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A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism

Don J. Waisanen

This essay examines the discourse of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, two of the most prominent political comedians in America. Kenneth Burke's theories of perspective by incongruity and the comic frame provide a general structure for surveying Stewart and Colbert's comic strategies on their nightly television shows, and their roles across various media events. Stewart and Colbert use three rhetorical strategies, in particular, to critically reframe American political discourses: (a) parodic polyglossia; (b) satirical specificity; and (c) contextual clash. By illustrating how these strategies of incongruity are employed, this essay demonstrates that Stewart and Colbert are comic rhetorical critics, who both make important contributions to public discourse and civic society.

[Critics] would find human foibles a theme for constant contemplation.

—Kenneth Burke (1969a)

Communication is kept open and free through laughter because laughter clarifies where tragedy mystifies.

—Hugh Dalziel Duncan (1962, emphases in original)

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's comic communications have influenced the patterns of contemporary American media and politics in surprising ways. From their nightly comedy programs The Daily Show and The Colbert Report on Comedy Central, to appearances on CNN's Crossfire, Fox News's The O'Reilly Factor, and even at college commencement ceremonies, their discourses have pervaded local and national discourse.
national arenas. Stephen Colbert's speech at the 2006 White House Correspondent's Dinner was viewed 2.7 million times within its first two days on Youtube (Sternberg, 2006) and was the top downloaded item on the iTunes best-seller list (Cohen, 2006), as was the release of his 2007 audio book, I Am America (And So Can You!). Similarly, Jon Stewart's book, America: A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction, was number one on USA Today's best-selling books list (Minzesheimer, 2004).

Stewart and Colbert's messages and use of different media engage civil society. Colbert, for example, was given the 2008 "Webby Person of the Year" award for "recognition of his pioneering role in utilizing the Internet as a significant tool for interaction with fans of 'The Colbert Report'... Colbert embodies the true participatory spirit of the Web" ("Stephen Colbert named," 2008, ¶). Stewart and Colbert link playfulness to the "public sphere" (see Habermas, 1989, p. 1), distinguishing themselves from a chorus of often mean-spirited media pundits, while also transcending concerns that they simply engage in meaningless entertainment. With their prominence across American media and politics, scholars should ask what contributions, if any, their discourses may make to public affairs? More specifically, do their seemingly surface, entertaining comic commentaries have real, useful rhetorical value?

In this essay, I argue that Stewart and Colbert are more than simply entertainers, they are rhetorical critics, who creatively guide audiences toward democratic possibilities. That is, they both critique and innovate upon the suasive phenomena of contemporary public life, to activate new insights about acts of human communication. In examining Stewart and Colbert's texts, I draw from Campbell's (1974) useful distinction between "ephemeral" and "enduring" contributions to criticism (p. 9). Ephemeral rhetorical criticism serves a social function—spotlighting issues of public concern, fostering discussion, or focusing on certain messages or communication processes. Campbell says that highlighting fallacies of reasoning in a politician's speech could be an example of this type of criticism. It is typically nonacademic but socially engaged. Enduring rhetorical criticism is intended to make a contribution to rhetorical theory. In this approach, critics teach audiences about the nature of (rather than simply acts of) human symbolic activity. Stewart and Colbert mostly engage in ephemeral criticism—it is one of the goals of this essay to show what contributions to enduring criticism can be gleaned from their communication.

By highlighting Stewart and Colbert's comic strategies, I will demonstrate the sociopolitical functions of their critical discourses. In other words, how Stewart and Colbert do what they do tells us much about whether what they do is very useful. As such, this essay contributes to current deliberations on whether political comedians such as Jon Stewart help or hinder democracy (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Bennett, 2007; Bolter, 2006; Hariman, 2007; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Jones, 2005, 2007; Lule, 2007; Mckain, 2005; "National," 2004a, 2004b; Young & Tisenger, 2006). Additionally, the function of political satire is an underdeveloped line of research (Holbert, 2005, p. 441). At a minimum, I submit that to deny Stewart and Colbert's contributions to civil society and a healthy public sphere (as scholars
such as Hart & Hartelius advance) is to deny the very activity that communication critics most value.

Kenneth Burke's (1984a) organizing principles of "perspective by incongruity" (p. 308) and "the comic frame" (p. 106) can illuminate how Stewart and Colbert's symbolic actions function to (re)shape political frames of reference. Both Stewart and Colbert draw attention to and debunk social absurdities and contradictions, while often providing incipient alternatives to myopic orientations. Burke (1984b) argues that "Planned incongruity should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experimentally wrenching apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us" (p. 119). A rhetorical criticism using incongruity, "should subject language to the same 'cracking' process that chemists now use in their refining of oil" (p. 119). At the same time, perspective by incongruity can remoralize (Dow, 1994), jarring people into new perceptions about their constructions of reality (Rockler, 2002). The comic frame further provides what Burke calls "maximum consciousness," or a point from which human beings can perceive social inconsistencies (1984a, p. 171). Thompson and Palmieri (1993) relate that "for Burke, a comic frame does not mean seeing humor in everything but refers to an open and balanced critical stance" (p. 276).

While comic communication can be just as divisive as it is uniting (Meyer, 1997, 2000), nor always liberatory in its outlook or appeals (Olbrys, 2006), Stewart and Colbert ultimately embrace their targets while pointing out their potential flaws. While ideological criticism often simply debunks (a frame of rejection), pedagogical rhetorical criticism provides us with ways to learn about and deal meaningfully with our environments (a frame of acceptance; Ott, 2007; Ott and Bonnstetter, 2007). Stewart and Colbert advance civil society through playful pedagogical critiques and juxtapositions that affirm democratic ideals. Their world-expanding strategies of incongruity fit with a comic-frame approach, which "carries to completion the translative act...hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of criticism" (Burke, 1984a, p. 173, emphasis in original).

This essay builds upon other scholarly accounts of Stewart and Colbert's critical approaches. Jones (2005) views these types of comedians as "political bricoleurs" (p. 119), who "craft persons built on paradoxes...through a language capable of entertaining multiple realities" (p. 123, emphasis added). Baym (2005) argues that The Daily Show practices "discursive integration," a way of broadcasting "defined by the permeability of form and fluidity of content" (p. 262). Baym (2007a, 2007b) further highlights Stewart's multivocality on The Daily Show interviews and believes that both Stewart and Colbert offer televised forums that support civil deliberation and cover issues unreported in the mainstream media. He also finds that Colbert's "postmodern spectacle" is a way of confronting media forms that undermine rational argument (2007b, p. 359). I extend these analyses to show how Stewart and Colbert use formal, specific, and contextually multiplicative rhetorical strategies within and outside their comedy programs. This paper highlights the remarkable degree of shifting personae and incongruous characterizations in Stewart and Colbert's discourses, which provide the type of wide
orientations to human social relations that Kenneth Burke spent his scholarly career encouraging.

In forming the comic strategies of Stewart and Colbert, I surveyed 40 (out of the 150 offered) “Jon Stewart” video clips from The Daily Show dealing with political issues available between October 18, 2006, and October 18, 2007 on the Comedy Central Web site. The 40 videos labeled under the heading “Colbert on...Politics” from The Colbert Report during the same time period were also examined (Comedy Central Videos, 2007). Out of all the video clips on Stewart and Colbert’s Web sites, these were chosen for most connecting their commentaries to public affairs. While the 40 Colbert videos addressing “Politics” were already conveniently categorized under this heading on his Web site, I chose the 40 Stewart videos based upon the relevance with which each of their headings and tags linked with political terms (e.g., if a word like “diplomacy” was used to describe the clip). While more or less videos may have been chosen, these numbers were well suited to analyzing the diachronic breadth and substantive depth of their political coverage. Additionally, transcripts were analyzed from Jon Stewart’s 2004 guest appearance on CNN’s Crossfire (“‘Jon Stewart,’” 2007), and Stephen Colbert’s visit to The O’Reilly Factor in 2007 (“‘Stephen Colbert enters,’” 2007). Most scholarly studies of these phenomena examine Jon Stewart and The Daily Show. Given the rising prominence of Stephen Colbert in American politics and media, and the fact that his show grew out of his prior appearances on The Daily Show, these videos and transcripts were selected for greater theoretical scope across the shows and forums of these two comedians.

Stewart and Colbert use the incongruous comic strategies of parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, and contextual clash to refashion public discourse. Starting with a close textual analysis of each of the videos, these categories were abductively generated from patterns in the data, with reference to earlier literature. They are each moored in suitable, existing comic concepts (e.g., parody), but go beyond previous vocabularies to describe Stewart and Colbert’s rhetorical enactments. By highlighting comic strategies that have real, useful rhetorical value, I mean to illustrate how Stewart and Colbert’s entertaining commentaries also have political force. Ultimately, their critical approaches refocus mystifying rhetorics and staid perceptions and make a vital contribution to the advancement of inclusive and expansive democratic attitudes within society.

**Stewart and Colbert’s Critical Comic Strategies**

*Parodic Polyglossia*

Borrowing Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984a) concepts of heteroglossia and the polyphonic voice, I use polyglossia to describe the sheer degree of expanded linguistic and vocal capacities that Stewart and Colbert push in their perspectives by incongruity. Their high degree of moving back and forth between different realms, for comic and insightful effect, is a distinguishing characteristic among much American media programming that lacks tonal or conceptual variance. Bakhtin (1984a) himself uses the word “polyglossia” to refer to “the simultaneous presence of two or more
national languages interacting within a single cultural system” (p. 431). This is a fitting description for the ways in which Stewart and Colbert cross vocabularies and voices to expand perspectives on social issues within American politics and culture. Parodies comically appropriate the style of a form (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 71) and “may be both critical of and sympathetic to their "targets”” (Rose, 1993, p. 47, emphases in original). Stewart and Colbert’s polyglossia is parodic in drawing from and reworking the form of linguistic and vocal styles in politics and popular culture—and true to the comic frame, also critical and sympathetic in its tone and regard for others.

Bahktin (1981) states that “the possibilities of [voice and language] orchestration make any segment of text almost infinitely variable” (p. 431). While “all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces” (p. 428), Stewart and Colbert shift the malleable symbolic forces within these matrices with greater frequency and intensity than is common in traditional public discourses. That is, they reflexively span the styles of various political and cultural worlds with a force above and beyond common political conventions, and this process constitutes a rather distinctive rhetorical-critical strategy.

Hart and Hartelius (2007) argue that Jon Stewart plays “two personae at once,” both serious, concerned citizen and non-serious “dilatory” and “dandy... jester” (pp. 266–267). They come to the conclusion that this malleability lets Stewart dodge accountability for his statements. “Politics,” they claim, “depends on serious beliefs seriously pursued” (p. 267). Most surprisingly, they then conclude that “Jon Stewart & Co. are bullies who force us into one and only one way of imagining the world” (p. 269, emphasis added). Oppositely, I find that Stewart and Colbert’s ability to play two (and more) personae multiplies political perspectives, extending Burke’s notion that comic approaches help us to “see from two angles at once” (Burke, 1984a, p. 41), and Condit’s (1994) idea that excellent public discourse is “maximally polyvocal” (p. 210). Stewart and Colbert speak out intertextual, imaginative avenues and catalyze the ability to step into and out of the shoes of others to perceive possibilities beyond oneself.

To draw attention to incongruities, Stewart typically uses his own voice, which is inflected by a tone of disbelief and tongue-in-cheek awe. He also shifts easily into other character voices to give presence to his jokes. These shifts are evident in Stewart’s critique of a news story on President George W. Bush’s approach to diplomacy with Iran. Having finished a segment of his show on the rock star Bruce Springsteen, Stewart says, “Boy this is not a good segue. Uh, alright. International diplomacy. Hey speaking of Springsteen, what about that international diplomacy? Huh? [Stewart then sings in Springsteen’s voice]” (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007a). Speakers tend to increase intellectual engagement and identification with audiences when they perform character voices in their narratives (Boor Tonn, 1996; Tannen, 1989). In the same way, Stewart’s commentary amicably shifts between the realms of popular culture and politics, bringing immediacy to news issues through his multivoiced, widely referenced coverage.

More importantly, in mediating between these two seemingly disparate realms, Stewart is also drawing attention to the very significance of these shifts (e.g. “this
is not a good segue”), inviting viewers to reflect on the intertextual conventions in media. This self-referentiality is a metacommunicative critique that both eases the link between Springsteen and international diplomacy, while avoiding the generally unreflective and chaotic “Now...this” shifts characteristic of much mainstream media discourse (see Postman, 1986, p. 99). Stewart gives us insight into the very constructedness of his mediated form and style, and one’s voice itself as always potentially prone to errors. Not only does Stewart imagine the world in many ways, but he adroitly calls attention to these very imaginings. As such, his communication is highly pluralistic and reflexive.

This parodic polyglossia does more than simply entertain: it morally critiques the suasive phenomena of public life through analysis and evaluation. Stewart continues from the previous example, “With tensions multiplying worldwide the utmost delicacy is called for in today’s dangerous world, the wary leader must observe cultural nuances, choose words with care; or, you just go with passive aggression” (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007a). Stewart then plays a video clip of George W. Bush at a press conference, discussing Iran and the possibility of World War III. Stewart impersonates Bush, “Here’s what I’m saying is this, you either agree with my position, or you’re looking to have a thermonuclear reaction bake your shadow into the sidewalk.” Between formal, stylistic appropriations of the language and voices of Bruce Springsteen and President Bush, Stewart gives pastiche-driven-presence to some premises: that Bush’s either-or policy approach may not serve the range of policy choices available for diplomacy, and that a Chief Executive’s words should be chosen with care. Through this comic strategy, a politics of prudent and diversified communication is imagined. In contrast to Stewart, who is able to entertain any number of different communicative forms at a time, Bush appears locked into a limited range of discursive conventions.

Stewart also uses parodic polyglossia to critically appraise the dearth of argumentation in one of the 2008 Democratic Presidential Debates. His jocular and linguistic shifts compare the political debates to a game show, again easing the link between politics and entertainment and multiplying angles from which the event might be viewed: “Democrats got together to discuss policy and to discuss who among them [Stewart changes to a high-pitched, British voice] is the weakest link, goodbye” (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007b). Stewart critiques the lack of stasis drawn between the interlocutors in the debate, cutting to a video clip of almost all of the debaters overly agreeing with one another. He continues, “Isn’t there anyone who could kick it up a notch,” and plays a clip of former Senator Mike Gravel at the debate stating, “I tell you what, after standing up here, some of these people, frighten me, frighten me.” Stewart then puts on the voice of a mafia boss, “that’s what I’m talking about, boom, boom.” Through these vocal and linguistic shifts, Stewart amplifies a critical argument about the need for substantive debate. At the same time, Stewart’s multiplying of different discourses and perspectives stands in direct contrast to the limited perspectives he finds in the forum. Stewart teaches his audiences that there are multiple ways to debate and even to interpret the news. By violating some formal conventions of media commentary (e.g., acting-out voices), Stewart models the
necessity for rhetors to constantly go beyond the given, generating arguments and looking for alternate ways of constructing any event.

Most importantly, in traversing the discourse and voices in the presidential debate, game shows, and gangsters, Stewart opens up attitudinal space in which to lambaste political flaws while simultaneously advocating for constructive standards (e.g. all the debaters are here to debate, not simply to flatter one another). Parodic, “intertextual allusions” such as these promote “interactive experiences,” acting as meaningful grounds for viewers to engage the conditions of postmodernity (Ott & Bonnstetter, 2007, p. 309). By bringing incongruous voices into the realm of the debates, Stewart also emphasizes a valuable argument, with a playful attitude that marks his targets as mistaken, rather than evil (see Burke, 1984a). Looked at in another way, Stewart establishes rapport and intellectual engagement with his audience by making an argument that many audience members might have—or at least wished they had thought through.

Stephen Colbert uses parodic polyglossia in much the same way, but with some slight differences, on his nightly television show The Colbert Report. On a popular segment of the show called The Word, he splits the television screen into two, juxtaposing his vocal comic persona on the left side of the screen against written statements on the right. Colbert reports: “You know folks, when I look back to the months leading up to our invasion of Iraq, one thing is clear: it seemed inevitable, thanks in no small part to the news media’s crack reporting” (the words “On Crack” then appear to the right of Colbert; Colbert, 2007a). Colbert appropriates the form of CNN-style newsmaking (e.g., the use of scrolling sentences across the bottom of the screen), juxtaposing two voices (in this case, the oral against the written) to chastise the mainstream media for its complicity in the government’s deliberations leading up to the Iraq war.

Unlike Jon Stewart, who mostly plays himself within and outside his nightly show, Colbert is almost always in character. Stewart delivers his jokes in his own left-leaning, astounded-but-amused persona, whereas Colbert’s character and show are formal, stylistic appropriations of generally right-wing news reporting. He plays the part of a “smug Republican” (Boler, 2006, “Conclusion,” p. 18), frequently telling tongue-in-cheek jokes about “liberals” and acting out support for conservative issues. At the same time, Colbert almost always sends “I’m jesting” gestures to his audience that let’s them know he is parodying conservative conventions (he also critiques liberal policies and practices, but from within this conservative persona). Colbert will, for instance, often attack “the media elites” like a conservative pundit and then quickly change or exaggerate his facial expressions to indicate his play (“Stephen Colbert enters,” 2007). In so doing, his vocal and linguistic appropriations are already “two angles at once” (Burke, 1984a, p. 41)—partly flashes of Colbert making points about politics and popular culture and partly a parodic mask debunking the style of much contemporary news reporting and commentary.

Similar to Stewart, Colbert performs other characters to create multivoiced insights about American media and politics. Colbert plays a number of different characters in a segment where he visits Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School
of Government. Over the campus loudspeaker, Colbert broadcasts, “Students, this is your founder John F. Kennedy, please report to the auditorium immediately” (Colbert, 2006a). With a voice-over, Colbert then narrates to his television audience, “Time for politics 101 with Professor Doctor Stephen T. Colbert.” Colbert is then seen standing in front of the Kennedy school’s entire student body, wearing a red bowtie and tweed jacket:

I need to say something to all of you, political instincts don’t come from a classroom, you can’t learn it from a book, no. You learn it by sitting down, at your table, and eating a honey glazed ham. You learn it by throwing a baseball out at a softball game. You learn it by riding in a corporate jet to a lobbying excursion to the Azores. Do you understand what I’m saying? Are you going to curry favor for your corporate overlords? Consider this your graduation ceremony, students of the Kennedy School of Government, you are free to go, congratulations! Stay strong, be brave, and stand by your President!

Between his Republican mask and vocal and linguistic appropriations of John F. Kennedy and a stereotypical professor, Colbert’s hybridized rhetoric opens up a polyvocal space to critique the potential excesses of the future leaders of America. Through these polyglossic shifts, Colbert’s parody gives his audiences an inoculating perspective against the incursions of trivial and private interests on the public’s welfare. In entering this playful alternative world, Colbert embraces his audiences, while disassembling public, susive communications within the political and corporate system (e.g. by spotlighting that there’s more to politics than throwing baseballs at games). These polyglossic shifts are linked to Bakhtin’s (1984b) notion of the carnivalesque, a “second world” (p. 6) typically outside the constraints of serious mainstream institutions, which is “organized on the basis of laughter” given its “strong element of play” (pp. 7–8). Similarly, Colbert conveys a carnivalesque awareness of how politics and business can devolve into self-interested and hierarchical orthodoxies. Colbert’s joke urging the students not to “curry favor for your corporate overlords” attacks unreflective, selfish motivations that might create too much slippage between private interests and civic engagement.

Rather than getting stuck in the potentially monolithic idioms of politics, Stewart and Colbert crack the nouns, adjectives, verbs, and voices of public life. Their weaving of voices and languages pushes political and media discourses beyond normal communicative boundaries, essentially inventing rhetoric as a way to bypass reified understandings. Parodic polyglossia is thus a strategy of multiplying formal and stylistic discursive possibilities. To advance pluralistic communication, Stewart and Colbert use both parodic polyglossia and the critical comic strategy of satirical specificity.

**Satirical Specificity**

Stewart and Colbert use satirical specificity to demystify and reorient public discourse. They illustrate what it is to find one’s way through, as Burke (1969b) describes, “a fog of merger-terms where the clarity of division-terms is needed” (p. 109). He argues we should “look for ‘mystification’ at any point where social
divisiveness...is obscured by unitary terms” (p. 108, emphasis added). Burke (1957) asks us to consider using “correct magic, magic whose decrees about the naming of real situations is the closest possible approximation to the situation named” (p. 4). Through satirical specificity, Colbert and Stewart detail alternate conceptions of public discourse and chip away at the mystifications in politics and media.

Through satirical specificity, Colbert and Stewart engage in a kind of anti-"ideographic" criticism (see McGee, 1980). Rather than finding comfort in the grand abstractions of political life (e.g. through words like “family values,” “equality,” “freedom” etc.), Stewart and Colbert deflate mystifying ideographs with localized references. In doing so, they critically appraise vague rhetorical claims. Stewart and Colbert's specificity reframes public affairs in terms of everyday, vernacular frankness. Moreover, they expose abstractions that public actors employ to gloss over the important details of policies and political actions. Stewart and Colbert thus use a humorous specificity with a valuable social purpose. Satire is used to debunk “the substance of a social or cultural icon or phenomenon” (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 71, emphasis added). Stewart and Colbert’s comic specificity is primarily satirical in evaluating the content, rather than the form or style of their targets’ claims and actions.

On The Daily Show, Jon Stewart uses satirical specificity to critically analyze the evasive answers that Attorney General Alberto Gonzales provided during a Senate Judiciary hearing on the firing of nine US attorneys. Stewart highlights the ducking and dodging of Gonzales's answer to questions, with the premise: “Yesterday, Alberto Gonzales became the K2 of obfuscation” (a picture of Gonzales with the caption “Hearing Problems” comes up on the left side of the television screen; Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007d). Stewart asks, “we know about the nine fired US attorneys, but were there any others?” He cuts to a video clip of Gonzales testifying: “I’m not aware of any US attorney being asked to leave, except, I am aware of some people being asked to leave because there was legitimate cause.” Stewart then explicates and amplifies the obfuscation for his audience:

It would appear to many observers that the Attorney General just admitted that some of the lawyers were fired for not-legalistic cause... So if I can get this straight, and I’m sure I can’t, Alberto Gonzales is saying basically that there are problems, of which he cannot speak, for which he is responsible, but not to blame, and that he is the only one who can clean up the mess, that he cannot neither confirm or deny exists. Let me try to put this in schoolyard terms if I may. He has smelt it, and while he cannot confirm that he in fact also dealt it, he refuses to deny it, on the grounds it might incriminate him for supplying it (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007d).

By satirically detailing some of the implications of Gonzales's evasions, Stewart heightens attention to the incongruity of the Attorney General’s remarks, bringing clarity to the mystification of “legitimate cause.” The unclearness of Gonzales’s rhetoric is underscored through Stewart’s vernacular schoolyard analogy, which also connotes that Gonzales’s response, quite simply, stinks. In addition to his contention that politicians often do not engage in straight talk, the “if I can get this straight, and I’m sure I can’t” disclaimer mocks media certitude. Where mainstream media
coverage might simply report the Gonzales hearings as straightforward knowledge, Stewart's qualification evidences a humble epistemological stance toward news commentary. He does not want to overclaim what he "knows," instead opting for a rhetorically reflexive approach to broadcasting.

Stewart makes political matters relevant to his audiences and then points out where divisions should be evident in public communication. In one show segment, Stewart first demystifies President Bush's veto of a children's healthcare bill (a policy proposal for an S-Chip healthcare program for low-income children), translating its political ramifications into specific, understandable terms: "Are the kids healthy? Because the news from Washington is, well, you're gonna want to try to keep them that way" (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007e). Stewart explains,

Congress has voted to expand the program by 35 billion dollars over 5 years, and add 2-4 million kids to the program's roles, paid for with a 61 cent increase in the cigarette tax. In summation, the bill takes money from cigarettes, and gives it to poor, sick children [Stewart cuts to a video clip of President Bush claiming, "that's why I'm going to veto the bill," and The Daily Show audience boos in the background] (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007e).

Stewart describes the bill, before critiquing Bush's mystifying reasons for the veto. As a setup to the forthcoming punch line of Bush's response, Stewart's explanation of the healthcare program creates an expectation for reasoned advocacy.

Stewart continues, "I've seen the man himself," and cuts to a video clip of Bush stating, "My job is a decision making job, and as a result, I make a lot of decisions...I want to share with you why I vetoed the bill this morning, poor kids first." Stewart comments, "Wait a minute, here's why I vetoed the bill, poor kids! Throw me a verb, give me a modifier...so the first reason you vetoed the S-Chip, if I can summarize your point, and I may have trouble doing it, 'poor kids' (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007e). Stewart's conditionality in the latter part of the sentence (e.g., "if I can summarize...I may have trouble") amplifies the point that Bush's abstract merger-term "poor kids" glosses over needed evidence for his conclusion in vetoing the bill. The qualification underscores a sense of bewilderment—that a comedian would need to break down the President's logic. This heightens the incongruity and force of Stewart's critical task. Stewart is quick to point out the tautology, asking for the discursive resources necessary to take the explanation from assertion to a reasoned, detailed argument (e.g., "throw me a verb"). He critiques the unspecific language, yet his jokes also build affirmative space for political policies and communication processes. Stewart argues both for policies that might help poor, sick children and for increased attentiveness to rhetorical obfuscations.

In the same way, Stephen Colbert becomes a rhetorical critic by employing satirical specificity to demystify public discourses. Colbert reports a news story about a man who complained after calling the Rush Limbaugh radio show. On his radio show, Rush commented that veterans who opposed the Iraq war were "phony soldiers." Colbert responds, "now, some veterans may have been offended, but sorry, Rush just calls this war like he sees it...from thousands of miles away in West Palm Beach" (Colbert, 2007b). Taking the general statement and incongruously
positioning it within Rush’s specific, local context. Colbert’s satirical specificity engages what Burke (1957) calls the “closest possible approximation to the [real] situation” (p. 5).

Colbert further critiques communication norms and practices through satirical specificity. Colbert continues to play with the “phony” assertion, by discussing *Media Matters for America*, an organization that monitors conservative rhetoric in the media. Limbaugh and other pundits attacked this group for distributing the “phony soldiers” comment through the mainstream news. In his comic conservative persona, Colbert asks, “So who started this ‘phony’ war? The answer, *Media Matters for America*.” He continues:

That’s right, hate mongers like *Media Matters* take innocent statements like mine, Rush Limbaugh’s, Jon Gibson’s, and Bill O’Reilly’s and make them offensive by posting them on the Internet, allowing the general public to hear words that were meant for people who already agree with us [Colbert then juxtaposes the words “Shrieking to the Choir” on the right side of the television screen] (Colbert, 2007b).

Colbert calls into question the incongruous implications of “phony soldiers” as a term meant for conservative audiences, or the belief that on public radio or television shows, these terms are not up for public debate, they’re only rallying calls for private, intramovement communication. Colbert points out the non sequitur of trying to have private discourse on public radio and attacks the substance of the overall communication practice “Shrieking to the Choir.” Mckain (2005) notes that Jon Stewart mediates the mediators and unpackages the process of news making for the public. Both Stewart and Colbert mediate and unpack the mediators and news making through satirical specificity. Overall, they advocate for a healthy stance toward terms that publics may unthinkingly accept.

Colbert additionally uses satirical specificity to lambaste political language that simply ignores recalcitrant empirical situations or events. In the following example, he conducts a rhetorical criticism of a military mystification. In response to a general’s comment that the US Army was meeting its recruiting goals, Colbert remarks that they probably did so by shrieking their recruiting goals; he asserts “We can win the war” (and the word “Semantically” pops up at the side of the television screen; Colbert, 2007c). Through Colbert’s comic assessment, audiences learn that language is partial, and are asked to become critically attentive to symbolic influence and manipulation.

In the same segment, Colbert demystifies the military abstraction “victory”: “[Bush] has changed what ‘victory’ is, it used to be changing the Middle East, now victory is ‘securing Baghdad’” (the words “Next, spelling Baghdad” pop up at side of the screen). Colbert teaches his viewers that language is malleable and ambiguous. The meanings in one seemingly consistent term may shift with their definer’s goals and as the words put up at the side of the screen indicate—may cover a multitude of sins. Through a specific analogy, Colbert then continues to argue his point about how the Bush administration’s use of the term “victory” overlooks important details in the Iraq war:
Let me tell you a story about my dog Gipper. Used to be I couldn’t control him at all, now I come home and say “Gipper, ignore me and poop on the carpet.” I gotta say, since I changed my expectations he has been such a good dog. So, Mr. President, if our goal is to redefine our goals, let’s just make our goals whatever is actually happening [the words “Redefinition accomplished” pop up at the side of the screen] (Colbert, 2007c).

To complicate any easy assurances about the unitary term “victory,” Colbert divides the government discourse from what he presumably views as a different military situation in Iraq. The Gipper analogy translates this insight into everyday terms—again vacillating between the realms of politics and culture to make his argument more immediate. The use of “Gipper,” a nickname for former President Reagan, is also a way of connecting a long line of presidential politics to the unreflective use of unitary terms. As the redefining of “mission accomplished” to “redefinition accomplished” illustrates, Colbert would have us be rhetoricians, always on the lookout for language’s complexities, the persuasive use of definitions to frame political agendas, and the ways in which high abstractions may be less than accurate in gauging social situations.

Stewart and Colbert’s strategy of satirical specificity performs essential democratic functions by directing critical accountability toward the suasive, mystifying merger terms in politics and media. Comics highlight for us potential gaps between what is and what should be (Mintz, 1985). Through satirical specificity, Stewart and Colbert exemplify Klampf and Hollihan’s (1989) idea that excellent rhetorical criticism is grounded in sound, moral critique: “Illuminate the mystery, bring it to consciousness, and you introduce the possibility of change” (p. 93). Colbert and Stewart are rhetorical critics who analyze and evaluate the use of terms that evade answers, hide interests, or gloss over the details of highly consequential policies or public actions. In short, they attack the substance of much political language to illuminate the workings of discourse, while simultaneously engaging alternate moral claims and standards for practicing communication. Beyond their critical appropriations of form and style, and assessments of language and content, Stewart and Colbert generate scenic comparisons to bring the social constructions, situated environments, and attitudinal atmospheres of different political worlds sharply into focus. They lastly employ the comic strategy of contextual clash to reframe political and media discourses toward conscientious ends.

**Contextual Clash**

Contextual clash involves the multiplying and mixing of seemingly unconnected contexts with one another. Stewart and Colbert analyze and critique political and social orientations by bringing into conscious view the very constructedness of many social environments. In doing so, they playfully help us see political and media discourses in more ways than one.

Scholars have used the concepts of juxtaposition or strategic juxtaposition to highlight how rhetors denaturalize patterned discursive commitments, through side by
side conceptual comparisons (Demo, 2000; Powell, 1995). While Stewart and Colbert are generally adept at using incongruous comparisons, their scenic juxtapositions are one of their most notable comic strategies. Firstly, they create situational clashes to generate rhetorical insights on their nightly shows. Secondly, they bring their own contextual comic attitudes into scenes outside of their programs, providing their audiences with new perspectives through situational incongruities.

Sitcom writer John Vorhaus (1994) states that “Clash of context is the forced union of incompatibles. . . . [It] takes something from its usual place and sticks it where it doesn’t fit” (p. 48). Clashing context is often the result of “abnormal people in normal situations” or “normal people in abnormal situations” (Libera, 2004, p. 8). Mintz (1985) finds part of the essence of stand-up comedy is in the “creative distortion” of expectations achieved through “incongruous context” (p. 79). Taken to a sociopolitical level, contextual clash (as I’m constructing the concept) also forces one to see their very situatedness in a particular material environment and attitudinal atmosphere.

This comic strategy allows Colbert and Stewart to increase their polyglissic rhetoric. Berger (1997) notes that, “the comic conjures up a separate world, different from the world of ordinary reality” (p. x emphasis in original). These separate worlds bring into focus the reifications of communicative environments, as Stewart and Colbert denaturalize normal situations, and naturalize abnormal situations. Stewart and Colbert weave together incongruous contexts to multiply linguistic and vocal options in their discourses on politics and media.

Within his show, Jon Stewart uses contextual clash to create political insights. On one episode of The Daily Show, Stewart turns to a presidential press conference, “Yesterday at President Bush’s press conference he was asked this very pertinent question” (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007c). Stewart cuts to video clip of a journalist asking Bush, “your Secretary of State is going to a conference in Iraq where the Foreign Minister of Iran is going to be present, uh, do you expect her to have conversations with the Foreign Minister, what will she talk about?” Stewart continues:

That could be a real opportunity, you know, Secretary of State Rice, the Foreign Secretary of Iran, uh, the two countries with the biggest stake in the Iraq war, apart from, uh, the Iraqis, it’s going to be a chance, going to be a chance for some real meaningful face to face dialogue, rapprochement.

Stewart cuts to a video clip of Bush answering the question: “Should the foreign minister bump into Condi Rice she won’t be rude, she’s not a rude person, she’ll be polite.” Stewart comments,

What is he? Twelve? They weren’t asking what would happen if Lindsay Lohan happens to bump into Paris [Hilton]. For God’s sakes, the President of the United States is relatively confident that when our chief envoy to the world is faced with one of our most crucial diplomatic challenges, she won’t be that much of a dick (Stewart & Javerbaum, 2007c).

By shifting the scenic grounds of Bush’s answer from politics to popular culture, Stewart calls into question the adequacy of Bush’s red herring response. Stewart
might have paralleled Bush’s diplomacy to other situations, but the link to popular
culture maximizes our awareness of the incongruity between trivial and consequen-
tial political communication.

As a comic rhetorical criticism, juxtaposing Bush’s situation with Lindsay and
Paris’s does more than simply entertain or reduce international diplomacy to a nihil-
istic absurdity. It actually calls for “meaningful face to face dialogue” in a “crucial
diplomatic challenge,” affirming political grounds and ideals through the comedy.
In Stewart’s hands, the contextual clash allows us to see the very situatedness of
supposedly “serious” political framings. That is, when Bush’s response is removed
from a particular material environment and attitudinal atmosphere (the presidential
press conference) and put into another (Lohan and Paris bumping into each other),
the event’s very constructedness is illustrated through a “see[ing] from two angles at
once” (Burke, 1984a, p. 41).

Stephen Colbert uses contextual clash in the same way within his show, although
he tends to generate more absurd contexts than Stewart. Just as cartoons are able to
communicate in ways not permitted in more serious forums, because of their seem-
ingly innocuous nature (Bruce, 2001; Rushkoff, 1996), it appears that Colbert is
able to heighten contextual incongruities more than Stewart because he is playing
a character. On an episode of The Colbert Report, Colbert interviews Jim Gilchrist,
the founder of the conservative immigration watchdog group, the Minuteman Project.
In his conservative character, Colbert turns to Gilchrist and assures him, “I screen
every member of my audience to make sure there are no illegal immigrants, no
Mexicans in my audience” (Colbert, 2006b). The camera then pans the audience,
in the middle of which sits a blond, pigtailed German woman holding four beer
steins. Colbert then asks Gilchrist, “What can we do to make our country less appeal-
ing?” By shifting the context from Mexico to Germany, Colbert playfully critiques
possible racial orientations to the immigration controversy. Colbert accomplishes
what Kastely (1996) calls the continual “need to use incongruous perspectives to
show the unnaturalness of what we uncritically take to be natural” (p. 321).

Contextual clash does not need to involve real situations. By inventing counterfac-
tual contexts (see Dannenberg, 2008), Colbert uses hypothetical, imaginary scenes to
make meaningful points about immigration policy. In the same show segment, Colbert
continues his analysis of Gilchrist’s politics by calling attention to a policy
proposal to build a 700-mile-long wall across the southern US border. Colbert asserts,
“You must be pretty happy about that 700 mile wall... Do you want a wall? Because
I want a wall” (Colbert, 2006b). Gilchrist affirms, “Yes, I want a wall now.” Colbert
then clashes Gilchrist’s ideal context with his own exaggerated context:

I want a 20 foot high wall 2000 miles long that you can see from space... There’s a
moat full of fire with fireproof crocodiles... How about this? What about an
underground electrical wire, uh, like we use for dogs, and we get those Mexicans
to wear shock collars?

Colbert conjures up a new scenic interpretation that denaturalizes Gilchrist’s com-
mittments. Colbert clashes Gilchrist’s ideal scene with the moat, crocodiles, and an
underground electrical wire, escalating Gilchrist’s premise so that the normalization of a 700-mile wall now seems abnormal. The moat evokes connotations of medieval times, an anachronistic solution to a complex contemporary problem. The underground electrical wires suggest the treatment of human beings like animals (underscored by “like we use for dogs”). There is also a link with Nazism in this absurd treatment, which appears to follow from his earlier mention of the German woman. This comic distortion again calls into question the racial and humanitarian implications of Gilchrist’s project. Through this process, the contextual shifts invite Gilchrist and The Colbert Report’s audience into the comedic insight, allowing them to view anew the potential excesses of certain orientations toward immigration.

It is worth noting that as Colbert makes these comments, Gilchrist looks slightly shocked and interjects, “uh, a little too far.” When Colbert finishes his statement, a concerned Gilchrist pauses and then asserts, “Mr. Colbert, you would never make it with the Minuteman project.” Perhaps the absurdity of Colbert’s scenario was simply too chimerical for Gilchrist to give it any rhetorical plausibility. Yet it is Gilchrist’s pausing and looks of shock rather than laughter, as well as his end response, that indicate he has briefly come into Colbert’s constructed world and confronted a moral moment in the midst of this contextual absurdity. Although it appears that Colbert did not change his guest’s views on the building of a wall at the United States-Mexican border—Gilchrist was briefly brought into a comic world where the clash of what is and what could be were focused, evoking a response that is anything but absurd—wouldn’t that be horrible, indeed.

Stewart and Colbert both use contextual clash outside of their shows too, by bringing their comic attitudes into more serious cultural forums. Stewart’s guest appearance on CNN’s Crossfire in 2005 illustrates this concept. Stewart’s very presence on the show juxtaposes playful and weighty contexts against one another, raising our awareness of the form and content of mainstream media communication. Stewart asks show hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala, “Can I say something quickly? Why do we have to fight? ... you're part of [the corporations and politician's] strategies. You are partisan, what do you call it, hacks” (“Jon Stewart,” 2007, pp. 1–2). By being the abnormal person in a normal situation, Stewart states a political critique, clashes contexts and consequently transforms himself into the normal person in an abnormal situation. Continuing this contextual clash, Stewart then claims that on The Daily Show, “we have civilized discourse” (p. 3), and escalates this scenic incongruity by telling Begala and Carlson, “you’re on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls” (p. 5). Stewart’s critique stresses how communication takes place on shows like Crossfire. Rather than simply playing into Crossfire’s communication norms—visceral shouting between partisan opponents—Stewart brings into sharp relief the metacommunicative issue of what practices are best suited to democratic deliberation. As such, the scenic incongruity demonstrates the point that a comic rather than tragic frame is likely the most well-rounded approach to sociopolitical relations.

Similarly, Colbert made a guest appearance on Fox News’s The O’Reilly Factor, bringing his comic context to bear on conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly’s show
(“Stephen Colbert enters,” 2007). Colbert uses the occasion to compare the two contexts of The Colbert Report and The O’Reilly Factor, stating “Nothing [is] prepared, I improvise the show every night, just like you do, Bill” (p. 2). Being the abnormal person in the normal situation, Colbert uses his conservative comic persona to identify with O’Reilly (e.g. “just like you do”). At the same time, Colbert puts his tongue firmly in his cheek and becomes the normal person in an abnormal situation by communicating how the highly constructed The O’Reilly Factor presents the illusion of spontaneity (e.g. “nothing [is] prepared”). Colbert clearly has an organization planning and preparing his broadcasts, as does O’Reilly (so that, for example, words at the side of the screen show up at the right time on both shows). Colbert becomes the normal person in the abnormal situation by letting audiences know that both contexts are packaged, thus bringing into focus The O’Reilly Factor’s material environment and attitudinal atmosphere.

Colbert further critiques O’Reilly through comic play, upsetting the patterns of communicative style typically enacted on the show: “You know what I hate about people who criticize you? They—they criticize what you say but they never really give you credit for how loud you say it… Or how long you say it” (p. 5). Colbert centers on the monologic nature of O’Reilly’s communication. Similar to Stewart’s appearance on Crossfire, Colbert’s visit to The O’Reilly Factor is not simply a debate about politics but a “birds-eye-view” metacommunicative critique of how persuasion is enacted within this forum. Ultimately, taking O’Reilly’s deafening discursive style out of the naturalized world of Fox News and into a separate comic world, Colbert creates a perspective by incongruity that turns O’Reilly’s rhetorical force into a farce.

Conclusion

Parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, and contextual clash are comic-frame strategies of incongruity that permit a communicator to be multivoiced, to deflate abstractions and mystifications, and to symbolically span a variety of situations. Stewart and Colbert’s comic strategies are more than simply techniques for creating entertainment—they are tools for rhetorical criticism with sociopolitical application. Stewart and Colbert practice a socially engaged “ephemeral” rhetorical criticism (see Campbell, 1974), daily analyzing and dissecting public discourses, while reminding or instructing their audiences about moral democratic possibilities. To thus deny that Stewart and Colbert make a positive contribution to democracy would be to deny the very task of rhetorical study—the critical examination of persuasive public texts. As such, Stewart and Colbert are comic rhetorical critics who have much to teach their viewers about healthy public spheres and civil society. There are several implications, or “enduring” contributions to rhetoric, offered by these critical comic strategies.

First, these comic strategies encourage the critique and innovation of perspectives in public life. They set in motion pluralistic communication and awareness and summon accountability toward politics and media. Stewart and Colbert’s (re)significations of voices, discourses, and contexts create a multiplicity of angles in which
their targets and audiences are called to be reflexive about themselves and society, as fallible and mistaken, but not evil (see Burke, 1984a). Stewart and Colbert are thus exemplars of civil argumentation. They do not push their terms to perfection but keep options open through critical and sympathetic play. They teach us that a public sphere is healthy to the extent that participants can engage in vigorous debate and reflective advocacy, take the perspectives of others, and make critiques in a playful rather than combative manner.7

Second, comic strategies such as satire and parody can play a vital role in public life by connecting aesthetic to rational–critical concerns. Habermas (1989) excludes aesthetic matters from his writings on the ideal speech situation. His critics note that within his scheme “‘writing poems and telling jokes’ are secondary to authentic illocutionary acts” (Aune, 1994, p. 129). Stewart and Colbert combine poetic imagination with concerns for a better politics, demonstrating that illusory boundaries do not need drawn between entertaining and rational approaches to deliberation—a finding echoed by Baym (2007a, 2007b). Stewart and Colbert connect everyday culture to the public sphere—making important political matters immediate, relevant, and engaging.

Third, far from a politics of “inertia” (Hart & Hartelius, 2007, p. 264) and passive, nihilistic resignation, Stewart and Colbert’s comic strategies are active, reflective engagements with public texts. There is a remarkable degree of alert reflexivity in their news commentary that greatly contrasts with the spirit of certitude informing much media discourse. There is neither unthinking dogmatism nor an unrelenting skepticism free from communal concerns in their approaches. Rather, Stewart and Colbert’s communications are “essential for modern critical consciousness,” in a democracy that itself thrives on the checking and balancing of flaws in the system (Hariman, 2007, p. 274). Stewart and Colbert certainly destabilize pieties. Yet beyond critique, their comic strategies are constructive in that, as Demo (2000) argues of comic-frame rhetors in general, they “shatter one system of pieties, or frame[s] of reference, [while] they ready audiences/viewers for another” (p. 152). Ultimately, the broadly oriented critical comic strategies that Stewart and Colbert employ build knowledge about public affairs.

Fourth, these comic strategies of incongruity are rhetorical ways to generate attention, heightening and amplifying arguments. Attention is one of the most precious resources in an information age, and rhetoric is the means by which it is allocated (Lanham, 2006). Stewart and Colbert use comic critiques to give “presence” (see Perelman, 1982, pp. 33–40) to their arguments. In generating analogies, setting up juxtapositions, and presenting alternatives on public matters, they continually force us to see these issues from more than one angle, creating shocks of insight. The sheer pace and scope of these new perceptions is fostered by Stewart and Colbert’s open and playful orientations (their comic frames) toward their targets, which keeps argumentation in motion. They avoid the monologic vilifications of tragic framing, which tends to shut down debate. Hence, Stewart and Colbert’s use of incongruity and comic framing create expansive grounds for inventive communication, which heighten and amplify their novel discourses.
Last, these critical comic strategies promote metacomunication. It has been the main contention of this essay that Stewart and Colbert are rhetorical critics. As such, they advance a great deal of communication about communication norms and practices. Most remarkably, what seems to distinguish them from much punditry is their communication about media norms and practices (relatedly see McAlpin, 2005). Stewart and Colbert’s criticism refutes the idea, echoed by a number of scholars, that parody “is not up to the task of undermining the parodist’s own purchase on the Truth” and only consists of negative critique “without affirming possible alternatives” (Harold, 2004, p. 191–192). Stewart and Colbert do more than conduct critiques of organizations and actors outside of the media—they turn their critiques back on themselves and general strategies of newsmaking, opinion reporting, etc., playfully identifying the substances and patterns of power. They are not scholars, yet they care a great deal about analyzing and evaluating communication issues like fallacies, generalities, important omissions, and how communication should ideally take place between interlocutors. They are not content to leave the suasive phenomena of politics and media alone, instead giving their audiences new perceptions of the ways in which these communications work.

This is not to endow Stewart and Colbert with limitless capacities. They do not vote daily in a legislature or build houses for the poor. They are only a couple of contributors, albeit distinctive ones, to the vast domains of American politics and civil society. Yet just like rhetorical critics in general, they demonstrate that there is a necessary place for communication criticism that can concurrently analyze, evaluate, and even entertain in public life. Stewart and Colbert give us hybrid comic equipment for dealing with the conditions of contemporary media and politics. Moreover, their intertextual innovations teach us to be more cognizant of the rich opportunities for perspective construction on any given topic or in any rhetorical situation.

Comically framed perspectives by incongruity were at the apex of Kenneth Burke’s theories of how human beings can best relate to and build community with one another. He invested morally in the idea that, “mankind’s only hope is a cult of comedy” (Burke, 1966, p. 20). Stewart and Colbert are models for the way in which playfulness can create space for civil political engagement. They teach their audiences to identify the logomachies of contemporary politics and media, which are always lurking in the symbolic nature of human affairs. As such, there is rhetorical and humanistic value in their practices. We might reasonably surmise that Stewart and Colbert would agree with Burke’s (1955) advice that criticism is best when the world is approached with a kind of “smiling hypochondriasis” (p. 273). Ethically directed, but never foolproof, this scholar concurs.

Notes

[1] Colbert’s collaborations with fans through viral videos, his 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner speech, the building of a massive Colbert fanbase on Facebook, and his use of Google-bombing (where fans inundate the show Web site and Google so that terms like “American hero” will pull up The Colbert Report on the search engine) all caught the attention of the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, which bestowed the award.
Perspective by incongruity has been used to examine the persuasive uses of radical metaphors (or catachresis), hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, parodic reversal, and other such invitational resources in advocacy (Bostdorff, 1987; Jasinski, 2001; Rocker, 2002). Scholars have also explored various strategies of incongruity in comic framing, such as spirituality, identification, reputation, mimicry, inventive revisions of history, and strategic juxtaposition (Carlson, 1988; Demo, 2000; Powell, 1995). Hence, this analysis builds upon calls to identify the processes and potential of comic strategies and correctives in public life (Appel, 1997; Carlson, 1986, 1988, 1992; Christiansen & Hanson, 1996; Demo, 2000; Dow, 1994; Lewis, 2002; Powell, 1993; Smith & Voth, 2002).

Baym (2005) connects Postman’s “’Now . . . This’” model to The Daily Show in another way. Much news and political comedy programming shift from topic to topic with little explanation or attention to context. Baym finds The Daily Show not only covers significant political issues more frequently, but in doing so “forsakes the ‘now this’ model, often providing single-issue coverage for as long as 8 minutes” (p. 264).

The Weakest Link is a British trivia game show that was brought to American television for a brief period between 2001 and 2003. In the show, a disciplinary host asks trivia questions and makes caustic comments to contestants. Every week, players in the competition would vote to eliminate one of their members, who was subsequently dubbed the weakest link (“Weakest Link,” 2008).

Underscoring his concerns for the constitutive battles of politics, Stephen Colbert (out of character) stated during an interview, “Language has always been important in politics, but language is incredibly important to the present political struggle. Because if you can establish an atmosphere in which information doesn’t mean anything, then there is no objective reality. The first show we did, a year ago, was our thesis statement: What you wish to be true is all that matters, regardless of the facts. Of course, at the time, we thought we were being farcical” (Sternberg, 2006, ¶ 9).

A counterfactual statement “hypothetically alters an event in the past, creating a new outcome” (Dannenberg, 2005, p. 96). Counterfactuals are based upon looking at events or actions as other than what have been or currently are. In other words, events or actions are imagined in terms of how they might have been or could be constructed.

This is not to deny the place nor the effectiveness of melodramatic communication in certain rhetorical situations (see Schwarze, 2006). It is to argue, however, that no healthy public sphere or civil society can long function under melodramatic communication norms. Hence, as Burke finds, the comic frame is the most preferred approach to human relations in general.

References


Stewart and Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism


