

## Political Television and Perceptions of American Politics

### **Reconsidering *Satire TV* for the Obama Era**

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For as much as political talk and partisan news coverage have cluttered cable and digital outlets over the last decade, comedy has seen a parallel rise in niche appeal as well. So much so that *New York Magazine's* culture blog Vulture recently published its "Map of the Comedy Zeitgeist," a labyrinthine diagram drawing connections among many of the most prominent players in American comedy of the last several years.<sup>i</sup> Familiar names such as Will Ferrell, Ben Stiller, and Judd Apatow appear in large, bolded print, with titles like *Saturday Night Live*, *The Office*, and *The Daily Show* emanating from them in all directions. One of the most notable things about the map is its characterization of comedy as a "zeitgeist," indicating that the genre somehow captures a defining mood of the times shared by many despite (or perhaps because of) the map's many Great Men. Indeed, there is ample evidence of a comedy boom over the course of the last decade. The explosion of political satire, in particular, defied commonsensical notions about the supposed "death of irony" after 9/11,<sup>ii</sup> and television's proliferation across and convergence with cable, satellite, online and streaming options opened myriad avenues for the growth of niche-oriented comedy outlets. The last several years alone have seen now-annual comedy issues from *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Spin*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*; the launch of comedy-centric news/review websites like Laughspin and Splitsider; and, of course, the dizzying launch of websites with original comedic content like FunnyorDie, CollegeHumor, and Earwolf. Even passengers onboard UK Virgin Atlantic flights last year were treated to live improvisation and stand-up routines by performers en route to the famous Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The proliferation of popular comedic content has fed increased interest by scholars focusing on the pro-social aspects of political satire television. Often, in amending the putatively "low culture" status of shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*, recent comedy scholarship seeks to highlight these programs' oppositional potential, clarify their critique of dominant socio-cultural ideologies, and argue for their growing importance alongside more "serious" forms of public deliberation. Less understood, however, are the ways in which commercial media institutions have incorporated the oppositional impulses of much recent political satire and rearticulated their critiques in the pursuit of financial gain. As the comedy zeitgeist evolves, it remains crucial for media scholars to clarify both political satire's polysemic power and the complex ways it circulates as a commercial product.

The elegance of the intervention made by Gray, Jones, and Thompson's 2009 volume *Satire TV* is in the simplicity of its title—it asks us to consider the explosion of political satire in television-specific terms, as a culturally constructed

genre category comprised both of polysemic textual addresses and rigid industrial discourses. There's a sense, too, in the book and in like-minded political satire scholarship of an identifiable, coherent machine against which comedy rages—the obfuscating doublespeak of President George W. Bush's neoliberal domestic policies and his hawkish campaigns abroad. But what is the target of satire tv's oppositional ire in the Obama era?

Certainly, a complex mix of factors have made it a moving target lo these last five or six years, but I'd like to draw the panel's attention to a couple of key ones. First is the aforementioned comedy zeitgeist—no longer is political satire the sole domain of liberal Comedy Central types. The spread of nasty television “satire” in programs like *Family Guy* and *Tosh.0* that operate under the guise of “equal-opportunity offenders” indicates confusion among purveyors of contemporary comedy—if we can't unite to attack the same source of clearly defined social/cultural/political injustice, better to simply attack everything and see what sticks, especially if it draws well with 18-34 year-old males. Second is the growth of what one scholar calls a “comedy of exasperation...a condition of being angry while lacking an object to express one's anger at, emerges most insistently in a moment distinguished by wireless technologies and global financialization; in a time when we cannot point to the powers that control our daily lives.”<sup>iii</sup> Certainly, this quality is not unique to comedy, but it seems to be one prominent aspect of contemporary comedy shared by most, if not all, of the more serious forms of public deliberation in politics, economics, and culture.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/comedy-zeitgeist-map-apatow-stiller.html>

<sup>ii</sup> The two most memorable proclamations expressing this sentiment are variously attributed to *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter and *Time* columnist Roger Rosenblatt.

<sup>iii</sup> Kyle Stevens, “Where Vanity Meets Volition: Technicity, Self-Monitoring, and the Comedy of Exasperation.” *World Picture 9*, summer 2014.

[http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_9/Stevens.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_9/Stevens.html)