

## How does Humour Function Philosophically as a Means to Approach the “Truth”? : Donald Trump, Late Night Comedy, and the Limits of Satire

Whether North Americans are watching Stephen Colbert, Trevor Noah, or any other influential late-night satirist, it is clear that many in North America get their “news” from comedians. A Pew research study in 2007 found that Jon Stewart of the Daily Show (TDS) was voted to be the fourth most trusted journalist in America. According to data from the Pew Research Center’s 2008 Media Consumption Study, 14 percent of 18–24 year-olds watch TDS on a regular basis. While many have written about whether satire explains policy coherently, I approach this question philosophically: how does humour function as a means to approach the truth in the context of “fake news” and “satire”?

In this research project, I argue that while political satire in late night comedy shows (specifically examining Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart) helps start conversations regarding issues that journalism sometimes fails to cover, I argue that there are often drawbacks of employing humour to bring attention to “facts” in a democracy. By comparing Stephen Colbert’s comedy sketches and Donald Trump’s rhetoric, I demonstrate that Trump’s methods share much in common with Colbert’s jokes. This is not to say that Colbert and Trump are on equal “moral” grounds, but rather that their rhetoric from a philosophical perspective shares fundamental techniques. Furthermore, they produce similar effects in their respective audiences.

First, I argue that the humour itself in political satire is a problematic tool to convey “facts.” I do this through Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Hegel’s lectures on Aesthetics and his reading of Hegel’s lectures on the Socratic method. Second, I argue that political satire does little to change minds. On the contrary, it tends to reaffirm pre-existing opinions, and creates a false sense of superiority among viewers. I argue this through Northrup Frye’s exploration of the nature of satire and Peter Jelavich’s take on the Berlin Cabaret. Lastly, I ground my philosophical approach with empirical evidence through a review of recent research conducted regarding the perception and effects on viewers of late-night comedy shows.

Žižek points out a potential problem in the portrayal of facts in late night comedy shows through a reading of Hegel. He argues that Hegel would oppose this form of “news reporting” and would instead encourage the recognition of the Good and the Truth embodied in social customs. In my reading of Hegel, he implies that criticism should be provided not in the light of humour but from what it truly is, in the light of the ultimate Truth. It is about approaching the rational core of the issue. Hegel explains in his lectures on aesthetics that “humour is not at task of developing and shaping a topic objectively,” in the sense that the essential nature of the topic is not appropriately explored. With this kind of problematic criticism, the main substance that remains is the winding course of the humour which uses every topic only to emphasize the subjective wit of the author. The “truth” gets sidelined, while the emphasis is on the person delivering the humour and the humour itself. In other words, whether it is Donald Trump making fun of a disabled reporter or whether it is Colbert making fun of Trump’s physical appearance, the focus becomes on the “humour” and its delivery, rather than the actual issue.

Northrup Frye points out two things essential to the nature of satire: 1. Wit or humour, and 2. The object of attack. According to his definition, it is “satire” only when both are present. Both the humour and attack depend on certain conventions which are assumed before the satirist begins to write. The audience is supposed to be “in on the joke.” Žižek points out that this kind of critique in reality does not serve to develop a deeper appreciation of the policy issue. It does not provide a true critique of the issue at hand, rather it only provides the listener an illusion of freedom and superiority by being “in on the joke.” This notion of being “in on the joke” also came up in my examination of political satire in the

Weimar Republic, where satirical jokes about “killing all the Jews” were taken literally by those committed to street violence and those that had a pre-existing hatred for them.

Through my research I have found that philosophically, there are drawbacks to employing humour as a critical technique and for portraying facts. I think this is an important philosophical finding in today’s politically polarized environment.