

Comedy and Politics

The Daily Show's influence on public opinion: framing and criticism in the 2004 and 2008 general elections



Juul Weijers

S4231473

American Studies

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Supervisor: Prof. dr. Frank Mehring

Second reader: Dr. S.A. Shobeiri

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Signed Juul Peter Marien Weijers, 15 June 2018

Name of student: Juul Weijers

Student number: s4231473

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Abstract

The popularity of satirical news shows is clear: What started with *The Daily Show* in 1993 has evolved into a plethora of shows, including *The Colbert Report*, *Last Week Tonight*, and others. These shows have millions of viewers in the coveted 18-35 demographic. As such, these shows have significant influence in U.S. politics by forming public opinion. The way in which politicians are framed and their actions are criticized has an effect on the audience's opinion of politicians. This thesis focusses on the representation of Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in order to examine if *The Daily Show* frames these candidates differently. A concise satirical background is established and related to the postmodern television medium. The close textual analysis of several salient fragments of *The Daily Show* serves to examine the way politicians running for the office of President of the United States are framed based on their affiliation. Framing and criticism can be observed to have become more polarizing when comparing the 2004 and 2008 elections.

Keywords: political humor, satire, politics, media theory, *The Daily Show*, elections, close analysis, framing, public influence, polarization

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Introduction

With the rise of television programming in the 1960s, news reporting and subsequently comedy and satire gained access to a new outlet. What had previously been expressed through writing or the spoken could now use visual elements as well. The news had to adapt from radio and paper formats to a new visual style, while at the same time satire moved from stage plays and literature to television. The use of the television medium in allows for a greater audience, and thus of greater influence in the public's perception.

Politicians and television have had a peculiar relationship throughout the years. On the one hand, it is a great tool for reaching out to the constituency. Barack Obama's performance on *The Colbert Report* in November 2014 (Brownell 925), as well as Bill Clinton's saxophone performance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (926) are some of the more successful and recent examples of this phenomenon: "Since [Clinton's] performance, political commentators and media scholars have frequently noted the opportunities and obstacles late-night comedy television presents presidents to become an entertainer in chief" (926). While *The Arsenio Hall Show* is an example of late night television rather than of political satire, it does help to illustrate the effect performances on television have on the perception of a politician. On the other hand, these sort of public appearances are politically risky:

John F. Kennedy used a variety of television appearances [...] to craft a celebrity persona to appeal to voters as "Jack Kennedy fans" to win the Democratic nomination and then the presidency in 1960. [...] ...this tactic may have hurt as much as it helped him. [...] Vice President Nixon frequently labeled Kennedy's celebrity strategy as "cheap" and undignified in the pursuit of the presidency. (Brownell 927-928)

History tells us that Kennedy won, although not by a large margin. His televised appearances drew politician's attention to the use of the television medium.

In more recent years, candidates like Sarah Palin and Herman Cain have suffered immensely from televised satire. Tina Fey's caricature of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) mocked "her lack of political ability and ignorance of basic issues," which cemented her image of incompetency and helped establish "the fact that she was unable to accomplish a satisfactory performance as a competent political actor" (Wild). Herman Cain suffered similarly, to the extent that his campaign was eventually hijacked by Stephen Colbert, host of *The Colbert Report*, in order to shed light on the potentially harmful effects of Political Action Committees (Gibson and Adams).

With the above in mind, my main research question focusses on the different ways presidential candidates have been featured on *The Daily Show* since the 2004 elections. Can a change in the way candidates are presented – and thus perceived by the electorate – be observed in *The Daily Show*? When comparing case studies relating to Republican's and Democrat's representations in *The Daily Show* in 2004 and 2008, can satire be shown to be more lenient when featuring Democratic candidates and more harsh when it comes to Republican candidates? Can a polarizing shift be observed?

To compare the representations of Republicans and Democrats, several segments of *The Daily Show* will have to be closely analyzed. This analysis will determine the way in which an image of the political actors are presented to the audience. *The Daily Show* episodes that focused on the 2004 elections between Republican president George W. Bush and Democrat presidential candidate John Kerry, are a good source of segments to examine this with. *The Daily Show* received a Peabody Award "for its unmatched wit and unorthodox approach in putting the 2004 Presidential Election in perspective without diminishing it" (peabodyawards.com, "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Indecision 2004 (Comedy Central)"). This serves to illustrate the effect it had on the American people. *The Daily Show* commented on the 2008 elections between Republican candidate John McCain and

Democratic candidate Barack Obama in the same style. This election cycle has been remarked to be historic in many ways. Both candidates were featured multiple times in various episodes, providing plenty of source material. In order to answer the research question, these sub questions need to be addressed. How are these candidates framed early in the election cycle? Is a different image shown on Election Night?

The images of these candidates as drawn from these close analyses allow for a comparison to be made, serving to illustrate the differences in representation between a sitting president and his challenger in 2004, and the differences in representation between two presidential hopefuls in 2008. Additionally, a comparison can be made between the Democratic candidates and the Republican candidates. Is either side consistently framed in a certain way?

In chapter one, a theoretical background is established. What are the characteristics of satire in contemporary society? Northrop Frye, Gilbert Highet, Robert Elliot, Alvin Kernan, and Ronald Paulson have published influential works on satirical theory in the latter half of the twentieth century and will serve as the theoretical basis of this discussion. Matthew A. Henry's work is used to place satire in its current postmodern context. This will illustrate what the current form of satire entails. Texts by Chris Barker and Jonathan Bignell will provide a theoretical base of postmodern media theory. What is the effect of television on public opinion? How is the news genre, and subsequently the news satire genre, constructed?

A cursory examination of *The Daily Show* shows that the show is more than just funny. By picking apart news and political actors, it exhibits both humorous and political elements. What is political humor? The work of Dannagal G. Young is used to explain what exactly political humor entails. The work of James E. Caron expands on the notion of satire as political humor in his work, arguing that satirical texts can be read as either funny or political, but not both simultaneously.

Lastly, the methodology of this thesis is discussed, as well as the use of close textual analysis based on the work of Carl R. Burghardt on rhetoric. Erving Goffman's notion of "framing," the way in which television presents an image of a politician and how this affects the audience, is summarily discussed in support of Burghardt.

Chapter two will focus on case studies relating to segments of specific episodes of *The Daily Show*. There are two parts to this case study. The first part relates to how a candidate is represented in the run up to Election Night, as this is the most relevant in coloring the public's perception. The second part relates to the actual Election Night, as the way the politician is presented on Election Night is indicative of the way the candidates are framed has changed. Before we can make sense of the content of a select few episodes, some historical context is required. The historical background leading up to the race between Bush and Kerry will be summarily discussed. A close analysis of the rhetoric in said episodes will determine the way these politicians are framed; either mostly positive or mostly negative.

Chapter three will focus on a case study based on segments of several episodes of *The Daily Show*. These segments again show the way Obama and McCain are framed in both the build up to the election and on Election Night itself. Again, a historical background is summarily discussed. Segments relating to Obama and McCain will be closely analyzed to determine which politician is framed best or criticized the least, as well as how this image is constructed rhetorically.

Chapter four will be dedicated to comparing and contrasting the framing of the parties' candidates by looking at the presentations of the presidential candidates as found in chapters 2 and 3. Comparing Kerry and Obama allows us to determine which of how either was framed, and whether or not Democratic candidates receive the same kind of attention in *The Daily Show*. The same is done for the Republican candidates in an attempt to determine if they are framed similarly. A conclusion is drawn from comparing the framing of the Democratic

candidates Kerry and Obama to the framing of the Republican candidates Bush and McCain.

Based on these case studies, does *The Daily Show* favor one party over the other? Has the way Democrats and Republicans are framed changed in the relatively short time of four years?

Finally, a conclusion summarizing all findings will be provided. Is satire, the institution dedicated to undermining powerful figures, helping to polarize the political landscape? Additionally, I suggest what further research must be done in order to reach a definitive conclusion regarding political polarization in satirical media.

Chapter 1 – Theory and Methodology

This first chapter serves as the theoretical outline for this thesis. The satirical theories as posed around the 1950s are established and related to the postmodern media theories. These postmodern theories are expanded upon with the concept of the satirical news genre and the role of political humor. The concept of framing is discussed, and the methodology of performing close textual analysis and its relevance serve to round of this chapter.

1.1 – The Satirical Background: Historical Context

Satire has long been established in Western culture, and has its roots in antiquity. The understanding of contemporary satire has been determined in the latter half of the 20th century, and is mostly based on the works of Gilbert Highet, Northrop Frye, Robert Elliot, Alvin Kernan, and Ronald Paulson (Henry 7).

Satire as a genre is well established in the Western literary tradition. Gilbert Highet refers to the origins of satire in antiquity in his book *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962), quoting Juvenal's depictions of Rome, as well as Plato's dirty joke on Athens' nationalistic sentiments of the time (Highet 15). He distinguishes between several categorical types of satire. According to Highet, Satire can be categorized as monologues, parodies, and narratives. "[A satirical writer] wishes to make [the people] see the truth – at least that part of the truth which they habitually ignore" (19). A satirist intends to shock his readers into reflection with the careful application of language: "Brutally direct phrases, taboo expressions, nauseating imagery, callous and crude slang" are the tools of satire (20). This expression of 'the truth' is what is supposed to invoke the universal emotion of satire, a "blend of amusement and contempt [...] a sour sneer, or a grim smile, or a wry awareness that life cannot all be called reasonable or noble" (21).

Robert C. Elliot focused in his book *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (1960) on the power that satire has in affecting change, citing “the origins of satire in primitive magic and incantations” in classical times as a way of affecting change (Elliot vii). “All satire ‘kills,’ symbolically at any rate” (4), referring to the legend of Archilochus, a man with a wit so sharp that it actually killed his subjects. While the subject of magic and ritual is a discussion for the more esoteric disciplines, Elliot’s work does help to illustrate the effects of satire. Words do have power.

Northrop Frye called satire “militant irony” in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957):

...its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. [...] Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude to experience. (Frye 223-224)

The comic experiences a sense of irony in the way the world works, and struggles with “two societies, one normal and the other absurd” (224). This is expressed in an attack, without resorting to mere denunciation (224). Satire must always target positions of power for it to be satire rather than a cheap jab at an innocent person. This has to do with the differences in power between the people and the governing bodies: “For society to exist at all there must be a delegation of prestige and influence to organized groups [...] all of which consist of individuals given more than individual power...” It is this power that corrupts, so satire is justified as “[the satirist] is attacking an evil man protected by his [institution]” (228).

Alvin B. Kernan writes in his book *The Plot of Satire* (1965) on the concept of dullness. “...to understand satire, we must concentrate on its central fact, the energy of dullness” (Kernan 4), referring to Alexander Pope’s interpretations of the people around him: “Fools rush into my head, and so I write” (Pope, qtd. in Kernan 5). The fools are the ones that

are most present in everyday discourse: they shout the loudest. Additionally, Kernan mentions the way satire has been regarded as negative literature by critics when viewed next to literary genres like the Comedy, the Tragedy, and the Epic:

Satire has most often been regarded from the same orthodox perspective and treated as a negative literary genre which shows not the action of some essential force [...] but rather the bumbling confusion which occurs in the absence of good sense and with the loss of traditional values. (Kernan 3)

Kernan is opposed to this notion of negativity, claiming that satire in this sense is “the work of serious artists trying to catch the grotesque shapes toward which the human form and the world are being forced under the weight of stupidity” (5).

Ronald Paulson writes in his *The Fictions of Satire* (1967) that the satirist does conform to established literary forms, describing it as a way to infiltrate the minds of people:

Historically, the satirist has often had to be on his guard and hide his satires beneath the sheep’s clothing of a commonly accepted form. Whether the satire appears to be a children’s tale or sheer nonsense, it offers both the author and the audience an opportunity to take it that way – for self-protection (Paulson 5).

This “hiding behind a commonly accepted form” has both the intention of making a text accessible to a large audience, and protecting the author from political backlash: “A generally understood form [...] is perverted to convey the satiric message” (5). This in turn means that the message is not beholden to the form in which it is presented. The satirical message is rather “a tone independent of a form” (6). When comparing satire to other genres, a distinction can be observed: “...if tragedy explores the upper ranges of man’s potential in relation to the limitations of society [...] satire explores his lower potentials” (8). According

to Kernan, satire, through the exploration of the lower potentials, offers its interpretation of what could be better by pinpointing what is wrong.

Henry proposes that these works are to be viewed through a contemporary lens. In his book *Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture*, he relates the aforementioned established theoretical definitions and interpretations of satire to contemporary American media. Henry asserts that:

In an “age of irony,” as our era has come to be known, things are a bit more complicated, and often we are uncertain what the satiric target might be, what the moral norm is, what the author’s perspective is, or if we even have satire at all rather than just parody or irony. (Henry 8)

Earlier satire, which revolves around notions of how-to-behave like in Juvenal’s Rome, or revolve around personal attacks like in Swift and Pope, require a different approach of study than that postmodernist satirical expressions require. The lack of a meta narrative is what makes studying contemporary satire so tricky, as it is insufficient to just mention the target and intent of satire. Especially the notions of a moral norm and the author’s perspective are relevant when it comes to deconstructing contemporary televised satire.

Based on the aforementioned works, the parameters of what constitutes satire become clear: satire is an attack on a person or on the status quo, satire suggests that we collectively deserve something ‘better’ as it highlights the stupidities of both life and politics, and satire achieves this through an ironic tone and by mimicking established genre formats, as can be observed in literary traditions. The satirist is both a comic and a political actor: his works may be regarded as funny when related to foolish persons, but can also stem from an interpretation of the political landscape and policy. While these elements are derived from satirical literature, they are also present in contemporary media.

1.2 – Postmodernity and the Media

For all intents and purposes, the contemporary cultural landscape is regarded as postmodernity by cultural scientists. The idea of a post-modern condition is based on Jean-Francois Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur le savoir* (1979), in which he states that the postmodern is characterized by an incredulity towards meta-narratives and overarching rulesets (Caron 154). Postmodernism also reflects "modern society's insecurities and uncertainties" (Rayner et al. 15). The style through which this is achieved is ironic, "a knowing pastiche that finds comment and critique to be the only means of innovation" (Mirzoeff 4). When there is no grand theory, there is no reason for elements of one genre to be exclusive to that genre. For example, by taking elements from news media and incorporating them in comedy and satire, an ironic comment on the medium can be established.

Television as a medium has the ability to influence and reach millions of people every day, and has only recently been surpassed in that capacity by the internet. The ease with which 'fake news' articles have been picked up by the public is an expression of the internet's ability to influence the public. Fake news was especially prominent around the Trump and Clinton campaigns of 2016 (Richie). Nevertheless, television is still one of the major influences on public opinion. What, and more importantly *how* stories are constructed and displayed is therefore still relevant.

Television offers the viewer "frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the world is constructed" (Barker 326). News outlets such as CNN and MSNBC are some the monolithic corporations that control and produce the news. Their influence on public discourse, and therefore public opinion, cannot be discounted. It is critically important to remember that the news is never objective. Any news item is the result of a selection. After all, only a finite number of news items can be aired each day. This

selection is made by people whom are subject to their own biases and milieu (326). History has shown us that news can be directed by government or the establishment, and this is still something the public still fears. This manipulative model, however, is outdated in western plural democracies (328). Instead, a pluralist model captures the effects of contemporary news corporations better.

The news corporations are aware of their own biases, and actively embrace it. According to a 2014 study of the Pew Research Center (Mitchell et al.), MSNBC, NPR, The New York Times and CNN are the go-to news outlets for those leaning to the political left and liberalism. Fox News on the other hand is consistently leaning to the political right and conservatism. A feedback loop is constructed, in which viewer and news producer achieve equilibrium: The channels cater to a specific niche on socio-political demographic spectrum. This demographic category then flocks to the channel that supports their beliefs. In this pluralist model, in which market forces lead to a variety of news outlets (Barker 328), “audiences, aware of a range of political views and presentational styles within the media, choose to buy or watch that which they already agree with” (329).

To properly understand contemporary television it has to be viewed through a postmodern lens, as that is the contemporary cultural zeitgeist. Postmodernism is expressed in television through “the celebration and enjoyment of mixing up the conventions of the source text” (Bignell 166). A text, in this context, refers to a television program. Postmodernism is referential in nature: intertextual references, which are fragments of other texts embedded in the new text, cause enjoyment when the viewer spots these fragments.

If television gains its meaning from fragmented texts and people enjoy this, does this mean people’s subjective identity is also fragmented (167)? It would appear so, as “features of television programmes [sic] seem to match descriptions of contemporary culture which focus on how people’s identity is mobile and fluid, and composed of partial fragments” (168). The

downside of this is that identity is not only constructed in a positive way, but in a negative way as well: "...stigmatizing those groups of viewers whose difference from oneself enables each person's identity to be constituted" (Bignell 169). This multiplicity also infers that people may have a different interpretation of televised events: "...some programmes [sic] may be taken at face value by some audiences, but read ironically by others" (168). The interpretation of a television text is dependent on the viewers belief systems: Those who watch *The Daily Show* exhibit distrust to anything that is featured on FOX News, for example. FOX News on the other hand styles itself as the straight-shooting voice of reason and exhibits distrust to the more mainstream news networks. The result of these different attitudes is that FOX News is the comedic butt of many *The Daily Show* segments.

In a way, *The Daily Show* is a simulacrum of news. Jean Baudrillard coined the term "simulacra" as a way of explaining "the way in which simulations or copies are replacing the 'real' artefacts" (Rayner et al. 16). The fact that so many Americans receive their news from a 'fake' news show is telling: Comedic satirical news is, if not slowly replacing, at least a substitute for these real news artefacts. In the aforementioned Pew Research Center study, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are mentioned as news outlets, and are consistently attracting audiences on the more liberal end of the political spectrum (Mitchell et al.), lending credibility to their status as a simulacrum. In their own way, they perpetuate the aforementioned characteristics of news media: These shows occupy their own socio-political niche. The way commentary on the news genre is established relies heavily on ironically taking fragments and rebranding them in a satirical parody.

Irony is often regarded as the lingua franca of satire and postmodern humor: "Just as satirical texts present critiques of society's ills through a humorous lens, irony offers a useful mechanism to playfully expose the gap between the way things are and the way things should be" (Young 4). Indeed, irony is a powerful rhetorical tool, used to create meaning in a highly

complex way, “cultivating multiplicity and fragmentation” (Shugart 433-434). In its current, postmodern form, irony functions both rhetorically and structurally as a strategy of opposition (434). It differs from pre-modern and modern forms of irony in that postmodern irony can undermine from within, emulating the dominant order (435). This is what these satirical news shows are doing: by taking on the appearance of a real news show (i.e. the dominant order), they both strengthen their own messages while undermining the credibility of actual news stations. This subversive element is achieved by operating within the rules of the news genre.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the use of irony as a humoristic tool came under attack as “...editorials and commentators initially called for an “end of irony” (Gournelos and Greene xi). If irony plays with ‘what is meant’ and ‘what really is,’ this implies that there is no objective truth: No matter the subject, there will always be supporters and critics, and they may even all be right. The 9/11 tragedy was perceived to be so terrible however that critics like *Time* magazine editor Rosenblatt and *Vanity Fair* editor Carter felt that irony no longer had a place in socio-political discourse:

...the event seemed so earth-shattering that there did seem to be an absolute and clear dichotomy between good and evil. Once you've got one of those, then a) the act of seeking the truth through irony is pointless, because the truth is staring you in the face; and b) the postmodern ironic distance that eschews concepts like "good" and "evil" has been trounced. (Williams)

Though similar assertions have been made throughout the years, they have been proven to be incorrect every time, as Michiko Kakutani wrote for the New York Times, referring to horrific events in Western history like the World Wars and Vietnam:

[Irony] would go on to permeate modern consciousness and art, acknowledged not only as a sneering, overused pose of detachment, but also as a potent weapon for

delineating a fractured and frightening world. At least until [September 2001], when commentators summarily, and prematurely, announced its demise. (Kakutani)

This is not to say that comedians were not impacted by the events of September 2001. If anything, the importance of irony during times of duress was underlined. A call for the end of irony is also a call to the end of postmodernist satire, and the satirists clearly were not done with their subjects just yet.

1.3 – Genre and the Format

While I have touched upon the notions of genre earlier, I have done so in general terms like the news genre and the satirical genre. The notion of genre is more complex and merits further discussion in order to narrow down the general terms to specifics relating to *The Daily Show*.

The study of genre according to Bignell is:

... based on the identification of the conventions and key features which distinguish one kind of work from another [...] It allows theorists to link the conventions and norms found in a group of texts with the expectations and understanding of audiences. (Bignell 116)

Based on the features of the text, cues given to the audience, supporting information, and the presence and association of performers (116), the audience can get an idea of what to expect from a television text before even looking at the content. In this sense, *The Daily Show* exhibits traits of a news broadcast and comedy show at the same time.

News reporting is what shapes one's view of the world the most. It comes as no surprise then, that in a reaction to this, comedy and satire have embraced the news genre as well. *The Daily Show* satirizes the news, first and foremost. Comedian Jon Stewart (and since 2015 Trevor Noah) follow some of the same medium rules as the big news corporations like

CNN and FOX News do: The news anchor in a suit sits at his desk and tells the audience the noteworthy events of that day, followed by a more in depth piece on one or more of these events. The audience expects a news broadcast but there is a comedic performer sitting in the news anchor's spot. This relates the first clues as to what the audience is to expect: funny news.

Barker determines that in the Anglo-American sphere news is selected based on topics like politics and the economy, and make references to elite nations or persons (Barker 326). These elements can similarly be observed in *The Daily Show* as well; when FOX covers politics, *The Daily Show* will mock FOX's coverage of politics. When CNN critiques a politician's policies, perhaps unfairly, *The Daily Show* will offer their own interpretation, correcting the perceived mistakes and assumptions made by the news media.

Also similar is the style in which the news is presented. "Current affairs programmes [sic] are often 'serious' in tone, with adherence to the 'rules' of balance" (Barker 331), focusing on reporting the news with as little bias as possible rather than to be entertaining. However, commercial competition has "tilted television towards popular formats" (331), including faster editing tempos and more a more engaging presentational style, as well as "a stress on immediacy in the presentation of news" (332). While this style is certainly more engaging to an audience that is unable or unwilling to consume more in depth pieces of news, this stylistic choice may also "reduce understanding by failing to provide the structural contexts for news events. We quickly learn *what* has happened, [...] but not *why* it has happened" (332).

The Daily Show uses the same flashy tactics as these news shows use: a solemn tune of drums and trumpets is accompanied by an announcer who introduces the show and its host, followed by the show's logo. This introduction then leads in to an upbeat musical score, followed by applause and cheers from the studio audience. The report of the day is

accompanied by segments of the news, funny graphics, and Stewart's own comedic devices like deadpan, impressions, and (faux) outrage. Ironically, it is the satirical shows that provide more structural context for the news in their in-depth segments. In this way, they break away from the popular news genre.

In the tradition of the late night comedy show genre, every episode of *The Daily Show* features a famous guest. Politicians like Barack Obama, John Kerry, John McCain, and both Bill and Hillary Clinton (Thoet et al.), have all been featured on the show, as well as journalists from the major news networks, published authors, Nobel Prize laureates, and philanthropists. Each guest usually gets between five and ten minutes to promote their work, supported by mostly good natured ribbing by the host. Longer segments are not unheard of as several guests have received a more in depth examination; Barack Obama had, near the end of his presidency, a half hour in which he and Stewart reflected on the presidency and the president's achievements and setbacks (2016). Bill O'Reilly was the subject to criticism of FOX News in general and the O'Reilly Factor in particular in a similarly lengthy segment (2014). This element of the show looks similar to the way interviews on news networks are conducted. The lighter tone and the jokes serve to marry the news genre and comedic genres.

Lastly, every episode of *The Daily Show* ends on A Moment of Zen, a lighthearted clip of a televised moment in politics or news media. This can vary from a segment of a filibuster featuring a nonsensical statement, to a political gaffe, to a discrepancy or poorly worded – and therefore humorous – segment in political or news reporting, and serves to round off the more serious tones of the episode.

This format has been well established throughout the years and is one of the key identifiers of the genre and style of *The Daily Show*. This format and presentational style has been used throughout Stewart's tenure. In the wake of greater events, such as national tragedies like 9/11 or a mass shooting, the format and style have often changed somewhat in

order to reflect severity of the occasion. These statistical outliers are not as interesting for the purposes of this thesis. This format serves to illustrate the correlation between the news, politics, and satirical humor.

1.4 – Political Humor

The Daily Show occupies a niche in television programming: it is a combination of humor, the news, and politics. Although Stewart himself described his show as being a fake news show, the content on the show belies that assertion. The show has its own political agenda, as is evident in the way they present politicians and policies to the audience. This combination of news and humor is part of the catch-all term political humor: “[Political humor] is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. Within that broad category, political satire occupies a specific role” (Young 3). This role revolves around “[eliciting] laughter” while simultaneously “casting judgment” (3). While political humor is often similar in tone or content, it is the act of judging that sets political satire apart from the rest:

Jokes and texts that treat political topics in a lighthearted manner but offer no criticism of institutions, policies, or societal norms do not constitute satire. Rather, satire questions the existing political or social order, usually by juxtaposing the existing imperfect reality with visions of what *could* or *should* be. [...] the underlying premise of a satirical text is often optimistic, as it suggest we (collectively) deserve better.

(Young 3)

By picking apart opposing ideological views and narratives, political satire offers their version of what the world should look like. This is their political affiliation and agenda. This agenda is in turn imposed on the audience.

The satirical genre has several tools at its disposal to bring across this political message of criticism and hope, such as parody:

Parody [...] relies on the audience's prior knowledge of an original text or concept by exaggerating its most familiar aspects. Caricatures [...] are an example of parody.

Other examples include impersonations of political figures as well as programs and texts that exaggeratedly (or ironically) mimic a political concept, event, or genre.

(Young 3)

In this light, the earlier example of Tina Fey's caricature of Sarah Palin on SNL becomes clear: by exaggerating Palin's "folksy accent" and criticizing her "conservative issue positions" (Young 4), a parody based on popular conceptions was constructed. The same is true for Stephen Colbert's performance: his character is a parody of a conservative pundit, almost exactly mimicking in Bill O'Reilly in both presentation and tone (Colleta 862). This might also explain the critical acclaim and popularity of both Fey's and Colbert's performances, as they follow the rules of the satirical genre.

James E. Caron attributes the success of these parodies to "truthiness," a term coined by Colbert. This neologism refers to playing into the representation of "gut-feeling as hard fact" in news media (Caron 160). Palin and O'Reilly relied heavily on this concept, giving voice to ideas that their audiences collectively 'know' or 'suspect' to be true. Truthiness works as a satirical device "because it mocks those who are so steeped in ideology that they jettison actual evidence in favor of accepting a claim because it feels right, but also because it apparently mocks the very pursuit of truth" (160). Commenting on this "truthiness" added a new layer to satire, one that is relatively young.

Caron notices that truthiness is symptomatic of a shift in the way civic issues are debated. Rather than the old process that focusses on rational argument, current media

practices render politics as sport and political events as show business (161). Truthiness “points to postmodernisms apparent indifference to moral value as well as truth” (162). Fact, accountability, and reason evidently still matter in public discourse however, given the popularity of shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. These shows offer the truth by highlighting what is left out in news reporting.

Caron also shows that satire exists in a quantum state of being both serious and non-serious speech. Stewarts appearance on CNN’s Crossfire and his work pushing Zadroga’s 9/11 Health and Compensation Act through congress (multiple times) are examples of this quantum state of “satiractivism” (163). Satire must be read as either political speech, or as comedic speech:

The quantum paradox of truthiness satire should obviate concerns that it collapses comic speech and political speech. Moreover, that paradox clarifies the claims of satiractivism, keeping satire separate from activism by insisting on a two-step process: such satire first has the greatest potential to change minds, which then lead to political or social action. [...] comic speech cannot be political speech. Once one argues that any brand of satire is the same as activism, [...] comic discourse metamorphoses into political discourse. (Caron 168)

When discussing *The Daily Show*, one cannot just look at it through just the lens of comedy. To fully grasp the nuances, a political interpretation is required in order to establish the influence satire has on politics.

1.5 – Methodology: Close Textual Analysis and Framing

Political satire wields significant political clout in the way that they communicate their messages to the public. Shows like *SNL*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show* can influence the way the public sees candidates, depending on their representation of said candidates. What is said on *The Daily Show* can even be treated as news in its own right. Journalists of national newspapers such as The New York Times (Russonello) and The Washington Post (Shapira) have picked up on this, lending more credibility to the impact political satire has on public opinion:

Journalists began to write about satirical commentary, as if those delivering it had become opinion leaders to them. This change constituted a distinct, empirically identifiable moment of transformation in the way journalists engaged with popular culture representations of political candidates. (Wild)

In short, political satire television has the potential to influence the way in which voters perceive politicians up for election.

The way in which these images and stories are used to influence the audience can best be described using framing theory as deduced by Davie. Based on the Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974) Davie describes framing as follows: "In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information" (Davie). Constructing an image of a political candidate is a way of communicating a message. When a political candidate is framed as incompetent, as is the case with the Palin parody, the audience is told to believe that Palin is incompetent. Framing "could be construed as a form of second level agenda-setting – they not only tell the audience what to think about [...], but also how to think about that issue [...]" (Davie).

The Daily Show has run for a little more than twenty two years now, and has had a number of different hosts. At the time of writing, close to 3100 episodes have aired under Killborn, Stewart, and Noah. Collecting data on all of the episodes that are in some way related to the 2004 and 2008 elections is well beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, when it comes to comparing the representation of political figures on *The Daily Show*, this can best be achieved by looking at specific segments of the more memorable episodes. Comedy Central has made these segments available on their internet archive. While it is unfortunate that full length episodes of the times mentioned are not available, these clips do show some of the more salient segments relating to the elections. The fact that someone deigned to feature these clips in the archives means that they are important or indicative of the time. A close analysis of several of these segments will prove fruitful.

The way to do come to a political interpretation is by close-textual analysis. Assuming that *The Daily Show* has both a political agenda and that it imposes this agenda on the audience in its rhetoric, as I have argued for so far, the question of how this message is presented and what it actually entails comes to the fore. Carl Burghardt, author of *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism* (2000) describes close textual analysis as a way of analysis that “seeks to study the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively” (qtd. in Self 61). Close analysis requires twofold approach to a text. The first aspect is an examination of the actors in an episode or segments, what they are saying, to whom, and how they react to each other and to new information. When Stewart looks directly at the camera and makes a funny face, this is always in relation to something that has been said before. Describing what exactly is happening during a scene is the way to achieve this. The same goes for images that are shown during the segment, as these serve to highlight what is being said.

The second aspect of close textual analysis is to place the events unfolding on screen in the social context of the time in order to extract the political meaning from the humor. Why does Stewart make a face? What is the context which makes him react in a negative or positive way to things that have happened? What exactly is being commented upon in the different segments? This in turn relates to how the candidates are framed and what message the audience is supposed to believe.

Selection of the clips analyzed for this thesis are made on several criteria. Firstly, a clip must not exclusively focus on attacking or undermining the news media. While the news media are prime target for *The Daily Show's* brand of satire, this thesis focusses on presidential candidates. Naturally, these candidates must be featured in the segment. Secondly, framing has to take place in the clip, via rhetoric or imagery. Using imagery from these clips via screenshot serves to underscore elements of the close analysis. An effort is made to select images that are both funny and are engaging in framing. An extra effort is made to find segments that are similar to one another. Thirdly, the clips must feature similar styles to allow for comparison. In the build up to the election several styles of commentary can be found. These include commentary on behavior, commentary related to policy, and the spoofing of election videos. The coverage of Election Nights provide several similarities in the way the various campaign headquarters are represented, and serve to highlight the changes in the presentations made since earlier in the election cycle.

In conclusion, this chapter related the satirical theory to postmodernism. Postmodernist media influences the audience in a certain way. *The Daily Show* occupies its own genre and political niche by which it influences the audience. Close textual analysis and the notion of framing will serve to show how this agenda setting is achieved in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

Chapter 2 – Case Study: 2004 Elections

This case study relates to the 2004 American elections between Democratic challenger John Kerry and sitting Republican president George W. Bush. A close analysis of several segments of *The Daily Show* serve to establish the image of these candidates. To determine whether this image has changed significantly throughout the election cycle, a comparison between early and late representations must be made. Season 8, Episode 59 of *The Daily Show* shows the way John Kerry is framed. Season 9, Episode 27 of *The Daily Show* relates to George W. Bush and the way he is framed. Close analysis of these segments serves to examine the difference in the way candidates are framed and critiqued. This can then be compared to the image presented of Kerry and Bush on Election Night 2004 in Season 9, Episode 54 of *The Daily Show*. How are these presidential candidates framed? What is the rhetoric used to construct this image, and how has this evolved throughout the election cycle?

2.1 – Election 2004 – Political Background

A short summary of the political landscape in the early 2000s is warranted as it was in 2000 that Bush got elected for his first term. This first term in offices shaped his image leading in to the 2004 elections. Bush was elected in the wake of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair of '98. After a lengthy legal battle to determine who had won the Floridian delegates, George W. Bush became the 43rd president of the United States, narrowly beating Democratic candidate Al Gore (Balz). Gore had won the popular vote, but did not succeed in the electoral college.

Coasting on the high economic tides, a legacy of former president Bill Clinton, Bush enacted several popular policies like tax cuts, subsidizing healthcare, and an increase in military pay (M. Oliver, “George W Bush: Key Policies”). Disaster struck on September 11th, 2001. Bush’s decisive action during these days initially cemented his popularity. However,

The War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan, and the unpopular – with the benefit of hindsight some might say unwarranted – war in Iraq, as well as a flagging economy, undid this initial rise in popularity in the build-up to the 2004 elections. President Bush and Vice President Cheney easily secured the Republican nomination, and were set to duke it out with the Democratic nominees John Kerry and his running mate senator John Edwards.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts was mostly an unknown factor, compared to Bush. He did not have the national spotlight on him like Bush had prior to the elections. In the televised debates between Democratic candidates he was mostly upstaged by rival candidate Howard Dean. In the end, Kerry managed to defeat the other contenders becoming the Democratic nominee (Johnston).

2.2 – Leading up to Election Day 2004

The public image of a presidential candidate is carefully constructed by their campaign team. In order to appeal to as many demographic categories as possible, candidates have to act in specific way and take a political stance on issues like for example defense, taxation, and gay rights. Satire can take these constructed images and twist them, showing the intention behind the act. The following relates to how John Kerry and George W. Bush were presented in *The Daily Show* in the build up to the election.

2.2.1 – Framing John Kerry

Senator Kerry had some difficulty clinching the Democratic nomination. During the election cycle, Democratic candidates met in televised debates several times, and in these bouts candidate Howard Dean often managed to establish himself as the best candidate. The segments “Democrats 2004: Race from the White House – Kerry Campaign” and “Kerrey 07”

(The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Season 8, Episode 59) offered their comments on John Kerry's flagging campaign. These segments will serve to highlight Kerry's perception in the run up to the actual election.

The segment "Democrats 2004: Race from the White House – Kerry Campaign" opens with Stewart commenting on Howard Dean's rejection of the Federal Matching Funds (0:11-0:42), allowing Dean to bypass the federal spending limit and making it possible for Dean to acquire unlimited private funds. Dean is aiming for 100 dollars from two million Americans. Stewart snidely points out that between two million people you'd be able to come up with a hundred dollars before being informed by the show's producers through a pantomime of an earpiece that his deduction is wrong and what Dean means is a hundred dollar each (0:42-0:59).

Stewart then goes to show a televised reaction on this flip-flopping move by Dean, who had earlier publicly stated to abide by the spending limit. A talking head is shown, presumably Democratic senator and Kerry's future running mate John Edwards, stating that this was "the wrong move" for Dean. Edwards claims that this move sends the wrong signals to voters in the country. Stewart then dejectedly points out that the voters really don't seem to worry about signals and that they just don't care anymore in general (1:11-1:27).

The segment then segues into coverage of another Democratic candidate, Richard Gephardt, who tries to chime in on Dean's controversial decision. Stewart points out that 'Dick' Gephardt is drawing attention to himself, rather than critiquing Dean. Gephardt's confidence in his ability to win the race for Democratic nominee is undercut by Stewart, who attributes his eagerness to too much caffeine (1:27-2:00).

Stewart then shows who is hurt most by Dean's popularity: Dean's fellow New England senator John Kerry. Kerry, in a reaction to Deans success, fires his clearly

underperforming campaign manager. This in turn prompts his campaign's deputy finance director to quit in protest. Stewart point out that at his point, the campaign spokesman usually tries to give a positive spin to these developments. But, alas, the spokesman has quit his job as well in solidarity with his coworkers. Stewart then quotes "a plucky intern" who has provided an exclusive statement for *The Daily Show*, which turns to be "I also quit." This prompts Stewart to conclude that Kerry's campaign "not doing well" (2:00-2:53).

Kerry is then shown in a clip of Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show*. In an attempt to reinvigorate his campaign Kerry arrives on a Harley Davidson motorcycle, sporting jeans, a leather jacket, and a manly hat i.e. a helmet. Accompanied by rock and roll music, Kerry breaks through NBC's security barriers in move



Figure 1. Leno (left) welcomes Kerry (right). Kerry drove his motorcycle on to the set.

that's quintessentially cool, and rides straight onto the set via a handy ramp. Stewart elects to comment on NBC Studios comically bad security. If any guy on a motorcycle can just drive in like that it is clear that their security needs some work (3:10-3:35). Stewart then jokes that no voters are going to think to themselves "I know who I'm voting for: dude on the motorcycle" claiming that such a move only works to attract the attention of fifteen year old girls. Or so he hopes. Kerry is then shown relating a funny anecdote to Leno, which Stewart hijacks as soon as the premise (being pulled over by a police officer) is established, turning an seemingly funny, innocuous anecdote into a graphic story about strippers, drugs, and sex. The audience learns that this is Stewart's impersonation of Kerry (2:53-4:40).

The following segment of this episode, titled “Kerrey ‘07”, features Ed Helms styled as a senior political analyst, who joins Stewart at his desk. Helms is ready to provide his interpretation of the events troubling Kerry. Helms asserts that the campaign has been mismanaged from the start, and that a fresh start as a result of these terminations is the best way a



Figure 2. Senator John Kerry speaking at an event, a clear example of mismanagement according to Ed Helms.

“troubled, troubled campaign” can continue (0:20-0:55). Helms then shows a picture of John Kerry speaking at an event (fig. 2). The signs around the speaking Kerry read “Kerrey in ‘07” which according to Helms is a clear indication of mismanagement: the campaign had gotten both the name and the year wrong. Helms then goes on to compare Kerry to Dean. Dean has more “attitude” and Kerry, in an attempt to emulate Dean’s attitude, is shown in a clearly doctored photo punching a baby (fig. 3). Which Helms feels is “just wrong” as punching babies has never gotten anyone elected since Taft (0:55-



Figure 3. John Kerry in a doctored photo, “punching a baby.”

1:35). Stewart, being the voice of reason, corrects Helms assertions on baby punching in general and questions Ed Helms’ expertise as an analyst. Helms, quasi offended, lists a couple of things he could be saying about the campaign instead, like that Kerry inspires no passion and that he looks like a zombie. Helms then recants by saying that he won’t say such things, standing by his original analysis (1:35-2:21).

2.2.1.1 – Kerry’s Pre-Election Image

In the first segment, four Democratic candidates are shown; Dean, Edwards, Gephardt, and Kerry. While these candidates receive some criticism – like on Dean’s flip-flopping and Gephardt’s mania – the framing and criticism of Kerry is most relevant for this thesis.

The future Democratic nominee John Kerry is the butt of the joke. The troubles in Kerry’s campaign team serve as the context for his actions on Jay Leno’s show later. Kerry is grasping at straws in order to reinvigorate his dying campaign. It is through this lens that Stewart is reflecting on Kerry’s actions. Kerry is desperately trying to look cool and hip by driving around on his Harley Davidson motorcycle while sporting jeans and a leather jacket, contrary to the prevailing image associated with Kerry. Ed Helms put this image into words by not-saying that Kerry is unable to invoke passion and looks like a zombie. It is easier to admit to mismanagement than it is to admit that the Democratic candidate is uninspiring. Stewart hopes that the public will not be fooled by this attempt to frame Kerry as someone worthy of at least some passion, comparing the audience to fifteen year old girls – if they are taken in by this performance. This relates to Hight’s notion of the way satire uncovers the truth: the way Kerry is portrayed is not genuine but rather a persona, a constructed personality which has the intention of presenting Kerry in a positive light. Kernan’s concept of dullness is also represented, as the way Kerry behaves can be considered foolish, providing the opening Stewart needs to voice his criticism. The prevailing theme is that Kerry is underperforming and that the American people deserve someone more inspiring.

2.2.2 – Framing George W. Bush

Bush, as the sitting president and confirmed Republican nominee, had other issues to contend with. Criticism leveled at Kerry did not follow the same format as criticism leveled at Bush: he was a known factor with a very public record of his first term in office, as opposed to the

relatively unknown Kerry. Attacks on Bush focused on his personal traits as well as his persecution of the war in Iraq.

The segment titled “Bush’s Words” (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, season 9, episode 27) shows *The Daily Show*’s interpretation of Bush in a spoofed campaign film. The Republican National Committee had earlier announced a film promoting the reelection of Bush, to be shown at the Republican Convention later that week.

Stewart introduces the film by saying that president Bush’s reelection campaign is centered around Bush’s handling of The War on Terror. The campaign film, produced by the Republican National Committee focusses “exclusively” on how Bush handled that war, highlighting his actions in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks. Stewart then goes on to claim that *The Daily Show* had somehow obtained an advance copy, and introduces the following clip to the audience as a sneak preview (0:00-0:20).

The clip starts with images from what is presumably war torn Iraq. The voiceover (Stephen Colbert) reminds the audience that they live “in a time of unprecedented danger” (0:22). The image of Iraq then cuts to a clip of Bush claiming that Americans are actually safer than they have been. The voiceover then reminds the audience of the economic uncertainty that plagues America, which is followed by a cut of Bush claiming that “the economy is strong, it is getting stronger” (0:35). The voiceover finally reminds the audience of a “massive intelligence failure that led a nation to war” followed by a cut to Bush claiming

that the intelligence he gets is “darn good” (0:44). The premise of the spoof is then established by the voiceover: “Bush has used the power of words to overcome insurmountable facts,” followed by a title screen that reads “George W. Bush – Words Speak Louder Than Actions” (fig. 4, 0:20-1:00). The voiceover gives the audience some background on the uncomfortable relationship Bush had with words in the

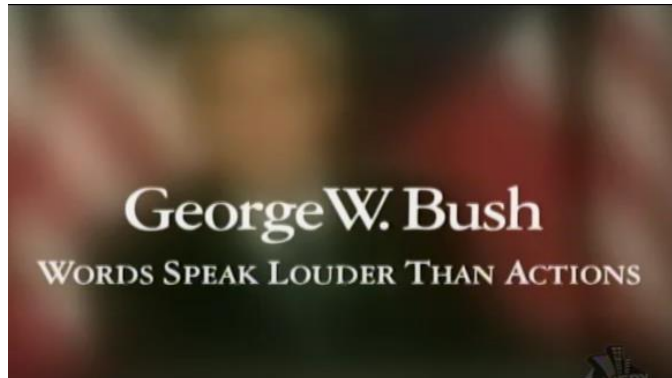


Figure 4. Opening title screen of the spoofed RNC election video.

beginning of his first term. Clips are shown on how Bush is stumbling through his sentences, how he combines words into neologisms like “prolifelators” and “sublimical” combined with his sometimes thick Texas accent (1:00-1:15). The clip then cuts to a famous clip of George W. Bush speaking at Ground Zero in the aftermath of September 11th from atop a fire truck

(fig 5). The voiceover recognizes the “suddenly powerful words” spoken to a country “united behind its president.” Clips of Bush showing powerful speeches about “hunting the killers down,” and “smoking them out of their caves” are then shown as examples (1:15-1:40). The voiceover establishes



Figure 5. Bush at Ground Zero, a famously powerful image. “Bush’s Words.”

“the one objective in the war on terror” with more clips of Bush, this time referring to hunting down Osama Bin Laden (1:40-1:55).

The voiceover then points out that trouble for the president arose when Bin Laden “turned out to be a really good hider,” prompting Bush to alter his message. A clip of Bush saying that “the objective is not Bin Laden” is cut by the voiceover constructing a causal

relation by interjecting the word “because” which is then followed by a clip of Bush claiming that “Saddam Hussein is a threat to peace.” This non-sequitur is then followed by clips of Bush stating that Saddam and Al-Qaida are basically the same when talking about them in the context of the War on Terror. The voiceover then continues that line of reasoning by pondering if words of association can turn Bin Laden into Saddam Hussein (1:50-2:15).

To make his case, the voiceover asserts that Bush needs “more words.” This is then followed by a series of clips in which Bush mentions that Saddam Hussein is trying to acquire uranium and mobile biological weapons labs, and has access to poison gas, mustard gas, sarin



Figure 6. Bush speaking terrifying words to congress in justification of his plans for Iraq.

nerve gas, VX nerve gas, torture chambers, rape rooms, and Weapons of Mass Destruction in general, which according to the voiceover are “terrifying words” (fig. 6). The influence this had on the public is made clear: “Scared shitless, the country rallied” (2:15-2:51).

Another cut leads in to the accomplishments of Bush in Iraq. “Victory was proclaimed, with words written and spoken,” says the voiceover, accompanied by images of a banner reading “mission accomplished” and imagery of military aircraft on an aircraft



Figure 7. Bush proclaiming victory on the deck of aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln.

carrier, which cuts to Bush claiming that “the United States and its allies have prevailed,” which are of course “strong words” according to the voiceover (fig. 7, 2:51-3:05).

The segment then twists to the reality following Bush's proclamation. "Reality wasn't down for the count," says the voiceover. Combat operations and explosions in Iraq are shown, belying Bush's claims of victory. Bush claims they are making progress in Iraq, prompting the voiceover to tell us that "the president's words fought valiantly [...] but the facts were about to open up a second front." A clip of

David Kay, former Chief U.S. Weapons Inspector is then shown. Kay claims that "it turns out, we were all wrong [regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction]" (fig. 8).

These facts are the president's words greatest challenge yet. A clip is then shown



Figure 8. David Kay reporting on the reality of the WMD matter. "Bush's Words."

of Bush claiming Kay's report showed "dozens of Weapons of Mass Destruction related program activities," followed by jubilant imagery of cheering soldiers and the voiceover commending the president on courageously changing the justification for the war (3:15-4:05).

The segment then ends on clips of Bush claiming he is an optimist, followed by a clip in which Bush claims the US is going to be attacked again. The voiceover implores the audience to "listen to the words" rather than "the filter" or "the facts." This is then followed by another

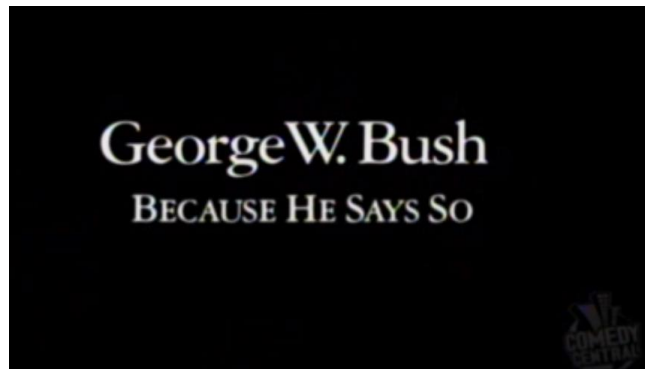


Figure 9. Closing title screen of the spoofed RNC election video.

title screen, but this time it reads "George W. Bush – Because He Says So" (fig. 9, 4:05-4:32).

2.2.2.1 – Bush’s Pre-Election Image

In this segment criticism of Bush revolves around how he handled the Iraq war. The act of justifying the Iraq war during its conception is shown to be based on false evidence, as confirmed by Kay. The president is accused of changing the narrative from “they have WMDs” to “they are potentially working on WMDs” when these facts came to light. By juxtaposing Bush’s words with the consequences of his actions, an image of a president who consequently misled his constituents is constructed. This segment is introduced as a sneak preview to the official RNC video which is due to be shown the next day, meaning that this segment is supposed to remind the American people about the realities of Bush’s policy before they remember the man who led them through the aftermath of 9/11. The president is framed as an untrustworthy character. Frye’s notion of a militant irony is represented here. The implicit moral norm of speaking the truth is established by juxtaposing the facts with Bush’s words, serving to highlight ‘the truth’ compared to ‘the lies.’ In the same vein, this spoof voices Paulson’s idea of the “lower potentials,” as it paints Bush as a terrible president, suggesting that things can only improve with the election of a new president, whom in turn would be a reflection of the higher potentials.

2.3 – Election Night 2004

In concordance with the ‘fake news’ attitude *The Daily Show* has, it mimics the major news networks in their Election Night episode (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, season 9, episode 54). Parodies of electoral maps, exit poll coverage, and analysts attempting to predict the outcome are accompanied by reporters present at the campaign headquarters of the major parties. It is these reporters that provide the people with the image that has been established of their respective candidates throughout the election cycle. After a short introduction by Stewart

regarding the current Electoral Votes count for both candidates, the audience joins Samantha Bee and Ed Helms in the Democratic and Republican campaign headquarters, respectively.

In the segment titled “Indecision 2004 – Kerry Campaign Headquarters pt. 1” Senior Correspondent Samantha Bee is shown present in Kerry’s campaign headquarters. Stewart introduces Bee by saying that *The Daily Show* is an organization that knows no bounds, so naturally they have their reporters on site. She relates to Stewart that Kerry’s campaign is optimistic. Thanks to the national attention on the election results, this night may finally be the night in which Kerry can confidently explain his vision for America to the voters. Stewart replies with a deadpan, followed by the assertion

that it might be a little bit late in the election process for that. Bee retorts, saying that Kerry has “almost got it” and that Kerry “is really starting to hone in on a crystalized message.” Up until this point, Bee claims, Kerry has been “aloof, detached, a bit of a sasquatch figure,” but



Figure 10. Samantha Bee reading from Kerry's nonsensical statement.

those are things of the past. To underline her point, Bee reads a statement made by Kerry: “On this eve, I am abulliant [sic], in ray, coagulation of my principles ... or something like that, I don’t know” (fig. 10). Sadly, Bee cannot make anything of this statement, which actually undermines her argument that Kerry is a changed man. The segment ends on that note, followed by Stewarts guarantee that they’ll check in later (0:10-0:57).

The following segment is titled “Indecision 2004 – Bush Campaign Headquarters pt. 1.” Stewart introduces senior correspondent Ed Helms at the Bush campaign headquarters. Stewart inquires to the president’s mood (0:00-0:10). Helms replies that Bush is confident to be leading the country for the next four years, prompting Stewart to wonder if it isn’t a little bit early for such an assertion since the numbers are not confirmed yet. Helms laughingly

retorts, saying that Bush is not a man who lets the numbers dictate his goal of moving America forward. Helms continues by saying that since 9/11, the paradigm has shifted, and waiting for the official results is “dangerous and a sign of weakness.” The president has taken “decisive electoral action” regardless of “whether you agree or not, or think it is the right thing to do or not, the president is not going anywhere” (0:10-0:50).

Coverage of the election headquarters by several segments that are irrelevant to this thesis, before cutting to the Al-Qaeda Headquarters and senior political analyst Steve Carell in a segment titled “Indecision 2004 – Al Qaeda Headquarters.” Stewart introduces Carell by referring to a video



Figure 11. Carell (right) in front of Al-Qaeda's headquarters in New York, and Stewart's (left) reaction to this location.

released by Al-Qaeda prior to the election, which some say is specifically meant to influence American voters (0:00-0:20). Carell is shown on location in front of the Al-Qaeda election headquarters located in the Marriot Marquis on Times Square (fig. 11). The terrorists are waiting to see “who will be crowned king of the infidels for the next four years” (0:20-0:30).

Stewart then questions Carell on the attempt to influence the election. Carell relates the position of one of the terrorists, one “Al-Sayed bin Ali el-Huri” who is an avid Bush supporter. Bush, it is said, has done wonders the global recruitment numbers. Additionally, the terrorists have plenty of “Bush effigies that aren’t going to burn themselves” (0:30-1:23). No matter who wins, the terrorists have agreed to hate that person. This is followed by the sound of ululation as Kerry wins the Massachusetts electoral votes, which in turn prompts Carrell to start ululating as well (1:23-2:03).

2.3.1 – Kerry's Election Night Image

Criticism of Kerry is mostly related to his message on Election Night. *The Daily Show* establishes hyperbolically that Kerry's goals for America are not clear. Kerry looks old and stuffy, and is about as approachable as the legendary elusive sasquatch. Whatever his plans for America might have turned out to be is irrelevant when he cannot communicate his goals. When his plans cannot confirm that Kerry is the better candidate, the plans become moot: Kerry cannot win the presidency without popular support. His plans therefore do not speak of his capacity as president. Even Samantha Bee in her coverage of the Kerry headquarters comes across as not very engaged with Kerry. Only the terrorists seem to care whether Kerry wins or not, but for disingenuous reasons: they just want a president to hate regardless of who is in office.

Compared to his earlier aforementioned representation in *The Daily Show* a difference can be seen: Gone is the desperate John Kerry who is trying his very best to stay in the race for president, despite his uninspiring zombielike ways. Instead, Kerry has evolved into an aloof and aging character which still has not managed to find actual resonance with the constituency. Attempts to reform Kerry's image from 'failing' to 'cool' to 'presidential' has not really achieved anything positive for Kerry. He remains the uncool fool. The public deserves someone better, someone more eloquent and inspiring than Kerry can offer.

2.3.2 – Bush's Election Night Image

On Election Night, criticism of Bush is once more related to his Iraq policy. The way that he, according to Helms, refuses to budge and relies on swift and decisive action draws a parallel to how Bush reacted in the wake of 9/11, eventually leading to the Iraq War. The warning about the way Bush conducts politics, as shown in the earlier spoofed RNC film, is repeated. The message has fallen on deaf ears: Bush is in the lead and it is too late to change that. When

near the end of the episode Bush is far in the lead regarding electoral votes, Stewart, in a mock breaking-voice-tone, voices his own opinion about another four years of the Bush administration: it reminds him of a bad dream where he woke up crying. The audience as well comes across as defeated, mimicking Stewarts mood and their own partisan hopes by not cheering as boisterous any more.

While Kerry may have been presented as the fool, Bush is set up as positively malign, using the powers of the executive branch more sweepingly than ever before in immoral and unconstitutional practices. Carell's coverage of the mock terrorist's headquarters relates another consequence of Bush's war policies: Terrorist recruitment has gone up. The War on Terror has exacerbated the problems caused by religious extremism rather than succeeding in stopping terrorism outright. In fact, the War on Terror is progressing so poorly that high level terrorists can just set up their headquarters in the middle of New York City, as Carell shows.

Chapter 3 – Case Study: 2008 Elections

The 2008 presidential elections are commonly regarded as historic. The race between the two presidential hopefuls, Republican McCain and Democrat Obama, has been a race of firsts. This culminated in Obama's victory, becoming the first African-American president. This case study relates to the differences in representation between these two contenders. These candidates have not previously been president and as such they had a fresh start in their campaigns, without the political baggage Bush had in 2004. This may result in a different style of criticism, focused on the candidates respective characters and plans rather than the mistakes they made in office. When comparing these two candidates, what are the differences in criticism and rhetoric?

3.1 – Election 2008 – Political Background

At this point in time, George W. Bush has served his eight years in office and us such had to make way for a new president. Both Republican and Democratic candidates lined up for the position and squared off during televised debates. Republican frontrunners included John McCain, Rudolph Giuliani, and Mitt Romney, before confirming John McCain as the Republican nominee. The race for the Democratic nomination was quickly reduced to only two serious contenders: Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Both would be historic presidents if elected, either the first female president or the first African-American president. In the end, it would be Barack Obama that would receive the Democratic nomination.

According to Susan D. James of ABC News, the 2008 election was one for the record books, citing campaign length and, expenditure, and voter turnout, viciousness, and social class:

The historic campaign [...] was marked by breakthroughs in race, gender, age, fundraising and use of technology. The primaries were the most contested, the debates the most contentious and the cost the highest [...]. In earlier primaries, voter turnout soared and, in the case of the Democrats, broke all records. (James)

The contentious nature of the campaign was reflected in the rhetoric used by both sides. Frank Rich of The New York Times noted that: “All’s fair in politics. John McCain and Sarah Palin have every right to bring up William Ayers” (Rich). Ayers, a Weather Underground activist, served to link Obama to domestic terrorism perpetrated in the early 1970s. Especially Sarah Palin jumped on this connection, claiming that Obama “launched his political career in the living room of a domestic terrorist” (Palin qtd. in Rich). Obama would be painted as the terrorist’s candidate throughout the election.

In addition to this, it was an election of firsts: potentially the first female or African-American president, the first contenders from beyond the United States’ mainland, McCain being the oldest potential president at age 72, and Sarah Palin being the first vice-presidential candidate from Alaska (James).

The use of relatively new technology allowed for a more constant barrage of political messaging, and it were mostly the younger generation of voters who were in a position to absorb it all through their smartphones: “Obama has turned to social networking tools like Facebook and text messaging to engage new voters. McCain has appealed directly to youth on MTV and used YouTube for political advertising” (James). These developments “may change the face of American politics for yet another generation”, as especially young people are unhappy with the status quo, the economy, and the war (James).

3.2 – Leading up to Election Day 2008

Both Obama and McCain were featured in *The Daily Show* segments after their confirmation as their respective party's candidate. A close textual analysis of these segments relating to these candidates will serve to establish what image is presented to the audience. How are Obama and McCain represented in *The Daily Show* in 2008, and what rhetoric is used to establish this image? To determine whether this image has prevailed throughout the election cycle, a comparison between these earlier episodes and the episode relating to Election Night 2008 has to be made. Have these images prevailed, or has the rhetoric changed near the end of the election cycle?

3.2.1 – Framing Barack H. Obama

Barack H. Obama was confirmed as the Democratic nominee on August 27th, 2008. *The Daily Show* chimed in as well, airing a video of a “very stirring biographical film” dedicated to Obama (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, season 13, episode 107).

Stewart introduces the film, titled “Barack Obama – He Completes Us (2008)” in the opening segment of the show. While *The Daily Show* has not been able to obtain footage of the Democratic National Convention, they do have access to a biographical film. Stewart asserts that this spoofed film is “quite marvelous” (0:00-0:24).

The film is introduced by a voiceover painting a bleak picture of America. It is a country torn apart by war, riven by a clash of factions, which legacy and existence is threatened. This is accompanied by images of soldiers and a burning American flag. The



Figure 12. Barack Obama (or perhaps O-Simba?) hailed as the future king.

video then cuts to the opening scene of Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) supported the movie's soundtrack, "The Circle Of Life" by Elton John (1994). Democratic speakers are heard hailing Obama as a hero and, followed by Oprah Winfrey claiming "he is the one." This is accompanied by an image of Obama's face superimposed with the lion cub Simba (fig. 12, 0:24-1:10). This is followed by the title screen, reading "Barack Obama: He Completes Us." The narrator then tells the audience the story of Barack Obama, which "begins 180 million years ago" with the breaking of the supercontinent Pangea, "scattering the races of man" and "sentencing mankind into a segregated existence of famine, war, and intolerance." This is followed year and place of Obama's birth, August 4th, 1961 on Hawaii. Obama, the "earthly son of an African goat herder from darkest Africa" and "an anthropologist from whitest Wichita" is destined to heal the divide caused by the shattering of Pangea (1:10-2:00).

Part Black and part white, part Christian and "Muslim," part land mammal and part "sea creature," Obama is uniquely positioned to cross the divisive boundaries. A headline of a news article about Obama working in a Baskin Robbins at age 15 is shown, used as evidence for Obama's ability to unite the American people: he has proven able to unite "an astonishing thirty one flavors of ice cream." Obama was destined for more, though, as his story does not end in a Baskin Robbins (2:00-2:35).

Obama is then shown on a trip to his ancestral home of Kenya. Here, he receives a vision of a goat in the sky, the obvious spirit animal for the son of a goat herder, which urges Obama to run for a seat in the Illinois state senate (fig. 13). This goat is then shown in pictures of Obama going through both his higher education and his journey to the state legislature (2:35-3:24). After serving "two thirds



Figure 13. Obama receiving guidance from a goat-ly vision.

of one decades [sic], he caught the notice of his party elders, and soon found himself on a national stage” (3:24-3:42).

Obama is shown to have “found his voice” on this stage. Several clips from Obama’s stirring speeches are shown, again supported by “The Circle of Life.” The speeches stress unity: it is the United States of America, rather than a liberal or conservative America. The

narrator asserts that “My God [Obama] is good” as “every time [Obama] speaks, an angel has an orgasm” (3:42-4:15) The narrator is moved by Obama’s words: “I don’t even know what that means but holy sh*tballs I am feeling it!” The narrator rounds of the clip by stating that, at the



Figure 14. Obama as Pangea, a nod to a united world.

precipice of a new age, “one man seems ready enough-ish to lead, one man who will once more unite the world,” which is illustrated by an image of a spinning globe featuring happy faces on the continents. The continents then drift and reform Pangea, only this time with Obama’s face on it (fig. 14). The segment ends with the same title screen shown at the start, again reading “Barack Obama: He Completes Us” (4:15-4:59).

3.2.1.1 – Obama’s Pre-Election Image

There is little criticism to be found in this film. The fact that Obama seems “ready enough-ish to lead” can refer to his relatively quick rise through the ranks of the Democratic party, which necessarily means relatively little experience concerning national politics. The narrator, unsure of what Obama is saying but sure he is “feeling it” relates another point of worry. Despite the amazing speeches and powerful rhetoric, there appears to be a lack of substance in the speeches, focusing on communicating a feeling of unity rather than a policy of unity.

The rhetoric used in this film is quite clear: Obama is supposed to unite the different factions in American politics. This becomes evident from his speeches where he focuses on uniting Democrats and Republicans, as well as the different ethnic groups, in one America. He is uniquely positioned to do that thanks to his background and political views. He is framed as the heroic leader by referring to Disney's *The Lion King*. In *The Lion King*, the cub Simba would rise to be the king of all animals after defeating his evil uncle Scar. This in turn can be related to the elections: By defeating the evil Republicans, Obama can achieve "kinghood" in the form of the presidency.

This film comes to Obama's defense as well. Earlier in the election cycle, Obama was accused of having a Muslim background. While these claims were unsubstantiated, they were featured on major news networks. In 2015, 29% of the country still believed these claims to be true (Bailey). This election took place during the War on Terror, the result of terrorism by and large perpetrated by Muslims. By juxtaposing Obama's Christian and "Muslim" background with him being part land mammal and part "sea creature," this film mocks the assertion that Obama is a Muslim, as well as the people and institutions that perpetuate this assertion.

While this film offers a narrative of a person striving for power, there is a notable lack of mockery and criticism targeting Obama. While a narrative of Obama's life is constructed, this does not invoke what Hightet calls "a blend of amusement and contempt" (Hightet 21). The narrative instead reinforces Obama's humble origins via a comedic nod to the American Dream, as well as his potential as a great uniting factor. Simultaneously, Obama cannot be accused of Kernan's notion of dullness (Kernan 5), for he is clearly not a fool as indicated by his quick rise through the Democratic party. Instead, dullness is related to those who falsely claim that Obama has a Muslim background. Frye would say that it is the satirist's job to attack the institutions of power (Frye 228), but Obama is hailed as a hero and the future king,

embracing powerful positions. In the same vein, this representation of Obama is definitely not the satire that Paulson called “the lower potentials” (Paulson 8). Instead, the film reminds of an classical epic tale.

Arguably, the producers of *The Daily Show* want Obama to win the presidency, and thus do not subject him to harsh criticism as that would contradict the show’s political stance. It could also be that Obama has few flaws through which a satirical attack can be constructed, resulting in a lack of criticism. This is perhaps a result of his humble background and his relative obscurity thanks to his rapid rise through the ranks of the Democratic party.

3.3.2 – Framing John McCain

McCain won the Republican nomination for president on March 4th, 2005, in what was regarded as an “unlikely comeback” (Glaister). Especially compared to Obama’s emotional speeches, McCain came across as somewhat lacking (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Season 13, Episode 96).

The first segment, titled “Indecision 2008 – McCain Coverage” opens with a reference to Obama’s trip overseas, “dazzling millions of people who come November can in no way vote for him.” This is then compared to McCain’s own “exotic adventure,” showing the Republican candidate in front of an American restaurant



Figure 15. McCain (left) in front of Schmidt’s Sausage Haus restaurant.

named Schmidt’s Sausage Haus (fig. 15, 0:00-0:30). According to Stewart, these “playfully ironic moves” lead to the media concluding that McCain’s campaign is not doing well. Several clips from major news networks are shown to illustrate this point (0:30-1:15).

Stewart asserts that McCain has been matching Obama move for move, showing a clip of McCain shaking hands with the Dalai Lama for an extended amount of time. McCain looks uncomfortable and, according to Stewart, had to “gnaw his own arm off” to escape (1:15-2:23).

McCain is then shown in a “big time interview” with George Stephanopoulos. During this interview a fly lands on McCain’s face. According to Stewart this is a “potent symbol of decay” that undercuts his attempts to come across as a good potential president. Stewart then faux

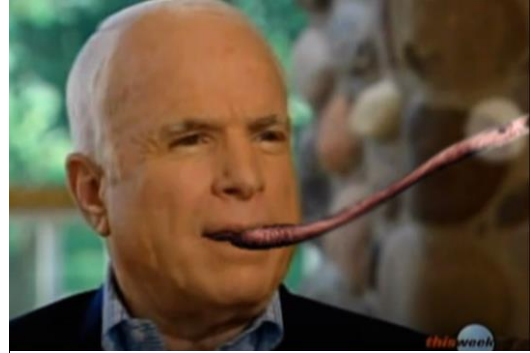


Figure 16. Lizard man McCain snatches a fly out of the air.

commends McCain by stating that he “handled it like a seasoned pro” showing an image of McCain using his chameleon-like tongue to snatch the fly out of the air (fig. 16). McCain has “still got it” (2:23-3:35).

The following segment, titled “Pity Vote,” is then introduced by Stewart, who questions McCain’s strategy of “relentless gaffes and awkwardness” (0:00-0:06). Chief political analyst John Oliver, traveling with the McCain campaign, then explains McCain’s strategy. Oliver asserts that the campaign “train wreck of awkward meetings, insect pandering, and supermarket slapstick” is actually right on schedule, as the one thing more powerful than Obama’s message of hope and change is pity. In the primaries McCain was going nowhere until people *noticed* McCain was going nowhere. This pity “turned the whole thing around” and resulted in McCain’s nomination, according to Oliver (0:06-0:49).

Stewart, unconvinced, thinks this is a dangerous strategy. Oliver agrees, saying that McCain needs the right kind of pity as “you don’t want your Magoo-like dottering [sic] to turn into Corey Haim-like hopelessness.” Rather than tearing McCain down, the campaign is actually focused on building Obama up. Oliver then shows a political ad attacking Obama for

not supporting the troops. In the background however, the ad features a clip of Obama “playing basketball *with* the troops” (0:49-1:16). This is “adroitly incompetent” and “brilliantly retarded” according to Oliver: “To allow another fighter to so viciously pound on you that the crowd cannot but help to pray for your resurrection” (1:16-1:40). McCain has no hint of “self-respect and integrity” so Oliver believes that McCain clearly has “the wrong stuff” (1:40-1:55).

The culmination of this strategy is shown “in a phenomenal moment for McCain’s campaign,” a fake image of McCain speaking at an event of “The National Association of Your Pants Not Falling Off” (fig. 16). McCain’s pants have, in conjunction with his strategy of gaffes, fallen off. McCain is unable to present himself as an adequate candidate, even to single-issue groups with the simplest message (1:55-2:22).



Figure 16. McCain fails to perform to the expectations of this single-issue action group.

Oliver then shows a picture of Lassie, the famous television dog, and compares her to Obama: “Sure, Lassie can save you from a burning building, but she is almost too perfect.” Another dog is shown, one Mr. Sniffles, and he



Figure 17. Oliver holding up a picture of Mr. Sniffles, a metaphor for John McCain.

is compared to McCain (fig. 17): “Oh honey, see how he looks wet, even inside? If we don’t take him, they’ll surely kill him.” Stewart then asks Oliver if this idea is really going to work, prompting Oliver’s final comparison: “Of course it won’t work. But tell that to Mr. Sniffles.” The pity strategy hinges on linking McCain to Mr. Sniffles. Just as America cannot deny such a sad little dog their love, they can’t deny McCain the presidency (2:22-3:14).

3.3.2.1 – McCain’s Pre-Election Image

McCain is framed as willfully incompetent. In a tone that is both amusing and contemptuous (Hight 21), *The Daily Show* suggests that these actions are a way of garnering “the pity vote” and that this is the pivotal element of McCain’s strategy. Compared to the brilliant oration of Obama, as well as Obama’s international acclaim, it is the only way in which McCain can compete. McCain is likened to a decaying entity, referring to his relatively advanced age. In addition, he is compared to a rodent in his escape from the Dalai Lama, to a lizard in the way that he remains unfazed during the Stephanopoulos interview and eats a fly, and a sad dog as a metaphor for the pity invoking image McCain presents with his gaffes. *The Daily Show* remains faux optimistic however, urging McCain to do better in his attempts to frame himself as a competent political actor. This is an ironic statement, as can be seen in the juxtaposition of Obama and McCain throughout the segment.

The criticism related to McCain is established by this juxtaposition as well. The satirical notion of deserving something better, which is central to the satirical theory as established earlier, claims that we collectively deserve someone other than McCain. McCain is being what Kernan would call a fool, prompting *The Daily Show* to take on the role similar to that of Alexander Pope. The Democratic candidate is clearly the better option, as he is everything McCain is not. Whether or not this is the political position of *The Daily Show* is not clear: McCain is an easy target for satire per his gaffes.

3.3 – Election Night 2008

Season 13, Episode 149 of *The Daily Show* relates to the 2008 Election Night. This episode features a collaboration between Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Colbert, at this point in time hosts *The Colbert Report*, and his role in this episode is that of the conservative pundit. Several segments relate to the campaigns respective headquarters and are illustrative of the

way Obama and McCain are framed during these final moments in the election cycle. This once again includes the Al-Qaeda headquarters, as well.

The segment titled “Indecision 2008 – Obama’s Whimsical Headquarters and Voter Suppression” relates to the framing of the Democratic candidate Obama. The segment opens with Stewart and Colbert discussing the latest election results, as well as an overview of the electoral map. Obama is leading 207 to 89. (0:00-2:25). After this, Stewart introduces senior political analyst Jason Jones, who is present at the Obama campaign headquarters in Chicago.

Jones is shown in a cartoon forest, reminiscent of Disney’s *Bambi* (1942) (fig. 18). Stewart inquires as to the mood in Chicago. Jones replies that the mood is cautiously optimistic as the polls appear to reflect the campaign’s internal numbers. Jones is then informed by a cartoon bird that the polls in the mountain states have just closed, and that this is illustrative of how closely the campaign monitors those numbers.



Figure 18. Jason Jones present in what is presented as Chicago under Obama.

Colbert interrupts Jones, asking about where in Chicago the headquarters is located. Colbert, having lived in Chicago, does not recognize the scenery. Jones replies that “this is what Chicago looks like when Obama’s in town.” Stewart then asks about the jumpy nature of many of the woodland creatures around Jones. Jones relates this to the political affiliation of the animals, saying that they are apprehensive of a possible McCain-Palin administration. “Fun fact, Palin actually killed [this baby deer’s mother] when bow hunting from a hang glider. It was a dick move, but a hell of a shot.” The segment then ends.

The segment titled *Indecision 2008 – McCain’s Hellscape Headquarters and the Al-Qaeda Vote* relates to the framing of the Republican candidate McCain. The segment opens with some bickering between Stewart and Colbert, and an update regarding the electoral college (0:00-3:24).

After a commercial break, Stewart introduces Samantha Bee, who is present at the McCain campaign headquarters. Stewart once again inquires as to the mood there. Bee relates that the people are “upbeat but realistic.” If everything goes according to plan for McCain, he



Figure 19. Bee present in McCain's campaign headquarters.

will soon stop being the underdog and instead be the “overcat [sic].” Stewart interrupts Bee, asking what exactly is going on behind her. Bee is standing in front of an “Escher-like hellscape that is McCain headquarters” (fig. 19). Bee, looking possessed, then goes on a rant about how “Obama wants to bankrupt the coal industry, his aunt is an illegal alien, and he created flesh eating bacteria that he plans to release in our juice boxes.” Colbert jumps on this “news” and accuses Stewart of being “USS Mainstream” when Stewart attempts to steer the conversation back to the historic elections (3:24-5:10).

Stewart then introduces senior foreign correspondent Aasif Mandvi, assigned to the Al-Qaeda headquarters. Once again Stewart inquires to the mood in the headquarters (fig. 20). Mandvi replies that the mood is quite glum: “I did see one man fire his AK into the air but it turns out he was just shooting down a



Figure 20. Aasif Mandvi reporting from the Afghan-Pakistani border.

kite.” This is because of Obama’s strong showing: “These guys were told Obama was their

candidate. But the more they learn about this guy, the less they like” as Obama’s mother is “white and from Kansas,” Obama associates with “unrepentant capitalists,” and the “radical madrasa he allegedly went to is in fact Harvard Law, which, as madrasas go, is fairly liberal.” Additionally, there is a “damning Youtube clip” which has gone viral. A clip of Obama speaking during the Presidential Debates of 2 October 2008 is shown, in which Obama states that “we will kill Bin Laden, we will crush A-Qaeda.” According to Mandvi, this is a perceived to be a veiled threat to Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Stewart points out there is hardly a veil present in this threat, prompting Mandvi to assert that, actually, “these people love their veils.” Stewart asks Mandvi if the terrorists are then polling for McCain. Mandvi asserts that McCain polls strongly in the “red caves” and among older terrorists, while younger terrorists poll for Obama. The segment ends on that note (5:10-7:27).

3.3.1 – Obama’s Election Night Image

Obama’s headquarter is likened to a Disney image, similar to the earlier spoofed film. The city of Chicago, normally one of the more notoriously dangerous cities in America, is presented as an idyllic forest full of whimsical woodland creatures. The premise is made clear: this is what one of the dangerous cities looks like “when Obama is in town.” The implication then becomes that, under Obama’s leadership, this can be the case for all America. Rather than being critical, as satire should be, the tone is jubilant when discussing Obama.

The fact that Mandvi claims that the terrorist don’t like Obama is part of *The Daily Show* rushing to the Obama’s defense. Republican framing of Obama characterized him as weak on defense. The earlier accusations of Obama’s alleged Muslim background, as well as Palin’s accusations of Obama’s connections to domestic terrorists, served to construct an image of a pro-terrorism Obama. He is allegedly “the terrorist’s candidate.” Juxtaposing this

with Mandvi assertions serve to undermine that image. Obama promises to crush Al-Qaeda have the terrorists worried, cementing his image of a competent leader for the American people. Young terrorists are alleged to poll for Obama in concordance with the trend in America, meaning that Obama resonates well with young people across ideological boundaries.

3.3.2 – McCain's Election Night Image

McCain takes his first hit in the segment relating to the Obama headquarters. The forest creatures are concerned about a possible McCain-Palin victory, as that will be dangerous for them: Palin is a crack show with a bow, targeting innocents.

Samantha Bee's coverage of the McCain headquarters shows that it is an Escher-like hellscape. The implication here is that the Republican candidate is a hellish creature given the location he chose for his headquarters. The hellish nature of the headquarters causes Bee to become possessed and start ranting accusation leveled at Obama. Colbert pounces on these accusations in his role as a Republican pundit. The rhetoric is clear: Republicans are corrupted by evil, and their accusations are baseless but are perpetuated by affiliated pundits. It is not the institutions that are being painted as evil, however. The source of evil is hell, and McCain and other conservatives seem to tap directly into hell.

Chapter 4 – Compare and Contrast

The case studies above have determined the way in which the candidates have been framed both early and late in the election cycles. A comparison can now be made to determine between Democrats and Republicans. Are they consistently framed differently?

4.1 – Kerry and Obama

When comparing the framing of Kerry in 2004 to the framing of Obama in 2008, several salient differences can be observed. Kerry is portrayed as uninspiring and zombielike early in the election cycle, and this image has mostly prevailed. Kerry's attempt to look cool falls flat, as it is perhaps too contradictory to his public image. During Election Night, Kerry has become aloof and unapproachable in his attempt to come across as presidential. The pendulum has swung too far, from cool too unapproachable. His lack of a crystalized message is put forth as the main reason as to why Kerry cannot mobilize sufficient voters.

Comparing Kerry's to Obama's representations in *The Daily Show* is like comparing dust to diamonds. Obama is consistently framed as a savior figure, borrowing heavily from Disney imagery to establish this connotation. Early in the election cycle Obama is likened to Simba from *The Lion King*, which serves to confirm that it is his destiny to be the king. Simba would create a better world than his evil uncle Scar. Parallels can be drawn between Obama and Bush as Simba and Scar, respectively. When Scar is defeated, *The Lion King's* world can start to heal. This image serves to reinforce the notion that Obama can cross the partisan and social divides in the county. The supporting soundtrack, Elton John's "The Circle of Life," can be read in support of Obama as well: Life and death are intertwined, and life springs back up after a period of death. The Republican administration of Bush can be likened to this

period of death, meaning that Obama's administration would be a period of life. These themes cannot be found in the image of Kerry that is presented.

Obama relies heavily on his oratory skills without actually providing substance. While Kerry was criticized for not have a crystalized message, Obama was not. He did not need a crystalized message as his character revolved around being a great speak and a powerful personality.

The Daily Show comes to the defense of Obama on issues of his alleged Muslim background. Republican attempts to frame Obama as the candidate for terrorists are undercut in *The Daily Show*. Early in the election cycle this is achieved by juxtaposing the ridiculousness of "sea creature" with "Muslim," and on Election Night this is done by claiming that the terrorists don't like Obama at all. This stands in sharp contrast to John Kerry, who arguably might have needed help more.

4.2 – Bush and McCain

When comparing the framing of Bush to the framing of McCain, some similarities and differences can be observed. Early in the 2004 election cycle, *The Daily Show* tells the audience to *remember* Bush. The way that Bush acted in the wake of 9/11 is laudable since it united the country, but that is not what Bush's policies revolve around. The fact of the matter is that Bush engaged in a morally questionable war in Iraq, that he acted on false intelligence data, and that he then changed the justification for the war. This is the frame through which the audience is urged to look at Bush's presidency. The juxtaposition of truth and falsehood paints an image of intentionality, as if Bush is of questionable moral standards. This warning is repeated on Election Night, and the audience is confronted with another consequence of

Bush's wars: The War on Terror has led to an increase in terrorism worldwide, rather than the destruction of terrorism.

When compared to McCain, we see a markedly different process of representation. Early in the 2008 election cycle, McCain is framed as a bumbling political actor. John Oliver frames McCain as brilliantly retarded in his attempts to invoke a feeling of pity in the electorate. While McCain may be a seasoned politician, he does not convey that experience in his actions by stacking gaffe upon gaffe. On Election Night however, the image has changed. Gone is the bumbling idiot, and instead a candidate who prefers to conduct business in an Escher-like hellscape is presented to the audience. This shift in tone from goofy and pity invoking to evil is telling: it is a more serious moral accusation.

4.3 – Comparing Democrats to Republicans: A Shift

While *The Daily Show* is reported to have a more liberal leaning political attitude, this is not reflected in the 2004 elections. Neither Kerry nor Bush were framed as good potential candidates: Kerry was trying too hard to be an engaging candidate but completely missed his mark. Bush, while doing well in the aftermath of 9/11, acted prematurely by going to war. The result of Bush's policies definitely ensured that he was framed as a worse candidate than Kerry, but *The Daily Show* did not shower Kerry in affection.

When comparing 2004 to 2008 we can observe a shift. Obama is consistently hailed a hero destined to heal the nation's divide, crossing the boundaries between race and class. This notion is reinforced by whimsical imagery and jubilant tones. McCain is first shown to be acting in a foolish way in the build up to Election Night, comparing McCain to a sad dog. On Election Night, however, McCain is supposedly an evil character. This evil corrupts everyone it comes into contact with, including reporter Samantha Bee, urging her to rant about Obama.

Colbert, in his role of a conservative pundit, jumps on this rant in attempt to shift the conversation away of Obama's success, again illustrating that Republicans are corrupted.

Based on these case studies, a clear conclusion can be drawn: Between 2004 and 2008, a polarizing shift has taken place in political satire. While in 2004 neither presidential candidates were framed in a positive manner, in 2008 a clear distinction can be seen.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have shown the origins of the contemporary notion of satire as posed by Highet, Elliot, Frye, Kernan, and Paulson. Henry links these authors to postmodernism, introducing the intention of the author and the lack of a metanarrative to satire. Satire must criticize institutions of power and suggest that the people collectively deserve something better. The way to achieve this is through ironic comment and attack on persons that represent these institutions. Television has been established as a leading influencer by the work of Barker, showing the way in which the news is constructed, and how people flock to news that supports their ideological beliefs. The work of Bignell explains the postmodern influences in television and the way the audience experiences these influences. A frame of reference is established by explaining what exactly the concept of genre entails. *The Daily Show* fits in postmodern television via Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and intertextual fragments, expressed as the news satire genre. The examination of *The Daily Show's* format, as well as the use of irony in the subversion of the establishment, serve to support this assertion.

The need for a political reading of the political humor genre as proposed by Young and Caron is established, as well as Burghardt's concept of close textual analysis to achieve this political reading. The notion of framing as is explained by the work of Davie: how something is framed has an effect on how the audience thinks about it. This method of analysis, when applied to *The Daily Show*, shows how politicians are framed and the rhetoric used to support this frame.

The first case study, relating to the 2004 elections, leads to the following conclusion: Neither candidate is framed in a positive manner, although Bush is framed slightly worse based on his political record. Bush has a very public history of policy as opposed to Kerry,

and this can be seen in the framing of these candidates. Criticism related to Kerry refer to his public image, while attacks made on Bush refer mostly to his war policies.

The second case study shows a difference in the framing of Obama and McCain in the 2008 election: Obama is consistently framed better. He is portrayed as a unifying hero who's destiny is the presidency. Obama is also criticized least: *The Daily Show* even comes to Obama's defense on his alleged Muslim and terrorist background. This stands in sharp contrast to the way McCain is framed. McCain is first framed as a fool and an incompetent public figure. He is urged to do better in an ironic way. His strategy must rely on garnering the pity vote, according to *The Daily Show*. McCain is later framed as evil, and as having a corrupting influence.

Based on a comparison of the representations of political candidates in 2004 and 2008, it can be concluded that a shift in tone has occurred between 2004 and 2008. Kerry and Bush are both satirized and framed as poor presidential candidates, whereas the difference in framing and criticism between Obama and McCain is an expression of a polarizing trend. *The Daily Show* favors the Democratic candidate in 2008.

The results of the success of *The Daily Show* can still be seen today: Satirical news programs have sprouted like mushrooms. Many of the former *The Daily Show* correspondents have their own shows now, most notable of which are Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* and recently *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, and Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*. The polarizing stance *The Daily Show* adopted in 2008 can still be seen in its offspring today: they consistently attack Republicans and conservatism while coming to the defense of Democrats and liberalism. Colbert calling president Donald Trump's mouth "Putin's cock holster," Oliver calling for impeachment, and Bee calling Ivanka Trump a "feckless cunt" are some of the more recent examples of this phenomenon. When are

reflecting on these contemporary developments, are we still talking about satire, or are we now talking about a polarizing political movement? Time, and additional research, will tell.

Further Research

As mentioned before, *The Daily Show* features over 3100 episodes filmed over a span of almost twenty years. The segments used for this thesis, while selected by the Comedy Central archivists as salient or telling, cover at best two hours of material. Compared to the nearly 1600 hours of material available, this is a small sample size. The limitations of a thesis have forced my hand in these selections: There is simply not enough time over the course of a BA thesis program to look at every single episode of *The Daily Show*. While the selected segments are indicative of a polarizing shift, further research needs to be done. Future research must focus on a larger sample size in order to come to definitive conclusion regarding the framing of and criticism on presidential candidates in satire. This thesis can be seen as evidence of political polarization, but at the same time it must be seen as a small part of the answer to a larger question. Especially the emergent field of the Digital Humanities, with their sophisticated tools capable of processing such large datasets, may find more conclusive evidence of the polarizing shift I have proposed based on these case studies. To determine if a polarizing trend has indeed been taking place, it is also warranted to examine other media genres besides satirical news. Does the news media show evidence of a polarizing trend? Perhaps there is a distinction between traditional news media and new media like social media and the internet?

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