The Effect of 9/11 on Political Satire in the United States

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Abstract:
The evolution of modern television satire has grown from the imitative antics of comedians like Chevy Chase and Rich Little to the biting commentary of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. The event that sparked the greatest changes in satirical performance was the terrorist attack of 9/11/01. As the political landscape changed and the country turned against President G. W. Bush after the surge of patriotism, television satire became a way to hear commentary and criticism that no longer seemed available from network news. In the last eleven years shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have become a primary news source for many people in the United States. Comedic satire is no longer effective in making the audience think differently about the issues, and "just kidding" is becoming a haven for extremists when they say something inappropriate. Satire has thus evolved away from comedy into drama in *The Newsroom*, changing the perspective of the audience while still presenting relevant commentary.

The hypothesis for this project began during the Spring 2012 semester in Dr. Savilonis's Comedy from Ancient Greece to Modern Day class (E481). One of my fellow students gave an oral presentation on *The Daily Show* and how it is received by modern audiences, talking about how it was both comedic and informative, how it crossed the line from purely going after laughs to genuine desire to inform its audience and back again, sometimes within the confines of a single episode. I remembered when *The Daily Show* was nothing more than a collection of one-liners and locker room humor. It made me realize that sometime after 9/11, during the rise and fall of George W. Bush's approval rating, *The Daily Show* became something more than just comedy and entertainment. I set out to investigate the timeline of modern satire to determine if 9/11 was the significant moment that changed how satire was presented, not only for the audiences, but for writers and performers as well.

To begin my research I first had to determine the literary definition of satire. I used the book *Satire, Origins and Principles* by Matthew Hodgart as my baseline source. Hodgart states that satirist "engages in the troubles of the world, and expects his audience to do the same," showing that both the text and the audience have to participate for the satire to be effective. He also defines three methods of satire: Reduction, Invective and Irony. [1]

To determine how satire changed over the course of the last 40 years, I first had to see the beginnings of 20th century political satire, specifically which appeared on television. I studied episodes of *Saturday Night Live* from the 1970's and 80's, and performances by impressionist Rich Little from the same period. I paid special attention not only to the performances but the content of what was being said. The difference between comedy and satire is context, so knowing I had no context for any possibly political commentary, I looked for topical issues, specifically those I didn't necessarily understand the references to. (Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* focuses on gender roles in Ancient Greece and a war Athens was engaged in that I had no context for, but historians and theater experts assure me were biting and topical in their day.) I felt that pointed, specific statements were good ways to judge if the performance was inviting the audience to share in the pains of the world.

During the 70s and 80s most satire focused on what Hodgart calls Reduction - "the degradation or devaluation of the victim by reducing his stature and dignity." Satire at this time was focused on imitation. By taking an individual characteristic or tic of the victim and repeating them, the satirical performer reduces the subject to something less. Rich Little's impression of Richard Nixon was very funny and a perfect likeness of the former President. He focused on exaggerating Nixon's phony arm flapping and his tensed, hunched shoulders. The content was mostly

about telling jokes, not commenting on the policies and troubles of the Nixon administration (except Watergate, but that was as much a talking point and sensationalist story as it was a national crisis). The performance was rarely much more than the iconic double peace sign and the repetition of "I am not a crook."[2]

*Saturday Night Live'*s Chevy Chase did an impression of Gerald Ford, but made no effort to look like him, sound like him or even adopt any of his common turns of phrase. He would simply get on stage, "Hail to the Chief" playing as an introduction, and then he would trip over something. Chase's impersonation was really just an exaggeration of Ford's clumsiness, reducing the character of Ford to nothing more than a stumbling buffoon.

All through the 80's and 90's *SNL* lampooned Presidents, Vice Presidents and presidential candidates, making fun of their appearance or the way they talked, but rarely brought up anything of substance. The writers of *SNL* were not engaging in the troubles of the world, only in the things that were already national media sensations (like the Monica Lewinsky scandal during the Clinton administration). It wasn't until *The Daily Show* that the comedic content began to have substance.

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* both use invective and irony to great effect, both insulting the news media with their mocking tone and lacing their jokes with double meanings to make the audience see the awful truth behind the joke.

The book *Satire TV, Politics and Comedy in the Post Network Era* covers the evolution of *The Daily Show* from simple wit and witticism to true political commentary. The discovery of this book made the rest of my research fairly pointless, as everything I was postulating had already been said. Articles by Amber Day, Joanne Morreale, and Geoffrey Baym articulate every point, including the change in television satire in recent years and the focal point of that change being the attacks of September 11, 2001. My project almost ended there, as I discovered I was merely reinventing the wheel.

While I was working on all of the research to this point I was also engaged in watching *The Newsroom* every week on HBO. Written by Aaron Sorkin, *The Newsroom* tells the story of a fictional news network deciding to stop flooding their audience with talking points and sensationalism and instead focus on the real news. Led by Will McAvoy, (played by Jeff Daniels) the AWN news team covers such topical events as the Deep Water Horizon disaster, the death of Osama bin Laden, the debt ceiling debate and the rise of the Tea Party.

I began working on a new hypothesis. 9/11 did change satire and give it the power to become an effective delivery system for criticism and commentary, but the umbrella of comedy was being used to shield too many to be as effective as it once was. FOX News personalities Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck and Sean Hannity, for example, had started using more and more extreme, inflammatory methods in their journalism, and each time they said something that aroused public outrage they would say they were kidding to deflect the criticism. By writing off their comments as a "joke" the commentators felt they could shield themselves from negative response. *The Daily Show* was able to get away with outrageous statements because it is understood to be a comedic presentation, but Rush and Hannity were blurring the lines of journalism and entertainment. Jon Stewart's methods are widely accepted by the American audience, so when Rush proclaims his show is merely entertainment, and that he is using absurdity to demonstrate the absurd, it becomes a plausible excuse. Rush effectively called his show satirical rather than purely journalistic, claiming he was using irony to support his arguments. This is contrary to the reputation Rush himself fostered, as he has claimed for many years that he is a paragon of journalistic excellence.

Michael Clemente, Senior Vice President of News for FOX News said "An increasing number of viewers are relying on FOX News for both news and opinion. And the average news consumer can certainly distinguish between the A section of the newspaper and the editorial page, which is what our programming represents. So, with all due respect to anyone who still might be confused about the difference between news reporting and vibrant opinion, my suggestion would be to talk about the stories and the facts rather than attack the

messenger"[3] but FOX shows continue to advertise as news. Even their slogan "We Report, You Decide" implies they are reporting facts, not opinion. Without clear separation of which shows are fact and which are editorial the lines become blurred and one can be easily mistaken for the other, regardless of Mr. Clemente's assertions to the contrary.

By presenting topics in a new light, namely a comedic light, satirists force the audience to consider the topics in a new way. By getting us to laugh at a serious point, such as the incompetence or dishonesty of a Presidential candidate, we suddenly see the situation differently. We become critical of the topics as the satirist criticizes, going along for the ride the satirist lays out for us. When comedic presentations of serious matters become too wide spread we take the comedic without thinking about what we're laughing at. The material is no longer jarring us.

Thus I believe *The Newsroom* is the most recent evolution of satire. By presenting the material in a dramatic narrative form it becomes new, something the audience cannot just mindlessly accept but are forced to think about. By Hodgart's definitions *The Newsroom* certainly qualifies. It does engage in the troubles of the world, not only in the current political climate but in media itself. *The Newsroom* uses invective and irony as well, making us realize the reason Casey Anthony got more television time than the debt ceiling debate was not solely the fault of the media but in us, the audience.

By making bold statements about current events, the media and the American people, *The Newsroom* brings current events to us in a way that makes us think about what we are watching. Instead of laughing with Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert we gasp in horror as Jeff Daniels says the United States is not the greatest country in the world. That shock is transformed as Daniels goes on and on about why, presenting statistics and facts that are completely true. We are forced to look at his statements in a new way, which is precisely what satire sets out to do.

Biography:

John Faugno is a senior at the University of New Haven and is majoring in English. He is the Treasurer of UNH's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the national English honors society, and was named Layout Editor for their regional literary journal *Mind Murals.* He is an aspiring writer, and spends as much of his free time behind a keyboard as he can. He has recently finished his first manuscript and is currently looking for a publisher. He would like to thank his wife, Dana, for enduring countless hours of *SNL* reruns in the name of research.

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[1] Hodgart, M. (1969) *Satire, Origins and Principles.* New Brunswick, NJ. Transaction Publishers.
[2] Hornby, R. (1983). Understanding Acting. *Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 17 No. 3.* 19-37.
[3] Stein, S. 3/18/10. Anita Dunn: Fox News An Outlet for GOP Propaganda. *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved Oct 17, 2012, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/11/anita-dunn-fox-news-an-ou_n_316691.html