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ASSESSING THE BALANCE – BURKEAN FRAMES AND *LIL' BUSH*

By

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B.A., Transylvania University, Lexington, KY, 2008

Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Theoretical Basis	2
Political Knowledge	3
The Viability of Entertainment TV	7
Political Context	19
In Time of War	19
The Primacy of the Executive	20
Staging the Presidency	22
The Public Disillusioned	24
The Culture of Fear	26
Overview of the Artifact	28
Preview	31
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework	32
The Power of Satire	32
Satire Defined	32
Engaging the Status Quo	36
The Limitations of Satire	39
The Distinction of Satire	43
Rhetorical Functions of Humor	46
Chapter 3: Analysis	51
<i>Lil' Bush's</i> Satiric Veneer	51
Plotline Analysis	54
Season 1 – “Mexican”	54

Season 2 – “Katrina”	61
Series-Wide Trends	70
Divisive Themes	70
Unifying Themes	73
Chapter 4: Conclusion and Implications	77
The Boundaries of Satire	77
Laughing at the Political System	79
Further Research	84
Conclusion	85
References	88

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Communication Studies

Assessing the Balance: Burkean Frames and *Lil' Bush*

Chairperson: Dr. Sara Hayden

In light of former president George W. Bush's remarkably low approval ratings during the later years of his administration, the Comedy Central program *Lil' Bush* seemed to be a satiric outlet for societal angst. A closer examination of the show, however, reveals that its content is funny, but does more to entertain than it does to criticize. Using the dichotomy of Burke's comedic and humorous frames as a standard for analysis, this thesis probes the program to determine the nature of its humor. Although the show does include some critiques of George W. Bush and the federal executive branch as a whole, it does not do so with enough gusto to catalyze hard-hitting satire. In fact, the show's efforts are mostly comedic, in Burkean terms, and lend themselves more toward a happy romp than a scathing criticism. Since the show's target audience is "the irony demo," a slice of society whose political knowledge is gained from consumption of entertainment than it is from more traditional sources (e.g. the nightly news), its failure to live up to its satiric veneer may have a significant impact on this group's political engagement.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rhetorical analyses surrounding the George W. Bush administration generally explore one of two broad categories: the rhetoric *of* the former president, and the rhetoric *about* him. The first category, exemplified by articles such as Birdsell's (2007) examination of Bush's "signing statements," provides valuable insight into the dissemination of presidential rhetoric in a democratic republic that increasingly views the executive branch as the most important component of the entire federal governmental system (Crockett, 2003; Lim, 2008). The second category, including work such as VanderHaagen's (2008) analysis of the heated discussion surrounding Bush's delivery of the commencement address at Calvin College, reflects the American public's engagement in governance. Both kinds of investigations are vital to understanding the maintenance of democracy in the United States. This particular study narrows itself to the latter focus—the public's discussion *about* the George W. Bush administration.

The Comedy Central program *Lil' Bush* aired at the conclusion of the administration of the former president it caricatures. The following chapter makes a case for the program's valuable role in public discourse about Bush. It has the capability to disseminate political knowledge, given the highly mediated nature of political knowledge in the current climate (Jamieson 2000), and thus influence public opinion while simultaneously embodying the public mindset and venting frustration about various political issues through a sort of humorous safety valve (Gilbert, 2004). This is an important area of study in the current climate of United States political involvement: as I will address, discursive integration has blurred the lines between purely informative

television, i.e. traditional news programs, and so-called “entertainment” television. As the genres slowly merge, rising numbers of 18- to 34-year olds appear to be choosing to gain their political information from comedy programs—numbers roughly equal to those within this demographic that get their knowledge from traditional news sources. The implications of this examination will prove useful to a broad understanding of the nature of political communication in the current incarnation of our mass-mediated democracy.

In this chapter, I begin with a review of pertinent scholarship, including literature about political knowledge and the discursive integration of the television medium. I then proceed to provide a brief overview of the political climate of the United States during the George W. Bush administration, focusing especially on various rhetorical analyses of issues surrounding his presidency. This is necessary to establish a general impetus for studying an artifact so thoroughly rooted in pop culture—its importance as a potential reflection of and catalyst for broader social consciousness must be recognized. Next, I briefly introduce the artifact being analyzed—the Comedy Central program *Lil’ Bush*. Finally, I offer a preview of the thesis chapters to come. My analysis will show that, although *Lil’ Bush*’s position in the political entertainment genre gives it room to disseminate productive critique of an unpopular executive administration and although some of the program’s jokes are satirical, its sometimes confusing mix of Burkean frames prevents it from being the hard-hitting critique its promotions made it appear to be.

Theoretical Basis

The outline presented here will include a brief homage to the acquisition of political knowledge in modern U.S. culture, and the progressively declining appeal of traditional news vs. the rising popularity of political entertainment television. The first

will provide some groundwork for the basic rhetorical lens through which the artifacts in question can be viewed within the broader spectrum of comedy. The other two spheres make apparent the importance of shows like the one being analyzed in its contemporary climate of political entertainment.

Political Knowledge

This brief overview addresses the building blocks of operative political knowledge, what drives citizens in a democracy to acquire such knowledge, and the sources from which it emanates. This will illuminate the analysis of *Lil' Bush* by positioning it within the sphere of potential political education and emphasizing its resonance with the 'irony demo' (Learmonth, 2006), a crucial group for the show's potential political effects.

The most basic consideration in a study of political knowledge is its smallest unit: the political fact. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) observe that while attitudes are the driving force behind political behavior, the simple bits of information behind those attitudes are pivotal aspects of democratic engagement in the sense that they drive the extent to which a citizen is "well-informed." The scholars note that "factual knowledge is the single best indicator of sophistication and its related concepts of 'expertise,' 'awareness,' 'political engagement,' and even 'media exposure'" (p. 1180) and is also related to participation, voting efficacy, and opinionation. Political belief systems are based upon acquisition of these facts: in particular, the number of facts acquired, the span of these facts in the political universe, and the sense-making organization of these facts. To an extent, acquisition of political facts is related to demographic factors:

For example, women were generally less politically informed than men, but this was less true for issues like abortion or women's suffrage. Young adults were less

informed about most aspects of politics than were older adults, but not about political institutions and processes, which is regularly taught in the schools. And strong partisans were more likely than others to know the partisanship of Nixon, FDR, and Truman, and which party controls Congress (p. 1185).

Various scholars bemoan the dearth of political facts in the mindset of modern American citizens. Baym (2007), for example, notes that

Historically, while 46% of people have insisted they could name their representative, only 29% actually could. Specific polls cited by Delli Carpini and Keeter found that at various moments in time, 73% could not name two branches of the federal government, 70% did not know the length of a representative's term, 55% did not know that Congress declares war, and 41% did not know that the president does not have the authority to adjourn Congress (p. 360).

The somewhat incredulous tone of the above excerpt illustrates the perceived importance of basic political facts for the perception of meaningful participation in democracy.

One of the driving factors behind the acquisition of these nuggets of political information stems from individual self-interest—the “market” approach to politics. Increasingly, however, scholarship recognizes social involvement as an additional, perhaps complimentary, impetus for political learning. People tend to process information from the perspective of their group memberships, thus participating in the dialogic public “forum” (Baym, 2005; LaMarre et al., 2009). VanderHaagen (2008) cites the motivating qualities of the “social imaginary”—the realm in which people interpret information according to “the way they imagine they fit together with others,” or the “constellation of identities, traditions, beliefs, and practices” that “constitutes the perceived and lived reality of a community” (p. 557). The “social imaginary” is the realm in which political culture congeals and citizens mesh “official” political facts with their everyday work and leisure experiences. The current political climate in the U.S., in fact, is one in which the

acquisition of political knowledge has become a primarily leisure-time activity that is cognitively linked with play and social enjoyment. As such, it is important to note that political learning regularly competes for attention with other leisure-time and social activities, many of which are ostensibly more fun (Baym, 2007).

Having established citizen's general motivation for acquiring political facts, it is also crucial to acknowledge where these facts originate. Hodges (2008) notes that "Political discourse is marked by the struggle over the representation of ambiguous issues" (p. 485). This "politics of representation" determines the meanings that the members of the public forum apply to political facts. Thus, in a democratic society, dissemination of information and the linguistic manipulation that accompanies it is very much a reflection of power and control (Ferrari, 2007; Hodges, 2008). For better or for worse, the majority of the citizen body has almost no direct contact with politicians at the federal level. As such, apparent control over political information in the United States has been relegated to the media, upon which citizens are dependent for their political facts. Jamieson (2000) notes that

With each passing election, American politics is increasingly defined by its mediated nature. The more powerful the media's role in disseminating campaign information, the more motivated candidates will be to tailor their messages and images to the media's requirements (p. 15).

Because the media has this power, it is capable of constructing the imagined social reality that forms the lens through which people perceive politics, and thus it plays a pivotal role in attitude and belief formation (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007). People are subjected to value-laden media framing of events that can impose perceptual boundaries around a problem and impact how it is defined, understood, evaluated, and resolved. This moral

framing in the media can either be the direct result of media efforts, such as sound bites or talking points, or ideological frames imposed upon the information released by the government itself, which is often prepackaged for sound-bite based reporting (Hodges, 2008; Spielvogel, 2005). Media dependency theory aside, though, it is notable that individuals with a better base of political knowledge—regardless of media boundaries—are more likely to resist the persuasive aspects of media presentation. High levels of partisanship and individual intelligence have also been shown to mitigate media effects (Young, 2004).

Postman (1985) notes that modern media has dictated that the presence of politicians in the public eye has become like that of any other breed of celebrity, and this phenomenon is especially true in the case of the office of U.S. president. The president has become the *uber*-representative, or the ultimate face of American politics toward whom the public looks as the ultimate source of political knowledge. Presidents from Wilson onward have embodied to some degree “the rhetorical presidency,” or the role of the ultimate interpreter whose job it is to persuade the public and energize the American political system. Crockett (2003) describes the phenomenon:

The presidency is now the most visible and important political institution. Under the demands of the rhetorical presidency, it is the president’s job to seek out public opinion and be responsive to it, aided by all the tools modern technology now provides. With rare exception, the president is the chief protagonist of the American political drama (p. 470).

The role of executive-as-superstar is evident in the factors that determine presidential approval ratings—perceived personal morality and physical attractiveness appear to be important factors (Konijn & Bushman, 2007). Rather than simply disseminating information, the modern celebrity president must construct a public persona and become

a friend of the media so that the citizen body will view his agenda favorably (Baym, 2007). This persona is almost completely mediated, since most members of the voting public will probably never meet their present in person. The president is therefore defined by their media persona to the point where “the signifier has no need of the signified, except as authenticating remains” (Taylor, 2003, p. 154). Thus, political facts have become synonymous with political personality, and are linked almost inextricably to media interpretation and the celebrity status of the president. Entertainment television that revolves around personifying the executive branch, then, has a valuable role to play in the American people’s perception of their government.

The Viability of Entertainment TV

Traditional news programs, whether they be network or cable, have begun to find the respectability of their niche threatened as their information-gathering methods become suspect and their content becomes increasingly less resonant with their target audiences. Entertainment television, on the other hand, remains quite popular, even when it adopts a political perspective. If trends continue to evolve in their current directions, it is possible that entertainment television could usurp the news media’s role as America’s political information source of choice.

The Decline and Fall of Traditional News

The ostensible role of traditional news media is a noble one: Walter Lippman referred to journalism as ‘the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision’ (Holbert, 2005, p. 437). In civic terms, the news is intended to transmit information to the people of the polis that they can use to make responsible decisions as caretakers of their democracy (Baym,

2007). The news has been America's primary source of televised political information since the medium became popular, evolving only in the sense that in 2000, more Americans turned to cable than to network news for political campaign information (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007)—although in a possible tip of the hat to decentralized democracy, local news remains the most popular genre of television journalism overall (Baym, 2007).

Recent survey data shows that trends might be shifting, however. A 2002 Pew Research Center study found that audiences for local, network, and cable news had declined across the board, and in particular among 18- to 24-year-olds (Baym, 2005). In fact, younger audiences are tending to veer away from traditional news in all its incarnations, including television and newspaper news. The vehemence of the trend among the up-and-coming generation is particularly notable, since the opinions of its members will continue to hold sway on cultural perceptions of the media in the future. Although it is tempting to blame this trend on the political inertia of youth, studies show that the same demographic possesses a strong desire to be politically informed—however, it finds traditional news uninformative, as do many Americans of other ages (Feldman, 2007).

In recent years, many critics argue, traditional news has begun to lose its veneer of objective respectability. Identifiable figureheads of the profession have ended their careers; Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather all did so within nine months of the 2004 presidential election season, taking their iconic personas into retirement with them (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007). Popular disenchantment with the news runs much deeper than disappointment at the loss of celebrity anchors, however. Glynn (2008) cites

Baudrillard's claim that "the very excess of media illusion plays a vital disillusioning role...for where better than on television can one learn to question every picture, every word, every commentary" (p. 239). Quite simply, audiences have become savvy to the spectacle of media tricks with which the news presents them (Baym, 2005). Feldman (2007) cites studies that have found audience's opinions of the news to range from "sensational," "trivial," commercial," to "graphic" (p. 408). Younger audiences feel that the news fails to represent their interests, despite placating efforts on the part of media outlets such as youth-targeted, entertainment-and-sports fixated tabloid inserts in newspapers. Overall, audiences feel that the news has begun to prioritize entertainment over information at the expense of its objectivity—although many viewers ultimately see news broadcasts as factual for all their sensationalism (Becker, Xenos, & Weisanen, 2010). Some critics deride the limited range of information available through the news; critics occasionally refer to traditional television news as a "narrowcast" rather than a broadcast (Baym, 2007). Others note that the news is simply not informative, citing research findings that a significant percentage of viewers cannot remember the content of news stories within a few minutes after their conclusion (Postman, 1985).

All of the broad symptoms of disenchantment with traditional news discussed above may have their roots in the limiting and sensationalistic nature of tactics employed by television news journalists. Baym (2005) notes that within the capitalist realm of modern television news,

Conglomeration has been accompanied by commodification, the reconceptualization of all media content not as public service but as products packaged for profit, and of the audience not as citizens but as consumers. At the same time, however, media companies are pursuing strategies of market

segmentation, largely abandoning the one-size-fits-all model of earlier network programming in favor of narrowly targeted, demographic-based appeals (p. 262). This trend has resulted, in Baym's words, in "a variety of programming strategies ranging from the latest version of network 'news lite' to local news happy talk and 24-hour cable news punditry" (p. 259). These practices have come more firmly into vogue since Postman (1985) issued his famously damning critiques of "peek-a-boo" (p. 77) and "now... this" (p. 99) reporting that reduce news programs to prolonged trivia games of compartmentalized information (Baym, 2005). News broadcasts increasingly employ tactics used by the creators of fictional film, such as *mise-en-scene* reporting that subtly creates the illusion that the reporter was actually an eye witness of an event (Glynn, 2008; Konijn & Bushman, 2007). These creative ploys have, to some extent, warped the public's expectation that, in Habermasian terms, "the political-normative was assumed to be clearly distinct from the aesthetic-expressive, the domain of art and affect, pleasure and play" (Baym, 2007, p. 361). This is not to say, however, that viewers associate traditional news with pleasure and play: political news in particular is viewed as having an overwhelmingly negative bias (Peake, 2007). Indeed, consumption of television news has been shown to cultivate within viewers an increased fear of imminent disaster, coupled with a distinct lack of information about what might precipitate such catastrophe (Holbert, 2005). The resulting so-called "mean-world syndrome" gives the news an undesirable negative pathos: "Watch enough brutality on TV and you come to believe you are living in a cruel and gloomy world in which you feel vulnerable and insecure" (Glassner, 1999, p. 44). All of this theatricality results in an audience disposition toward disbelief:

Indeed, you tell me—which of the following stories were straight news and which were fake: an investigative report on whether the fighting in Lebanon was a sign of the Last Days; asking viewers to vote on whether we are in World War III; frequently updated at-the-scene reports that there was nothing new to report. And was it true or false that the White House gave press credentials to a prostitute who then would be called on to ask softball questions, and that the administration put supposedly independent journalists and clergy on the payroll, and prepared fake news stories with actors posing as reporters and distributed those stories as real news reports? Needless to say, this was all supposedly serious journalism and good government (Hariman, 2007, p. 275).

Political reporting itself has come under increased criticism, both in the sense that it fails to provide citizens with enough information to participate responsibly in their democracy, and in the sense that journalists have begun to more openly falter in their purported role as watchdogs, or “beams of a searchlight.” To begin with, the news media has begun to focus extensively on the executive branch as the epicenter of federal governance, a trend which may have contributed to the tendency for Americans to view the president as the ultimate source of political knowledge (Baym, 2007). Furthermore, reporters have seemingly begun to take marching orders from the White House. As the government has exercised increased strategy in its press releases (John et al., 2007, p. 196), reporters have begun to rely increasingly on information drawn from mainstream political opinion. In print news, counterarguments are generally discussed toward the end of articles, and ‘a lot of people don’t read that far’ (p. 196). Overall, even when news sources criticize mainstream opinion, they have to present arguments in order to critique them, which still gives them voice. The aggregate of these reporting tactics creates a societal perception of what Postman (1985) calls a news media “pseudo-context,” which

he says is “the last refuge, so to say, of a culture overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and incompetence” (p. 76).

The Entertainment Alternative

Within this context of failing reliance on traditional news sources, viewers—particularly younger ones—are turning to entertainment television as their political information source of choice. A 2004 Pew Research Center poll found that 21 percent of the 18- to 34-year-old demographic gained its information about the 2004 presidential election from comedy programs, a percentage that was double of the number that did so during the 2000 election and that was also nearly equal to the percentage of that demographic that got its information from traditional news media (Baym, 2005; Feldman, 2007; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007).ⁱ In a remarkable correlation, the 2004 election saw the highest turnout of voters in that same demographic seen in over a decade (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007). This cross-section of the American public has gained such a cohesive identity that analysts sometimes refer to it as ‘the irony demo’ (Learmonth, 2006, p. 18).

This is not to say that these viewers always watch political comedy programs in lieu of traditional news—in fact, comedy programs have been shown to perform a socializing function because they pique audience interest about the subjects they discuss, causing them to probe further through other media so that they may better understand the issues at hand (Feldman, 2007; Young, 2008). Furthermore, whether it be a result of the shows themselves or of their socializing function, regular viewers of political comedy programs, including talk shows, are shown to be better informed about current political issues than non-viewers (Holbert, 2005). Viewers of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*ⁱⁱ,

in particular, demonstrate greater campaign knowledge than their peers (Baym, 2005; Feldman, 2007; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007; Hariman, 2007), maybe in part because studies have shown that the program's campaign coverage contains as much political substance—if not more—than the coverage found on traditional news outlets. In fact, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have both been the recipients of the prestigious Peabody Award (Feldman, 2007; Jones, 2010). The educational value of political comedy programming has been attributed to a myriad of variables, including primacy, recency, and basic acquisition of political knowledge (LaMarre et al., 2009). In fact, Young (2004) speculates that viewers can actually gain knowledge especially well from political comedy programs because they enter the entertainment program without resistance—their anticipation of fun makes them more susceptible to information exposure. In the words of Meddaugh (2010), “As ‘cheap framing,’ soft news has more entertainment appeal and requires less cognitive effort, engaging audiences who otherwise may be less motivated in attending to public discourse” (p. 378).

The attraction of the public—especially “the irony demo”—to political comedy programs is based on several factors. One potent variable is the tendency of today's younger generations to integrate formerly distinct areas of culture, e.g. political culture and pop culture, so that Feldman (2007) cites Barnhurst (1998) in noting that “‘Understanding an issue comes scattershot from pop songs, TV commercials, documentary films’” (p. 408). The fact that the media is a driving force behind this integration should come as no surprise, since mass media has come to be recognized as a hot spot for cultural and political struggle (Glynn, 2008). Furthermore, in contrast to the ponderously negative spin of traditional news discussed above, political comedy is

happy. Baym's (2007) analysis of the "Better Know a District" recurring segment of *The Colbert Report*ⁱⁱⁱ notes that

From a cultural perspective, [*Better Know a District*] treats politics as play. It suggests that better knowing a district need not carry the onerous weight of citizenship, but can be a source of pleasure, a leisure-time activity that can compete in an entertainment-saturated environment (p. 375).

As such, *The Colbert Report* and other political comedy programs cater to audiences' desires for comfort, pleasure, novelty, and distraction (Baym, 2007; Learmonth, 2006; Postman, 1985), which in turn fuels their ability to encode political information (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007). Furthermore, the fact that political comedy programs have no pretense of being objective—comedians like Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert are well known for their *indignatio*—means that they uphold audience expectations when they present a controversial opinion rather than violating them like a traditional, "objective" news outlet would in a similar situation (Baym, 2005). *The Daily Show*, for example, routinely discusses perspectives on the media that traditional journalists are only able to reveal in their personal memoirs at the conclusion of their careers (Bennett, 2007). The somewhat fictionalized presentation inherent in political comedy programs does not seem to be a deterrent, both because traditional news seems increasingly entertainment-esque, and because, in the words of Konijn and Bushman (2007), "After all, most of us know world leaders only through the media, just like fictional characters" (p. 159). Finally, for many audience members, watching political comedy is a social experience that can be enjoyed with friends in a lighthearted manner that traditional news cannot. The social aspect of this kind of programming facilitates immediate emotional bonding and later debate over the talking points presented on the shows, catalyzing a rewarding experience

for viewers (Baym, 2007; Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010). In the end, entertainment television may embody the notion somewhat reluctantly cited by Postman (1985): “Janice Trebbi Richards of Holt, Rinehart and Winston asserts, ‘Research shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and television can do this better than any other medium’” (p. 150).

Merging News and Entertainment

The scholarship surrounding political entertainment culture has made clear that ‘the traditional distinctions between news and entertainment content are no longer very helpful’ and actually create a false dichotomy (Holbert, 2005, p. 437; Sienkiewicz and Marx, 2009). Postman (1985) argues that entertainment has co-opted all other forms of discourse, as exemplified by what he views as the dismal prospect of shows like *Sesame Street* that attempt to make learning fun. For some critics, this has precipitated the erosion of the cultural distinction between “high art” and “low art” (Feldman, 2007). Baym (2007), however, argues for a more positive stance toward the phenomenon. “Discursive integration,” as he calls it, entails a “fundamental rethinking of the possibilities of media and public discourse too often mistaken simply as infotainment” (p. 361). He elaborates that

Discourses of news, politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable; the languages and practices of each have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations. Although some may see this as a dangerous turn in the realm of political communication, it can also be seen as a rethinking of discursive styles and standards that may be opening spaces for significant innovation (Baym, 2005, p. 262).

Examples of this trend have emerged throughout the entertainment media:

Saturday Night Live features its “Weekend Update” news segment; Comedy Central has

housed the “fake news” programs *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Chocolate News*. Fox responded to the popularity of “fake news” with the creation of *The ½ Hour News Hour*, and CNN with *D.L. Hughley Breaks the News* (Alston, 2008). These programs were preceded by the emergence of the “new” or “soft news,” including programming like “tabloids, daytime talk shows, MTV, Letterman, and Larry King” (Feldman, 2007, p. 413) and comedic political commentary like *Real Time with Bill Maher* (Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010). Arguments have also been made for the political relevance of programs like *The Simpsons*, which works satire into broader narratives (Holbert, 2005), and *South Park* (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 2009), which demands that viewers critically engage its episodes with external political texts in order to make sense of storylines that have no clear internal meaning. For some critics, this merging of genres is advantageous: the hospital drama *ER* brought health care issues into the mainstream mindset, and scholarship surrounding the series *The West Wing* has shown that it increased public opinion surrounding the office of president for members of multiple political parties and provides the public with a new frame from which to view the office (Holbert, 2005). With the increased prevalence of discursive integration, Baym (2005) argues, audiences benefit from “an easily accessible and relatively unconstrainable information environment, expanding the boundaries of the public sphere to a ‘communicative space of infinite size’” (p. 261).

The public appeal behind this discursive integration has not gone unnoticed by the political elite, some of whom see value in the apparent ability to sidestep the gatekeepers of traditional news outlets (Schudson & Sonnevend, 2009). Political celebrity appearances on entertainment programs have occurred sporadically throughout the

history of the medium, including events such as Richard Nixon's appearance on *Laugh-In*, Gerald Ford's brief role on *Dynasty*, and the episode of *Saturday Night Live* hosted by Ralph Nader (Postman, 1985). Regular and concerted use of entertainment television for political purposes began in earnest, however, with the 1992 election, with candidates appearing on vox pop talk shows like Oprah and Larry King Live (Holbert, 2005; Young, 2004). Al Gore used talk show appearances to his benefit during the 2000 election (Young, 2004). More recently, the vast popularity of the "fake news" programs *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have made the shows a pivotal stop for political figures. ABC News correspondent George Stephanopoulos has noted that the comedy programs have become part of "the standard rotation; they're part of the atmosphere and help shape the conversation" (Learmonth, 2006, p. 17).

With 'The Daily Show's' 1.6 million viewers and Colbert's 1.4 mil [numbers that have since risen to 2 million for both programs (Alston, 2008; Baym, 2007)], the duo outweigh just about every show on cable news, short of Bill O'Reilly (whom Colbert calls 'Papa Bear'). When you count the multiple airings both shows get per day, and their far younger demo, Congress has clued in that they reach way more young people in their districts than 'The O'Reilly Factor' or 'Larry King Live' (p. 18).

John Edwards even used *The Daily Show* to announce his run for the presidency—although Jon Stewart immediately reminded the senator that he was appearing on a fake news show and he might need to make his announcement again through a more traditional vehicle (Feldman, 2007).

Many of the shows addressed above inhabit the genre of comedic "fake news," which makes their appeal as an alternative to traditional news seem accessible. In light of

the rise of entertainment media as a legitimate source of political information, it seems likely that *Lil' Bush* could have performed an agenda-setting function tantamount to that formerly embodied by traditional news. Although this program does not wear the deliberative trappings of traditional news like *The Daily Show* or embody the sense of dramatic realism of *The West Wing*, further analysis will show that the trends illustrated above can be taken a step further into the realm of the purely epideictic. That is, American audiences could potentially become engaged in their democracy in a valuable way by watching Comedy Central's cartoon-ish offerings as much as they can from the political entertainment programs listed above. There is good reason to probe this particular area of political communication more thoroughly than scholarship has yet attempted—many scholars have tried to more clearly classify what political entertainment programs are (Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2010; Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2009), but the time has come to plumb more deeply the implications of these classifications. For example, *South Park* may engage its audience with political issues on an intertextual plane (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2009). Having determined this, the next step would be to discern what effect this has on the show's viewers. The effects of a show like *Lil' Bush* are perhaps more important to understand on the level of political engagement, since this particular show directly discusses federal politics in every episode, where many other adult cartoons that mention politics do not, and since the rhetorical background against which it aired was one of great political consciousness for a great deal of the American population. As the following analysis will outline, the show often takes its themes directly from current events and advertises divisive commentary about the Bush administration's method of handling the current events. Because its impetus seems to stem so directly from a

particular exigency, understanding the inner workings of *Lil' Bush* is a great step toward understanding the decreasing gap between entertainment television and politics.

Political Context

Examining *Lil' Bush* as significant political comedy would be fruitless without first gaining some understanding of the political environments satirized by the program. The progression of the George W. Bush administration produced a radical shift in American attitude toward its governance—an attitude change from which *Lil' Bush* draws much of its material. The following will provide a brief overview of the rhetorical behavior of the administration and the climate of fear that several scholars have argued that it precipitated. To set the stage, this overview will address the “wartime” sensibility promoted by the Bush administration, the emphasis on the authority of the executive that this climate enabled, the administration’s tendency toward obfuscation, and the ultimate disillusionment of the voting public as Bush’s presidency progressed. Thus, the nature of *Lil' Bush's* viewing audience will be established, providing a more sturdy platform from which to analyze its political effect.

In Time of War

Perhaps the most easily identifiable trademark of the George W. Bush administration is its prolonged military campaign against terrorist sects and the Iraqi regime—an association formed due in no small part to publicity efforts of the federal government itself. Spielvogel (2005) describes the use of a ‘good and evil’ frame for the war on terrorism and Iraq that created a moral imperative for military action. While earlier attacks against the United States—such as the attacks against a U.S embassy in

Africa in 1998 and the U.S.S. Cole in 2000—had been framed as criminal acts which would be punished on an individual basis, the events of September 11, 2001 were immediately framed as a declaration of war which could only be addressed through “‘victory’ and justice through retribution” (p. 557). This approach precipitated an effort that some critics have identified as a ‘reinvention and legitimization of American superpower identity in the post-Cold War era’ (Ferrari, 2007, p. 607).

The War on Terror gradually became the screen with which almost all the actions of the administration were framed, marked by the president’s repeated use of phrases such as ‘I’m a war president’ and ‘This is all in the context of war’ (Benoit, 2006, p. 293). This framing effort was kicked into high gear during the 2004 presidential election, during which many Americans supported Bush on the grounds that he made a good ‘wartime president’ (p. 299). Karl Rove explicitly made the war a central strategic point of the campaign: as early as 2002, he was instructing party leaders to “Focus on War” (Rich, 2006, p. 55). This election rhetoric had a decisive effect on the mindset of the American public: In a Gallup poll conducted in January of 2004, 26% of those surveyed thought that war, Iraq, and terrorism were the most pressing issues facing the United States. By 2006, the war in Iraq was perceived as the most pressing ‘moral issue’ facing the country, surpassing such culture war staples as gay marriage and abortion (Glynn, 2008).

The Primacy of the Executive

As a figurehead, Bush rose to such prominence that a study by Konijn and Bushman (2007) found him to be the most recognizable and familiar of a set of world leaders presented to test subjects (including Tony Blair, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam

Hussein). His public eminence combined with the omnipresent frame of the War on Terror allowed Bush to nestle comfortably in the power of the executive branch of the federal government, slowly consolidating his image of power in the eyes of both the public and other members of government. Bush promoted his authority in both political and moral terms.

Birdsell's (2007) analysis of Bush's signing statements does a lot to illustrate the political personality of the president. The scholar states in no uncertain terms that "[Bush's] statements are a naked power play, assertions of presidential privilege that are striking in large part for their airy dismissal (at least neglect) of any plausible interlocutor technically competent to carry on discourse with the president" (p. 342). Aside from being crafted in deliberately nonspecific terms about particular aspects of the legislation in question, Birdsell asserts, the statements are written in the language of the 'unitary executive' and 'commander in chief' (p. 349), a position that the statements imbue with egregious amounts of constitutional authority. Bush showed a repeated disregard for the intent behind Congressional legislation, interpreting it as he saw fit or failing to enforce particular provisions. To an extent, this behavior may be indicative of Bush's frustration with his role as the inheritor of a 20-year-old regime initiated by Ronald Reagan, which deposited Bush in the position of an administrator more so than that of a leader (Crockett, 2003).

Whatever his motivation, however, Bush's consolidation of executive authority gained great momentum from his role as Commander in Chief in the War on Terror—and thanks to the "good vs. evil" frame that accompanied the military efforts, Bush also endowed the executive with the auspices of moral authority (Spielvogel, 2005). This

dichotomy granted him the executive power behind the War on Terror while also rallying America's religious community behind him—a politically savvy move considering that in 2004, 32% of U.S. citizens considered themselves conservative, but 90% considered themselves religious (Glynn, 2008). Rhetorically,

As iterated throughout the [2004] campaign, such comments as 'I will not waver' and 'You know where I stand' functioned symbolically as pronouncements of moral strength and spiritual fortitude that Bush used to establish and reinforce his moral authority to make decisions on behalf of the nation, and to contrast his moral leadership with a critique of Senator Kerry as a malleable moral relativist" (Spielvogel, 2005, p. 552).

This sense of moral authority was accented by Bush's persistent refusal to acknowledge any mistakes made by his administration (Benoit, 2006), and may have led to the hubris behind the federal government's spread of strategic misinformation.

Staging the Presidency

The sense of deception created by the vagaries of Bush's presidential documents—particularly about information that 'could impair foreign relations, the national security, the deliberative processes of the Executive, or the performance of the Executive's constitutional duties' (Birdsell, 2007, p. 346)—reflected the tendency of the administration to both alter and manufacture the information it disseminated to the public. Bush's initial refusal to testify before the commissions that were investigating U.S. intelligence failures prior to 9/11 indicated reluctance to bring governmental affairs into the public life (Benoit, 2006). Other administration officials followed Bush's lead, and the War on Terror began to be compared to the Vietnam War in its concealment of information (Rich, 2006).

Furthermore, the administration displayed a remarkable understanding of the nuances of the press and often used this to its advantage. Since local reporters tend to publicize the president more favorably than the prestige press, Bush was often inclined to spend more effort on appearances outside of Washington and less on major press conferences (Peake, 2007). The administration also made use of faux news reporters—one of whom has gained added notoriety for his simultaneous employment as a gay male escort and internet porn site entrepreneur—who asked Bush helpful questions during press conferences and recirculated White House press releases under the guise of phony news companies (Glynn, 2008; Rich, 2006). Legitimate news agencies were often forced into collaborative roles as well: the administration often censored information surrounding the casualties of the War on Terror (including images of coffins returning home from the front), and when the White House did release bad news, it made sure to do so late on Friday evenings so it would appear in the relatively unpopular weekend press (Rich, 2006).

Perhaps the most infamous instances of media manipulation under the George W. Bush presidency took the form of fabricated information manufactured explicitly for propaganda purposes. The administration experienced a minor scandal in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when it came to light that the Pentagon was operating a secretive Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) meant to plant “news” with foreign media that would promote the American cause. After the war in Iraq had gotten underway, the government published letters from soldiers describing their successes in the field—but when the quoted soldiers were contacted, they knew nothing about these letters or their publication (Rich, 2006). Other more blatant spectacles included the “rescue” of Private Jessica

Lynch, whose nonviolent discharge from an Iraqi hospital was prevented by U.S. gunfire until she was forcibly removed—two days later—during a camera-toting raid staged by American soldiers. Another such fabricated event was the “combat death” of former professional football player Pat Tillman. Although Bush’s memorial statements after his death indicated he fell to Al Qaeda, evidence at the time—which has since been inexplicably destroyed—indicated he was actually a victim of friendly fire (Glynn, 2008).

Many of these tactics could be considered age-old tricks of the trade as far as dissemination of political information is concerned. It is important to note, however that this climate was relatively unfamiliar to the generation with which the following analysis is most concerned: the “irony demo.” This is not to say that this new generation of voters would disbelieve the strategic nature of governmental information dissemination. These instances during the Bush administration, however, may have been their only vivid firsthand experience with it. While administrations before and since may have used similar devices, their dissemination in the post-9/11 U.S. political climate had damning effects on the people’s view of the presidency, as discussed below.

The Public Disillusioned

The growing discontent with the Bush administration expressed by the American public as its second term in office waned could have been the result of a myriad of factors. Perhaps the public was no longer satisfied with the hubris of moral authority—a position which opens itself to blame as much as it invites acclaim (Feldman, 1995). Perhaps the president’s incommunicative tendencies caused suspicion. Perhaps, as publicity spectacles came to light, the public no longer felt it could take the Bush administration at its word. Whatever the combination of factors, by the time *Lil’ Bush*

aired on Comedy Central, Bush had achieved the distinction of attaining the record low of 30% approval ratings (Garron, 2007).

The Bush administration faced a tough trial in the court of public opinion even before it solidified its identity post-9/11. Like any American president, Bush faced a heterogeneous audience, the liberal members of which were already disposed to dislike him after the controversy of the 2000 election, during which electoral chicanery in the state of Florida cast an immediately negative pall on the administration (Benoit, 2006; Glynn, 2008). Furthermore, Bush had gained notoriety during his campaign for his unpolished speaking style. Crockett (2003) notes, “Despite some praise for Bush’s rhetoric following the September 11 terrorist attack, the general trend soon reverted to criticism of Bush as ‘an oratorical version of Cinderella’ at midnight, known for ‘tortured prose’ and ‘rhetorical missteps’ both at home and abroad” (p. 466). Delivery snafus aside, however, Bush was able to use the rhetoric of his early presidency to raise expectations of what he would accomplish throughout his terms, promises he would later find difficult to fulfill in practice. In March 2003, though, the president’s approval rating was still 71%, which gave him apparently solid ground upon which to enter the 2004 election season (Benoit, 2006). Although the Kerry campaign presented a scathing critique of Bush’s execution of the War on Terror, the rhetoric of the wartime president succeeded in winning Bush another term in office (Spielvogel, 2005).

The Kerry criticisms did not fall on entirely deaf ears, however. Americans increasingly began to consider the economy to be just as important—if not more so—than the war effort, and the administration’s continued efforts to suppress publicity about the war in Iraq led a growing percentage of the citizen body to believe that the

government was concealing important information about the conflict. The presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as well and the Hussein regime's link to Al Qaeda terrorism became points of great contention, and Bush was increasingly unable to quell popular suspicion (Benoit, 2006). The administration faced critical treatment in the press as well. Newspapers based in Democratic states published particularly negative treatments, and they covered the Bush administration's activities much more often than those in traditionally red states (Peake, 2007). By the time Bush's approval rating hit its record low, the administration's system of hiding information under the auspices of moral authority seemed to have taken its toll. Birdsell (2007) opines that an unfortunate "casualty is confidence in government. If the president's reasons are sound, they should be defended openly and clearly. Citizens should know which laws will be enforced and which will not" (p. 354).

The Culture of Fear

The decreased trust of Americans in their government is symptomatic of one of the most salient characteristics of the Bush administration's persuasive efforts: a state of perpetual fear, or Tulis's 'routinization of crisis' (Birdsell, 2007; Holbert, 2005). Political theorists from Machiavelli (1950) onward have observed the persuasive value of fear in the polis, since "necessity cannot make itself without being accompanied with danger" (p. 111). John et al. (2007) note that Bush's rhetorical use of threat to create a perception of necessity began shortly after the 9/11 attacks, and grew to become the primary persuasive link between the War on Terror and the war in Iraq—a link which later became a source of intense controversy in public discourse. Initially, however, the threat link proved quite persuasive. In late summer 2003, 80% of Americans thought that Saddam Hussein had

helped Al Qaeda execute the 9/11 attacks, although most of these individuals could not explain why they held that opinion other than, in the words of John et al. citing Milbank and Deane (2003) ‘an instinct that came from news reports and their long-standing views of Hussein’ (p. 212).

Ferrari’s (2007) analysis of fear strategies notes that they depend upon the opposition of two emotional spaces: “an ‘outside’ (locus of ‘fear’) represented as peril and threat, as an enemy approaching, and an ‘inside’ (locus of ‘confidence’) represented as a space of tranquility and an ideal of perfection.” However,

As horror films teach us, the maximal emotive reaction is obtained with the potential break of this equilibrium of antithetical spaces, or, in Charteris-Black’s terms, ‘the potential for penetration of the container’ (2006: 576), usually offered by the sudden appearance of the *monster* in the space of tranquility (i.e., of *fear* suddenly entering the locus of *confidence*) (p. 617).

That is, effective fear strategies encompass both external and internal threats. To its credit, the fear promoted by the Bush administration did just that, treading on what Robin (2004) calls “a delicate alchemy” that preys on fears of both external military threats and domestic threats to morality and livelihood (p. 184). In this spirit, while facing threats from abroad, the American people also found themselves adrift in the divisive and competitive aspects of unsolvable societal “issues” (Dionne, 1991, p. 80) embodied by domestic initiatives such as the 2003 Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act (Lakoff, 2004) that bolstered Bush’s persona of moral authority. “So,” as Chomsky (2002) says, “it was international terrorists and narcotraffickers and crazed Arabs and Saddam Hussein, the new Hitler, was going to conquer the world” (p.44)—this is the atmosphere in which the American public found itself embroiled during the latter part of the George W. Bush administration.

This discussion of the culture of fear during the time *Lil' Bush* was on the air is pertinent to this analysis especially in light of Cicero's (2001) elaboration of the interplay between various emotions in discourse. He observes, "what is presented gently with the aim of winning favor, or vehemently for stirring the emotions, must be undone by opposite emotions, so that goodwill is removed by hatred, pity by envy" (p. 180). It may be illuminating to examine the television program in question as an exercise in logic: because fear was being deployed "vehemently for stirring the emotions," the humor of the show may act as an agent of undoing—fighting fear with laughter.

Overview of the Artifact

As noted above, this study will examine a Comedy Central late-night program featuring a caricature of George W. Bush as a protagonist: *Lil' Bush*. The program performs a unique function in political discourse: it is deliberately and primarily entertaining, yet also imbued with useful political information. In a media environment in which entertainment television is rapidly becoming a more attractive source of political knowledge than traditional news sources for a large segment of the American population, this show provides a remarkable insight into the people's involvement in their democracy.

The first mobisode-based series to be picked up by a major cable network, *Lil' Bush* was originally produced as a string of animated shorts for Amp'd Mobile phone customers. Comedy Central adapted the series for television by combining the shorts into half-hour episodes. The show was created and produced by Donick Cary, whose previous writing credits included *The Simpsons* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. The network edition of the show premiered on June 13, 2007, a debut seen by more viewers

than any Comedy Central premiere since 2004. In fact, the show remained number one in its timeslot—Wednesdays at 10:30 p.m.—among men 18-24 throughout its first season (Comedy Central, 2008; Garron, 2007).

Drawn by Sugarshack Animation (Comedy Central, 2008), *Lil' Bush* portrays Bush as a child, living in a cartoon version of the White House with his father, George Sr. (who is serving as President of the United States), his mother, Barbara, and his brother Jeb (Garron, 2007). Despite the fact that George Sr. is the president, though, the political climate that the characters inhabit is very much set in the George W. Bush administration, so that the first President Bush is navigating political situations that in real life were administrated by his son. This leaves the show's lil' caricature of George W. Bush free to act on his childish impulses. Lil' George's exploits at home and school are facilitated by his group of yes-man "cronies," including juvenile versions of Dick Cheney ("Lil' Cheney"), Condoleezza Rice ("Lil' Condi"), and Donald Rumsfeld ("Lil' Rummy"). The cronies are often foiled, however, by an opposing crew of Lil' Dems, whose leadership changes from Lil' Hillary Clinton to Lil' Barack Obama as the tide of the real-life Democratic candidacy changes during the show's run (Comedy Central, 2008).

The animated format of *Lil' Bush* allows it great creative flexibility. The characters are drawn after the fashion of editorial cartoons and are identifiable by exaggerated personal characteristics, e.g. Lil' Cheney's pacemaker scar or the gap between Lil' Condi's front teeth. The setting receives the same treatment—for example, the White House is drawn with oil rigs and nuclear missiles in its yard, as well as a small cemetery for Bush family pets including "Doggy," "Fishy," and "Gerald Fordy" (Jones, 2009a). The series also features several celebrity voices behind the animated facades:

Iggy Pop and Tim Meadows have recurring roles as Lil' Rummy and Lil' Barack Obama, respectively. Guest cameos include Phil Lesh of The Grateful Dead, Fred Schneider and Kate Pierson of the B-52's, Joel and Benji Madden of Good Charlotte, Joe Escalante, and Kevin Federline as "M.C. Karl Rove" (Comedy Central, 2008).

The show also bolstered its appeal through good use of the appeal of the Internet. The Comedy Central website presented show-related interviews, a game, and extra animated shorts (Comedy Central, 2008). Furthermore, it attracted attention through numerous appeals to punk-rock culture (Jones, 2009a). Thanks to all its appeal, and thanks to its humorous genre, the show could well have enabled humorous criticism of the Bush administration in the form of satirical criticism. In fact, it appears to do so in many ways. Its execution, however, muddles distinctions among genres of humor such that its criticism never really gets off the ground, and in the end it comes across as more happy comedic entertainment than humorous criticism.

Preview

Chapter Two of this analysis lays the groundwork for the theoretical discussion in which this analysis is enmeshed. After discussing the definition of satire as it is understood in contemporary rhetorical criticism, I position it within the broader humor literature in the terms of Burke and other scholars. I then introduce an overview of some rhetorical functions of humor that will help identify where *Lil' Bush* falls within the spectrum of funny texts.

Chapter Three of this analysis zeroes in two episodes of the series, using their plots to bring some broad themes of the show to light. In terms of the rhetorical functions of humor outlined in Chapter 2, the show seems to straddle genres of funny text thanks to

its incorporation of Burke's (1937) comedic frame as well as its counterpart, the more apparently satiric humorous frame.

Chapter Four directly addresses the implications of this complicated mix of effects for the show's target audience. Since the 'irony demo' often uses entertainment television as its springboard for political engagement, the show's stunted criticism may promote a similar spirit within the political attitudes of those who watch it for its apparent satire. However, its comedic aspects may work toward drawing a crowd for the show to begin with. In the end, the show seems to inhabit an area of balance between the two frames.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To preface the blow-by-blow analysis of the caricatures of politicians in *Lil' Bush*, this chapter will address theory that is relevant toward an understanding of the way the program achieves its humor and its resonance with the 'irony demo' (Learmonth, 2006). First, I discuss the power and limitations of satire, the subspecies of comedy that *Lil' Bush* outwardly appears to exhibit. From this foundation, I move on to address the place of satire within the overall humor literature, discussing the manner in which various aspects of humor are supposed to work in contrast with others. Finally, I lay groundwork for some capacities of humor that determine the category of understanding into which a particular funny text might fall, using John C. Meyer's (2000) four rhetorical functions of humor as an illuminating framework. The nuances of the nature of humor heavily influence the potential effect of this show within the governmental and media climate addressed in Chapter 1, which can perhaps make a statement about humor's place within the mass media and the political system.

THE POWER OF SATIRE

"Satire, at its best, requires a willingness to scorch the earth. Just as we need a leader who is steady, we need political satirists who are willing to find his sweet spot and never stop attacking" (Alston, 2008, p. 69).

SATIRE DEFINED

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* definition of satire is that it encompasses "biting wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose vice or folly" (Gilbert, 2004, p. 857). Its focus, indeed, is failure (Feldman, 2007), and its driving force is the act of 'carping at human vices' in an aesthetic, often playful way (Jones, 2009b, p. 30; LaMarre et al., 2009). Its roots lie in Roman literature of the first century, and its original intent was to

aid popular understanding of abstract moral issues (Bennett, 1991). It is from this background that it draws its blunt, matter-of-fact tone and its sometimes crude artistic voice (Thorne, 2004). With its spirit of *indignatio*, or “cynic outrage” (p. 40) beyond simply acknowledging the presence of vice and laughing about it, the humor behind satire has been praised as a means of expressing discontent, a catalyst of cultural change, and an asset to effective leadership (Westwood, 2004). Arguments have been made further for satire as a “discourse of inquiry” (Baym, 2005, p. 268) and as a political act that analogizes power structures with communication structures, providing a platform for power through communication (Jones, 2009b). Unlike other forms of humor, satire can deal effectively with the presence of tragedy, and as such it can acknowledge the pain and suffering of life (Westwood, 2004). Cicero gives satire a prominent position in his analysis of the oratorical benefits of humor (2001):

The...most important way of making people laugh is to point out and mark something dishonorable in a way that is not itself dishonorable.... it is indeed clearly fitting for the orator to stir up laughter, either because cheerfulness by itself wins goodwill for the one who has excited it... or because laughter crushes the opponent, obstructs him, makes light of him, discourages him, defeats him...and especially because it soothes and relaxes sternness and severity, and often, by joking and laughter, dismisses offensive matters that are not easily refuted by arguments (p. 186).

Burke (1937) takes the potential of satire beyond crushing opponents and identifies it as a form of self-flagellation: “For the satirist attacks *in others* the weaknesses and temptations that are really *within himself*” (p. 49). He cites the sometimes strategic ambiguity of satire as a means through which this process occurs.

The realm of satiric humor includes several subgenres that are pertinent to this analysis. Parody, for example, involves the “imitative use of words, style, attitude, tone and ideas of an author in such a way as to make them ridiculous” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 860) as it “simultaneously reinvokes and challenges the styles and standards of a particular genre” (Baym, 2005, p. 270). Hariman (2007) prioritizes parody as humor that “accompanies all genres of discourse and is essential for modern critical consciousness” (p. 274). Burlesque operates on the same principles, but with less sophistication—it ridicules by means of gross exaggeration or imitation (Gilbert, 2004, p. 860). Irony serves as one of the satirist’s more subtle utensils, since its criticisms are indirect and its targets ambiguous (Jones, 2009b).

One of the most important functions of satire for the purposes of this analysis is its enthymematic dependence on societal consciousness to succeed, which enables dialogue within the public mindset. Satire is lost on those who cannot identify the targets of its attacks in the broader social reality, but the humorous goodwill it engenders demands that its audiences understand the fact behind its fictions, a process called interpolation (Bennett, 2007; Gilbert, 2004; Holbert, 2005; Young, 2004). In psychological terms, the high-processing demands of understanding satirical humor require audiences to rely on pre-existing knowledge structures—especially since such comedy is often even more demanding due to limited processing time or alcohol consumption (Young, 2008). This demand may in part explain the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey’s finding that followers of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*^{iv} proved to be more knowledgeable about politics than non-viewers. *The Daily Show* and programs like it are reputed to serve a “socializing function” that drives

viewers to acquaint themselves with news topics so that they can understand the jokes on these humor programs (Feldman, 2007, p. 422). It is also possible that this is simply a non-causal correlation: people who are already interested in politics are more likely to watch *The Daily Show*. However, satirical humor serves to engage society in either scenario. Thus, it enables critical reflection through the dialogue of rite and anti-rite, “or as public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a reexamination of those beliefs” (Mintz, 1985, p. 73). Since it plays upon broad societal perceptions, satire can adopt multiple ideological biases (Jones, 2009b): hence the equally resonant voices of Dennis Miller’s conservative commentary^v and Jon Stewart’s liberal routines.

Because its enthymematic and critical nature allows satire to function from multiple mindsets, its stance is occasionally cloudy—especially when its delivery is deadpan or otherwise subtle (Gruner, 1965). La Marre et al. (2009) found that viewers of Steven Colbert’s satirical spoof of conservative punditry on his Comedy Central program *The Colbert Report* have vastly different interpretations of the point of the humor. Conservative viewers tend to think that Colbert’s comedy reflects his true personal views, while liberal viewers acknowledge the insincerity of the parody. (As a testament to Colbert’s comedic abilities, both groups find the program funny.) This dichotomy results, according to the scholars’ research, from the high-effort demands of understanding humor, and the tendency of audience members to rely on preconceived ideas to expedite their cognitive processing. “Coupling this complex process with an entertainment setting where people are generally less engaged in effortful cognitive processing of information, conditions for miscues and biased processing emerge,” the authors note (p. 217). They liken the *Report* to *All in the Family*, a sitcom which was meant to ridicule bigotry but

was actually perceived by some viewers as condoning it. This apparent ambiguity lends itself to a notion of impotent satire, since “a satirist’s goals can be achieved ‘only to the extent that the audience responds to the attack’” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 858). However, Sienkiewicz and Marx (2009) offer a brief counterpoint with the idea of hyper-irony. This phenomenon, which occurs “when a comedic text consistently advances ‘positions only to undercut them’” (p. 7) bridges the gap between intellectual elite understanding and public consumption through their repetitive use of irony. Programs like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* make use of this tool and so subvert the apparent simple-mindedness they represent. Perhaps when *The Colbert Report* has been on the air for a longer period of time, it too will reap the processing benefits of its hyper-ironic approach.

ENGAGING THE STATUS QUO

The power of satire in the political sense lies in its ability to challenge existing power structures. Its comic criticism is often targeted toward public figures with the intent of taking them down a notch, usually in the midst of political climates where other voices of dissent are discouraged (Baym, 2005; Gilbert, 2004)—like the Bush administration with its penchant for censorship directly preceding the time *Lil’ Bush* went on the air (Gilbert, 2004; Lamb, 2007). Baym (2005) states that

Lying just beneath or perhaps imbricated within the laughter is a quite serious demand for fact, accountability, and reason in political discourse....Comedy provides its initial appeal; humor assembles the audiences....But comedy also provides the method to engage in serious political criticism (p. 275).

Part of the potency that political satire brings to its punch is the ability to make its criticisms memorable, thanks to the emotional appeal of comedy (Young, 2004). Humor has been shown to pique attention and aid comprehension, and audiences are attracted to

humorous situations because they anticipate a happy “affective payoff” (Markiewicz, 1974; Young, 2008, p. 122). Topics or rhetors who are perceived as dull benefit from the addition of humor to their presentations (Markiewicz, 1974; Powell, 1977).

Indeed, funny presentation may make audiences more open to receiving particular messages, because the presence of humor as a ‘discounting cue’ makes a critical mindset seem undesirable lest the happy mood be dampened (p. 123). Although studies have shown that humor itself does not inherently persuade audiences toward action—and can actually distract them—repeated exposure to funny commentary has been shown to erode audience resistance and make its enthymematic assumptions seem increasingly logical, so that “repeated exposure over time could foster attitude change” (Young, 2004; 2008, p. 134). This potential is compounded by recent media effect scholarship which shows that immediate bite might not always be necessary to advance a particular opinion, particularly when that opinion is presented in the form of a narrative. Jensen et al. (2011) have advanced the notion of “the delay hypothesis,” or the idea that “media effects can manifest over time as a byproduct of information retrieval, storage, and processing....In other words, the full impact of fictional narratives may be felt over time as bits and fragments of the message are disconnected and then activated out of their original context” (p. 509). Although research in this area is still burgeoning, it creates a potential for argument about comedic enrichment over time. All in all, the appeal of the happy affect of laughing may leave room for humorous narratives to take root so that they might be expressed later in other contexts. Furthermore, the act of laughing with other people can catalyze a sense of community and shared happiness within an audience that can catalyze common belief and behavior, or even create new paradigms while cementing the

cultural values upon which the humor depends (Mintz, 1985; Westwood, 2004). Thus, satiric humor can fulfill the function of consciousness-raising (Gilbert, 2004), with the comedian fulfilling the role of the traditional “*shaman*, leading us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogenous understanding and expectation” (Mintz, 1985, p. 74).

Satire can also create room for the presentation of alternatives and counterarguments. Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) note that

because satire and irony both work by highlighting incongruities, they may inadvertently make transformation possible. As they hold up new ideas to ridicule and disparagement, they also introduce the possibility that alternate perspectives exist. As Kenneth Burke notes, ‘The universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways—and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men’s cuts fall at the wrong places.’ Still the recognition that other cuts are possible may alter settled predispositions (p. 146).

The lack of determinacy that satire can leave in its wake creates a cognitive space of action (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996) for the audience through which they can conceive alternatives that had not been present in the discourse before.

Satirical humor has been shown to act as a sort of cultural safety valve in some contexts. Laughing at an ominous public figure can disseminate his apparent threat and bring him to the audience’s level—a desirable effect in a democratic society (Hariman, 2007; Pehowski, 1978). Bennett (2007) observes that “Comedy—even cynical comedy—occasionally relieves us from the burden of having to ignore and endure the prospect that the emperor, once again, has no clothes” (p. 279). Since comedy is based on community understanding, information disseminated through comedic avenues can subvert the gap

between the elite and the public (Bennett, 2007; Sienkiewicz & Marx 2009). The U.S. Supreme Court has recognized and protected the cathartic function of satiric humor, beginning with its decision in *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell* (Gilbert, 2004). For disenfranchised minority groups, satire can vent frustration or heal wounds after political defeat without heightening emotional tension:

‘If we can laugh at the failure of our fallen hero or the feet of clay of the victor, some of the pressure is released. It is a consummation preferable to storming the palace.’ Political satire... serves as an escape valve for the release of heightened political pressures after a bitter political contest. As Gardner writes, ‘Humor lets us take the issues seriously without taking ourselves too seriously’ (Gilbert, 2004, p. 864).

As such, scholars have recognized the value of satire as a form of release after the 9/11 attacks, while acknowledging that the genre found itself adapting the escapist form of comfort-seeking that was rampant at the time. Often, the satire published soon after 9/11 juxtaposed America’s former sense of supremacy with its newfound culture of fear, imposing a Bakhtinian ‘corrective of laughter’ that elicited criticism from U.S. government and society alike (Jones, 2009b, p. 38).

THE LIMITATIONS OF SATIRE

The vast potential of satire as a venue for political discussion and engagement is not always fulfilled. Some satirical attempts fail to appeal to their target audiences. The elite members of a society’s hierarchy can co-opt satire for their own purposes, or they can censor its voice altogether. Satire has a difficult row to hoe as a powerful voice of the people. On the other hand, these common and vehement elite reactions to satire may indicate the power of its threat to the status quo, and contribute a great deal to the political environment that imbues their society.

Although humor is a lucrative means of encouraging societal self-reflection, as noted above, some literature suggests it can also fall flat if incorrectly placed. Audiences do not appreciate satire they feel is unfairly abusive, especially if its victim is a particularly beloved figure (Cicero, 2001; LaMarre, et al., 2009; Lamb, 2007) and respond negatively if the issue involved is perceived to be inappropriate for joking, like illness or death (Scott, Klein, & Bryant, 1990). Since satire is so rooted in lampooning reality, audiences are highly attuned to its faithfulness to their perception of the world—if it does not ring true to them, they reject the humor and/or the criticism embedded within it (Thorne, 2004). Even when the target is legitimate, some audiences are not satisfied with mere ridicule, and are left wanting “villains to be wounded by a weapon more forceful than humor” (Cicero, 2001, p. 187). The “safety valve” function of satire is itself risky, since it may endear audiences toward abusive power structures (Pehowski, 1978).

Then, although satire does perform a community consciousness-raising function, Postman (1985) cautions, “You must...know the difference between a joke and an argument” (p. 26), that is, the two do not necessarily go hand-in-hand and sometimes shtick is just shtick (see Endnote vi, for example). Audiences can—and do—fail to understand the criticisms behind the satire and simply laugh at its jokes, particularly when the humor is drawn from extreme *reductio ad absurdum* that obscures critical argumentation (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Predictability can also ruin the abrasive quality necessary for satire’s criticisms—if a joke is trite, it can ruin “a certain astonishment on the part of the [audience]” and “has the effect of spoiling the punch line” (Bytwerk, 1988, p. 313). As noted above, although couching an argument in humor makes it more aesthetically appealing, the approach does not guarantee that audiences

will take it seriously (a phenomenon that can be somewhat subverted by repeated exposure to the humorous argument). Thus, a satirist has a hard line to walk. Bytwerk (1988) notes that “A careful balance must be kept—if the enemy is seen as too ludicrous, he is no longer threatening. If he is too demonic, he becomes unbelievable” (p. 313).

Furthermore, according to the superiority theory of humor—the idea that humor reinforces and reproduces society’s hierarchies and structural systems—satire’s enthymematic nature can reinforce existing hierarchies as well as subvert them. Leaders are often reluctant to be satirized because the situation implies a loss of control over the public rationale (Westwood, 2004). When politicians satirize themselves, however, they regain that control and create a situation in which audiences are laughing with them rather than at them (Miller, 2001), which fails to engender subversive consciousness-raising. Such was the case with George W. Bush:

However much the satire galls him—and it’s obvious that it does—he has managed somewhat, and so far, to rise above it—and ensure its harmlessness—by seeming to take part in it himself. Thus he started early on to use that weary little joke about his tendency to ‘stress the wrong syl-LAB-ble,’ and told Letterman that he ‘would make sure the White House library has lots of books with big print and big pictures.’ Likewise, just before Election Day, he and Al Gore co-starred in the opening bit on *Saturday Night Live*—he riffing broadly on his own dyslexia (he said he was ‘ambivalent’ about appearing on the show, which he at times had found ‘offensible’), while Gore sat stiffly sighing. That defensive comic pas de deux brought down the house—which made it clear, if further proof were needed, that such self-parody has no subversive edge at all (Miller, 2001, p. 39-40).

The phenomenon spans party lines. Barack Obama, during his election campaign, went so far as to pre-empt satirical comments about his “alleged messiah complex” by

quipping at a New York charity event that ‘I was actually born on the planet Krypton and sent here by my father Jor-El, to save the planet Earth’ (Alston, 2008, p. 68).

Often, politicians are not content to merely deflect criticism by satirizing themselves, and their powerful gaze does not go unnoticed by comedians. Writ small, “professional comedians are in business and need to satisfy the client, who often expects a safe and sanitized humor. This potentially limits the extent to which humor can be an assault upon or subversion of the client organization” (Westwood, 2004, p. 782). Writ large, satire is seen as a threat to “paramount reality” and thus “something to be guarded against, controlled, or managed” (p. 785). This control and management can amount to regulation or censorship. Regulation can result in a bland, insipid sort of humor—as Miller (2001) notes, “Real satire always draws a little blood or else it’s just court entertainment” (p. 40). Censorship, especially those visits from the ‘Men in Black’ which under the George W. Bush administration were usually reserved for direct attacks on the president or high-ranking government officials, silences satiric voices of dissent altogether (Gilbert, 2004; Lamb, 2007). However, Jones (2009b) notes that “it is when engagement turns to conflict during moments of crisis that satire is subjected to repression, and a repressive response often provides illuminating details about the nature of the conflict between the arbiters and the critics of a society” (p. 27). That is, even the censorship of satire can speak volumes about the society that its humor was intended to critique. In the case of *Lil’ Bush*, it may be that the lack of censorship speaks to the show’s lack of satire.

Those in power can also use satire as a more offensive weapon, spurring identification through antithesis by making an out-group seem undesirable and uniting

the people against it. The humor periodical *Brennessel* fulfilled this function within the German National Socialist party, and later the GDR publication *Eulenspiegel* ridiculed capitalist practices and those who followed them—while consciously avoiding satirization of domestic issues that might incite the population to laugh at itself (Bytwerk, 1988). The Soviet publication *Krokodil* edged closer toward domestic issues in order to create identification with its audience, but this unifying effect was quickly complimented by encouragement to dis-identify with capitalist societies, thus ultimately endorsing governmental authority even as it lambasted it (Pehowski, 1978). Thus, “Satire cannot be ignored in the overall system of propaganda” (Bytwerk, 1988, p. 307).

THE DISTINCTION OF SATIRE

When analyzing the nuances of satire it is imperative to recognize that its nature is different from that of other forms of humor. Multiple scholars have attempted to shed light on its difference. The most important of these, in terms of this analysis, are Kenneth Burke (1937) and Charles Gruner (cited in Pokorny & Gruner, 1969). Burke draws a clear distinction between comedy and humor, the latter of which encompasses satire, and Gruner advances a theory of satire as a “wit-form” (p. 205) rather than humor. Each of these distinctions boils down to similar underlying themes, which will be brought to light after a brief overview of each.

Burke (1937), while analyzing his various literary frames of acceptance, envisions the comic frame as a decisive step toward “humane enlightenment” because it portrays people “not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*” (p. 41). Comedy celebrates the fact that people, necessarily, are culpable for their own mistakes in a manner that can be celebrated as inevitable. Burke finds comedy in political philosophy as well as in dramatic literature,

since it deals with the overall human condition. But he draws an immediate and stark distinction between the categories of comedy and humor. Rather than celebrating the human ability and inevitability of making mistakes,

humor...takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation*. It converts downwards, as the heroic converts upwards [by magnifying the situation in contrast to the individual] (p. 43).

Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) deconstruct the implications of Burke's analysis:

Thus, humor, in contrast to comedy, tends towards rejection rather than acceptance of that which is ridiculed. In comedy, the mistaken one can be easily reincorporated into society because she or he is merely mistaken. In humor the diminution of the other creates distance and differentiation—division rather than identification (p. 137).

Since distance and differentiation are quite explicitly the goals of satire—political satire in particular—it would seem that satire falls well within Burke's conception of humor rather than that of comedy. To clarify the point, a funny text that encourages the audience to identify with its object would be considered comedic in Burkean terms; one that encourages the audience to distance itself from its object would fall into the category of humor. A text would have to fall into the latter category of divisive humor in order to be considered satiric.

Although this analysis of *Lil' Bush* will draw its distinctions along the lines of Burke's (1937) vocabulary, it is useful to continue to explore this distinction in the purposes of funny texts. The opposition is further elaborated by Gruner as described in Porkony and Gruner (1969). He clarifies satire as wit rather than what he perceives to be the broader distinction of humor. This difference, he claims, is analogous to that between rhetoric and poetry:

...wit, like rhetoric, is likely to (a) have more serious purpose, (b) deal more with real events, (c) be relatively more logical in method, (d) be intended, usually, for a relatively specific audience and occasion, and (e) deal in subject matter of limited theme or scope, whereas humor, like poetic, is (a) more likely to be content 'to be,' without serious purpose, (b) more likely to deal with fantasy, (c) more likely to be alogical, imaginative in method, (d) more likely to be intended for all audiences of all times, and (e) more concerned with 'timeless' themes (p. 205). In more concise terms, Gruner's wit draws its material from grave reality rather than silly fantasy and employs greater specificity in content than humor.

Finding some similarities between the two semantic divisions will bring clarity to this analysis. Gruner's wit (including satire) seems more closely related to Burke's humor, although Burke's comic frame seems to deal with reality just as much as his humor frame does. The similarity lies in the seriousness of purpose that wit and Burke's humor share. Both allow mistakes to be seen in terms of human agency—with an appropriate spirit of gravity underlying the laughter. Both are tailored to examine the workings of very specific situations. Thus, Gruner positions satire within wit, and the nature of wit is like that of Burkean humor, there is further evidence that satire should fall within Burke's (1937) frame of humor.

Keeping in mind this distinction between Burkean humor, including satire, and comedy, I intend to determine the side of this dichotomy in which *Lil' Bush* situates itself, in order to better understand the workings of its humor. A lucrative way to do this is to examine the pathos *Lil' Bush* can create within its audience, which consists mainly of members of the 'irony demo,' and see whether the program creates an affect that is celebratory (comedic) or divisive (humorous). I draw my toolkit for this examination from the rhetorical functions of humor outlined by Meyer (2000).

RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR

John C. Meyer (2000), in his article “Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication,” provides an extremely thorough analysis of preexisting humor literature as well as a detailed discussion of its implications. Taking this precedent into account, he discusses four rhetorical functions of humor, two of which (identification and clarification) serve to unite a rhetor with the audience, and two of which (enforcement and differentiation) divide her from them: unification and division. I will briefly outline the basics of each of these functions here, then use them as a framework through which to view *Lil’ Bush’s* political caricatures in Chapter 3.

Meyer’s (2000) motivations for outlining these effects of humor stem from his acknowledgment that the three preexisting theories of the origins of humor, although valuable, leave funny texts in a very subjective place, their analysis being heavily dependent upon the ‘theoretical sunglasses’ (p. 315) through which they are scrutinized. Furthermore, he argues that much humor is context-based, such that acknowledging its potential origins does little to bring to light its effects on a particular audience in a particular situation. Having established this need, he offers brief discussions of the potential impacts of mirth, tangential to but not dependent upon its origins.

The first two rhetorical functions of humor serve to, in the author’s view, unify the source of the humor with the audience—thus falling into Burke’s (1937) celebratory comic category that pits all humans as equally and necessarily mistaken at one time or another. Identification, to begin, takes place when an audience is “highly sympathetic to and quite familiar with a topic of humor” (p. 317). Sometimes this sympathy is enhanced because there has been a previous lack of a socially acceptable outlet for a common

sentiment, and the acknowledgment reduces tension. The ultimate effect of this function is that the credibility of the speaker is increased, and he can bridge the gap between himself and his audience through mutual release of laughing together at the same thing. The second potential effect, clarification, occurs when the audience and speaker enjoy a lower degree of familiarity or common understanding at the outset of a humorous situation. Clarification can be achieved when the humorous punch lines are brief and/or memorable, allowing them to be recalled more easily later. Clarification can reiterate and reinforce social norms “without a sense of correction or censure of anyone involved” (p. 319). Through both identification and clarification, speaker and audience become unified in understanding and purpose.

The latter two functions, again, separate a source from the audience—but without losing humor’s happy affective payoff, so that the audience can bid a *heiteres Abschiednehmen* (‘cheerful farewell’) (Bytwerk, 1988, p. 313) to something or someone undesirable—a “soft sell” of the criticism (Scott, Klein, & Bryant, 1990). They lend themselves toward Burke’s (1937) definition of humor that dwarfs the situation and focuses instead upon the human agent. Enforcement, the first divisive function, “allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification” (p. 320)—he cites humor surrounding the naiveté of children as an example of this function in action. This effect of humor can teach mores by ridiculing deviations from them in a way that makes clear the need for correction but still lets the audience experience a happy affective payoff in some manner. The violation is made more than clear, here—it is made clearly undesirable. Differentiation, then, directly contrasts the speaker with an opponent and creates a clear in-group and out-group beyond

a single violation of a social norm—the agent is criticized as well as the deviation—and the audience is highly pressured to side with the in-group. The rhetor acts as an agent of deterritorialization that allows the audience to gain enough distance to engage in ethical critique—allowing “escape, creation, and decontextualization” (Eko, 2007, p. 224). As described by Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003), “By offering a new way of looking at something, this strategy calls into question one’s taken-for-granted” (p. 139). “This is the harshest function of humor in rhetoric,” Meyer (2000) notes, “as often no quarter is given to the opposing group. The audience is very familiar with the subject, but is in complete disagreement with the humor’s target” (p. 322).

It is useful to complicate this with Thorne’s (2004) analysis of satire, in order to make clear the nuance embedded in this process. Calling upon the tradition of the comedian as an outsider (e.g. a shaman or jester) (Mintz, 1985), Thorne observes that

Satire, then, never has the authority it seems to claim for itself, the authority of assured indignation, of a morally impeccable self squaring off against some unambiguously despicable other. Properly understood, it is more like an anthropological ritual of pollution and purification, as when a tribe bands together first to reverence and then to destroy whatever it takes to be threatening. Satire is not an instrument of moral order. It is a ‘poetics of disequilibrium’ (p. 124).

So the process is not so much austere condemnation as it is self-examination guided by an opposing force, then a sort of societal spiritual purging.

Meyer (2000) makes clear that the division among the functions of humor is not strictly binary, building upon the above reasoning. He notes that the functions that ostensibly engender division can also unify one group by pitting it against another, in a form of identification by antithesis (Cheney, 1983). But his distinction becomes clearer when he elaborates that the divisive functions are properly the use of humor to attack

others, which “stress the violation of the norm more strongly than the continuing effective norm” (p. 323). Given the nature of satire, then, with its mission to carp at vice—that is, deviation from accepted norms—in a way that offers commentary on the distribution of power, it clearly should elicit enforcement, differentiation, or both. The difference here is much like the one outlined above in the discussion of the definition of satire—that between criticizing and celebrating. If humor elicits effects of identification or clarification, it instills unification and therefore does not fulfill the burdens of criticism. It may be funny, but it is not satire.

These four functions will be used in the following chapter as a diagnostic tool to determine the effects of the caricatures depicted in *Lil' Bush*. If the show carps at the executive branch's deviation from norms in a critical way or encourages the audience to feel removed from it altogether, then it can be considered humorous and satirical in Burkean terms. If, on the other hand, the humor encourages the audience to identify with or attempt to understand the George W. Bush presidency, it is celebrating the administration rather than satirizing it, and thus falls into the Burkean category of comedy. It is important to note that both Burkean comedy and Burkean humor are capable of painting the Bush administration as erroneous. The difference between the two is the apparent consequence of that error—whether the humor celebrates mistakes with an emphasis on their broader humanity, or whether it truly “scorches the earth” and drives the audience to consider, critically, the deeper political impacts of the Bush administration's use of power. This will change the nature of the show's interpreted affect and illuminate the effectiveness of its interaction with the media and political

environment from which it draws its context. The result of this analysis will be to reinvigorate the nature of satire by dissecting it, to solidify its nature rather than, in Thorne's (2004) words, "making the satire sound like pretty much any other text after Yale deconstruction has had its way with it" (p. 125).

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

The following chapter offers an analysis of *Lil' Bush* in terms of the rhetorical functions of humor outlined by Meyer (2000). The functions are useful tools to discern the level to which the show either criticizes the executive branch or simply provides its audience with a fun fantasy romp through an imaginary Beltway. The show provides a mix of all of Meyer's rhetorical functions of humor, and thus appears to straddle Burke's comedic and humorous frames.

LIL' BUSH'S SATIRIC VENEER

To understand the irony demo's attraction to the program, it is helpful to first acknowledge the show's satiric veneer, which may have led audiences to believe that the show contained more staunch criticism than it did. Its humor builds itself upon caricature as a means to frame those in power. Caricature can be described as visual satire—a stylized form of drawing that is based more on the opinion of the artist about the subject than it is on visual realism (Eko, 2007). The caricatures of prominent contemporary politicians found in *Lil' Bush* channel opinion, and lend themselves to the image of *Lil' Bush* as satire, since caricature is a common tool of satirists (Bytwerk, 1988).

This visual cue of critique was compounded by the manner in which the show was advertised. On a network which was already famous at the time for its satiric spoofs of news and politics through overwhelmingly successful shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *South Park* (Feldman, 2007; Jones, 2010; Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2009), *Lil' Bush* was presented as an explicit outlet for public angst against the Bush presidency. This appearance may have been a key factor in marketing the program to its

target audience. From the initial stages of its promotion, the show purported to make fun of George W. Bush in a satiric manner (Comedy Central, 2008). Clips included in promotions for the show included one-liners like a narrator commenting that “He’s leading at a third-grade level” and Lil’ George exclaiming that multi-syllabic vocabulary “sounds like a Dr. Seuss word” (StefanNagelAG, 2009), a reference to prevalent criticisms about Bush’s intelligence (Miller, 2001). Commercials also drew from atypical material in the show’s mythos, e.g. an episode where the main characters’ personalities are inverted through prescription drug use. This may have hooked the audience into believing, for example, that Lil’ Condoleeza Rice was aggressive and abrasive—but her normal personality throughout the duration of the show is quite the opposite. Since the promotions were context-free, the statements they made seemed to be examples of unabashed criticism rather than the more complicated, less scorching statements a closer examination reveals them to be.

Reviewers and scholars have accepted the satiric veneer of *Lil’ Bush* without much probing. The show has been called a return to Juvenalian satire at the conclusion of the Bush administration (Jones, 2009b). Jones (2010) identifies the program as “a blistering attack on the Bush administration’s policies, ranging from nuclear proliferation and sound science to attacks on gay rights and the Iraq war” (p. 8). It is not hard to understand this reaction, given the appearances just discussed. It is also statistically probable that many reviewers and scholars were members of the camp that disapproved of the presidency. They may have passed judgment on the program based on their hopes and expectations of its content without truly delving into the implications of its humor. However, since satire’s application should by definition have critiqued the Bush

administration's use of power without inviting much sympathy for its members, the legitimacy of *Lil' Bush's* satire depends on the prevalence of this direction in its criticism.

As the following discussion will illustrate, the show's jokes span both the comedic and humorous frames, despite its strictly humorous appearance. Meyer's unifying functions are a driving force of the humor as much as the divisive ones, and the balance of the show's affect often lies on the side of the comic frame more so than the humorous one. Remarkably, this trend is evident in the series's portrayals of members of both political parties. Republicans and Democrats alike are spoofed and occasionally criticized, but often left in a likeable light. Thus, the show seems to lack a clear political agenda, and seeks happy comedy over vindictive humor in an equal-opportunity fashion.

As Jones (2009) notes in his analysis of *Saturday Night Live's* political satire, "the question is whether the performers are criticizing the president or are simply using the president—the most familiar political figure in America—as part of their stand-up comedy schtick" (p. 39). Because President Bush and his administration were commonly critiqued at the time the show aired, "using the president" was a trope that naturally carried some criticism embedded within it. But the goal of satire is, again, is to "engage in serious political criticism" (Baym, 2005, p. 275). Furthermore, in Meyer's (2000) terms, the criticism must encourage the audience to distance itself from an undesirable other, or at least illustrate a need for correction. Satire, by definition, should not engender identification (except by antithesis) or allow its analysis of society to rest at clarification. The following descriptions will show that the comedy behind *Lil' Bush* channels some surface-level criticism of the Bush administration—and the federal

government in general—but its failure to compound these mentions with any prompts to make the audience view the administration in a new light may leave viewers feeling confusion or nonchalance toward the unpopular executive branch rather than enjoyable cognitive space of action and a sense that the earth has been scorched. Although the show contains some satire, reading for Burke’s comedic element shows that its punch is not what it could be, and certainly fails to meet the severity of the exigency created by the almost overwhelming unpopularity of the executive branch of the federal government at the time.

PLOTLINE ANALYSIS

Because the show is so postmodern, the show’s rhetorical foreground can be difficult to understand when described as a laundry list of traits or details. As such, in order to better establish the sometimes nonsensical ways the show discusses the Bush administration, my analysis will begin by describing the plotlines of two episodes that seem to be greatly satirical in their content. I have selected one episode from the first season, written while the series was still an Amp’d Mobile feature, and one from its second season, written after episodes were being crafted to last for an entire half-hour block of Comedy Central air time. Both of these engage policy points that elicited criticism of the Bush administration, as will be discussed, and the premises of both lend themselves to the overall impression that the show’s humor is devastatingly satirical.

SEASON 1 – “MEXICAN”

The first-season episode “Mexican,” which originally aired on June 27, 2007 (IMDb, 2011), engages the dependence of the U.S. economy on foreign workers—namely, Mexican immigrants. The plot revolves around Lil’ George Bush’s reluctance to

do work around the house: when he wakes up in the morning to discover that his pet fish has died, he writes the animal off as “one less dumb chore I gotta do.” At the family fish funeral in the back yard of the White House, Lil’ George plaintively asks his parents why God keep taking all his pets. While his mother, Barbara, responds in a soothing voice that “God works in mysterious ways known only to Republicans,” his father, President George Bush Sr., makes the irritated observation that “Ya never feed the damn things!”

It turns out that Bar and George Sr. have been discussing their son’s all-around lack of industry, and have decided that if he doesn’t do his chores, George Sr. will use his power as president to cancel the upcoming Martin Luther King holiday, so that nobody will get a day off and Lil’ George will have to explain himself to everyone at school. During lunchtime in the school cafeteria, Lil’ George complains to his cronies (including Lil’ Cheney, Lil’ Rummy, and Lil’ Condi) that doing his chores would be “un-American!” He then has a sudden revelation – “Why don’t we get an un-American to do it?” Eagerly, the cronies hop on their bikes and follow Lil’ George down the street to a group of Mexican men hanging around on the sidewalk.

This is a good opportunity to note that *Lil’ Bush*, especially in this cross-section of an episode, intrinsically invites identification at the outset with its elementary school-aged protagonist and main cast. This is a setting to which audience members, almost all of whom have gone through elementary school, can relate. They can envision their own cafeteria camaraderie, and they can remember their own bicycle-powered adventures with their own cronies. This context paves the way for Meyer’s (2000) identification at work in this funny text, a unifying function which falls into the category of comedy rather than humor.

When Lil' George exclaims to the group that "We need someone to do the jobs we don't wanna do!" all of the Mexican men eagerly volunteer. Lil' George picks one of them to be his "temporary guest worker" (who he'll "compassionately hire" for three years of "hard, back-breaking labor"). The man observes, in perfect English, that he was a chemical engineer in his country, but he can make much more money doing manual labor in the United States. Lil' George refuses to engage this odd dichotomy, saying "Slow down, Rico Suave, this ain't Telemundo. Now get on [my] bike and start pedalin' before I build a wall and putcha behind it."

This particular transaction exemplifies a type of exchange that occurs often throughout the show. When Lil' George is faced with evidence that conflicts with his ontology, he responds to it with glib ignorance and insults its source. The intent behind these jokes is clear—the show seeks to ridicule George W. Bush as someone who stubbornly refuses to listen to others. The humorous delivery behind his refusals to listen is somewhat cute, however, and is compounded by the character's kitschy foibles like his endearing love for hot dogs and his attraction to chubby women. Thanks to this appealing veneer, Lil' George's undesirable tendencies are often explained away or glossed over. He is likeable, and his charisma in the face of dispute encourages the audience to like or even identify with him. The addition of empathy to the script again fosters identification. Another important element at work here is the inclusion of several references to the real George W. Bush's foreign policy. The Bush administration did, indeed, promote a "guest worker" program that proposed to address illegal immigration by allowing Mexican workers to enter the country for a limited tenure and work until their time was up and they were forced to return to their country of origin (Fletcher & Fears, 2005). Bush also

signed a law that planned to build 700 miles of wall between the U.S. and Mexico in the name of Homeland Security (BBC News, 2006). But note that the delivery of this particular line does not encourage the audience to give these facts much thought—in fact, because the exchange is immediately followed by a segue into another scene, it seems unlikely that viewers will actually have time to think beyond instantaneous recognition.

Lil' Bush is on the whole rife with similarly clarifying one-liners. They range from Ted Kennedy ordering a whiskey sour, “hold the sour,” channeling common media critiques of the senator’s drinking (Cline, 2009), to Lil’ John Kerry working at a store called “Flip-Flop Hooray” in reference to the common catchphrase about “flip-flopping” during his presidential campaign (Bloomfield, 2011), to Lil’ Barack Obama putting “too much stock in the audacity of rope” during gym class—a punny dig at the title of Obama’s bestselling book, *The Audacity of Hope* (Obama, 2006). The underlying message amounts to “audiences will laugh at this out of recognition” rather than “audiences will find this novel and thought-provoking.” They constitute simple reiterations, leaving the audience with a cozy, uncritical feeling of familiarity that, again in Bytwerk’s (1988) terms, “has the effect of spoiling the punch line” (p. 313) in contrast with the expectations of satire.

Like most of the first-season episodes of *Lil' Bush*, this one features a music montage in the middle. The cronies sing about the perks of having Mexicans around to do their chores while the audience observes images of Lil’ George’s “guest worker” doing the dishes, Lil’ Rummy’s worker taking child abuse for him, Lil’ Condi’s worker performing a piano recital for her, and Lil’ Cheney’s worker cleaning the Death Star^{vi}. By the end of the song, the guest workers have taken the cronies’ places in the band and

changed the song to a mariachi number. The interlude adds a sort of a bridge to the overall structure of the episode, but does little to advance any satirical argument. The effect is comedic, and escapist to boot.

When Barbara and George Bush, Sr. arrive home and find Lil' George tanning on the porch while his worker hangs Bar's "dainties" on the clothesline, they are initially shocked. But as their son explains his logic, they decide that "he *is* learning about the economy" and "the chores *are* getting done." They decide that Lil' George can "keep" his worker as long as he promises to take good care of him.

This is not atypical behavior for the show's President and First Lady. The pint-sized version of George W. Bush often gets himself into scrapes thanks to his ego and willingness to obey id-driven impulses, but when he does face comeuppance for his actions, it is ludicrously lax. When he bets the entire United States on the Olympic games, for example, he is grounded. The spirit of Meyer's (2000) enforcement is present, since it is clear that gambling the country and exploiting foreign workers is wrong, but it lacks vigor because Lil' George's punishments are hyperbolically weak. The potential appeal to emulation—wanting to punish the president—is stifled. On the other hand, there is still some encouragement of adherence to norms, since some of the humor comes from almost despicably shoddy parenting. The jokes encourage the audience to view George Sr. and Bar as incapable of raising their children, which perhaps implicates them in the undesirable behavior of their son at the time. That is, the audience can infer that George W. Bush may run the country the way he does because his upbringing was extremely lax.

Furthermore, the Bush parents are not role models with which the audience can hope to sympathize or look up to. The audience would not want to be parented by the Bushes, nor would they aspire to parent like them. Because this treatment is divisive rather than comedic, the spirit of satire is stronger here. It is mitigated, however, by the contrasting innocence of the childlike Lil' George. Although the character is the victim of poor parenting, the audience can also interpret this trope as a locus from which he draws his faults. Thus, though the audience can condemn the elder Bushes for their son's lack of maturity, they may be less likely to condemn George W. Bush himself. As such, the power of Meyer's (2000) identification works alongside that of critical satire, and creates a somewhat confusing effect for viewers.

Predictably, Lil' George's worker ends up joining "Fishy" in the family pet cemetery after five days of neglect. Instead of feeling remorseful, Lil' George observes that "I shoulda hired a Mexican nanny to take care of my Mexican worker. Mexicans: They're America's greatest resource." The Bush family all laugh warmly as they stand over the worker's grave on what is revealed to be the (still celebrated) Martin Luther King holiday. The duality of clarification and enforcement come to a head in this scene. Lil' George's disrespect for Mexican workers is made apparent, again with the use of a brief, memorable punchline. The causal element of poor parenting is equally present, however, since the Bush family seems to either approve of or not care about Lil' George's murderous neglect of his worker. The result is a blend of comedy and humor that, while not crippling the show's criticism completely, blends satiric elements with comedic ones in a way that gives the overall effect of a more whimsical satire than was indicated by the promotional material surrounding the show.

Each episode of *Lil' Bush* ends with a post-show press conference, during which the line between Lil' George the in-show character and Lil' George the caricature of the current president becomes blurred. The figure on the podium is Lil' George as the audience is used to seeing him, but he responds to audience questions as if he is the current president of the United States (contrary to the show's usual convention that he is the son of the current president of the United States). At the end of this particular episode, he is asked if his immigration policy is racist. He responds that he is equal-opportunity, because people embodying all shades of brown (and he names several) are "all welcome to do the work us white people don't wanna do." He proceeds to cite his friendship with contemporary U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales as evidence that he is not, in fact, racist.

This vehicle has staunchly satiric elements. For one, its presentation of Lil' George as the actual president makes it easier for the audience to project his traits onto the real George W. Bush—especially when Lil' George is made directly answerable for George W. Bush's policies. The voice of the unseen reporter forces the character to acknowledge critiques of the presidency that are in all probability held by the audience (potentially making the reporter an audience member by proxy), and engage in dialogue in a manner that the glib one-liners throughout the episodes proper cannot facilitate. Whereas the trope of the mid-plot musical number gives the episodes a veneer of comedy, then, the endcap interview brings satire home, and allows the audience to feel as if they are directly engaging in almost criticism of—or even dialogue with—the unpopular Bush administration. This clearly falls within the realm of Meyer's (2000) enforcement, with the audience feeling as if they have a part in the enforcing, and adds to

the satirical effect of the show. Because this is the last thing the audience sees before the episode concludes, they may in fact walk away with a more satirical impression of the show than its overall content would support.

SEASON 2 – “KATRINA”

The episodes in the second season of the series are, again, longer, but they still usually center around a single focal point of U.S. policy, with the extra time usually being eaten up by character-driven subplots. “Katrina,” the fourth episode of the series’s second season, originally aired on April 3, 2008 (IMDb, 2011) and is, predictably, set primarily in post-Katrina New Orleans.

It is useful here to briefly outline the exigency for criticism created by this background. In late August and early September 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and wreaked particularly horrific damage to the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. The storm killed more than 1,800 people and stranded tens of thousands more amid its flood waters. Even as the water receded, a public health emergency was declared to cope with the disease and injury it left in its wake. A federal-level emergency response effort was not coordinated until five days after the initial State of Emergency was declared by the states of Louisiana and Mississippi. A House committee report released after the disaster referred to the administrative response to the crisis “A Failure of Initiative,” and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was especially criticized for its failure to provide efficient or useful aid to those affected by the storm. President Bush’s approval ratings fell from 60% to 49% by mid-September, and public opinion of the federal relief effort was that it remained uninvolved throughout the storm and its devastating aftermath (Kravitz, 2009; ThinkProgress, 2005).

This is the context in which Lil' Bush's viewers engaged "Katrina." Against this backdrop, the episode opens with the cronies and Lil' George's brother, Jeb, playing "Katrina" in the White House. These are small children playing a game, which is, again, a scenario that all audience members have very probably experienced and can identify with such that the scene has comedic roots. The nature of the cronies' play, however, has much more nefarious implications than most childlike play-acting. The game involves lightswitch lightning, trash can thunder, and rain provided by the hose in the kitchen sink. Against this dramatic backdrop, Lil' Condi breaks her assigned character and complains that she always has to do the looting when the cronies play Katrina. Lil' George, however, shuts her down by saying that "It's either that or we stick ya on the roof and wait for FEMA to save ya." (The part of FEMA is played noncommittally by Barney, the White House Scottish terrier.) Lil' Cheney, playing the part of the hurricane, wreaks havoc on the living room by spinning through it. Jeb, who is playing Anderson Cooper^{vii}, gets tossed aside by the force of Lil' Cheney's whirlwind and whacks his head against the patio door.

Suddenly, it's "time for the levees to break!" and Lil' Cheney, still in the role of the hurricane, drops his pants in the middle of the living room to create a "shitstorm." Barbara and George Sr. arrive at precisely this moment to discover that one of their sons is hurt and the other is allowing his friend to defecate on their overturned couch. Lil' George defends this behavior as an "act of God"—a brief, clarifying iteration of some religious (especially Christian) discourse surrounding the disaster of the hurricane which claimed that its devastation was caused by the wrath of an angry deity (Cooperman,

2005). As the angry parents prepare to take Jeb for medical treatment, they exclaim that they want the cronies gone and the house cleaned by the time they return.

George Sr. and Bar's treatment of Jeb throughout the show merits discussion here, because Jeb is one of the grosser caricatures featured in the series. Jeb Bush, Lil' George's little brother in the series, has been touted in real life as "the smart one" of the Bush brothers (DePresident, 2011). The series, however, portrays its juvenile Jeb as outrageously mentally retarded and animal-like—his voice and demeanor make this interpretation inescapable, especially in the sense that he begins all of his lines with a drawling "Durr..." and often attempts to eat inanimate objects like pottery and broken glass. His parents do nothing to enrich him beyond this behavior, only going so far as to discipline him by whacking him with a cast-iron frying pan, and serving him breakfast in a dog dish. (Again, as in "Mexican," the Bushes are portrayed as extremely shoddy parents.) The joke that Jeb is a pet rather than a child comes to a head in this episode, because George Sr. and Bar put their injured son in a dog carrier and take him to veterinarian rather than the emergency room.

This behavior provides a weird sort of inverted clarification. The brief gags clarify the idea that the cartoon Jeb is stupid, but this clarification opposes the reputation of the real-life politician. The result seems to be that the audience is presented with a critical argument (Jeb is not as smart as he is reputed to be), but not given the time to process it because the jokes are short and occur amid fast-paced dialogue. (For example, Jeb is put into his dog carrier while his parents are scolding Lil' George, so the action is very much in the background of the scene.) Jeb is not the only character in the series to embody this sort of glossed-over criticism: Barbara Bush, for example, is portrayed as an

oversexed party animal with the veneer of a caring maternal figure, despite the fact that the real Barbara Bush is reputed to embody neither of those traits (Killian, 2002; National First Ladies' Library, 2009). Although the jokes surrounding Bar get more attention, they are still part of a fast-paced program and may need more attention for their criticism through inversion to really take hold on the audience.

When the Bush parents return (with Jeb wearing a cone around his neck like an injured dog), they find that Lil' George has made a huge "Chores Accomplished!" banner to cover the still-smoldering wreckage of his family's living room—a dig at President Bush's staged public address in which he co-piloted a plane that landed on an aircraft carrier bearing a large sign that read "Mission Accomplished," after which he prematurely declared the end to major combat operations in Iraq several years prematurely (CNN Politics, 2003). (Lil' George goes above and beyond this precedent—he has also made a "Banner Accomplished!" banner to celebrate his banner-making success.) In response to his parents' renewed anger, he tells them that cleaning up the living room is a long-term job, but he will stay the course even if it never gets done. To punish their son for his neglect (and in part because of this episode's subplot in which the family might lose the White House because George Sr. refinanced it) the Bushes decide to send Lil' George and his cronies to help with the reconstruction of New Orleans.

As the children fly over the post-hurricane devastation in Air Force One, Lil' George is apparently taken aback. The cronies soon discover, however, that his consternation is based on his perception that all the houses and people in New Orleans appear tiny from the plane's perspective. Lil' Rummy, in true crony fashion, immediately begins proclaiming that he sees miniature people, too. Their distraction channels

criticisms of President Bush's August 31 "tour" of New Orleans—he flew above the city in Air Force One, and then later that day gave his first public address after the disaster, during which critics observed that he appeared nonchalant about the devastation he had witnessed and unmoved by the mounting death toll (ThinkProgress, 2005).

The cronies arrive at FEMA headquarters, which features a sign reading "We Put the SASS in DiSASSter!" A caricature of actor Sean Penn appears with a throng of bedraggled black people, protesting FEMA's lack of initiative. Penn, in real life, was one of many celebrities who contributed to the relief effort—Steven Spielberg, Nicholas Cage, George Clooney, and Oprah all made significant monetary donations to various Katrina-related entities—but his involvement was notably more physical than that of his peers because he actually helped rescue flood victims who had been stranded, using nothing but a leaky boat (Purcell, 2006). When the cartoon Penn tells Lil' George that he wants to clean up the disaster, Lil' George ignores his charity and counters that he should have tried to clean up his film *The Interpreter*: "Now *that* was a disaster." (This is an odd comment for Lil' George to make, since Penn's film *The Interpreter* did well at the box office [Associated Press, 2005]. Perhaps it reflects the film preferences of some of the *Lil' Bush* writing staff.) As usual, Lil' George offers glib but funny refusals to accept evidence that does not agree with his previously held ideals

The cronies enter the FEMA headquarters and chat with Lil' Brownie, the show's pint-sized version of former FEMA director Michael Browning, a figure who was famously unresponsive to the needs of Katrina victims during the worst parts of the disaster (Allbaugh, 2005). Lil' Brownie observes that somebody apparently forgot to fire him, providing a clear example of satiric enforcement—the implication is that the real-

life Bush administration has kept inept administrators in positions of great power and influence. The satire is directed both at FEMA and at the federal administration in general, both of whom are laden with culpability for mismanagement of resources in the House “Failure of Initiative” report regarding Katrina (Kravitz, 2009). Lil’ Brownie, in the world of cartoon Katrina, has apparently been hoarding vast amounts of cash money, and has such great quantities of it laying around that Lil’ Cheney is able to go swimming in the piles, a la Scrooge McDuck. When Lil’ George suggests that the funds could be used to help the people of New Orleans, Lil’ Brownie protests that it’s all he has to heat the place (in a tropical climate)—and throws a shovelful of cash on the fire. Again, all of this is satiric enforcement, and well within the realm of Burkean humor. The criticism’s response to rhetorical exigence, though, is mitigated by the fact that it is directed at the FEMA director rather than George W. Bush himself, who along with his cronies is portrayed as well-meaning but misguided; that is, they want to use the money to help victims, but are persuaded not to by Brownie’s fallacious argument.

After an interlude involving this episode’s subplot, the cronies seem to be working to rebuild a house, and observe that they find the work very satisfying. As the camera zooms out from their activity, though, it turns out that they have been fixing Lil’ Trent Lott’s treehouse mansion, which was largely unaffected by the storm. Sean Penn shows up again, protesting that the people of New Orleans need “real help,” like “monologues from brooding actors.” He coaxes the cronies down so they can witness the real devastation, and assigns them to rebuild a school despite their request for a managerial position rather than labor. Lil’ George is puzzled by their assignment, since “How’s fixing a school gonna make anyone happy?”

This is, in its way, endearing, and the audience can identify with his childlike aversion to learning. There are implications here regarding the policies of the real George W. The controversy surrounding No Child Left Behind, for example—became a hallmark of the discontent surrounding the administration’s domestic initiatives (Education Network, 2007). But this criticism, like many of the brief, enthymematic mentions made in passing by the show, seems distant because the audience is presented with a child saying childlike things. The behavior makes sense in this iteration (a child who does not want to go to school) where it does not when paired with the image of a middle-aged man whose custody of the educational system was often seen as damaging on a wide scale. Thus, premise of the cartoon prevents it from letting some satiric enforcement hit home.

After some contemplation, Lil’ George decides that the suffering people of the city need something festive to brighten their spirits—a Surprise Mardi Gras. The cronies take the lumber they were supposed to use to build the school, give it to Lil’ Brownie to heat FEMA headquarters, and pile all of his cash on the back of an amphibious assault vehicle (accidentally sent to Louisiana in lieu of FEMA trailers) in the shape of the words “Best Surprise Mardi Gras Float Ever.” As soon as they are done, they triumphantly ride their float through the French Quarter, singing and firing Mardi Gras beads from the assault vehicle’s machine guns. The people of the town emerge from their homes and grumble that the cronies have gotten them up at four a.m. when “it’s not even Tuesday... or February,” Lil’ George perceives—or deludes himself into perceiving—that they have come to join the party because they love it. As the cronies continue down their route, they begin to inadvertently destroy the city—they run over celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse—

who is known for his Cajun cooking and runs multiple restaurants in New Orleans—for example, and break the levees, causing the area to flood once more.

Lil' George happily proclaims that New Orleans is getting the good scrub it really needed, while hip-hop artist Kanye West floats by and proclaims that "Lil' George Bush doesn't care about black people!" This, of course, is a direct reiteration of the real Kanye West's criticism of the Bush administration levied during a telethon intended to raise money for Katrina victims (de Moraes, 2005). Because it is a word-for-word repetition without much commentary, it falls well within Meyer's (2000) category of clarification. Some of the humor of the situation arises from the visual image that Kanye is quickly drowning as he says this. As such, the audience does not have time to process beyond simple recognition. As often occurs in the series, the fast-paced nature of the action prevents viewers from acknowledging the potential embedded criticism that Bush actively drowned out criticisms of his administrations' post-Katrina actions (Shah, 2005).

The children decide that their Surprise Mardi Gras has left the people of New Orleans with something fun to do, i.e. swimming and playing in the water, and cheerfully make their way back to Washington. When Barbara and George Sr. sternly ask their son what he has gotten out of his experience, he hastily hides the "Lessons Learned!" banner he has made, and declared that his true lesson is that "When you flood New Orleans, it tastes just like gumbo."

It is difficult to definitively categorize the message of these events in terms of Burke's (1937) genres of funny texts. The actions of Lil' George and his cronies are galling. They channel Meyer's (2000) differentiation in the sense that the children's actions directly destroy the city of New Orleans, and imply that the Katrina relief efforts

promoted by the Bush administration have similar implications. The actions are, at face value, despicable. But following the plotline of this particular episode couches the events in a confounding context—Lil’ George and the cronies actually believe they are helping. Lil’ George refuses to rebuild a school because he feels that going to school makes children sad. The cronies allow Lil’ Brownie to mismanage FEMA funds because they believe he is well within his rights to do so. The flood of New Orleans is precipitated by the cronies’ childlike zeal toward throwing a party and making everyone happy again. This interpretation moves the episode’s overall message into the realm of Meyer’s (2000) enforcement, which revolved around the actions of misguided children who have not yet assimilated social norms in the scholar’s original interpretation. I would argue that there are elements of comedic identification present in this as well, since Lil’ George so clearly wants everyone to be happy despite the harrowing practical impacts of his actions. He has motives with which the audience may be disposed to sympathize, and the fact that they are channeled through the happy, innocent face of a child may mitigate the irresponsibility being attributed to the adult Bush.

The post-show press conference for this episode echoes themes that had already been established—maybe there were only so many jokes the show’s writers felt comfortable making in the wake of a devastating natural disaster. When a reporter asks what happened to the erstwhile FEMA director, Lil’ George replies that he believes that Lil’ Brownie “is now fucking over African Americans in the private sector.” (Again, culpability is attributed to Browning more than Bush.) In response to criticism of his lax reaction to the hurricane, the childish presidential figure makes an ardent promise to the American people that “[he] will keep flooding New Orleans until [he gets] it right!”

Then, to distract the reporters from their critical line of questioning, he offers them free copies of a Katrina-based board game he has designed, entitled “Roofs and Ladders.”

Throughout all this, the audience voice in this particular press conference is stifled, and the snub comes in the form of one of Lil’ George’s habitual glib refusals to acknowledge breaches in his ontology. Again, criticism is present during the press conference, but in this episode it is not allowed to truly flourish and as such its differentiation loses punch.

SERIES-WIDE TRENDS

The show’s fluctuation between unifying and divisive examples of humor extends beyond these two episodes, of course. The remainder of this analysis will extend some of the themes introduced in the analysis of these two episodes and show how they proliferate throughout the rest of the series. These examples continue to span both humorous and comedic Burkean frames, leaving the audience with a mixture of effects similar to that created by the specific episodes discussed above. The overall effect is mixed, but it is precisely this confusion that dilutes the overall satiric punch of the show.

DIVISIVE THEMES

The sense of Meyer’s (2000) enforcement—condemnation of deviance from norms—presented in “Mexican” and “Katrina” is present throughout the series. Lil’ George himself provides great fodder for this, because he is a sympathetic protagonist, but his actions are beyond the scope of what would be considered normal or customary for someone in a position of power—even a juvenile one. For example, to compound Lil’ George’s tendency to brush off opinions that contradict his own, the character’s dialogue is peppered with mock Bush-isms like, “Now, there’s no time for thinking when decisions need to be made.” This criticism, much like the predictable one-liners discussed

above, presents an undesirable trait without provoking the audience to contemplate it a great deal. This happens first because the pacing of the show leaves little time for processing beyond superficial recognition, and also because such criticisms were so pervasive in the media at the time—e.g., Bush-isms were “collected” and published throughout the George W. Bush presidency (Weisberg, 2009)—that they lacked novelty. In examples like this, the deviation from the norm is obvious and the need to reinforce a standard is clear, but the overall happy-go-lucky nature of Lil’ George prevents the audience from wanting to totally differentiate themselves from him.

Meyer’s (2000) differentiation is occasionally provoked during the series, however. Lil’ George can, at times, be quite ethnocentrist. Compounding the examples seen in both “Mexican” and “Katrina” (like calling Mexican people “America’s greatest resource”), Lil’ George’s dialogue is rife with sexist and racist comments well beyond the scope of most elementary school students. In one pre-show monologue, for example, he offers the following advice to the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign: “Don’t be a woman! People don’t like that!” This language clashes with the usual nature of Lil’ George’s undesirable but childishly endearing behavior. His ethnocentrism is not cute, and as such does not engender the gentle push back from the audience brought on by Meyer’s (2000) enforcement. In these instances, Lil’ George becomes a totally distasteful character. The post-show press conferences, some of which are, again, more legitimately vox pop than others, are common settings for this sort of joke. When Lil’ George-as-President-Bush faces the people, his responses to criticism are often so crass and dismissive that he comes across as totally unlikeable.

The ideological nature of some of the show's humor, illustrated when Lil' George proclaims the "shitstorm" of the cronies' Katrina game to be "an act of God," adds to its differentiation. There is some polysemy here, because the show makes fun of ideologies traditionally associated with both liberal and conservative mindsets. The comment during "Katrina" pokes fun at the religious right, a joke that might be perceived as too low of a blow for some members of the audience to stomach at the level of enforcement of a cute norm deviation. Lil' George is, in fact, prone to using religious arguments to avoid responsibilities or punishments. Other episodes feature him turning to Christianity so that he can use his "belief" in creationism to get out of having to take an exam in his biology class. This manipulation may provoke religious audience members to associate this behavior with the president and buy into the common criticism that George W. Bush hid behind religion (Suskind, 2004).

In other episodes, however, more liberal ideologies are lampooned. Some of the victims of Lil' George's ideology jokes are his rivals, the Lil' Democrats. Lil' Hillary, for example, is often ridiculed for her feminist views, which are often expressed with a sense of *reductio ad absurdum*. For example, while working her part-time job at the Gap-like "GOP" store, she suggests that the clothing store order a series of plump, Asian, and lesbian mannequins. Her science fair project, written in partnership with Lil' Pelosi, is entitled "Dinosaurs: A Feminist Perspective." She speaks in a register that is clearly low (read: masculine) for a woman, let alone a little girl. To compound this take on the liberal end of the U.S. political spectrum, Lil' Al Gore is insulted for his environmentalism, which often gets in the way of Lil' George's pseudo-capitalist adventures. His dedication to his cause is portrayed as obnoxious: he has five recycling bins outside of his house,

one of which is for old recycling bins. Even when the cronies bully him for his lunch money by giving him a swirly, he sticks to his cause by muttering, “I hope this is a low-flow toilet!” He has an after-school job at a booth in the mall called “Carbon Nation”—which sells carbon credits, not soda. In the end, members of both conservative and liberal subgroups might feel slighted by Lil’ George’s trivializing of their beliefs.

This equal-opportunity approach has myriad implications. Audience members may see the diversity of lampooning as room for their own opinion, so that they can decide for themselves which critiques to agree with and which to dispute. However, while this cognitive space of action is valuable, it is not satiric. A humorous take on the issue would leave less room for the audience to form their own opinions, and put more effort toward constructing critique of the target of the humor—in this case, given the exigency discussed in Chapter 1, it would need to confine its criticisms to the conservative Bush administration in order to really be satirical.

UNIFYING THEMES

There are limits to the critical thinking that the show incites, however, because it presents the audience with unifying comedy alongside the critical satire. The dissonance this creates may have the effect of leaving cognitive space for action for audience members so that they make their own choices about each party and about the political system as a whole. On the other hand, it may confuse audience members or leave them feeling nonchalant about the executive, both of which outcomes fail to “scorch the earth” in a meaningful way.

There is identification inherent in the premise of the show, as mentioned above, thanks to its setting. Many of the cronies’ adventures are couched in experiences that the

entire audience can relate to from their own childhoods—like the episode “Mexican,” in which Lil’ George does not want to do his household chores. The political issues of the show are put into contexts like finding dates for the school dance, hanging out at the soda fountain, presenting at science fairs, and getting excited for Hot Dog Day in the school cafeteria. These tropes make the situations accessible to an audience that has almost universally had similar experiences. To compound the setting, the characters are drawn, for the most part, as cute kids. The nature of the *Lil’ Bush* caricatures makes the figures seem much more innocent and endearing than their comparatively curmudgeonly real-life counterparts. All of these appeals to identification do a lot to help the audience adhere to the show—if the audience likes the characters, it may be more likely to continue watching.

The show also unifies the audience with the characters through its use of clarifying humor, mentioned above during the discussion of the show’s funny one-liners that mention common facts or opinions surrounding various politicians. This tendency toward excessively enthymematic, fast-paced humor extends through the series to clarify long-running *Lil’ Bush* gags that have little to nothing to do with the actual politicians who serve as their vehicles. Barbara Bush, for instance, is increasingly attributed with a tendency toward substance abuse and sexual deviance, despite the social conservatism of the real-life figure (Killian, 2002). There is humor in contrast here, and there is also a chance that the audience will find this contrast interesting or endearing. (Conversely, there is also a chance that the audience will find Bar’s behavior repugnant in a woman of her age.)

Lil' Rummy provides a more clear-cut example of this trend. The character is voiced by rock musician Iggy Pop, and the second season of the show uses him less and less as a vehicle for jokes about Donald Rumsfeld and more for jokes about rock music in general, and Iggy Pop in particular. There is some discontinuity in this—especially since it prevents the audience from thinking about the real-life political scene by distracting them with alternative (perhaps flashier) references. On the other hand, there is the chance that this use of engaging pop culture currency will draw audience members in where they might otherwise not have been interested. That is, people who are not into politics but who like Iggy Pop will have a reason to feel invested in the show whereas they might not otherwise have been piqued. Audience members who are interested in both politics and rock music will have multiple reasons to watch, and multiple reasons to enjoy. This is bit different than some of the show's other pop culture references. Often, *Lil' Bush* refers to other texts in order to bridge gaps in understanding – as noted above, for example, Lil' Cheney is made analogous with Darth Vader in order to bring home the idea the he is evil. In this way, the reference is almost metonymous. The Iggy Pop references, however, have little to do with the character of Lil' Rummy. Their purpose, devoid of analogy, is to bring another pop culture outlet under the purview of the show in order to make its entertainment accessible for a separate audience.

These likeable aspects create the same happy affective payoff as the divisive rhetorical functions, which makes them equally memorable and desirable. Their cumulative effect may attract viewers and make the show more enjoyable overall than a purely satiric treatment might have. But the fun involved is not necessarily the issue at

stake when the rhetorical exigency surrounding the artifact is overwhelmingly critical of the federal executive. My goal here has been to position the artifact within Burke's (1937) categorization of funny artifacts, using Meyer's (2000) rhetorical functions of humor as a diagnostic tool to probe Lil' Bush's various characters and situations. Having done so, it would appear that the show provides viewers with a complicated mix of comedy and humor. This has implications for the show within its context, since it aired in a climate suited for satire (humor), and was advertised to be such. The variance between the projected affect of the show and its multifaceted result may have effects on the show's viewers. As the next chapter will plumb, these effects may vary from nonchalance to disappointment to political disengagement.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

THE BOUNDARIES OF SATIRE

Since humor makes high-level demands on audience understanding and viewers are less likely to think in-depth when they expect to be entertained (LaMarre et al., 2009), it is possible that *Lil' Bush's* unifying identification and clarification (Meyer, 2000) may have decreased the audience's tendency to indulge in intense critical thinking about the political machine, thanks to the limited impetus and response time for it that they were given. As such, although the show has satirical elements, it does not end up inspiring the audience toward a uniform critique of the Bush administration. It may, however, continue attract its audience with its elements of an easier, less critical comedy that makes the satire seem less brusque and more attractive.

We should not forget that the appearance of unapologetic satire had a lot to do with the show's drawing power within the 'irony demo'. The *Lil' Bush* premiere was the most-watched debut of a Comedy Central program for the previous three years of the network's programming—it is not a huge logical pirouette to assume that a lot of this drawing power came from the people's statistically proven disapproval of their president. Viewers wanted to see the president being ridiculed. Thus, *Lil' Bush's* perceived declaration that the emperor had no clothes may have drawn viewers toward it. Although the practical potency of their critiques was not always great, the pseudo-satirical aspects of *Lil' Bush* piqued interest. It is easy to imagine, however, that watching a show with continual doses of negative pathos could become ponderous. The unifying humor may provide a sense of respite from the exigent troubles of the Bush administration. Remember from Chapter 2 that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, consumption of silly,

escapist comedy skyrocketed. *Lil' Bush's* combination of funny categories may have provided a refreshing dose of happy silliness alongside the more thought-provoking satire.

To inductively overview the theoretical lens for this analysis, the show's humor includes the patterns of Meyer's (2000) identification and clarification along with its enforcement and differentiation. This means that it has elements of the Burkean (1937) frame of the comic—a unifying frame that positions people as equals and equally mistaken in the face of life's situations—as opposed to humor, the divisive function that “dwarf[s] the situation” (p. 43) and brings culpability to the man who has made mistakes. This show is not without divisive humor, yet it is hard to situate the show as true satire in Burkean (1937) terms or as wit in Gruner's (Pokorny & Gruner, 1969) terms. Even when the show borders on the critical, its tentative frame of rejection is vastly overshadowed by a frame of acceptance, particularly for audience members who want to resolve what might have been a jarring, uncomfortable or relaxing and pleasurable mixture of the two (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003). Because it falls outside of these categories, this funny text straddles the two concepts of funny texts outlined in Chapter 2.

The show's lack of driven satire has impacts that extend beyond definitional arguments and into practical outcomes, making its implications important. A similarly useful example of satirical failings can be drawn from Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003). In their analysis of James Finn Garner's *Politically Incorrect Bedtime Stories* as an exercise of irony, they describe that artifact's tendency toward “scatter-gun” satire (p. 148). That is, Garner made an effort to draw multiple audiences into his humor by making the stories intertextual with such a broad array of societal targets that he may

have ended up offending just as many people as he attracted. *Lil' Bush* takes a step toward the “scatter-gun” approach with its alternating comedy and humor.

However, rather than satirizing multiple targets like Garner, *Lil' Bush* fails to really satirize any target with much conviction. In the words of Jones (2009), “Satire works best when it works from or advances a thesis” (p. 44). *Lil' Bush's* humor lacks a clear bottom line. As such, its scattered nature prevents it from being very hard-hitting. *Lil' Bush* does not think for its audience—but neither does it create much impetus to address the perceived governmental illegitimacy of the George W. Bush administration. *Lil' Bush's* scatter-gun humor may not offend as many audience members as *Politically Incorrect Bedtime Stories*, but it also may not prompt them to separate from and contemplate societal norms in the way Garner's humor might.

The audience does not attain the sense of complete dissent from *Lil' Bush* that it might expect from the advertising and scholarship surrounding the show. But it may derive more of a happy affective payoff than it expected, thanks to the inclusion of comedy. It is hard to make a definitive claim with this analysis—how much satire is enough to matter? Rather than drawing that particular line in the sand, then, it behooves us to examine where the nuance of the show's blend of frames can deposit its audience in terms of their engagement with the political system.

LAUGHING AT THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The portrayal of Lil' George in the *Lil' Bush* mythos is not truly representative of the roots of the public's discontent with George W. Bush. That is, in the face of public angst toward the federal executive, Comedy Central aired a program that appeared to provide an avenue through which to democratically bring the president down to the

audience's level (i.e. Hariman, 2007). But although *Lil' Bush* certainly “carp[s] at human vices” (Jones, 2009b, p. 30), it does not do so in a manner that channels much cynic outrage—unless the source of the public's outrage at the federal administration truly stemmed from the president's bumbling sentence structure. Where public opinion might have provided the enthymematic first half of critical reflection about the president, the show's glib one-liners do not always give these criticisms time to take root. Thus, while the show gives the people's opinion a legitimate presence in the media scene, to an extent, it is not always a presence with bite.

There is some gray area surrounding the practical potential of funny texts in general. Humor can either enact the superiority theory (Westwood, 2004) and reproduce power structures, or serve as a form of resistance through consciousness-raising (Young, 2004; 2008) or by defining and reinforcing dominant in-groups and submissive out-groups (Collinson, 1988). Some of this dual capacity stems from the personal agency of actors who consume funny texts. Gramsci, according to Mumby (1997), “position[s] social actors neither as unwitting dupes who unreflectively reproduce the status quo nor as individuals who, by virtue of their marginalized status, can create a pristine space of resistance that subverts the dominant order” (p. 366). He solidifies this observation by citing the example of Collinson's (1998) study of shop-floor workers, whose humorous banter served simultaneously as control and resistance, but could never fully embody the unmitigated definition of either category.

What these scholars observe of individuals as social actors could also be said of humorous texts, the effects of which can also inhabit this gray area of concurrent domination and resistance. Satire in particular can “reflect a state of tension between

rejection of authority on the one hand and regard for it on the other,” (p. 731) as Pehowski’s (1978) analysis of the Soviet humor magazine *Krokodil* points out. The power of a humorous text, particularly one that addresses an unpopular power structure, lies in what audiences take from it. That being said, audience acceptance or disregard is often influenced by cues from comedians who analyze society (Mintz, 1985) to help them navigate that tension.

Remember, as discussed in Chapter 2, comedians and comedy writers are faced with material constraints that they must heed in order to be successful. Stand-up comedians avoid insulting their employers too much, knowing that their paycheck is on the line (Westwood, 2004). Political satirists operate under a similar constraint, compounded by a potential for retaliatory government regulation and censorship like that faced by the editorial cartoonists whose censorship is chronicled by Lamb (2007) and Internet humorists like the one who faced government condemnation after spoofing the wife of then-Vice President Dick Cheney (Gilbert, 2004). Although Jones (2009b) observes that “a repressive response often provides illuminating details about the nature of the conflict between the arbiters and the critics of a society” (p. 27) as if this illumination serves a valuable function—and maybe it does—comedians may be unwilling to put their paychecks or careers on the line for the sake of illustrating the nature of political repression for others. Although there are comedians who do choose to accept monetary or career setbacks to remain true to their ethical principles (Haggins, 2009), many are much more reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them.

This principle, written larger, speaks to the political climate from which *Lil’ Bush* emerged. Satire, at the time, could have been directed at any one of myriad targets. Recall

that satire is one of the only forms of humor that can deal effectively with tragedy and suffering (Westwood, 2004). It can also be used as an offensive weapon—in Cicero’s (2001) terms, it “crushes the opponent, obstructs him, makes light of him, discourages him, defeats him” (p. 186). The political climate in which *Lil’ Bush* was enmeshed, one in which there had been a recent terrorist attack on U.S. soil and in which the president of the United States had sunk to record low approval ratings (Garron, 2007) was certainly rife with tragedy, and the American people had positioned themselves against a clear opponent—an international one as well as a domestic figurehead in the form of George W. Bush. The opportunity for serious political criticism catalyzed by the anticipated happy affective payoff of humor was apparent (Baym, 2005; Young, 2008). However, Comedy Central chose to air a series that appeared to draw blood, but under the surface was something closer to Miller’s (2001) lackluster “court entertainment” (p. 40).

The effects of the writers’ creation of a product that proves to be more of a happy romp than hard-hitting satire are meted out upon the irony demo, whose cognitive space of action and practical space of resistance are both enriched and limited by the show’s half-hearted bite. The close relationship of shows to the perceived mandates of their target audiences should not be downplayed, especially given the nature of cable television:

Cable’s broadening of the television spectrum has created niche markets for which producers have crafted shows that obey market necessity by establishing product differentiation—a kind of cultural segregation (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 210).

Remember, this particular culture—the show’s target audience, as well as its network’s—is one that gets more of its political information from entertainment media than from

traditional news sources (Learmonth, 2006). This information, in turn, affects the group's awareness, engagement, and, ultimately, political belief systems (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993). The comedic affect of *Lil' Bush*, rooted in comedy more than in critical humor, promotes some resignation to governmental shenanigans. The irony demo is encouraged to laugh off their criticisms of the Bush administration, and thus let them fizzle out rather than build into a political consciousness that might affect voting patterns or participation in other forms of citizen engagement. Audience members who were hooked by the show's appearance of funny criticism may laugh while watching it, but thanks to the emphasis on identification and clarification, that may well be the extent of their reaction.

Thanks to the consciousness-raising potential of the delay hypothesis, as well as the catalyzing effect of the comedy, the satiric elements may gain some ground. However, in the balance, this ground may not be enough to have real political import. In that case, since the irony demo is comprised of 18- to 34- year olds who are in the process of forming their political opinions and becoming politically involved, the mixed messages of *Lil' Bush* could affect the overall United States political system.

Lil' Bush and programs like it may prevent this group's developing ideologies from fermenting beyond initial, simple reactions to stimuli. Remember, political sophistication and all its links to awareness and political engagement are depending upon citizens being "well-informed," that is, accruing facts that add up to an overall ontology (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993). *Lil' Bush* could have disseminated critical facts throughout the irony demo and increased their ability to function at a sophisticated level within the political mythos of their time. Instead, it gave them a comedic escapist safety valve through which to relieve their angst without becoming politically engaged. Where

the show's stylistic elements and—especially—its promotions promised scathing criticism, *Lil' Bush* failed to deliver much more than a diversion revolving around political figures that only occasionally called political decision-making into question. In some ways, this is simply “court entertainment,” in Miller's (2001) phrasing. In terms of Jones's (2009) litmus test for political satire, it seems that the show puts less effort toward really criticizing the president than it does toward “simply using the president—the most familiar political figure in America—as... schtick” (p. 39). Amid a sea of political jokes aimed toward the politically engaged irony demo, *Lil' Bush* simply may not have had enough mettle to make a difference.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The nature of the comedic societal “safety valve” merits more attention. Most scholarly treatments of this capacity of humor do not condemn it—rather, it is discussed as a healthy outlet that prevents more radical forms of resistance or revolution. However, it is possible that a text that spurs laughter without introspection might invite audiences to laugh away their angst about serious abuses. In some cases, it might be for the greater good of society that the people who are dominated and do not have agency within their government are allowed to build up steam.

Many scholars seem propelled to investigate ways in which humor can have concrete effects toward subversion—in doing so, fighting a small sea of quantitative literature that points to humor's lack of concrete effect in general. We should not ignore the necessary reciprocation of subversion, though, that if humor can aid resistance, it can also facilitate domination. The superiority theory of humor can have concrete political consequences through a great many avenues, which should be explored with much

greater concentration as the irony demo comes into its own as primary movers within the United States political system and entertainment becomes an increasingly pervasive channel of political engagement.

CONCLUSION

Benchley (2002) observes in his mock-academic analysis of joking that “by the time you have the ‘humor’ analyzed, it will be found that the necessity for laughing has been relieved” (p. 345). He is not the first to make the observation that analyzing humor makes it less funny, nor will he be the last. Trite though it may be, this distinction illuminates the impetus behind studying the rhetorical capacities of humor, particularly satire. If there is nothing to comedy but laughter, then its value is based purely in its ability to immediately entertain. If comedy breeds effects beyond hilarity, though, then it becomes a different rhetorical animal.

In the end, satire theory aside, *Lil’ Bush* is lighthearted and fun. It gives an audience that is disenchanted with the George W. Bush administration an opportunity for a chuckle at the president’s expense. No research on the show to date has included any statement about reactions to the show from the politicians it caricatures. George W. Bush himself might not find his cartoon image very amusing. Perhaps the former president took some private umbrage at the superficial insults of himself and his family that the show presented. (But then maybe, in the words of *Lil’ Bush’s* Lil’ Pelosi, “his dad couldn’t buy him a sense of humor.”) But the show remained on the air, and its capacity to celebrate and amuse stayed at the forefront of the Comedy Central programming lineup throughout the duration of the Bush presidency. It walked its line and left its audience giggling.

This study does something to reinforce the somewhat disputed importance of studying texts based in pop culture, rhetorically or otherwise. Entman and Rojecki (2000) discuss this importance in their analysis of media images of members of the African-American culture:

Gray has described the media and popular culture as ‘the cultural and social sites where theoretical abstraction and cultural representation come down to earth, percolating through the imagination of America. These often supply important currents in our political discourse and affect minorities’ relationships to a larger society, and their life chances. Cultivation research demonstrates how expectations and responses may be due mainly to a mediated reality that in the absence of personal experience may be every bit as credible a foundation for belief and even behavior (p. 146-7).

Very few United States citizens have direct contact with the executive branch of the federal government, nor are they privy to firsthand knowledge of its inner workings—there is a decisive “absence of personal experience” that makes mediated reality all the more important. Thus, “Media are our primary points of access to politics...and the place for political encounters that precede, shape, and at times determine further bodily participation (if it is to happen at all)” (Jones, 2009a, p. 23). These observations, compounded by the fact that increasing numbers of Americans choose entertaining mediated realities over more traditional, serious fare makes studies of political pop culture invaluable to understanding the nature of modern democratic engagement. This analysis has both bolstered the nature of funny political programs as we understand them in modern contexts, and discussed the impact that these texts in general can have—or not have—on the citizen body, depending on the citizen in question. *Lil’ Bush* both subverts and celebrates, and in doing so traverses a remarkable balance of content with rich

potential for audience engagement, as well as rich potential for audience disengagement, both of which can have significant impacts on the nature of these viewers' participation in politics. In this light, the rhetorical importance and political consequence of funny artifacts is apparent.

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ⁱ Although Jones (2010) finds fault with the manner in which the results of these Pew surveys are usually interpreted by scholars and journalists alike, he concedes that the tendency of younger viewers to turn to comedy for political information has become a pervasive notion that may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

ⁱⁱ A "fake news" program aired by Comedy Central. The cast of comedian reporters and anchor Jon Stewart critique politics and television news media (Jones, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ A spinoff of *The Daily Show* that parodies the personas of right-wing pundit talk show hosts e.g. Bill O'Reilly (Jones, 2010).

^v Comedian Dennis Miller underwent a rather remarkable shift in political ideology from liberal to conservative after the September 11 attacks (Jones, 2010).

^{vi} The show's depiction of Dick Cheney is portrayed as downright evil – a trait accentuated by the fact that Li'l Cheney's father is drawn to resemble *Star Wars* villain Darth Vader, and their family lives in the Death Star. This is one of many references to popular visions of absolute evil associated with the character.

^{vii} Anderson Cooper, a CNN reporter, gained renown for his emotional approach to coverage of the Katrina disaster.