

ENGL 114: Reading and Writing Argument  
Professor Alfred E. Guy

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### The Corrective Lens of Satire

by Benjamin Solarz

*“I think both [presidential candidates George Bush and John Kerry] are terrific guys. It’s one of the reasons I’m so frustrated that half of the country thinks each of them is a fool and an idiot – it’s just not true.”*

William Weld, former governor of Massachusetts

*“Well, I hope that in some small way we’ve been able to contribute to that.”*

John Stewart, host of “The Daily Show” (Indecision 2004: Prelude to a Recount).

Stewart’s mock newscast epitomizes the recent proliferation of trenchant political satire in an increasingly polarized society. This lampooning – characterized by exaggeration and caricature – seems divisive while it tints issues with sarcasm and derision. The recent explosion of political satire coincides with some of the most rancorous partisan division this country has ever seen, which might suggest that such satire reinforces difference and puts consensus – the very foundation of a liberal democracy – further out of reach. But this misleading correlation demonstrates reverse causation. Far from polarizing, the very machinery of political humor works to present a more complete and clear image of the world. Though humor may at first seem to be a meaningless pursuit, an examination of political satire shows that comedy has a much greater purpose: it provides the very same philosophical clarity of vision extolled by Aristotle and Plato as the means to attaining happiness in life.

#### **Satire as a Divisive Force**

If it did not impart such clarity, satire would convey far more malicious effects than one would expect of a pursuit as seemingly useless as laughter – its viewers would suffer like those Aristotle mentions in *Nicomachean Ethics* whose narrow vision obstructs their pursuit of happiness. Aristotle writes that such people “think happiness is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour” (2), chastising them for seeing only one side of an issue. He describes a good life as transcending its innumerable individual definitions and instead entailing action involving “the best and most complete” virtue (5) – one that would be impossible to understand given an isolated view of the world. Rather than obscure ideas and beliefs, humor, specifically political satire, facilitates a more complete view of the world and thus assists in this pursuit of virtue.

The recent increase in polarized politics has painted the world in the very blacks and whites that would seemingly obscure a

complete understanding of the world. An article in the April 2004 issue of *The Congressional Quarterly Researcher* entitled “The Partisan Divide” concluded that “elected officials and party leaders have become openly more partisan” and, as a result, that “politicians present completely opposing views.” Illustrating this favoring of extremism over moderation, GOP strategist Grover Norquist even equated bipartisan behavior to date rape (Greenblatt Partisan). Neither side is willing to agree on a shade of gray, thus tearing the public between two undesirable extremes.

As political moderation has soured in the United States, so has the popularity of political satire exploded – potentially implicating satire as its cause. Shortly before the 2000 Presidential election, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press reported that 47% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 obtain most of their political information from late-night entertainment outlets. The impact of such outlets – most notably Saturday Night Live – is even believed to have contributed significantly to the election’s outcome (Smith 109). The trend has only continued, with the Pew Institute more recently concluding that fake news programs “are beginning to rival mainstream news outlets within this generation” (Peterson). This symbiotic relationship – with satire and politics feeding off one another – makes satire ripe for use as a partisan political tool.

This possibility has in fact become a reality, with satirists increasingly preaching partisan messages and viewers increasingly seeking partisan mediums. The conservative satirist Rush Limbaugh, for instance, advocates in such a polarized manner that Ronald Reagan once sent him an unsolicited note thanking him for his work promoting “Republican and conservative principles”; Reagan noted that liberals view Limbaugh as “the most dangerous man in America”

(Bowman 1). In response, the liberal satirist Al Franken wrote an equally polarized book: *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot*. Given this spectrum of partisan political satire, the *Congressional Quarterly Researcher* concluded that “millions of Americans are seeking a ‘journalism of affirmation’ – news presentations that explain or contextualize events in a way that accords with their political outlook” (Greenblatt News). That Limbaugh has been called an “opinion maker” and an “adept populizer” further indicates the persuasiveness of satire as a polarizing force.

In laughing at Limbaugh or Franken, is a viewer subconsciously accepting the joke’s partisan slant? Ronald de Sousa argues affirmatively; his Endorsement Thesis states that endorsing the premise of a joke’s logic is a precondition for enjoying its humor. Directing his comments to sexist humor, de Sousa notes the malicious envy that he feels underlies the most sexist jokes – borrowing the term “phthonos” from Plato to describe it – and says that “...to find the joke funny, the listener must *actually share* those sexist attitudes” (290). Generalizing this claim to political satire, it would seem that in an already polarized world in which Americans are seeking commentary that affirms their partisan slant, viewers of satire are emphasizing and solidifying their preexisting biases.

### **Humorously Debunking Extremism**

While the endorsement thesis and the public’s predilection for media of affirmation may indicate otherwise, the premise of helping one see more clearly underlies all political satire. Satire’s initial development shaped it as a means of helping viewers grasp a fuller understanding of the world in which they live – and current cognitive research affirms its effectiveness as such. A censoring joke about President Bush’s foreign policy may seem so compelling that it solidifies the

audience's bias or so incendiary that it causes inevitable division; in truth, it fosters a fuller view of the issue at hand. The origin of this uncanny characteristic lies in the evolution of the underlying machinery of two of satire's most essential elements: humor and comedy.

In ancient physiological theory, the word humor, which referred to the fluids of the body, had no comic connotations. The four cardinal humors – blood, phlegm, cholera, and melancholy – were thought to determine one's physical and mental qualities and dispositions. Though an ideal person had a perfect balance of the four, someone with humors in unhealthy proportion was said to be sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholic. Each complexion had specific characteristics whose subtlety has been since lost: the choleric man, for instance, was not only quick to anger but also yellow-faced, lean, hairy, proud, ambitious, revengeful, and shrewd. By extension, "humor" in the 16<sup>th</sup> century came to denote an unbalanced mental condition, a mood or unreasonable caprice, or a fixed folly or vice (Humor).

This paradigm of humorous balance and imbalance eventually led to the word's modern connotations and has shaped humor as a means of encouraging completeness over extremism. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the dramatic genre of "Comedy of Humors" emerged. Led by playwright Ben Jonson, this genre presented characters who exemplified one of the humors; the caricature of the characters' actions fueled the comic entertainment of this genre (Humor, Comedy of). In allowing the audience to laugh at such excess, however, these comedies advocated for balance. One character, portraying an imbalance of one of these four characteristics, illustrated the absurdity of one isolated feature and thus argued persuasively for a totality of all four. The veracity of the theory of humors aside, the genre of humor thus developed as a means of censuring extreme

views in advocacy of a more balanced approach.

This comedic search of truth is evidenced nightly on "The Daily Show" hosted by Jon Stewart. Michael Cornfield, an adjunct professor at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, notes three main approaches "The Daily Show" takes to the news; it can be seen that each denounces the extremism of the political arena in favor of more healthy moderation.

The first entails reacting visually and verbally to video clips of political occurrences. During coverage of the 2004 Democratic National Convention, "The Daily Show" aired a clip of Hillary Clinton telling the crowd, "It is with great pleasure that I introduce the last great Democratic president." The scene cuts to Stewart, who affects mock disbelief as he exclaims, "Oh my god FDR is alive!" and plays off Clinton's exaggeration (July 27). In responding to clips that would otherwise be digested uncontested, "The Daily Show" calls into question the credibility given to politicians' partisan statements, showing them to be imbalanced caricatures. While not especially novel, this attitude nonetheless demonstrates the ability of political satire to allow audiences to look past the façade of political sensationalism and see a more complete version of the truth.

The second method of exploring the truth is what Cornfield calls "the storytelling and repartee conventions of ordinary television." Discussing the Republican National Convention, John Stewart asks Stephen Colbert, a senior political correspondent, whether the televised overrepresentation of minorities in relation to their relatively small proportion of the Republican electorate is disingenuous. "That's... that's really insulting," responds Colbert. "That's the difference between me and you. Where you see color, I see ability... to be colored" (September 1). As with before, the analysis exaggerates politics – in this instance the

drive to appear diverse in appealing to the electorate. It highlights excess to debunk the apparent desirability of such superficial policies and thus encourages a closer examination.

Cornfield terms the final method seen on the show a “shambush” interview. During a segment examining exit polling, correspondent Samantha Bee approaches a man leaving the polls and asks him, “So, did you vote with the President or with the terrorists?” (Prelude). The satirists use the shock of an unexpected question to draw attention to the inanity of extremism – in this case the Republicans’ attempts to color their opposition as soft on national defense. The illustrated extremity of this viewpoint, much like an imbalanced character in one of Jonson’s plays, advocates for a less polarized and more complete view on the issue.

### **Comically Understanding the Fool**

One way comedy, like humor, enhances understanding is by temporarily suspending our preconceptions, allowing us to view the world unencumbered by a traditional framework. Critic Kenneth Burke advocates that the world is largely a function of how we view it and that the observer can best understand it by removing himself from a conventional context; he defines “perspective by incongruity” as “a means for overcoming the limitations which any single system of thought and classification places on us” (Gusfield 7-8). This method for more complete observation scrutinizes and censures that which we have come to accept. It is also known as the “comic corrective.”

The comic frame, a specific application of the comic corrective, entails what Burke calls maximum consciousness. He says, “One would transcend himself by noting his own foibles” (Burke 264). Comedic principles such as gross exaggeration and incongruous perspectives elucidate the inadequacy of any given subject – not just of oneself, as Burke

suggests – but do so in a jocular and friendly manner; thus, while seeming to censure any given attitude, a comedic barb in fact encourages triumph over such shortcomings. It allows for a new, more complete form of understanding than otherwise possible under somber critique and criticism.

“Saturday Night Live” (SNL), a late night sketch comedy show whose punches often fall on politicians’ shoulders, demonstrates the importance of this more complete understanding. In “The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How ‘Strategy’ and ‘Lockboxes’ Changed a Political Campaign,” Chris Smith and Ben Voth argue that the comedic impact of SNL was such that it significantly altered the 2000 Presidential Election. In a paper detailing the power of satire as a rhetorical tool for politicians, Smith and Voth also provide compelling evidence of the power of comedy, as employed by SNL, to alter its audience’s perception of the world – or in this case perceptions of presidential candidates. The evidence indicates that SNL’s influence on the election was not due to its ability to polarize but instead due to its capacity to facilitate a clearer view of the issues.

Quoting H.D. Duncan, Smith and Voth assert that the importance of the comic frame is that “communication is kept open and free through laughter because laughter clarifies where tragedy mystifies” (112). This key distinction is brought about by treating the protagonist as a comic fool whose flaws should be mended to maintain social balance rather than a tragic victim whose flaws are absolute and unalterable.

In mimicking the 2000 Presidential Debates between Al Gore and George Bush, SNL was able to emphasize each candidate’s foibles and, through confronting and exaggerating them, convince the audience to look past them. For instance, Bush introduced SNL’s “Presidential Bash 2000” on November 5, 2000 with an exaggerated satire

of his often-criticized vocabulary: “Now, when they asked me to help introduce tonight’s special, I felt, frankly, ‘ambivalent.’ Although I’m not a big fan, I have seen some things on the show that I felt were, in a word, ‘offensive’” (116). Though the study claims, “[SNL] isolated, identified, and magnified Bush’s and Gore’s imperfections...” (115) it does not consider the reaction of a rational audience. Because of the lighthearted nature of any comical program, the communication between viewer and protagonist is by nature a friendly one – one that encourages growth and looks optimistically past flaws. An audience viewing a self-deprecating caricature of Bush should not censure him as semantically inept, but see him as a comic fool plagued by one large flaw; the audience’s natural reaction would, given a spirit of friendliness, be to look past Bush’s flaws and see other aspects of his personality. Thus, the audience would see a more complete portrait of this comic fool.

Evidencing this, the satire of SNL and other such outlets did not hinder Bush significantly throughout the period of presidential debates: Bush trailed by 10 points in the Gallup pole lead heading into the first presidential debate and gained an 11 point lead following the third debate (Smith 126). Not only did the satire fail to doom Bush, it in fact illustrated his more favorable characteristics and – although it is impossible to isolate extenuating factors – one could argue that this satire in fact led to greater voter support.

### **The Elucidation of Assimilation**

What affords satire this clarifying property is its ability to present a scenario whose absurdity forces the audience to acknowledge conflicting views. When presented in a serious forum – such as a political debate or campaign speech – political extremity has divisive effects. Satire, however, is different; because it is not

designed to be taken seriously, it allows the viewer a comfortable position from which to point out inconsistency and acknowledge irrationality.

A study undertaken by Lawrence Lengbeyer that analyzed humor in the context of cognitive principles asserts that a joke “describes situations or events that we know not to be true to life” and concludes an audience must merge what it deems “the joke-world” with “the real-world” (315). The study discusses compartmentalized cognition, which is able to simultaneously support distinct “perspects” (331). Assimilating these various perspects – the joke-world with the real-world – is an active process of discovery that increases one’s knowledge about the world. In analyzing extremism on “The Daily Show” or a comic fool on SNL, a viewer sees a world he knows to be fictionalized. By comparing the veracity and falsity of this account with accepted norms, he expands his knowledge of the world.

Thus, while de Sousa’s “Endorsement Thesis” asserts one must support the premise of a joke’s logic, Lengbeyer points out the possibility of a viewer assuming the premise in one of the perspects (the joke-world) while containing what he believes to be a more accurate idea of the world in another of the perspects (the real-world). Further, while de Sousa’s theory depends on malicious phthonos, Lengbeyer asserts that political satire today is more aptly characterized by “fond teasing, or admiring ribbing, or gentle mocking” (311)

Another case of assimilation is that of assimilating another’s state of mind with that of the observer – in other words, empathy. A qualitative study undertaken in Sweden that focused on the use of humor in hospitals concluded, “Empathy is one of the most important conditions within the context of care and humour [sic].” (Olsson 25). Although the conclusions are drawn from a hospital setting, the data appear applicable to

other settings. Observers felt empathy for those involved in comedic situations, saying “That could just as well have been me,” (Olsson 25). Extrapolated, this suggests in the larger sense that comedy fosters knowledge into the protagonist’s state of being and thus elucidates what would otherwise be overlooked. While empathy may be very similar to de Sousa’s concept of endorsement, the key difference is that empathy implies assimilating two points of view while endorsement connotes unconditional acceptance. It is through this connection of empathy that humor fosters a greater understanding – a greater recognition of the need for balance and a greater insight into the comic fool’s strengths and weaknesses.

This assimilation and empathy is a function of the basic paradigm of a joke – its characteristic levity and necessary departure from the real-world. Regardless, therefore, of a comedian’s intentions – be them conservative, liberal, or something else – his satire will nonetheless elucidate rather than obscure. As hard as Rush Limbaugh or Al Franken may try, they will never be able to further polarize their audiences.

This unequivocal power to illuminate is the driving force in the demand for satire. While it may seem as if political satire begets partisan division, in truth it is the reverse. As Americans sought truth amidst partisan bickering, political satire rose in America.

The dormancy of political satire during the 1960 election despite the prevalence of divisive politics led Eric Goldman to lament, “Where is the purifying wit and humor? The catharsis of caricature? The outcries against all of this nonsense?” (Gardner 270). His concerns echo the purpose of satire to elucidate. He sensed a need to purify professed political agendas and sort through the nonsense of campaign promises – and he sensed that it could be best accomplished through the comedy of caricature.

In *Campaign Comedy*, Gerald Gardner claims that “as Jimmy Carter emerged from the Democratic pack in the primaries of 1976, America’s wits emerged from their hibernation” (175); this satirical explosion is perhaps more aptly traced to the dire search for truth during the Watergate scandal of the preceding years. Reports the *Wall Street Journal*, “During the Watergate cover-up, comedians were the first to say out loud what many people were thinking: ‘Heard about the new Watergate watch? Both hands always point at Nixon’” (Shafer).

A similar surge in satire followed the information breakdown that occurred when Bill Clinton was impeached for perjury; in 1998, Jay Leno and David Letterman combined told 4,063 political jokes, more than any year before or since (Shafer). When crises of confidence arose in result to apparent improprieties by trusted government officials, Americans turned to comedy in search of truth.

### **Satire as Philosophy**

A viewer engaging in this active process of assimilation and cognition is sure to arrive at a greater truth – one affirmed by both Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s *Symposium* can be seen as a conceit for contemporary partisan division: a series of philosophers deliver encomiums on the topic of *erōs* (passionate love), each preaching his own narrow definition, and a clear friction develops between the philosophical *erōs* espoused by Socrates and the visceral *erōs* championed by Alcibiades. Each side of the issue can be seen as unnecessarily narrow and lacking – Socrates is unable to take part in the physical pleasure of alcohol despite attending a symposium while Alcibiades’ lusty emotions lead to poignant rejection. Thus, Plato demonstrates the importance of a tempered synergy of both extremes – rather than taking any given philosopher’s declaration at face value, the reader should analyze each extreme

and decide on some moderated medium (Solarz).

Even more notably, one of the main methods employed by Plato in showing his readers the importance of analyzing and assimilating each speech is, in fact, comedy. As Cameron Leroy observes in a critical essay, Plato “opens [Socrates] to inspection and closer examination” (3) by juxtaposing the speakers’ affected gravity with comic elements peppered throughout the text – this in a manner very similar to the way comedians’ satire clashes with politicians’ elevated rhetoric. Leroy adds that “Plato does not wish for us to passively take these arguments at face value; he *wants* us to wrestle with all of these ideas, in essence turning us into philosophers” (1). This assumption that the pursuit of truth requires active contemplation is found in political satire as well; as comedians force listeners to assimilate the joke-world with the real-world, they force them to contemplate and analyze polarized viewpoints that would otherwise be taken as truth.

Far from contributing to the polarization of society, political satire – and by extension humor and comedy in general – fosters insight that allows one to see the world in all of its varying grays. It is this unhindered sight that allows the fullest enjoyment of life. Writes Aristotle in *Nicomachaen Ethics*, “Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?” Though his comments refer directly to what he deems the “chief good” – that which brings ultimate happiness – clearly his logic applies just as well to clarity on any subject. The more that satire elucidates about the world, the clearer we can see things that will bring us the most satisfaction and see how to attain them (1). Political satire may not itself lead directly to general happiness, but it does illustrate the importance of humor in all aspects of life. Humor, comedy, and a general irreverence are tools that can ensure one’s outlook on life never loses sight of that which imparts virtue.

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