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Political Parody and Public Culture

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Parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture. They do so by exposing the limits of public speech, transforming discursive demands into virtual images, setting those images before a carnivalesque audience, and celebrating social leveling while decentering all discourses within the "immense novel" of the public address system. Parody culminates in modern laughter, which is the shock of delighted dislocation when mediation is revealed. That laughter provides a rhetorical education for engaged spectatorship.

Keywords: Parody; Public Culture; Mikhail Bakhtin; Political Humor; Menexenus

A minister, a priest, and a rabbi walk into a bar. The bartender looks at them and says, "What is this, some kind of joke?"

Leave it to an academic to start with a meta-joke—and one that's not funny. Any joke may seem out of fashion when it draws on shopworn formulas while dealing in stereotypes.[1] Many racist, sexist, and ethnic jokes have been rightly swept away by progressive social movements. Other commonplaces are worn down by the incessant circulation of modern media environments, while the social world of the stock joke has faded into the past. Gone are the days when clerics were notable figures in the community and bartenders were founts of communal wisdom. In the meta-joke, the bartender is as cynical as any fifteen-year-old at SomethingAwful.com.

Yet political humor abounds: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the doubly clichéd. Of course, good jokes are better than bad jokes, and fine wit is better than contrived gags, and satire on behalf of social justice is better than humor used to enforce hierarchies of domination. But it's a package deal. To take humor seriously, one has to be prepared to step outside the norms of deliberation, civility, and good taste. To do so, I believe, is to do more than indulge private indiscretions. I hope to demonstrate

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why political humor and particularly its core modality of parody are essential for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture.

The discursive field of political humor contains many genres.[2] These include familiar forms such as editorial cartoons, comic strips (*Doonesbury*), satiric magazines (*Mad*), animated sitcoms (*South Park*), variety shows (*Saturday Night Live*), and late-night monologues by Leno, Letterman, and others. Many people also have enjoyed theatrical/improv shows (*Second City*) and comedic songs (*The Capitol Steps*), as well as stand-up comic monologues in clubs and on TV that are circulated further as audio recordings, movies, and spin-off books. Other venues include institutional settings for roasts and other ritual play (the White House Correspondents' Association dinner), and, on the other side of the street, drag shows and other queer revues and camp events. There also are artistic installations, mockumentaries and other satiric films, parodic Web sites (whitehouse.org), and a steady stream of video clips, altered photographs, and other spoofs that flow through the Web and the Internet as viral media. Add to this street theater, culture jamming, caricatures and effigies in political demonstrations, and bumper sticker one-liners and satiric auto magnets. Also fake newspapers (the *Onion*), fake TV news and commentary (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*), fake speeches (the Gettysburg Address on PowerPoint), and fake editorials, letters, memos, shopping lists, playlists, Google search lists, diary entries, vacation plans, lesson plans, technical diagrams, flow charts, organization charts, advertisements, and more. And don't forget the parodic candidates and PACs (Billionaires for Bush), and, to go full circle, recent parodic campaign ads used by political candidates, interest groups, and digital media providers. And, not least, the jokes that appear continually in conversations, speeches, blogs, and your inbox. All of these genres proliferate in the US, but they are found in many other societies as well. The titles of fake news shows are illustrative: in Canada, *This Hour Has Twenty-two Minutes*; in Iraq, people tune in to *Hurry Up, He's Dead*.

This not exhaustive list of political humor, wit, satire, parody, and the like is accompanied by periodic commentary. That commentary includes reportage on roasts, reviews of stand-up comedy acts, obituaries for comedians, editorials, letters to the editor, and so forth. Comments are both positive and negative. Praise can feature shared experiences, democratic virtues, good character, professionalism, intelligence, style, and the ability to provoke, entertain, or comfort. Complaints include poor taste, boorishness, indecorousness, incivility, immorality, distortion, discrimination, stereotyping, unfairness, meanness, mediocrity, pandering, trivializing, extremism, radicalism, immaturity, psychological problems, and, of course, humorlessness.

I hope to show that parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining public culture. A corollary claim is that scholars should not assume that democracy needs only the right forms of serious public discourse. Neither civic republican eloquence nor rational deliberation will do, and not just because they are too elevated or insufficiently affective. Were every speaker a Pericles and every discussion a model of rational-critical debate, we would be in deep trouble. Eloquence is indeed a good thing and at times necessary and sometimes decisive, but

even eloquence needs to be put it its place—or, more accurately, placed beside itself if the public audience is to reclaim their capacity for independent thought and action.

Language Beside Itself

My daughter probably was about ten years old when she would parrot my gestures and facial expressions while I was talking at the dinner table. Not a sound was made, no critical inflection was added; all she did was replicate what I was doing. Legs crossed, arched eyebrows, hand waving in the air: there I was, declaiming, confident, at home with myself. And, of course, ridiculous. Why? Note that she was not ridiculous, even though she was the one behaving oddly. Nor was I ridiculous solely because transposed into a ten-year-old girl who had neatly subverted the old adage that children should be seen but not heard. I was ridiculous because she had reproduced me in spite of the differences in gender, social station, and power between us. But even that is misleading. I had become ridiculous in my own eyes simply by being placed beside myself.

"Parody" literally means "beside the song." "Para" also can mean "beyond" or "against," as in parable, paradox, paranoia, and paralysis, and these additional senses of the term are never far away. My daughter was literally beside me while imitating me; she also was going beyond me by throwing my style beyond its usual vehicle of expression to make a rough parable of adult pomposity; and, of course, she was going against me, disrupting not only my performance but also the usual power relations of the dinner table. But let's not make too much of power too soon. The key fact of this story is that all it takes to make one self-conscious is to duplicate some part of the communicative act. Duplication of verbal performance, by placing speech beside itself, induces the key features of sophistication: self-consciousness and attention to communicative technique.[3] Just as important, it seems to threaten what it creates: the mime strips its target of individuality and turns whatever was being used for effect into a joke. Thus, duplication is essential for communicative competence and also a source of profound anxiety that runs from Plato to contemporary debates about cloning.

My daughter must have sensed that she was on to something significant, because she would not stop. Even if I laughed sincerely and complimented her, she would keep on replicating my gestures. And now a more explicitly parodic element often would emerge: slight exaggerations that moved the imitation into caricature, or additional facial expressions that provided obviously critical commentary. The most important factor by far was that she simply would not stop. At some point, not a distant one, this became very annoying. Why? Surely one reason is political. The temporary inversion of power was starting to look less than temporary, and that threatened me. Likewise, though she may have started for the laugh, my daughter will have persisted because she had become hooked on the power shift, and, being ten, had not yet learned that it is important to know when to quit the game. But I think that she also had stumbled onto another truth: imitation can become mechanization. Her parody revealed a deeper potentiality and danger of communicative practice,

which is its autonomic operation. As the Russian formalists observed, parodic imitation works by turning an organic moment into something mechanical, and so reveals the mechanization underlying the original communicative act.[4] Likewise, Henri Bergson's account of laughter emphasized its importance as the sure corrective to rigidity: humor consists in perceiving "something mechanical encrusted on the living."[5]

My daughter's imitation of my gestures was funny because it was something mechanical encrusted onto my organic speech, and it was critical precisely in that it revealed how the autonomic, ultimately deadening reproduction of language had been at work and gaining strength in my serious, unreflective performance. I was talking because my talk was reproducing itself whether or not I had anything to say and without regard for others. But what really scared me when my daughter went on too long was that she, still a child, was being captured by that force. She was becoming rigid precisely because the autonomic pattern was attaching itself to and controlling her living being. Now she was the one unable to step out of her performance to be beside herself and reflect on the social relationships and her own interests. Even parody, the essential corrective to "inelasticity," could become autonomic.[6]

The earliest use of *parodos* comes from the oral tradition of Greece "to describe an 'imitating singer,' or 'singing in imitation.'"[7] Quintilian describes parody as "a name drawn from songs sung in imitation of others, but employed by an abuse of language to designate imitation in verse or prose."[8] Quintilian is suspiciously low key about the scope of parody. By contrast, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that

> there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse—artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday—that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*. What is more, these parodic doubles and laughing reflections of the direct word were, in some cases, just as sanctioned by tradition and just as canonized as their elevated models.[9]

This parodic doubling of all forms of direct discourse has yet to stop. As is clear from the literature on parody, every possible form of human speech has been subjected to comic imitation: epic, lyric, drama; oratory, philosophy, science; lower, middle, and upper class conversation; academic, bureaucratic, and clerical prose; songs, recipes, and kiddie lit; diaries, biographies, and histories; dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks; every cinematic genre; every other genre; the list goes on and on. Direct speech always is shadowed by a marked copy of itself.

Parodic techniques involve various combinations of imitation and alteration: direct quotation, alternation of words, textual rearrangement, substitution of subjects or characters, shifts in diction, shifts in class, shifts in magnitude, etc. Margaret Rose concludes that "parody may be defined in general terms as *the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material*."[10] With the change of a single word, this could be a definition of rhetoric, that is, of *the strategic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material*. The correspondence could be drawn out extensively.[11] For example, I doubt there could be a better example of the *dissoi logoi* than this headline

from the *Onion*: "New Children's Hospital Filled to Capacity, Owner Overjoyed by Success of Just-Opened Business."[12] Following Richard Lanham's alignment of rhetoric with laughter against seriousness, one might say that laughter can be the sign of a distinctively rhetorical pleasure: the pleasure taken when speech is made playful.[13] But much more than pleasure is at stake. Parody is like its natal genre of epideictic speech: the public formalization of language beside itself puts social conventions on display for collective reflection.[14] The parodic imitation simultaneously praises and blames, and one result is to highlight where discourse ends.

Exposing Limits

When language is placed beside itself, limits are exposed. What had seemed to be serious is in fact foolish, and likewise the powerful is shown to be vulnerable, the unchangeable contingent, the enchanting dangerous. Parody works in great part by exceeding tacit limits on expression—the appropriate, the rational—but it does so to reveal limitations that others would want to keep hidden. A classical example is illustrative. Scholars now recognize that democracy in Greek antiquity was not so golden, but it should be given credit for being able to ridicule its failings.

Nicole Loraux concludes her magisterial study of the Athenian funeral oration by turning from the *epitaphioi* to the lampooning they received throughout Aristophanes and, in particular, in a parodic dialogue attributed to Plato. Loraux astutely observes that "[t]here is only a narrow gap between eulogy and parody," in part because "ancient comedy, despite its status as institutional parody, draws its inspiration from the same social imaginary as the official orations."[15] So it was that the parodic complement to the funeral oration could make the Ideal City answer to the real city. Against the tyrannizing, totalizing ideal, civic comedy makes self-government look ridiculous, but also cut to human scale.

Plato, however, does not stop there.[16] The dialogue *Menexenus* consists of a mock oration with brief conversations to frame the performance. As usual, Plato lacerates the orators with ironic praise of their art while demonstrating that he can outdo them at their own game. Here he outdoes himself: simultaneously proving his mastery of the conventions of the genre through parodic iteration while also slipping in fragments of eloquence and several Platonic prescriptions about the best city. Loraux argues that he "rejects the funeral oration in and by his words, subjecting to the corrosive force of irony the solemn identity of an oration whose relationship with Socratic speech is one of opposition, if not of absolute otherness."[17] Likewise, "[i]n attacking the funeral oration Plato is again attacking Athenian democracy, and in one of its most solemn practices."[18] Thus, "we can see in the *Menexenus* the most sustained effort by an Athenian to distance himself from the city of the epitaphioi—a squaring of the circle, no doubt, but one that was worth attempting."[19]

One might ask, however, if Plato's fellow citizens would have heard the speech in the same way. The question is both historical and, more important, a pretext for countering the ideological bias in Loraux's interpretation. The documentary record does not provide direct evidence regarding actual use of the oration, but Cicero does

remark that the Athenians had the speech recited during their annual memorial festival because of its popularity.[20] It could be the case that the Athenians were so obtuse that they missed the parody. To believe that, however, one also has to believe that they had a near-total lack of sophistication despite being notorious in antiquity for their rhetorical proficiency, and that they saw no humor in the speech despite its use of comic techniques from well-known plays.[21] Most important, one has to overlook the institutional pairing of solemn and comic performances in Athenian civic life. Athenians would regularly enjoy parodies of political speech, speakers, and policies in the comedies that were staged during ritual periods of civic observance, and so it seems plausible that they might hear another performance from a well-known dialogue in the same way. Like others who appreciated Plato's text, they would have valued the speech precisely because it was parody; as citizens, however, they could not have been doing so to *reject* the funeral oration, much less reject democracy. The reason for the yearly recitation must have been closer to their use of comic drama: to protect themselves against unreflective use of their civic rhetoric. Thus, the parodic eulogy keeps serious and comic speech in tension with one another so that citizens can criticize themselves *and yet still have* their city.

Loraux provides a fine account of some of the technical maneuvers in the dialogue, particularly of the marking of generic conventions (and, with that, the excessive conventionality of the funeral oration), as well as the use of pastiche composition. Not surprisingly, the genre is shown to be thoroughly mechanized and thus an artificial form far removed from the reality of Athenian conduct in the world. Other techniques are employed as well, including word play, contradictory phrasings, exaggeration, and egregious euphemism. Better yet, the whole thing is identified as a recitation of a speech written by a woman who was composing some of it "on the spur of the moment" and most of it by piecing together "leftovers" from the Periclean oration (236b). Thus, the parodic copy is far removed from the serious discourse by a series of displacements, each of them involving another drop in legitimacy, and yet it also directly points toward the center of its target: the Periclean funeral oration with its concentric rings of Pericles, democratic discourse, and democratic government.

The key thing that Loraux misses is the laughter. If one looks not for "the semnos logos hidden in the funeral oration" but rather for the laugh lines, a somewhat different speech emerges, one that is consistent with its appreciation by a sophisticated audience.[22] In this speech, we hear of a community who would believe that they were *literally* autochthonous, from a land that then had to be, somewhat confusedly, both mother and fatherland, and who believed that they were the first humans and devoid of wildness and the inventors of food. These same fools thought they were a democracy when they really were ruled by aristocrats, and yet also thought that they made sure discriminations of virtue and wisdom when they actually were ridiculously egalitarian. Likewise, these Athenians have a noble history that proves to be a chronicle of unending war that along the way builds up a long list of peoples likely to resent them or worse. When the Athenian military habit and lust for empire lead to the disastrous expedition to Sicily and subsequent conquest by Sparta, well, that really was a war started by others, the expedition to conquer Sicily

was undertaken to liberate them, and Athens did not lose the war so much as abandon its plans, and in any case they were to be praised for their superlative restraint.[23] Likewise, Athens is a city with a history of civic discord, but not to worry about that, and if its fortunes continued to decline, that was only because they chose to let it happen.

Now this is a really funny speech. And read as such, it is not a speech that repudiates democratic Athens. What it does instead is to remind the Athenian citizens of how their achievements lie very close to their own worst tendencies.[24] Athens did not become Athens by following the advice to do "nothing too much," but it could become dangerous to itself by becoming subject to its love of excess.[25] Athens acquired and then paid dearly for its empire, and the recitation of this speech in the fourth century must have been one way to remind itself of the costs and of why it had to pay them. A polity that thrived on public speech likewise could consider how that speech tends to become formulaic, self-perpetuating, and increasingly delusional. And when the people rule, they would do well to recognize that an egalitarian society has specific tendencies to corruption, including indifference to merit while being distracted by popular spectacles.

Unlike Plato, the Athenian audience was committed to democracy, which they took seriously by enjoying public arts that could create a rich, polyvocal public culture. Parodic performance left all the abuses of public life intact, but it at least exposed the limits of public speech. Parody creates and sustains public consciousness first and foremost by exposing the limitations of dominant discourses: it counters idealization, mythic enchantment, and other forms of hegemony. But that is not enough. A vital public culture has to include more than a corrective mechanism. Parody not only reins in other public arts but also spins important threads in the fabric of democratic polity.

Constituting Public Culture

All of the media, arts, and discourses of public life will contribute to the ongoing, substantive articulation of political thought, but parody is an essential element of that mix. Parodic artistry crafts a productive articulation of public identity and agency through at least four operations: doubling, carnivalesque spectatorship, leveling, and transforming the world of speech into an agonistic field of proliferating voices. Note that these all are varieties of "comic refunctioning," rather than specific stylistic techniques.[26] They also have each received their most significant theoretical exposition in Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the novel; my argument consists largely in the extension of his insights from the literary genre to the broader field of the public sphere.[27]

I have already introduced the core operation of doubling direct address, but it is so important that it requires additional elaboration. Parodic imitation works, appropriately, at more than one level. The parody replicates some prior form and thereby makes that form an object of one's attention rather than a transparent vehicle for some other message; think of my daughter's miming of my gestures. Comic doubling

also introduces a profound ambiguity into the direct address. What once seemed to have one meaning now can have more than one meaning. As the *Onion* announced in a headline from its science section, “Standard Deviation Not Enough for Perverted Statistician.”[28] It turns out that there need not be a standard meaning for “standard deviation” (or the standard meaning contains some deviation). Such ambiguity in turn introduces a radical contingency: what was given now is shown as something that could be otherwise. Statisticians not only could be perverts on the side, but also could lust for extremes on the job. To get really crazy, one might imagine statistics being used to define morality or license unjust policies.

Parody does not stop with ambiguity. What begins as a binary reversal (father/daughter, science/morality) ultimately can put the binary under erasure. The full significance of the parodic function is evident when placing a parody and its target discourse side by side. Before being parodied, any discourse could potentially become all-encompassing (such is the dream of totalitarianism). Once set beside itself, not only that discourse but the entire system is destabilized. As the act of replication replicates, everything is potentially both where it is and beside itself. Now there are two possible responses to any discourse: that which it intends and the laughter of those who see it through the lens of its parodic double. Everything is left as it was, because the original discourse is not itself subject to any change and the comic recasting is patently ritualized; this is the conservative fact of parodic transformation. And yet everything is changed, for what was capable of becoming an all-encompassing worldview has been cut down to size, corrected against the “backdrop of a contradictory reality,” positioned to be set aside or otherwise not obeyed, and challenged to adapt toward the critique in order to continue to hold an audience; this is the radical fact of parodic transformation.[29] Needless to say, parody is neither radical nor conservative, but both at once.[30]

The core operation in this multilayered process is one that Bakhtin captures only with a suggestive observation, though one that points directly toward the idea of a public consciousness. In asking “What is distinctive about parody as a form?” Bakhtin looks at the parodic sonnets at the beginning of *Don Quixote*. He notes,

> In a parody on the sonnet, we must first of all recognize a sonnet, recognize its form, its specific style, its manner of seeing, its manner of selecting from and evaluating the world—the world view of the sonnet, as it were. A parody may represent and ridicule these distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the *image of a sonnet*.[31]

Not the sonnet but the image of the sonnet; not the speech but the image of the speech; not the father but the image of the father. This is a momentous shift politically. When the weight of authority is converted into an image, resistance and other kinds of response become more available to more people. Whereas the direct discourse automatically scripted responses in the form of the demand, that discourse now has been offered to the audience. The father’s demeanor (however progressive the father) implies that the child should listen until cued to speak; when the father’s act of speaking then is silently offered for viewing, his authority plummets. An image

can still tyrannize, of course, but that is where the laughter comes in. "Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically."[32] What is crucial to recognize, however, is that laughter depends on prior conversion of some part of the world into an image. One does not laugh so easily and fearlessly at the thing itself. By remaking the direct discourse into an image of itself, parody creates a virtual world in which one may play with what has been said and so think about it without direct consequences of reprimand, censorship, or punishment.[33] The free investigation that might follow is itself a high form of the playfulness that has been made possible by the conversion into the image. Public consciousness involves not only public address but also that public address can be recast from direct demands on the audience to images offered for reconsideration.[34]

Parody does more than just change the demand into the offer. It matters to whom the image is being offered and in what way. Of course, specific texts will attempt to construct specific publics according to discriminations of taste, and where one will cultivate the slim smile of urbane sophistication another will go for a belly laugh from the crowd. What is important, however, is that, one way or another, parodic form casts direct discourse into a carnivalesque spectatorship. The parodied object is held up to be seen, exposed, and ridiculed, rather than discussed, amended, and enacted. And it is offered to anyone who might be played for a laugh, that is, anyone in the most wide-open, mixed-up, unfettered public audience, rather than for peer review, formal deliberation, or informed consent. Note that this definition of the audience is a stock feature of stand-up comedy and late-night comedy shows as well as the *Onion* with its "American Voices" vignettes.[35] In these gambits, the comic quickly establishes that the audience is unruly, mixed, possibly drunk or stoned, maybe crazy, and at times also perhaps stupid, deluded, out of work, or otherwise deviant from the norms of serious, respectable, daytime routine.

Several steps are required to articulate the full significance of this definition of the audience. Once again, Bakhtin provides the key insight, this time while taking the rogue, clown, and fool as emblematic figures.

> These figures are laughed at by others, and *themselves* as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure: the entire being of characters such as these is, after all, utterly on the surface; everything is brought out on to the square, so to speak, their entire function consists in externalizing things (true enough, it is not their own being they externalize, but a reflected alien being—however, that is all they have). This creates that distinctive means for externalizing a human being, via parodic laughter.[36]

By doubling discourse into a self-consciously comic image of itself, and then casting that image before the most democratic, undisciplined, and irreverent conception of a public audience, parodic performance recasts the hermeneutics of public discourse in terms of a "fundamentally new attitude toward language and toward the word."[37]

Meaning now is that which can be offered to a profoundly mixed crowd, which in turn mandates the mixing of the direct discourses themselves.[38] And validation now is provided by laughter. To be validated here means to survive in a particular sense, that is, to be accepted as what is revealed after disguises have been exposed, laid bare, dismembered, and otherwise cut down to size.[39]

It is easy, however, to emphasize only this analytical carnage, rather than to appreciate the prior and fundamental act of externalization. Being presented to the rowdy spectatorship of the carnival does damage enough to seriousness. The key operation is to reveal that what seemed to be identical with a particular mode of articulation in fact is otherwise. Externalization reveals that world exceeds discourse, which also falls short of its totalizing claims. What might have worked as direct demands on an audience already habituated to the address, now have been offered to a crowd whose very nature is not predictable. The conception of "a vital connection with the theatrical trappings of the public square, with the mask of the public spectacle," is undertaken to emphasize that public discourse is always and rightly subject to metaphoric transformations beyond the control of the author.[40] Whatever the purity of the discourse, casting it before a mixed audience allows it to become polluted. Whatever the authority of a discourse, those who are seeing it as an image, as a mask that has been revealed to be a mask, now have the capacity to judge whether it represents their own condition.

All public discourse externalizes a cast of characters, but only parody so radically reveals that there are actors behind the masks. Only through the shifts, slippage, and silliness of parody does the prior text become an obviously contrived performance. As the parodic techniques coalesce in the construction of a carnivalesque spectatorship, institutional forms are revealed to be masks, power and status are shown to be acts, and the key to success is not transcendental backing but rather some combination of backstage maneuver and audience gullibility.

This complex spectatorship is essential for public culture in itself and also has additional implications regarding its enactment. The comic inversions of standard and variant meanings, high and low classes, ideas and bodily functions, and other stock features of comedy all serve a more comprehensive leveling. Indeed, the single most pervasive element of stand-up comedy is to bring the topic, any topic, down to the body and all its desires, embarrassments, and infirmities. It is all profane, of course; the only difference is of degree. It also is textbook metonymy, the premier trope of reduction.[41] This (along with sheer silliness, and they often run together) is perhaps the area of greatest divergence between *The Daily Show* and real news. It also is evident in many other forms of political humor, including, though rather decorously, editorial cartoons. It also can appear in more sophisticated form, as when the *Onion* reports, "Pope Condemns Three More Glands."[42] There is no doubt about the ubiquity of bodily humor, only the question of how to properly frame its significance. My point is that it is the general form, at the most pervasive level of symbolic action, of the function of social and political leveling.

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. When put into public media and the widespread, uncontrolled dissemination that follows, comedy in democratic societies becomes a comprehensively available leveler.[43] This democratic sensibility is enhanced by another comic inclination: silliness. Briefly, for the leveling within the parodic performance to be fully effective, it may have to be disseminated at the simplest, most apolitical level of laughter. And, as the detractors of *The Daily Show*, the *Onion*, and other political humorists are quick to point out, much of the time such supposedly satiric commentary is just ridiculous. The humor starts with word play but quickly degenerates (another term of leveling) into people making poop jokes, men taking their shirts off to twiddle their nipples, altering photos or adding voiceovers to represent events that are patently impossible, interviewing people who are obviously nuts, and so forth. All of this, of course, is solidly in the tradition of late-night TV—think of Letterman getting into a tub of chocolate pudding, or of Carson's carefully staged idiocies—and before that of club comedy and of folk practices before that. It is both traditional and subversive, for only in the purely silly moment does laughter become as Kant described it: annihilating. "Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). *Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing*."[44] This may not be the only way, but is it one way in which great structures of domination can be leveled within consciousness. The annihilating laughter at the momentary triumph of the absurd is a moment of freedom.

The fourth means by which parody nurtures public culture is by portraying public life as a dynamic field of competing voices forever commenting on each other. As with leveling, this is part of democracy's social imaginary. Just as democratic citizens are equals before the law and equally entitled to public speech, so democracy often is defined as an arena of public debate. I want to suggest that parody advances a rich conception of that model, and, in fact, parody is necessary to sustain that model. Parodic imitation provides an internal brake on a process of natural selection and corresponding extinctions in the public forum. Because of parodic replication, distortion, and so forth, direct speech acquires a second, virtual reality beyond the control of the speaker. That embarrassing double, of course, reveals that its supposed better is far more like than unlike the double's embarrassments. The parodic model is constructed on every *Colbert Report* and in many other parodies, but it probably is represented best by the *Onion*'s report, "Tenth Circle Added to Rapidly Growing Hell." It almost goes without saying that this lowest circle of evil had to be designed for the legions of professional persuaders working for capital against the common good:

> Demographers, advertising executives, tobacco lobbyists, monopoly-law experts retained by major corporations, and creators of office-based sitcoms—these new arrivals represent a wave of spiritual decay and horror the likes of which Hell had never before seen. . . . We're really on the grow down here. . . . This is an exciting time to be in Hell.[45]

This parody is twice democratic: it warns against the totalizing discourse that can result from commercial persuaders enchanting the public, and yet it explicitly recognizes that those "publicists," "lobbyist," "media whores," and the like are here to stay—all-too-human makers of the public culture streaming into Hell in large numbers precisely because they are so successful in this world.

The "Blockbuster Video-sponsored" Tenth Circle is not the Athens of the Periclean Funeral Oration or the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream," but it is the alter ego to such serious performances of democratic culture. Because of the ubiquity of parodic performances, public address is always shadowed by an alter ego, and one that is slightly daft, obviously deformed, and completely artificial. In short, public discourse is perpetually confronted with a true image of itself that it constantly tries to hide. This shadowing in turn highlights the essential polyglossia of the system and so resists the totalizing tendency of any direct discourse. Speech that can cover all things is reduced to one account among many, and not one out of many. As all discourses become "novelized," that is, as they are re-inflected by the inevitability of their display in other contexts, the domain of public speech becomes more oriented toward free response by an audience. Like the novel, parody "inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with the unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)."[46] Furthermore, one can see the hybridic, second-order, polyglot, dialogic character of public address directly in the parody, whereas it often is obscured in official discourses. "Thus, every parody is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another."[47] Each parody is a version of the whole system in miniature. Stated otherwise, each parody presents an image of the public culture, whereas each direct discourse is an attempt to remake the culture in its own image. In sum, the long-term effect of a public culture alive with parody is an irreverent democratization of the conventions of public discourse, which in turn keeps public speech closer to its audiences and their experiences of the public world.[48]

This last step completes the Bakhtinian model, for at this point the panoramic view of the field of play leads to not merely a wider range of texts but rather a transformation of the original system. The key observations are these:

> Thus we see that alongside the great and significant models of straightforward genres and direct discourses, discourses with no conditions attached, there was created in ancient times a rich world of the most varied forms and variations of parodic-travestying, indirect, conditional discourse. . . . [T]his world was unified, first of all, by a common purpose: to provide the corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, languages, styles, voices; to force men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them. . . . In the second place, all these forms are unified by virtue of their shared subject: language itself, which everywhere serves as a means of direct expression, becomes in this new context the image of language, the image of the direct word. . . . I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking,

> reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch.[49]

This is a key moment in the genesis of the dialogic imagination, and it can illuminate the conditions of emergence, the formal operations, and the cultural products of modern literary innovation.[50] Consider this last implication. Just as the novel is "an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another," modern literary culture becomes a larger version of that system.[51] Likewise, one might imagine that the genres of political parody produce a public culture that is an immense cacophony of discourses organized through performance. One might call this culture the public address system.[52] Stated otherwise, the reason that there is no Great American Novel is that we already have one. US public culture has all the features of "the immense novel" that Bakhtin imagines: all the genres of direct discourse that have been produced along with the parodic doubles that mark them as genres and render the entire system "multi-styled, mercilessly critical," and otherwise capable of being constantly regenerated.

This idea of an immense novel is a totality but one shot through with contradiction. The public sphere coheres not by things held in common but rather through the constant agitation and interference created by iterating, appropriating, attacking, and parodying other discourses. Thus, the emergence of a public culture parallels the shift from the premodern travesty world to the modern novel. As both the novel and public address more generally reflect the formalization of this heteroglossia, they each become defined against two myths: "the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified."[53] As a result, "the author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with *almost no direct language of his own.* The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language."[54] Likewise, as discourse becomes folded back on itself, the "public" becomes both audience and author and known by omnipresent participation in the system rather than the authority of any one form of address. All that is needed to complete the analogy is Bakhtin's sense of what is achieved by this hybridization: "It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself, and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality."[55]

Note also that these are crucial features of a well-functioning democracy. That is, a democracy, conceived as a communication system, is a set of procedures, practices, and norms for bringing discourses into contact with one another. By articulating, comparing, judging, brokering, and synthesizing the varied discourses of their society, citizens become equipped to negotiate plural interests based on realistic accounts of self, other, and a world of change. More to the point, democracy does not have a direct discourse of its own: not critical reason, not democratic deliberation, not civic republican eloquence. As I have argued elsewhere, this was Isocrates' deep

insight into the *logos politikos* and the most important reason for his emphasis on artful imitation rather than *techne* in civic education.

> [B]y locating the process of imitation (and, therefore, the best means for the reproduction of right speech and just polity) within the culture of the city, political discourse itself is redefined. The *logos politikos* is not a single code or original text, but a creative process through which many speakers and audiences collaborate to invent ever more eloquent statements of who they are and what they should do. More important, *no one speaker can speak the logos politikos*. It is the voice of the city: polyglot, multifaceted, and openly adaptive to a myriad of new circumstances. It is something that one can't even hear at once—and so there is need for habituation and reflective appropriation. It can be imitated, but only in part; most important, *it can only be imitated, never spoken directly*.[56]

To extend the argument, genres such as parody play a particularly crucial role in keeping democratic speech a multiplicity of discourses. Since the city can only speak through a plethora of voices, all are necessary; since no one can speak the voice of the city, all are fallible. Thus, everyone is fair game for the comic's mimicry. Like the novel, public culture is defined not by the creation of a new, distinctively modern discourse of representation, but rather by the historical struggles that Bakhtin describes as the constant tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, that is, those forces that would "unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world," and those, such as parody, that would disrupt that process.[57]

Stated otherwise, parody, more than direct discourse, reveals the necessary play of alterity in the system. Granted, it is not the only means to that end, for democratic antagonism in conditions of relatively free speech will suffice much of the time. Political humor also can suffice, however, and it may be necessary to ensure that public discourse is destabilized beyond the prevailing standoffs, that competing parties are equally accountable in their race to the bottom, and that a sense of discursive agency is distributed broadly. Parody and other forms of political humor are workhorses in this regard, as they can take any other discourse outside of its given context of assertion and assent to show how things could be otherwise. The parody is not what it claims to be, to reveal that the discourse being parodied is what it claims not to be. This constitutional paradox, whether marked by Burke or Derrida, is equally true of the direct discourse, but denied there by a set of interdictions to inhibit any play of the system that would reveal its generation from something that it is not.[58] Needless to say, high seriousness and other aversions to silliness are just such operations.

So it is that public consciousness cannot be sustained for long without parodic imitation of the prevailing forms of pubic address. Other forms of speech such as formal debate will also generate awareness that public speech is both partial and disposed to exaggerate, but parody does it best. Direct discourses can succeed beautifully at projecting visions of solidarity and noble purpose, but those same visions can numb collective engagement and critical thinking unless they are not only contested but also mimed, mocked, and otherwise put beside themselves. Parodic public consciousness begins by transforming discursive demands into virtual images

that can be viewed and altered easily. These images are set within a practice of carnivalesque spectatorship where all speech is oriented toward externalization before a public audience capable of irreverent responses. That projection acquires additional potential for free response as it includes social leveling and the annihilating laughter provoked by silliness. As all speech genres are reproduced as parodic speech acts, the domain of free speech becomes defined as radically open because inherently fallible.

Modern Laughter and the World's Second Truth

If political humor is not merely superficial, the question remains as to how it acquires depth. The most likely answers need to be discounted. Bakhtin's celebration of medieval parody fits too easily into Freud's account of the joke as an indirect and somewhat involuntary discharge of repressed desire.[59] Modern laughter becomes a small consolation within a system of social constriction, while medieval laughter remains a lost carnival of unbridled excess. In this account, both liberalism and feudalism are conveniently forgotten. When bringing them back into the story, it becomes tempting to update the idea that humor is a universal means of coercion, whether to enforce a rigid social structure or the more fluid status alignments of private life. Although each of the several theories of humor can be true some of the time, the question remains whether there is a distinctively modern experience of humor that has not yet been identified adequately.[60] And if there is such a thing as modern laughter, and if it is the laughter reverberating through the public sphere, what might that reveal about politics and media today?

When laughter is distinctively modern, it cannot be understood entirely in respect to either repression or domination. Premodern laughter is all about maintaining and subverting hierarchy, as hierarchy is the most important social fact of premodern societies. By contrast, modern public culture has to be defined against kinship, clan, or ethnic identity or other hierarchical structures. Laughter in those structures is used to enforce domination, resist and endure it, and negotiate its gaps and slippages. But modern laughter is the laughter suited to living in modern civil society—that is, within mass media and among strangers. As modern identity is constituted by its characteristic practices of consumption and interaction, it depends on articulations of difference and continual bracketing of social ascription and exclusion. More commonly, it requires continual negotiation of the dangers of a highly media-intensive civic environment, which include enchantment, cynicism, and disorientation amidst the white noise of circulation.

Modern laughter is a reaction to the experience of mediation. As Marshall McLuhan claimed, media are extensions of human capability and desire.[61] That human element disappears in technological reification, only to be revealed again when a medium is refracted back on itself. Duplication of speakers, styles, and genres provides a unique way to see ourselves as creatures of our own making. This can happen through mirrors, pedagogical exercises, mechanical reproduction, or other means; parody makes this technique into an art form. As a culture forms around that art and those it mocks, a structure of feeling develops.[62] That structure turns what

might otherwise be a frightening experience—seeing the world being replicated—and makes it enjoyable.

Modern laughter is the shock of dislocation and delight that occurs when seeing that something is mediated rather than a thing in itself. This pleasure is also, for a social animal, the shock of recognition. What seems to be the world is actually known through the media and messages—in short, the other people—enveloping and shaping one's experience. People laugh at many things for many reasons, but they enjoy modern laughter when experiencing the liberating moment that comes from recognizing how perception is actually a projection, how projections become reality, and how people make it through this maze by stumbling forward in slapstick performances of their own making. Think of Plato's cave—as a comedy club.

Modern laughter does not enforce social ascriptions, but it is profoundly social. One sees both that other people are already there in the discourse or image being mocked—people who are behind, beside, or beyond the artifact—and that one already is in relationship with them. Sometimes one laughs at seeing them exposed; sometimes the laughter is to acknowledge and appeal to them. That laughter also captures a moment of inelasticity: what was thought to be organic is shown to be artificial and therefore somewhat rigid. Despite the constantly shifting dynamics of human interaction, there we are in the family photo looking like every other family. Despite the complete contingency and inevitable folly of political action, there are the political leaders standing like every other official in a suit and a smile. Despite near-total dependence on the press, there they are shown to be clowns running a dumb show.

This laughter completes the rhetorical arc from speaker to audience while also reverberating back along the medium of communication. The parodic intention is completed by laughter—nothing else is needed. To take just one example, consider a video clip from the *Onion Network News* that reports on the Army's Bring Your Daughter To War Day.[63] The clip contains multiple parodies: the opening logo, newsroom, and well-groomed talking head foreground perfectly the conventions of TV news; the photographs and video supposedly from Iraq mimic the soft news coverage of military deployment; the basic conceit plays with the feminist ritual for socializing girls to work outside the home. Along the way, smaller motifs include military recruitment materials and the cute kid interview. All this converges back on how news coverage normalizes the continuing carnage of the war itself. "Organizers called this year's event the most successful so far. Only four girls were killed, down from a dozen last year, making it the most accident free on record." Like the post-surge coverage in the real news, military fatalities now are acceptable while war is treated as no more meriting documentary journalism than the ordinary day at work. This satiric message is an added value, however; the laughter comes first and for the simple reason that the public's experience of war is shown to be so inappropriately yet inescapably mediated.

The refraction of mediation back onto itself permeates modern humor at every level. Conversation is punctuated with laughter as it consists of the many turns of phrase, discursive splices, small imitations, and other techniques for marking the

media that saturate everyday life and especially the political process. The editorial cartoonist's frequent combination of the stock images from one event with another is a case in point: as political leaders are portrayed as, say, hurricane victims or Olympic athletes or students on spring break, the media and the social types they reproduce are folded back on themselves. Likewise, by applying catch phrases from TV sitcoms, the latest advertising campaign, or some politician caught off the record, editorials, speeches, and everyday conversation become stippled with laughter about specific failings, while politics itself becomes mediated by a structure of feeling that is essentially comic. This is especially so whenever the various genres of popular media are subjected to parody. As we laugh at YouTube send-ups of commercials, music videos, every film and TV genre, and more, in every case media are being folded back on themselves to put some part of the mediascape beside itself. Thus, modern laughter decenters the viewer as well, moving the spectator from an imaginary center to the side of the genre on display.

So it is that modern laughter helps constitute the modern public sphere. It does so by confirming and continuing a form of spectatorship. That is, modern laughter is the applause given in a civic theater devoted to performances in which the discourses of public life are doubled, unmasked, and remediated. As these are likely conditions for social critique and democratic renewal, they deserve elaboration.

First, it becomes clear that each of the major discourses featured in Habermas's original model was a means for the virtual representation of direct discourse: the conversation of the salons, the newspapers, and the literary works of bourgeois reading were all, like parody, converting direct discourses into images. Michael Warner has recognized the enormous significance of this double consciousness, one might say, of the folded nature of public consciousness before any other disjunction or irony can occur. Warner is worth quoting at length:

> In addressing indefinite strangers, public discourse puts a premium on accessibility. But there is no infinitely accessible language, and to imagine that there should be is to miss other equally important needs of publics: to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing ... So, in publics, a double movement is always at work. Styles are mobilized, but they are also framed as styles. Sometimes the framing is hierarchical, a relation of marked to unmarked. Sometimes the result can be more relativizing. Quite commonly, the result can be a double-voiced hybrid. Differential deployment of style is essential to the way public discourse creates the consciousness of stranger sociability. In this, it closely resembles the kind of double-voicing of speech genres classically analyzed by Bakhtin.[64]

Thus, rational-critical discussion depended on a process of aesthetic replication through which discourses could be marked as discourses and then assessed and, perhaps more important, accented and otherwise inflected in the retelling.[65] Those inflections were all based on a deep playfulness; more significantly, the specific inflections will have been precisely the means by which individual subjectivity and the characteristics of the national publics will have been developed and negotiated.[66] If

Habermas now concedes that the public realm is "wild," that only underscores the point.[67] It also makes parody all the more important for exposing how much disorder still remains within the more restrained forms of institutional governance. Whatever the target and method, however, rational-critical discussion is coeval with parodic composition at least to the extent that they each depend on the conversion of a discourse into the image of a discourse.[68]

Another corollary is that the bourgeois identification of its own class position and subjectivity with humanity in general, which Habermas identifies as the role of literary culture in the bourgeois public sphere, is in fact not unique to that class but a general feature of public consciousness.[69] The full significance of the hermeneutical shift from direct discourse to second-order discursive (and performative) images is marked by the claim that human being is something only fully achieved in the act of radical externalization. Stated baldly, one technique for creating the human is to have it emerge as the actor exposed when the theatrical mask is pulled aside. The basis for human identification lies in that gap between person and performance; only then can there be a basis for ethical judgment apart from institutional assessment of performative efficacy.

The operation is in fact twofold (appropriately enough): first, the parodic imitation replaces a text with the text's style (or the person with the social type); then the exposure of the style (or type) to ridicule allows the author, character, or person to emerge as a human figure from behind the mask. Stated otherwise, whereas every discourse will operate ideologically to naturalize specific forms of social identity, public discourse does the same, but with a twist. The articulation of the human through externalization makes public spectatorship absolutely crucial to human life. What is at least as important is that full externalization can only occur if there is laughter, and laughter can only be assured over time if the audience is mixed and there are performers ready to try anything for a laugh.

Equally important is the manner in which parody negotiates the division of labor between performance and spectatorship. One might describe parody as the modality that provides a rhetorical education for spectators. Parody is a tried and true technique for learning the conventions of any genre, which probably is why adolescents love the stuff.[70] Now, where might one acquire knowledge of the formal conventions and social assumptions of public speech? It is readily available to those few who apprentice within subcultures of democratic participation such as interscholastic debate, electoral campaigning, and legislative service. But most people never go there. When most citizens are spectators all of or almost all of the time, there is a need for civic performances that can provide the requisite rhetorical education via spectatorship. For many people, that education is provided by parody and other forms of political humor. As discourses are transformed into images, chopped up, and moved across multiple media, their conventions become highlighted as conventions. Moreover, in the modern public address system, citizenship requires recognizing the limits of a wide range of discourses from presidential inaugurals to television ads to soft news stories to terror alert codes. Every time one of these discourses is parodied, a particular set of conventions are marked while all discourses

are "novelized," that is, made potentially subject to the same displacement. As they provoke modern laughter, parody and other forms of political humor provide an education in the conventions, intended effects, and limits of persuasion.

Anyone recommending instruction in rhetoric always faces the question of whether it is imparting mere skills or something better than that. I shall conclude by asking whether, by looking at laughter, one can discern the horizon of possibility for political and perhaps even spiritual transformation in the present age. Bakhtin's observation on another era might provide some direction:

> Medieval parody, especially before the twelfth century, was not concerned with the negative, the imperfections of specific cults, ecclesiastic orders, or scholars which could be the object of derision and destruction. For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology. It was the world's second truth extended to everything and from which nothing is taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter.[71]

Here parodic laughter is taken beyond a merely reformist agenda to counter the most profound restriction in medieval culture. There the world's first truth as told through the direct discourses of the Church, the universities, and other official voices was that this life was fallen, miserably corporeal, hopelessly inferior to the life after death that was distant and perhaps lost forever. Against this background of divine judgment and ecclesiastical control, laughter revealed a second world within the first, a heaven on earth of sensory pleasures, the simple joys of association, and the insistent resurgence of every kind of life regardless of whether it served any higher purpose or not. First, a world defined by a cosmic drama of sin and salvation, then "the second revelation of the world in play and laughter."

But that is not the truth that needs to be revealed today. The question for us is, what is the modern world's second truth? If one stays true to parody and Bakhtin's commitment to polyglossia, it cannot be one thing. Were it so, one might be tempted to say something like this: As the first truth of the modern world is to know the world scientifically and so to master it technologically, the second truth is to know ourselves as we are most human, speaking and scheming, always fallibly. Within the framework of a world that now can conceivably be known and made over in our own image, godlike, laughter then reveals that the knower is forever going to make a mess of things, like a magician's assistant attempting too much. Fittingly, this scenario's profundity comes from a Disney cartoon. But even that may be too serious. Perhaps the second truth is closer to the experience of playing a video game: everyone fails, all systems crash, the world ends, and yet life goes on. What else can it do? And what else can we do but, like Benjamin's Angel of History, look back over the wreckage?

But political humor does not look over the wreckage; it looks at the wreckage, often in intimate detail. So let me try again: I think that the deeper truth revealed by *The Colbert Report*, the *Onion*, and other forms of political parody is not just that politics and political coverage are in need of reform here, here, and there, although they certainly do that well. It is that the public media and democratic politics alike are

delusional, hopelessly self-absorbed, pathetically conventional, obsessively repetitive, emotionally out of control, *and always so*, but for all that still capable of being made accountable and of becoming realistic, altruistic, and redeemable for a while, perhaps in the next election and in any case in the next joke.

Notes

[1] Warren St. John, "Seriously, the Joke Is Dead," *New York Times*, May 22, 2005.

[2] Attention within communication studies has been paid to political humor at least since Jeffrey Auer's 1947 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* essay on Tom Corwin, and very recent scholarship has included fine studies of notable examples of political parody, satire, and the like. J. Jeffrey Auer, "Tom Corwin: 'Men Will Remember Me as a Joker!'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 33 (1947): 9–14; Martin J. Medhurst and Michael A. DeSousa, "Political Cartoons as Rhetorical Form: A Taxonomy of Graphic Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 48 (1981): 197–236; Barry Alan Morris, "The Communal Constraints on Parody: The Symbolic Death of Joe Bob Briggs," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 460–73; A. Cheree Carlson, "Limitations on the Comic Frame: Some Witty American Women of the Nineteenth Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 310–22; Adrienne E. Christiansen and Jeremy J. Hanson, "Comedy as Cure for Tragedy: ACT UP and the Rhetoric of AIDS," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 157–70; Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler, "Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 289–310; Kara Shultz and Darla Germeroth, "Should We Laugh or Should We Cry? John Callahan's Humor as a Tool to Change Societal Attitudes Toward Disability," *Howard Journal of Communications* 9 (1998): 229–44; John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10 (2000): 310–31; Helene A. Shugart, "Parody as Subversive Performance: Denaturalizing Gender and Reconstituting Desire in *Ellen*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21 (2001): 95–113; Chris Smith and Ben Voth, "The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How 'Strategery' and 'Lockboxes' Changed a Political Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39 (2002): 110–29; Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson, "The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 132–53; Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, "*Seinfeld*'s Democratic Vistas," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22 (2005): 390–408, and "Disciplining the Carnivalesque: Chris Farley's Exotic Dance," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (2006): 240–59; "Critical Forum: On *Doonesbury*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (2007): 77–92. I believe that these studies, like the wider literature on humor, comedy, and parody, provide ample evidence that there is little value in making strong, comprehensive discriminations between humor, comedy, parody, satire, wit, jokes, and the like, particularly when done to rule some genre out of court. There are differences to be marked for various purposes—see note 31 below—but no parsing of terms should distract from the primary focus of this essay, which is on parody. I have featured parody because I believe that it is an important form of political humor and the most vital and influential form of the past several years, and because it offers important resources for understanding culture.

[3] Mark Backman, *Sophistication: Rhetoric and the Rise of Self-Consciousness* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1991).

[4] See the discussion in Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 119. I find Rose's review of the history of erudition about parody to be the most useful. Other recent work includes Simon Dentith, *Parody* (New

York: Routledge, 2000) and Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

[5] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Shovell, Henry Brereton, and Fred Rothwell (Project Gutenberg, 2003), chapter I, section v, http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/4352/. Bergson lays out the problem with reference to the relationship between gesture and speech in oratory. There is an element of romance in his thinking, however: "The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself" (19). Whatever the insight or affirmation here, Bergson has to deny (a) the reality of life as it is lived, not least the nature of ethical obligation; (b) our artificial nature as users of language and other tools and the role of culture that both gives meaning to life and exists only through iteration; and (c) the truth that some of the best things in life can occur only in the second time. Even so, the essay remains one of the great works on comedy.

[6] Christopher Stone, *Parody* (London: 1914), quoted in Rose, *Parody*, 26.

[7] Fred W. Householder, Jr., "Παρωιδια," *Journal of Classical Philology* 39 (1944): 1–9, quoted in Rose, *Parody*, 7.

[8] Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 395. See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

[9] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 53.

[10] Rose, *Parody*, 52.

[11] Full comparison of parody and the art of rhetoric should include the following comic reversal: What if, instead of the development of classical rhetoric, with wit a subtopic within that art, the Greek sophists had developed an art of comedy, with rhetoric (strategic maneuver) merely a subtopic within that art? Plato still would have had plenty to dislike. Many concepts might have been much the same, but the parodic inversion could lead to imagining other forms and a different history.

[12] Robert Siegel, ed., *Dispatches from the Tenth Circle: The Best of the* Onion (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 5.

[13] Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

[14] This technical, philosophical, and attitudinal alignment of the art of rhetoric with parodic imitation is felt most directly within the genre of the epideictic. For an outline of the genre, see Yun Lee Too, "Epideictic Genre," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 251–57. Jeffrey Walker argues that epideictic discourse "shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture live." *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9. This claim grants considerable political significance to display, albeit with too neat a division of labor with pragmatic genres that also negotiate values rather than merely apply them. Scott Consigny suggests an additional function by demonstrating that parody was Gorgias's master trope and the comedic character of the *alazon* his preferred role in his epideictic performances. *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 167–77, 192–97. In sum, parody lies within epideictic discourse, which not only does (some of) the serious work of forming deep sources of civic action, but also can provide an equally important critical function through the public formalization of language beside itself.

[15] Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 310.

[16] Note that Loraux and R. E. Allen disagree on whether Plato has Pericles or Thucydides as his primary target. It seems safe to say that both are nailed, with the question of primacy best determined by the reader's interest. R. E. Allen, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 323–27.

[17] Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 312.
[18] Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 314.
[19] Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 327. The dialogue strongly supports this last claim: e.g., *Menexenus,* 324a–336d and 338c–339a.
[20] This is the standard gloss on Cicero, *Orator* 44.151, e.g., in *Orator*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[21] Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 311–12, 321–23.
[22] Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 323.
[23] If this is not a perfect template for the conservative history of the Vietnam War, I do not know what is. See, for example, Richard Nixon's statement that the US had demonstrated a level of restraint unmatched in the history of nations. *Hearts and Minds*, VHS, directed by Peter Davis (1974; Beverly Hills, CA: Rainbow Pictures).
[24] Drawing on Robert Connor, I argue that this is an element of classical prudence, in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice*, ed. Robert Hariman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 8–12. W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 65.
[25] That advice, which was inscribed on the temple to Apollo at Delphi, is featured in the serious corrective to Athenian folly that Plato supplies at the end of the speech. Plato, *Menexenus*, trans. R. E. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, 247e.
[26] The literature of humor is filled with attempts to provide formalistic definitions of parody and the many related forms of comic variation. Situating those accounts within the tradition of rhetoric reveals that the techniques are in fact much more broadly distributed. Gary Saul Morrison argues that parody can never be adequately explained by the technical devices used because the unit of analysis has to be the utterance. "Parody, History, Metaparody," in *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 63–86.
[27] Bakhtin argues that premodern parody created a broad field of discourses but was "homeless" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 59); that is, it lacked the genre that could incorporate parodic doubling and heteroglossia into a system of discourse. This is a key insight into the modernity of the novel and its importance in the literary public sphere. It also can mislead, as the discursive field continued and grew within the modern print media to become the larger, more inchoate system. See M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" in *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60–102. That is, novels themselves are imitations of the field in which they exist, the public address system, and to see that system one has to step outside the literary enclosure of parodic functioning that is implied by Bakhtin's historical narrative.
[28] Siegel, *Dispatches*, 39. This "headline" also is an excellent example of the primary technique for creating both ambiguity and the parodic effect: *hybridization*, or the "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 358).
[29] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 56.
[30] The questions of whether parody (and related forms such as satire) are more critical or appreciative, progressive or conservative, and the like, have been much discussed. See Rose, *Parody*, 45–53. There also is a history of fussing about the distinction between parody and satire; generally, satire need not imitate the structure of its object while parody must do so, and satire presumes a more stable commitment as opposed to the greater ambivalence of parody. See Rose, *Parody*, 80–86. Recent studies of satire include Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).
[31] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 51. "Image" in this English translation refers to the Russian word *obraz*, which can mean image while also being the word for icon. Bakhtin also is punning against *obrazetz* or sample. Thanks to Gary Saul Morson for instruction on this point. See also his parodic work by Alica Chudo, *And Quiet Flows the Vodka, or When Pushkin Comes to Shove: The Curmudgeon's Guide to Russian Literature and Culture with the*

Devil's Dictionary of Received Ideas: Alphabetical Reflections on the Loathesomeness of Russia, American Academia, and Humanity in General, ed. Andrew Sobesednikov (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

[32] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 23.

[33] Note that there is an unexplored relationship between the idea of the "image of a language" and the role of visual images in public culture.

[34] Note that this point also implies the importance of taking style seriously in the study of public discourse. Parody is always a representation not of a specific text but rather its style and, likewise, not of a specific person but rather the social type or protocol. If parody is representative of public consciousness generally, then that consciousness must include a trafficking in styles.

[35] This is the current title for the section titled "What Do You Think?" in previous years.

[36] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 159–60.

[37] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 21.

[38] This effect can be created by other means outside of comedy, such as the addition of women in the nineteenth century to produce the "promiscuous audience." The initial transgression carried some of the features of parodic duplication and was counterattacked with explicit derision. Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Women's Rights Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 191–207.

[39] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 23–24.

[40] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 159.

[41] Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 503–17.

[42] Siegel, *Dispatches*, 167.

[43] This feature is valorized more by some theorists than others; Kenneth Burke perhaps makes the most of it, as the "comic corrective" consists precisely in the reduction of social distance that comes through deflating hierarchies and thereby restoring those caught up in forms of assent to their senses, their compatriots, and their need for others. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 34–74, 166–75; *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 208–12, 221–33. Other more explicitly prudential theories of political humor feature its function as an equalizer, social lubricant, and so forth (much like the alcohol also present in the standard model): humor reduces partisan hostility and also the inevitable gap between rulers and ruled by bringing people to see past their differences to a common fallibility and shared experiences. (Note also that humor converts those differences into images of difference, which then can be set aside more easily.) See Charles E. Schutz, *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1977). Schutz sees political humor through the rosy lenses of dramatism and humanism. One source may be Kenneth Burke's signature statement on the comic: "Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity*. . . . The progress of humane enlightenment 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" (Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41). Perhaps the best popular example of prudential humor is the series of collections by Paul F. Boller, Jr. on wit and other comic episodes in congressional and presidential history: e.g., *Congressional Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). These approaches can be either too large or too narrow for constituting a public world: the first applies to all symbolic action, the second to the political class. This last interest is, of course, a topic in the history of rhetoric. See, e.g., Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.217–34; Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtier*; and so on. See also Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Chris Holcomb, *Mirth Making:*

The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, ed., *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997). A more contemporary public art is the editorial cartoon; see, e.g., Edward J. Lordan, *Politics, Ink: How America's Cartoonists Skewer Politicians, from King George III to George Dubya* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). More generally, see Maurice Charney, ed., *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, 2 vol. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); Wes D. Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre: "Never Give a Saga an Even Break"* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Dan Harries, *Film Parody* (London: BFI Publishing OR British Film Institute, 2000); Jonathan Gray, *Watching with* The Simpsons*: Televison, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). At the edge of the spectrum are mock candidates and street theater: e.g., L. M. Bogad, *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[44] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 54, 201.

[45] Siegel, *Dispatches*, 60.

[46] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 7.

[47] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 76.

[48] Simon Critchley's observation about the relationship between joke structure and social structure is particularly useful here: "in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure—no social congruity, no comic incongruity." *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4. A restatement of the enthymematic element in any joke, Critchley's insight also looks back to Bergson's emphasis on the social function of laughter, specifically, to mark the rigidity that inhibits optimal social interaction. That formulation can mislead, however, as both the individual and the social structure can be sources of rigidity. Nor are they symmetrical: where the individual might nonconform, the society can tyrannize. Thus, Critchley's claim might be adjusted to better reflect Begson's claim that comedy operates at "the border-line between art and life" (*Laughter*, 55). Parody not only reflects a social structure; it also marks and adjusts the relationship between a discursive convention and social reality. Society may be out of whack with its discursive order (say, its ideals), or the discursive form (at any scale—myth, speech, or phrase) may no longer reflect social experience. The result is the same: the parodic composition creates an image of what needs to be examined, an image now isolated from the modal assumptions that allow it to escape notice otherwise. Comic distortion provides the key to seeing where incorrect alignment occurs between another discursive structure and the world it would describe. By folding the medium on itself, parody exposes distorted relationships between discourse and society.

[49] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 59–60.

[50] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 60.

[51] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 361. Bakhtin adds, "a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image of another language." This singleness of purpose would apply only to the literary work, if there, and not to the discursive field of which it is a model and which would have multiple intentions.

[52] Thanks to Ron Greene for promoting the system metaphor in the study of public address: "Rhetorical Pedagogy as a Postal System: Circulating Subjects through Michael Warner's 'Publics and Counterpublics,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002): 434–43.

[53] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 68.

[54] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 47.
[55] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 39.
[56] Robert Hariman, "Civic Education, Classical Imitation, and Democratic Polity," in *Isocrates and Civic Education*, ed. Takis Poulakos and David Depew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 225.
[57] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 270.
[58] Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 21–23; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93.
[59] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). I am necessarily simplifying, not least because Freud allowed that jokes differ from dreams by being thoroughly social. Those using psychoanalysis today would emphasize its value in charting the distribution of tensions within economies of symbolic exchange.
[60] Other theories of humor from those mentioned so far include discharging social tension, discharging formal tension, creating pleasure via incongruity or play, sublimating cynicism or absurdity, reasserting radical freedom, and creating community.
[61] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).
[62] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 48–71. Thus, emotional responses such as laughter reflect patterns of experience developed over time in collective interaction and articulated through the intermediate realm of culture rather than in either vernacular or official discourses alone.
[63] "Army Holds Annual 'Bring Your Daughter to War' Day," *Onion*, March 24, 2008, http://www.theonion.com/content/video/army_holds_annual_bring_your/.
[64] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 108.
[65] Davide Panagia, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) argues for the importance of aesthetic assumptions in political theory.
[66] On playfulness as a constituent of human action, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) and Lanham, *Motives of Eloquence*. For a recent example of the debate between advocates of comedy and seriousness, see the forum essays on *The Daily Show* in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (2007): 262–83, which includes my essay, "In Defense of Jon Stewart," 273–77.
[67] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
[68] Obviously, the virtual representation of other discourses will differ as it happens through rational-critical discourse or parody. A note on critical method may apply here. Taking parody seriously can involve a series of operations: identifying and analyzing a parodic composition; including in the analysis of a serious discourse attention to parodic doubles of that discourse; reading either serious or parodic discourses in respect to the now "novelized" genre and the decentered intertext of the public address system; employing parodic exaggerations to discover and test ideas. Let me make one additional suggestion as well. Once a speech culture develops and in particular once genres become "novelized," the distinction between the "original" genre and parodic supplements begins to blur. As with Bakhtin's account of the structure of the utterance, every speech act is a response to a prior act. Thus, not only is the parody a response to the serious discourse that precedes it, but over time the serious discourse becomes a response to its parodic other. Thus, the direct discourse is no longer entirely prior to its comic double; in fact, *to be a serious discourse, it has to be selected or reconstructed as such out the parodic field.* Serious discourse (official statements, "real news," and the like) can't be so prima facie once implicated in the dialectic of seriousness and parody. To be serious, the discourse has to distinguish itself from doubled, exaggerated, or profaned versions of itself, and serious discourse can be shown to employ many techniques

to that end. Michael Calvin McGee made a similar argument in response to the inherent fragmentation of discourses in postmodern media environments: "Text, Context, and Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 274–89. McGee left the work of constructing the focal text to the critic, rather than considering how it is part of the process of discourse production.

[69] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 56.

[70] Gehring notes how parody provides the tools for learning an artistic genre's conventions. *Parody as Film Genre*, 3.

[71] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84.