

From Truthiness to Drumpf: The Potentials and Limitations of Satirical News Shows as Critical Media Spectacles

Ilias Ben Mna

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Citation: Ilias Ben Mna. "From Truthiness to Drumpf: The Potentials and Limitations of Satirical News Shows as Critical Media Spectacles." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 8, n.º 1, 2019, pp. 10-29. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: <http://ojs.letras.up.pt/>.

Abstract

The article discusses the cultural and political significance of popular satirical news shows in the US and their potential to form a counter-discourse to established news media from the perspective of younger viewers. Douglas Kellner's concept of the "media spectacle" provides a primary theoretical access to an analysis of the format and contents of such programs. In this context, the political economy, distribution avenues and the entertainment logic of, for example, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* are dissected and put into a larger socio-political context. The confluence of a digital media environment and a language of pop-culture-inflected irony is found to be a principal foundation for the spectacle status of satirical news shows. A further discussion of Stephen Colbert's speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner illustrates the discursive power of these media spectacles in unmasking staged political performances and calling out the failures of established journalism. To a certain degree, satirical news shows can therefore be seen as filling a void, in that they act as a "fifth estate" that holds public power brokers accountable through a pop culture-friendly iconoclasm. Nevertheless, popular satirical news shows on major networks were also found to be largely structured by a neoliberal market logic and shaped by corporate ownership, which favors "ideological corridors" wherein radical democratic politics or structural economic changes are repeatedly sidelined. In this sense, these programs perform within a set of contradictions, in that they critique (conventional) media spectacles while perpetuating the logic of the spectacle.

Keywords: Satire; News; Spectacle; Media; Politics.

Resumo

O artigo discute o significado cultural e político dos noticiários satíricos populares nos EUA e o seu potencial para criar um contradiscurso face aos *media* estabelecidos a partir da perspectiva dos telespetadores mais jovens. O conceito de Douglas Kellner do "espetáculo dos *media*" fornece o ponto de partida teórico para uma análise do formato e conteúdo de tais programas. Nesse contexto, a economia política, as vias de distribuição e a lógica do entretenimento de *The Colbert Report* e *The Daily Show*, por exemplo, são dissecadas e comparadas com um contexto sociopolítico mais abrangente. A confluência de um ambiente de *media* digital e uma linguagem de ironia influenciada pela cultura pop é considerada a principal base para o estatuto de espetáculo de noticiários satíricos. Uma discussão mais aprofundada do discurso de Stephen Colbert no Jantar de Correspondentes da Casa Branca de 2006 ilustra o poder discursivo desses espetáculos dos *media* ao desmascarar apresentações políticas encenadas e denunciar as falhas do jornalismo estabelecido. Até certo ponto, os noticiários satíricos podem, portanto, ser vistos como preenchendo um vazio, na medida em que agem como um "quinto estado" que responsabiliza os agentes do poder público por meio de uma iconoclastia favorável à cultura pop. No entanto, os noticiários satíricos populares nas principais redes também foram sendo amplamente estruturados por uma lógica de mercado neoliberal e moldados pela propriedade corporativa que favorece "corredores ideológicos" em que políticas democráticas radicais ou mudanças económicas estruturais são repetidamente deixadas de lado. Nesse sentido, esses programas atuam dentro de uma série de contradições uma vez que criticam os espetáculos dos *media* (convencionais) enquanto perpetuam a lógica do espetáculo.

Palavras-chave: Sátira; notícias; espetáculo; *media*; política.

Introduction

In recent years, the US media landscape has witnessed an increased popularity of satirical news shows that provide humorous and irreverent commentary on the news coverage of established media. TV shows such as *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* have repeatedly shown to be one of the primary news sources for viewers under the age of 35 (Cao & Brewer).

In my paper, I will discuss how satirical news shows represent a form of political counter-discourse that appeals to the experiences of the "millennial generation" (Milkman 1-31) in critical ways. Based on Douglas Kellner's theory on the "media spectacle", I will outline how the combination of humor and news feeds into a politics of entertaining dissent that is marked by the discursive integration of critical inquiry and mass compatible performances of iconoclasm (Baym 35). This will be flanked by discussions on the dissemination of pop culture-inflected political imagery and the conscious construction of an alternative political vocabulary, which fosters a climate through which audiences can reframe discourses in established mass media. I will, therefore, also explore how satirical news pundits employ efficient ways of news

dissemination through memes and neologisms. Simultaneously, I will locate satire news shows within a socio-economic and cultural context informed by the spectacle logic of late capitalism (Debord; Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11-15). Given that satirical news shows are commodities primarily aimed at consumption, they are subject to market pressures and therefore informed by a drive toward saturating their respective targeted segment (Leclercq 50). By applying the concept of the media spectacle, I will dissect the positioning and distribution of satirical news formats and analyze how their claimed role as “watchdogs” over established news media is augmented by demands for more active participation among millennial viewers (Binford 18).

As previous scholarship has pointed out, the most pre-eminent satire news formats are closely associated with younger viewers (Binford 9; Hollander 402-415; Jacobs 9-11), often putting the spotlight on discourses that are underrepresented in established news media. In this context, it becomes important to investigate not only the content of such programs, but also their potentials and limitations in mediating national debates on alternatives to the neoliberal consensus that reigns throughout much of the corporatized media landscape of the US. The resulting questions revolve around which specific implicit boundaries impinge on the relatively uninhibited world of political satire and in how far certain “ideological corridors” result from editorial agenda setting or from the political economy of given broadcasting platforms.

The implications of this analysis are far-reaching, as the convergence of entertainment and political discourse has regained increased currency in numerous societies around the world (Kellner 11-15). Matthew Binford states that one of the primary functions of satire news is to entertain (51) which, however, reinserts this entertainment into a contemporary political sphere, marked by demands for validation and catharsis. Kellner maintains that modern technospectacles can fuel a sort of “spectator politics, in which viewers/citizens contemplate political spectacles, undermines a participatory democracy in which individuals actively engage in political movements and struggles” (177). In this context, it becomes important to examine whether and in how far satirical news shows offer counter-spectacles that may re-politicize disengaged viewers. A further relevant factor for this analysis is the observable permeation of political campaigns and performance by e.g. celebrity logic (Driessens 5-9), which links up directly with the rising demand for emotionally resonant imagery that aids viewers/voters/consumers in reducing the complexity of seemingly growing choices. This becomes relevant due to growing political polarization in the US, but also within the context of so-called “post-truth politics” (Andrejevic 9) and the erosion of trust in established media outlets in the US. Thus, this analysis can

provide further insights into the workings of power relations within the broader media landscape and how the politics of the spectacle can become a vital tool for agenda setting in an attention economy.

Satirical News Shows as Media Spectacles

In order to theoretically contextualize the cultural and political significance of satirical news shows, I employ the term “media spectacle” as outlined by Kellner (*Media Spectacle* 2-11) and originally derived from Guy Debord’s conception of *The Society of the Spectacle*. Kellner argues that “media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution” (2). The spectacles take the form of a staged event and/or performance, which is characterized by its immersive thrust and suitability to be circulated in reproductions. Kellner places these aspects in the context of a late capitalist societal setting. He draws from Debord’s observations on French post-war capitalism, in which consumption and commodification became central to mass cultural productions. In this sense, the contemporary media spectacle is undergirded by a market logic that seeks to saturate pre-defined spaces of popular imagination. In doing so, spectacles serve an instructive function by exposing the public to certain narrative forms, while also serving as mass consumable items that can be monetized in various ways.

In terms of content, media spectacles generally channel existent societal discourses and introduce these in a manner that is consistent with the target audience’s demands for a coherent narrative that offers memorable and emotionally resonant catharsis. The aspect of entertainment in conveying political messages therefore assumes a critical role in a media environment that is marked by seemingly limitless choices and increasing diversification - a development that has been amplified by the rise of the Internet and social media. The instructive character of the spectacle is therefore conversant with a rising demand for the reduction of complexity and the accessible narration of a globalizing political environment. Against this background, satirical news formats fulfil a market role that is embedded in a neoliberal cultural regime of choice and individualized consumption preferences (Antonio & Bonanno 33-77). For more “millennial” consumers with higher degrees of digital immersion, the conventional formats of news dissemination often appear un compelling and disengaged. Roberto Leclerc argues that, therefore, “Irony and

reflexivity are standard operating procedures for networks looking to ingratiate their younger audiences” (60).

In a similar fashion, Kellner outlines the parameters for the successful distribution of messages through aestheticized brands: “To succeed in the ultracompetitive global marketplace, corporations need to circulate their image and brand name, so business and advertising combine in the promotion of corporations as media spectacles” (3). Thus, the shareability of both - news stories and entertainment - is critical to achieving the desired impact. Through shareable images and performances, satirical news shows connect individuals, build communities of shared interests and develop a common pop cultural vernacular (Plevriti 19; Shao 11), thereby offering more emotionally resonant experiences of consumption (or what Leclerc dubs “aestheticized consumption”, 33). This is distinct from conventional news formats, which largely rely on mass distribution through owned or bought platforms (e.g. TV or print), as opposed to letting viewers share their favorite bits and pieces on individualized digital media. This can be exemplified by the bite-sized signature segments that Stephen Colbert employed in *The Colbert Report*, among them were *The Wørd* and the *ThreatDown*. These recurring elements included a succession of brief humorous commentaries on issues curated from established media news reporting. Not only were these segments modularized in a way that they could be easily redistributed by viewers on e.g. social media, but they always remained branded with the signature colors and background music of the show - making them ample brand ambassadors of Stephen Colbert’s satirical persona, the show itself and its network Comedy Central. One concrete example is the introduction of the term “Truthiness” by Colbert in a segment of *The Wørd* in October of 2005. The term has often been defined as a variation on “perception as reality”, which overrides fact-based or self-critical inquiry (Meddaugh 376). Stephen Colbert noted in an interview that “Truthiness is ‘What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.’ It’s not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I *feel* it to be true. There’s not only an emotional quality, but there’s a selfish quality” (Jones 80). The term “truthiness” immediately garnered national attention. Within a few weeks the term had been featured on major news outlets, such as *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The tongue-in-cheek character of the term came in handy for commentators and journalists, who sought to criticize

- a) political narratives that focused on emotional appeals and style and
- b) an apparent unwillingness of established news media to interrogate entrenched political machinations on the national stage.

In terms of the spectacle aspect, it is interesting that a satirical news format - which is embedded in a logic of entertainment - offers a pungent unmasking of inconsistencies and failures to live up to the high codes of journalistic standards that mainstream journalists are supposed to espouse. This illustrates a privileged position for satirical spectacles in not only engaging contemporary controversies, but also serve as inter-medial negotiators, which can inject themselves into meta-discourses on how society's dramas are thematized in the first place.¹ Binford explains in his analysis of satirical news affinity and traditional news media consumption that "Jon Stewart and others like him, then, appear to hold a unique and important position in American society. Stewart's nightly program shows that there are effective ways for the media to critique and comment on itself and the government" (4). Against this backdrop, such spectacles acquire a distinctive self-referential quality in that they actively deconstruct their targets and the very stylistic formulas they are built upon (Burton 20). In this sense, satire news represents a postmodern twist on the media spectacle by incorporating contemporary critiques of mass media and political commination and offering humorous catharsis on the state of conflict resolution in the media itself. Kellner dubs this dynamic a "media-mediated spectacle" (100). What is important to note here is that this form of meta-critique remains within the recognizable dramaturgy and entertainment paradigms of established spectacle performances. In her discussion of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as both a news source and a media critique on the 2012 presidential election, Mia Brunelle Jønnum outlines that, for instance, "Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* fits in as a social commentator like Greek philosopher Socrates did in his time. . . . [T]hese [two] shows in present time still use conventional satirical methods" (13). The seamless integration of traditional comedic formats points to how Kellner's spectacle concept can be expanded by pointing out that satirical news shows effortlessly reference other entertainment spectacles to drive home larger political points. By using pop culture references, satire effectuates a sense of "familiarity" among and with media-saturated viewers that conventional news formats can hardly achieve.

For instance, in response to the shutdown of the US federal government in the winter of 2018-19, the official Facebook page of *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* published a meme in form of an open letter to President Donald Trump. While the signature purports that the letter was written by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the body of the message actually directly quotes a passage from a debate speech in the high school comedy film *Clueless* (1995).² The fitting appropriation of a movie dialogue to comment on the current immigration debate in the US, demonstrates the ease with

which satirical news formats reassemble well-known pop cultural texts and refit them into their own style of critical commentary. The ensuing massive positive response to this posting exemplifies, how a humorous spectacle format thrives on audience familiarity with pre-existing entertainment items (Plevriti 19). For example, several Facebook commentators augmented the original letter with further references to the same film. This establishes a pop cultural vernacular among the viewership, which aids in creating highly engaged and vibrant digital communities on the one hand,³ but also spurs a form of public discourse in which political events are more and more mediated in the form of the spectacle.

Overall, it can be observed that the constant production of mimetic and viral content stands in close relationship with a highly segmented process of commodification that is facilitated by the Internet and social media (Leclerc 35-36). Through specifying target groups by way of accumulated big data, networks like Comedy Central can gain leverage in relatively unexplored markets and tailor flagship projects, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as brands that receive high levels of resonance among clearly defined audiences. Mimetic content can move and redistribute itself quickly in these echo chambers, as it dramatizes topical concerns in an accessible manner. This aligns with the drive towards reducing complexity and offering a form of alternative reality to the one produced by traditional media outlets.

The rapid dissemination of alternate terms of discourse is also exemplified by John Oliver's use of the word "Drumpf" as the ancestral family name of Donald Trump. In an episode of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in February of 2016, the host urged his viewers to refer to the contender for the Republican nomination by the name "Donald Drumpf", in attempt to rhetorically unmask the air of grandiosity surrounding the "Trump-brand" (Martin 34). This cross-media dissemination of satire connects with Kellner's view of the media spectacle as a colonizing force (15), which permeates different aspects of life with recognizable symbols of both entertainment and dramatized political discourse. The media spectacle is therefore intricately intertwined with calculated moves to leverage audience reach and an instruction on how to use the spectacle. (Arvidsson 244). Sarah J. Burton has placed this phenomenon within a push and pull between technological fragmentation and the integration of ownership in a changing media landscape, which has informed the rise of "infotainment" (15). However, despite its heavy interlinkage in a post-Fordist media setting, the positioning of satirical news formats has given voice to discourses and agendas that resist the paradigms of a neoliberal cultural regime. This is facilitated by

the post-financial crash concerns of the main group consuming such entertainment: The millennial generation under the age of 35.

Satirical News Shows as a Potential Expression of Millennial Resistance

Several polls have indicated that a large portion of US society has incorporated satirical news shows into their news sources. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010, 13% of under 30-year-olds watched *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* regularly. These percentages declined to 5% and 3% for the age bracket of 50 to 64-year-olds.⁴ While these numbers may seem comparably low to daily newspapers and TV news networks, it is interesting to note that in 2008, Jon Stewart - then the host of *The Daily Show* - was voted the fourth-most admired journalist in the US according to the Pew Research Center (Burton 1-2). This confirms the level of trust viewers award to satirists, who often self-identify as comedians (Self 60). This development can be traced to a variety of factors. Jeffrey P. Jones maintains that “The language of satire may seemingly maintain a degree of authenticity to younger citizens simply because it doesn’t seem so closely aligned with the “manufactured realities” that politicians, advertisers and news media construct and would have them believe” (246).

This reasoning, however, showcases shifting fault lines in the attitudes towards media consumption that expand beyond the supposed anti-authoritarian impulses of a younger generation. The general erosion of trust in established news media power brokers, like political parties, stretches among generations and has manifested itself in various political counter-discourse figures claiming national attention (a phenomenon that is repeatedly described as the rise of the “anti-politician”, Fieschi & Heywood). Philosopher Rachael Sotos has described the emergence of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart as the addition of a possible “fifth estate” in democratic discourse (Sotos 28-40; Jønnum 1). Behind this claim is the frequently observed notion that the so-called “fourth estate” - the established media - are failing to assert the investigative function they are supposed to fulfill in their civic mission. For instance, Stephen Colbert publicly called out the failures of traditional journalism in covering the illegalities of the Bush administration in his noted speech at the White House Correspondents dinner in 2006:

As excited as I am to be here with the president, I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, with the exception of Fox News. Over the last five years you people were so good - over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn’t want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.⁵

Colbert's performance of a fervently pro-Bush commentator is marked by a thick layer of irony, which make his persona virtually unassailable from a right-wing perspective, as he merely reiterates standard talking points from conservative Fox News pundits like Bill O'Reilly (Baumgartner & Morris 622-643; Jønnum 70; Burton 129); albeit he does so in a satirical form by taking them to a ridiculous extreme. However, this fact may also inhibit immediate millennial identification with this persona, as it requires familiarity with Colbert's style of mimicry and the reactionary discourse on Fox News - two key elements, which very young and unengaged viewers generally lack (Binford 19).⁶ This lends evidence to the argument that the purported "convergence culture" that satirical news represents is still marked by high entrance barriers of repeat viewings and acclimatization to existent mainstream discourses. Despite *The Colbert Report* reaching up to 1.9 million viewers, with 43% of them being between the age of 18-29 (Jacobs 9-10), it can be argued that its role as "training grounds for monitorial citizens" (Jenkins 227) is confined to informed viewers with sufficient cultural and economic capital to assertively position themselves in the news media landscape (Leclercq 11). Arguing that satirical news shows represent a millennial form of resistance thereby leads to the inevitable question "which millennials" specifically are courted.

Nevertheless, the oppositional quality of Colbert's performance is undeniable in terms of its setting and dramaturgy. The fact that Colbert articulates these subtle criticisms in the very face of the present George W. Bush at the dinner adds a further layer of media spectacle to this performance, as he creates narrative binary in which his pundit character ironically highlights the hypocrisies and failures of the Bush administration, while claiming that no disagreement between him and the president exists (e.g. he opens his speech by calling Bush his own personal "hero"). Furthermore, the attacks on the press are framed in away, in which he lauds the previous failings of established journalists ("Over the last five years you people were so good . . ."). Colbert thereby merges two positions in one persona, one that exposes government and media failings from an oppositional point-of-view and one in which he claims to be with and of the political establishment. Yet, his conscious performance, which is evident to those in the know, also marks him as an "outsider", who can openly lambast the powers to be. Using satire as form of political discourse can arguably appeal to audiences, who do not identify with the "painstakingly crafted façades" of adult politicians and journalists (Boesel 32). In this sense, satirical news spectacles offer a "refuge" from the usual performances of sincerity with - ironically - fictional personas like Stephen Colbert enticing real-life politicians to "break

character” and enter into a playful mode of self-debasement. The role of such programs is therefore also marked by a Baudrillardian quality, in that they seek to make their audience aware of the “hyperreality” of staged political spectacles (Baudrillard 166-184). This arguably connects with the experiences of younger viewers with a high degree of digital immersion.

As noted in the discussion of Kellner’s notion of the media spectacle, the structural transformations brought about by technological, economic and cultural realignments, which have significantly affected the structure and content of mass media discourse, but also the consumption habits and demands of the population. Adopting a different tone and habitus that the fourth estate has allowed satirical news media to position itself as a “watchdog over the watchdogs of government” (Jønnum 1) - injecting a layer of political meta-discourse into national debates. The increasing integration of corporate and political interests on global scale and throughout multiple platforms over the last four decades have contributed to a climate, in which established institutions for civic discourse are often seen as “part of the problem” as opposed to “part of the solution”. While satirical news show hosts might see themselves as comedians (Wallachy 14), their language of irony and sarcasm is often instrumental in voicing the discomfort felt by those segments of the society, which feel that the concentration of more power and wealth in the hands of a few is not working to their advantage (Milkman 6-7). Jon Stewart sums up the way in which satirical news shows echo a general disaffection with the state of political discourse:

I represent the distracted center. My comedy is not the comedy of the neurotic. It comes from the center. But it comes from feeling displaced from society because you’re in the center. We’re the group of fairness, common sense and moderation. We’re clearly the disenfranchised center . . . because we’re not in charge. (Wallachy 12)

In this telling quote, Stewart reiterates a position that is often voiced by high-profile satirists, including Stephen Colbert⁷ and Trevor Noah.⁸ Namely, that attacks against established media or politicians result from an underlying “common sense” rather than an impulse toward radical transformation. It appears, however, that - apart from individual inclinations - major satirical news shows are confined by “ideological corridors” due their political economy as well.

Ideological Confines of Satirical News Shows Under a Neoliberal Cultural Regime

In his book on *Media Culture*, Kellner posits that “media production is . . . intimately imbricated in relations of power and serves to reproduce the interests of powerful social forces, promoting either domination or empowering individuals for resistance

and struggle” (43). The production of cultural texts is thereby socially and economically embedded in existing structures, which are impacted by questions of ownership, production, distribution and consumption. Kellner proposes to dissect cultural texts within larger context that also includes the political economy and the mode or production in order to illuminate e.g. pop cultural artefacts (*Media Culture* 37-38). With regard to satirical news shows, it is important to note that these shows remain primarily a product of a corporatized mass media landscape and shaped by the corridors of a profit-oriented conglomerate structure. Both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are/were produced by Comedy Central, a channel that is owned by the Viacom Global Entertainment Group, which is itself a subsidiary of the multi-national mass media conglomerate Viacom (Boesel 18). *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* airs on TBS, which is an affiliate of the Turner Broadcasting system and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* is offered by HBO, a channel owned and operated by AT&T and WarnerMedia.

These frameworks illustrate that, like so many other mass media ventures, satirical programming is subject to a neoliberal corporatization process in which global corporations buy different outlets to integrate different market segments into their reach (Daws 148-152; McChesney). The high-budgeted production of shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* illustrates the capital-intensive investment quality of these projects, underlining their reliance on corporate funding and their need to generate a return on investment. These programs generally recoup their expenses by serving a niche market that Roberto Leclercq describes as “characterized by specialised and “intensive narrative investment” (50). He goes on to state that

Niche-cable networks like Comedy Central rely on the specificity of their audience - an audience more likely to appreciate and expect contentious forms of programming. Satiric programming becomes a marker of “distinction for both [Comedy Central] and audiences alike—forms of smart (or puerile) television that provide distinctive appeal and a seemingly unique perspective on the world not found elsewhere on television” (Gray et al. 14; Leclercq 50).

This observation is critical in understanding the profit motive behind the production of distinction in mass media entertainment. While satire can take aim at established outlets and politicians by exposing hypocrisies and offering an alternative mode of discourse, their opposition is still undergirded by a desire to covet audiences that possess the time and capital to consume. Douglas Kellner notes in this context that “Difference sells. (...) The mere valorization of “difference” as a mark of opposition can simply help market new styles and artifacts if the difference in question and its effects are not adequately appraised” (*Media Culture* 40). Against this backdrop, it

becomes important to investigate which specific ideological range the most popular satirical news shows cover and which larger socio-cultural frameworks they reside in.

As noted in the previous discussion on the term “media spectacle”, Kellner points out that such spectacles serve as “mode for conflict resolution” by dramatizing the pre-eminent (or most marketable) societal tensions and dramas of the day. In this sense, satirical news shows become one out of many participants in parlaying ideological struggles into an accessible and narratable form. In his analysis of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, Roberto Leclerq posits that these shows resolve the dramas they have selected on the basis of a “depoliticized centre-left pluralism (...). It is a form of antagonism that provides biting criticism while invoking a populist appeal to common-sense values like tolerance, moderation and trust” (52). This positioning, however, remains firmly within the reigning paradigms of a neoliberal cultural climate⁹ in which questions of radical social transformation or structural economic issues get sidelined. A telling confirmation of this assumption comes in the fact that major satirical news shows on corporate networks rarely venture out of the two-party paradigm that characterizes mainstream political discourse in the US. One of the few and more prominent examples, wherein a host focused on “third-party candidates”, was an episode of *Last Week Tonight with Oliver* in October of 2016. In the episode entitled *The Lesser of Four Evils*, Oliver took aim at the presidential candidate of the Green Party, Jill Stein, by deriding her plans to implement federal programs to fully cancel all student debt in the US. He also presented a series of verbal gaffes by Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson. The episode was hotly debated among viewers with tendencies outside of the two-party spectrum and it also sparked a rebuttal by the Stein campaign.¹⁰ What is interesting in this takedown of a left-wing, progressive candidate is that Oliver ended his segment by invoking a form of seemingly ideology-free “common sense”. Towards the end of the segment, Oliver summarized that

I would love for there to be a perfect third-party candidate. I even understand the argument that a third-party candidate can put a new issue or a new solution on the table, but it is hard to make the case that that is what’s happening here. There is no perfect candidate in this race. And when people say “You don’t have to choose the lesser of two evils” they are right, because you have to choose the lesser of four.¹¹

Oliver appears to be arguing from the standpoint of a “mythical center” (Lakoff 18-21),¹² in which perceived flaws among candidates and campaigns are played out against each other; without clearly delineating his own ideological tendencies. In doing so, Oliver offers a complacent form of political discourse (Leclerq 53) that shies away from radically questioning the status quo or affirming a constructive political

vision beside the four options he has discussed. The oppositionality of this form of satire confines itself to humorously lamenting the current political landscape; giving the impression that even third-party candidates offer no viable alternative. This is suitable for constructing the current neoliberal consensus as a cultural regime without any viable options.

A further example for this satirical push to an (imagined) center is a segment from the *Daily Show* from August of 2017. In this bit, host Trevor Noah criticized the actions of left-wing Antifa groups in the US. Noah went on to characterize two young, self-declared members of Antifa as merely driven by personal enjoyment and engulfed by video games and Japanese anime culture, which - according to this bit - appears to be in trend within the movement. While his critique of the consumerist undertones in this example showcases a certain anti-capitalist impulse, Noah then proceeds to invoke a centrist tone when condemning the actions of individual Antifa members, who attack property and people identified as white supremacists:

You don't realize, when you think you're punching Nazis, you don't realize that you're also punching your cause. Because your opponents; they'll just use every violent incident to discredit your entire movement. And they make it seem like - they make it seem like - that, in a world where white supremacists have a friend in the White House, the real problem is *you guys*.¹³

A string of right-wing Fox News commentary is then shown, lambasting Antifa as “fascistic” and a potential “terrorist organization”. In Noah’s commentary, a mediatory position is staked out in which he juxtaposes Antifa to its opponents (“Because your opponents . . .”) without affiliating himself with the movement. Yet, the opponents cited in the succeeding montage - Fox News reporters - are regular targets for criticism on *The Daily Show*. It can be argued that, by refraining from deconstructing Fox News on this specific issue, a certain overlap of editorial opinion is made evident. The resulting ideological contours expose a faultline in which corporate-produced media spectacles will distance themselves from movements which call for radical transformations and structural economic change. What is of further interest in this episode is that, much like John Oliver’s commentary on third-party candidates, Noah utilizes a mix of progressive and centrist positions to reprimand specific and different targets. The commentary is, therefore, “bi-conceptual” in its outlook (Lakoff 18-21), but it naturalizes itself as mediatory and reasonable “moderate” position.

In his essay on the political economy of late-night comedy, Don Waisanen opines that a “late night segment might get us to think momentarily about counterfactual political possibilities, but systematically, these shows keep bringing us

to their same starting points the following days” (Waisanen in Webber 163). While some of the observations in this chapter have cemented this viewpoint, it is still important to take note of the far-reaching repercussions of satirical news shows and performances especially among younger generations (Amarasingam 39-43). Despite being a one-time performance, Colbert’s speech at the White House Correspondents Dinner has been described as one of the “defining moments” in helping the Democratic Party win the mid-term elections in November of 2006.¹⁴ Yet, the corporatized political economy of major satirical programs does evidently impinge on the content. Further research might benefit from exploring satirical news shows with less mainstream media exposure such as *Redacted Tonight* or the *Jimmy Dore Show*. Questions of ownership, budgeting and distribution will undoubtedly be of relevance in examining such formats.

Conclusions

It can be summarized that popular satirical news shows in the US fill critical voids, which have emerged in the shift from conventional mass media productions toward a more digital and individualized setting. These voids are, among other factors, characterized by the rise of viewer participation in programming and the increased shareability of imagery and discourses through social media. These programs generally orientate themselves toward covering existing news stories from established outlets, thereby offering a take on societal discourses and conflicts, which have been confirmed to be pre-eminent in the larger media landscape. In addition, satirical news is built on traditional patterns of comedy and irony, which exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of political satire as a cultural practice (Jønnum 13; Leclercq 8). However, within the context of Kellner’s concept of the media spectacle, a larger socio-economic evaluation of satirical news shows becomes possible, in which the production and distribution process of these programs reveals their immersion within a late capitalist market logic. Against this backdrop, the circulation of brands and shareable memes points toward a new mode for monopolizing attention in a more complex and fragmented society. Moreover, the transposing of political debates into a language informed by pop cultural spectacles implies an increased precedence for market-driven symbols and images to generate political meaning. Given the strong linkage between the contemporary media spectacle and commodity capitalism, there is ample reason to believe that satirical news shows serve as manifestations of a late neoliberal cultural regime marked by consumption and choice - rather than as progenitors for an activist transformation of social power structures. Yet, Kellner’s

claim that media spectacles cement a form of “spectator” politics (177), in which viewers contemplate on political spectacles does not hold true in that these programs do manage to foster communities of engaged debate (Gournelos 161) and act as starting points for political activism. This is notable, as these shows predominantly target demographics that established media formats can barely reach with the same topics.

In the discussion of satirical news shows as a form of millennial resistance, it became manifest that the tone and ironic style of journalistic comedians appealed to younger audiences, who generally felt mistrust towards established news outlets. In that capacity, these programs often invoke a role as “watchdogs over the watchdogs” by positioning themselves as freewheeling commentators. The analysis of Stephen Colbert’s biting criticism of politicians and the press during the White House Correspondents’ Dinner was shown to come from a virtually unassailable position as the satirist is merely playing out a fictional persona, who lauds these failings. Kristen Boesel’s observation that “The fictional quality of the address makes the attack seem “safer” but does not necessarily undermine the effectiveness of the critique” (11) holds true in this respect and illustrates the undeniable power of satire in deconstructing abuses of power and privilege. Future research would therefore benefit from staking out, in how far performances of “comedic disruption” are semiotically geared towards unmasking the routine performances of “public personas” by political figures. Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “hyperreality” might aid in determining to what extent satire journalists not only act as a “fifth estate”, but also serve to break the “fourth wall” in their reporting.

The discussion of the political economy has uncovered that major satire news shows remain firmly in the grip of multinational corporate ownership and are intricately tied to larger structures of power and capital in a late capitalist media environment. As for ideological limitations, a recurrent trend towards invoking the “mythical center” became visible. This was especially in connection with debates and controversies that involved movements that called for structural transformation and radical democratic change. In segments from *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, a narrative pattern emerged, wherein progressive and centrist viewpoints were both employed to critique voices that place themselves outside of the broader neoliberal consensus. These discursive strategies were found to operate on myths of “common sense” and the naturalization of one’s own positioning. Further research could elucidate these aspects from the perspective of “myth as depoliticized speech” as promulgated by Roland Barthes (142-145). It would

be interesting to find out what specific myths are narrated in which ideological constellations and when exactly satirical commentators move from a conscious politicized language into the realm of a seemingly “depoliticized” speech of “common sense”.

Overall, satirical news shows remain important interlocutors in the mass media landscape of the US. As pop cultural artefacts, products for consumption and disruptors to mainstream news discourses, they inhabit an intersection wherein the traditional distinctions between “entertainment” and “political commentary” have become increasingly blurred. Against the backdrop of an increased permeation of political culture by “celebrity logic” (Driessens), satire news shows appear as fierce opponents of staged performances as well as ardent suppliers of (escapist) spectacles. With the ascent of “pop-culture-figures-turned-politicians” such as Donald Trump, this mode of combining entertainment with political disruption has garnered further currency in today’s complex and diverse media environment. The rise of celebrity politicians benefits satire news shows in subtle, but not insignificant ways. After all, the most-watched YouTube clip from *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* remains the segment on “Donald Drumpf”.

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¹ Kristen Boesel explains in her analysis of binary oppositions in *The Colbert Report* that the show "more consistently attacks media practices by emphasizing the way news commentary often reduces political parties and issues to oversimplified binary oppositions" (26).

² “Dear Mr. President . . .” Posting on the official Facebook Page of *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/fullfrontalsamb/photos/a.1771924126368559/2409344575959841/?type=3&theater>. Accessed 22 January 2019.

³ Matthew Binford notes in his discussion on the influence of satirical news that “What is unique about the genre, though, is that it is an entertainment-based genre with an informative subtext. The increased sense of news enjoyment among satirical news viewers might also explain why satirical news viewers tend to take in other forms of news media more often as well” (46). This points towards such entertainment formats as a valid starting point for greater civic participation and the sharing of knowledge. Yet, the corridors of the spectacle, especially in a late capitalist society, pre-define and structure certain narrative foci and agendas, as the discussion of the limits of satirical news in this work will show.

⁴ “Americans Spending More Time Following the News.” Online Article at Pew Research Center, 12 September 2010, <http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/section-1-watching-reading-and-listening-to-the-news/>. Accessed 23 January 2019.

⁵ “Transcript of Stephen Colbert’s WHCA Speech: You Be the Judge.” *Editor & Publisher*, 4 May 2006, <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/news/transcript-of-stephen-colbert-s-whca-speech-you-be-the-judge/>. Accessed 20 January 2019.

⁶ Matthew Binford states that “It has been shown that in an experimental setting, first exposure to Stephen Colbert’s unique style of satire featuring many implicit and explicit messages seems to confuse some younger viewers. Yet this may not necessarily be the case for regular viewers of *The Colbert Report* as they are more accustomed to Colbert’s unique style of satire (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008)”.

⁷ In a 2009 interview with the magazine *Rolling Stone*, Stephen Colbert declares that “I don’t have an ax to grind. I get disappointed with both sides. But I do like human behavior.” Strauss, Neil: “*The Subversive Joy of Stephen Colbert.*” Article in *Rolling Stone*, 17 September 2009. Accessed 21 January 2019: <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/the-subversive-joy-of-stephen-colbert-106698/>

⁸ In an interview with the online magazine *IndieWire*, Trevor Noah states that “I’m neither left nor right (...) It’s interesting to come into this space and then point out from both sides what I think is right or wrong...” Kohn, Eric: “*10 Ways ‘The Daily Show With Trevor Noah’ Aims to Move Beyond Jon Stewart.*” Online article from *IndieWire*, 27 September 2015. Accessed 21 January 2019: <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/09/10-ways-the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-aims-to-move-beyond-jon-stewart-57439/>

⁹ David Harvey defines the term “neoliberalism” in the following way: “Neoliberalism is the intensification of the influence and dominance of capital; it is the elevation of capitalism, as a mode of production, into an ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic. It is also a project: a project to strengthen, restore, or, in some cases, constitute anew the power of economic elites” (Harvey in Thompson, 23).

¹⁰ Kreps, Daniel: “Green Party Candidate Jill Stein Rips John Oliver’s ‘Deceptive Attack’”, *Rolling Stone*, 19 October 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/green-party-candidate-jill-stein-rips-john-olivers-deceptive-attack-116487/>. Accessed 21 January 2019.

¹¹ Oliver, John. “Third Parties: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” Online video on *YouTube*, 16 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3001EfM5fU>. Accessed 22 January 2019.

¹² Cognitive linguist George Lakoff explains that centrist positions rarely exist in the way individuals process political positions. Instead, individuals who self-identify as “moderate” hold a mix of both progressive views on certain issues and conservative views on other issues. Lakoff dubs this “bi-conceptualism” (18-21).

¹³ Noah, Trevor. “Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Antagonists of the Alt-Right: The Daily Show.” Online video on *YouTube*, 31 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmpqnxpYUqA>. Accessed 22 January 2019.

¹⁴ Rich, Frank: “Throw the Truthiness Bums Out.” Article in *The New York Times*, 5 November 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/05/opinion/05rich.html>. Accessed 22 January 2019.