original. Bakhtin's articulation of how a parody of sonnet is not a sonnet but is the image of a sonnet helps clarify his meaning:

Take for example the parodic *sonnets* with which *Don Quixote* begins. Although they are impeccably structured as sonnets, we would never possibly assign them to the sonnet genre. In *Don Quixote* they appear as part of a novel - but even the isolated parodic sonnet (outside of the novel) could not be classified generically as a sonnet. In a parodied sonnet, the sonnet form is not a genre at all, that is, it is not the form of a whole but is rather *the object of representation*: the sonnet here is the *hero of the parody*. In a parody of the sonnet, we must first all recognize a sonnet, recognize its form, its specific style, its manner of seeing, its manner of selecting from and evaluating the world - the world view of the sonnet, as it were. A parody may represent and ridicule these distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the *image of a sonnet*. (*Dialogic* 51).

From this acknowledgement of something similar but different, the parody asks the audience to acknowledge that the original "straightforward, serious word" is being ridiculed through the exploitation by the parody (52).



This act of juxtaposition of the parody against an original text works to show the openness and fluidity of interpretation through an act of laughter that demonstrates how the “given straightforward generic word ... is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object” and the parody “forces us to experience those sides of the object that are otherwise not included” (*Dialogic* 55). By taking the original and using it in an irreverent fashion the parody highlights the limits of the original and narrow framing of the word(s). This both functions to challenge the original by exposing it and by opening new possibility in showing an alternative way of understanding. Through laughter generated by the parody, the object or subject of the original is separated from the power of the word. The “position and tendency of the parodic-travesty consciousness is ... oriented toward the object—but toward another’s word as well, a parodied word about the *object* that in the process becomes itself an *image*. Thus ... distance between language and reality” (61).

While Bakhtin used this essay to develop the critical potentiality of the parody, he also returned to the idea of official sanctioning of the act of parody, or carnival, by existing structures of authority developed in *Rabelais*. The church and other institutions would use parodies at certain times of the year, for instance during the feasts and festivals noted above, to engage in a self-critical mocking that would also function as a way of bringing the body of the congregation together. For instance, priests would regularly engage in “paschal laughter” where they used parodic liturgies and joking to encourage laughter by the congregation (*Dialogic* 72). While degrading and ridiculing the sacred, in these moments of communal laughing generated by sacred parody, the laughter was “conceived as a cheerful rebirth after days of melancholy and fasting” (*Dialogic* 72).

With this sense of what Bakhtin understand to be parody, we can now return to the first essay, “Epic and Novel” in the collection contained in *The Dialogic Imagination*, which develops Bakhtin’s rationale for selecting the novel as a significant form of literature to study. This rationale can be summarized as a recognition of the novel as a parody of traditional high literature, or “the literature of ruling social groups” (*Dialogic* 4).

“Epic and Novel” begins by noting that the novel is but one genre of literature that sits alongside other general categories of literature such as the epic and the tragedy. While these other genres have existed for centuries and therefore developed their defining features a long time ago, the novel is a “younger” form of literature (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 3). In fact, Bakhtin states that the novel is the only form of literature that was born in the era of the written word and the advent of the book. This newness of the novel also means that it lacks an established canon that can be relied upon to help guide subsequent endeavors down the path of becoming part of the genre. The absence of a canon is important for Bakhtin because it suggests an ability to study the novel as a living (and relatively young) style such that one can see the process of formation as it is taking place.

Bakhtin’s notion that the novel stands in contrast to the genres of high literature is based on his view that the novel ‘novelizes,’ or makes new, by parodying the existing genres. Bakhtin wrote that the novel “gets on poorly with other genres”: “There can be no talk of harmony deriving from mutual limitation and complementariness. The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them” (*Dialogic* 5). This action of parody and the rise of the novel as a dominant form breaks down the stylized nature of the older forms of literature. By

challenging their canonical ways, the novel allows other forms of literature to sound in new ways.

There are three primary features that Bakhtin deems important to highlight in this process of novelization. First, the novel incorporates heteroglossia into one's understanding of literature by adding new voices and layers of style and language. Second, novelization dialogizes existing texts by putting them into a conversation "permeated with laughter, irony, humor, and elements of self-parody" with the novel (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 7). Third, novelization generates an "openendedness" or "indeterminacy" by revealing the understanding of the novelized to be alive and evolving instead of allowing the sense of completedness to be perpetuated (7). Because of these characteristics, Bakhtin identified the novel as a still-evolving, or better yet, as an ever-evolving form because of the fluidity of its nature.

Another aspect of the novel highlighted by Bakhtin of consequence is its temporal orientation, which is one of a present geared toward the future. Other genres of literature, such as the epic, are directed to the past and attempt to offer an absolute understanding of the past because the epic is "monochronic and valorized ... walled off absolutely from all subsequent times" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 15). The novel's effort to novelize and parody the epic destabilizes and destroys this boundary and the significance of tradition and memory of the past become "merely transitory" (19). While the deployment of the features and styles of these other genres takes place in the novel in several ways, the key for Bakhtin in breaking down temporal distance that is created, and demanded, by these other forms of text, is that of laughter. To laugh at something requires relevance and proximity with meaning that familiarizes and allows investigation:

Laughter ... destroys the hierarchical ... distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close ... Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare, and expose it examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before a subject, before a world, making it an object of familiar contact. (23)

The act of ridicule and the resulting laughter eliminates the significance of memory and tradition because they no long maintain a purpose. This ridicule induced laughter results in an “uncrowning” that allows one to forget, and then move forward anew (23).

Bakhtin’s discussion of the power of laughter is one that continues into the third essay in *The Dialogic Imagination*. In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” laughter is emphasized not as a biological, physiological, or psychological act, but instead is conceptualized as an “objectivized, sociohistorical cultural phenomenon, which is most present in verbal expression” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 236). The significance of laughter as a sociohistorical and cultural force is its ability to reconfigure associations and meanings. For Bakhtin this is a “making contiguous of what is normally not associated and the distancing of what normally is, a destruction of the familiar and the creation of new matrices, a destruction of linguistic norms for language and thought (237). Referring to *Rabelais*, the power of parody and laughter is presented as a way to pass the boundaries created by the original text and the laughter functions as a “special force and capability to strip ... the object of the false verbal and ideological husk that encloses it” (*Dialogic* 237).

While not using the language of metaphor, Bakhtin highlights the metaphorical potential of parody to take the original text and use it to reveal an understanding previously unknown. However, the metaphorical power is unique in that it is being used to subvert the meaning of the original that makes the comparison possible. For Bakhtin, much of the critical potential within the connection between the original and the parody comes from the way that the parody valorizes what had been previously relegated by the original.

Bakhtin also uses “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” to develop his ideas about the characters and the vulgar nature of parody. Regarding the inclusion of various characters, parodies are literature of the “dregs of society” and as a result tend to rely on the use of outcasts such as rogues, clowns, and fools as primary figures (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 158). These characters are important because they tend to “create their own special little world, their own chronotope” that present a “vital connection with the theatrical trappings of the public square” (159). The clown, as an example, is not understood as a character that can be understood literally because the presence of the make up or mask demands they be approached metaphorically. The clown or the fool enters the public space as a connection to the common people not as themselves but as a representation of something else. Additionally, this entering as other gives these characters a “right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right to not make common cause ... they can exploit any position ... but only as a mask” (159). Giving the heretofore marginalized characters protagonist status not only flips the sense of their place within a style, but it also gives those characters a right to be different. It legitimizes their wearing of a mask or taking on a role that stands against existing social norms.

The presence of these metaphorical characters and their humanizing image is further elucidated as important for Bakhtin because they represent a “metamorphosis of tsar and god” to

more vulgar creations (*Dialogic* 161). The superiority of the hero and conventionality of the dominant structures are made vulgar in their transformation to the social outsider. The hypocrisy of duplicity of institutions, who try to frame regular and real life as “crude and bestial,” are exposed in the vulgar parody (162). Rather than conceptualizing the clown or the fool or the rogue as a villain or some sort of monster, the parody provides the “rogue’s cheerful deceit” or the “fool’s unselfish simplicity” as sympathetic and relatable (162). This process confers upon the novel and parody a right to attack and dismantle convention. A right to not be one’s self and to adopt a masked posture in the public sphere to expose, confuse, and rage against conventions. When these characters assume the mantle of hero or protagonist in a story, the potential is further magnified for Bakhtin as an exposing force. Bakhtin goes on to note that as the forces of stratification and differentiation (of “the means of production, ritual and everyday life”) intensify, there is a corresponding development of violations of differentiation through laughter and parody to expose and breakdown efforts at bounding off ideological and communal elements of life from one another (212).

In this fourth essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin again introduces the idea of the parody and the novel as a counter to preexisting and preeminent speech types. At the same time, he returns to the idea that an additional part of the power of parodic stylization is that it cannot destroy the original language. A new “image of language and a world corresponding to it” is only possible on the condition that the original is re-created as “an authentic whole” and given “its due as a language possessing its own internal logic (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 364). This creates a limit to the struggle between the two languages as the parodying language is intrinsically a hybrid of the past, present, and future that cannot be nullified because “novelistic dialogue is pregnant with an endless multitude of dialogic confrontations, which do not and cannot resolve

it” (365). As Bakhtin noted earlier in the work, “playing with the boundaries of speech types” cannot result in something “separated from authorial speech” (308). Absent the existence of stratified discourses, style is not possible.

Parody plays an important role as a concept in *The Dialogic Imagination*. While Bakhtin’s interest is most clearly targeted at the development and social location of the novel in the history of literary evolution, his thought here comes together to offer a treatise of the power of the parodic to stand against an original instance of rhetoric and to exploit the style and language of the original for the sake of opening new interpretive potential through the image of a language that is offered with the parody. This idea of the importance of parody as a tool for facilitating social consciousness continues in his other works, though the degree of time and space the subject gets may not be on par with the consideration offered in *The Dialogic Imagination*. The next section of the chapter examines additional work by Bakhtin to highlight how theoretical considerations in those texts helps expand Bakhtin’s thought about the power of parody.

#### *Bakhtin’s Other Works*

Though *Dialogic Imagination* is the place where Bakhtin did his most concentrated work on the nature of parody, he continued to discuss the concept in other works. While not as sustained, the significance of the moments of discussion are no less noteworthy. This section of the chapter will discuss those constructs within the larger framework of the parodic that has been already developed.

Bakhtin continued to develop his ideas about the boundedness of genres and their situatedness with other forms of writing and discusses how the styles employed communicate certain values through perspective. As Bakhtin noted in his essay “The Problem of the Text,”

which is contained in his *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (1986), one of the primary distinctions he makes regarding the parody is its dialogic nature where voices are layered onto one another creating a complexity of meaning and understanding that is revealed through the responsiveness of the voices to one another (120). It was noted earlier in this chapter that one of the powerful features of the novel's parodying of other forms of literature is the injection of a heteroglossia where multiple voices speak, and relate, to one another. These voices are not the voices of multiple characters in a story but instead constitute a convergence of authorial voices interacting on a same playing field. Parody draws in and from other texts, styles, and languages to add a layer of extratextual authorship to the work. These voices layer on top of and through one another to allow the reader or listener to develop a greater sense of meaning as "potential means of expression ... become actual, realized expression" (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 120). The original text makes the parody possible, and without the original the parody is incomprehensible as a parody. The parody speaks to the original and offers commentary about it, and therefore influences the understanding and potential of the original.

In "The Problem of the Text," Bakhtin develops the relationship between an author and the characters of a story in the sense that an author constrains what a character can do and in the sense that the character exerts a similar force onto the author. Bakhtin notes that the author is a constrained creator because characters can impose limitations on what can be written. The author is intrinsically embedded in their work and the image of the author is always and already a part of the text being developed that we can "perceive, understand, sense, and feel" (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 109). This does not mean the author is the narrator, for Bakhtin differentiates the narrator from the depiction of the author that underlies the work. Furthermore, the author cannot be separated from the characters and the story of the text. The elements of the actual story,



including the characters, are images created by the author and speak to the author in the development of the work. While the author is the creator, “the planes of the characters’ speech and that of the authorial speech can intersect, that is, dialogic relations are possible between them” (116). The author has a vision for his or her work and creates the characters but the process of creation ‘breathes life’ into those characters that constrains what the author can do with them as the story unfolds.

Bakhtin made a comparable argument about the relationship between a speaker and audience in “The Problem of Speech Genres,” also published in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. He noted that the “addressivity” of a speech to some audience is an essential marker of a speech utterance, and the “composition and ... style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker ... senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the audience” (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 95). Likewise, the audience’s ability to understand is immediately shaped by their understanding of the author. As Bakhtin wrote, “the listener becomes the speaker” (*Speech Genres* 68). There is a dialogic relationship between the author and the audience prior to the enactment of communication between the two parties. The author must have a sense of who the audience is and what the audience expects, or at least imagine a sense of identity and expectation, before crafting a specific message. Comparably, the audience reads or listens by making judgments about the author and those judgements inform how the audience processes the words of the author.

Bakhtin makes observations here that become important when one considers the relationship between the parody and that which is being parodied. The multi-voiced nature of a parody and the corresponding dialogism that occurs between the original text and the manufactured parody creates a complex web between the original author or rhetor, the original

work, the attending audience and then those same elements of the process of parody. The parody is constrained by the original and all its elements for developing a sensibility about what is to be parodied. The original text and its composite elements are simultaneously opened in terms of potential meaning that may be parodied.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) Bakhtin continued to describe the carnivalistic laughter that emerges within a parodic text and from the form of parody is a “decrowning double” where the world being parodied is presented as a “world turned inside out” (127). For example, a parody of an epic cannot truly be thought of as part of a genre unto its own as the parody is tied to the original text such that dissolution of the relationship eliminates the parody as ‘parody.’ But more than the author merely writing to an existing genre, parody works in a two-fold manner that reflects back, though in distorted ways, to that which is parodied and to the direct object of the speech. This comment speaks to the relationship developed about regarding the author to the text to the audience and vice versa. If we do not understand and acknowledge the dialogue that is taking place between authors and audiences, and only pay attention to the direct object of the parody, “stylization will be taken for style, parody simply for a poor work of art” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 185). While this comment seems to speak to how parody “clashes hostilely with its primordial host” and force an openness of meaning (193), the idea of a parody failing and ultimately reaffirming the original again emerges. If the parody fails to resonate with an audience and is understood as mere polemic, then the parody may be rendered passive and the original to emerge as energized and “the parodied discourse rings out more actively, exerts a counterforce against the author’s intentions” (198).

As should be clear, Bakhtin sees parody as a significant and powerful social force. Parody’s comedic power as a form of humor is important in that it reminds people of something

that they already know and puts it into a different light to evoke a new interpretation of the social importance of that thing or person or text. Furthermore, while it is the case that parody may operate on a local level of parodying a particular work, parody can also function as an indictment of a grander style. A parody of a judicial speech may be a parody of a very particular speech uttered by a specific individual, or it may be something indicative of the more generalized nature and contours of judicial speech-at-large, or both. However, while parody has the power to expose texts and rhetoric that have traditionally been considered complete and absolute in their interpretive potential, this condition of refraction is limited by the doubling-nature that is at the core of parody. Parody can expose and signify an original text, but it cannot escape it. A poorly understood effort at parody by an audience may not only fail to escape or transcend the original text, but it may also end up serving the ambition and purpose of that original.

#### Bakhtin and Rhetoric

Up until this point in the chapter the aim has been to develop Bakhtin's concept of the parody by allowing his work to be considered on its own given the number of texts he used in articulating his thought. The final portion of the chapter will take up the connection between Bakhtin and the field of rhetoric. As has been made clear, Bakhtin was not interested in the study of 'rhetoric' but instead situated himself in the realm of literary theory and therefore focused on the development of the novel. While Bakhtin did not self-identify within the discipline of rhetoric, several rhetorical scholars have appropriated his work and articulated a relationship between Bakhtin and rhetoric. The section will examine some of this work, with a significant amount work also covered in Chapter 5, to show how Bakhtin's thought fits within the scope of the field of rhetoric and how social and technological advances inform Bakhtin's work. As noted above, the fifth chapter will also identify linkages between Bakhtin and the contemporary

practice of rhetorical theory as it relates to the study of particular parodies in the late 20<sup>th</sup>, and early 21<sup>st</sup>, centuries.

Bakhtin's work has been utilized by a significant number of professionals in the field of rhetoric since his works were translated and made available in the early 1980s (Murphy, "Mikhail Bakhtin" 259). While the use of the work has been varied by rhetorical scholars, his notion of the dialogical nature of the novel has been applied to the study of rhetoric. Della Pollock describes the dialogical process of negotiation in the formation of meaning in the novel as profoundly rhetorical. She writes that "by releasing the multiple voices competing for dominance in a given socio-rhetorical field, the novel directly participates in social-rhetorical relations: it dialogically intensifies those processes that might otherwise be suppressed...and consequently destabilizes both dominant forms of expression and fixed patterns of social relations" (298). Horace Newcomb provides a comparable observation in articulating the idea that what is at stake in Bakhtin's argument for the novel is the interpretative connection between the rhetor the audience and text (40-1). As much as the speaker tries to impose superiority over the word there is a multi-vocal complex web of meaning that is negotiated between the speaker and the text, the text and other texts, and the audience and the text and the author.

It may seem obvious that there is a connection between Bakhtin and rhetorical studies. However, there is a need to address the fact that rhetoric was not something Bakhtin took a favorable view upon. For instance, Bakhtin differentiated rhetoric from prose despite the double-voicedness of both because he viewed rhetoric's double-voicedness as remaining subservient to a monovocal language that sought to exercise power over determinations of meaning (*Dialogic* 325). According to John M. Murphy, Bakhtin is one of several scholars who have offered negative assessments of rhetoric but who have been incorporated into the rhetorical tradition

(“Mikhail Bakhtin” 260). Murphy argues that Bakhtin’s fear of the power of rhetoric, which is why Bakhtin expressed his opposition to it as enacting the critical posture he saw in the novel, is in many ways connected to Bakhtin’s life in Stalinist Russia where the potential danger of rhetoric was clear (“Mikhail Bakhtin” 273). Furthermore, Murphy argues that while Bakhtin attempted distance the novel from rhetoric, Bakhtin’s work stand as rhetorical. It is not that the two are truly distinct but that they are part of the same family:

Rhetoric shares blood with the novel and blood is thicker than water. He struggles with rhetoric in the same way that one fights with siblings because *he* is faced with the task of choosing a language. Rhetoric is good and bad. It is loved and hated. It is a valued ally in the fight against poetics and it is a loathesome villain in the fight. Bakhtin’s performance, despite his protestations, demonstrates that this essay, and thus rhetoric, is a dialogic event. (“Mikhail Bakhtin” 272)

Bakhtin essentially ends up adopting a ‘do as I say and not as I do attitude’ because he understands that the power of rhetoric a powerful force but with the potential for dangerous ends.

Rather than run from Bakhtin’s concern about the power of rhetoric, Murphy argues that rhetorical scholars need to engage with Bakhtin on the question. Murphy observes that while As Bakhtin called for dialogue between and amongst texts, Murphy calls for dialogue between rhetoricians and Bakhtin since Bakhtin’s arguments “reveal the dialogic potential of rhetoric, possibilities that arise not from the neutral orchestration of languages and voices but from the nasty collision of vocabularies in Bakhtin’s score” (“Mikhail Bakhtin” 275).

With Bakhtin given a seat at the table of rhetoric, a question emerges about what is on table that might not have been there when Bakhtin was theorizing. While there are several differences in the world of today from the world of Bakhtin, there are two differences of

relevance that stand out. First is the development of communication technologies that Bakhtin could not necessarily anticipate. Second is the way that politics has developed in politics, particularly American politics.

Bakhtin did not concern himself with the emergence of modern communication technologies and therefore address their impact on discourse. Robert Hariman lists several modern vehicles capable of serving as vessels for parody, such as editorial cartoons, comics, stand-up comedy, sitcoms, satiric periodicals, variety and sketch programming on the radio and television, and parodic websites to name a few (248). These did not exist, or exist as socially conceived now, when Bakhtin was doing his work. Hariman adds that the potential for interaction across these forms of address to render prior instances of public address to the status of mere image has enormous consequences for how those rhetorical moments enter public consciousness (255). Newcomb states that it may even be the case that television is more ‘novel’ than the novel (41). He argues that the novel has been elevated to what Bakhtin would have considered to be higher forms of literature and is now used to regulate interpretation instead of opening it. Television and visual media have “assumed the positions of dishonour...and almost every aspect of television draws from the heteroglot environment and contributes to the dialogic nature of the medium” (Newcomb 41). This multi-voiced potential is further magnified when the shows on television are actual parodies (Newcomb 42), and on self-reflexive shows like *SNL* and late-night television (44). Failure to consider such shifts during a paradigmatic rearrangement of modes of popular expression would not only do an injustice to the effort to apply the work of Bakhtin today but also render a genre-based understanding of rhetoric and expression fundamentally problematic given the potential for changing social dynamics brought about by evolving modes of public address (Druick 298).

The introduction of visual media is also important in Bakhtinian terms in terms of the way that American politics is understood. Murphy, in “Knowing the President: The Dialogic Evolution of the Campaign History,” argues that modern political campaigns can be understood as a genre or style in the sense described by Bakhtin. Murphy goes as far as arguing that the campaign exists as an epic with a “search for a once and future champion, his defeat of an evil opponent, and thus, the making of a President” (30). This observation goes along with Hauser’s claim that the development of political opinion occurs not just through the observation of formal campaign speeches and events but through vernacular rhetoric that allows “societal conversation to ensue...akin to the dialogized, heteroglossic tapestry Bakhtin finds in the novel” (“Vernacular Dialogue” 101). Televised clips of speech and coverage of political events exists as one way for this dialogue to emerge given the focus on the audience (Hauser, “Vernacular Dialogue” 102). Hauser argues that it is through these dialogues that the public develops a sense of the political and says that measures of public opinion exist as a parody of these conversations and their role in social production (105).

Both observations about the changing nature of social organization and outlets for communication remind one of the importance of studying how rhetorical patterns and styles can change over time. In fact, it should be noted that Bakhtin even indirectly speaks to the need to study current modalities of rhetoric as changes in speaking styles in “inseparably linked to changes in speech genres” (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 65). Bakhtin highlights the importance of understanding how changes in the delivery of rhetoric influences social events and dynamics:

In order to puzzle out the complex historical dynamics of these systems and move from a simple ... description of styles ... to a historical explanation of these changes, one must develop a special history of speech genres ... that reflects more directly, clearly, and

flexibly all the changes taking place in social life. Utterances and their types ... are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language. There is not a single new phenomenon ... that can enter the system of language without having traversed the long and complicated path of generic-stylistic testing and modification. (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 65)

Just as Bakhtin noted the importance of the development of the written word and the book to the advent of the novel, the communicative technologies that dominate today's social interactions may be of comparable importance to understanding how forms of rhetoric are organized and operate.

### Conclusion

Parody, for Bakhtin, is a form of humor (or forms of humor) that works by using an existing moment of rhetoric or form of rhetoric in terms of style and language. It is a doubling of the original and then presenting that double through a comedic mirror that takes the original and distorts how it is consumed by an audience. Because of this dependence on another author and another text, parody is something that exists as an intentional hybrid, but only if the audience understands that dialogic relationship of one text to another. The power of the parody is not just that it can evoke a moment of laughter. The power is that it can take the way people understand a particular text, or set of texts, and transform them through the act of laughter. What once deemed serious and complete it rendered vulnerable as the laughter highlights the importance of context. The parody takes the seeming absoluteness of the relationship between an object and language and rips it open. To show the potential different understandings of the language or the ability to interject new language. By taking was once fearful, monstrous, and absurd and transforming



those concepts through humor, the fear is lost, the monstrous rendered beautiful, and the absurd shown as normal, logic, and rationale.

While all of this is possible through the enactment of the parodic, it is also the case that parody is bound up with an original. To mock a style requires the style to exist and be acknowledged. This demand of the relationship creates a limit on the power of the parody. To be parody, parody must awaken and resurrect the original. The original cannot be destroyed or the interpretive openness of the parody vanishes, and one style is replaced by a new style. As Bakhtin has explained, a parody is not the thing it parodies, it is an image of that thing. The image has no value if one does not recognize that they are in the presence of an image and that there is signification created by observing the image. This chaining of the parody to the parodied provides parody with the power to demonstrate the ever-incompleteness of rhetorical development. This chaining also has the potential to return the original to the fore and to give it a new life and energy that overwhelms the parodic initiative. As has been made clear throughout, parody is fundamentally relational. While it may be that the dominant voice in the conversation is that of the parody and its author, there is reason to expect a response from the other participants in the conversation. If those other participants perceive the parody as a threat, then they may resist. It is also possible for the other participants in the conversation to have created the space for the parody to exist. The evidence is clear that there have been moments of institutional control and allowances for parody because of its potential to function as a social safety value. At the end of the day, the point of all of this is to highlight what parody can do; not to say what parody will do. Therefore Bakhtin does not offer abstract theorization about parody but instead situated his ideas around analyses of specific works of parody.

Given the evolutions of technology and communication that have taken place, and the increasing role of parody in modern society, more work is needed to understand parody's features as they manifest themselves in contemporary society. Bakhtin's own work notes both the similarities and differences in forms of parody, and functions of parody, over time. Bakhtin is clearly focused on writing about the novel as a parodied response to more established and socially valued literature. While we can conceptualize the modern American public culture and its multiplicity of forms of public address as a massive version of Bakhtin's novel where there is layer upon layer of doubling of meaning (Harriman 259), Bakhtin did not concern himself with such an environment of human communication.

Evaluation of contemporary forces and instances of rhetoric is something that this dissertation will return to in Chapter 5. Before that, the above highlighting of the range of interpretive potentialities that can emerge from parody warrants additional consideration. That is the task for Chapter 4. As has been made clear since the opening chapter, the rhetorical purposes, and functions of humor-at-large vary widely. Sometimes humor works to unite a speaker and an audience. Sometimes humor works to offer relief from the uncomfortable. It can function cathartically for people. Sometimes humor works to identify, signify, and divide. This potential to divide can foster or fuel social division by identifying a target and functioning with hostility. In other words, humor can work to resolve conflict or to create it through derision and the generation of victimage.

Parody, as a form of humor, is imbued with these potentialities and the work of Bakhtin helps make that clear. Given parody's relational nature to other authors and texts, it is perhaps even more true, and important to understand how it can function along these lines. While Bakhtin's writing notes the multiple possibilities for meaning contained with parody, it is the

case that this work's reliance on the novel as the basis of his understanding could influence the general tenor of his views on parody. As the avenues for discourse have increased with the development of the digital world, those changes could impact the way parody operates in its relationships with the text and the audience. Therefore Chapter 4 will work to explicate theoretical insights, particularly from Kenneth Burke that speak to this potential in humor and show how these insights can be used to further an understanding of the relational potential of parody.

## Chapter 4: Burkean Notions of Comedy

Parody is one of the most widely used forms of comedy due to its ability to insert critical commentary on issues of the day by highlighting an existing piece of rhetoric, or style of rhetoric, and representing it. Both Mikhail Bakhtin and Kenneth Burke provide important insights into understanding how parody's reflective potential can work. Bakhtin's work shows that parody is a powerful device in the toolbox of rhetoric by discussing the potential and limitations of parody as a form of social illumination. Bakhtin argued that parody is a unique form of both humor and rhetoric in its appropriation of a prior text or style to expose the original to criticism and create opportunity for new discursive possibilities by revealing the openness that exists between language and the things of the world. For Bakhtin, this ability to interrogate a text is significant. The ability to interrogate gives parody the ability to take what is known and through an act of mirroring transform the perception of the original and therefore alter how meaning operates. While not tackling the specific rhetorical device of parody, Kenneth Burke's discussion of the rhetorical role of comedy as a social force capable facilitating social resolution or catharsis complements the work of Bakhtin.

Burke's contributions on the role of comedy provide additional shape to an understanding of how comedy can shape the contours of social life. Burke's work on comedy adds to the concepts developed in the first three chapters of this dissertation by addressing his development of the cathartic potential and limits found in humor. Burke strove to understand how comedy worked both in terms of purpose and function to address social conflict and his theorizing about the cathartic effect of comedy speaks to this. While it would be potentially appropriate to situate Burke's work within the functions and purposes conversation, his thought better stands in conjunction to the work of Bakhtin; Burke's thoughts on comedy can help operationalize the

principles developed in Bakhtin's consideration of the parody. Beth Bonnstetter points to this alignment of the two by seeing that Bakhtin's notion of carnival and Burke's thoughts about comedy work together in developing a complete sense of how laughter can facilitate social criticism through their potential to render anyone and everyone a fool (20). Dana Sutton adds to the connection by highlighting the cathartic potential of the festival to "liberate psychic energy invested in maintaining inhibitions" (108). Both Bonnstetter and Sutton's work points to the importance of understanding the potential in parody to act cathartically for a rhetor and/or audience. Mapping the work of Burke onto that of Bakhtin facilitates this understanding and points to the importance of perception of parody by the interlocuters for how the parody is processed as catharsis.

This chapter explores Burke's thoughts on comedy to extend the contribution of Bakhtin's work. The chapter begins by developing Burke's concepts about how people engage in an act of framing their experiences. This includes a discussion of frames of acceptance and rejection and builds to why he identified a comic frame (of acceptance) as superior to a tragic frame (of acceptance). It will then move to consider the nature of catharsis and discuss Burke's arguments for why comedic catharsis is generally preferable to the use of a tragic frame for catharsis, as well as considering the problem of derisive laughter for catharsis. The chapter will close by offering thoughts about the connection between Burke and Bakhtin. While Bakhtin provides a well-developed explanation of the parody and its social significance, Burke's commentary on the comic frame assists with the understanding of parody by highlighting how the relationships between a speaker, audiences, and the subject contain an uncertainty of rhetorical consequence. Understanding how the relationships in Bakhtin's and Burke's work can

operate may allow a rhetor to reduce the potential for a failure of rhetoric and maximize the critical potential of parody.

### Burke's Frames

Burke opened *Attitudes Toward History* by developing the notion that people do not encounter world from a position of detachment but instead through some orientation or perspective that shapes their experiences and frames the world. These frames help an individual understand the moments into which one is thrown and determine how a situation is to be interpreted and understood. This act of framing allows an individual to name a situation as a particular type. By naming a situation, the potential of how to act in it is determined for the participants. A person acts in accordance with a social norm determined for each type of frame. An individual can classify a moment in time into a type, and then act accordingly, for instance through comedy, based on how the frame sets up the understanding and potential of the moment.

These frames can lead one to embrace or accept a situation (a frame of acceptance), or the way one frames a situation can lead to a posture of opposition and rejection (a frame of rejection). Drawing on the work of William James, Burke wrote that action in the world begins from a question of how to avoid actions that are evil, and the decision to accept or reject a framing of an event emanates from one's sense of evil. Framing helps an individual to determine whether they wish to act and accept the world they have encountered as a particular type of situation, or to reject and resist that world. Burke wrote that "in the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death one adopts policies" based on how one frames their world in judging other people and moments as "friendly or unfriendly" (*Attitudes* 3-4). From there judgement about how to act emerges. Burke continued in describing how judgement unfolds into action: "If they are deemed friendly ... prepares ... to welcome them; if they are deemed unfriendly ... weighs

objective resistances against his own resources, to decide how far he can effectively go in combating them” (4). Action in the world is only possible if one has an attitude towards a situation. The attitudes that people hold come from their more general sense of how people are situated in the world, and this sense of perspective is developed in the naming of the conditions of existence that “shape our relations ... prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing these functions ... they suggest how you shall be for or against” (4). If one names another person as a “villain,” a particular perspective emerges that identifies the other as wicked or sinister and leads to a posture of “attacking or cringing” in response (4). If one names the same person as “mistaken,” then any harm that emerged from the mistake is understood as an unfortunate accident and a posture of correction or “setting...right” unfolds (4).

#### *Frames of Acceptance*

For Burke, frames of acceptance function to accept the overall order of the world and signal a desire to operate within it. For Burke acceptance does not necessarily mean an embrace of the social order identified in the frame but can be understood as a resignation to it (*Attitudes* 7). Burke also clarified that ‘resignation’ is not a passivity towards the world but instead refers to a willingness to work within existing societal structures. While it may be the case that someone holds the existing order with positive affirmation, Burke argued that a frame of acceptance also allowed for people to be critical of the order but in the sense that the solution was reform and revision as opposed to resistance (*Attitudes* 19). Again, turning to James, he described resignation as the degree to which one was willing to accept limits placed on themselves, and others, and by themselves on others in the existing order (10).

Burke focused on two frames of acceptance: the tragic frame and the comic frame. These two types of frames are part of what Burke referred to elsewhere as tools that are used to devise

strategies for living. They provide forms for recognition that he terms “equipments for living” (Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* 304). Burke saw tragedy and comedy as the basis of the two general orientations of acceptance. While Burke drew his sense of these forms by studying their existence in literature, he described that literature as something that can be used to evaluate life in the world. In other words, he took the lessons from literature and considered them as real-world practice by imagining how human agents can and may perceive in a moment of actual enactment. The importance of human perception was not to be understated for Burke and explains why he argued that despite the popularity of tragedy in literature that the comic frame was generally a preferable orientation for everyday living in the world.

Burke opened his consideration of the nature of the tragedy and then the comedy but starting with a brief explanation of form of the epic. Burke established that the epic was also a frame for understanding the world but one that depicted life under “primitive conditions” prior to “commercial enlightenment” and where people accepted the inevitability of the “rigors of war” as necessary for success and therefore sought to glorify a hero that exemplified the courage and willingness to be sacrificed for the benefit of all (*Attitudes* 35). This resignation of one’s limits, the need to be sacrificed, communicated the “social value of such a pattern ... to make humility and self-glorification *work together*” (36). The epic was an important frame but is one that was not actively used after the marketplace developed and systems of economic organization developed in the form laws and rules of economic engagement emerged. The willingness to sacrifice one’s self for others through violence ceased to be socially permissible in a world where preservation of rules was paramount for the maintenance of the social order. Even Virgil, who emulated Homer’s epics in his own writing, wrote to celebrate economic development away from laissez-faire economics (34). Out of the epic, Burke wrote, came the tragic and comic



frames of acceptance. Before discussing those, however, there is a need to briefly address the frame of rejection.

### *Frames of Rejection*

Frames of acceptance are differentiated from frames of rejection. Burke described the frame of rejection as related to acceptance but as a decision of resistance and saw it as the result of imposed coloring of the world:

“Rejection” is but a by-product of "acceptance" ... It takes its color from an attitude towards some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a shift in the allegiance to symbols of authority. It is the heretical aspect of an orthodoxy ... it has much in common with the "frame of acceptance" that it rejects. It somewhat robs a thinker of his birth-right, his right to "consume" reality without regurgitation. If the king is well thought ... the man who would build his frame to accept the necessity of deposing the king is almost necessarily ... shunted into a negativistic emphasis... (stressing the no more strongly than the yes) throws the emphasis stylistically upon the partiality of rejection rather than the completeness of acceptance. (*Attitudes* 21-2)

Rejection is rooted in a desire to overthrow the existing order. It comes from a position that acceptance is not possible nor desirable. The argument in favor of rejection is one that sees the status quo as untenable regardless of the degree of reform that it may take. If the existing system is the cause of social ills, then the only way to rectify the situation is to destroy the system. Burke added that frames of rejection tend to emphasize one value against all else, which fuels the orthodoxy behind it (28).

Although frames of rejection and frames of acceptance are similar in that both shape human perspective and action, they are different in that rejection is rooted in a negativity and

fear of the existing order instead of an openness to it. It should be noted, however, that Burke did suggest that there are gradations in the frames of acceptance and rejection. He described the difference between these two types of frames as based in the nature and degree of emphasis. This potential for rejection and acceptance to exist on a continuum is demonstrated in Burke's statements that the work of Machiavelli and Hobbes embrace a logic of rejection where they embraced a politics rooted in "*cult of power*" and the idea of perpetual war absent a monarchy (*Attitudes* 23). Burke rejected this view of human nature and therefore embraced acceptance, which led to his consideration of the tragic and comic frames.

### *The Tragic Frame of Acceptance*

The tragic frame builds off the epic but transforms it within "the cultural materials" that were available to the playwrights of the time that were more "urban, complex, sophisticated" because of the development of the marketplace (*Attitudes* 37). The advent of rules of commercial engagement led to new norms that rejected valorization of the self and introduced a framework of legality to sustain order. While the hero of the epic acted to save everyone else and used the logic of war to do what needed to be done, the tragic put emphasis on rules for order and saw ambition as problematic enactments of pride and sin.

The formulation of the tragic gave motive a new power and made crime an important theme (39). Individuals live in a world with others and the key to the stability of that world is the existence of rules that ensure activity, primarily economic activity, can be conducted without the threat of undue interference. When people act against those rules, those actions are understood as an expression of a motivation to willfully step beyond the bounds of the rules. The action can be named as illegal or criminal. What makes the tragedy 'tragic' is that the hero acts criminally but the action is presented in a sympathetic manner where "even though the criminal is finally

sentenced to be punished, we are made to feel that this offence is our offence, and at the same time the offence is dignified by the nobility of style” (39). As noble as the intent might have been to act criminally, the action was still wrong and demanded punishment because the alternative would be an embrace of chaos through the devaluing of the rules. While Burke argued that the tragic frame had merit, he ultimately embraced a comic frame as the best method of engaging the world.

### *The Comic Frame of Acceptance*

Following his description of the tragic frame, Burke then moved to discuss the comic frame. Burke argued that the comic frame differed from the tragic frame because it replaced criminal motive with the concept of mistakenness. While the tragedy required a villain, the comedy required a fool to be responsible for the conflict of the plot. The shift from criminal to the foolish is important in that it removes the element of blame associated with intent. A character flaw rooted in intent shifts to accident or stupidity. Burke stated this as follows:

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools...you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. The audience...sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once. (*Attitudes* 41-2)

This vantagepoint enables the audience to recognize that the actions of the characters were not intentional as connected to motive but were the result of simply being unwise. The audience becomes capable of forgiveness, which is why he found the comic frame to be a preferable social orientation. Burke even closed the introduction to *Attitudes Toward History* by asking the

reader to give him a “comic discount” and approach the text “comically inspired” in the event the reader found the writing to come up short in addressing a situation (xvi).

Burke further noted that unlike tragedy, comedy deals with “man in society” instead of “cosmic man” because there is a necessity for “logical forensic causality” in explaining the consequences of stupidity (*Attitudes* 42). In tragedy there is a sense of inevitability of the occurrence of the tragic flaw. It is the very nature of the tragedy for the hero to suffer some flaw that cannot be avoided. Comedy, on the hand, is free from the moment of inevitability; the audience lacks the ability to anticipate the criminal action and its ensuing damnation. This situatedness of man in society, as oppose to “man in heaven” or “man in nature,” becomes important as it enables an ability to transcend or overcome through humility, which Burke stated brings us to Aristotle’s notion of the person as a “political animal” (*Attitudes* 170).

This frame empowers the individual by demonstrating that our failures are not the result of something that is inevitable and comes down from the heavens. Instead, the comic frame highlights the human ability to control events through the power of observation and action because causality is something that is rooted in human decision-making. Burke wrote that understanding the motives of others, or the ‘causal pressures’ referenced above, there is a “program of socialization” where “we get the cues that place us with relation to them” (170). This forestalls an inclination to simply assign blame to a tragic inevitability and allows one to overcome the outrage that may come from sensing that inevitability. What Burke is getting at is that the comic frame forces social learning: “And one is exposed indeed to the possibilities of being cheated shamelessly in this world, if he does not accumulate at least a minimum of spiritual resources that no man can take from him. The comic frame, as a method of study ... is a better personal possession” (*Attitudes* 170). By studying how actions and relations in the world

function one can learn and therefore reshape the causality of events. The comic frame forces an appreciation of the rational and irrational:

The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to "transcend" occasions when he has been tricked or cheated ... Thus we "win" by subtly changing the rules of the game ... we make "assets" out of "liabilities" ...

In sum, the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational. (Burke, *Attitudes* 171)

Burke's concept of the comic frame is important because it demonstrates how such a framing is both more socially soothing in that it changes the conceptualization of blame and because it removes the specter of a forced flaw that changes the conduct of one's life. While the comic (and the tragic) may not be capable of truly radical change in the world since they are frames of acceptance of the social order, the comic frame's prioritization of the roles of observation and rationality empowers change within the order.

While Burke preferred the comic frame, he felt that it was limited in application. He felt that a weakness of the frame was that it could not apply to all situations because cultural changes made it impossible to know what would be funny everyone and over time. He wrote that: "The materials incorporated within the frame are never broad enough to encompass all the necessary attitudes. Not all the significant cultural factors are given the importance that a total vision of reality would require. Class interests provide the cues that distort the interpretative frame, making its apparent totality function as an actual partiality" (*Attitudes* 40). The weakness of the comic frame is that class interests are always at risk of being presented in a biased manner based

on the perspective of the author. Because comic authors cannot know how history will proceed and predict news and contexts it is possible those forces negate the cultural significance of the comedy. This poses the threat of the frame functioning deceptively because a “frame becomes deceptive when it provides too great plausibility for the writer who would condemn symptoms without being able to gauge the causal pressure behind the symptoms” (41). If a rhetor does not understand the attitudes people hold or their cultural sensibilities, then there is a risk the rhetor will falsely believe their rhetoric is humorous, or appropriately humorous. In such a moment, the comic frame may miss its mark or even backfire and generate a hostile reaction. This limitation can be described by Burke as a weakness of the frame, but in many ways it can be conceived as a strength in that it again reinforces the humanizing force Burke identified in the comic frame. While there is an impending sense of a fall in the tragic, the comic demands an attentiveness to understanding how and why people act in the world. It is true that misunderstanding the situation can lead to a failure of the comic frame, but it is also true that an accurate sense of attitude and motivation can foster a successful use of the comic frame.

These observations about the nature of motive and reason are important not just for understanding how the comic can function as a teaching tool for understanding social forces and relations. Sarah Elizabeth Adams has argued that Burke’s vision of the comic is important because it serves as the basis of rhetorical engagement: “Burke’s comic is more than just one rhetorical tool among many because, for Burke, the comic would ideally underlie all rhetorical engagements” (323). The above observations are also important for consideration of how social conflict is to be resolved through an act of catharsis. Thinking about how the frames work is important because they reveal how people view, and then act in, the world. The frames set up

what is a conflict and provide ways to approach those conflicts. The next section of this chapter will move to a discussion of how resolution, or catharsis, is achieved.

### Burke's Concept of Catharsis

Burke's writing about the comic frame clearly establishes it as a preferred system of engagement with the world. The prospect of anyone being played a fool is productive in its potential to mitigate and forestall conflict because it establishes a burden for all to learn. Burke extended his consideration of the comic frame in his work about catharsis. While the comic frame may be a valuable orientation in avoiding conflict, a question emerges about what to do when conflict emerges. Burke's discussion of catharsis shows that many of the issues that led him to prefer the comic frame of acceptance also led him to endorse a comic approach to catharsis. This section of the chapter will work through Burke's articulation of the nature of catharsis.

In "On Catharsis" Burke made the argument that an important role of rhetoric is its ability to allow us to generate resolution to conflict through catharsis or cleansing (364). Catharsis is a natural part of life. In the physical sense of the body, there may be a need to purge sickness through a cleansing to bring the body back into a condition of health and balance. In the context of the "body politic," there is a comparable need to resolve those matters that render a social sickness, but that resolution is generally something that can be accomplished through a metaphorical purgation that relies on an "imagery of bodily purgation" (359). In other words, catharsis is a cleaning or release of the audience from a conflict or unrest. By a cleansing or release, Burke means that a society is freed from the cause of social imbalance or disturbance in catharsis. Upon being emancipated through catharsis, order is restored as "the catharsis of release must not only arise out of the regulatory, it might also be so shaped by the very modes of

emancipation somehow help re-establish the regulations for which they are the ‘cure’” (366). In “Catharsis - Second View” Burke offered additional detail to his sense of what catharsis looks like in everyday life, particularly since the perfection of catharsis is unlikely:

The total situation, then, would be as follows: perfect catharsis would arise from a sense of universal love. Insofar as such a condition is not attained, the next best thing is a sense of radical pity that lies on the slope of tearful release. Fear is not directly cathartic; but it is cathartic indirectly, insofar as it sets up the conditions for the feeling of pity. Wonder is cathartic in that, whereas it is in the same spectrum with fear, it is on the other edge of the spectrum, being itself a kind of "cleansed fear," like reverence. It in turn is aided by various devices such as heroic diction, that give magnitude to the action. Insofar as pity is employed to arouse our moral indignation, it is not wholly cathartic; but it may be employed secondarily to this end if the non-vindictive use of pity is primary. (Similarly, "derisive" laughter lacks the wholly cathartic function of "sympathetic" laughter, which comes close to pity. (109)

Catharsis then can be enacted several ways though there are limits to the cathartic potential of most realistic efforts to achieve catharsis. While the proponents of the relief theory of humor, as identified in Chapter 1, see a comparable role for humor, Burke’s argument assigns greater value to the relief potential of humor. Catharsis is not just a momentary escape but a deeper transformation of a social condition from conflict to resolution.

For Burke there are two rhetorical forces that can achieve this cathartic effect: the rhetoric of tragedy and the rhetoric of comedy. Rhetoric has the potential to reveal a speaker’s motive and reveal the speaker’s understanding of why things have transpired. In fact, he noted that Aristophanic comedy was fundamentally a cathartic expression (“On Catharsis” 362). In



*Grammar of Motives*, Burke noted that it is not just the tragic which can be understood as dramatic in revealing motive and explaining suffering; comedy can also by revealing state of mind and disposition (266-7). As symbol users, humans can achieve relief or resolution from a situation through crying or laughing, or even crying from laughing (“Catharsis – Second View” 107-8; “On Catharsis” 341-2). While catharsis can be expressed through physical manifestations, such as crying, the question emerges as to why catharsis has been achieved since crying can occur for multiple reasons. This means that there is a need to understand how one arrived at the point of crying. Was the cry, or laugh, tragic or comic?

Tragic catharsis is typically enacted through physical suffering: pain, torture, and death. Given the emphasis of the tragic on the criminal, as developed in the preceding section, it is logical for the solution to the tragic to be physical suffering. While tragedy is quite capable of producing a cathartic release for the body politic, Burke was concerned that the rhetoric of tragedy was a risky proposition because it demands that the tragic be enacted through a criminal action. As Burke wrote in *Attitudes Toward History*, the problem with tragic catharsis is that the way motive is assigned places blame, or the possibility of blame, in the few given that the choices requiring resolution were not the result of a mistake that anyone could have made. The cause of social pollution that needs to be addressed is only found in some, due to the tragic flaw. While Burke identified a “universal tragedy” where the flaw exists in everyone, he also identified a “factional tragedy” where the flaw and criminality exists in one group but not another (185). The boundedness of this culpability then requires the use of violence to weaken one faction against another: “The “factional” tragedy, on the other hand, attributes the evil, not to all men, but to some (the other faction). Hence, since one's offence has been transferred to the shoulders of the other faction, the “cleansing” leaves one with a “program of action” beyond the

ritual. That is, in some way he must act to weaken the other faction, the vessel charged with his own temptations” (Burke, *Attitudes* 189). If the motive behind the criminal action is not properly developed, then there is a risk that the effort at catharsis backfires because an audience may end up experiencing sympathy with those who are suffering: “We can feel pity even for our worst enemy ... at the height of our vindictiveness ... suffering would seem ‘underserved,’ and thus pitiable ... Thus, if situations are presented in a way which, while causing fear, also contrives to avoid provoking of ‘moral indignation,’ such appeal to our pity is negatively ‘on the slope’ of love, through neutralizing its opposite, hate” (“On Catharsis” 359-60). Burke’s observation about the importance of how an action is perceived is important for his thought about catharsis. The key to how society seems to resolve conflict is not really in the form of the specific action as the means to catharsis but the way that action is perceived brings about catharsis. To drive home the importance of perception Burke added that even someone who was “resented as ‘superior’ could be seen in a light whereby, instead he was pitied for his sufferings” (“On Catharsis” 351). The framing that one individual has for understanding the world may be different for others. It may be the case one person or group understands the justice of a punishment, but others do not. The failure to properly understand a situation makes it possible for diverging attitudes about the cathartic punishment to emerge and breed resentment.

While Burke stated what perfect catharsis would look like in “Definition of Man,” he noted that a person’s concern with trying to attain perfection risks negativity and the creation of a scapegoat. He wrote that “The principle of perfection in this dangerous sense derives sustenance from other primary aspects of symbolicity ... the conditions are set for catharsis by scapegoat (including the ‘natural’ invitation to ‘project’ upon the enemy any troublesome traits of our own that we would negate)” (“Definition” 509-10). Burke added that the potential for pride to become

resentment from the demand for perfection perpetuates a “hierarchical psychosis...embodied in a political scapegoat” (“Definition” 510). The demand for perfection, while theoretically admirable, is problematic because it creates a cycle of blame, punishment, and resentment that can be difficult to escape because of the perpetual need for perfection and the accompanying failure to achieve that condition.

This potential for tragic catharsis to come up short in properly cleansing the individual or body politic for the social ill or conflict at stake is rooted in the work Burke previously developed regarding the nature of the tragic frame of acceptance in *Attitudes Toward History*. The assignment of blame that resides in the tragic frame creates the potential for misunderstanding that results in a cleansing that then requires a subsequent cleansing because of the potential for divisiveness. This conclusion about the nature of tragic catharsis led Burke to view comic catharsis as a preferable form of catharsis, though he did note in “On Catharsis” that in many ways the tragic can be understood as comic since there is something comic about an audience accepting the inevitability of a tragic flaw leading to someone’s downfall that then results in sympathy from the audience (339). Burke even went as far as to state that the only hope for human survival in the presence of the atomic bomb is to embrace a “cult of comedy” because the “cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust” (“Definition” 512). The power of the comic is that the act of laughter can function as an expression of togetherness because there is a recognition that anyone could have made the mistake that has produced an active predicament. The laughter therefore allows people to come together and resolve a social conflict. need transition from social tragedy to importance of laughter.

Burke's concept of the comic and his comments about social potential of laughter as a resource for addressing conflict, led Timothy Crusius to identify the comic as a system of ethics.

Crusius wrote:

For the most part an ethics of motives will be, as they used to say on *Monte Python*, something "completely different." But how exactly different?

First and most importantly, it will be comic. Comedy supplies our goal, Burke's *ad bellum purificandum*, "toward the purification of war." We won't be able to eliminate conflict in human relations, but our ethic must strive to limit conflict to words, verbal conflict. We know, then, what we want. Furthermore, we know a lot about how we'll approach the moral confusion MacIntyre described so well. Instead of solemnly undertaking to eliminate it, we'll take the comic route of "appreciating" it instead. We will smile or laugh at our own and everybody else's inconsistency because we know that morality cannot be any more consistent than situations are. ("The Question of Kenneth Burke's Ethics")

Burke therefore can be said to identify an important ethical responsibility for comedy as a social corrective capable of cathartic effects.

However, this assumes a form of comedy and humor that is based on the notion of the accident, the mistake, and the propensity for anyone act with stupidity. There are times though where people use humor for other purposes, for instance to assert superiority. In those instances, humor may not have the same cathartic effect. The next section takes up the question of how such derisive comedy works according to Burke.

## Catharsis of Derisive Laughter

While Burke argued that comedy is more humane than tragedy, he did identify a vicious potential in comedy; the comic can be used derisively to laugh at someone (“On Catharsis” 362). Victimhood plays an important and inevitable role in both comedy and tragedy (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 285). As Burke noted in “Catharsis – Second View,” drama is not possible without a victim who may experience suffering, or the possibility of suffering, in a conflict that requires a resolution. Catharsis then in the dramatic fashion requires a sacrifice. While the sacrifice may suffer physically in tragedy, Burke included “comic embarrassment and bewilderments” as imposed hardship (“Catharsis – Second View” 118). Even if the sacrifice is not elevated to the level of a kill, as a trophy, there is a need for a scapegoat that gives us tragic or comedic pleasure (Burke, “On Catharsis” 340). The flow from character flaw or motive to action to suffering makes it logical for one to laugh at the subject of the derision through insult (Burke, “On Catharsis” 349-50). To the extent that Burke assigns a cathartic value to derisive laughter it is merely in the sense that the laughter functions to differentiate and tighten “partisan alignments” (362). Much like there is a factional tragedy, Burke wrote there can be a “factional scapegoat,” whose rhetorical manifestation he identifies as comparable strategically to satire, which appears to put the parodic on notice of the potential to be derisive (*Attitudes Toward History* 188).

What makes this observation about malicious intent more striking is the additional observation that Burke provided about the role of the audience and its ability to pick up on the comedic function at play (“On Catharsis” 358). As Burke noted, it is quite possible for an audience of a particular politics to not pick up on the comedic entailments in a way that generates sympathy and therefore the cathartic potential may be lost (“On Catharsis” 362). It is

on this very basis that Bonnstetter notes how viewers of the television show *All in the Family* witnessed Archie Bunker as “a hero rather than a joke” and remarks that one must be careful with their use of the comic because even progressive aims can be subverted by the audience (28). Gregory Desilet and Edward Appel build on this idea by noting that one limit of the comic frame is that everyone may not, or will not, subscribe to it. The split in framing across people creates a unique rhetorical problem for a humorist to ensure that an audience relying on a different frame does not respond to being scapegoated through escalation:

However, the fact that the attitude—“all people are mistaken”—is a chosen attitude rather than a view imposed, say, by a preponderance of empirical evidence means that in some cases of conflict it may be held unilaterally. Not every “enemy” may appreciate the merits of such an attitude. An asymmetry of attitudes in conflict requires the comic framer to proceed with extraordinary due diligence and carefully deployed rhetorical structurings of conflict in order to prevent a vicious cycle of scapegoating. (354)

People choose how they view the world, and it is not universal that all people will opt to see conflict as the result of a mistake or accident. This perceptual split creates the potential for a social danger where a rhetor adopts a comic frame towards the world, but others do not (and do not recognize that the rhetor has). The split therefore risks perpetuation of a conflict, or even the development of a new conflict.

Burke’s development of the comic frame, and catharsis, came out his notion that people live in the world by employing a particular way of framing and understanding events. While the tragic frame is one that Burke also described as a frame of acceptance of the existing social order, he indicted the tragic frame due to its reliance on motive and intent in understanding conflict. The comic frame did not rely on the same view of intent and instead saw conflict as the

result of the potential for people to act foolishly. Burke argued this was a preferable orientation to take toward the world because it creates space for love to emerge between people through catharsis. Burke did, however, acknowledge the potential for comedy to be used for less than admirable ends and highlighted the ability for derisive laughter to generate hostility and backlash.

In many ways Burke echoes the work of Bakhtin. While Bakhtin used a different language than Burke, he identified a comparable potential in comedy, or parody in particular. The final section of this chapter will work to establish the linkages between Burke and Bakhtin.

#### Burke and Bakhtin in Dialogue

While Burke and Bakhtin existed in very different social worlds the fact, they were independently coming to many of the same conclusions at similar points in time is fascinating. Independent of the coincidence of their unknowing conceptual overlap, the more pressing observation is that Burke's work helps situate that of Bakhtin by providing a more concrete grounding in the field of rhetoric and by adding greater articulation as to how the potential of parody, and its corresponding limitations, might be enacted in the world of comedy.

Throughout *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin argued that the value of parody is to highlight the arbitrariness of meaning that is imposed by 'completeness' of the system that one senses coming from existing modes of presentation. He thought that the novel functioned as a parody of the traditions of the epic and tragedy, amongst others, by removing the distance between language and its referents. While previously developed genres of literature proclaimed to offer a finite and final view of the world through a universalized language with a sole interpretation, the novel presented the reader with a new perspective towards the epic and the tragedy by taking elements of their style and specific language and transforming them to

offer a different way of understanding the world. Humor in the parody worked to open the possibility of meaning.

Burke offered a comparable and supplementary position regarding comedy. While Burke did not define the parodic as narrowly as Bakhtin, Burke also saw the potential of laughter to open the world. While the tragedy announces itself with a determined nature of action in terms of motive, comedy opens space for acknowledging that action can occur because someone being mistaken. The laughter that comes from the comic frame is a laugh of choice. It is a recognition of the unfortunate accident that could beset anyone. For Burke, “laughter is to be distinguished from that of the Hyena, the difference derives from ideas of incongruity that are in turn derived from principles of congruity necessarily implicit in any given symbol-system” (“Definition” 512). Greig Henderson argues that Burke and Bakhtin come together in endorsing a “comic criticism” that can produce social change:

For Burke as for Bakhtin, history is an unending conversation, and the aims of comic criticism are threefold: first, to liberate what identifies itself as culturally given and politically correct from the hegemonic language in which it is enmeshed; second, to destroy the homogenizing power of myth and ideology over that hegemonic language by cultivating heteroglossia and perspective by incongruity; and third, above all, to create a distance between that language and reality so that the emancipatory possibilities of new languages and new social programs become not only visible but viable. (“Dialogism Versus Monologism”)

The potential of emancipation or social liberation comes through a project of rhetorical humor that can reveal the ways that contextualizes meaning. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist describe the compatibility between Burke and Bakhtin as being rooted in the idea that the two



advocate “‘perspective by incongruity,’ the ability to not see the identity of a thing as a lonely isolate ... but as a contrasting variable of all other categories which might ... fill the same position in existence” (7). Bakhtin and Burke celebrated the potential of comedy to highlight the accident and the mistake as unfortunate and natural mistakes that can happen to anyone.

Both Burke and Bakhtin also are led to identify humanizing consequences that emerge out of the comic frame. Bakhtin describes the power of the comic frame as a humanizing force in its relocation of the power to determine meaning. Burke sees comedy’s removal of the inevitability of the tragic flaw and fall as also humanizing. The ability of the people to recognize the potential for anyone to be the fool and to understand that social problems are the result of being mistaken gives weight to the importance of human rationality and irrationality.

Bakhtin and Burke also found comparable importance and power in characters such as the clown, rogue, and fool. Bakhtin argued that while the tragedy treated outsiders as threats to the order and marginalized and villainized those persons, the novel transformed those characters by giving them previously unseen importance as heroic figures. This transformation placed these historical outliers into the center of a story and contributed to the humanizing element of the parody. Foolishness was now something to be celebrated. Burke approached the matter differently than Bakhtin, but also ended up in the same place regarding the potential of the fool. According to Burke, the epic valorized the war hero, and the tragedy rejected that self-aggrandizement in favor of a protagonist who suffers a criminal yet sympathetic flaw. The comic frame rejected these notions in favor of a fool who is forced to navigate the social world by working to avoid making a mistake or blunder. The comic protagonist is also capable of stumbling into success through accident. In both cases, success or failure is the result of the

humanity of the fool. This humanization of the fool works to encourage learning about made an action foolish to understand how the actions worked or failed.

While both Bakhtin and Burke use all these observations to piece together arguments in favor of a comic lens for framing the world, both also recognize the limits of comedy. In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke saw comedy as limited because a comedic author would not be capable of anticipating future cultural signifiers and therefore incapable of speaking to all cultural issues. He continued by identifying limits to the comic frame given that it was a frame of acceptance of the overall order. This is in line with Bakhtin's argument made in both *Rabelais and His World* and *Dialogic Imagination* that the parody was constrained by its necessary relationship to an original text. Bakhtin saw limits to the critical power of parody given the inevitability of appropriation of an original text. Parody can open the interpretation of the original, but it cannot escape the original or destroy it without engaging in self-destruction as well. Both also identified a limit created by the dialogic nature of the mirroring or catharsis in the form of active resistance by those being humiliated or exposed. While a text cannot resist the comedic effort at transformation, the author of the text and the audiences to the text can resist a speaker's comedic effort. To the extent that those human forces identify the presentation of parody as a threat or as unjust, there is a risk that those who feel scapegoated or ostracized by the rhetorical force of the humor may counter.

The thinking of Burke and Bakhtin about comedy runs parallel. While Bakhtin gives an excellent account of the nature of parody and details its potential to serve as a site of exposure and resistance to acts and styles of rhetoric, his work leaves a question about the likelihood of a parody fulfilling those ambitions or instead serving as a force that reasserts the authority of the original text. Burke's work complements Bakhtin's and helps answers the question by

developing a place for rhetorical motivation in the parodic equation. A parody can have transformative potential if the audience interprets that potential and accepts the parody as a humorous take on a prior text. However, if the audience sees the parody as a threat to the order in which the audience operates, then it may be the case that the potential of the humor to transform how one interprets the content ebbs and a prideful resistance to the message manifests itself in the audience.

### Conclusion

Kenneth Burke's theorizing about comedy and humor is a valuable addition to the work of Bakhtin on how such rhetorical devices can function. Burke put forward a compelling argument that comedy exists as a frame of acceptance regarding the overall structure of the world that one operates in. The comic frame stands in contrast to a frame of rejection that seeks to destroy the existing social order, and it also stands in contrast to the tragic frame of acceptance that accepts the order but does so by assigning blame and a criminal intent to others.

For Burke, the epic existed as a form of literature that was pre-modern and accepted the primal conditions in which people lived, valorizing war and sacrifice. The tragedy offered a different perspective where self-restraint and existence in a legal order was to guide behavior. The result was that criminal action became an important theme in the tragedy though there was a corresponding sympathy for a criminal character given that criminal flaw was tragic and came down from the heavens onto the individuals in question. The comedy was similar in that it also stood against the epic but instead of focusing action as resulting from motivation and becoming criminal, the comedy instead relied on the idea of the accident and the mistaken as an alternative explanation for action. This switch from criminal to mistaken changed the way that people were depicted and could be understood.

The change in understanding of motive therefore allowed the audience to empathize with the protagonist as someone who was a fool that simply chose poorly and see that potential in everyone. Burke argued that the comic frame was therefore a superior orientation to the world because the move away from war and the criminal improved the probability of peace and love amongst people. This viewpoint also manifested itself in his thinking about catharsis where he again assigned a better probability of conflict resolution and forgiveness in the comic than the tragic. However, the probability of comedy achieving catharsis is not total. Perspective and understanding of persons implicated in a moment of attempted catharsis plays an important role in guiding how a situation is processed, and as the laughter evoked by humor becomes increasingly derisive then the odds of catharsis are reduced. As there can be a demand for retribution and vengeance in response to tragic catharsis, there can be a demand for such action in the face of derision and humiliation.

These observations provide an added dimension to thinking about Bakhtin's assessment of parody. While Bakhtin sees parody as a tool capable of transforming knowledge and social relations, he also acknowledges the constraints that inevitably placed on parody by its mirrored relationship with an existing text. How a parody might get to a place of success or failure along these lines is something that Burke's thought helps develop. While the comic is clearly articulated as a frame of acceptance by Burke, humor can take on elements of rejection as it moves towards derision. As this negativity is heightened in comedy and the goal becomes less about seeing the comic potential of a situation that could implicate anyone and more about seeing something wrong yet humorous in the select few, then humor becomes less of a social 'laughing with' and more of a 'laughing at' that can evoke resistance from those targets.

One limit to relying on Bakhtin and Burke is that they could only work with historical evidence and examples available at the time to construct their notions about comedy. While their work may have been an accurate read of the power of comedy parody there is no guarantee of such applicability still. Both rely on examples that predate the rise of television as a medium for bringing comedy to the masses. This also obviously means that their work is not informed by the proliferation of comedy-based shows that have flourished in the era of television, and now the digital age. To help determine the relevance and significance of these ideas today the next chapter will look at recent literature studying the rhetorical significance of parody.

## Chapter 5: Political Parody in the Contemporary World

The subject of using parody and other associated forms of humor to challenge existing structures and identities, has been undertheorized as a rhetorical strategy. However, there has been some work exploring how the specific invocation of parody has functioned in the contemporary world of human communication. Researchers understand and appreciate that there are a myriad of forms that humor can take and that there are multiple purposes warranting its invocation, as well as rhetorical functions that it can have. While it is that case that there is a heavy reliance on the use of parody in late-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century comedy, particularly on television where programs specializing in comedy-at-large and parodic comedy, all these uses have not functioned equally. Therefore, it becomes important to look at how existing research has evaluated the use of parody over the last several decades and to see if there are additional theoretical insights that merit highlighting. This chapter will offer a review of the academic literature exploring the role of parody, in helping to facilitate an understanding of the world we inhabit daily and to get a sense of parody's purpose and functions in modern politics. While there are clearly more communication vehicles for the delivery of parody as noted above, there is evidence that parody continues to serve the purpose of enabling a critical response to events in the public sphere through its appropriation of prior texts with which the audience has previously encountered.

This chapter will divide the existing literature into three sections. First it will cover work that has looked at the role of parody as a general phenomenon and assesses its potential as a rhetorically powerful strategy of informing social understandings and change. Second, the chapter will look at how parody of traditional news delivery has worked as a political counterforce. This body of work reveals the limitations of television-based news delivery and

shows how parodies of the news can function to challenge both the content and communicative tactics associated with traditional broadcasts. Finally, the chapter will look at the available literature to understand how parodies of specific individuals in modern politics has worked. This set of literature goes beyond exploring how parodies of the candidates and officials has functioned to challenge their identities and degree of authority and examines how candidates have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to use parody themselves to make their mark on the American political scene.

### Parody as a Rhetorical Tool for Political Engagement

Robert Hariman observes that there has been a proliferation of shows and other forms of media-based expression over that last several decades that have relied on comic devices like parody to entertain and communicate rhetorically with audiences. These range from the use of political cartoons in print to magazines like *Mad* to situational comedies to late-night television to variety shows like *Saturday Night Live* and more (248). While he admits that there has been a range of rhetorical outcomes for the efforts at humor generated by this assortment of programs, Hariman explains how the laughter engendered by parody functions to mediate an individual's understanding of the events taking place around them, giving parodic laughter power to critique existing social practices and reshape the contours of the public sphere (262).

Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of parody as a comedic doubling of an existing text, Hariman observes that virtually no form of human communicative interaction has been left untouched by efforts at comic imitation and shows how the definition of parody as a "comic refunctioning" of a prior text or material can be changed to a definition of rhetoric by simply altering it to a "strategic refunction" of that material (251). While it is certainly the case that all discursive productions can influence public culture, Hariman identifies a rhetorical potency in

parody by stating that “Parodic artistry crafts a productive articulation of public identity and agency through at least four operations: doubling, carnivalesque spectatorship, leveling, and transforming the world of speech into an agonistic field of proliferating voices” (253). Parody’s use of existing rhetoric works on multiple levels to influence how the original is understood by the parody and how the parody is informed by the original through act of degradation of the original’s interpretive intentions and opening rhetoric. He goes on to show how the act of parody, when paired with the original, can put the reversal of their binary relationship “under erasure”:

Before being parodied, any discourse could potentially become all-encompassing ...  
Once set beside itself, not only that discourse but the entire system is destabilized. As the act of replication replicates, everything is potentially both where it is and beside itself. Now there are two possible responses to any discourse: that which it intends and the laughter of those who see it through the lens of its parodic double. Everything is left as it was, because the original discourse is not itself subject to any change and the comic recasting is patently ritualized ... And yet everything is changed, for what was capable of becoming an all-encompassing worldview has been cut down to size, corrected against the “backdrop of a contradictory reality,” positioned to be set aside or otherwise not obeyed, and challenged to adapt toward the critique in order to continue to hold an audience ... parody is neither radical nor conservative, but both at once. (254).

In other words, the relationship between the original and the parody takes the demand of the original and turns it into an offer through the act of laughter in the midst of “an immense cacophony of discourses organized through performance” (259). The parody and the original exist as part of a large network of connected rhetoric that all influence one another and expose



the myth of a unified language and reveal a world where rhetors perpetually borrow from one another.

Hariman also highlights the prominence of parody culturally as a teaching tool for a rhetorical education. Because parody has been so widely applied across time, Hariman observes that it is a “tried and true technique for learning the conventions of any genre” (264). While it is possible to learn how public discourse is developed and operates through academic endeavors such as the public speaking class or participation in civic activity, the reality is that most people do not receive this form of a rhetorical education. The spectatorship embodied through parody serves this education function through the highlighting of conventions and practices (Hariman 264).

This mediation of original content through the lens of parody is often one that adds a critical dynamic to ongoing political and social deliberation by “cultural[ly] jamming” the messages put out by officially sanctioned news outlets (Warner, “Political Culture Jamming” 33). Jamie Warner makes the argument that while the parodying of content functions to jam an original source at the micro-level, there is also an ability to jam through the branding of the parodying source. Warner examines the role of branding in advertising to argue that it is important for a communicative outlet to develop an identity or brand to simplify the shopping process for the consumer. By developing a sense of what a company or organization is about, a potential consumer knows before they interact with the organization what to expect. This is true not just of a corporate entity marketing good or services but also for political and communicative entities. In the political realm, parody can therefore work to take political speech, or coverage of political messaging, and contest the meaning intended by the politicians and pundits. The parody can counter the specific meaning being sought by the original speech, or it can challenge the idea

that the perspective(s) of the news outlets and their analysts is the correct way to understand political events. In fact, the ability of the parodying text to be understood as a subversive doubling of the original in part depends on the ability of the source to be understood as a doubling source. In the context of a show like *The Daily Show*, much of a comedian's rhetorical power comes not just from the specific stories and content but also from the framing of the discourse shaping the program as a counter-brand to traditional news programs seen on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.

While the understanding of a given parody requires one to understand the original text(s) and cultural context to observe that one is witnessing 'a parody,' the general power of parody to challenge power cuts across cultures. Nour Halabi describes how the use of a form of visual rhetoric, logo parodies, in the Arab Spring functioned to counter the symbols and rhetoric of Hezbollah. Here participants in the Syrian uprising used parodic images of Hezbollah's political brand to expose the group's violent nature and contest its place as a social location for resistance. Halabi demonstrates in this context how the public can take those things that would otherwise evoke sadness and distress can be transformed through parody and generate a laughter that resituates and exposes the original (4033). As is shown in the analysis of counter-messaging through parody against Hezbollah, the use of parody, particularly grotesque parody, functions to challenge and contest the original and allow for the dismantling of authority and fear generated by the original:

Thus, these parodies ridicule and deride, undermining political authority in ways that may not unseat it in the present but certainly suggest an unsettling of the stability with which oppression and dictatorship is practiced ... the profane linguistic and visual presentation of these logos allows an unveiling of an unofficial truth that is closer to

public perception because of both its crudeness and its popular perceived audience. The parodies speak the vernacular of the street and the crude language of the marketplace, further enhancing their reach. (4043)

The parodies challenge official messaging and allow people to realize that the official message is but one possibility of interpretation.

Cindie Maagaard and Marianne Lundholdt offer a comparable analysis of parodic rhetoric utilized by the Norwegian Students and Academics International Assistance Fund (SAIH). Maagaard and Lundholdt show how the SAIH used online videos resembling documentaries, advertisements, and game shows, to parody the rhetoric of humanitarian aid appeals made by western organizations across Africa. Maagaard and Lundholdt show how the use of advertisement-based parody and a mock award campaign drew on notions of empathy and differentiation while revealing gaps in practices of actual living in Africa to expose the savior complex advanced by traditional aid organizations (132). They note the importance of not just offering a spoof or parody as a reflection of a particular text but for the parody to be understood as a counter to the narrative that underpins the original. There have been a number of sources that seek to create parodies, particularly online, but do so more to highlight the technical prowess of the creator(s), which risks tilting the power of the parody to reaffirming the value of the original more than subverting it (134). Furthermore, the potential for a parody to backfire is enhanced if the experiential source of the parody is not well-known. A lack of awareness of the political content presents an audience member with a message designed to be humorous but that does not make sense and risks obscuring the critical potential of the parody (133). Maagaard and Lundholdt identify this as a risk of a “self-congratulatory complicity” with the genre being spoofed (117).

Jason Peifer has also identified that a similar interpretive potential allows the spectator to develop sympathy for those individuals who are parodied. The parody can recast a person's understanding of the nature and context of the social relationships being depicted as a receiver of the message develops an understanding and connection to those individuals who are the subject of the political news and the parody ("Parody Humor's Process" 190). What arguably stands out as most intriguing about Peifer's work is that he demonstrates the potential for different interpretations of a parody relative to different members within a given audience. While it is possible for an audience to see a parodic treatment as critical of an individual, it is also possible that the parody can have a reverse effect where the humor renders a moment, person, or speech more understandable or approachable if the audience interprets the information as exposing an already critical treatment of the subject. Peifer concluded that the reaction of the audience, in terms of degree of enjoyment of the parody, significantly impacted their trust and faith in the existing political system. Even if the parody succeeds in reducing the credibility of the direct target, the greater the degree of enjoyment held by the audience, the greater the degree of faith in the system because of a potential to "humanize politicians, effectively producing more forgiving attitudes toward political figures" (193). Peifer's research shows how the connection between the parody and an original text or source works can have a legitimizing tendency relative to the original.

The work of these authors builds on the work identified in Chapter 3 and 4 (ranging from Bakhtin and Burke to Benacka and Newcomb to Desilet and Appel) and collectively serve as important contributions to an understanding of the rhetorical power of parody. While the doubling potential of parody has been made clear over the years from Bakhtin to Peifer, these works show how parody can illuminate and foster understanding of the dominant discourses in

society thereby contributing to a rhetorical education for the audience. Furthermore, these parodies have been shown to have potential consequences for how spectators view the desirability and value of dominant discourses and those who author them. While it is the case that a parody can function as a counterweight to the messages and narratives of the established texts, it is also possible for a parody to fail to land with the audience as a challenge and be ineffectual or even reinforcing of the status quo. The next section of this chapter takes the awareness of these potentialities and asks how dominant outlets in the political news media, such as Fox News or CNN, have been addressed through the range of parodies that have increasingly dominated the airwaves over the past few decades by looking at existing research on this question.

#### Parody of the Political News Media

A particular observation about parody in the current political environment, which differentiates it from the conditions observed by Bakhtin and by Burke, is that parody is almost always a reaction to messages delivered through mediated communication channels that share programming such as the news and other televised events. Research reveals that parody today not only parodies the rhetoric of an original text but also parodies the way such texts are discussed in the media. As important as a moment of political rhetoric is on its own, it is also important to understand that the way most people encounter those instances of rhetoric is through the news media that alerts people to the rhetoric's existence and provide commentary about the rhetoric. This section of the chapter looks at why it is important to study parodies of the media and develops the social significance of such parody. Utilizing the concepts of Bakhtin and adding Marshall McLuhan's observation about mediation as an extension of the self, Hariman develops the position that:

Modern laughter is a reaction to the experience of mediation. As Marshall McLuhan claimed, media are extensions of human capability and desire. That human element disappears in technological reification, only to be revealed again when a medium is refracted back on itself. Duplication of speakers, styles, and genres provides a unique way to see ourselves as creatures of our own making. This can happen through mirrors, pedagogical exercises, mechanical reproduction, or other means; parody makes this technique into an art form. As a culture forms around that art and those it mocks, a structure of feeling develops. (261)

Contemporary parody, therefore, plays with the way individuals can be perceived to exist in relation to the political news media's coverage of the world. Hariman says that regardless of whether one is discussing the work of the political cartoonist, the parodic television program or advertisement, or content developed for a platform such as YouTube, the deployment of parody through media such as these are as much commentary on the way in which a message is delivered as on the content of the parody. Hariman concludes that parody reframes the relationship between the persons creating the parody and the audience where "modern laughter decenters the viewer as well, moving the spectator from an imaginary center to the side of the genre on display" (263). The parody is most immediately understood as a response to the moment (Achter 299).

Elizabeth Benacka suggests that the real power of parody is its potential to attack the original text or genre (50). Benacka, primarily through her analysis of several performances by Stephen Colbert both on and off *The Colbert Report*, addresses the potential of comics such as Colbert and Jon Stewart to fill voids in the process of democratic deliberation created by, or at least not addressed by, the traditional political news media. A parody may win over an audience

on the political advocacy underlying the content of the parody. However, Benacka notes that parody first draws the audience's attention to the absence of a conversation, or viewpoint within a conversation, in the existing political dialogue. She adds that "what an audience concludes about the object of ridicule contained within any given satire becomes secondary to generating a vibrant democratic deliberation centered on a topic of importance" (Benacka 31). This occurs as the parody is specifically harkening back to an original text and in the process of folding back on to it, therefore highlights for the audience that something is missing in the original and the original's effort to speak authoritatively. Regardless of whether the audience agrees with the intent behind the parody, the audience must identify the parodic potential by being aware of both the original and the parodic form to assess the potential meaning and value of the connection being created. Drawing on Bakhtin's discussion of the interplay between the original and the parody, Benacka identifies the potential for a critical stance vis-à-vis the original text:

Parody presents an image, and this duplicate calls attention to the underlying person or text being represented, thus facilitating critical reflection—but not necessarily consensus—in audience members. But the audience must first recognize both the original work and the object of ridicule...In the case of parody, its ability to bring attention to the scaffolding behind any given prototype through imitation and mimicry make it an ideal discourse to expose not only how discursive genres are constructed but also lays bare the practices and customs of public institutions. But this critique only emerges if a work of parody is properly identified. (44-5)

Given the scope of the audience available to the traditional media through outlets such as the television, the ability of parodies of such programs to insert themselves into the conversation then gives the parody an important ability to shape the nature of the public sphere.

Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey Jones took up the task of working to highlight political parody's reactiveness to the popular criticism that has been, and continues to be, leveled against the traditional media, and highlight parody's power to challenge both the content of the messages of news outlets coverage of politics as well as their status as official sources of information. They also note that these parodies can go beyond critiques of specific manifestations of the machinery of news delivery and work to expose how the persons and processes behind the news work to shape political deliberation-at-large:

With several of the parodic programs considered ... the focus shifts from the form of news to its content, from the *ways* in which news speaks, to that which it *speaks of*. News parody offers critical examination of both the information provided by the real news and the agendas that lie behind or beneath it ... news parody not only exposes the machinery of news but in its more piercing forms also can confront the broader machinery of public discourse ... interrogating the efforts by those in positions of power to shape popular understanding of the political sphere. (Baym and Jones 5)

In a moment when traditional media increasingly face questions regarding trustworthiness and have been delegitimized by many, it is logical that humorists use parody to highlight the relationships individuals have with traditional news media and Baym and Jones note the global nature of the parodying phenomenon in this context. Given the ever-increasing sense that people, globally, occupy a position of skepticism towards the media, it makes sense that parody operates in a space "marked by the cultural and discursive forces of decentralization ... It encapsulates a search for truth and meaning in a time when populations have grown increasingly suspicious that traditional discourses no longer suffice" (Baym and Jones 12).



Furthermore, Baym and Jones also bring useful definitional insights to the question of what political news parody is. While several scholars have done research on the subject by simply taking up the effectiveness of a particular show that strives to parody political news coverage, most have not sought to define the range of programs that exist under this umbrella. Baym and Jones admit they have brought broad definitional boundaries to bear on this question but define “news parody” as a program that “uses humor to engage with, and offer critiques of, contemporary political life and current events” (4). Since they are willing to consider any program that fits the above definition, they admit that there are several programs of varying forms that may be defined as news parody ranging from shows with “faux news anchors who posture authoritatively at pretend news desks, to puppet shows, sketch comedies, and panel discussions” (4). They also include shows that may be said to use a number of specific forms of humor and did not set out to worry about limiting programs out or defining things down to being “satire or parody, social or political satire, and ‘fake news’ or humorous discussions of the news” (4). The value of this approach, as they note, is to allow any show that attempts to engage in political dialogue through the parodic instead of requiring a more rigorous effort at discerning effectiveness of the attempt. Attempting to navigate the effort at discerning effectiveness for the larger set of programs that can be classified as news parody is further complicated by the fact that it is difficult to know how a show functions.

The parodies offered by *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Onion*, and others use satire (Druick 306), irony (Hariman 263), nonsense and the profane (Achter 280), and even grotesque realism (Achter 299) to highlight the limits of the current style of news and information delivery today (Day and Thompson 181). Zoe Druick uses Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic nature of parody to argue that news parody uses the conventions of traditional news

delivery against itself. She notes that “the centralizing or monologic tendencies of power that attempt to reduce difference and create homogeneity” in language are subverted through a counter force created by the dialogic relationship that leaves the old and new “locked into a grotesque embrace” (297). Druick adds that while Bakhtin’s focus was on the novel and its relationship to preexisting forms of writing, the intertextuality of a parody is clear in television comedy. Druick notes that “television, with its excessive text, its tendency to hybridize, and its practices of signaling self-reflexivity...is an equally historically significant dialogic medium. Within it, self-reflexive comedy is a particularly typical form” (298). While Druick discusses programs, which have attempted to parody the American political news cycle, she focuses most clearly on *The Daily Show* and its spinoff, *The Colbert Report*. She notes that while *The Daily Show* began as a more juvenile reaction to the news under its original host, Craig Kilborn, the show began to offer a more biting take on the news media’s “parasitic relationship with the government” with the transition to Jon Stewart as the host of the program (303). She observes that the program’s use of content from the traditional media and press conferences, the invitation to politicians and other politically focused professionals to appear on the show, and its lampooning of correspondents and the use of satellite feed to connect to the correspondents as explicit efforts to both provide a space for political discourse and to challenge the notion of insider status that traditional news programs bestow upon themselves. Regarding *The Colbert Report*, Druick offers comparable insights noting how the program very intentionally has set itself up as a parody of Fox’s *The O’Reilly Factor* by modelling Bill O’Reilly’s persona as a host and the structure of the show in terms of the segments used to organize its delivery of news analysis.

Paul Achter offers comparable work that examines the role the online newspaper, *The Onion*, plays in creating avenues for humor and political commentary, particularly in a post-9/11 world. Achter speaks to Bakhtin's concepts of parody and carnival to show how comedy can function as a "second social world" that "points to a communicative interdependence between the people and the privileged" (Achter 279). Parody can help create this second social world by using texts against themselves through its double-voiced posture that speaks to the original text by invoking it and challenging the primary text as authoritative, though it should be noted that Achter also acknowledges the potential for parody to lose its potential as a carnivalesque challenge due to its propping up of the primary text. Achter uses these theoretical constructs to show how *The Onion* functioned as an alternative platform for explaining 9/11 and its aftermath by challenging dominant conceptions of the Middle East that were being offered by the traditional news media. According to Achter, *The Onion* ran stories that challenged rationales for the motivations behind the terrorism, questioned prevailing views many Americans held about Arab culture, and offered insights about how the nation might heal and move on from the tragic events of 9/11.

As suggested above, it has been noted that parodies of the news media can also highlight the gaps in news coverage in addition to providing a response to the ways in which the media covers a given story. Benacka notes, particularly in the context of *The Colbert Report*, that the institutional focus of political news parody exposes the perceived organizational failure to provide sufficient information regarding numerous public issues by both the traditional news media (ABC, CBS, MSNBC, FOX and so forth) as well as formal governmental institutions and events, such as press conferences (66). This occurs not just through the ways in which a parody responds to a specific story but in the ways in which a performer performs parodic messages.

Part of what makes Colbert's performances as a goof or an idiot compelling is that the performances force the audience to reflect on how traditional news journalists and pundits present themselves. In realizing that the practices employed by Colbert are not that far off the mark for how actual news pundits, and their associated shows, operate, one may realize that there is an information deficit underlying the content one finds on the mainstream news networks. In fact, a recent court case involving Fox News's Tucker Carlson, Fox News argued, and a U.S. federal judge agreed, that Carlson cannot be sued for slander because a reasonable viewer knows that he is not presenting facts and that the words should be approached with skepticism as a form of exaggeration (Folkenflik "You Literally Can't Believe").

Priscilla Meddaugh offers a comparable observation noting that Colbert's placement as "comedian, caricature, and critic" all at once facilitates criticism of the traditional press, while also creating potential for media literacy (379). Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, Meddaugh explores how the paired images of the original and the parodic create role reversals that enable Colbert to function as a "critic of the press" while providing issue education for the audience (379). Colbert's hyperbolic mocking of Bill O'Reilly, and others who act in a comparable manner, and *The Colbert Report's* use of technology imitates traditional news shows and works to expose the claims of authority present in traditional news programming. Meddaugh highlights how the use technology mixed with over-the-top and exaggerated commentary and physical humor allows Colbert to recreate the fear generated by much of the coverage of events offered by traditional media while simultaneously breaking it down and exposing the degree of performance embedded in programs like *The O'Reilly Factor*.

Matthew Meier explores how Colbert's creation of an actual Super Political Action Committee (PAC) extended Colbert's criticism of institutional political participation and turn his

parody from political comedy to a comic politics (269). Meier sees Colbert's perpetual performance of parody as Burke's comic fool, someone delivering a message that functions rhetorically and "conjures the comic attitude even before the joking begins" (265). Meier's focus is on how Colbert used the "citizen-fool" he created on *The Colbert Report* to then create an actual Super PAC, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" in support of the 2012 election. While the Super PAC was real, its purpose was a continuation of the parody offered by Colbert on television. He used money to run advertisements and to campaign. For instance, he ran advertisements in Iowa urging voters to write-in "Rick Parry" instead of former Texas governor Rick Perry who was asking the voters to write him as candidate for president. Colbert's advertisements asked voters to write-in "Parry" because the "A was for America" (Meier 271). Meier argues that Colbert's actions were unique in that while they were parodying the actions of actual Super PACs and their associated candidates, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" was also an actual Super PAC. Because it was an official Super PAC in the eyes of the Federal Elections Commission, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" had to follow the same rules as comparable organizations. When Colbert decided to run for "President of South Carolina" he had to turn over control of the Super PAC to Jon Stewart since a candidate cannot legally operate a Super PAC (Meier 273). All this activity by Colbert leads Meier to conclude that Colbert's Super PAC initiative works to illuminate the nature of campaigning and campaign finance through the actions of the citizen-fool and a comic frame that exposes the machinery that we otherwise would not understand:

Colbert's citizen-fool reminds us that playful expressions of public engagement are important ... to public culture. Rendering visible those contests otherwise obscured by the machinations of the American political structure, the citizen-fool reminds us that the

comic frame is a necessary component of the public imaginary in any democracy ...  
Colbert Super PAC offers a kind of “comic corrective” that not only educates its audience about campaign finance ... but also interjects itself into the political arena in order to uncover contests and reframe those contests as comedies capable of correction ... enacting new forms of citizenship and understanding the absurdities in our political culture. (276)

Colbert’s fool echoes the lessons offered by Burke, and Bakhtin, about the humanizing potential of seeing a untraditional protagonist succeed. The fool also reminds people that those structures which have been typically off limits for interrogation, such as the PAC and campaign financing law, are created by people, run by people, and fraught with the same limitations as their human creators and administrators.

While it is true that several parodies have been noted for their effectiveness in critiquing the practices of traditional news media, all parody is not received by the audience equally. This potential for failure by the audience to consumer the parody’s content as a jab the original text, noted theoretically in the preceding section, may have consequences for how the message of a parody is received. Amber Day and Ethan Thompson argue that there have been limits to the power of *SNL*’s news parody segment, “Weekend Update,” as the hosts have been more concerned with their own professional ambitions and the ability of the segment to propel an individual’s status as a comedian/comedienne of significance (171). While not making the same investment in the development of theory as many of the authors cited here, Day and Thompson note the power of parody as found in programs, such *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, to challenge the twenty-four-hour news channels, and highlights that *SNL*’s efforts on this front have not been as successful. They analyze the structure of “Weekend Update” over the decades

of *SNL*'s existence, from the 1970s to the 2000s to show that the segment has been more about giving a platform for comedians such as Chevy Chase, Dennis Miller, and Norm MacDonald to use their preferred styles of comedy. Furthermore, the depiction of the news offered by the segment retained its 1970s air over the decades. Day and Thompson also show how the effort to revitalize the segment in the 2000s with the introduction of Jimmy Fallon and Tina Fey as the hosts may have reenergized *SNL* in terms of interest by the viewers but failed to develop the segment as serious political commentary. They attribute this to the high level of goofiness presented in the segments, particularly by Fallon who did not even have an interest in being a host for "Weekend Update." Day and Thompson describe Fallon as someone who was "thoroughly enjoying himself on the set, but who was neither political nor knowledgeable about current events" (177). While *SNL* may have tried to develop a more sophisticated political savviness, Day and Thompson's research shows that the program remained plagued by a focus on the segment as a platform for the hosts to showcase themselves instead of serving as a platform for critical political commentary.

Additional research has identified a historical split between parodic news programs like *The Daily Show* and traditional late-night television like *The Tonight Show* (Hoffmann and Young 165; Kaye and Johnson 132) regarding the nature of the parodic power of the speaker and actors vis-à-vis the audience. Barbara Kaye and Thomas Johnson argue that the lack of parodic complexity that presented through jokes delivered on late-night television by individuals such as Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel undermines the political potential of their efforts at humor. The fact that these programs are not dedicated to the craft of presenting political news parody inhibits the ability of the audience to absorb the critical potential of the commentary when it does appear, whereas the dedicated hosts and structures present in shows like *The Daily Show* provide

the audience with the awareness that the efforts are more than humor for the sake of humor. Research by Lindsay Hoffmann and Danaagal Young validated this finding. They used audience surveys to evaluate the political efficacy of humor and argued that shows such as *The Colbert Report* may have a “priming effect” toward humor that is not present in late-night television. Hoffmann and Young suggest that “certain media use might activate constructs in audiences, encouraging them to evaluate their efficacy, and perhaps even strengthen the relationship between that evaluation and their behaviors” (165). This research shows that all comedy is not equal in function. While some of the programs that rely on parody have been shown to have a stimulating effect in terms of a critical political awareness by the viewers, others have not had a comparable effect. This observation is important because it suggests a need to study if there is a relationship between the content on a show and the perception of the show that an audience might hold before the parody in question is enacted.

In addition to these works that have looked at how modern parodic programming has functioned vis-à-vis traditional political news outlets, it is also important to ask how particular politicians have been lampooned by parody and to see if there have been consequences to the lampooning. As this section, and the preceding one, acknowledge, it is possible for a parody to undermine a source and/or the source’s messaging. It is also possible for the parody to miss the mark or potentially reaffirm the credibility of the original source and message since a parody must utilize rhetorical strategies and tactics of the original to complete the goal of doubling. The next section evaluates the findings of existing research on this question and discusses research exploring how candidates and politicians have utilized the power of parody. While it is certainly the case that a significant amount of parodying comes from independent comedic sources, it is also the case that the emergence of the technique of parody as a rhetorical tool for presenting a



view of the world and inducing social action may be of interest to certain politicians looking to adopt a comic mantra as part of their identity.

#### Parody of and by the Politician

An additional set of literature has gone beyond the examination of political parody's attack on the style of news delivery and looked at the relationship between parody and the style and behavior of political candidates and politicians in the public sphere. Unfortunately, the research bench is not very deep on this question as there have been a significantly larger number of political targets of parody than has been considered in the literature. Most of the literature on political parody has tended to look at the macro-level effects of a given program's lampooning instead of focusing how particular individuals have responded to parody (Peifer, "Palin" 156).

One of the earliest examples of significant parody in the modern era was Chevy Chase's parodying of then-President Gerald Ford on *SNL*. Both *SNL*'s role as a political force in popular culture, and the Chase-Ford relationship have been well-documented (Brownell "The Saturday Night Live Episode That Changed American Politics"; Day and Thompson 173; Denton and Voth 120. In addition to Chase's popular impersonation of Ford in a few parodying sketches that aired on the program, Chase appeared at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 1975. On April 17, 1976 President Ford and his Press Secretary Ron Nesson both appeared on *SNL* in what has been considered a watershed moment for the relationship *SNL*, popular culture, and politics (Brownell). Nesson hosted the *SNL* episode. While this was not the first time a politician had appeared on a comedy sketch show, it was the first time a sitting president appeared on one and the depth of the relationship that seemed to exist between Chase and the administration was certainly something not seen before. Robert Denton and Benjamin Voth believe that this moment of parodying the then-president was of enormous significance for the how televised comedy

would approach politicians, particularly conservative ones, and note that Chase actively sought to make Ford look like a walking accident to the American people (118-9). Denton and Voth highlight the role of then *SNL* writer, and future U.S. Senator, Al Franken and his politics, in addition to others, in shaping the nature of the Chase parody and setting a tone for how politicians were to be treated. Denton and Voth cite a 2008 interview that Chase provided to CNN as evidence that Chase is aware of the importance of his performances on the 1976 election and says that he very much wanted to use the portrayal to hurt Ford's chances of election (CNN "Chevy Chase"). In the interview, Chase does say that he thinks the program treats all parties fairly and equally across time even if there is a rooting interest for a particular candidate. However, Denton and Voth's claim that these parodies may influence overall perceptions of candidates, and the claim that the success Chase-Ford parody helped propel future political parody, both resonate.

While Denton and Voth speak to both the Ford and Palin parodies as noted above, other scholars have also looked at the depictions of Palin during the 2008 presidential election when she was McCain's choice to serve as vice president if elected. Peifer looked at the various parodies offered by Tina Fey on *SNL* and concluded that the parodies drew on several conceptual frames of character (physical image, faith, competence, and folksiness) to cement the persona of an individual not capable of serving as a national leader ("Palin" 172). Peifer argued that part of the motivation in selecting Palin as a case study was because existing research had looked heavily at deeply satirical parodies that were very aggressive in attacking the source, and that the *SNL* parodies of Palin stood as a contrast given their lighter and more playful nature ("Palin" 169). Peifer notes that the problem with the satirical parodies offered by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are that they "subversively attack the conventions and practices of broadcast

journalism, not simply humorously comment on the genre” (169). Rather than merely highlighting the conventions used by the traditional media, programs such as *The Daily Show* aim to deride the traditional media. By using a less critical form of parody, the Palin parodies were able to reflect on the original text in way that highlighted difference by framing Palin’s personality without attacking institutions and structures in the ways witnessed on Stewart’s and Colbert’s shows.

Arlene Flowers and Cory Young complement Peifer’s work by analyzing the confluence of visual and verbal cues in the parodies of Palin. Flowers and Young analyzed how the literal images and associated cues of Tina Fey allowed her to look and act like Palin. They argue that this created a negative perception of Governor Palin that far outweighed the work to present an image of her as presidential that was developed in preparation for the Republican National Convention (62). Given the struggles that the McCain-Palin campaign, and the Republican Party, were having with putting forward a presidential image for Palin, the image parodied by Fey played up the idea that Palin was a quirky, unsophisticated, and a confused individual whose intellect lacked substance. Flowers and Young conclude that the Fey parody was so powerful that when people would close their eyes and see ‘Palin’ that they were in fact visualizing Fey’s impersonation (63).

Angela Abel and Michael Barthel add to the significance of this by explaining how *SNL*’s parodying of an interview between Katie Couric and Palin in 2008 led to journalists posing more and more questions about Palin’s ability to function as the vice president (13). Palin participated in a few interviews with Couric during the 2008 presidential campaign, and after her third such interview *SNL* parodied the event a mere two days after it aired. Abel and Barthel examined the impact that the parody held for how traditional news media covered the actual interview given

the temporal proximity between it and the parody. They conducted a content analysis of several newspapers as well as televised news programs to see if they discussed the Palin-Couric interview in different terms before and after the parody of the interview aired. The findings led Abel and Barthel to conclude that pre-parody commentary was substantially less critical of Palin as the media did not indict Palin's answers to the extent possible and they highlighted her inexperience with interviews and being on such a grand stage. After the parody, Abel and Barthel concluded that the tenor and content of the treatment of Palin in the interview changed dramatically if the source was able to discuss the parody and those media began to seriously question the ability of Sarah Palin to be deemed a legitimate candidate for the office of vice president. In the end, Abel and Barthel concluded that the ability to draw on non-traditional sources, such as comedic television, can have a significant impact on the perspectives advanced by journalists (14). In addition to examinations of how parody influences the traditional media, other research has looked at how parody has been used to address questions the electorate might have about a candidate.

Amber Davisson looked extensively at the relationship between Hillary Clinton and parody. In "'I'm In!': Hillary Clinton's 2008 Democratic Primary Campaign on YouTube," she looked at the use of parody by Clinton as part of her 2008 campaign. Later, in "'Hallelujah': Parody, Political Catharsis, and Grieving the 2016 Election with Saturday Night Live" Davisson evaluated the parody of Clinton offered by Kate McKinnon. Davisson explored Clinton's use of parody in the 2008 presidential campaign to address questions regarding the role that Bill Clinton would play in the White House. Davisson argued that Hillary Clinton's appropriation of the concluding scene of *The Sopranos* in a YouTube video, and her use of strategic ambiguity worked to help address some of these issues and make her more approachable for potential

voters (“I’m In” 81). While not overcoming some of the earlier efforts to control the media’s contributions to her image and the missteps of other early campaign actions, this video, as well as videos produced later in the campaign, were argued to have improved Hillary Clinton’s receptiveness with voters by creating interactivity (Davisson, “I’m In” 85).

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, Davisson looks at Kate McKinnon’s cold open parody of Hillary Clinton singing Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” and argues that the parody worked rhetorically to help a number of voters, and even the candidate herself, in the grieving process (“Hallelujah” 208). Davisson argued that this parody was unlike other political parodies given its placement after the 2016 election and McKinnon’s clear commitment to Clinton. Davisson notes that the cold open was as much about Hillary Clinton conceding the election as it was about McKinnon giving voice to her own emotional state following Donald Trump’s victory by using “the hidden polemic to address the moment by placing the genres of concession and eulogy next to one another in the form of the double voiced text” (207). This polemic was not an effort to speak to a conflict that may exist between subject and comic like most parodies. According to Davisson, the polemic was an effort to speak to the conflict created by the acceptance of the outcome of the election:

The polemic arises not from a conflict between McKinnon and Clinton but from a conflict between the genre of political concession and the genre of eulogy. The polemic is rooted in the violation of the expectations of the political moment. The multiple voices in the text are necessary to produce the violation and create dissonance; the discomfort of parody comes from the fact that the dissonance is not resolved. That dissonance gives parody its political power...McKinnon uses the dissonance of parody to construct the

affective moment in a way that, while not rational, is both deliberative and cathartic.

(199)

While the concession speech has historically been understood as a simple acknowledgment of a campaign loss, a message of congratulations to the victor, and an expression of thanks to all those people who worked for the campaign, McKinnon's performance parodied those expectations. McKinnon provided a deeply emotional response to a loss that was very unexpected, to an incredibly polarizing candidate, and showed that the barriers standing in the way of a woman winning the White House had not been overcome (207).

James Janack's research examines how a politician or political candidate can exist as a sort of a parody of the traditional politician. Much like Davisson's earlier work examined the use of parody by Hillary Clinton, Janack does not offer an assessment of how political parody of a politician can function. Janack instead makes the claim that political outsiders have tried to position themselves rhetorically in ways that function in terms of Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and parody. Although not successful at the presidential level, Janack argues that the outsider rhetoric of Jesse "The Body" Ventura was a reason for his election to the governorship of Minnesota (208) and did allow him to make some headway into the national political scene (210-211). While Janack covers several instances of rhetoric used by Ventura, the real focus of his work is to highlight how Ventura attempted to leverage his status as an outsider as a campaign strategy and craft himself as a parody of the traditional politician, whom Ventura regularly decried as having failed the people of Minnesota and then the United States.

Additionally, there is evidence that political figures are concerned with how they are depicted in the conduct of political comedy (Hollihan 134), and this can have real world electoral ramifications (Denton and Voth 114). The significance of parodic jabs as a cultural phenomenon

has been picked up by not only the ordinary viewing public but the presidents themselves who have jabbed back over the years (Compton 22-23). While there has been no real investigation of the degree to which candidates and politicians have been concerned with the depictions presented of themselves on programs like *The Tonight Show*, *SNL*, or *The Daily Show* amongst others, the increasing role of these programs in the social consciousness has, and will, very paid attention to by those seeking to maintain or develop political power. The acknowledgement of the words and actions of comedians by political figures goes back decades and the relationships between high profile politicians and comedians has been well-acknowledged: the Chase-Ford and Bush-Carvey impersonations, candidate appearances on late-night television and other comedic programs dating back to Richard Nixon's 1968 appearance on *Laugh In*, and appearances by comedians at events such as the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner speak volumes to this issue. Furthermore, Denton and Voth add that there is no evidence of political parody waning as a rhetorical tool for shaping how the voters think about potential political candidates (123).

### Conclusion

Parody has played an important role in shaping American political culture of the last half century through its placement in the popular media. While much of this power has been documented by humor theorists and rhetorical scholars for long time, recent literature adds to this body of work by demonstrating the power of parody in the current political and media environment. Parody may not always have a truly subversive purpose, but in many instances, such as the moments identified throughout this chapter, purpose has been present. Furthermore, the presence of purpose does not necessarily translate into subversive function. It is more than

possible for a parodic action to backfire given the intrinsic demand that is placed upon parody to reflect the original.

The work cited throughout this chapter demonstrates the widespread use of parody in American political commentary over the last forty years. While much of this research can be traced back to Bakhtin and Burke in terms of direct citations, particularly Bakhtin, the work adds valuable insights about the role of television news in shaping how the American political sphere operates. Research shows that there has been increasing tendency for parodies of the news media for the way that various programs cover issues of political significance. *The Daily Show's* style is as much about providing commentary on particular news stories as it is about mocking the nature of news networks like CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. Meanwhile, other parodic programs, such as *SNL*, have been shown to have had a mixed record in providing critical commentary regarding the subjects of their parodies. Research has also shown that parody is often used to parody the rhetoric and stylings of politicians, such as Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Jesse Ventura. Furthermore, these parodies are important in the eyes of politicians as they regularly acknowledge and interact with the parodies and the comedians behind them. Politicians have even been shown to use the logic of parody in facilitating their own public identities.

The conglomeration of the research stands as clear supporting evidence for the positions staked out by both Bakhtin and Burke and verify the rhetorical potential within political parody. Bakhtin and Burke articulated a vision of the parody as being capable of opening fissures between an original text and the idea of a unified language and interpretative power within that original text. Through the use of the original and enabling the original to stand next to itself through a parodied mirror, the interpretive potential of meaning is revealed and signified. This refracting of the text through a double injects the audience into the interpretive circle and allows



them to acknowledge the human element that shapes the public sphere and political consciousness. Bakhtin's work on parody, particularly in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, and Burke's work on the comic frame in *Attitudes Toward History* show how this potential works. Research on contemporary American political communication emanating through parody speaks to this potential.

In addition to highlighting how parody can operate as a form of rhetorical criticism of existing social practices, Bakhtin and Burke also offer limits to this critical capability. Recent studies validate the existence of those limits. As Bakhtin noted, a parody is limited in its critical potential due to the obligation of a sustained relationship with the original. In addition to developing this position throughout *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin identified the two-way relationship that exists between an author and a text in "Problem of the Text" where one creates a limit on the other. Furthermore, Burke's work on catharsis, particularly in "On Catharsis, or Resolution" and "Catharsis – Second View," shows that while comedy could function as a social corrective capable of producing resolution on a given matter, it is also the case that such potential can only be actualized if the rhetoric used for catharsis is perceived properly by the participants to the rhetoric in question. If the rhetorical humor is deemed as derisive and threatening, then resentment and hostility to the mocking laughter can emerge and escalate a situation. If the rhetorical humor is not properly understood by the audience as humorous, or critical, then there is a risk of the parody being misclassified or for its placement within a frame of acceptance to operate differently than intended. Again, current investigations into parody affirm these limits as sometimes an audience has detected the critical nature of the parody (for instance, audience reaction to *The Daily Show*). Other times they have not, and the parody has worked to support the existing political structure (such as with audience assessments of *SNL*'s

skits). What existing research has not really shown is how the target of a parody has been received in the audience perceived the parody as hostile, threatening, or derisive. The research has not disconfirmed the potential for resistance that both Bakhtin and Burke noted but instead has simply been silent on the question. The explanation for this seems to be rooted in the fact that there has been no real evidence of publicly voiced opposition to a parody by politicians or candidates. It remains to be seen if there was such a relationship between a humorist and a political candidate, how it would be received.

While this chapter has looked at work that explored the relationship between parody, the media, and politics over the last several decades, one comic-media-political relationship of significance remains to be discussed: how might have these forces worked in 2016 to influence the perception of then-candidate, and eventual election winner, Donald J. Trump. As was noted at the outset of this project, Donald Trump's use of the media and his effort to identify as a political outsider seeking to 'drain the swamp,' as well as the infatuation with him held by members of the comedic universe since the moment he came down the escalator in 2015 to announce his candidacy for the presidency has been on full display. If the lessons of the first chapters speak to this moment, they most clearly say that the prominence of the parodies of Donald Trump probably had an impact on the conduct of the 2016 campaign and the views of the voters. Given that Donald Trump went on to be elected to the presidency in November of 2016, this it also stands to reason that if there was an impact, the impact was not negative or not negative enough to swing the election in favor of Hillary Clinton. The final chapter of this dissertation will therefore examine the relationship between several parodies of the then-candidate to gauge how those parodies may have rhetorically helped shape the American

political consciousness that saw an individual with no prior political experience win the highest office in the United States.

## Chapter 6: Trumpian Parody: A Case Study of Parodies of Candidate Donald J. Trump

The first five chapters of this dissertation have come together to show how humor is a critical tool in the development and deployment of rhetoric. This final chapter will attempt to weave together the preceding thoughts about parody, and humor generally, helps explain how the parodies of the Trump's candidacy functioned to shape our understanding of Trump, his words, and his attendant actions. Merely showing evidence of parodic treatment is important but insufficient. What is required is to piece together an understanding of how the parodic rhetoric shaped the ways that potential viewers, particularly viewers as potential voters, understood the images and words of the parody as juxtaposed against the information and perspectives advanced in traditional media and news outlets. To accomplish this purpose, the remainder of this chapter will identify the rhetorical ground of humor, use that content to identify and discuss examples of parodies of Donald Trump that aired during the 2016 election cycle, and then use the work of the first five chapters to situate the parodies in the public consciousness.

### The Rhetorical Ground of Humor

As developed in Chapter 1 there are moments when non-humoristic discourse is both sufficient and preferred for addressing a given exigence, there are several moments where the use of humor as a way of shaping the public sphere and inducing social action is the best, if not the only, way to effectively reach an audience (Gordon 5; Morreall "Philosophy of Humor"). Sometimes the rhetorical power of humor is that it allows a speaker to bring relief to a moment of distress or controversy where other ways of communicative engagement are too social problematic to enact (Bardon 468; Berger 135; Meyer 312). Sometime humor is a way to highlight the unpredictability of the world and to highlight incongruence (Morreall "Philosophy of Humor"; Sprowl 53). And other times, humor is a power rhetorical weapon to create feelings

of superiority within an audience against some target that serves as the butt of a joke (Meyer 314; Scruton and Jones 208).

While humor may be called forth to serve these purposes, there is no guarantee that the audience will pick up on the purpose being sought by the author. Furthermore, even if the audience does understand and act on the intended purpose, there are several functions or outcomes that the humor may have (Meyer 315). First, the humor may work to create identification (Lynch 434; Martin et al. 51; Romero and Pescosolido 406) between the rhetor and the audience by uniting them on some issue or perspective. Second, humor may function to clarify (Meyer 323; Miczo et al. 445). Humor can make content known in multiple ways. It can reveal knowledge or reveal a rhetor's perspective on a given matter. Third, humor can work to enforce various social norms (Hirzalla et al. 50; Lynch 435; Meyer 320). By calling people or their actions out as warranting laughter and humiliation, humor serves as a way of regulating social interaction. Fourth, differentiation may occur in humor (Ford and Ferguson 80; Lynch 434; Meyer 322). The potential to create identification also means there is a potential to distinguish and differentiate between social groups. This gives humor a power to create an in-group and an out-group and setting up sides for social conflict.

To accomplish these purposes and functions, a humorist may utilize several different forms of humor. Humor exists in a range of forms and those forms act on different elements of the comedic process to win audiences over. While some of these forms are more simplistic, such as a pun or the use of childish behavior, others are more sophisticated in both their development and the process required by the audience to properly digest the rhetoric. To assist a humorist in understanding the options available Arthur Asa Berger and then Moniek Buijzen and Patti Valkenburg developed typologies of the forms of humor that both list and categorize the

available options, as explained in Chapter 2. In *Anatomy of Humor* Berger established that there are numerous forms of humor, such as allusions, puns, satire, mimicry, and parody, that can be placed into four major categories: language-based, logic-based, identity-based, and action-based humor (18). Buijzen and Valkenburg updated Berger's typology by applying it to realm of the audio-visual, specifically television commercials, and rearticulated the categories to include slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody (162). Buijzen and Valkenburg argued that the value of the reconfiguration was that it allowed for a more appropriate clustering of specific forms relative to a master form that the specific forms supported. For instance, they placed parody, absurdity, bombast, infantilism, and rigidity under the heading of 'parody' as those forms are regularly deployed together to create parody (160). Unfortunately, these typologies come up short in helping a rhetor identify which device is most likely to be of assistance. These shortcomings include a failure to sufficiently theorize the power of the device as a generalized tool and a failure to understand how these devices might function metaphorically to allow a speaker to walk into an uncomfortable conversation or subject in a less threatening manner (Sorenson 71, Weaver 6). While this failure is probably not of significant consequence for understanding those forms of humor that are tailored to children and adolescents due to the simplicity of the humor, this failure is of consequence when considering more sophisticated humoristic endeavors such as the parody. Parody is a device that connects a prior text, author/speaker, and/or audience to a new text that mirrors the original to speak rhetorically about the original and to communicate new language and meaning about the social world. While it is possible for a parody to exist for the mere sake of demonstrating the technical prowess of comedy, social signification is inexplicitly bound up in the act of parody and parody's effort to

communicate about one world to create another. This makes parody both a powerful, and popular, tool for humorists seeking to speak rhetorically through comedy.

The demand for relational depth and sophistication to effectively develop parody renders parody open to a range of potentialities of interpretive force and consequences for social worlds. Mikhail Bakhtin argued in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* that parody carries the power to invert the existing order, destabilize meaning, and create avenues for images of new language and meaning through a revelation of the ever-open nature of discourse (75). Bakhtin also argued that because the parody is intrinsically tied to an existing discursive reference there are limits to parody's transformative power as the original signifier is never capable of being destroyed in parody (*Dialogic* 72; *Problems* 198). Instead, it is possible for parody to revitalize the original and increase its social power. These ideas are further developed in Kenneth Burke's work on the power of humor to function cathartically for an audience and/or as an attack on the target of the humor through an act of victimage. In "On Catharsis, or Resolution," Burke highlighted the importance of comedy as a way of rhetorically achieving catharsis (362; "Definition" 512). Burke also noted, however, the potential for laughter to function derisively and fail to achieve catharsis because an audience may perceive the effort as hostile ("Catharsis – Second View" 118; "On Catharsis" 349).

While Bakhtin and Burke were not necessarily doing their theorizing in the contemporary era of parody that has emerged with the dominance of the television and the late-night comedy shows such as *SNL*, research previously, particularly in Chapter 5, validates the power of parody and humor that had been previously described (Halabi 4043; Hariman 262; Maagaard and Lundholdt 132; Warner, "Political Culture Jamming" 33). In addition to confirmation of the potential of parody as a social force, this research also speaks to the power conferred to parody

by the power of mediated communication. In addition to the difference of effect that comes from different styles of programs, contemporary research reveals a more modern problem for understanding parody: the complex web of parody that exists across a proliferating set of outlets, particularly on television, that are capable of being stored and accessed on the internet.

Although *SNL* has been a staple of popular culture for almost fifty years, and late-night television even longer, the evolution of cable television has increased the number and variety of channels and programs to an extent previously unfathomable. The development of networks developed to the development and distribution of comedic television has had a profound impact on television culture over the last twenty-five years with programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* leading the way. Additionally, these programs, their hosts and ensembles, and their styles, have co-existed alongside the growth and development of the twenty-four-hour news channel (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and others) creating an intricate web of platforms for news and commentary as well as parodic treatments of the sociopolitical universe.

The conglomeration of outlets, the array of content and styles, the ability to reach multiple audiences, and the potential for news and parody to become intertwined has clearly been a feature of American life for years, but the 2016 presidential election accentuated those relationships in ways not previously seen. The entry of Donald J. Trump into the presidential election brought an individual with a long history of association with the entertainment media into the fore. That, along with his penchant for ignoring the norms of how to operate and act as a candidate led to levels of news coverage and parodies previously unseen. While it may be the case that the insertion of this endless wave of comedic commentary and parody did not influence the contours of the 2016 election, the observations of the opening five chapters of this dissertation, the number of viewers associated with these parodies, the closeness of the result of



the election, and the unexpected outcome at least raise preliminary doubts about the non-effect of parody on the political dynamics that culminated in November 2016, and suggest a need for investigation.

### Parody Around the Candidate

When it comes to seeking material for a case study of political parody with regards to Trump's presidential campaign, the coverage was almost immediate from the moment Trump announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination. Rather than referring to 'parody about,' this work refers to 'parody surrounding' the candidate. This boundary provides a border for selecting instances to include in this case study of rhetorical parody. Further, the instances have been selected from television shows only, including programs of *SNL*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Tonight Show*. As has been highlighted throughout this work, there have been parodying forces at play that are rhetorically designed to influence voters related to Trump's presidential campaign. There have also been parodies that are parodies of the news cycle and its coverage of the campaign process. In addition, Trump sought in some ways to portray himself as a parody of the traditional political candidate to fuel his status as an outsider seeking to disrupt traditional American politics. This chapter will address the effect of parody on the image of Donald Trump by examining six parodies. These examples provide depictions of parody and map on to several key moments in the electoral process: the announcement, pre-primary image development where the candidate gained a hold in the field of Republican candidates and remained a leader, and then post-nomination events of significance such as the debates.

#### *The Announcement*

On the day of Trump's announcement, Jon Stewart opened *The Daily Show* with ten minutes dedicated to the announcement which he immediately described as "a gift from heaven"

and juxtaposed it with the lack of entertainment provided by a Hillary Clinton rally (“White House Don”). Stewart’s coverage of the Trump speech was situated within an already established framework for coverage that began in January of that year as “Democalypse 2016” (“Democalypse 2016 – It Beginnnnnsssss!!!”). Jamie Warner observes that this concept of Democalypse goes back to 2014 when Stewart started a segment called “Democalypse 2014: 2016 Foreplay Edition” to highlight the spectacle of the coverage the 2014 midterm elections (“The Smugglers” 49). These two parodies, as well as the others slotted in under the Democalypse mantra, are notable in that they continued the trend identified in Chapter 5 as being as much a parody of traditional media news coverage as of the candidates themselves intersplicing commentary about the candidates and their statements with a parody of the methods commonly utilized by the twenty-four-hour news networks.

While Stewart was known for providing a high degree of theatricality with his presentation of ‘the news’ on The Daily Show, the “White House Don” episode of the broadcast (the opening segment of the show) takes Stewart’s energy to new heights as he opens by announcing that he “is busting” with excitement of the news of the day, the announcement by Trump of his intent to seek the Republican nomination for the 2016 presidential election. Stewart then immediately notes the mind-blowing nature of the current election cycle by saying that “whites are black, Trump’s running for president” and asking if gravity still worked.

Before getting to the coverage of the actual announcement by Trump, Stewart uses “White House Don” to work through clips of a rally Hillary Clinton had been held days before the Trump announcement, where she noted that the Republican contenders were singing the same old tunes of years gone by. In between the clips of Clinton speaking at the rally, Stewart’s frenetic energy builds for her to get through the speech so that he can get to the point of

discussing the “crazy person” running for the office. Stewart then moves to cover a Jeb Bush rally. In both cases, Stewart expresses his dismay at their boring nature and same-old, same-old qualities. The coverage finally gets to Ivanka Trump welcoming her father’s arrival down the escalator and Stewart’s energy again takes off. Stewart begins mocking Donald Trump both by highlighting Trump’s words, his use of Neil Young’s “Rockin’ in the Free World,” and Trump’s speaking manner. The segment presents a flurry of clips of Trump’s speech and then moves to a crude mocking impersonation of Trump with a New York accent centering around the now infamous comments Trump made about Mexicans coming into the United States. The segment then returns to clips of Trump speaking which highlight Trump’s egotistical nature before the camera then comes back to Stewart who thanked Trump for making Stewart’s final six weeks as host of *The Daily Show* his “best six weeks.” “White House Don” then extends the program’s tradition of parodying the traditional delivery of the news by cutting to a pair of correspondents who were ‘at’ the event and in Washington D.C. Both correspondents, as well as Stewart, offer no additional commentary but use physical humor to make a sexual allusion to having an orgasm over the decision to run for the presidency. Stewart then cuts over to a female correspondent, Jessica Williams, who “is outside” Trump Tower and extends the sexual allusion by noting how this is “biggest announcement” and “she cannot take it anymore” before asking if the segment can just be over. Trump’s presence as a front and center object of parody continued throughout the campaign on *The Daily Show*, under both retiring host Jon Stewart and new host Trevor Noah.

#### *Primary Campaign Parody*

Parodies of Trump also proliferated on other programs such as those in the late-night circuit: *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Late Show with*

*Stephen Colbert* which was born into the Trump era in September of 2015. One set of parodies from those programs that stand out as notable come from Fallon, who parodied several campaign moments featuring the Trump. One such example as the infamous interaction between Trump and Megyn Kelly during the August 2015 Republican debate (“Donald Trump Clarifies”). In this parody, Fallon impersonates Donald Trump at a press conference following Trump’s controversial remarks about Megyn Kelly’s performance as moderator of a pre-primary Republican debate amongst the contenders for the presidential nomination. Fallon walks ‘on stage’ to a podium with Trump’s campaign logo emblazoned on it and attempts to clarify and walk back the remarks about Kelly where Trump had said that she had “blood coming out of her wherever” (Yan “Donald Trump’s ‘blood’ comment”).

“Donald Trump Clarifies” opens with Fallon’s Trump indicating that he called Kelly to “not apologize” and state that he meant ear and nose by “whatever” and suggests anyone taking a different interpretation is a “deviant.” The skit continues with ‘Trump’ clarifying other sexual comments and continues to note that any other perspective is inappropriate and the result of one being a deviant. This clarification takes place through a process of continuing a process of sexualization of a number of women, ranging from Melania Trump to Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj, which is then followed up by a series of clarifying statements such as ‘Trump’ noting that “junk in the trunk” referred to actual junk in the back of a vehicle including Juicy Juice which spirals into a discussion of the candidate’s juice preferences or that a reference to “sausage” was meant to be the meat products of Trump’s local butcher. The skit closes with ‘Trump’ announcing he need to get back to the campaign to “pound some Bush” and cueing up outro music, a parody of his cueing of music at the campaign announcement speech.

Fallon also made regular use of his Trump character in skits where Trump would call politicians and celebrities to give them advice about various matters. For example, Fallon's Trump called Hillary Clinton before she was scheduled to make an appearance on *The Tonight Show* so that he could interview Clinton instead of Fallon because 'Trump' would be able to conduct a better interview than Fallon would ("Donald Trump's Phone Call with Hillary"). This sketch both parodies Donald Trump with Fallon again impersonating the candidate while also parodying the process of interviewing a candidate in the media.

"Donald Trump's Phone Call" began with 'Trump' sitting at a phone waiting for someone to answer. The camera then cuts to Clinton answering an incoming phone call before moving to a split screen between 'Trump' and Clinton once she answered the phone. After greeting Clinton by saying that he has not seen Clinton since his last wedding, the call begins with 'Trump' talking up his recent "fantastic" performance at a Republican debate and telling Clinton that he would be interviewing since Fallon "is a lightweight." The call then moves to 'Trump' asking questions on a few political topics and Clinton responding with statements about her political positions on issues such as women's rights and immigration. 'Trump' makes light of her answers with mocking responses about the women he knows "have issues" and then segueing into a discussion of Bernie Sanders based on her immigration response. The Sanders discussion then morphs into a discussion of hair with Clinton making fun of Trump's hair. The call ends with 'Trump' informing Clinton that her poll numbers will go up following the interview and both stating that the numbers will be "huuge" before Trump again cues up music to end the skit/call.

This skit occurred a mere days after Fallon's 'Trump' interviewed the actual Trump through a mirror during an episode of *The Tonight Show* ("Donald Trump Interviews Himself").

This skit is remarkable because not only does the skit present the target of the parody inside of the parody, and literally mirroring the parody, but because the Clinton interview parody then relies on the Trump interview for an additional layering of meaning. The skit opens with ‘Trump’ walking into a dressing room to prepare for an interview by talking to himself in the mirror. When the camera pans back, the viewer sees Fallon’s ‘Trump’ looking at the actual Trump. While the discussion between the two Trumps largely centers on Trump’s tendency for self-admiration by highlighting Trump’s sense of physical attractiveness and wealth. ‘Trump’ makes the point he would echo days later that Fallon is a lightweight and says that the only person who is qualified to interview Trump is Trump and ‘the reflection’ in the mirror agrees. ‘Trump’ then begins to interview himself and asks if he is ready for the upcoming Republican debate, and Trump says that he was born ready. The discussion then shifts to policy and demonstrates Trump’s tendency to make a claim without warranting it. ‘Trump’ asks Trump how he will create jobs and Trump says “I’m just gonna do it...by doing it. It just happens.” And ‘Trump’ calls this “genius.” ‘Trump’ then asks Trump how he will get Mexico to pay for Trump’s proposed border wall and Trump then flips the question back to ‘Trump’ since they are the same person. ‘Trump’ then says that he will challenge Mexico to play a giant game of Jenga at the border, get Mexico to set the game up, and then refuse to play. Trump nods approvingly and says, “That’s genius.” ‘Trump’ asks Trump what else he will do to boost the U.S. economy and Trump then starts laying out a policy of reducing government spending and incentivizing businesses to stay at home. During this answer, Fallon’s ‘Trump’ does not speak but mimics the hand movements of candidate Trump and then after the answer ‘Trump’ says he was not listening but admiring their Greek god-like beauty. After discussing a potential role for Gary Busey and Kanye West in a Trump administration, ‘Trump’ says it is time to go out for the

interview with Fallon which both Trumps anticipate will go “classy,” “fantastic” and “huuge,” all terms that were used excessively in candidate Trump’s public appearances.

One final observation of note about the Fallon parodies that they appear to have occurred at a moment of transition, or been a reason for transition, in the ratings war of late-night television. While NBC had held a virtual stranglehold on the top spot for late-night television for twenty years from 1995 to 2015, the 2016-2017 ratings season saw *The Tonight Show* replaced by *The Late Show* under the direction of the former Comedy Central personality as “Colbert refocused his comedic talents on national politics, where his satirical instincts and intellect could flourish” (Edkins “Colbert Beats Fallon”).

In addition to the parodies presented on programs like *The Daily Show* and public late-night television, *SNL* did not waste time in getting their feet into the Trump parody waters. In October of 2015, *SNL* began the opening of their season with a cold open skit where Taran Killam and Cecily Strong parodied Donald and Melania Trump by having them speak about issues that had been highlighted in the media such as Trump’s views on women and immigration (“Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open”).

“Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open” began with ‘Trump,’ with ‘Melania’ at his side, seeking to give the audience a chance to get to know the “real Donald” and dispel the lies that were being perpetrated in the media against him. Melania welcomes the audience into their “humble gold house” and Trump noting that he has foreign policy experience because he had the same interior decorator as Saddam Hussein. Killam’s performance continues the traits seen in the parodies that included impersonations of Trump by attempting to deploy facial and physical gestures commonly associated with Donald Trump, and by excessively relying on overly generic

adjectives to describe things like “great” and “fantastic.” The idea throughout is to reveal Trump as a “regular Joe, like you, but better.”

In “Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open,” ‘Donald’ and ‘Melania’ address issues such as Trump’s views on women and immigration by coming back to the Megyn Kelly remarks and the advocacy of building a wall on the southern border of the U.S. While ‘Donald’ is consistently trying to develop his conservative credentials, ‘Melania’ keeps unwittingly pointing out contradictions. ‘Donald’ says that he loves women to try and refute the idea that he is a sexist and ‘Melania’ agrees by noting how much ‘Donald’ loves women due his constant referring to women as “beautiful” or “a 10.” When ‘Donald’ speaks about immigration, ‘Melania’ talks about how smart and powerful her husband is because he was able to bring her to the country although she did not possess a green card allowing for legal admission to the U.S. She also tries to explain that ‘Donald’ is the only person who can unite the country because he is a former Democrat who does not care about sexual orientation or abortion, at which ‘Donald’ speaks up to stop his wife from speaking any more on the subject. The skit then ends by trying to connect Donald Trump to regular people with a comment about how he puts his hair on like everyone else, one strand at a time, and then dives into the famous close for every opening sketch of “Live from New York, it’s Saturday night.” A month later, on November 7, *SNL* continued to up the ante by bringing Trump on to host an entire episode.

### *General Election Parody*

While parodying continued throughout the spring and summer of 2016, in October 2016, Alec Baldwin joined the cast of *SNL* to take up the role of Trump in sketches highlighting the debates with Hillary Clinton and the infamous Billy Bush recording. The October 1, 2016 episode of *SNL* introduced the world to Baldwin as Trump during the cold open which parodied



the debates with Hillary Clinton, who was portrayed by Kate McKinnon, in “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Cold Open.” This parody is significant because it was one of the first mainstream parodies to take a serious change with the way Trump’s demeanor was presented. While previous parodies of Trump had acknowledged Trump’s arrogance, this skit saw Baldwin give Trump a much nastier tone. ‘Trump’ comes off as short in temperament and bitter. ‘Trump’ regularly cuts Clinton off in her answers to questions, tells her to “shut up,” and mocks her personality and appearance, for instance referring to her mouth as a tiny “bug hole.” The parody discusses Trump’s views. For instance, on the Iraq War moderator ‘Lester Holt’ asks Trump for proof that he opposed the war to which ‘Trump’ says he told Sean Hannity in private by whispering it into Hannity’s ear whom ‘Trump’ then claimed he ended up making out with. Baldwin’s Trump also voluntarily offers that “The blacks are killing each other,” and says that they all live in Chicago on one street named “Hell Street.” Throughout the skit, McKinnon’s Clinton is jubilant or crying tears of joy as she believes that ‘Trump’s’ behavior will assure her a victory on election night. The sketch then moved to closing statements. ‘Clinton’ says that she knows that America hates her and says the surest way for America to not have to see her is by electing her president because she promised she will not leave the White House for four years. ‘Trump’ closes by reminding the audience that Hillary’s husband is Bill Clinton and that Trump’s research team is investigating an affair Bill Clinton had with a woman named ‘Monica’ in 1998. ‘Trump’ then promised to tweet the findings in the middle of the night once the investigation was complete.

#### *Post-election Parody*

As noted above, President Trump has continued to occupy this persona since the election. The comedic focus on Trump has remained relentless with the comedy sketch shows regularly

tackling the Trump presidency, most notably with Alec Baldwin parodying the President on *SNL* and nightly commentary about the activities of the Trump administration. Meanwhile, after Jon Stewart left *The Daily Show* late in the summer of 2015, the show continued to exist with Trevor Noah as the host and the regular lampooning of Trump has continued as a focal point of the show's comedy. *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* has even gone as far as to note for the audience when an episode is going to be a Trump-free broadcast. Although it is the goal of this dissertation to look at rhetorical parodies of Trump during his run-up to the 2016 presidential election, the understanding of the rhetorical effect of parody in political campaigns may help inform the post-election environment.

#### Existing Analysis of Trump and the Media

While some literature specifically examining comedy and parody around Trump's candidacy is available, researchers have not sufficiently explored the relationship between the portrayals of Trump in political parody relative to potential voters. Scholars have identified rhetoric surrounding, and generated by, Trump's candidacy. That literature has tended to not examine role of parodies in shaping public consciousness about Trump. Furthermore, while some literature has examined the significance of televised parody on the 2016 election, that research has tended to be limited to a particular outlet and has not examined the matter from a rhetorical perspective.

Elizaveta Gaufman uses the work of Bakhtin to make the argument that Trump functioned as a carnivalistic candidate who sought to destabilize the existing political order (410). While not offering an analysis of the parodies of Trump, and instead presenting Trump as a parody of politics as usual, Gaufman's work indicates that the comedic outlets were already

primed to cover the Trump campaign given his status as a reality star and celebrity prior to his candidacy (418).

Barry King acknowledges how Trump's ability to speak in vague and coded language during the election worked to give him power as double-voiced trickster (5), but there is no discussion of the relationship between political parody and Trump. There is discussion of typographic parody about Trump's "tiny hands" and the creation of a font known as "Tiny Hand" (Donzelli and Budgen 217).

While the works cited in the preceding paragraphs are important in understanding connections between Trump and parody, neither of these works explore how televised parodies of the then-candidate functioned to shape the public's understanding of Trump as presented by political news outlets. Other research, such as that by Outi Hakola (2017), did investigate the role of *SNL*'s depictions of Clinton and Trump during the 2016 election cycle, but did not connect the assessments of the candidate back to theory about the functioning of humor and parody. Hakola noted that the two candidates were both mocked but in different ways. Clinton was presented in a more favorable light by trying to present her as more charismatic, while Trump (particularly Baldwin's version) was depicted as more antagonistic and hostile and triggering backlash from Trump (14).

Amy Becker did not evaluate the nature of parodies of Trump but did conduct a study that looked at how people responded to Trump's tweets about *SNL*'s depictions of the candidate. Becker's results showed that people who read Trump's tweets criticizing the show, again with an emphasis on Baldwin's performances, saw Trump more favorably, as more authentic, and experienced, than prior to reading the tweets (1749).

Warner et al. conducted research on the exposure to political comedy about Donald Trump on viewers, but also did not utilize rhetorical analysis. Warner et al. studied the impact of exposure to political comedy and political advertisements, both of an anti-Trump nature, but did not utilize parody in their research (727-8). Warner et al. did find that exposure to the content reduced the favorability of viewers towards Trump, but they also noted that the cross-exposure to comedy and advertisements moderated the effect. They also only looked at reconstructed segments from *Late Night with Seth Myers* and worked with a convenience sample of undergraduate college students. As Hakola notes, evidence suggests the younger demographic was more likely to prefer Clinton (12). Warner et al. also identified the sample selection as a potential limitation on the study (737).

Allaina Kilby also did research on the connection between Trump and satirical/parodic news comedy, such as *The Daily Show*, but from a journalistic perspective, Kilby conducted a content analysis to study how *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Full Frontal* (but not *The Daily Show*) are organized in terms of content and framing. The research did not work with specific segments and analyze their rhetorical effectiveness. Instead, it evaluated how much content of a particular type existed in these programs before and after the rise of Trump. Kilby found that Trump has led to a more a traditional journalistic edge to these programs and an effort to use comedy for real world social purposes “by adopting advocacy journalism practices that included solution building and audience motivation techniques” (1942).

Given the attention to Trump’s character across the political news media and the corresponding focus on this same thing in political parodies of the candidate as demonstrated with the above examples, it makes sense to ask if the intersection of these two groups of messages worked in concert, or against one another, in helping the public craft a sense of who

Trump would be as a president. There is some limited evidence of an effect, but questions remain about how the content of the messages contributed to the effect, the size of the effect(s), and the potential for different audiences to experience different effects. All rhetoric is not created equally so a deeper rhetorical analysis seems warranted based on the available theory and evidence.

Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will offer an analysis of the parodies identified above.

### Trump, Presidential Character, and Parody

Parody played a prominent role in the 2016 presidential election. Evidence of the quantity of parodies and theoretical investigation into the nature and power of parody have paved the way for a detailed analysis of how parody may have influenced the outcome of the 2016 electoral process. Before analyzing the specific parodies identified above, this section will open with a discussion of how voters have tended to evaluate the character of previous presidents and prospective candidates. While it is the case there are elements of policy discussion in the previously discussed parodies, it seems clear that the bulk of the parodic energy has been directed at the character of the Donald Trump instead of engaging in policy analysis. These parodies may identify a policy position of Trump or Clinton but there is not a developed discussion of how their positions are justified or should be evaluated. To the extent that there is some degree of comment regarding an issue, that sentiment is an unspoken phenomenon where the highlighting of the issue itself signals something about the rhetor's sense of the issue (for instance, choosing to highlight and mock Trump's plan for constructing a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border). What is more apparent in these parodies is that the rhetor is using rhetoric to construct an image of the candidates and the image is focused on a more general sense of who the candidate is as a person. Therefore, the next several paragraphs will explore the attributes that tend to come together and make an individual 'presidential.'

## *Presidential Character*

American culture has generally preferred candidates who have held experience in other political offices that can be referred to as a training ground for the obligations of the presidency. Clearly this form of experience is something that the current president lacked prior to his 2016 election. The question for many people (members of the public, pundits, comedians, and others) turned to whether he possessed the other attributes that one commonly thinks of when looking to an individual as a potentially legitimate candidate for the office in question. The historian, James David Barber, has written extensively about the expected character and personality of a presidential candidate in *The Presidential Character*. He notes that while different presidents employ different styles and are thrust into action based on the given context of their time in office, the reality is that there seems to be core set of traits that across the presidents that we general admire and believe make them likely to be a success. Doris Kearns Goodwin adds to this by noting that we generally expect a successful president to demonstrate empathy, resilience, strong communication skills, openness to new information and perspectives, impulse control, and an ability to relax to help manage the pressures of the job (“These are the 6 Essential”).

What experts such as Barber and Goodwin are highlighting is the role played by past presidents in facilitating our assessment of potential future presidents. Furthermore, they are pointing to the role played by circumstance in determining how a president may be likely to express themselves. A candidate or president feels the need to act ‘presidential’ generally, and to be ‘presidential’ in the moment, because the office of the presidency is not just about doing a job in the sense of accomplishing the day-to-day obligations associated with the direct executive responsibilities in terms of enforcing the laws of the United States. A president needs to act and look the part because the responsibilities of the office go beyond these things and include a need

to connect with, and inform and influence, people to sustain a healthy American spirit (and to connect with audiences around the world). Trevor Parry-Giles and Michael Steudeman concur with this assessment and argue that campaigning is more about the image and character of the candidates than their actual policy stances, even if this is something most people involved in the political process do not want to admit:

American presidential campaigns and elections are mostly (if not exclusively) about candidates rather than issues. The judgments voters do make about public policy and issues are often influenced by perceptions of leadership and credibility ... Despite these truths, American political culture is uncomfortable talking about political character, political images, and political identity in presidential campaigns. Indeed, acknowledging these truths ... is dangerous. Naming or identifying image defies the mythology ... that voters reach their ultimate electoral decisions by rationally weighing competing policy positions. Even as they espouse this mythology, candidates, their consultants, and many observers implicitly place character at the center of contemporary campaigning. Political campaigns ... are about people, leaders, images, and political identity as much or more than they are about public policy or issues. (67)

As Edwin Black notes, identity is evoked; a rhetor assumes a role or persona that gives them the power to speak from a certain vantagepoint with a given audience (113). Parry-Giles and Steudeman add to this sentiment by noting that “Voter perceptions of candidates emanate ... They do not spring fully formed ... These perceptions ... come from the ... rhetorics that construct them, the arguments given for a candidate’s ... character, the evidence provided to justify ... identity, and the interchange between public figures about public persona” (69). And simultaneously, the audience grants the speaker credibility.

An additional factor in the development of one's credibility is the role of the media. The media is the primary means through which most people come to learn about who a candidate is both in terms of policy and character (Van Aelst and Walgrave 504). This occurs as identities "are expressed via an array of media, from television advertising to campaign oratory, from expert testimony to celebrity endorsement" (Parry-Giles and Steudeman 68). W. Lance Bennett adds that the increasing role of reality television culturally has magnified the role of character in the minds of voters as the expectation is that people can get a better sense of who a person is and judge if the candidate is someone worth liking:

What reality TV offers is an instant connection with feelings about ordinary people and, in the case of political reality news, public personalities, who are either like us or appallingly not like us. Those dramatic emotional connections are somehow therapeutic and useful for sorting ourselves out in highly personalized yet isolating social worlds ... It is not surprising that people turn away from politics and politicians when they are not emotionally satisfying in the ways popular culture productions are. (176)

Bennett's comment is significant because it reinforces the primacy of character in the minds of the electorate. Furthermore, it raises important considerations about how changes in the media landscape can influence expectations that force politicians to then keep up with the emotional demands of the day.

These observations about the expected persona of an American president become critical to an effective analysis of the rhetorical potential of parodies of Trump because they help contextualize what is being parodied. While it is true that parody is actively working to parody the content from an original source, it is often the case that the parody is more about the style, genre, or persona of the political figure. A parody may make fun of the president's rhetoric in support



of a given issue because the aim is to expose some aspect of the issue or characteristic of the politician. But it is also the case that parodic rhetoric is often more concerned with parodying the style or genre of the original. In this context we can understand the parody as attacking the presented leadership style or persona of the president more so than, or equally with, the specific advocacy being advanced. This becomes a particularly important observation for assessing parodies of Trump because using parody to highlight the un-presidential nature of Trump's behavior may work for certain audiences but is likely to backfire with others given Trump's self-declared intent to not be 'presidential' most of the time. For other individuals, the parodies may backfire because they highlight what is already thought of as an over-the-top and sensationalized depiction of the candidate, or president, by the news media. In the case of either of these two preceding potentialities, it may be that the result of the parody is the generation of a laugh but one which makes the candidate more presentable at the end of the day because the laugh facilitates acceptance of the adopted persona. Given what can be loosely described in electoral contexts as the existence of three main camps of potential voters, those who support the candidate, those who oppose the candidate, and those who are relatively undecided about a candidate, recognizing how a parody reaches each of those groups is important if we accept that there are potential rhetorical consequences of the deployment of parody.

### *Parody of Trump's Character*

Of the six parodies identified in this chapter, four of them come together to provide a more lighthearted attack on Donald Trump's personality. The three Fallon parodies and the initial *SNL* sketch performed by Taran Killam and Cecily Strong present Trump in a similar manner. While all these parodies present the future president as an arrogant and self-absorbed individual, they do so in a relatively playful way.

First, the Fallon press conference presents the audience with a candidate who is trying to make amends for his previous comments vis-à-vis Megyn Kelly. It is certainly the case that ‘Trump’s’ speech is laden with contradiction after contradiction given the sexual allusions that litter the rhetoric, but these remain veiled as allusion. Furthermore, the allusions are consistently followed up by a playful suggestion by Fallon that any other interpretation is because one is a deviant. There are no efforts by ‘Trump’ to attack anyone during the press conference. To the extent that the comments are offensive they only offensive if one reads into them, and they can be explained by Trump’s tendency to speak off-the-cuff. The level of laughter from the audience while ‘Trump’ talks also reinforces the light nature of the parody.

Second, the Fallon interview parodies, which will be considered as a pair given that they are really presented to the audience that way, continue the light and playful approach with Trump’s character. In both parodies Trump, real and parodied, comes off as amicable. While the clearest sign that the Trump interviewing Trump parody offers a softer view of candidate Trump is the candidate’s actual participation in the skit and then conduct of the ‘actual’ interview, the nature of the performances add to the sense of amicability. At the open, ‘Trump’ criticizes Fallon’s interviewing skits, the actual Trump does not and never has to. While the audience sees Fallon as ‘Trump’ they also know it is Fallon so they the act as Fallon’s willingness to criticize himself. The conversation between the two is very friendly. Trump and Fallon both are smiling and upbeat. Both continually look to the audience for approval. At the end of the skit Trump even looks to the audience, smiling, and gives an approving pointing action towards Fallon.

The interactions between ‘Trump’ and Clinton in “Donald Trump’s Phone Call with Hillary Clinton” are warm. He offers a polite greeting at the opening of the call and does not attack Clinton but instead engages in a self-attack by remarking that he has not seen Clinton

since his last wedding. Trump then says that he is calling to offer advice for how to manage an interview. The conversation between the two is relaxed. Hillary Clinton is smiling and laughing during the skit. His rhetoric does not attack Clinton's politics but instead are more negatively self-reflexive. When Clinton mocks Trump's hair, his initial response is "toupee" before saying "touché." She even drinks some wine when Trump asks her if she is taking notes on all the advice that he is giving her for how to successfully navigate the interview. In the end these parodies do not present Trump as a threatening individual but more as a self-absorbed but misguided individual who others can understand. In the end, the audience can empathize with Trump.

Third, the *SNL* sketch featuring a parody of Donald and Melania Trump also is easygoing in its treatment of Donald Trump's character. Again, the audience is presented with a Donald Trump who is seeking to establish that he is a regular and normal person like the members of the audience, but he just cannot seem to get out of his own way. As stated in the summary of the parody, Trump comes on screen next to his wife and announces his intent to get past the persona depicted in the media and allow the viewers to get to know the real Donald Trump. This version of Trump is comparable to the version offered by Fallon in that it plays up some of his speaking and nonverbal tendencies instead of focusing on his positions on the issues. Trump speaks to his views on the economy, immigration, and other issues but these are secondary to the discussion of him as a personable and relatable person. The parody certainly does emphasize the sense of superiority that he has about himself but couches those statements in amongst rhetoric aimed at clarifying the comments in way that makes him come off more as a fool than a monster. Trump generally allows Melania to speak and Trump accept the flattery. Furthermore, Melania's comments work to offer a kinder and gentler image of Trump. As noted above, while Donald

Trump says outlandish things, Melania contextualizes those as the involuntary reactions of someone with a propensity for foolishness than anything else.

The Baldwin parody of Trump in “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Cold Open” stands apart from the other parodies of Trump’s behavior. As noted above, the Baldwin impersonation and the overall debate parody offers a much more sinister assessment of Trump. While the first set of parodies are full of laughter and the characters acknowledge each other in a pleasant manner, this parody is very different. While Trump is again portrayed as being self-consumed, the degree to which he is degrading of others is a new addition. As noted above, Baldwin gives a downright nastiness to Trump who berates Clinton throughout the parody. Trump also belittles Lester Holt. In addition to degrading African Americans whom Trump identified as killing each other on “Hell Street,” he also refers to Holt as ‘Jazz Man,’ which comes off as a clear attack on Holt’s race. This sense is reaffirmed by McKinnon’s Clinton who is not relaxing and drinking a glass of wine as seen in *The Tonight Show* parody but is instead visually mortified by Trump’s comments which fuels her sense that she is going to win the election. The threatening nature of Trump’s demeanor is also highlighted by the relative lack of applause that the in-person audience provides whenever Trump speaks. This stands in stark contrast with jovial relationship that exists both on-screen and between the performers and the in-house audiences for the initial set of parodies. The relative silence that the television audience receives from the in-person audience communicates immensely. While one might normally think of there being an audience to react to an instance of rhetoric in a given moment, even if that ‘audience’ is really composed on several distinct audiences within it, the mediated nature of the parody adds new audiences to the fold: those at home watching and consuming the entirety of the performance which includes the live in-person audience’s reactions.

Trump is also shown to be in a greater degree of control of the words that come out of his mouth in “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Cold Open.” In the first *SNL* parody Trump says insensitive and offensive things but Melania explains it as an instinctual reaction drawn out by a desire to win. The demand to speak negatively is something that Trump really cannot control which works to reduce his culpability for the comments. In the Fallon performances, Trump’s willingness to say insensitive and offensive things is either left off to the side and not included in the performance or it is presented through coded language which can immediately be dismissed. In the debate parody, Baldwin’s Trump is shown as intentionally acting as he does. When Trump decides to attack Bill Clinton Trump notes that he made the choice to say these things intentionally in a presidential debate. At the open of the debate, Baldwin’s Trump gets through the first couple minutes without being overly offensive and then engages in a moment of self-congratulations for showing that he could remain calm, composed, and presidential, declares he has therefore won the debate, and then begins to walk off the stage before Holt alerts Trump to the fact that 88 minutes of debate remain. It is clear from even superficial observation of the sketch that the humor presented here is highly critical of Trump’s character. In fact, the dramatic change in *SNL*’s coverage of Trump with the insertion of Baldwin into the role initiated a feud between the program and Donald Trump that continues to this day (Obeidallah, “Trump’s Beef”). Hakola notes the significance of the break with *SNL* given the historical willingness of a candidate to accept the critical nature of parody as a sign of the candidate’s ability to engage in self-restraint (2).

While it would be easy to just look at the impersonations that are being offered in these parodies and use that as evidence that the parodies were not overly critical of Donald Trump, that is only part of the story. If one looks at the parodies and just considers the impersonations then

the logical conclusion is that Donald Trump still not emerge as someone qualified to seek the office of the presidency due to his overly inflated ego, his lack of intelligence, and propensity to offend. The skits work to present those aspects of Trump in a relatively tame manner, but they remain present. While adopting a much harsher tone of presentation, the debate parody echoes these sentiments about Trump's character in even starker tones. In addition to studying the parodies by examining the impersonations of the Trump it is important to note the larger context of the parodies.

### *Parodies of the Media's Presentation of Character*

There are several additional elements of the parodies, both individually and collectively, that stand out as significant for evaluation. First, these are not just parodying the behavior of Donald Trump, that are also parodying elements of the way that the media was covering Trump during the campaign. "Donald Trump Clarifies" parodies the nature of a press conference. The pair of interview parodies from *The Tonight Show* are parodies of the way that the media interviews the candidates. The presence of the actual Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in both the parodies interacting with an impersonation of Trump portrayed by Jimmy Fallon who is there to mock the very idea of either candidate having a quality interview with Fallon shows the purpose of the parodies while the layering of identity adds to the depth of the parodies. "Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open" functions as a general parody of the nature of the media's process of covering Trump. This is made clear in the opening shot where "A Message from Donald and Melania Trump" is imposed on to the camera image of the Trumps' and they then welcome the audience into their home with the purpose of presenting the real Trump and clearing up the misconceptions being pushed in the media. The debate sketch is clearly a parody of the debate process.

“White House Don” is a parody that highlights the nature of media coverage of elections and candidates to expose the absurdity of the laser-like focus of the media on every word and action a candidate makes, as well as showing the absurdity of how candidates interact with the media. The parody offered by Stewart and *The Daily Show* is important as one piece of a larger parodic project to show how the relentless of the modern news media and its effort to develop significance for single moment of ‘news’ works to inhibit democratic deliberation. This inhibition is developed through the media’s effort to create a sense that only those inside of it know what is going on and have access to the inner workings of politics. *The Daily Show*’s three-year coverage of the 2016 election stands as an elaborate parody of the traditional media’s electoral posture. “White House Don” stands as an exemplar in showing the contrived nature of much news reporting’s demand to move on from the same-old and drab and boring to the next big thing that is going to completely change the nature of the game. The skit’s frenetic pace and the energy of the host, the intersplicing of clips of Trump’s announcement to highlight the theatricality of the event and its clownish nature, and the cutting from the studio to correspondents at the event and in Washington D.C. all build to a state of ecstasy for the host and correspondents until the parody arrives at the end and the female correspondent in New York delivers the parodic goods for the segment but sarcastically remarking that this is definitely the biggest story before asking if the show can just move on.

As noted above, the way that the people get to know candidates in a presidential election is primarily through mediated coverage. While it may be the case that an individual gets to attend an event, or even a handful of campaign events, most of what people learn comes through the news and their coverage of those running for office. This means that the sense of character that one develops is most likely a mediated sense of character. The parodies in play here are not just

parodying character by juxtaposing the candidate, Trump, against impersonations. The parodies are attacking the larger structure of how character is presented. As was noted in Chapter 3, Bakhtin observed that parody works best, and most typically, as a reflection of larger rhetorical structures. Bakhtin's work on Rabelais noted how the parodies created by Rabelais were not necessarily a parody of a particular enactment of epic or tragedy or other genres of literature but instead functioned as an indictment of the generalized stylings of those forms. A significant part of the way that people determine meaning from a particular act of rhetoric is by situating it as a style and then imposing what the style means for how one can listen or read. If this was not the case, then the ability to decipher meaning would infinitely more difficult because all communication would be virtually indistinguishable. If a member of the audience did not realize that they were experiencing humor, then the consequence could be quite severe the way they decoded and interpreted the rhetoric that was before them.

Recognizing that the parodies of Trump are not just presentations of mere impersonations is important and leads one to take away new significant interpretation from them. Much of this interpretive significance comes from recognizing that while the parodies are providing a sense of who Donald Trump is, they are also calling the campaign process into question. The campaigning and the coverage of it by the media has been understood as a very formal and regulated process for years. Candidates exist within a larger campaign structure that governs their actions, regulates their availability, and works with the candidate to establish positions on issues and develop speeches to control the perception of the candidate so that the candidate can appeal to the widest audience possible. Donald Trump scrambled all this traditional structure and discarded pieces of it as he saw fit. Trump held rallies all the time. He called into morning talk shows at will and would say everything and anything on his mind. If Trump said something that



was deemed excessively controversial then he would just say the opposite thing the next time he got a chance to speak or would work to clarify his way out of the predicament. Trump did not rely on pre-crafted speeches or teleprompters; he would speak how, and about, what he wanted. If there was a need to use a teleprompter, he would do so but regularly go off-script. Being a creature of regulated communication and order was not his nature. While there are limits about what can be known about the Trump campaign behind the scenes, reporting suggests that Trump was the campaign as there was not much of a structure underpinning it and no real ability to control the actions of the future president (Sarlin et al., “Donald Trump Does Not Have A Campaign”).

Trump made it a campaign message to challenge the existing order of political engagement and the campaign process and his actions on the campaign trail were intended to reflect that. Her heralded his willingness to do or say anything as evidence of his outsider status and his willingness to ‘drain the swamp’ and disrupt the status quo. The parodies offered here clearly identify this as part of his message and contextualize that willingness to disrupt within a larger narrative about the nature of the relationship between the government and the media. Trump regularly advanced that idea that media did not like him and was out to get him by promoting lies and misconceptions about his actions and his statements. As Kalb demonstrates, Trump took aim at the media, framing that as an enemy that cannot be trusted:

But it is the press, or the media, to use its more fashionable moniker, that is the target of the president’s special fury.

The press, overall, he says, is a “disgrace...false, horrible, fake reporting.” It is “out of control...fantastic.” Reporters are “very dishonest people,” their coverage he describes as “an outrage.” The New York Times—a “failing” newspaper. CNN—“terrible.”

Buzzfeed—“Garbage.” Then, on top of it all, this presidential tweet, dripping with anger and threat:

The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 17, 2017

Meaning it is not to be trusted. His chief of staff later emphasizing, yes, that is exactly what he means—“enemy of the American people.” (“Trump’s Troubling Relationship With The Press”)

In every single parody of Trump offered here Trump echoes these accusations either by clarifying remarks he said were being misconstrued against him, or by seeking time to speak to the American people unfiltered by the media, or by accusing the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton of being liars willing to say anything to make him look bad. A report by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy that came out after the general election did confirm some of Trump’s claims about negative coverage noting that an overwhelming amount of the media coverage of him was negative with his personal character and leadership skills treated particularly negatively:

News reports focusing on his personal qualities were 82 percent negative to 18 percent positive. His policy stands were widely criticized—coverage in that area was 85 percent negative to 15 percent positive. His leadership qualities and experience were treated even more harshly—93 percent negative to 7 percent positive. The controversies enveloping his candidacy were also a source of bad news. Collectively, they ran 92 percent negative to 8 percent positive—a ratio of 11-to-1. (Patterson, *News Coverage* 13).

The results of this content analysis do indeed show that Trump's coverage was overwhelmingly negative, but it should be noted that this negativity was not solely directed at Trump and the Republicans. The report found comparable results for Clinton as the journalistic environment has become overwhelming negative in general. What becomes interesting about the relative equality of the treatment is that one of the two candidates made it a theme to attack the press for unfair, negative treatment while the other did not. This question of interest is magnified by the conclusion offered in the Shorenstein report offered by Thomas E. Patterson which noted that the relentless negative treatment of the candidates was a boon for Trump and the Republicans given the connection to their anti-government and anti-system message:

An irony of the press's critical tendency is that it helps the right wing. Although conservatives claim that the press has a liberal bias, the media's persistent criticism of government reinforces the right wing's anti-government message. For years on end, journalists have told news audiences that political leaders are not to be trusted and that government is inept. And when journalists turn their eye to society, they highlight the problems and not the success stories. The news creates a seedbed of public anger, misperception, and anxiety— sitting there waiting to be tapped by those who have a stake in directing the public's wrath at government. It's ironic, too, that negative news erodes trust in the press, which is now at its lowest level in the history of polling. Watchdog reporting can build confidence in the press, but when journalists condemn most everything they see, they set themselves up to be as credible as the boy who repeatedly cried "wolf." (*News Coverage* 19)

This conclusion that negativity in the media benefitted the future president and the significant amount of parodying of that relationship that existed in the mainstream television universe, leads

one to ask how the parodies might feed back into the public consciousness and have impacted the outcome of the 2016 election.

Bakhtin argued that the significance of parody was that it takes an existing style and reflects it through humor to distort the sense of the original and open new meaning and potential by exposing the arbitrariness of interpretation that heretofore had been offered. The consequence of the opening of meaning by distancing language from the referent is a humanizing force that allows for new possibilities of understanding to emerge by highlighting the role of human agency in viewing and evaluating the world. One of the implications for Bakhtin's work was that the novel as parody took existing styles of literature and reassembled their content to demystify the content and remove the monstrous and fear-inducing nature of those elements historically looked down upon by the existing traditions. The rogue, the clown, and the fool are shown to occupy positions of power in parody and ascend in the role of the hero where their faults can be expressed as virtues that allows for new possibilities of social interaction. Burke makes a comparable observation about the potential of the fool to highlight a social problem as the result of mistake or accident which removes the criminalization of the behavior in question.

If one looks at the parodies of the 2016 electoral cycle merely for the accuracy of the impersonations of Trump, there is a risk that this transformation of character gets lost. While these parodies did include what could be considered 'negative' images of the Trump, they often did so by taking 'Trump the monster' and presenting him as a rogue, fool, or clown who might be capable, through his willingness to violate social norms and do and say what is needed to achieve a result, of being a hero. Trump himself regularly admitted a potential to be 'presidential' if the moment called for such a persona. Most of the time however, he argued that there was no need to put on such a mask. His supporters often made the same arguments

apologizing for his demeanor by saying that end the day it would be best to let ‘Trump be Trump’ because the system required a shake-up. The transformations of Trump that are presented in the parodies contribute to that sense of the role of the Republican nominee, and it should be noted that most of the softer parodies of Trump aired during earlier stages of the campaign process when image-building was in its more formative stages. Fallon even stated regret for the way he handled the opportunity to interview Trump during the campaign because of the way that the interactions seemed to normalize and humanize Trump to the world (Zhou, “Trump Attacks Jimmy Fallon”).

However, from a Bakhtinian perspective what might be more important than the specific caricatures that were offered is their place within the larger structure that focuses on the rhetoric as parodies of the campaign and media processes. It has already been demonstrated how the parodies speak to the process of media-based information dissemination. By offering a different perspective on who Trump is, and juxtaposing that against the likes of Fallon, Clinton, and Trump’s wife, inside of a parody that calls out the negativity and formality of modern journalism, the parodies then can be seen to operate in the Bakhtinian fashion of taking a preexisting style and refracting it through parodic treatment. The parodies work to question to the authority of the media to serve as the guiding force for one comes to know about the candidates. The parodies attempt to highlight the selectivity of interpretation that is offered in the traditional news media and show the audience that there are different ways to understand the content presented in the media.

The parodies also use humor to make fun of the ways that we are given access to the candidates. The press conference parody presents an unregulated Trump who just speaks his mind and then closes by cuing music, which while mocking the Trump announcement directly

also challenges the ways in which the spectacle of campaign events is generated. The interview parodies are comparable in that they are not the actual interviews but represent access to what goes on behind-the-scenes to manage the candidate and their words. The Donald and Melania parody's use of going directly to the people through television and bypassing the news media also clearly indicts the news-based management of candidates. Other than Ross Perot purchasing time to talk to the electorate through national television in 1992 this sort of rhetorical strategy is something that is not used. These parodies work to bracket and then question the nature of the campaign style that is commonly employed and then normalize the idea that circumvention of this process of candidate engagement is acceptable. This again works to normalize the rhetorical strategies of Donald Trump who regularly engaged in actions to get his message out by taking to Twitter and calling in to news programs to bypass the red tape commonly associated with getting airtime. Even the debate parody highlights Trump's tendency to play outside of the rules when he makes the attack on Bill Clinton and offers self-congratulatory remarks about playing inside the norms of presidential debate conduct.

While these parodies do work to reflect and refract the nature of the candidate and the process of candidate engagement in a presidential campaign, they also work to reaffirm the importance of the structure of the media for electoral purposes. As Bakhtin noted, parodies are a powerful rhetorical tool for exposing existing structures and texts, but parodies are also bound up with those original texts and structures. To destroy the original would also be to destroy the parody. In this instance the parodies work to normalize the actions and character of Trump but also have a rejuvenating effect on the media. While a parody may question the nature of the power of the media, it simultaneously acknowledges the potential of the media to shape events. This is particularly remarkable in the context of Trump given his expressed disdain for the

media, his actual use of and reliance on the media, and the level of media coverage that he received. Patterson notes in a different Shorenstein report that was produced earlier in 2016 that Trump's coverage by the media was both unparalleled and unpredictable in the summer of 2015 given that Trump entered the race as a political novice with virtually no support from likely Republican voters his level of coverage and the ratings that coverage received was highly unusual (*Pre-Primary News Coverage* 5). A case can be made that critical news parody programs, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, do challenge the nature and content of the traditional news media but also in many ways reaffirm it. The ending of "White House Don" speaks volumes on this as Jessica Williams strives to suggest that Trump's decision to enter the Republican nomination waters was not a big story and asks to move on, only to then see the media remain highly focused on Trump's unorthodox style of campaigning and for *The Daily Show* to provide significant coverage of Trump both as a candidate and as president for the next five years. It may also foreshadow Kilby's observation that televised comedy news shows are increasingly adopting an advocacy journalistic edge as the hosts are attempting to not only question the conduct of the traditional media but also claim some of that space by adopting comparable tactics.

So how does all of this get us to an outcome in 2016 where Donald Trump wins the presidency? As has been documented, Trump's victory in November of 2016 seemingly came out of nowhere. The overwhelming majority of the polls anticipated a Clinton victory and virtually every pundit in the news media was predicting a Clinton win as well. What happened? While there are factors that go beyond the scope of this work, such as the effects generated by the organization of the electoral college, there is a compelling argument that the effects of catharsis and victimage emanating from rhetorical humor played a role. These parodies helped

humanize Trump to make him less of a monster in the eyes of voters and they helped cement a belief in his criticisms of the government and the media (or 'Deep State'). It is certainly true that there was a segment of the television viewing public and electorate that saw the milder impersonations of Trump as problematic and therefore shifted their eyes to different programming, as suggested by the previously cited decline in ratings for *The Tonight Show*. However, this only accounts for those persons who would have been most ardently anti-Trump. For those who supported Trump or were open to supporting Trump (or at least open to not supporting Clinton), a different reaction may have very well emerged.

Burke observed that one of the powers of rhetoric is to enable people to address social conflict through discourse and language as discussed in Chapter 4. There are a variety of stories that can be told to get audiences to a resolution for a particular conflict. As Burke, and other theorists addressing the purpose and function of humor, have observed, humor is a device that can be relied upon to recount the past and explain what has transpired with a degree of maneuverability and deftness not available to other forms of rhetoric that may be deemed socially inappropriate. By couching a conflict or exigence in humor and seeking laughter as evidence of achieving understanding, humor can function cathartically. In the case of the 2016 election there were many related conflicts requiring intervention. At the grandest level there was the competition between Clinton and Trump, and before that the races for the nominations of their respective parties. There were also other conflicts about how people would view candidates and decide if the candidates were even worthy of consideration in the first instance. In the context of Trump this meant deciding if he was presidential given the eccentricity of his campaign style and the unpredictability of words and actions.



One way for individuals to come to decisions on these questions came through the rhetoric of humor, in particular parody. For those persons who did not know how to evaluate Trump's rhetoric, parody provided a comedic outlet to process the world that was unfolding. The reflection of Trump and the media that was offered by the parodies offered a different view of the electoral landscape than was being advanced in the mainstream traditional media. Instead of being offered a monster who would rip apart American democracy, viewers saw a different person who though not traditionally presidential might be able to achieve the goals that the viewers wanted address (or at least not block those goals from being addressed). Additionally, instead of being offered an authoritative view of the media, the media was shown to be selective and just as rhetorically crafty as a political candidate. Seeing these parodies and placing them against the original texts and structures created an opportunity for catharsis allowing a resolution of the 'who is Trump' question that was not nearly as threatening. Burke's notion of catharsis and Bennett's observation of the therapeutic value of a reality television approach to campaign coverage come together to show how the parodies humanize Trump by situating him within a larger drama involving the media.

For those persons who were supporters of Trump it is possible that a similar effect occurred except that the parodies just reinforced the belief that the traditional news media was not a neutral participant in the election. As Hakola observed it is even likely that a significant portion of this component of the electorate was not even watching the parodies, particularly those associated with shows like *The Daily Show* that had already established themselves as a source of anti-conservative comedy. For those voters who did see the parodies, or learn about them, it is possible that Burke's notion of victimage comes into play. For humor to work there needs to be something to laugh at, something to serve as a scapegoat. In all the parodies, Trump

was that scapegoat to be rhetorically attacked and humiliated. In “White House Don” and “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Cold Open” the intensity of the target on Trump is much clearer and larger. Bakhtin notes that one risk with parody is that by going after an existing style or rhetoric that the style or rhetoric pushes back when treated with hostility. Burke also sees that scapegoating can result in a failure of catharsis and produce sympathy for the target. For those persons who stood in support of Trump the attacks on their candidate reaffirmed the belief that he was accurate in his indictments of the media. This conclusion is fully consistent with the findings of Patterson regarding the impact of media negativity on the outcome of the election. It is also likely that these thoughts led voters to not disclose their intent to pollsters and those in the media. If the logical conclusion from consuming both the news media and parody is that the media is actively working against Trump, then sharing information about that support would presumably render one vulnerable to comparable scrutiny and criticism. In the end it seems likely that while the intent of humorists noted here and elsewhere may have been to work to undermine the probability that Trump would be elected president, the nature of the parodies only worked to fuel a sense of political acceptability, and need for, Trump as a presidential candidate.

### Conclusion

The power of humor has been well-documented as a rhetorical tool for centuries. Humor can be a powerful of addressing a subject that might otherwise be difficult to bring up due to social discomfort. There are a variety for forms that the humor might take as part in order to address a conflict requiring rhetorical intervention. One of the more popular and powerful forms of humor that can be called upon is the parody. While there are competing notions of parody from a definitional perspective, some are broader than others, the consensus is that parody is a form that engages in an act of critical mimicry to highlight a style, text, or author with the

purpose of making known an alternative way of interpreting that style, text, or author. The parody uses the elements of the original against itself to offer a new perspective and open the relationship between a thing and language.

Parody has been a predominant mode of engaging in political commentary for humorists. As a field inclined to social controversy and divisiveness, parody's humoristic nature has been a powerful way to ease into a subject without the force associated with traditional judicial and epideictic rhetoric. While parody has been a powerful force used to interrogate styles and rhetorics, its use in the modern era of television has been well-documented over the last fifty years. Furthermore, parody is a form of rhetoric that does not appear to be declining in use any time soon.

One site of a significant amount of parody was the 2016 presidential election cycle. Humorists across shows regularly used parody as a means of interjecting their voices into the process and offering commentary about how they viewed the candidates, the issues, and associated entities such as the media. While parody was used to address many of the candidates, one candidate in particular was regularly at the nexus of politics and comedy: Republican candidate Donald Trump. From the moment Trump entered the electoral ring of competition the traditional news media and the comedic outlets were enamored with him and produced an inordinate amount of commentary. These forces emerged and proceeded to develop in different ways, but they are of significance to the study of rhetoric given their correspondence with the unlikely, yet meteoric, rise of Trump from candidate to contender to nominee to president-elect.

This dissertation has asked the question if the predominance of comedy in the form of parody functioned rhetorically to assist in the social resolution of Trump's image as a presidential contender and ascendancy. Drawing primarily on the work Bakhtin and Burke it has

been shown that the power of parody to transform sensibilities about how the media operates, and who Trump was, were of rhetorical significance. Parody of Trump, and regarding Trump, worked to humanize the candidate and work in conjunction with many of the claims Trump himself advanced about politics. While there is no true way to know how and why every voter responded to the events of the 2016 election cycle in the way that they did, the evidence is clear that humor played a contributing role in normalizing a celebrity who was a political newcomer grab the presidency of the United States without having held prior political office or adhering to traditional notions about what constituted presidential behavior.

It was not, and is not, the goal of this work to attempt to explain the rhetorical significance of post-election comedy on the course of Trump's four years as president or his failure to be reelected in 2020. While the trend of parodying President Trump continued, and perhaps even accelerated, during 2017-2020, the lessons learned in the 2016 election cycle may not apply. The point of all the theorists cited in this work is that the use of a particular rhetorical strategy, or a form or purpose of humor, does not guarantee any outcomes. Instead, one must acknowledge the situatedness of rhetoric and understand how the rhetoric works to craft a relationship between a given speaker a moment in time and the audiences with whom the speaker can engage. To the extent that generalization is possible, what is clear is that humor and parody are powerful rhetorical devices but also ones with limits. Those limits come from several sources: the content of the humor, the ability of the rhetor to appropriately deliver the humor, and the audiences who must digest the humor. This final piece, the audiences, seems increasingly important in the digital era given the ability of a rhetor to reach a wide array of persons and interests at any given moment. The almost inevitability of the recording of those messages, allowing repeated distribution of a message to additional audiences, diversifies the potential

responses to a moment of humor and creates a web of potential relationships between the comedian, the source of the comedic material, and the potential for translation by the audiences. Even the comedian in question and their associated media outlet, as well as others, need to be understood as potentially being members of an audience to a particular production given the ability for a moment of humor to be layered within a subsequent moment of humor. By studying these elements of the rhetorical process and considering them in the context of particular situations, it seems clear that rhetorical scholars can continue to develop the important role played by parody and humor-at-large in constructing and shaping the public sphere.

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