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# Satire and Dissent: A Theoretical Overview

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## Satire and Dissent: A Theoretical Overview

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### Abstract:

In an age when Jon Stewart tops lists of most-trusted newscasters and Michael Moore becomes a focus of political campaign analysis, the satiric register has attained renewed and urgent prominence in political discourse. Day focuses on three central contemporary forms: the parodic news show, the satiric documentary, and ironic activism. She highlights their shared objective of circumventing the standard conduits of political information and the highly stage-managed nature of current political discourse. In so doing, she argues, they provide fans with a sense of community and purpose notably lacking from organized politics in the twenty-first century.

### Key words:

satire, irony, politics, activism, news

### Bio:

Amber Day is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies in the Literary and Cultural Studies Department at Bryant University. Her work has been published in the *Electronic Journal of Communication*, *Popular Communication*, *Social Text*, and the anthology *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. Her book, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* was published in 2011 by Indiana University Press.

While voter apathy may be as high as ever, interest in traditional news on the wane, and professional political dialogue merely a repetition of partisan talking-points, there is nevertheless a renaissance taking place in the realm of political satire. A number of new satiric forms have exploded in popularity in recent years, all markedly political, and all incorporating the real into the mimetic in striking ways. Turn on the television in any number of countries around the world and you are bound to find at least one news-parody show providing its take on contemporary events. A trip to the multiplex offers a slew of fiercely political documentaries that embody a striking blend of polemic and satire. Meanwhile, activist groups are looking to capture your attention by staging elaborately ironic stunts. The political discourse taking place in the satiric register currently appears far more vibrant than any of the traditional outlets for serious political dialogue. Whether or not satire has become verifiably more “popular,” satiric media texts have become a part of mainstream political coverage, thereby making satirists legitimate players in serious political dialogue.

In my book, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, I focus on three of the most prevalent new forms: the parodic news show, the satiric documentary, and ironic activism. These emergent genres are notable for their lack of fictionalized material and impersonations, relying instead on deconstructions of real news events, improvisational pranks,

and ambushes of public figures. All share a performative form of irony that injects the satirists' bodies into the political world, as they physically interrogate and interact with the real, cultivating a blurring of the traditional categories of entertainment and news, art and activism, satire and political dialogue. Notably, these forms have generated strong affective communities around them, capturing the interest of many in a way that organized politics has often struggled to do, as viewers look to the parodists to voice their opinions within the public arena. The fact that this mode has become so popular makes discovering why particularly important.

While I describe the documentaries as "satiric," the news programs as "parodic," and the activist stunts as "ironic," I believe that all three significantly overlap. I have brought them together because I see them as collectively composing the larger phenomenon I am describing. I analyze the satiric/ironic/parodic register as a particular discursive strategy within the larger media playing field. My intention is to provide a broad overview of the historical moment, connecting the dots to examine a larger shift in both entertainment and political dialogue.

The pull toward the ironic, the book contends, is related to the manufactured quality of contemporary life. The public discourse available to us is overwhelmingly designed as spectacle, but rarely acknowledges itself as such. Political actors and corporate spokespeople are carefully staged, groomed, and scripted, and their armies of handlers are experts at getting their talking points on television. Seemingly everyone is aware that the "candid" moment of exchange between politician and citizen at a folksy roundtable has been assiduously pre-framed, but the news media rarely point this out. In this highly stage-managed landscape earnestness can seem suspect. It is the quality that over-produced public figures bend over backwards to convey, while there is something about the unabashedly personal, ironic, tongue-in-cheek perspective that appears refreshingly authentic. This has likely contributed to the attraction toward personalities like those of Jon Stewart, Rick Mercer, Stephen Colbert, Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock, and others who have all, as entertainers, slid into the role of political pundits, while activists craft spectacularly ironic stunts, similarly sliding into the role of entertainers. As the book explores, the satiric barb is an increasingly popular means of gaining control of the conversational ball within political discourse.

Much of the growth in satiric offerings in the United States in particular coincided with George W. Bush's tenure as president. That is not a coincidence. His administration expanded presidential power while limiting transparency and access. As a result, his staff became skilled at using political doublespeak to obscure. At the same time, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 made the mainstream press reticent to appear adversarial, meaning that official language and policies went unchallenged, particularly in the lead-up to the Iraq war. The uninterrogated discourse was then rife for deconstruction by ironists who moved in to fill the critical void. However, while the Bush administration provided particularly fertile ground for satire, satirists will certainly not have a lack of material any time soon. Regardless of the personalities in power, we still have a system in which realities tend to be infinitely more complicated than the made-for-TV performances of those realities; in which public-relations-ese is the second language of pundits and politicians; and in which public political discussion is a difficult realm for anyone but industry insiders to break into. As long as these circumstances endure, so too will the desire to poke holes in the spectacle and challenge the truth value of statements made by elites.

The book breaks the primary case studies into three groupings. By "parodic news show," I refer to television programs framed as if they were a straight news program, but understood as a send-up of the format. I concentrate primarily on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in the

United States and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *The Rick Mercer Report* in Canada. Most of these shows have multiple rotating cast members, but there are a few particularly famous hosts who I examine as celebrity figureheads: Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Rick Mercer. I refer to the second genre as “satiric documentary.” The films in this category are politically motivated documentary exposes created in a tongue-in-cheek tone. Most are structured around a first-person narrator/protagonist who places himself in front of the camera as the everyman stand-in. I focus primarily on the filmmakers Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock. Finally, I refer to “ironic activist groups” to describe a popular contemporary mode of political agitation. These groups attempt to capture media attention through spectacular stunts and ironic public happenings. The technique I focus on most heavily is one I call “identity nabbing,” in which members of the groups publicly pose as people they are not. I focus primarily on the Billionaires for Bush, the Yes Men, and Reverend Billy.

All of these case studies are markedly different from the wholly textual examples of satire normally examined within literary theory. Rather than being confined to the page or to the realm of fiction, they incorporate the real into the satiric in a tangible way. This ability to manipulate the real gives the satire a great deal of power. Rather than just doing a critical impersonation of a public figure, for instance, Michael Moore ambushes real officials, cornering them into playing *themselves* within his frame and providing the damning evidence for the thesis he has already set up. Similarly, when Jon Stewart juxtaposes footage of a politician’s statements on several different occasions to demonstrate his/her duplicity, the piece becomes evidence in a real political argument on a level that a fictionalized skit does not. In a sense, these hybrid satiric genres become performative: they create that which they name/enact in the moment.

The unique workings of these hybrid genres point up gaps in both the theory of satire and public sphere theory. The most common assumptions about satire are that it is detached from the problems it critiques and from any real desire for change, meaning that it is rarely treated as substantive political speech (or is dismissed as the worst kind of negative, cynical politics). In a similar way, theorists of the public sphere tend to focus on “rational” political debate, ignoring discursive engagement in other registers. It seems integral, however, to examine these texts as instances of political discourse, and to take seriously their contributions to public dialogue.

These genres are linked by several important characteristics, including a desire to challenge the standard formulas within the mainstream press, a choice to do so by highlighting absurdities and inconsistencies, and a reliance on impromptu personal interactions. They offer a method of influencing the political discussion by poking holes in the pre-framed narratives and public relations screens, and by providing to legions of fans, relief, satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and connection with others. Ultimately, I contend, the satiric realm is one of the most vibrant arenas of public debate in operation today.

### **Ironic Authenticity**

There is something synergistic about the relationship between new technologies and these emergent forms of satire. The way in which contemporary irony has developed is tied to the creation of digital technologies. While new media have certainly contributed to the scripted nature of public discourse, these technologies are equally being mobilized to critique that discourse. The Internet has played a central role in the rapid dissemination of much satire, while technologies enabling easy access to video footage and tools for repurposing it have had an enormous influence on contemporary satirists. In short, the technology has made it relatively simple to create ironic commentary on media discourse as it unfolds. And, though many worry

that the presence of irony signals a lack of sincerity, there has been a flowering of irony wielded for earnest political aims.

The success of the satirists examined here is at least partially due to their achievement as viral phenomena, with clips from, say, *The Daily Show* forwarded widely among friends. Communication over the internet has also been key to sustaining communities around these forms. Beyond the more large-scale examples, though, there are also millions of individuals making their own online videos, many of which draw on irony, parody, and satire as the audience hook. The tactics of communication popular in these videos are also common to the professional satirists: editing to create ironic juxtapositions, creating popular culture “mashups” to generate unexpected moments of resonance, and the shaming of public figures through collections of contradictory statements. Henry Jenkins and Stephen Duncombe point to practices such as these as fueling a large-scale shift in communication, arguing, “this is how we tell our stories now – we quote from the media and the culture around us;” (Jenkins and Duncombe) and we often draw on irony to do so. But the widespread use of irony is also generating its own cultural anxiety. Worries about its ubiquity and speculations about its effects constantly swirl around irony, particularly when mixed with the political. Literary theorists have been arguing about its effects for centuries, but irony’s perceived prevalence as a cultural dominant since the 1990s has made it a prominent contemporary preoccupation in both academic and journalistic criticism.

In the 1990s, irony was the catchall term for describing the sensibilities of postmodernism, but its prevalence also created a backlash, with many warning of its dangers, culminating, at the end of the decade, with Jedediah Purdy’s book *For Common Things*. Purdy describes contemporary citizens as painfully self-aware and terrified of appearing naïve. We revel in the ironic quip, he explains, because we find it difficult to speak earnestly about personal matters, and almost impossible about public issues. He argues that we have lost the belief that politics can bring about a better world. Instead, “contemporary irony finds in public life a proliferation of cant that reinforces ironic skepticism” (15). He was both lionized and ridiculed for this prognostication, with most commentators focusing on his treatment of irony. Purdy later expressed frustration with this, explaining that he was using the concept only to get at the larger phenomenon of indifference (Hirschorn). This is the major weakness of his account, as his description of irony is incredibly imprecise. Nevertheless, his usage is a symptomatic one. The commonly held belief is that where there is irony, parody, or poking fun, there must too be a smirking cynicism and, by extension, political disengagement. This is an accusation that dogs irony in all of its forms. However, there are clearly a growing number of artists and activists looking to irony as a prime tool with which to advocate for change. In other words, the opposing camp sees irony as a potential *antidote* to cynicism and disengagement. The two opposing viewpoints regard irony wildly differently, one as a mode of smug detachment signaling a lack of will, the other as a potentially powerful form of critique and engagement.

This dispute replayed itself with a vengeance following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As commentators struggled to express what people were feeling, one of the pronouncements that echoed through magazines was that, if nothing else, irony would now be put in its place. As Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* magazine put it, up until that moment, nothing was taken seriously: “with a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes – our columnists and pop culture makers – declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life” (79). All of that, he declared, would now come to an end as people who had come face to face with evil would finally throw off “the tyranny of the ironists” (79). Looking

back at the aftermath of 9/11, Jamie Warner points out that the Bush administration was a step ahead of Rosenblatt's call to seriousness, invoking the dichotomy of Good versus Evil to make sense of the world (Warner). This framework served as a national unifier, but also restricted dissent, as it created an either/or construction that demonized not just the terrorists but anyone who questioned that binary. Warner points out that though journalists repeated the administration's terms, the satiric newspaper *The Onion* did not, instead using irony to introduce ambiguity, prompting readers to question the dualism so dominant everywhere else. I would add that *The Onion* is not the only example. Rather, the lack of substantive critique in the mainstream press created a vacuum that was soon filled by a variety of ironic commentary. Though they certainly did not have the same frame-setting power as the mainstream media, voices such as those of *The Daily Show*, Michael Moore, viral video makers, and numerous activist groups attempted to undermine the power of the dominant narrative, drawing numerous fans eager to hear this critique made.

While I do not believe that irony is somehow inherently progressive, there happens to have been an enormous upsurge in its usage as a means of dialoguing with the political sphere. While some irony may certainly take the form of the distanced savvyness Purdy finds so off-putting, that does not mean we should elide all forms of irony with these modes. Perhaps because it is such a common lingua franca, there has been a movement to use irony's components: the self-referentiality, the wit, and the bite, as political tools in the hope for change. Clearly, irony is not inseparably linked to cynicism; rather, it appears that, for many, it is becoming a new marker of sincerity.

### **Truthiness and Consequences in Parodic News**

In recent years, there has been an explosion of fake news and talk-show outlets in media markets around the world. The form is not new, as faux news reports have been incorporated into variety shows in the past. However, these segments were featured as a single recurring sketch amongst many. Now, as entire programs have developed around the conceit, a more fleshed-out genre has emerged. These newer programs involve far fewer impersonations, sketches about politicians' personal foibles, or entirely made-up news items. Instead, they incorporate deconstructions of real news events, as well as interviews or ambushes of actual public figures, blending the mimetic and the real. In other words, they tread a finer line between news and entertainment. This hybridity has served to thrust the programs into serious political debate, while well-known hosts of the format are seen as pundits in their own right. Due to these blurring boundaries, there is some uneasiness around the genre, with many accusing it of fomenting cynicism and detachment from the political world. I argue quite the opposite: this blend of satire and political non-fiction enables and articulates a critique of the inadequacies of contemporary political discourse, while demonstrating an engaged commitment to the possibility of a more honest public debate.

Though these programs are usually referred to as "fake news," that label obscures their more complicated relationship to "real" news and the attraction they hold for fans frustrated with the compromised authenticity of straight news programming. Less fictionalized imitations, the programs act as comedically critical filters through which to process the suspect real world of reportage and debate. The importation of non-fiction material into the mimetic frame often serves to call attention to how the "real" is itself constructed. One of the primary targets on these shows is the lack of substance behind much political discourse – the public-relations spin tactics used by politicians and corporations and the lack of interrogation on the part of the news media.

It is through this pointing up the artificiality of public discussion that, for many fans, these “fake” news shows actually come closer to embodying the characteristics – like authenticity and truth – that we would normally associate with the “real.”

In the book, I trace the history of this form, beginning with some groundbreaking programs in the early 1960s which were ultimately too controversial to survive, through the subsequently safer home of variety programming, into the explosion of new shows in the present. I focus my textual analysis primarily on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and *The Rick Mercer Report* since they are some of the most popular and/or long-running shows, and because they provide the best examples of the melding of satire with serious political discourse.

This genre relies on an interweaving of the mimetic and the real. Clearly, audience members are not to mistake the hosts for real newscasters, nor to view the shows as legitimate news broadcasts. When Jon Stewart segues to a report from a correspondent “on location,” who is actually on the set in front of a green screen, the studio audience inevitably erupts in giggles. The comedy derives from the audience’s awareness of mimesis and appreciation for the skills of the performers. Within this parodic universe, however, the writers draw in pieces of the real. Most obviously, they rely on real news stories, with the host deconstructing the official rhetoric and media sound-bites. While the straight news world is supposed to simply report, these shows are free to satirically compare and contrast, interrogate and mock, sometimes developing a deeper analysis than the straight programs. Many of the performers additionally provide editorials on current events. Rick Mercer, for example, is well known for his political rants, filmed while he is walking down the street. Though they are certainly amusing, these monologues are premised on the audience having a fairly sophisticated knowledge of Canadian party politics.

In addition, these programs interact with the real political world via interviews with public figures. Some incorporate ambush interviews, while all include lengthy consensual interviews. More often than not, guests are politicians, academics, or journalists. The exchanges are conducted in a style somewhere between a straight news interview and a celebrity chat, with hosts putting their guests at ease by cracking jokes, but segueing into “often-heady conversations about public affairs” (Baym, 216).

The hybridity of the genre allows for the manipulation of footage within the satiric frame with the intention of affecting broader discourse. The theses advanced by these shows often do become a part of the public record, for instance, when Stewart plays clips of a public figure on several occasions directly contradicting him- or herself. As opposed to textual parodies that allude to real events but exist outside of the political world, in these shows, the comedians interact with the real, literally dialoguing with the day’s news or interviewing newsmakers themselves. Viewers tune in to watch the performers comedically interrogate, critique, and transform the real.

Parodic news does what the straight news cannot in staging an ongoing dialogue with itself, cross-examining the rhetoric of public figures and of standard news discourse. In so doing, the hosts become audience stand-ins. If a regular newscaster cannot roll an eye at a politician’s statement, the comedian can fall off his chair doing so, acting as the viewer’s surrogate, as we take vicarious pleasure in hearing our own opinions aired on television. In one newspaper article on *The Daily Show*, a journalist interviews members of the studio audience and quotes a 78-year-old woman, who explains her affection for Stewart: “he can really see through things and some of the shams we’re being fed,” she says. ‘And I’m tired of the shams. I want a little truth to

come out. I want somebody to see some of the things I see and Jon does that for me’” (Thompson, 1E).

As our stand-ins, these performers have also garnered a form of status not granted to the average comic. Rick Mercer, for example, has become a ubiquitous Canadian celebrity, known for his political critiques, and has been tapped for his expertise south of the border, sought out not for jokes but for his knowledge of current affairs. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have received even more attention, winning awards not simply for performance but expertise in journalism and contributions to public discourse. Each has garnered a reputation as a media watchdog and political provocateur, partially because of the material on their programs, but also due to infamous public outbursts, like Stewart’s withering critique of the debate program *Crossfire*, delivered on the program itself, and Colbert’s indictment of president George W. Bush at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner in 2006.

But the programs’ increased legitimacy has sparked some cultural anxiety, attracting suspicion about what message audiences are receiving. Since fans clearly enjoy poking fun at the news media and the flawed nature of public discourse, there is concern that they are becoming disillusioned with politics as a whole. The accusation that dogs the genre is that it begets cynicism, trivializing the serious and leading viewers to see the political world through detached amusement. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris have written several articles designed to demonstrate that *The Daily Show* in particular encourages cynicism. They have had subjects watch clips of either *The Daily Show* or a straight news program and then answer questions about how much faith they have in the U.S. electoral system, what they thought of particular candidates, or how much they trust the media to cover events fairly. Finding that viewers of *The Daily Show* are slightly less likely to express faith in particular candidates or the news media, they conclude that the show increases viewer cynicism. However, a lack of blind faith in the American electoral system or particular candidates might just as easily be described as healthy skepticism, as an understanding of nuance, or as an engaged form of wishing for more. Nowhere in the studies do they link unhappiness with politics or its reportage with a belief that they cannot be changed for the better, nor with a lack of desire for change.

My own analysis reveals that, in opposition to the tendency in much political comedy to critique personalities rather than policy (sending the message that everyone is equally inept and immoral and there is nothing to be done about it), the parodic news shows are far more likely to dissect substantive policies and structures. Indeed, while late night comedians usually move quickly from issue to issue in a series of one-liners, *The Daily Show* spends several minutes covering each story, often providing more background information than straight news programs, or describing how the media contribute to the lack of meaningful debate. As Baym articulates, the Daily Show’s critique stems from a belief in a deliberative theory of democracy: “the notion that only civil and honest conversation can provide the legitimate foundation for governance” (118). It points out where the 24-hour news media fall short and models the ideal in its own interview segments. Stewart seriously engages with guests from all intellectual corners, most often taking the attitude of someone searching for solutions, interested in what his guests think the answers are and in how areas of consensus can be reached. One quality all these popular hosts share is less a smug detachment than a passionate enthusiasm for the political world and a desire to spread that interest to their audiences.

It seems that these television shows are anything but cynical, as they actively engage the issues of the day, provide context to contemporary dilemmas, dissect how both politicians and the press work to cloud political discussion, and encourage the development of solutions. Given



the avid fan activity around the programs and the flurry of gleeful web forwarding that follows a particularly trenchant piece, it seems clear that viewers gain energy and pleasure from witnessing the deconstruction of contemporary debate, and they clearly use the show as a form of connection with others. These programs are providing a powerful locus for critique, debate, and communion. In fact, their function begins to approach that which many public sphere theorists have classically hoped for in straight news, while still standing a parodic step removed.

### **Heroes and Villains: Satiric Documentarians Spearhead the Debate**

Long an art-house curiosity, the documentary film has muscled its way into mainstream debate. As a reporter for the Chicago Tribune put it in 2004, “documentaries, traditionally a speck on the cultural periphery, have moved front-and-center in the national discussion, achieving a relevancy and popularity that would have been inconceivable just two years ago” (Caro 1). At the heart of this shift has been the popularity of a new formula. The satiric documentary combines a playful, satiric style with unabashed polemic, resulting in a product rooted simultaneously in mass culture entertainment and political activism, guerrilla theater and documentary exposé. These elements are brought together through a narrative centered around the filmmaker’s personal quest. The satiric documentarian plays two important roles: on screen, he performs the classic fool, asking revealing questions out of (feigned) naïveté, while, as filmmaker, he plays the preacher, providing the framing for how these interactions are interpreted. I argue that these directors’ primary achievement is in successfully nurturing the creation of oppositional political communities, or “counterpublics,” anchored by the films and sustained by books, websites, and interviews. As popular culture objects, the films serve as accessible touchstones, energizing those who already share similar opinions and functioning to shift the wider debate.

The figure most identified with this format is Michael Moore. He came to public attention with his first film, *Roger & Me* (1989), a cheeky exposition of the disintegration of Flint, Michigan after General Motors closed its local factories, structured around Moore’s quest to speak with CEO Roger Smith. Since then, he has built on this style in five more films. He has also developed two television series and written four books, makes appearances on the talk-show circuit, conducts speaking tours, and hosts a large online community. Although Moore pioneered the genre, other directors have followed. The most prominent is Morgan Spurlock, whose films include a satiric jab at fast-food culture, *Super Size Me* (2004), and *Where in the World Is Osama bin Laden?* (2008), tracking his one-man mission to hunt down bin Laden.

Both Moore and Spurlock hail from the political left; both attempt to popularize critiques that are relatively marginal; and since their work frequently has undisguised political intent, it is both loved and despised. Satiric documentaries incorporate a mix of genres and styles, engendering competing demands on how they should be read. The use of the word “documentary” is one of the things that most angers detractors, as it is a term that, for many, is associated with qualities like objectivity and transparency. In reality, documentary film has never fully been able to live up to these ideals, nor has it always been expected to. Most contemporary media consumers likely do understand that all media messages are constructed, but, nevertheless, many are unconvinced of their neighbor’s ability to understand this. Critics of Moore’s and Spurlock’s films on the political right complain about the movies being polemical, arguing that they are propaganda and thus cannot be documentaries. The implication is that audience members might be duped into believing that, say, Moore is offering an objective picture of President Bush’s record in *Fahrenheit 9/11* because it is billed as a documentary. Detractors

express intense loathing, seeing them as potentially dangerous due to the combination of unabashed polemics, the ability to attract audiences, and the cultural legitimacy that the word “documentary” is perceived to confer.

Ultimately, if we look to the satiric documentary to uphold standards of objectivity it is going to fall short. This is not where the genre excels, nor what it strives for. Rather, it is opinionated, satiric, and intimate, and, as such, has its own strengths and appeal. The embodied presence of the filmmaker is key to the genre’s draw, as he takes the audience vicariously along for the ride on his individual quest. Much like an op-ed, it offers a personal treatise on a particular issue, though unlike a written piece, it builds its case on revealing interviews and encounters that can resonate on both intellectual and emotional levels. Their strength is in articulating a critique that may already be shared by many, but that is not normally heard within the dominant public sphere, and doing so in an entertaining manner. These films become accessible nodes of identification, attracting and energizing counterpublic communities, and affecting the direction of wider debate. As Robert Toplin argues about *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in the lead up to the 2004 election, “no single work of speechmaking, writing, filmmaking, or television producing sparked as much debate about the direction of U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy as *Fahrenheit 9/11* did” (9). The satiric documentary has had a profound impact on the contemporary political discussion.

In the book I briefly trace the various documentary movements and styles that have influenced the satiric documentary, as well as the history of guerrilla theater that informs the films’ stunts. Since the filmmakers are the main actors in their stunts as well as the directors, they have the advantage of playing two important roles.

In an analysis of *Roger & Me*, Miles Orvell observes that “Moore turns the tables on traditional documentary: he himself becomes the ‘powerless’ subject” (17). That film deliberately foregrounded his status as a nobody filmmaker pitted against the army of security guards surrounding his powerful subject. It is a formula he has continued to rely on (though some would now call it a contrivance), as the premise of his work is to attempt to make the powerful accountable to the public, or to expose them as unaccountable. To get anywhere on this mission requires that the on-camera Moore seemingly have the innocence to believe, for instance, that the guards at Guantanamo Bay will allow him and his boatload of sick Americans to receive access to the free medical care offered to the prisoners there (in *Sicko*). Moore taps into the long satirical tradition of playing the fool, using what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the technique of “not grasping” (402) to dissect the conventions of his society. The repeated moments of him naively trooping into some corporation’s headquarters to chat with a higher-up are constructed to expose the failures of the modern public sphere. Corporate America is powerful enough to speak only in PR sound-bites and has no interest in debate with the person on the street. As opposed to more traditional forms of satire that critique real but absent officials, Moore brings his script to his targets, forcing them to play *themselves* within his frame, providing the damning confirmation for his thesis.

In a similar way, Spurlock also plays the fool. Though he spends less time trying to trick individuals into revealing too much via loaded questions, in *Super Size Me* he uses a “foolish” conceit to expose industry sins. As many less enthusiastic critics have testily pointed out, Spurlock must have known that an all McDonald’s diet combined with little exercise would be bad for him, but he undertakes it with a naïve attitude of “how bad can it be?” He can then shock audiences with the details of how bad it really *can* be. His second film is similarly organized around another foolish quest: to personally hunt down Osama bin Laden to make the world safer

for his unborn child. He does deliver some interesting footage of his encounters in other countries, but he ends up ultimately being too foolish about a complex topic, as he does not offer the viewer any clear message about what should be done in the fight against terrorism. Spurlock's on-screen fool is here not sufficiently balanced by a strong directorial voice. What is missing is the role of the preacher.

The fool, easily dismissed as crazy, is fairly powerless on his own. In the majority of their work, Moore and Spurlock ensure that, as directors, they also play the preacher, structuring their footage to make a forceful claim. Moore relies heavily on ironic juxtaposition to deconstruct seemingly innocuous statements and point to revealing parallels. His films are structured around a pointed voice-over and held together by stock footage, music, and titles, communicating a clear thesis (for instance the segment in *Capitalism: A Love Story* which uses footage from a film about Jesus' life, redubbed with free-market platitudes about self-sufficiency). Both filmmakers use techniques borrowed from fiction film to make their didacticism entertaining, preaching to their audience while also keeping them amused. Both also continue preaching outside of the movie theater – in interviews, speaking tours, books, television programs, and online. They routinely remind their audiences that there are alternatives to the problems portrayed in their films, often specifically entreating viewers to take action. Both have worked to build a politicized counterpublic around their work, thereby prolonging continued circulation of discourse around their pet issues.

As Michael Warner explains, neither publics nor counterpublics preexist the circulation of texts. This is *not* to say that those watching a Moore film were previously blank slates suddenly radicalized by the experience. Clearly there were people predating Moore who held similar views. However, his work offers a temporary focal point for those views, allowing people to identify through the consumption of particular popular culture texts. Moore works to draw attention to issues that have been relatively ignored by the national media, pushing them into the larger political dialogue. Those already interested in taking up such a debate often invoke his movies to do so, as they become part of a shared lexicon.

Morgan Spurlock is not nearly as polarizing a figure, but with his first film, *Super Size Me*, he did become identified with the issues surrounding the American obesity epidemic, fast food culture, and corporate accountability. Like Moore, he managed to push these issues out from the margins into the wider public sphere.

The press also happily frame these filmmakers as heads of political counterpublics. Surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* in particular, many began treating Moore as the more logical opponent to President Bush than even the democratic candidate John Kerry. This figurehead slippage did not always work in favor of Moore's goals (nor Kerry's), as Moore became an easily targeted straw-man for the other side. Consequently, from the beginning, media coverage focused on the horse-race quality: whether Moore would succeed in persuading undecided voters. Of course, it is impossible to measure how many votes Moore succeeded in attracting or repelling, but thinking in these terms at all seems absurd, as it implies that one cultural text could be expected to single-handedly cause quantifiable political change. Nevertheless, this is the standard frequently used to judge the political effect of satire.

The problem with defining political effect so narrowly is that it reduces all democratic politics down to what one does at the polls, ignoring the groundwork that precedes any type of change, negating the lengthier process of shifting popular assumptions. While it is unlikely that Moore himself expects he will be able to single-handedly transform every CEO he hunts, he joins the efforts of other counterpublic agents to “transform notions of the common good and to

reprioritize items on public and official agendas” (Asen and Brouwer 25). Thus, it is more useful to examine the impact of these films in terms of their influence on political discourse. Reviewers of *Fahrenheit 9/11* noted that in many theaters audiences were bursting into applause at the end. Moore had succeeded in articulating a point of view that many shared and were longing to hear confirmed. As Toplin puts it, “it was clear that Moore had done more than preach to the converted. He had energized them and given them hope” (135). Cheering him on was a way of identifying with a larger movement, one that suddenly seemed tangible and that was making inroads into the national debate.

In attracting such large audiences and generating press, these filmmakers become significant figures in the battle for hegemony between competing discourses. Though they offend many, they also continue to inspire many others. They are far from universally respected, and their films are not without flaws, but their talent is in continuing to be imperfect, opinionated spokespersons for change, who are willing to play all the roles we demand of them in the process—from hero to villain.

### **Irony in Activism**

As mass media communication has evolved, so too have the tactics employed by political activists. More and more groups are now building their actions around a playfully ironic sensibility, creating attention-getting stunts and graphics, along with pre-packaged media sound-bites. Many activists are now adeptly creating their own cultural texts. And though the use of irony may appear trivial to some, it is in the service of dead-serious aims, used not only to attract attention, but to call upon their audiences’ shared assumptions, to make members of existing discursive communities present to one another, and, ideally, to turn those communities into actively politicized ones.

It is easy to dismiss political critique aimed at those who already appreciate the perspective as merely “preaching to the converted.” The common assumption is that activists are wasting their time if they are speaking to people who already share their convictions. However, it is important to remember that the so-called converted may still be apathetic, or unconnected to a larger movement, or simply in need of some validation. Passively holding a particular opinion is not analogous to acting on it or even to privileging it as particularly pressing. As Jonathan Gray argues, there is a reason that most preachers do preach to the converted every week; they clearly believe that reinforcement is important (158-9). Additionally, I contend, affirmation fulfills an integral community building function, crucial to nurturing a political movement. While the type of efficacy achieved by ironic activists is often less measurable in terms of concrete legislative goals, it is located in the strengthening of the visceral experience of community, and in the attempt to shift debate by turning laughter over a shared joke into anger and engagement.

I focus on a practice I term “identity nabbing,” in which participants pretend to be someone they are not, appearing in public as exaggerated caricatures of their opponents. Members draw on irony to rhetorically head opponents off at the pass, performing their own version of the other side. The question is: why would activist groups want to use such a convoluted mode of discourse? The answer is at least partially found in the co-participatory workings of irony that Linda Hutcheon lays out. As she explains, the presence of irony requires not only the intention of the ironist but also the intention of the receiver to read it as such. For irony to happen, ironist and interpreter must share assumptions. While many argue that irony creates in-groups (separating out those who “get it”), Hutcheon turns the formulation around to

argue that irony happens because discursive communities already exist, providing the context for irony.

It is my contention that the activist groups profiled here rely on existing discursive communities to understand their irony, but that they also attempt to turn these discursive communities into politicized communities, (or counterpublics). Appealing to shared assumptions about the world, they challenge their audience to not only get the joke but to take up the issues as their own.

Of course, ironic forms of play are not the only type of activism operating today, nor the only type necessary to effect social change. However, they have taken on a significant role within twenty-first century activism. In the book, I trace the history of spectacular, playful, and ironic protest, moving from American suffragists, through 1960s groups like the Situationists and the Yippies, to ACT UP, and the culture-jamming movement. I concentrate most heavily, however, on three contemporary groups: The Billionaires for Bush, The Yes Men, and Reverend Billy. Each takes on the identities of their political opponents, using the “identity nab” to reframe their enemies and engage and entertain potential allies.

The Billionaires for Bush provide a great example of the identity nab. Originally titled “Billionaires for Bush (or Gore),” the group developed in the lead-up to the U.S. election of 2000 to draw attention to the influence of big money on politics. When Bush won the presidency, the Billionaires focused on the policies of his administration they believed favored the wealthy. Their formula was simple: members dressed up in tuxedos and top hats, fake furs and evening gowns, and assumed ironic fake names like Meg A. Bucks or Ava Rice. At events, they brought signs with slogans like “Leave No Billionaire Behind” and “Tax Work Not Wealth.” The strategy was to link images of corporate greed and vast wealth disparities with particular politicians, and to reframe the terms of discussion. If campaign financing or budget deficits were not primary topics of reportage, the Billionaires tried to reinsert them through coverage of their events. Andrew Boyd, one of the founders, explains that the group aimed to design a “humorous, ironic media campaign that would spread like a virus via grassroots activists and the mainstream media” (369). Anyone wishing to set up their own Billionaires chapter was encouraged to do so; the website provided suggestions for slogans, costuming, and talking points. The concept has proven remarkably resilient, and has since been adapted to attack other targets, like the Billionaires for Tar Sands (protesting oil processing in the Canadian tar sands), and Billionaires for Wealthcare (supporting the Obama administration’s health care proposal in 2009). The concept creates a more interesting angle for reporters than simply relaying the number of protesters at an event, and, as Boyd explains, because humor and content were intertwined, “if the media wanted the humor (and they did), they had to take the content too” (373).

The ironic technique sets up a unique relationship between activists and audiences, so that, for bystanders to find the joke amusing, they must participate in the meaning-making process, sharing the group’s assumptions. They have not likely succeeded in winning over many Republicans, nor should they necessarily. Rather, they attempt to push otherwise peripheral issues into the public sphere and to politicize those who may already share their assumptions. The political point is clearly targeted, while the humor provides a satisfying wink to the audience.

This idea gets more complicated when the identity-nab is so convincing that the audience becomes entirely taken in. The Yes Men, for instance, deliberately court confusion, attempting to “pass” in their assumed identities. The group began with a parody website which closely

mirrored that of the World Trade Organization, but included damning statistics and critiques. To their surprise, they were contacted by institutions that believed they were the real WTO. They accepted the speaking invitations and began making presentations they thought more honestly represented the organization, trying to rankle their audiences with patently offensive ideas, like a flashy “management leisure suit” fitted with an inflatable television screen phallus designed to monitor workers. They argue they are merely taking their adversaries’ positions to their logical extreme, pushing the neo-liberal market philosophy of the WTO only slightly further than the organization itself. No one questions their ridiculous presentations because they have reproduced a simulacra of officialdom: a clean business suit, an air of gravitas, and a practiced power-point presentation. While Baudrillard characterizes the rise of simulacra as profoundly anti-political, working to conceal and naturalize the lack of a real, the Yes Men create simulacra in the pursuit of distinctly political aims, precisely to reveal that lack, hoping to make people question the rhetoric used by real officials with real power.

Most famously, they seized on an opportunity to represent Dow Chemical on the BBC, announcing that, after 20 years of denials, the company was taking responsibility for the plant explosion in Bhopal, India, compensating victims and cleaning up the site. The stunt attracted a flurry of media reports, bringing the almost forgotten issue under scrutiny. The group creatively attempts to influence the direction of public discourse, even if that involves a level of fraud. The revealed hoaxes speak to a growing number of fans who take delight in witnessing the public pranking of organizations they are critical of, again providing affirmation for existing discursive communities.

It is this goal of fostering discussion and engagement to which the identity-nabbing tactic is aimed. However, the technique need not be used exclusively to lampoon the opposition. The performance artist/activist known as Reverend Billy has a more complex relationship to his character, borrowing some of the preacher figure’s genuine allure while still assuming an ironic distance. Actor Bill Talen created the bouffant-haired, booming-voiced preacher who now presides over the Church of Life after Shopping and its gospel choir. The group organizes street performances and incursions into major chain stores, produces theatrical performances, hosts video-sermons, and is the subject of a documentary called *What Would Jesus Buy?* (2007). Talen uses the ironic, semi-comedic character to engage his audience, making it somehow more permissible for him to rant and rave in public. Reverend Billy allows Talen to take his convictions to almost grotesque extremes, both amusing and inspiring those around him.

The performative power of Reverend Billy makes what Talen has to say compelling, allowing him to be both playful and serious at the same time. Though it could appear that he is simply mocking religiosity, this is not the case. All who have profiled Reverend Billy remark on the passion he summons forth in his flock. A parodic send-up of a preacher on, say, *Saturday Night Live* would never attract the dedicated followers Talen has. He preaches with genuine conviction, co-opting the power that the preacher figure exerts, allowing audiences to get caught up in his fervor, but still maintaining an ironic gap. The irony is not about ridicule; rather, it is a more complicated form of play, one that is dependent on a discursive community willing to create the ironic reality together. Reverend Billy’s church offers followers the chance to pick and choose elements of religion that they like (qualities like community, spirituality, and a higher truth), while remaining distrustful of organized religion. This irreverent reverence is then funneled into political actions, drawing on the energy of do-it-yourself activism, providing the inspiration of a like-minded community.

It is worth noting that irony as a mode of political discourse is not appreciated by everyone. Typically, it polarizes the audience, potentially frustrating those who do not appreciate the joke. Those unwilling to read the irony often dismiss these groups as nonsensical or see them as actively offensive. However, irony does not itself create divisions; rather, it plays on existing differences of temperament and belief in the attempt to bring those beliefs to the surface. It seems clear that activist groups draw on irony at least partially to bring observers' attention to their shared understandings, spurring them into viewing themselves as a community with collective power. Rather than seeing this as "preaching to the converted," we might think of it as reconverting the converted. Where ironic activism excels is in engaging an audience, attracting attention, and rallying support, all of which are integral in building political momentum.

### Conclusion

Though they are distinct genres, parodic news, satiric documentaries, and ironic activism are manifestations of similar impulses. They share a desire to circumvent the standard conduits of political information. While the parodic news shows critique the substance and tenor of the debate in mainstream news, a group like The Yes Men mimics the performance of power in order to draw critical attention to its core. All attempt to reframe the terms of discussion or temporarily hijack it out of the hands of authority. And all share a pointedly comedic mode, highlighting contradictions, inconsistencies, and absurdities, and mining them for their humor. Finally, all have succeeded to differing degrees in becoming pop culture phenomena, functioning as cultural reference points.

The remaining question is whether the critique can move from simple opposition to a more fleshed-out platform for concrete change. One of the most damning criticisms leveled at the ironic/parodic/satiric mode is that it is always locked in a negative bind, criticizing but not helping to produce a positive vision. This would seem to be a serious limitation, particularly for explicitly political material. However, as I have argued, the highly politicized forms of satire chronicled here frequently gesture beyond the problematic present, often providing concrete suggestions for alternatives. As a further example, some of the activist groups are also experimenting with ways of moving beyond critique alone. Most spectacularly, in November of 2008, days after the presidential election, a number of diverse activist groups including the Yes Men, United for Peace and Justice, Code Pink, The Anti-Advertising Agency, Improv Everywhere, and others, came together in a massive collaboration, managing to print and distribute tens of thousands of copies of a fake edition of *The New York Times*. Rather than critique a particular topical story, the activists created a vision of the world they hoped to see in the not too distant future.

The paper was a spot-on reproduction of the *Times*, but the date of publication was listed as July 4, 2009, roughly eight months in the future, while the content was aspirational. The top headline blared "Iraq War Ends." Other stories included Congress passing a "maximum wage law" and the impending development of national health care. Everything in the paper painted an image of what the country could look like given a progressive tilt in priorities.

In addition to the logistical triumphs in distributing thousands of copies, it also represented a significant shift in focus for many of the groups involved. After loudly protesting the policies of the Bush administration for eight years, this action was focused on creating a vision for what the upcoming Obama era *should* look like. One contributor explained, "it's about what's possible, if we think big and act collectively ("New York"). This stunt is

particularly notable for its attempt to draw on the power of counterpublics, not just to get everyone angry about the present, but to spur them to work toward alternatives. I close the book with some discussion of this event because it is a good example of ironic critique that manages to move beyond criticism toward articulating a future vision. Again, we have an instance of irony used in the service of entirely earnest and, in this case, concrete ends.

Regardless of technique, all of these examples of irony, satire, and parody are intended to intrude into the public conversation. Rather than engendering cynicism, as critics charge, they are a calculated shot across the bow of the cynically manufactured elements of public debate. The fact that they are sparking so much interest and enthusiasm seems particularly significant, especially when seen against the background of reported political apathy and disinterest. In an era when political discourse is so often over-produced, stage-managed, and predictably choreographed, these examples of performative satire offer a way of satisfyingly breaking through the existing script.



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