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Irony as a mode of political engagement

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IRONY AS A MODE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

by

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1999

Master of Arts
Babes Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania
2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
Department of Communication Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2008**

UMI Number: 1460471

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Thesis Approval

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

July 7_____, 2008

The Thesis prepared by

Daniel L. Horvath

Entitled

Irony as a Mode of Political Engagement

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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Examination Committee Chair

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Dean of the Graduate College

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Examination Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

Irony as a Mode of Political Engagement

by

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In the context of an estranged public sphere, irony, as dissonance

between the literal meaning of the utterance and the latent one, becomes

a new standard for political sincerity. What Linda Hutcheon calls irony's

"edge," involving "the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental

attitude," cannot be divorced from (political) attitudes and emotion.

Despite irony's popular reputation of being a humorous disengaged

trope, my analysis follows its deployment in increasingly politically

engaged artifacts and performances. Matt Stone and Trey Parker's *South

Park*, Michael Moore's documentaries, and Stephen Colbert's

performance at the 2006 WHCA dinner, provide ample evidence of irony

as politically relevant. The current project charts irony's progression

from *South Park's* generalized critique of collective behavior, and Moore's

politically committed performance of the "impossible conversation," to

Colbert's communicating directly to the president his dissent as

"truthiness." All these artifacts sketch the image of irony as versatile

trope, rhetorically efficient as a mode of political engagement.

.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In my wildest dreams I always imagined myself giving an Oscar

acceptance speech: "I want to thank God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit,

the twelve apostles, Pope John Paul II, Mother Theresa, the participants

of the first and second Council of Nicaea, and all the patron saints in

existence." It took a grueling two days at the American embassy in

Bucharest, a summer-long lobbying effort apart from my sister, a 20,000

km trip, and two years of intense Master level classes to realize that I

was interested in irony all along.

First I want to thank Dr. David Henry for not resisting my sister's

efforts to convince him that I am a viable candidate for the

communication studies graduate program and for making clear the

distinction between terrible and decent writing. I also want to thank all

the members of the admission board for taking a chance on an

international student from Transylvania, famous for its bloodlust rather

then universities. I also want to thank Dr. Thomas Burkholder for

making me realize that Aristotle and Plato are not simply dead Greeks

but a vital component of a strong rhetorical foundation. I also want to

thank Dr. Anne Stevens, who, together with Dr. Henry and Dr.

Burkholder, formed my thesis committee and provided valuable feedback

in advancing this project in the right direction. I want to thank all the

faculty members as well, not only for the diverse classes offered but also for the high standards to which they held me and my classmates.

This brings me to my friends, my "comrades in the trenches," fighting the deadlines shoulder to shoulder. "Cooperate to graduate" was never truer then with this group of people: Desiree A. "D-ray" Cartmill, Jonathan K "J-oz" Osborne, Michele L. "Elle" Cannella, Brittney M. "Wifey" Wojtaszek, Sarah Anne "Bff" Ewing, and Sarah Nicole "Soulmate" Nebel. Within this family, and I'm not using this term lightly, "purple hearts" go to: Brittney "Wifey," with whom I became a family by spending weeks upon weeks at the library, from dawn till dusk working to exhaustion; Sarah "Bff," who embraced my presence here with an intoxicating curiosity and overwhelming friendship – being her friend means being her family; and "Soulmate" who proved that souls do no speak different languages – her incredible love of life was indeed contagious. Somehow, thank you doesn't seem enough. So, here it is: I love you.

But all this couldn't have happened without my family: my sister Edith Gelu, my brother-in-law Robert, and my niece Petra. From stalking Dr. Henry for an entire summer, to sharing their house and embracing me with the kind of peaceful atmosphere only family can, they have offered me a safe haven vital for the survival in a strange new universe. Here I also want to thank my best Romanian friends Andreea and Adi for

being and for being adamant in their conviction that coming here will do me good.

However, this acknowledgment would've had the same faith as my Oscar acceptance speech if it weren't for Dr. Donovan Conley. As my professor and thesis advisor, he went well beyond the call of duty to read each paper and chapter several times when even I could no longer stare at my own writing. If rhetoric is indeed constitutive, then Dr. Conley's classes, the articles, and the topics to which I was exposed, shaped me the most.

As a final word, if PHD school, published articles, and books are to follow, they all have their origin here, within this group of people. My "brilliant" rhetorical voice to come, changing the face of rhetoric forever, will always be a chorus, this chorus.

CHAPTER 1

IRONY AS A MODE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

During an interview with Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's

The Daily Show, Al Gore summed up the contemporary political and

media environment by saying, "Back in the Middle Ages, the court jester

was sometimes the only person allowed to tell the truth without his head

being cut off."[1] This interesting metaphor about the visible role of humor,

irony, and satire within the current configuration of the public sphere

prompts the question: Do we really live in what Gore calls a new "dark

age" of reason? The Supreme Court deciding the presidency; 24 hour

news without news; the lack of political consequences for initiating a war

on insufficient evidence; or the administration's refusal to sign the Kyoto

accord, when the growing concern about the detrimental effects of global

warming brings well over a hundred and fifty nations together, seem to

support an affirmative answer. Even if these examples do not necessarily

add up to what Gore dubs the "assault on reason," they do sketch the

image of an estranged public sphere in which the public dialogue on

matters of common concern is not as open and as accessible as it is

imagined.

The theory of the decline of the public sphere is well established. From political figures such as Al Gore to social theorists such as David Zarefsky, Nancy Fraser, Craig Calhoon, or Thomas Goodnight, to name just a few, the story of what John Dewey called "the eclipse of the public" is told over and over again. We seem to have strayed from Jurgen Habermas' notion of a bourgeois public sphere, open to all, where the differences between individuals can be "bracketed" to allow a rational debate for the common good. The "dumbing down" of the public seems to constitute a true Bitzerian exigence, or as Lloyd Bitzer phrases it, "an imperfection, marked by urgency" that can potentially be mended through discourse. Within this framework, irony is one such discursive response.

"Public stupidity," to borrow a phrase from Robert Hariman, is under scrutiny from the deeply political satire of *South Park* to the sarcastic venom of Michael Moore's documentaries and to Stephen Colbert's ironic praise of the Bush Administration at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association's Dinner. Each of these authors, and each of their texts, responds to a specific exigence through irony. For the purposes of this project, I use the term irony to mean a dissonance between the expected and the actual, the latent and the manifest, meant to resolve a specific political exigence. For Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of *South Park*, the little town of South Park becomes an ironic expression of a larger society characterized by panic, fear, and

uncritical crowd behavior, more often than not, induced by media. For Moore, a dialogue with a deaf corporate and political power becomes an "impossible conversation," performed ironically through encounters with Roger Smith, Charlton Heston, or George W. Bush. Similarly, for Colbert, the contradictions between a self-sufficient president and the long string of controversial policies, are addressed through Socratic irony. Embodying an admirer of the Bush administration Colbert communicates dissent through "praise."

If this estranged public sphere is analyzed in conjunction with the dissolution of the critical function of media, Gore's metaphor about the role of the jester becomes illuminating. The disappearing line between news and entertainment and the fear of being branded "unpatriotic" or "thinking in a pre 9/11 mindset," makes "speaking against the king" a difficult and dangerous endeavor. Taking into consideration cases such as the firing of Bill Maher for living up to his own "politically incorrect" label, it comes as no surprise that Reporters Without Borders ranks the US 56 in terms of freedom of the press, after being ranked 17th in the first list published in 2002.[2] The media seem preoccupied more with the jail ordeal of hotel heiress Paris Hilton and the potential loss of ratings for allowing politically incorrect versions of the truth than anything else. These aspects of the current media environment are what leads Al Gore to claim, "to get to the heart of what the most important news is, this [The Daily Show] is one of the places to go to get the straight story."[3]

Paradoxically, then, news and entertainment seem to have switched places. Irony, satire, and ridicule seem to fare better in exposing the discrepancies and contradictions of this estranged public sphere, than "straight talk." "Serious media" follow from above, for minutes upon minutes, Paris Hilton or Eliot Spitzer driving in their cars, one on her way to prison and the other on his way to an apologetic press conference, and call it news. It seems that it takes Stewart's laughter, as he puts side by side the same images from all major networks, from CNN to MSNBC and Fox, and the same moronic commentaries about the traffic in New York, to put things in perspective.

Irony, and its partners satire and sarcasm, flourish when rational argument is in short supply. This estranged public sphere - of torture rhetorically disguised as "enhanced interrogation," of fear as argument to limit the liberties of American citizens, of car rides as news - seems to go hand in hand, in the last 20-30 years, with the resurgence of political irony. TV shows such as *Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The Colbert Report, The Late Show with David Letterman,* or *Late Night Show with Conan O'Brian,* to name just a few; and cartoon series such as *The Simpsons, South Park,* or *Family Guy,* use irony to expose and challenge the various "stupidities" of our public lives. As such, irony as a new standard for political sincerity will provide a working model for each of the chapters in my thesis.

In order to explain how irony operates rhetorically in texts like *South Park*, Michael Moore's documentaries – *Roger & Me, Bowling for Columbine, Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Sicko* – and Stephen Colbert's 2006 WHCA dinner performance, one must also explain how it works politically. Irony, after all, seems to be a disengaged trope. In their discussion of subject positions in relation to a rhetorical artifact, Barry Brummet and Dentine Bowers define the subject position of the "knowing ironist" as neither opposed to nor self-identified with a given text. This account suggests that the ironist maintains a position of conscious detachment. How can a trope characterized by a willed distance be said to have political valence? In other words, how can we conceptualize irony as a mode of political engagement if what it seems to offer is nothing more than strategic aloofness?

To answer this question, each of the chapters will look not only at how irony works artistically but also at the audience's reaction when exposed to what Linda Hutcheon calls the "edge" of irony. Irony's audience is cued in to the follies of public life, simultaneously concerned enough to allow themselves to be constituted by a text that brings attention to a particular issue. Affect, being laughter or anger, becomes a way of paying attention, a way of being concerned and involved; it becomes the condition of access to a public. In the end, through this public, capable of recognizing what Charles Morris calls the "textual wink," the emotional aftermath or irony is what actualizes its political

valence. As Burke points out "the comic frame" ultimately is not passiveness, but "maximum consciousness."[4]

Thus, the current project intends to analyze how each of these authors and their texts respond to the exigencies of this estranged public sphere and what the emotional investment of audiences in their "fitting responses" tells us about irony's edge. I argue that the strangeness of our public exchanges on matters of common concern makes irony an appealing, perhaps even necessary, mode of engaging in public debates. The remainder of the introduction offers a detailed discussion of the main concept and critical tool needed for my project: irony. Following this discussion, the second section provides insight into the concept of audience. The final section sketches the overall picture of the thesis by offering a preview of each chapter.

Irony

Irony, according to The Oxford English Dictionary is "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used."[5] Such a definition is useful, for it synthesizes the most common usage of even complex philosophical concepts. We can infer from this simple definition that irony entails, first and foremost, a dissonance between the literal meaning and the latent one (usually the opposite). The tension between the two levels of meaning points to a salient dimension of irony: intent. It is difficult to gauge someone's intent

when speaking and as such, detecting irony entails knowledge of the context and the process of decrypting/recognizing the "true" meaning of the utterance as ironic. Thus, synthesizing the implications of this definition, three concepts become relevant to the study of irony: dissonance (discrepancy), meaning (interpretation/recognition), and intent (context).

In *The Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke approaches irony as one of the four "master" tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. He argues that the four tropes, and their corresponding functions - perspective, reduction, representation, and dialectic - shade into each other and the use of one necessarily implies the use of the others. But what is of interest in Burke's approach is primarily his reason for analyzing the master tropes. Burke argues that the goal of his analysis is not the figurative usage of the four master tropes but "their role in the discovery and description of 'the truth.'"[6] This perspective adds an important dimension to irony, as a mode of *discovery*. Thus, if we look at irony not solely as a figure of speech but as a trope organizing our public experiences, a trope linked in some way to the discovery of new truths, the notion of irony as a form of political engagement becomes tenable.

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms expands the Oxford dictionary definition, explaining irony as, "The subtlest rhetorical form," as "a contradiction or incongruity between appearance or expectation and reality."[7] This definition adds new forms of irony, such

as situational irony or structural irony, thereby expanding our critical palette. First, verbal irony, dubbed "stable" by Wayne Booth, has to be distinguished by unintended "ironies of event" or "ironies of faith." The question of intent becomes salient in Booth's discussion of irony. For Booth stable irony is defined by four dimensions: its intended (deliberate), covert, stable, and finite in application. Booth's idea of *reconstruction* of ironic meaning, a staged process of reconstructing the presence of irony in a given rhetorical performance, entails knowledge of context and a focus on audience.

The Bedford Glossary identifies two more types of irony besides verbal: situational and structural. While verbal irony, also called rhetorical irony, is defined as the discrepancy between what a speaker says and what the speaker means, situational irony points toward the discrepancy between expectation and reality. Situational irony is further divided into three subspecies: dramatic irony, tragic irony and Socratic (dialectic) irony. In dramatic Irony "the character's own words come to haunt him or her"- as such dramatic irony becomes a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or the audience knows to be true. Tragic irony is distinguished from dramatic only insofar that the consequences of the incomplete information on the part of the character have catastrophic consequences. The third type of situational irony, Socratic/dialectic, stems from Socrates' style of

argumentation: acting foolish to expose the irrationality of his adversaries' position.

This extensive taxonomy of irony reveals the interwoven layers of irony at work in the three artifacts that organize this thesis. In the case of Michael Moore's documentaries, for example, the ironic engagement of controversial social and political issues goes beyond verbal irony. In *Bowling for Columbine*, a documentary about the pervasiveness of violence in American society, hashed out through the tragic shooting at the Columbine High School, Moore schedules an interview with NRA vice-president Charlton Heston. The dramatic irony in this scene is evident. Introducing himself as a legitimate National Rifle Association (NRA) member and a reporter, Moore sets the stage for the "character's" downfall. The audience is well aware of the discrepancy between Heston's misguided perception of the interview and Moore's ambush – the textbook definition of dramatic irony. Similarly, the scene points to Socratic irony as well. Dressed in "plain" clothes, with a humble attitude, Moore exposes the irrationality of his opponent's position by first agreeing with him and slowly steering the discussion for Heston to contradict himself - a modern day platonic dialogue. This scene is a perfect example of the different and interwoven levels of irony manifested through these artifacts.

As we have seen with the discussion about subject positions, the implied position, that of the ironist, neither accepts nor rejects the

themes presented in a text. As Brummet and Bowers point out, "The reader might take an implied subject position. Here the reader does not identify with the character or image in the text, but is nevertheless called to and constructed as subject in order to read it. Ironic or satiric texts often encourage this stance."[8] Nevertheless, irony, as used by Stone and Parker, Moore, and Colbert, is anything but politically disengaged. Revealing the irrationality of the public's collective behavior in the *South Park* episode entitled *Two Days Before the Day After Tomorrow,* where the media spectacle surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is savagely ridiculed, is not simply an exercise in humor, but rather a mirror for our real-life collective absurd behavior. Similarly, in Michael Moore's documentaries, irony is not just a tool used to expose the discrepancies and inconsistencies between official positions and harsh realities, but also a way to shine a passionately invested light on public issues such as youth violence, corporate indifference, or political manipulation. And last but not least, Colbert uses his ironic persona, the embodiment of an arrogant poorly informed supporter of the Bush administration, to harshly "praise" Bush's achievements be they the "fabulous" job in Iraq or the disappearing glaciers. I posit that the use of this seemingly disengaged trope actually increases the awareness about an issue by highlighting its internal inconsistencies.

It is these internal inconsistencies and irony's appearance of a disengaged trope that fuel Burke's discussion about perspective by

incongruity. According to Burke, the "methodology of pun," or metaphorically applying words that belong to one category to a different one, offers a revised perspective, a "comic synthesis" that transcends the individual elements. He argues further that perspective by incongruity is not "demoralizing" but "remoralizing" a situation "already demoralized by inaccuracy."[9] Burke's discussion offers further support to the idea that irony is not a disengaged trope. Consequently, further inquiry into the link between irony and politics is needed.

Enter Richard Rorty's discussion about contingency, irony and solidarity. For Rorty, the self referentiality of irony makes it incompatible with the public realm for the ironist is someone continuously doubting her own "final vocabulary," "always aware of the contingency and fragility" of such vocabularies. For Rorty the final vocabulary is the set of terms which one employs to justify his/her actions, his/her beliefs, and his/her lives. Simply put, the final vocabulary is our view of the world. It is the self referentiality, meaning an awareness of the fragility and contingency of one's own "final vocabulary," which makes irony "largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions." Rorty posits, "I cannot imagine a culture that socializes its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter."[10] It is the potentially relativistic nature of such awareness of fragility that prompts Rorty to endorse a distinction between the private and the public realms. He leaves irony

and the ironists a crucial role in the formation of our self-image but excludes them as irrelevant in the public realm. For Rorty irony is not a mode of truth but the consciousness of the fragility and contingency of one's own "final vocabulary" – fragility which displayed in the public sphere is incompatible with the common sense (the opposite of irony) which most benefits the liberal societies.

This depoliticization of irony has to be acknowledged in order to be revised. James McDaniel, for instance, not only considers irony relevant for public life, but also identifies the "liberal ironist program" with a specific section of the political spectrum: "the middle range – the sotto voce – characteristic of a certain 'republican' ethos." In other words, for McDaniel "liberal irony" constitutes the very ground of democratic life. In a response to Robert Hariman's placing allegory at the center of the democratic public culture, McDaniel builds his arguments toward irony as better outfitting "critical consciousness, political activity, self-governance, and skills through which subjects participate in civic deliberation."[11] McDaniel argues that, as opposed to the cynic who "holds out for the presence of the real hidden behind appearances," the ironist realizes that there is nothing to discover or reveal and the true task is to "invent a space for the real to appear."[12] Consequently, in McDaniel's approach, the self-referentiality of irony not only fails to disqualify it from the political arena but is exactly what makes it better situated to outfit critical consciousness and hence political action. Linda

Hutcheon's re-conceptualization of irony provides further insight into this concept. In short, for Hutcheon irony "happens." Moving away from a logic of influence, where the traditional elements of irony – ironist, message, and audience — are locked in a linear model of production and reception, Hutcheon situates irony "on the edge," in the in-between spaces of chance and indeterminacy. The elements that make irony happen are "its critical edge; its semantic complexity; the 'discursive communities' that, I will argue, make irony possible; the role of intention and attribution of irony; its contextual framing and markers."[13]

In fact, by using this image of protean manifestations, Hutcheon moves towards a definition of irony not as a universal rhetorical tactic – a "Master Trope" – but as a dynamic communicative process. As such, Hutcheon argues that we should avoid thinking of irony "only in binary either/or terms of the substitution of an 'ironic' for a 'literal' (and opposite) meaning,"[14] and think about the ironic meaning as relational, inclusive, and differential. In other words, irony is flux, is the tension between latent and manifest and not a simple process of semantic substitution based on observable markers.

In her discussion of parody, Hutcheon equips irony with a semantic as well as pragmatic specificity, where the first is constituted by the contrast between latent and manifest while the latter points to the evaluative/critical function. Developing along the lines of its pragmatic specificity, Hutcheon defines irony as having an edge, involving "the

attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude."[15] It is in this pragmatic specificity that irony's edge lies and makes it most suitable as a rhetorical device for satire. As such, "the emotions provoked by irony as it is both used and attributed, as it is felt as well as deployed are probably not to be ignored."[16] In other words, irony cannot be divorced from attitudes and emotion; the very deployment of irony, in any context, involves the first and stirs the latter.

In the end, irony's trans-ideological nature, which allows its "edge" to cut both ways, to be used by the entire spectrum of concrete ideological manifestations, defines a trope in flux. This is a more versatile and protean behavior than irony's classical definition as a master trope would allow it to be. These unique resonances, I argue, can enrich any rhetorical discussion about irony and its deployment as a mode of political engagement. From the *Theory on Parody* to her discussion about irony's edge, Hutcheon charts the map for a tensional and politically charged trans-ideological trope. This trope doesn't act on an inert audience, surgically dividing those who get it and those who don't; rather it "happens" at the intersection between intent and discursive communities. Irony can reinforce as well as subvert. However, irony is never neutral; it involves the encoding and decoding of an evaluative attitude – "an edge."

Audiences

The emotional, judgmental, attitudinal edge of irony provides a way into the next relevant subject in the context of any discussion of irony with strong rhetorical resonances: the audience. The concept of audience in rhetorical scholarship can be sketched as a continuum. At one end we can plot the "pre-constituted audience," stable and homogenous, a necessary precondition of the rhetorical act, reminiscent of Lloyd Bitzer's rhetorical situation. At the other end is an audience that comes into being only through discourse, through the process of interpellation, or what Maurice Charland calls "constitutive rhetoric."

Moving past the theories which argue that irony creates an exclusive group of people "who get it," Hutcheon argues that that community in fact precedes irony and allows it "to happen." These "discursive communities" point to a shared system of beliefs, values, and, most importantly, communicative strategies as "a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings; which specify who can claim to initiate (produce, communicate) or know (receive, understand) meanings, about what topics under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why)."[17] These discursive communities are in fact highly volatile and in flux, "continuously and rapidly reconfigured."[18] For Hutcheon, "irony does not so much create 'amiable communities' as itself come into being in 'contact zones' as the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,

often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."[19] In other words, these discursive communities are fluctuant, in constant tension, and in-between spaces. Hutcheon argues that the fact that we all belong simultaneously to a multitude of such discursive communities is part of the complexity of irony and its reception. The concept of discursive communities will provide a useful critical tool in understanding the reaction to each of the artifacts under scrutiny in my project and help explain these reactions in terms of the appropriateness of irony and not in terms of the ability to decode the ironic meaning.

A mode of political engagement

My thesis thus argues that irony, far from being a politically disengaged trope, shines a different light on "matters of common concern," bringing attention to the countless incidents that act in conjunction toward estrangement of public exchanges. It is the tension between irony's simultaneous engagement and disengagement that links irony and audiences. Although the ironists, disengaged, seem to sit comfortably far from the raging debates taking place in the public arena, their laughter is not disengaged. By the same token, the anger of those targeted speaks of irony's cutting political edge. Irony, as a master trope, is based on a discrepancy between the actual and the implied, between expectations and reality. At the same time, the use of irony through artifacts that clearly have a public/political stake compels me to argue

against Rorty's appraisal of irony as being inherently private, by drawing from McDaniel's and Hutcheon's perspectives. The self referentiality of irony makes it not less but more suited for the political arena, given that it brings into the debate a vital component: the humble awareness of the contingency of one's own position.

The aim of my thesis is to assess the use of irony through three different artifacts that share an important similarity: the use of irony as a mode of political engagement in an estranged public sphere. As Burke points out "the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness."[20] Irony is thus not disinterested in the issues but in framing any debate in exclusive, opposing, irreconcilable positions – radical final vocabularies. In the end, I argue that common sense is not the opposite of irony, as Rorty posits; it is its ground and effect.

Chapter division

Chapter 2: "'Two Days before the Day after Tomorrow!' Public Stupidity and the Ironic Subject in South Park," advances the argument of *South Park*'s "mediational" theory of exigence. In the first section, through an analysis of several episodes with political relevance, informed by Lloyd Bitzer's model of rhetorical situation and its subsequent modifications by Richard Vatz, I argue that for Parker and Stone exigence is constituted not by publicly observable imperfections, but by

what Hariman calls public stupidity and the media spectacle surrounding the events and social/political issues addressed. This ironic "mirror," set against real events, exposes the ridiculousness of mediated collective behavior. Parker and Stone's target is crowd behavior and, through that, the latent and mediated system of shared beliefs and, most importantly, fears. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that for some audiences which recognize the lampooned system of beliefs as being their own, irony doesn't happen. In the end *South Park* becomes a discursive space in which Harriman's notion of "public stupidity" converges, through irony, with Canetti's concept of "crowd behavior."

In Chapter 3, "Michael Moore's Impossible Conversation," I explore Moore's use of ironic contrasts as means to expose a sharp discrepancy between harsh socio-economic realities and the "official" version of reality as voiced by corporate and political elites such as Roger Smith, Charlton Heston or President Bush. By ambushing these prominent figures, Moore leads his audience to the closed doors of power. First, I will discuss Moore's performance of the "impossible conversation," that is, the inability of marginalized voices to access public debate. The second section explores Moore's use of irony and controversy as means to expose this breakdown in public communication. In the last section I will explore Moore's deployment of irony - verbal as well as dramatic and Socratic - as means to emphasize and strengthen his message.

In Chapter 4, "'Speaking 'Truthiness' to Power:' Stephen Colbert at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association Dinner," I will explore Colbert's performance as featured entertainer at the 2006 WHCA dinner. Embodying a cartoonish exaggeration of a Bush supporter—proud, brash, and unsophisticated—Colbert used irony to mock the Bush administration. In this context, Colbert's use of irony has a unique characteristic: it is performed in the presence of the President himself, the very object of ridicule. Here irony is not deployed at the safe distance of a fictional town in Colorado or through Moore's cheeky editing techniques. Consequently, in the first section, I will explore the context of this performance by reviewing the WHCA and the annual dinner, Colbert's public persona, and the Bush presidency. Subsequently, in the second section, through a close analysis of the text itself, I will argue for the political edge of Colbert's use of irony intensified by the presence of the president – communicating dissent directly under the obvious cover of praise. The mixed media reception following Colbert's performance allows us to further the argument about the uses of irony through a discussion about audiences' reactions. Consequently, in the third section, I will argue that the negative reception of Colbert's ironic attack cannot be explained by simply equating poor reception with a failure to "get" the irony. Rather, objections raised by Bush's supporters as well as by some media outlets – either directly or by omitting Colbert's

performance in their covering of the 2006 WHCA dinner, pertain more to the appropriateness of irony than to "not getting the joke."

The last chapter, Chapter 5 "General Observations and Conclusion," will provide the concluding remarks following the analysis of irony through three different artifacts. Overall, the current project traces irony's evolution, from *South Park*'s somewhat general and distant ironic treatment of broad topics such as crowd behavior and mediated stupidity, to Moore's deeply invested ironic attacks of concrete individuals – Roger Smith, Charlton Heston, and President Bush – on concrete topics - corporate indifference, youth violence, the war in Iraq – and to Colbert's harsh "praise" of the Bush administration and media in the very presence of his targets. This progression shows irony being discharged increasingly closer to its targets. The resulting image is not that of a humorous trope, enacted from afar; rather it is a deeply involved, politically invested trope with an edge affectively cutting through audiences and targets, through supporters and adversaries – an emotional trope in flux actively making a difference in how public issues are approached and experienced.

Notes

¹ Al Gore, "On the Threat of Democracy," Comedy Central, The Daily Show, 24 May 2007, http://www.comedycentral.com/videos/index.jhtml?videoId=87525 (Accessed June 7 2008.)

² Reporters Without Borders, "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006," Reporters Without Borders, http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=639 (Accessed June 7 2008.)

³ Ibid

⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (. Los Altos, Calif., Hermes Publications), 1959, 171

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "irony"

⁶ Kenneth Burke, A grammar of motives (Berkeley: University of California Press), 503

⁷ Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston : Bedford Books, 1997)

⁸ Barry Brummet and Dentine L. Bowers, "Subject Positions as a Site of Rhetorical Struggle: Representing African Americans," in *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Thomas Rosteck (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 118

⁹ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 309
¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press 1989.), 87.

¹¹ James P. McDaniel, "Liberal irony: A program for rhetoric." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 34: 4 (2002), 323-324

[12] Ibid, 310

[13] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 4

[14] Ibid, 64

[15] Ibid, 41

[16] Ibid, 41

[17] Ibid, 94

[18] Ibid, 83

[19] Ibid, 89

[20] Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 171

CHAPTER 2

"TWO DAYS BEFORE THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW"!

PUBLIC STUPIDITY AND THE IRONIC SUBJECT

IN SOUTH PARK

South Park is an animated series about "life" in the fictional town of South Park, Colorado. The series, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, follows the lives of four foul-mouthed friends (Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny) as they critically engage current political and pop-culture events. The show premiered in 1997 on Comedy Central, and is currently (April, 2008) in its twelfth season, with over 170 episodes aired thus far. During this extensive run, no political issue (voting, political correctness, 9/11), social problem (poaching, gay rights, assisted suicide, hate crimes, sexual education in schools, child abduction), or religious belief (Scientology, Mormonism, Catholicism, Judaism) has been taboo for *South Park*, nor any celebrity beyond criticism. Anything that enters the public sphere is potentially fair game for the self-proclaimed "equal opportunity offenders" Parker and Stone.

Not only does the show directly engage political events and social issues, it often does so with remarkable speed. An episode of *South Park* can be put together in just a few days. For the original pilot episode

paper cut-outs were used in animation, a laborious process that has subsequently been replaced by computer animation. The impact of this animation style on production enables the creators of *South Park* to approach current events in real time, to integrate, literally, "up-to-the-minute" cultural references, and thus participate in live public debates. For example, "It's Christmas in Canada" aired on December 17 2003; The episode portrayed the capture of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein three days after the actual event. By the same token, the "Quintuplets 2000" story, set to air on April 26, 2000, would revolve around five Romanian gymnasts' ability to clone themselves. Nevertheless, before the episode aired national media became fixated on a cute little boy from Cuba, Elián González. As a result Parker and Stone quickly changed the episode to accommodate Elián González's story.[1] Another example of the swiftness with which social and political issues are animated in the South Park universe comes from the episode "Best Friends Forever." In this story, one of the four children, Kenny, ends up in a vegetative state. A legal battle ensues over keeping Kenny alive or removing his feeding tube. The show parodies the Terry Schiavo case and the media frenzy surrounding it. Aired on Wednesday, March 30, 2005, the work on the show began the previous Thursday, less than a week before.[2] This particular episode ended up wining an Emmy award for Outstanding Animated Program (For Programming Less Than One Hour) in 2005.

South Park's success and its underlying political and social commentary, so finely attuned to current events and debates, thus warrants an analysis of the show's power as a rhetorical artifact and, particularly, its relationship with its audience. Thus, in the first part of this chapter I develop an analysis of the show by drawing on Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, including subsequent modifications by Richard E. Vatz. I will argue that Parker and Stone use irony to advance a "mediational" theory of exigence, whereby political defects marked by urgency are constituted not within reality as such but in the mediational aftermath of the events. For Parker and Stone, the public's most pressing exigence is its own collective stupidity, its habit of transforming real events into media spectacles and dramatic red herrings. Irony exposes the ridiculousness of this crowd behavior by contrasting the world of "responsible" adults with the innocence of children. In *South Park*, the four children, the main characters, more often then not see things more clearly than the adults. As in the fairytale *The Emperors' new clothes*, the children are able to see through the mediated veil and point out that the "emperor has nothing on." However, as opposed to the fairytale, the South Park children's voices are muffled by the adults' passion with which they embrace their collective myths. The *South Park*'s "'smart' mobs," point to a community sharing beliefs and, most importantly, fears. The most common socio-political clichés are at the root of the people's ridiculous behavior. "Chased" by global

warming, because the televised reports dub it the cause of a flood, or burning down Wall Mart because they cannot exercise consumer self control, these *South Park* crowds are at once ridiculous and dangerous. The humor resulting from their derisory behavior should not obscure the fact that more often than not these crowds change the social, political, and – yes – natural landscape of South Park.

To such "imperfections," Parker and Stone offer the "fitting response" of humor through irony. Thus, having first examined Parker and Stone's use of irony to advance a mediational theory of exigence, the second section of the chapter looks at how *South Park* interacts with its audience. *South Park's* effectiveness – defined as both the number of lowal viewers and the number of outspoken critics - and its ability to engage in real time current events, transforms the show into a source of information and attitude. Although a comedy and "just" a cartoon, *South Park*'s satirical tone and its choice of themes promotes in fact a critical - even serious – engagement with contemporary social issues. The show reminds us that rhetoric is never neutral, that even cartoons have the capacity to structure political thought. Rhetoric has imbedded in its texture ideology, which configures the relationship between the individual and the social.

Building on Barry Brummet and Dentine Bowers' approach to subject positions, as well as Linda Hutcheon's concept of "discursive communities," I will argue that a close reading suggests that the show

opens up the space for the "knowing ironist" as a privileged position. The ironist, or the implied subject position in Brummet and Bowers' discussion, points to the individual that neither identifies nor opposes the text but is constituted nonetheless in order to read it. It is this ironic distance and laughter that *South Park* privileges. However, Leah Ceccareli's notion of polysemy complicates and enriches such an appraisal. It is the multiplicity of meanings, the polysemy or rhetorical artifacts that open multiple spaces to be inhabited by different subject positions. Consequently, the negative reactions to controversial episodes qualify the above assumption about the privileged position, introducing, through the notion of "discursive communities," the idea of irony as happening. As Linda Hutcheon argues, discursive communities are built upon a shared system of beliefs and communicative strategies. Following Hutcheon, I argue that irony is not deciphered but rather happens if the ironic interplay between latent and manifest resonates within such a particular discursive community.

Flaws in reality

The episode *Two Days before the Day After Tomorrow* begins with Stan and Cartman, two of the four main characters, playing in a docked speed boat. The childish play takes a turn for the worse and the boat crashes into the world's largest beaver dam, causing a massive flood and thus submerging Beaverton Town under water. Following a plethora of

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theories about the cause of the flood, global warming is found to be the culprit. Panic ensues, plunging the town into chaos. In the end, nothing is resolved. The children's admission of guilt goes unnoticed, muffled by a collective admission of responsibility. In the final scene, after Stan admits to breaking the dam, one of the characters in the crowd exclaims: "Don't you see what this child is saying? We can't spend all our energy placing blame when something bad happens. He's saying... we *all broke the dam*."[3] When Stan replies "No. I broke the dam," the people in the crowd start chanting one after the other – in a sequence reminiscent of the movie *Spartacus* - "I broke the dam." Stan's repeated admission of guilt becomes part of this collective chant. The true cause of the flood is slowly erased by South Park's people's inability to transcend their mediated collective behavior. This inability is evident all throughout this episode. The people are more than willing to embrace preposterous explanations, moving without so much as a second thought from global warming to "crab people" as explanations for the disaster.

The text is deeply political. It deals with current events, such as the debate surrounding the issue of global warming and the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, all of which is folded into a parody of the 2004 apocalyptic movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. The episode's clear connection to real events points to two salient concepts of Lloyd Bitzer's model of the rhetorical situation: exigence and fitting response. For Bitzer, rhetoric is fundamentally situational. Exigence, audience, and

constraints are interwoven within an objectively observable reality.[4]

Bitzer posits that the exigence, what he calls an "imperfection marked by urgency,"[5] prescribes both the discourse and the audience "capable" of mending it; it contains, if properly deciphered, the clues to its own solution. He argues that a rhetorical situation should be viewed "as a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance."[6] Consequently, rhetoric is "called into existence" by some objective imperfection, by a flaw in reality - "publicly observable" - that can potentially be resolved by discourse as mediated through an audience capable of being influenced by discourse into action.

Employing a Bizterian reading of *Two Days Before*, we can argue that both Hurricane Katrina and the issue of global warming are "publicly observable" phenomena, objective imperfections whose aftermath and effects in reality can potentially be mended through discourse. Nonetheless, for Parker and Stone, the exigency is not constituted by the actual events - in this case Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, depicted in the show as the Beaverton flood - but by the public's *interpretation of* or *reaction to* such events. The focus of Stone and Parker in this episode is not to get to the bottom of the situation and determine the real cause of the flood, and thus participate in the real conversation about Hurricane Katrina, but to follow the absurd tribulations of the people, the televised fear and the crowd behavior that ensues. What interests the

South Park creators is not solely to critique the media exaggeration but the people's complicit eagerness in taking part in the aftermath of disasters. In Oprah Winfrey's interview with New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, the mayor, visibly distraught talks about people being cooked up in the Super Dome: "Watching dead bodies. Watching hooligans killing people, raping people. People were trying to gives us babies, that were dying."[7] Following these emotional revelations, the mayor, overwhelmed, stops talking and wanders off camera. Oprah understandably starts crying. As later reports showed, these numbers and reports of rape, murder, and dead babies were in fact gross exaggerations, even if unintentional. However, with an estimated 7.4 million people watching Oprah daily, this mélange of televised reports and truth and its effects on how people perceive reality becomes an issue.[8] It is exactly this immediate reaction to a mediated report that is at stake in *South Park.* By reflecting the real media exaggeration, *South Park* points out that proof or critical thought no longer fits in the spaces between mediated truths in our eagerness to embrace them.

I thus argue that show thus supports a theory of exigence closer to Vatz's "correction" of Bitzer's model. Vatz argues in "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," that what Bitzer calls "situational characteristics" are nothing more than the speaker's or the observer's *interpretation* of the facts, his or her "phenomenological perspective." He argues that "meaning is not intrinsic in events. We learn of facts

and events through someone's communicating them to us."[9] Imperfections do not exist but are created from a multitude of intertextual events. According to Vatz, it is the rhetor that creates the rhetorical situation through his speech by which he makes salient particular events. It is the power to choose that brings a social imperfection into existence. So, in contrast with Bitzer, Vatz argues that it is the hermeneutic dimension of rhetoric that determines reality and not vice versa.

The above mentioned *South Park* episode presents a clear chain of events: the Beaverton flood caused by the children's boat accident and their admission of guilt as a "fitting response" - both appropriate and demanded by the situation - to the exigence. The narrative is to this extent a perfect Bitzerian model of rhetorical resolution. However, for Parker and Stone, the imperfection, the flaw in reality, is *not* the kids' behavior or the hurricane as event but what Robert Hariman calls "public stupidity," the South Park people's appetite for hysteria which makes them embrace preposterous explanations and absurd courses of action. Indeed, I suggest that it is precisely this type of stupidity and ignorance that constitutes *South Park*'s rhetorical "reality"; it is the mediational absurdity of public discourse itself that is the show's object of ridicule.

For example, George Bush, terrorists, Al Qaeda and their Beaver dam WMDs, the mayor of Beaverton, FEMA, Communists, and Chinese

radicals are, in succession, suspected to have "caused" the Beaverton flood. In a representative scene, the South Park reporter announces that the causes of the flood "are being investigated." The camera pans out showing the towns people engage in a debate. One man exclaims "That's right! We know whose fault this is! ... It's George Bush's fault!"[10] To such a "preposterous" explanation another man in the crowd argues "George Bush didn't break that beaver dam! It was terrorists and Al Qaeda! They've been secretly building beaver dam WMDs for *years* now!"[11] The scene moves back in Stan's house in which the Marsh family follows the televised debate. Stan's mother points out that "the mayor of Beaverton should've done something about that dam years ago."[12] Randy, Stan's father promptly replies "Don't blame the mayor, Sharon. What about FEMA? Think this whole thing is really their fault."[13] A similar scene unfolds toward the end of the episode, in which Stan finally admits his responsibility to his friend Kyle:

Stan: I know what did cause the flood.

Kyle: George Bush?

Stan: No.

Kyle: Terrorists?

Stan: No.

Kyle: Communists?

Stan: No.

Kyle: Chinese radicals?

Stan: No.[14]

This humorous search for blame, a motif that runs throughout the entire episode, points to the public stupidity birthed and maintained by the South Park people's lack of reason and judgment. Parker and Stone use dramatic irony to expose this collective stupidity. The Bedford Glossary defines Dramatic Irony as a feature of the situation in which "the character's own words come to haunt him or her." As such Dramatic Irony points to a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or the audience knows to be true.[15] The audience of *South Park* is cued in from the first scenes about the true cause of the Beaverton flood and is left to witness the tribulations of the towns people in their ridiculous quest for answers.

Discussing the people's reaction to the dramatic events of 9/11, Robert Hariman argues, in his article "Public Culture and Public Stupidity Post – 9/11," that people are "incredibly ignorant" in regard to foreign policy. Two of the three reasons for this stupidity and ignorance are linked with media. Hariman posits that it is the political economy of media - "the revenue driven composition of local news or the working relationship between the national news organization and their government sources" - which makes media more susceptible to spectacle and government influence.[16] By the same token, Hariman argues that the programmatic eluding of foreign affairs in the news coverage, leads to

the people's inability to employ critical thinking when faced with important foreign affairs policies.

A case in point that can be brought to support Hariman's appraisal of public stupidity is Republican representative Bob Ney's attempt to change the names of culinary products such as French fries and French toast or to boycott wine as a reaction to France's insistence on a diplomatic solution and its refusal to support the U.S. military intervention in Iraq. Responding to complex foreign affairs issues, such as one country's refusal to support an international policy, with semantic tinkering and the boycott of (already purchased) products, points to the eagerness of the public to employ dramatic/theatrical solutions.[17] As Alan Reynolds, a prominent U.S. economist, points out, through the wine boycott people displayed what he called, "economic illiteracy." [18] According to Reynolds, French wine accounts for less than 3 percent of US imports from France and, the wine used in the "pouring parties" (in which French wine was bought and then poured down the gutter) was already purchased by U.S. distributors and retailers. Both Hariman's concept of public stupidity and Reynolds' more forgiving notion of public "illiteracy," point to the public behavior that emerges when bad journalism meets an already over-stimulated audience.

Similarly, the collective stupidity exemplified by the *South Park* community is a blend of the exaggerated media portrayal of events, the public's constant appetite for the sensational and the banal, and their

compulsion to act on insufficient evidence or information. Take for example *South Park*'s satirical references to media reports on Hurricane Katrina. The line "It's George Bush's fault! ... Yeah! George Bush doesn't care about beavers!" uttered by one of the characters in the first moments of the Beaverton flood, refers to an incident in which, in an NBC televised fundraising for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, African American rapper Kanye West strayed from the teleprompter saying "George Bush doesn't care about black people!" As a result, NBC issued the following statement:

> Kanye West departed from the scripted comments that were prepared for him, and his opinions in no way represent the views of the network. It would be most unfortunate if the efforts of the artists who participated tonight and the generosity of millions of Americans who are helping those in need are overshadowed by one person's opinion.[19]

When Stan, the actual culprit of the Beaverton flood, asks if someone will go and help the people stranded on their roof tops, his father promptly answers: "That's not important right now, son. What's important is figuring out whose fault this is." Thus, *South Park*'s satirical reference to the Kanye West incident points to the public's eagerness to cast quick blame, a sort of lynching impulse, instead of focusing on the actual task at hand – the effort to raise support for the victims.

Another obvious reference to the media exaggeration during Hurricane Katrina and its effects on public opinion is offered in the first scenes of the Beaverton flood. The South Park field reporter, standing ankle deep in water, paints an apocalyptic picture by talking about a death toll "in the *hundreds of millions*"—in a town with a population of eight thousand. This absurd depiction is further amplified when reports of murder, rape, and cannibalism are made:

> Mitch: W-we're not sure what exactly is going on inside the town of Beaverton, uh Tom, but we're reporting that there's looting, raping, and yes, even acts of cannibalism.
>
> Tom: My God, you've, you've actually seen people looting, raping and eating each other?
>
> Mitch: No, no, we haven't actually seen it Tom, *we're just reporting it.*[20]

These scenes are references to actual statements, as for example Randall Robinson's[21] comment, later retracted, that victims in New Orleans had resorted to eating corpses to survive, or Ray Nagin's comments on September 5 on *Oprah* that murders and rape are happening in the Superdome and "babies are dying," while the death toll is expected to be around 10,000.[22] As mentioned, after the hurricane, both New Orleans officials and the media retracted many of the gruesome stories circulated during the flood.[23] According to BBC News, New Orleans police confirmed that there where no official reports of

rapes, murders or cannibalism during the aftermath of the Hurricane

Katrina and that the death toll - 841 - was far from the 10,000 figure

advanced.[24]

These mirror images (Beaverton - Katrina), exposing the

hypervigilance of media reporting, point to the true exigency for Parker

and Stone: the connection between "just reporting" and the people's lack

of critical thought and calm judgment. Therefore, the show's irony is

focused on the public's mediated perception of reality. As Vatz exposes

the subjective nature of Bitzer's "reality," Parker and Stone likewise

expose the absurdity of the public's routine beliefs that what is "just

reported" to be happening actually constitutes reality. We watch how

mediated public discourse creates reality. Named as the cause of the

flood, Global Warming creates effect in reality; people run around fearful

for their lives, hiding inside the school auditorium prepared to "ride it

out." The real cause in the episode, the children's boat accident, is used

by Parker and Stone to expose the ridiculous and mystifying effects of

the public discourse surrounding the events. *South Park* creators' critical

eye is focused not on Bitzer's publicly observable reality but on the

subsequent public rhetoric that creates a new, skewed reality—petty,

irrational, and hysterical. As Vatz argues, rhetoric must be viewed as a

"creation of reality ... rather then a reflector of reality."[25] As such, Parker

and Stone's critique is not directed towards the actual catastrophic

events (the flood and the people stranded on the rooftops) but towards the public's peculiar response to them.

For Parker and Stone, then, the imperfection marked by urgency is the collective stupidity of public discourse itself. *South Park*'s creators' own "fitting response" to the mystifying effects of public discourse is ridicule through irony. If the fitting response is, as Bitzer posits, a discourse through which a positive modification of the imperfection can be enacted, Parker and Stone's aim is to enact such a modification through irony. As such, the power of the show is manifested within reality. Through ironic engagement of these issues, the imperfections could be potentially solved through discourse. For example, in VH1's special documentary *Inside South Park*, Parker and Stone talk about an episode in which the object of ridicule was famous directors who meddle with their past movies. In the episode, Stan Marsh, one of the four boys, states that movies have to be taken from directors like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas "because they're insane." One of the reasons behind making this episode, according to Parker and Stone, was the rumor that a special updated edition of the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark" was to be produced. Stone argued that, as a result of their episode, in which such an attempt is savagely ridiculed, the remake of the movie will not take place. Steven Spielberg, the director lampooned in the episode, wrote "the meanest nicest letter" – talking about what a badge of honor it is to

be vilified as a character in *South Park.* The conclusion seems to be that the episode contributed to halting the re-make of these old movies.

For Parker and Stone, then, the exigence is not determined by the situation but created within the public sphere by discourse. The real exigencies are replaced by collective myths and absurd mob-like behavior. In *Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes,* the people of South Park struggle against "big corporations." Unable to fight against Wall Mart's low prices through consumer self-control, one of the characters exclaims "This place has a power over us we can't resist! We have to find a way to put the South Park Wall Mart out of business once and for all!"[26] "Evidently," the solution is simple, as another character puts it: "Let's burn it down!" The children's innocence provides again the contrast for the adults' collective stupidity. Kyle, one of the four children yells "No! All we have to do is not shop at Wall Mart anymore! If you want it to go away, all it takes is a little self-control and personal responsibility."[27] The answer comes in the next scene depicting all the people of South Park standing silently on the sidewalk, watching Wall Mart burn to the ground. One of the characters starts singing "Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya" and the entire crowd follows, swaying back and forth, holding hands. The song galvanizes the community. Ironically, yet again, the simple solution of individual responsibility fades away in a quasi-religious display of collective stupidity.

Through this view of the public, Parker and Stone's satire follows

Vatz's approach that construes the rhetor as creating reality. This use of

irony exposes the ridiculousness of this collective behavior enacting an

absurd reality. The children provide a clear reading of reality and are

ready to enact their fitting response. However, the children's fitting

response is always ignored by adults. As a matter of fact, the adults

themselves act like children, producing an infantile public. The end of

the Wall Mart episode finds the people "finally" understanding the error

of their ways. One of the characters points out "You see boys, if we like

our small-town charm more than the big corporate bullies, we all have to

be willing to... pay a little bit more. Do you understand?"[28] The epiphany

is quickly followed by the real solution "Let's all go shop at Jim's Drugs

down the street!" The scene portrays Jim's Drugs, a store previously run

out of business by Wall Mart, opening its doors. The crowd flocks to the

store and cheerfully starts shopping. The long string of people entering

Jim's Drugs makes it grow steadily. As if the store was feeding on people,

Jim's Drugs slowly becomes a huge building identical in size to the

recently scorched Wall Mart. Cut to the next scene, the people silently

watch from the sidewalk as Jim's Drugs burns to the ground. The flames

are once again accompanied by the communal song *Kumbaya Oh Lord,*

Kumbaya. One of the characters exclaims, "All right, let's not make that

mistake again," while another points the way, "Yeah, let's all shop over at

True Value!" [29] The crowd wholeheartedly agrees and moves in block to

another store, "feeding" it. Every "revelation," then, is always already misplaced. The crowd consistently makes the same mistakes and consistently employs the same rash solutions.

For *South Park*'s creators, mediated public discourse is ontological; that is, it creates reality by materializing ideas, and by doing so induces irrational collective behavior. This ontological power of public discourse, combined with the people's appetite for drama, is viewed by Parker and Stone, as mind numbing, creating a "false consciousness." The ridiculousness of the different causes of the Beaverton flood in *Two Days After the Day After Tomorrow* is exposed in comparison with the objective cause - the boat accident. Although guilty, it is the children's "innocence" in finally accepting responsibility, which offers the contrast to expose the absurdity of collective beliefs and actions. By the same token, in *Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes*, the children advocating responsible consumer behavior expose the ridiculousness of the adults "burning down and moving to another store" behavior. As such, it is mediational aftermath of events that constitutes the true exigency for Parker and Stone. Ultimately, the show's creators are bent on dissolving the unholy marriage between reports of Global Warming as real and the people running away chased by a Global Warming transformed by televised reports into a material entity. Their ironic approach to the public debate surrounding the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina is

bent on deconstructing both the belief that what we talk about constitutes reality and the people's passion invested in such a belief.

In the episode entitled *Cartoon Wars*, the people of South Park are afraid of retaliations from Muslims due to a cartoon - *Family Guy* - depicting the Muslim prophet Mohamed. This episode references the scandal surrounding The Muhammad Cartoon Controversy in which the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published in 2006 twelve cartoons depicting caricatures of Muhammad. What is of interest here is, yet again, the collective solution to deal with this issue. In order to prevent Muslim extremists from grouping the innocent (viewers) with the guilty (authors of *Family Guy*), the South Park people literally bury their head in the sand. When one character argues for freedom of speech pointing out that "we should ALL make cartoons of Muhammad, and show the terrorists and the extremists that we are all united in the belief that every person has a right to say what they want,"[30] the other characters promptly reply "I like the sand idea ... Yeah, me too ... Yeah. The sand thing sounds a lot simpler."[31] The next scenes show people across America, in the middle of the street, with their head buried in the sand. Yet again, rash solutions, mediated reality, and collective stupidity overshadow reality.

Parker and Stone constantly use irony to expose this ridiculous mob-like behavior. The crowd and its absurd manifestations are their real target. In *The Crowd and the Mob: from Plato to Canetti*, J.S. McClelland

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provides an extensive overview of crowd theories. What is of interest here is the last chapter of the book dealing with Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, or what McClelland calls "the only masterpiece of crowd theory."[32] What makes Canetti's theory different from all the other theories preceding it is the separation between crowds and leaders. According to McClleland, before Canetti, crowd theory can be characterized as leadership theory. The demagogue, the leader is seen as the creative source behind the crowd. Quite the contrary, for Canetti, crowds are in fact an escape from the patterns of authority. According to McClelland, Canetti is the first theorist "to take the mind of the crowd seriously, and provide it with a content of its own."[33]

Similarly, in *South Park*, there is seldom a leader leading the crowd. The South Park characters always voice what is on everybody's mind. Voices of reason are silenced. Whenever the children point out the obvious, they are ignored. The South Park crowds draw their energies from an inert material of shared beliefs, themes, and fears. For instance, in *Night of the Living Homeless*, in which the issues of homelessness is folded into a parody of the 1968 movie *Night of the Dead*, the towns officials discuss possible solutions to this problem. One character points out that "We could give the homeless all designer sleeping bags and makeovers. At least that way they'd be pleasant to look at" while another suggests that "We could turn the homeless into tires, so that we'd still have homeless, but we could use them, on our cars."[34] When one of the

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characters exclaims that "this whole conversation is extremely offensive! The homeless aren't monsters, they are people, like you and me" the reply comes promptly "You mean they've adapted, copied our DNA."[35] Even the expert in homelessness studies has to dissect "several" homeless people to figure out what "makes them tick." The scenario becomes even more absurd when the four children travel to Evergreens, a nearby town, to find out how this particular city got rid of the homeless people. In an extensive rant, one of the Evergreen survivors explains that "They (homeless people) fed off of our change to the point that they could actually start renting apartments. We knew it wouldn't be long before the homeless actually started buying homes. And then we'd have no idea who was homeless and who wasn't!"[36] The characters' solutions for homelessness are different, yet always the same. Behind these "diverse" answers to this social issue lies the same ignorance manifested into the utter otherness of the homeless people. All the *South Park* characters draw from the same pool of clichés, collective ignorance.

The South Park crowds are indeed smart; however they are smart not in critical intelligence but in self-awareness – i.e. agency. For Cannetti emotional content is an important factor in understanding crowd behavior. Consequently, one of his taxonomies of crowds identifies five types according to emotional content: baiting, flight, prohibition, reversal, and double crowds.[37] For example, in *Douche and Turd*, Stan's refusal to participate in a mascot election in which the only choices are a

"giant douche bag" and a "turd sandwich" quickly becomes a life and death situation. According to Canetti the baiting crowd is a "murderous crowd, a quick crowd which forms to kill."[38] Similarly in the town of South Park, Stan finds out that not voting is a crime punishable by banishment. All the inhabitants speak with one voice. The scene depicts a classic lynch mob. At dawn the entire population is gathered at the outskirts, holding torches. The mayor delivers the decree "As it was in the times of our forefathers, so it is now. Stan Marsh, for not following our most sacred of rites, you are hereby banished from South Park for all eternity. Or until you decide that voting is important."[39] As soon as the mayor finishes delivering the sentence, the towns people approach Stan one by one and rip a piece of his clothes and then spit on him. He is then tied to a horse, facing backwards, and his head covered with a bucket. The ridiculousness of the situation is accentuated when Stan's father, tying him to the horse, exclaims "This is breaking your mother's heart, Stan. She couldn't even help tie you to the horse."[40] The scene ends with the horse starting slowly to move while the crowd watches silently. One of the characters starts blowing a horn, adding to the "solemnity" of the situation.

For Canetti, flight crowds are even more easily identified for the threat causing the flight is indiscriminate affecting all. In *Two Days before the Day After Tomorrow*, "scientists" identify global warming as the cause of the Beaverton flood. As a result, panic ensues plunging the town into

chaos. One of the characters, looking in the distance points out towards something and yells "Oh Jesus, here it comes!" Everyone starts running in terror from "the thing" that the man is pointing to. Desperate cries, "Its right behind us!" give materiality to global warming. The ridiculousness is augmented when the crowd switches directions shouting "It's coming the other way!" The materiality of the threat is flawlessly portrayed in this scene. The camera starts acting the role of Global Warming, chasing the crowd. One man stumbles while "global warming", now a physical entity, catches up with him. Fallen, the man suffers seizures, as if something invisible, yet real, takes hold of him. The crowd takes refuge in the community center, "pursued" by the Global Warming. They barely manage to get inside and close the door in "Global Warming's 'face'", a scene reminiscent of horror movies, where the characters manage to close the door in front of the pursuing monster just in time.

The episode *Child Abduction is not Funny* identifies the third type of crowd, the prohibition crowd – a negative crowd – which obeys a sudden self-imposed prohibition, as, for example, in a worker's strike. Responding to *reports* about the increase in child abduction, the South Park parents become increasingly protective of their children. This build-up of fear culminates when a news anchor announces that the latest study shows that the parents themselves are the most likely abductors. Evidently, the parents begin to suspect each other until the solution

becomes yet again evident. The scene depicts the entire town gathered on a neighborhood street. The parents sobbingly hug their children. When one of the boys points out the obvious "why do I have to leave?" the reply comes promptly "The news says that at your age you aren't safe with us, son. You have to get out of here before we abduct you."[41] When one of the children asks where they should go, one of the parents answers "We can't tell you because we can't know where you are!" All the children in South Park huddle in the middle of the road, unsure what to do, then slowly start to move. Meanwhile, the crowd is literally bawling with their backs turned to their own children. The absurd and self-imposed prohibition is for the "greater good" - the safety of the children; the irony being of course that through this gesture the parents put their children more to risk then ever before. Yet again, one of the children points out the real problem. Moving away from this sobbing crowd, Stan states "Dude, sometimes I think our parents are really stupid."[42]

In other words, it is the reaction to the perceived problem that is the real problem. For Parker and Stone the preferred target is media-influenced crowd behavior and its effects on public discourse. As Canetti points out, this crowd is a self-aware; no leader can be blamed. The crowd feeds on itself. What is common to all these crowds is a shared symbolic material made up of themes, collective fears, and clichés. Parker and Stone use irony to lampoon not only absurd crowd behavior but through also their shared system of beliefs, common themes, and

fears from which the crowd feeds. Contrasting the aftermath of the

Beaverton flood and reported cartoon reality mirrors the tensions

between the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and real media exaggeration.

This is true for this episode as well as for other episodes referencing real

events. Dramatic irony provides a contrast between real events or

explanations, usually voiced by the children, and mediated reality

sparking absurd mob-like behavior. Parker and Stone lampoon crowd

behavior and especially their shared system of beliefs; their target is the

very (mediated) fears which drive these self-aware crowds. The

discussion about this mediated reality and recognizing through dramatic

irony the references to real events, also raises the issues of *South Park*'s

audience, the "crowd" watching the show. In the next section of the

chapter I will address the issue of audience through a discussion about

Brummet and Bower's concept of subject position and Linda Hutcheon's

notion of discursive communities.

"What's in an audience?" – Irony and audiences

It's hard not to love *South Park*, with its shallow, deep, twisted

blasphemy; the carnivalesque chaos it births into the universe, a house

of mirrors where everything is turned on its head for one simple reason:

to expose the absurd and ridiculous underbelly of public discourse.

These compelling rhetorical features warrant a pertinent question: Who

am I? What sort of viewer is this rhetoric calling out to? What kind of

audience does this discourse seek to capture? In pursuing answers these questions we explore how it is that rhetoric constitutes subjects.

Brummet and Bowers advance the notion of subject positions as "offered" by the rhetorical artifact. According to the authors, subject positions are roles or stances inhabited by an individual in relation to the rhetorical artifact. They argue that "the meanings of the categories (through which we define ourselves) are socially, symbolically created and charged with political and social import."[43] As such, these categories are constantly changing through and by different texts. As a consequence there are, according to the authors, three subject positions: identified, subversive, and implied. The first subject position – identified – circumscribes the acceptance of the themes, the socially constructed categories, as conveyed through the text categories. Using *Two days before* as an example, such a subject position sympathizes with the apparent critique of global warming as the cause of global weather disasters. The second subject position – subversive – defines a stance taken in opposition to the themes or images as portrayed in the text. In this example, the space for such a subject position is opened by the resistance to ridiculing global warming as the cause for the Huricane Katrina. The third and the last subject position is the implied one, in which the individual neither identifies nor opposes the text, but is constituted nonetheless in order to read it – the "knowing ironist."

The term "knowing" from the concept "knowing ironist" might seem linguistically redundant since the satirical and/or ironical approach implies that the subject is able to recognize the discrepancy between the literal and the actual meaning. Nonetheless, "knowing" is central to the term ironist. To inhabit the position of the ironist entails a double recognition: recognition of oneself as being addressed by a text—"this texts is speaking to *me*"—and a second recognition of oneself as part of a particular community of addresses—"this is speaking to *us*." One (identified or subversive) is a matter of attitude towards a text while the other (implied) adds knowledge and the awareness of possessing such knowledge.

This second awareness resembles what Charles E. Morris III calls the "textual wink." In his discussion of the "fourth persona," Morris posits that the textual wink calls audience members "into being as abettors."[44] The textual wink is a covert sign, the equivalent of a secret hand shake, one that both grants and reinforces one's access to a community/audience capable of recognizing hidden meanings. Thus, recognizing the textual wink elevates being interpellated as ironic subject into a privileged subject position, one that entails the awareness of one's own access to a deeper level of meaning, one that might escape to individuals inhabiting the implied or subversive subject positions.

It is the position of the ironist which *South Park* privileges. Although Brummet and Bowers do not expand on the latter, the arguments within

South Park support such a claim. For example, in *Two days before the Day after Tomorrow*, such an implied subject position is created through ridiculing media portrayal of catastrophic events as well as the public stupidity gullibility. Being able to recognize these constant references allows the interpellated subject to acknowledge its privileged position and "join" in a disengaged yet complicit laughter.

The first, and most obvious, issue is the ironic engagement of a pop culture icon: the apocalyptic movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. According to the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), the 2004 movie The Day After Tomorrow is ranked 43 on the All-Time USA Box office with and estimated gross income of $527,939,919 and 83 All-Time Worldwide Box office $186,739,919, and holds the record for biggest opening weekend for any movie not opening at #1 with $68.7 million. The ironic references to this highly successful movie are overt.

Starting with the title of the *South Park* episode, Parker and Stone point to the ridiculous configuration of the lampooned movie. The scientific community believes that global warming will strike "… the day after tomorrow." After more tests, the actual date is updated: global warming "is going to strike … two days before the day after tomorrow." The line, "Oh my God. That's today!" points to the ridiculous and flashy titles of block buster movies, to the need to embellish for "dramatic effect" something as simple as "today" or "two days from now."

The subject of the movie is also the target of ridicule. In the movie, global warming creates a super storm that brings about a new ice age. The same "scenario," even though global warming isn't really happening in *South Park*, unfolds in this episode. Randy Marsh, Stan's father, "the leading scientist," explains to the people that took refuge in the community center that "global warming has... shifted the climate bringing on a new ice age. Within the hour, the temperature outside will fall to over 70 million degrees below zero." Following the script of the blockbuster movie, *South Park* deconstructs through exaggeration these apocalyptic images and associated drama. The pop-culture references and the satirical treatment of apocalyptic movies, in fact opens up the space for the ironic engagement of the text.

Besides the parodic approach to commercially successful pop cultural events, *South Park*, as we have seen in the previous section, also exposes the ridiculous construction of public reality through media. From the "hundreds of millions" victims, in a town with eight thousand people, to the rape and cannibalism incidents, not witnessed but "reported," are ridiculed instances with counterparts in the real media portrayal/exaggeration/falsifying of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. The satire is clearly directed toward the mediational aftermath of natural catastrophes, towards the collective behavior enacted at the intersection between exaggerated media portrayal of events and the people's unfounded trust in reported realities. Consequently, the space opened

for subject position by *South Park* favors the ironic subject capable or recognizing the references, the satirical engagement, and, most of all, the real target of satire: public stupidity.

The "world of adults" is the most consistent subject for ridicule. The characters' inability to take (true) responsibility, their tendency to embrace the most preposterous explanations, and their eagerness to be influenced by media paint a mock picture of a public sphere where adults act like children and children act like adults or, to use Lauren Berlant appraisal, an "infantilized public." "We", as the audience, are left with few options in terms of identifying or opposing the themes and events portrayed in the show. Everything from pop culture to the ridiculous media portrayal of catastrophic events is ironically engaged. "We" are well aware, at all times, of what "really happened." We laugh at the ridiculous tribulations of the characters in their struggle to cope with a nonexistent global warming, mirroring the mediational public dramas that unfolds in reality. We are the "knowing ironist" constituted by an ironic engagement of the major themes and issues within the public sphere, including blockbuster movies.

In fact linking plots with a highly successful movie, Parker and Stone suggest the juxtaposition between our collective fantasies and reality. The show is bent on promoting awareness of the hegemony of public stupidity and lack of individual responsibility. Only the children's innocence makes them immune to and aware of the ridiculousness of

public discourse. But in the end, chanting "I broke the dam," unable to understand Stan's admission of guilt, Parker and Stone suggest that people are simply ridiculous. Any action and/or "epiphany" of the grown-ups are "always and already" premature and misplaced. The only choice left to "us" is to laugh and to recognize ourselves. The ironic treatment of major themes in this episode, from blockbuster movies to the preposterous explanations advanced as the cause for catastrophic events and to the panic ensuing such mediated realities opens up space for the ironist as the most prominent subject position. By opening up the space for the ironic subject, *South Park* does not simply mock public stupidity but addresses and creates a subject position capable of recognizing the flaws and, potentially, enacting change.

Data regarding *South Park*'s consequences hint at the success of this type of ironic engagement of current events. According to Devin Leonard, senior writer at *Fortune* magazine, *South Park* is one of Comedy Central's highest rated programs. The average viewers per episode is 3.1 million, more than another successful show of the same network – *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The same report points out that in 2005 the show generated $34 million in advertising revenue. According to Leonard, *South Park* transformed Comedy Central from a virtually unknown cable station into a power-house.[45] Furthermore, *South Park* won two Emmy awards for Outstanding Animated Program (For Programming Less Than One Hour) in 2005 and 2007 for *Best Friends*

Forever, and *Make Love, Not Warcraft*. The show also won in 2006 a Peabody, one of the oldest and more prestigious awards recognizing achievement by broadcasters, cable and Webcasters, producing organizations, and individuals.[46] Furthermore, Comedy Central recently extended the show's contract for another three seasons, a deal worth $75 million.[47]

However, casting the 3.1 million viewers in the role of the ironist, even grounded in data supporting the show's success, has to deal with the polysemic nature of rhetorical artifacts. It is the multiplicity of meanings that open multiple spaces to be inhabited by different subject positions. In its most basic definition, polysemy refers to the multiple meanings of a text. As Leah Ceccarelli argues, the term polysemy itself is polysemous, entailing at least three dominant and distinctive "meanings" used by rhetorical critics: resistive reading, strategic ambiguity, and hermeneutic depth as multiple meanings that subtract from the hegemonic control of the author, authorized by the rhetor, and respectively, discovered by the critic. Brummet and Bowers' subject positions – identified, subversive, and implied – point to the identification, opposition or neutrality towards the themes within a text. Thus, the possibility of simultaneous subject positions, with reasonable arguments within the text to justify their existence, is intimately linked with the polysemy of the rhetorical artifact. The polysemic and recalcitrant nature of texts, which makes artifacts resist being cemented into a singular reading, actually empower the

rhetorical artifact by offering individuals multiple subject positions. In other words, it is the possibility of different readings of the same text that creates different spaces for an audience.

In this light, my own appraisal - "We, as the audience, are left with few options in terms of identifying or opposing the themes and events portrayed in the show" – is ultimately an assumption. Evidence of *South Park*'s irony not hitting its mark is abundant. For example, The Parents Television Council "a non-partisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment,"[48] founded in 1995 constantly awards South Park, among other shows, the title "Worst Cable Content of the Week."[49] Besides the foul language being inappropriate for children, *South Park* sparks controversies with adult audiences as well. Starting with religion, *South Park* has drawn criticism for its portrayal of Scientology, Christianity, Mormonism, as well as Islam.

For instance, in the episode *Trapped in the Closet*, Parker and Stone make fun of the Church of Scientology as well as of the actor Tom Cruise, a well known member of this church. According to unconfirmed reports, Tom Cruise exerted pressure over Comedy Central – a company owned by Viacom, which also owns Paramount the movie studio employing Cruise – to stop airing the episode. During the same period, actor Isaac Hayes (the voice of character Chef), also a member of the church of Scientology, departed the show in protest. The show was indeed stopped form being re-broadcast; however the official reason given

by Comedy Central was to pay tribute to Hayes by making room for two episodes featuring the character Chef. Parker and Stone subsequently released a characteristic statement in *Daily Variety*: "So, Scientology, you may have won THIS battle, but the million-year war for earth has just begun! Temporarily anozinizing our episode will NOT stop us from keeping Thetans forever trapped in your pitiful man-bodies... You have obstructed us for now, but your feeble bid to save humanity will fail!"[50]

By the same token, in several episodes, Stone and Parker's use of irony and satire drew criticism form the Catholic Church, especially for the episode *Bloody Mary*. In this episode a statue of the Virgin Mary is portrayed as having a menstrual cycle. As a reaction, the president of the US Bishops dubbed the portrayal of Mary as "tasteless," depicting her in an "ugly fashion."[51] The same episode was pulled from Australian Television due to concerns over "sensitivities about religious cartoons." A SBS spokesman stated that, "Given the current worldwide controversy over cartoons of religious figures, we've decided to defer this program."[52] The controversy refers to the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, which sparked extensive protest from the Muslim community. Evidently, the Danish controversy itself is the subject of another two part *South Park* episode entitled *Cartoon Wars*, where the issues of depiction of religious icons is set against freedom of speech.

The list of controversies could continue. My goal, however, is to explore the possibility of alternative receptions of irony that move beyond

the distinction between those who "get it" and those who don't. As Linda Hutcheon points out, irony needs discursive communities to happen. Discursive communities are built upon a shared system of beliefs and communicative strategies. Given that the target of Parker and Stone's irony is crowd behavior and its shared system of beliefs and common fears, it comes as no surprise that for some of such communities, irony does not happen. What these communities advocate is not a misinterpretation of the ironic treatment for certain themes but to the inappropriateness of employing irony when dealing with sensitive issues. In the end, the assumption about the "knowing ironist" as the privileged subject positions has to be qualified by taking into consideration the notion of discursive communities and their reaction to irony. Not even the huge success of the show, both financial and in terms of viewers, guarantees a "correct" reading of the ironic meaning. What can be said about *South Park*, in relation to its audience, is that a close reading of the text suggests the ironist as a privileged subject position. However, the polysemy of the texts invites alternative readings, and, as the negative reactions suggest, the real circulation of the *South Park* "text," sometimes escapes this privileged position favoring the subversive one, based not on misunderstanding the irony but exactly on understanding it. Given the opened spaces of polysemic texts, not being able to identify beyond doubt the subject position privileged by South Park does not point to methodological or critical shortcomings. Rather, it speaks of the

very complexity of irony's journey between texts, contexts, and audiences.

"I broke the dam"

In the "quiet" town of South Park, Colorado, absurd utterances become reality. This power of language is made possible by what Hariman calls public stupidity. The innocent world of towns children is set against the absurd world of adults. The children's journey towards admission of guilt provides the contrast needed to exposes the adult's collective stupidity. Bizter's model for rhetorical situation, with its subsequent modification by Vatz, offers the theoretical framework to unearth Parker and Stone's "mediational" theory of exigence. Although the show deals with current political and social issues, Parker and Stone's aim is not to take a political stance on specific issues. Their ironical approach highlights another exigency: the "mediational" aftermath, the crowd feeding itself from its own shared system of misplaced beliefs and fears. It is the people's eagerness to accept as real exaggerated stories about murder, rape and cannibalism without evidence, and their collective adherence to this mediated "truth" which constitutes the real "imperfection marked by urgency." Parker and Stone's fitting response to such an imperfection is humor through irony.

This ironic "mirror," set against real events, exposes the ridiculousness of mediated collective behavior. It also creates and

addresses a privileged subject position: the (knowing) ironist. However, the polysemy of the text strongly points to Brummet and Bowers' notion of co-existing subject positions. The controversial nature of *South Park* and the negative reactions to its deployment of irony, compel me to appeal to Hutcheon's concept of discursive communities. This concept moves the discussion about irony's audience from the realm of deciphering (the latent meaning,) to the realm of happening. Objections are less about misinterpreting the latent meaning than about its appropriateness. Parker and Stone's target is crowd behavior and, through that, the latent and mediated system of shared beliefs and, most importantly, fears. Consequently, it come as no surprise that for some audiences which recognize the lampooned system of beliefs as being their own, irony doesn't happen. If the ironist sees the "textual wink," in the continued ravings of a dramatic public, the circulation of the text provides alternative readings. The controversial use of foul language and the inappropriate treatment of sensitive topics raises issues of appropriateness in the deployment of irony beyond the particular groups lampooned in one episode or the other. In the end *South Park* becomes a discursive space in which Harriman's notion of "public stupidity" converges, through irony, with Canetti's concept of "crowd behavior." The relationship between this space and its audience, beyond any theoretical tags we might impose, is alive, dynamic, and on-going.

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CHAPTER 3

MICHAEL MOORE'S "IMPOSIBLE CONVERSATION"

Jurgen Habermas inaugurated the narrative of the rise and fall of the

Bourgeois Public Sphere (BPS). Characterized by open access, the

possibility of "bracketing" social differences, and grounded in critical-

rational exchange, the BPS was organized around the rational principles

of reasoned debate. For Habermas the BPS is a "sphere of private

individuals assembled into a public body."[1] Emerging in opposition to the

state, from the particular historical and economic condition of the

emergence of the bourgeoisie, for Habermas the function of the public

sphere is defined by the principle of supervision. This principle defines

"the task of criticism and control" directed toward the authority of state.

Reason, access, and bracketing become intertwined. Reason, in

Habermas' understanding, placed at the center of the Public Sphere in

which access is "guaranteed," entails the force of one's argument over

one's historical particularity (identity). Such precedence can only be

achieved, Habermas argues, through the bracketing of social differences.

However, critics such as Nancy Fraser posit that the Bourgeois Public

Sphere never was nor could truly be opened to all given that "bracketing"

social differences is in fact an exclusionary tactic, one that in practice prohibits the entry of "marginal" voices to the forums of "official" debate.

Even if we do not accept Habermas' teleological narrative of the rise and decline of the public sphere, we cannot ignore the fractious nature of public deliberation today. Most obviously, the Bush administration's bogus case for going to war in Iraq, as typified by Colin Powell's speech to the U.N. On February 5 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered a speech to the U.N. Security Council on the case against Iraq. During his presentation, geared towards exposing Iraq's breach of UN resolution 1441 regarding the possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Powell provided extensive evidence in the forms of satellite pictures, audio tapes of Iraqi members of the armed forces, and testimonies from eyewitnesses to support the decision to attack Iraq. However, two years after President Bush's assessment that Iraq possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, Charles Duelfer head of the Iraq Survey Group concluded that Iraq had neither such weapons nor the capability to produce them.[2] The same conclusion was reached by U.N. weapons inspectors.[3] By the same token, the links between Iraq and Al Qaeda were also dismissed. The congressional commission appointed to investigate the events of 9/11, "found no collaborative relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda."[4]

As Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith point out in their report *The War Card. Orchestrated Deception on the Path to War* published

under the auspices of The Center for Public Integrity, President George W. Bush along with seven of the administration's top officials from Vice President Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice to Donald Rumsfeld, made at least 935 false statements about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.[5] According to the authors, the officials made "on at least 532 separate occasions" unequivocal statements about Iraq's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and its links to Al Qaeda.[6] Furthermore, as Representative John Conyers Jr, the second most senior member of the House and the Democratic Leader of the pivotal House Committee on the Judiciary, points out in the *Conyers Report. Constitution in Crisis* - a 350-page document supported by 1,400 footnotes - the Bush administration disregarded the constitution. According to Conyers, "Approximately 26 laws and regulations may have been violated by this Administration's misconduct."[7]

It is in this context of estranged public discourse that Michael Moore becomes relevant. Michael Moore, a well known and controversial filmmaker and author, was born in Flint Michigan. A less known fact about his public life is that at the age of 18 Moore won a seat on the Flint school board, thus becoming one of the youngest people to hold a US public office. From *The Flint Voice* and *The Michigan Voice* to *Mother Jones* Moore explored printed journalism as a career attuned to his activist passions. Frequent conflicts with the publisher of *Mother Jones* ended their collaboration. To make his first documentary *Roger and Me,*

"one of the most financially successful documentaries ever," Moore had to sell his house. Following a short TV career, Moore wrote the 1996 bestseller *Downsize This*. His subsequent documentaries won different awards and went on to become financially successful stories. More won a Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival as well as an Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), while *Fahrenheit 9/11* earned the title "the highest grossing documentary of all time."[8] From *Roger and Me, Bowling for Columbine, Fahrenheit 9/11,* to *Sicko*, Moore uses irreverence, confrontation, and sarcasm as rhetorical instruments in pursuit of social justice. Irony, sensationalism and guerilla theatre intertwine in Moore's documentaries. He seeks to stir emotion while exposing the unreachable indifference of corporate power.

Passionate and controversial, Moore is always in front of the camera, both guiding and goading it along. His voice, unapologetic, wavering between sincere and incredulous, targets the culprits. Flaunting the documentary tradition, he does not let facts "speak for themselves." As the self-proclaimed voice of universal victimage - of the unheard and unremembered, the poor and the sick, the weak and the innocent - Moore does not rely on the raw power of facts and statistics alone. His means of persuasion include the liberal use of irony as an instrument of political change. Moore addresses the discrepancy between the status quo and the ideal of a rational public sphere through another discrepancy: the ironic one. Moore's documentaries employ irony, with

its internal echo, its subversiveness, and its critical edge in obvious contrast to the ideal principles of calm, reasoned public debate.

In his use of irony, Moore perverts the "neutral gaze" of the documentary form. In its most common usage, the term "documentary" points to "Factual, realistic; applied to a film or literary work, based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes."[9] However, Moore deconstructs not only the content (the status quo) but also the very form of his documentaries. His films are not objective recordings of events; they are excursions into the overlooked abuses and injustices in "actually existing" America. Moore is not informing or passively reporting, but rather persuading. He does not hide behind the camera to convey impartiality, but rather uses his identity, his presence, indeed his full body, as argument. He does not bracket his rage and sadness so that quiet reason might prevail, but rather injects the blood of affect into his every move. Through controversy and spectacle, through ironic contrast and guerilla-style ambushes, Moore abandons cool reason in favor of hot sensation. Indeed, I argue that Moore's goal is not to enter a proper debate with the agents of corporate power, but rather to dramatize its very impossibility.

We live indeed in a mediated world that responds more often to spectacle and suggestion than demonstration and transparency. This is a world in which Moore is well schooled. With carefully staged scenes and theatrical performances, Moore's irony makes use of images as well

as words. Ultimately, I argue that Moore plays the spectacle game of our contemporary mediated world to increase the effectiveness of his message. On one hand he exposes the impossibility of an unobstructed dialogue between citizens and decision makers; on the other, he fights against the public's numbness by stirring its emotions. The anger or refusal of Roger Smith in *Roger and Me*, Charlton Heston in *Bowling for Columbine*, or George Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11* only serves to reinforce their unwillingness to participate in a public dialogue with the people who suffer their decisions. By the same token, our own anger in witnessing and accepting or rejecting Moore's images of culprits walking away, makes it impossible for us to slip back into the comfortable passivity. Whether we accept his arguments or not, whether we love or hate him, experiencing a Moore documentary is never an indifferent affair. Behind agreement or disagreement, underneath admiration or anger, experiencing Moore is in fact experiencing *more*.

In making this argument, the chapter unfolds in three sections. First, I discuss Moore's performance of the "impossible conversation," that is, the inability of marginalized voices to access public debate. By attempting to initiate a dialogue with the corporate power and being rejected, Moore in fact theatralizes the very impossibility of such a dialogue. The second section explores Moore's use of irony and controversy as means to expose this breakdown in public communication, his very goal. Moore's use of ironic contrasts exposes a

sharp discrepancy between harsh socio-economic realities and the "official" version of reality as voiced by corporate elites like Roger Smith, Charlton Heston or President Bush. Ambushing these figures, engaging in what I call rhetorical guerilla warfare, Moore leads his audience to the closed doors of power. In the last section I will explore Moore's deployment of irony - verbal as well as visual - as a means to emphasize and strengthen his message. Overall, Moore's journeys are journeys of initiation into our own marginality. The impossibility of the conversation is not a sign of our civic inability but an effect of the societal structure. His images and arguments leave spikes in our bodies. This is true for audiences and targets alike. His ironic revelations are barbed. He does not build a "panic room" in the structure of his films. For in the end, Moore traumatizes to enliven.

The "Impossible Conversation"

In *Roger and Me*, Moore's stated goal is not to mediate the grievances of the auto-workers to GM's CEO, but actually to bring Roger Smith to the town of Flint. Moore's mission is a "simple" one: "to convince Roger Smith to spend a day with me in Flint and meet some of the people that were losing their jobs."[10] Securing a normal conversation with "Roger" would be difficult enough, never mind bringing the CEO of a major company to visit the employees recently laid off by his company. This reverse journey - not bringing the grievances to the boss but bringing the

boss to the grievances - prohibits any real conversation from happening. In fact, from the beginning, the ironic double-voice frames Moore's argument. In dubbing such an impossible task a "simple mission," Moore frames his endeavor through the edge of irony. What he claims is a "simple" task - to make bosses confront the legitimate complaints of their workers - is in fact prohibitively difficult. The procedural "hoops" through which someone attempting to enter a dialogue with the corporate power has to jump, places the entire process under the corporate control; "awarding" an audience becomes a tool of (social and political) selection. Why then would an advocate of the downtrodden select such a grand plan? The mission seems less grand and more like grandstanding. Moore's interest in bringing to the same table bosses and workers seems contrived from the start. I thus argue that Moore has no interest in forming a "real dialogue" with the agents of corporate power. Rather, his goal is to perform for his audience the inherent impossibility of that very fantasy. The tool Moore chooses to use in order to expose the internal inconsistencies of such a fantasy is the double voice of irony.

What Moore ultimately dramatizes is the political problem of *access*. For Habermas, the ideal BPS ensures universal access through bracketing the social differences that might impose on the validity of the arguments. In other words, as Craig Calhoun points out, for Habermas, a democratic public sphere depends on the "quality of discourse and the quantity of participation" a participation that "far from presupposing the

equality of status, disregarded status altogether." [11] For Nancy Fraser,

however, although "something like Habermas' idea of public sphere is

indispensable to critical theory and democratic practice," set against

"actually existing" conditions, the BPS reveals its internal

inconsistencies. [12] For Fraser bracketing social, gender or racial

differences is unavoidably exclusionary in nature and thus contrary to

the idea of open, free access to all. Bracketing eliminates issues and

struggles because it eliminates bodies and voices. If the ideal of critical

rational discourse argues that peers participate "as if" they are social and

economic peers, Fraser points out that actual discursive interaction is

"governed by protocols of style and decorum that are themselves

correlates and markers of status inequality." [13] In other words, the

criteria of critical rational discourse presume access to a type of cultural

capital that itself is not universally shared. Through bracketing, then,

this model of communication implicitly blocks the very socio-economic

categories it explicitly professes to include.

Moore illustrates this inability of marginalized voices to take part in

open debate through his short journey to San Francisco. In *Roger and*

Me, Moore is hired to run a newspaper. As acting manager he attempts

to give a monthly column to an auto worker. In his own words "I went to

work and announced that I was going to give a monthly column to a Flint

auto worker. The owner instead told me to run an investigative report on

herbal teas. I told him I had a better idea: Let's put the autoworker on

the cover."[14] The images accompanying Moore's words show the cover of a magazine with a typical auto worker smiling. For this act of disobedience, Moore is fired. What he demonstrates in this scene is just one way that the socially marginalized voices of unemployed auto-workers are denied access to the "open" spaces of mainstream journalism. His attempt to bring working class struggles into broader consciousness is thwarted by the owner of the paper. The attempt to give a platform and thus a voice to the destitute auto-workers from Flint costs Moore his job at the San Francisco paper. Moore is fired for trying to enact the very idea of a public sphere as opened to all.

As we have seen, for Fraser, bracketing deters participatory parity. Bracketing perpetuates de facto exclusions based on gender, economic status, or race; it obscures voices, and thus issues, and thus conditions. Therefore, for Fraser, "a necessary condition for participatory parity is that systemic social inequalities be eliminated."[15] She argues that such inequalities must be "rendered visible," thematized as the very ground of public debate, not bracketed and tamed at the outset. Similarly, I argue that Moore's goal as a documentary filmmaker is never to secure conversations with the representatives of corporate power but to perform the impossibility of such conversations and thus thematize the social inequalities. His attempts to "just talk" with Roger Smith in *Roger and Me* are stopped at the door, literally as well as metaphorically. In *Bowling for Columbine*, a duped Charlton Heston wanders off camera - in his own

home! - as Moore raises awkward questions about the prevalence of youth violence in the U.S. In *Sicko*, Moore's plea to the officers of Guantanamo base to allow him and the 9/11 rescue workers access to medical assistance is answered by a base-wide alarm. Moore's very aim is to "thematize" these problems of access, to expose the impossibility of a direct and open dialogue between corporate elites and citizen workers. In *Roger and Me*, Moore shows celebrities and CEO's honoring the resilience and ingenuity of the people of Flint. However, between the actual, lived voices of these workers and the institutions of corporate power lies an impenetrable wall of security officers, doormen, public relations experts, and kiss-off rhetoric. This more than anything else is Moore's goal: documenting the unbreachable chasm that separates the ordinary citizens from the agents of corporate power.

Moore's constant attempts to press the 14th floor elevator button, the top floor of GM headquarters - an architectural metaphor for the social hierarchy - in an attempt to convince Roger Smith to talk to his aggrieved auto-workers are routinely thwarted by security officers. In these failures, Moore slowly deconstructs the myth of "speaking truth to power." Even when such conversations do take place the people targeted by the camera as being "responsible" for social suffering never admit guilt and confess their sins; they simply refuse or "walk away." In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore tries to initiate a dialogue with Bush as a governor, before his nomination. Bush's reply to Moore's plea "Governor

Bush, it's Michael Moore" comes promptly "Behave yourself, will you? Go find real work."[16]

Roger Smith or Charlton Heston do not crumble when faced with the truths of loss and suffering; they remain secure in their own political assumptions about rights and freedoms. When confronted with Moore's "truth" of suffering and injustice, they simply retreat behind another line of doormen. Moore's ambushes thus raise the problem of locating blame and responsibility in what F.R. Ankersmit calls "the age of unintended consequences." For surely, neither Roger Smith nor Charlton Heston is solely responsible one for the economic collapse of Flint and the other for all the high school violence in America. Even if they were to acknowledge this level of responsibility they alone could not solve the economic problems of Flint or the constant problem of gun related violence. Moore thus uses them as synecdoches of corporate indifference. By capturing their individual indifference, Moore makes them stand for the universal problem of social injustice and corporate negligence. In the next section of this essay I will explore Moore's use of irony as a preferred tactic deployed to expose the impossibility of the conversation. The double voice of irony, the interplay between the latent and the manifest are best suited to expose the tensions and the contradictions within the myth of a corporate power opened to dialogue.

Enter irony

Facts do not speak for themselves. In Moore's case they scream. As shown in the previous section, Moore's objective is not to enter into a proper debate with those in the seat of power. The "impossible conversation," is not a consequence of his failed attempt to bring to the same table workers and CEOs alike, but rather his goal. His documentaries unfold as a demonstration of this impossibility. A never-ending cycle of PR appointments, failed communiqués, and cliché pre-prepared interviews characterize Moore's doomed efforts to "speak truth to power."

As briefly mentioned, Moore's belief in the impossibility of a proper debate between the powerful and the powerless is constantly portrayed by the potent visual metaphor of the "doorman." Naively unaware of the implication of their gesture, these corporate "gatekeepers" habitually revert to their prime directive: maintaining the integrity of the socio-economic hierarchy. In *Roger and Me*, Moore starts a conversation with workers from a soon to be closed factory about their looming predicament. Not being allowed to enter the factory, Moore conducts this conversation in a quasi-clandestine manner through an opened window - an image reminiscent of the visiting hours in a prison. Cued in about the situation, the PR representative of the factory quickly puts an end to the conversation between Moore and the workers, fittingly, through the same narrow window. Documenting these impossible conversations, showing

how such dialogues are sabotaged over and over by institutional guardians, is, I argue, Moore's real goal. His use of contrast reinforces the performance of the impossible conversation; hence, "enter irony."

One of Moore's most prominent rhetorical strategies is the use of irony's "incongruity." Throughout his documentaries, the optimistic worldview of social elites is constantly juxtaposed with the bleak realities of the downtrodden. For instance in *Roger and Me*, Moore visually contrasts the cheerful messages of town officials about the power, ingenuity and resilience of the people of Flint, Michigan with images of evictions, rundown houses, and destitute families. In *Bowling for Columbine*, he shows the absurd incongruity of Marilyn Mason and bowling as explanations for what caused the tragic high school incident. By the same token, in *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore contrasts congress members' statements on the importance of engaging in a just conflict in Iraq with their refusal to enlist their own children in the same war. The scene, symbolically entitled "Congressional recruitment," depicts Moore walking back and forth on the sidewalk, prowling for congress members on the street. The goal again a "simple" one: to see how many members of congress "we can convince to enlist their children to go to Iraq."[17] Outfitted with brochures from a recruitment office, Moore has unsurprisingly little success. The congress members ignore him and walk away - the two ingredients of the impossible conversation.

However, Moore's use of irony goes beyond these stagings of incongruity. He also uses situational irony. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines 'situational irony' as the discrepancy between expectation and reality. Situational irony is further divided into three subspecies: dramatic irony, tragic irony and Socratic (dialectic) irony. In dramatic Irony "the character's own words come to haunt him or her," and as such dramatic irony becomes a discrepancy between a character's limited perception and what the reader or the audience knows to be true. For example, in William Shakespeare's play Othello, the audience is well aware of Iago's treachery while witnessing the tragic consequences of the main character's unawareness. By the same token, Socratic irony designates a style through which a character acts foolish to expose his adversary's position. In other words, feigning ignorance in order to expose the deeper ignorance of one's adversary. One of Moore's preferred interview tactics intertwines both dramatic and Socratic forms of irony. I call it the rhetorical ambush.

The best example of Moore's use of the ambush is his interview with NRA vice-president Charlton Heston in *Bowling for Columbine.* Introducing himself as a legitimate NRA member and reporter, Moore humbly enters Heston's lavish Hollywood mansion and begins to set the stage for his "nemesis'" downfall. Heston, oblivious to the danger ahead, proceeds to rehearse the usual arguments about Americans' right to own guns. Of course, the audience is already privy to Moore's attitude about

gun ownership and youth violence. We have already been shown Heston defiantly justifying the NRA's decision to hold its annual meeting in Denver on the first of May 1999, only weeks after the Columbine massacre, which occurred on April 20, 1999. Put simply the audience is well aware of the discrepancy between Moore's dramatic situation and Heston's cluelessness. Moore starts with seemingly innocent questions about the number of guns in the house. Slowly yet methodically, Moore tests the internal logic of Heston's arguments until Heston becomes aware that the interview is not one designed to reinforce his position but one bent on vilifying him in relation to youth violence. By ambushing Heston with a picture of a *six*-year-old girl, killed by a six year old classmate, Moore attacks Heston - the face of gun violence in America - with the sharp edge of irony. From a proud and composed figure, happily sharing with the camera his deep rooted belief in the connection between freedom and bearing arms, Charlton Heston grows dead silent and walks away.

Moore doesn't stop the camera once the victory over his opponent is sealed by Heston's inability to respond. Moore prolongs the scene; he continues to follow Heston, documenting every step of his retreat. Moore finishes the scene by pleading with Heston to contemplate the picture of the little girl. The audience witnesses Heston becoming finally aware of his own effacement. Unable to respond, Heston disappears behind a closed door. Walking away from Heston's house, Moore props the

picture against one of the entrance pillars as a reminder, for Heston himself as well as for us. Once again, by showing the inability of the people in power to acknowledge responsibility, through recording every step of their walking away, and through focusing the camera on the closed door, Moore performs the impossible conversation. Moore uses dramatic irony to enhance his message. Through ambush, Moore makes the audience, through the use of dramatic irony, accomplices in Heston's rhetorical demise.

Advancing the argument about Moore's prevalent use of irony must also take into consideration the third type of situational irony, Socratic/dialectic, which stems from Socrates' style of argumentation: acting foolish to expose the weaknesses in one's adversaries. Portraying himself as an NRA member, Moore humbly begins questioning Heston about his guns:

> Moore: I assume you have guns in the house here?
>
> Heston: Indeed I do. Bad guys take notice![18]

By letting this line pass uncommented, Moore acts as if he agrees with Heston on the principle of owning guns. However, following the outlines of Socratic irony, Moore falsely projects genuine shared-interest and thus entices Heston to proudly rehash his pro-gun principles on camera. Moore's aim here is clearly to expose the internal inconsistencies in Heston's line of arguments. Following up the questions about the

guns, Moore moves the discussion towards the reasons behind having

them loaded:

> Moore: Have you ever been a victim of crime?
>
> Heston: No. No.
>
> Moore: Never been assaulted or...?
>
> Heston: No.
>
> Moore: No violence toward you, but you have guns in the
>
> house.[19]

Slowly, Moore exposes the assumptions behind Heston's arguments

without revealing his own opinions about guns. In a traditionally

Socratic style, Moore sets the scene for Heston to contradict himself. The

signs of Heston's final effacement begin to show:

> Moore: Why don't you unload the gun?
>
> Heston: Because the second amendment gives me the right to
>
> have it loaded.
>
> Moore: I agree. I totally agree with that. I'm just saying... I mean,
>
> the second amendment gives me--
>
> Heston: Let's say it's a comfort factor."[20]

By "totally agreeing" with Heston, Moore maintains the Socratic

illusion of his own subordination. The trap is slowly set. Moore doesn't

want just a few simple logical fallacies. Through the use of Socratic

irony, Moore deconstructs the larger game of Heston's philosophical

stance on gun ownership. By asking questions and steering the

discussion from the constitutional debate over guns to the tragic

consequences of gun related violence, Moore stages a fiercely ironic,

some might even say sarcastic, platonic dialogue. From the classic Eiron,

performing an inexistent inferiority, Moore swings into full attack mode.

After pointing out the consistent patter of NRA meetings following school

related shootings, Moore asks "You think you'd like to just maybe

apologize to the people in Flint for coming and doing that at that time?"[21]

The unrelentless attack continues culminating with the picture of the six

year old girl:

> Moore: You think it's okay to just come and show up at these
>
> events.
>
> Heston: No.
>
> Moore: You don't think it's okay? Mr. Heston, just one more
>
> thing. This is who she is or was. This is her. Mr. Heston, please
>
> don't leave.[22]

Unable to withstand this barrage of accusation Heston gets up and

leaves the room utterly defeated with an awkward friendly tap on Moore's

shoulder. This scene is an example of the different and interwoven levels

of irony manifested through Moore's documentaries. It organically

weaves dramatic irony, stemming from the interplay between the

audience's awareness of Moore's attitude towards Heston and Heston's

own naiveté, with Socratic irony as played out in the rhetorical ambush.

Moore's use of Socratic irony is woven into the texture of each documentary. Moore doesn't prod and provoke his victims. Nor does he reveal from the start his cards by openly disagreeing with them. Rather, Moore lures, woos, and baits his targets. They innocently and unknowingly deliver their zealous attitudes toward economic, political or human disaster. They are crushed in front of the audience under the weight of their own words without ever seeing the context of irony that Moore has developed. It is as though they have been speaking in front of a blue screen, naively awaiting Moore's rhetorical paintbrush. They are never aware of the images projected behind them as they speak. In *Roger and Me*, after documenting the economic disaster translated into the massive loss of jobs due to GM's closing plants, Moore moves his camera inside a country club asking representatives of the wealthy families what can be said about Flint in a positive note. True to character, Moore doesn't bother to challenge their answers - "ballet and hockey". He smiles and waits for the editing room so he can paint images of run-down houses and of people being evicted from their homes, to reveal the utter ridiculousness of "ballet and hockey."

The discrepancies between answers such as "ballet and hockey" and the images of abandoned houses are at once ironic and dramatic. Miss Michigan's message for the people of Flint, after learning from Moore of the loss of so many jobs, is "keep your fingers crossed so I can bring home the title."[23] His subdued voice pointing from time to time to the

disastrous situation of Flint, declared by *Money Magazine* "the worst place to live in all the country," only reinforces the contrasting naiveté of the stars. The cheerful and sometimes silly music accompanies the optimistic words delivered on the background of disaster.

Illustrative of this point is the scene entitled "A Dickens Christmas." The scene starts with a report about a plant closing on Christmas, followed by a "General Motors Christmas program" broadcast to GM plants all around the world. The images of the young men and women singing "Santa Clause is coming to town" are intertwined with images of "Deputy Fred," in charge of eviction, knocking ominously on doors on Christmas Eve. The images of GM's CEO Roger Smith, delivering a hopeful Christmas speech at this event are contrasted in the same manner. His speech about Christmas as a "total experience," where the lights "lift us out of the winter's cold and gloom,"[24] are intertwined with images of a mother cursing while Deputy Fred evicts her. Roger's voice and warm words - "they (the lights) remind us of the warmth of human companionships"[25] - accompany Deputy Fred's henchmen as they take all the furniture of the mother, including a Christmas tree, and placing them on the sidewalk. Here again, Moore plays the audience's awareness of Flint's economic disaster against the cluelesness of social elites - the very marks of dramatic irony.

In trying to provide medical attention for destitute 9/11 workers in his latest documentary, *Sicko*, Moore leads his party toward the

American military base in Guantanamo Cuba. His plea "These are 9/11 rescue workers. They just want some medical attention. The same kind Al-Qaeda is getting. They don't want more than the 'evildoers' are getting" is answered by the base alarm.[26] The ironic contrast in this situation is again plainly evident. Moore associates key words used by the Bush Administration to designate the enemy in the War on Iraq narrative - such as Al-Qaeda and "evildoers" - with free medical assistance, while the 9/11 rescue workers literally and metaphorically float outside the base. Pointing out that suspected terrorists benefit from free medical assistance while the 9/11 rescue workers do not, Moore uses irony's sharp edge to expose the contrast between official sentiments of appreciation toward 9/11 heroes and the institutional realities of health care injustice.

In Moore's case, then, irony is a political weapon. As Linda Hutcheon points out, irony has an "edge," involving "the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude."[27] Irony cannot be divorced from attitudes and emotion. Its very deployment, in any context, involves the former and stirs the latter. Moore's use of irony, by turns humorous and tragic, has a definite political edge. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, learning that very few members of Congress actually read the Patriot Act before voting for it, Moore rents an ice-cream truck and circles in front of "the Hill." The strident-mechanical yet cheerful ice-cream music accompanies Moore's reading of the Patriot act. Laughter and despair coexist in this gesture.

Moore doesn't hope to make members of congress listen. The act has already been voted. It already has its visible effects: normal people or peace groups being questioned or infiltrated by the FBI for expressing opinions against the war in Iraq. For example, the members of Peace Fresno Group find out from a news report about a deputy sheriff being killed, that what they thought to be a fellow member, Aaron Stokes, was actually Deputy Aaron Kilner infiltrating their group. The aim of the ice-cream truck stunt is not to educate Congress on the Patriot Act but to expose and shame the congressmen for not having read it in the first place. By using a silly ice-cream truck, Moore treats members of congress like children; for, by not reading yet enacting such an important bill, Moore argues, they act like irresponsible children.

This political edge of irony is imbedded in the very texture of the documentary that "divided the nation," *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The documentary starts with a thorough recounting of President Bush's rise to power and his first eight months of office. Employing dramatic irony, Moore one again plays the audience's awareness of the facts in contrast with the "character's" - in this case President Bush's - unawareness. A long string of political mishaps seems to define Bush's presidential activity. As Moore puts it "He couldn't get his judges appointed, he struggled to pass his legislation and he lost Republican control of the Senate. His approval ratings in the polls began to sink."[28] Moore juxtaposes again silly pop music - fittingly entitled *Vacation* by Go Gos -

with images of President Bush on vacation, a vacation that according to Moore made up forty two percent of his nine months in office. The images show the president playing golf or fishing. When asked how he responds to the people that say he is "eloping," President Bush stutters saying "Working on some things ... discussing things ... decision will be made."[29] This is exactly the vacuousness that Moore is looking for.

What differentiates this particular documentary from all the others, and makes it a perfect case in point for the political "edge" of Moore's deployment of irony, is that in this case he attacks the acting president on the eve of the presidential elections. With a release date of 25 June 2004, four months prior to the presidential elections on November 2 2004, Moore is clearly interested in making his arguments part of the public's decision about their fate and their commander in chief - portrayed here as a warmonger. The last images of the film show President Bush erroneously quoting the saying "fool me once." Moore complements Bush's words "you can't get fooled again" with his encoded political goal: "for once we agreed."[30] This politically charged, judgmental attitude is clearly designed to discredit the current president in the light of the upcoming elections.

This ironic framing of Moore's arguments is as important as the arguments themselves. Moore's documentaries are not just about conveying information; the attitudes imbedded in irony's edge make them about affect and provocation as well. His aim is not simply to

provide evidence for the magnitude of the problem and let the viewer decide. Moore wants to dramatically expose the inner workings of a corrupt state apparatus. Moore's use of irony is most suited to expose the inconsistencies and the contradictions of a public sphere opened to all in theory yet closed to marginalized voices in practice. More than seeking mere blame, Moore uses irony to stage a drama of accountability. Roger Smith, Charlton Heston, and George Bush are relentlessly pursued in rhetorical spectacles of justice-seeking. Moore does not rely on statistics alone. He uses them to educate the audience, thereby making them accomplices in the ambush of his targets. He is not using an "objective," emotionally "neutral" "journalistic" approach in these documentaries. Indeed, at one point in *Roger and Me,* Moore is asked for his journalist credentials by a security officer in the GM's building. In order to be considered for a possible audience, Moore offers his Chucky Cheese discount card instead. This is clearly a sign of his disgust with "mainstream" journalism. Moore refuses to speak their language, the language of acquiescence.

In the end, Moore performs the impossible conversation through the interwoven modes of irony. Moore's multilayered use of irony, from verbal to dramatic and Socratic, enhances the inconsistencies, contradictions, and incongruities of his journey to the closed doors of corporate indifference. Moore's true goal, I argue, is to make his audience feel the sting of "impossible conversations." The ironic "edge" and what Hutcheon

calls the attribution of a judgmental attitude, becomes necessary for convening Moore's message in the context where "speaking truth to power" doesn't make it so much as flinch. However, irony's edge does not reveal itself only in contrasting statements. As we have seen, Moore also uses silent images and playful music to expose ironic incongruities. Thus, in the last section I will explore Moore's use of images, of carefully staged ironic "plays," closely resembling what Kevin DeLuca dubs "image events," as a way to strengthen his message and further advance his political stance.

Theatrics

Returning to the issues of the dissolution of the public sphere, Al Gore points toward media as one of the reasons for its decline.[31] He cites the blurring line between news and entertainment, the integration of the news divisions among those designed to generate revenues, and the concentration of media into a small number of conglomerates. Bluntly put, "the purpose of the television is no longer to inform the America people serve the public interest. It is to 'glue eyeballs to the screen' in order to build ratings and sell advertising"[32] Even if we do not completely accept Al Gore's narrative of "decline," it is hard not to see the public as generally apathetic about large-scale political issues. For example, according to a Gallup poll, in the 2004 presidential election only 60% of

the people voted.[33] Furthermore, the same poll argues that although 9 in

10 people declared voting intentions only about half actually voted.[34]

Making similar arguments to Gore about citizen apathy, David

Zarefsky claims, "mass media equates publicness with celebrity."[35]

Zarefsky concludes that in order "to reclaim the public sphere, then, we

must find and enlarge the occasion for deliberation ... move towards

public journalism ... and an approach to education that cultivates ... 'the

public philosophy.'"[36] In other words, this decline can be reversed

through the very act of public deliberation. Put simply, "it is the process

of deliberation that transforms participants from private individuals into

a problem solving collective body."[37] Al Gore similarly proclaims that

"American democracy is in danger" and the solution lies in the return to

the examples of the founding fathers: the marketplace of ideas based on

open access, meritocracy, and common goals. For Gore, given that TV

has become a one-way medium, "The greatest source of hope for

reestablishing a vigorous and accessible marketplace for ideas is the

internet"[38] a medium that must be protected and allow to develop "in the

mold of the open and free marketplace of ideas that our Founders knew

was essential to the health and survival of freedom."[39] Implicit in these

messages is the idea that the media, concentrated in fewer and fewer

hands, conflates entertainment and politics to the detriment of all. As

Noam Chomsky points out, answering the question what makes

mainstream media mainstream, "first of all, they are major, very

profitable, corporations. Furthermore, most of them are either linked to, or outright owned by, much bigger corporations, like General Electric, Westinghouse, and so on. They are way up at the top of the power structure of the private economy which is a very tyrannical structure."[40] In other words, media's high price as a platform for one's message and its trivial obsessions seem to make it counterproductive to political deliberation.

Michael Moore has a similarly bleak view of the media. Mainstream journalism and television are made targets in his documentaries and in his public appearances. Invited to CNN after a three year absence, Moore, evidently upset by CNN's accusations of his "fudging the facts" in *Sicko*, confronts Wolf Blitzer by saying, "I wish CNN and other mainstream media would just for once tell the truth."[41] This is not an isolated incident. His documentaries are filled with similar depictions of the mainstream media. In *Bowling for Columbine* a reporter covering the killing of a six year old girl, after delivering his report with a sad voice, is shown to be more preoccupied with his hair than the story. Moore offers a depiction of the reporter as more invested in petty technical issues than the grave subject at hand - the death of the little girl. Some might call it a cheap shot on Moore's part, but this scene perfectly captures the tenor of his attitude toward mainstream media.

However, underneath this negative view, Moore also demonstrates a keen understanding of the power and possibilities of this medium.

Beyond the controversy surrounding the topic for which he is invited to discuss, Moore always takes the time to rehash his main arguments against the Bush administration, against the war on Iraq, and about the ineptness of mainstream media. Every public appearance is a platform. Recall his infamous performance at the 2003 Academy Award Ceremony, in accepting the Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine.* Instead of the usual acceptance speech, filled with tropes of humility and pious sentiments of tolerance, Moore called Bush a "fictitious president" and ended his speech with a harsh "Shame on you mister President." Well aware of the size of his audience, Moore seized the occasion to chastise not only the Bush presidency but an uncritical media and a too-gullible public. With close to thirty-three million viewers, Moore clearly saw the Oscars as a rhetorical opportunity not to be ignored.

Not content with the validation of the statue, Moore starts his speech in the same subdued and humbled voice as his ambush interviews. At first politely thanking his crew and producer, he slowly shifts into attack mode: "we like non-fiction and we live in fictitious times ... fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president."[42] Puzzled celebrities and loud booing accompanied the speech. The transformation of the audience is uncanny. When the winner of the award is announced, Moore literally receives standing ovations. The entire audience cheers and applauds. We see major Hollywood celebrities, such as Martin Scorsese and Daniel Day Lewis to name a few, standing up and

applauding, wholeheartedly supporting the decision to recognize and
award Michael Moore. Generously inviting the other nominees on stage,
Moore proceeds to the lectern in the sound of thunderous applause.
Images of high profile Hollywood celebrities smiling and applauding are
juxtaposed with images of Moore receiving the coveted statue. As soon as
Moore's message about the opposition between non-fiction and the
current fictitious administration, applause and booing become
intertwined. This time, the images of Moore delivering his speech are
juxtaposed with stunned celebrities. Adrian Brody looks eerily around
the audience. Martin Scorsese, at one point giving standing ovation, sits
stunned. The mixed applause and booing accompany the entire speech.
At the end, the classic Oscar music played when a winner exits the stage
is actually raised before Moore has a chance to finish his speech. In a
classic Pavlovian reaction, the audience starts cheering louder. This
sabotage becomes evident when we see Moore raising his voice, rushing
to finish his speech in the increasingly loud confusion of applause,
booing, and typically Oscar music.

This example speaks to Moore's strategy; he seizes media
opportunities to advance his political message. Moore clearly has the
ability to understand the power of the media and to use it. The more
controversial the better. Indeed, for Moore controversy means
circulation, exposure and publicity. The Socratic - ironic trap, in which
his voice and his arguments move from inviting humility to passionate

accusations, acts also as a mode of publicity. In other words controversy sells. Even a negative report of his performance has to cite Moore's words in order to debunk them, ensuring thus circulation of the message.

What Moore thus illustrates is that, however docile and distracted, the media can still be taken advantage of to distribute one's political message. A great example unfolds in *Bowling for Columbine*. Moore, together with two high school boys, victims of the Columbine shootings, marches to the headquarters of the giant conglomerate K-Mart. The goal of this scene is to "return" the bullets still lodged in the two victims' bodies, the same bullets purchasable at any K-Mart store. If something as deadly as bullets can be sold in family stores then all the rules of commerce, including returning merchandise, should apply. By returning something that cannot be return, by attempting to give back something that already did the damage it was built for, Moore underlines the tragic consequences of convenience stores selling bullets.

On this first attempt, the familiar scenario of the impossible conversation unfolds. K-Mart employees, from PR representatives to merchandise specialists, pass in front of Moore's camera. After hours of waiting and intermittent conversation with different employees that promise to call "other people," Moore and the boys depart. At the suggestion of one of the victims, the crew stops at a local K-mart to buy their entire stock of bullets with the intention of "returning" them to K-Mart's headquarters. Moore's voice, accompanying the images of the two

boys buying the bullets, informs the audience about their intent to return the next day with "the press."

With press in tow, Moore's second attempt produces surprisingly different results. Moore and the boys march into K-mart's headquarters accompanied by news cameras and local reporters. As viewers, we see the scene develop through intermittent cuts of the actual news coverage of the incident; we watch the event through both sets of cameras, Moore's and the press that he generates. Eventually, K-Mart's PR Representative delivers to the cameras a different speech than the one expected. K-Mart, he proudly announces, will phase out selling handgun ammunition within ninety days. Moore and the boys are ecstatic, genuinely surprised and thrilled, to hear this news. Moore's introduction to the scene - "this time we brought the press" - shows his awareness of the real pressure that news cameras can exert on corporate behavior. In the end, Moore does not simply take advantage of media's obsession with controversy and scandal; he uses its power of persuasion for his own ends.

Moore's use of media as a vehicle for criticism points to what Habermas calls the principle of supervision meaning "the task of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally - and, in periodic elections, formally as well - practice vis-à-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of the state."[43] This is indeed relevant, for Michael Warner, in his discussion of publics and counter publics,

points out that publics "commence with the moment of attention."[44] Furthermore, in *Letters of the Republic*, he argues that "the public as constructed on the basis of its metonymic embodiment in printed artifacts. That is how it was possible to imagine a public supervising the actions of officials even when no physical assembly of the public was taking place."[45] In this sense, in Moore's case, being a public to his texts entails an abstract participation in the criticism of the Bush administration. I do not want to suggest that just by watching we support his opinion. However, the unexpected financial success of his documentaries, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* in particular, as well as the vote of twenty one million Americans designating *Fahrenheit 9/11* "Best Picture of the Year" at the "People's Choice Awards" speak about Moore's public and the principle of supervision.[46] In other words, through their vote, twenty one million viewers reveal themselves as a public engaging in a form of social and political criticism through the act of watching.

As we have seen, Moore capitalizes on any occasion in which his voice can be heard. Whether in routine interviews or in elegant occasions such as the Oscars, Moore profits on the media's obsession with controversy and scandal. Booing and negative framing do not matter. For Moore, such treatment actually translates into higher circulation. Even those media outlets that wish to discredit Moore first have to carry his message. To scandalize his words "fictitious president" requires uttering those very words. Furthermore, as Thomas Goodnight argues, public

discourse is "always controversial" and "emerges out of and fashions public time and space"[47] In other words, controversy, more than creating scandal, emerges out of an urgency simultaneously creating it. In Moore's documentaries, the message is always delivered in conjunction with the seriousness and the urgency of the problem. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* the issue is not just that President Bush is an unfit president; releasing the documentary months before the presidential election speeds up (political) time. The ending words in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, when Moore agrees with Bush that "you can't get fooled again," induces the urgency of considering and re-considering Bush as a candidate in the light of the fast approaching elections. Thus, despite Moore's negative view of mainstream media, he also understands its potential to influence public attitudes. The immediacy of televised images contributes to enhancing the urgency of debate. Moore's very use of the circulatory power of controversy[48] and urgency in a news world obsessed with the latest catastrophes and scandals speaks to his understanding of the rhetorical force of public images.

Moore's awareness of the media's influence and obsessions, of its power and its weakness, also provides a different opportunity: to complement his persuasive strategy with visual arguments. Moore shows that words by themselves are not enough in a mediated world where the voices of the unemployed, the victims of gun violence, or those who disagree with the war in Iraq struggle to find sympathetic ears. Slammed

doors and unusable elevators are as powerful "arguments" as the word themselves. Simply put, pathos appeals are an important part of Moore's rhetorical strategy; and as we have seen, these appeals are visual as well as verbal. Affect is carried by Moore's voice, by voices of destitute people, and by ironic juxtapositions of images, words, and sounds. We as an audience are meant to feel anger and desperation when we see Roger Smith speaking in heartfelt tones about compassion while his former employees are literally thrown on the street. Moore deliberately places his cameras in situations of stasis, where doors are slammed in his face and conversations dissolve into thin air. These uses of irony extend beyond verbal in Moore's documentaries.

It is more accurate to say that Moore's films enact what Kevin DeLuca calls "image events," which take advantage of the power of the image to deliver "mind bombs," that is, "crystallized philosophical fragments that work to expand the universe of thinkable thoughts."[49] Cataloguing a host of incidents in which organizations such as Greenpeace take advantage of a spectacle-hungry media, DeLuca sketches a new way of debating on matters of common concerns by bypassing verbal rhetoric. Similarly, in *Unruly arguments,* DeLuca looks at the rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation, three different activist groups that share a similar method of persuasion: the use of bodies and spectacles as forms of rhetorical argument. DeLuca argues that the visual arena of the television, "the de facto national public forum of the United States,"

warrants the use of images "played" in front of the camera as means of persuasion.[50] Time constraints inherent to news coverage, he argues, rule out the use of highly structured persuasive discourses. He also points out that financial constraints, in terms of the inability to buy air time, makes the use of linguistic/verbal rhetoric improbable since "the voice of the news" is dependent on the network. Furthermore DeLuca, in a small review of the coverage of the protest enacted by these three activist groups, points out to a consistently negative framing. From "war in the woods" to the use of the term "terrorist" media coverage seems to be prone on denigrating Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation. DeLuca argues that faced with such overwhelming odds, a textbook persuasive speech would probably fade in a sea of negative epithets.

In a similar manner, Moore's documentaries employ much more than verbal arguments. As the activist groups from DeLuca's analysis, Moore is cut off from mainstream media. By the same token, due to the controversial nature of his topics and arguments, he is often accused of "fudging the facts." The latest scandal between CNN's own Dr. Sanjay Gupta and Michael Moore relating to the facts presented in *Sicko* speaks to this negative framing. In the words of Gupta "no matter how much Moore fudged the facts -- and he did fudge some facts -- there's one everyone agrees on. The system here should be far better."[51] As mentioned above, the controversy sparked by Gupta's comments

resulted in an apology letter from CNN. Amidst this negative framing of Moore's verbal rhetoric, images become a *necessary* asset.

In *Bowling for Columbine*, at the end of the interview with Heston, in which the right to bear arms is contrasted with the high rate of violence and the high number of school related shootings, a powerfully emotional - and almost completely wordless - scene unfolds. While Heston walks away, frustrated, speechless, Moore follows behind holding a picture of the six-year-old-girl gunned down by a classmate, pleading - "take a look mister Heston, this is the little girl ... this is the girl." This emotionally charged plea is elevated by Moore's use of the picture. The man presented as morally "responsible" for her death is walking away with his back turned, unable to face the image of the little girl. The Heston scene ends with Moore leaving the picture propped against the column of Heston's lavish mansion, an appeal at once linguistic and visual. The emotion is imbedded in Moore's plea, in Heston defeatedly walking away, and in the very image of the little girl. One can ask how a picture of one victim can be an argument against a constitutional right. The answer is: "it is not"; and yet, through Moore's dramatic irony, it is. Heston's inability to reconcile through verbal argument the constitutional right to bear (loaded) arms with the harsh reality of murdered children is as important for Moore's strategy as the single image of Heston's back as he walks away.

Rhetorically, these images function as more than simple illustrations. Constantly trying to push the elevator button of the 14th floor in *Roger and Me* is a Sisyphean effort, one that conveys the impossibility of accessing the top level of the societal hierarchy. The message is never explicitly named, yet the point becomes salient through dramatic repetition. Moore innocently enters the elevator and pushes the button for the "top" floor of the building. Once in the elevator, the camera shows Moore naively trying to push over and over the button as if all you need is persistence. His efforts are cut short by a security guard questioning his motives and destination. More exits the elevator to explain, that his goal is to meet Roger Smith. The ironically played naiveté is built on the premise that all you need to meet the people in charge is a legitimate reason and the push of a button or the gesture of opening a door - the marks of the opened space of debate. However, what follows this genuine attempt to a dialogue is a long sting of corporate "gatekeepers" informing Moore that "anything above first floor is private property" and that a meeting with Roger Smith requires an appointment. The images portray security officers, bodyguards, and PR representatives, talking on the phone or trying to make Moore understand a seemingly universal truth: the agents of corporate power are beyond reach. Under the pretense of organizing a schedule, "the appointment" is clearly a strategy designed to keep unwanted voices at bay. The "appointment" enables recalcitrant voices to be screened and, if necessary, blocked. Moore's design is to

expose exactly these assumptions, these roadblocks masquerading as efficiency. Through these images, Moore shows us that a "frontal assault" on corporate hegemony is bound to fail.

Likewise, his interviews display the same mélange of arguments and images working in conjunction. Moore does more than ambush his victims, more than just demand (verbal) answers. His interviews are carefully staged theatrical scenes. The very idea of returning bullets still lodged in the bodies of Columbine victims is more than a polite request for K-Mart to stop selling bullets; it is a spectacle of metal, bodies, and media as argument. Moore's trips to Canada, Great Britain, France, and Cuba in *Sicko* are more than statistical comparisons between healthcare systems; they are performances of political irony. We are led into a journey to see and feel, then to know. Moore's is an affective journey before it is a rational one. By the same token the images with the brutalization of Iraqi people - dead children, tossed around women, humiliated men - complement the verbal arguments about the injustice and the confusion of the war in Iraq.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11,* images of a soldier singing "the roof ...the roof is on fire ... we don't need no water let the mother fucker burn ... burn mother fucker ... burn," after explaining that this is one of the best songs to listen inside the tank while engaged in combat, are juxtaposed with images of Baghdad literally burning. Another soldier talks about how difficult it is to go on the scene after napalm bombs hit. Seeing children

and innocent civilians hurt, seeing "Husbands carrying their dead wives" is a "difficult thing to deal with."[52] Images of little girls with burned faces, and corpses rotting on the side of the road complement these words. Following these gruesome images and stories are the juxtaposed words of Donald Rumsfeld praising the technological might of the American Army. His voice explains that the "targeting capabilities and the care that goes into targeting is as impressive as anything anyone can see" and that "care" and "humanity" goes into it.[53] Rumsfled's words accompany the images of a child screaming in pain while undergoing a medical procedure. Moore contrasts the "humanity" Rumsfeld speaks of with images of innocence falling victim to this humanity. We see silhouettes gunned down through an infrared scope, while the words praise technology. Put simply, Moore places us behind this scope to experience the tragic consequences of this technological humanity. Yet again, by contrasting Rumsfeld's words and gruesome images with innocent civilians' burned, shot or killed, Moore uses dramatic irony to deconstruct his victim - in this case Rumsfeld.

One can argue that the availability and ease of gun ownership is the most serious problem affecting the high level of violence in America. Yet Moore does not spell it out. Instead, in *Bowling for Columbine,* he enters in the North Country Bank and Trust which offers a free rifle with every new account opened. Moore's question "don't you think that is a little dangerous to hand guns in a bank?"[54] is left unanswered. The next scene

shows Moore getting a haircut while purchasing bullets for his new rifle from the barber shop. The ironic contrast of buying bullets and haircuts in the same place, the obvious yet overlooked contradictions between selling guns in a bank the robbing of which requires the very same instrument offered as bonus for opening an account, are at once verbal as well as visual. Moore uses all possible means of persuasion; he appeals to all through facts and statistics, through words, and through images. Through dramatic and Socratic irony, through words as well as images, through reason as well as affect, Moore exposes the painful inconsistency between corporate rhetoric and lived reality by performing and rehearsing the impossible conversation.

Politically invested irony

Moore's goal is not to enter a proper debate with economic and political elites, but to show the impossibility of such a conversation. His documentaries subvert the genre. He does not try to dispassionately capture a "neutral" reality; he seeks to intervene and stir it up. Doors slammed in his face become doors slammed in our face. Conscious of the exclusionary nature of the official channels of debate, Moore uses irony to convey his message, to expose "systemic inequalities," to ambush "perpetrators," and to bring crashing to the table marginal voices. Using documentary he subverts both its form and content. Invested rather than self-abstracted, passionate rather then emotionally detached, Moore uses

irony to advance clear political goals. Sharing the negative view of mainstream media and their contribution to the dumbing and numbing of the people with the theorists of the public sphere's decline, Moore nevertheless seizes its persuasive power. The carefully staged performances and ambushes are as relevant to his strategy as the arguments themselves. By showing pictures of gunned down children or ceremoniously returning bullets from the Columbine High shooting, extracted from the bodies of the survivors, Moore uses a theatrical enactment of his arguments. Between words and images, Moore strives to shape, through ironic contrast, arguments that would not survive otherwise in the disillusioned public sphere, obsessed with scandal, yet still dreaming of a golden age that never existed. Irony's edge and theatrical ambushes work in conjunction to show us the discrepancies and the impossibility of a proper debate with those who advocate reason, disinterest, and self abstraction, yet act on passion, interest, and identity. In the end, Moore's journeys are meant to be controversial and make us, supporters and adversaries alike, angrier; for as long as we are angry, the issues are on the table.

Notes

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[16] *Fahrenheit 9/11*, DVD, directed by Michael Moore (Lions Gate Films, 2004)

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[19] Ibid

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22 Ibid

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33 Jeffrey M. Jones and Joseph Carroll, "Changing Minds in the 2004 Election? A Report on Gallup's Post-Election Panel Survey," http://www.gallup.com/poll/16576/Changing-Minds-2004-Election.aspx (Accessed June 6 2008.)

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[44] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002): 413-425

[45] Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in 18'th Cnetury America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 61

[46] Michael Moore, *"Fahrenheit 9/11" Named Best Picture of the Year by the American People,*
http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/message/index.php?messageDate=2005-01-10 (Accessed June 6 2008.)

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[48] In Eliot Spitzer's case, one of the latest political scandals, mainstream media's triviality is evident. The news hungry media is obsessed with controversy to the point of becoming ridiculous. As Jon Stewart points out, showing images from three major networks - FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN - under the heading "breaking news," the governor of New York received what now has come to be known as the "full OJ" treatment. The images show three black SUV's traveling through town. The commentators compete in making comments about the Manhattan traffic, while the three cars move slowly through intersections. Documenting the governor's "journey" to his press conference is not just news but "breaking news" warranting spending thousands of dollars if not more, on following from the helicopter cars in traffic. Jon Stewart, *Tainted Gov*, The Daily Show,
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CHAPTER 4

"SPEAKING 'TRUTHINESS' TO POWER:" STEPHEN COLBERT AT THE

2006 WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS

ASSOCIATION DINNER

In 2006, political humorist Stephen Colbert, of *The Daily Show* fame,

performed at the White house Correspondents Association Dinner as the

featured entertainer of the evening. This annual dinner brings together

high profile politicians, journalists, and celebrities for the purpose of

presenting scholarships and journalism awards. The event features a

presidential address, usually in the form of a self-deprecating humorous

speech, as well as a comedy routine by a well known entertainer.

Embodying a cartoonish exaggeration of a Bush supporter—proud,

brash, and unsophisticated—Colbert used his 16-minute-speech and 7-

minute video presentation to stage what I argue is a form of direct

political dissent. Colbert's situation is unique: his performance takes

place in the direct physical presence of the President himself, the very

object of ridicule. In this situation, irony is not deployed from the safe

distance of a fictional town in Colorado or through the clever editing of a

documentary. Although Colbert mocks the Bush administration every

night on his Comedy Central show *The Colbert Report*, his audience is

limited to those television viewers who are already "in" on the joke. At the WHCA dinner, however, the president, his supporters, and the media outlets ridiculed for willingly or unwillingly "collaborating" with the administration, are part of Colbert's immediate audience.[1] Bending the unwritten rule – "poke but don't pierce" – Colbert used irony to criticize his audience, refusing to be simply funny and politically harmless.

In the first section of the chapter I explore the context of this performance by reviewing the WHCA and the annual dinner, Colbert's public persona, and the Bush presidency. This contextual analysis will provide a better understanding of the dynamic between Colbert's persona, the event, and the Bush administration's policies as they become fodder for Colbert's irony. Subsequently, in the second section, I conduct an analysis of the text itself, Colbert's performance. Here I argue that the political edge of Colbert's use of irony is intensified by the presence of the president: dissent, under the cover of irony, is communicated directly to the president. In other words, Colbert's performance is literally an enactment of speaking "truthiness" to power. The word "truthiness" was coined and popularized by Colbert in his first debut show on October 2005. Voted Word of the Year by American Dialect Society in 2005 and in 2006 by Merriam-Webster, "truthiness" refers to, in Colbert's own words, "something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist."[2] The definitions of the word, "the quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than

concepts or facts known to be true"[3] or, in Colbert's own words, ""truth that comes from the gut, not books."[4]

Although popularized by Colbert, truthiness is actualized, Colbert argues, by the Bush presidency. It comes as no surprise that much of Colbert peroration about the similar set of beliefs with the president uses the same words and concepts as those used in his 2005 debut show to describe truthiness.[5] If truth is static, truthiness is dynamic designating a pro-active role in creating the truth, in fashioning history, and in manipulating the public opinion. As Robert Ivie[6] points out, "democratic dissent was rendered oxymoronic in America after 9/11" being placed "strategically" on a "continuum of lawlessness leading to terrorism" where dissent and protest are perceived as "the unpatriotic act of the enemy within."[7] Former U.S Attorney general John Ashcroft, cited in Ivie's article, provides the perfect illustration of the Bush administration's tactic of making dissent benign: criticism of the administration – a.k.a. dissent – argues Ashcroft, provides "ammunition to America's enemies" and "aid [to] terrorists."[8] In the light of this "oxymoron," Colbert's performance becomes relevant. The ironic praise allows Colbert to bypass this contradiction and communicate dissent directly to the president. In fact "truthiness" opens the door for political dissent. Colbert critics, when exposed to "truthiness," accused him of either not being funny or being inappropriate. However, "truthiness" itself is neither funny nor appropriate. By stirring such strong emotions,

Colbert managed to use irony, through "truthiness" to open the space for debate.

The political edge of Colbert's irony becomes evident in the media aftermath of his performance as well. While some media outlets chose to completely ignore his performance at the 2006 WHCA dinner, the intense internet circulation of the clip featuring his comedic routine made this speech an overnight sensation. The mixed media reception following Colbert's performance, I argue, confirms the political relevance of communicating dissent through irony. Colbert's direct dissent was not challenged on the basis of the accuracy of its claims but on the basis of its inappropriateness and humor or lack thereof. By calling him not funny or inappropriate, or both, Colbert's critics branded his performance as a transgression to the rules of the event: funny and (politically) harmless. In the end, Colbert's epideictic oration used irony to transform criticism into "praise" and allow communicating dissent in the very presence of a president adamantly casting critics into the role of unpatriotic terrorist abettors.

Context

WHCA

The White House Correspondents' Association represents the press corps attached to the White House. Its nine-member board of directors deals with issues related to access to the chief executive, coverage

arrangements, work space arrangements, logistics and costs for accompanying a president in his official travels. The WHCA was created on Feb. 25, 1914, as a reaction to a rumor that the Congressional Standing Committee of Correspondents would be in charge of selecting the reporters covering President Woodrow Wilson's new series of regularly scheduled press conferences. The primary objective of the WHCA was to promote "the interests of those reporters and correspondents assigned to cover the White House." In 1920 the organization held the first WHCA dinner, and in 1924 Calvin Coolidge became the first president of a total of 14 to attend this event. It was President John F. Kennedy in 1962 who, by refusing to participate unless the ban on women participating at this dinner was dropped, ended gender discrimination. The objective of this annual event is to raise money for WHCA scholarships and honor the recipients of the WHCA's Journalism Award.[9]

However, beyond the official history, the WHCA dinner is also viewed as breeding coziness between the Administration and the press corps. As Al Eisele from *The Huffington Post* points out, discussing the 2006 dinner, "Some of Washington's most powerful journalists prostrated themselves before the people they are supposed to be keeping a critical eye on."[10] Furthermore, the increased presence of celebrities is sometime seen as a Hollywood-ization of this event. As *Washington Post* staff writer Jose Antonio Vargas pointed out, referring to the 2008 WHCA dinner,

"Last night's festivities, held at the Washington Hilton, made clear that the see-and-be-seen ethos of the event has overtaken its original purpose: to give awards."[11] The president himself joked, in his opening speech at the 2008 dinner, that Pamela Anderson and Mitt Romney in the same room might be "a sign of the apocalypse." *New York Times* refused to participate altogether at the 2008 event, arguing that it undermines the credibility of the press. Their absence made Craig Ferguson, the entertainer of the 2008 dinner, to exclaim "Shut the hell up, *New York Times*, you sanctimonious whining jerks!"[12] It is amidst this controversially friendly mélange of politicians, journalist, and celebrities that the president is expected to make light fun of himself while the featured entertainer is expected to poke light fun at the administration – the very rules Colbert chose to disregard at the 2006 WHCA dinner.

Colbert

Steven Colbert is a political satirist and comedian, born on May 13, 1964 in Charleston, South Carolina. He studied as an actor at Northwestern University, where he became a member of the Second City comedy troupe. As a comedian and writer, Colbert helped create the sketch comedy *Exit 57*. He worked for *The Dana Carvey Show* and for *Saturday Night Live*. In 1997 Colbert was hired as a correspondent on the Comedy Central fake news program *The Daily Show*. By the time he left the show in 2005 to host a spin-off series, *The Colbert Report*, he was

the show's longest-running correspondent.[13] He also contributed to Jon Stewart's wildly successful satirical textbook, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, which became a New York Times bestseller for 15 consecutive weeks.[14] Colbert also made a bid for the presidency in 2007. Intending to run "as both a Republican and a Democrat," Colbert secured an official campaign sponsor (Doritos) and applied for a spot on the ballot for the Democratic Party in his home state of South Carolina following the proper rules for a serious attempt at the presidency. His bid was eventually denied by the South Carolina Democratic Party, with 13 to 3 votes against certifying him, according to Katharine Q. Seelye.[15]

The failed presidential bid nevertheless speaks directly to the political investments of Colbert's use of irony and satire. What is of interest here particularly is Colbert persona on his show *The Colbert Report*. The show is considered a critical and commercial success with an average of 1.2 million viewers per night in late 2005, twice as many viewers as the same time slot in previous year.[16] Overtly parodying *The O'Reilly Factor*, Colbert portrays "a self-important reporter who exhibited, to a comical degree, the self-important speech, attitudes, and mannerisms of legitimate news correspondents."[17] In his own words, Colbert describes his television persona as "a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot."[18] In 2006 Colbert was invited as a featured entertainer for

the WHCA dinner. It was his *Colbert Report* persona who showed up to deliver an epidictic "praise" of the Bush Administration.

The Bush Presidency

George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the United Sates of America, won the controversial 2000 presidential election against former Vice-Ppresident Al Gore. Although Bush was initially declared the winner, issues related to missing votes in the swing state of Florida prompted an intense legal battle over the actual winner of the election. The manual recount of the votes was eventually halted by a 5-3 ruling of the Supreme Court, thus granting Bush the presidency.[19] While the first year and a half of his presidency was sluggish, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 Bush's approval rating reached 90%.[20] However, since this spike, due to major controversies such as the war in Iraq (and the missing WMDs), his administration's response to hurricane Katrina, the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse, the secret CIA prisons scandal, the NSA surveillance without warrants, the Guantanamo Bay controversy, his approval rating dropped in 2008 to a record low - 69% "the highest disapproval rating of any president in the 70-year history of the Gallup Poll."[21] Although a presidency cannot be characterized solely by its controversial policies, it is these very controversies that are of interest for my project. In his ironic praise of the Bush presidency, Colbert actually dramatizes the administration's failures. Consequently, the analysis of Colbert's

performance will be supplemented by detailed historical context on the specific policies and statements under attack.

In the Presence of the President

As we have seen, the White House Correspondents dinner is an event with a long tradition. Once a year the president and the press corps covering the White House arguably put aside their differences and participate in a benefit dinner with the overt goal of presenting scholarships and awards for journalism excellence. However, on April 29, 2006 this delicate balance was shattered. In his introduction of Colbert, WHCA president Mark Smith ominously declared "Mister President, usually you and the politicians are the ones in the crosshairs at these dinners. Tonight no one is safe."[22] As if following this script to a letter, Colbert exposed the president, his administration, and the press corps alike to the cutting edge of irony.

Aristotle provides a useful way to frame Colbert's performance. For Aristotle, epideictic rhetoric complements deliberative and forensic rhetoric to provide a complete taxonomy of oratorical occasions and addresses. The epideictic oratory, argues Aristotle, is designed to praise or blame, is directed at the present, and deals with virtue and vice "since they constitute the aim for one who praises and of one who blames."[23] Colbert's skit is indeed a special occasion speech, dealing with the present and intended to cast blame. The addition of irony inverts

Aristotle's model; it turns it on its head; each element – praise and blame – becomes its opposite. The interplay between the latent and the manifest meanings, at work in the ironic utterances, flips the traditional epideictic model. Everything within this model, from virtues to vices, becomes its other. By praising Bush's virtues and his administration praiseworthy achievements, Colbert in fact cast blame. It is precisely this tactic, of disguising through irony criticism as praise, which allows Colbert to engage in direct political dissent.

The President

Right at the onset, Colbert establishes the manifest tone of the entire presentation as one of praise. The ironic contrast between this celebratory praise and its own latent critique is conveyed through Colbert's public persona. In his introduction, Mark Smith describes Colbert as "a sensation since his show the *Colbert Report* debut on Comedy Central last year." He also characterizes him as "not only funny but fearless," defending the truth "whether or not it is under attack," and standing up for what is right "without fear of mere trifles like facts." Warning the audience that "any resemblance between Steven and persons here in this room is completely intentional," Smith presents Colbert's performance as a "special edition of the *Colbert Report*."[24] Put simply, the audience is given the elements to decode Colbert's performance as a humorous display of irony in tone with his show on *Comedy Central*. Colbert himself points out during his speech that "Every

night on my show, The Colbert Report, I speak straight from the gut, okay? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument."[25] Once these necessary elements of the ironic contrast are established, Colbert proceeds to rehash the reasons for his "admiration" for President Bush.

Colbert begins his speech by portraying himself as a Bush supporter and admirer, stating "Wow! Wow, what an honor! ... to sit here at the same table with my hero, George W. Bush, to be this close to the man."[26] Colbert not only praises the president but also claims to identify with him. For Colbert it is a privilege to "celebrate this president, 'cause we're not so different, he and I. We both get it."[27] As Kenneth Burke points out, "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his."[28] However, for Burke, identification is not simply being 'substantially one' with another, for "'identification' is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division."[29] Identification, argues Burke, "is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division."[30] For Colbert identifying with the president means dis-identifying with him. Colbert is "identifying" with Bush in order to ridicule.

Following the "identification" process, Colbert proceeds to describe himself and the president as sharing the same public identity: "Guys like us, we're not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut. Right, sir?"[31] Colbert's

identification with the president's style, ideas, and values is crucial for his performance. Never breaking character, Colbert wholeheartedly embraces the public's perception of President Bush as a man who disregards opinion polls and acts solely on intuition.

Portraying a brash, arrogant, and ignorant political pundit, Colbert continues his speech by voicing a platform of ideas held in common with the President: "I'm a simple man with a simple mind. I hold a simple set of beliefs that I live by."[32] This "simplicity" contains the double voice of criticism. Colbert's "simple mind," delivered as a compliment, describes a man of quiet resolve, a Forest Gump-like character: virtuous, innocent, and good-hearted. Yet read through the political edge of Colbert's irony, "simplicity" refers to simple-mindedness: impulsive, arrogant, unreasonable, even child-like. For instance, in a 2008 PBS interview President Bush responded to a question about his administration's policy on oil by stating that "You're going to have to ask the experts that. I'm just a simple president."[33] Colbert's "simple" set of beliefs leads us through the main points of contention about the legacy of Bush's presidency, from his declining approval rating and staged photo ops to his stance on the war in Iraq and global warming.

While reviewing this simple set of beliefs, Colbert declares "Most of all I believe in this president," a president for which the approval ratings were at the time decreasing dramatically. This is a point which Colbert is quick to make by mentioning that "there are some polls out there saying

that this man has a 32% approval rating."[34] While holding the record for the highest approval rating – 90% – after the 9/11 attacks in September 2001, Bush's approval ratings steadily decline over the years reaching 32% at the time of Colbert's performance. However, Colbert's aim here is not simply to point out the low approval rating of the president. The low approval rating is common knowledge, one that provides fodder even for Bush himself when, during his comedic routine preceding Colbert's performance, he wondered "How come I can't have dinner with the 36 percent of the people who like me?" While mentioning these figures Colbert adds, "But guys like us, we don't pay attention to the polls. We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in "reality.""[35] By siding with the president, Colbert uses irony to underline Bush's blatant disregard of public opinion.

A few representative statements frame Bush's opinion on polls. In the 2000 debate with Al Gore, when asked how he would advise the voters to make up their mind about who is better at making decisions as commander in chief Bush replied, "whether or not one makes decisions based on sound principles or whether or not you rely upon polls or focus groups on how to decide what the course of action is. We have too much polling and focus groups going on in Washington today."[36] It is easy to agree that excessive polling and focus groups can distort policy-making, but Colbert raises the question of where the President's dislike of polling ends and his indifference to actual public opinion begins. In 2001,

president Bush made a similar statement regarding tax cuts, claiming

that "this is an administration that, when we see a problem, we

move. We don't stick our finger in the air trying to figure out which way

the wind is blowing. I don't need a poll or focus group to tell me what to

think. I do what I think is right for the American people. And we'll just

let the political chips fall where they may."[37]

This attitude has not changed. On February 11, 2008, near the end of

his eighth year in office, Bush reiterated his low opinion of opinion polls

in an interview on *Fox News Sunday*.[38] Echoing the comments from

2001, he restated his political philosophy by pointing out that he makes

decisions according to, "what I think is right for the United States based

upon principles. I frankly don't give a damn about the polls. And I darn

sure don't, you know, call a group of people together in a focus group

and say, well, tell me what to think."[39] It is exactly this attitude that

Colbert is lampooning. He ridicules the president's willful disregard of

the public's opinion. Colbert thus uses irony to expose a president

stubborn in his conviction that what he is doing is right regardless of any

criticism, a president who claims to make decisions not on the principles

of democratic practice but in his own words on "a higher power."[40]

· Continuing in this manner, Colbert "criticizes" Mrs. Bush's reading

initiative by exclaiming, "I've never been a fan of books. I don't trust

them. They're all fact, no heart. I mean, they're elitist, telling us what is

or isn't true or what did or didn't happen. Who's Britannica to tell me the

Panama Canal was built in 1914? If I want to say it was built in 1941, that's my right as an American! I'm with the President. Let history decide what did or did not happen."[41] Here Colbert alludes to Bush's adamant belief in his own capacity to do "the right thing" regardless of the public's opinion; for Bush history cannot help but vindicate him. As Ron Suskind points out, in his article *Without a Doubt*, the "reality-based community" – where solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality - is being replaced by a faith-based presidency. According to Suskind a Bush aid made the following statement that captures this administration's philosophy:

> That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.[42]

This proactive view of history is one that, as we can see, justifies controversial policies and disregards public opinion by casting it in the role of simply witnessing "history's actors" at work. Colbert targets Bush's belief that reality, and subsequently history and public opinion, will bend to express his will.

Yet again agreeing with the president, Colbert uses irony's edge to expose Bush's controversial response to criticism of his administration. In the Fox interview mentioned above, when asked about Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan's claim that Bush destroyed the Republican Party, he replied, "History will be the judge of an administration and I — when you make tough decisions like I have had to make, you obviously ruffle some feathers." [43] He later elaborated, stating that,

> And as far as history goes and all of these quotes about people trying to guess what the history of the Bush administration is going to be, you know, I take great comfort in knowing that they don't know what they are talking about, because history takes a long time for us to reach. And there is no such thing as short-term history. There just isn't — objective history.[44]

He later continued, "but you know, they — to assume that historians can figure out the effect of the Bush administration before the Bush administration has ended is just — in my mind, it is not an accurate reflection upon how history works."[45] These extended quotes, although more recent than Colbert's performance, nonetheless confirm Mr. Bush's philosophy of governance. It is this very philosophy that is the target of Colbert's critique. In siding and agreeing with the president, Colbert in fact condemns the Bush presidency by exposing its explicit disregard of the people's will.

In case there were any doubts about the source of Mr. Bush's self-confidence, Colbert makes a point of exposing it. In discussing "his" religion, Colbert declares that "though I am a committed Christian, I believe that everyone has the right to their own religion, be you Hindu, Jewish or Muslim. I believe there are infinite paths to accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior." This seemingly ecumenical view is, of course, designed to expose Bush's notorious religiosity. Recall that in the 1999 republican primaries, the moderator asked each candidate which political philosopher they identify most with and why. While some of the answers pointed to John Locke or a specific founding father, George W. Bush replied promptly, "Christ, because he changed my heart."[46] Similarly, when asked what his letter to the next president would contain, Bush replied, "I would say that occupying the White House is a huge honor. Savor every minute. Stay focused on your beliefs. Rely upon a higher power to help you through the day."[47] Once again, as Suskind reports in his article on the faith-based presidency, at a private meeting with Amish farmers in Lancaster County, Pa., Bush allegedly said, "I trust God speaks through me." Although the White house spokesperson denied that the president uttered those words, he made clear that "his faith helps him in his service to people."[48] Colbert in fact uses irony to ridicule Bush's belief in his divine mandate - a mystic justification that can be deployed whenever controversy arises. The ironic twist in the traditional epideictic model transforms Colbert's praising depiction of

Bush as a man of strident political views, into blame. Through Colbert's admiring eyes we see a president who is indifferent to public opinion, who governs on intuition and "principle" rather than democratic responsiveness, who relies on the unverifiable whims of a higher power, and who clings to a "long view" of history as an excuse for reckless governance. However, Colbert's ironic gaze does not linger solely on the president himself. The administration's policies, a "natural" extension of a self-sufficient president, are much a part of Colbert's performance as Bush himself.

The Administration

Colbert does not use irony exclusively as a character assassination tool. His speech moves from Bush himself to the scandals surrounding his administration, from its handling of the Iraq war to its climate change policies to its manipulation of the media. Reviewing the high profile guests present in the audience, Colbert remarks on Rev. Jesse Jackson. Describing the experience of interviewing Jackson, who regardless of the question is "going to say what he wants at the pace that he wants," Colbert characterizes it as "boxing a glacier."[49] After a short pause, he adds, "Enjoy that metaphor, by the way, because your grandchildren will have no idea what a glacier is."[50] Here Colbert directly references the Bush administration's negligence on global warming.

Right at the onset of his presidency, President Bush refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement between industrialized

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countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions partially responsible for global warming.[51] On multiple occasions, through official letters, statements, and press conferences, Mr. Bush has claimed that the protocol was "unfair and ineffective," not based on sound science, "unrealistic" in the targets it sets for the industrialized countries, and that targets themselves are "arbitrary and not based upon science."[52] In a 2006 press conference, when asked about Al Gore's movie on global warming and the premise on which it is based, president Bush pointed out that "I have said consistently that global warming is a serious problem. There's a debate over whether it's manmade or naturally caused."[53] James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York, briefing in multiple occasions the Bush administration's task force on global warming headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, decried that "In my more than three decades in government, I have never seen anything approaching the degree to which information flow from scientists to the public has been screened and controlled as it is now."[54] As we can see, the debate to which Bush refers to – whether global warming is manmade or not – is not necessarily scientific but rather political.

In the 2008 State of the Union Address, President Bush made what has been dubbed a "u-turn" in terms of climate policies, by promoting clean energy, reducing the dependence on fossil fuels, and committing "to work with major economies and through the UN to complete an

international agreement that will slow, stop, and eventually reverse the growth of greenhouse gases."[55] The irony here being, as Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* points out, such an agreement already exists – the Kyoto protocol! These are the Bush administration's statements and policies on global change that Colbert is targeting. His glacier metaphor is designed to spotlight the discrepancy between the administration's official statements about climate concerns and its lack of meaningful, concrete policy.

Another issue under Colbert's scrutiny is the Bush Administration's manipulation of the media. Rehashing his admiration for the President, Colbert points out that he stands for the president for

> he [the president] stands for things … he stands on things, things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound with the most powerfully staged photo-ops in the world.[56]

This is a two-pronged attack: first, on the media for promoting the President's superficial handling of national crises; and second, on the administration for so blatantly manipulating media events to paint over its blunders. For Colbert, standing on things means standing on aircraft-carriers, as when the President declared on May 1, 2003 that major operation in Iraq had ended while casualties risen; it means standing on the rubble of WTC with promises of retribution that led a nation to

attack a country with no documented connections to the Twin Tower attacks; and it means standing in Jackson Square in New Orleans, promising aid while the scandal of government neglect and fraudulent spending becomes a matter of public fact.[57]

Bush himself recognized that the "'Mission Accomplished' banner was premature," taking into consideration that the number of casualties in Iraq that followed his statement was greater than those that preceded it.[58] However, the Administration went even further. In April, 2008, White House press secretary Dana Perino stated that the "'Mission Accomplished' phrase referred to the carrier's crew completing its 10-month mission, not the military completing its mission in Iraq," and that "President Bush is well aware that the banner should have been much more specific and said 'mission accomplished' for these sailors who are on this ship on their mission."[59] Yet again, the administration's reaction when confronted with criticism on its handling of media is denial and avoidance.

However, the "mission accomplished" pseudo-event goes beyond the administration's staged photo op. As Anne E. Kornblut points out, in 2005, the Bush administration was warned about its news videos. Federal Agencies were caught promoting prepackaged television programs with paid spokespersons acting as journalists. According to Kornblut, investigators from the Government Accountability Office pointed out that the administration had disseminated "covert

propaganda," by not revealing its role developing and financing them, an act in clear violation of a statutory ban.[60] Some of the cases include a news cast praising the new Medicare Law, an antidrug campaign. Furthermore, the administration was accused of buying favorable news coverage for President Bush's education policies.[61] It is this manipulation of the public's perception, this disregard for the transparency of information, this lack of interest in public perception, this staging of photo ops, and this blatant manipulation of the media to create a favorable perception of the administration that is the focus of Colbert's epideictic performance. He uses humor as a tool of shame.

But the most prominent object of Colbert's ridicule is the War in Iraq. Throughout Colbert's performance he touches on the reasons for going to war, the strong opposition to it, and its disastrous aftermath. Colbert isn't poking innocent fun; he's taking aim at this serious and momentous issue. For example, Colbert concludes his speech with a mock press conference tape meant to prove to the President that he is qualified to be the White House press secretary. The video portrays Colbert conducting a press conference as the White House press secretary. During the conference, reporter Helen Thomas states,

> Your decision to invade Iraq has caused the deaths of thousands [Colbert's smile fades] of Americans and Iraqis, wounding Americans and Iraqis for a lifetime ... Every reason

given, publicly at least, has turned out not to be true. My question is why did you really want to go to war?[62]

Colbert's behavior during this questioning grows increasingly erratic. He tries to interrupt Helen, "That's enough! No! Sorry, Helen, I'm moving on."[63] Helen continues to press the questions while Colbert frantically tries to lower Helen's volume by turning a knob in his podium as if he could control it. The knob falls off while Colbert becomes more and more distraught. Picking up on Helen's question, all the other reporters start shouting questions related to the invasion of Iraq. Colbert starts whining, asking the journalists to not let Helen "do this to what was a lovely day," but to no avail. The reporters keep shouting while Colbert, in a desperately childish gesture covers his ears and starts shouting to cover the noise of the question, chanting "Bllrrtt! No, no, no, no, no. I'm not listening to you!" Colbert finally rushes out of the press room, yelling "Look what you did, Helen! I hate you!", but is unable to find the door. The scene is reminiscent of one of Bush's hallmark moments when, on 20 November 2005 at a press conference in Beijing, he tried to get out of the press room after ending abruptly only to encounter a locked door.[64]

After exiting the room, Colbert is chased and haunted by Helen Thomas. The question is always the same "why did we invade Iraq?" Colbert continuously runs trying to get away from Helen and her haunting question. However, all his efforts are in vain. In the last scene, Colbert, relieved to have finally dodged Helen Thomas, takes refuge in a

black limousine. Behind the wheel, disguised as the chauffeur, Helen

Thomas exclaims "Buckle up, hon." With the doors locked, Colbert yells a

horrified "NO!!" Colbert's message with this video clip is simple. No

matter the lengths to which the administration is willing to go, the

question on the faulty reasons for going to war persist. The entire scene

is reminiscent of a horror movie, from the ominous music to the

relentless pursuit. Colbert's point seems to be that if this administration

is not haunted by its reckless handling of the war and the American

public, it ought to be.

The issue of the increasingly unpopular Iraq war is Colbert's main

target. The questionable reasons for initiating it are just part of the

problem. According to a *Washington Post* report, as of May, 2008, the

war has claimed an estimated 4,563 coalition casualties.[65] By the same

token, an estimated 600,000 Iraqi deaths can be traced as a result of the

Iraq war and subsequent occupation.[66] And finally, from an economic

standpoint, the cost of the war is estimated at $600 billion.[67] Joseph

Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes go even further, estimating the real cost of the

war at three trillion dollars.[68] The White House reacted to these

estimates, through spokesperson Tony Fratto, by pointing out that

"People like Joe Stiglitz lack the courage to consider the cost of doing

nothing and the cost of failure. One can't even begin to put a price tag on

the cost to this nation of the attacks of 9-11," and then adding that this

is also "an investment in the future safety and security of Americans and

our vital national interests. $3 trillion? What price does Joe Stiglitz put on attacks on the homeland that have already been prevented? Or doesn't his slide rule work that way?"[69] Yet again, the administration's response is not necessarily to challenge the point of criticism but to divert attention by questioning the critics' integrity and patriotism.

These numbers paint a controversial picture of a war that will define Mr. Bush's legacy. As detailed in the previous chapter, the main reasons for going to war in Iraq, respectively the WMDs and Iraq's links to Al Qaeda, have proven to be inaccurate. However, Colbert doesn't simply want to bring attention to this controversy. His tape of the mock press conference, screened at the end of his speech, is also a reference to the Bush Administration's *response to* the public's outrage.

President Bush and his cabinet have consistently downplayed their pre-war statements, attempting to lay the blame on "faulty intelligence." Yet a host of statements by the president and senior cabinet members of his administration remain that link Iraq with the attacks on 9/11. None is more suggestive than the "Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate" in which Bush states that,

> Acting pursuant to the Constitution and Public Law 107-243 (Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002) is consistent with the United States and other countries continuing to take the necessary actions

against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.[70]

This excerpt makes a clear connection between Iraq and the events of 9/11 by offering as a justification for war Iraq's involvement by "planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks." Even after the findings of the bipartisan Sept. 11 commission in 2004 were made public, concluding that there were no links between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, President Bush pointed out that "The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al Qaeda: because there was a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda,"[71] Even when confronted with increasing evidence undermining the pre-war certainty of the Bush Administration, there seems to be no accountability.

However, in a 2006 Press conference, Mr. Bush's tone and focus shifted from the links between Iraq, Al Qaeda, and 9/11 to the more nebulous topic of human suffering. When questioned about the disastrous consequences for withdrawing from Iraq might not even be an issue if we wouldn't have gone to war, Bush answers by asking us to

Imagine a world in which you had Saddam Hussein who had the capacity to make a weapon of mass destruction, who was paying suiciders to kill innocent life, who would -- who had

relations with Zarqawi. Imagine what the world would be like with him in power. The idea is to try to help change the Middle East ... imagine a world in which Saddam Hussein was there, stirring up even more trouble in a part of the world that had so much resentment and so much hatred that people came and killed 3,000 of our citizens ... The terrorists attacked us and killed 3,000 of our citizens before we started the freedom agenda in the Middle East.[72]

Yet again, the link between 9/11 and Iraq is subdued yet present in Bush's statements. However, when asked directly "What did Iraq have to do with that?"--with the 3000 American citizens killed in 9/11--President Bush replied,

Nothing, except for it is part of -- and nobody has ever suggested in this administration that Saddam Hussein ordered the attack. Iraq was a -- the lesson of September the 11th is, take threats before they fully materialize, Ken. Nobody has ever suggested that the attacks of September the 11th were ordered by Iraq. I have suggested, however, that resentment and the lack of hope create the breeding grounds for terrorists who are willing to use suiciders to kill to achieve an objective. I have made that case.[73]

It is these flagrant contradictions – between the official letter in which Iraq is mentioned among the nations "who planned, authorized,

committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11"
and his later statements that "*Nobody* has ever suggested that the
attacks of September the 11th were ordered by Iraq" - these attempts to
sidestep the question on the faulty justification for going to war and to
deny responsibility that constitute Colbert's target. Thus, Colbert's aim is
to flush out the Bush's administration's failure to acknowledge and
apologize for the gross errors that plunged the nation into a dubious war
of choice.

Colbert's childlike gestures during his mock press conference –
covering his ears and making noises to muffle the question on the
reasons of going to war – mimic the Bush administrations' childlike
refusal to accept accountability for the gravest of all political acts: taking
a country to war. Such contradictions become all the more strange in an
internet era where official statements, video releases, and press
conferences are readily available to an inquiring public. This is precisely
the message of Colbert's futile flight from the press conference. No matter
how much effort is invested in avoiding the question on the faulty
justifications for waging war in Iraq, the question remains until it is
answered properly, until somebody takes responsibility for building a
"freedom agenda" on a foundation of sand. As in the horrifying press
conference, this administration's legacy is going to be haunted, Colbert
argues, forever.

The war in Iraq is constantly referenced in Colbert's performance, not only in terms of its questionable foundation, but also in its meager "success." Combining the traditional GOP small government agenda, ironically contradicted by Bush's *expansion* of government spending and executive reach, Colbert proceeds by rehashing his simple set of beliefs: "I believe that the government that governs best is the government that governs least. And by these standards, we have set up a fabulous government in Iraq."[74] To this day, the war in Iraq remains the sharpest point of contention for critics of the Bush administration. Almost three years after President Bush's statements about the end of major operations in Iraq, the war still wages on. Iraq's transition toward a democratic society was not what Bush and his administration had promised the American citizens. Far from being "greeted as liberators," as Vice-President Dick Cheney declared before the invasion of Iraq, the US led coalition was better prepared to wage war than to conduct an occupation; Iraq was and remains shaken by sectarian violence.[75] The transitions from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to the Iraq Government was not without difficulties.[76] A well organized insurgency as well as violence between different ethnic and religious groups, led to an increase of American and coalition troops, after "major combat operation are over." With Iraqi democratic leaders being assassinated, and continued violence, the aftermath of the war is anything but the original picture painted by the Bush Administration.[77]

Indeed, as government sources pointed out in 2005, "What we expected to achieve was never realistic given the timetable or what unfolded on the ground."[78] According to the same article, Larry Diamond, a Stanford University democracy expert who worked with the U.S. occupation government declared "We are definitely cutting corners and lowering our ambitions in democracy building."[79] It is this contradiction between the utopian promises of the Bush administration's statements prior to the invasion and Iraq's troubled transition to democracy that fuels Colbert's stinging "praise" of the fabulous job done in Iraq. For Colbert, the issue under scrutiny is not solely the questionable justification – and the subsequent metamorphosis of WMD into humanitarian reasons - but the adamant persistence in waging a war constantly justified by an optimistic image contradicted by the facts on the field. However, for Colbert, beyond Bush, media's participation in this "successful" administration has to be praised as well.

The Media

As Mark Smith warns in his speech introducing Colbert, "no one is safe." In this respect, the representatives of major media outlets present at the dinner have as much to fear about Colbert's "praise" as the president himself. As in Michael Moore's case, Colbert is well aware of media's power. He uses the 2006 WHCA dinner to convey his critical message on Bush and his administration. Taking the president's side, Colbert "scolds" the press by asking "what are you thinking? Reporting

on NSA wiretapping or secret prisons in Eastern Europe? Those things are secret for a very important reason: they're super-depressing. And if that's your goal, well, misery accomplished."[80] This is a case in point of the double-edged meanings in Colbert's performance. By scolding the press for "daring" to ask critical questions of the administration, he in fact praises it for exposing important issues. To cap off this maneuver, the "misery accomplished" line is Colbert's direct reference to the above mentioned fiasco surrounding the President's infamous "mission accomplished" speech.

Although this inverted criticism would seem to suggest Colbert is celebrating the press, he doesn't let them off easily either. The double voice of irony is present in "praising" as well as in "scolding." Complementing the media, Colbert adds, "Over the last five years you people were so good, over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew."[81] Underneath this praise, Colbert inserts a reproach. In a setting where the representatives of major media outlets have gathered together, and present themselves as a captive audience – a unique occasion – Colbert makes sure that his message about media's public responsibility, and its recent failures, is conveyed. In her collection of interviews entitled *Feet to the Fire*, Kristina Borjesson asked 21 top American journalists, such as Ted Koppel, Helen Thomas, Ron Suskind, and Walter Pincus why the

media failed in reporting on the War in Iraq. The secrecy of the Bush Administration, the media manipulation through orchestrated PR campaigns, and the fear of being branded unpatriotic after the events of 9/11 stand out as reasons for the media's failure. As Walter Pincus points out, when asked how the press did in terms of covering the reasons given for going to war,

> You have to consider the source of information ... when it comes to the government we moved into a PR society a long time ago. Now it's the PR that counts, not the policy ... They understand how we in the media work much better then we understand how [?] in the government work.[82]

As we can see, journalists are now more then ever cued into the Bush administration's resolve not to adapt its policies to the people's will but to "sell" their policies in such a way that they are accepted.

Similarly, when asked why did the press laid down on the job in the run-up to the Iraq war, Helen Thomas – herself *Persona Non Grata* with the White House for asking why the president wants to bomb and kill thousands of innocent Iraqis, including women and children – responds simply "Fear. The fear card was very important. Everybody felt the tension of 9/11 ... Nobody want to be considered unpatriotic or un-American in these crisis."[83] No later than the White House reaction to the three trillion dollar cost estimate for the war in Iraq, we can still see the

patriotic card and 9/11 being used as arguments against outspoken critics of the administration.

Whether through the overt bias of Fox--which "gives you both sides of every story: the President's side, and the Vice President's side"--or through unconscious complicity, Colbert accuses the media of further "dumbing down" the public.[84] Detailing the way the press "should" act Colbert points out that "The President makes decisions ... The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type."[85] Make, announce, type: with these three words Colbert lays out the model of journalistic acquiescence demanded of the current administration. This model, Colbert happily notes, will "allow" the journalists to enjoy life to "Get to know your family ... Write that novel ... the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!"[86] Colbert's aim can not be to condemn the entire media, however, as he himself--a satirical media pundit with his own show on Comedy Central--is very much part of media. His criticism does not simply point out past mistakes; it also functions as a warning. The danger, he argues, is that a compliant and uncritical "fourth estate" will transform meaningful journalism into mere "fiction."

Through declaring his admiration for and similarity with the president, Colbert performs a harsh critique of the Bush administration. Colbert's references to Bush as indifferent to public opinion, governing

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on intuition, convinced that history will judge him kindly, and relying on a higher power paints an unflattering image of a self-righteous and manipulative President. By the same token, the reference to his administrations' policies and statements about the war in Iraq, Global warming, and the blatant manipulation of the media sketch an image of a presidency that has tarnished the very idea of democracy. What makes Colbert's performance matter is the actual presence of the president himself. This direct dissent makes Colbert's irony immediately and directly political. Colbert uses irony to deliver a message that could otherwise hardly be delivered directly to the president, given Mr. Bush's ability to downplay any contradiction as well as his belief in the reparatory powers of history.

For Michael Moore, "speaking truth to power" is an impossible conversation. However, standing feet away from the most powerful man on the planet, Colbert is able to speak "truthiness to power" or, to speak this administration's language. What enabled him to deliver "truthiness" in the presence of the President was irony – dissent cloaked as praise. As opposed to Moore's activism, Colbert uses irony intertwined with a hyperbolic, absurdist form of humor. Colbert uses irony's double voice as a political instrument. Irony is "discharged" in the immediate presence of the president - indeed a "captive" audience, tricked into listening this blistering criticism.

However, the president is not alone among the accused. Colbert rhetorically transforms the WCHA dinner from a special event for journalists, celebrities and politicians, into a wide-open political danger zone. For Colbert, the media have much to think about its own complicity to the "success" of this administration. Their bias or their inability to put the politicians' "feet to the fire" is as much to blame as the Bush administration's manipulation of public opinion. The journalistic sins are grave, for their very role is to look for accountability and see through the veil pulled over their eyes by politicians.

Despite the artfulness of his performance, however, Colbert largely failed to win over the crowd. Colbert refused to play the role of the clown, and harmlessly mock unimportant issues, a role usually assigned to the event's featured entertainer, and choose instead to play the role of the jester. In the presence of "the king" Colbert's irony revealed, by concealing in an obvious manner, the "truthiness." In the next section, I will explore the reception of Colbert's performance as further evidence of his politically and emotionally charged use of irony.

Media aftermath

As Aristotle points out, "We also ought to consider in whose presence we praise for, as Socrates said, it is not difficult to praise Athenians among Athenians."[87] However, as we will see, irony makes "praising" the Athenians among Athenians a more difficult endeavor. The response to

Colbert's speech as a whole was mixed. Colbert was praised and criticized, hailed as a hero by some as well as accused of crossing the line by others. On one hand, the internet made the speech famous; on the other hand, some media outlets, when covering the event, made no reference whatsoever to Colbert's speech, focusing entirely on President Bush's own comedy routine.[88] At the same event, preceding Colbert's comedic routine, President Bush delivered his own skit, side by side with a Bush impersonator. The skit involved the President and comedian Steve Bridges giving a speech. The president gave a mock statement in a professional tone while the impersonator, voicing Bush's hidden thoughts, humorously contradicted the official statements. The initial coverage of the dinner, as we will see throughout this section, focused extensively on Bush's routine.

The reaction of Colbert's direct audience, comprised of politicians, government officials and media representatives, can be characterized as reserved at best. A simple comparative viewing of the two performances reveals that Colbert's comments are seldom accompanied by applause; the occasional laughter is subdued. As opposed to this reception, Bush's own comedy routine was received in a positive manner. The clip, distributed by C-Span through Google video, shows warm reaction to Bush's every joke. As opposed to Colbert, where laughter is subdued and sometimes lacking, Bush's routine is constantly accompanied by laughter and applause.

The immediate audience as well as the media praised Bush's

performance. In her May 1, 2006 article "A New Set of Bush Twins

Appear at Annual Correspondents' Dinner," Elisabeth Bumiller wrote

"With his approval ratings in the mid-30's and a White House beset by

troubles, there is some evidence that Mr. Bush worked harder on his

performance this year than in the past."[89] The article extensively details

the collaboration between Bush and Bridges, painting a warm picture of

a president willing to laugh at himself, from the president first hearing

about Bridges to their meeting and preparation for the routine.

However, in Colbert's case a few of Bush's aides reportedly left the

dinner during Colbert's performance, as a form of protest.[90]

Furthermore, lines such as "Colbert crossed the line," or "I've been there

before, and I can see that he (Bush) is angry" were attributed to the same

people.[91] In his May 1, 2006 article "White House Correspondents

Dinner: Hobnobbing With the Stars" on FOX News, Steve Doocy argued

that Colbert's performance was "one unflattering jab at the president

followed by another," adding "I thought Mr. Colbert had gone over the

line of what is appropriate when a sitting president is sitting four feet

away."[92] By the same token, Tucker Carlson in his May. 4, 2006 MSNBC

show 'The Situation with Tucker Carlson," argued that "Stephen Colbert

bombed at the White House correspondence dinner. Trust me. I was

there, and saw it. Ouch. We hear next from someone who says Colbert's

genius just went right over our heads," adding "Ooh, the President lied

about weapons of mass destruction. I mean, that was, like, edgy four years ago. I like Stephen Colbert. If he was good, I would admit it. He was awful. I felt sorry for him."[93] Furthermore, Richard Cohen in his Washington Post May 4, 2006 article "So Not Funny," argued that "Colbert was not just a failure as a comedian but rude" where rudeness means "taking advantage of the other person's sense of decorum or tradition or civility that keeps that other person from striking back or, worse, rising in a huff and leaving." For Cohen, Colbert "failed dismally in the funny person's most solemn obligation: to use absurdity or contrast or hyperbole to elucidate -- to make people see things a little bit differently."[94] However, the absurdity Cohen speaks of is the very material Colbert's "truthiness" is built of.

Beyond overt criticism, Colbert's performance was also downplayed through omission. Although there are a host of examples where media covered in a balanced way both performances, the refusal to cover the main entertainer of the evening has less to do with not "getting the joke" and more with a conscious rejection. Returning to Bumiller notorious article "A New Set of Bush Twins" - notorious for it is often cited as a prime example of the unbalanced early reporting of the 2006 WCHA dinner – the coverage focuses exclusively on Bush's comedic routine without mentioning Colbert's performance at all.[95] By the same token, video excerpts posted on the website of CNN and FOX News, featured the presidential performance without covering Colbert's.[96] Even C-SPAN, the

original broadcaster, aired an abbreviated version featuring only Bush's performance.[97] A balanced coverage of the dinner cannot bypass one of the key performances of the WHCA dinner. Thus, this incident sketches a deliberate attempt to eschew Colbert's performance.

In his May 2, 2006, *Washington Post* article "The Colbert Blackout," Dan Froomkin points out that "the traditional media's first reaction to Colbert's performance was largely to ignore it," focusing "on the much safer, self-deprecatory routine in which Bush humorously paired up with an impersonator playing his inner self."[98] Hinting at the media rebound after the internet success of the clip featuring Colbert's performance – 2.7 million hits in two days – Froomkin added that "now the mainstream media is back with its second reaction: Colbert just wasn't funny."[99] In his April 30, 2006, *Huffington Post* article "Ignoring Colbert," Peter Daou argues that "Sins of omission can be just as bad as sins of commission."[100] At the same time, on May 1, 2006, *Media Matters* posted an extensive review of this media blackout under the title "Media touted Bush's routine at Correspondents' dinner, ignored Colbert's skewering." Complete with transcripts from the cited shows, the article documents this omission through examples such as ABC's "This Week" April 30 edition, NBC's "Sunday Today," NBC's "Nightly News" April 30 broadcast, and May 1 CNN's "American Morning," playing clips of Bush's routine but ignoring Colbert entirely.[101]

On May 15, 2006, in an article entitled "Why No Stephen Colbert?" The Public Editor of *New York Times* referenced in his blog the *Times'* article documenting the omission of Colbert performance. Following the 200 complaints from readers, The Public Editor asked the Washington bureau of *New York Times* for an explanation. Richard Stevenson, a deputy bureau chief in Washington made the following statement:

> In this case, we didn't write about Mr. Colbert's routine at first because whether you thought it was funny or not, it relied on what seemed to me to be familiar themes: there was no WMD, Bush is detached from reality, the White House press corps was cowardly and asleep at the switch ... Having said all that, I wish in retrospect that I had recognized how the Colbert performance, delivered to the president's face, would resonate in some quarters. And I wish we had done a separate story that anticipated the reaction the routine generated and explained its political significance, rather than waiting to capture it after the fact.[102]

As Froomkin pointed out, the second stage of eschewing Colbert, after denial, is accusing him of not being funny. However, neither ignoring him nor dubbing his performance as lacking in humor, do not excuse nor fully explain this concentrated cover-up effort. If nothing more, this mixed reception of Colbert's performance only confirms his ironic attack

during his performance on a complicit media afraid of holding the politicians' feet to the fire.

The subdued direct feedback to Colbert's performance, as well as the media aftermath ignoring it, was eclipsed a few days later by the unexpected circulation of the clip featuring Colbert's routine. According to one of Colbert's nemeses, Fox News, the video was viewed 2.7 million times in less than two days.[103] In a rebound after initially ignoring Colbert's performance in Bumiller's article "A new set of Twins," *New York Times* reporter Noam Cohen documented the viral circulation of Colbert's clip and its rise to No. 1 album at Apple's iTunes store.[104] According to this article, the clip was so successful that a "commercial rivalry has broken out over its rebroadcast," prompting C-Span to demand the removal of the clip form YouTube and IFilm giving Google exclusive rights. The internet shattered the media cover-up of Colbert's performance.

The "distant" audience was far more interested in Colbert's controversial performance, a criticism of the Bush administration enacted in the very presence of the president, as opposed to the Bush twins' lighthearted and unprovocative routine. The explanation for the mixed response to Colbert's performance is simple: Colbert's target was the audience itself. To reiterate Smith's introductory warning: "Mister President, usually you and the politicians are the ones in the crosshair of this dinner. Tonight nobody is safe."[105] Under Colbert's ironic edge lies

the president, as the guest of honor, his political entourage, and the complicit media, in other words, virtually *everyone* in the room.

In a manner that recalls Michael Moore's performance at the Oscar ceremony, where instead of giving the usual acceptance speech he delivered a criticism of the Bush administration, Colbert uses epideictic oratory to cast blame on Bush's presidential persona and his administration's miserable track record. Like Moore, Colbert challenges the conventions of the WCHA address. In a setting where the members of the current administration meet with mainstream media, Colbert uses irony to challenge them all. Bush's blunders along with mainstream media's complicity are the main topics of the speech. I argue that Colbert's intended audience is comprised exactly from people that made the speech a viral video. His intended audience reacted to the "inappropriateness" of making fun of the president to his face through intense circulation and downloading.

Speaking "truthiness" to power

In the presence of the president, Colbert uses irony to speak "truthiness" to power. This is a rhetorical form of political dissent. Very much like Michael Moore, Colbert uses the WCHA dinner to convey his message by bending the rules: "poke but don't pierce."[106] Instead of a light heated speech of gentle ribbing, Colbert uses irony's edge to expose this administration's blunders, from the war in Iraq to its policies on

global warming. As opposed to Moore's "impossible conversation," Colbert uses irony to perform dissent, thereby conducting just such a conversation under the cover of praise. However, Colbert doesn't stop here. The mainstream media, his direct audience, is also a target. Media's complicity, intentional or not, participates in the dumbing down of the people. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that some of the media outlets disregarded altogether Colbert's performance from their coverage of the event, focusing instead on Bush's performance. This deliberate effort to eschew Colbert's performance was upset by its internet success. His intended audience was interested in seeing Colbert speaking "truthiness" to the very administration that made this term the norm of political communication. Irony provides a twist to the traditional epideictic model: praise becomes blame and virtues become vices. In his praiseworthy depiction of Bush as a man of strident political views, Colbert in fact uses irony to communicate his dissent, to cast blame on a president who is indifferent to public opinion, who governs on intuition and "principle" rather than democratic responsiveness, who relies on the unverifiable whims of a higher power, and who clings to a "long view" of history as an excuse for reckless governance. In the end, from within what Ivie's calls the oxymoron of democratic dissent, Colbert used irony to harshly criticize the president directly by wholeheartedly embracing his persona.

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CHAPTER 5

GENERAL OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

No matter what concept we use to describe the status-quo, be it

Habermas' "decline of the public sphere," my own "estrangement of our

public (political and social) exchanges," or Ivie's notion of "democratic

dissent as oxymoron" through the efforts of the Bush administration and

its unequivocal divide between good and evil, we can argue that

democratic communication and democratic dissent seem to have stalled

following the events on 9/11. On one hand, we have, as the authors and

artifacts scrutinized in my project have contended, an administration

adamant to protect and preserve the American society against a faceless

enemy at all costs - which can include the loss of civil liberties through

the Patriot Act, secret wiretappings that bypass the normal legal rout,

loss of habeas corpus and the use of torture in violation to the tenets of

Geneva convention, manipulation of the media through staged photo

ops, scare tactics, or more directly through distributing propaganda

manufactured by governmental agencies as "news." A devout supporter

of Plato might even argue that his ideal republic has been actualized

given that, according to Socrates, echoing Plato's thoughts, "If any one at

all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the

persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good."[1]

On the other hand, we have frivolous media at times, following Paris Hilton or Eliot Spitzer in their cars, or bumping Moore and the discussion about the healthcare system in US to hear, for an hour, respected journalist Larry King inquiring into the 28 days prison ordeal of Paris Hilton; naïve media at times, falling for the governmental PR machine, as Walter Pincus dubs it in Börjesson's *Feet to the fire*, reporting rather then questioning the reasons for engaging in the war in Iraq; bullied media at times, scared, branded unpatriotic or helping the enemy by equating reporting with being accomplice to future terrorist attacks, as Bush so eloquently puts it, when asked about the Military Commissions Act, "For people to leak that program and for a newspaper to publish it does great harm to the United States of America. That fact that we're discussing this program is helping the enemy;"[2] and overzealous media at times, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, where, to allegedly make amends for not scrutinizing enough the WMD issue in the run-up to the war, exaggerated reports of casualties, rapes, murders and infanticide made their way on the front page.

Within the strangeness of our public exchanges on matter of common concern, I argued, irony becomes an appealing mode of engaging in public debates. Strangely enough, irony, as dissonance between the literal meaning and the latent one, as "saying one thing and meaning

another," becomes a new standard for political sincerity. As Hutcheon contends, irony has an "edge" involving "the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude."[3] As such, irony cannot be divorced from (political) attitudes and emotion; the very deployment of irony, in any context, involves the first and stirs the latter. This edge becomes even clearer when analyzing audiences' reactions, be they positive or negative, to the deployment of ironic performances in a political context by the three artifacts analyzed here. Hutcheon's concept of "discursive communities," pointing to a shared system of beliefs, values, and, most importantly, communicative strategies provided a useful critical tool in understanding the audiences' reactions in terms of the appropriateness of irony rather than in terms of the ability to decode the ironic meaning.

Despite irony's popular reputation of being a humorous disengaged trope, my analysis followed its deployment in increasingly politically engaged artifacts and performances. Such an analysis followed silently Burke's ideas about the "perspective by incongruity" not as "demoralizing" but "remoralizing" a situation "already demoralized by inaccuracy," a perspective for which the ultimate is not passiveness, but "maximum consciousness."[4]

In South Park, using Bizter's model for rhetorical situation, with its subsequent modification by Vatz, I advanced a "mediational" theory of exigence. Harriman's notion of "public stupidity" converged, through irony, with Canetti's concept of "crowd behavior" to paint an unflattering

picture of our own collective behavior feeding of common fears and misconceptions. Here *South Park* functions synecdochically. The little town in Colorado stands in for the entire United States; the townspeople's absurd behavior, mirrors our exaggerated behavior; the overreacting *South Park* media, reporting rape pillage and murders without witnessing, echoes the real media's exaggeration, as in the case of Huricane Katrina for example. All the problems of the world, so to speak, affect this fictional town. As such, laughing at the South Park townspeople's trials and tribulations is no longer simply a humorous experience. Laughter, or anger for that matter, gain social and political valence.

The same synecdochic function became apparent in my analysis of Moore's documentaries. In performing the "impossible conversation" with economic and political elites, Roger Smith, Charlton Heston, and George W. Bush were made to stand in for a generalized corporate indifference, a rise in youth violence, and a decline in political responsibility. By subverting the genre of documentary, I contended that Moore uses irony to convey his message, to expose "systemic inequalities," and to ambush "perpetrators." As we have seen, for Moore, irony doesn't manifest itself only through utterances but also through editing techniques and careful staged performances and ambushes – theatrics. With a scheduled date before the 2004 election, Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, directed at President Bush, was clearly designed to have a political impact on the presidential

elections. As such, Moore's use of irony is not simply *South Park*'s

generalized indictment of absurd collective behavior, but rather a

concrete prosecution of specific individuals on specific issues. His irony

is clearly designed to have an impact on current political debates. Much

more then laughter, I concluded, Moore's goal is to make us, supporter

and adversaries alike, angry and thus keep the issues in the public view.

Although President Bush could choose not to watch *South Park* or

Moore's documentaries, he was not afforded this privilege in the case of

Colbert's performance at the 2006 WHCA dinner. Indeed a captive

audience, the President listened and watched a 16 minutes speech and 7

minutes video presentation in which the "truthiness" of his

administration was laid bare. Colbert bent the rules of the event - "poke

but don't pierce" – and used irony to criticize directly the president and

the complicit media. Colbert cast blame by "praising" Bush's public

persona, his self-sufficiency and his administration's blunders from the

war in Iraq to its policies on global warming. Media was also a target in

its failure to scrutinize thoroughly the current administration. Although

the featured entertainer, Colbert was largely ignored by media after the

event. This deliberate effort to eschew Colbert's performance was upset

by its internet success. The larger audience was more interested in

seeing Colbert speaking "truthiness" to the administration that coined

this term as the norm of political communication, than watch Bush

making fun of himself in his own comedic routine. In the end, it was

irony which allowed Colbert, in his epideictic performance, to communicate democratic dissent directly to the president.

My project followed irony's progression from *South Park's* generalized critique of collective behavior, and Moore's politically committed performance of the "impossible conversation," to Colbert's communicating directly to the president his dissent as "truthiness." All these artifacts sketch the image of irony as versatile trope, rhetorically efficient as a mode of political engagement. Beyond the distinction of those who get the joke and those who don't, we find intense emotional involvement from audiences, supporters and targets alike. As such, I argue, irony is far from being a disengaged trope. In fact, its emotional and judgmental "edge" makes it an efficient rhetorical tool that can be used to dissect the estrangement of our public exchanges.

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