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IN THE CULTURE OF TRUTHINESS:  
COMIC CRITICISM AND THE PERFORMATIVE POLITICS OF STEPHEN COLBERT

by

JUSTINE SCHUCHARD HOLCOMB

Under the Direction of M. Lane Bruner

ABSTRACT

I analyze comedian Stephen Colbert's performances as the bloviating "fake" pundit, "Stephen Colbert." Colbert's work reflects the progression of personality-driven media and performance-driven society. His frequent shifts and blending of characters – from actor and entertainer to pundit and politician – call attention to the similarly character-driven nature of "real" figures in politics and media. Using Kenneth Burke's theory of tragic and comic frames of acceptance, I analyze three sets of Colbert's performances – hosting *The Colbert Report*, speaking at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, and running for president – as well as the conventional situations and discourses he complicates. I argue that Colbert's comic critique provides perspective by incongruity about the processes of production, mediation, and persuasion in the business of news punditry – and the literal staging of politics performed as entertainment.

INDEX WORDS: Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Kenneth Burke, Comic frame of acceptance, Perspective by incongruity, Performance, Media criticism, Political satire, Parody

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by

JUSTINE SCHUCHARD HOLCOMB

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009

IN THE CULTURE OF TRUTHINESS:  
COMIC CRITICISM AND THE PERFORMATIVE POLITICS OF STEPHEN COLBERT

by

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To Matt, who always inspires me to love and laugh.

To my parents, who always inspire me to go for it!

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## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the debut of his show, *The Colbert Report*, in 2005, Stephen Colbert has become the new name in political satire, in more ways than one. Stephen Colbert, a left-leaning comedian, plays "Stephen Colbert," a parody of a bloviating rightwing television news pundit reminiscent of Fox News's Bill O'Reilly. Colbert's program is a spin-off of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the "fake news" comedy show where he played a "fake" correspondent. Since establishing his character as an over-the-top champion of "truthiness,"<sup>1</sup> Colbert has also ventured beyond the bounds of his program to critique the mainstream media and political establishments on their own stages. In 2006, he questioned the appropriateness of the media's complicit relationship with the Bush administration in a stinging speech at the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner. In 2007, he campaigned in character for president, lampooning the media's self-involved speculation and daily poll-driven coverage of a crowded field of contenders. Colbert's parody follows the trajectory of the news business from providing perceivably objective news reporting to selling highly opinionated, personality-driven commentary to actual political involvement. He continues to foray into the blurry space of pundits who not only talk politics but also become politicians, entertainers who take up politics as their latest act, and politicians who seek votes by getting laughs. Colbert's frequent shifts and blending of characters – from actor and entertainer to pundit and politician – call attention to the similarly performative nature of figures in national politics and media.

As consumers, scholars, and critics of political media, what can we learn from these performances? How do the performances of Stephen Colbert contribute to or complicate

contemporary forms of political communication, news reporting, and commentary? What are the various ways in which Colbert performs his critique?

Such a study of Colbert's comedic performances is significant for several reasons. First, his performances appear to fill a critical void left by other media figures who have become wrapped up in their own ratings-driven performances. Second, Colbert appeals to viewers to become better critics themselves by providing tools to identify and question certain rhetorical conventions that are otherwise taken for granted. Third, while scholars have conducted extensive research on *The Daily Show's* critical functions, there has been little attention to Colbert's distinct performances, especially those outside of his television show, which extend *The Daily Show's* critique of television news to television personalities. Whereas much of the scholarship on *The Daily Show* has focused on that program's implications for journalism, I believe that Colbert raises other important questions about media punditry and the relationship of media and media figures to politics and political figures.

No one has written about Colbert's performances through the rhetorical-critical lens used in this study. Specifically, I demonstrate how Colbert's parodies of rhetorical conventions in political media provide "perspective by incongruity," a concept named by Kenneth Burke in which one places the taken-for-granted conventions of one environment and places them into another environment to render them unnatural and problematic. I also interweave a number of other rhetorical approaches in my analysis of specific performances. In Chapter Three, for example, I consider Michel Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*, or speaking truth to power at one's own risk, and notions of the "carnavalesque" and "inversion" from Mikhail Bakhtin, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. In Chapter Four, I include Michael Kaplan's critique of media speculation based on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. In doing so, I first identify the

ideological and rhetorical conventions of contemporary political media, drawing on recent scholarship in political and media criticism. I analyze specific conventions that have become the objects of Colbert's parody, including Bill O'Reilly and his show, conventional humor at the White House, and coverage of presidential races in the media. I then analyze Colbert's comedic critique of each of these objects, drawing on the relevant scholarship to support my claims. I argue that Colbert's comedy provides the viewing public with critical awareness and tools to assess how and why contemporary conventions are constructed and perpetuated. Such a critical education has taken root in political comedy, arguably, because the conventional vehicle for political criticism – the mainstream media – has lost its critical distance. That is, where the media industry has become a contributor to the processes of rhetorical production, it can no longer analyze those processes objectively. In this environment, as news and politics become a joke, comedy becomes a serious critique.

This work extends recent scholarship on news parody and satire, specifically on *The Onion's* parody of print news (e.g., Achter), *The Daily Show's* parody of television news (e.g., Baym, "Discursive Integration"; Love; McKain; Smolkin), and emerging work on *The Colbert Report* (e.g., Baym, "Communication Representation; Burwell and Boler). As I will show in the literature review, this scholarship reflects the development (both the promising and the problematic) of contemporary mass media forms, especially in mainstream print and television news. This study adds to the literature by addressing the more recent trends of personality-driven punditry and politics with an in-depth analysis of both rhetorical conventions and Colbert's satiric criticism of such conventions. This research is significant to communication scholars seeking to understand recent political performances in the media and alternative critical responses. By studying the developing tensions between politics and entertainment, "real" and

"fake" news, trustworthiness and "truthiness" in modern media-driven culture, we will also be better prepared to identify and respond to future generations of media problems.

### ***Who is Stephen Colbert?***

Colbert is many personas at once, which I describe here briefly. Stephen Colbert is a professional, politically left-leaning comedian who performs as "Stephen Colbert," a parody of a loud, self-centered, self-promoting, rightwing pundit with his own half-hour talk show, *The Colbert Report*, on the Comedy Central cable network. Colbert's act is inspired by conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly and his program, *The O'Reilly Factor* on the Fox News Channel (Lemann). On each episode of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert delivers an exaggeratedly loud and opinionated monologue on current political issues, followed by interviews with guest politicians, writers, or various experts, during which Colbert frequently interrupts, asks aggravating questions, and makes judgmental statements, mimicking O'Reilly's controversial style (see Conway, Grabe, and Grieves). On his show and in his book, *I Am America (And So Can You!)* (Colbert, Dahm, Dinello, and Silverman), Colbert's satire calls attention to the self-centeredness of many pundits and exposes the flaws in their partisan logic. Ultimately, his comedy raises questions about today's blurring of news, commentary, politics, and entertainment in mediated discourses.

In April 2006, Colbert took this further when he delivered, in character, the keynote address at the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner in front of President Bush, White House officials, and members of the mainstream media elite. He skewered not only the president for his controversial policies but also the press for sacrificing the search for truth for the security of continued access to White House sources (Rich, "All the President's Press"). Much of the media establishment responded by blacking out coverage of Colbert's speech, covering only other speakers and entertainers (including a Bush impersonator who performed a

lighthearted "roast" skit with the real President Bush). Meanwhile, video clips of Colbert's performance, along with public commentary, virtually exploded in the blogosphere, offering an apparently much-needed space for public engagement, response, and debate in an age when the media industry and political administration's discourses appear tightly controlled and restricted (see Love; Smolkin).

In 2007, Colbert the actor and "fake" pundit added "candidate" to his résumé when he announced his bid to run for President of the United States. With at least twenty Republican and Democratic candidates vying to succeed President Bush, Colbert's campaign echoed that of comedian Pat Paulsen in 1968 (Starr) and the California gubernatorial recall in 2003, when 135 people – from politicians to sumo wrestlers – appeared on the ballot ("October 7, 2003 Statewide Special Election"). Colbert announced he would attempt to run on both the Republican and Democratic tickets – but only in South Carolina. He told NBC's Tim Russert, "I don't want to be president; I want to run for president. There's a difference" ("*Meet the Press*"), suggesting that that presidential primary was perhaps, for many, a mere publicity opportunity. Critics also wondered whether to take Colbert seriously, since another comedian, Al Franken, was running a serious campaign for the Senate (Green; Cilizza). Colbert simultaneously parodied the political pundits as they speculated incessantly over which candidates were most "electable" (Zengerle). Colbert offered a timely reflection on pundit discourses, which are marketed as critical but often lack useful critique, and he interrogated buzzwords like "viable," "real," and "authentic," as employed by the candidates. His performance as both candidate and pundit also revealed certain myths and problems of a campaign process driven by a media "horserace."<sup>2</sup>

I find "Stephen Colbert" especially interesting because he embodies a number of personas and roles (actor, entertainer, character, pundit, politician) that, at face value, seem

contradictory or necessarily different, and yet his blending and shifting of them work so naturally. What does this say about other figures in political and media culture today? Recent scholarly literature (e.g., Baym, "Discursive Integration"; Conway, Grabe, and Grieves; Christensen; Hollander; Love; McKain; Smolkin) articulates a number of problematic changes in the media and political industries in the twenty-first century, which are the objects of Colbert's critique. These developments include the rise of twenty-four-hour television news and "infotainment," as well as increased partisanship and strict message control under the administration of George W. Bush. The literature includes several scholarly analyses of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Baym, "Discursive Integration"; Feldman; Gaines; Love; McKain; Smolkin), which is the counterpart to *The Colbert Report*. As these scholars show, *The Daily Show* is a similar type of critical comedy, so it is helpful to understand that show's work as the foundation from which Colbert proceeds on his own show. A recent analysis of *The Onion* newspaper (Achter), an older sibling, so to speak, of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, also offers foundational perspective based on *The Onion's* critique of print media. There are also two recent studies of *The Colbert Report* (Baym, "Communication Representation"; Burwell and Boler), which I argue are helpful if narrower analyses, as they address only a couple of aspects of his show. I wish to extend the conversation about the critical potential of comedy to educate the viewing public about the rhetorical conventions of politics and media. My work builds on existing findings and adds to the scholarly conversation through a more thorough analysis of new critical directions, particularly Colbert's take on the evolution from straight-news reporting to the new conventions of overtly partisan punditry and personality politics.



## *Literature Review*

### *Key Problems in Contemporary Media and Political Rhetoric*

Communication scholar Geoffrey Baym describes the changing environment of the news media industry in the twenty-first century. Today's media industry is characterized by both an expansion of channels, designed to appeal to multiple niche audiences, and increased consolidation, resulting in a few multinational corporations owning all networks. These conglomerates "are vertically and horizontally integrated, structured to share resources, personnel, and approaches to content across what were once distinct media outlets" (Baym, "Discursive Integration" 261). To most media executives, Baym argues, news programming is now considered a profit center, rather than a public service, and viewers are considered consumers first, citizens second. To increase advertising revenue, therefore, media corporations must keep consumers happy. One result, says Baym, is that "the once-authoritative nightly news has been fractured, replaced by a variety of programming strategies ranging from the latest version of network 'news lite' to local news happy talk and twenty-four-hour cable news punditry" (259). The lines distinguishing news and entertainment have become significantly blurred, which is troublesome to media critics. (Baym agrees, although he argues that just as the news can become permeated with entertainment, this is "a conflation that cuts both ways" (262). That is, so too can entertainment programs provide important and in-depth news content. I will revisit Baym's argument in my review of scholarship on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.)

Another major issue facing news reporting today is the rise of visual media, coupled with the increasing ease of digital image manipulation, which may perpetuate ideological views more unnoticeably. Aaron McKain notes that the formulaic structure of television news has become so

natural to viewers that we do not even realize "the process of mediation" (417); rather, we take for granted that what is mediated (that is, constructed and narrated) is reality. For example, McKain notes that television news reporters are often filmed on location, such as standing in front of the White House when reporting on the president, "ostensibly to become geographically, symbolically, and metonymically closer to the story" (418), when in fact that reporter may have no better access to the White House than a copyeditor back at the station.

Christian Christensen also observes a number of ways in which broadcasters use "iconic" images as visual cues to help viewers more quickly grasp the context of a story. The problem, argues Christensen, is that these iconic images often perpetuate stereotypes. For example, he describes much of the Western news reporting he observed while living in Turkey: "Reports from Turkey invariably included images of a mosque, a minaret (the tower attached to mosques used to call people to prayer), veiled women, or men carrying strings of Muslim prayer beads. What was particularly striking was that these religious images were used regardless of the subject of the story" (30). He contends that most reporters probably do not consciously intend to perpetuate stereotypes – the images are taken for granted – but perhaps this makes the problem even worse.

The changing media landscape is further complicated by the rise in partisanship and cultural polarization in the United States since 9/11 and the start of the Iraq War. Journalism scholar Rachel Smolkin argues that many journalists have allowed the misguided notions of "objectivity" and "balance" to cripple rather than strengthen their reporting, drawing on interviews with several communication scholars to support her case. She quotes scholar Hub Brown, who describes "an atmosphere that's become so partisan that we're afraid of what we say every time we say something" (Smolkin 20). In trying to be objective, "straight news" reporters

focus on taking down the facts, but the problem is, argues Smolkin, what constitutes "fact" is now in question. Sources may contort or even falsify information to further their agendas. Reporters like the *New York Times'* Jayson Blair may report entirely fictitious stories as fact, and the fiction is perpetuated as other reporters cite it further. Scholar Martin Kaplan, quoted in Smolkin's article, says that journalists who do not realize what is happening "can be played like a piccolo by people who know how to exploit that weakness" (21). At the same time, Smolkin notes that "balance" has become the new watchword in news, arguably at the expense of truth. For example, Smolkin discusses the debate about global warming, noting that recently, for the sake of balance, many news outlets would give equal air time or print space to opposing sides of the issue, specifically to scientists who say global warming is real and man-made and those who deny that claim. Scholar Venise Wagner argues, "That really was not authentic. There were very few scientists who refuted the body of evidence [supporting global warming]" (quoted in Smolkin 21). When journalists focus strictly on balance, they risk missing the heart of the issue. "Every issue can be portrayed as a controversy between two opposing sides," Smolkin quotes Kaplan, "It leaves the reader or viewer in the position of having to weigh competing truth claims, often without enough information to decide that one side is manifestly right, and the other side is trying to muddy the water with propaganda" (21). Reporters should be able to identify that propaganda and bring it to light for viewers, argues Smolkin.

Scholar Robert Love argues that the problems of inaccuracy, propaganda, and outright fiction have always existed in news reporting. In wartime, governments frequently push propaganda to their own people and those of opposing nations. In 2005, the U.S. government spent \$300 million to garner public support for the Iraq War, including taking steps to place "positive news" in Iraqi newspapers (Love 33). War propaganda may not surprise anyone, but

Love notes instances where the government recently has taken more secretive steps to promote domestic agendas. He cites the case of Armstrong Williams, a conservative columnist to whom the Bush administration paid nearly a quarter-million dollars to support its No Child Left Behind education program. Williams was outed after being caught for fraudulent billing practices; otherwise, Love notes, the public might never have known he was working as a paid spokesman in this case. Armstrong is only one of many so-called "experts" hired to operate as a hidden hand, warns Love. Even more insidious, Love observes, is the government's practice of producing and distributing video news releases, or VNRs, which tempt increasingly time- and staff-strapped news outlets to take shortcuts in broadcasting. When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created a VNR to promote its Medicare plan, the video featured an actress posing as a reporter who delivered a news-like story. According to Love, a number of news stations across the country ran the VNR without disclosing its source, allowing the public to believe it was an objective news piece. This is dangerous to journalists and to the public, argues Love, and both need to be aware of this practice and able to identify it.

Why do journalists and news networks allow the government and other newsmakers to control the news with their agendas? Key reasons may be the dependence on such sources for news content and the fear of losing access to those sources as retribution for running anything critical of them. Aaron McKain argues that the news industry is structured to depend on certain "authorities" for information, which may be a fundamental flaw in the newsgathering process. He describes the industry's typical process of "gatekeeping," or "deciding what is news or what will become news" (McKain 416). He discusses two key problems with this structure. "First, either because of economic demands, formal convention, or, more conspiratorially, a commitment to preserving the ideological status quo, gatekeeping is accomplished largely by

'indexing' to sources that are guaranteed and predictable producers of news" (ibid.). These sure-bet producers tend to include high-ranking government officials, observes McKain. "The corollary to this process is that non-'official' sources do not gain entry, viewpoints not espoused by government officials cannot make it into the news's narrative, and the indexed sources are allowed carte blanche to frame the way that the issues are reported on and the terms upon which they are debated" (ibid.). A fundamental change in the way sources are selected and vetted may be critical to the future of news.

Other research suggests that news audiences have become more partisan in recent years. Barry Hollander analyzes data from five "Biennial Media Use" surveys conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press from 1998 to 2006, which show a dramatic increase in the gravitation of political partisans to news programs that reflect their political views. Hollander is most concerned with dramatic changes by Republican viewers, who have flocked to the conservative Fox News Channel and away from CNN and network news programs considered to be more left-leaning. In 1998, fourteen percent of Republican viewers watched Fox News and twenty-seven percent watched CNN. By 2006, thirty-six percent of Republicans chose Fox News while nineteen percent tuned into CNN. Democrats, by comparison, remained relatively stable in their viewing choices. Meanwhile, viewers who did not identify strongly with either party tended to watch less news over time, turning instead to more entertainment programming. With more than one hundred channels to choose from in today's media landscape, "the remaining audience, more interested and more partisan, now has the opportunity to seek out news sources that confirm beliefs or to avoid sources that challenge beliefs, which research suggests can lead to even more extreme positions on social and political issues," argues Hollander (34). As viewers migrate to news that reinforces their political beliefs, news networks cater to these preferences

by adding more politically charged news programs, creating a vicious cycle of political division and "echo-chambering" ("UGA Study"; Fahmy).

On Fox News, one of the most popular and controversial political news pundits is Bill O'Reilly, whose program *The O'Reilly Factor* is the inspiration for *The Colbert Report*. O'Reilly joined Fox News in 1996 and gained popularity in 1998 with his coverage of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal (Auletta, cited in Conway, Grabe, and Grievess). O'Reilly offers brash, opinionated commentary with a rightwing slant on the political issues of the day, followed by interviews "that can be described as either incisive or combative, depending upon one's perspective" (Conway, Grabe, and Grievess 199). Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe, and Kevin Grievess compared O'Reilly's language on his show to that of 1930s radio commentator Father Charles Coughlin, who became infamous for his fear-mongering, propagandistic speech. The researchers found that O'Reilly employs all seven propaganda devices defined by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937. These include "name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and band wagon" (ibid.). In a content analysis of a segment called "Talking Points"<sup>3</sup> on *The O'Reilly Factor*, the researchers cited O'Reilly for name calling at a rate of more than eight times per minute (e.g., referring to Democrats as "the kool-aid left") (203, 205) and making glittering generalities nearly three times per minute (e.g., describing coalition forces using "virtue words" such as "the good guys") (206). Conway, Grabe, and Grievess argue that O'Reilly divides the people and institutions he discusses into three main categories: "villains, victims, and the virtuous" (202). According to the research,

The most evil villains in O'Reilly's world are illegal aliens, terrorists, and foreigners because they are apparently a physical and moral threat to the United States. Slightly less evil – but unambiguously bad – are groups (media,

organizations, politicians) who share a political leaning to the left. On the other side, the virtuous flank emerged as an all-American crew made up of the military, criminal justice system, Bush administration, and ordinary U.S. citizens (Conway, Grabe, and Grievies 197).

I build on this research in Chapter Two, where I identify, analyze, and compare the rhetorical conventions of O'Reilly and his show to Colbert's parodic critique.

I have just outlined several key issues and problems permeating mass media culture today. First, as Baym argues, while both the capabilities of communication technology and the number of media channels are on the rise, networks are consolidating, cutting their reporting staffs, and recycling content across market segments. Media conglomerates see audiences as consumers to be given what they want, rather than citizens who need critical context. Second, according to McKain and Christensen, as television and other visual media become news sources of choice, viewers may grow more comfortable with the visual cues and short-cuts commonly employed to tell stories quickly. Not only do people equate mediated images with reality, they may also be unaware of the ideological influences of popular visual icons. Third, as Smolkin reports, the rise in partisanship and cultural polarization, especially following 9/11, has had negative effects on objective news reporting. In trying to please both sides of perceived binary issues, journalists only perpetuate divisiveness and even propaganda. Moreover, as Love and McKain suggest, reporters' dependence upon government officials and other authoritative sources preclude them from being free to critique those sources when necessary. Fourth, as Hollander demonstrates, audiences have indeed gravitated to news that caters to their political preferences. This creates a vicious cycle, as Conway, Grabe, and Grievies illustrate, for as the ratings go up for pundits like O'Reilly, their programs will continue to cater to partisan views.

*The Response of Critical Comedy*

These problems of a changing media landscape and increasing partisan polarization in political communication continue to be a grave concern for media scholars and critics. Meanwhile, however, we can point to an interesting and unusual site of resistance: late-night comedy. Four nights a week on the Comedy Central cable network, more than one million viewers – mostly young, male, and educated – tune into new episodes of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, followed by *The Colbert Report* (Baym, "Discursive Integration"; Feldman and Young). While *The Daily Show's* creators describe it as a "fake news" program, research studies show that viewers consider it a preferred source for real news. For example, a study by the Pew Center for the People and the Press found that twenty-one percent of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-nine turned to *The Daily Show* for political news during the 2004 presidential election, compared to twenty-three percent who said they got their news from the major networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS (Feldman and Young). Both shows have won prestigious awards not only for comedy, but also for news reporting (Smolkin; Greppi). What is it about Stewart and Colbert's comedy that has turned the traditional notion of news on its head?

Before answering this question, however, it is necessary to acknowledge *The Onion* newspaper as a veteran source of parody on the continuum from print media to broadcast media to personality-driven media, for two reasons. First, the concept of *The Onion* is a precursor to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as former *Onion* editor Ben Karlin went on to executive-produce both television shows. Second, it places print news parody on a continuum with television news parody (*The Daily Show*) and television pundit parody (*The Colbert Report*), reflecting the trajectory of the news business in an increasingly paperless and partisan age. Paul Achter, whose essay on *The Onion* was published in 2008, acknowledges that a



rhetorical-critical analysis is "overdue" for *The Onion*, launched in 1996 (Achter 278). Achter positions *The Onion* as "carnavalesque discourse that couches its criticism in the format of news" (277), applying a Bakhtinian lens to the study of news parody in his in-depth analysis of the paper and its response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.<sup>4</sup> *The Onion* exaggerates the structure and conventions of print journalism in order to call readers' attention to the often contrived, problematic, and even silly ways in which traditional newspapers and stories are constructed. In the wake of 9/11, when a shocked public was glued to television news while media outlets fretted over the appropriateness of reintroducing "entertainment," *The Onion* effectively illustrated this atmosphere of emotion and confusion in its parody, which arguably served to educate its readers and provide a way forward. For example, one story, "Talking to Your Child About the WTC Attack," mimicked similar titles appearing in the conventional press while offering complex and nuanced details of historical and geopolitical factors influencing Islamic tensions with the West, which many American adults did not know about and were not likely to find in other papers. "Opening up rather than closing down public discourse, the stories articulate America's blind spots and hold them up for examination," argues Achter (296).

*The Daily Show* complements *The Onion's* print news parody with a satiric yet enlightening look at the television news industry. In her essay, "What the Mainstream Media Can Learn from Jon Stewart," Rachel Smolkin argues that what Stewart and his team effectively do is "to be bold and to do a better job of cutting through the fog" (Smolkin 19). In its comedy, *The Daily Show* points directly to the problems Smolkin outlines of the mainstream news industry, while "fearlessly" getting to the heart of the matter, which many "real" journalists seem to have forgotten how to do. Stewart frequently skewers the questionable positions and hypocritical statements of politicians, the trivial stories that occupy the airwaves at the expense

of serious reporting (think Paris Hilton's arrest versus the Alberto Gonzales hearings), and the self-important attitudes of TV news personalities. What also resonates is that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* "parody not only the news but also how journalists get news" (22). Smolkin quotes *Chicago Tribune* columnist Phil Rosenthal, who says, "It's actually kind of a surefire way to appeal to people, because if the news itself isn't entertaining, then the way it's covered, the breathless conventions of TV news, are always bankable...So much of the news these days involves managing the news, so a show like Stewart's that takes the larger view of not just what's going on, but how it's being manipulated, is really effective" (ibid.). Media critic Melanie McFarland adds in Smolkin's article, "[Stewart] actually gives you some stuff to consider in addition to the punch line. He and his staff show an awareness of the issues and are able to take a longer view than a twenty-four-hour news cycle can, which is funny because it's also a daily show" (23).

Aaron McKain also considers the ways in which *The Daily Show* teaches viewers to recognize the "process of mediation" (417). Whereas most television (and film, for that matter) is produced so that viewers do not notice or think about camera angles, digital enhancements, or story construction, *The Daily Show* unveils all of these things by parodying them in fake news reports. For example, the show's fake reporters frequently stand in front of obvious green screens (digital studio backdrops), and Stewart's desk monologues are typically accompanied by images that have been exaggeratedly altered for comic effect. Whereas traditional television news production encourages "looking through it," McKain argues, *The Daily Show's* "hypermediation" technique "encourages the viewer to look *at* it" (ibid.). Similarly, Elliott Gaines' semiotic analysis of *The Daily Show* argues that it shows viewers the processes of visual narrative

construction so they are better prepared to recognize the rhetorical intentions of certain images and signs.

In addition to saying what traditional reporters seem afraid to say and showing viewers how news broadcasts are constructed, Baym argues that *The Daily Show* provides a platform for "rational-critical" discourse that is missing from many other news talk shows (Baym, "Discursive Integration" 272). As noted earlier, Baym sees the positive potential of the blending of news and entertainment, as "it can also be seen as a rethinking of discursive styles and standards that may be opening spaces for significant innovation" (262). That is, *The Daily Show* is an example of an entertainment program that *promotes* awareness of and interest in the news, as opposed to soft-news shows that entertain at the *expense* of awareness and interest in the news. Baym argues that *The Daily Show's* satire is "dialogic," in that it both questions the narratives supplied by the political administration and mainstream media and compels its viewers to do the same. "Unlike traditional news, which claims an epistemological certainty, satire is a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation" (267). From Stewart's satiric opening monologue to the parody of live-on-the-scene broadcasting with self-centered reporters – where "one becomes an expert by being on television, rather than the reverse" (269) – to Stewart's interviews with top politicians, authors, and the occasional celebrity, the show calls on viewers to engage in critical analysis and conversation.

In "The News About Comedy," Lauren Feldman analyzes discussions of *The Daily Show* by journalists in popular press articles, observing that journalists both fear and welcome the show's criticism of their work and their profession. "For many journalists, *The Daily Show* has prompted reconsideration of the once rigid distinction between news and entertainment and of

the historical conventions used to enforce this distinction," writes Feldman (406). She argues that *The Daily Show* phenomenon serves as a "critical incident" (similar to Watergate, the Kennedy assassination, the Gulf War and the rise of CNN) that "allows journalists to re-evaluate the rules and assumptions that dictate their professional practice" (411). For example, many journalists have credited *The Daily Show* with breaking a story about Vice President Dick Cheney giving major military contracts to Halliburton, an important finding that the mainstream media either ignored or avoided.

Even though Colbert and Stewart insist that their shows are entertainment only,<sup>5</sup> many scholars and viewers agree that these parodies provide much more than simple comic relief. Smolkin argues that *The Daily Show's* coverage of news is a model for journalists. Baym suggests *The Daily Show* is a new kind of critical journalism that invites public inquiry into constructed discourses. Feldman agrees, citing numerous journalists who credit Stewart and his team for stellar reporting. McKain says *The Daily Show* shows viewers how to "look at," and not "through," rhetorical conventions. McKain's concept is key to my study of Colbert's critical performances. As I discuss in the methodology section, Burke's theory of "perspective by incongruity" essentially calls upon the viewer to "look at" conventions that are otherwise taken for granted. Just as *The Daily Show* provides a model for critical journalism, as these scholars argue, I am interested in how Colbert provides a model for a more critical form of punditry.

#### *Emerging Literature on The Colbert Report*

There is not yet a substantial body of scholarly literature related to Colbert. Baym is one of the first scholars to analyze *The Colbert Report* since its debut in 2005. Like *The Daily Show*, Baym argues that *The Colbert Report* "challenges the 'foolish certainty' of an aesthetic totalitarianism" in the media, especially television news, characterized by a dominant emphasis

on visual spectacle and dramatic narratives rather than objective, intellectual analysis (Baym, "Communication Representation" 371, 374). To illustrate his argument, Baym analyzes Colbert's recurring segment, "Better Know A District," in which Colbert engages in off-the-wall, satirical interviews with lesser-known members of the U.S. House of Representatives. In his analysis, Baym notes that TV news – national as well as local – tends to feature only national political figures while generally ignoring "rank-in-file" representatives, unless they take on prominent leadership roles in the national arena or become embroiled in some kind of scandal. Meanwhile, that national political narrative – virtually the only narrative reported – has become controlled by rightwing political interests that "substitute passion for reason and volume for fact" (374). Colbert's interviews parody such "passion" and "volume" to make their irrationality apparent; thus, Baym says, this segment's "indulgence in the techniques of postmodern spectacle simultaneously functions as a critique of those techniques" (ibid.). Baym's study is an excellent segue from analyses of Jon Stewart's straight-man interactions with politicians to studies of Colbert's in-character parodies of pundit-politician dialogues, inviting further inquiry into the unique critical value of Colbert's additional performances.

Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler study the online interactions and discussions of fans of Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report* in their essay "Calling on the Colbert Nation: Fandom, Politics, and Parody in an Age of Media Convergence." Burwell and Boler, who initially intended to study Colbert's use of irony through textual analysis, argue that scholars cannot study this irony without considering Colbert's fans and their willingness and ability to "get" the irony. The authors review fan web sites, both official (ColbertNation.com, created by Comedy Central) and unofficial (such as NoFactZone.com, created by a fan), to which Colbert frequently alludes on his show. "Colbert has suggested that fans are essential to the *Report*," the

authors note (6), citing Colbert's own description of his audience as "a character in a scene I'm playing" (7). The authors conclude that Colbert fans (in particular, the probably small segment that participates actively on fan web sites) are motivated by a variety of factors, including entertainment, and not always politics. This research is a helpful start for studies of Colbert fan culture, but since the authors' research is limited to postings to two web sites, it is only a start.

#### *Opportunities for New Research*

In summary, while there is a wealth of existing literature on comedy-news and political critique, there are some clear opportunities for the conversation to continue. Up to now, most of the conversation has centered on *The Daily Show*, especially its critique of the contemporary television news business and implications for journalism (Baym, "Discursive Integration"; Boler and Turpin; Feldman; Love; Smolkin). This is important because *The Daily Show* is the precursor and counterpart to *The Colbert Report*, which I will argue extends the critique to political punditry, mirroring the evolution of political news programming. Some studies of *The Daily Show* (Gaines; McKain), as well as *The Onion* (Achter) and traditional television reporting (Christensen), offer helpful insights on the visual-cultural problems evident in today's media and political spheres. *The Onion* and *The Daily Show*, they argue, impart critical knowledge to the public of how images and signs are used rhetorically and how structural conventions of mass media erase awareness of mediation. This is key to my analysis of Colbert, who also parodies the rhetorical use of images and visual framing; however, I argue that Colbert's parody of personality-driven media and political culture is different and perhaps uniquely complex.

While research on *The Daily Show* is relatively thorough, there has been little attention to Colbert's distinct performances, especially those outside of his television show. To date, Baym's essay on "Better Know a District" is perhaps the most in-depth analysis of *The Colbert Report*.

Baym, however, focuses on only one segment of the show that is rather similar to *The Daily Show's* in-depth reports that parody television news coverage. Burwell and Boler's essay raises some useful questions about the relationships of Colbert's fans to his performances and the production of his show, although they do not analyze any performative texts in-depth. This leaves ample room for further study. There has been much discussion in the popular press, but no scholarly work, on Colbert's 2006 speech at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner or his 2007 run for the presidency. Nor has anyone conducted a comparative rhetorical analysis of specific media conventions and Colbert's performative critique of those conventions. In addition, whereas much of the scholarship on *The Daily Show* has focused on its implications for journalism, I believe that Colbert's distinct performances raise important questions about not only journalism, but also media punditry and the relationship of media and media figures to politics and political figures.

### ***Methodology***

I conducted this study using rhetorical-critical theory, which is an appropriate method for analyzing Colbert's performances because not only are they rhetorical performances in their own right, but they also conduct rhetorical-critical analyses of their surrounding political and social contexts. The rhetorical-critical approach allowed me to identify and critique rhetorical patterns in the performative texts and apply theory to develop new insights for understanding today's rhetorical landscape.

### ***Theoretical Approaches***

In each chapter, I analyze Colbert's persona and performances primarily through the lens of rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke's method of "perspective by incongruity." Perspective by incongruity is a rhetorical act of revealing problems in common assumptions by locating those

assumptions in a seemingly incongruent context, with the goal of opening new spaces for critical analysis. It is "a method for gauging situations by verbal 'atom cracking,'" writes Burke. "That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (308). We can find perspective by incongruity in satire and irony, which are staples of Colbert's performances. For example, a recurring segment on his show, "The Word," features Colbert, in character, making inane rightwing statements to the viewing audience while words or brief phrases appear next to him on screen to undercut what he says. "The Word" is, in fact, a spoof of *The O'Reilly Factor's* "Talking Points" segment, in which the words on screen repeat and reaffirm O'Reilly's opinion. Burke's theory is a fitting lens to analyze "The Word's" ironic effects and critique of O'Reilly's conventions. Argues Burke, "The result is a perspective with interpretive ingredients" (311).

Perspective by incongruity is a method of the "comic frame," which Burke describes as a manner of studying the world to seek wisdom from both positive and negative experiences with the aim of correcting and learning from personal, social, and ideological missteps. In rhetorical criticism, it is a dialectical approach to rhetoric and criticism that maintains an "ambivalence" between those two poles. This is interesting considering that Colbert performs as both a rhetor and a critic (like other pundits or satirists), balancing seriousness with humor and criticism with a certain hopefulness. Burke asserts that the comic frame "should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles" (171). This idea relates to Colbert's performances as an actor and character of the same name. As Colbert-the-actor and Colbert-the-character, he is an observer of himself and of the pundits he satirizes. Through his parodic performances, he also makes others aware of such performances in the world of "real" media and



politics. His performances help uncover "mystificatory" rhetorical efforts using a "clarificatory" methodology (172).

In Chapter Three, I complement my Burkean analysis with Michel Foucault's theory of *parrhesia*. Foucault defines "*parrhesia*," an ancient Greek word, as speaking truth to power at one's own risk. In a political environment, when speaking out against the ruling administration can be costly to one's career or, as in ancient Greek times, one's life, the *parrhesiastes* is one who has the courage to speak and does so freely out of a sense of duty to a democratic society and the greater good. I find this theory relevant to studying Colbert's performative critique of the news media and pundits, as well as his shocking speech at the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner in 2006, where he skewered, in person, President Bush and members of the media establishment.

Foucault differentiates *parrhesia* from rhetoric, which he defines in the ancient Greek sense as persuasive and potentially manipulative speech. Foucault writes, "Whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience (regardless of the rhetorician's own opinion concerning what he says), in *parrhesia*, the *parrhesiastes* acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes" (12). The *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth, which is an interesting contrast to Colbert's notion of "truthiness," that which one wants or feels to be true, but is not really true (Sternbergh). Foucault says, "The *parrhesiastes* is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true." He argues that in *parrhesia*, "there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth" (14).

Foucault argues that the function of *parrhesia* is not simply truth-telling, but "it has the function of criticism" (17). For example, the *parrhesiastes'* speech may say to an authority, "This

is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave" (ibid.). The *parrhesiastes* is always in a subordinate position to the authority he or she addresses and takes a major risk to speak the truth. The *parrhesiastes*, Foucault notes, is marked by his or her courage, free will, and sense of duty to proclaim the truth where the truth is being suppressed. I am interested in how Colbert's critical speech may be risky, and, if so, what he risks and what others may (or may not) risk who would also speak out against the president and media industry.

Also in Chapter Three, I examine the White House Correspondents' Association dinner tradition through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, as well as Peter Sallibrass and Allon White's complication of this theory. Like Burke, Bakhtin favors a dialectical relationship between seriousness and humor. He considers Rabelais, the satirist of the Middle Ages, to have been a master of "clowning wisely" (60) in that his humor was whole and universal, celebrating both death and rebirth, criticizing power and yet demonstrating hope for the future. Rabelais' carnivalesque, grotesque humor was truly a people's art, dealing entirely with the real, rather than in abstractions. Bakhtin calls for new recognition of the essential connection of laughter to politics and public culture. He writes,

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness (Bakhtin 122-123).

As time went on, however, this healthy dialectic gave way to stricter social distinctions between "low" and "high" culture, until carnivalesque performances became restricted to limited sanctioned events (such as Halloween or Mardi Gras today). Stallybrass and White warn of the suturing tendencies of such events – that is, when authorities allow the public to engage in carnivalesque revelry on limited occasions in order to relieve tensions but ultimately reinforce social hierarchies (Stallybrass and White).

In Chapter Four, I introduce Michael Kaplan's concept of "iconomics," derived from Jean Baudrillard's notions of the real, simulation, and simulacra, to enhance my analysis of Colbert's critique of speculation among political pundits and campaign strategists. According to Kaplan, "iconomics" is a system of economics driven almost entirely by speculation, rather than "fundamentals" indexically tied to reality (485). He describes the way financial markets react to Alan Greenspan's utterances about the economy, suggesting that his words mean more than actual, documented market trends. Kaplan relates this to simulation, which Baudrillard calls "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" 166). Kaplan argues, "In iconomics...there is nothing to deliberate about, save the process of deliberation about deliberation. In fact, if it were possible to deliberate about something, iconomics could not function" (489). I show where Colbert, through perspective by incongruity, exposes this problem among pundits who speculate on the election to promote themselves and fill airtime without providing actual, useful context about the electoral process.

My study is also generally influenced by Robert Hariman's recent work on political parody, which draws on the writings of Burke and Bakhtin. Hariman argues that political parody in public culture is not dismissively cynical or unpatriotic, nor is it merely comic relief to be enjoyed on the sidelines of "serious" discussion. Rather, parody is an *essential component* of

healthy, democratic, public discourse. "Parody not only reigns in other public arts but also spins important threads in the fabric of democratic polity," says Hariman ("Political Parody and Public Culture" 253). Political parody exaggerates the faults of political rhetoric and contributes alternative viewpoints and narratives to public dialogue. Perhaps even more importantly, it gives the public (and indeed, the administration and media industry) an opportunity to examine the whole of a discourse by stepping outside of its constructed boundaries, or, as Hariman says, "placing language beside itself" (249).

In this way, political parody offers both "rhetorical education" (264) and potential for resistance. Hariman argues that parody reveals the processes by which political rhetoric is constructed – insights that might otherwise be available or of interest only to rhetorical scholars – in a manner that is accessible and attractive to the general public. In addition, parody makes public criticism and reflection *easier and safer* by turning "direct discourse" into an image of itself, thus once-removed from the often authoritative object of critique. "When the weight of authority is converted into an image, resistance and other kinds of response become more available to the people." (254). That is, few would feel safe or tactful ridiculing President Bush to his face were they to meet him in person, but many can laugh at (and think about) Stewart or Colbert's take on Bush's latest address.

Hariman stresses that good political parody balances cynicism in the system with overall faith in democracy. He considers Plato's parodies of the eulogy in ancient Greece (the *Menexenus* is one example), arguing that these performances reminded Athenian citizens "how their achievements lie very close to their own worst tendencies" (253). Such political parody "keeps serious and comic speech in tension with one another so that citizens can criticize themselves *and yet still have their city*" (252).

Hariman's argument (echoed by Achter; see also Bennett) offers an important defense of parody as a vehicle for rhetorical education and civic critical resistance against those who decry the cynical slants of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as anti-democratic and marketed purely for profit (see Hart and Hartelius). In his essay "In Defense of Jon Stewart," Hariman refutes accusations that cynicism is a "sin against the Church of Democracy" (Hart and Hartelius 263). Hariman argues, "For the record, I do believe that we are awash in cynicism, although it is not found primarily (if much at all) in the *Daily Show* audience. No, there is a terrible cynicism today, and it is found in the political class, in mainstream journalism, and even perhaps among scholars in political communication" ("In Defense of Jon Stewart" 273). Hariman invokes Burke's notion of the comic frame, embodied by Stewart's performances, as a much-needed transcendence from tragic moralism and partisanism. "Stewart's comic framing of great and small alike emphasizes a common fallibility. And...this is the most authentically democratic attitude" (275).

Hariman, who draws frequently on Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, describes political parody as a process of "leveling or bringing the public and their ruling elites onto an even plane." He notes "that leveling is carefully circumscribed in non-democratic societies: e.g., by keeping the fool within reach of the king's wrath, or jokes within the relatively safe interactions of private life, or the festival within the ritual confines of a specific place and time" (256-257). Hariman's statement is especially pertinent when considering Colbert's satiric performances that cross such rhetorical boundaries – particularly his speech at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, where Colbert skewered President Bush and media elites in the room for their failures to serve the public.

### *Application and Analysis*

Colbert's performances are parodies of many conventions of contemporary media and political communication. I identified three key sets of performances to serve as the basis for this study. The first set includes the "conventional" texts of *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Colbert Report*. In the second chapter of my thesis, I analyze O'Reilly's conventions and Colbert's parody of these conventions using Burke's method of perspective by incongruity in a close analysis of selected episodes of each show. I identify the stylistic conventions of O'Reilly's combative, high-volume, personality-driven style, some of which reflect the rhetorical techniques identified by Conway, Grabe, and Grieves in their study. I am interested in the ways O'Reilly uses language to frame ideological and partisan discourses and to connect with a perceived audience type, which Conway, Grabe, and Grieves describe as "virtuous" Americans (202). Then, I analyze Colbert's parody of O'Reilly, locating ways in which his performance provides perspective by incongruity. I demonstrate instances in which Colbert "wrenches loose" (Burke 308) conventions from O'Reilly's carefully constructed setting. I argue that Colbert's performance calls attention to rhetorical conventions that may otherwise be taken for granted by viewers of O'Reilly's talk show. Just as *The Daily Show* calls on viewers to "look at," rather than "look through," the conventions of broadcast journalism, as McKain has argued, I show that Colbert's performances invite viewers to "look at" the conventions of cable-TV punditry. He offers, as Hariman describes, a "rhetorical education" to help viewers (and also other journalists, pundits, and candidates) see these conventions with greater critical awareness and reflection.

I located my sample of *The O'Reilly Factor* video segments online using Google Video and YouTube. Only the most recent shows are available for viewing on Fox News's web site, and past shows are not available on DVD, so my population was largely limited to program segments

that have been posted online by viewers. To supplement my research, I consulted the episode guide on Bill O'Reilly's web site ("O'Reilly Factor Archive"), which offers brief, textual summaries of the topics discussed on each show since 2004. These summaries mostly list O'Reilly's target groups, including illegal aliens; "far-left" groups and individuals in the media, politics, the judiciary system, and universities; atheists and "secular progressives"; sex offenders; homosexuals; pro-choice abortion activists; terrorists; and anyone who appears sympathetic to these "agendas." Less frequently, the summaries listed characters and events O'Reilly considers virtuous or heroic, such as U.S. soldiers, children, and Christmas, all of which O'Reilly depicts as victimized or under threat. Once I identified common topic phrases, I selected at random several program dates between 2005 and 2007 (the same time period used for my Colbert sample) that featured one or more of those topic phrases. I located and reviewed the textual transcripts of those programs on Lexis-Nexis.

I located my sample of *The Colbert Report* episodes on the show's web site, [www.colbertnation.com](http://www.colbertnation.com), where all previously aired episodes are archived and searchable. I also consulted a list of episodes posted on *Wikipedia*, which, like Bill O'Reilly's online episode guide, provides brief, one- to two-sentence summaries of each show. This helped me initially to identify general themes and common topics on *The Colbert Report* ["List of *The Colbert Report* episodes (2005)"; "List of *The Colbert Report* episodes (2006)"; "List of *The Colbert Report* episodes (2007)"]. I first narrowed my population to episodes that aired since its debut on October 17, 2005, through November 1, 2007. The debut episode is important because Colbert introduces the concept of the show and one of his key phrases, "truthiness." Selected episodes from 2006 and 2007 are also relevant because this timeframe encompasses Colbert's performances outside of the show, which I discuss next. I selected a purposive sample from the 2006 and 2007 set of

episodes. In purposive sampling, "the characteristics of the population are identified and used to guide the selection of respondents," or texts in my case (Hocking, Stacks, and McDermott 219). I selected episodes in which Colbert's parody best illustrates "perspective by incongruity" in comparison to O'Reilly's performances.

The second set of performative texts in question are the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner tradition, the "conventional" skit with President Bush and Bush impersonator Steve Bridges, and Colbert's satiric speech, which laid those conventions bare. This speech event is important to my study because it marks Colbert's first foray beyond the bounds of his "fake" show; here, he troubles the political and media elite in their own conventional, comfortable space. In the third chapter of my thesis, I identify the conventions of the dinner event and the "Bush twins" skit – for example, the audience's roaring approval of lame, lighthearted jokes about Bush's pronunciation habits. I then show how Colbert uses more direct, skewering humor to call attention to the inherent problems of a seemingly happily married political administration and media industry. For Colbert, Bush's policy failures and the media's preference for celebrity-watching are preferable targets of comedic critique. I employ Burke's method of perspective by incongruity in a close analysis and comparison of both performances. I support my claims with Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*, or speaking truth to power at one's own risk. I argue that Colbert's speech is ultimately a call to the media establishment to stand up to the administration and put the public's need for truth above personal fears of professional retaliation. I also consider the annual dinner tradition as an example of modern carnivalesque, using Bakhtin, Stallybrass, and White's work to argue that the event is like a seasonal festival of fantasy that sanctions the inversion of the administration-media hierarchy but ultimately reinforces the administration's ruling status over the media.



I located the text of Colbert's speech in his book, *I Am America (And So Can You!)* (Colbert, Dahm, Dinello, and Silverman). I viewed video footage of the entire event, including the "Bush twins" skit and Colbert's delivery, online through Google Video. I also consulted numerous new reports and trade articles covering the dinner event and Colbert's speech.

The third performance in question is Colbert's in-character campaign for the presidency during the primary election season in 2007. This performance is Colbert's second and, to date, only other foray into "real" political media culture. It is especially interesting because he complicates the notion of who, or what, is "real" on the national political stage. For example, when Colbert outpolls candidates like Bill Richardson and Sam Brownback, does that make him, as he suggests, "realer" than they ("*Meet the Press*")? In the fourth chapter of my thesis, I analyze Colbert's performances as a simultaneous pundit-candidate and compare them to political campaign conventions, such as politicians appearing on late-night talk shows and other soft-news programs; the incessant "horserace" reporting and speculation by pundits; and instances in which pundits have become candidates and vice versa. I identify specific examples through scholarly literature and trade reports on recent political campaigns and coverage. I show how Colbert provides perspective by incongruity toward how conventional campaign scenes and performances are rhetorically constructed. For example, Colbert secured a corporate sponsor – Doritos – for his campaign, bragged to his audience that he was the best panderer of all the candidates, and proclaimed that he did not want to *be* president, but to *run* for president. I contend that these outlandish actions and statements point to legitimate issues like campaign finance corruption, gimmicky appeals to voter demographics, and self-important publicity-seeking. In addition, I show how Colbert problematizes the media's process of analyzing political primaries using unreliable polling data and personal opinion. I compare this to Kaplan's critique

of the self-important, self-referential speculation by financial profiteers, in which the performance of speculation matters more than reality. Using perspective by incongruity, Colbert extends the logic of such taken-for-granted conventions to ridiculous, and therefore revealing, ends.

Most of Colbert's presidential campaign-related performances took place on his show between April and November 2007, so I refer to relevant episodes available on the show's web site. During his campaign, Colbert also appeared on NBC's *Meet The Press* and CNN's *Larry King Live*. I viewed video and transcripts for both on those networks' respective web sites.

In each of these performances, I identify strategies of what Hariman calls "rhetorical education" in the face of intentional (and perhaps unintentional) obscurity ("Political Parody and Public Culture" 264). These strategies address several questions. First, *in what ways do Colbert's parodic performances reveal rhetorical processes, discursive practices, and mediation conventions that may otherwise go unnoticed or be accepted as natural or "real"?* Whereas recent studies of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* have identified such instances as they relate to broadcast journalism and political public relations, I broaden this conversation by analyzing Colbert's critical parodies of news punditry, political posturing, and how the lines between media, politics, entertainment, and the cult of celebrity are increasingly blurred. Second, *how does Colbert, through his many forms, disrupt the seeming seamlessness of performance in media and politics?* I am especially interested in how he questions notions of "real" versus "fake" personas, as well as how he reveals certain media events and political activities to be more "show" than substance. Third, *in what ways does Colbert make complex or nuanced shifts among personas or roles, and how does this reflect the media and political arenas he parodies?* While *The Daily Show* tends to lay bare its critique, Colbert seems to require closer attention and

careful interpretation of his parody. I believe his complex blending and blurring of personas and performances is a meaningful reflection on the trajectory of American media and politics.

Colbert's performance suggests that all lines have now been crossed, redefined, or erased all together. What might be next in the rapid evolution of mediated politics?

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, in this project I conduct close analyses of contemporary rhetorical conventions in political media culture, complemented by close analyses of Colbert's rhetorical-critical response through comedy. I demonstrate how Colbert's unconventional comedic critique complicates conventional political media performances. I pair three sets of "conventional" and "unconventional" texts, including *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Colbert Report*; the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner conventions, including the conventional "Bush twins" skit, and Colbert's unconventional satiric speech; and conventions of political campaigns and media coverage, both parodied by Colbert in his performance as a pundit-candidate. These three sets of texts incorporate Colbert's most significant and noted performances to date as a comedic critic of the media and political industries. In my analyses of these texts, I identify, first, rhetorical conventions that allow viewers to (as McCain says) "look through" the processes of mediation and ideological construction, and, second, comedic critiques that call upon viewers to "look at" these conventions and constructions. I argue that Colbert's performances, by conveying perspective by incongruity, offer a "rhetorical education" to the viewing public that follows in the tradition of *The Onion* writers and Jon Stewart while pioneering criticism of newly evolving frontiers in political media.

Through this project, I expand a theory of "critical comedy" as it relates to critical analysis of political rhetoric and media discourses. I am interested in the "blending" of multiple

performances by one character and what this reflects and critiques of mass media and society. I am interested in the implications for several groups, including, but not limited to the following: media practitioners in terms of what constitutes responsible, ethical news reporting and commentary; politicians in terms of open and honest communications with the citizens they represent; and the viewing public in terms of understanding the inner-workings, production processes, and narrative strategies of the dominant political and media industries. I believe this study contributes new tools and insights to help media consumers, scholars, and critics locate the unconventional truth about conventional "truthiness."

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Colbert introduces the term "truthiness" in the premiere episode of *The Colbert Report*. "We're not talking about truth, we're talking about something that seems like the truth – the truth we want to exist," he explains to *New York Magazine* (Sternbergh).

<sup>2</sup> In Chapter Four, I draw on the substantial field of scholarly and trade literature on "horserace" political coverage, including recent articles by Paul Farhi for the *American Journalism Review*; the organization Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (cited by John Eggerton); and Tom Rosenstiel for *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

<sup>3</sup> Conway, Grabe, and Grievess selected "Talking Points" because it most closely resembled the opening monologue format of Father Charles Coughlin.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World*, is the main source for Achter's analysis. The carnivalesque is discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>5</sup> "We're just trying to ease the pain of people who feel the world is going insane and no one is noticing," says Colbert in an interview (Solomon ¶6).

## CHAPTER 2.

### **HEROES, ALIENS, AND BEARS: RHETORICAL CONVENTIONS OF *THE O'REILLY FACTOR* AT PLAY ON *THE COLBERT REPORT***

In this chapter, I identify the rhetorical conventions of conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly on his television talk show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and then show how comedian Stephen Colbert complicates those conventions on his parody program, *The Colbert Report*. Using Kenneth Burke's theories of frames of acceptance, I argue that O'Reilly employs a tragic frame, casting the world as entrenched in a battle between good and evil, heroes and villains, in a self-centered manner. Conversely, Colbert adopts a comic frame, using humor to question O'Reilly's polarizing views and engage his own viewers in a critical act. Although Colbert the comedian is left-leaning politically, his performance does not simply offer "left" to counter O'Reilly's "right." Instead, it lays bare the processes of rhetorical construction and mediation by either side, calling on viewers to choose their own frame critically, rather than simply accepting the frame presented to them by an appealing personality – be it O'Reilly, Colbert, or any other media figure. I demonstrate how Colbert provides Burke's notion of "perspective by incongruity" by employing parody, satire, and irony to confront the conventions of O'Reilly's rhetoric in an alternative, critical light.

#### ***Burke's Tragic and Comic Frames***

Burke describes differing "frames of acceptance," by which "we mean the more or less organized system of meaning by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it" (5). Those who adopt a tragic frame, for example, view the world as good versus evil and people as villains or heroes. Conversely, those who adopt a comic frame are ambivalent about such definitions, which tragic rhetoric may employ for propagandistic

purposes. In the comic frame, the "villain" is perhaps simply "mistaken" or "tricked"; the "hero" is offered instead, self-deprecatingly, as "intelligent" at best (4-5). Burke advocates the comic frame as the more critical and potentially emancipatory perspective. While the tragic frame is often tempting and seemingly appropriate for the difficult issues we face (remember those who called for "the end of irony" after the 9/11 terror attacks<sup>1</sup>), it veers too easily into uncritical, propagandistic and "mystificatory" logic (172). Burke cites the rise of anti-Semitism during economic downturns, pushed by authoritative leaders with a tragic frame:

The steps are these: Economic depression means psychologically a sense of frustration. The sense of frustration means psychologically a sense of persecution. The sense of persecution incites, compensatorily, a sense of personal worth, or goodness, and one feels that this goodness is being misused. One then 'magnifies' this sense of wronged goodness by identification with a hero. And who, with those having received any Christian training in childhood, is the ultimate symbol of persecuted goodness? 'Christ.' And who persecuted Christ? The Jews. Hence, compensatorily admiring oneself as much as possible, in the magnified version of a hero (the hero of one's first and deepest childhood impressions) the naïve Christian arrives almost 'syllogistically' at anti-Semitism as the 'symbolic solution' of his economically caused frustrations (168-169).

Through such a problematic reasoning process, authoritative leaders and other self-centered figures imagine social issues as strictly us-versus-them binaries, thus constituting a tragic frame.

Those who employ a comic frame, however, identify and call attention to the problems with such syllogistic rationales, which they deem sentimental and cynical. "The comic frame is best suited for making disclosures of this sort [that is, where syllogistic rationalizations have

occurred], which are necessary to counteract the dangers of 'mystification,' so momentous in their tendency to shunt criticism into the wrong channels" argues Burke (169). Rather than insisting there can be no more irony after 9/11, or that *others* (be they Jews, Muslims, immigrants, or any other generalized group) are responsible for the problems afflicting oneself and those deemed virtuous like oneself, the comic frame insists on self-examination and humble reflection. "The comic frame, in making man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience'" (171). The comic frame is not about blaming oneself or excusing real wrongdoings by others, but rather about stepping outside of an egocentric, polarized view in search of a dialectical, holistic understanding of problems and opportunities.

### ***O'Reilly's Tragic Persona***

I conducted an in-depth study of *The O'Reilly Factor* episodes from 2005 through 2007, reviewing online program summaries, transcripts, and a limited set of archived video segments to identify common themes and trends. I found that one needs only minimal exposure to Bill O'Reilly's rhetoric to picture the world as he vividly – and tragically – portrays it. His program segments on *The O'Reilly Factor* like "Children at Risk," "Unresolved Problem," and "Policing the Media" suggest an innocent society under threat by devious forces, including illegal aliens, sex offenders, the liberal media, left-wing politicians, and atheists. His book titles like *Culture Warrior* and *Who's Looking Out For You?* frame him as a hero. O'Reilly is a crusader for his audience, for all that is virtuous and threatened in America. He is a fighter, and, the way he sees it, there is a battle underway.



This sense of an epic battle being waged on behalf of his presumptively virtuous viewers – mostly conservative, middle-aged and older (Hollander; Pew) – is exactly how Fox News markets *The O'Reilly Factor*, one of the network's top profit and ratings centers. O'Reilly is clearly the figurehead of Fox News's brand of conservative news analysis programming. Fox News's Web site proclaims, "For more than seven consecutive years, *The O'Reilly Factor* on the Fox News Channel has been the highest rated of any cable news show. No program even comes close" ("Bill O'Reilly," Fox News). A promotional statement for *The O'Reilly Factor* emphasizes his stance against "rhetoric" and "spin."

THE #1 CABLE NEWS TALK SHOW FEATURING BILL O'REILLY

-Monday Through Friday 8-9 PM/ET-

"Other interview news shows are guest-driven," says the pugnacious, broadcast journalist Bill O'Reilly. "*The O'Reilly Factor* is driven by me. I will not stand for spin. I look for guests who will stand up and verbally battle for what they believe in."

*The O'Reilly Factor* (8-9 PM/ET) uncovers news items from the established wisdom and goes against the grain of the more traditional interview style programs. Having surpassed CNN's *Larry King Live* in 2001 as the number one cable news talk show, O'Reilly's signature "no spin zone" cuts through the rhetoric as he interviews the players who make the story newsworthy.

Pushing beyond just the headlines, *The O'Reilly Factor* also features issues from local markets that do not find the national spotlight on other newscasts. According to O'Reilly, "Just because a story originates from

somewhere the networks typically avoid, doesn't mean it contains less challenging issues or compelling ideas."

O'Reilly rose to national fame as anchor of the highly successful syndicated program *Inside Edition* and as a correspondent for ABC's *World News Tonight*. Never afraid to assert his opinions on the news, O'Reilly's commitment to "cut through the clutter" has distinguished him from his peers. *Television Week* donned him one of the 10 most powerful in TV news in 2003 and 2004. O'Reilly is the author of four *New York Times* bestseller books, including *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The No Spin Zone* which were both number one on the list, as well as the recent *Culture Warrior* and *The O'Reilly Factor for Kids* ("*The O'Reilly Factor – About The Show*").

This manifesto of sorts contains several rhetorical conventions characteristic of a tragic frame. O'Reilly asserts control over his show – and by extension over his guests – whom he casts as combatants in a battle. The description alludes to another opponent – the presumably liberal media outlets (and thus competitors) like CNN's Larry King – suggesting that King and his ilk are full of "spin," whereas O'Reilly promises "no spin." It frames O'Reilly's attention to "local market" stories as unique and relevant to a national audience. Finally, it positions O'Reilly as a powerful authority, citing his dominance on the *New York Times* list of bestselling books as evidence (which is ironic considering his frequent critiques of the *New York Times*' authority and credibility). I will address each of these conventions further in my analysis of selected segments from *The O'Reilly Factor*.

But first, because this is a study of personality-driven media, it seems appropriate to investigate the person behind the persona of Bill O'Reilly. It is worth noting, for example, that

O'Reilly's "no spin" brand and on-screen performances belie at least two curious back-stories. The most recent is his involvement in a 2004 sexual harassment lawsuit, in which Fox News producer Andrea Mackris accused him of making lewd comments toward her over the telephone, and he accused her of attempting to extort millions of dollars from him. The case was settled out of court, and O'Reilly proclaimed his innocence, framing it as an unjustified attack on him made worse by competing media networks that saw him as "a huge target" (Kurtz, "Bill O'Reilly, Producer Settle Suit" ¶6). Meanwhile, critics of O'Reilly used the case to question O'Reilly's credibility as a staunch crusader against sex offenders.

The other back-story is, in essence, the *legend* of O'Reilly, as he recounts in his books and interviews (see Kitman). O'Reilly describes himself as coming from working-class roots, and he carries strong, personal grudges against members of the media "elite" who excluded him in his early days as a broadcast journalist, especially at CBS. As the story goes, in 1982, O'Reilly, then employed by CBS News, went to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to cover the Falkland Islands War, where he and his crew filmed a riot in the streets. CBS included the footage in a news report by fellow correspondent Bob Schieffer but did not show or credit O'Reilly on air. Later, CBS refused to air a story pitched by O'Reilly about the expanding homosexual population in the village of Provincetown, Massachusetts, and its harmful implications for nearby children. O'Reilly left CBS soon thereafter (Lemann).

Not only does O'Reilly characterize himself autobiographically as a good, regular guy shunned by elites, but also he develops this character further in his 1998 fictional suspense novel, *Those Who Trespass*. *New Yorker* writer Nicholas Lemann describes the book as "a revenge fantasy, and it displays incredibly violent impulses" (3). The story's two main characters appear to be O'Reilly's alter-egos. Shannon Michaels, an investigative journalist with Global

News Network, is forced out by the network after his reporting on the Falkland Islands War. Seeking revenge, Michaels brutally murders the people whom he believes ruined his career, which O'Reilly describes in vivid detail. Opposing Michaels is Tommy O'Malley, a New York City homicide detective on Michaels' case. "O'Malley, too, has a lot of ambition and rage, but he channels it into bringing bad guys to justice," writes Lemann (3).

Together, these narratives form a complex and conflicting mix of tragic characters, presumably within the same person: O'Reilly as the working-class, regular guy; O'Reilly as the virtuous, victimized journalist; O'Reilly as the accused harasser; Michaels as the villainous, revenge-seeking murderer (imagined by O'Reilly, and whose career troubles recall O'Reilly's own reported experience); O'Malley as the heroic, justice-seeking avenger (also imagined by O'Reilly, and whose actions reflect O'Reilly's heroic framing of his own pundit work); and O'Reilly as the heroic pundit. The villainous personas – O'Reilly the accused harasser and Michaels the murderer – seem incongruent with the virtuous and heroic personas. And yet, perhaps they are essential in the constitution of a somewhat ironic, double (perhaps more than double) *self-centeredness* of O'Reilly's tragic frame, which is evident in the structuring of his relationships with both his audience and adversaries. That is, on one level, O'Reilly projects himself on *The O'Reilly Factor* as a crusader – a "culture warrior" – for his viewing audience. In doing so, he also perceives and positions his audience as virtuous, everyday heroes who deserve a fair shake. Here, in essence, O'Reilly imagines his audience *in his own image*, which is a virtuous and heroic projection. On another level, however, when O'Reilly positions his adversaries as villains, perhaps he imagines *his adversaries, too*, in his own image – specifically, the *negative* of his heroic image, an anti-heroic or villainous projection. As I will discuss in detail throughout this chapter, O'Reilly's self-centered, self-important view drives the show's

discourses, which start with O'Reilly, end with O'Reilly, and revolve around O'Reilly. Arguably, this includes not only O'Reilly's self-centered projection of himself as a hero, but a similarly, negatively, self-centered projection of himself onto his adversaries. As I will also show, this multilayered persona, shifting between good and evil, real and fiction, is a key aesthetic foundation in Colbert's own, multilayered performative critique.

However, if "Bill O'Reilly" is a person and a character embodying multiple layers of persona and performance, this conflicting complexity is never intentionally made obvious. On *The O'Reilly Factor*, O'Reilly the heroic pundit takes the stage, and all discourses are structured to project, promote, and reinforce that persona. In my analysis of O'Reilly's program, I located a wealth of rhetorical conventions and strategies on *The O'Reilly Factor* that, while marketed as "fair and balanced," are in fact O'Reilly-centered, pre-scripted and ideologically loaded with tragic features. Evidence of these conventions and strategies is embedded in virtually every aspect of the show. First, the show's visual construction reinforces O'Reilly's hero persona, from the patriot-themed, yet austere set to the split-screen presentation of his binary debates with guest adversaries. Second, O'Reilly's didactic speech employs a number of strategies that frame him and his opinions as absolutely, invariably right and his adversaries' opinions as invariably wrong.<sup>2</sup> Such strategies include repetition, rhetorical cues, fear appeals, binary choices, syllogistic rationalizations, dramatic narratives, and the demonizing of individuals and groups. Third, O'Reilly's guest interviews and debates, which he describes as rational, critical debate, are in fact scripted, staged, and rigged in advance in O'Reilly's favor. I will now analyze these conventions and strategies in detail. Later, I will show how Colbert lays all of these conventions bare so that they are not taken for granted by media consumers.

### ***Visual Strategies on The O'Reilly Factor***

*The O'Reilly Factor's* construction includes a number of visual formulae. O'Reilly's set and on-screen graphics are red, white, and blue, characteristic of Fox News's American-flag-inspired, "patriotic" design theme. He sits at a desk in front of a chroma key screen (or "green screen") displaying a deep red or blue background with subtle, moving graphics that lend a dynamic feeling to the set. A digital, three-dimensional rendering of the red, white, and blue Fox News logo rotates in the lower left corner of the screen, balanced by *The O'Reilly Factor* logo in the lower right corner of the screen. *The O'Reilly Factor* logo is circular in shape, with the show's name superimposed over a blue sphere encased by a red circle – a red atmosphere, possibly, suggesting an endangered world on alert. The logo also resembles a target, as thought O'Reilly is "taking aim" at the issues of the day.

O'Reilly wears a traditional suit and tie and is filmed at a "far personal distance" (Tuchman 117) from the chest up, not usually showing his hands at the desk. Typically, he appears to be alone in the studio, speaking either "directly" to the viewing audience or to guests who are filmed from another location. During his monologues, O'Reilly looks into the camera as though making eye contact with the viewer. Images and text may appear next to him on-screen to reinforce his topic and points. When interviewing guests in another location, O'Reilly and guest appear side-by-side in a split-screen format so that both figures face the audience during their discussion. When O'Reilly interviews a guest in the studio (including talk-show rivals Colbert, Geraldo Rivera, and Phil Donahue), the cameras tend to alternate to show one figure at a time as each person speaks. Occasionally during the interview, when the guest speaks, brief text stating his or her name and affiliation may appear at the bottom of the screen. Both the split-screen and

alternating-camera formats lend a sense of contrast between O'Reilly and guest: one against the other, back and forth.

The digital graphics and camera angles used on *The O'Reilly Factor* create a visual stage that, not coincidentally, reflects the rhetorical style and strategies of the show's host (not to mention its network). Against the background of red, white, and blue, O'Reilly presents himself as an American patriot. He faces the camera, and thereby faces his viewers, as though establishing a peer-like relationship of mutual understanding between the heroic host and the virtuous, heroic audience. Aided by split screens, O'Reilly the crusader faces down the world's evildoers, taking them on one by one, show by show. In this O'Reilly-centered setting, his didactic monologues and binary, me-versus-you debates are made to seem natural and commonsensical.

***"Talking Points": The Truth According to O'Reilly?***

Complementing his tragic frame, O'Reilly's speech reflects a didactic strategy, which Burke describes as "propagandistic" and containing "polemical, one-way approaches to social necessity" (166). In literature, writes Burke, "the didactic poet, as his detractors are eager to point out, attempts to avoid the confusions of synthesis by a schematic decision to label certain people 'friends' or 'enemies.' Hence, the didactic poet is headed towards allegory... His procedure also leads naturally to oversimplifications of character and history that can, by the opposition, be discounted as 'sentimentality'" (79). O'Reilly's didactic speech is most evident in a segment called "Talking Points Memo" (also referred to as "Talking Points"). In this opening monologue, O'Reilly states his position on a given issue that usually will be discussed further during the program. Commonly discussed issues include illegal immigration, sexual predators, the Iraq war, liberal media networks, abortion, and other contentious subjects. While he speaks, a

digital screen appears beside him with text from his statement. The sentences on screen are taken directly from his script, reaffirming visually what he states orally. Through spoken word and visual text, O'Reilly clearly delineates the binaries and boundaries of the world's problems as he sees them, as I will show in the following examples.

The notion of a "War on Christmas" is an annual issue for O'Reilly, surfacing every November and December during my period of study (2005-2007). For example, O'Reilly makes his case that traditional American Christian values are under attack in his Memo "Progressives Strike Back on Christmas," aired December 5, 2005. He argues:

There is a very small minority of Americans who want Christmas out of the public square, and they've made big inroads into America's most revered tradition. However, Christmas is making a comeback, and some companies that used to avoid saying "Merry Christmas" have reversed themselves. That's not playing well in the secular progressive movement, which wants to diminish Christmas and all vestiges of Christian power. They realize that to get gay marriage, legalized drugs, euthanasia, and other parts of their agenda passed they need to marginalize religious forces. Over the weekend, some liberal newspapers stepped up to the plate. The absolute best comes from the most enthusiastic secular newspaper in the country, the *New York Times*. Adam Cohen wrote this: "The Christmas that Mr. O'Reilly and his allies are promoting fits their campaign to make America more like a theocracy." Of course, Mr. Cohen has no idea what he's talking about. I don't want a theocracy and I don't want Christian prayers in the public schools. What Talking Points is really promoting is respect for a holiday that is celebrated by 95% of Americans. It's insane to diminish Christmas



and it's also wrong. The secular progressives are going to lose the fight, and they'll do what they always do – attack (O'Reilly, "Progressives Strike Back").

In this short statement, O'Reilly paints a vivid picture of American traditions and innocence under threat. He alludes to villainous categories: secular progressives, the liberal media, gays, drug pushers, and euthanasia supporters. He then names *The New York Times* and reporter Adam Cohen as specific "evidence" of these villains in action. Because they challenged his viewpoint in a manner with which O'Reilly disagrees, O'Reilly frames this as an unprovoked, personal attack on him and argues to his viewers that these villains are poised to attack them, too. O'Reilly reiterates similar arguments and repeats similar names and phrases in his recurring discussions of the "War on Christmas." Through this repetition, O'Reilly solidifies a long, yet memorable list of rhetorical cues for his viewers. After watching even a few episodes of *The O'Reilly Factor*, one only has to hear, for example, the phrase "*New York Times*" uttered to "know" that something sinister is afoot, according to O'Reilly.

Burke notes the dangers of such taken-for-granted cues in rhetoric. He writes, "If you call a man a hero or a bastard, and mean it, it is unnecessary for us to seek, by tricks of exegesis, the 'moral weighting' of your term. Your attitude is made obvious, since your private use of the word corresponds to its public connotations. On the other hand, you may use words which seem neutral, but in actuality possess hidden weighting" (Burke 236-237). This latter concern is especially evident in O'Reilly's speech. When O'Reilly deems certain people heroes and others villains, he is speaking as a matter of opinion. However, O'Reilly couches these opinionated labels in lengthy presentations of seemingly neutral facts. That is, for example, when O'Reilly states that the *New York Times* has reported a story, his implied meaning is that *a corrupt, far-left organization is actively conspiring against American values*.

Rhetorical cues are also evident in O'Reilly's impassioned rhetoric against illegal immigration. He repeats additional watchwords and phrases as though establishing his own language on the issue, and he insists that the debate can only be framed in that language. For example, in his Memo "The Trouble With Mexico" on October 9, 2007, he provides numerous statistics on the high Mexican high-school dropout rate, the increasing number of Mexican criminals in U.S. prisons, and the alarming amount of cocaine and other drugs being trafficked across the border. He argues, "Talking Points believes that tight border security, including a fence and the National Guard, is the first step, followed by alien registration and working permits for those who have legitimate jobs and a clean record. Also, American businesses that continue to hire illegals have to be heavily fined. There is no other way to solve this problem." After delivering this Memo, O'Reilly introduces his guest, former Mexican president Vicente Fox, and immediately takes Fox to task for having done virtually nothing to fix these problems. Here, the Memo cues viewers to what O'Reilly considers the "right" view of this issue before the debate with Fox even begins. Viewers (at least those who agree with O'Reilly) should then "know" that if Fox disagrees with O'Reilly's framing of these positions, then he must favor the binary alternatives of open borders, undocumented criminals, and American jobs being taken away from Americans. As expected, Fox disagrees with O'Reilly's rhetoric, and O'Reilly uses this to paint Fox as incompetent and possibly corrupt. The debate is scripted and decided in advance by O'Reilly, for O'Reilly, as well as for those watching at home who identify with O'Reilly's projected persona as a tragic hero.

O'Reilly links illegal immigration to violent crime, arguing that undocumented aliens may have criminal records we do not know about. He also blames left-wing interests in the United States for allowing undocumented criminals to go unpunished. In his memo "Crime &

Illegal Aliens" from May 4, 2005, he recounts a gruesome, brutal murder of an American mother of two by Ronald Castellanos, a Guatemalan national "who overstayed his tourist visa four years ago and has been running around ever since" (O'Reilly, "How Bad Is Illegal Alien Crime"). Worst of all, police caught Castellanos but a judge "let him go," says O'Reilly. The story is undoubtedly a tragedy regardless of one's political affiliations, but O'Reilly politicizes it to support his views. He states dramatically:

So Mary Nagle becomes yet another victim of illegal alien killers. She is no less a victim of our government's failure to protect us than all of those who died on 9/11. There are thousands of other Mary Nagles you will never hear about because the government doesn't keep statistics on murders by illegals and the liberal press doesn't want to report these kinds of stories. That's because the media generally supports lenient border policy, driver's licenses for illegals, sanctuary cities, and a humane policy for those who come to America illegally. Now every sane American knows that most illegals are good people, just trying to fight their way out of poverty. Talking Points has said that many times. But sane Americans also know the federal government refuses to enforce the immigration laws. And that puts all of us in danger (O'Reilly, "How Bad").

Again, O'Reilly provides a specific policy platform that he implores his viewers to support. A skillful debater, he employs the rhetorical technique of acknowledging and then refuting the opposing point of view. He invokes the tragic drama of Mary Nagle to insist that there should be no question about the need and means for strengthening illegal immigration policies.

As a matter of convention, O'Reilly names the names of individuals and organizations he believes are responsible for America's ills. In his memo "Buying Political Power" on April 23,

2007, O'Reilly, the master detective, delivers a detailed indictment of billionaire investor George Soros, arguing that Soros is a hidden hand who spends his billions to pump left-wing propaganda into the mainstream media. O'Reilly displays a visual chart connecting Soros to various left-wing groups, citing "the vile propaganda outfit Media Matters, which specializes in distorting comments made by politicians, pundits, and media people." He adds, "Media Matters is an Internet site, but directly feeds its propaganda to some mainstream media people, including elements at NBC News, columnist Frank Rich and Paul Krugman at *The New York Times*, columnist Jonathan Alter at *Newsweek*, and Bill Moyers at PBS." O'Reilly employs his conventional trick of blacklisting journalists he perceives to be conspiring with Soros and Media Matters (all of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, have written articles critical of O'Reilly). Regardless of the truth, O'Reilly's effort to keep viewers from tuning into these competing networks is an excellent marketing tactic for his program and for Fox News. At the end of his statement, O'Reilly promotes his book, *Culture Warrior*, letting viewers know that it offers much more information about Soros's secret schemes.

From a Burkean perspective, a critical problem with O'Reilly's didactic rhetoric in "Talking Points Memo" is its authoritarian force under the guise of democracy, free speech, and "no spin." We can relate this to Burke's concept of "casuistry," or "metaphorical extension" of logic from one setting to another (230). Burke characterizes *tragic* casuistry as "mystification" and "the concealing of a strategy (*ars celare artem*)," or art to conceal art (232). [By contrast, as I will show, comic casuistry – employed by Colbert – aims to provide "clarification" and "the description of a strategy" (ibid.).] Tragic casuistry, then, mystifies and conceals rhetorical intentions through techniques like metaphor and syllogism. In this case, because O'Reilly's problematic logic is presented through such intriguing narrative, it may convince viewers to

perceive, accept, and follow his direction as the only workable solution; i.e., tough times call for tough measures. Operating in a tragic frame, O'Reilly categorizes popular moral and political issues – and their potential solutions – into strict binary choices. His logic, however flawed, is compelling and comforting to those who share a tragic frame. Using his personal rapport with his perceived audience (i.e., honest, hard-working Americans like himself), O'Reilly speaks with assurance that he and his "sane" viewers are in full agreement.

Perhaps it is because of this sense of rapport between O'Reilly and his audience that the name "Talking Points Memo" seems fundamentally problematic. This phrase is typically used – often in a derogatory way – to describe pre-scripted, carefully "spun" language approved by a certain party or organization for its representatives' use. If O'Reilly's show is a "no spin zone," as he calls it, why does he issue carefully crafted, highly opinionated "talking points" at the outset? And, whose talking points are they? On the surface, it appears that O'Reilly provides these talking points to his viewers so that they can imitate his language in their own speech – reproducing the party line, so to speak. But this begs another question: are these talking points O'Reilly's own, or has someone else issued them to him? The phrase "talking points" typically suggests that the person's speech is not his own; it has been provided to him. Does O'Reilly speak for himself, as he claims to do, or does he speak for someone else's "agenda," as he accuses others of doing? Notice how he refers to "Talking Points" as though it were a character with a voice (e.g., "Talking Points believes"; "Talking Points has said that many times"). If these positions are O'Reilly's, why does he not say "I believe" or "I have said that many times"? Here, we find yet another persona being projected through O'Reilly, but we are never told who this persona is. Perhaps, if "Talking Points" is projected as another "heroic," credible voice, then O'Reilly's reference to it in third-person serves to corroborate his opinion, thus rationalizing his

opinion as "common sense." That is, O'Reilly's opinion is not his alone – "Talking Points" agrees, and so do countless, unseen others like "you" at home, and *since we all agree, then it is true*. On a deeper, even more troublesome level, O'Reilly's deference toward "Talking Points" as an all-knowing source is not unlike the conventional quoting of scripture – the absolute word of God, and thus, the ultimate guarantor of credibility. With "Talking Points" – and by metaphorical extension, the word of God – on O'Reilly's side, his views are rendered – through this internal, syllogistic logic – unquestionable and unassailable.

***Guest Interviews: O'Reilly's "Us" versus "Them"***

This sense of rhetorical invincibility also constitutes O'Reilly's combative interview style. Like his monologues, perhaps O'Reilly's most pervasive rhetorical convention during interviews is his portrayal of distinct, binary oppositions for any given issue. In O'Reilly's world, red states oppose blue states, and you are either with us or against us. What his fans find so compelling – and his critics so aggravating – is that on O'Reilly's stage O'Reilly is always right. Based on my analysis of his program, I contend that what makes this work for O'Reilly is a strict, scripted set of rhetorical techniques that give him a seemingly natural sense of control.

One such convention is the promise of a battle between O'Reilly and a perceived villain. O'Reilly's debates are predictable because his choice of guests prescribe the exchanges to come. Many guests represent the extreme opposition, such as Kevin Barrett, a college professor who believes the U.S. government orchestrated the 9/11 terror attacks ("Kevin Barrett on O'Reilly Factor 12/19/2006"), and Sunsara Taylor, an anti-war activist who leads confrontational demonstrations ("BattleCry: Ron Luce on the O'Reilly Factor"). Knowing their positions in advance, O'Reilly asks leading questions that force his guests into a rhetorical trap. When Taylor, who is pro-choice, argues that the U.S. is killing untold numbers of Iraqis, O'Reilly

quips, "Well, why do you want to kill eighty-five million babies?" To an advocate for Palestinian relations, O'Reilly asks, "So do you want to destroy Israel, Ms. Erakat?" ("Noura Erakat Rocks O'Reilly"). When his guests argue back, O'Reilly interrupts them, lectures them, and sometimes shouts over them. Should the debate become particularly fiery, O'Reilly seizes control by cutting off his guest's microphone. In this manner, he silenced Jeremy Glick, the son of a 9/11 victim who criticizes the U.S. government, after telling Glick to "shut up" ("Jeremy Glick vs. Bill O'Reilly").

O'Reilly maintains rapport with his perceivably supportive audience by casting guests with opposing views as enemies who threaten "our" way of life. He concedes, albeit snidely, that his guests have "a right" to their own beliefs, actions, and speech, but his tone gives away his opinion that certain guests ought not to believe, act, or speak in ways he finds disagreeable or reprehensible. He belittles his guests' views, referring to atheist author Richard Dawkins' perspective as "your little belief system" (O'Reilly, "Science Versus Religion?") and Taylor's organization, World Can't Wait, as "your paltry little group" ("BattleCry"). O'Reilly frequently rephrases his guests' statements into his own, ideologically loaded words. He often promises to give his guests "the last word"; however, after their exchange ends, O'Reilly concludes the segment by reasserting his own opinion or judgment in a direct address to his audience. Ironically, acting in a so-called "no spin zone," he allows virtually no consideration of relativism, gray areas, or consensus between opposing sides. Anyone on the left is cast to the "far-left." He extends his guests' logic to extreme ends. For example, he lectures Taylor, who criticizes both Republican and Democrat politicians: "According to you, ALL of our congresspeople are corrupt and the American people are too stupid to know what you do" ("BattleCry").

O'Reilly's interview with atheist author Richard Dawkins on April 23, 2007 further highlights O'Reilly's assertions of his own views as "truth" (O'Reilly, "Science Versus Religion?"). The interview is predictable, since O'Reilly is a practicing Catholic and vocal critic of atheism. He positions himself against Dawkins from the outset, saying, "I think it takes more faith to be like you, an atheist, than like me, a believer." When Dawkins concedes "there's a lot that we still don't know," O'Reilly pounces.

O'REILLY: All right. When you guys figure it out, then you come back here and tell me, because until that time I'm sticking with Judeo-Christian philosophy and my religion of Roman Catholicism because it helps me as a person.

DAWKINS: That's different. If it helps you, that's great, but that doesn't mean it's true.

O'REILLY: Well, it's true for me. I believe.

DAWKINS: You mean true for you is different from true for anybody else? Something has got to be true or not.

O'REILLY: I can't prove to you that Jesus is God, so that truth is mine and mine alone. But you can't prove to me that Jesus is not. So you have to stay in your little belief system (O'Reilly, "Science Versus Religion?").

True to form, O'Reilly belittles Dawkins's beliefs and then adds fuel to his fiery point: "Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. All confirmed atheists." What is most compelling here, however, is his definition of "true" as "true for me – I believe." Of course, we all have opinions and beliefs that are "true for us," especially when it comes to religion, but O'Reilly thrives on asserting to viewers that, in religion, politics, and culture, what is true for him is (or at least ought to be) not



only universally true, but also factual, as he consistently demonstrates by citing case studies, statistics, polls, names, and other figures as "evidence."

O'Reilly also cites ample "evidence" in support of his views on illegal immigration, which is perhaps the most dramatic example of his use of the tragic frame. O'Reilly argues that people from other countries who want to live and work in the United States must do so legally. This statement in itself is not particularly polarizing. However, O'Reilly relentlessly makes his case against "illegal aliens" (his preferred terminology<sup>3</sup>) by raising the specter of undocumented criminals and terrorists hiding out in American neighborhoods and living off taxpayer dollars. O'Reilly seizes upon any local news reports involving crimes committed by illegal aliens, often Hispanics, and uses these stories to "prove" the presence of a pervasive, imminent danger to all Americans. He further extends this fearful argument by "reminding" viewers that the 9/11 terrorists entered the country illegally. He supports building a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border (but not the U.S.-Canada border) and decries the notion of "open borders" that would allow foreign evildoers to stream into our country at an alarming rate.

O'Reilly's heated exchange with fellow Fox News talk show host Geraldo Rivera in 2007 highlights his staunch connection of illegal immigration to crime (O'Reilly and Rivera). It also reveals, perhaps unwittingly, the highly performative nature of the debate. In the interview, O'Reilly points to a recent case in which two teenage girls from Virginia were killed by a drunk driver who, it turns out, was also an illegal alien with a criminal record. O'Reilly blames a lax immigration policy and soft-on-crime local leaders for the girls' deaths, calling Virginia Beach "a sanctuary city. This means the authorities do not report criminal illegal aliens to the feds, unless it's a drastic situation." Rivera protests, "It's not an illegal alien story, Bill. It's a drunk-driving story." Rivera points out, "There were 347 drunk-driving fatalities in the Commonwealth of

Virginia in the year 2005. I think this may be the first drunk driving story we have done from Virginia. And the only reason it's news on *The Factor* is because the driver was an illegal alien." To which O'Reilly replies, "Right." They shout back and forth about whether the issue at stake is drunk driving or illegal immigration. Rivera yells, "Don't obscure a tragedy to make a cheap political point!" O'Reilly cries, "This is justice. And you want anarchy. You want open-border anarchy!" And then, suddenly, both hosts stop shouting, possibly having lost track of time.

O'REILLY: How much time do we have? We have one minute. What are you doing on your show this weekend?

RIVERA: Oh. [LAUGHTER] Well, thank you very much for asking, Bill. You know, seriously, I think that one of the wonderful things about our network is that we are fair and balanced, that impassioned common peers...

O'REILLY: Yes. People can decide whether you're right or I'm right.

RIVERA: Right. And they can.

O'REILLY: And they will decide that I'm right. [LAUGHTER]

RIVERA: Well, maybe your viewers will, and my viewers will judge it the other way. So, will – I think that there is – there is that – what that does is, you often talk about political correctness and left-wing media. And I think that they do portray our network unfairly, because they fail to represent that we are on different sides of the fence, on this issue most passionately, but many others as well.

O'REILLY: That's why we have you on every week.

RIVERA: So, I – and I appreciate the chance.

O'REILLY: Right. OK. [To audience] Geraldo Rivera, check him out, 8:00 Saturday and Sunday, in *The Factor* slot. [To Rivera] Good weekend. Happy Easter.

RIVERA: You, too (O'Reilly and Rivera).

After such an impassioned debate, this ending is anticlimactic and seemingly unplanned, yet O'Reilly and Rivera adapt quickly with another formula. Perhaps not expecting the extra time, Rivera fills the air with a lame pitch for Fox News and its "fair and balanced" slogan. O'Reilly takes the opportunity to promote Rivera's show as well as future appearances of Rivera on *The O'Reilly Factor*. While professional courtesy among peers is not surprising, in this moment, the act of courtesy seems out-of-place, as though both hosts have "broken character." For the critical viewer, this reveals the possibility that these hosts are, indeed, actors portraying characters, performing both to entertain their viewers and to increase ratings for their network.

I have identified a complex, multilayered range of rhetorical conventions through these examples from O'Reilly's performances. To recap, these conventions, which frame O'Reilly's rhetoric as logical, rational, natural, and truthful, are initially grounded in his self-centered casting of himself and his audience as heroes and his adversaries as anti-heroes or villains. Such projections are supported through visual staging of O'Reilly as a simultaneous peer (e.g., making eye contact with his audience), authority figure (e.g., instructing his audience with his words, reinforced by the on-screen script of a presumably higher authority), and warrior (e.g., facing off his adversaries in split-screen debates). This setting – O'Reilly's world – is further reinforced by his persuasive techniques: repeating "good" and "evil" phrases, naming "good" and "evil" names, establishing rhetorical cues, arguing from syllogistic narratives, framing issues on binary poles, asking leading questions, and maintaining absolutist stances. In addition, his language often

dehumanizes adversarial personas (e.g., "aliens") while invoking God-like authority favoring his own views (as seen in "Talking Points"). To protect himself from criticism, O'Reilly makes skilful concessions when necessary, like affirming that "most illegals are good people" and acknowledging his guests' "right" to their beliefs, and he assures viewers that his choice of guests with opposing beliefs constitutes "fair and balanced" discussion.

I have attempted to set the scene, so to speak, of O'Reilly's on-screen character, his characterizations of others, and his performances as a pundit within a tragic frame of acceptance. His career biography, promotion of his personal mythology, and rhetorical behaviors on his show formulate a compelling persona associated on the one hand with fearlessness, heroism, patriotism, and up-by-his-bootstraps entrepreneurialism, while on the other hand nagged by characteristics of fear, revenge, domination, and ideological elitism. To O'Reilly, the American Dream is always threatened by the American Nightmare of terrorism, crime, social ills, and those who supposedly sanction them. The world is a strange and dangerous place, with strange and dangerous people wanting to hide this tragic truth. O'Reilly promises to tell his viewers what no one else will tell them, so they had better stay tuned. And yet, O'Reilly's visual and rhetorical narratives never attune his audience to the problematic, contradictory aspects of his performance. For example, why does he condemn "the media," when he is part of the media? Why is "*The New York Times*" his buzzword for all that he sees wrong with the media, when he also boasts about topping *The New York Times* bestseller list? What makes his views "sane" and others' views insane? Is his audience truly sympathetic to his arguments? Do his guests, who offer alternative arguments, really want to destroy the values O'Reilly fights to protect? Is O'Reilly fighting the right battle – that is, "our" battle – or are we simply witness to his own battle in his removed, self-centered sphere? Together, all of O'Reilly's strategies and conventions, along with the

questions they seek neither to raise nor answer, create a vast, complex terrain of "mystification." To a satirist like Colbert, however, this terrain provides significant opportunities for "clarification."

### **The Colbert Report: A Parody of Performance**

*The Colbert Report*, which debuted on Comedy Central on October 17, 2005, exhibits a number of elements that easily identify it as a parody of *The O'Reilly Factor*. For example, it spoofs O'Reilly's segment names like "Talking Points Memo," "Children At Risk," and "The Most Ridiculous Item of the Day" with "The Word," "Balls For Kidz," and "The Craziest F#?king Thing I've Ever Heard." Just as O'Reilly promotes his books like *Culture Warrior* and *Kids Are Americans Too* on his television show, Colbert eagerly shills for his own book, *I Am America (And So Can You!)*. Colbert mimics O'Reilly's loud voice and finger-pointing. However, I contend that *The Colbert Report* is more than a simple exaggeration of recognizable language and gestures for the sake of laughs. Rather, Colbert's humor is a form of critical comedy providing viewers with what Robert Hariman calls a "rhetorical education" ("Political Parody and Public Culture" 264). Hariman argues that political parody is an essential component of healthy, democratic discourse and contends that it makes complex rhetorical criticisms accessible to the general public. That is, for example, while only a few scholars are likely to review my master's thesis identifying rhetorical conventions on *The O'Reilly Factor*, Colbert uses comedy to make these conventions readily visible to a non-scholarly public audience and invites them to participate in a critical discourse.

When developing his parody of O'Reilly's personality-driven punditry, it is worth noting that Colbert could have based his humor on any number of characteristics. For example, he could have portrayed O'Reilly through a counteracting tragic frame as a cruel, sneering, manipulative

villain hell-bent on destroying civil liberties and oppressing minorities. In fact, Colbert first piloted the concept of *The Colbert Report* using a tragic frame in four sketches appearing on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2003 and 2004. The sketches are presented as commercials for the show, which Stewart advises viewers has already been cancelled. Colbert's character here exaggerates O'Reilly's angry temper: yelling at his guests to shut up, calling them names, offering them "the last word" before interrupting them, and then promoting his books. In one sketch, he promotes his hardnosed style by saying, "Tonight, I sit down with the nation's top newsmakers and shut them the hell up." This is followed by a video clip featuring Democrats Al Sharpton, Joe Lieberman, and Howard Dean in split screens next to Colbert at his desk, calling them names like "idiot" and "jackass." He tells potential viewers, "On *The Colbert Report*, the usual labels don't apply. What matters is: you're wrong" ("The Colbert Report"). In a later sketch, an announcer says, "Join Stephen Colbert for a lively half hour, as he delves right past the issues of the day and straight into what he thinks." The announcer continues, "Tired of statements backed up by research?" To which Colbert replies, "Then take a spin in the no fact zone," a clear spoof of O'Reilly's "no spin zone." Behind Colbert is a digital graphic of " $2+2=4$ " crossed out by a red circle and line. He sneers, "Quote all the statistics you want, but in my book prenatal care is just more pork-barrel politics." ("The Colbert Report – No Fact Zone").

Certainly, there are many liberals who adopt such a tragic view of conservatives in power, just as tragic conservatives paint liberals as enemies. The brilliance of *The Colbert Report* (the television show, not the fake commercial), I argue, is that it does not counter conservative with liberal (even though, yes, Colbert leans to the political left). Rather, it counters a tragic frame with a comic frame, which means that, rather than entertaining liberal viewers with self-important jabs back at conservatives, this critical comedy asks all viewers to step outside of their

discourse and reflect on its construction. As I will show, Colbert frames O'Reilly not as a "villain" (as Conway, Grabe, and Grieves describe him), but as possibly mistaken, and not as evil, but rather tragic. Rather than retaliating in a rhetorical war, Colbert critiques the perceived need for war. His parody provides perspective by incongruity about the processes of production, mediation, and persuasion in the business of news punditry – and the literal and rhetorical staging of politics performed as entertainment.

### *Colbert's Comic Persona(s)*

Colbert has stated that his audience must "work hard" to follow his humor and message (Borden and Tew 307). Arguably, this is because his character and performances are rife with contradictions. To begin with, Colbert's identity seems ironic and even incongruous. The left-leaning actor Stephen Colbert plays rightwing blowhard pundit "Stephen Colbert," a parody of O'Reilly. The idea, ostensibly, is to reveal that Bill O'Reilly also plays a character, "Bill O'Reilly," calling into question the motives of his performance. However, as noted earlier, Colbert's O'Reilly-inspired persona is not cast as a tragic villain, but rather a comic, "well-intentioned, poorly informed, high status idiot" (Safer ¶13). Colbert's character is self-centered, yet affectionate towards those he admires (including O'Reilly, whom Colbert calls "Papa Bear"); bloviating, yet inquisitive; argumentative, yet optimistic; obnoxious, but likeable and endearing to his fans. Thus, his portrayal critiques O'Reilly's performances without tearing him down as a person. Consider Burke's argument: "Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity*" (41). Where tragedy requires villains, comedy employs fools to teach critical lessons. "The progress of humane enlightenment," Burke argues, "can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act

as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy" (41). By acting as a fool, Colbert points to O'Reilly's mistakenness and vulnerability – not to injure O'Reilly but to show viewers that O'Reilly, like any other human being, is not the all-powerful persona promoted on television.

Colbert also interpellates his audience on at least two contradictory levels. In his satiric manifesto during the pilot episode, he proclaims:

This show is not about me. No, this program is dedicated to you, the heroes. And who are the heroes? The people who watch this show. Average, hard-working Americans. You're not the elites, you're not the country club crowd – I know for a fact that my country club would never let you in. But you get it, and you come from a long line of it-getters. You're the folks who say, something's got to be done. Well, you're doing something right now. You're watching TV. And on this show, your voice will be heard – in the form of my voice ("First Show").

Whereas O'Reilly defers to his presumed audience as patriotic, hard-working, God-fearing, honest Americans, Colbert satirizes the marketing intentions of such an appeal by turning it into obvious patronizing and pandering. This is also ironic because Colbert's character hails his audience as like-minded, self-important conservatives who take him seriously, while in reality his viewers know that his show is a comedy and the joke is on him. And yet, Colbert's sarcastic pandering to his viewers hints that they do not deserve to be pandered to if, as he observes, they behave only as media consumers, not active citizens. Through a Burkean lens, we can describe this parody as *humor downplaying the heroic*. Burke writes,



Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by *magnification*, making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation* (43).

Under the guise of praise, Colbert's manifesto issues a critique of his audience's own level of civic participation, letting them know that simply laughing and agreeing with him is not enough to effect change in the problematic discourses he critiques.

Next in the debut episode, Colbert introduces a word that sums up not only what he offers viewers on this show, but also describes, satirically, what viewers ought to expect from any pundits who peddle personality and ideology over facts and critical discussion. That word is "truthiness," and Colbert's definition lays bare the rhetorical conventions of much contemporary conservative rhetoric, including anti-intellectual appeals to rural and working-class voter demographics:

Now I'm sure some of the word police, the "wordinistas" over at Webster's are gonna say, hey, that's not a word! Well, anybody who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist.

He continues,

I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. Because, face it, folks, we are a divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms,

no. We are divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart.

He concludes: "The truthiness is: anyone can *read* the news *to* you. I promise to *feel* the news *at* you" ("The Word: Truthiness"). Thus, not only does this monologue satirize pundits like O'Reilly, it also forewarns viewers that Colbert's character should not be trusted either.

### **The Colbert Report's *Satiric Stage***

Colbert, like O'Reilly, is the single host of his show and acts as if he alone offers viewers the "truth" about social and political issues. However, while O'Reilly's show is staged to reinforce this sense of righteousness, Colbert's show is staged to reinforce the ridiculousness of such claims. For example, just as Fox News markets O'Reilly as a powerful force to be reckoned with, the over-the-top visuals introducing *The Colbert Report* position Colbert as a "hero" crusading for the truth. The sound of a bald eagle's cry launches each episode. The camera shows Colbert at his desk, where he offers a serious preview of the humorous topics to be discussed and asserts his commitment to bringing viewers "the truth." An introductory sequence follows with up-tempo, instrumental music; a digitally created eagle flying; and Colbert, wearing an expensive-looking suit, standing on a digital red, white, and blue map of the United States, surrounded by a digital background of red, white, and blue stars and stripes juxtaposed with words like "BOLD," "FEARLESS," "RELENTLESS," and "PATRIOTIC." Colbert waves the American flag and then points authoritatively toward viewers. The show's title appears on screen, followed by the digital eagle screaming and flying toward viewers, talons out. The camera then returns to Colbert's studio, which is designed tongue-in-cheek to glorify its host. Colbert's name appears in large letters above his desk, on plasma screens and in chaser lights.

Even his desk is "C" shaped. These self-important visuals immediately contradict Colbert's O'Reilly-like insistence that his *viewers* are the true heroes.

*The Colbert Report*, as though the actual set were personified, frequently employs dramatic irony to satirize the self-centered worldview of Colbert's character. While Colbert parrots O'Reilly's rhetoric, digital visuals and text provide an alternate narration – which Colbert either does not realize or deliberately ignores – that counters or complicates his statements. This is most prominent in "The Word," a spoof of O'Reilly's "Talking Points Memo," in which the on-screen text accompanying Colbert's speech undercuts rather than reinforces his arguments. For example, in "The Word: Xmas" aired December 5, 2005, Colbert imitates O'Reilly's perception of a "War on Christmas" while "The Word" suggests that Christmas is alive and well. Inspired by Fox News correspondent John Gibson's book, *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christmas Holiday is Worse than You Thought*, Colbert argues to viewers:

COLBERT: This War on Christmas is just a part of the larger war on Christianity. Christians in the United States are a persecuted minority.

THE WORD: All 80% of them.

COLBERT: A minority under siege by the powers that be.

THE WORD: Except for the President, Congress and State Legislatures.

[The studio audience erupts into laughter and applause at what "The Word" is saying. Colbert claps and nods along with them, believing they are applauding his argument.]

COLBERT: I agree! Give it up for Christmas. If not this season, where else will we defend Christianity?

THE WORD: Darfur? ("The Word: Xmas")

"The Word" is not merely part of the set; it acts as a character in itself – a comic foil to Colbert's bloviating on popular rightwing topics. For another example, "The Word" takes on Colbert's mock conservative argument against illegal immigration in a segment aired January 16, 2006.

COLBERT: For more than 200 years America has opened its doors to the world.

And that brings us to tonight's Word: Closed!

THE WORD: ¡Cerrado!

"The Word" then calls attention to the racist and xenophobic undertones of anti-immigration rhetoric, here couched in Colbert's sentimental argument, which mimics O'Reilly's rosy, up-by-their-bootstraps characterization of his own family's Irish-immigrant ancestry.

COLBERT: In the old days, immigrants were charming, sepia-toned Europeans who overcame racial bigotry.

THE WORD: The Dutch Are A Filthy, Thieving People.

COLBERT: But today's immigrants don't look like us, and they're just plain lazy.

THE WORD: Lazy Dodging Border Patrol Fire.

COLBERT: Now there is only one solution.

THE WORD: Help Build Central American Economies?

COLBERT: We must build a wall. A wall across our entire southern border.

At this point, Colbert considers the need for additional security measures, and "The Word" playfully goes along with him. On screen, an image appears of a geographical map of North and Central America, first depicting a wall across the U.S.-Mexico border, then another wall cutting off Canada, then walls on each coast, and finally a dome covering U.S. airspace, punched with "breathing holes" for Americans now safely inside.

COLBERT: So immigrants, sorry, party's over.

THE WORD: Lettuce Picking Party.

COLBERT: It's time for you to go. Right after you finish building those walls.

Because without a lot of cheap labor, we'll never get our borders closed (The Word: Cerrado!).

Colbert complicates conservatives' calls for a border fence by making the rather silly, yet realistic observation that illegal immigrants can find ways around the fence, while "The Word" wonders if better foreign relations and economic policies with neighboring countries are a more appropriate solution. "The Word" also downplays perceptions of illegal immigrants as criminals or taking "good" jobs, framing them as cheap laborers upon whom Americans rely greatly.

In these performances, Colbert's speech opens obvious holes in the logic of the rhetoric he parodies. "The Word" then complicates his speech with alternative language, which helps to balance the argument and critique popular, yet problematic discourses. "The Word" shows the audience that Colbert is incapable of controlling the world through rhetorical framing, nor is anyone else. Thus, "The Word" exemplifies what Burke describes as "a truly liquid attitude toward speech," in which one "would be ready, at all times, to employ 'casuistry' at points where these lacunae are felt" (231). That is, rather than take rhetoric for granted as truth, one actively recognizes problematic language and takes steps to extract it from its ideological comfort zone, a method of perspective by incongruity. "We believe that the result, in the end, would be a firmer kind of certainty," argues Burke (231). Moreover, the very phrase "The Word" directly confronts the positioning of O'Reilly's "Talking Points" as a self-centered projection of the voice of God. It is perhaps no coincidence that "The Word" is the same phrase used to describe Biblical scripture.

However, unlike "Talking Points," "The Word" puts Colbert in his place as a fallible human being. If "The Word" indeed plays the voice of God, then the difference from "Talking Points" is that, here, while the voice of God may speak *with* Colbert, Colbert does not speak *for* him.

***From Aliens to Bears, and From Fear to Love***

As discussed earlier, O'Reilly's insistence on using words like "aliens" for "immigrants" keeps his objects impersonal and even dehumanized. Colbert responds to this convention by playing up an intense, irrational, and ridiculous fear of bears. This fear of bears is silly on the surface. For example, regular viewers know that bears will almost always top Colbert's list of the five biggest threats to Americans in his recurring segment "ThreatDown." (The other threats typically include terrorists, the liberal media, homosexuals, scientists who support the theory of evolution, and other groups typically targeted by O'Reilly.) But the silly incongruity of bears, whom Colbert describes as "godless killing machines" (O'Reilly and Colbert) with "radical bear agendas" ("ThreatDown – Hamas"), as the number-one threat to his viewers, invokes a serious critique of O'Reilly's rhetorical construction of threatening figures, such as "illegal aliens" as "undocumented criminals...running around" (O'Reilly, "How Bad Is Illegal Alien Crime") and other fearful specters like terrorists, child predators, and liberal conspirators lurking, potentially, in his viewers' own neighborhoods. Colbert suggests that O'Reilly's fear is not imaginary (conceding that bears and illegal alien criminals do exist), but exaggerated, melodramatic, and possibly based on unresolved childhood fears.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Colbert seemingly slips in and out of character as he describes his fear of bears to host Terry Gross. He argues facetiously, "They're after our honey, our picnic baskets, and our women" (Gross 12). He then explains:

COLBERT: In my head, I've always since I was a child have had this specter of being mauled by a bear as, like, the worst thing that could happen to you. And I grew up...

GROSS: Did you live near a bear?

COLBERT: No, I grew up on coastal South Carolina. There's not a bear for 250 miles. But...

GROSS: With the exception of the zoo.

COLBERT: When I was a kid, I thought the woods were full of bears, raccoons and bears. And so, you know, it's like I had dreams about bears. They're after me. They're after me.

GROSS: That's very funny.

COLBERT: They're between me and something I want. I see bears. They're dancing bears, but I know that if I get close enough to them, they'll turn into Kodiaks (Gross 10).

Is this a true, personal story of a fear of bears stemming from childhood? Is he simply parodying O'Reilly's fear-mongering of illegal alien criminals lurking in our midst? Perhaps it is the former; it is almost certainly the latter. Even in a supposedly straight-man interview, Colbert keeps us guessing about whether or not he is "performing."

Considering his fear of bears, Colbert's affectionate dubbing of O'Reilly as "Papa Bear" is especially ironic. At face value, "Papa Bear" alludes to portrayals of O'Reilly as the elder pundit – brash, strong, and intense – whereas Colbert's character is the junior pundit – gangly, less established, and following O'Reilly's lead. Colbert's term "Papa Bear" also subverts the conventional positioning of a pundit in opposition to his adversaries and competitors, as seen in

O'Reilly's frame. Instead, Colbert acknowledges that O'Reilly is the reason his character exists. Thus, O'Reilly is not really his enemy; rather, Colbert depends on him for the "life" of his character and career. In addition, this perspective calls attention to the fact that O'Reilly depends on his own "bears" – illegal aliens, liberal media, and so on, in order to have content for his own program. If all of these threatening figures were to disappear, O'Reilly would be out of a job. Therefore, O'Reilly must continually beget new threatening figures to keep his show interesting and attractive to his viewers. Colbert lays this bare by literally embracing his adversaries, from bowing to O'Reilly to holding Jane Fonda in his lap, as I discuss next.

***Interviews: Turning Adversity on Its Head***

Like O'Reilly, Colbert complements his monologues with guest interviews. Colbert often interviews guests who are unlikely to appear on *The O'Reilly Factor*, like Jane Fonda, whom O'Reilly criticizes for using her Hollywood celebrity as a podium for liberal activism. Colbert, however, showers affection and admiration on Fonda, like a little boy infatuated with a teacher. He conducts the interview with Fonda sitting on his lap, nuzzling his neck and whispering in his ear while he tries to control his excitement. Fonda refers to a previous episode in which Colbert put his fantasies of Fonda "on notice," and tells him to embrace his fantasies instead. He tries to ask her softball questions about her new movie, but she wants to talk politics. "We cannot elect men to office that are afraid of premature evacuation," says Fonda. "And Felicity Huffman was also in the movie, I see..." replies Colbert, trying to avoid the more contentious subject ("Jane Fonda"). Here, Colbert's incongruous interview provides a fresh perspective on the relationship of pundits to their targets – in this case, conservative O'Reilly's condemnation of liberal Fonda. Colbert suggests that conservatives like O'Reilly and him harbor secret sexual desires for liberal women like Fonda. The critical perspective extends further: Colbert's satire points out how much



pundits need their targets in order to have a show. In that sense, he suggests that O'Reilly ought to worship Fonda for giving him something to talk about. Rather than adversarial, perhaps their relationship is co-dependent.

Colbert also interviews people who have appeared previously on *The O'Reilly Factor*. Colbert parodies O'Reilly's attacks on them, only his ironic undertone is usually more gracious to left-leaning guests. He interviews Richard Dawkins on October 17, 2006, who reiterates much of his argument presented on O'Reilly. Mimicking O'Reilly's exchange with Dawkins, Colbert says,

I've already played my hand here. I believe in God, and you don't believe in God, so I've got that on you. So, this is kind of unfair because God's on my side in this argument. But ninety-five percent of Americans believe that there is a God, so doesn't that disprove your argument, or else, do you not believe in democracy? I mean, the people have spoken ("Richard Dawkins").

Here, Colbert's parody raises the issue of O'Reilly's "truthiness" – that God is true because enough people believe God is true, and belief trumps fact. However, Colbert's irony does not defend Dawkins' own "truthy" view of the non-existence of God. In fact, Colbert (who in real life is a practicing Catholic, like O'Reilly) complicates Dawkins' argument that while man-made things are intelligently designed, the universe evolved naturally with no creator. Colbert asks confusedly, "[You] say your book is intelligent design, but the universe is not intelligently designed. Then you're saying that the universe just naturally came into existence, continues its existence through natural laws of nature – through physics, thermodynamics, the laws of gravity and energy – produced *you* eventually, and then through you produced this book that proves that it has no natural intelligent design?" Colbert's satire suggests that neither O'Reilly nor Dawkins are fundamentally right; rather, he defends the possibility of multiple, coexisting beliefs about

the world and its creation or evolution. For those who expect Colbert's satire to defend Dawkins, his incongruous critique serves to remind viewers that not all issues are divided on conservative-versus-liberal lines.

In January 2007, Comedy Central and Fox News producers coordinated a comedic coup: Colbert appeared on *The O'Reilly Factor*, and O'Reilly appeared on *The Colbert Report*. Both interviews were meant to be humorous, and both shows enjoyed ratings boosts from the exchange (Toff). However, even while O'Reilly plays along, his tragic frame remains intact and seems out of place in an openly entertainment-oriented setting.

In a desk-side interview, O'Reilly welcomes Colbert to *The O'Reilly Factor* and immediately criticizes him for pronouncing his surname with a silent "t" when as a child he pronounced the "t." O'Reilly argues that Colbert is an elitist trying to pass as French while hiding his real Irish-American roots. However, rather than rebut that he is not an elitist, Colbert – in character – acknowledges openly that he changed his pronunciation to compete in the same elite sphere as O'Reilly. "Bill, you know you've got to play the game that the media elites want you to do. OK? Some places you can draw the line. Some places you can't. You and I have taken a lot of positions against the powers that be, and we've paid a heavy price. We have TV shows, product lines, and books. Okay?" Eventually, O'Reilly becomes irritated and bellows, "Who are you? Are you Coal-bert or Colbert?" Colbert replies, "Bill, I'm whoever you want me to be." O'Reilly eventually gives up and concludes the interview, reminding the audience that Colbert "owes his whole life to me, and I'm happy to give it up for him" (O'Reilly and Colbert).

While O'Reilly downplays Colbert's appearance on his show, Colbert is giddy and enthusiastic in anticipation of "Papa Bear's" appearance on *The Colbert Report*. He plays up the greatness of the occasion and, when O'Reilly arrives, acts humbled and deferential to his guest.

(Meanwhile, his set lends dramatic irony with a "Mission Accomplished" banner hanging on the wall behind the interview table. On the surface, this message refers to the fact that Colbert's inspiration, O'Reilly, has finally come on the show after more than two years. However, the banner is also an ironic icon of George Bush's premature Iraq War victory speech in May 2003 ["Commander in Chief lands on USS Lincoln"], reminding viewers that O'Reilly and other conservatives once championed Bush's problematic war policies.) After discussing O'Reilly's book *Culture Warrior*, Colbert asks O'Reilly if he could defeat rival pundit Sean Hannity in a fight. O'Reilly jokes, "I'm not a tough guy. This is all an act. I'm sensitive." Colbert, feigning shock, replies, "If you're an act, then what am I?" ("Bill O'Reilly," *The Colbert Report*).

The two interviews wrench both men's performances from their conventional settings and place them in their adversarial environments. Colbert's comic frame arguably "works" in both settings because he makes it obvious that he is acting in character. However, O'Reilly's tragic frame appears incongruous in this humorous, obviously staged exchange. His attempt to reveal Colbert as an imposter falls flat because Colbert is openly fake. His attempt to retain his "real," tough persona is undercut by his own admission that he is "an act." Once again, Colbert's engagement with O'Reilly raises the critical question: is O'Reilly really "looking out for you," as he claims, or is he simply an entertainer looking out for his own career?

***Conclusion: Setting the Media World as a Stage***

In this chapter, I have positioned Bill O'Reilly's performances on *The O'Reilly Factor* as a tragic frame fraught with rhetorical conventions, many of which are critically problematic, using the scholarly lens of Burkean theory. I followed this critique with an analysis of Colbert's own critical work on *The Colbert Report*, which through parody makes O'Reilly's questionable conventions visible to a broader, potentially non-scholarly public. By placing the conventions of

O'Reilly's pundit performances – such as constructing opinions as "truth," casting his fans as heroes and his critics as villains, using dehumanizing language, and invoking the voice of God – in alternative, incongruous contexts, Colbert reframes them as truthiness, pandering, phobia, and self-centeredness. He is aided by his own set, especially "The Word," which acts as a personified character to lend a sense of dramatic irony that engages viewers at a critical distance from the pundit's platform. By acknowledging his own character as fallible, misinformed, and more entertaining than enlightening, Colbert positions O'Reilly in the same frame, revealing to viewers that both pundits are performers acting in character; therefore, viewers should accept neither Colbert's nor O'Reilly's rhetoric at face value.

To that end, I also found that both O'Reilly and Colbert's performances are multilayered, complex, and often contradictory. O'Reilly is constituted by multiple tragic personas, including images of him as a victim, a villain, a hero, and even god-like. However, only one of these personas – O'Reilly as hero – is directly projected onto O'Reilly on his show. His performances project a self-centered image of victims onto others who have been wronged, possibly concealing his own frustrations over being wronged. He projects a self-centered image of villains onto those who disagree with his worldview, concealing external evidence of his own wrongful acts. He projects a self-centered image of God onto his "Talking Points" script, concealing his opinion as a matter of credible, broadly accepted, and even God-given truth. By contrast, Colbert parodies these personas through a comic frame in order to reveal, explain, and clarify them in a broader context. Colbert's character, too, is self-centered and imagines himself as a hero, but Colbert the actor employs parody, irony, and satire to make this apparent to viewers and render it problematic.

In the next two chapters, I will examine two performative events (Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner in 2006 and his campaign for president in 2007) in which Colbert departs from *The Colbert Report* and moves beyond his specific parody of O'Reilly to critique the media and political industries at large. I believe there are important differences – and some similarities – between Colbert's critical performances and those of O'Reilly, who also criticizes the mainstream media and politicians. One distinction is tragic versus comic framing, as I have discussed throughout this chapter. Both O'Reilly and Colbert critique other media and political figures for spin, partisanship, and dishonesty. O'Reilly frames the most threatening offenders in the media as "the far-left," while Colbert argues that perceivably left-leaning groups have actually kowtowed to conservatives in power. He questions why the media sides with either right or left, and worse, puts profits over public service. Colbert becomes further distinguished from O'Reilly by venturing beyond the comforts of his own television studio, which O'Reilly rarely does. Arguably, Colbert's speech to the White House Correspondents' Association, scheduled serendipitously by an ill-informed event planner, is a performative rite of passage that establishes Colbert's character as a more complex persona in his own right and perhaps no longer simply a parody of O'Reilly. From there, Colbert takes an additional leap into a more complex critical performance: running for president while operating as his own pundit. Thus, as I will show next, Colbert's performances follow the trajectory of political news evolving into personality-driven media, in which personality and opinion are not only more pronounced than genuine expertise and critical content, but perhaps they are also more welcomed and defended within conventional discursive frames.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Time* columnist Roger Rosenblatt argued shortly after September 11, 2001: "One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes—our columnists and pop culture makers—declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life. Who but a slobbering bumpkin would think, 'I feel your pain'? The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real—apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity—is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace" (Rosenblatt paragraph 1).

<sup>2</sup> My findings support those of Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe, and Kevin Grieves, who, as I discussed in my introduction, contend that O'Reilly employs a number of propagandistic rhetorical techniques that make his problematic logic appear commonsensical, compelling, and convincing (Conway, Grabe, and Grieves).

<sup>3</sup> In an exchange on 14 February 2007, O'Reilly lectures fellow Fox correspondent Jonathan Hoenig for using the word "immigrant" instead of "alien" to describe people entering the United States illegally. He tells Hoenig, "You used the word 'immigrant.' I'm telling you that's subterfuge. And it erodes your credibility. And I'm looking out for you. Don't do that" ("Illegal Alien Apologist Jonathan Hoenig On Fox News O'Reilly Factor").

### CHAPTER 3.

#### OVER THE LINE? WHOSE LINE? COLBERT SPEAKS UP AT THE WHITE HOUSE

##### CORRESPONDENTS' DINNER

On April 29, 2006, Stephen Colbert took his critical humor to a new stage with an unconventional and controversial performance at the White House Correspondents' Association annual dinner. In his after-dinner speech – delivered ironically in character as an over-the-top, Bush-loving, media-loathing, rightwing pundit – Colbert went far beyond the traditional "roast" of the president. Instead, his comic routine was merely a thin veil for a skewering critique of both President George W. Bush for his failed policies and the press corps for not effectively challenging the administration's problematic messages. Colbert's critical humor called attention to a number of problematic conventions, from the sanctioned, status-quo-reinforcing revelry of the dinner event to the media's unwillingness to accept criticism. His satiric, acerbic remarks received a chilly response in the ballroom and were widely panned or ignored in many mainstream news reports on the event. However, while many in the mainstream media reacted as though Colbert crossed a line of appropriateness, others, including regular citizens discussing the event in online forums, cheered Colbert for speaking truth to the "truthiness" in power. His speech became a runaway hit on the Internet, where millions of viewers posted comments on YouTube, blogs, and other interactive sites praising, condemning, and further debating the relevance and appropriateness of Colbert's jokes.

This apparent disconnect between the mainstream media's reaction to Colbert's speech and the tremendous public response to it through alternative media raises important questions for rhetorical criticism. What rhetorical boundaries or lines did Colbert cross, and whose lines were they? What rhetorical conventions and ideological constructions did he unmask, and whose faces

were revealed? In what ways did varying responses to his speech – from the media establishment's rejection to the blogosphere's "viral" embrace – further complicate the status quo of political and media communication?

Here, I address these questions by analyzing the speech event and its aftermath through several rhetorical-critical lenses. I begin with a detailed overview of the speech situation, introducing the White House Correspondents' Association, the customs of its annual dinner tradition, and criticisms of the event from professional critics and, increasingly, independent bloggers. I follow this with a narrative description of the evening's performances, including a skit starring President Bush and a Bush impersonator and Colbert's keynote speech, and the divergent reactions to them in mainstream and alternative media spheres. In my theoretical analysis, I argue first that Colbert's speech once again employs Kenneth Burke's notion of the comic frame. I contrast this with the Bush-impersonation act – arguing that this light, sanctioned humor operates within a tragic frame emphasizing a perceived polar positioning of the media versus the administration. Rather than placing the media in binary opposition to the administration, which the annual dinner event observes and reinforces, Colbert reframes this relationship from a third, perhaps more holistic perspective – that of the viewing public which senses that neither the administration nor the media are fully truthful and acting in its best interest. Next, I argue that Colbert's speech provides perspective by incongruity, not only as an "incongruous" performance in itself (i.e., criticism in the guise of entertainment) but also toward the performances it critiques (i.e., the media's masking of its own self-interest). I interweave two additional theories in this analysis. First, I link Colbert's speech to Michel Foucault's concept of "*parrhesia*," or speaking truth to power at one's own risk, and question the incongruity of the media establishment's self-proclaimed truth-seeking role in light of its self-protective reaction to Colbert's speech in



subsequent news cycles. Second, I use the concepts of "carnavalesque" and "inversion" – as advocated by Mikhail Bakhtin and complicated by scholars like Peter Stallybrass and Allon White – to discuss incongruities of the annual dinner performances in particular and the performative relations between the media and political establishments in general. Finally, I consider another aftermath of this speech event, as "Stephen Colbert" was propelled to new heights of popularity and controversy as a media personality in his own right, which prepares him for his next parody of the performative trajectory of media figures on the political stage (specifically, his presidential campaign, discussed in Chapter Four).

### ***A Time-honored Tradition Celebrated and Excoriated***

The White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) is a long-established organization for Washington reporters that has come under some scrutiny in recent years for arguably putting journalists' perks above journalism (Rich, "All the President's Press"; Rieder). Founded in 1914, the WHCA "represents the White House press corps in its dealings with the administration on coverage-related issues" (WHCA, "Home" ¶1). The WHCA offers journalism scholarships and awards, funded by proceeds from its annual dinner (WHCA, "History"). Former WHCA President George Condon notes that the dinner "was at the heart of what the Association did" until the 1990s, when "new restrictions on access, new increases in travel costs, new scrutiny of reporters, and new forms of media" required greater advocacy by the WHCA on behalf of White House reporters (WHCA, "History" ¶6). Today, the Association's priority concerns are "access to the president" and "efforts to reduce the costs that news organizations incur covering the president on the road" (¶6). Some journalists have criticized the WHCA for protecting the interests of the White House administration and its credentialed reporters at the expense of the public's right to know. For example, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich

characterized this "Beltway establishment" as having "parroted Bush administration fictions leading America into the quagmire of Iraq" ("Throw the Truthiness Bums Out" ¶14). In 2007, Rich announced that the *Times* would no longer partake in the WHCA's annual dinner festivities ("All the President's Press").

The WHCA dinner is a decades-old tradition ostensibly intended to reinforce good relationships between the presidential administration and the journalists assigned to cover it on a daily basis. The first annual dinner took place in 1920; a sitting president – Calvin Coolidge – first attended in 1924 (WHCA, "History"). For a long time, the event was considered rather low-key; however, over the last two decades, it has become known by insiders as a competition among news organizations to "line up celebrity dates" with Hollywood actors and famous newsmakers (Rieder ¶7). For example, the week before the 2006 dinner, two *Washington Post* reporters gushed with excitement on their blog: "ABC is bringing [Condoleeza] Rice, Valerie Plame and Joe Wilson, General Peter Pace, and *Dancing With the Stars* winner [Nick] Lachey; *People* magazine nabbed Mary Cheney, *Grey's Anatomy's* Isaiah Washington, John Legend, and Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges; Bloomberg gets Michael Chertoff, Governor Mitt Romney, New York Giant Tiki Barber, tennis babe Anna Kournikova, and Melina Kanakaredes" (Argetsinger and Roberts ¶4). Another *Washington Post* reporter blogged, "The thing is, the White House Correspondents' Dinner...is basically a good excuse for allegedly dignified journalists to act the fool. (Yes, us included.) Where else can you shed all sense of decorum and go chasing after Terrence Howard in mad pursuit of a 'quote'? Or shove your mug in front of *Desperate Housewives* star James Denton and maneuver an impromptu photo op?" (Wiltz ¶10).

Such musings have prompted criticism from journalism scholars and critics, who believe the dinner's fanfare depicts a culture of Washington that is "smug and arrogant and self-

important" (Rieder ¶18). Rem Rieder, editor and publisher of the *American Journalism Review*, argues, "The problem is that this black tie underscores the notion that journalists are part of a wealthy elite, completely out of touch with ordinary Americans – their audience. (That's ridiculous, of course, given the fact that far too many journalists at smaller papers work for hideously low salaries.) And panting furiously after these name and semi-name guests is simply demeaning" (¶10). Rieder quotes former *New York Times* Washington bureau chief Michael Oreskes, who refused to let *Times* reporters attend under his watch in the late 1990s: "The purpose of honoring good journalism with awards and raising money for scholarships has become lost in the circus. The association each year is seen around the country as host to a Bacchanalia that confirms everyone's worst sense of Washington. We should not be a part of this" (¶13).

Despite such admonitions, the WHCA dinner has continued to draw crowds seeking a good time – including more than 2,600 guests in 2006 (Argetsinger and Roberts). However, by the mid-2000s, the new, rapidly expanding "blogosphere" of concerned citizens, alternative journalists, and self-anointed pundits writing on personal or public Internet sites had begun to amplify criticisms of the mainstream media. Alternative media web sites like *Daily Kos*, *Huffington Post*, *Instapundit*, and *Wonkette* gained popularity for offering alternative, critical, and sometimes partisan-appealing perspectives on stories reported in the news and the news business itself. For example, just two days before the WHCA dinner in 2006, *Huffington Post* blogger Peter Daou wrote, "One of the hallmarks of the painfully-too-long Bush presidency has been the abject failure of the traditional media to adopt an interrogative or disputatious stance toward the administration. We've been treated to a half decade plus of stenography with a few smatterings of lucidity (Katrina being the lone example that comes to mind)" (Daou ¶1).

Meanwhile, independent media consumers embraced the increasing ease and access to online content production, self-expression, and interactive discussions enabled by low-cost computer tools, YouTube video, and personal blog software (Gillmor). As public concerns grew over the administration's handling of the Iraq war, hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and civil liberties restrictions under the guise of national security – to name just a few hot issues – events like the WHCA dinner stood to become fodder for the growing population of mainstream-media and administration critics with alternative media access.

By tradition, the annual dinner's official highlights include two comedic performances: one delivered by the sitting president and the other by a professional comedian. President Bush obliged the audience with a brief routine each year during his tenure. In 2002, for example, he opened with a photo slideshow mocking life in the White House (Kurtzman); in 2005, First Lady Laura Bush stopped him within the first minute and cracked jokes about being a "desperate housewife," in reference to the popular television series ("Laura Bush: First Lady of Comedy?"). Over the years, many popular comedians have joined presidents on the dais, including Jay Leno, Drew Carey, Ray Romano, Cedric the Entertainer, and even Jon Stewart (years before his *Daily Show* fame). Customarily, the comedian delivers a light "roast" of the president and top officials, to the delight of the press corps. Apparently, Mark Smith, who was head of the WHCA in 2006, was not fully aware of the satirical, critical nature of Colbert's comedy when he invited Colbert to perform at the Association's dinner. Smith admitted later that he had not seen much of Colbert's work (Steinberg ¶1). Any assumptions that Colbert's rightwing persona would cater kindly to a Republican administration would prove grievously incorrect.

As anticipated, the ballroom of the Washington Hilton hotel boasted a star-studded guest list on the evening of April 29, 2006. The event was filmed and broadcast live on cable news

channel C-SPAN. President Bush, the First Lady, high-ranking administration officials, members of the White House press corps, Hollywood celebrities, and other newsmakers enjoyed dinner and networking. Somewhat oddly, several vocal critics of the Bush administration were present and partaking in the festivities, including Valerie Plame, the CIA undercover operative whose identity was leaked allegedly by a White House official; New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, who was harshly critical of the Bush administration's poor response to Hurricane Katrina not one year earlier; and civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, a known Bush critic. And yet, in spite of the many controversies connected to the people in this room – from devastating disasters to deadly wars – the atmosphere here was one of lightheartedness and laughter (C-SPAN, "Colbert Roasts President Bush").

Before Colbert took the stage, President Bush and Bush impersonator Steve Bridges performed a ten-minute comical skit that generated great applause and laughter from the audience (C-SPAN, "President Bush Impersonation"). Following the time-honored customs of the annual dinner, Bush played along in light self-deprecation for the amusement of the press corps and other audience members. While Bush played himself in a straight role, Bridges represented Bush's inner thoughts, playing up the president's reputation for malapropism. Together, they poked fun at Bush's inability to pronounce words like "nuclear" and made light of current headlines like the recent administrative reorganization that sent several White House officials packing. "I'm feeling chipper," Bush joked. "I survived the White House shake-up!" Bridges commented on the high-profile members of the audience, calling them "all the usual suspects" before asking, "Speaking of suspects, where's the great white hunter?" Bush followed, "I am sorry Vice President Cheney couldn't be here tonight." The audience rolled with laughter at this reference to Cheney's recent hunting accident in which he shot his friend, Texas attorney

Harry Whittington (Bash). Bush and Bridges also served up several partisan punch lines, pitting the media and liberals as adversaries. Bridges joked that the room was full of "media types" and Hollywood liberals" – "the only thing missing is Hillary Clinton sitting on the front row rolling her eyes." Later in the skit, Bush contended (as all politicians do) that he supports bipartisanship. To illustrate his vision, Bridges envisioned a "church" (shown by clasping his fingers together and turning his hands upward in the style of the children's rhyme, "here is the church, here is the steeple; open the door, and there are the people") in which Bush and the iconically liberal Senator Ted Kennedy sit side-by-side in the front row, and all would be well. In closing, Bush thanked Bridges as "my invited guest" and noted, "It's really important to be able to laugh at your job." He thanked the audience for attending, and concluded with "God bless the troops, God bless freedom, and God bless America." Mark Smith then introduced Colbert (C-SPAN, "President Bush Impersonation").

As Jon Stewart would later remark tongue-in-cheek, "Apparently [Colbert] was under the impression that they'd hired him to do what he does every night on television" ("Intro – Correspondents' Dinner"). True to his biting satiric act, Colbert stepped up to the bully pulpit, first ridiculing Bush, and then – more shockingly – the press corps sitting in the audience. Colbert went beyond Bush's pronunciation problems, aiming instead at Bush's overall leadership style and sense of judgment in serious situations, particularly what he saw as Bush's rigid stance on issues and his tendency to surround himself only with those who agree with him. "We're not so different, he and I," said Colbert-in-character. "We get it. We're not brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the Factinista" (Colbert, Dahm, Dinello, and Silverman 221).<sup>1</sup> He continued, "The great thing about this man is he's steady. You know where he stands. He

believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday" (224).

For Colbert, Bush is the epitome of "truthiness" – deriving truth from what feels true and what ought to be true, in one's opinion, rather than facing conflicting facts. Said Colbert, "Now I know there are some polls out there saying this man has a 32% approval rating. But guys like us, we don't pay attention to polls. We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in 'reality.' And reality has a well-known liberal bias" (Colbert, et al. 222). Colbert also criticized the administration's deft use of visual images to reinforce positive public perceptions of Bush as a strong, caring leader. "I stand by this man because he stands for things," said Colbert. "Not only 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" (223). Here, Colbert alluded to well-known images of Bush standing on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln under a "Mission Accomplished" banner in 2003 (although the war continues in 2009); atop the fallen World Trade Center towers shortly after 9/11, promising to catch the perpetrator (although Osama Bin Laden remains at large); and in New Orleans, where thousands suffered in the wake of Hurricane Katrina with little assistance or apparent concern from the federal government.

Colbert also lampooned Bush for his apparent contradictions of conservative Republican ideology. Alluding to Bush's notion of "compassionate conservatism," Colbert exclaimed, "I believe in pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. I believe it is possible – I saw this guy do it once in Cirque du Soleil. It was magical. And 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 savior" (Colbert, et al. 222). Addressing Bush's controversial expansions of federal oversight, from No Child Left Behind to the Patriot Act, Colbert added, "I believe the government that governs best is the government that governs least. And by these standards, we have set up a fabulous government in Iraq" (222). His jokes drew some chuckles from the audience, but much of the laughter appears stifled and uncomfortable – certainly not the roaring response heard during Steve Bridges' impersonation. A camera focused on President Bush showed him grow increasingly uncomfortable and possibly angry as Colbert's routine went on ("Bush Realtime Reaction to Colbert Speech"); one White House aide said later, "He's got that look that he's ready to blow" (Bedard ¶3).

It is an understatement to say that Colbert upped the temperature on the traditional presidential roast. And certainly his words were to the liking of many journalists in the room, even if they showed discomfort. But then Colbert turned his sharp wit on the White House press corps, the very group that invited him to speak. He accused them of sleeping on the job while the Bush administration enacted highly questionable policies affecting the lives of millions of Americans and people around the world. "Over the last five years you people were so good – over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming," chided Colbert. "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" (Colbert, et al. 224). He then fired at the correspondents' inability to get anything but "spin" from the White House and their seeming acquiescence. "Here's how it works: the President makes the rules. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know – the one about the intrepid



Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know – fiction!" (224). The audience response remained chilly.

Colbert then announced that he would like to have been considered for the White House press secretary position recently vacated by Scott McClellan and filled by former Fox News anchor Tony Snow. "Got some big shoes to fill, Tony," he remarked. "Big shoes to fill. Scott McClellan could say nothing like nobody else" (Colbert, et al. 226). Colbert segued to a ten-minute "audition" video featuring him, still in character, now in the role of White House press secretary. The video featured clips of actual White House correspondents asking rather tough questions at a press conference, spliced with staged footage of Colbert as press secretary at a fictitious pressroom podium, desperately dodging the reporters' questions. When NBC correspondent David Gregory continued a line of pressing questions about Iraq, Colbert examined several buttons on his podium: "EJECT," "GANNON" [a reference to one reporter who appeared to be asking pre-approved, "friendly" questions (Savage and Wirzbicki; Rich, "The White House Stages Its 'Daily Show'")], and "VOLUME." Colbert elected to turn down the volume; the camera cut back to Gregory, still talking, but now inaudible. Later, veteran reporter Helen Thomas, known as a vocal critic of the White House, was shown asking questions about the Iraq invasion. Frustrated, Colbert fled the room, only to be stalked by Thomas into a parking lot in a scene resembling a suspense movie. (Thomas actually participated in the filming of this scene expressly for Colbert's video.) To be fair, the footage suggested that the White House correspondents were asking tough questions and doing their best against the powerful controls of the White House. The video primarily attacked the White House press office for its unwillingness to answer tough questions about faulty policies with disastrous consequences.

Nevertheless, Colbert still characterized the press corps as ineffective and irrelevant (with the possible exception of Helen Thomas).

After the video, Colbert thanked the crowd and left the podium. Video footage of his exit shows President Bush shaking his hand and saying "Good job," while the First Lady appears to give him an icy reception with no handshake. The Bushes promptly departed, and Mark Smith, seeming embarrassed, quickly concluded the program ["Speech at the White House Correspondent's Dinner (2006) p3"] (*sic*).

***The Aftermath: Did Colbert Cross a Line? Whose Line?***

Perhaps most telling about the impact of Colbert's speech were the divergent responses from the mainstream media versus alternative media and the viewing public. Not surprisingly, the White House downplayed the story; press secretary Scott McClellan said only, "We'll let the others be entertainment critics. I know better than to insert myself into that one" (Steinberg ¶17). Meanwhile, the discomfort among the Washington reporters in the Hilton ballroom carried over into the subsequent news cycle, where much of the mainstream media responded by ignoring, dismissing, or condemning Colbert's speech in their coverage of the event. The major television news networks – whose anchors are members of the WHCA – ignored it entirely in their Monday-morning recaps, focusing instead on the Bush-Bridges skit – obviously a much safer story (Kalvin; Kaufman; Mallick). C-SPAN, which broadcast the live event, repeated the full recording several times within the next twenty-four hours but thereafter aired only edited segments that featured the Bush-Bridges skit and excluded Colbert's speech (Kalvin). The *New York Times'* initial coverage focused entirely on the Bush-Bridges skit, offering a rather interesting criticism of Bush's increased need to ingratiate himself with the press because of dire

current affairs – and yet not a single mention of Colbert (Bumiller). *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz also ignored it at first (Kurtz, "Media Backtalk").

Colbert's story might have faded quickly from these news organizations' lineups had readers and viewers not complained about its omission. Still, some news organizations responded dismissively to their audiences' concerns. In a published letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Gloria D. Howard wrote, "I was stunned to read your recounting of the White House Correspondents' Dinner, which did not mention the bravura performance of Stephen Colbert" (Howard and Phillian). The *Times* posted a response from Richard Stevenson, a deputy bureau chief in Washington: "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 asleep at the switch" – suggesting that Colbert's jokes derived from standard partisan cues (Hoyt ¶7). Similarly, during an online chat program, when participants chastised *Washington Post* columnist Howard Kurtz for not mentioning Colbert's performance in his column, Kurtz initially quipped that he did not respond "maybe because I wasn't there, and another *Post* reporter covered the dinner." When pressed, he offered, "The problem in part is one of deadline. The presses were already rolling by the time Colbert came on at 10:30." He noted, with some irritation, that he had run two clips from Colbert's speech on his own CNN program. Finally, when participants criticized his excuses, Kurtz ended the discussion with, "I'm very interested in the president's reaction...But whether David Gregory and the gang were offended, I suspect they have more of a sense of humor than some of you seem to believe" (Kurtz, "Media Backtalk").

Meanwhile, by contrast, video clips of Colbert's speech, recorded from C-SPAN, surfaced on the Internet and quickly went "viral" on video web sites like YouTube and Google

and blogs like *Crooks and Liars* (Noam Cohen, "A Comedian's Riff"), which Nielson BuzzMetrics would later rank as the second most popular blog post of 2006 (Nielson BuzzMetrics). According to early reports of the online interest in Colbert's speech, forty-one video clips were posted on YouTube and viewed 2.7 million times in less than forty-eight hours (Noam Cohen, "A Comedian's Riff"). Moreover, on that Monday's episode of *The Daily Show*, viewers cheered when Jon Stewart expressed congratulations to Colbert for delivering an address "that I can only describe as balls-a-licious" ("Intro – Correspondents' Dinner"). On *The Colbert Report*, Colbert mocked himself for telling jokes that were met with "a very respectful silence." He showed a short clip from his speech, in which he responded to suggestions that the White House staff reorganizations equate to "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," deadpanning, "No, this administration is not sinking – this administration is soaring! If anything, they're rearranging the deck chairs on the Hindenburg!" When the camera panned over the stunned audience, Colbert's producers superimposed the sound of crickets chirping. "The crowd practically carried me out on their shoulders," Colbert bragged facetiously, "although I wasn't actually ready to leave" ("White House Correspondents' Dinner").

With public attention exploding in alternative outlets, the mainstream media eventually had to acknowledge Colbert. But among those who did address his speech, including many conservative pundits and mainstream news columnists, they framed the discussion not so much on the implications of the public's response as on the question of "was he funny or not?" Gossip columnists Amy Argetsinger and Roxanne Roberts, who earlier chronicled their own excitement about the WHCA dinner, proclaimed: "The reviews from the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner are in, and the consensus is that President Bush and Bush impersonator Steve Bridges stole Saturday's show – and Comedy Central host Stephen Colbert's cutting satire fell

flat because he ignored the cardinal rule of Washington humor: Make fun of yourself, not the other guy" (Froomkin ¶7). Several known conservative pundits panned Colbert's speech as bad partisan humor: Fox News's Steve Doocy called it "over the line" (Nico ¶2); Republican strategist Mary Matalin dismissed it as "predictable, Bush-bashing kind of humor" (Steinberg ¶15); and the *Washington Post's* Richard Cohen judged Colbert as "not just a failure as a comedian but rude," arguing that Colbert violated proper standards of decorum and disrespected the president (Richard Cohen ¶2). Howard Kurtz mocked the idea of a "media cover-up" circulating among "the liberal bloggers," reminding his readers (again) that he played two clips of Colbert on his CNN show (Kurtz, "Punchline Politics"). The *National Review's* Stephen Spruiell, also responding to "all those lefty bloggers," offered condescendingly that Colbert's speech was so poorly crafted and delivered, the media was protecting him – not the president – by not covering it. "It doesn't ring true with most people, thus it did not succeed as comedy. Why would reporters – who *like* Stephen Colbert – give a lot of coverage to such a failed performance?" (Spruiell ¶5). Even some left-leaning pundits like *Time's* Ana Marie Cox sided with the mainstream media's case, referring to "the blogospheric debate" as "whining, really" (Cox ¶2).

These opinions are certainly acceptable and plausible from conventional, left-versus-right, my-opinion-versus-your-opinion perspectives. However, by focusing on the binary debate over "funny" versus "unfunny," pundits on either side limited themselves within a tragic frame, which appears incongruent with Colbert's comically framed critique. Rather than realize Colbert's criticism as a catalyst to transcend the problematic "truthiness" of their punditry, many commentators simply positioned Colbert as a conventional comedian and thus focused on his

(in)ability to get laughs. Thus, it appears to many viewers that the mainstream media – even some of those who proclaimed it funny – did not get the joke.

The bizarre incongruity of the mainstream media's reaction to Colbert was noticed by many in alternative spheres. Joan Walsh, editor-in-chief of *Salon*, wrote about the fallout days later: "Personally, I'm enjoying watching apologists for the status quo wear themselves out explaining why Colbert wasn't funny. It's extending the reach of his performance by days without either side breaking character — the mighty Colbert or the clueless, self-important media elite he was satirizing. For those who think the media shamed itself by rolling over for this administration, especially in the run-up to the Iraq war, Colbert's skit is the gift that keeps on giving" (Walsh ¶9). Indeed, several weeks after the event, an audio recording of Colbert's speech became the number-one album purchased from iTunes Music Store (Noam Cohen, "That After-Dinner Speech"). In addition, a web site called *ThankYouStephenColbert.org* allowed visitors to post their comments (presumably notes of praise) about Colbert's WHCA speech. The site shows more than 56,000 "thank you" messages to date (although a closer examination of the comments indicates that some messages are duplicated, some are spam, and some are, in fact, criticisms of Colbert). Many of the comments suggested that not only did many viewers "get" Colbert's intentions, but also they wanted to continue the conversation, whether on sites like this, with friends and family members, or through other forms of communicative interaction. For example, "Katie B." wrote, "Thank You, Stephen Colbert for a marvelous speech. I saw it live and then send [sic] links of streaming media clips to all my friends and family the next day. You Sir have Titanium Balls" (*ThankYouStephenColbert.org*, comment 1632). And "Len W." wrote, "Thank you for pointing the way to our cowardly media. The more people who insist on pointing out the

uncomfortable truth (as you have) the easier it will be and the louder the collective dissenting voice" (comment 5).

What does this series of dueling performances and reactions – both tragic and comic – reveal about media communication and culture today? I will analyze the WHCA event through several theoretical lenses in the next several sections of this chapter. I begin with Burke's frames of acceptance, positioning the Bush-Bridges skit as humor shaped by rhetorical conventions and a tragic frame, in contrast to Colbert's unconventional comic critique. Then, I identify several ways in which Colbert's speech offers perspective by incongruity. This includes Colbert's performative transgression of conventional speech customs, which reflects and models an act of *parrhesia*. This also includes his complication of the conventional media-versus-administration hierarchy and its temporary inversion at the WHCA dinner, which I position as carnivalesque-lite using the theories of Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White.

### ***From Tragic Humor to Comic Critique***

I contend that the Bush-Bridges skit is an example of tragic humor in contrast to Colbert's comic criticism. Tragic humor is similar to regular tragic speech in that both employ familiar rhetorical cues to enforce their points. For example, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Bill O'Reilly employs words and phrases like "*The New York Times*" to cue his audience to the presence of a villainous liberal agenda. Through repetition, both on his show and in other parts of the public sphere, phrases like "cut and run" and "Nancy Pelosi" come to represent metonymically, to conservative partisans, all that is wrong with liberal politics. Conversely, "Fox News" and "Karl Rove" become rhetorical cues to liberal partisans for conservative political ills. The Bush-Bridges skit is full of rhetorical cues as punch lines, from the partisan vision of "Hillary Clinton rolling her eyes" to recent reports of Cheney's duck-hunting trip, all of which

elicit hearty laughter and applause from the audience in the room. Thus, in tragic speech, these phrases not only reinforce the argument, they eventually *become* the argument. By simply uttering these words, a certain meaning is identified and understood. In tragic humor, these phrases are the punch lines. The set-up hardly matters.

Tragic humor, therefore, relies on rhetorical *recognition*. As with tragic speech, the simple utterance of a popular metonym or buzzword is enough to elicit a "natural" identification and desired response, be it agreement with the speaker or laughter at the comedian.<sup>2</sup> One agrees or laughs out of *familiarity*. Conversely, comic humor (perhaps *comic criticism* is a clearer description) does something else. Its laughter is born of the *realization* that what was said is closer to the truth than what is typically stated in discourse. One agrees or laughs out of *discovery*. When Colbert, through his satire, told the media elites in the room that they were asleep at the wheel, the punch line was neither recognized nor familiar to that audience. Initially, they neither anticipated nor welcomed his vicious joke; perhaps later they would succumb to the forced self-reflection (although, in this case, many of them did not). However, Colbert's audience was not only the media and political elite in the Hilton ballroom. Those who "got" the joke were members of the larger, unseen, possibly forgotten audience watching on C-SPAN and later on Google Video and YouTube, who also did not expect to hear such words but cheered that *someone finally said it right*. Thus, as Burke argues, "'perspectives by incongruity' do not belong to a cult of virtuosity, but bring us nearest to the simple truth" (309).

Through Burke's theory, Colbert's comic criticism is a tool for identifying and exposing the processes by which a speaker's rhetorical shortcuts – whether in sober speech or jokes – bypass critical reflection for the easy gain of audience approval. Whereas Colbert's speech used comedy to break out of a limited frame of discourse, Bush's comic routine fit neatly within that



frame and a taken-for-granted identification of "appropriateness." Burke describes this identification not as "irrational" but "non-rational": "and so it is with many human processes, even mental ones, like the 'identification' that the non-heroic reader makes with the hero of the book he is reading" (171). To many viewers, readers, and other media consumers, identifying with the recognizable and familiar seems natural and commonsensical. To the speaker seeking to persuade, this is a desired effect. And yet, for Burke, this is not to say that all persuasion is bad. The comic critic, too, seeks to persuade.

To call such processes "irrational" is to desire their complete elimination. But we question whether social integration can be accomplished without them. If we consider them simply as "non-rational," we are not induced to seek elaborate techniques for their excision – instead we merely, as rational men, "watch" them, to guard ourselves against cases where they work badly. Where they work well, we can salute them, even coach them (Burke 171).

The difference between tragic and comic persuasion, here, lies in the question of what is perceived as recognizable and familiar. Whereas Bush and Bridges wanted the audience to recognize Bush's mispronunciation of "nuclear" and Cheney's shooting incident, Colbert wanted the audience – especially the media establishment – to realize Bush and Cheney's mismanagement of the Iraq war (to name just one controversy), and in turn make *this* recognizable and familiar to both the administration and the public.

In his speech, as he does on his show, Colbert made unrecognized rhetorical conventions visible using the comic methodology of perspective by incongruity. This is evident at first on the surface of his speech performance: he was a comedian who was hired to entertain but instead delivered a serious critique of his audience. In years past, after-dinner entertainers at the WHCA

dinner have drawn little or no attention; this time, however, Colbert's out-of-place critique shocked the media world and turned the heads of media watchdogs. The immediate irony was apparent: comedians like Colbert and Stewart were providing serious news, while the news industry had become a joke. This alone was an important realization and impetus for media criticism and public discussion. But I believe Colbert's critique went further. Colbert not only made problematic conventions visible – to stop here could be construed as cynical or "demoralizing," as Burke describes tragic critique. Colbert also offered a way forward by performing what he presumably believed the media can, and ought, to do – that is, speaking freely, boldly, and for the public interest. This emphasis on "transcendence" is critical in a Burkean critique; Burke describes perspective by incongruity as "not negative smuggling, but positive cards-face-up-on-the-table. It is designed to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" (309). Colbert offered transcendence in at least two ways. First, his bold speech was simultaneously a critique of the media and a reflection of journalistic ideals, through which he invited the media to follow his example and showed them how the benefits may actually outweigh the risks. Second, he problematized conventional hierarchies (especially the media versus the administration) and invited the public to subvert both on a more permanent basis.

### ***A Persona of Parrhesia***

Colbert's comic critique shocked the Washington media establishment into stunned silence and indignant disapproval. By ignoring, dismissing, or condemning Colbert, the press corps judged his incongruent act as inappropriate at least and threatening at most. At the same time, Colbert surprised millions of viewers with what they considered a bold, truthful, and transcendent re-framing of real problems perpetuated by both the administration and mainstream

media. Viewed through this frame of comic realization, Colbert's ironic incongruity offered a welcome perspective – and potentially a way forward – even as his targets sought to discredit him. In doing so, I contend that Colbert (or at least his character) performed the role of the *parrhesiastes*, which Foucault describes as one who speaks truth to power freely, courageously, at his own risk, and out of a sense of duty to his society and democratic ideals. "In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (Foucault 20). The *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth, which is an interesting contrast to Colbert's notion of "truthiness," or that which one wants or feels to be true, but is not really true. The contrast between the rhetoric of the White House and the press corps and the "frankness" of Colbert's speech, however thinly veiled by comedy, are made apparent. While the White House spun its justification for going to war and its credentialed reporters "just put 'em through a spell check" (Colbert, et al. 224), Colbert acknowledged the stark realities resulting from these problematic actions and inactions. This truth-telling, according to Foucault, serves "the function of criticism" (Foucault 17). The *parrhesiastes* tells those in power, "This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave" (ibid.). Whereas the evening's sanctioned entertainment – the Bush-Bridges skit – flattered the audience and stayed silent on the problems affecting millions of people beyond the ballroom, Colbert spoke on behalf of those millions to remind the administration and media of their moral obligations to the public interest, not self-interest – or worse, a blindness to their own ideologies of "appropriate" entertainment and "appropriate" journalism.

In criticizing the administration and media establishment for passing "truthiness" as truth, did Colbert really take a risk? After all, his role as an entertainer and his performance in

character afforded him a certain "professional immunity" (Burke 230). One could argue that Colbert did not risk anything by delivering his speech. He did not risk access to the White House, as he never had it. He probably did not risk the cancellation of his show, as his own fans would reward him with a ratings increase. The Bush administration would not punish him, as it would not want to generate negative perceptions as "poor sports" or unfair censors. Conversely, one could argue that Colbert risked his reputation among those outside of his fan circle. But let us take this a step further. Perhaps the risk was not that of Colbert the comedian; consider instead the risk to Colbert-in-character – that is, *to the pundits he parodies*. In essence, Colbert the comedian channeled Colbert-in-character to portray a great "what-if": *what if the mainstream media – which prides itself on having "access" to power – actually spoke truth to power instead of ingratiating the administration?*

For the *parrhesiastes*, "telling the truth is regarded as a duty. The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept the truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is free to keep silent. No one forces him to speak; but he feels that it is his duty to do so" (Foucault 19). Colbert's speech, performed through his pundit persona, implied that members of the media establishment were capable of speaking truth to power (that is, to the Bush administration) but chose not to speak in order to protect their own interests, at the expense of the public interest. As he joked earlier in the speech, this notion of media *parrhesia* was, "you know – fiction!" (Colbert, et al. 224). But while his character was fictitious, his speech is better characterized as hypothetical. Colbert demonstrated to the media establishment what would happen if they spoke truth to power. The result? He was not physically hurt, financially penalized, or banned from broadcasting. Therefore, it was possible that the perceived risk was not so great and may be worth the rewards – for example, public praise and impetus for reforms.

*This is America*, Colbert's character reminded his "peers": he can speak freely under the protection of the Constitution, "and so can you!" (Colbert et al.).

***Subverting the Pseudo-subversive***

Before April 29, 2006, the WHCA annual dinner was a party few outside the beltway paid attention to or even knew about. Colbert's speech that night, however, brought national public attention to this tradition, which he characterized as a microcosm of many major problems with political communication and media today. What some knew, and many may have learned, is that the WHCA dinner is a once-a-year, officially sanctioned opportunity for media and administration officials to let down their guards against each other and celebrate their working relationships – "rubbing shoulders but never, ever to the point of chafing" (Garfield ¶3). All other days require seriousness, but on this festive night political realities are suspended and authority is supposedly inverted. Correspondents and politicians may celebrate their fame as media personalities alongside Hollywood stars, as though the dinner were the equivalent of Oscar night. Even controversial "outsiders" like Plame, Nagin, and Jackson are welcomed into the inner circle, and they seem happy to be there. According to custom, the media may enjoy a "roast" of the president, who grants them this treat with self-deprecating grace. The president's humor, however, is pre-vetted: in 2006, Bush personally selected Bridges to perform with him, and one of Bush's speechwriters helped write the material (Bumiller), recycling pre-9/11 punch lines that lightly mock Bush's inconsequential quirks, but little more. On this night, the president may also make light fun of the media's inquisitions. The professional comedians may deliver an edgier performance, although they typically do not go over the edge of conventional appropriateness.

From an ideological-critical perspective, it is important to understand that this annual tradition is not unique to the WHCA. Sanctioned laughter at authority has a long tradition in Western ideological history. Bakhtin illuminates this issue as he traces the decline of folkish carnivalesque culture from the Middle Ages, when it was generally a people's movement, to the seventeenth century and later times when officials set about to control all aspects of folk life. In the old carnivalesque tradition, the people celebrated both degeneration and rebirth as part of a positive and universal cycle. Bakhtin posits that sixteenth-century novelist Francois Rabelais was a master of carnivalesque satire and "clowning wisely" (60): protectively skewering the fallacies of the ruling elite not for the sake of mockery alone, but rather to bring attention to human error and surreptitiously create a platform for public action. Rabelais' humor, argues Bakhtin, was whole and universal, celebrating both death and rebirth, criticizing power and yet demonstrating hope for political reconciliation. Over the centuries, however, as ruling officials and scholars struggled to distinguish the realms of knowledge and rhetoric, laughter and the carnivalesque were reclassified in opposition to more "serious" matters. "High" culture remained welcome in public, while "low" culture was deemed base and banished to the private realm, such as women "cackling" and gossiping together in the home (105). Eventually, much of European culture viewed "low" laughter as a means for light diversion at best, and at worst a negative behavior inappropriate for serious matters. And yet, those in power were aware of the public's need for some form of release or outlet from their ideologically motivated seriousness. Thus, they sanctioned annual or seasonal events for the public to enjoy carnivalesque-lite, pseudo-rebellion against cultural hierarchies and norms. This tradition continues to this day – consider Halloween and Mardi Gras, for example.

In their review of carnivalesque traditions, Stallybrass and White are similarly concerned with the modern role of carnivalesque as official reinforcement. They express interest in the "processes through which the low troubles the high" (3). Whereas the high seeks to debase the low, the low attempts to provide a "counter-view through an inverted hierarchy" (4). However, Stallybrass and White are cautious toward Bakhtin's advocacy for the carnival of Rabelaisian times, which they consider "nostalgic and over-optimistic" (18). Still, they contend that carnival may be powerful as an "analytic" or critical tactic supporting "the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression" (18). In the case of the WHCA dinner, therefore, the critical key is to identify who was really "low" or "high," and which inversions provided a "counter-view" or simply a sanctioned joke.

I contend that the WHCA dinner event was an instance of carnivalesque-lite functioning within a limited discursive space. That is, it appeared subversive within the world of the media establishment, whose world is structured around, and against, the political establishment. The media group was positioned as the "low" versus the political group as the "high." The "high" (especially Bush, through his lightly self-deprecating performance) willingly submitted to the "low" in order to relieve tensions, build rapport, and maintain cooperative relations going forward. If anyone in the media was troubled by the administration's message-control practices, then on that night these feelings could be assuaged by a sense of camaraderie, as in, *we are all in this together, right?* From this perspective, when Bush said, "It's important to be able to laugh at your job" (C-SPAN, "President Bush Impersonation"), an underlying message might have been, *yes, we are all in this together, so relax, take a moment to laugh at your job...and trust us.*

Colbert's speech not only recognized this limited discursive space, it also transgressed it. His performance operated outside of that space entirely, insisting on a broader view of the dinner

event and its implications for journalism. If his own performance was carnivalesque, he did not place the media as "low" and the administration as "high"; rather, Colbert represented a third group: an interested public that felt disenfranchised just as much by the media establishment as by the Bush administration. He also recognized a group within that group: the new, alternative media sphere known as the "blogosphere," which some in the mainstream media viewed skeptically or competitively. On behalf of these citizens, Colbert suggested that the mainstream media embarked on a joint "high" partnership with the administration at the expense of the people, who were ironically and problematically cast as "low," even as the administration proclaimed the virtues of democracy for and by the people. Whereas the conventional media/administration inversion was returned to order by the next day, Colbert's inversion was just beginning – as video footage of the speech took off online and spawned an open-ended public dialogue that the mainstream media was largely unable to control. However, as Colbert suggested, this uncontrollable inversion was not necessarily tragic.

In fact, this inversion of conventions offers a comic illumination of an even broader reshaping of the media landscape, characterized by the increasing number and complexity of personas and performances in contemporary media culture. Consider the WHCA performances as part of just one snapshot of the multilayered media universe. First among these, of course, we have the ambivalent tension between the personas of Stephen Colbert – the "real" satirist – and "Stephen Colbert" the "fake" pundit. On *The Colbert Report*, the line distinguishing the two Colberts is somewhat blurred on purpose to call attention to the performative nature of television punditry, including that of Colbert. At the WHCA dinner, this line is blurred further when Colbert's comedic character serves as only the thinnest veil for a serious, scathing critique. Within this speech are even more performative layers, including Colbert as Bush sycophant,



Colbert as media opponent, Colbert as imaginary press secretary, Colbert as press secretary turned endangered protagonist in a suspense movie, and, simultaneously, Colbert as *parrhesiastes*. Next, representing the administration, we have President Bush, who plays "himself," but is not really himself, and Steve Bridges, who plays Bush's id, but is not really Bush's id. We also have mock imitations of presidential press secretaries Scott McClellan and Tony Snow, who must perform the administration's narrative each day in the press room. Colbert sees their role as so theatrical that he "auditions" for the role as if it were for a movie or play. (To that end, the presence of so many Hollywood actors attending the WHCA dinner suggests that Colbert's view is not so far-fetched.) Then, representing the mainstream media, we have the columnists and pundits, who perform in print and on camera as the venerable fourth estate, conducting critical investigations for the greater good. During this event, however, they perform as cozy friends of the administration. Which role is real? This line is also blurred, as evidenced when they respond to Colbert's criticism by both asserting their role as media critics (although criticizing the wrong issue – that of Colbert's funniness) and defending conventional customs that reinforce their place below the administration. In addition, we have the diverse mix of independent citizens and alternative-media bloggers entering a stage they were once only able to watch. Their performances are numerous and layered as well. Finally, all of these personas and performances are mediated in a potentially infinite number of ways, from the Hilton dais and C-SPAN to *The Colbert Report* and YouTube, followed by layers of commentary upon commentary upon commentary. If just one mediated event produces and encompasses all of these performances, then the number and complexity of personas and performances mingling, competing, and blending in our broader media culture is exponential and potentially infinite. Colbert's comic frame, at least, compels us to recognize and consider the possibilities. With this

perspective, we are perhaps better equipped to observe performances (including our own) with maximum consciousness of their rhetorical implications.

On a somewhat disappointing, yet interesting note, in 2007 the WHCA clearly opted for safety and familiarity by selecting as its after-dinner speaker semi-retired comedian Rich Little, who displeased many with recycled jokes from the days of Richard Nixon and Johnny Carson (Zoglin). When questioned about this choice, new WHCA president Steve Scully dismissed the idea that the dinner event promotes "coziness" between the media and administration. "An evening of civility does not mean we are selling out. If people want to criticize the dinner, then don't come," said Scully (Strupp, "WHCA Prez Defends Dinner" ¶8-9). Ann Compton, preparing to succeed Scully as the next year's WHCA president, also described the complaints as "way overdone," adding, "As if any of us at the [press] gaggle this morning didn't hit [deputy presidential press secretary] Dana [Perino] with everything we've got" (Strupp, "Incoming WHCA Prez" ¶10). After viewing the relationship between the press corps and the White House through Colbert's comic lens and witnessing the self-protective reaction by much of the press, one is left to wonder exactly what constitutes "everything we've got." If Colbert's critique was accurate but the press corps dismissed it, then has anything changed? Perhaps it is now up to viewers to decide as critical media consumers.

***Conclusion: A Study in/of Performance***

Colbert's satiric speech at the WHCA dinner was a form of critical comedy that troubled the mainstream media and political establishment, made publicly visible their problematic relationship and self-imposed discursive limits, and offered a performative model for transcending those limits through boldly truthful speech and critical reflection. Colbert called attention to conventional rhetoric on several levels: from recognizable and familiar forms of

"appropriate" humor (as seen in the Bush-Bridges skit), to the sanctioned inversion of authority used to protect the status quo (embodied by the WHCA annual dinner tradition), to the inability or unwillingness of media figures to frame their own analyses from a critical distance (as evidenced by their condemnation or censoring of Colbert's message). His performance provided perspective by incongruity on the increasingly blurry distinctions between the administration and the fourth estate, while the media's humorless, defensive reaction only further reinforced his argument. By speaking boldly and representing a broader view of political media evidently shared by many media consumers, Colbert created a new space for public dialogue, fostering what Burke describes as "folk criticism" characterized by "a collective philosophy of motivation" among the people (173). His speech may not have moved the audience in the Hilton ballroom, but, with the help of new media forms not yet under official control, it invited an interested public to consider a number of relevant questions, such as: *What should good journalism look like today? Who should decide what news is relevant, and what is veiled rhetoric? What constitutes truth versus truthiness? How should we participate in producing and critiquing collective knowledge?*

Colbert's boldly comic speech arguably became the "political-cultural touchstone issue of 2006" (Poniewozik ¶1) in spite of – or perhaps partly because of – the media establishment's attempt to contain it in a sphere it could no longer fully control. To Colbert's supporters, the WHCA dinner "vaulted him from a cult-TV comedian to a lantern-wielding folk hero in the dark" (Sternbergh 2). In this sense, his character moved from being primarily a parody of Bill O'Reilly and conservative television punditry to a more biting satire of a self-centered, self-absorbed media industry that has, not admittedly, submitted itself to the administration and distanced itself from the public.

Colbert continues along this trajectory in his character's next venture into official political affairs. As we have seen, his critique begins by revealing where rightwing punditry is an ideological performance, characterized by O'Reilly's projection of his personal experience and worldview onto the structuring of his stage, his casting of "good" and "evil" characters, and his framing of opinion as absolute truth. Colbert then extends his critical view to the ideological performances of the mass media industry, characterized by the industry's collective denial of its alignment with authoritarian power. Next, Colbert challenges the ideological performances of presidential campaigns and campaign coverage. He once again complicates conventional notions of "real" versus "fake" in media and politics by performing as both a pundit and candidate during the presidential primary season in 2007. Blending yet another persona into his performance, Colbert reveals even more performative layers functioning within political media. Ultimately, however, the questions of whether and how Colbert's comic performance transcends political discourse become much more complicated to answer. As I will show, he points to this site of transcendence but does not model the transcendent act, leaving that work, arguably, to viewers as voters.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Colbert's speech text is reprinted in *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, pp. 218-227.

<sup>2</sup> My husband, an amateur stand-up comedian, relates this to comedians who use curse words in jokes. Those who swear often get laughs, but the joke is considered "cheap" if the impact of the curse word is simply the shock of its utterance. More "artful" swearing lends support to, rather than constitutes, a more complex joke and punch line. In my husband's beginners' comedy class, therefore, the instructor would not allow students to use curse words in their routines, arguing that their joke-telling skills were not yet sophisticated enough to swear "artfully."

## CHAPTER 4.

### "COLBERT '08 (AND SO CAN YOU!)" PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY AND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN CONVENTIONS

In the fall of 2007, with an unusually early and lively buzz well underway for the 2008 presidential primaries, Stephen Colbert tossed his hat – or his character's hat – into a ring already crowded with at least twenty other presidential hopefuls. Using his television show both to promote himself as a candidate and to comment on his place among the many contenders, Colbert chronicled his ultimately unsuccessful efforts to get on the Republican and Democratic ballots in his home state of South Carolina. Along the way, he satirized the frequently analyzed notions of "authenticity" and "viability" of candidates, as well as the shallowness of poll-driven, soundbite-heavy campaigning and punditry. In this performance, the question of who is "Stephen Colbert" becomes even more complex. He embodied a number of personas and roles (actor, entertainer, character, pundit, and now, politician) that, at face value, seem contradictory or necessarily different, and yet he blends and shifts them with seemingly natural ease in his performances. After all, in American political culture we are somewhat used to seeing entertainers run for office (e.g., Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger), politicians host their own talk shows (e.g. Joe Scarborough and Mike Huckabee), and pundits offer political analysis as entertainment (e.g., Bill O'Reilly and Bill Maher). Through his multilayered parody, however, Colbert dissected these layered performances to create a critical awareness of, and discomfort with, such performances. And yet, as Colbert's character became subsumed by so many parodic, performative layers, the questions of whether and where his critique transcended these limited discursive frames are more difficult to answer.

What can we learn from this case about performances and personalities in political and media culture today? Here, I look at the ways in which Colbert parodied campaigning and speculative punditry to reveal the theatrics of both. Through Kenneth Burke's rhetorical-critical lens, I show how Colbert exposed many rhetorical and performative conventions of campaigns and campaign coverage using perspective by incongruity. I contend that Colbert's comic critique positioned these discourses within candidate- and pundit-centered tragic frames, revealing a deepening disconnect between these figures and the publics they portend to serve. To support my contention, I complement Burke's theory with Michael Kaplan's critique of self-referential speculation within the media, which draws on Jean Baudrillard's concepts of the real, simulation, and simulacra.<sup>1</sup> This is relevant to conventional pundit conjectures on "how Americans will vote," which, Colbert showed, focus less on providing useful, in-depth context than on self-promotion and filling airtime during the long campaign season. He showed that candidates, too, play the speculation game by shaping their own personas to appeal to images of voters constructed by loosely interpreted polls, demographics, and personal biases. Thus, Colbert pointed to a hidden cynicism among both candidates and pundits toward the political process and voters themselves. However, as Burke contends, the revelation of this perspective is not "demoralizing," but "designed to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" (Burke 309). It allows us to "transcend" the limited, inaccurate, and cynical discourses in favor of a broader, more critical view towards democratic progress.

My analysis begins with an overview of Colbert's participation in, and general parody of, the presidential primaries. I then discuss in detail Colbert's exposure of at least three myths perpetuated in the political discourses of this period. First, he questioned the honesty of the candidates' rhetoric of "change," suggesting that their actions often contradict their words.

Second, Colbert connected the candidates' assertions of being "real" – that is, just like voters – to mere pandering for votes. Third, he complicated the pundits' speculative logic of candidate "electability" and "viability" based almost solely on media recognition and poll status, showing that if even his "fake" character could meet these criteria, then something was fundamentally wrong with this discourse. Colbert's comic treatment of each of these issues amounted to what Burke describes as "'taking over' a mystificatory methodology for clarificatory ends" (Burke 172). Among the problems he sought to clarify were, first, the rhetorical myths of the independent, authentic candidate and, second, the self-interested, self-referential, speculative play of the punditocracy. However, in his performances as a pundit, candidate, and entertainer himself, Colbert was able to critique *but never fully escape* participation in the problematic and even cynical performances of mediated personas. That is, while his parody pointed to a number of problems perpetuated by politicians and pundits, this time Colbert's performance did not model a way forward. I close with a look at possible sites for transcending the increasingly insular sphere of political discourses, proposing that voters completed the final performative act, with Colbert and his parodied kind a worthy sacrifice.

### ***Indecision 2008: Colbert for President***

The political atmosphere in 2007 created numerous openings for Colbert's comedic critique. Eleven Republicans and nine Democrats, plus a number of minor-party contenders, all vied to succeed George W. Bush. Republican candidates included Sam Brownback, James Gilmore, Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, Duncan Hunter, John McCain, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo, Fred Thompson, and Tommy Thompson ["Republican Party (United States) Presidential Candidates, 2008"]. Democrats included Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, Mike Gravel, Dennis Kucinich, Barack Obama, Bill Richardson, and Tom



Vilsack ["Democratic Party (United States) Presidential Candidates, 2008"]. Pundits on political talk shows dissected and speculated on every possible factor contributing to, or detracting from, the candidates' "electability" (Zengerle), in somewhat vain efforts to successfully predict the winner of an election still more than a year away. Jon Stewart and the cast of *The Daily Show* covered these discourses in "Indecision 2008," following a theme first launched in 2000 during the contested election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, suggesting that, once again, no clear "frontrunner" had emerged.

Colbert parodied a number of traditional political campaign performances. His parody, however, was not entirely fictional – he actually participated in the campaign process. He began where candidates customarily do, making numerous hints of his intent to run for office for more than a year before his formal announcement. As Richard L. Berke explains this convention, "First, [the candidates] coyly suggest that they might run. Then they announce 'exploratory committees.' Then they hint even more strongly that they will run. Then, when everyone knows what they have decided, they finally make it official" (Berke ¶2). The goal of these "elaborately choreographed non-announcements" is "maximum fanfare and publicity," notes Berke (¶1). Colbert followed this formula to the letter, playing up the pseudo-ambiguity of such performances by candidates who already intend to run. His first hint occurred at the end of his July 19, 2006 show: before going off the air, he exclaimed, "I will not for any foreseeable reasons be running for president in 2008." He then winked and repeated emphatically, "foreseeable" ("The Convenientest Truth"). On February 8, 2007, he told viewers, "I have formed an exploratory committee on whether to form an exploratory committee" ("Stephen for President – A Sign"), alluding to the formal steps politicians take to "test the waters" and generate and gauge interest before officially entering the race (Elving). On September 13, 2007,

he told viewers he would only run for president if he received a "sign" that he should do so. At that moment, actor Viggo Mortenson appeared on stage, dressed and performing as his character from the movie *Lord of the Rings*. He offered to guide and protect Colbert, and bestowed him his sword. Colbert pretended to have missed this "sign," thus further prolonging his fans' anticipation of a formal announcement ("Stephen for President - Answering the Call").

During this period, Colbert also published a book, *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, a parody of other politicians' memoirs and manifestos introducing their political philosophies to the public (for example, Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*, John McCain's *Faith of My Fathers*, John Edwards' *Ending Poverty in America*, and Joe Biden's *Promises to Keep*). Not only did Colbert frequently, deliberately, and shamelessly promote his book on *The Colbert Report*, but he also used it to secure mock appearances on *Larry King Live* and *Meet the Press*. Larry King noted that Colbert was not unlike many other candidates who publish books as a foray into politics ("Interview with Stephen Colbert"), and *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert referred to Colbert's tome as "the mandatory presidential campaign book" ("*Meet the Press*"). In these interviews, plus a guest column in *The New York Times*, Colbert spoke with the exaggerated confidence of someone who believes he is destined to lead and promises, however vaguely, a break from the status quo. "I know why you want me to run, and I hear your clamor," he proclaimed in the *Times* (Dowd and Colbert ¶17).

On October 16, 2007, Colbert "formally" declared his candidacy on a popular late-night talk show – his own ("Indecision 2008: Don't F%#k This Up America"). He appeared on *The Daily Show*, which runs immediately prior to *The Colbert Report*, to let viewers know that he would soon make a major announcement "on a more prestigious show" ("Colbert's Big Announcement"). This statement was not only comically self-promoting, but it also jokingly

one-upped a rival, Democratic candidate John Edwards, who announced his candidacy for the 2004 presidential election on *The Daily Show* ("Intro - John Edwards").<sup>2</sup> Colbert and Edwards were not alone in using the late-night television circuit as a platform for such announcements. For example, Arnold Schwarzenegger appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* in 2006 to announce his run for governor, and Republican Senator Fred Thompson sat down with Leno in 2007 to confirm his bid for the White House (Saulny).

Colbert's entry to the fray reminded some of comedian Pat Paulsen's candidacy during the 1968 election (Starr) and the circus-like California recall of 2003, when 135 candidates appeared on the ballot for governor – including former child star Gary Coleman, an adult film star, and a sumo wrestler – most seeking publicity for various reasons ("October 7, 2003 Statewide Special Election"). Colbert announced he would attempt to run on both the Republican and Democratic tickets – but only in his home state of South Carolina, "running as a favorite son" ("Indecision 2008"). On October 21, 2007, Colbert told Russert on *Meet the Press*, "I don't want to be president; I want to run for president. There's a difference" ("*Meet the Press*"), suggesting that the presidential primary was perhaps, for many, a mere publicity opportunity. Meanwhile, some wondered whether to take Colbert seriously (Green; Cillizza) – after all, former *Saturday Night Live* comedian Al Franken was running a serious campaign to represent Minnesota in the U.S. Senate.

Colbert's campaign finally was thwarted after he attempted to file the necessary paperwork for the ballots in South Carolina. On his program on October 17, 2007, he revealed to viewers the stringent, pay-to-play requirements, including a \$2,500 fee for the Democratic ballot and a \$35,000 fee for the Republican ballot ("Hail to the Cheese – Filing Papers"). Colbert attempted to secure a corporate sponsor, Doritos brand tortilla chips, to cover his costs.

However, his campaign soon encountered the legal problems of corporate influence. As he explained in faux-shock to his audience on October 30, 2007, Colbert could not spend more than \$5,000 on his campaign without facing restrictions under federal election law ("Massie Ritsch"). Colbert subsequently dropped his bid for the Republican ticket and prepared to pay the \$2,500 fee for the Democratic ballot, but on November 1, 2007, South Carolina Democratic Party officials refused his placement, arguing that Colbert was not a "viable" candidate ("Hail to the Cheese – Democratic Executive Council"). Colbert ended his campaign after that.<sup>3</sup>

While Colbert's campaign was short-lived, his satirical performances from that time are rich with opportunities for critical interpretation. For example, his interrogation of words like "viable," "real," and "authentic," as employed by the candidates, is interesting because it reveals the problematic definitions and assumptions surrounding these words in conventional campaign discourse. In addition, his performances as both candidate and pundit reveal interesting myths and problems of a campaign process driven by daily tracking polls and speculation constituting a media "horserace." These critiques are illustrated in a number of performative moments during Colbert's foray into the campaign season.

### *Questions of "Change"*

As an entertainer playing a pundit-candidate, Colbert was positioned to proclaim his stance on issues while commenting on others' positions and actions. In two interesting instances, his performances complicated campaign rhetoric – and its perpetuation in the media – by baring the truth, as he saw it, behind "truthy" claims and myths. His performances alluded to a popular, yet contentious theme of the election season. With President Bush's approval ratings stuck at dismally low levels and polls showing a majority of Americans unhappy with the country's direction, candidates from all parties sought to position themselves as agents of "change." Barack

Obama spoke about "change we can believe in." John Edwards promised "the change we need." Mitt Romney said he would "bring change to Washington." Hillary Clinton, emphasizing her experience, said, "I'm running on 35 years of change" ("Change' Theme Is No Big Change At All"). Throughout the primary season in 2007, the candidates performed at length to define "change" through their own records and policy platforms. However, as political scholar James E. Campbell observes, the "change" theme is by no means unique in political campaign history. "There are two basic campaign themes in presidential electoral politics that address the referendum question: change and continuity," argues Campbell (122). Throughout modern campaign history, candidates have run on a platform of "change" when times are bad and on "continuity" when times are good. "Both themes are simple appeals, easily communicated by candidates, and readily grasped by voters" (ibid.). Even President Bush acknowledged, "That's just American politics. If I were running for office at this point I'd be saying, 'Vote for me, I'm gonna be an agent of change'" ("Change' Theme Is No Big Change At All").

Colbert challenged one manifestation of the "change" debate in an episode of "The Word" on October 31, 2007. He addressed the phrase "Job Description," commenting on recent televised debates in which candidates debated the role of the president, particularly executive authority in wartime. Colbert's take on the seemingly simple concept of a job description cut to a more important question he believed the media ought to be asking outright: *will the next president abuse the powers outlined in his or her job description, as many believe George W. Bush has?*

COLBERT: There are, I believe, 63 other candidates running for president, and we've heard a lot about their positions...But there's one thing we haven't learned: exactly what job are they all applying for?

THE WORD: Hillary's V.P.

COLBERT: Because let's face it, just saying "I want to be president" is a pretty cagey answer these days.

THE WORD: Fred Thompson Still Hasn't Said It

COLBERT: By that, do they mean the chief executive as defined by the Constitution, or are we talking about George Bush's job?

THE WORD: International Burnt Effigy Model

Colbert ran two clips from the recent debates – one in which Democratic candidate John Edwards denounced Bush's interpretations of torture, and another in which Republican candidate Mitt Romney decreed, "I hear from time to time people say, wait a second, we have civil liberties we have to worry about! But don't forget, the most important civil liberty I expect from my government is my right to be kept alive." Colbert praised Romney's statement and continued to assert that "Bush's job" rightly did not concern itself with the notion of "checks and balances" among the branches of government. He argued:

COLBERT: In a time of extraordinary danger, executive power must be extraordinary.

THE WORD: Cheney Can Start Fires With His Mind

COLBERT: So tonight, I would like to be the first candidate to make my position clear: I am not running for president, I am running for President Bush.

THE WORD: Job Description

COLBERT: Why? Because I believe in freedom, and I would be crazy to let anybody else have that kind of power over *me*! ("The Word – Job Description")

While Colbert drew boos from his studio audience for stating he will run "for President Bush," upon further reflection, his incongruous statement was an important observation. Even the Republican candidates distanced themselves from Bush in their rhetoric, but in truth, many of them supported the same policies Bush promoted, not to mention the power Bush's policies afforded the executive branch – as Romney suggested in the debate – *so why not just admit it?*

In the second example of questioning the "change" narrative, Colbert challenged candidates, particularly Democrats like Edwards, who proclaimed to be unfettered by "special-interest" influences (Smith). When Colbert discovered the costly fees required to run for presidential office, he announced on his show that he secured a corporate sponsor, Doritos brand tortilla chips ("Hail to the Cheese - Filing Papers"). By the next night, Colbert had learned about campaign finance laws preventing corporations from directly sponsoring campaigns – and immediately sought a legal loophole. He produced a letter from his lawyers stating that corporate sponsorships could only be used to support his television program, not his campaign. Colbert deduced slyly, "So, it's illegal for my 'crunch money' to pay for the campaign, but it is legal for it to pay for my show, and the show can report on my campaign." He then changes the graphic label for his campaign from "Hail to the Cheese: Stephen Colbert Nacho Cheese Doritos 2008 Presidential Campaign" to "Hail to the Cheese: Stephen Colbert Nacho Cheese Doritos 2008 Presidential Campaign *Coverage*," assuming this semantic twist rendered his efforts legal ("Hail to the Cheese - Campaign Coverage Finance"). He continued, while displaying the Doritos bag and eating chips, "So as the host of the show, I can take Doritos' money and enjoy the zesty blasts of flavor you can only get from Nacho Cheese Doritos. But, as a candidate, I'm simply enjoying the nacho-cheese-tastic taste-spllosion because I happen to love them, that's all! There's a clear line, you see. And I promise, I will not cross that line!" Colbert signaled to his

production assistant to show the "line" in question. On screen, a digital, vertical red line appeared dividing Colbert in half. One side of Colbert was labeled "host" and the other "candidate."

This seemingly absurd and incongruent act speaks directly to Burke's theory. Burke writes, "The comic analysis of exploitation prompts us to be on the lookout also for those subtler ways in which the private appropriation of the public domain continues" (169). Here, Colbert satirized the ambivalent relationship of politicians to so-called "special interests." Many candidates promised to stand up to special-interest groups, like corporations and industry lobbyists, while quietly continuing to accept campaign contributions from such associations. When Hillary Clinton acknowledged that many lobbyists represent important public interests like nurses and schoolteachers, her opponents chastised her, ostensibly wanting to keep their myth intact (Smith). In his performance as a candidate, however, Colbert openly welcomed and accepted Doritos as a corporate sponsor, as though to say to other candidates, *why hide it? You are all indebted to special-interest groups in one way or another.*<sup>4</sup>

### *Questions of "Authenticity"*

Colbert also complicated the discourse of debates over who is a "real" candidate. The question of "authenticity" preoccupied many of the Republican candidates, who, desperate to distance themselves from the unpopular incumbent, argued among themselves over whose policies were more like those of Ronald Reagan, elevating Reagan to mythical heroic status for their party (Green).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, candidates from both parties sought interviews on soft-news and entertainment talk shows in efforts to present themselves as "likeable" and "just like you."<sup>6</sup> Colbert, too, took part in this exercise as a candidate. On October 28, 2007, he attended a rally at the University of South Carolina, telling the audience of approximately one thousand students,



"I'm here to prove to everyone that this campaign is real" ("Colbert Campaigns in S.C."). On his November 1 show, Colbert showed video footage from visits to two local businesses in South Carolina: first, a beauty salon with female African-American employees and customers, and second, a firearms store with white male employees and customers. Colbert explained to his television audience that black women and gun owners were identified as key "swing voters" in his state. The video showed him pandering heavily and obviously to both groups – getting his hair styled in the salon and then aiming a rifle in the gun shop while touting his appreciation for the Second Amendment ("Hail to the Cheese – Ballot Issues"). Of course, Colbert's rally and campaign stops were staged – but so are all rallies and campaign stops. Colbert's performances here touched on a key convention of mediated politics: images that portray candidates "among the people" are deliberately offered (and perhaps unwittingly accepted) at face value as proof of a candidate's "authenticity" as a man or woman of the people.

Barack Obama invited candidate Colbert to wade further into the authenticity debate when Obama jokingly questioned Colbert's position as a true native of South Carolina. In a televised, town-hall-style debate, Obama said he could not imagine Colbert eating grits and suggested challenging him to a "grit-off." To assert his authenticity, Colbert ate several large bites from a bowl of grits on his October 31, 2007 show ("Obama's Grit-Off Challenge"). Once again, Colbert (and, arguably, Obama) parodies the candidates' emphasis on iconic representations of authenticity – from visiting gun shops to eating grits – in place of more substantial evidence such as legislative records, which are harder to portray through visual media.

Meanwhile, Colbert's pundit character critiqued this process of self-authentication. On his April 23, 2007 show, Colbert's guest was Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee

("Mike Huckabee – Running Mate Bid"). Colbert ran a series of news clips in which Huckabee states repeatedly that conservative voters were looking for a candidate who was "real" and "authentic." Colbert quipped, "So far, authenticity has garnered Huckabee a staggering *one percent* in the polls! Behind Sam Brownback, Duncan Hunter, and I think six guys named Thompson." Huckabee then joined Colbert at the studio desk and proceeded to tell Colbert that Colbert is authentic, "just like me," and suggested that Colbert could be his running mate. Huckabee was joking, but, ironically and possibly unintentionally, his statement pointed to the complicated question of *who is real?*

Colbert took the opportunity to question what the Republican candidates were really trying to accomplish by asserting "authenticity" as a character trait. He flippantly asked Huckabee, "Does authenticity really matter that much? I mean, if appearance is so important in politics, if a person *appears* authentic, isn't that enough? I don't really think the president is a cowboy, but he *seems* like a cowboy to me. You know?" Huckabee smiled and nodded as though acknowledging that Colbert was right – at least about the other Republican candidates. Huckabee posited, "It's like an apple. If you cut into the apple, and it's an apple all the way to the core, then it's authentic. If you cut into it and it turns out that it's plastic fruit, there's no nourishment there." (Colbert replied, "It's also a choking hazard.") Colbert then connected these claims of Republican authenticity to simple pandering for votes. He deadpanned, "What's wrong with pandering? Because, I mean, if a politician is willing to pander to me, that just says to me, *me liking him* is more important than the truth, and I find that very flattering." Huckabee conceded, "You totally lost me on that one." Colbert replied, "That was my intention" ("Mike Huckabee – Running Mate Bid"). By juxtaposing the incongruent terms "authentic" and

"pandering" Colbert suggested that the Republicans' debate over authenticity was, in fact, an inauthentic debate.

In this instance, both Colbert and Huckabee's word choices contributed to an interesting visual picture of candidates as simulacra, echoing Burke's example of perspective by incongruity in artist George Grosz's drawing of a "bloated, profiteering type" man sitting at a table with a female manikin. "The picture, by its planned incongruity, would say, in effect, that Grosz's profiteer is typically himself when entertaining the simulacrum of a woman" (Burke 311). Huckabee argued that he was the authentic Republican in a field of simulacrum or "plastic fruit." His self-promoting rhetoric was typical of all candidates appealing to voters. However, Colbert's response was especially jarring. Here, Colbert did not refute Huckabee's assertions that he was the most "real." Instead, he subverted Huckabee's assumption that anyone actually wants "real." If the candidates were going to such lengths to construct mythical images of themselves as *real like Reagan*, then they must have believed that voters want that myth, and not the real. If voters chose a candidate based on his or her perceived likeness to them, then their choice was based on a self-interested myth. By embracing this stance openly in his performance, Colbert revealed not only the "truthiness" of the "authenticity" argument, but he also touched on the hidden cynicism shaping and perpetuating such discourses.

### ***Questions of "Electability" and "Viability"***

Colbert also located a troublesome cynicism in his treatment of horserace-based political commentary, which many journalism scholars and critics argue has become the standard business model in punditry, to the detriment of the political process (e.g., Farhi; Eggerton; Rosenstiel; Zengerle). Paul Farhi argues that today's cable news cycle emphasizes quantity at the expense of quality analysis. There are more hours to fill, fewer experienced journalists in the

newsroom, and more on-air anchors marketed for their personalities rather than their insights. Political reporters and pundits, reports Farhi, "now work harder to answer the wrong questions – who's winning the daily image and message battle, who's ahead in the horserace – rather than who'd make the best president" (31). A study by the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) confirms this observation. In a content analysis, FAIR found that 255 out of 385 stories about the presidential primaries aired on broadcast news programs between December 26, 2007 and February 5, 2008 focused primarily on "analysis and strategy," while only 19 stories were "primarily about issues" (Eggerton 23). Making matters worse, in most cases where "issues" such as the Iraq War were mentioned, FAIR concluded that "it was only in passing and usually related to how the candidates were polling on the issue" (ibid.).

But if public opinion polls, when conducted according to strict empirical standards, are known to be accurate reflections of voter sentiment at a moment in time, what is wrong with reporting about them? Tom Rosenstiel argues that, while some polls are precise, insightful, and ultimately useful for in-depth political commentary, many polls are not, and often their news value is merely a means to a more capitalistic end: marketing value. That is, organizations capitalize by placing their name as the name of the poll, such as "the *Los Angeles Times* poll" (Rosenstiel 699). And, in today's twenty-four-hour media world, the proliferation of daily tracking polls quickly and easily feed the demands for content. Meanwhile, cost-efficiency measures have left news organizations staffed with fewer, less experienced reporters who lack the training necessary to give in-depth analyses of polls and interpret which polls are actually reliable. "The combined effect of these trends in polling is providing citizens with more facts about the daily ups and downs in the horserace and tactics of American politics but a weaker

understanding of the deeper structural meaning of elections or the mandate that they give the victors to govern" (700).

Jason Zengerle notes that many widely reported polls during the early primary season in 2007 focused more on unusual demographic factors among the candidates than on their policies. Popular polls measured, for example, whether Americans were "ready" to elect a "qualified" African-American (namely Barack Obama), a woman (namely Hillary Clinton), a Mormon (namely Mitt Romney), or a divorcee (namely Rudy Giuliani) (Zengerle 4). In addition, campaign strategists were prone to massaging the numbers to demonstrate how their candidates' "electability" was mathematically probable, based on loose amalgamations of different poll data and, of course, campaign bias. For example, Giuliani's campaign strategist released a hypothetical study mapping out how Giuliani would beat Hillary Clinton if certain states leaned this way and specific demographic groups voted that way (3). Pundits, looking for the latest poll report, picked up these pseudo-scientific speculations and ran with them – not necessarily critiquing their intentions, but simply adding them to the speculative mix of possible outcomes.

Colbert complicated this question of "electability" on several levels, first by the sheer incongruity of being a "fake" pundit, a fictional character, who actually campaigns. Colbert-the-actor was physically present, but "he" was not running. Can a fictional persona run for office? Apparently, Colbert showed, he could, and at least a small percentage of the public supported him. This pointed to a second level of complication, in which pollsters speculate on Colbert's chances just like any other candidate. For example, in October 2007, one poll indicated that Colbert was the current favorite of 2.3 percent of Democrats surveyed, ahead of three other candidates (Cillizza). On *Meet The Press*, Colbert assured host Tim Russert, "I'm more real than Sam Brownback," a Republican candidate with less than one percent support in national polls

(Carr). Meanwhile, an *Atlantic Monthly* reporter ran the numbers, so to speak, to show how Colbert might at least secure a delegate or two with the help of "the 'drunken college student' demographic" (Green ¶10).

Colbert further complicated the conventional measures of electability when the South Carolina Democratic Executive Council declared him ineligible for the ballot. On his November 1, 2007 show, chairwoman Carol Fowler explained that Colbert did not meet the party's standard of "national viability" (Hamby), which Colbert immediately called into question. "South Carolina Democrats require that candidates be 'generally acknowledged or recognized in news media throughout the United State as viable candidates,'" said Colbert, quoting party guidelines. "How's this for generally viable?" He then showed and read a headline from *Editor & Publisher*: "Stephen Colbert Moves Ahead of Richardson, Closes in on Biden, in National Poll!" He continued, "Plus, ABC News says my campaign is, quote, 'No Joke.' I ask you, is anyone saying that about Richardson and Biden? Not after that poll!" Colbert also addressed the issue of media coverage, considering he had his own show and appeared on other national news networks like CNN and NBC. "And as for 'recognized,' hey audience, who am I?" His studio audience members replied in unison, "You're Stephen Colbert!" He concluded, tongue-in-cheek, "Thank you, random cross-section of America!" ("Hail to the Cheese – Democratic Executive Council").

Here, Colbert extended the logic of "viability" to its troublesome ends. If viability is based on media exposure and polls, then Brownback, Richardson, and Biden should be no more viable than Colbert. Moreover, why should we allow the media to decide which candidates get more airtime or to invite only certain candidates to televised debates? He joked on his April 23, 2007 show, "Come on, media! It's your job to preemptively anoint someone so we all know who

to give our money to!" ("Mike Huckabee – Running Mate Bid"). Upon reflection, Colbert's satire of "viability" suggested that the pseudo-science of daily polling and "horserace" punditry has little merit. (And, we now know that Hillary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani, predicted as "frontrunners" by the media in 2007, did not win their respective party nominations.)

Colbert's satirical revelations about conventional discourses of authenticity, viability, and electability align interestingly with Michael Kaplan's analysis of the speculation-driven, self-referential world of finance capital. In his study of former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan's speculative comments and subsequent reactions within the stock market, Kaplan posits that a system driven by such speculation is entirely socially based and ultimately self-referential.

Seen in this light, "fundamentals" [e.g., corporate earnings] are themselves governed by speculation, which they represent indexically. Thus when investors sell their stock, they do so not because they realize shares are "overvalued" (as if that were possible) or because they believe *others* will think so, but because they assume that others will act on what they believe everyone else will believe about what everyone else will believe, and so on. Each investor is speculating about what all the others are speculating about. The dynamic of speculation is a continuous cycle, with the "fundamentals" lying at the forever deferred end, rather than some determinate origin, of speculations (Kaplan 485).

Kaplan refers to this system of economics driven by speculation as "iconomics," and relates it to Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" 166). According to Baudrillard, in such a system "referential value is nullified, giving the advantage to the structural play of

value...in the sense that from now on signs will exchange among themselves exclusively, without interacting with the real (and this becomes the condition for their smooth operation)" ("Symbolic Exchange and Death" 123). That is, in economics – and, I would add, in political media – speculators are more interested in, and involved with, that which is simulated and hypothetical than anything real and proven.

Colbert lampooned such absurd speculation in his commentary on MSNBC pundit Joe Scarborough's commentary on Republican Fred Thompson's odds of winning the election ("Thompson Fuss"). Colbert ran a video clip from *Scarborough Country* in which Scarborough showed a clipping from a *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Will Fred Thompson's Racist Role Have Political Repercussions?" The article suggested that some naïve voters might judge Thompson – a former U.S. Senator and current star on the television drama *Law & Order* – by his fictional role as a white supremacist in a 1980s television miniseries. Rather than critique the *Times* article or give voters the benefit of the doubt, Scarborough simply re-circulated the question on his program. He asked dramatically, "Will Thompson's racist role come back to haunt him in his run for the White House?" He then turned to a number of other pundits in split-screen, who advised in turn, "Oh, I think he should ignore it"; "I don't think it will hurt him at all"; and "Yeah, I don't think so." When the camera returned to Colbert in his studio, he exclaimed sarcastically, "Good story! Joe knows that a TV journalist's most solemn responsibility is to fill airtime by pointing out when newspapers are filling column inches." He continued, alternating from seriousness to mockery, "It's ridiculous to judge an actor based on a role he's played. Although, at the end of Scarborough's report there was a comment from MSNBC political analyst Lawrence O'Donnell that gave me pause." Colbert ran a clip of O'Donnell's advice on the Thompson question: "One of my dear friends, Martin Sheen, who



played a great president, also played in one of the finest film performances in history – a serial killer in the movie *Badlands*." Colbert responded in mock shock: "Oh my God! President Bartlett is a serial killer! That's why they cancelled the show!" Thus, Colbert not only acknowledged the increasing ease in which real and fictional performances blend and overlap in the media, but also he showed how this blending becomes so insidious, even those who portend to acknowledge it still cannot distance themselves from it.

The "structural *play* of value" cited by Baudrillard is evident in the pundits' daily speculations on how voters will vote based on shallow, biased interpretations of tracking polls and candidate soundbites – even from blatantly fictional performances. Pundit speculation, in this light, is nothing but a game based on fantasy – fantasy in terms of what the pundits imagine and in terms of their wish to be perceived by others as credible experts. The pundits do not need the real (e.g., grounded research and well-founded theories) in order to play the game; in fact, the real is often a threat to the fantasy. Kaplan notes, "In iconomics...there is nothing to deliberate about, save the process of deliberation about deliberation. In fact, if it were possible to deliberate about something, iconomics could not function" (489). The pundits' livelihoods are based on their performance of speculation, not on their knowledge or expertise; they need viewers to take their speculations at face value, or else they are out of a job.<sup>7</sup>

Colbert also extended this critique of speculative play to address pundits' self-important perceptions of their own influence on political outcomes. Specifically, he claimed the ability to advance the careers and popularity of minor celebrities and politicians with what he dubbed the "Colbert Bump." In June 2007, he proclaimed that Republican candidate Ron Paul's favorability in electoral tracking polls jumped from nearly zero to two percent after his appearance on *The Colbert Report* ("Ron Paul's Colbert Bump"). In August 2007, Colbert proclaimed *himself* the

winner of the Iowa Straw Poll – a non-binding poll of likely Republican voters touted as a bellwether for the election – not because he actually won the poll (Mitt Romney won) but because he was solely responsible for Huckabee's second-place win – a significant surprise to those following the tracking polls, which indicated that Huckabee had only about one percent of the electorate's support. "How did he make that kind of impact? Simple. Governor Huckabee has twice appeared on the *Report*," stated Colbert matter-of-factly. "And thanks to what statisticians call the Colbert Bump, the press is finally taking him seriously" ("Mike Huckabee"). In both examples, Colbert feigned ignorance of, or at least appears unconcerned with, other plausible causes of the candidates' rise in the polls, such as Huckabee's statements on other television appearances and Paul's growing support base in online communities. Moreover, Colbert did not comment on how the candidates' voting records or policy platforms might resonate with voters. Rather, just as "real" pundits and campaign strategists assumed voters would simply choose the candidate who looks most like them and reject candidates with weak "electability" prospects, Colbert "assumed" his viewers would do anything he told them to do. The Colbert Bump, then, by mock-celebrating the insider games of punditry, suggested something deeply troubling – an increasingly fundamental cynicism among both candidates and pundits towards the democratic process and the public they promise to serve.

### *Negotiating Idealism, Realism, and Cynicism*

To review this analysis through Burke's lens, the cynicism Colbert located in conventional political discourses constitutes a tragic frame of acceptance on the part of both pundits and candidates. That is, cynical pundits position themselves in opposition to their audience, "the American public." They proclaim their expertise on American voters based entirely on their breadth of polling data, to the point where they claim to know American voters

better than they know themselves. We can see this when they ask, for example, "Is America ready for an African-American president?" and proceed to predict Obama's chances of winning based on responses to such a hypothetical question from a limited sampling of potential voters. Meanwhile, candidates who succumb to the pseudo-wisdom of horserace punditry also find themselves positioned against the public they wish to represent. We can see this when they speak in talking points, appeal to partisan myths, and take advantage of iconic photo opportunities, as fearful that their real "authenticity" is not as convincing as their performed "authenticity." Thus, we witness an excess of shallow criticism and speculation on one end, and an excess of idealistic, yet vague promises on the other end. Ironically, while both pundits and candidates wish to appeal to the public (to gain viewership and votes, respectively), such cynical judgments on the electoral process ultimately endanger civic engagement. For example, poorly informed voters may cast poorly informed votes, or worse, disenchanted voters may skip the voting booth all together.

By contrast, Burke identifies a way out – or "transcendence" from – the cynical trappings of the tragic frame. Burke advocates for applying the "comic frame" as a *dialectical* approach to rhetoric and criticism. Comic rhetorical strategy, he argues, "contain[s] two-way attributes lacking in polemical, one-way approaches to social necessity" (166). It is a holistic view, in which the rhetor or critic (here, we might say, candidate or pundit) maintains a balance or "ambivalence" between poles, such as ideology and criticism and, in Colbert's case, seriousness and humor. Burke writes, "It is neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking – hence it provides a *charitable* attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of 'cashing in'" (ibid.). Burke argues that while the "euphemistic" and the "debunking" (or any other

rhetorical polarities) have useful attributes, when a rhetor or critic gravitates to only one of the two, both break down. This is evident in politics, where candidates and administrations speak from strict party ideologies and carefully constructed myths (the "euphemistic" to its extreme) while pundits do no better than simply "cashing in," reducing criticism to mere "muck-raking" (the "debunking" to its extreme) (ibid.). "A well-balanced ecology requires the symbiosis of the two," writes Burke (167).

Colbert, as I have argued, performs with a comic frame to reflect and critique the problems of tragic discourses, while offering performative models for "transcending" these discourses and moving forward. But where are the potential sites for transcendence in Colbert's campaign performance? Because of the rapid expansion of personas, performances, and stages in the sphere of political media, I contend that the sites for such transcendence here are not immediately obvious.

### *Sites of Comic Transcendence*

Burke contends that "the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles" (171). As we have seen, arguably, Colbert's performances incorporate a distinct consciousness, as he observes and evaluates his own performance alongside those in politics and media, whom he both models and critiques. Colbert's parody of Bill O'Reilly and satiric speech at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner provide a clear comic critique that transcends tragic frames in political media. In the first instance, Colbert the comedian performs as a ridiculous pundit in order to show the ridiculousness of punditry, while also providing his own critical analysis of public affairs. In the second instance, he performs as a comic *parrhesiastes*, thus providing a model for pundits to be

bold, cut through the administration's rhetoric, and serve the public rather than their own self interests. In both instances, he effectively balances the "shrewdness" of criticism with the "charitable" optimism that *we can do better*.

However, when Colbert adds a new layer to his performance as a comedian, pundit, *and* candidate, he requires us to work harder to locate those points of balance which are the sites of transcendence from the tragic frame. This, I argue, is because his parodic performances and serious critiques are now multiplied and overlapping. Through his continued performance as a pundit caricature, Colbert the comedian comments upon the ridiculousness of shallow, horserace-driven punditry. Through his role as a candidate caricature, Colbert the comedian comments upon the ridiculousness of conventional campaign rhetoric. By covering his own campaign, Colbert the comedian comments upon Colbert the fake pundit commenting upon Colbert the candidate – who also, in turn, comments upon both Colbert the candidate and Colbert the fake pundit. Meanwhile, we have the question of "which" Colbert actually seeks placement on the ballot. Is it Colbert the critical comedian, in which case he might be considered an "authentic" candidate, like Al Franken? Is it Colbert the character, in which case he is an "inauthentic" candidate, like Pat Paulsen? Colbert remains ambivalent on this. Clearly, Colbert has generated a number of incongruities, but where, exactly, is the desired perspective?

I contend that Colbert offers perspective through similarly numerous layers. There is not just one point of "euphemism" and one point of "debunking," but many of both, and they intersect on different planes. On one level, Colbert offers perspective by incongruity to the pundits covering the candidates. By parodying the pundits' ridiculous discourse, he tells them in essence, "look at what you are doing." However, unlike his *parrhesiastic* performance at the WHCA dinner, where he shows them, "that is what you are doing" *as well as* "this is what you

ought to be doing," in this case, the latter perspective is displaced onto another performative level. That is, by parodying the *candidates'* ridiculous rhetoric, he tells the pundits, "here is what you ought to investigate, but you are not investigating." In this way, Colbert the comedian continues his performance as a media critic, using his critique of candidates as an extension of his critique of pundits. However, he does not appear to show the candidates, "this is what you ought to be doing"; rather, upon laying bare the problematic realities behind their rhetoric, Colbert embraces and even celebrates those realities (the Doritos sponsorship is a prime example).

To that end, it is potentially discomfoting that Colbert appears to perform only the negative, cynical qualities of both pundits and candidates. As a candidate, he states openly that he will pander for votes and take corporate money. As a pundit, he promotes himself shamelessly and claims the ability to influence electoral outcomes. Thus, he clearly reflects the problematic attitudes being perpetuated in political media (so that, from this reflection, we can deduce what candidates and pundits should *not* be doing), but if he provides a performative model for transcending these attitudes, it is not immediately evident. Might we have seen this model performed later – say, if Colbert had made it onto the ballot and participated in debates? One can only speculate on this; however, I can locate one clue in the existing text toward a possible a site for transcendence, which is displaced onto yet another performative level. Here is the clue: In his interview with Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*, Colbert noted that in seeking placement on both the Republican and Democratic ballots he would "like to lose twice" ("*Meet the Press*"). On the surface, Colbert acknowledges that he cannot actually win the election. On another level, perhaps Colbert offers the performative model in question – only it is not directed at pundits or candidates, but at his audience. That is, it is up to his audience to carefully observe and critique

the rhetorical performances of the candidates and then perform their own act in the voting booth. If they vote for Colbert, then their act signals a tragic acceptance of a negative, cynical state of politics, as if to say, "All candidates are fake, so why not vote for the one who admits he is fake?" However, if they vote for the candidate they actually believe is most qualified, having made this decision with "maximum consciousness," then their act signals a comic transcendence from the negative, cynical image of politics perpetuated in the media.

Looking back on the 2008 primaries, we have compelling evidence that many voters did transcend the frames presented to them – or at least adopted different frames – since the actual election results diverged widely from pundit predictions (Farhi). Huckabee, shown to be trailing in the polls, won the Iowa Republican caucus, surprising many pundits who deemed Giuliani the candidate to beat. Then, nearly everyone predicted Clinton would lose New Hampshire, only to backpedal when she took that state. In the end, McCain won his party's nomination handily after being "left for dead" by political analysts and pollsters. Obama, another lesser-bet candidate, won the national election with a clear majority of popular and electoral votes, despite cynical assumptions that voters were not "ready" for an African-American president. Of course, I do not wish to speculate here on why voters voted the way they did. That said, had the election reflected the cynicism of pundit predictions – including Colbert's own – his performance might have signaled a truly negative, "demoralizing" situation, as imagined by the punditocracy. However, it was ultimately the public, not Colbert, who upset the conventional wisdom of the self-centered realm of political media, thereby "remoralizing" the democratic process. Colbert's performance did not usher in this action, but, arguably, his campaign contributed to public discussions and reflections toward a broader movement for change – and, perhaps appropriately, went no further.

***Conclusion: And So Can You!***

Colbert's multilayered performance reflected the complexity and confusion of the 2007 primary season, with dozens of candidates making hundreds of public appearances, and hundreds of pundits making thousands of comments on the candidates, their public appearances, and other pundits' comments as such, and so on. At best, such a busy, buzzing stage fostered excitement and hope for the next election. At worst, the players on television risked disconnecting from actual voters by engaging in discourses only with one another, which was the impetus for Colbert's critique. Where candidates took "euphemistic" rhetoric to extremes, speaking of change and authenticity, Colbert reapplied their logic onto his own fake character to ask, "How are you really different from the rest? And what makes you more 'real' than me?" Where pundits took "debunking" to extremes, issuing self-important, ill-formed judgments on viability and electability, Colbert begged the question, "What makes you know how I will vote better than I know myself?" In telling candidates and pundits "you need to do better," Colbert created a critical discomfort with such insulated, increasingly cynical discursive frames. At the same time, he offered some comfort to the viewing public, who risked being alienated from such discourses, telling them "we can do better." Colbert's performances are significant because, in making these uncritical discourses apparent, he invited the public (especially viewers, but also the candidates and pundits themselves) to identify and interrogate them critically. And yet, by blending and shifting his personas on numerous performative levels, he reminded us that political participation is necessarily hard work – and necessarily caught up in performances. By applying a comic frame and continually adjusting it to manage increasingly numerous points of concern, as Colbert showed, we can transform an otherwise tragic scene into a productive site for critical reflection and action.



## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Now that mass media is firmly established in virtually every aspect of Western life – from television, film, and photography to advertising, computers, the Internet, and more – much of our lived experience is entirely through the media. Baudrillard describes this environment as "hyperreality," in which we are saturated by mediated images to the point that what is "real" and what is simulated are no longer discernable. In this condition, signs and images no longer have a referent or origin in what is "real"; they simply exchange among themselves in a mediated world, taking on meanings and values of their own. Baudrillard was especially concerned with how images in visual media can be manipulated to simulate what is real, and therefore taken to be true (see "Simulacra and Simulations" and "Symbolic Exchange and Death"). Kaplan argues that language, too, can simulate the real without having a veritable link to the real, which I find relevant to Colbert's critique of the speculative punditry characterizing campaign coverage.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards's announcement prompted Jon Stewart to quip, "I should tell you now, we're a fake show. I want you to know that this may not count" ("Intro - John Edwards").

<sup>3</sup> Immediately following that episode, *The Colbert Report* ceased production for several months in cooperation with the Hollywood writers' strike. However, while Colbert's "real" campaign was over, fans kept hope alive on their own Web sites, and Marvel Comics incorporated Colbert's character and campaign story into its *Captain America* comic ("Joe Quesada"). I will not analyze these elements in this paper, but this is a compelling opportunity for future research in visual studies, cultural studies, or fan studies.

<sup>4</sup> The Edwards campaign responded humorously to Colbert's stunt, albeit strategically to reinforce its own message. "What is more troubling than [Colbert's] quest for a status his own mother won't grant him (favorite son) are his ties to the salty food industry," said Edwards's campaign spokesperson Elizabeth Wells in a tongue-in-cheek statement. "As the candidate of Doritos, his hands are stained by corporate corruption and nacho cheese. John Edwards has never taken a dime from taco chip lobbyists and America deserves a President who isn't in the pocket of the snack food special interests" ("Colbert Campaigns in S.C.")

<sup>5</sup> Reagan was the central theme of the Republican primary debate on May 3, 2007, which took place in Reagan's presidential library in California. The moderator's opening question was, "Just twenty-two percent believe this country is on the right track. How do we get back to Ronald Reagan's 'morning in America'?" Throughout the debate, each candidate praised the superlative leadership and legacy of Reagan, the last Republican president to serve before either of the ultimately unpopular Bushes. Mitt Romney mused, "Ronald Reagan was a president of strength. His philosophy was a philosophy of strength: a strong military, a strong economy and strong families." Mike Huckabee said, "I think it's important to remember that what Ronald Reagan did was to give us a vision for this country, a morning in America, a city on a hill." Opining about Iran's president Ahmadinejad and American-Iranian relations in the 1980s, Rudy Giuliani said, "He has to look at an American president and he has to see Ronald Reagan. Remember, they looked in Ronald Reagan's eyes, and in two minutes, they released the hostages." Tommy Thompson claimed, "The great thing about Ronald Reagan was, he was a uniter, and that's

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exactly what I tried to do as governor of the state of Wisconsin." James Gilmore argued, "I was an alternate delegate for Ronald Reagan to the Kansas City convention back in 1976. So I have been consistent all throughout, and I'm someone that people can count on as a conservative" ("California Republican Debate Transcript").

<sup>6</sup> The top presidential contenders all competed for the favor of "low-information voters," those who do not follow daily campaign coverage, but do watch entertainment programming, and are considered more likely to choose a candidate they like personally. Suzanne Smalley and Sarah Kliff cite several examples of candidates working the soft-news circuit, including Hillary Clinton talking about hairstyles on *The Tyra Banks Show*, John McCain describing his fitness routine on *Live With Regis and Kelly*, and Barack Obama joking on *The View* about a recently published genealogical study that claims Obama and actor Brad Pitt are distant cousins. These fluff appearances are in fact highly strategic, considering these shows together draw tens of millions of viewers daily. "The candidates calculate that the exposure is worth any loss of dignity they might suffer among the high-minded for going tabloid," argue Smalley and Kliff (35).

<sup>7</sup> For another excellent satire of pundit speculation, see *The Daily Show's* "Specularium" sketch from October 2007. Cast members parody the self-promoting, self-referential speculations of cable news pundits. They compete with one another to make the most outlandish, nonsensical predictions (based on banter from actual pundit shows). They also portray themselves in the "past" (by simply applying and removing fake mustaches to distinguish their past and present selves) to boast about predictions they claim to have made that have now come true ("Specularium").

## CHAPTER 5.

### CONCLUSIONS

#### *Of Truth and Truthiness: The Critical Value of Colbert's Comic Critique*

Along with Jon Stewart's work, Stephen Colbert's comic performances remain fresh and significant because they continually reflect and critique the rapidly expanding and changing media landscape. Colbert's work, especially, tracks the progression of personality-driven media and performance-driven society. This is important because, as our concept of society comes to exist more and more through mediated means, we must remain conscious of the processes that construct mediated vision and narratives, and we must stay vigilant against the blinding effects of socially constructed, studio-produced "common sense." Colbert contributes an essential, alternative perspective on political discourse by shining light on hidden rhetorical processes and intentions. Through his parody of conventions, he forces those processes and intentions to speak for what they are, so that viewers can recognize and respond to them consciously. Through his parody of media performances, he calls on those in power to account for their words and their actions. When the political and media establishments speak at the viewing public, he seeks openings for the public to speak back – and even change the conversation entirely.

Colbert's impetus for critique is the notion of "truthiness," which he identified and named in 2005 to describe the growing trend in political media culture to declare "truth" based on opinion, rather than facts. As he proclaimed to the nation on the debut episode of *The Colbert Report*, "We are divided between those who *think* with their head and those who *know* with their heart," to which his performative counterpart, "The Word," added, "Head Bad, Heart Good" ("The Word – Truthiness"). This single, ridiculous-sounding word reflects a growing ridiculousness in media discourses, from the Bush administration's problematic justifications for

the Iraq war to cable news pundits' urgent perpetuation of opinion-driven, partisan-appealing narratives. Through Colbert's satirical lens, we find that "truthiness" is perhaps even more ingrained in our media culture than we *realize*.

In this project, I have analyzed Colbert's recent body of work through several rhetorical-critical lenses. Kenneth Burke's theories of tragic and comic frames of acceptance and perspective by incongruity comprise the backbone, and perhaps the heart, of my analysis. Burke contends that all rhetorical acts are performances; thus, not only does Colbert act "in character," but so do all other figures on the political and media stage. In each case study, I found that the objects of Colbert's critique, both pundits and politicians, act within a tragic frame. In the case of Bill O'Reilly, the tragic frame is manifest when he casts himself and his perceivably supportive audience as "heroes" against a myriad of "villains," including anyone who disagrees with him. At the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, we find Bush and an impersonator cracking predictable, lighthearted jokes based on the same partisan cues used in O'Reilly's angry speech. We also find the media establishment, stunned by Colbert's attack on their profession, unable to address it beyond the binary debate over "funny" versus "not funny." When Colbert lampooned the presidential primary season in 2007, we find candidates performing at one pole of what Burke describes as "euphemistic" self-proclamations while pundits play at the opposite pole of "debunking" self-speculation, with little common ground for critical debate and analysis.

Colbert's performances make each of these constructions visible by applying a comic frame. With a comic frame, one does not simply laugh at the world; rather, one looks carefully at the world from multiple perspectives, admitting "the world's rich store of error" and celebrating it as "a *genuine aspect of the truth*, with emphases valuable for the correcting of present emphases" (Burke 172). Using the methodology of perspective by incongruity, the comic critic

reveals the logical limits of rhetorical arguments, where seemingly dire circumstances may actually be overblown and seemingly inconsequential acts may actually endanger us all. Through this distinctly conscious, critical, self-effacing frame, Burke argues, the comic critic is positioned to "transcend" the limited spheres of egocentric and binary discursive constructions. Perhaps most importantly, the comic frame is available as a tool for the people. As we have seen, Colbert offers his comic critique as a model for media consumers, providing "rhetorical education" for everyday use (Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture" 264). Each of Colbert's comic performances calls upon and encourages viewers to engage in critical acts themselves.

Colbert's critical portfolio begins with a focused parody of the pundit personality, inspired by the tragic persona of Bill O'Reilly. While his program is marketed as "fair and balanced," O'Reilly's language is in fact pre-scripted and ideologically loaded. O'Reilly argues from syllogistic logic that illegal aliens, leftists, activist celebrities, and other media organizations (not his employer Fox, though) are deliberately working to destroy the freedoms "you at home" earn and enjoy, from Christmas to national security. On his show, O'Reilly perpetuates an atmosphere of a nation on alert, from stern digital effects to his didactic opening warning in "Talking Points Memo" about the encroaching dangers of the day. By repeating words and phrases associated with "friendly" and "enemy" groups, O'Reilly establishes rhetorical cues that subtly instruct his viewers what to think and how to feel. He frequently names the names of those he believes represent the proliferation of social ills. He applies particular examples of crime or social offenses from local-market news outlets as proof for his broad accusations and political points. He asserts his opinions as unquestionable, black-and-white truths and proclaims that anyone who disagrees with him must want America to fail.

The format of O'Reilly's show, especially his debates with guests, is highly theatrical, and, upon closer inspection, very carefully constructed to produce outcomes in O'Reilly's favor. His producers select guests whose views diverge specifically from O'Reilly's – and the more controversial, the better. O'Reilly, as the Catholic, supporter of the troops, warrior against Islamofascism, and advocate for the unborn, battles atheists, anti-war protestors, 9/11 conspiracy theorists, and pro-choice activists. The issues are always framed on binary poles, and O'Reilly has control of all microphones. In nearly every episode, O'Reilly verbally slays his adversaries and lives to fight another day. Only on occasion, when the format breaks down, do we get a glimpse of the production process, such as when O'Reilly and Geraldo Rivera struggled lamely to fill unexpected airtime after an intense shouting match over immigration issues.

While the show is obviously personality-driven – as O'Reilly states, "*The O'Reilly Factor* is driven by me" ("*The O'Reilly Factor – About the Show*") – its structures and conventions obscure the deep, multilayered self-centeredness of O'Reilly's tragic frame. Looking more closely at O'Reilly's own narrative histories, we can find multiple layers of tragic persona and performance. O'Reilly is framed as the hero of his show, but his other personas are projected onto his audience and guests. O'Reilly perceives and addresses an audience in his own heroic image, thus enveloping his audience within his tragic frame. Simultaneously, he casts his adversaries in his own anti-heroic or villainous image (e.g., O'Reilly the accused harasser crusading against sex offenders; O'Reilly the media pundit denouncing the media industry) so that, within this frame, such interpellations appear natural and logical. These conflicting positions, and the ideologically driven efforts to conceal them, provide a complex and troubling foundation for O'Reilly's performances. These strategies do not offer themselves for interrogation, which is why Colbert the satirist seizes the opportunity to do so.

On *The Colbert Report*, Colbert is relentless in his satire, complicating an exhaustive range of O'Reilly's rhetorical conventions, from the subtle sleights of hand to blatant bloviating. Colbert parodies O'Reilly's visual and rhetorical production processes to make them visible and accessible for public critique. Colbert's own studio set, especially the digital "Word," acts almost anthropomorphically as if shouting to be noticed. In direct contrast to the on-screen text supporting O'Reilly's "Talking Points," which gives O'Reilly a God-like authority, "The Word" undercuts and ironizes Colbert's claims, as though checking Colbert on a fallible, human level. Playing to O'Reilly's fearful appeals against illegal "aliens" lurking in our midst, Colbert rails ridiculously against his own bitter enemy: bears. Colbert also plays up O'Reilly's brash interview style, full of loud interruptions and opinionated interjections, often with the same guests who appear on O'Reilly's show – like atheist Richard Dawkins – and sometimes with guests O'Reilly will never engage – like celebrity activist Jane Fonda. Only, Colbert's does not shout down or condemn his guests into silence; rather, he gives them the opportunity to subvert his silly logic so that an actual dialogue takes place, albeit indirectly. While O'Reilly casts his guests as adversaries in the wrong so as to magnify his opinions as the only logical truth, Colbert's parodic rantings serve to dwarf or downplay his self-centered logic, thus casting his guests as legitimate participants in a dialogue that extends beyond him.

And yet, through Colbert's biting critique of O'Reilly comes an ironic sense of love for him as "Papa Bear." Colbert acknowledges O'Reilly as the reason he exists – literally, since without O'Reilly Colbert would not have him to parody. Likewise, this parody suggests, O'Reilly depends his own "villains" in order to have a talk show, which means he has an incentive to persuade viewers of their continuing threat. Colbert's humor offers a comic reframing of "villains" as "tricked" or "mistaken," and "heroes" as "intelligent" beings at best, but by no

means godly. From this perspective, we see that O'Reilly is neither a hero to his fans nor a villain to Colbert's fans; in truth, he is another television performer, doing his job in the media business. This comes to the forefront especially when Colbert and O'Reilly appear on each other's shows. Colbert, who openly admits he is a fake character, performs easily on both sets. O'Reilly, however, still attempts to assert the "realness" of his persona and tragic views – and essentially gets caught in the act. He jokes defeatedly, "This is all an act. I'm sensitive." To which Colbert replies, "If you're an act, what am I?" Ultimately, Colbert's parody of O'Reilly tells viewers: O'Reilly is not a villain, but you should watch him carefully, for he is no hero, either. Likewise, Colbert is an entertainer, not a hero – you should watch yourself carefully when watching him.

Colbert unveiled additional layers in the complex tapestry of media performance at his speech at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in 2006. Whereas *The O'Reilly Factor's* ideological frame revolves around one person, Bill O'Reilly, the discursive structuring of the WHCA dinner tradition is broader and more socialized among the political and media industries. Colbert recognized and revealed the intricate, insular drama playing out between the media establishment and White House. He appeared on stage in character, but in this case his character and comedy only thinly veiled a genuine, damning critique of both parties in the room. Colbert declared of President Bush, "The great thing about this man is he's steady. You know where he stands. He believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday" (Colbert, et al. 224). Turning on the press corps, he said, "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" (ibid.). In contrast to Bush and Bridges' skit, which reinforced the familiar myth of a separate White House and fourth estate, Colbert reframed such



binary positioning to suggest that they operate on the same pole at the expense of the people they proclaim to serve. He offered a third, more holistic perspective on behalf of citizens (including the emergent blogosphere) who sensed that neither the media nor the administration was transparent or acting in the public's best interest.

In Chapter Three, I applied Burke's concepts to elucidate a theory of tragic *humor* contrasting with comic *critique*. I argued that tragic humor derives from the *recognizable* and *familiar*. Just as O'Reilly repeats otherwise neutral words and phrases to convert them to rhetorical cues, tragic humor employs the same rhetorical cues as a shortcut to the unquestioned. O'Reilly utters "*The New York Times*" to rile his audience, and Bush and Bridges utter "Hillary Clinton" and "Dick Cheney's shotgun" to amuse their audience. When the meaning are readily established, the jokes are always safe. Comic humor, conversely, generates laughter from a deeper source: the *realization* that what is said is closer to the truth than what is typically said. Comic humor *discovers* new meanings about existing discourses by reapplying them in unfamiliar, but logically valid, contexts. In the case of the WHCA dinner, the Bush-Bridges skit served to reinforce the recognizable and familiar, while Colbert's speech compelled realization and discovery of inherent problems with the status quo.

Burke characterizes such discovery as "the 'transcendence' of a new start" (Burke 309). "It is not 'demoralizing,'" Burke says, "It is designed to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" (ibid.). I argued that Colbert "transcended" tragic discourses and offered opportunities for his audiences to transcend as well. To make my case, I interwove two additional theories to give additional depth and context to the meaning of Colbert's perspective by incongruity. First, I argued that Colbert's character served as a Foucauldian *parrhesiastes* – speaking truth to power at his own risk. Not only did Colbert the

comedian speak boldly, but he also demonstrated through his character a model for other pundits and journalists. This dual performance of *parrhesia* offered transcendence by inviting the media to follow his example and showing them how the benefits of speaking the truth outweigh the risks. Second, I applied Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque festival, complicated by Stallybrass and White's problems with the sanctioned, temporary inversion of social hierarchies, to Colbert's critique of the WHCA dinner tradition. I argued that Colbert's speech unmasked the dinner tradition as an example of *carnivalesque-lite* that appears to liberate the media from the authority of the administration, but in fact sutures this problematic relationship. By subverting the familiar, one-night-only inverted hierarchy of the media and administration, Colbert invited the viewing public to subvert both on an enduring basis.

Finally in Chapter Three, I looked at how Colbert's foray as a "fake" character on a "real" stage, in which he provided authentic criticism about an inauthentic culture, illuminating an increasingly complex world of multiple, layered personas, performances, and stages. We saw at least two "Colberts" (one "real," one "fake") giving at least two performances (one "fake," one "real") in a real ballroom with real politicians and correspondents who, however, perpetuate false images of both their distance and their close relations. We also saw many layers of mediation, from the stage to C-SPAN to YouTube, and the subsequent entry of a new group of citizen performers and a new stage, the blogosphere. Colbert's performance in this instance compels us to consider the possibilities – both positive and negative – of such exponential proliferation of media in our culture. As Burke describes, "The comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*" (Burke 171). With the comic perspective, we are better equipped to observe performances – including our own – with a fuller awareness of their rhetorical character.

Colbert's performance as a presidential candidate and campaign pundit also took his critique to a multidimensional level. On the surface, his performance was incredibly silly, reflecting the circus-like scene of the 2007 election season, in which, it seemed, anyone and everyone was running for president. However, in Chapter Four I argued that Colbert's performance also offered a much more intricate critique, in which he made visible the tragic positioning and cynical reasoning of the prevailing political discourse but did not – and could not – fully "transcend" this limited frame. Instead, Colbert offered an opening for viewers to transcend tragic discourse, for example, by voting independently and conscientiously, using the critical tools suggested by Colbert.

To support my claim, I outlined the critical tools Colbert offered as follows. First, Colbert parodied the candidates' rhetoric of "change" to show where such speech contradicts actual practices and beliefs, warning that the notion of "change" is, in fact, a formulaic campaign discourse. He also complicated the candidates' efforts to position themselves "euphemistically" as the most "authentic." Colbert equated these statements to pandering and showed where they perpetuated mythical images of both candidates and voters. That is, when candidates introduce themselves as "just like you," they appeal to an image of voters and adjust their own images (their personas and performances) to appeal to that image. Colbert's parody suggested that both types of image are inauthentic. More so, he problematized the notion of authenticity itself by suggesting that it is ideologically constituted, in which one judges others based on how well they reinforce that ideology. Second, Colbert parodied political pundits who proliferate quantity of coverage without quality of context. Colbert caught pundits dealing in images, too, speculating on not only poll-based images of voters but also performance-based – even overtly fiction-based – images of candidates while perpetuating the question of "electability." I contextualized this

trend with Michael Kaplan's theory of speculation-driven media in the financial markets. With so many hours and column inches to fill, and so much time before the actual elections, political pundits extended their questioning and deferred answering for as long as possible. In the game of speculation, the goal is to speculate. Third, Colbert lent perspective by incongruity to the arbitrariness of determining a candidates' "viability" based on polling status and media exposure. Colbert, the fake candidate, outpolled several other contenders and benefited from nightly exposure on his own program.

Through these performative examples, Colbert positioned the conventional discourse of candidates as (to interweave Burke and Kaplan's terminology) "euphemistic" in asserting their authenticity to the point that they become simulacra. This plane of discourse intersects with that of conventional punditry, which is cast as "debunking" to the point that speculation perpetuates for speculation's sake. As a result, these discourses risk alienating the electorate. However, in this case, Colbert portrayed the negative qualities of these performances but did not perform a distinct model for transcending these frames, as he does by modeling useful criticism on *The Colbert Report* and speaking as a *parrhesiastes* at the WHCA dinner. I concluded that Colbert's performances here did what the candidates' and pundits' discourses did not: engage viewers in the process of investigation, deliberation, and conscientious action. In the end, the transcendent act was offered to viewers to perform as voters.

I started this project with two research questions. First, how do the performances of Stephen Colbert contribute to or complicate contemporary forms of political communication, news reporting, and commentary? Second, what are the various ways in which Colbert performs his critique? I can conclude the following.

First, Colbert complicates conventional political and media discourses by revealing their structures as tragic frames of discourse. His parodies provide perspective by incongruity toward the limits of self-centered and binary reasoning by extending that logic beyond conventional limits until its problems are revealed. In this way, he contributes to discourse by reframing established narratives through a more ambivalent or holistic, *comic* approach. Colbert's performances also reveal the performative nature of all political and media communication. His parody of media figures mirrors aspects of them that are otherwise invisible or obscured in conventional discourse. By acting as a character – Stephen Colbert as "Stephen Colbert" – he mirrors other characters at work: Bill O'Reilly as "Bill O'Reilly," media personalities as "serious journalists," and candidates making inauthentic claims to their "realness." By overtly blending and shifting a range of personas – entertainer, pundit, candidate, real, fake – Colbert reflects the complexities and contradictions of all media figures. The difference is that Colbert openly flaunts his personas and performative nature, while those he critiques tend to mask any characteristics that contradict their preferred, projected image. This masking as such constitutes the unbroken character; only by accident do these conventional personas "break character" on their own. Colbert, too, rarely breaks character in his performances; however, because his "character" is so obvious, his performative shifts are more visible and subject to questioning – a more critical "breaking," so to speak.

Second, Colbert not only performs the tragic conventions to hold them up for scrutiny, but he also performs a comic model for moving beyond, or transcending, tragic discourse. Most importantly, this model performance invites public engagement and interaction. Whereas O'Reilly tells viewers what to think and how to feel, Colbert's satire raises questions for viewers to consider. His comic criticism at the WHCA dinner raised key questions about the mainstream

media industry, and when the industry tried to stifle those questions, members of the public revived and circulated them. When presidential candidates and pundits addressed a preconceived, poll-derived image of the electorate, Colbert expressed hope that citizens would complicate that image. In each case, his critiques progressed in their complexity, requiring increasing engagement and consciousness among viewers to "get" the joke and subsequently model their own performances. And yet, there is always an underlying sense of faith in his audience to do the right thing, as suggested in his book title, *I Am America (And So Can You!)* By parodying the problems of American ideology projected through a tragic frame, Colbert offers new spaces to enact the progressive aspects of American ideology considered through a comic frame.

### ***Opportunities for Future Research***

My analysis of Colbert's work does not exhaust the subject. To date, scholarly studies of Colbert's comic methods are just beginning, leaving many opportunities for future research. For example, other scholars might extend my initial study of performative layers in the media. I have identified some of these layers, as *realized* by Colbert's blending and shifting of roles. What other layers exist today and may exist tomorrow as the media universe continues to expand, and how might we map these for a more critical view of media culture? Moreover, while I focused on Colbert's performances as texts, there are rich opportunities to investigate Colbert's audience, from casual viewers to his active fan base, as well as members of the media and politicians who encounter Colbert's work. To date, only Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler have published work about Colbert's fans from a cultural studies perspective. How has his critical comedy affected public criticism, interaction, and civic participation? How has his work affected the performances of other performers in political media? Furthermore, visual culture scholars will

find significant instances in which Colbert blends not only performances, but also media forms. In addition to the "real" and "fake" stages I discussed in this project, Colbert also plays with animation. He occasionally features his animated alter ego, Tek Jansen, on *The Colbert Report*, and Marvel Comics continued Colbert's presidential campaign as an animated fantasy. Additionally, the scholarly, political, and media communities would benefit from deeper investigations into the presence and influence of tragic and comic frames in "real" political situations and media coverage. Colbert's work illuminates much of the tragic influence on politics and media; scholars who can locate comic discourses in this landscape may be able to identify positive models for future study.

***Closing: Toward a Comic Culture***

How does Colbert's comic critique help us going forward? What is now at stake? Colbert's work reflects the recent evolution and trajectory of mediated culture, which continues to evolve, move forward, and expand. This presents both problems and opportunities for democratic discourse. One key problem is that as mass media becomes more massive, it is not necessarily more diverse. Most mainstream media outlets are now controlled by a few national and international corporations. While cable television viewership has gone up (Pew), local newspapers are dying out – to name just a few, the *Rocky Mountain News*, *Cincinnati Post*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Detroit Free Press* have all recently shuttered their print operations (Gillin). Others, like the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, are making troublesome changes to survive, from scaling back circulation to printing less news in a more "efficient" fashion (Roughton). As the mainstream media industry is consolidated and news narratives are constructed by fewer voices, we risk also the *consolidation of our framework of the world* – more national, less local, and less diverse. Within an increasingly limited frame, tragic personas

and ideological performances are better enabled to flourish unchecked. As we look toward the next stages of media culture, we must conscientiously protect, and teach to others, the critical tools necessary to identify and challenge such discursive closures. The comic frame is one such tool for providing alternative, critical views and fostering new discursive opportunities. It can and should be performed on many stages: in political satire and comedy news; in independent publications and online media, by critical journalists working within the mainstream media industry; by media consumers acting as citizens, and on other unconventional stages not yet realized – although none of these stages should be taken for granted as necessarily comic or progressive. The key is to be ready and willing to identify the tragic and comic frames that shape our discourse. Where they are problematic and obscuring, we can reveal and challenge them. Where they help us think and act more critically, as Burke says, *we can coach them, even salute them.*



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