

**“NOT *THE COSBY SHOW*”:  
COMEDY IN THE AGE OF IRONY AND  
POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS**

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**“Not *The Cosby Show*”:  
Comedy in the Age of Irony and Political Incorrectness**

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“NOT *THE COSBY SHOW*”:  
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Under the supervision of Professor Jonathan Gray  
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The late twentieth century was deemed an “age of irony” in American media and popular culture. A wide variety of cultural commentators fixated on the emergence of a new kind of ironic ethos and debated its implications for television and society. Pointing to novel nineties shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Married... With Children* (dubbed “Not The Cosbys”), and *South Park*, some celebrated irony as a bold postmodern posture while others lamented the “irony epidemic” as a portent of moral and civic decay. Seen as a transgressive, unpredictable, and hip alternative to traditional modes of broadcast humor, a sense of irony has steadily and fundamentally transformed the structures of television throughout the post-network era. Despite prominent speculation that such ironic irreverence would lose its luster for humorists and audiences following the tragedy of 9/11, what occurred instead was a steady reassertion, reconfiguring, and revaluation of both irony and cynicism across numerous cultural fronts.

This project provides a cultural and discursive history, charting the story of that irony’s eruption, evolution, and impact as told through the various lenses of the nation’s critics. Placing the robust discourse on the spread of irony within historical context, the study interrogates the meanings being made of irony as a label and a programming trend over the past three decades. I trace the turn(s) to and transformations of “postmodern irony,” as it has come to be defined and contested, and examine critically how cultural politics bear upon attitudes and expectations about comedy’s social relevance. Highlighting the interplay of ironic ambiguity and “political

incorrectness,” the dissertation explores irony’s salience for American culture, politics, and identity.

I find that despite attempts to harness irony to various commercial, social, and partisan agendas—attempts that taken together demonstrate irony’s contingency as comedic and cultural practice—branding has its limits. The very polysemy that renders irony appealing and potent in articulating institutional and individual identities also works to complicate imposed values and political vectors. Irony frequently slips these yokes, opening up space for semiotic, affective, and experiential negotiations where the bounds between meaning and not-meaning may be reworked by both culture and comedian.

## Introduction: The Irony Age

The late twentieth century has been called an Age of Irony in American culture. In March of 1989 *Spy* magazine lamented, “This is the era of the permanent smirk, the knowing chuckle, of jokey ambivalence as a way of life. This is the Irony Epidemic.”<sup>1</sup> The 1990s were bookended by panicky pronouncements about the spread of irony in entertainment, politics, art, leisure, fashion, and all areas of social life. By decade’s end irony had become so pervasive that *Newsweek* wondered, “Will we ever get over irony?” *Macleans* blamed irony for breeding cynicism in contemporary culture. *Time*’s Joel Stein chimed in with a sly appeal “In Defense of Irony,” promulgating that jokey ambivalence. “[I]rony is much more fun than earnestness...,” he taunted. “Earnestness is what you hide behind when you have nothing to say. Unless you hide behind irony, which is much cooler.” *Time* film critic Richard Schickel took a less forgiving view, complaining that “smug and lazy” adolescent humor threatened to “kill comedy.”<sup>2</sup>

Irony in its popular usage describes a much maligned mode of humor that came to dominate the market during the late 1980s and the 1990s: a comedy of ambiguity and self-contradiction said to eschew earnestness in favor of cynicism and substitute a cool detachment for sincerity and social “relevance.” TV executives along with comics today are fluent in this tradition which redefined what it means to be cutting edge and “hip” in American culture. In the business of comedy, self-referential irony served to mark certain comic practices and products

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, “The Irony Epidemic,” *Spy* (March 1989): 94.

<sup>2</sup> David Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?” *Newsweek* 134, no. 26 (December 27, 1999–January 3, 2000): 90–94; Charles Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Macleans* 112, no. 41 (October 11, 1999): 67; Joel Stein, “In Defense of Irony,” *Time* 154, no. 14 (October 5, 1999): 42; and Richard Schickel, “Can Irony Kill Comedy?” review of *What Planet Are You From?* (Columbia Pictures, 2000), written by and starring Garry Shandling, *Time* 155, no. 9 (March 6, 2000): 72, LexisNexis Academic (all accessed September 2004).

as edgy and to exclude others as overly tame, transparent, and uni-dimensional. On television by the turn of the 1990s, a dualism was set up with “ironic” comedy standing in opposition to the “earnest” and “sincere” didactic mode long associated with family-friendly programming. The resulting image is a contest in which ostentatiously “crude” programs like MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head* (original run 1993–97) on one side and “wholesome” entertainment like ABC’s *Full House* (1987–95) on the other are locked in mortal struggle over the soul of American comedy.

The cult of irony came under more urgent scrutiny immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and the ensuing War on Terror fostered a cautious and sober media climate that disrupted and revised the rules for the use of irony in comedy. Many spoke of irony as a virus infecting American national discourse and public life. Journalist Roger Rosenblatt, for example, joined the chorus of voices condemning irony as a failure of the culture to “take things seriously.”<sup>3</sup> Despite widely circulating predictions that the death of irony was imminent, the ironic sensibility with its reputation for promoting cynicism or “pessimism chic”<sup>4</sup> did not lose much momentum or loose its hold on popular culture. The 2000s saw continued growth and innovation in irony, a media phenomenon that in comedy proved its remarkable staying power, range, resonance, and renewed lease on political relevance for American culture.

Popular memory has tended to account for shifts in American comedy by resorting to a decade-based *reflection* model that locates comic mode in the cultural mood of the moment, such as the displacement of countercultural seventies satire by cozy early eighties earnestness and in turn nihilistic nineties irony. The nation’s changing comic preferences—with irony

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” *Time* 158, no. 13 (September 24, 2001): 77.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow this phrase from J. J. Charlesworth, “Serious Art, or Pessimism Chic?” *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 9, 2003, 19, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 25, 2007), who writes, “Art can be critical of the way things are; but, without a sense of a better alternative, it’s always in danger of turning into pessimist chic for the culturati.”

displacing prime-time parables and a comedy of commonality—are said to “mirror” shifts in the social milieu. Such accounts, while seductively straightforward, downplay the dynamic relationship between comedy and culture, and in the case of the turn or turns to irony, among media industries, entertainers, and audiences.

This dissertation looks at irony as a national discursive formation and interrogates the meanings being made of irony—of its ubiquity, form, and function—as a trend in American television comedy. My object of study extends beyond ironic programming to include the uses of irony as a critical term in popular culture and the shifting cultural politics of irony as comic practice. The uses and functions of irony, and its perceived value and marketability, are shaped as much by context and the shared social meanings being made of that loose baggy monster called “irony” as by the manifest content and authorial intent of individual programs.<sup>5</sup>

Irony in American culture has been described in many different ways—as signaling a bankruptcy of national values, or the preeminence of postmodernism, or the zeitgeist of an age. My project, by offering a discursive history, does not so much work to isolate and describe irony as a discrete set of textual features or affective traits as to examine the contexts and competing agendas that lead to its invocation and that establish irony as a pillar of American popular culture. It is not my aim to account for nor to condemn irony as an attitude erupting from a cultural moment or endemic to postmodernity. Instead, I map out specific cultural and industrial transitions that led to the production of a comedy centered on irony. This ironic comedy so characteristic of not only 1990s television but the humor of the period more generally was facilitated (and, in some instances, necessitated) by the growth of cable television, and with it, audience fragmentation and “narrowcasting.”

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<sup>5</sup> The oft repeated expression “loose baggy monster” originally hails from author Henry James’s recognition of the nebulosity of the novel as a genre, and has since been applied to various eclectic and contested cultural categories and enterprises, including the scholarly/political movement of cultural studies.



## Comedy and the Niche Nation

Irony is a group sport.

— *Spy* magazine, 1989<sup>6</sup>

As the audience of various ages, races, social classes, and education levels continues to split apart—in life and on TV—and Fox capitalizes on that fact, worrying about the new fourth network is just another way of worrying about the country itself.

— Critic Andrew Holleran, 1990<sup>7</sup>

Ever since television reached into U.S. homes and became a fixture of American family life in the 1950s, cultural critics and popular wisdom have looked to television programming—and perhaps comedies in particular—as an index of national mood, values, and identity. Comedy of the classic network era (roughly the late 1950s through mid 1970s) aspired to bring a national audience together in laughter. Representational comedy and specifically the domestic sitcom, which has been called sincere, didactic, and consensus-driven, would begin to fracture in the 1970s under the weight of satire and boomer skepticism, with the broadcast networks sharpening their focus on a young, upscale, “quality” demographic. With the maturation of cable television in the 1980s and 1990s, emerging social ideas and attitudes about “identity politics” dovetailed with the television industry’s increasing reliance on demographic segmentation and the exploiting of difference to develop specific markets. These decades saw the national “mass” audience breaking into enclaves of identity groups—engendering a humor based in social fractions, to an unprecedented degree, along lines of generation, gender, race, and class. The

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<sup>6</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, “Irony Epidemic,” 98.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Holleran, “A Very Small Gene Pool: Andrew Holleran on Fox Television,” *WigWag*, November 1990, 37.

post-network era, spurred on by the imperatives of cable, saw comic tastes “branded” according to the logics of narrowcasting and niche marketing, a development that tracks with the twin attentions in public discourse to cultural pluralism and market competition.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to comedy icons of classic television’s “golden age” such as Milton “Mr. Television” Berle, Jackie Gleason, and Lucille Ball, the post-network comedian emerges as a different kind of public figure with license to explore and exploit the politics of identity. The “comedy boom” of the 1980s through early 1990s cultivated a rhetoric of the comedian as a populist figure who represents the public or, more accurately, speaks to and for a discrete demographic constituency—and sensibility—of that public. From the gender demagoguery of “lad” icons like Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison to “yuppie” yukster Jerry Seinfeld to more liberal-leaning or feminist acts like Roseanne Barr and Whoopi Goldberg, comics hailed specific audience segments into a sense of in-group identification. In this context, the culture of irony, its critics contend, installs a comedy that is derisive and potentially divisive at the expense of humor’s “unifying” function. Irony’s defenders would maintain that the social, cultural, economic, and political divisions were there all along, while the industrial reality of audience segmentation makes it harder to rally together as a unified national audience around an earnest position. In place of a superficial consensus of values, meta-humor and irony are deployed to stake out a different common ground as the shared culture of “cool.” Irony as practiced by professional comedians—as well as popular embrace of ironic perspective as a “group sport” within the subculture of hipster elites or the “hip” postmodern audience—rests upon acts of inclusion, establishing a fellowship among ironists, at the same time as this

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<sup>8</sup> David Marc in *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), argues, “By radically increasing audience segmentation, cable gave American teledrama the opportunity to develop *range* [emphasis in original], a luxury denied it by channel scarcity during the technological regime of broadcasting” (187). See also Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), for recent comedy case studies.

growing clique depends on exclusion and the expectation of an unknowing and “square” social majority, presumed to be more conservative, who will not be “in” on the joke.

The irony of the late 1980s and 1990s is strongly aligned with a cultural backlash against “political correctness” and, on American television, against traditional domestic and situation comedies that relied on emotional appeal and ideological heavy-handedness to teach a moral, or lesson, and affirm the status quo. While broadcasters focused on attracting socially liberal, savvy audiences, prime-time comedy during the 1980s primarily belonged to moralizing and relatively normative domestic sitcoms that instilled values of love, respect, and accountability as the basis for family life and good citizenship. Owing in part to the phenomenal success of *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–92), themes of racial harmony and gender equality, brought within quirky, compassionate narratives of belonging set in the home or workplace, continued to define situation comedy as the hippest of “sentimental” formats. Cosby’s and his TV family the Huxtables’ blend of warmth and wit, and of personal responsibility and social idealism, was widely imitated and emulated on other network family shows of the period. Caustic and cynical humor was reserved for venues like *Mad Magazine*, comedy albums and live shows, late-night television and *Saturday Night Live* sketches, indie cinema, and imported comedies on cable that supposedly clashed with the “American sense of humor.” Niche strategies of the post-network era exploited these competing taste cultures for comedy, rendering them an increasingly visible and valued part of mainstream television and American culture.

Irony on U.S. television, though today widespread, remains a niche-driven phenomenon. Industrially, as I will discuss in detail in the first chapter, the rise of irony was encouraged by cable’s expansion and by FOX, the “fourth network” which targeted young, urban markets with such controversial and unconventional comedies as *Married... With Children* (1987–97, which had the working title of *Not The Cosby Show*) and *The Simpsons* (1989–present). The success

of such programs began to raise a formal question the impact of which was felt throughout the television industry: Is the sitcom going to continue to offer “morals” to build good families and citizens? Multiculturalist images and messages, increasingly derided as politically correct, or “PC,” accounted for much of the moralizing still found in network sitcoms. As cable channels and the newer networks rolled out nontraditional, antirealist, or imported formats and edgy content to distinguish themselves and offer alternatives to traditional television, the Big Three networks increased their comedy star power scrambling to reassert dominance and defend their reputations as the pioneers of national entertainment trends. When seasoned bachelor Jerry Seinfeld eventually replaced huggable dad Cliff Huxtable as the king of NBC’s “Must See TV” Thursday night schedule, it was a signal that irony’s moment had indeed arrived. America’s growing appetite for provocative and non-“PC” humor was used to smuggle more and more of the freedoms of late-night, stand-up clubs, and the cable fringe onto network and even prime-time television as a way to compete with the comedy empires of Home Box Office (HBO) and Showtime as well as youth channels like Music Television (MTV) and Comedy Central. Irony rapidly became a metric of the cleverness or edginess of performers and media texts and a metonym for presumably desirable audiences.

Irony was by no means new to American television in the 1980s, as I will discuss, and it had been an ingredient in that decade’s family and kid-friendly entertainment including *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982–89), *Alf* (NBC, 1986–90), and similar programs deemed ultimately sincere. In an earlier sitcom cycle, in the 1970s the biting satire of Norman Lear’s hit *All in the Family* was more expressly achieved through ironic use of character. By the turn of the 1990s, however, a new breed of sitcom ironists garnered attention for inciting a comic *coup d’état* overthrowing polite, family-centered television comedy. Although Lear’s assault on the genre and the picture-perfect TV family has been retrospectively celebrated as a prototype for

the “political incorrectness” of various contemporary shows, his brand of social satire had laid foundation and set the bar for an “earnest” liberalism and pathos in comedy. The “new” irony ridiculed, dismantled, or otherwise resisted the underlying sincerity and didacticism of the earlier programs. Alternately deemed corrosive and creative, anarchic and avant-garde, a postmodern aesthetics of self-reflexive irony shifted the terms for comic transgression in both populist and quality programming alike. Subversive irony, seen as an unpredictable, bold, and playful alternative to familiar modes of broadcast humor, soon achieved a kind of dominance while maintaining its countercultural chic, and has continued to colonize and transform the structures of comedy on American television throughout the post-network era.

### **Defining Irony**

Blackadder: Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?

Baldrick: Yeah, it’s like goldy and bronzy, only it’s made of iron.

— *Blackadder the Third*, 1987<sup>9</sup>

Irony is notoriously difficult to define—a fact exploited by the economic and social interests vying for the final word on irony’s significance to society and media culture. It is a versatile term that pop culture makers and critics have used to conjure with over the past three decades. With all the lip service being paid to irony, numerous cultural commentators have tried their hand at defining contemporary irony decisively, accounting for its pervasiveness and wide appeal, and even prescribing its usage. Irony has its defenders who argue vociferously for this or that correct meaning, credited to the term’s etymology and rich literary lineage. And it has its detractors, as well, who insist that, like obscenity, irony falls into the category of “I know it

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<sup>9</sup> *Blackadder* (also known as *Blackadder the Third* in its third season), “Amy and Amiability,” episode 3.5, written by Ben Elton and Richard Curtis, originally broadcast October 15, 1987, by BBC1.

when I see it.” The former tend to focus on ironists’ contributions to esteemed cultural forms: art, literature, theatre, and cinema—rarely television. The latter complain that irony has opened the floodgates of mean-spirited, detached humor and cynicism in U.S. media and popular culture.

At the end of the 1990s the mounting sense of panic over “detached” or “Seinfeld-type” irony seemed to have reached its apogee. Cultural critics looking ahead to the new millennium pleaded for a rapid reversal of what they saw as America’s decade-long descent into glibness, smugness, and insincerity. *Newsweek*’s David Gates mused in December 1999, “We’ve had everything else, so why not a backlash against irony? Could be fun. But if it survived the end of ‘Seinfeld,’ our disapproval won’t make it go away. In fact, irony kind of gets off on our disapproval.”<sup>10</sup> Many who felt that irony had defined American culture in the 1990s feared that the 2000s would continue to be, as *Time*’s Richard Schickel complained, “an era enervated by the ironic ideal.”<sup>11</sup> Nihilism was named as the reigning “American style” with the publication in 1999 of *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* by philosopher Thomas S. Hibbs, who warned that *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–98) and other “shows about nothing” testify to sprawling moral apathy and “comic nihilism” in contemporary American life.<sup>12</sup>

Journalist Charles Gordon’s October 1999 essay “When Irony Becomes Cynicism” in *Maclean’s* offered this pithy definition of *Seinfeld*-era irony: “In today’s context, irony is a sensibility that values cleverness and style above passion and commitment.”<sup>13</sup> Seeking to separate himself from “the anti-irony forces,” Gordon highlighted examples of the “skilful ironist” rising

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<sup>10</sup> Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?” 90.

<sup>11</sup> Schickel, “Can Irony Kill Comedy?” 72.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from ‘The Exorcist’ to ‘Seinfeld’* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1999). Hibbs also finds nihilism behind the fascination with “seductive comic evil” in Hollywood films like *Pulp Fiction*. I look at his account of *Seinfeld* as a nihilist text in Chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> C. Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” 67.

above what he regarded as the imposter irony of a culture obsessed with “cheap cynicism.” Where the former “does society a service,” he argued, the latter reduces irony to a trivial form of “self-amusement” and disdains “anybody who actually *cares* about anything [emphasis added].” “Take almost any episode of the much-celebrated *Seinfeld* television show and try to find anything more important than the lineup at a bagel store being discussed,” he complained. Gordon was equally critical, however, of manufactured sincerity in mass culture. Indeed, he suspected that ironic detachment served to stave off a blight of excessively earnest, sappy media: “Our attachment to irony probably began as a retreat from corniness. There is so much phoney emotion around... so much calculated tugging at the heartstrings, so much Celine Dion and Kenny G that it is only natural that there would be a counterreaction, an attempt to keep one’s distance.” Gordon perceived a vast rift between the “I-never-mean-what-I-say smugness of David Letterman and the gooeyness of *Forrest Gump*,” polarizing popular culture into the battle of Seinfeldian “empty cleverness” versus *Cosby*esque sugar-coated sanctimony.<sup>14</sup>

That same year, intellectual idealist Jedediah Purdy, a Yale graduate student, became the leading voice in the backlash against irony with his first book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, entreating Americans to rise above world-weariness and reinvest in sincerity. His definition of irony was widely consulted and warrants quoting at length.

This book is a response to an ironic time. Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naivete—of naive devotion, belief, or hope. He subtly protests the inadequacy of the things he says, the gestures he makes, the acts he performs. By the inflection of his voice, the expression of his face, and the motion of his body, he signals that he is aware of all the ways he may be thought silly or jejune, and that he might even think so himself. His wariness becomes a mistrust of language itself. He disowns his own words.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), xi.

Purdy's portrait of the ironist is a rebuke, but not lacking in empathy when acknowledging the interior life of discontent he ascribes to this irony's practitioners. His characterization of the ironist as cowardly yet discerning—not only a culprit in but also a casualty of the decline of civility—was among the more generous definitions in circulation:

There is something fearful in this irony. It is a fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open us to these. However, there is also something perceptive about irony, and sometimes we must wonder whether the ironist is right. The ironist expresses a perception that the world has grown old, flat, sterile, and that we are rightly weary of it. There is nothing to delight, move, inspire, or horrify us. Nothing will ever surprise us. Everything we encounter is a remake, a rerelease, a ripoff, or a rerun. We know it all before we see it, because we have seen it all already.

... Around us, commercials mock the very idea of being commercials, situation comedies make *being* a sitcom their running joke, and image consultants detail the techniques of designing and marketing a personality as a product.<sup>16</sup>

Here, irony is rendered as a cross between an “exquisitely self-aware” postmodern sensibility—that which brought pastiche in art and architecture—and a self-fulfilling fatalism that stunts creativity and forecloses any possibility of hope, honesty, and authentic feeling as the basis for civic engagement.<sup>17</sup>

The “anti-irony movement” built on critiques like Purdy's targeted both a television phenomenon and a broader cultural orientation.<sup>18</sup> Consumers and audiences, along with media makers, were deemed the ironists, enacting this sensibility. Purdy wrote, “Irony is not just something we watch; it is something we do.”<sup>19</sup> Americans were in the thrall of “indifference,” he argued, because “[t]he ironic sensibility inhibits the act of remembering how to value what

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xi–xii; emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup> Stein, “In Defense of Irony,” 42, among others, adopts this phrase “anti-irony movement.”

<sup>19</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, 11.



you value.”<sup>20</sup> A “detached” and at times disingenuous mode of discourse finding favor with Generations X and Y, and a sizeable subset of their parents, was blamed for spawning a culture of snide, disrespectful cynics and reducing popular culture to a postmodern “cultural echo chamber.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Custody Disputes: Whose Irony Is It, Anyway?**

#### *Irony and Generational Identity*

The arrival of irony, whether seen as a sudden onset or gradual unfolding, has been explained through different historical lenses. One impulse among media critics and cultural historians is to pin irony onto a particular generational identity. Here we find some disagreement about *to whom* this irony as a generational “sensibility” or “structure of feeling”<sup>22</sup> rightfully belongs. Typically, ironic detachment—and irony as *ennui*—is said to define Generation X, as exemplified in such independent films as comedian Ben Stiller’s directorial debut *Reality Bites* (1994) and other cult favorites examined collectively by media scholar Jeffrey Sconce.<sup>23</sup> The irony attributed to this class and taste fragment fanned out across a broad spectrum of cultural forms, not limited to the emergent indie cinema surveyed by Sconce, who notes the popular perception that Generation X grew increasingly “bitter” and diffident during the 1990s:

Distrustful of the hippy past, dismayed by the yuppie present and disillusioned with a bumpy future, so the narrative goes, a bitter Gen-X retreated into

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<sup>20</sup> Purdy quoted in an interview by Marshall Sella, “Against Irony,” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 1999, <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/19990905mag-sincere-culture.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, 12, quoted by Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?” and others. Purdy identifies irony a set of psychological and emotional responses more than a set of cultural texts and practices, and he locates these responses not as a generational identity *per se* but culture-wide.

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism, and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” *Screen* 43, no. 4 (winter 2002): 349–69. *Reality Bites*, a bittersweet homage to Generation X angst and aimlessness written by Helen Childress, depicts obstacles to love and personal fulfillment among a clique of jaded twentysomethings. The film interrogates yet romanticizes the cynical detachment and nihilism that shapes the world of the ironic hipster. Other independent films of the period that dramatized the social dynamics of Gen-X slacker and grunge culture include *Slacker* (1991) and *Singles* (1992).

ironic disengagement as a means of non-participatory coexistence with boomers and their domination of the cultural and political landscape.<sup>24</sup>

This account sets up a friction between the “lazy, apolitical, cynical, sarcastic” Generation X and conscientious, earnest baby boomers enjoying greater economic and cultural power.

Although he uses the category “Gen-Xer irony” to group together such films as *Slacker* (1991), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), and *Election* (1999), Sconce exposes the limits of this generation-gap narrative and is careful to point out that Gen-X is itself a historical construct, “a demographic category as unstable as the trope of irony itself.”<sup>25</sup>

Historians reaching further back to explain irony as a generational phenomenon often identify it as a baby boomer antiestablishment art form in decline. This argument is laid out meticulously in *Spy*’s piece on the “Irony Epidemic” and holds up the satire and camp of the sixties counterculture as a yardstick for rapping the knuckles of naughty eighties ironists who, instead of iconoclasm, amused themselves with superficial identities and indulged a pseudo-nostalgic soft spot for commercial “crap” of the past. *Spy*’s Rudnick and Andersen told this story of the Irony Epidemic as a boomer-driven phenomenon: “Instead of war and economic cataclysm, their coming-of-age rituals consisted of signing petitions and taking drugs; more than any previous generation, they have the luxury of making fun, of always grinning and scoffing, of being ironic.” As the youth rebellion of the 1960s began to shed its “deadly earnest” outlook, “an irony industry sprang up to fill the void,” they argued, as *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live* became the new voices of the generation, and the boomers’ “perpetual frown had become a perpetual smirk.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism, and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” 355.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, “Irony Epidemic,” 95.

In this history the “bad” irony stretching from the 1980s into the 1990s is a byproduct of the baby boomer generation’s formerly “savage” wit collapsing under the weight of its own yuppie ideologies of comfort and complacency. The resulting “irony-stricken yuppie,” by turning the “fashionably unfashionable” and kitsch into a national fetish, is accused of diluting and debasing irony’s subversive power.<sup>27</sup> Gordon’s *Maclean’s* essay a decade later was largely a reprisal and extension of this critique, declaring that the irony of the *Seinfeld* generation “attacks bad taste by seeming to celebrate it. It mocks devotion to important causes by feigning devotion to trivial causes. It ridicules politics and lauds garage sales.”<sup>28</sup> Author David Foster Wallace, a late boomer, in 1993 more probingly critiqued irony as “the hip, upscale, baby-boomer *imago populi*,” lamenting that a “numb blank bored demeanor... that has become my generation’s version of cool is all about TV.”<sup>29</sup> “Indifference” had become, he argued, a habit “for U.S. young people” weaned on television: “[I]n 1990, flatness, numbness, and cynicism in one’s demeanor are clear ways to transmit the televisual attitude of stand-out transcendence—flatness is transcendence of melodrama, numbness transcends sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naive about something at maybe like age four.”<sup>30</sup>

The demographic category of the yuppie hipster blurred the lines between boomer and Gen-Xer ironists and at times represented an uneasy fusion of generational ideologies and supposedly distinct class and taste fragments. Boomer participation in the irony trend that launched the *Seinfeld* era is attributed to social liberals losing touch with their countercultural conscience—a critique that crept into a few TV and movie narratives of the period—and turning

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<sup>27</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, *ibid.*, 95. The authors decry the new irony as “Camp Lite.”

<sup>28</sup> C. Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” 67.

<sup>29</sup> David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (summer 1993): 151–94. I discuss Wallace’s influential argument in detail in the Interlude chapter.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

to irony to (as Rudnick and Andersen asserted) “fill the void.” In one respect, irony served as a readymade vehicle for dispelling liberal guilt and nagging discomfort with the seductive nostalgic rhetoric of the Reagan era. At the same time, I argue in the first three chapters of this study, subversive irony was widely used as a weapon to beat into submission not only the earnestness, melodrama, and sentimentality of comedies like *The Cosby Show* and *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–93) that soberly modeled traditional “family values” or that dabbled in liberal-friendly “socially conscious” themes, but increasingly also to rebel against “political correctness” as a manifestation of boomer liberalism and in many instances mock earnest progressive ideals of social movements like feminism and multiculturalism.

In the comedy business, irony during the 1990s became closely associated and often intertwined with the trendy term “political incorrectness,” celebrated as a way of using ambiguity to circumvent, and offensiveness to flagrantly defy, the kinds of socially sensitive speech and counter-stereotyping demanded by progressives. As Jeffrey P. Jones explains in *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*,

“Political correctness” became the term used by conservatives and moderates alike to derisively chide efforts by liberals and progressives to alter what were seen as harmful, stereotypical, or ideologically loaded practices in society. Political correctness mandated certain behaviors, critics claimed, and resistance to such efforts in a strongly individualistic American society appeared with great frequency in public life....<sup>31</sup>

American comedians and television writers in pursuit of edginess broadly embraced a reputation as politically incorrect ironists. With the rapid spread of the logics of political incorrectness across media and civic culture, the specific cultural politics, ideological stakes, and political allegiances, if any, of much ironic humor were often, by design, conspicuously difficult to “pin down.”

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<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 42.

Seizing on the cultural ambivalence around political correctness, readily articulated to the progressive social agendas of liberal feminism and multiculturalism, U.S. television comedy's swift retreat from earnestness was repeatedly framed in this language of politically incorrect humor, a label that quickly came to signify bold and uncensored, as opposed to safe or sentimental, humor. While social critics worried that this "edgy" irony would erode family values and civility, the entertainment industry welcomed it as a way to woo not only youth but also both affluent and blue-collar adults who were increasingly finding the enforced politeness of "political correctness" off-putting. Despite the noted feminist potential of certain leading programs modeling the new irony and "un-PC" humor like *Roseanne*, the tendency to conflate politically incorrect humor with irony worked to establish a sense of irony elsewhere as a reaction against supposedly sanctimonious social liberals and humorless feminists, as much or more than it was a backlash against heartland values or the "family viewing" ethos that dominated prime-time sitcom.

Some tension exists between the potentially conflicting generational claims on irony, and much dispute about the benefits or dangers of becoming a "culture of irony" is preoccupied with the underlying question of whose interests the irony serves. While there are noteworthy examples of cultural analyses tackling this question directly, such as Sconce's examination of the "smart" film and *Spy*'s account of boomer irony gone wrong, the assumed politics and beneficiaries are more typically left unspoken. In the cultural discourse on irony, whether it is being assessed as a social movement with aesthetic ambitions or just a cultural bad habit or even a large-scale collapse of hope and caring as suggested by Purdy, certain questions are not posed with much consistency or curiosity—among them, *whose* irony is subject to scrutiny and why? What drives the discourse, rather, are generalizing claims about the authentic 'nature' and

enervating effects of contemporary irony. Such claims are often embedded with assumptions about the group or groups held responsible for the ascendance of said irony. Mobilizing these and other guiding assumptions, critics who seek to psychologize, pathologize, or otherwise shed light on the deeper significance of a national or transnational obsession with ironic codes and modes of discourse rarely reach consensus about so-called detached irony's function either as a philosophical predisposition or a coping strategy or "condition" of (post)modern experience.

*"Risking Disaster": Problems of Meaning and Questions of Community*

All U.S. irony is based on an implicit  
 "I don't really mean what I say." So what  
 does irony as a cultural norm mean to say?

— David Foster Wallace, 1993<sup>32</sup>

Social historians, philosophers, and literary critics are quick to point out that an irony movement did not spring fully formed from the collective unconscious of the Reagan era. Irony had been brewing in the cultural cauldron since at least the Victorian era, historians assure us. Just as successive generations make their own claims on irony, modernist and postmodernist traditions continue to fight for custody over irony and the right to determine its cultural meanings and accepted uses. For many the term irony in recent decades has become synonymous with the postmodernist movement in pop art, architecture, camp, and other cultural forms where artist-iconoclasts comment upon the collapse of meaning and absence of novelty in the present by promiscuously "quoting" images and icons from the past.<sup>33</sup> Self-fashioned critics of the postmodern age like Purdy and many of his peers take this position when contemplating the arts as a "cultural echo chamber."

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<sup>32</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 185; emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> See Rudnick and Andersen, "Irony Epidemic," 95.

Philosopher Richard Rorty's influential work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) touts irony as a structuring logic of postmodern life, defining the ironist as one who has "radical and continuing doubts" about all discourse including one's own and whose language thus does not "attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply [plays] the new off against the old." These ironists "are never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."<sup>34</sup>

The philosophical "ironism" exemplified in the works of influential thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault is an inward disposition that, Rorty argues, deepens an individual's experience of the contingency of truth and knowledge, yet has tended in practice to undermine the political goals of liberalism, or rather, has failed to provide the necessary foundations for "liberal hope." According to Rorty, this "private irony" has become an essential personal tool in "our increasingly ironist culture," but can and must be held in balance with our best models for liberal hope and compassionate community.<sup>35</sup> Seeking to bridge that gap, this experiential model of irony promoted by Rorty points toward solidarity rather than solipsism and encourages an engaged civic life rather than a shrugging nihilism. In contrast to the fearful projections about becoming a culture of insincere and indifferent smirkers whose refusal to "take things seriously" is a deflection from meaningful engagement, Rorty's vision revises and legitimizes the identity of the ironist as an individual who recognizes the "contingency and fragility" of all terms, roles, and structures and, by virtue of this recognition, is radically and constitutionally *open* to new possibilities.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," chap. 4 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73–74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Textualist traditions in literary and media studies seek to understand the ways irony as a rhetorical/aesthetic device, likewise, renders meaning contingent and open. Television studies, which has been less concerned with social and psychological portraits of the ironist than with illuminating irony as a feature and function of media programs and the reception of those programs by audiences, greets this openness with varying degrees of caution. Theorist John Fiske, taking an expressly populist view, champions irony as a device that, similar to metaphor, jokes, and contradiction, works to limit “ideological closure” and ensure the polysemy or “openness” of television texts to interpretation; thus, he reasons, irony may resist the work of hegemony in mass culture by carving out spaces for alternative, resistant readings. Fiske argues that, while narrative and generic conventions at work in television may limit the available meanings, other textual forces at *play* in some programs keep meaning flexible. With irony, competing discourses “collide” to create “an explosion of meaning that can never be totally controlled by the text,” he stresses, and the resulting “contradictions are always left reverberating enough for subcultures to negotiate their own inflections of meaning.”<sup>36</sup> Literary theorist Wayne C. Booth likewise draws a comparison to metaphor when noting that irony “will not stay graciously in an assigned position” and sometimes pursues fluidity of meaning for its own sake.<sup>37</sup> Fiske’s view sees irony’s playful excess in television and other mass media forms as helping to foster a “semiotic democracy” by allowing for active audience engagement.<sup>38</sup>

The multiplying and destabilizing of meaning potentially enhances pleasure for audiences enjoying the interpretive agency that textual irony affords, yet may disturb those

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<sup>36</sup> John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1987; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 85–87 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>37</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 138.

<sup>38</sup> The exact quote from Fiske (1987/1995): “Television’s playfulness is a sign of its semiotic democracy, by which I mean its delegation of meanings and pleasures to its viewers” (p. 236).



readers who desire singular, fixed meanings, a group that includes many media critics expecting irony at its best to function as incisive social critique. Cultural and literary critics, hailing the legacy of satirical wordsmiths such as Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, celebrate irony foremost as a subversive rhetorical tactic. Yet, as contemporary scholars such as Linda Hutcheon argue, irony and edgy humor have no intrinsic politics, no essential iconoclasm that precedes the individual utterance.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, art critic Helene Shugart warns, ironic works that do set out to make a specific “subversive” statement, challenging norms or values of capitalist patriarchy for example, may simultaneously support readings that reinforce the dominant hegemonic ideologies being opened to ridicule.<sup>40</sup>

Postmodern uses of irony, as I will explore in greater depth in a theory Interlude that follows Chapter 1, frustrate structuralist media criticism’s familiar tools for isolating “preferred” readings, and limit our ability to assess the extent to which a given cultural text can be said to uphold or subvert dominant ideology.<sup>41</sup> Shugart, drawing on Booth, distinguishes postmodern irony’s flexibility of meaning from that of “traditional” irony as a matter of degree:

Booth (1974) argues that... irony “risks disaster more aggressively than any other device”... because of the possibility that the audience won’t “get it.” These extremes may be even more true of postmodern, subversive irony than of traditional irony. The multiple, complex, and inconsistent messages postmodern, subversive irony advances can be confusing, thereby prompting an audience to dismiss the artifact as incoherent.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Helene A. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (fall 1999): 433–55, especially 451.

<sup>41</sup> British scholar Stuart Hall’s assessment that mass media texts hold “preferred” meanings, which individual audience members or groups may accept, resist, or negotiate with, is a widely accepted premise in ideological analysis of TV programs. See Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1972–1979)*, ed. Stuart Hall, et al. (London: Hutchinson/CCCS, 1980), 128–38.

<sup>42</sup> Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 435–36; for the internal citation, see Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 41.

This unrulier irony obscures intentionality and, Shugart stresses, “invites multiple readings on multiple levels, thereby *creating multiple audiences* [emphasis added].” Thus, she concludes that its “subversive potential” must continually “compete with significant hegemonic potential.” Flirting with incoherence, postmodern works that deploy “irony as a subversive strategy” carry no guarantee that viewers will look through that rhetorical lens and recognize an implicit political argument to arrive at the preferred reading. A counter-hegemonic statement framed by irony “inadvertently may reify the very ideological tenets that it seeks to subvert,” advancing hegemonic interests and pleasures for some audiences.<sup>43</sup>

Television studies during the 1990s and 2000s raised these same concerns about negotiated audience readings of programs that may employ irony as a comedic strategy to interrogate persistent stereotypes, prejudices, or forms of hypocrisy and privilege propagated in media and society. Scholars studying unintended or reactionary readings of ironic ambiguity and satire in comedy series including *In Living Color* (FOX, 1990–94), *Chappelle’s Show* (Comedy Central, 2003–06), and *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2005–present), among others, support Shugart’s conclusion that “although postmodern irony functions subversively for select audiences, it may well function hegemonically for others.”<sup>44</sup> Such caveats call our attention to the shadow side of the Fiskean “semiotic democracy” thesis. While American network television has grown reliant on irony’s ability to generate multiple audiences, many scholars have observed

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 433, 451, 454.

<sup>44</sup> Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 434. Notable case studies (some discussed in upcoming chapters) of unintended interpretations—i.e., that fall outside the scope of stated or presumed authorial expectations—include Norma Miriam Schulman, “Laughing Across the Color Barrier: *In Living Color*,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 20, no. 1 (spring 1992): 2–7; Bambi Haggins, “In the Wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie’: Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy,” in *Satire TV* (2009), 233–51; Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, “The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 2 (April 2009): 212–31; and Lisa Glebatis Perks, “Three Satiric Television Decoding Positions,” *Communication Studies* 63, no. 3 (July/August 2012): 290–308.

the steady rise of postmodern television irony with deep ambivalence and, increasingly, have sought to reclaim irony's "traditional" subversive rhetorical potential.

In work seeking to make sense of multiplicity of meanings and manage "incoherence," irony defies purely textual analysis and demands attention to the bonds established with and among the social audience. Part of irony's core appeal, according to rhetorical theory, is the way it "cultivates an audience's cohesion" with the author/speaker, and Shugart maintains this bond "is likely to be granted and enhanced" by postmodern, subversive irony.<sup>45</sup> The principle audience for this irony and its pleasures of subversiveness, furthermore, functions as a kind of "imagined community," with a sense of shared recognition and appreciation of ironic codes.<sup>46</sup> This may be especially true of the "'hip' postmodern audience" skilled in navigating "multiple and contradictory messages" to grasp an esoteric preferred reading, Shugart contends, while also accommodating audience members who are not necessarily "postmodern" in orientation yet do detect and respond on some level to the presence of irony: "By recognizing the artifact as ironic and subversive, the audience gains access to an elite community created by the irony." In this regard, she asserts, and numerous scholars of media likewise insist, that postmodern irony "may function less as a subversion than as affirmation of the audience's postmodern literacy."<sup>47</sup>

From this perspective, the proliferation of ironic texts in the contemporary mediascape, flourishing in an era of audience fragmentation, cultivates interpretive communities of media

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<sup>45</sup> Shugart, "Postmodern Irony," 452–53.

<sup>46</sup> "Imagined community" is Benedict Anderson's term from his seminal work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Here, I extend Anderson's theorization of the functions of a vernacular as effecting a national community, to posit the potential for codes of irony to facilitate a sense of insiderdom—with shared ironic sensibilities functioning to connect individuals who may have little else in common and in this case may even be separated by national identity.

<sup>47</sup> Shugart, "Postmodern Irony," 452, 453.

consumers boasting a shared postmodern outlook.<sup>48</sup> American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff in a 2004 essay pondered the self-reflexivity of *The Simpsons* as one such ritualized exercise in postmodern media literacy, arguing that the irreverent ten-year-old cartoon character Bart Simpson “embodies youth culture’s ironic distance from media” and that his alienation served as an early and ongoing “lesson in Gen X strategy.” Rushkoff elaborates:

... [T]he pleasure of watching *The Simpsons* for its media-literate (read: younger) viewers is the joy of pattern recognition. The show provides a succession of “aha” moments—those moments when we recognize which other forms of media are being parodied. We are rewarded with self-congratulatory laughter whenever we make a connection between the scene we are watching and the movie, commercial, or program on which it is based.<sup>49</sup>

As Gates had asserted in *Newsweek*, irony becomes a way of “winking at the cognoscenti,”<sup>50</sup> of flattering those audience members who are sufficiently well-versed in pop culture to “get” it and pick out the pieces of its pastiche puzzle.

Critics and defenders of irony as a popular phenomenon readily acknowledge its promise of in-group distinction but debate the value of this cohesive capacity, particularly for youth culture. As *Spy*’s Rudnick and Andersen explained, “Art in the age of air quotes requires a fellow smirker, someone else smart enough to get it.”<sup>51</sup> Purdy observed:

MTV presented *Beavis and Butt-head*, a cartoon whose eponymous antiheroes spend their time watching MTV—and subtly mocking its melodramatic... videos. Now, from comedies to commercials, viewers are invited to join TV programmers in celebrating just how much more clever they are than TV programmers.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For theoretical discussion of “interpretive communities,” see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>49</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, “Bart Simpson: Prince of Irreverence,” in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, ed. John Alberti (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 294, 296, 297.

<sup>50</sup> Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?”

<sup>51</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, “Irony Epidemic,” 98. Instead of television programs, the authors use the hypothetical social example of postgraduate “boys” taking an ostensibly ironic pleasure from visiting a strip club.

<sup>52</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, 11.

Conservative columnist David Klinghoffer drew a similar conclusion in a review of Comedy Central's cartoon *South Park* (1997–present) for *National Review* in 1998, complaining, “The appeal of irony is simple. By chuckling at it you remind yourself what a jaded, cynical—i.e., cool—person you are, how high you fly above the dowdy heads of those old folks and other squares who find irony mystifying or offensive.... its payoff is to set you above conventionality in general.”<sup>53</sup> Kathy M. Newman, contributing to the anthology *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, supplied a more generous view when suggesting that irony, as depicted in *Reality Bites* and MTV's Gen X-targeted animated series *Daria* (1997–2002), a spin-off of *Beavis and Butt-Head* that seemingly celebrates alienation from adult and mainstream values, was ultimately “about community” for its viewers (as opposed to antisocial self-indulgence); her analysis sees irony providing a foundation for friendship between characters in these texts and bringing together like-minded fans.<sup>54</sup>

Sconce in his critique of the indie “smart” film narrows in on the ability of irony to cultivate a sense of shared alienation that cannot be accounted for as purely a function of texts or cultural genres:

Mobilizing irony as a tactic of disaffection, a certain social formation (defined perhaps more by bohemian aspirations than generational boundaries) created a culture of *semiotic exile* during the 1990s, reading “against the grain” of so-called mainstream culture while cultivating a “new voice” of cynical detachment [emphasis added].<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> David Klinghoffer, “Dirty Joke,” *National Review* 50, no. 4 (March 9, 1998): 48, 51. See also Marco Calavita, “Idealization, Inspiration, Irony: Popular Communication Tastes and Practices in the Individual Political Development of Generation X'ers,” *Popular Communication* 2, no. 3 (September 2004): 129–51, who describes Gen-X popular media broadly in terms of “a disinclination for earnestness, commitment, and conventional or collective politics, and above all a celebration of ‘postmodern savviness’ and ‘knowingness’... the understanding that you and your cool friends get the reference, and the joke, while those ingenuous fools over there do not” (143).

<sup>54</sup> Kathy M. Newman, “‘Misery Chick’: Irony, Alienation and Animation in MTV's *Daria*,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, ed. Carole A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2003), 187.

<sup>55</sup> Sconce, “New American ‘Smart’ Film,” 356–57.

Here, irony is not “in” or “of” these mainstream texts but rather something that is done to them, a subversive preference for “reading against the grain” of dominant opinion, values, and tastes. This subcultural tactic animates the stereotype of the sneering postmodern consumer who “ironically” watches sensationalistic spectacles like daytime talk shows or professional wrestling, scoffs at any program delivering an end-of-episode moral, and flashes cynicism as a badge of coolness. Postmodern irony’s invitation to a free-wheeling subversiveness, whether signaling “semiotic democracy” or “semiotic exile,” stretches our attention beyond texts into theories of audience activity. Thus, studies of textual irony dissolve back into conjecture about the social character and inner life of the “ironist”—audience member as well as author/auteur—and the who, how, and why of ironic reading strategies as a loose cultural movement.

Shugart is not alone in drawing sharp distinctions between postmodern polyvalence and the less unruly irony of an earlier era. Rather, questions of ‘authentic’ versus ‘messy’ meaning and traditional versus postmodern strategy remain the essential fault lines in definitional disputes over irony. Literary scholar Lance Olsen asserts that irony under modernism was designed to carry an identifiable message, whereas postmodern humor is in this regard post-ironic. Olsen insists that aggressively polyvalent humor should not be called irony. His *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (1990) explains postmodern “humor,” his term to distinguish from “irony,” as a radical refusal to allow for a singular preferred meaning:

Humor... is a state of mind that believes primarily in surface, in no positive content. In other words, there is *no “truth” to humor, rather, an incessant questioning that yields no ultimate answer....* The modern text is primarily ironic, for it believes that its intent is to communicate a message (although it chooses to do so in a less “sincere” or direct way than a premodern nonironic text). The postmodern text is primarily humorous; it believes its intent is inconclusive, polyvalent, and unreadable through an ironic optic because *there is no meaning tucked under its surface*. The humorous, which needn’t necessarily be funny,

delights in discontinuity; the ironic, which needn't necessarily be sad, mourns it.  
[emphases added]<sup>56</sup>

Olsen goes on to suggest practical limits to the postmodern playground and refute the commonly heard claim that “postmodernity democratized art, opened it to everyone, and hence has turned its back on the ‘cryptofascistic’ elitism of modernity.” He speculates, on the contrary, that postmodernity’s literary minds although enthralled with mass culture have “simply replaced one sort of elitism with another.”<sup>57</sup> Olsen describes the postmodernist comic vision as “antisystem” and therefore potentially alienating and inaccessible to many cultural readers. While his focus is literature and fine art, this finds clear parallels in postmodern TV comedy. In order to “get it” and be “in on” the joke of the postmodern, subversive irony (in Shugart’s terms) or postmodern humor (in Olsen’s) of comedies like *The Simpsons*, *Married... With Children*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *The Man Show* (Comedy Central, 1999–2004), *Family Guy* (FOX, 1999–present), *Strangers with Candy* (Comedy Central, 1999–2000), *My Name Is Earl* (NBC, 2005–09), *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* (Cartoon Network, 1994–2004), or *South Park*, the viewer must occupy certain social positions and possess the cultural competencies to crack the codes of coolness.

While several perspectives outlined in the preceding pages stress the elitism of postmodern reading strategies, a potential paradox arises in that many of the television texts most commonly identified as postmodern irony or humor deliberately operate in the populist register of “vulgar” comic genres, evoking the commonality of carnival. On the one hand, irony and postmodern reflexivity as “group sport” depend upon granting the audience member a sense of exclusive access to an oppositional attitude, such that layered, oblique, or intertextual humor

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<sup>56</sup> Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 30. In the theory Interlude chapter, I discuss such distinctions in greater depth and outline key theoretical frameworks that inform claims like Olsen’s and Shugart’s.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

in programs like those I have just named may indeed strive to affirm a (shared yet proprietary) sense of subversive play as distinctive. At the same time, the ambivalence ascribed to postmodern comedy and self-subverting television invites parallels to the communal comic revelry of the carnival as theorized by the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's richly textured account of the carnival in medieval Europe as a space and time set aside for popular rebellion and the joyful suspension of social hierarchy has made him one of the most popular, influential, and provocative figures in cultural and humor theory of recent decades. Widely adapted to present day mass media, Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque reshaped the terrain of television comedy studies during precisely the period when this ostentatiously polyvalent irony was being declared an American epidemic and commercial television began to incorporate a "self-mocking" and ostensibly "antisystem" comic vision. The Bakhtinian view, championed by scholars such as Fiske, is keenly interested in the power of the people to throw off, if only temporarily, the oppressive constraints of the social order and official culture, and powerfully informs the case for postmodernism as a movement democratizing media and art.

Bakhtin defines "carnival laughter" as a vital, life-affirming force that convulses and sustains the social body, defying the distinction between humor's derisive and cohesive functions:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in its scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.<sup>58</sup>

This concept of festive mockery and laughter as resistance or respite from social power struggles is frequently extended to television, with caveats, by scholars of late twentieth century culture.

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<sup>58</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Introduction" to *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11–12.



As Fiske stresses, “The carnivalesque always skates on thin ice. Emancipation is not an essence but a potential that is realized by some social formations in some conditions, but not by others.” Therefore, “It is more important to assess the uses people make of the carnivalesque and the social circulation of its pleasures and attempts to control them than to evaluate it *per se*.”<sup>59</sup>

The vitality of carnival as a social ‘event’ finds its corollary in mass-mediated culture in the abundance of transgressive comedy that delights in crude body humor, as well as a vast array of texts celebrating visceral and interactive spectacle. Beyond expressly comedic genres, prominent examples like *Jerry Springer* and World Wrestling Entertainment’s programs, featuring unruly and excessive bodies and behaviors, manage to project a strong aura of self-aware irony, while simultaneously accommodating the practice of watching such spectacle *ironically* from a critical distance as so much cultural garbage (per Gordon’s claim, above, that the 1990s ironist “attacks bad taste by seeming to celebrate it”).<sup>60</sup> A Fiskean reading of such texts as sites of bottom-up resistance to regimes of discipline and social control, as I will discuss later in this work, calls attention to the class bias implicit in the critical impulse to demonize irony when attached to “trash” television yet celebrate “sophisticated” self-reflexivity and intertextual irony as splendid in programming aimed at upscale demographics. Elitist evaluatory discourse often deigns to segregate “quality” from “low” comedy—praising the clever while tolerating the crude. Yet, in comedy programming, wherever television enters the realm of the carnivalesque, the cerebral and the vulgar are destined to commingle.

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<sup>59</sup> John Fiske, “Family Discipline: A TV Text and an Audience,” *Journal of Communication & Culture* no. 1 (1993): 12.

<sup>60</sup> For discussion of male-oriented, reflexive irony and excess in the World Wrestling Federation’s (WWF) entertainment, see Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell, “Trading in Masculinity: Muscles, Money, and Market Discourse in the WWF,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 260–94. They discern: “The programs indulged in masculine excesses and lewdness while expressing skepticism of or hostility against anything perceived as politically correct” and “inoculated themselves against criticism by using irony and play to justify their excesses” (p. 261).

“Something Completely Different”: Irony and National Identity

[T]his is a phenomenon that is un-American.

— *The Times* of London, 1989<sup>61</sup>

Good friends should never discuss politics, religion,  
and British humor. Wars have begun over Benny Hill.

— *Comedy Central: The Essential  
Guide to Comedy*, 1997<sup>62</sup>

The split in meanings of irony has also been explained in terms of national distinctions in “sense of humor,” with great emphasis placed on British comedy as the birthplace of comedic irony. The declaration that the American public lacks an appetite or aptitude for irony was recycled every few years during the 1980s and 1990s in the international press. According to critics abroad, irony proved either too dark and irreverent or too subtle and talky for the American public reared on happy endings, heartland humor, and the domestic sitcom’s “familiar mom-pop-and-kiddie routines.”<sup>63</sup> As recently as the mid 1990s, it was still a common perception overseas that the American culture industry was too enamored with earnestness to commit to irony. For example, *The Independent* (London) in 1995 proclaimed irony to be the “sacred duty” of the British, and a few independent filmmakers in the U.S. managing to break free of the crushingly earnest idealism—or “Gumpification”—of Hollywood:

... [I]t is only in the presence of irony that idealism can properly be considered, so that an unironical film like *Forrest Gump* ends up unwinkingly offering

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Bremner, “Caught in the Grip of the Smirk,” *Times* (London), June 10 1989, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Claro and Julie Klam, “Monty Python,” in *Comedy Central: The Essential Guide to Comedy—Because There’s a Fine Line Between Stupid and Clever* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1997), 108, on the topic of Monty Python and “Transatlantic Humor Prejudice.”

<sup>63</sup> Phrase from Shirley Knott (*nom de plume*), “Perspective Comedy: What’s Funny to One is Groaningly Dull to Someone Else. Britain, the United States and Canada Have Their Styles, and Surprise, We’re Not That Dull After All,” *Globe and Mail* (Canada), January 25, 1992, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

America a national identity of benign idiocy. When huge audiences in a superpower really want to be told that they may be dumb but they mean well—and dumb is the true smart anyways—then we'd better hope the film-makers are laughing behind their hands. And if they aren't, that sacred duty falls to us.<sup>64</sup>

British critics are especially fond of saying that the American sense of humor is not built for irony, claiming it as a hallmark of British wit. The first rumblings of America's mainstream "ironic" turn caused journalists' brows to arch in both Great Britain and Canada.

Charles Bremner in *The Times* (London) in June 1989, responding to *Spy*'s account of the "Irony Epidemic," averred:

[I]t can be found in everyone from George Bush, to the television advertisers, to the drug dealers of the Bronx. ... As *Spy* magazine, a suddenly successful New York equivalent of [British satirical news magazine] *Private Eye*, diagnoses it, the new sensibility is a product of American affluence: "Irony has always been a luxury item, but now, like foreign travel and original art, it is a luxury that millions of people can afford."

America is in the grip of the smirk, a relentless need to mock. From Manhattan dinner parties to the groves of Midwestern academe, they are dissecting this strange Zeitgeist of the late 1980s, usually tracing its origin to a moral drift, a pervading sense of cynicism or the "post-modernist" sensibility. As any Briton can observe, this is a phenomenon that is un-American.

Bremner reasoned that "Europeans generally do a better job" with ironic ambivalence, citing the "zany English humour" of Monty Python as superior wit.<sup>65</sup> Fellow London *Times* correspondent Carol Sarler, reporting from the Montreal Comedy Festival that same year, was less comfortable sharing the custodianship of irony with the rest of Europe, claiming, again while invoking Monty Python, "There is a unique irony in British humour that the French do not understand."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, "Irony Enters the Soul; As Hollywood Gets Dumber, Adam Mars-Jones Escapes to *Barcelona* and the Pleasures of the New American Cinema," *Independent* (London), January 26, 1995, 25, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Bremner, "Caught in the Grip of the Smirk."

<sup>66</sup> Carol Sarler, "Still Joking Apart; Montreal Comedy Festival," *Times* (London), August 5, 1989, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008). For a scholarly perspective on French fascination with physical humor, see Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Like the French, reputedly fans of physical not verbal humor, Americans as a national audience are presumed to prefer visual violence over intellectual irony and slapstick over satire. “Memo from Mel Brooks to John Cleese: Cut the words, mister, and add the sound of gunfire or smashing plates,” wrote Quentin Letts in *The Times* in January 1996, insisting that in the U.S. “the scope for subtle in-jokes is smaller than in Britain.” Letts looked favorably on irony gaining a toehold on U.S. primetime television. “In recent years there has been some appreciation of irony, thanks to the lip-curlingly sarcastic wit of *Roseanne* and *Frasier* on television,” he conceded, “but Americans still grunt happily at stereotypes and toe stubbing.”<sup>67</sup>

These perspectives, asserting irony as a sophisticated skill and sensibility largely eluding American media makers and audiences, served to set irony against the hegemonic trend of the ‘Americanization’ of global culture. To the extent that American tastes and temperaments were characterized as obtusely un-ironic, in other words, in these journalistic circles irony could be claimed as a means to *resist* the Goliath (or Gump) of American cultural imperialism. This construction of irony as noble and necessary held the intellectual irony being branded as uniquely British (“the unflagging energy of the Britcoms”<sup>68</sup>) far apart and out of reach of the new American “smirking” irony (the “extremes of cynicism and disingenuousness that are now the rule in Hollywood”<sup>69</sup>).

The Canadian press, too, scrambled to reassert their national reputation for superior irony and satire to avoid any confusion with the new American irony. Canada’s *Globe and Mail* in 1992 ranked Canuck comedy as second only to the “fearless irreverence of the Brits” and

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<sup>67</sup> Quentin Letts, “So Just What Does Make the Americans Laugh?” *Times* (London), January 25, 1996, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Knott, “Perspective Comedy.”

<sup>69</sup> Mars-Jones, “Irony Enters the Soul,” 25.

complained that “satire and irony have been virtually banished” since the 1970s on network TV in the U.S. where “blander is better.”<sup>70</sup> A piece in *The New York Times* by Toronto-born Rick Marin contended that Canadian ex-patriots’ “sense of irony” makes them the cleverest of American entertainers, and went on to speculate that Canadians have a much more authentic understanding of the British irony found in imports like the BBC sketch series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969–74). He agreed with the assessment of former *New York Times* correspondent Andrew Malcolm who said that “Americans appreciate British humor like Monty Python, but they don’t always *get* it [emphasis added]” (neither the irony nor the satire, insisted Marin), whereas “Canadians get it.”<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, there is little denying that ironic programming on American television has deep roots in the soil of British silliness. British imports heavily influenced America’s own comedy industry and irony movement, providing an alternative model with which to break the mold of “formulaic sitcoms which won’t offend anyone anywhere with anything.”<sup>72</sup> Despite irony’s rapid rise in the 1980s through 1990s, the U.S. broadcast networks, even when directly adapting British sitcom scripts, were slow to take risks with unapologetically grotesque and dark humor, which was more likely to be found on MTV, Comedy Central, or the cable majors alongside provocative British imports.<sup>73</sup> Monty Python’s wide reach and lasting impact served

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<sup>70</sup> Knott, “Perspective Comedy.” For more measured claims documenting a push-and-pull on British TV, as well, between “provocative and challenging” (1960s) vs. “cosy, comforting” (1970s and 1980s) sitcoms, and a supposed steady decline of pointedly satirical U.K. comedy programming by the 1990s, see David Christopher, “Television and Radio,” chap. 6 of *British Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 117–18, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Rick Marin, “The Most Entertaining Americans? Canadians,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1993, sec. 2, 1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>72</sup> Phrase from Knott, “Perspective Comedy.”

<sup>73</sup> British scholar Brett Mills in “Sitcom Behaving Badly: Television Humour in Transatlantic Transplants” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Humor Studies, Oklahoma City, Okla., July 1997) has analyzed 1990s U.S. network remakes of the British sitcoms *Men Behaving Badly* and *One Foot in the Grave* to document specifically how the adaptations significantly scaled back the original series’ signature irony.

not only to define and popularize “zany” British comedy on the world stage, but also powerfully shaped the generational experiences of postmodern humor for both baby boomers and Generation X in the United States. With its toe in the utopian and its mind in the gutter, Monty Python’s imaginatively impertinent and surreal brand of humor was no respecter of borders, social hierarchy, or the generation gap and thumbed its nose at the class divide.

On U.S. television Monty Python’s sketch comedy managed to move fluidly between public television (PBS), where it carried connotations of uplift as the exemplar of “safely splendid” highbrow humor, and cable television, where the MTV generation established comedy as “the new rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>74</sup> Much like the series had set a precedent of silly yet subversive youthful humor for antiestablishment baby boomers (as developed by *Saturday Night Live* during the 1970s), *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* resurfaced as MTV’s flagship comedy in the mid to late 1980s, fronting a youth-targeted comedy block that also included the aggressively anti-elitist and ironically titled *The Young Ones* (BBC1, 1982–84), the darling of Britain’s “alternative comedy” movement. Together, these British shows imported anarchy from the U.K. as the comedic counterpart to the British Invasions of punk and new wave in music. *Flying Circus* and *The Young Ones* each in their own way, with their absurdist elements and Rabelaisian moments, helped to foster a comedy Never-Never Land<sup>75</sup> and acquired a considerable cult following

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<sup>74</sup> “Safely splendid” is Erik Barnouw’s phrase cited in Patricia Aufderheide, “A Funny Thing Is Happening to TV’s Public Forum: PBS Funding Comes with Strings Attached. Could That Be Why the ‘Safely Splendid’ Is Driving Out Bolder Fare?” *Columbia Journalism Review* 30, no. 4 (November/December 1991): 60–63. As comedians rose to rock star status on both sides of the Atlantic, the claim that “comedy became the new rock ‘n’ roll” can be attributed to any number of publications, but I am quoting here from Cosmo Landesman, “Can They Really Be Serious?” *Sunday Times* (London), March 19, 1995, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> MTV’s presentation of Britishness as a “cool” and exotic other came with gestures to diversity and openness and perhaps even a utopian space for transcending the condoned, familiar forms of social distinction that young viewers sought to rebel and define themselves against. In the context of mediated fantasies of parentless high school utopias that dominated teen films like *The Breakfast Club* (1985) in the Reagan–Bush era, the rebroadcast of Monty Python’s sketch comedy at the same cultural moment similarly worked to carve out spaces for youth freed from both their own cliquishness (local systems of distinction) and rational adult supervision.

among the nation's youth, setting the stage for home-grown puerile comedies like *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *South Park*. In the case of both public television and Music Television, British comedy bore “signifiers of superiority”<sup>76</sup> and provided raw materials for social distinction for audiences turning away from the familiar American domestic sitcom formulas.

America's ironists have thus repeatedly reached into the cookie jar of this absurdist and anarchic humor, a tradition in which anyone and everything is a suitable target for satire.<sup>77</sup> The expression “Pythonesque,” describing anything resembling the Pythons' comic-grotesque style, is sometimes used a kind of synonym for both “carnavalesque” and “postmodernist” humor. *Flying Circus* is still held up as the paradigm of postmodern comedy in the U.S. and abroad, and perhaps no television text provides richer examples of the “de(con)structive” impulses that led Olsen to describe postmodern humor as a “circus of the mind”:

[B]oth the comic and the postmodern attempt to subvert all centers of authority—including their own—and ... both ultimately deride univocal visions, toppling bigots, cranks, and pompous idiots as they go.... Both seek through radical incongruity of form and vision to short-circuit the dominant culture's repressive impulses. Hence, both are simultaneously destructive and constructive. ...

When wedded, postmodernism and comic vision become a *mindcircus* with an infinite number of rings all astir, all swirling with wild hoopla, all gorgeous and astonishing. Hierarchies are toppled, and pedants become fools, and fantasy becomes fact, and the sacred becomes wonderfully marvelously profane, and every voice is a dodecaphonic symphony. [emphasis in original]<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 20. For an account of Monty Python's (and *That Was the Week that Was*'s) direct influence on *SNL* creator Lorne Michaels, see p. 162. Miller provides close analysis of “reading formations in which American audiences derived meaning from imported British programs” (xiv) during the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>77</sup> Television comedy in the United States does not have a strong absurdist tradition, although there are notable elements of absurdism in such popular programs as *The Ernie Kovacs Show* (NBC/CBS/DuMont/ABC, 1952–62), *The Muppet Show* (Britain's ITV/U.S. syndication, 1976–81), *Mork & Mindy* (ABC, 1978–82), and *The Simpsons*. For the most part, we must look to the margins to programs like MTV's *The Idiot Box* (1990–91) and *The Andy Dick Show* (2001–02) and Comedy Central's *TV Funhouse* (2000–01) to find the extremes of absurdism and dark irony that are the key ingredients of much British comedy. Many of today's more outrageous American ironists cite British humor as a strong influence on their art, drawing inspiration from the Brits' unrelenting taste for the absurd.

<sup>78</sup> Olsen, *Circus of the Mind*, 31–32.

This passage and its conceptualization of the comic postmodern draws directly upon the “utopian” promise of carnival for Bakhtin which, media theorist Robert Stam reiterates, produces “a special kind of universal laughter, a cosmic gaiety that is directed at everyone, including the carnival’s participants.”<sup>79</sup> Olsen’s neologism “mindcircus” lends an ideal metaphor for the topsy-turvy comic realm created by Monty Python’s madcap series and films, and their many imitators, where cerebral wit and wordplay are conjoined with “low” forms of speech and abuse, narratives are disrupted by disorienting incongruities, and grotesque physicality, rude gestures, and all manner of bodily excess are continually on display.

The absurdism of an already radically polysemic text like *Flying Circus* is amplified when it is transplanted to a different national setting, where the text reaches new heights of postmodern non-sense and British irony acquires new depths of inscrutability as the skits are stripped of their referents. Viewers unfamiliar with the specific social and political targets or media references of the troupe’s frequent topical satire were perhaps more impressed by the sheer fact/fantasy of English eccentricity. For example, the “Ministry of Silly Walks” sketch when removed from its immediate political context becomes all about the silliness of the walks rather than ludicrous contortions of bureaucracy in British life. The skit may strike a vaguely familiar chord with American anti-bureaucratic sentiments but remains obscure enough that U.S. viewers are free to derive pleasure purely from the spectacular display of uncanny physical humor—hence the Brits’ and *The New York Times*’s insistence that there are layered meanings being lost in translation and that the Americans don’t really “get it.” Yet, Monty Python’s broad and cross-generational appeal for comedy fans seeking alternatives to network television

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1989), 87.



demonstrated the *versatility* of subversive postmodern humor—its ability to be and to mean “something completely different” for multiple audiences.

The case of British imports that succeed as comedy even divested of their direct relevance as social satire reveals the limits of structuralist models of ideological criticism that look for the meanings and messages hidden in humor and irony. In the “marvelously profane” humor of Monty Python, the satisfactions of recognizing the specific targets of political or social satire are easily ploughed under by the pleasures of complete immersion in the absurd (whether we attribute this loss of a singular preferred reading for the globe-trotting postmodern text to Shugart’s risky “incoherence” or Olsen’s “mindcircus”). Extirpated from its immediate political and media context, *Flying Circus* becomes in some ways the original “show about nothing.” As such, it is an indirect but indispensable precursor to *Seinfeld*—the 1990s sitcom that by coining that phrase and by celebrating superficiality set the new standard for ironic humor on U.S. television, with its pretensions to being “pure” comedy freed from the restraints of *relevance* and *depth* of feeling that had defined baby boomer irony’s formative years through social comedies of the 1970s like CBS’s trifecta *All in the Family* (1971–79), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77), and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–83).

The discourse and practice of postmodern humor drives a wedge between irony and satire, distancing comedic irony from social critique and divesting comedy of any claims to truth behind or beneath the ironic statement. Part of the novelty of playfully postmodern forms for U.S. comedians and audiences was the eventual invitation to declare transparent meanings, along with moralizing and sentimentality, passé in comedy. The anarchic irreverence and non-sense of British humor and irony, when assimilated into and simulated in U.S. comedies like *Seinfeld* and *South Park*, is reconfigured in the American discourse on irony as “nihilistic” and “cynical.”

The perception that American comedy from the age of *Seinfeld* has “no message” and drifts further and further away from social relevance flatters postmodern sensibilities but also fuels a national narrative of moral and civic decline, requiring comedians and audiences for this irony to embrace or contest their reputation for cynicism, whether seen as a social vice or comic virtue.

**“The New Comic Order”: Comic Politics in the Age of Irony**

We live in a world where the line between news and entertainment has been eaten away like David Crosby’s septum.

— Bill Maher, 1997<sup>80</sup>

The same decade blamed for smearing irony all over the cultural canvas was also being heralded as a new frontier for the satirical arts. “Political satire is back,” *Newsweek* announced in 1996, following what critic Rick Marin saw as a prolonged dry spell stretching back to television satire’s “heyday” of subversive sketches on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and the early years of *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>81</sup> While the relative barrenness of the satirical landscape in the interim depended on one’s definition of what counts as politics, the consensus opinion was that the second half of the 1990s through the mid 2000s saw populist political humor return to prominence for the first time since the collapse of the sixties and seventies counterculture’s satire boom, resurfacing wrapped in postmodern style and irony with programs such as Comedy Central’s *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (later poached by ABC) and *The Daily Show*. The wholesome family humor that dominated eighties prime-time television had not, in the

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Scott Shuger and Julian E. Barnes, “Comic Relief: Real Issues, Barbed Wit and Celebrities Galore. Bill Maher Is Turning Political Satire into a Formula for Success” (cover story), *U.S. News & World Report*, January 20, 1997, 58, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 29, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Rick Marin, “Primary Comics: Political Satire Is Back, with Three Subversive Candidates out Front,” *Newsweek* (February 19, 1996): 75, LexisNexis Academic (accessed February 22, 2005).

grand scheme, been hospitable terrain for satire, and mainstream comedy continued to pull away from political content into the ironic nineties as stand-up along with sitcoms in the *Seinfeld* tradition confirmed the market appeal of light “observational” humor largely divested of any claim on a social and political consciousness. Yet, on the nation’s stages comedy was also being steered toward topicality by stand-ups like Jon Stewart, Janeane Garofalo, and Lewis Black, as well as certain sitcom writers. This generation of political comedians saw themselves not strictly as entertainers but also stakeholders in the national discourse on issues ranging from electoral politics to cultural politics more broadly conceived.

Cable and Network Television – Political Comedy Series														
1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<i>Indecision</i> '92, '96, '00, '04, '08– (Comedy Central, presidential election specials)														
<i>Politically Incorrect</i> , '93–'96, '96–'02 (Comedy Central/ABC)														
<i>Dennis Miller Live</i> , '94–'02 (HBO)														
<i>TV Nation</i> , '94–'95 (NBC/FOX/BBC2)														
<i>The Daily Show</i> , '96– (Comedy Central)														
<i>LateLine</i> , '98–'99 (NBC/Showtime)														
<i>The Awful Truth</i> , '99–'00 (Bravo/UK Channel 4)														
<i>Tough Crowd</i> , '02–'04 (Comedy Central)														
<i>Dennis Miller</i> , '04–'05 (CNBC)														
<i>That's My Bush!</i> , '01 (Comedy Central)														
<i>The Colbert Report</i> , '05– (Comedy Central)														
<i>Crossballs</i> , '04 (Comedy Central)														

**Chart 1.** Comedy Central, with its foothold on the comedy market, expanded in its first few years beyond stand-up comedy specials and developed a variety of new formats to rival the traditional network sitcom. The broadcast networks and cable channels built on the early successes of Comedy Central’s *Politically Incorrect* and *The Daily Show* with vehicles for the political satire of Dennis Miller, Michael Moore, and Al Franken.

With “political incorrectness” on the upswing, the Clinton and Bush years favored a somewhat more aggressive and promiscuous strain of satire than the preceding decade—no longer hurled from the sidelines or confined to the marginal spaces of late-night monologues, political cartoons, editorials, and novelty magazines.<sup>82</sup> Humorists were popping up everywhere

<sup>82</sup> During the 1980s and early 1990s, political satire was primarily aimed at an elite audience fragment. Perhaps best exemplified by Garry Trudeau’s *Doonesbury* in the funny pages and Mark Russell’s music hall style revues on PBS, such satire played to a beltway crowd and offered a barbed yet respectful look at the affairs of Washington.

from HBO and Comedy Central to CNN and C-SPAN, encroaching on the cultural centers of public discourse, with trenchant comedy about public policy and political process, a trend gaining momentum into the 2000s. *Newsweek*'s article heralding the revival of satire had profiled ranter Dennis Miller alongside "Clintonista" Al Franken and libertarian Bill Maher as three leading "subversive candidates" restoring candor and potency to satire and stretching it across the political spectrum.<sup>83</sup> Maher's *Politically Incorrect*, described by *Newsweek* as "'The McLaughlin Group' on acid," set the pattern with its rowdy town hall aesthetic, purporting to offer political opinions in their most raw and undiluted (ergo authentic) form. A *U.S. News & World Report* cover story praised the program's "oddball hybrid of stand-up comedy and public-affairs chitchat" and hailed its outspoken host Bill Maher (whose positioning in the irony debates I will dissect in Chapter 3) as "the highest-impact political entertainer since Will Rogers." The authors, Scott Shuger and Julian E. Barnes, proclaimed that unlike most late-night comics "who all effectively make fun of politics but stop there, Maher at his best can be funny while making a political point worth considering."<sup>84</sup> Thus, amidst the protesting of an "irony epidemic," the press as its most enthusiastic considered whether a renaissance of political satire would reinstall the comedian as social critic.

The proliferation of political humor from the mid-1990s on was nevertheless said to exploit a growing public cynicism about politics. Numerous journalists and scholars decried the submersion of politics into the morass of "infotainment" as a further debasement of national discourse and rational debate, while some held out hope that the break with political formality enacted by humorists might cut through spin and rhetoric and recover an investment in truth and

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<sup>83</sup> Marin, "Primary Comics." See Jones's *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* for detailed analysis of the populist comic politics of these comedian-hosts and their programs.

<sup>84</sup> Shuger and Barnes, "Comic Relief."

idealism. Such questions and concerns found purchase at a moment when prominent postmodern theorists vigorously deliberated on the “implosion of meaning in the media,” a vivid phrase from Jean Baudrillard’s key work *Simulacra and Simulation*. “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning,” Baudrillard famously proclaimed.<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, political actors were attributing greater significance to mass mediated comic products as a force for shaping public opinion. In perhaps the most publicized early instance, politicians and comedy makers had come to verbal blows in the early 1990s when Vice President Dan Quayle accused CBS sitcom *Murphy Brown* (1988–98) of contributing to the decline of family by “glamorizing” single motherhood. The criticism came in a May 1992 speech following the L.A. Riots in which Quayle attributed urban decay to a “poverty of values” among the underclass and cited marriage as the antidote to crime and violence in the nation’s cities. Quayle pinned urban “chaos” on sitcom feminist and new mom Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen), accusing her of “mocking the importance of fathers” by undertaking single motherhood as “just another ‘lifestyle choice.’” Working women were alienated by Quayle’s argument that TV moms should be at home knitting the nation’s moral fabric, and they proved to be a vital constituency for Republicans seeking a win at the polls that November. This misstep is held at least partly responsible for the G.O.P.’s failure to get Bush elected for a second term. *Murphy Brown*’s writers struck back that September in an episode that incorporated news footage of Quayle’s speech and responded with a rebuttal by Murphy on her fictional national news program *FYI* in which she challenged conservatives’ narrow definition of family. Although the episode was filled with jokes at Quayle’s expense, this scene set joking aside and exploited Murphy’s status within the narrative as an accredited journalist to lend authority to her words:

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<sup>85</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 79; originally published in French in 1981.

The Vice President says he felt it was important to open a dialogue about family values, and on that point we agree... Perhaps it's time for the Vice President to expand his definition and recognize that, whether by choice or circumstance, families come in all shapes and sizes, and ultimately what really defines a family is commitment, caring, and love.<sup>86</sup>

These remarks were directed not only to Murphy's diegetic audience but to the sitcom's own liberal-leaning viewership and to its critics. *Murphy Brown* was widely praised for delivering a candid and sincere message, although several prominent conservatives denounced the episode as defensive and heavy-handed. Rush Limbaugh, for instance, insisted that the program "wasn't funny" (in keeping with his running critique that liberal feminists should lighten up).<sup>87</sup> Indeed, with notable exceptions like this one, network comedies under the regime of irony in the 1990s were increasingly wary of the stigma of sitcom sermons and avoided being branded as too earnest.

Embedding the message in a play of fiction and reality, the program enacted a postmodern moment of "hyperreality" and simulation that enhanced its profile as sophisticated television. Prominent sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* (though eclipsed by *Seinfeld* in the annals of irony) thus also helped to confirm the pattern of "blurred" generic lines that would govern other 1990s comedy.<sup>88</sup> The incident ignited a frenzy of media commentary fixated upon the peculiar postmodern implications of a debate between the real-life Vice President and his fictional sitcom opponent. Television continued to pull down the barriers between "truth" and "fiction" with other newsroom sitcoms like *LateLine* (1998–99), an NBC and Showtime vehicle for the

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<sup>86</sup> *Murphy Brown*, "You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato," episodes 5.1–5.2, written by Gary Dontzig and Steven Peterman and directed by Peter Bonerz, first aired September 21, 1992, on CBS.

<sup>87</sup> For discursive analysis of the Quayle-Brown quarrel over "family values," its implications for race, gender, class, and sexual politics in U.S. society, and the *Rush Limbaugh* response and news coverage, see John Fiske's "Murphy Brown, Dan Quayle, and the Family Row of the Year," chap. 1 of *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, revised ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 21–74.

<sup>88</sup> Use of actual news footage to thrust the sitcom storyworld into current national politics became one marker of "quality" comedy. A year earlier, *Designing Women*, another CBS sitcom aimed at career women, mounted a similar pro-feminist critique of the televised Clarence Thomas hearings in "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita," episode 6.8, written by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason and directed by David Steinberg, first aired November 4, 1991, on CBS.

political satire of Al Franken, likewise intended as a gentle lampoon “of the news business.”<sup>89</sup> The sitcom touched on real events in the news and featured cameos by political figures playing themselves, including Michael Dukakis and Jerry Falwell, prompting *Newsweek* to call it “news with a laugh track.”<sup>90</sup> While *LateLine* plotted a course for polite conversation between comedy and politics, the unscripted banter taking place on *Politically Incorrect* and *The Daily Show* suggested a more radical pulling down of barriers between news and entertainment. These formats pressed politicians and other public figures—as well as opinionated citizens in the case of the latter show’s eccentric human interest stories—into direct conversation with comics. This conceit of the comic forum created opportunities for political pundits, candidates, or activists to insert their message directly *into* the text of a comedy program. By doing so, they could avoid the pitfalls of speaking a writer’s script or arguing with fictional characters, but this came at a cost. The comic forum fostered a battle of wit. Activists entering this arena are given a voice equal to (or indeed subordinated to) that of the comedian.

The first Bush administration’s inability to outmaneuver television comedy writers confirmed the impotence of a paternalistic politics that presumes to place itself outside of popular culture. This was a lesson well heeded by politicians in a changing mediascape. By the mid-1990s politics was entering into new types of dialogue with comedy. Politicians cozied up to the comedy establishment, from *LateLine* to *The Late Show with David Letterman*, to score points with voters and secure a reputation as good sports. Comedy stunts had become an important strategy to humanize or otherwise enhance a candidate’s “likeability,” as a player on

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<sup>89</sup> Franken’s own political credentials, notably his work as a CNN correspondent at the Democratic National Convention, were a talking point in press coverage that endorsed this fusion of news and entertainment. M.S. Mason, “A Satirical Take on TV News,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 1998, B7, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>90</sup> Rick Marin, “News with a Laugh Track,” *Newsweek* 131, no. 11 (March 16, 1998): 62.

the public stage.<sup>91</sup> A main gambit by the late 1990s was for candidates to appear on *Saturday Night Live* in sketches spoofing their own public image (see fig. 1). Such attempts served to negotiate a politics more comfortable with, if not fully conversant in, youth codes of irony. These displays were allowed to be clumsy, so long as they showed that the candidate did not take himself “too seriously.”



Figure 1.  
*Saturday Night Live*'s Norm MacDonald received a lesson in comic impressions from Bob Dole, following his Presidential campaign, in a sketch that first aired November 16, 1996, on NBC. Two years after his own defeat at the polls, Al Gore hosted the show, December 14, 2002.

The implications of an alliance between comedy programs and campaigning politicians by the 2000s generated escalating concern about the blurring of entertainment and politics. “Something profound has changed in the way we elect a president,” observed Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek*.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the 2000 election campaign, the press dickered over whether Al Gore had the sense of humor to put him ahead at the polls. *U.S. News & World Report* complained, “Gore’s problem is that he’s not funny.”<sup>93</sup> Alter, who thought he detected Gore’s sense of

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<sup>91</sup> Politicians appearing on *Letterman* between 2002 and 2005 included Senator John Kerry, former President Bill Clinton, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Democratic candidate Howard Dean.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Alter, “The Lessons of Oprahland: The Softballs on the Happy-Talk TV Shows Can Be a Foundation for the Sliders in the Debates,” *Newsweek* (October 2, 2000): 32, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>93</sup> Kenneth T. Walsh, “Looking for a Breakthrough: A Frustrated Gore Now Has To Be Lethal and Lovable at the Same Time,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 30, 2000, 27, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 27, 2004).



humor on *The Late Show with David Letterman* a month before the election, drew the different conclusion that he “was obviously smart enough not to get too serious; he knows how to make fun of himself.”<sup>94</sup> This “pre-emptive self mockery” became a predictable public relations tactic, and social critics weighed the consequences of a national politics that turns to humor as a means to manipulate public sentiment. In *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert in 2004 tackled the question of “why candidates need to make fun of themselves” and observed:

What sets contemporary political humor apart is its curious—one is tempted to say unprecedented—configuration. In the new comic order, the most devastating joke is circulated not by an irreverent observer or a sly opponent but by the target himself, who appears on national television solely in order to deliver it.<sup>95</sup>

Meanwhile, Bob Dole, who said he regretted sheathing his rapier wit in the 1996 election,<sup>96</sup> was emboldened to participate in this “new comic order.” Serving as a consultant to *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central’s *Indecision 2000*, he supplemented host Jon Stewart’s outsider persona with decidedly insider wit. *USA Today* described this as a strategic move for both Comedy Central and Dole, with the latter providing credibility and the former a platform to showcase the politician’s noted wry humor to young Americans.<sup>97</sup> Stewart marveled at this opportunity to collaborate with a figure of such accomplishment, saying of his fake-news team, “We’re a bunch of jackasses sitting in an office in New York who don’t know how the government works.... He gives us insight.”<sup>98</sup>

Following the 2000 election, the *National Review* expressed a sense of betrayal at Dole’s embrace of this ethos:

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<sup>94</sup> Alter, “Lessons of Oprahland,” 32.

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Stooping to Conquer: Why Candidates Need to Make Fun of Themselves,” *The New Yorker* (April 19, 2004): 116–22. Kolbert used the phrase “pre-emptive self mockery,” as did various critics of irony.

<sup>96</sup> Barbara Kantrowitz, “A Hard Day’s News: Jon Stewart and His Irony-Dipped ‘Daily Show’ Are Going to the Conventions, with Bob Dole in Tow,” *Newsweek* 136, no. 5 (July 31, 2000): 60.

<sup>97</sup> Martha T. Moore, “Dole Lands a Comedy Central Gig,” *USA Today*, January 19, 2000, 8A.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Kantrowitz, “Hard Day’s News,” 60.

Losing with a smile is one thing; repeatedly poking fun at your loss—in a campaign to which thousands of people anonymously devoted themselves because they seriously believed in a man and his ideas—is another. Nowadays Dole is more likely to be seen on Comedy Central’s *Daily Show* than on *Meet the Press*. He’s not an elder statesman so much as an aging comic.<sup>99</sup>

*National Review*’s lamentations notwithstanding, this blending of comedy and politics was quickly becoming the new norm, underwritten by a host of powerful institutional actors.

Everyone from newsmakers to the voting public played a part in grinding down the retaining wall between politics and entertainment. Limbaugh and other conservative talk-radio personalities and Internet-based commentators, as remarked in *U.S. News & World Report*’s 1997 cover story on *Politically Incorrect*, seemed content to “keep their audiences guessing about whether they’re primarily humorists or political activists.”<sup>100</sup> Further closing the gap between politics and entertainment, celebrities such as Howard Stern, Jesse “The Body” Ventura, and Arnold Schwarzenegger attempted, with varying degrees of success, to translate outspoken and hyper-masculinist entertainment personae into professional political identities. Initial responses by the press ranged from amused to dismayed. Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek* objected, “Ventura’s election was viewed not just as a curiosity but as a body slam to the body politic. If a wrestler could be governor of a major state, what did that make all the real politicians?” He feared that such a candidacy, well received in Minnesota, encouraged citizens across the Union to view politics as a “joke” and “vote for the most fun character we can find.”<sup>101</sup> Cannibalizing the criticisms of the media’s role in turning public life into a postmodern circus, some channels enthusiastically depicted politics as being consumed by the maw of “reality TV”

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<sup>99</sup> John J. Miller, “The Yuckster: Bob Dole, After Politics,” *National Review*, April 30, 2001, LexisNexis (accessed September 28, 2004). Dole’s wry humor shapes his outlook on “life after politics” in *Great Presidential Wit (...I Wish I Was in the Book)*, published in 2002 with cover art depicting Abraham Lincoln as a stand-up comic.

<sup>100</sup> Shuger and Barnes, “Comic Relief.”

<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Alter, “‘The Body’: So September 10,” *Newsweek* (July 1, 2002): 37, LexisNexis Academic.

with programs emphasizing perverse spectacle. The Game Show Network, for instance, hailed the public less as voters than ironist-voyeurs with its October 2003 offering *The Debating Game: Who Wants to be Governor of California?*, billed as “The most amazing spectacle of democracy, greed, and political ambition ever staged” (fig. 2). Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, the ribald rubber hound puppeteered by satirist Robert Smigel, when appearing on *The Tonight Show* one month later quipped, “John Kerry, a war veteran, has to follow a freaking dog puppet! What’s going on in America?”<sup>102</sup>



Figure 2. “Politics is a game”: *The Debating Game* contestants, including former child star Gary Coleman and adult film star Mary Carey, spin the Wheel of Sound Bites to select from topics such as Free Choice, Energy Crisis, Crime, Old People, and The Economy, Stupid. *Who Wants to be Governor of California?* aired live on October 7, 2003, on The Game Show Network.

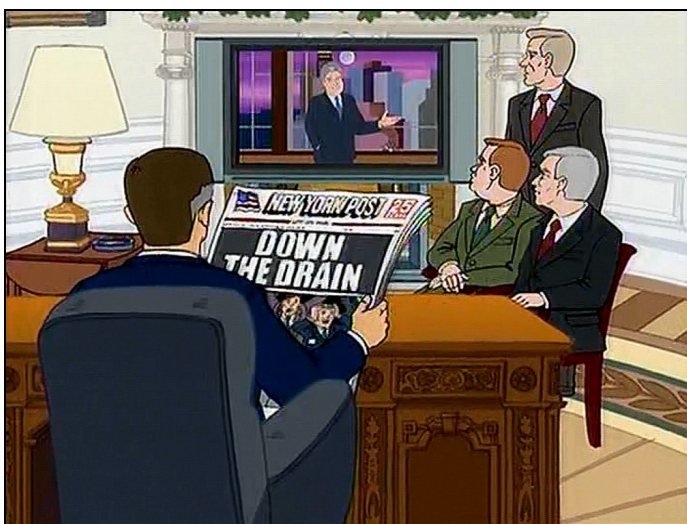


Figure 3. “Down the Drain”: The President watches Jay Leno’s *Tonight Show* monologue to gauge public opinion on the state of the Union in a *Saturday Night Live* short, “Divertor.” *Saturday TV Funhouse* by Robert Smigel, originally aired May 21, 2005, on NBC.

<sup>102</sup> Originally aired November 11, 2003, on NBC. Quoted in Kolbert, “Stooping to Conquer.”

In sum, the late 1990s through early 2000s brought a surge of satire and with it what many saw as a problematic “eating away” of the lines between comedy and news media, as well as comedy and politics itself. Pointing to examples of comic participation or intervention in these trends over the past two decades, critics wondered: Did political parody and satire under the vast umbrella of postmodern media and irony promote, reflect, or counteract the all-encompassing cynicism that many feared was debasing the national discourse? The continued rise of ‘satiric’ irony, commenting on formal and cultural politics, has been interpreted as either an impenetrable barrier to earnest speech, hope, and idealism, or in the alternative, an obstacle training course in the new civic art of postmodern transgression honing skeptical investment and hopeful dissidence.

## Chapter Overview

“Nihilist” is definitely an identity, and I shy away from identities.... I understand that a person who doesn’t believe in a lot is *called* a cynic—but I think of myself as a skeptic.... [T]hey say if you scratch a cynic, you’ll find a disappointed idealist, and I have to cop to that. ... But you find when you look at the world this way there’s a great deal to enjoy about it. ... It’s a circus.

— George Carlin<sup>103</sup>

This dissertation does not take as its focus the task of defining and classifying ironic, cynical, or nihilistic versus un-ironic comedies into discrete categories—although groupings of performers and programs that have garnered these labels will certainly be discussed. Rather, the chapters that follow will look at industrial and cultural uses of the label *irony* and surrounding terms to authorize, legitimize, rationalize, and commodify comedic practices. The analysis presented here is concerned with the life cycle of “the age of irony” as a discourse that has

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<sup>103</sup> Excerpted from the last taped interview of Carlin’s career, transcribed in Paul Provenza and Dan Dion, *¡Satiristas! Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs & Vulgarians* (New York: It Books, 2010), 341.

ebbed and flowed in the popular imagination and significantly shaped the expectations for entertainment programming on American television over the past three decades. Television's turn or multiple turns to irony are economically and culturally motivated, and I examine the relationships among comics, consumers, and broadcasters that allow for irony's inherently contradictory meanings to work as fairly coherent utterances and that establish irony as a highly versatile and valued brand of humor. Through case studies looking at individual programs and programming trends on network and cable television, each chapter examines one slice of the prolific cultural discourse on irony, with particular attention paid to the changing industrial and social meanings of representational and presentational comedy forms with the alternating efforts to politicize and depoliticize American humor. Within this narrative, we can see frequent reformulations of irony and of cynicism in humor over a twenty-five-year arc, as well as continual reexamination of the social functions, cultural legitimacy, and political efficacy of comedic irony.

Chapter 1 traces the rise of ironic meta-comedy as a programming push on U.S. television in the late 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of a discourse denouncing such irony as a vehicle for postmodern nihilism and yuppie or youth cynicism. Taking *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld* as two chief examples, this chapter covers industrial transformations that brought irony from the margins into the mainstream of network television during the cable-driven "comedy boom" of this period. While these rebel sitcoms stood apart in the critical discourse, representing FOX's anti-quality strategy and NBC's quality television respectively, these two points determine a line that divides the neo-ironic sitcom—also exemplified in this period by *The Simpsons*, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, *Get a Life*, and many others—from sitcoms modeling a fairly conventional and softer "family" humor, as well as from hard-edged social satire of the 1970s framed in the tradition of "relevance." Ridiculing sitcom

conventions, these new shows refused to be warm or to celebrate family values, and instead borrowed off-beat British comedy's perverse delight in self-indulgent social grotesques. Such post-relevance programs positioned irony as an answer to the earnestness of more traditional domestic sitcoms exemplified by the reign of *The Cosby Show* and broke with the practiced didacticism that had governed American comedy throughout the classic network era.

As deliberately offensive and self-subverting postmodern television, this generation of ironic comedies sat at the intersection of theoretical debates over carnivalesque comedy and postmodern nihilism, the one celebrated for its populist liberatory energies and the other feared for its refusal to take ideology "seriously." Following the first chapter's overview of industrial and cultural factors that created an optimal comic climate for these subversive sitcoms to find purchase in prime time, an Interlude maps out this theoretical terrain and establishes questions of productive polysemy, affect, and ideology that frame the remaining chapters. The Interlude begins by reviewing the distinctions made in literary and media studies between *traditional* and *postmodern* irony as analytical categories and considers related concepts of stable versus unstable meaning, ironic distance and "detachment," and postmodern ambiguity and ambivalence as key terms in the irony debates. Exploring rhetorical "intention" and the changing relationship between author, text, and audience in postmodern media culture, I compare scholarly theorization of Norman Lear's *All in the Family*, the leading ironic sitcom of the 1970s widely regarded as sincere and stable social satire, with the "ironic nihilism" and apoliticality ascribed to sitcom irony and satire of the *Seinfeld* era. Looking beyond prime-time comedy to the broader playing field of comic transgression in popular culture, I further unpack the social construction of irony since the 1980s as "never meaning what I say." I delve into recent controversy spawned by the comedy culture of political incorrectness and interrogate the role of irony, specifically postmodern irony,

in shielding “anti-PC” comedy and especially masculinist discourse from ideological criticism, a prominent trend examined in greater depth in Chapter 2. I argue for specificity and challenge a tendency to dismiss the workings of hegemony and the cultural politics of individual comic texts, both in blanket critiques reducing television irony and so-called “postideological” media to a crisis of nihilism and potentially also in indiscriminate praise for “offensive” comedy as purely carnivalesque play.

The backlash against political correctness warrants consideration as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, gaining traction during this same period as a comic philosophy marketed to men. The most direct channel through which British irony inspired and influenced irony in the United States in the 1990s was through a movement dubbed “the new laddism” in the British press, a sweeping rebellion against both political correctness and elitism that gave rise to wildly successful men’s media like *Loaded* magazine and ITV/BBC’s *Men Behaving Badly*. In Chapter 2, I explore how the irreverent ethos of laddism provides a foundation and finds parallels in American popular culture. With the surge in stand-up and cable comedy from the 1980s onwards, irony had become the signature shtick of “angry white men” of comedy like Andrew Dice Clay, Sam Kinison, and eventually *The Man Show*’s Adam Carolla and Jimmy Kimmel, setting a brazenly anti-feminist and anti-sensitivity agenda for the irony movement. U.S. networks and cable television adapted, imported, or imitated “laddish” British comedy scripts and formats for sitcoms, including *Men Behaving Badly*, as well as cultivating the distinctly American strains of lad humor finding expression in stand-up, comedy-variety, adult cartoons, sitcoms, reality programming, and magazine and contest shows catering to a male youth market. Looking at the relationship forged between postmodern irony and anti-PC comedy in male-oriented media, the chapter examines the gendering of irony as a masculine mode of humor,

through various genres, together with the ironizing of masculinity encouraged by these trends in both the British and American contexts. For reasons I will explore, irony, in its postmodern forms, rapidly became the preferred language of masculine excess and homosocial bonding, while also coming under scrutiny as a “mask” or “defense” mechanism insulating anti-PC comics and programs against accusations of chauvinism, racism, homophobia, and hostility. Whereas *Seinfeld*-esque humor promised televisual sophistication without earnestness, the new lads of comedy made sport of anger, apathy, and antipathy without apologies.

For progressives it can be tempting to write off the irony movement as yet another instance of dominant culture suppressing multiculturalist and feminist currents through its relentless ridicule of “PC” culture. Indeed, as Chapter 2 details, irony is closely articulated to expressions of white male anger or aggression in both American and British media culture. This is certainly one legacy of irony. However, such a master narrative disregards or obscures irony’s more multifaceted expressions throughout this period. Irony and “politically incorrect” humor have been as enthusiastically embraced by minority, women, and activist comedians, including those professing a socially progressive outlook, as well as political satirists. This not only attests to the remarkable success of attempts to demonize “PC” culture, but significantly, it also points to the ways irony as a construct is politically slippery, contingent, and conflicted—a concept flexible and vague enough to accommodate a diverse cross-section of comedic genres, performers, and audiences. The second half of this work will consider ongoing laddish influences in American comedy that further complicate the prevailing narratives of cynicism, nihilism, and “apolitical” postmodern irony. Chapters 3 through 6, from different angles, take a closer look at the cultural constructions of postmodern irony in the 2000s as related to but not exclusively dictated by the trends of laddism in ironic programming geared to the male and youth markets.



At the outset of the twenty-first century, the industrial and cultural uses of irony were so well established that irony had arguably become the dominant comedic mode on U.S. television. Little seemed to stand in its way. Then came 9/11, a national tragedy of such gravity that both the practitioners and critics of irony questioned its viability in a “post-9/11 world.” Chapter 3 scrutinizes claims of the “death of irony” in this climate of national crisis and the attempts to call forth an American comic conscience, initially in the interest of national unity and later through competing lenses of patriotism. Of the developments that followed directly from the supposed demise of irony, the most noteworthy was the discourse proclaiming a “New Earnestness,” also known as the “New Sincerity,” in which comedy was to be characterized by a renewed sense of significance and comics were encouraged to embrace a new “attitude.” My analysis highlights specific objections to, definitions of, and aspirations for irony that emerged in this context, as media makers and the public were called upon by numerous conservative and mainstream critics to shed the smirking “cool life” and practice patriotic vigilance and moral clarity. Three targets in particular—moral relativism, media cynicism, and “smug” hipsterism—came under fire as the core vices of postmodern irony. Political satirists such as Bill Maher and Jon Stewart, while pegged by their critics as aloof cynics or puerile provocateurs, were upheld by fans and public intellectuals as disappointed idealists modeling a passionately engaged, patriotic, constructive, and sincere irony. Defenders of irony sought to distinguish “good” irony from “bad,” and “engaged” cynicism from self-indulgent “cynical detachment,” making strides to redeem irony as a socially “relevant” and meaningful practice, or comedy *about something*.

In the shadow of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, meanwhile, the network sitcom in the early 2000s was deemed a format once again in decline, yet this lull brought range and innovation in tone and content as broadcasters scrambled to strike the right chord in a transitional comic climate. Situating new Black and ethnic sitcoms from the television seasons between 2001 and 2004

within post-9/11 narratives of national unity and community, Chapter 4 narrows in on inflections of irony by minority comedians during this period. My analysis focuses on how networks and comedians leveraged political incorrectness to fashion irreverent approaches to multiculturalism in both family and “workplace family” comedies. Flanked by several suburban domestic sitcoms being hailed as a bold new kind of family show, a brief but notable cycle of aspirationally multiculturalist urban comedies more thoroughly seized on political conflict as a crucible for reimagining difference and American identities. The wisecracking “laddish” dads of *The Bernie Mac Show* and *George Lopez* alongside the loose-tongued “unruly” women of *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large*, in particular, together promised a renewed lease on “edgy” irony through the figure of the “outrageous” and outspoken minority comedian-star. Equally hopeful and caustic, but differing in their relationships to “colorblindness” and “diversity” as cultural ideals, these parallel program trends were compared to *The Cosby Show* and *All in the Family*, respectively, signaling the ongoing salience of those landmark programs as cultural touchstones for the contemporary sitcom ironist. Before the surge of noted mid-decade hits like *The Office*, *My Name Is Earl*, and *How I Met Your Mother*, these ethnic and multiracial sitcoms in their own way experimented with style and reflexivity but moreover served as a staging ground for comic dialogues about race, gender, class, and nation, as well as depicting and defusing tensions about the American “melting pot” stirred by the War on Terror—themes that were also playfully and ironically threaded through more overtly “postmodern” sitcoms of the decade such as *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, *Greg the Bunny*, and *30 Rock* and multiculturalist sketch comedies that further participated in rearticulating race and liberal-progressive aspirations within the parameters of “politically incorrect” or “post-PC” comedy.

Furthering the inquiry into the post-9/11 and “post-PC” moment, Chapter 5 revisits the polysemy of irony and analyzes its changing significance for political culture, focusing on

Comedy Central as a font of satirical irony during the 2000s. As my primary case study, I closely examine the critical reception of *South Park*, one of the most celebrated and debated ironic texts of recent decades, and the perceived political investments of its authors and audiences. The case of *South Park* provides a striking example of an ironic artifact acquiring a shifting social significance, political polyvalence, and far-flung fan base, while the broader industrial construct of irony maintained its allure. As the War on Terror added fuel to the culture wars dividing the nation, comedy purportedly took a political “right turn,” and cynicism, which had been a dirty word when attributed to the nation’s youth, became a point of pride for young conservatives and libertarians. The creators of *South Park*, self-described “equal opportunity offenders,” were at the center of the struggle to ascertain or assign stable political identities for some of the nation’s leading subversive ironists. The first half of the chapter charts the emergence and self-definitions of a subculture rallying around the moniker “South Park Conservative” (initially “South Park Republican”), a loose movement that steered national discussion of the show and of comedic cynicism in support of the idea of a politically engaged irony. For this reading community, political incorrectness as a potent rhetorical construct worked to circumscribe meaning and conscript the text into a coalescing comic and cultural “antiliberal” agenda, a label that likewise enfolded lad-themed comedies such as Comedy Central’s *Tough Crowd*. Charting a course through this round in the irony debates, I seek to pull focus onto persistent rhetorical tactics that elide any distinction between “political incorrectness” narrowly posed and pursued as an antiliberal force and carnivalesque laughter as a more universal comic impulse enveloping the social body.

Comparing *South Park*’s strategic positioning within the culture wars to that of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, the chapter’s second half turns from conservative reading formations to those voicing liberal-progressive hopes for humor and irony.

I weigh key arguments in leftist critical theory for and against *South Park*'s multivalent, chaotic postmodern brand of subversiveness, set against scholarly praise for Stewart and Colbert as architects of a more serious and stable compound of satiric irony. Amidst ongoing outcry for politically viable satire and calls for engaged and meaningful (as opposed to “detached” and “meaningless”) irony, for both the right and the left, renewed concerns over the instability and ambiguity of postmodern irony and its audiences, and the gratuitous vulgarity and semiotic volatility of carnivalesque humor, permeate the critical dialogue, to some extent confounding attempts to police unruly pleasures and set a stable path for irony's march back to “relevance” in the cultural forum.

The sixth and final chapter further explores comedic television conversant with, if not necessarily neatly compliant with, the “new sincerity” as a cultural and programming pull since the mid 2000s. I focus on appeals to honesty, authenticity, and poignancy in two areas in particular, laddish cable programming targeting young men and prime-time comedy for the socially liberal quality audience, highlighting key programs and reflecting on broad trends. Building on Chapter 2's analysis of 1990s lad irony as a celebration of insensitivity and “behaving badly” and Chapter 3's overview of the persistent attempts in social discourse to sequester irony and to recuperate or “reform” it beyond postmodernism's fascination with surfaces, this chapter identifies rehabilitation, renewal, and self-reinvention as persistent premises in television narratives about cynical and laddish characters in the mid and late 2000s. The first half of the chapter tracks changing constructions of ironic masculinity and expressions of sincerity surfacing in lad media. Crucial for contextualizing this turn, I briefly address the explosion in masculine melodrama as a genre frequently merging themes of duty, love, loyalty, and newfound or elusive sobriety with representations of irony in masculinity, and consider how

wounded antiheroes in stories of shared tragedy, private pain, exceptionality and courage, or simply the trials of friendship, built on the national preoccupation in this decade with not only heroism but also nihilism. Taking the FX Network brand as one primary site for rearticulating laddish masculinities in increasingly complex and ambivalent terms, I identify comic tropes and trajectories of post-1990s American laddism, or neo-laddism. As key examples, I analyze *Rescue Me* and *Starved*, two series that reconceived the Lad archetype as a noble, troubled, and misunderstood figure equally defined by his vices and virtues. Just as quality cable melodramas of the last decade presented often profound portraits of masculinity in crisis, irony as armor, and depth of feeling as a basis for cynicism, dramedies and sitcoms have staked out possibilities for moral substance and even “sensitivity” within the masculine culture of political incorrectness.

The second half establishes parallels with network hits of the decade praised for delivering “irony with a heart.” My discussion touches on a cross-section of programs, including CBS’s *How I Met Your Mother*, FOX’s comedian-fronted drama *House, M.D.*, ABC’s *Samantha Who?*, and NBC’s *My Name Is Earl* and *Community*, among others. Taken together, I consider how the language of “truth” and the “real” penetrated narrative television, as various ensemble shows jointly deployed irony and melodrama to present meditations on identity, reinvesting in the search for humanity, truth, and meaning. Here again, I highlight comedy tropes that worked to redeem, reform, or rebuke the cynic and the character “behaving badly.” These narratives of redemption have served as a kind of cultural exercise in exorcising the demons of the so-called shallow and narcissistic ironist, but they were not a repudiation of comedic irony. Contemporary sitcoms have relished and exploited the dichotomy of “earnestists” versus ironists to furnish comic conflict, often displacing divisive differences from identity markers such as race and class onto characters’ affect and differing orientations to “caring.”

Together, these chapters argue that the age of irony is a social construct, as motivated by specific cultural contexts and institutional investments as by the larger social milieu. Multiple origin stories, ambiguous loyalties, and shifting meanings in popular usage all add to the openness of the discourse on irony. I examine irony on U.S. television since the 1980s not as an index of postmodernism's reach, but instead as a set of articulated industrial and gendered practices. While this dissertation does not aim to stake out a decisive definition of contemporary irony, I believe that the dominant definitions and preferred uses of irony in television culture and comedy do matter, not for their correctness but because they have the potential to shape our political and social world, and both circumscribe and expand our experience of the comic.

## Chapter 1

### The Rise of “Cool” Irony and Anti-Relevance in American TV Comedy

At its most symbolic level, television comedy has dispensed with the comic destroyers. The comedy has traditionally expressed its energies through the impulse to make a mess of things, to attack authority and destroy its symbols of power, especially its property. In the history of television series comedy, only four principle characters ever did damage to the world, despite the tried and true humor available in such routines. [...] The characters who get to stay are the fixers.

— Humor theorist David Grote, 1983<sup>1</sup>

A revolution in quality television during the 1980s and early 1990s provoked deliberations on the media as a fountainhead of postmodern activity and problematically “cool” irony. The irreverent formal stylistics of avowedly postmodern programs served as a springboard for speculation on shifts in audience temperament. This was compounded by various unapologetically lowbrow or populist forms, arousing generational and class anxieties and earning labels like “trash” and “loser” television, that surfaced under the same broad umbrella of postmodern aesthetics and irony. Comedy thrived in this environment, enjoying a heavily reported boom as cable television nurtured a wide range of observational and transgressive forms of humor as rivals to network sitcoms. With a few notable exceptions like Home Box Office’s *Comic Relief* charity events, the comedy craze of the 1980s gravitated away from the serious socially and politically conscious ambitions of 1970s satire. Rather, by the late 1980s, a burgeoning culture of irony came to define a wide swath of popular performers and programs, and left critics grappling with the increasing inscrutability and perceived aloofness or celebratory superficiality

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<sup>1</sup> David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983), 84–85.

of much contemporary comedy and its postmodern postures. Viewed *en masse* these programming trends were increasingly implicated, in contemporary theory and political discourse, in a “crisis of nihilism” that would reach fever pitch in the *Seinfeld* years.

Some thinkers have approached TV itself as a postmodern medium. As media scholar Jane Feuer notes, with respect to broad historical arcs, “Television presents a . . . problem for theorists of the postmodern in literature and architecture in that TV is not ‘post’-anything. There was no modernist TV.”<sup>2</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, author of *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, elaborates: “Any systematic look at the history of television soon shows that all of those formal and narrative traits once thought to be unique and defining properties of postmodernism—intertextuality, pastiche, multiple and collaged presentational forms—have also been defining properties of television from its inception.” In this respect, he ventures, one might say “television has always been postmodern” as a “*textually messy*” medium.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Caldwell extensively documents, television “aestheticized itself” and the networks grew “self-conscious of style” in the 1980s, co-opting *avant-garde* techniques to conceive new televisual forms and reconceive established genres in postmodern terms. The mid-1980s through mid-1990s are widely hailed as the period of ascendance for postmodern style and irony on U.S. TV, spurred on by increased competition for audiences in the neo- or post-network era as the logics of broadcasting were supplanted by niche marketing, or narrowcasting. Irony proved especially useful in this media climate promising “postmodern-literate” audiences a sense of exceptionality as sophisticated media consumers, while the

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>3</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), ix, 4, and 23; emphasis in original. Scholars have also argued that the disrupted nature of television’s “flow” veers toward the postmodern. See Lynn Joyrich, “All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture,” *Camera Obscura* 6 (1988): 128–53.



ambiguity and layered meanings of some forms of ironic programming often enabled texts to multitask, earning audience appeal across discrete niches.

Irony had meant something very different for U.S. television in the 1970s, though no less significant as a demographic strategy. Ironic humor rippled through a small yet prominent portion of prime-time series, including thought-provoking comedies that promised commentary or social relevancy such as CBS's *All in the Family* (1971–79) and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–83) and, to a lesser extent, gently self-reflexive “warmedies” like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77).<sup>4</sup> CBS instigated this turn to “relevance” when it overhauled its comedy schedule at the outset of that decade to woo young (18- to 34-year-old) baby boomers with these “hip” comedies espousing socially liberal values. In scholarly histories, this is a well rehearsed narrative in which demographics were said to reshape television with CBS's decision to cancel popular rural “rube” comedies in order to focus on pursuing the cosmopolitan “quality” audience.<sup>5</sup> Touted for their social and political progressiveness, CBS's comedies tinged with traces of the sixties counterculture's blend of idealism and cynicism provocatively altered the style and content of the domestic sitcom, adding moral and narrative complexity without attacking the genre's underlying dramatic and didactic functions as moralistic melodrama.

Whereas television criticism of the 1970s is dominated by the discourse of “relevance” as an index of quality in comedy, the benchmarks for sophistication had shifted considerably by the arrival of *Seinfeld* in 1989. Much as Learean relevance gave way to the oft-noted “irrelevance” of late 1970s sitcoms like *Three's Company* (ABC, 1977–84), the Reagan era's sincere motifs

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<sup>4</sup> Although forms of ironic humor arguably factored into each of these comedies to some degree, and coursed through quirkier peripheral programs like Norman Lear's surreal syndicated talk show parody *Fernwood 2Night* (1977), in certain classification systems, as I will discuss later, only a select subset of these programs modeled ‘irony.’

<sup>5</sup> Aniko Bodroghkozy skillfully contextualizes this turn in “Make It Relevant: How Youth Rebellion Captured Prime Time in 1970 and 1971,” chap. 6 of *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 199–235.

of paternal rectitude, as modeled by *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–92), prompted a cultural and comedic counter-movement. Because from the 1950s through the mid-1980s the sitcom in both its traditional and its relevant and quality forms had become so thoroughly harnessed to melodrama, sentimentality, and a strain of didacticism, attempts to renew the sitcom in the late 1980s grew less focused on reconfiguring the genre's politics and more concerned with a deconstruction of its forms or rejection of studio sitcoms in favor of hip hybrids. The prestige and novelty attached to postmodern approaches to genre and style alongside the rise in stand-up comedy served as dual influences that redefined the state of the art for sitcom.

In the two programs I take as case studies in this chapter, celebrated as outliers and outlaws from sitcomdom, subversiveness took the form of ostentatious eschewals of cozy togetherness and of earnest messages and morals. Hailing contemporary audiences as co-conspirators in a rebellion against America's domestic sitcom tradition, *Married... With Children* (1987–97) and *Seinfeld* (1989–98) became prototypes and exemplars of 1990s television irony, each playing a key role in establishing irony as a defining network comedy brand for "edgy" FOX and "hip" NBC respectively. Emblematic of FOX's claim on irreverence and NBC's on quality, these series stood as the twin tent poles of an overarching push that I refer to as the comedy of anti-relevance. While such retreats from relevance have been widely explained as a cultural "nihilism" sweeping the nation, issues of generic innovation and industrial differentiation do much to account for these textual changes independent of the cynicism supposedly endemic to the national mood. This chapter anchors the 'ironic turn' in mainstream U.S. comedy to social and industrial transformations in the 1980s and early 1990s. In a theory interlude that follows this chapter, I further frame the emergent comic temperaments and trends of this era within ongoing academic debates over irony, deemed and heavily discussed as a structuring sensibility of postmodernity.

The chapter begins by considering the parallel phenomena of *The Cosby Show* and cable television's "comedy boom" as crucial context for the eruption of anti-formulaic and antirealist sitcoms by the outset of the 1990s. The comedy boom spans a complex chapter in U.S. television history, and I do not presume to offer an exhaustive overview of the shifting cable comedy landscape but instead focus on its significant impact on network television and the sitcom genre. While I place *The Cosby Show* within the surrounding "comedy boom," my discussion of this program takes a theory detour through genre criticism of American sitcoms and offers a brief synopsis of the preceding programming pushes toward relevance and irrelevance. Seventies as well as classic sitcoms not only served as persistent points of reference and departure for *Cosby Show* era comedies, but also lined the syndication schedules of local stations and various cable channels, leaving the 1980s comedy market marinating in nostalgia and a certain trans-historical atmosphere ripe for postmodern pastiche and celebrations of post-relevance.

As the broadcast networks sought to win loyal audiences in the age of cable and narrowcasting, the domestic sitcom did not fade away but continued to dominate prime time, succumbing to the growing demand for irony and self-reflexivity in programming. Broadcasters also increasingly pursued counter-normative or even "vulgar" tastes and alternative or oppositional forms as epitomized by FOX's burlesque of *The Cosby Show* with *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld*'s supplanting of *Cosby*'s didacticism. I do not mean to suggest that these shows were *typical* of the era's comedy programming, nor to discount sitcom's renewed claims of relevance through surrounding self-reflexive comedies like *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–97), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988–98), and *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989–present). Rather, in this chapter and the next, I consider how the cultural meanings of these breakout hits and their signature self-referential irony, or "cool detachment," were circumscribed by the discourse of postmodern nihilism in ways that would obscure questions of cultural politics in comedy.

## The “Comedy Boom” of the 1980s and 1990s

Comedy is thriving. Comedy clubs are everywhere. Comedy movies are box office winners. TV sitcoms dominate the weekly Nielsens. Cable’s next big opportunity lies in comedy.

— *Indianapolis Star*, 1989<sup>6</sup>

During the 1980s, vast transformations in the television industry along with the shifting political and economic climate of the Reagan years rapidly redefined the comedy landscape. The decade began with ominous talk of the inevitable decline of U.S. television’s classic network system and not coincidentally of the imminent “death” of commercial broadcasting’s workhorse genre, the domestic sitcom, a prime-time staple dating back to the golden age of network radio. The spread of cable television, along with technologies such as satellite and VCRs (delivering independent stations and home movies respectively), eroded the broadcast networks’ audience share. The Big Three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) rapidly came to be seen as dinosaurs, and the family sitcom in particular—having retained much the same basic formulaic thrust since 1950s TV despite continually adjusting to track currents in social and representational norms—was deemed a conservative and stale genre doomed to extinction.

As the decade progressed, contrary to the predictions that it was a format “endangered by social change” if not creative obsolescence, the domestic sitcom enjoyed a much discussed resurgence.<sup>7</sup> *The Cosby Show* achieved “blockbuster” status, becoming one of the most watched series in the history of the medium, and within the industry was routinely credited with igniting a timely sitcom boom. The show’s success was also taken by cultural critics as evidence

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<sup>6</sup> “HBO, MTV Battle Over Comedy,” *Indianapolis Star*, July 2, 1989, J12.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Horowitz argued the former point in “Sitcom Domesticus: A Species Endangered by Social Change,” *Channels* 4, no. 3 (September/October 1984): 22–23, 50, published shortly prior to this resurgence.

of a sweeping “conservative turn” in eighties sitcoms, setting a tone for family-centered comedy that dovetailed ideologically with the political right’s rhetorical focus on personal responsibility, family values, and prosperity as the cornerstones of the American Dream.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, cable television was fostering a “comedy boom” much more varied in scope, bringing an onslaught of aesthetically adventurous program formats and new venues for stand-up and comedy-variety, unrulier presentational comedy genres marginalized over the prior quarter-century by mainstream broadcast television with its business model built on providing unobjectionable, formula-driven programming suitable for habituated viewing by a mass audience.

As the Big Three struggled to reassert control amidst this multi-pronged competition in an expanding media marketplace, the classic network system gave way to what various media historians have designated the post-network era. The arrival of “the fourth network” in 1987, Fox Broadcasting Company (FOX), facilitated by the Reagan-era FCC’s embrace of deregulation and relaxed censorship, struck a further blow to three-network hegemony. By the mid-1990s, the networks had adapted and were holding their own, proving forecasts of their downfall premature. By some accounts the “Big Four” (now including FOX) were in fact thriving,<sup>9</sup> albeit with modified expectations of what constituted competitive ratings and a heightened sense of urgency about attracting the specific demographic segments most desirable to advertisers. Innovations in comedy and novel strategies for securing audience interest and loyalty proved essential, both for defining the alternatives to mainstream fare on cable’s narrowly targeted channels and FOX and

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<sup>8</sup> For an account of the show’s significance either as a ratings buster or as evidence of a “conservative turn,” see, respectively, Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 21, 26; and Jane Feuer, “Situation Comedy, Part 2,” in *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI, 2001), 69.

<sup>9</sup> See Douglas Gomery, “Dinosaurs Who Refuse to Die,” *American Journalism Review* 17, no. 2 (March 1995): 48, *H.W. Wilson Web, Humanities Full Text* (accessed March 8, 2004).

enabling the established networks, in turn, to downplay least-objectionable mass programming and gain the allure of sophisticated television appealing to “the discriminating viewer.”<sup>10</sup>

*Talking about Quality: Relevance and the Cosby Phenomenon*

I’m not talking about political correctness.  
I’m talking about quality.

— Bill Cosby, pleading for dignified  
depictions of race in sitcoms, 1993<sup>11</sup>

Carsey-Werner’s *The Cosby Show* occupies a place of privilege in this narrative, enshrined in industry lore as the show that resuscitated the sitcom genre and secured NBC’s dominance as the Quality TV network and home of “must see” comedy. Amidst all the activity of cable’s boom, *The Cosby Show* dominates the discourse on comedy of the 1980s as “the definitive Reagan era sitcom.”<sup>12</sup> By its second season, the show’s climb to the top of the Niensens brought comparisons to the towering popularity of *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–79).<sup>13</sup> As the series entered its third season in fall of 1986, *The Cosby Show*’s influence factored into virtually all scrutiny of sitcom trends in television journalism. *New York Times* critic John J. O’Connor recited the prevailing narrative that October, musing, “Just a couple of years ago, informed sources were assuring viewers everywhere that the situation comedy was dead. Then along came ‘The Cosby Show’ and that particular insight was put to rest. Sitcoms are now

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<sup>10</sup> This phrase is used by Arthur Unger, “Network TV; After Years of Decline, Better Days Ahead?” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 16, 1986, 18, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004), summarizing a dialogue between B. Donald Grant and Brandon Tartikoff, the entertainment programming chiefs of CBS and NBC.

<sup>11</sup> “Someone at the Top Has to Say: ‘Enough of This,’” interview with Bill Cosby, supplement to Harry F. Waters, “Black Is Bountiful: Fox Focuses on African-American Shows—but at What Cost?” *Newsweek*, December 6, 1993, 60.

<sup>12</sup> David Marc, “Demographic Fantasies of the Reagan Era,” chap. 6 of *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 182.

<sup>13</sup> See John Carmody, “The TV Column,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 1986, C8, reporting that *Cosby Show* scored a 39.0 Nielsen rating and 56% audience share the last week of February 1986, the highest since its premiere.

tumbling out of the studio closets faster than ever before.”<sup>14</sup> “Viacom knows it has a blockbuster on its hands,” reported *Business Week* the following month.<sup>15</sup> *The Washington Post*’s Tom Shales that fall bemoaned a “suffocating abundance” of “Cosbyesque” premises in prime time.<sup>16</sup> The mega-hit not only inspired imitations but also, as my title indicates, soon came to be earmarked as an all-purpose defining other for more contrarian currents in comedy—the conventional standard against which aesthetically subversive (and some said “anti-family”) texts sought to distinguish themselves—in a fragmenting market that by the turn of the 1990s rewarded irony and irreverence.

While *The Cosby Show* itself can be said to include forms of textual irony, and Bill Cosby’s performance as a “hip” and “self-mocking” sitcom dad did not escape notice in intellectuals’ broadest condemnations of irony as a hallmark of commercial television,<sup>17</sup> the series was not widely spoken of in terms of the groundswell of ironic humor in popular criticism of its day. As irony became a catchall term signaling cynical detachment, postmodern meta-television, and particularly strains of “edgy” or “cringe” comedy, the relatively conventional

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<sup>14</sup> John J. O’Connor, “TV: 4 More for the Sitcom Clutter,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1986, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Mark N. Vamos, “Cosby Could Stuff \$500 Million More into Viacom’s Pocket,” *Business Week*, November 10, 1986, 42, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 9, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Tom Shales, “ABC’s Double Indemnity; ‘Dads’ and ‘Gung Ho’: A Death of Mirth,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 1986, C4.

<sup>17</sup> In particular, Cliff Huxtable’s (Bill Cosby) playful parenting style involves regular moments of irony, in the service of the show’s overarching didacticism. For example, in “Denise’s Decision,” episode 2.25, first broadcast May 15, 1986, by NBC, Dr. Huxtable, feigning a childlike innocence, uses a kind of Socratic irony to gently guide his youngest daughter Rudy from selfishness and sadness to cheery acceptance of her big sister’s decision to move away for college. The most notable example of academic criticism taking Bill Cosby as representative of “self-mocking” sitcom ironists and irony’s permeation of the television ecology (as I will further discuss in the next chapter) comes from media scholar Mark Crispin Miller’s influential essay “Deride and Conquer,” in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 183–228. As a further example, anthropologist and philosopher Thomas De Zengotita’s “Celebrity, Irony and You,” *The Nation* 263, no. 18 (December 2, 1996): 15–18, pauses mid-paragraph in a response to academic and “High Culture postmodernism” to provide a litany of shows as proof that “the whole culture is drenched in ironism” (p. 16), sandwiching *The Cosby Show* directly between *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Married... With Children* and alongside *The Simpsons* and *Roseanne*, all listed as prime examples of a “whatever” culture of irony socializing kids into cool indifference as media spectators.

*Cosby Show* was more often deemed a sophisticated yet safe and ideologically transparent sitcom. Thus, again, the shift away from *Cosby*'s mode of humor and earnestness during the late 1980s and 1990s was not strictly a turn *to* irony in American comedy, but rather, as I discuss throughout this work, a cultural reframing of what "irony" meant as a label and critical category.

*The Cosby Show* stood at the apex of a cycle of sentimental baby-boomer superparent sitcoms that included the white suburban comedies *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982–89) and *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985–92). Set against certain 1970s trends, including Norman Lear's satires buffooning quarrelsome patriarchs and MTM's proto-yuppie urban sitcoms that lingered on relationship humor about adult singles forming quasi-families of coworkers and friends, these 1980s programs faithfully toed the line for the middle-class nuclear family as mythic social ideal, allowing that parents were imperfectly 'human' but did ultimately know best. Somewhat complicating these normative mom-dad-and-kids portraits were assorted non-traditional family shows in their orbit such as *Kate & Allie* (CBS, 1984–89) and *My Two Dads* (NBC, 1987–90) that held out alternative, progressive meanings of family, while ultimately sharing the same emphasis on warm and wise (though frazzled and less glamorous) parental leadership. With few exceptions, the new domestic comedies were, like their predecessors, overridingly sincere in tone.

Whereas *All in the Family*, Lear's milestone urban sitcom of the 1970s, had deployed dramatic irony to make a satirical intervention into the mythic realism of the quaint domestic sitcom genre, *Cosby*'s in turn was deemed a revival of the *Father Knows Best* tradition. As a contemporary twist renovating the old formula with progressive images of race and gender, it was sometimes disparagingly dubbed the "black 'Father Knows Best.'"<sup>18</sup> This particular line of

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Holleran, "A Very Small Gene Pool: Andrew Holleran on Fox Television," *WigWag*, November 1990, 39. The comparison is argued exhaustively in June M. Frazer and Timothy C. Frazer, "'Father Knows Best' and 'The Cosby Show': Nostalgia and the Sitcom Tradition," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (winter 1993): 163–72.



criticism seized on ways in which the series replicated the insularity, sentimentality, and didacticism at the core of the classic domestic comedy format, as theorized by Horace Newcomb, where “socially and politically significant” themes are absent and problems are tidily resolved through “the magic of the wise father, the counseling mother, and the obedient child.”<sup>19</sup> While typical of 1950s and 1960s sitcoms in general, this dynamic is most pronounced in the domestic comedy subtype, which as Newcomb recounts traded the slapstick and “wacky” comic elements of early situation-based comedies for a sense of realistic albeit archetypal settings and circumstances that add up to a romantic picture of homey middle-class comfort as “average” American life.<sup>20</sup> In this equation a core belief in “the family as a supportive group” is upheld, he observes, through a consistent underlying message of “peace, love, and laughter,” these being “the central virtues of the world of domestic comedy” which are implicitly extended from the family on-screen to the viewer’s own at home. Even adults in these stories are likely to “learn” lessons about human nature, as family members mutually grow through love.<sup>21</sup> On *The Cosby Show*, in the imposing figure of co-breadwinner Clair Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad), the assertive career woman supermom replaced the doting housewife of classic sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* as a revision of TV’s “counseling mother” archetype. Prioritizing the pedagogical function of domestic comedy with humorous and upbeat storylines that always centered on devotion to family and moral rectitude, *The Cosby Show* invited viewers to relate to the Huxtables and perhaps emulate this model TV family, imbibing lessons on virtue and responsibility channeled through this otherwise familiar formula.

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<sup>19</sup> Horace Newcomb, “Situation and Domestic Comedies: Problems, Families, and Fathers,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), 57.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–47; see 37 and 43 for contrast with “wacky” and “hysterical” situation comedies.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

Historically, the bulk of American half-hour representational comedies, media scholar David Marc suggests, can be considered a form of “linear, didactic teletheater” or “edudrama.”<sup>22</sup> Through the end of the classic network era and beyond, TV studies places the majority of sitcoms within a dramatic tradition, as a kind of serio-comic sociodrama, treating elements of humor and comic performance as secondary to narrative content and structure. Notably, Nina Leibman’s study *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film & Television* classifies the suburban, white, nuclear family sitcoms of the late 1950s and 1960s, such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *The Donna Reed Show*, not as comedies but family melodramas, a cluster of programs delivering moral messages (or “living room lectures”), while cultural historian Mary Beth Haralovich illuminates how these postwar programs leveraged their claim on filmic realism to model normative gender roles and sell particular consumerist fantasies of suburban peace and prosperity.<sup>23</sup> Marc explains, “They were comedies not so much in the popular sense as in Northrop Frye’s sense of the word: no one got killed, and they ended with the restoration of order and happiness. What humor there was derived largely from the ‘cuteness’ displayed by the children in their innocent but doomed attempts to deal with problems in other than correct (adult) ways.”<sup>24</sup> By the end of each episode, Gerard Jones argues in his 1992 book *Honey, I’m Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream*, narrative closure would ensure audiences that “paternal wisdom has been upheld, youthful pretensions have been exposed as shams, sound priorities have been restored, and family discord has been healed.”

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<sup>22</sup> These two terms are from David Marc’s “Understanding Television,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 254 (August 1984): 38, and his “Demographic Fantasies of the Reagan Era,” 191.

<sup>23</sup> Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film & Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), analyzes episodes of *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Donna Reed*, and *My Two Sons* from 1954 to 1963; and Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 111–41, examines *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*.

<sup>24</sup> Marc, “Understanding Television,” 37.

In this formula, the harmony of the domestic family unit is temporarily challenged by some internal dissent or misunderstanding, or perhaps an interloper or external circumstance, but order is promptly restored, with lessons learned and the love of the group (likely also the wisdom of its leader) confirmed. “This little drama played on *The Cosby Show*” each week, Jones attests, much as “it had played hundreds, thousands of times before.”<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, historians of the genre like Jones regularly approach the American sitcom on commercial television as a kind of consumerist morality play.

Consequently, media and cultural scholarship has contemplated television comedy foremost as a site of ideology, a primary staging ground for hegemonic power and resistance. The didactic sitcom genre had long functioned as a site of socialization, studied chiefly for the ways in which stories and representations ritualistically reaffirmed the ideas of the ruling class and upheld the status quo by keeping threatening new ideas and subordinated groups marginal. Across each successive cycle and generation of sitcoms, a nation watched as the dominant values of the day encountered, and typically subdued or absorbed, resistance. In the case of *The Cosby Show*, scholar Mark Crispin Miller, among others, has argued that Cosby’s character with his “child-like” silliness offered white America an affable and apolitical representation of blackness and thus signified “a threat contained.”<sup>26</sup> Numerous media scholars have pointed out that even satirical and unconventional network sitcoms, when aspiring to social commentary, avoid truly revolutionary ideas while similarly projecting images of social progress and enlightenment. That is, mainstream comedies only call dominant cultural myths, modes, and mores into question once the old ideologies are fraying and critique is culturally sanctioned.

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<sup>25</sup> Gerard Jones, *Honey, I’m Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, “Deride and Conquer,” 213. Miller asserts that white Americans craved “such reassurance because they are now further removed than ever, both spatially and psychologically, from the masses of the black poor” (214).

CBS's reinvention of the sitcom in the image of boomer liberalism in the 1970s, with *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and other series cut from the same quasi-countercultural cloth, tested the limits of the genre's hegemonic work. Leading genre theorists including Newcomb were enthusiastic about these shows expanding the possibilities for domestic comedy and, in the case of Lear's sitcoms and *M\*A\*S\*H*, converting a banal or static form into "the perfect vehicle for biting social commentary."<sup>27</sup> Examining *Mary Tyler Moore* and *M\*A\*S\*H* as "quality sit-coms" that combined "comedy and 'liberal' sentiment" in reaction to the entrenched logics of domestic comedy, genre theorists Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik likewise note that "one of the ways to produce a 'quality,' differentiated show is to appeal to a sense of 'character realism' at the expense of the 'triviality' and formulaic nature of the domestic sit-com."<sup>28</sup> As Kirsten Lentz documents in her discursive history of "relevance" and "quality" sitcoms of that decade, the creations of Norman Lear's company (Tandem Productions) and Mary Tyler Moore and Grant Tinker's (MTM Enterprises) were "credited with transforming the situation comedy, making it more complex and more responsive to the social and political changes resulting from the Civil Rights and black power movements and the burgeoning feminist movement." Following in these movements' wake, as Aniko Bodroghkozy argues, the new sitcoms "domesticated" social tensions that over the prior decade had destabilized dominant social myths and begun reshaping the contours of public life.<sup>29</sup> Although this selection

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<sup>27</sup> Newcomb, "Situation and Domestic Comedies," 57.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 236–37.

<sup>29</sup> Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* 43, no. 15.1 (2000): 46; and Bodroghkozy, "Make It Relevant," especially 231–33. Lentz approaches "relevance programming" and "quality programming" as two distinct discourses about comedy in the 1970s that described the Lear and MTM comedies respectively; however, I would add that these discourses were interpenetrating and, as Bodroghkozy demonstrates, Lear's relevance comedies were vying for the socially liberal "quality" audience.

of programs positioned themselves as a decisive break with sitcoms of the past, they tended to do so through cultural politics and style rather than a full-scale deconstruction of sitcom form or disavowal of realism. Later Lear shows such as cult comedies *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (syndicated, 1976–77), *Soap* (ABC, 1977–81), and *Fernwood 2Night* (syndicated, 1977) distinguished themselves from earlier relevance programming with a more avowedly reflexive take on television itself, anticipating the turn toward postmodern emphasis on form.

While this period is remembered for elevating the sitcom to its “literate peak” through a mixture of heightened social realism, satire, and self-reflexivity, television scholars have been careful not to overstate the potential of such efforts to radicalize or reform the genre.<sup>30</sup> For example, Marc observes, “Beneath the stylistic differences that separate a classic fifties sitcom and a Norman Lear show, the two are bound together by their unwavering commitment to didactic allegory. Lear indeed updated the conversation in the sitcom living room, but the form of his sitcoms was actually quite conservative.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Hal Himmelstein in his genre primer *Television Myth and the American Mind* (published the year *The Cosby Show* premiered) cautions that the groundbreaking “social comedies” of the 1970s in their own way hewed to the logics of U.S. commercial television which, in depicting social relations, “makes the threatening unthreatening and incorporates potentially emergent oppositional social strategies into the social fabric as demanded by the dominant values of the culture.”<sup>32</sup> As an intervention into dominant ideology, the situation or domestic comedy at its most ambitious as social critique remained, in

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<sup>30</sup> See David Marc, “The Sitcom at Literate Peak: Post-Vietnam Refinements of Mass Consciousness,” chap. 5 of *Comic Visions*, 130–71.

<sup>31</sup> Marc, “Understanding Television,” 38.

<sup>32</sup> Hal Himmelstein, “Television’s Social Comedies,” chap. 5 of *Television Myth and the American Mind* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 121.

Himmelstein's words, "at best mildly provocative."<sup>33</sup> He stresses that "self-reflexive comedy-drama" series like *M\*A\*S\*H* and Lear's *All in the Family*, *Maude* (CBS, 1972–78), and *Soap* affirmed countercultural viewpoints only to the extent that those taboo-breaking ideologies and identities had already achieved significant traction in the cultural mainstream. These explicitly "dramatic" shows, as well as the hip urban "work family" sitcoms like *Mary Tyler Moore*, spoke to us of "the strength of family bonds."<sup>34</sup> With or without domestic settings, the family remained in some sense the genre's symbolic center. Nevertheless, Himmelstein and other scholars writing in the 1980s held out hope for comedy, especially satiric and dramatic forms aspiring to relevance, as a rare and valuable site for airing alternative ideology.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, relevance as a demographic strategy, designed to appeal to the values of socially liberal baby boomers and affirm their independence from their parents' generation, undeniably instigated a project of purging the domestic sitcom of its traditionalism and authoritarian bias.<sup>36</sup> These programs stretched from the overt didacticism of Lear's pointed satire to the gentler sentimentality of MTM's "warmedies." The signature cynicism that many boomer-targeted programs of this era directed at social authority figures and cultural institutions was tightly framed by a generational script of legitimate anger and passionate investment in social change. Scholar James W. Chesebro reported a decline in "leader-centered" series in the period from 1974 to 1978, a shift he attributed to Americans' "increasing distrust of the nation's institutions" and preference for seeing that reflected in TV characters—a representational pattern we would see

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, 152–53.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–17, 121–23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>36</sup> See Bodroghkozy, "Make It Relevant," 234–35.

reversed in prime time during the *Cosby Show* years. In contrast, he noted that “ironic” series over the same period had remained steadily salient for viewers “although the absolute number of such series is relatively small.” In his schema, sitcom irony was best exemplified by certain Lear shows, those like *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77) in which the viewer is invited to regard the central character as an ignorant or uncivilized “loser” and reject his value system as flawed.<sup>37</sup> Textual irony’s openness to interpretation played no small part in the wide popularity of Lear’s shows, as I will address with a closer look at his brand of satiric irony in the upcoming theory Interlude chapter, but let me underscore here that irony in this context was considered a rhetorically motivated *communicational* strategy and one expressly aligned with the industry’s sharpening focus on a quality audience hailed as sincere, serious, and socially conscious young adults.

As the counterweight to these shows, the mid through late 1970s sparked what some have called a swift turn (or return) to “irrelevance” and “escapism” courtesy of ABC’s cheerful schedule built around *Happy Days* (1974–84). Former CBS executive Fred Silverman, having overseen that network’s successful overhaul of prime time with its decisive switch to relevance programming geared to serious-minded upscale boomers, subsequently led ABC into first place for the first time by engineering a savvy counter-strategy of kid-friendly yet mildly racey hits ranging from Garry Marshall’s *Laverne & Shirley* (1976–83) and *Mork & Mindy* (1978–82) to the more overtly single-oriented and sexually themed “jiggle TV” romp *Three’s Company* (1977–84). These frothy comedies hewed more closely to traditional sitcom form and style and eschewed social relevance, emulating the casual, youthful, free-spirited *Happy Days* ethos that Marc has

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<sup>37</sup> James W. Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series—a Four-Year Assessment,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 42–43. This stood in contrast to “mimetic” series like *Mary Tyler Moore*, the predominant representational strategy, where (as I will discuss later) viewers are invited to regard each central character as “one of us” facing relatable challenges.

described as “coolly dismissing the importance of overt political consciousness” or, in the case of *Three’s Company*, opening the door for new extremes of “puerile anti-Victorianism.”<sup>38</sup>

*The Cosby Show*, arriving at the twilight of these major trends (a lull which we saw prematurely parlayed by the press into the “death of sitcom” panic), managed to split the difference and steer directly between the markers of relevance and irrelevance. The program subtly laid claim to a sense of caring about social issues (with nods to anti-Apartheid sentiment, ethnic cultural heritage, and gender equality) while avoiding substantial topicality and keeping the mood light. Even as it fused didacticism with warm sentiment into a sanitized view and tone often described as “saccharine” sweetness, the show did not so much resurrect the mythical sitcom suburbs as selectively recombine and politically neutralize elements of the preceding “quality sitcom” trends. Carrying forward a cosmopolitan sensibility and reputation for realism, it found favor with critics for an MTM-esque emphasis on characters of substance, poignant relationship humor, and quality of writing. Despite academic comparisons with classic domestic comedies, the program was often praised in TV columns for surpassing the “facile” family fare of yesteryear with its urbane and witty contemporary makeover.<sup>39</sup> Yet, *The Cosby Show* only partially fulfilled the demands for difference in contemporary comic sensibilities as it remained tethered to generic traditions. Neither it nor many of the surrounding network shows satisfied the diverse desires on the part of cultural critics and scholars to see comedy rise to its counter-hegemonic potential.

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<sup>38</sup> Marc, “Sitcom at Literate Peak,” 134; idem, “Demographic Fantasies of the Reagan Era,” 180.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, “Deride and Conquer,” 209, delves into press coverage of the show’s supposed “breakthrough” in realism. A wave of “relationship shows” striving for Reagan-era realism and Cosby’s prestige is discussed in Alvin P. Sanoff with Adam Paul Weisman, “A New Season Yields a Bumper Crop of Female Stars and Family Comedies,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 22, 1986, 78. The press took to reminding that early domesticoms in the *Father Knows Best* mold had been “facile” (*Christian Science Monitor*) or “vapid” and “dopily quaint” (*NYT*) by comparison. Arthur Unger, “New Beaver Treads Old Ground,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 2, 1986, 34; and John J. O’Connor, “Farewell to Wit, Hello Vulgarity,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1987, H44, LexisNexis (all accessed March 5, 2004).



In the culture wars, *The Cosby Show* quickly came to symbolize not only a victory for conservative “family values” rhetoric in prime time, with its idyllic depiction of affluent and morally pristine nuclear family domesticity, but simultaneously, if somewhat paradoxically, the persistence of “liberal” sentiment as the driving force in contemporary situation comedy. With its harmonious “colorblind” portrait of Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable’s (Cosby) devoted family and friends, seemingly untouched by the roiling racial and economic tensions splintering urban and Black America beyond the urbane fantasies of yuppie lifestyle TV, some critics have accused the series of explicitly advancing a “right-wing agenda.”<sup>40</sup> The subtler hegemonic socio-economic, political, and racial implications of *The Cosby Show* as “colorblind” television have been extensively examined in TV studies and sociological criticism.<sup>41</sup> For all of its emphasis on parental authority and a singular American Dream, the show also came to signify liberal sanctimony. This stemmed in part from Bill Cosby’s own social activism as a proponent of conscientiously progressive representations and his star image as an icon of racial progress on American television. Indeed, Cosby’s legacy as a civil rights trailblazer from TV’s 1960s turn to multiracial shows (a crucial early step toward “relevance”) prefigured his place in sitcom history, as did his wildly successful stand-up comedy career which by the 1980s often dealt in themes of fatherhood.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Wells uses this phrase in *Animation and America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>41</sup> See especially Herman Gray, “Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 376–86; Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992); and for a contrasting view in support of the show as “liberal progress” challenging dominant myths of Blackness, Michael Real, “Structuralist Analysis 1: Bill Cosby and Recoding Ethnicity,” in *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1989), 106–31.

<sup>42</sup> Barry Putterman’s analysis of comedian-centered shows from the 1970s through early 1990s begins by acknowledging Cosby’s impact as a “conduit between the generations and the races” who “opened the doors for the stream of black-themed sitcoms... and integrated action dramas” of the 1970s. Barry Putterman, “‘It’s My Show So Who Cares’: Martin Mull, Julie Brown, and the Stand-ups,” chap. 10 of *On Television and Comedy: Essays on Style, Theme, Performer and Writer* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1995), 147–48.

Advocating passionately for television's potential to reform and uplift society through positive messages, Cosby made a point of speaking out against programs and performers he felt were socially irresponsible, famously faulting comedian Eddie Murphy for obscene language and *The Simpsons* cartoon on FOX for giving kids a bad role model in cynical juvenile slacker icon Bart Simpson. In a 1993 interview in *Newsweek*, for instance, Cosby condemned representations of African-Americans on FOX comedies (as well as some at NBC) as "living cartoons" and implored network executives to raise the consciousness of writers. "I'm not talking about political correctness. I'm talking about quality," insisted Cosby. Pointing to "believable" characters like those found in "a Mary Tyler Moore show" as the standard for quality, he lamented, "Today's writers look on TV as just a joke machine."<sup>43</sup> As the frequent target of so-called "anti-PC offensiveness" in many texts in its wake, Cosby's signature didacticism through *The Cosby Show* and its more overtly politically "relevant" spin-off *A Different World* (NBC, 1987–93) came under attack in some taste cultures not solely as platitudinous propaganda for a stable ideal of marriage and family life (a charge leveled by the producers of *The Simpsons*), but also as preachy "PC" do-gooderism.<sup>44</sup> Self-conscious alternatives to the network comedy paradigm began to challenge the adherence to the generic norms of the domestic sitcom, and increasingly, thwarted the demand for "positive" images and messages that shaped arguments like Cosby's.

Given the considerable footprint of the mega-hit *Cosby Show* and similar programs on prime time, this moment did give rise to sitcom oppositionality. However, the shifts that occurred brought neither a pendulum swing back to self-consciously serious "relevance" nor fantastical,

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<sup>43</sup> "Someone at the Top Has to Say: 'Enough of This,'" interview sidebar, in Waters, "Black Is Bountiful," 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Simpsons* producer James L. Brooks called Cosby "pro-propaganda"; cited in Wells, *Animation and America*, 95. Meanwhile, phrases like "anti-PC offensiveness" were applied to what was often seen as an "anti-domestic" comedy push by the early 1990s with a bubble of ironic live-action series discussed below like FOX's *Married... With Children* and *Martin* (1992–97), and cartoons like *The Simpsons*, MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and Nickelodeon's *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991–96). See John Leland, "Battle for Your Brain," *Newsweek* 122, no. 15 (October 11, 1993): 48–53.

bubbly “irrelevance,” but rather a gradual supplanting of the genre’s foundational earnestness by a darker and more inscrutable irony, and in certain instances an outright ironizing of sitcom form and of the viewing experience. In postmodern-flavored programming, statements of difference and oppositionality in comedy came not necessarily in the form of identifiable social critiques, pushing back against normative messages, but increasingly boasted subversiveness at the level of style, tone, and attitude, trading realism and family-friendly humor for a sense of distinction and “freedom” from restraint.

### *Situating Comedy on Cable*

Cable services courted viewers bored with “safe,” conventional TV. As the Big Three in the mid-1980s still claimed the lion’s share (74%) of the viewing audience, cable’s narrowcasters sought to differentiate their product with an emphasis on original programming.<sup>45</sup> Ranging from the upscale arts and cultural networks to joyously “lowbrow” youth channels, bold and unique comedy offerings played a crucial part in defining cable television’s role, as leading channels catering to specific psychographics developed and broadened their chosen niches. The premium movie channels and Music Television (MTV), each outgrowing its narrow generic focus, turned to comedy programming in order to stay competitive, a gradual but persistent progression that garnered accolades and in the latter’s case notoriety and led critics to speculate on “cable’s new role” as a platform for original comedy.<sup>46</sup> Specializing in young acts and innovative formats, as well as bawdy and irreverent imports unlike anything found on American broadcast TV, novelty and “raw” comedy granted these and other cable competitors an indisputable edge.

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Colletti, “Narrowcasters Gird for Program War with Big 3,” *Advertising Age* 57 (December 1, 1986): S8, LexisNexis Academic, offers this statistic, framing the competition in terms of “David vs. Goliath.”

<sup>46</sup> See Stephen Farber, “Brothers’ Success Hints at Cable’s New Role,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1985, C29; and Jon Pareles, “MTV Makes Changes to Stop Rating Slump,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1986, C21.

*The New York Times* reported in fall of 1987, quoting Showtime's vice president of original programs Steve Hewett, "Comedy is the most successful overall genre on cable."<sup>47</sup>

A dominant narrative in the press contrasted the creatively conservative or "timid" broadcast networks with cable TV's daring pioneers, looking to subscription channels Home Box Office (HBO), Showtime, and Cinemax in particular as the new frontier of creative freedoms and opportunity. *New York Times* critic Stephen Farber praised the premium channels for their eagerness to let comedians create "anarchic, unconventional comic and satiric programs."<sup>48</sup> Experimentation on cable's esteemed comedy fringe often took the form of explicit self-reflexivity, as was the case with Showtime's unorthodox *It's Garry Shandling's Show* (1986–90), which *Newsweek* hailed as an "anti-sitcom sitcom."<sup>49</sup> A nod to Jack Benny's and George Burns and Gracie Allen's hybrid variety/situation comedies and a way-paver for *Seinfeld*, the series featured its genial Jewish stand-up comic star as himself. Shandling became known for constantly breaking television's "fourth wall" with monologues and asides directed to the studio and home audience, dissecting his fictionalized TV-self's lackluster personal life and dating habits as well as the genre itself by focusing attention on the show's own sitcom-ness.<sup>50</sup> "Don't look for it on any network because all three turned it down. If Garry wanted to play a zany hardware

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<sup>47</sup> Steve Hewett quoted in Stephen Holden, "Market for Humor Still Bullish: Comedy Clubs Have Become a National Industry," *New York Times*, October 29, 1987, C25.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Farber, "Cinemax Experimenting in Comedy," *New York Times*, July 18, 1985, C22.

<sup>49</sup> Harry F. Waters, "Sending up a TV Ritual: An Anti-Sitcom Sitcom," *Newsweek*, November 3, 1986, 68–69, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> The "fourth wall" is a sort of window on the diegesis, a convention of narrative television realism that posits characters unaware of the cameras filming their lives and antics. The notion of "breaking" the fourth wall to highlight the constructedness of a work, a tactic derived from theatrical traditions, when applied to TV sitcom refers to disrupting the traditional positioning of the audience as/at an invisible anterior wall of the sitcom set. See Brett Mills, "Comedy Verite: Contemporary Sitcom Form," *Screen* 45, no. 1 (2004): 65; and for a study of audience reactions to *Shandling's Show*, Philip J. Auter and Donald M. Davis, "When Characters Speak Directly to Viewers: Breaking the Fourth Wall in Television," *Journalism Quarterly* 68, no. 1/2 (spring/summer 1991): 165–71.

salesman or a bumbling father, they told him, maybe they could do business. But spoof TV's most revered entertainment format? Uh-uh, booby, not in *our* chicken coop," wrote *Newsweek's* Harry F. Waters. "Which is why this 36-year-old stand-up comic... is currently doing his lampoon on Showtime, the pay-cable channel that relishes the unconventional—especially when the convention it mocks belongs to the competition."<sup>51</sup> *The New York Times* likewise reported that the Big Three had "balked" at flouting convention with a "self-mocking series," while *The Washington Post* reiterated that such genre play was "too radical" for the networks.<sup>52</sup>

Other acclaimed pay-cable situation comedies included *Brothers* (Showtime, 1984–89), featuring a homosexual theme rejected by ABC and NBC, *Hard Knocks* (Showtime, 1987), a buddy sitcom co-starring comedian Bill Maher that ventured into spoofery of other genres' styles, and *Dream On* (HBO, 1990–96), boasting adult situations, nudity, no laugh track, and an exuberant recycling of clips from old TV and movies in order to give insight into its boomer protagonist's state of mind and sense of self. According to Showtime's executive vice president of programming, Peter Chernin, a key strategy was to scoop up off-the-beaten-tracks projects nixed by the networks that stretched but did not abandon the recognizable molds. "We are very concerned about offering an alternative to network television. At the same time, we are still a mass-market medium. We're not going to be doing Zen comedy," he said in a 1985 interview, emphasizing that *Brothers* was "in a familiar format but a little more daring than other situation comedies."<sup>53</sup> Cinemax, meanwhile, offered *Cinemax Comedy Experiment*, an anthology-style vehicle

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<sup>51</sup> Waters, "Sending up a TV Ritual."

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Farber, "54 Shandling Episodes Ordered for Showtime," *New York Times*, April 7, 1987, C18; and Michael E. Hill, "Garry Shandling: What's This Show About, Anyway?" *Washington Post*, May 3, 1987, Y11. NBC programming executive Warren Littlefield specified different reasons for not picking up Shandling's show, saying his network "didn't think the material was strong enough" for prime time. Quoted in Morgan Gendel, "A Real-Character Sitcom," *The Record*, November 16, 1986, 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Farber, "'Brothers' Success Hints at Cable's New Role," C29.

indulging more absurdist and *avant-garde* bending of boundaries. Reviewing one installment, *Action Family* (1987) by *Late Night with David Letterman* veteran Chris Elliott, *The Washington Post* declared that cable supplied “the freshest and most impudent comedy on television.”<sup>54</sup>

This half-hour satirical sketch, billed by Cinemax as “*Mannix* meets *The Brady Bunch*,” mocked studio audience tapings and merged tepid TV action hero and sitcom dad stereotypes in a Brechtian barrage of glaring genre clichés (and at one point featured the star breaking character to brag about his cable special and defend his career to pal David Letterman who taunted him from a passing car).<sup>55</sup> Such programs were few in number but established a pay-cable portfolio promising daring if not “truly different” comedy.<sup>56</sup>

For all its insistent marketing of difference, the cable industry also found it necessary to build on broadcast TV’s legacy, and was partly responsible for ushering in what *The New York Times* proclaimed a “wave of nostalgia for Television Past.” This manifested in the form of new sitcom deals for 1950s comedy legends like Lucille Ball and Milton Berle and attempts to revive such early-1960s sitcoms as *Leave It to Beaver* (with *Still the Beaver* on cable) and *The Andy Griffith Show*.<sup>57</sup> As a repository for syndicated reruns of sentimental favorites from the classic network era, moreover, an array of premium and basic cable channels needing to fill out their schedules dabbled in what was being heralded in the mid-1980s as “a 1950’s television revival.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Shales, “‘Action Family’: An Inspired Absurdity on Cinemax,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 1987, C1.

<sup>55</sup> The quoted tagline is from a Cinemax bumper leading into the special.

<sup>56</sup> John J. O’Connor in his review “‘Hard Knocks,’ Sitcom,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1987, C18, weighs in on the industry narrative of “timid commercial networks” and finds Showtime a cut above the competition, extolling *Hard Knocks* as “something truly different” in sitcom.

<sup>57</sup> Joe Saltzman, “There’s a Golden Glow ‘Round Those Grainy Reruns,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1986, H23.

<sup>58</sup> Jerry Buck, “Comeback for Caesar, an Emperor of Comedy,” *The Record*, January 12, 1986, 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004), describing cablecasts “recycling” Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows* on HBO and Jackie Gleason’s *The Honeymooners* on Showtime.

The original *Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960–68), in syndication on WTBS, was reportedly “among the most popular programs on cable TV” in 1985.<sup>59</sup> More fully exploiting this trend, Nick at Nite, launched that year as the evening counterpart to kid channel Nickelodeon, was chockablock with vintage sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s repackaged with ironic flair for nostalgic adults and curious teens. With *The Cosby Show* being called a throwback to domestic sitcoms of an earlier era and with cable services oscillating between the impulses to revolutionize, satirize, or memorialize situation and classic comedy, all of this added to a growing sense that American television was not about to part with the sitcom tradition as a cultural institution, proving to be as resilient in the narrowcasting age as it was derided.

Even channels seeking a high degree of distinction from mainstream television found themselves relying on the sitcom to boost ratings in key demographics. MTV along with the cultural networks on basic cable made a calculated turn to imported comedies with youth appeal, trumpeting a “British invasion” in the popular arts and capitalizing on an antiestablishment comedy movement that had erupted in Thatcher’s Britain. Acquiring BBC series *The Young Ones* in 1985, MTV boasted comedy that was “disrespectful, wild, slightly obnoxious and generally irreverent,” a refinement of network identity exemplifying the industry’s increasing reliance on comedy to attract young viewers.<sup>60</sup> Arts & Entertainment (A&E) took the same movement upmarket with a “Brit Wit” programming block featuring the BBC’s acerbic *Blackadder*, likewise known for its celebratory rudeness and antirealism attacking the generic conventions of sitcom, in a “bid for more youthful viewers.”<sup>61</sup> A&E represented its new British

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<sup>59</sup> “To Entertainment and TV Editors,” PR Newswire, July 15, 1985, LexisNexis (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>60</sup> Unnamed MTV spokesman quoted in Fred Rothenberg, “Rock Video Channel Branching out with Sitcom,” Associated Press, May 31, 1985, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004). MTV also participated in Classic TV nostalgia, airing 20-year-old sitcom *The Monkees* in 1986. Pareles, “MTV Makes Changes to Stop Rating Slump,” C21.

<sup>61</sup> Steve Schneider, “A&E Aims to Woo Younger Viewers,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1987, H30.

fare as sophisticated transgression, and in the words of *Blackadder*'s star Rowan Atkinson interviewed for a promotional segment aired in 1989, "quite rude" and "risky" television unlike "any contemporary or current situation comedy."<sup>62</sup> Whereas mainstream sitcoms were populated by a blend of wise role models, wacky fools, and endearing innocents, Britain's "alternative" sitcoms inverted that paradigm with a parade of outlandishly lewd, loud, unprincipled, and antisocial antiheroes leading squalid lives trapped in dystopic situational premises. Like the aforementioned pay-cable series, the anarchic Britcoms on basic cable accounted for a narrow but celebrated class of cable programming, cutting against the grain of U.S. network television.

As the fledgling fourth broadcasting network, FOX in its formative years settled into a niche approach, targeting the youth market and underserved urban minorities. The newcomer network made its mark by pursuing a combined strategy of narrowcasting, sensationalism, and aggressive counter-programming, effectively shifting the terms for broadcast comedy form, tone, and content in the final years of the decade. Positioning itself as the "network without censors,"<sup>63</sup> FOX at first sought to get noticed by courting controversy with irreverent comedies, most notably its first prime-time series *Married... With Children*, a decision discussed in detail below, and unapologetically schlocky "reality" programming. Making a grab for MTV's Generation-X audience, FOX's early cult hits mirrored the "rude" alternative comedy gaining popularity on cable, with a blend of satirical sketch/variety shows (e.g., *The Tracey Ullman Show*, 1987–90, where *The Simpsons* originated as a featured sketch) and self-reflexive sitcoms that eschewed the conventions of realism and role models in the name of unbridled impudence (e.g., *The*

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<sup>62</sup> This programming push was also reflected in numerous stand-up specials on pay cable, such as a 1988 edition of *HBO Comedy Showcase* "Live! from London," introducing alternative comics known from these sitcoms. The liminality of alternative comedy imports such as *Blackadder* on A&E and *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* on Bravo enabled the "cultural networks" to reinvent their image around a younger demographic sought after by advertisers, while retaining the status of high-culture niche TV by emphasizing cerebral British wit and wordplay.

<sup>63</sup> Jim Impoco, "The Bundys Meet the Censors at Fox," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 11, 1995, 68.



*Simpsons* and Chris Elliott's 1990–92 manchild saga *Get a Life*), staking a claim on lewd and crude comedy.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside MTV, FOX was a catalyst in a representational shift the press came to dub “loser television”—an umbrella term applied to MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head* (initial run 1993–97), FOX's *Married... With Children* and *The Simpsons*, and ABC's *Roseanne* (1988–97), among other series that embraced vulgarity and trampled on the ethos of presumptive affluence that had come to define prime-time U.S. television in the 1980s.<sup>65</sup> An October 1993 *Newsweek* editorial by author John Leland considered these shows, with a collective claim on irony, to be “a trash phenomenon” channeling the disillusionment and alienation of a generation faced with limited prospects for higher education and employment, who did not see the “good life” in their grasp.<sup>66</sup> “*Beavis and Butt-Head* join a growing crowd of characters who have found a magic formula: nothing cuts through the [television] clutter like a slap of bracing crudity,” he wrote, conjecturing that “losers have proven remarkably embraceable” as these programs tapped widespread cultural and generational anxieties about economic downslide. FOX and MTV dominated this school of irony with what he deemed anti-domestic and “shockingly *lumpen* [emphasis in original]” comedies intensely preoccupied with representations of “[s]tupidity, served with knowing intelligence.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The early FOX comedies were consistently described in these terms. See Diane F. Alters, “‘We Hardly Watch that Rude, Crude Show’: Class and Taste in *The Simpsons*,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, ed. Carole A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2003), 165–84. As for British comedienne Tracey Ullman, immediately prior to hosting her own FOX variety show, she had co-starred with comedy team French and Saunders in Britain's cult “alternative” sitcom *Girls on Top* (ITV, 1985–86).

<sup>65</sup> This trope was compounded by the influx of British sitcoms, which often focused on “loser” figures and had historically tended to internalize a pessimism born of a stratified class system with limited opportunity for class rise.

<sup>66</sup> Leland, “Battle for Your Brain,” 48–53. For critical attention to “loser television” as a feared phenomenon, see also Douglas Kellner's subsection “*Beavis and Butt-Head*: No Future for Postmodern Youth” in *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 149.

<sup>67</sup> Leland, “Battle for Your Brain,” especially 49–50.

HBO and MTV Networks (owned by Time Warner and Viacom respectively) branched further into this hot young market at the outset of the 1990s, going toe-to-toe with their own all-comedy networks on basic cable, The Comedy Channel and Ha! TV Comedy Network. Debuting in November 1989, the HBO-owned Comedy Channel was conceived as a short-form channel modeled after MTV with nonstop, 24-hour programming. The concept originated with an earlier version of The Comedy Channel planned for 1986, to consist of stand-up comedy video bites “sandwiched in between concerts and live performances.”<sup>68</sup> In January 1986 the channel’s founder Tom Kay described the venture as “riding on the coattails of ‘The Cosby Show’” while emulating the strong brand identification and “grabbing power” of MTV.<sup>69</sup> In the eventual 1989 iteration of the channel, as Kay had previously envisioned, the assorted comedy clips interspersed with acquired programs would be introduced by “joke jocks,” much like MTV’s veejays, embodying the personality of the network and lending a sense of rapport with the audience.<sup>70</sup> Viacom/MTV’s Ha!, launched soon after in April 1990, pursued a business model closer to Nick at Nite’s heavily reliant on off-network syndicated sitcoms, yet also promising an infusion of youthful MTV attitude and energy.<sup>71</sup> The rivals eventually merged in 1991 to form Comedy Central, which inherited from HBO/Comedy Channel an

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<sup>68</sup> “Comedy Channel,” United Press International, January 13, 1986, Monday, BC cycle, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004). This advance description indicated the launch was anticipated as early as summer 1986.

<sup>69</sup> The network logo was a heart, which Kay felt emphasized the ability of laughter to bring people together. The channel would offer an eight-hour programming block daily, comprised of fast-paced “snippets,” shown three times to fill out the 24-hour schedule. Fred Rothenberg, “Latest in Single-Minded Cable Networks: The Comedy Channel,” Associated Press, January 10, 1986, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 9, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> “HBO, MTV Battle Over Comedy,” J12; also Rothenberg, “Latest in Single-Minded Cable Networks.”

<sup>71</sup> Michael Burgi, “The Yucks Stop Here,” *Mediaweek* 4, no. 12 (March 21, 1994): 22, ProQuest Research Library; and Scott Donaton, “HBO, MTV Ready Comedy Nets,” *Advertising Age* 60, no. 34 (August 7, 1989): 61, LexisNexis Academic (both accessed March 5, 2004).

emphasis on original, youth targeted programming and has continued to position itself as “the anti-network.”<sup>72</sup>

Original full-fledged sitcoms remained a rarity on cable networks through the 1990s, being cost-intensive and broadcast’s whitebread-and-butter genre. “Cable doesn’t want to follow the formulaic route because the broadcast networks can pay more... and attract the big talent,” Cyma Zarghami, senior vice president in charge of programming for Nickelodeon and Nick at Nite, told *Broadcasting & Cable* in 1996.<sup>73</sup> For the most part, both premium and basic cable services’ escalating efforts to colonize the comedy market hinged on blatant departures from the traditional American sitcom, from MTV’s anarchic and loosely structured “rock-flavored”<sup>74</sup> comedies like *The Young Ones* and *Beavis and Butt-Head* for teens and twentysomethings to HBO’s “event” stand-up specials and star-studded *Comic Relief* benefits (founded in 1986), to a range of “adult” cartoon series like USA’s *Duckman: Private Dick/Family Man* (1994–97, about a brazenly insensitive, sexually depraved, foul-tempered waterfowl) and Comedy Central’s whimsical Squigglevision computer-animated sitcom/stand-up hybrid *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* (1995–99).<sup>75</sup>

The emergence of the so-called “anti-sitcoms” (or post-sitcoms) like Showtime’s *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show*, MTV’s *Young Ones* and *Just Say Julie* (1989–92), FOX’s losercom *Get a Life*, and Comedy Central’s *Dr. Katz* and later *Strangers with Candy* (1999–2000) directly hailed viewers as media-saturated subjects and “ironic” consumers of television and its

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<sup>72</sup> Bill Hilary, executive vice president and general manager of Comedy Central from 2000 to 2004, quoted in Allison Romano, “A Youthful Viewpoint,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 132, no. 36 (September 2, 2002): 34.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Rich Brown, “Cable Tries Its Hand at Originals,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 126, no. 14 (April 1, 1996): 29.

<sup>74</sup> Description of *The Young Ones* from Pareles, “MTV Makes Changes to Stop Rating Slump,” C21.

<sup>75</sup> *Seinfeld*’s Jason Alexander provided the voice of *Duckman*’s rant-prone and morally challenged widower “family man” title character. *Dr. Katz* featured a rotating guest cast of up-and-coming and veteran comics playing themselves, such as Ray Romano, Garry Shandling, Judy Tenuta, and Louis C.K., performing stand-up bits embedded in the narrative as fictionalized therapy sessions.

discourse.<sup>76</sup> Alongside HBO's satirical news sketch show *Not Necessarily the News* (1983–90, patterned after the BBC's *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, 1979–82), yuppie-com *Dream On* (1990–96), and showbiz sitcom *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–98) set behind-the-scenes of a late-night talk show starring “anti-sitcom” veteran Garry Shandling, such experiments putting a postmodern spin on classic situation comedy and/or variety formats extended layered viewing pleasures hailing the “TV-lifers”—baby boomers and post-sixties youth reared on TV—as interpretive communities deeply familiar with the medium's entrenched formulas and conventions.

Michael Dunne seized on this last point in his 1992 book *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture*, distinguishing the self-reflexivity of postmodern media from that found in “High Modernism” of the early twentieth century and in popular comedy-variety of “golden age” broadcast radio and early 1950s television. Whereas self-referentiality for modernism served as an expression of the artist's unique voice, he observes, in postmodern media it is foremost a collective “affirmation of the mediated community.”<sup>77</sup> Against those who would find *It's Garry Shandling's Show* “derivative” of the late vaudevillian theatrics of stars like Jack Benny and George Burns, Dunne stressed that “self-referentiality has become much more common and elaborate in today's popular culture” and, moreover, “the rhetorical intention of the self-references has shifted considerably” with this celebration of creators' and audiences' advanced fluency in textuality as citizens of a “hypermediated” culture.<sup>78</sup> That said, as his

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<sup>76</sup> Genre theorists Neale and Krutnik in *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (245–46) use this label “anti-sitcom” less loosely. They discuss *The Young Ones* and *Blackadder* as the exemplars of “‘anti-sit-com’ sit-com,” as shows that use “shock-tactics” for “deliberately rupturing the sit-com's conventions of ‘naturalistic’ representation,” but stress that *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, in contrast, for all its “play with the artificiality of television and the traditional limits of the sit-com” still displays a more “conventional orientation” to its plots. For relevant analysis lauding *Just Say Julie* (1989–92) as a “looser” sitcom form built on the persona of its subversive stand-up star, see Putterman, “It's My Show So Who Cares,” 159.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Dunne, *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 8, 10, 11.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 48–49.

objection to equating a Shandling and a Benny might suggest, for many popular critics of the day, the triumphant resurgence of “live” and presentational comedy formats courtesy of cable did hearken back to and rekindle cultural memories of vaudeville and of the diversity of early fifties television in the popular critical imagination, as well as begging mixed comparisons to “rebel” comedians of the 1950s and 1960s.

*“Yuppie Vaudeville”*

The experiments in narrative and character comedy brought cable services a measure of distinction, but it was stand-up comedy that overwhelmingly propelled and dominated the comedy boom and that secured cable’s and especially subscription TV’s claim on a strain of “comedy for adults.”<sup>79</sup> “Even though sitcoms have returned in numbers to the networks,” wrote *New York Times* TV critic Thomas Morgan in October 1986, cable’s stand-up specials stood apart by reveling in freedoms not possible on broadcast “comedies that are geared to family audiences and must satisfy network censors.” “Pay cable offers viewers the sometimes raw adult language and atmosphere of smokey [*sic*] nightclubs,” remarked Morgan.<sup>80</sup> The censoring of material in such venues was reportedly rare, cultivating a sense of edgy exclusivity with this ostensibly adults-only ambiance, unsurprisingly also attracting younger viewers eager for R-rated language and themes. A 1987 HBO press release boasted giving “rising young comics the opportunity to stretch their comic talents in a free and uncensored atmosphere.”<sup>81</sup> Whether splendidly theatrical and on-trend like *HBO Comedy Showcase* (a series of one-off specials starting in the mid-1980s),

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<sup>79</sup> Deborah Mesce, “Cable Television Finding Niche with New Types of Programming,” Associated Press, May 16, 1987, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Morgan, “Comedy Finds a New Niche in Cable,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1986, C17.

<sup>81</sup> Press release for HBO’s *Young Comedians*, quoted in John J. O’Connor, “Two Comedy Specials, on Showtime and HBO,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1987, C30. See also O’Connor’s “Pay Cable Delivers a Variety of Punch Lines,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1987, H23, exploring this trend as a revival of “borscht-circuit comedy.”

upbeat and unfussy like A&E's *An Evening at the Improv* (1982–96), or defiantly profane and “undignified” like HBO's more controversial *Def Comedy Jam* (original run 1992–97),<sup>82</sup> stand-up/variety shows on both premium and basic cable services strove to recreate for the home viewer the informality, intimacy, and intensity of live comedy clubs and tours.

Cable showcases and stand-up comedy nightclubs were credited in equal measure with spurring on mutual and momentous growth. The number of live comedy venues scattered across the country's urban centers had tripled between 1981 and 1983, and by 1987—as the boom was reaching its zenith—there were eight nationwide chains of franchised comedy clubs.<sup>83</sup> One source cited in *The New York Times* early that year, *Laughtrack* magazine founder Rick Siegel, estimated that comedy clubs had increased tenfold in number over a span of ten years, while Richard Fields, owner of New York's Catch a Rising Star club, directly attributed this “explosion of comedy” to cable TV.<sup>84</sup> After half a century in the business, comic Alan King agreed that “cable is the best thing to happen to comedy,” welcoming its eager revival of variety television as a comedian renaissance.<sup>85</sup> The abundance of comedy showcases on cable inspired nostalgic analogies to past eras, acquiring the nicknames “yuppie vaudeville” (a phrase credited to *Showtime Comedy Club Network*'s executive producer Ken Weinstock) and the new “borscht belt.”<sup>86</sup> Live comedy concerts (together with recorded stand-up specials) were also, to the point of cliché, called “the rock & roll of the Eighties,” as a live performance genre with

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<sup>82</sup> “In direct opposition to the intentionally dignified *Cosby Show*, *Def Comedy Jam* was intentionally undignified,” stresses the Paley Center for Media, <http://www.paleycenter.org/the-arrival-of-def-comedy-jam/> (accessed September 12, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> Data from Holden, “Market for Humor Still Bullish,” C25.

<sup>84</sup> In Susan F. Rasky, “Impresario Promotes Laughs,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1987, D1.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Morgan, “Comedy Finds a New Niche in Cable,” C17.

<sup>86</sup> Phrases are from Holden, “Market for Humor Still Bullish,” C25, quoting Ken Weinstock; and John J. O'Connor, “2 Comedy Programs, on HBO and Showtime,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1986, C18.

transgressive appeal for youth and young adults and rapidly producing its own constellation of iconoclastic stars, a prominent subset of whom the press took to calling “screamers.”<sup>87</sup>

While cable gets directly named as the cause, the club franchise movement also thrived on the Reagan era’s celebration of self-made success and entrepreneurialism. Stories of exceptional comedians rising from obscurity to celebrity on individual merits of hard work, personal charisma, and perseverance in a robustly competitive marketplace played powerfully to the Reaganite ideology of the American Dream. This hard-won success was the subject of several fictional films, including the gritty *Punchline* (1988) featuring Sally Field and Tom Hanks and *This Is My Life* (1992) starring Julie Kavner (best known for her work on *Rhoda* and *The Simpsons*), as well as plenty of press that profiled the real-life careers of TV’s rising stars like Roseanne Barr and Jerry Seinfeld.<sup>88</sup> For cable programmers, besides being a hot commodity, stand-up shows had the added advantages of being inexpensive to produce and culling from a vast untapped talent pool. That is, much like “reality” programming would later spread like kudzu across cable and prime time in the following decades, stand-up “exploded” onto the cable scene in the 1980s and early 1990s in part because it afforded a relatively cheap, flexible alternative to scripted original comedy and drama.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> One of many to seize on this phrase was Duncan Strauss, “The Clubbing of America,” *Rolling Stone* 538 (November 3, 1988): 92. “Live comedy has replaced live rock ‘n’ roll for a lot of young people,” explained Catch a Rising Star’s chairman Richard Fields in 1989, quoted in John Motavalli, “Laughing all the Way to the Bank,” *Adweek* 30, no. 15 (April 10, 1989), S8, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>88</sup> Given that the leads of these two films all came to prominence through situation comedy (respectively with *Gidget/The Flying Nun*, *Bosom Buddies*, and *Rhoda/The Simpsons*), these stories of stand-up struggle were potentially undergirded by the core recognition of each star’s considerable sitcom successes. In these instances, comic actors who were not principally known as stand-ups served to articulate club performance as a crucial step in the comic star narrative of the 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>89</sup> As journalist Betsy Borns (a former assistant to the executive producer of *Saturday Night Live*) remarks in *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy* (New York: Fireside, 1987), 47, “Stand-up comedy, which had been resurrected as a cost-efficient broadcasting ploy, was turning out to be that most elusive of commodities—something that left audiences begging for more.”

Questioning widespread enthusiastic reception of cable's "free and uncensored" comics, various critics expressed anxiety over the ethics, attitude, and taste of the current wave of humor. "[C]ontemporary comedy is becoming downright unsettling," wrote *New York Times* columnist John J. O'Connor in 1986 in one of several essays in which he lamented that "a good many of the newer comedians are pushing the limits of outrageousness in routines that reach for questionable laughs."<sup>90</sup> From the "infantile screaming" of Howie Mandel to the "snarling cries" of Bob (Bobcat) Goldthwait to the "calculated outrageousness" of Sam Kinison, O'Connor protested that this "generation of screaming performers" succeeded on shock value and fed on public repulsion/fascination with vulgarity and viciousness.<sup>91</sup> On the frontlines were a handful of stand-up sensations like Kinison, the former Pentecostal preacher whose comedy trademark was, in the words of one reviewer, a "loud, piercing scream into the face of an unsuspecting audience member," and Eddie Murphy, whose high-grossing, expletive-filled theatrical release concert film *Eddie Murphy Raw* (1987) directly mocked Bill Cosby's stance against profanity in comedy.<sup>92</sup> *Adweek's* John Motavalli in 1989 echoed O'Connor's sentiment, highlighting pay cable's "powerful position" in shaping and exploiting new directions for comedy:

HBO, after all, ... telecast the ravings of Sam Kinison, who finds starving Ethiopian refugees figures of fun; presented the highly controversial ethnic and gender putdown humor of Andrew Dice Clay; and allowed Eddie Murphy to insult (with ample use of obscenity) gays, women and other targets. The reason is that these guys aren't some outer fringe of comedy; they're emblematic of the

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<sup>90</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Outrageous, Yes, but Not So Funny," *New York Times*, May 25, 1986, H23.

<sup>91</sup> Descriptions of Mandel and Goldthwait are from John J. O'Connor's "HBO Comedy Special Stars Bob Goldthwait," *New York Times*, February 24, 1987, C18; the other quoted language is from O'Connor's "Sam Kinison in a Comedy Special," *New York Times*, April 27, 1987, C18. Holden, "Market for Humor Still Bullish," C25, is another who references the "screamers" as a trend.

<sup>92</sup> Gary Graff, KNT News Service, "Comic's Calling Card Is a Scream: Sam Kinison Delivers Humor to the Lovelorn," *Orlando Sentinel*, November 28, 1986, [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1986-11-28/lifestyle/0270400219\\_1\\_sam-kinison-piercing-scream-hear](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1986-11-28/lifestyle/0270400219_1_sam-kinison-piercing-scream-hear) (accessed October 5, 2013). For a case study of Murphy as a comedian with "rock star" status, see Bambi Haggins, "Murphy and Rock: From 'The Black Guy' to the 'Rock Star,'" chap. 2 of *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007).



entire direction stand-up has been going as it has gained popularity during the last few years.<sup>93</sup>

Performers' drawing-power in this climate was at times driven as much by notoriety as by wit. Those critics recoiling from a groundswell of cultural "insensitivity" in comedy would, by the early 1990s, be increasingly labeled as hypersensitive or elite gatekeepers of "politically correct" speech.

Complicating these assessments, a broader cross-section of noted stand-up acts of the day reveals that the cultural politics and demographic orientations of the new "outrageous" comedians in fact differed wildly. To the same extent that Kinison stood as a proudly misogynist spokesman for the Angry White Man (a trope I explore Chapter 2), Goldthwait used the stage to challenge homophobic and racist currents in popular culture, while the abrasive and joyously "trashy" Roseanne Barr was embraced as a feminist voice for working-class women. Roseanne's stage persona as self-proclaimed "domestic goddess" exemplified her pointedly irreverent stance on the emergent etiquette of political correctness.<sup>94</sup> Some of the so-called shouting comics, like Howie Mandel and Gilbert Gottfried, largely avoided contentious material, performing their exaggeratedly eccentric behaviors and idiosyncratic speech affectations in a more impish defiance of polite norms. In a similar vein, Goldthwait's version of "shouting" comedy offered a kind of burlesque of hostility wrapped in disarming humility, and was a close cousin of the postmodern gender play of comics like Mandel, Gottfried, "Pee-wee Herman" (the comic persona of Paul Reubens), and Emo Philips, collectively using vocal and physical strangeness to subvert the Reagan era cultural codes of hypermasculinity.

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<sup>93</sup> Motavalli, "Laughing all the Way to the Bank."

<sup>94</sup> As an identity substituted for "housewife," her famous coinage played ironically on such revisionist, gilded labels as "domestic engineer" entering public discourse. Her shtick thus parodied "PC" gestures at semantic leveling of class differences, while simultaneously driving home the point that acts of labeling are indeed political. Cable subscribers were introduced to her brash "domestic goddess" character on HBO's *The Roseanne Barr Show*, which premiered September 19, 1987, one year before being repackaged and toned down for ABC's blue-collar sitcom *Roseanne*. Roseanne's formative onstage performances came in childhood, as a preacher in the Mormon Church.

Combined, the new comedians comprised an irrepressible populist intervention disrupting the hegemony and homogeneity of “family viewing.” Thus, in contrast to condemnations of an undifferentiated hoard of obnoxious loud-mouths, a competing, at times utopian, perspective defended the changes as a refreshing influx of diverse voices breaking down “consensus television,” in the words of author Barry Putterman, to allow those who had been artistically and socially marginalized “access to the stage.” With cable, first-run syndication, and FOX expanding that stage, Putterman, among others, argued that “the integration of more offbeat voices from stand-up” shaking up the medium might be the key to revitalizing “mainstream sitcoms.”<sup>95</sup> The networks agreed.

Although the stand-up trend did not directly penetrate network prime time, it did heavily impact the direction the sitcom boom would take. The nature of a cutthroat club-comedy industry, as *Rolling Stone* reported in a November 1988 feature story on headliners like Jerry Seinfeld then navigating the club circuits, increasingly encouraged performers to fashion “a persona that can be packaged and sold.”<sup>96</sup> The commercial networks, in addition to poaching comedians from cable, scouted successful nightclub acts to supply a stream of fresh talent and began developing new sitcom pilots, in the words of ABC Entertainment president Ted Harbert, around “a point of view” supplied by distinctive young comics.<sup>97</sup> A promising young stand-up with a solid act honed in clubs and on cable was in one sense a proven commodity for broadcasters, yet could be signed at a fraction of the cost of a big-name star like *Cosby*. The overall number of half-hour sitcoms in prime time doubled between *The Cosby Show*’s premiere

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<sup>95</sup> Putterman, “It’s My Show So Who Cares,” 160.

<sup>96</sup> Strauss, “Clubbing of America,” 92.

<sup>97</sup> ABC president Ted Harbert, quoted in Tom Hopkins, “You Gotta Be Joking! Stand-up Comedians Make TV Sit up and Take Notice,” *Dayton Daily News* (Ohio), December 18, 1994, 1C, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 25, 2003).

in 1984 and the launch of the fall 1991 broadcast schedule.<sup>98</sup> By the 1994–95 season, four of the top five network series were sitcom vehicles for stand-up comics, including ABC’s *Roseanne* and NBC’s *Seinfeld*.<sup>99</sup> Comics looked to cable as a land of opportunity and artistic freedoms, but also as a career launch pad in pursuit of the coveted, lucrative network sitcom deal.

### **Sitcom Is Dead, Long Live Sitcom: Two Turns to Irony and Anti-Relevance**

A simple rule in television seems to be that the network with the hit sitcoms rules the roost; to a great degree, the history of network TV is nothing but a list of situation comedies.

— Essayist Andrew Holleran, 1990<sup>100</sup>

As cable’s reach expanded and the comedy boom hit its stride in the mid to late 1980s, the broadcast networks accelerated into what was hailed as a new “era of quality programs.”<sup>101</sup> Acknowledging advantages of a niche-driven broadcasting model, the networks sharpened their focus on the quality audience, that elusive class fraction of “hip,” well-educated, young adults thought to watch less TV on average than the typical viewer. In the 1980s, this loosely defined psychographic was predominantly comprised of socially liberal and upwardly mobile baby boomers, specifically “yuppies,” who frequented cable’s original programming enclaves. While *The Cosby Show* remained the jewel in NBC’s Quality crown and the period’s preeminent sitcom in the baby-boomer superparent tradition, eighties network television also scrambled to put forth alternatives to “family viewing” and safe “formula” shows.

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<sup>98</sup> Victor Dwyer with Pamela Young, “A Laugh a Minute,” *Maclean’s*, August 12, 1991, 40, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>99</sup> Hopkins, “You Gotta Be Joking!” 1C, trumpeted the trend: “Stand-up comedians are taking over television.”

<sup>100</sup> Holleran, “A Very Small Gene Pool,” 37.

<sup>101</sup> Alvin P. Sanoff with Steve Hawkins and Mary A. Fischer, “The Writer Is King in the New World of TV; Is Television Getting Better?” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 7, 1987, 62, LexisNexis (accessed March 5, 2004).

Brandon Tartikoff, president of NBC Entertainment and the force behind NBC's winning quality strategy in the 1980s, in a January 1986 round-table interview asserted that pressure to win back audiences defecting to cable was improving network television. "The competition has made extinct... the more derivative, lowest-common-denominator, least-objectionable programming," he stated, pointing to series that performed better "in HBO households than they do in the national Nielsens," like NBC's *Hill Street Blues* (1981–87) and *Cheers* (1982–93), as the new standard and future of prime time. CBS's entertainment programming chief B. Donald Grant echoed that his network was likewise pursuing a "literate, intelligent audience" by anticipating the preferences of the "discriminating television viewer."<sup>102</sup> "Is television getting better?" pondered Alvin P. Sanoff of *U.S. News & World Report* in fall of 1987, reporting that the networks were indeed taking more risks with seemingly "uncommercial" and "venturesome programming" with an emphasis on smart writing and complex characters designed to intrigue "the younger, better-educated viewers that advertisers crave." By addressing baby boomers as "hip, smart, sophisticated people" who had grown weary of TV's status quo, Sanoff stressed, the Big Three stood to gain "almost as much from innovative shows as from programs that have higher ratings but less desirable demographics."<sup>103</sup>

Increasingly, prime-time programs were called upon to distinguish themselves by making unusual aesthetic, conceptual, and intellectual demands on viewers. "Only the dull-minded could keep on doing formula shows," averred writer/producer Hugh Wilson, who developed *Frank's Place* for CBS, one of a handful of heavily anticipated comedy-dramas or "dramedies" introduced in the 1987–88 season that dispensed with the sitcom laugh track and dramatically

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<sup>102</sup> Brandon Tartikoff's and B. Donald (Bud) Grant's comments are highlights from a *Christian Science Monitor* round-table interview published in Unger, "Network TV; After Years of Decline, Better Days Ahead?"

<sup>103</sup> Sanoff et al., "Writer Is King," 62.

reconceived the half-hour format as highbrow sociodrama for this upscale quality audience.<sup>104</sup> Aiming for dry subtlety or in some cases cosmopolitan chic rather than laugh-a-minute comedy, these subdued yuppie quasi-soaps eschewed what *The Washington Post* not long beforehand had proclaimed “an era when too much humor is delivered via battering ram.”<sup>105</sup> Antifformula experimentation on the broadcast networks also ventured into more playful and boldly “postmodern” forms of genre mixing and antirealism with programs such as ABC’s self-reflexive comedic drama *Moonlighting* (1985–89) and offbeat sitcom *Sledge Hammer!* (1986–88) spoofing the cop genre. The former, a hit with both critics and audiences, belonged to a prestigious new class of quirky prime-time serial dramas laced with “smart” references designed to engage the college-educated audience, exemplifying a trend that John Thornton Caldwell dubs “yuppie night-school” and sees extending into quality sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* and *Seinfeld*.<sup>106</sup> In addressing the audience as “literate” and “in the know,” a number of network programs emerging in this period cultivated a sense of irony as a mark of distinction, rewarding interpretive savvy not only through the viewer’s ability to recognize stylistic, cultural, and intertextual references but also to “get” the cleverness of ironic perspectives on narrative or genre.

Even with experimentation on the rise, the sitcom remained “the network TV format king” in the ratings, as *Advertising Age* announced at the conclusion of the 1985–86 season, with women 18-to-34 comprising the genre’s core audience, a group coveted by advertisers.<sup>107</sup> Although *The Cosby Show* was often trumpeted as part of the trend of “better” television, the second half of the decade saw more direct attempts to cater expressly to working women as a core

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<sup>104</sup> Wilson’s quote is from Sanoff et al., *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Tom Shales, “Garry Shandling, Sly & Affable on Cable,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 1986, B1, B4.

<sup>106</sup> Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 251–53.

<sup>107</sup> “Sunday Still the Biggest TV Day,” *Advertising Age*, May 5, 1986, 28, LexisNexis (accessed March 5, 2004).

constituency of the quality audience, as well as shake up the genre. “Network television in 1986 is a woman’s world,” Sanoff had reported in fall of that year, with a “bumper crop” of female-oriented family and workplace comedies striving to “clone” *The Cosby Show*’s sense of realism and focus on relationships.<sup>108</sup> Somewhat tellingly, attempts to rekindle the particular chemistry of 1970s quality, most notably with Mary Tyler Moore’s sitcom encore *Mary* on CBS (1985–86), groomed as competition for *The Cosby Show*, foundered in this market.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, attempts at all three major networks to further “mature” and yuppify the half-hour comedy two seasons later by offering (as mentioned above) understated and complex slice-of-life narratives, such as CBS’s *Frank’s Place* (1987–88), ABC’s *The “Slap” Maxwell Story* (1987–88), and NBC’s *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (1987–88, continued on women’s cable network Lifetime through 1991), though collectively praised for innovation by Sanoff and many others, suffered in the ratings. Coming at the height of the comedy boom, these drama-sitcom blends also found themselves to some extent at cross-purposes with prevailing logics that saw laughter as the key inroad to attracting desirable youth audiences. Some network programming, like the cable competition, would double down on this appeal to youth (viewers 18-to-34, or more broadly, 18-to-49) by combining comedy with expressly “edgy” and tactically transgressive style or content.

Whereas critics had commonly complained that the “least objectionable programming” philosophy stood in the way of “better” television, some were quick to caution that the transition into niche programming did not always make network television more highbrow or serious so much as it entailed greater willingness to risk airing objectionable content to reach

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<sup>108</sup> Sanoff with Weisman, “New Season Yields a Bumper Crop of Female Stars and Family Comedies,” 78.

<sup>109</sup> For a decade-by-decade genre overview contextualizing the “serialization and ‘yuppification’” of network programming in the 1980s, see Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 113–33, who describes how, in the bigger picture, the MTM sitcom style nevertheless “emerged as the dominant form of the genre” in this decade—that is, the tradition linking quality to realism and “character comedy” (129).

the right audiences and recreate some of cable's "adult" ambience. The prolific *New York Times* media critic John J. O'Connor was again among those to comment on a coarsening of prime-time television's adult programming in the shadow of cable, as the networks began "inching forward into previously forbidden territories." "Today's viewers will find language and situations on their weekly series that would never have got past the 'program practices' guards just five years ago," wrote O'Connor in December 1987, citing network programs as diverse as hit sitcom *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985–92) and creator/producer Steven Bochco's sexually charged drama *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986–94) and prestige dramedy *Hooperman* (ABC, 1987–89) as evidence of network television's "impulse toward being crude or outrageous."<sup>110</sup> The prior season, *Advertising Age* had likewise flagged the bawdy *Golden Girls*—one of the year's most watched shows—for "tasteless jokes" on such topics as homosexuality and "bathroom habits," condemning the humor as "rank and vile."<sup>111</sup> Expanding on his objections that cable was lowering the barriers to "vulgarity" with "stand-up comedy acts that revel in aggressive coarseness," O'Connor found that ethos spilling over into such commercial broadcasting and reaching its "nadir" with FOX's *Married... With Children*.<sup>112</sup>

Even as the Big Three networks took cues from cable and eventually FOX, displaying a willingness to sacrifice some mass appeal to prioritize select demographics, a double-edged

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<sup>110</sup> O'Connor, "Farewell to Wit, Hello Vulgarity," H35. Five years earlier, indeed, the Big Three were competing with cable's more sexually themed content by increasing emphasis on "family viewing," leading *U.S. News & World Report* to declare a season of "escapism" as the networks faced pressure to keep sex and violence or "controversial" material to a minimum under the watchful eye of groups like the Coalition for Better Television. James Mann, "'Escapism' Is the Word for New TV Season," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 27, 1982, 51, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004).

<sup>111</sup> "Sunday Still the Biggest TV Day," *Advertising Age*. Holleran, "Very Small Gene Pool," too, argued (p. 40) that *Golden Girls* was no less "raunchy" than FOX's *Married... With Children* while again implicating HBO's Kinison and Murphy concerts in an expanding vortex of vulgarity.

<sup>112</sup> O'Connor, "Farewell to Wit, Hello Vulgarity," H35.

“mass and class”<sup>113</sup> strategy proved preferable, a point driven home by the notable failure of the aforementioned critically revered, high-minded “dramedies” of 1987, which stood in sharp contrast to the enduring success of joke-driven studio sitcom *Cheers*.<sup>114</sup> This critical and popular favorite, as media scholar Michele Hilmes has argued, demonstrated a high degree of demographic flexibility as two-tiered comedy scripted to amuse blue-collar and elite yuppie taste cultures simultaneously. A layered mode of address in the ensemble comedy proved effective for maximizing appeal, encouraging laughter both for and at upscale liberals and exploiting the possibilities for demographic pluralism.<sup>115</sup> By decade’s end, the emergent postmodern ironic ethos empowered new comedies with various strategies to further exercise a tiered mass-and-class address, whether by wrapping “smart” irony in crude characters and situations or, increasingly, inviting self-aware ambivalence in comedy about class identities and socially liberal ideologies of yuppiedom.

However, appeals to quality demographics notwithstanding, the crucial value of the sitcom was seen as being comedy’s appeal to youth. Earl Pomerantz, a writer for such quality sitcoms as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Cheers*, protests that this period began to phase out “the TV family” or at least banish its wise “authority figures” to the margins, beginning with programs like *Family Ties* where the parents quickly fell to the background with precocious teen Alex P. Keaton (Michael J. Fox) becoming the comic heart of the show, as

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<sup>113</sup> The phrase “mass and class” I borrow from Eric Schmuckler, “Quality Time,” *Mediaweek* 13, no. 16 (April 21, 2003): SR3, quoting an ad buyer on the advertiser appeal of quality shows from *The Cosby Show* to *The West Wing*.

<sup>114</sup> Notably, in keeping with the era’s emphasis on comedy *as* comedy, figures like Tartikoff condemned the dramedies for being insufficiently funny. For a detailed case study of the critical and industrial discourse surrounding the dramedies, see Philip Sewell, “From Discourse to Discord: Quality and Dramedy at the End of the Classic Network System,” *Television & New Media* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 235–59.

<sup>115</sup> Michele Hilmes, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name: *Cheers* and the Mediation of Cultures,” *Wide Angle* 12, no. 2 (April 1990): 64–73. We will see this particular mediation tactic—a kind of ‘democracy’ of joking—simulated somewhat parodically, contorted and collapsed for the more insistently antielitist and derisive aims of *Married... With Children*.



broadcasters heeded industry imperatives to “go younger.”<sup>116</sup> Objecting that an emerging demographic bias toward “Gen Xers” meant the dissolution of the TV family, Pomerantz lamented the loss of a certain message of “stability and well-being”—a shift he saw culminating in the 1990s streak of shows celebrating a culture of single “neurotic semi-adults” like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004).<sup>117</sup> As the major networks continued to pursue the “younger” demographics in prime time, and with the exception of older-skewing CBS (and NBC’s *Golden Girls*) avoided the “blue-haired set,” *Variety* in December 1993 reported the unabating “preference for situation comedies over all other genres.”<sup>118</sup>

As two of the most talked about sitcoms of the 1990s, *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld* each played a significant role in ringing in what critics heralded as the Age of Irony. With characters and joke content often deemed crude and “adolescent,” these series were also notable as a departure from conceiving of women as the primary audience for sitcom and indeed managed to attract young male viewers, considered “a fringe demographic”<sup>119</sup> and a difficult one for the broadcast networks to deliver reliably to advertisers. Both programs marked a decisive turn to postmodern self-referentiality and subversiveness in sitcom, while representing somewhat distinct taste cultures organized around irony. *Married... With Children* (premiering in April 1987) reveled in its reputation as blue-collar “loser television” and became the gateway for the youthful FOX’s aura of comic freedom and irreverence, while *Seinfeld* (after a shaky start with its pilot

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<sup>116</sup> Earl Pomerantz, “How Demographics Reshaped the TV Family,” *Television Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (winter 2004): 34–37. It bears mentioning that the lone hit from the 1987–88 cycle of dramedies, *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–93), was a nostalgic domestic comedy doubling as baby-boomer yet youth-targeted family TV, as a show set in the past with a child/teen protagonist and a present day adult narrator.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 37.

<sup>118</sup> Brian Lowry, “Ad Coin Rolls to Youth,” *Variety*, December 27, 1993, 33.

<sup>119</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*’s fall 1986 piece cited above on the rise of female-oriented shows mused that “men have deserted the networks in droves for cable, videocassette and independent stations, while women have remained loyal viewers.” Sanoff with Weisman, “New Season Yields a Bumper Crop of Female Stars,” 78.

and first season buried in the summer schedules of 1989 and 1990) subsequently became the beacon of “yuppie” irony. Presenting themselves as daring alternatives to the status quo, the former began as a populist response to the elitism of quality TV representations, while the latter came to redefine NBC quality in the image of the smart ironist. Both defied generic expectations of didacticism and sentimentality and flaunted instead a comic philosophy of deliberate anti-relevance, *Married* with its perverse parody of domestic comedy unmoored from parental moral authority and *Seinfeld* with its mesmerized focus on life’s minutia and wry self-positioning as the ultimate “show about nothing.”

*“Not the Cosbys”*: *Upping the Anti- with FOX*

Were Laurel and Hardy role models? Is Elmer Fudd a role model? These characters are just supposed to make people laugh, not teach or enlighten anyone.

— Ed O’Neill of *Married... With Children*, 1989<sup>120</sup>

FOX in its first decade gradually rose from obscurity to become the full-fledged fourth national network and a recognized comedy brand on the strength of its rebellious and niche programming. While embracing the “anti-sitcom” spirit of premium cable services and MTV, FOX’s early strategy was more overtly anti-*Cosby Show*, brazenly resisting the realist aesthetics and yuppie-centered discourse of quality television. Beginning with *Married... With Children* and *The Tracey Ullman Show*, the two series that launched FOX’s first night in prime time on April 5, 1987, the new network began assembling a small fleet of postmodern, ironic sitcoms and satirical comedy-variety sketch shows that lampooned television norms and delighted in intertextuality, in keeping with cable’s two-pronged emphasis on genre deconstruction and stand-up

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<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Steve Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy: Stars Defend Sitcom That’s Getting Ratings,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1989, E12.

or variety as the daring alternatives in comedy. This sense of alterity proved effective as the upstart sought to get noticed, gaining a foothold initially in urban markets by targeting inner-city minorities and youth in part with irreverent comedies like hip-hop-flavored sketch series *In Living Color* (1990–94), sketch-derived sitcom *The Simpsons*, and exuberantly artificial and crude sitcom burlesque *Get a Life*. While such entertainment provocatively defined itself against the cozy affluence of surrounding programs aimed at the yuppie quality viewer, with shows like these FOX replicated quality TV's flattery of the audience as sophisticated consumers of TV's conventions.

*Married... With Children*, the network's first hit sitcom, was unsurpassed during its decade-long run as the most pointedly anti-quality and outrageous of FOX comedies. The story centers on the Bundys, the quintessential "dysfunctional" nuclear family, a bickering blue-collar household leading petty lives in a dreary Chicago suburb. Soured spouses Al and Peggy (Ed O'Neill and Katey Sagal), together with air-headed teen daughter Kelly (Christina Applegate) and scheming, sarcastic son Bud (David Faustino), entertain themselves with open displays of contempt for one another. In pre-production, the series was known on the set as "Not the Cosbys" (or according to some sources, "Not the Cosby Show"), a working title that made explicit its comic mission to fracture the family sitcom mold of network television. The scripts invited viewers to take a perverse pleasure in casting off what *TV Guide* called "the goody-goody tone of *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*," a tone of unstinting sweetness that essayist Andrew Holleran opined "borders on nauseating" for some viewers.<sup>121</sup>

Series creators Michael G. Moyer and Ron Leavitt, a veteran writing team whose credits included *The Jeffersons*, *Happy Days*, *Laverne & Shirley*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*, felt convinced in 1986 that many Americans, like themselves, harbored a growing contempt for "Cosbymania."

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<sup>121</sup> Howard Polskin, "Does *Married... with [sic] Children* Go Too Far? Will It Give in to Critics?" *TV Guide* 37, no. 30 (July 29, 1989): 3; Holleran, "Very Small Gene Pool," 39.

“After 10 to 12 years of what I consider the more preachy situation comedies, people are ready to laugh again,” Moye told the *Los Angeles Times* in a 1989 feature charting their cringe comedy’s brushes with controversy and blossoming Nielsen ratings as the series began beating two of the Big Three in the Sunday night schedule. “[Audiences] don’t have to worry about a character on this sitcom having a heart attack or getting raped. They don’t have to worry about learning anything. They can just sit back and laugh for 30 minutes.”<sup>122</sup> *Married... With Children* regularly took on taboo adult themes, such as resentful marital sex, demeaning employment, and in one famously censored episode, women’s synchronized menstrual cycles (season three’s “The Camping Show,” initially titled “A Period Piece”), all delivered with “adolescent” humor.

FOX like MTV was a formative site for the postmodern trend dubbed “loser television,” mentioned earlier, oriented to Generation X with programs making ironic icons and antiheroes of society’s “losers” and underachievers. *Married... With Children* came to epitomize the losercom. Deadbeat Al Bundy, a sneering strip mall shoe salesman who (in the pilot episode) refers to his job as a “minimum wage paying slow death,” knows that his glory days as a high school football star are firmly in the past and serve only to underline his present failures and bleak future. He spends his days grouching and verbally abusing overweight female customers, then reluctantly returns home to an empty dinner plate and the emasculating sarcasm of his sex-starved wife Peggy (née Wanker), a layabout housewife and *Oprah* addict who, as the *Los Angeles Times*’s Steve Weinstein notes, finds him “woefully inadequate as a provider, as a companion, as a man.”<sup>123</sup> Like their mom, the two kids are parasites waiting to divvy up their father’s paycheck, blithely going through the motions of performing TV clichés of affection for “Daddy” in hopes of a cash handout.

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<sup>122</sup> Moye quoted in Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E1. Moye uses the word “Cosbymania” in *E! True Hollywood Story*’s episode 5.37, “*Married... With Children*,” first aired August 26, 2001, on E!

<sup>123</sup> Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E1.

“Peg, kids, time to torture me, I’m home,” Al drones as he slumps through the doorway to his house. “Let’s hear the pitter patter of little feet, the thrusting of greedy little hands.”<sup>124</sup>

Going against the advice of market researchers, Moyer and Leavitt from the pilot onwards refused to offer much in the way of assurances that the Bundys love and care for each other, gaining the writer duo a reputation as FOX’s “outlaw heroes.”<sup>125</sup> Early on, the series did offer rare glimpses of Al Bundy showing affection (strained but borderline sincere) toward his wife, most notably with a poignantly intimate bedroom scene in the second episode, couching their relationship in the comic and cultural narrative that real men don’t talk about feelings (see fig. 1.1). Overall, the show aimed to be “deliberately cartoonish” and bore the peculiar artificiality of the wackiest *Saturday Night Live* sketch comedy, as stressed in Weinstein’s 1989 profile of the show relaying the cast’s and producers’ conviction (paraphrased by the journalist) that “there has never been anything like this sitcom that was designed to be anti-sitcom.”<sup>126</sup>

The crass, class-conscious series was loosely inspired by the abrasive comic personas of “screaming” stand-ups Sam Kinison and Roseanne Barr. In this respect, the show, however briefly, was at the outset expressly conceived as an acrimonious marriage between domestic and stand-up comedy, subjecting the former to the latter’s unpredictability and refusal to be well behaved.<sup>127</sup> As a further salute to performative unruliness and hyperbolic excess, the Bundy name itself,

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<sup>124</sup> This gag explicitly parodying the “Honey, I’m home” breadwinner structure of classic sitcoms kicks off *Married... With Children*’s “If I Were a Rich Man,” episode 2.3 (production number 204), written by Marcy Vosburgh and Sandy Sprung, first aired October 4, 1987, on FOX.

<sup>125</sup> Polskin, “Does *Married... with Children* Go Too Far?” 2.

<sup>126</sup> Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E1, E12, in his own words. Marc, *Comic Visions*, 192, echoes that *Married* is closer in tone and style to a “comedy-variety sketch than a representational situation comedy series.”

<sup>127</sup> This originating concept is recounted in various sources, including Holleran, “Very Small Gene Pool,” 39, and the *E! True Hollywood Story*. Kinison later guest starred on the sitcom, appearing in season four as Al Bundy’s guardian angel in a December 1989 holiday special (see fig. 1.6), as did another icon of “screaming” comedy, Bobcat Goldthwait, featured as one of Peg’s eccentric relatives in season seven (September 13, 1992).

according to the show’s lore, alludes to popular professional wrestler “King Kong Bundy” of the WWF—the archetypal synthetic sport of postmodern surfaces and shout-fest “trash” TV. When up-and-coming comics Kinison and Barr both declined to star in the show, the parts of Al and Peggy Bundy were significantly retooled, with experienced actors O’Neill and Sagal bringing a mutual performance of cool dismissiveness (rather than shrill shouting) as the core relationship dynamic and refining their roles in ways that would heighten the potential for dramatic irony.



Figures 1.1 and 1.2. *Left:* In the second show of the series, Al (Ed O’Neill) reassures Peggy (Katey Sagal) that he loves her just the way she is, like his tattered old baseball glove. *Right:* Late in season two, Al begrudges his wife her victory hug after she demands a verbal “I love you” on Valentine’s Day. While thematically consistent, contrasting these related scenes at the level of tone, facial acting, costuming, and color palette underscores the series’ evolution into a full-blown “living cartoon” by its second season. “Thinergy” and “Peggy Loves Al, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah,” *Married... With Children*, originally aired April 5, 1987, and February 14, 1988, on FOX.

O’Neill contended that the series was unusually “honest” in its unromantic treatment of sex and bitterness in a stale marriage, and the writers believed that many viewers, while not looking to the show for role models, related on some level to Al Bundy’s experience of toil and misery and took solace in seeing their frustrations with a dismal work or family life represented.<sup>128</sup> Co-star Sagal said of the show’s populist appeal, “People tell us all the time that they have a

<sup>128</sup> O’Neill and Moye express these views in Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E12, and elsewhere.

father or an uncle who is just like Al.... Not everyone out there is young doctors and lawyers and two income families.... We're not all 'thirtysomething.'"<sup>129</sup> In Moye's words, quoted in *The New York Times* in December 1987, "Al says what we believe a lot of men in his position would like to say to their wives and children."<sup>130</sup> The aesthetics of antirealism granted license to breach polite representational norms, even as the show indirectly staked this claim to a certain unvarnished social realism and affective "honesty" in airing aggressively politically incorrect attitudes. Although it became the paradigm for comedy unfettered by any obligation to quality or relevance, the sitcom was produced by Embassy Communications, which up until 1985 had been a Norman Lear company, and indeed, occasional parallels were tentatively drawn to *All in the Family* by virtue of *Married... With Children*'s flawed patriarch, whose ignorance and verbal sniping prompted the coinage "Father Knows Worst."<sup>131</sup>

For all their friction, the Bundy clan manages to muster a sense of sporadic solidarity ("Bundy unity" as Al calls it), if only to team up and take sporting pride in manipulating and humiliating their neighbors, straight-laced yuppie newlyweds Steve and Marcy Rhoades (David Garrison and Amanda Bearse), gleefully trampling the plucky couple's romantic optimism and deflating their liberal pretensions at every opportunity.<sup>132</sup> The Rhoades stand for gender equality, with Marcy in particular spouting platitudes about the value of marital partnership ("consulting our life partner"), honesty, and taking the mental and moral high road. Bankers by profession,

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<sup>129</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, E1. Sagal's remark directly alludes both to the Huxtable power couple Cliff and Clair (obstetrician and lawyer) and the yuppie prime-time quality soap *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987–91).

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in O'Connor, "Farewell to Wit, Hello Vulgarity," H35.

<sup>131</sup> For example, Clarence Lusane uses this phrase in "Assessing the Disconnect between Black & White Television Audiences: The Race, Class and Gender Politics of *Married... With Children*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 1 (1999): 16.

<sup>132</sup> Al invokes a code of "Bundy unity" in passing in *Married... With Children*, "For Whom the Bell Tolls," episode 2.7, written by Richard Gurman and Katherine Green, first aired October 25, 1987, on FOX.

the progressive power couple also exudes middle-class materialism, with Steve bragging that he works in “the cathedral of capitalism.”<sup>133</sup> Ambitious social climbers, they serve as the main comic foils for the stagnant Bundys. Throughout the first four seasons, much of the humor depends upon the Bundys’ calculated and unyielding assaults on their neighbors’ aspirational lifestyle—mocking the youthful passion and dynamism, upward mobility, and professionalism that are the building blocks of their “yuppie” identity. Befriending and insinuating themselves between the devoted young couple, Al and Peggy make a game of goading, corrupting, and dividing their naïve new friends for their own amusement or personal gain (see figs. 1.3 and 1.4). Often the instigator, Al makes Marcy (the self-respecting feminist career woman) his adversary and mentors Steve as his pupil and pawn, drawing them into a battle of the sexes where their idealism is continually put to the test and steadily eroded by antiquated Bundy gender politics.



Figures 1.3 and 1.4. *Left*: The comic motif of divide-and-conquer is visually reinforced by character blocking, with Al Bundy taking center stage physically insinuated between the Rhoades. *Right*: Crashing his neighbors’ date night, Al savors the ensuing family feud as romance dissolves for Steve and Marcy into a grudge match to determine who has the more repellant mother-in-law. “The Poker Game” and “All in the Family,” *Married... With Children*, originally aired May 24, 1987, and May 1, 1988, on FOX.

<sup>133</sup> “If I Were a Rich Man” (episode 2.3, cited above). The surname Rhoades, like Bundy, is rumored to be an homage to a professional wrestler, “The American Dream” Dusty Rhoades, now a WWE Hall of Famer.



This theme plays out again and again, laying the comic foundation for the early seasons. “I work in hell, I earn nothing,” Al whines over a pile of unpaid bills in episode four of the series (April 1987’s “Whose Room Is It Anyway?”), while Steve and Marcy gloat that they scarcely know what to do with their sizable tax refund. The Rhoades’ decision to use their windfall to build an addition to their home (pending the Bundys’ signed consent) is derailed by Al’s desire for a men’s pool room and Peg’s opposing scheme to get her own exercise room next door. When the “unselfish” newlyweds resolve their differences respectfully and settle on a cozy sitting room they can share, the Bundys lose out but have the final satisfaction of petty retaliation by retracting their consent, coming together to crush their neighbors’ suburban dream. In “The Poker Game” a month later, after winning the smugly thrifty Steve’s mortgage money at the card table, Al coaches him to hide the loss by distracting his anti-gambling spouse from budget matters with sex (fig. 1.3). When sexual subterfuge fails, Al advises a patriarchal ultimatum. “That’s what being a man is all about, Steve. Making mistakes, and *not caring*,” he lectures.<sup>134</sup> This latter storyline sees Mr. Rhoades disabused of optimism and “caring” not only by Al but also the invisible hand of scriptwriters Leavitt and Moyer, who ensure that the character’s privilege, pompousness, and charitable nature backfire: Steve’s magnanimous gesture of handing the last five dollars of his paycheck to a hungry homeless man results in him being chased by a pack of grasping vagrants—an absurd punitive outcome—reducing to naivety his quasi-karmic, preachy maxim that “if you do something good, something good will always happen to you in return.” Steve nevertheless comes out ahead in certain scenarios, largely by embracing the spirit of competitive sarcasm and scheming, and the text acknowledges that he possesses superior sexual

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<sup>134</sup> *Married... With Children*, “Whose Room Is It Anyway?” episode 1.4 (production no. 106), written by Marcy Vosburgh and Sandy Sprung, first aired April 26, 1987; and “The Poker Game,” episode 1.8 (prod. no. 110), written by Ron Leavitt and Michael Moyer, first aired May 24, 1987, on FOX.

stamina *and* homemaking skills—outperforming Al and Peg put together.<sup>135</sup> Established in the pilot, this battle-of-the-sexes theme is further honed in many episodes.<sup>136</sup>

For “loser” Al Bundy, habituated to failure, even winning comes as a punishment. When the hostile married couple impersonate the Rhoades in order to appear on a TV game show for newlyweds called *How Do I Love Thee?*, Peg’s eagerness to subject her husband to public humiliation and torture, and vice versa, pays off in the form of commodities—Al is crushed under a half-ton pile of obese women on a bed, stung in a killer bee chamber, and ultimately electrocuted, in the name of “winning” prizes such as a ladies’ watch, toaster, and washer-dryer, all traded up for Peggy’s dream car. The following week, in the March 1988 episode “Father Lode,” Al scores big at the race track while Steve wins only a pittance, but both men end up with nothing once their wives discover they are hiding cash—an outcome Steve fails to foresee (“You, my friend, are a *loser*, whereas I am your consummate winner,” he crows after extorting hush money) but Al shruggingly accepts as inevitable.<sup>137</sup> Earlier in season two (“If I Were a Rich Man”), Al once again tempts Steve into violating his no-gambling policy,

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<sup>135</sup> This point is hammered home in season two’s “The Razor’s Edge,” episode 2.10, written by Ellen L. Fogle, first aired November 15, 1987, on FOX. In another notable example from scriptwriters Vosburgh and Sprung, “Impo-Dent,” episode 2.19, February 28, 1988, “liberated man” Steve under Al’s tutelage fakes impotence after Marcy dents his Mercedes, and she must accept Al’s degrading advice to turn her man on by becoming “servile.” As the two men share a beer, Steve toasts his mentor for giving “me a wife I never even dreamed existed.”

<sup>136</sup> For an early analysis that insightfully explores this dynamic of the show, see Denise J. Kervin, “Ambivalent Pleasures from *Married... With Children*,” *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 2 (summer 1990): 42–52. Kervin argues that the series uses Al and Peg Bundy’s relentless corrupting of the Rhoades to create “ambivalent pleasures” for an audience chiefly comprised of baby boomers, by confronting them with contradictory subject positions in a clash of traditional values (“learned as a child”) versus progressive ideals (“acquired as adults”) symbolically represented through these two couples. While I do not fully agree with Kervin’s thesis—predicated on a boomer viewer and one who values gender equality but seemingly subconsciously favors the “original subject position formed within dominant ideology” over a fragile learned “layer” of liberalism—I recommend her overview of how contact with the Bundys functions ideologically and comedically to “bring out the previously hidden, dominantly defined core within Steve and Marcy, tearing away their liberal veneer and moving them towards agreement with Al and Peg” (see pp. 50–51).

<sup>137</sup> *Married... With Children*, “Just Married... With Children,” episode 2.20, written by Ellen L. Fogle, first aired March 6, 1988; and “Father Lode,” 2.21, written by Jerry Perzigian, first aired March 13, 1988, on FOX.

this time playing poker with borrowed riches inside his bank's vault, and nearly persuades him to take the money and run off on their families, indulging a fantasy of escaping to Canada as fugitives. When a fortuitously timed banking glitch the next day reveals that the theft would have gone undetected, Al is castigated by his wife and children, and further mocked by the unseen narrative forces that seal his unchangeable fate, for *not stealing* a million dollars when he had the opportunity. Plots like these that remove incentives for the characters to "do the right thing," destabilizing the moral foundations of the family sitcom for the viewer's pleasure, are a crucial facet of the program's attack on television didacticism.<sup>138</sup> But no element of the text sustains that agenda quite like Al Bundy's spirited tutorials in sexism, selfishness, and nihilism as the reigning anti-Cosby TV dad.

Inverting the paradigm of sitcom "lessons," the protagonist preaches his loser logic and rails against male sensitivity from the lowly soapbox that doubles as the program's ironic platform. "Aw, who cares?" is Al's familiar refrain, and the essence of the value system that he and Peg instill in their children, a running joke of the initial seasons. When asked about his day at school, in the opening scene of the episode "If I Were a Rich Man" discussed above, son Bud's parroted response "Who cares?" earns Al's inattentive approval: "Good boy. Now, shut up, Bud, the game's gonna come on." "Remember how you always say it's important to do nice things for other people?" young Bud asks in another fall 1987 episode, reflexively playing up the show's standing as the antithesis of the quality family sitcom. "I never say that, Son," Al tersely replies. When Peggy also denies credit for this nugget of parental counsel, Bud delivers the punch line,

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<sup>138</sup> "I believe deep down that you are an honest man," exhorts Steve, who because of the computer error suspects Al did abscond with the missing million and appeals to his conscience and his wife to "make him do the right thing."

“Hmm, must have been Cosby, then.”<sup>139</sup> “Mom, when I grow up I want to be just like you. I want to *do* nothing. I want to *be* nothing,” Kelly announces at her school’s Women’s Career Day, where “housewife” Peg teaches teen girls (and their gainfully employed mothers) that no woman needs a job if she can master such skills as how to purloin the wallet from her husband’s pants pocket. In this same February 1989 episode, Al teaches his son about responsibility and initiative, Bundy-style, by ordering Bud to open a lemonade stand in the middle of winter, a self-defeating exercise culminating in “valuable lessons” as Al explains that inevitable failure is a male rite of passage. In much the same way that Al appeals to Steve’s “lower” nature, the junior Bundy is a regular receptacle for the shoe salesman’s jaded wisdom that being a man means a life of resignation (“You earned a quarter and the women took it. Congratulations, Bud, today you are a man.”) and ideally also revenge (“If you have a chance to get back at a girl who has wronged you, do it.... Humiliate her for me, Son.”).<sup>140</sup> When it comes to choosing their family credo, in a May 1990 episode, Al and his progeny dicker over whether to claim futility, willful ignorance, or apathy as their birthright: “A Bundy never wins, but a Bundy never quits,” “a Bundy never learns,” or “a Bundy never cares.”<sup>141</sup>

As FOX’s flagship comedy, *Married... With Children* served as what series star O’Neill came to see as the “shock troops” in the network’s invasion of prime time.<sup>142</sup> With its reputation for ironically celebrating “white trash” American life, the show mirrored the aura of

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<sup>139</sup> Dialogue excerpted from *Married... With Children*’s “If I Were a Rich Man” (episode 2.3, cited earlier) and “Earth Angel,” episode 2.12, written by Ellen L. Fogle, first aired December 6, 1987, on FOX.

<sup>140</sup> The career lessons are from “My Mom, the Mom,” episode 3.12, written by Lesa Kite and Cindy Begel, first aired February 26, 1989; and the revenge speech is from “What Goes Around Comes Around,” 4.18, wr. Ellen L. Fogle, first aired February 25, 1990, on FOX. As the kids age in the later seasons, the “who cares” ethos remains but the lesson structure is less pronounced and Bud’s mock innocence is replaced with a hyperbolically hormonal drive for sex.

<sup>141</sup> “Yard Sale,” episode 4.23, written by Marcy Vosburgh and Sandy Sprung, first aired May 13, 1990, on FOX.

<sup>142</sup> Interviewed in *E! True Hollywood Story*, “*Married... With Children*.”

sensationalism attached to FOX tabloid television like *When Animals Attack* and *Cops*. It became the sitcom ambassador of the emergent phenomenon of “trash TV” being decried in various news venues of its day. Indeed, the show’s most famous objector, Michigan viewer Terry Rakolta, was featured on a *Nightline* segment on the topic of trash television in 1989. Rakolta, a wealthy Christian conservative housewife and concerned mother of four, had stumbled upon a bawdy episode one evening that January with her children during what was still unofficially considered the “family hour.”<sup>143</sup> Outraged by *Married... With Children*’s apparent promotion of “anti-family values,” she organized a sponsor boycott, and eventually founded an organization for anti-obscenity activism.<sup>144</sup> Although Rakolta persuaded several major advertisers to withdraw from the show, her protest and talk show appearances amounted to free publicity for FOX. The controversy drew in curious viewers, and was generally seen as a main factor in taking this comedy from a little known oddity to a break-out cult hit.<sup>145</sup> The Rakolta campaign also succeeded in getting the show bumped to 9 p.m. and, *Married*’s creators complain, led to closer scrutiny of scripts by network censors.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, the show enjoyed its newfound notoriety as FOX’s “most controversial program,” a description bestowed by *TV Guide* in summer 1989, and not coincidentally was the network’s number-one comedy.<sup>147</sup> During its third season *Married... With Children* had become the first FOX series to be viewed

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<sup>143</sup> The Family Viewing Hour was a former National Association of Broadcasters policy in the 1970s—reserving the first hour of prime time (8-to-9 p.m. Eastern) for family-friendly programming—that was overturned as a result of a court case launched by Norman Lear, but remained a normative practice for the Big Three in the 1980s and continues to be a benchmark for socially conservative television activists.

<sup>144</sup> For the quoted phrase, attributed to Rakolta, see Howard Rosenberg, “Some Viewers Can Make a Difference,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1989, E1.

<sup>145</sup> John Fiske, “Family Discipline: A TV Text and an Audience,” *Journal of Communication & Culture* no. 1 (1993): 8–9. Published by the Graduate School of Mass Communications, Fu Jen Catholic University, Japan.

<sup>146</sup> Polskin, “Does *Married... with Children* Go Too Far?” 2–5.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

by more than one-quarter of households using television (HUT) in its time slot. By summer 1990, both *Married* and *The Simpsons* began placing in the top ten, leading Holleran to decree that FOX had finally arrived as the fourth network by joining the ranks of the sitcom hit-makers.<sup>148</sup>

Counter-programming *Cosby* was a tactic and attitude that came to define FOX's first half-decade of comedy. As scholar Clarence Lusane discerns, "It was a case of 'if you cant beat 'em, diss 'em.'" <sup>149</sup> Profiling the FOX strategy in a November 1990 essay in the journal *WigWag*, Holleran surmised, "Going up against 'Cosby' is a statement of corporate identity"—the unmistakable message being "We're different!"—with hits like *The Simpsons* and *In Living Color* sharing *Married*'s claim on being "Not the Cosby Show." Holleran speculated that the latter, the acclaimed multiracial sketch series that launched the careers of Damon Wayans and Jim Carrey, might be "the real anti-*Cosby*" with its bold approach to exploring racial themes with humor.<sup>150</sup> But it was *The Simpsons* that proved to be *Cosby*'s immediate and fiercest rival, going up against the NBC comedy juggernaut on Thursday nights for its second season (1990–91) and emerging a ratings victor in the key demographics, another turning point for FOX. Media theorist Matthew Henry goes so far as to cite the moment *The Simpsons* surpassed *The Cosby Show* (and precipitated its cancellation) as a milestone for postmodernism and proof that "the family sitcom in its traditional structure and conventional trappings was null and void."<sup>151</sup> Animation scholar

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<sup>148</sup> Holleran, "Very Small Gene Pool," 37–38. The rise to a one-quarter audience share in the third season (1988–89) is cited as a milestone in the *E! True Hollywood Story* documentary special.

<sup>149</sup> Lusane, "Assessing the Disconnect," 14.

<sup>150</sup> Holleran, "Very Small Gene Pool," 38, 39, 41.

<sup>151</sup> Matthew Henry, "The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism and *The Simpsons*," *Studies in Popular Culture* 17, no. 1 (October 1994): 92–93. Kevin Dettmar, "Countercultural Literacy: Learning Irony with *The Simpsons*," in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, ed. John Alberti (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2004), echoes, "Moralistic television is pretty easy, and pretty well played out. The platitudinous verities of *Father Knows Best* and *The Cosby Show* do not map very well onto the lived experience of many contemporary television viewers and millennial citizens" (104).

Paul Wells stresses the “extraordinary literateness” and boomer “counterculture credentials” of *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening and his team, an authorial hand that for Wells and many critics ensures that the cartoon and its reflexive irony amounted to a “politically engaged” postmodern statement fostering a critical viewer.<sup>152</sup> With this popular text, such assurances of “literateness” served as the counterweight to the anxieties that the FOX show glorified nihilism or “Gen-X” cynical irony and apathy in the figure of Bart, whom Cosby branded a bad role model.

In subverting TV’s nuclear family, *The Simpsons* alongside *Married... With Children* sparked some social panic with its representation and seeming celebration of “dysfunctionality,” and together they were sometimes discussed as a strain of “anti-family shows.”<sup>153</sup> Of FOX programming, these series in particular throughout their early years attracted a mixture of praise and protest for their perceived mockery of heartland and “family values.” TV theorist Jane Feuer states that *Married... With Children* stood out as a dissident sitcom “radically critical of family values,” while animation scholars Carole A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, among others, identify *The Simpsons* likewise as “ironic commentary on the family values discourse prevalent when the series began.”<sup>154</sup> Denise J. Kervin further contends that *Married* subverts “naturalized beliefs” about class and family such as “the virtue of hard work” and the myth of parental “selflessness,” arguments that have been made more forcefully for Roseanne Barr’s own hit

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<sup>152</sup> Wells, *Animation and America*, 95–97. In Wells’s account, the “nihilism” and “underachievement” depicted in the characters of Homer and Bart Simpson function as ironic commentary on “indifference” and materialism rampant in American culture. Numerous scholars provide textual analyses of the protean *Simpsons* theorizing its reception and functions as satire, parody, and irony. My project does not unpack this text’s prominent role in shaping and defining pleasures of irony in the 1990s, given the abundance of admirable literature covering this subject. For relevant studies, see Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Dettmar, “Countercultural Literacy: Learning Irony with *The Simpsons*,” 85–106.

<sup>153</sup> This phrase was taken up by assorted critics, including Rosenberg, “Some Viewers Can Make a Difference,” E1.

<sup>154</sup> Feuer, “Situation Comedy, Part 2,” 69; and Carole A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, “Introduction: Prime Time Animation—An Overview,” in *Prime Time Animation*, 6–7.

sitcom *Roseanne* which arrived the next year to abundant praise for its raw realism and made her a working-class feminist icon.<sup>155</sup> Some academic critics felt that *Married... With Children* paled by comparison to *Roseanne* as comedy exposing the limits of the American Dream that *Cosby* embodied, even though the series was flush with financial gallows humor about struggling to pay bills, going hungry, and living in poverty in what Al Bundy wryly refers to at one point as his “ghetto home.”<sup>156</sup> Feuer’s and Kervin’s claims notwithstanding, relatively few scholars have sought to make a case for *Married* as viable social satire, with some preferring instead to stress this show’s limited scope—as genre parody directing its satire inward at the mechanics of sitcom form itself—and many historians assigning greater cultural value (and relevance) to *The Simpsons* and *In Living Color*, along with ABC’s *Roseanne*, as the subversively class-conscious comedies of the period.<sup>157</sup>

Whereas *The Tracey Ullman Show* and its spin-off *Simpsons* aimed for some topicality and carried artistic clout, respectively as live theatre-inspired variety and “literate” satire suffused with wit by writers from the Harvard Lampoon, *Married... With Children* made no claims to being either art or social commentary (see figs. 1.5 and 1.6). Rather, the cast and writers have repeatedly remarked in interviews that they saw the program making no

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<sup>155</sup> Kervin, “Ambivalent Pleasures,” 47. For feminist criticism on unruly *Roseanne*’s role in denaturalizing myths of the sitcom Mom as domestic angel, see Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 284–5; and Janet Lee, “Subversive Sitcoms: *Roseanne* as Inspiration for Feminist Resistance,” *Women’s Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 1992): 87–101.

<sup>156</sup> “The Razor’s Edge” (episode 2.10, November 15, 1987, cited earlier). Zingers and plot premises about low-income family life regularly framed the narrative. Typical examples from the first few seasons can be found in “Peggy Sue Got Work” (1.9, May 31, 1987), “Where’s the Boss?” (1.12, June 21, 1987), “A Three Job, No Income Family” (3.14, March 19, 1989), and “A Taxing Problem” (4.14, January 14, 1990).

<sup>157</sup> For example, David Marc, “Friends of the Family,” chap. 7 of *Comic Visions*, argues *Married* “stops short of convincing satire” and lacks “radical potential,” as a text opting for “verbal slapstick” and lampooning not the American Dream but merely how it has been represented from *Leave It to Beaver* to *The Cosby Show* (p. 192). In contrast, he finds *The Simpsons* to be “bona fide satire of middle-class family life” and sees *Roseanne* making a significant socio-economic intervention into the genre (194–95).



“statement” of social import. Reviewer Ed Bark of *The Dallas Morning News* in 1989 deemed the series “one of the funniest” and a refreshing change of pace precisely because it “has absolutely no redeeming value,” while declaring it “the coarsest show that’s ever been on prime-time television.”<sup>158</sup> Many critics failed to be entertained, however, like *Southeast Missourian* columnist Ken Newton who in 1989 condemned the series as “a half-hour of sexual putdowns and gastronomic humor,” and in the international press, a Jerusalem-based journalist who five years later pressed FOX’s former chairman Barry Diller to answer for this “moronically raunchy” sitcom that “seemed to drag the level of American TV to its lowest depths.”<sup>159</sup> Although *The Simpsons*, with its quarter-century on the air, has enjoyed greater countercultural chic and pride of place in media histories and popular memory for disrupting the classic network system and traditional conceptions of the situation comedy, it was *Married... With Children*, as humor historian Doyle Greene reminds, that first “put FOX on the TV map” with its “more confrontational effort to demolish the sitcom.”<sup>160</sup>

Other early FOX comedies at times self-consciously cannibalized the discourse on nihilism. For example, on a first season episode of Chris Elliott’s *Get a Life*, the star rages, “They’re gonna tear down my childhood playground. No, no! What kind of stinking nihilistic world are we living in?!” in a hand-wringing monologue dripping with dopey nostalgia that launches his doomed quest to restore the condemned site, now a trash-strewn wasteland, to its former glory.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ed Bark of *The Dallas Morning News*, quoted in Polskin, “Does *Married... with Children* Go Too Far?” 3.

<sup>159</sup> Ken Newton, “McCarthyism of Television? Let’s Not Get Carried Away,” *Southeast Missourian* (Cape Girardeau, Mo.), July 26, 1989, 12A; and Calev Ben-David, “Diller’s Crossing,” *The Jerusalem Report* (Jerusalem), October 6, 1994, 42, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Doyle Greene, “Fair and Balanced Satire: Against *The Simpsons*,” in *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2008), 200.

<sup>161</sup> *Get a Life*, “Pile of Death,” episode 1.5, written by Chris Elliott and Adam Resnick, first aired October 21, 1990, on FOX.

The episode, and series as a whole, baldly signals its postmodern-ness through its constant emphasis on play and insistent lampooning of the civic-minded sitcom's often melodramatic social crusades. A shorter lived series that followed *Get a Life* and *Married... With Children* in the Sunday schedule, *Good Grief* (1990–91) starring comedian Howie Mandel, was set in a funeral home called Sincerity Mortuary, the name itself evocative of the notion that irony knelled the death of sincerity. These comedies aspiring to “poor taste” continued and confirmed the pattern set by *Married*.



Figure 1.5. Trashing ‘Quality’ TV: Gathered ‘round the TV set, the Bundy family scowls at ABC’s acclaimed lineup of “*Roseanne*, *Moonlighting*, and the award-winning *thirtysomething*,” the mere mention of which has a laxative effect on Al’s bowels. “A Dump of My Own,” *Married... With Children*, originally aired January 8, 1989, on FOX.



Figure 1.6. Breaking the Yule: Sam Kinison makes a guest appearance as a ranting, rancorous guardian angel who claims he was driven to suicide by a fat, lusty wife. Besides learning that death is no escape from marital acrimony, Al is shown that, had he never been born, his family would lead loving, rewarding lives. “It’s a Bundyful Life, part 2,” *Married... With Children*, originally aired December 17, 1989, on FOX.

At a time when quality sitcoms and dramedies moved away from laugh tracks and studio production, *Married... With Children* preferred to exaggerate its staginess and “live” soundtrack. The FOX studio audience takes on a life of its own and somewhat dictates the show’s sensibility and pacing. Particularly by the later seasons, from their seats at the soundstage fans raucously cheered as Al made his entrance on the set and hooted for “slutty” daughter Kelly with a rowdy energy to some extent reminiscent of the testosterone-charged wrestling culture for which Bundys (and Rhoades) were named. Cast interviews speak to the challenges of performing for a very vocal (often inebriated) portion of the male fan base who “idolized” O’Neill’s character, and who sexualized Applegate’s in ways that made the teen actress uncomfortable. Yet, as the theatrically trained actor David Garrison, who played Steve Rhoades and eventually left the series during its fourth season to return to his Broadway roots, has remarked in hindsight, “When the show was at its best, ... [i]t was a little piece of theater.” He recalls, “And to have the audience there as part of that rhythm was *really* important. ... We sort of got the *pace* of the show because of the notion of the bi-play between the audience and the show.”<sup>162</sup> Significantly, the series regularly relied on female scriptwriters to create what Katey Sagal calls its “male point of view,” and co-star Amanda Bearse directed more than thirty episodes over the last six seasons.<sup>163</sup>

*Married... With Children* and the surrounding trend of “loser television” significantly reinfects and complicates what Chesebro had theorized a decade before as television irony’s

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<sup>162</sup> Garrison’s commentary is part of a cast interview included on the DVD release of *Married... With Children*’s third season (Sony Pictures/Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2005), which also features Christina Applegate recalling the challenges of dealing with the “drunk audiences.” The *E! True Hollywood Story* further explores how fans “idolized” Al Bundy. See also Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 192, who observes: “The crucial fourth-wall illusion, so carefully maintained by married-with-children domesticoms..., disintegrates as the studio audience is given license to abandon the ultra-conservative protocols of traditional sitcom spectatorship to hoot and howl at every rank-out and sexual innuendo, the two comic techniques that thoroughly dominate the program.”

<sup>163</sup> Sagal uses this phrase in interview footage included with the season three DVD (same as cited above). Bearse’s directorial contributions began in 1991 and increased from season eight onwards (the same year she came out publicly as a lesbian comic), averaging one-quarter of the episodes produced during the show’s last four years on air.

“rhetoric of the loser.”<sup>164</sup> His schema, referenced by television scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, drew a clear distinction between ironic, mimetic, leader-centered, and other types of scripted fictional series, based on the way in which viewers are expected to relate (or else feel superior) to central characters. Ironic programs as defined by Chesebro, a rare but prominent mode in U.S. prime time exemplified by several of Norman Lear’s domestic sitcoms as I noted earlier, reveal the relative lack of power and intelligence of their central characters, encouraging the viewer to focus on a character’s inferiority and deep moral failings. In contrast, in the mimetic mode, which describes the majority of American sitcoms, each main character is meant to be seen as “one of us,” generally acting with the best of intentions, rising to meet challenges not unlike those we (the viewers at home) face in our own lives.<sup>165</sup>

Reagan era realism was replete with family sitcoms advancing the mimetic tradition, and presuming empathetic (versus irony’s derisive or profoundly ambivalent) laughter. “The viewer’s identification with the character is the crux of it,” Susan Horowitz wrote in 1984 in praise of shows like CBS’s *Kate & Allie* that “demand that you like and believe in the characters.”<sup>166</sup> On a mimetic sitcom, Chesebro explained, a central character’s values are likely to be gently explored through stories of personal growth (as with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), and while this character may inadvertently violate a few social norms and rules, her value system will not be presented as a perpetual problem and viewers can rest assured that everyone ends up “wiser” for the experience. The ironic protagonist, on the other hand, in Chesebro’s taxonomy, is constantly “polluting” the social system and is implicitly to be condemned as (in Himmelstein’s

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<sup>164</sup> Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series,” 43.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>166</sup> Horowitz, “Sitcom Domesticus,” 23.

words) “the eternal loser”; while smarter or kinder characters may attempt to correct the offending behavior and manage the damage it causes in any given week, episodes end with the central character’s disruptive values being “reinstated” to cause trouble again the next week.<sup>167</sup>

On the surface, this rhetorical mode somewhat captures the narrative mechanics of *Married... With Children*, provided we overlook the absence of any characters granted moral authority by the text.<sup>168</sup> However, such a formula-based definitional scheme, tailored for the late classic network era, does not adequately accommodate series like this one that hail the audience into an ironic relationship with television itself, turning irony back onto sitcom form, much less account for youth media culture’s irreverent reaccenting of various “loser” archetypes during the 1980s and 1990s as cultural identities to be consumed (or performed) ironically for their crudity or nihilism. It also does not anticipate television’s post-didactic moment generating texts that would consistently blur these categories, whether by embracing losers within TV’s “us” or allowing a set of central characters to operate in somewhat different comic registers (as I will argue *Seinfeld* does). Further complicating the attempts to pin down meanings of “loser” shows as a cultural trope or trajectory for irony during this period is the fact that they run along a continuum—from cartoonal anarchy to reflexive realism, and from narratives serving up “amorality” and alienation in the form of irredeemably antisocial or hopelessly irresponsible characters like the Bundys or Beavis and Butt-Head to the expressly ethical themes and deep pathos of a family show like *Roseanne*, or any combination of the above served with self-aware irony.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series,” 24–25, 43. Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind*, 79, in a synopsis of Chesebro’s analytical scheme, supplies the phrase “the eternal loser.”

<sup>168</sup> See Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 191. The series advances its anti-sitcom agenda, as Marc perceptively writes, by “pursuing an amoral cosmology” that grants “no character... ethical legitimacy, much less authority.”

<sup>169</sup> *Beavis and Butt-Head* protestor Dick Zimmerman, as quoted in Leland, “Battle for Your Brain,” 52, based his campaign against that show on the “total lack of redeemability” and destructive lifestyles of its characters.

More ambiguously than with *All in the Family* (revisited in the next chapter as the seminal model of U.S. sitcom irony *cum* pathos), *Married... With Children* prompts laughter ‘at’ and also ‘with’ its central character, marked as a hopeless loser by his blatant chauvinism, nastiness, and pathetic lack of prospects. The thick veneer of cool irony and lack of a moral center allows the program to function as ridicule of Bundyesque small-mindedness and yet simultaneously wallow in the antihero’s petty pleasures and vindictive victories. Regardless of the viewer’s own personal politics or social status, fans may find themselves rooting for Al Bundy as he fends off his family and neighbors and struggles to be king of the couch in his own home. The text cultivates this loyalty, and does so “ironically,” without imposing a moral or ideological narrative framework to punish the Bundys’ self-serving schemes.

Whereas *Married... With Children* and *Get a Life* are unrelenting in their use of sadistic insult humor to dissolve the group warmth of domesticoms, irony in either *Roseanne* or *The Simpsons* more readily accommodates not only claims on relevance but also sincerity. Roseanne Barr’s transition from stand-up to sitcom, as is commonly the case, softened her comic persona’s caustic edge to ensure that her wisecracking character would be read as likeable and relatable (“one of us”) more so than contemptible or mean-spirited. Marc explains, “Roseanne the character emerged as a loving, caring mother whose sarcasm is evidence of personal pluck rather than selfishness, laziness, nihilism or maternal dysfunction.”<sup>170</sup> One TV critic quipped that the boorish Bundy family “makes Roseanne’s look like Ozzie and Harriett’s.”<sup>171</sup> Moyer and Leavitt insisted that *Roseanne* fell closer on the spectrum to *The Cosby Show* than to their *Married*, as her show emphasizes character growth and familial love, or what Moyer disparagingly called the family sitcom

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<sup>170</sup> Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 199.

<sup>171</sup> Rosenberg, “Some Viewers Can Make a Difference,” E1.

“group grope.”<sup>172</sup> *The Simpsons*, likewise, for all its self-reflexivity and subversion of sitcom “lessons,” is laced with sentimentality and, as Matthew Henry notes, this TV family (like *Cosby*’s) shares “an underlying sense of commitment and caring” and conveys “sincere” affection.<sup>173</sup>

Taken together, scholars such as Douglas Kellner have focused on how the rise of so-called “loser television” that “punctured” Reaganite TV fantasies of affluence spoke to growing economic disparity. Kellner attributes the popular appeal of shows like *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons* directly to their ability to channel the anger of Americans “experiencing downward mobility and a sense of no future.” In the case of *Beavis and Butt-Head*, he considers Gen-X loser television to be a mediated form of “popular revenge,” playing to the rebellious attitude of a “downwardly mobile” generation by symbolically degrading authority figures.<sup>174</sup> “[T]hey are not just any losers, this lineage of losers,” John Leland had announced in his 1993 *Newsweek* article advancing a similar thesis, “They are specifically *our* losers, totems of an age of decline and nonachievement.”<sup>175</sup> In the same vein, Clarence Lusane, analyzing *Married... With Children*’s racial, class, and gender politics in a 1999 essay in *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, writes that the show “was ahead of its time in capturing *the don’t-give-a-damn 1990s* [emphasis added].”<sup>176</sup> While expressly appealing to the “MTV generation ethos,” the self-proclaimed anti-*Cosby Show* proved remarkably popular with African-American audiences, he

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<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E12.

<sup>173</sup> Henry, “Triumph of Popular Culture,” 93; see also Greene, “Fair and Balanced Satire,” 215.

<sup>174</sup> Kellner, “*Beavis and Butt-Head*: No Future for Postmodern Youth,” 148–49. See also Fiske, “Family Discipline,” 7–8, for a relevant audience study documenting attitudes of college-aged communal viewers of *Married... With Children*.

<sup>175</sup> Leland, “Battle for Your Brain,” 50. Released in 1993, the radio hit “Loser” by alternative rock artist Beck, celebrated for its sense of Gen-X irony appealing to “slacker” youth boredom and low prospects, received heavy airplay in the mid-1990s.

<sup>176</sup> Lusane, “Assessing the Disconnect,” 20.

notes, in spite of its predominantly white cast and silence on issues of race. Exploring the black community's appreciation and loyal viewership for *Married... With Children*, Lusane cites multiple factors, including the creative influence of its African-American executive co-producer Michael Moye, skilled in a tradition of insult humor embedded in black culture, but especially the fact that the show "addressed the politics of limited opportunities" and depicted "the downsized hopes... confronting today's youth" as "facts of life."<sup>177</sup>

From the 1991–92 season through 1994–95 in FOX's Sunday night comedy block, *Married... With Children* was bundled with top-rated black-themed comedies like *Martin* (1992–97), an HBO independent production starring the coarse and cocky comic Martin Lawrence, *Living Single* (1993–98), often dubbed "the black *Friends*" (despite pre-dating the NBC hit), and the more serious-minded, working-class sitcom *Roc* (1991–94), featuring Charles S. Dutton as a hard-working garbage collector and devoted family man modeling upright values in a neighborhood threatened by urban decay. In this venue, Lusane observes, rightly, that *Married* enjoyed comic benefits of pushing "hyperdysfunctionality" to grotesque, cartoonish extremes that would have been branded minstrelsy by progressive critics and black nationalist activists had the show been about a non-white family.<sup>178</sup> Indeed, community leaders like Bill Cosby, who in the early 1990s fended off the accusations of "political correctness" while demanding positive (i.e., respectful, socially responsible) images of blacks, as I discussed earlier, expressly called out FOX's comedy writers and the networks in general for reducing African-Americans in sitcoms to "living cartoons" and forsaking the hard-won "quality" of social realism and complexity for TV's "joke machine."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 14–15, 19–20.

<sup>178</sup> Lusane, "Assessing the Disconnect," 14–15, 19–20.

<sup>179</sup> Cosby interview, "Someone at the Top Has to Say: 'Enough of This,'" 60, as cited above.



The over-the-top, sketch-like *Martin* was commonly considered one of the worst offenders, accused of “buffooning” black masculinity and actively promoting misogynist attitudes, while *Married* was free to brazenly explore politically incorrect vices of “blatantly sexist” working-class masculinity and in doing so often enjoyed the benefit of the doubt by critics reading the show as a satire of boorish attitudes and “unabashed sexism.”<sup>180</sup>

This was not always the case. In approaching the “amoral cosmology” of *Married... With Children*, Marc urges a reading of the show as mere “self-reflexive parody” of sitcom marred by a “self-congratulatory, more irreverent-than-thou tone.”<sup>181</sup> Defending the text’s confrontational vigor, Greene counters that a more legitimate grounds for criticizing the show should highlight the “highly problematic sexism and misogyny.”<sup>182</sup> Both scholars agree that the series offered little in the way of clear or consistent social critique to anchor its irreverence in an affirmative satire of social relations. Similarly, Lusane, while acknowledging *Married*’s economic resonance with ethnic minorities and non-affluent audiences, concludes that the comedy likely “reinforced, while lampooning, sexist stereotypes and did little thematically to overtly challenge oppressive and inequitable power relations.”<sup>183</sup> Regardless of *Married*’s status as empty versus ‘true’ satire, its markers of anti-relevant bawdiness and bundling with black shows were crucial to its status on the network.

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<sup>180</sup> See Weinstein, “‘Married’... With Controversy,” E12, for extended discussion of the “unabashed sexism” of Ed O’Neill’s character, summarizing the actor’s and producers’ (aforementioned) explanations as to why Al Bundy should not “be expected to project a positive image” in a wacky comedy not meant to “teach or enlighten anyone.” Yet, Weinstein also inscribes the show into a tradition of satire of bigotry by drawing the parallel to *All in the Family*: “Al is blatantly sexist, just as Archie Bunker was blatantly racist.”

<sup>181</sup> Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 191–92.

<sup>182</sup> Greene, “Fair and Balanced Satire,” 204.

<sup>183</sup> Lusane, “Assessing the Disconnect,” 20.

As Fox Entertainment Group's chairman Sandy Grushow told *Newsweek* in 1993 (in the same issue that featured Cosby's critique), the network also expressly relied on its "black shows to hook the hip white audience," on the theory that the white youth so sought after by advertisers take cues on what is cool from urban black youth culture.<sup>184</sup> In the mid-1990s, as the Big Three became the Big Four, FOX would deemphasize both Black television and *Married*-inspired crudity and take its network image "upmarket," broadening the brand beyond its core 18-to-34 youth demographic to lure adults 18-to-49 by featuring upscale fare and, as promised by Fox Entertainment's new president John Matoian in 1995, "less raunch."<sup>185</sup> "When you begin to grow up, you need to give your audiences some grown-up choices," Matoian said that fall of the revised FOX strategy, chasing Generation X now on the cusp of becoming the new yuppie thirty-something demo and hoping to rival NBC for their attention.<sup>186</sup> Matoian named *The Simpsons* as the model for hooking young adults with "sophistication and intelligence." Yet, the unshakably low-brow *Married* remained a FOX institution and, he acknowledged, the benchmark for the network's edgier fare.<sup>187</sup>

Meanwhile, NBC set the industry standard in sophisticated and upmarket "Must See" prime-time comedy for young adults with a steady infusion of new urban sitcoms in the nineties that included *Seinfeld* and, in its wake, *Mad About You* (1992–99), *Frasier* (1993–2004), *Friends*

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<sup>184</sup> Quoted in Waters, "Black Is Bountiful," 59. For in-depth analysis of race within the institutional context of FOX comedy in the 1990s, see also Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by FOX: The FOX Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>185</sup> John Matoian quoted in J. Max Robins and Brian Lowry, "Gen X Marks the Spot," *Variety*, March 20, 1995, 1, 63; "upmarket" is the authors' term.

<sup>186</sup> Matoian quoted in Joe Flint, "Nets Court Gen 'X' and 'Friends,'" *Variety*, September 4, 1995, 33–34. "We're very serious about being the No. 1 network in adults 18 to 49," said network distribution executive vice president Lana Corbi two years later, quoted in Michael Schneider, "In the Very Beginning, Few Shared Fox Vision," *Electronic Media* 16, no. 17 (April 21, 1997): 20.

<sup>187</sup> Matoian quoted in Robins and Lowry, "Gen X Marks the Spot," 63.

(1994–2004), *NewsRadio* (1995–99), *Caroline in the City* (1995–99), and *The Single Guy* (1995–97). As television scholar Ron Becker has demonstrated, such sitcoms striving for quality in the 1990s collectively catered to a psychographic of young, educated, cosmopolitan (if not city-dwelling then “urban-minded”) professionals, managing to hold their interest with the use of titillating, edgy, and sexually and fairly socially progressive themes, such as on *Friends* the lesbian wedding (and other episodes laced with opportunities for bicuriousness or mistaken sexual identity).<sup>188</sup> Becker dubs this latest iteration of the quality audience “slumpies,” an acronym for socially liberal, urban-minded professionals, his term to distinguish from 1980s “yuppies.” The shifting adult market of eighteen to forty-nine-year-olds extended across a generational divide to include post-college Gen Xers now loosely bundled in demographics data with the youngest of the baby boomers. While ABC led in the ratings into the early 1990s, offering family-oriented sitcoms with kid appeal such as *Full House* (1987–95), *The Wonder Years* (1988–93), and *Home Improvement* (1991–99), NBC persisted in narrowing its focus on this “hip,” “sophisticated” quality demographic increasingly thought to prize their individualism and hold cynical “seen-it-all attitudes” and a “distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility.”<sup>189</sup> This niche continued to be defined by progressive values, albeit by the Bush and Clinton years, Becker argues, inflected with certain libertarian attitudes prizing individual autonomy. For network executives, the quality television consumer in this era became synonymous with what one media critic referred to as “*Seinfeld*-type viewers.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ron Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 42 (fall 1998): 36–47; and for discussion of the *Friends* lesbian wedding, see his *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 193–94.

<sup>189</sup> Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties,” 37–38.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–38. This last phrase, quoted by Becker (p. 39), is columnist Gail Shister in 1996 in the *Wisconsin State Journal* summarizing a high-level studio executive’s vision of the market for the “edginess” of ABC sitcom *Ellen*.

*NBC's "Sitcom About Nothing": Making Sense of Seinfeld*

I tell them we don't want sitcom ideas.  
I tell them what we don't want to do,  
but it's hard to explain what we do want.

— Jerry Seinfeld, on hiring writers, 1991<sup>191</sup>

*Seinfeld* was widely hailed as one of the chief fruits of the stand-up push of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a fact that helped set it apart from the cluster of NBC urban sitcoms in its orbit. Jerry Seinfeld was by 1987 one of the most recognizable faces associated with the new adult-themed stand-up comedy as “yuppie vaudeville.”<sup>192</sup> On the heels of his flourishing club career and a critically acclaimed HBO special, the groundbreaking NBC series cashing in on the New York-based Jewish comedian’s unique brand of observational comedy was slow to make its mark. *Seinfeld* premiered, under the original title *The Seinfeld Chronicles*, to minimal fanfare in July 1989, in the summer schedule informally regarded by network executives as a graveyard for unsold pilots. Prospects were weak, yet sufficient support was scraped together by the show’s chief advocate at the network to commission a four-episode trial season the next year, aired as a summer replacement in 1990. Notably, according to the show’s lore, the funding for this abbreviated first season had to be sprung from NBC’s division for Late Night and Specials, a tactic that led to minor confusion in early press coverage as the network discovered this meant *Seinfeld* (as it was retitled) was *not* counted among that year’s new sitcoms by one major industry publication.<sup>193</sup> Yet, for all of this program’s trouncing of the dominant conventions of

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<sup>191</sup> Quoted in Glenn Collins, “How Does Seinfeld Define Comedy? Reluctantly,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1991, H33.

<sup>192</sup> Indeed, his photo, performing at Seattle’s Giggles club, is featured in the 1987 *New York Times* article I cited above introducing this phrase. Holden, “Market for Humor Still Bullish,” C25.

<sup>193</sup> According to “Notes About Nothing,” on-screen commentary included with the DVD of *Seinfeld* seasons 1 & 2 (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012), the first season used financing slated for two unrelated variety specials.

situation and domestic comedy, the network and creators crafted it as a new take on sitcom. Its phenomenal impact on the genre and American comedy in subsequent seasons is a testament to what can happen when ambitious and ambiguous programs are granted greater latitude to win over an audience than today's market typically allows.

*Seinfeld* arrived during a tenuous period when sitcoms were in constant demand but, as a genre overrun with sweet family shows scrambling to recapture the *Cosby* magic, were still routinely criticized as “safe” and “frivolous” television. Richard Zoglin in *Time* magazine in September 1991 diagnosed the format with “creative exhaustion,” complaining that the need for novelty in a market flush with new half-hour domestic and workplace comedies (upwards of fifty pilots that season alone) left writers relying on “gimmicks” to set each sitcom family apart. In short, a chief complaint in the early 1990s fixated on what Zoglin called “the curse of ‘high concept.’”<sup>194</sup> Often linked to the rise of postmodern media, this term refers to the industry demand for programs with a pithy premise that can be captured (and thus pitched to executives and promoted to audiences) in a succinct phrase, as we saw satirized in Chris Elliott’s Cinemax special with its stated concept “*Mannix* meets *The Brady Bunch*.” Victor Dwyer and Pamela Young in *Maclean’s*, writing in August 1991, agreed that as network executives “reached new levels of desperation” they resorted to “extremely strange concepts” to keep the sitcom boom afloat.<sup>195</sup>

In this context, critics looked to the sudden increase in narrative comedy vehicles for stand-up comedians as part of the solution. A piece in *Variety* by John Brodie, for instance, welcomed what he hoped would be a “low-concept season” in 1993–94 with the surge of performer-driven series that “started off with little concept beyond that of a star’s name,” as the

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<sup>194</sup> Richard Zoglin, “Is the Sitcom Played Out?” *Time* 138, no. 10 (September 9, 1991): 70–71.

<sup>195</sup> Dwyer with Young, “A Laugh a Minute,” 40.

networks signed an unprecedented number of comics to development deals that year while production studios culled experienced prime-time writers to help “spin stand-up dross into sitcom gold.”<sup>196</sup> Although the majority of these name-driven efforts did not survive past a season or two, enduring hits like *Seinfeld*, ABC’s *Roseanne* and *Home Improvement* (based on the stand-up material of Tim Allen), and later CBS’s *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005, a vehicle for comic Ray Romano), like *Cosby*’s before them, ensured the continued migration of stand-up stars into sitcom.

With these “stand-up personacoms,” as David Marc calls them, the hook is a particular performer’s persona and *sensibility*.<sup>197</sup> It was only *Seinfeld*, however, that evaded the trappings of domestic and workplace comedy altogether and wryly staked its reputation to the pursuit of “nothing” as its mark of distinction. This is first made explicit in the fall 1992 season four episode “The Pitch,” in which TV Jerry and his best friend George Costanza (who doubles as the on-screen alter ego of *Seinfeld*’s actual co-creator Larry David and is played by Tony Award-winning stage actor Jason Alexander) prepare to pitch a sitcom pilot to NBC. At their regular booth in Monk’s Café, a diner in Manhattan’s Upper West Side and the spot rivaled only by Jerry’s apartment as the group’s preferred gathering place, George hatches the idea for a sitcom with no unique situation, and no content beyond what they can crib from their routine conversations. “It’s about *nothing*,” he tells Jerry, with gusto. “Everybody’s doing *something*. We’ll do nothing.” The pair find it virtually impossible to put the proposed “no story” script

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<sup>196</sup> John Brodie, “Low-Concept Season (TV Season High on Talent, Low on Concept),” *Variety*, November 22, 1993, 21, 73. Many such efforts were short-lived, such as (of those Brodie mentions) FOX’s *The Sinbad Show* (1993–94), *The George Carlin Show* (two seasons in 1994–95), and *Townsend Television* (comedy-variety, fall 1993) and ABC’s *The Paula Poundstone Show* (comedy-variety, fall 1993), and in subsequent seasons, the WB’s *Cleghorne!* (1995) with former *SNL* comic Ellen Cleghorne and NBC’s *Mr. Rhodes* (1996–97) starring Tom Rhodes, best known as Comedy Central’s first comic spokesperson.

<sup>197</sup> Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 196–97.

into words for network executives, yet manage ultimately to walk away with a contract.<sup>198</sup>

Whereas the pilot deal never really leads anywhere beyond false starts as the years pass for the fictional Jerry and George, “The Pitch” was critically lauded for its self-referential commentary on the show’s own humble origins, and George Costanza’s shameless enthusiasm for comedy free of concept was widely regarded from that point forward as the series’ internalized philosophy.

In Jerry Seinfeld’s own words off-screen, “Our show is actually about details. We joke that it’s about nothing because there’s no *concept* behind the show; there’s nothing intrinsically funny in the situation.”<sup>199</sup> Finding “average” sitcom plots overly predictable, moreover, Seinfeld told *The New York Times*’s Glenn Collins in 1991 that “we wanted to do a show where, well, you don’t *care* where it [i.e., the story] goes” and challenging the viewer’s expectations is key.<sup>200</sup> Modeled on the eponymous star’s own life as a stand-up, the episodes revolve to some extent around the comedian’s idiosyncratic musings as the basis for comic misunderstandings and banter designed, accordingly, to go nowhere in particular. Reviewing Seinfeld’s HBO special in 1987, *The New York Times*’s O’Connor had characterized the slim, neatly dressed yet rough-around-the-edges comedian as an acquired taste, writing, “Mr. Seinfeld plays the brash yuppie, staying just this side of being objectionably snide. [He] focuses on the ordinary facets of ordinary

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<sup>198</sup> In the commonly repeated real-life *Seinfeld* origin story, Seinfeld and fellow comic David similarly conceived their show in a coffee shop after NBC expressed interest in commissioning a Seinfeld project. In the fictional pitch, sensing NBC executives’ resistance when George sums up the sitcom boldly in this one word (“Nothing!”), Jerry squirms, “Maybe in philosophy. But even nothing is *something*.” George holds firm, “*No* stories.” *Seinfeld*, “The Pitch” and “The Ticket,” episodes 4.3 and 4.4, written by Larry David, first broadcast as an hour-long combined episode on September 16, 1992, by NBC.

<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Tracy, *Jerry Seinfeld: The Entire Domain* (Toronto: Carol, 1998), 145, emphasis in original, as cited (at greater length) in Shane Gunster, “‘All About Nothing’: Difference, Affect, and *Seinfeld*,” *Television & New Media* 6, no. 2 (2005): 209.

<sup>200</sup> Quoted in Collins, “How Does Seinfeld Define Comedy?” H34.

lives, giving them a knowing poke with ingratiating boyishness.”<sup>201</sup> This blend of “brashness” tempered by “boyish” attitude, and a predilection for vulgarity couched in sophistication, provided the recipe for *Seinfeld*. In what Collins called a “clear and persistent comic vision” tailored to “showcase... Mr. Seinfeld’s cable-ready cool,” the partners set out to expose the process behind stand-up and reverse-engineer jokes (derived from their own and eventually the assorted *Seinfeld* writers’ collected experience) as “in each show [Seinfeld] demonstrates how the mundane events of his off-stage life inspire material for his on-stage act.”<sup>202</sup> Given that the series went on to serve as an exemplar of nineties “high concept” television for media theorists like Caldwell (because it was readily distilled into its concise ironic premise as the “show about nothing”), it is worth noting that the writers cagily managed to leverage low-concept-ness itself as a pithy concept, teasing that distinction until it begins to collapse in on itself.<sup>203</sup>

What we see of TV Jerry’s lucrative (we are told) career as a comic is consigned to the margins of the plot, while instead a typical dialogue will linger on minute details about his breakfast cereal habits, deli selections, or more central to the narrative, the growing list of dating pet peeves that prop up his insistence on the bachelor life. The protagonist’s most constant companion remains George, squat and balding, tight-fisted, a self-professed “loser” who feels cheated by life and is in the habit of scheming to get his way, cut corners, and evade obligations. Kramer, Jerry’s inexplicably solvent yet mooching across-the-hall neighbor played by actor and

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<sup>201</sup> John J. O’Connor, “Stand-Up Comedy Specials on HBO,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1987, C18. Writing four years before *Time*’s Zoglin bemoaned sitcom “gimmicks,” O’Connor in this review of the HBO special *Jerry Seinfeld: Stand-Up Confidential* made a similar argument about stand-up performers on cable: “Now that the success of stand-up comedy on television threatens to rival the golden days of the Borscht Belt boom, comedians are looking for ways to make their routines just a little bit different. ... In short, you gotta have a gimmick” (C19).

<sup>202</sup> Collins, “How Does Seinfeld Define Comedy?” H33–34.

<sup>203</sup> Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 67, identifies high concept as a problematic industry trend of the 1980s and 1990s. His examples include *Miami Vice* (pitched “as MTV cops”), *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* (“Mr. Rogers on acid”), and *Seinfeld* (“as a show about nothing”).



physical comedian Michael Richards (who had been briefly considered for the role of *Married... With Children*'s Al Bundy), brings a complementary element of slapstick as the show's resident rubber-limbed "clown" figure and ironized wacky neighbor stereotype, prompting Marc to call him a "postmodern Ed Norton."<sup>204</sup> He is lofty in height and low in deed, a gentle giant and "hipster doofus"<sup>205</sup> who indulges his every impulse and wafts through life guilt-free with a Teflon conscience and general disregard for the chaos he sows in his wake. Rounding out the main cast is Jerry's ex-girlfriend Elaine Benes (*SNL* alumna Julia Louis-Dreyfus), not featured in *The Seinfeld Chronicles* but written into the retooled show at the outset of season one to satisfy network demand that the writers reach for a female viewership. Elaine is functionally "one of the guys,"<sup>206</sup> as cool Jerry's hot-headed sidekick and partner in wit, and though coded by the text as an attractive, assertive, confident, sexually independent woman, the character's distinctive hipster costuming (she turns retro-style saddle shoes and dowdy feminine floral dresses into quirky preppy-chic) places her curiously at odds with dominant beauty codes and helps make her in fans' eyes an ironic style icon.

Jerry and his posse dissect and dicker over what various critics have described as the "minutiae" of ordinary life, fixating on social infractions from public nose-picking ("The Pick") to poor parking etiquette ("The Parking Space") to plagiarized sentiment in personal correspondence ("The Letter").<sup>207</sup> "Nothing was too small-minded" as the series explored "the pettiest envies

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<sup>204</sup> Marc, "Friends of the Family," 202. Irwin Hirsch and Cara Hirsch assess Kramer as a "clown figure" tinged with "malevolent qualities" in "Seinfeld's Humor Noir: A Look at Our Dark Side," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 119, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>205</sup> This phrase, coined by Francis Davis in "Recognition Humor: *Seinfeld* Shows Why Television Is Today's Best Medium for Comedy," *Atlantic Monthly* 270, no. 6 (December 1992): 136, was subsequently incorporated into the series as an insult hurled by Elaine in episode 5.3 of *Seinfeld*, "The Glasses," first broadcast September 30, 1993.

<sup>206</sup> Hirsch & Hirsch, "Seinfeld's Humor Noir," 118, also use this phrase, as have various commentators.

<sup>207</sup> *Seinfeld*, "The Pick," episode 4.13, first aired December 16, 1992; "The Parking Space," episode 3.22, first aired April 22, 1992; and "The Letter," episode 3.21, first aired March 25, 1992, on NBC.

and the most banal euphemisms,” relates Bill Wyman in a *Salon* editorial deeming *Seinfeld* a “hellish, upside-down version of a miracle play.”<sup>208</sup> Allowing the main characters’ peevisish grievances and neuroses to escalate into dyspeptic if not dystopic scenarios, the show fuses *Seinfeld*’s personable and sunny (yet ultimately callous) disposition with David’s flair for sadistic themes into a combined comic sensibility that journalist Ron Rosenbaum retrospectively called “darkness lite.”<sup>209</sup> David’s stand-in Costanza, endowed by Alexander with mannerisms and vocalizations of such excruciating, whiny intensity that we are spared no nuance of his nebbish angst, became the mascot of the show’s darker themes, his spiteful rants and shallow schemes giving the viewer unfiltered access to a psyche erupting with base urges and “politically incorrect” inclinations that place him in constant risk of violating social taboos. He is altogether less likely than the smooth, happy-go-lucky Jerry to get away with it. The result is a pathetic “schlub” Wyman classifies as oddly sympathetic yet “so amoral as sometimes to seem almost a monster” in his “resentful, infantilizing war against reality.”<sup>210</sup>

Despite the show’s intricate multi-plot structure and outlandish premises (such as a *Dagnet*-inspired sixtyish hard-boiled library cop hunting down a book two decades overdue<sup>211</sup>), *Seinfeld*’s attention to these tiny details or “nothing” moments of life, and prioritizing of comic style and character over goal-oriented plot and resolution, is frequently framed in the critical discourse (and by the show’s creative team) in terms of realism, or “vulgar realism.”<sup>212</sup> This

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<sup>208</sup> Bill Wyman, “Seinfeld,” *Salon.com*, January 7, 2002, [http://www.salon.com/2002/01/07/seinfeld\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2002/01/07/seinfeld_2/) (accessed March 10, 2012).

<sup>209</sup> *New York Observer* columnist Ron Rosenbaum in “*Seinfeld*’s Last,” transcript of *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio (Washington, D.C.), May 14, 1998, *ProQuest Research Library* (accessed March 1, 2012).

<sup>210</sup> Wyman, “Seinfeld.”

<sup>211</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Library,” episode 3.5, written by Larry Charles, first aired October 16, 1991, on NBC.

<sup>212</sup> Robert Hurd, “Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously: Modernism in Popular Culture,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 4 (autumn 2006): 766, notes that *Seinfeld*’s reputed “vulgar realism” does not strive for verisimilitude.

claim stems from the creators' stated desire to avoid the artificiality of witty (joke-a-minute) sitcom banter, achieved by juxtaposing the comic's polished on-stage delivery of well-rehearsed jokes with a greater sense of aimlessness in his casual dialogues each week, the latter in theory capturing the banality of 'unscripted' life.<sup>213</sup> This randomness-by-design policy is further highlighted in conversational, meandering narratives and *Waiting for Godot*-esque suspension of action with episodes in which "nothing happens," most famously in 1991's "The Chinese Restaurant" and "The Parking Garage," written by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David respectively.<sup>214</sup> In such stand-out examples, and the program in general, established conventions of sitcom's decades-old "problem/resolution format"<sup>215</sup> devoted to harmony, hegemony, and familiarity are ignored and swapped for celebratory strangeness in extended comedic meditations on urban antisociality, alienation, and implacable frustrations.

*Seinfeld* rapidly became a favorite example of an aesthetics of postmodern irony among TV critics. Initially, many focused on the program's blurring of fiction and reality through the persona of Seinfeld the comedian/character, leading scholars to remark that the show exhibits the "extreme self-reflexivity" characteristic of postmodern art.<sup>216</sup> While not overtly deconstructing the format like some of the noted "anti-sitcoms," the program garnered attention for its genre hybridity as a series featuring stand-up comedy sets embedded within the sitcom format yet somewhat detached from the diegesis (to the extent that the Jerry behind the microphone

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<sup>213</sup> "Notes About Nothing," *Seinfeld* seasons 1 & 2 DVD, commentary for episode 1.4, "Male Unbonding."

<sup>214</sup> *Seinfeld*, "The Chinese Restaurant," episode 2.11 (production no. 206), written by Jerry Seinfeld, first aired May 23, 1991; and "The Parking Garage," episode 3.6, written by Larry David, first aired October 30, 1991, on NBC.

<sup>215</sup> See Feuer, "Situation Comedy, Part 2," 69.

<sup>216</sup> See, for example, Dino Felluga, "General Introduction to Postmodernism," *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, July 17, 2002, updated January 31, 2011, Purdue University, <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html> (accessed January 30, 2012). Current URL as of January 30, 2014, is <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html>.

addressing the studio audience in the teaser and tag sequences is ambiguously positioned as the TV character and the “real” performer). These segments, or “interstitials,” though reduced and eventually phased out by the eighth season, initially framed each show—serving as bookends and (until season four) a kind of mid-episode intermission—planting the seeds for the loosely structured plots in line with the creators’ initial vision.

In these ways, *Seinfeld* was credited with rendering the sitcom a vehicle for daring genre play, joining the ranks of, and overshadowing, cable’s quality “meta” comedies including *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* (this Showtime series was notably also acquired and aired by FOX in 1988 through 1990) and *The Larry Sanders Show* (which debuted on HBO in 1992) as television about television. “Few sitcoms have worn artifice like a badge the way *Seinfeld* did by the 1992–1993 season,” remarks Caldwell.<sup>217</sup> Beyond “The Pitch,” the show is rife with additional instances of the kind of *self-theorizing* (as well as the “Cliff Notes intellectualism”) that Caldwell finds to be a prerogative for television texts in an industry growing preoccupied with postmodern style and targeting the yuppie consumer.<sup>218</sup> One example of the show’s self-conscious use of style occurs in the 1992 episode “The Wallet,” which ends the narrative abruptly with Jerry, who is desperate to cut short a conversation with his parents to avoid confessing a misdeed, asking, “Can we continue this another time?” This evasive tactic cues the words “To Be Continued” on screen, a cliffhanger cliché by the 1990s and here a reflexive gesture laying claim to ironic distance from the program’s own sitcom-ness as underscored by a tag sequence in which Jerry in his role as stand-up performer scolds television’s use of this common

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<sup>217</sup> Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 60.

<sup>218</sup> For Caldwell’s thesis, discussed previously, see *Televisuality*, viii, 4, 9, and, for his account of “intellectual excess” in yuppie-targeted network shows including *Seinfeld*, see p. 253. *Seinfeld* participates in what Caldwell calls “Cliff Notes intellectualism,” through its scripts peppered with superficial references to high culture, including opera (“The Opera”) and literary figures such as Henry Miller (“The Library”), John Cheever (“The Cheever Letters”), and playwright Neil Simon (“The Letter”).

storytelling device.<sup>219</sup> More intriguingly, several episodes also playfully internalize the kinds of academic and art discourse that sprang up interrogating the meanings and quality assigned to *Seinfeld* itself, turning the show's ironic lens onto the very theoretical questions it inspired.

In "The Letter" the prior season (episode 3.21), for instance, the show takes jabs at critical perspectives on the use of immoral, immature characters, with a storyline in which two high-society art snobs become captivated by an imposing, lifelike portrait of the disheveled Kramer (see figs. 1.7a–b), painted by the latest in Jerry's rotating cast of temporary girlfriends. The distinguished couple's impromptu analysis of "The Kramer" in the artist's studio is punctuated by cross-cutting with Jerry and girlfriend Nina (guest star Catherine Keener) in the next room coming to verbal blows over the fallout from the latest flagrant breach of social courtesy by a member of his inner circle. The married couple stare on undeterred as if in a reverie:

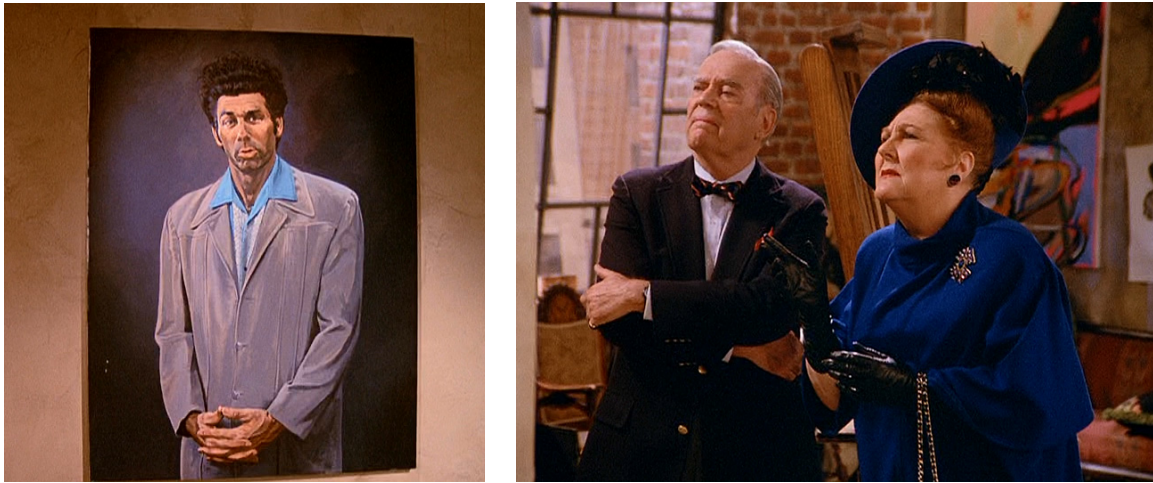
- Wife: I sense great vulnerability. A manchild crying out for love, an innocent orphan in the postmodern world.
- Husband: I see a parasite. A sexually-depraved miscreant who is seeking only to gratify his basest and most immediate urges.
- Wife: [gravely] His struggle is Man's struggle. He lifts my spirit.
- Husband: [resolutely] He is a loathsome, offensive brute—yet I can't look away.
- Wife: He transcends time and space.
- Husband: He sickens me.
- Wife: I love it.
- Husband: Me, too!

Intent on assigning profound significance to this goofy and grotesque figure, the pair manage to reproduce here in parody a slice of the public debate about Kramer the TV character (and the

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<sup>219</sup> *Seinfeld*, "The Wallet," episode 4.5 (first of a two-parter), written by Larry David, first aired September 23, 1992.

rest of the ‘dysfunctional’ cast), before promptly buying the work for a large sum to display ostentatiously in their dining room as a conversation piece. Extending the life of the joke, more than twenty years later, framed canvas prints of the original oil painting featured in this subplot are today still widely available for fans of the show to hang “ironically” in their own homes.



Figures 1.7a–b. Muckety-mucks Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong (played by Elliott Reid and Justine Johnston, on the right) contemplate the enigma that is “The Kramer” (left). Cropped screenshots from “The Letter,” *Seinfeld*, which originally aired March 25, 1992, on NBC.

In another instance of whimsical reflexivity, taken from the ninth and final season, Elaine pleads with a humor editor at *The New Yorker* to reveal why exactly a vaguely satirical cartoon printed in the magazine “is supposed to be funny.” “It’s merely a commentary on contemporary mores,” he casually assures her, “... a slice of life.” While Elaine’s failure to *get* the joke in the upscale magazine is seemingly a blow to her sense of herself as cultured and sharp-witted, she is also vexed by this level of ambiguity in the humor, demanding (like so many television and cultural critics) to know, “But what *is* the comment?” At the level of metacommentary, the episode arguably reinforces for *Seinfeld*’s regular viewership the pleasure of being “in” on the show’s distinctive brand of humor (which *Seinfeld* characterized in the above

epigraph as “hard to explain” even to professional comedy script writers) while simultaneously poking fun at its own status as loosely intellectual humor for the “sophisticated” viewer.<sup>220</sup>

*Seinfeld* though slow to earn its blockbuster status proved remarkably successful at securing NBC’s grasp on that elusive urban, upscale niche (or quality audience), in the words of *The Boston Globe*’s Don Aucoin, “coveted by advertisers but considered difficult to reach because they watch little TV.”<sup>221</sup> By most accounts 1992–93, during which the show’s writers moved toward a more serialized approach with a story arc about the fictitious NBC pilot, was the breakthrough season, establishing *Seinfeld* as a hit and noted innovator in postmodern sitcom narrative technique. During fall of 1993 the series surpassed long-time hit *Cheers* in the Nielsen ratings (based on data from that show’s final season the prior fall) across all key demographics: not only men but also women 18-to-34 and 35-to-49 (fig. 1.8).<sup>222</sup> *Variety* reported that *Seinfeld*’s value stemmed from this winning mix of “high ratings with extremely targeted audiences” of young adults. Of the top five programs securing above-average ratings with men 18-to-49, entering spring of 1994 *Seinfeld* held the number two spot (31% share), with *Married... With Children* and *Frasier* both close behind tied at number three (30%).<sup>223</sup> Even in its early seasons when the show’s overall ratings were middling (it ranked only thirty-eighth in 1991–92), its laser-like demographic appeal to men 18-to-34 was hailed as “spectacular” (by *Atlantic Monthly*) and “a network ad salesman’s dream” (by an NBC spokesman).<sup>224</sup> *Seinfeld* went on to set records

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<sup>220</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Cartoon,” episode 9.13, first aired January 29, 1998. Highlighting a further level of self-reflexivity, commentary in the screen notes included with Sony’s DVD release of that season stresses that *Seinfeld* writer Eric Kaplan (responsible for this script) contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* just as Elaine attempts to do in this episode.

<sup>221</sup> Don Aucoin, “How ‘a Show About Nothing’ Changed the Whole TV Industry,” *Boston Globe*, May 10, 1998, N9.

<sup>222</sup> “Demo Derby,” *Variety*, January 3, 1994, 47.

<sup>223</sup> “Demo Derby,” *Variety*, January 24, 1994, 78. *Seinfeld* was second to *Monday Night Football* (37% share).

<sup>224</sup> Davis, “Recognition Humor,” 138; and unnamed NBC spokesman quoted in *ibid.*

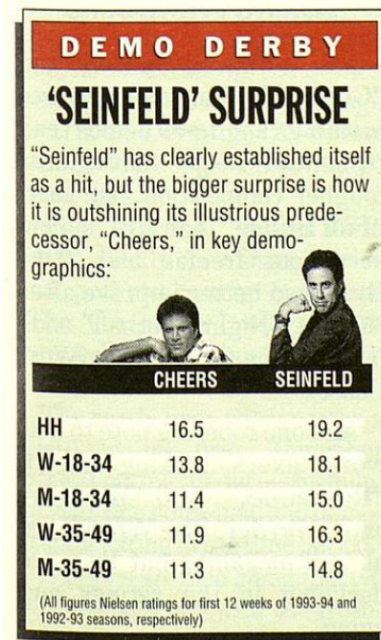


Figure 1.8. Everybody Knows His Name: *Seinfeld*'s fifth season "outshines" *Cheers*. *Variety* 353, no. 9 (January 3, 1994), p. 47.

reshaping the syndication market by commanding unprecedented advertising rates in the mid and late 1990s.<sup>225</sup> Through the end of its run, the series continued to boast not only one of the largest audiences in prime time but one heavily concentrated in the upmarket "desirable demos," making it the "solid No. 1" show in households with annual incomes over \$75,000 and leading *Variety*'s Tom Bierbaum to quip in March 1998 that *Seinfeld* was indisputably the "master of most demo domains"—as the reigning program for all groups except for kiddie and teen viewers.<sup>226</sup> The magazine earlier that year deemed *Seinfeld* "easily the decade's most successful sitcom" and "a rare cultural touchstone," suggesting that the end of the series signaled a blow for the network on par with NBC's loss of its former powerhouse *The Cosby Show* in 1992.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>225</sup> See Jim Benson and Thomas Walsh, "'Home' Enters Original Syndie To Duel 'Seinfeld,'" *Variety*, March 27, 1995, 29; Joe Flint, "'Seinfeld' Success Sets Rates for 'Mad' Ads," *Variety*, March 25, 1996, 25; Michael Fleming and Joe Flint, "'Seinfeld' Composing its Ninth," *Variety*, January 13, 1997, 90; and Cynthia Littleton, "'Seinfeld' Set To Earn Record Syndie," *Variety*, January 12, 1998, 87.

<sup>226</sup> Tom Bierbaum, "'Seinfeld' Demos: Rich Get Richer," *Variety*, March 16, 1998, 32.

<sup>227</sup> Gary Levin and Cynthia Littleton, "Yadda, Yadda [*sic*], Nada: NBC Faces Sein-off ('Seinfeld' Exit Has Peacock Ruffled)," *Variety*, January 5, 1998, 1, 95.



Much like *The Cosby Show* had dominated the critical discourse on eighties comedy, *Seinfeld* thus came to define quality network comedy for the new decade, seen by journalists as a barometer of nineties comic tastes in the cultural mainstream. It was heralded as “the defining comedy of manners for the 90’s” in *The New York Times*, and praised, by numerous sources including *Cheers* co-producer Rob Long, as a savvy “rebuke to PC pieties” that circumscribed early 1990s social etiquette.<sup>228</sup> Many welcomed the brazenly insensitive characters and utter absence of moralizing as a respite from the “compassion craze” (the same that drew “socially concerned humorists” to participate in the large-scale televised charity benefits) of the 1980s.<sup>229</sup> Critics marveled at the show’s cult appeal and knack for coining phrases or “Seinfeldisms” that became instant fixtures of the national vernacular—such as the masturbation-related euphemism “master of my domain,” alluded to by *Variety* above, and the disclaimer “... not that there’s anything wrong with that!” as a reflex when the sensitive subject of homosexuality arises. With the multiculturalist push in public discourse, as Becker documents in his cultural history *Gay TV and Straight America*, programming for this quality psychographic balanced nineties social imperatives “to be hip and demonstrate an edgy tolerance” with a certain lingering ambivalence as the white, heterosexual middle class adjusted to social change and was asked to practice sensitivity and confront its own privilege.<sup>230</sup> Despite catering to the quality audience “hip” to progressive

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<sup>228</sup> Caryn James, “Critic’s Notebook: All Right, Goodbye Already! Parting Is Such Sweet Sitcom,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1998, E1; Rob Long, “Jerry Built: The Success of ‘Seinfeld’ Was an Implicit Rebuke to PC Pieties—and a Confirmation of America’s Unpredictable Spirit,” *National Review* 50, no. 2 (February 9, 1998): 32–34.

<sup>229</sup> I am quoting phrases from Mark Schwed, “Comic Relief: Comedy for Cash,” United Press International, March 29, 1986, BC cycle, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2004); and Steve Schneider, “Cable TV Notes: Comedians To Harness Humor on Behalf of the Homeless,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1986, H28.

<sup>230</sup> Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 131. Against the broader backdrop of “political correctness” in public life, Becker’s study specifically details how the increase of gay-themed content and characters on U.S. TV in the 1990s carried an undercurrent of “slumpy” ambivalence across a range of genres, especially palpable in sitcom, as popular prime-time series like *Frasier*, *Friends*, *The Single Guy*, *Roseanne*, and *The Simpsons* all comedically contemplated (and defused) challenges posed to heterosexual norms and privileges—often self-consciously as in (continued...)

values, *Seinfeld*, in particular, lacked any clear basis in liberal sentiment and sentimentality. Like *Married... With Children*, the series was distinguished by, and alternately celebrated and condemned for, its conspicuous evacuation of the “moral center” expected of sitcom.

Both generically and as a cultural text, *Seinfeld* enacted and, in the words of esteemed critic Geoffrey O’Brien, came to be “defined by a series of refusals.”<sup>231</sup> As scholar Robert Hurd enumerates, *Seinfeld* foremost eschewed romantic love and marriage, as well as the narrative convention of “happy endings” and the melodramatic underpinnings of popular sitcoms such as *Cheers*.<sup>232</sup> This defiant stance was cemented by series co-creator Larry David’s firm insistence that the show would include “no hugging, no learning,” a phrase that circulated widely in the press as the *Seinfeld* writers’ credo.<sup>233</sup> The motto was, as television scholar Joanne Morreale has noted, a “rebuke” of the sentimentality and didacticism of American sitcoms dating back to the 1970s “warmedies” and 1950s domesticoms.<sup>234</sup> Psychologists Irwin and Cara Hirsch identify “aversion to marriage and children” as a persistent theme of the show, exemplified by the 1996 episode “The Soul Mate” in which Elaine considers her best-case scenario for a long-term love connection to be (as Jerry puts it) “a barren, sterile relationship that ends when you die.”<sup>235</sup>

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the case of *Seinfeld*’s protagonist’s pained efforts to dodge homophobia and recover his rightful claim on straight masculinity in “The Outing” (episode 4.17, February 11, 1993). For keen analysis of this program’s “not-that-there’s-anything-wrong-with-that” tag line as a negotiation of heterosexual unease, or “straight panic,” hedged by humor and appealing to the hipness of contemporary audiences, see Becker’s chap. 6, especially pp. 189–90, 199–213.

<sup>231</sup> Geoffrey O’Brien, “Sein of the Times,” *New York Review of Books*, August 14, 1997, as cited by Hurd, “Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously,” 768.

<sup>232</sup> Hurd, “Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously,” 768.

<sup>233</sup> The phrase is cited as “the show’s unofficial motto” by Davis, “Recognition Humor,” 137, and many others.

<sup>234</sup> Joanne Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye: The Cultural Spectacle of *Seinfeld*’s Last Episode,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 111.

<sup>235</sup> Hirsch & Hirsch, “*Seinfeld*’s Humor Noir,” 121.

On this point, *Seinfeld* shares in the central joke and anti-sentimental mission of *Married... With Children*. Elaine's cynical goal of unfruitful union, I would add, doubles as a joke about the ubiquity of family sitcoms as she wryly dismisses domesticity and child-rearing because "it's been done to death."<sup>236</sup>

Despite presenting the *Seinfeld* friends as a kind of "family" unit (a "surrogate family of thirtysomethings," as they were designated by journalist Francis Davis, among others), the series sidestepped the tradition of MTM-style quality shows and, as Morreale asserts, "mocked the principles of group unity and loyalty that typically bind either the nuclear or surrogate family in sitcoms."<sup>237</sup> The foursome are comfortably enmeshed in one another's lives, yet their dynamic is uncluttered by devotion and caring. Friendship bonds among *Seinfeld*'s core characters are "utilitarian," Morreale observes, and their sexual relationships "casual" and "devoid of emotional connection."<sup>238</sup> *Salon*'s Wyman, in the same vein, sums up Jerry and Elaine's anti-erotic foreplay in "The Deal," from a defining second season scene in which the two friends set terms for resuming a purely physical sexual relationship, as a "ballet of sophistry."<sup>239</sup> In the aforementioned storyline from season eight's "The Soul Mate," Elaine and Jerry's talk of her having babies is steered by his dryly recited factoids about the "procreation" imperative of mollusks.

For *Seinfeld*'s fickle and fastidious lead, compassion is a turn-off and reason enough to reject a potential mate. He dumps one girlfriend because "she's giving and caring and generally concerned about the welfare of others," exclaiming, "I can't be with someone like that!" The true

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<sup>236</sup> These lines of dialogue, referenced by Hirsch & Hirsch, *ibid.*, who attribute both statements to Elaine, are from *Seinfeld*'s "The Soul Mate," episode 8.2, written by Peter Mehlman, first broadcast September 26, 1996.

<sup>237</sup> Davis, "Recognition Humor," 136; Morreale, "Sitcoms Say Goodbye," 113.

<sup>238</sup> Morreale, "Sitcoms Say Goodbye," 113.

<sup>239</sup> Wyman, "Seinfeld"; *Seinfeld*, "The Deal," episode 2.9, written by Larry David, first aired May 2, 1991.

spirit of Christmas, he suggests to another, is “people being helped by people other than me.”<sup>240</sup> Not-caring is also a central tenet of George Costanza’s dating policy, based in desperation. “My dream is to become hopeless. When you’re hopeless you don’t care. And when you don’t care,” he postulates through a mouth smeared with spaghetti sauce to a receptive Jerry as they dine stag in a nice restaurant, “that indifference makes you attractive.” On another occasion, George attempts to charm and “pitch” TV celebrity Corbin Bernsen at NBC’s studio, angling to sell his sordid stories to the quality legal drama *L.A. Law*, by boasting that he once starved a girlfriend’s cat to death and refused to make restitutions because she could not prove his guilt.<sup>241</sup> The insular clan’s callousness extends from their trifling criticisms that snuff out romance to global and current affairs. In addition to being privy to the core group’s diner talk, the audience hears second-hand from Elaine (in season three’s “The Fix-Up”) that a typical lunch date with a friend outside the group is spent mocking the seriousness of topics from the Federal Reserve to environmental destruction: “Cynthia thought we should nuke the rain forest,” Elaine beams at Jerry, “you know, get rid of it in one swoop so we could at least eliminate it as a subject of conversation.”

This cool disregard for the well-being of others and “refusal to take anything seriously,”<sup>242</sup> an indifference mirrored in their internal dynamic, is what drives the friends’ daily interactions. Even the amiable Jerry derives entertainment value from the misfortunes of those in his social world, while fully exploiting his role as wry observer to exonerate himself from blame. “That’s a shame,” he is given to saying casually, with a sometimes perceptible shrug, as he beholds the

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<sup>240</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Sponge,” episode 7.9, written by Peter Mehlman, first aired December 7, 1995; and “The Pick,” episode 4.13, written by Larry David and Marc Jaffe, first aired December 16, 1992, on NBC.

<sup>241</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Fix-Up,” episode 3.16 (prod. no. 317), written by Elaine Pope and Larry Charles, first aired February 5, 1992; and “The Trip,” 4.1 (part 1 of 2), written by Larry Charles, first aired August 12, 1992, on NBC.

<sup>242</sup> Variations on this phrase surface across hundreds of reviews and essays on *Seinfeld*. For example, Hirsch & Hirsch, “*Seinfeld*’s Humor Noir,” 120, distill the message, “Nothing is to be taken seriously, including oneself.” Hurd, “Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously,” 762, adds that the series “refuses to take itself seriously as ‘high culture.’”

grim outcomes that tend to befall those around him, often as a direct result of his group's inadvertently toxic, tumultuous influence. Though he embodies the principle of looking out for Number One from the outset of the series, Jerry's proclivity for provoking and taking a certain sadistic pleasure in the miseries and mishaps of even (or especially) his closest friends becomes increasingly apparent as a comic undercurrent in the later seasons.<sup>243</sup> By dispensing with the expectations of character *growth* and civic lessons in responsibility associated with sitcom-as-sociodrama, *Seinfeld* (together with surrounding programs) has been broadly theorized by many as a televisual and cultural fantasy of perpetual youth, enacting what author Steven Stark called the "flight from adulthood" and "new adolescent sensibility sweeping America in the 1990s."<sup>244</sup> "Closer to being fortysomethings than thirtysomethings," avers Nicolaus Mills, a professor of American Studies, *Seinfeld*'s commitment-phobic clique "sent out the message that in order to be happy you don't have to outgrow adolescence; you only have to find others who will share your arrested development."<sup>245</sup>

*Seinfeld* owned and magnified this particular comic trope, arguably more so than the other new quality-coms of its day, through dialogue and subplots continually playing up the child-like mentality, petulance, and stunted development of its key characters with the show's

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<sup>243</sup> This mischievous mean streak is particularly played up by early in season six with episodes such as "The Couch" (6.5, October 27, 1994) and "The Mom & Pop Store" (6.8, November 17, 1994). Deliberately unsympathetic, dark, or mean-spirited humor seldom but occasionally carries over into the star's stand-up monologues, as with "The Suicide" (3.15, January 29, 1992), in which Seinfeld in his stage act chides suicide attempt survivors as quitters.

<sup>244</sup> Steven Stark, *Glued to the Set* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 284–87, as cited in Michael V. Tueth, "Fun City: TV's Urban Situation Comedies of the 1990s," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 107.

<sup>245</sup> Nicolaus Mills, "So Long, Jerry Seinfeld," *Dissent* 45, no. 3 (summer 1998): 90. For relevant analysis, see Barbara Ching, "They Laughed Unhappily Ever After: *Seinfeld* and the Sitcom Encounter with Nothingness" (subsection "Arrested Development"), in *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom*, ed. David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne (New York: Continuum, 2006), 60–63; Hirsch & Hirsch, "*Seinfeld*'s Humor Noir" (subsection "Extended Adolescence"), 119–20; and Thomas S. Hibbs, "Nihilism, American Style" (subsection "Perpetual Adolescence"), chap. 1 of *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 41–45.

signature of “wearing artifice” and wallowing in surfaces. The program’s fixation on the superficiality of both the text and its characters is especially present in the never-ending salute to singledom. In the seventh season opener “The Engagement,” after George dumps his new girlfriend because she beat him in a game of chess (and he dislikes how her Queen maneuvers like those proactive “feminists”), Jerry cross-checks his mate, ending his own affair with an attractive woman for a second time because of the dainty way she eats peas, having previously broken up with her a week earlier because she “shushed” him while they watched TV. “What kind of lives are these? We’re like children. We’re not men,” muses Jerry in a rare moment of clarity, between dumpings, before perpetuating the cycle. “Are we going to be sitting here when we’re sixty like two idiots?”<sup>246</sup> The hardened boy-bachelor has his one brush with deeper connection and feelings in the farewell season, mid-way through the fall 1997 episode “The Serenity Now,” when he spontaneously learns to express emotion and “care” (fig. 1.9), culminating in the insight that there must be “more to life than shallow, obvious observations.”



Figure 1.9.  
The victim of a break-up, Jerry Seinfeld (played by himself) experiences his own tearful “discharge” for the first time and exclaims, “This is horrible! I care.”  
Cropped screenshot from “The Serenity Now,” *Seinfeld*, first aired October 9, 1997, on NBC.

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<sup>246</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Engagement,” episode 7.1, written by Larry David, first aired September 21, 1995. Scenarios of the men behaving “like children” are mined as a steady source of the humor, from George’s tantrums to Jerry’s love of toys and comic books. In “The Limo” (3.19, prod. no. 318, February 26, 1992), after George filches another passenger’s airport limousine, his first impulse is to call his elderly mother to brag that he’s using a car phone. In “The Keys” (3.23, prod. no. 321, May 6, 1992), Kramer’s exhortation, “George, it’s time for us to grow up, and be men. Not little boys!” elicits from Costanza a bemused “Why?” Kramer’s own “manchild” nature is a recurring joke across his various escapades, such as when he joins a kiddie carpool as a passenger and incites the ‘other’ children to demand an ice cream stop on the way to karate class, in “The Foundation” (8.1, September 19, 1996).

With exchanges like these doubling as metatextual commentary, on the characters' "arrested development" and star's "shallow" observational shtick respectively, the show again flashes its self-reflexive edge and knowing irony. Seeing his choices to be "funny" or sensitive as mutually exclusive, Jerry of "The Serenity Now" accepts sincerity as his new path, spouting doe-eyed declarations of brotherly love for George and Kramer and kneeling to ask a dumbfounded Elaine's hand in marriage. However, within six minutes of screen time, the freshly reformed comic just as suddenly becomes bored and annoyed with the kind life (or as he puts it, is "scared straight" by his disturbed best friend's reciprocal raw emotional honesty) and retires the compassionate "new Jerry." Squashing the "what if" premise of personal and relationship progress, Old Jerry by episode's end blithely reneges on his sincerer self's soulful marriage proposal, leading George (whose own happy release from engagement came two seasons prior when he caused and rejoiced in the grisly demise of his fiancée) to confide in Elaine, "You know, all these years, I've always wanted to see the two of you get back together." In the end, it is the sharp-tongued "shiksa" who regards the forced detour through male sensitivity with the greatest skepticism, initially resisting because she is fed up with Jerry's "gentle sobbing" and her besotted suitors, and finally dismissing George's confessed romantic streak as further proof that he is an "idiot."<sup>247</sup> This episode's self-canceling warmth commemorates for the viewer and fan community *Seinfeld's* iconoclastic legacy, with a not so veiled swipe at its network stablemates, of lampooning sitcom clichés like romantic union as a predestined (if forestalled and frustrated) series arc for male and female friends in lead roles, the impetus for more sentimentally inclined hits like *Cheers* and *Friends*.

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<sup>247</sup> Earlier in this episode (9.3, written by Steve Koren), Elaine's expositional gibe "Jerry, you break up with a girl every week," as an in-joke for the repeat viewer, elicits a burst of studio laughter. In a related example of the series' famed self-referential irony, George deduces that their NBC pilot failed in the U.S. market "because here every time you turn on a TV, all you see is four morons sitting around an apartment *whining* about their dates." *Seinfeld*, "The Checks," episode 8.7, co-written by Steve O'Donnell, Tom Gammill, and Max Pross, first aired November 7, 1996, on NBC.

## “The Great Nothing”

A strange sort of nothing is destroying everything.

— *The NeverEnding Story*, 1984, children’s movie  
for Generation X about The Great Nothing<sup>248</sup>

Writings on *Seinfeld* invariably diagnose the lead characters as juvenile, selfish, self-absorbed, aloof, unsympathetic, narcissistic, and neurotic, if not also reaching for labels like sociopathic, hostile, corrupt, malevolent, or evil.<sup>249</sup> Detractors and enthusiasts alike point to the *Seinfeld* gang’s lack of “redeeming” or “positive” values as a trademark of the show. Yet, various commentators such as television scholar Michael V. Tueth have stressed that these captivating characters alongside the other young urbanites of nineties sitcoms, although remarkable for their eccentricities and “childish” traits, were ultimately “something close to role models.” The “1990s television comic heroes need not be admirable,” opines Tueth, but instead won over audiences with their charismatic blend of cleverness and intensity, their embrace of their failings, and most noteworthy, he suggests, the promise of “freer forms of self-expression.”<sup>250</sup>

Scholarship has explored the text of *Seinfeld* fairly exhaustively from a variety of angles, with particular attention to its representations of Jewish ethnicity, its place in the lineage of urban sitcoms, and as a persistent undercurrent in the literature on the show, this tricky question of whether (or why) nineties audiences *identified* with its “amoral” and “unlikable” characters.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> *The NeverEnding Story*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen (1984; Warner Bros., 2001), DVD.

<sup>249</sup> All of these labels appear in one or more articles I have cited in this chapter but are so commonplace in the literature on *Seinfeld* that they do not warrant direct attribution here.

<sup>250</sup> Tueth, “Fun City,” 102, 103, 107. Not only were some of the main characters “generally attractive, well educated, and/or well respected in their professions,” but also, he argues, this cycle of urban comedies relied on the “emotional intensity” of the stand-up stars like *Seinfeld*, Paul Reiser (of *Mad About You*), Ellen DeGeneres (*ABC’s Ellen*, 1994–98), and Drew Carey (*ABC’s The Drew Carey Show*, 1995–2004) to fashion them as the “new comic heroes.”

<sup>251</sup> See David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne, eds., *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television’s Greatest Sitcom* (New York: Continuum, 2006); and Vincent Brook, “From the Cozy to the Carceral: Transformations of Ethnic Space in *The Goldbergs* and *Seinfeld*,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 44 (fall 1999): 54–67.



Overwhelmingly, however, in the shadow of this latter question, cultural criticism about *Seinfeld* has dwelled upon three concepts that have continually worked to define self-reflexive and “edgy” comedy since the 1980s, examined in this dissertation as intersecting discourses: irony, political incorrectness, and nihilism. In many respects, *Seinfeld* came to occupy a place at the center of the national conversation and anxiety over these closely articulated cultural phenomena. Turning now from the fascination with *Seinfeld*’s textual style as anti-conventional sitcom to its critical reception as a cultural text imbued with anti-relevance, the remainder of this chapter focuses on how the series’ cultural significance came to be framed in terms of broad questions of postmodern “amorality” and social politics and positioned in debates over political correctness.

Jedediah Purdy, the author of *For Common Things* (discussed in my Introduction), singled out *Seinfeld* as the figure who came to embody the irony epidemic in the 1990s, writing:

... [H]e is irony incarnate. Autonomous by virtue of his detachment, disloyal in a manner too vague to be mistaken for treachery, he is matchless in discerning the surfaces whose creature he is. The point of irony is a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationship, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech—especially earnest speech.<sup>252</sup>

Purdy’s book famously faulted *Seinfeld* for his coolly noncommittal approach to life, for “refusing to identify strongly with any project, relationship or aspiration.”<sup>253</sup> In his 1999 *Maclean*’s essay “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” as we saw, journalist Charles Gordon, too, indicted *Seinfeld* as the envoy of a degraded irony “in which no character and no idea can be found to admire.”<sup>254</sup> Accordingly, David Marc has summarized the series as follows:

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<sup>252</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 9–10. Purdy’s argument that “[t]he ironic stance invites us to be self-absorbed, but in selves that we cannot believe to be especially interesting or significant” (19–20) is arguably perfectly exemplified by *Seinfeld*’s protagonist’s obsessive interest in the trivial as the basis for his identity.

<sup>253</sup> Quoted in Marshall Sella, “Against Irony,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 1999, <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/19990905mag-sincere-culture.html>.

<sup>254</sup> Charles Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Maclean*’s 112, no. 41 (October 11, 1999): 67.

Jerry... is a man committed to only one thing: detachment. ... [P]ositing no political beliefs of his own, and glad to take potshots at anyone who does, he leaves the viewer with the impression that anyone stupid enough to be committed to believe in anything, as opposed to nothing, deserves ridicule.

The nonchalance with which *Seinfeld* “advocates nothing,” the noted comedy historian asserts, made this sitcom ripe to be “remembered as the perfect period piece of the American 1990s.”<sup>255</sup>

Competing with the industry discourse of quality, such arguments collectively worked to explain popular enthusiasm for a “comedy about nothing,” seen as the defining instance of television irony for the 1990s, as a culture-wide descent into nihilism.

While scholars viewed U.S. media culture increasingly in these terms, even those downplaying aesthetic questions of “quality” to focus instead on a contemporary “crisis” of meaning frequently handled *Seinfeld* and David’s sitcom as a special case, to be acknowledged and examined for its exceptionality as much as for its popularity and representativeness of irony as the new cultural currency. Media theorist Shane Gunster, who upholds *Seinfeld* as a product of and strategic response to a postmodern culture of nihilism, concedes that the characters mobilize irony to “sponsor a casual indifference” to political values and social virtues. However, whereas *Seinfeld*’s most outspoken critics have objected to its thematics of not “caring” or taking anything “seriously,” Gunster praises the program for extending to its target audience a sense of agency through irony as a playful means to navigate a “social life stripped of deeper meaning.”<sup>256</sup> He stipulates:

[*Seinfeld*’s] extraordinary ability to appeal to the young and the wealthy, I would argue, was based on the show’s fusion of a hard-edged, cynical diagnosis of many aspects of modern life as meaningless with fun, privatized forms of agency in which a Sisyphean fate becomes neither cause for existential despair nor call

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<sup>255</sup> David Marc, “*Seinfeld*: A Show (Almost) About Nothing,” in *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain* (2006), 26–27, reworking a passage that appeared earlier in his *Comic Visions* (1997) chapter “Friends of the Family,” 202–3.

<sup>256</sup> Gunster, “All About Nothing,” 209, 210; see also 211, 213.

for transformative social action but instead the basis for idle coffee-shop chatter. Such visions are bound to be especially appealing to those deeply embedded in the comforts of consumer society yet skeptical of many of the ideologies and belief systems that have traditionally given that society deeper meaning.<sup>257</sup>

The characters, he argues, model ironic strategies for “mobilizing the trivial, irrelevant, and silly *as if* it is something one might want to care about [emphasis in original],” in effect “making something out of nothing,” which is, he suggests, the show’s prevailing theme.<sup>258</sup>

While numerous scholars have weighed in on the significance of the “about nothing” tag line as a testament not only to this comedy’s embrace of the mundane and of non-relevance but moreover to its vacant “moral center,”<sup>259</sup> philosopher Thomas Hibbs’s *Shows About Nothing* offers the broadest theoretical overview of *Seinfeld*’s place in the cultural history of Western nihilism. Tracing the principle of living “beyond good and evil” from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Death of God* through Jerry Seinfeld’s merrily “malevolent” universe, Hibbs’s much-cited 1999 book (and revised edition in 2012) named the latter as the harbinger of a new *comic* nihilism, dominating a phase he calls *normal nihilism*, asserting itself across American popular culture.<sup>260</sup> These terms describe a nihilistic mode of pleasure-seeking divested of angst and lacking the sense of moral authenticity that once elevated Nietzsche’s “superman” above herd mentality as the architect of his own values. Nihilism is no longer “wrestled with” but rather an “unspoken

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 206, 216. A subsection header on p. 208 designates this thematic work “postmodern cultural alchemy.”

<sup>259</sup> For example, Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye,” 114, stresses “‘nothing’ defined the moral center of the show”; Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 202, points out that “Jerry lives in a universe empty of values”; and N. Mills, “So Long,” 90, discussed in context below, defends this “absence of a clear-cut moral edge” as an artistic prerogative of the creators to avoid scoring easy “political points” with right-on, liberal-friendly resolutions.

<sup>260</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, especially chap. 4, “Normal Nihilism,” 136–72. Hibbs outlines three stages of nihilism in Western thought and popular culture, moving “from the pursuit of evil [as liberating] through the banality of evil to normal nihilism as comic” (182). His revised edition (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012) bears the truncated subtitle *Nihilism in Popular Culture*, omitting “from *The Exorcist* to *Seinfeld*.” Since “show about nothing” is cultural shorthand for *Seinfeld*, this titular deemphasizing in the newer edition of the author’s parallel attention to film genres subtly reinforces the focus on *Seinfeld* and television shows as the fulcrum of this trend.

assumption” of the culture, he argues, “a prevailing, if unremarked, supposition and a fertile source of comedy.”<sup>261</sup> Dissolving all pretense of purposefulness into laughter and establishing “the futility of the quest” as the new comic motif *de rigueur*, Hibbs stresses, *Seinfeld*’s Jerry as the all-American ironic hero served to “illustrate the preeminence of lifestyle over morality.”<sup>262</sup>

*Shows About Nothing* maps the emergence of this amoral comic nihilism and celebratory shallowness onto the postmodern pursuit of “meaninglessness” in contemporary media:

The virtues that Nietzsche praises—courageous resolve and truthfulness about the nonexistence of all objective ideals—are the virtues of those who heroically and tragically confront the emptiness of human life, and there is something noble and edifying in their struggle. It is, however, difficult to sustain the seriousness of the struggle in the face of its meaninglessness. Pointlessness mocks strenuous effort. If no ennobling affirmation emerges from the era of nihilism, the struggle itself comes to seem foolish and laughable. The tragic thus degenerates into a comic satire of all things serious and elevated.<sup>263</sup>

Similar to Purdy, Hibbs finds that *Seinfeld*’s lead “is capable of an unrivaled detachment and indifference,” as a figure defined by his “innate superficiality.”<sup>264</sup> In the *Seinfeld* metatext, he notes, the star’s own heroic ideal is the two-dimensional *Superman* of comic books, a highly ideological pop cultural icon whose moral rectitude and altruism Jerry chooses to ignore altogether, preferring simply to ornament his bachelor pad with the spectacle of absolute power in the form of a Man of Steel action figure and refrigerator magnet. Whereas more melodramatic quality shows of the time like *Cheers*, *ER* (NBC, 1994–2009), and even farcical dramedy *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997–2002) retained poignant notes of tragedy and held onto “the quest” for love, meaning, or fulfillment, Hibbs asserts, *Seinfeld* depicts a society “populated by Nietzsche’s

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. (1st ed.), 137.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 21, 159.

<sup>263</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing* (1st ed.), 18.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 167.

last men, who, when faced with the great questions and ultimate issues of life, blink and giggle”— a reiteration of his key point that supreme apathy and banality make the sedentary creatures Jerry Seinfeld and George Costanza, although somewhat symbolic of “radical autonomy,” the antithesis of the philosophical ideal of an agential, superior being rising above the masses.<sup>265</sup>

On the one hand, scrutinizing the show as a self-aware statement on nihilistic living, Hibbs, like Gunster, admires the creative “genius” and “depth and complexity of *Seinfeld*’s insight into the comical consequences of life in a world devoid of any ultimate meaning or fundamental purpose.”<sup>266</sup> However, whatever empowerment and autonomy audiences may find in the culture of irony or “jaded amusement,” he argues, comes at the expense of “any shared vision” of the American Dream or “the good life.”<sup>267</sup> As a conservative, Hibbs works to establish a basis for Republican condemnations of “Hollywood’s nihilism” as a product of liberalism, but he insists, moreover, that media such as *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*, by encouraging ironic detachment in audiences, jettisons ideals of American democracy and “human dignity” precious to both the Right and the Left.<sup>268</sup> He cautions that the prevalence of “nihilistic premises” in popular culture promotes and celebrates the rapid disintegration of “the very foundations of modern politics” and “the principles for our discernment of good and evil.” “Adolescent giggling” at evil, by art and audiences in a media culture beholden to irony, warns Hibbs, guarantees “there is no easy way back to Enlightenment ideals.”<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 154, 161–62; and for his critique of “autonomous self-creation” or “radical autonomy,” see p. 48.

<sup>266</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 137, 156; see also 53.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 5, 22, 48, 145.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 5, 53. Like many cultural commentators on the right, Hibbs sees this strain of nihilistic self-interest as an inevitable consequence of liberalism’s embrace of postmodern ideas that “truth” is contingent and relative; the result, he argues, can only be “democratic nihilism” that sacrifices any shared ideal of the American Dream (p. 156).

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 5–6, 53.

Such sweeping philosophical claims converged with the explanations, being posed in the political economic vernacular, that saw the roots of this programming trend in an era of relative affluence. A 1998 piece by Caryn James in *The New York Times* summed up the *Seinfeld* years as “a period whose strong economy allows for navel gazing,” a notion that parallels what Lusane dubbed the “don’t-give-a-damn” ethos of the 1990s in his account of *Married... With Children*’s resonance with underprivileged, financially disadvantaged audiences.<sup>270</sup> Both assessments are evocative of the indictments of a decade that saw standing for “nothing” celebrated as the height of cool. With losercoms and yuppiecoms being framed in turn as expressions of youth alienation and neo-yuppie narcissism, both sets of programs were charged with participating in this nihilistic postmodern malaise. We can presume significant potential for crossover in viewerships for the blue-collar suburban and upscale urban sitcoms as the networks and advertisers competed, as I noted previously, for the young, adult, postmodern-literate Generation-X audience.<sup>271</sup> Despite overlapping with the late-1980s programming trend of losercoms, the cultural salience of which persisted (along with new versions) well into the nineties for Gen-X audiences, however, these remarkably upbeat early and mid-1990s arrivals populated overwhelmingly by perky young singles were seen by critics, rightly, as a decisive break with that particular motif in U.S. comedy.

*New York Times* columnist Alessandra Stanley, for example, with the benefit of hindsight after the series’ end, cited the 1994 arrival of *Friends* as a sitcom turning point and attributed

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<sup>270</sup> James, “Critic’s Notebook,” E1; Lusane, “Assessing the Disconnect,” 20. Echoing James, Rosenbaum on NPR (“*Seinfeld*’s Last”) described *Seinfeld* as a show for and “about people gazing at their own navel so lovingly that they rhapsodize about the texture of the lint.”

<sup>271</sup> Citing data from a March 1993 issue of *Advertising Age*, Becker notes that *Roseanne* “despite its decidedly blue-collar tenor” experienced a ratings bump in 1992–93 to become “the number one rated show” in the “lucrative demographic” of households in the \$60,000-plus income bracket. Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties,” 46, note 39. See also Lowry, “Ad Coin Rolls to Youth,” 33–34.

its strong appeal to the rebounding economy and the correspondingly rosy outlook for the next-generation yuppies, channeled into a rekindled national sense of urban vitality, fun, and romance. “‘Friends’ came along after the Reagan-Bush recession of the late 1980’s and early 90’s [*sic*], a period that had fostered shows like ‘Married... With Children,’ ‘Roseanne’ and ‘The Simpsons,’ caustic comedy centered around dysfunctional, financially strapped, families,” reasoned Stanley, adding that this series helped seal the country’s sense that “Manhattan once again looked like a safe, fun and romantic place to be.”<sup>272</sup> Tueth has likewise argued that the urban sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, *Frasier*, and *Spin City* (ABC, 1996–2002) depicting young urbanites for the most part as attractive, clever or hip, unattached professionals brought with them the unmistakable message that city life is “fun,” a playful ethos further reinforced after hours with David Letterman’s *Late Show* hijinks and frequent New York man-on-the-street segments.<sup>273</sup> Beyond this urban focus, an overarching thematic of adolescent-style aimless “fun” also penetrated the latest losercoms like *Beavis and Butt-Head* and ultimately *Married... With Children*—which from its fifth season onward increased its focus on Al Bundy’s pleasurable men’s outings with new sidekick Jefferson D’Arcy (David Garrison’s replacement Ted McGinley, formerly of *Happy Days*), the careerless and “cool” antithesis of stodgy Steve Rhoades or in *Seinfeld* parlance the Bizarro Steve, and other disgruntled husbands eager to recapture the bachelor life.

While *Seinfeld* indeed advanced and self-consciously celebrated the same ironic trope of the “loser,” particularly through the figure of George (“I am Costanza, king of the idiots”<sup>274</sup>), this

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<sup>272</sup> Alessandra Stanley, “Twilight of the Sitcom Gods (Cue the Strings),” *New York Times*, May 6, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/06/arts/television/06STAN.html> (accessed May 6, 2004).

<sup>273</sup> Tueth, “Fun City,” 102–4.

<sup>274</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Apartment,” episode 2.5 (prod. no. 208), written by Peter Mehlman, first aired April 4, 1991, on NBC. George’s line may call to mind Al Bundy’s dubious claim on power with Peg’s assurances, “You’re the king, baby!”

series, like *Friends* and the NBC quality brand revitalized in their image along with their imitators on ABC, thus split away and achieved distinction from the “losercom” trend in significant ways. The *Seinfeld* characters, even with Elaine and George “caught in a revolving door” of jobs over the seasons (as Caryn James’s editorial observes), lead lives of leisure defined by their comfortably middle-class status.<sup>275</sup> This is captured in the contrasting representations of perpetual lack versus abundance: Al Bundy has nary a scrap of food to eat and scrounges for “toaster leavings,” while on the neighboring quality network the Manhattan sitcoms’ “idle coffee-shop chatter” takes place over never-empty plates of uneaten diner treats at Monk’s Restaurant, or brimming latte bowls at *Friends* hangout Central Perk.<sup>276</sup> The notion of Seinfeldian “navel gazing,” threaded through what sitcom producer Rob Long dubbed the “young-people-talking” sitcom craze of the 1990s, was claimed as a luxury (as underscored by Gunster’s passage quoted above) for the smartly cynical, “wealthy” audience member.<sup>277</sup>

The presentation of *Seinfeld*’s George Costanza (and his self-identification) as a pathetic figure and the perennial “loser,” as several scholars have detailed, is paired with the suggestion of Jerry Seinfeld as a “winner” on his own terms in the life and relationships he views as a “game.”<sup>278</sup> Jerry’s expectation that everything works out for him in the end is laid out explicitly in the

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<sup>275</sup> James, “Critic’s Notebook,” E6. *The Drew Carey Show* further blurred these categories with its star’s mild “everyman” image, trading the coffee shop for the blue-collar beer tavern while enjoying relative material comforts.

<sup>276</sup> The contrast extends to adult protagonists’ sex lives, skills, and/or smarts. In a twist on these sensibilities based in lack/abundance, to the same extent that parents or parenting are a structuring *absence* for the teens of losercom *Beavis and Butt-Head* (along with the Bundy children and various Gen-X latchkey kid fantasies of the 1980s and 1990s), the young boomer adults Costanza and Seinfeld feel smothered by overbearing elders’ presence and intrusions. *Seinfeld* on this score appeals *both* to the boomer conflict with the older generation and to the Gen-X mediated master narrative of “adolescence.”

<sup>277</sup> Long, “Jerry Built,” 34; Gunster, “All About Nothing,” 217 (“idle coffee-shop chatter”), as cited above.

<sup>278</sup> See especially Hirsch & Hirsch, “*Seinfeld*’s Humor Noir,” 118, for textual analysis on this latter point, arguing, “Relationships are games, and he has the requisites to be a winner—nothing ever hurts him”; and Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 153, asserting that “where arbitrary, individual preferences rule, relationships can be nothing more than games.”



season five closer “The Opposite,” in which the central joke is that he invariably “breaks even” and thus cannot really lose.<sup>279</sup> As the show’s narrative and comic center, shown enjoying the fruits of his success and an intellectual head start on many occasions, he is potentially aligned with the prospective ‘smart’ viewer. Presented as a respected professional who “has girls, money and power enough to play philosopher-king,” Marc contends, the comedian’s stage and screen persona is that of the “cosmopolitan, enlightened contemporary guy” and comes much closer than George Costanza to “*goyische* ideals of televisual masculinity.”<sup>280</sup> In the storyworld, the star’s claim on normalcy is shored up by his juxtaposition with George and Kramer, according to Marc, who sees *Seinfeld* situated by the text—between these two physical and temperamental extremes—as a kind of spokesman for “the American middle.”<sup>281</sup> Francis Davis’s December 1992 piece in *The Atlantic* finds him “a surprisingly effective straight man” and point of identification for the audience given that the integrated stand-up monologues establish common ground with humor based in “recognition.” *Seinfeld*’s material “internalizes everybody’s experience,” Davis enthused, through deadpan observations about dating and daily annoyances “you feel as though you could have come up with yourself.”<sup>282</sup> Jerry *Seinfeld* is widely seen in these ways as taking up the role of the “straight man” and “bemused bystander” surrounded with a supporting cast of characters who function to a greater degree as physical and

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<sup>279</sup> *Seinfeld*, “The Opposite,” episode 5.22, co-written by Andy Cowan, Jerry Seinfeld, and Larry David, first aired May 19, 1994, on NBC. In this instance, it is hinted that he has better fortune and mastery of his circumstances despite inhabiting the same narrative universe where events conspire against all characters (as Hibbs points out) in chains of sinister “coincidence.” For close analysis of coincidence as a structuring “malevolent” force in *Seinfeld*’s narrative universe (even more so than in *Married... With Children*), see Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 161–66.

<sup>280</sup> Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 200–1; emphasis in original.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 202. He is “one of TV’s ‘us,’ a televisually acceptable, conventionally well-dressed, SWM,” observes Marc (p. 200).

<sup>282</sup> Davis, “Recognition Humor,” 136, saw this “recognition humor” replacing (both as a term and a technique) “observational” humor of the prior generation of stand-up comics “generalizing from [their] own experience.”

social grotesques.<sup>283</sup> Content to cast his lot with “essentially unlikable, petty characters,” writes *The New York Times*’s James, our guide and point of entry into this carnival is “Jerry, the droll bystander, observing and commenting on it all, refusing to take life seriously.”<sup>284</sup>

With Jerry Seinfeld heralded as the ironic “everyman,” his character jointly operates in the mimetic and ‘new’ ironic registers. His relative intelligence and autonomy prime viewers to accept him—but also to varying degrees, by association, each member of his entourage of grotesques—as “one of us.” While the four principals as a unit engage in what Chesebro would call “polluting” the social order, significantly, unlike sitcom irony of a prior era their violations are never followed or corrected with narrative rituals of guilt, purification, and redemption.<sup>285</sup> Consequently, a competing strain of analysis poses the pleasures of “recognition” in this comedy more broadly, speculating that *Seinfeld*’s audiences related not only to the yuppie class identity, wit, and cosmopolitanism but moreover saw themselves in the vices and “amorality” on display. “*Seinfeld* holds a mirror up to our ugly, amoral aspects,” proclaim the psychologists Hirsch and Hirsch, whose thesis is that “viewers *identify* with the immaturity, narcissism, and venality [emphasis in original]” of the comic foursome who feign no goodwill for their fellow man.<sup>286</sup> “The awful things that are said about serious relationships and the value of interpersonal cruelty,

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<sup>283</sup> See Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye,” 114. Setting up a contrast between the “controlled classical” body versus “grotesque” bodies on the show, Morreale asserts that Seinfeld (the former) played “the bemused bystander” or “the straight man who reacted to the events around him,” compulsive and orderly while often “not in control.”

<sup>284</sup> James, “Critic’s Notebook,” E6.

<sup>285</sup> See Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series,” 21–22. Although one could plausibly argue that a chief comedic function of George Costanza in the narrative is to advance the “rhetoric of the loser” that Chesebro identified (p. 43) as the basis for the *ironic* sitcom form during the late classic network era, by serving as a central character who is “both intellectually inferior and less able to control circumstances than is the audience” (p. 21), Jerry Seinfeld in the lead role ensures against taking that representation “seriously” as a rhetorical strategy by continually tipping the comedy back toward the mimetic tradition. As the “philosopher-king” holds court with the idiot, the unruly woman, and the clown, the program renders even its own informal hierarchy of hipness largely irrelevant.

<sup>286</sup> Hirsch & Hirsch, “*Seinfeld*’s Humor Noir,” 123.

detachment, and utter selfishness resonate with some of the wishes, if not the behavior, of most people,” the authors postulate, stressing that audiences tuned in for the hedonism and misanthropy, as “ugly ‘truths’” being “gloriously celebrated,” because “it is liberating to hear stated what is normally muted.”<sup>287</sup> Just as some fans found Al Bundy’s unvarnished chauvinism refreshing, this line of argument suggests participatory rhetorical acts of rebellion as a key appeal of the program. Even media scholars such as Morreale who were more reluctant to suppose that viewers took up the “uneasy subject positions” supplied by these characters have concluded that much of the text’s pleasure lies in its performative “celebration of the taboo, a reveling in the unmasking of social proprieties.”<sup>288</sup> The cast’s cavalcade of bad behavior unencumbered by regret or gestures of contrition garnered unprecedented attention in the cultural mainstream to comic transgressions as “political incorrectness.”

The same irony that some cultural commentators cautiously condemned as comic nihilism, others applauded as an unraveling of quality television’s “self-congratulatory liberalism.”<sup>289</sup> In a February 1998 *National Review* editorial, for instance, Rob Long exhorted conservatives to be cheered by the prospect that “after years of pious liberal nonsense, the American viewing public relished the naughty pleasure of apolitical laughter” with *Seinfeld*’s “kvetching,” “unlikable” characters.<sup>290</sup> In the leftist journal *Dissent* that summer, meanwhile, Nicolaus Mills reiterated, “What lay at the center of *Seinfeld* and made it the leading sitcom of the nineties was the delight it took in attacking political correctness” and “never... suggesting the value of doing the right thing.”

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 120, 122.

<sup>288</sup> Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye,” 114.

<sup>289</sup> *The Atlantic*’s Davis again is representative. Complaining that quality sitcoms from *M\*A\*S\*H* to *Murphy Brown* are “overpraised,” he saw *Seinfeld*’s key achievement as the humor’s radical departure from a tradition of “self-congratulatory liberalism [that] regularly passes for biting social satire.” Davis, “Recognition Humor,” 136.

<sup>290</sup> Long, “Jerry Built,” 34.

He situated the series as an early adopter of the emergent anti-PC ethos, an usher giving viewers a front row seat as the nation “entered the era of postmoral politics.”<sup>291</sup> Whereas the *Married... With Children* protagonist’s blatant misogyny, foregrounded as anti-PC “sexism” by the text, was sometimes flagged as a problematic basis for humor by critics, that is rarely the case with *Seinfeld*’s systematic ‘trivialization’ of his female partners. The show largely deflected terms like sexism in the press while attracting praise for the comic’s “attacks on PC sexual thinking,” as when Mills enthuses that “Jerry had no qualms about not playing by the sexual rules of the nineties: dropping women for the slightest ‘fault.’” Though Mills has faintly faulted the hit sitcom’s writers for foregoing “any larger social vision” to anchor its anti-PC chic, he largely shared Long’s enthusiasm for comedy committed only to the belief (in his estimation, fresh and revolutionary for prime-time programming in the early 1990s if overplayed by decade’s end) that “in our daily lives political correctness can only kill joy and complexity.”<sup>292</sup>

Further defining and defending the “apolitical tone” of contemporary comedy as a freeing response to PC sensitivity, essayist Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker*, retrospectively in a 2003 review of Gerald Nachman’s history *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, sought to draw a clear line of progression from the “subversive” or “anti-establishment” comics of that generation (such as Jackie Mason, Alan King, Mort Sahl, Phyllis Diller, Tom Lehrer, and the Smothers Brothers) to their eventual successors like *Seinfeld* who had subsequently redefined comedy as a business of “attitude and apolitical indifference.” Of the earlier movement, led by left-leaning satirists, Gopnik observed, the preferred target was not primarily the right wing power bloc but ultimately “liberalism and its pieties,” as

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<sup>291</sup> N. Mills, “So Long,” 90–92.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. Long, “Jerry Built,” 34, calls *Seinfeld* a “revolutionary” blow to “the prevailing wisdom.”

acerbic yet relatable comics of the counterculture from Lenny Bruce to George Carlin challenged conformity while self-consciously navigating the modern moral order, lampooning progressive ideology from within and addressing their audiences as “insiders.”<sup>293</sup> “The real genius of the ‘new’ [1950s and 1960s] comedians lay in spotting... the sudden rise of the wide-eyed optimism of liberalism—the rhetoric of rights, personal growth, acceptance, and ostentatious tolerance,” he reflected.<sup>294</sup>

Gopnik was adamant that a shift away from political topicality by the 1990s had not “defanged” but broadened satire’s scope and audience. In his account, the subject of politics drifted out of the nation’s comic crosshairs altogether in the Reagan era as comedians tackled liberalism’s disproportionate influence in the “private” domain. That is, post-sixties comedians drew their material from “the bedroom and the living room,” he argued, because that is “where liberal pretension has gone.” “The liberal cultural pieties were so strong, and affected people’s lives so directly—the way we eat, sleep, date, make love, and so on—that... they have managed to persist in power even after they were rejected politically,” he ventured.<sup>295</sup> “By doubting liberalism, the new comedians reinforced its essential message,” he concluded, “which is that extreme self-consciousness is a social good.” In invoking the “rebel” legacy and directly articulating *Seinfeld*’s “obsessiveness about the minutiae of social presentation” to that of

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<sup>293</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Standup Guys: What Were the Rebel Comedians Rebellious Against?” review of *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (Pantheon, 2003) by Gerald Nachman, *The New Yorker* 79, no. 11 (May 12, 2003): 106–9; the quoted phrasing is from pp. 107 and 108. “Even Lenny Bruce, for all his reputation as an agitator, presents himself not as an outsider but as a hipster,” he explains, “a knowing and essentially well-wishing insider speaking to others” (109). George Carlin, not a big name before the seventies and thus not a subject of Nachman’s book, is emphatically included by Gopnik as part of this “rebel” tradition.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. Just as Mills’s “So Long” in *Dissent* assures that *Seinfeld* exposed and satirized how “our private lives” by the early 1990s were in the grip of liberal “sanctimoniousness” (p. 92), here again we see the discourse, commonplace even on the left by the 2000s, mobilizing the specter of hegemonic PC as deeply saturating the private lives of Americans such that comedic observations reflexively criticizing multiculturalist manners were framed as liberatory and simultaneously apolitical disruptions of comfortable common sense.

Woody Allen, Mike Nichols, and Lenny Bruce before him, Gopnik not only offered a concise analysis bridging several successive comedic eras, but also, notably, suggested that Seinfeldian observational comedy has its roots in the same soil of what began as a liberal humanist comedic tradition dedicated to exploring “how to be a good person.”<sup>296</sup> Intriguingly, Gopnik’s essay ends on this point and does not pick at the scab of the 1990s accusations that Seinfeldian comedy breaks faith with that project.

Even those making the case for reading *Seinfeld* as social commentary, then, have tended to identify political correctness, broadly construed as manners vested in sanctimonious liberalism, as the one consistent target of its humor, hailing the show’s use of irony simultaneously as “apolitical” and a “war on political correctness.”<sup>297</sup> Literary scholar David P. Pierson, dissecting the mechanics of *Seinfeld* as “a contemporary comedy of manners” and the modern equivalent of an Oscar Wilde play, places the text in a distinguished theatrical tradition of farce laced with social critique. In his account, published in 2000 in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, the series does not so much promulgate as thoroughly satirize the “noncommittal ethos of the ‘90s single adult dating scene” and “postmodern American civility.” Approaching the characters as moral and physical grotesques, in the Bakhtinian sense, but also proxies for the thirtyish viewer expected to negotiate and “keep up with” social rituals and rules of political correctness, Pierson concludes that *Seinfeld* is “extremely egalitarian in its satirical thrust.”<sup>298</sup> Gunster, likewise, deems *Seinfeld*’s humor “surprisingly inoffensive” given that it romped through “serious social terrain.” Indeed, he maintains that “political correctness... is not so

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<sup>296</sup> Gopnik, “Standup Guys,” 109. O’Connor’s 1987 review “Stand-Up Comedy Specials on HBO” likewise contended that Seinfeld, though more subdued, “is spawned by the George Carlin school of comedy.”

<sup>297</sup> The latter phrase is used by N. Mills, “So Long,” 90.

<sup>298</sup> David P. Pierson, “A Show About Nothing: Seinfeld and the Modern Comedy of Manners,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (summer 2000): 49–64, especially 53 and 59.

much attacked as it is defused” as the show shifts PC social codes out of serious discourse and into the realm of comedic absurdity.<sup>299</sup>

Some left-oriented critics were not amused. Writing in *The Progressive* in fall 1995, Marxist feminist media scholar Elayne Rapping forcefully condemned television’s complicity in a creeping cultural preference for “trivial pursuits” and balked at *Seinfeld*’s popularity with socially liberal audiences.<sup>300</sup> For Rapping, the sophisticated urban comedies like *Seinfeld*, *Mad About You*, and ABC’s *Ellen* as the new alternative to nuclear family sitcoms collectively offered a “flat and empty” fantasy. While not directly invoking nihilistic irony, like several of the authors above she saw comedy writers and potentially audiences in the aura of *Seinfeld* abdicating any sense of politics and found the common theme of these shows to be a troubling implication that “neither work nor parenting nor human relationships in general have much meaning” for young adults in the new economy. By contrast, she noted, TV families from the “wacky” Ricardos through the Bundys dabbled in matters of obligations and consequences, facing work and money worries. *Seinfeld*-inspired programs, in turn, tended to depict “a world in which *all* time is spare and empty and free, in which all relationships and problems are trivial and transient and disposable, in which days and nights are spread out before us in an endless line of pointless, silly, slap-happy conversations and activities,” she deduced, concluding, “The yuppie narcissisms, the shirking of responsibilities, the sneering at politics all get to be a bit much.”<sup>301</sup> Objecting that *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and their clones fashioned witty young urbanites in the image of immature, insular,

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<sup>299</sup> Gunster, “All About Nothing,” 217–18.

<sup>300</sup> Elayne Rapping, “The Seinfeld Syndrome,” *The Progressive* 59, no. 9 (September 1995): 37–38. Support was so widespread that she begins, “Am I the only left-leaning U.S. citizen who has not joined the cult of *Seinfeld*?”

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 38; emphasis in original. One of the first reviews of *Friends* in the industry press similarly condemned that series as a “sitgiggle” steering around “[m]oral and health issues” towards “empty-headedness” and providing “not much of a positive example for juves.” Tony Scott, “TV Reviews: *Friends*,” *Variety*, September 19, 1994, 50.

irresponsible “junior-high school kids,” Rapping opined that “the most offensive aspect of the trend may be its adolescent way of mocking everything that has any meaning whatever. These shows make anyone who takes politics—or anything else—seriously seem like a schmuck.”<sup>302</sup>

The tendency to hype *Seinfeld* as “the defining sitcom of our age,” media scholar Mary Ann Watson, echoing Rapping and Marc, lamented in *Television Quarterly* in March 1998, “confirms we’re living in a self-absorbed, cynical era in which real creeps are often elevated as colorful nonconformists and the good-hearted and hard-working are dismissed as dull chumps.”<sup>303</sup> While acknowledging the skill that went into the show, Watson confessed to feeling “physically sick” at watching the middle-class, white characters dole out laughs frequently at the expense of immigrants, service workers, the handicapped, the homeless, and various socially disadvantaged people they are in the habit of inconveniencing and trivializing from their positions of relative comfort and privilege in this show that wrings its humor from the “arrogance and intolerance” of its principal characters and deliberately lacks a moral compass. Watson took away much the same point from the series as enthusiastic advocates like Long and Mills, namely the underlying message, “The PC do-gooders are the real villains. They cramp our style.”<sup>304</sup>

Complicating this persistent criticism that the show elevates “colorful nonconformists” over hard-working “chumps” in its cheeky pursuit of expressive freedoms, some theorists see this text supporting no such hierarchy or rivalry. Notably, according to Hibbs, *Seinfeld*’s comic bent punctures even the enduring fascination in American media with “evildoers” and antiheroes as intriguing rebels, by steering us instead into new territory where “evil, which starts out as the

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<sup>302</sup> Rapping, *ibid.*

<sup>303</sup> Mary Ann Watson, “The Seinfeld Doctrine—‘No Hugging, No Learning’—Imprints the 1990s,” *Television Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (March 1998): 52–54, *Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*



new path to freedom, as an attractive and exciting way to overcome conventional society, manifests its own essential emptiness and banality.” On the one hand, to the extent that democratic ideals or societal norms “are exposed as bankrupt” or meaningless, the rebellious “attempt to transcend moral conventions, can be seen as... a perverse affirmation of life and freedom in opposition to a degrading moral system. The pursuit of evil, then, can... seem cool and hip.”<sup>305</sup> But as we saw, a key tenet of irony-driven “normal” nihilism as he defines it is that the comic “rebel” in transgressing social codes of conduct retains no claim on courageousness or radicalism, as well as offering no “alternative moral vision.” This strain of nihilism, he posits, “deprives the rebel both of worthwhile enemies and of a claim to moral superiority,” such that in *Seinfeld* even the putative generic satire aspires to flaunt its sense of futility, rather than to rebuke or reform sitcom, or by extension, social discourse.

That is, morality is mere “farce” for the *Seinfeld* metatext, where the ironist as rebel undermines convention just for the fun of it. In this sense, Hibbs suggests, *Seinfeld* the series is not especially committed to “rebellious critiques” of the sitcom family, just as Elaine Benes on the show “looks utterly ridiculous” whenever she sporadically takes up radical political (or as he says, “politically correct”) postures. “In a world with no ultimate sense of good and evil or of shared purpose, taking a moral stance is inevitably constructed as striking a pose,” he gleans from the show whose protagonists’ refusal to make meaningful distinctions between important versus trivial matters conjures a world with “no higher and lower.”<sup>306</sup> Nevertheless, as critical

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<sup>305</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 5, 50–52. He does see much contemporary media absorbing and upholding this competing post-Nietzschean view of the nihilist—who casts off a “homogenized, timid, and conformist” social order—as special, superior, and seductive (50). Tapping this vein, Hollywood films like 1991’s *Cape Fear* and *Silence of the Lambs* “exalt the artistic boldness of their evil supermen,” he suggests, such that “evil begins to appear attractive, courageous, and liberating” (51).

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–48, and 162. As an example of *Seinfeld*’s “underlying motif... of morality as farce,” he analyzes “The Couch” (episode 6.5) in which a pizza-themed argument mirrors and mocks public debate over abortion, noting that for *Seinfeld* and company, “There is no higher or lower. Pizza, abortion—it’s all the same” (162).

reception of the show demonstrates, *Seinfeld's* artistic and comedic claims on excellence and audacity did make “cool and hip” heroes (or antiheroes) of the Seinfeld four, and moreover of their creators, repeatedly positioned and praised by journalists, scholars, and fans as rebels taking on a tepid and stifling moral sanctimony in sitcom and society. However noncommittal and nonconfrontational *Seinfeld's* comic venture may be, it steadily served to gel an emerging national narrative defining political correctness as silly and arbitrary rules and thus a worthy “villain” for the nation’s comedians.

Such academic criticism seeking to account for *Seinfeld*—with its shedding of sitcom’s layers of family melodrama and liberal sociodrama—as the triumph of “apolitical” comedy, whether attributed to nihilism or political incorrectness or both, is indebted to ideas of generic “purity.” Hibbs, among others, asserts that because the show “never gives in to the temptation to take itself seriously... it returns us to *pure comedy* [emphasis added]” of a bygone era. In contrast to “older pure comedies” like the skits of Abbott and Costello that Jerry Seinfeld considered his comic forebearers, however, which Hibbs believes were not only “void of any interest in moral instruction or social critique” but “avoided serious issues at all costs,” he stresses that “the scope of *Seinfeld's* humor is unlimited. All the grave topics, whose treatment turned other comedies tragic or at least melodramatic, are but additional subjects of comic insight for *Seinfeld*.”<sup>307</sup> Notably, Elayne Rapping’s condemnation of this show (above) expressly dwells on this refusal to explore “tragic” consequences, for example of Kramer’s self-serving actions—that is, her discomfort lies with the writers’ unwillingness to move the story into the realm of melodrama

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<sup>307</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 152. For additional analysis of *Seinfeld* as “pure comedy,” see Hurd, “Taking *Seinfeld* Seriously,” 767. Hurd takes an auteurist aesthetic approach, arguing that Larry David “actively resisted popularity” and with *Seinfeld's* rejection of sentiment instigated a “‘modernist’ revolution” in the format by “simultaneously legitimating a disparaged yet beloved genre and negating certain ‘contaminating’ conventions of the genre, while bolstering ‘pure’ ones” (768). Significantly, many humor scholars—myself included—would counter that social commentary suffused the slapstick of these “older pure comedies” of American cinema and vaudevillian stand-up and sketch iterations of classic television comedy.

that gave earlier sitcoms like *M\*A\*S\*H* (which Hibbs calls an “abdication of pure comedy”) their claim on relevance.<sup>308</sup> Whereas light entertainment of the late 1970s and early 1980s like *Three’s Company* that veered away from such relevance programming was branded “irrelevance” and “escapism,” in the 1990s this ambiguous label “apolitical,” as shorthand for the new comedic enterprise of anti-relevance, was broad enough to support mixed connotations of nihilism and expressive freedom.<sup>309</sup>

As we have already seen, the producers and many popular critics participated in depoliticizing the show and its irony, by declaring the departure from melodrama and didacticism—or “hugging” and “learning”—to be a cultural reclaiming of “pure” comedy, drawing parallels to classic slapstick acts like Laurel and Hardy (as *Married... With Children*’s Ed O’Neill does in the epigraph earlier in this chapter) or Abbott and Costello (as *Seinfeld*’s star and DVD commentary would likewise do for that show). The subtext of such arguments downplaying the cultural politics of representation is usually that “pure” comedy is just a stimulus for laughter and lacks real ideological potency. Without weighty themes and messages, as *Married... With Children*’s executive producer Michael Moyer stated above, viewers are free to “just sit back and laugh.” TV critic Bill Carter, in an editorial celebrating *Seinfeld* for giving us “the most endearing set of self-absorbed characters ever created,” similarly wrote, “No one watched the show to see favorite characters face challenges, overcome diseases or feel heartache. The goal was only laughter.”<sup>310</sup> Against critiques like Mary Ann Watson’s in *Television Quarterly*,

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<sup>308</sup> Rapping, “Seinfeld Syndrome,” 38; Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 152.

<sup>309</sup> While several scholars do refer in passing to the “escapism” of *Seinfeld* era comedies—including Marc, “Friends of the Family,” 195 (arguing *Roseanne* avoided the “socio-economic escapism” of surrounding sitcoms) and Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 53 (“Ironic, detached comedy... is pure escapism”)—the notion of *apolitical* comedy received far greater emphasis and served as the operative discourse, as shown over the preceding pages.

<sup>310</sup> Bill Carter, “A Show About Nothing Covered A Lot,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1997, A34.

this discourse of “pure comedy” did considerable cultural work, then, to neutralize the specific content of anti-PC humor—to mitigate “offensiveness” of jokes and prioritize the overarching playfulness of the postmodern (as meaningless “fun”), whether seen as liberating or a collapse of moral modernity under a vast comic nihilism.

### **Crimes Against Sincerity: Irony on Trial**

[T]here’s not going to be any moral message here. It’s just going to be four despicable people living their despicable lives....

— Stand-up comedian Kenny Kramer (on whom *Seinfeld*’s Kramer is based), interviewed prior to the much anticipated series finale<sup>311</sup>

With the ironic protagonists of *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld* being scrutinized as problematic “role models” in the court of public opinion, it is only fitting that both series, in their farewell seasons, leveraged their trademark self-reflexivity to put the central characters—and their attitudes—on trial. In *Seinfeld*’s much debated season nine sign-off “The Finale,” broadcast May 14, 1998, the program that had entertained the nation by wallowing in what one reviewer called the “motiveless malignancy” of New Yorkers invited audiences to deliberate on its amoral stakes.<sup>312</sup> Atypical of the series, the story begins with promises of imminent and long awaited change in the lives of the lead characters, as we learn that NBC is reviving *Seinfeld*’s sitcom pilot *Jerry*, requiring Jerry and George to relocate immediately to Los Angeles. Emerging from NBC’s offices jubilant, the duo nearly embrace before silently settling on a no-contact air hug, an in-joke between text and viewer that reaffirms the comedic contract that there will be

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<sup>311</sup> Quoted in Watson, “The Seinfeld Doctrine.”

<sup>312</sup> NPR reporter Brooke Gladstone on *All Things Considered* (the transcript “Seinfeld’s Last” is cited above) seizes on this phrase, which he credits an unnamed reviewer, to describe *Seinfeld*’s New Yorkers.

“no hugging, no learning.” Instead, all emotional displays were confined to the final ten minutes of a series retrospective “clip show” special broadcast the same night, featuring bloopers nostalgically interspersed with behind-the-scenes still images of the cast and crew, including some affectionate moments, in a montage set to Generation-X ironic punk band Green Day’s bittersweet breakup song “Good Riddance (Time of Your Life).”<sup>313</sup>

While tonally consistent with the series as a whole, “The Finale” ejects the characters from their familiar settings into a neighboring state, sowing a sense of their estrangement from American values and their “neighbors.” As a last hurrah, Jerry and George whisk Elaine and Kramer away on an NBC private jet for a Paris getaway, but instead the plane goes down anti-climactically and takes them nowhere in particular. Waylaid in the sleepy town of Latham, Massachusetts (“Stickville” to Jerry), the grounded vacationers witness a carjacking and stand idly by enjoying the show as the driver, an obese man, is yanked from his seat and robbed at gunpoint. While swapping jokes at the expense of the corpulent victim, the chuckling bystanders are promptly arrested under a new Good Samaritan Law because they did “nothing” to help a fellow citizen in need.

Seinfeld and his companions, thrust into national headlines by muckraker Geraldo Rivera and other newsmakers calling them “the New York Four,” face charges of “criminal indifference” and are sentenced to hard time as serial offenders of decency. This hour of television commemorates, through plot and dialogue, virtually every charge that cultural commentators had leveled against these characters, as the embodiment of a detached ironic temperament, over the prior eight years. Signaling this setup, the prosecution team’s strategy session proclaims that “the big issue in this trial is going to be *character*.” In addition to

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<sup>313</sup> *Seinfeld*’s “The Clip Show” (a.k.a. “The Chronicle”), written by Darin Henry, and “The Finale” (parts 1 and 2), written by Larry David, aired together in a two-hour block as episodes 9.21–9.24, May 14, 1998, on NBC.

literalizing Seinfeld and friends' metaphorical "arrested development" by seeing them confined ultimately to a jail cell,<sup>314</sup> the script enlists the extensive cast of supporting characters (plucked from memorable episodes over the seasons and redeployed as sketchy character "witnesses") to testify to their vices.<sup>315</sup> Through the pre-trial coaching of their defense attorney Jackie Chiles (actor Phil Morris in a recurring role inspired by celebrity lawyer Johnnie Cochran), we are authoritatively told that the jury will surely condemn "a mean, nasty, evil George Costanza" with "no moral compass" and will find a "smart-alecky," wisecracking Jerry Seinfeld unsympathetic. "This time, they are going to be held accountable," promises the prosecutor, D.A. Hoyt (James Rebhorn), whose mission it is to document their "pattern of antisocial behavior that's been going on for years." His opening statement assures jurors that the accused "have quite a record of mocking and maligning. This is a history of selfishness, self-absorption, immaturity, and greed." The defense, meanwhile, rests on simply restating Seinfeld's "bystander" status. The judge (Stanley Anderson), the face of immovable seriousness and rectitude, finds that the New York Four's "callous indifference and utter disregard for everything that is good and decent has rocked the very foundation upon which our society is built."

The nation's critics had mixed views on the ultimate meaning of *Seinfeld's* final exercise in hyper-reflexivity. Imprisonment has no discernible impact on the four inmates' interior lives, where there is still nothing "more to life than shallow, obvious observations."<sup>316</sup> Although

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<sup>314</sup> Ching, "They Laughed Unhappily Ever After," 62–63, when analyzing arrested development as a guiding theme of the series and finale, makes this point that prison time is "a literally arrested development" for the static foursome.

<sup>315</sup> One of the assembled victims taking the stand, the Pakistani immigrant Babu Bhatt (Brian George) from November 1991's "The Cafe," claiming they destroyed his livelihood and got him deported, fumes, "But they did not *care!* They're totally indifferent." "All they do is mock....," the destitute restaurateur wags his finger, "They're very bad. Very, very, very bad." Earlier in the hour, the comedian's neighbor and nemesis Newman (Wayne Knight), the show's most overtly sinister character, prophesies that this "day of reckoning is coming" to "wipe that smug smile" from Seinfeld's face and extinguish his "little play world."

<sup>316</sup> The worst part of their jail ordeal, according to Jerry, is "milk rationing" that throws off his cereal levels.

many saw the series conclusion as cementing the nihilistic pleasures of the text and offering, just as Kenny Kramer surmised, “no moral message,” some felt that Larry David used the last script to clarify the show’s thesis as existential comedy and impose a preferred reading of the characters. When *Salon* television critic Bill Wyman called *Seinfeld* “one of the most widely misunderstood works of art of our time,” for example, he focused on the finale for confirmation that “the show was really about” the toll that petty evil and hostility takes on humanity, opining:

Scriptwriter David’s semiotic coup in this episode was to try, in a last parting burst, to get the audience to consider the implication of a show about nothing that dominated the most powerful medium of its time. Finally, almost in desperation, he criminalized the act. Sometimes, he was insisting, nothing is something.<sup>317</sup>

Similarly, Pierson when dissecting this “comedy of manners” finds that “*Seinfeld* comically argues that even small, unrelated acts *do matter* and thus have undeniable social effects for others [emphasis in original].”<sup>318</sup> Against various critics who read the final show more simply as an overdue or forced “judgment” of its shallow characters, Hibbs counters, “There is... a heavy dose of moralism in the episode, perhaps too much to be taken seriously.”<sup>319</sup>

The text indeed takes considerable measures to carve out an ironic subject position from which the in-the-know viewer will not be tempted to take the opposition at all “seriously.” The trial is blatantly one-sided, a dog and pony show choreographed by the prosecution. As flawed and unreliable witnesses are paraded through the courtroom, assigning blame based overwhelmingly on instances of mistaken identity, absurd accidents, and misunderstandings—a cumulative pattern that notably eclipses any actual and intentional cruelty—their allegations go unanswered and no specific defense is offered. All cross-examination is left up to the informed viewer’s

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<sup>317</sup> Wyman, “Seinfeld.”

<sup>318</sup> Pierson, “A Show About Nothing,” 57.

<sup>319</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 172.

mental dialogue.<sup>320</sup> In a parody of public outcry, several of the witnesses (or “character assassins” in Wyman’s estimation<sup>321</sup>) spout either “politically correct” or prudish judgments in the interest of moral panic: With audible gasps the courtroom audience is repulsed at the revelation that the group made a sport of masturbation abstinence, condemns Elaine’s use of birth control as excessive, and is persuaded that she deliberately tripped to grope another woman’s breast. Far from mirroring NBC’s “hip” quality audience watching at home, the reacting courtroom spectators who sit in judgment in the diegesis lend corporeality to the double specter of sanctimonious liberalism and moral conservatism.

The prior season, *Married... With Children* had honored Al Bundy’s eleven-year run of reckless rudeness on the airwaves with its own court-themed clip show “Crimes Against Obesity,” in December 1996, summoning past victims of his offensive jokes as witnesses and angry jury. The story sees the Bundy patriarch’s plan to cash in a birthday dinner coupon thwarted when a stampede of women declaring themselves “big-boned” activists storm Gary’s Shoes, demanding justice for his loutish history of “excessive cruelty to large women.”<sup>322</sup> The group’s leader, an austere fifty-something (Diana Bellamy), presides as judge and prosecutor in an impromptu trial, vowing to punish or reform the jokester. “For every insult, you lose a free meal,” she threatens, commandeering his coupon stash. “You’re not grasping the gravity of the situation, Mr. Bundy,” scolds the judge. “Oh, I think gravity has its hands full right now,” is his snide retort, as the camera leers at the large women. Here again, as with the NBC meta sitcom, criticism focuses on

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<sup>320</sup> As their accusers offer testimony that Kramer is a pimp, that George is a communist, and that Elaine publicly exposed her nipple on purpose and on a separate occasion attempted to smother her elderly boss with a pillow, for example, the viewer familiar with the relevant episodes can be expected to recognize these allegations as not “true.”

<sup>321</sup> Wyman, “Seinfeld.”

<sup>322</sup> *Married... With Children*, “Crimes Against Obesity,” episode 11.9 (production no. 1105), written by Russell Marcus and directed by Amanda Bearse, first aired December 29, 1996, on FOX.



the lead character's refusal to take things "seriously," with the program playfully pitting its own brand of crude and insult comedy against caricatures of compassionate and earnest speech.

While fat jokes are also what directly incriminates the giggling quartet in *Seinfeld's* finale, they are Bundy's specialty and the entire basis for his character trial. Unlike the *Seinfeld* four, the career fatophobe faces his accusers on his own turf—held hostage by these disgruntled customers in the strip mall that is already his personal prison—and although he is found guilty, this is one forum in which a Bundy comes out the "winner." The star character retains the comedic upper hand even while trapped in physical restraints and always gets in the final word, answering every accusation with yet another vicious fat joke (the script contains forty in all, mostly Al's) delivered to uproarious studio laughter (fig. 1.10). Typical of the series, large women with booming voices perform semiotic double or triple duty, serving ambiguously as symbols of a heavy-hitting, humorless feminism and of Middle-American marmish mediocrity, while both sets of associations are slyly subordinated to the supposedly universal comic-grotesque language of carnival laughter directed at the monstrously excessive maternal body. Playing up the latter, the script takes a dark turn with a string of one liners about ravenous obese women devouring family and children.<sup>323</sup> Lingering on these disturbing images, the "defendant" breaks the fourth wall, fixing his gaze on the camera with head cocked and muttering, for the television viewer's ears only, "And *I'm* on trial" (fig. 1.11).

Even as jokes of this kind compel us to view Al's victims/captors as ludicrous figures fully outside of rationality and sitcom realism, as comic foils they become the public face of politically correct scolds for the purposes of this program. This comic conflation of antagonistic,

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<sup>323</sup> This episode's most striking example of the insatiable monstrous feminine comes when Peg Bundy lets slip that her morbidly obese mother (the ultimate object of Al's terror, never shown on camera) accidentally consumed a relative standing too close to the pies on Thanksgiving, a confession that leads the activists' most ferocious, largest member (played by Jennifer Echols), a brawny teacher, to share that she once "lost a kindergarten class that way."



Figures 1.10 and 1.11. *Left*: Overweight customers from Al Bundy's past play judge and jury as the "shoe schmuck" stands trial for excessive telling of fat jokes. *Right*: Al peers knowingly directly into the camera, appealing on the sly to his viewers as the real jury of his peers. "Crimes Against Obesity," *Married... With Children*, originally aired December 29, 1996, on FOX.

uncontrolled bodies with the disciplining voice and reformist vision of "Political Correctness" pulls the latter (as does *Seinfeld*) firmly within the twisted logics of baseless absurdity. Here, the protestors' cause founders upon the Bundy's rocky, self-serving, and class-based solidarity in the final minutes of the show. In answer to the judge's query of "who would be so loathsome and horrid as to defend" such a man, Peg takes the stand, happy to dish gossip that further indicts her husband as a disappointment to all women, before finally lashing out in his defense in the following exchange:

Judge: Al Bundy, I find you guilty of excessive cruelty to large women.

Peg: You should see what he's like with midgets.

Acting bailiff: The proper term is "little people."

Al: Well, that's the proper term for *anyone* standing next to you.

Judge: [ripping up the last of his confiscated coupons] That's it!

Peg: Hey, that's our dinner coupons, *you fat cow!*

Acting bailiff: No, no, no. We don't like to be called "fat."

Peg: Then, *stay home.*

With this, a grinning Al Bundy high-fives his wife, exclaiming “You go, girl,” as she sidles over to stand beside her man.<sup>324</sup> Although neither side is cast in a favorable light, the “loathsome and horrid” Bundys in this showdown play to a certain popular sentiment as the daring violators of prescriptive sensitive speech, as does the authorial voice of the text by erecting a joke framework that guarantees the hefty women remain the ultimate objects of derision. Rewarding his wife with rare victory sex at the episode’s end, Al admits, “Peg, ... [after] spending eight hours looking at fat women, you don’t look half bad.” While “fat” women have a big voice on the series, they are functionally silenced and carry the lowest value in this narrative universe where, embodying stereotypes of the nag and moral scold, they buoy bottom-feeders like the Bundys.

With *Married... With Children*’s “Crimes Against Obesity” and *Seinfeld*’s “The Finale,” both programs invite a two-tiered cultural and comic dialogue whereby the leading 1990s sitcom ironists are performatively scolded and, at the same time, celebrated for their transgressions and history of “mocking, mocking, mocking, all the time” (in the words of *Seinfeld*’s irate character Babu Bhatt). Both series achieve a multiplicity of comic targets, as cultural texts that gladly condemn their central characters superficially as “superficial” but, crucially, extend no greater moral legitimacy to their on-screen accusers or the off-screen proponents of “sincerity” in sitcom.

## Conclusions

The milestone programs *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld*—as “cringe” comedy and “hip” meta-humor respectively—laid down parallel tracks that irony traveled on nineties network television, instigating the turns to “cool” irony associated with FOX irreverence and NBC quality.

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<sup>324</sup> Peg’s objection is not to the verdict or even unwanted ‘lessons’ in PC speech, but the meddling with her meal ticket. In the end, Al lies and cheats his way out of punishment (a striptease performed by the plus-sized school teacher). Condescending to identify with “my metabolically-challenged chums,” he forges a truce by preying on their sympathies and emotional vulnerability with a concocted sob story about his inner husky teen’s hidden pain, then hurls abuse as he locks the door behind the women who foolishly forgave him.

With an equal claim on vulgarity, *Seinfeld*'s sophisticated irony was steeped in coarseness, while *Married... With Children* actively worked to collapse altogether the distinction between “smart” irony and “trash” television. Even as sitcom realism and melodrama remained the cornerstones of the genre at large, shows like these, seeming to disdain socially conscious messages in comedy to endorse a liberating spirit of anti- or post-relevance, came to be seen as emblematic of what critics have highlighted as the *problems* of irony and postmodernism. By most accounts in the industry and the entertainment press, particularly in the case of ‘quality’ or premium shows, as outlined in this chapter, the upsurge of self-consciously postmodern programming served as an aesthetic coup elevating the televisual arts, with a range of shows foregrounding formula and style to deconstruct and depose generic television. However, the striking contrast between the empathy-driven “warmedies” of the 1970s and “cool detachment” said to be sedimenting in American comedy and culture by the late 1980s through the 1990s gave many cultural critics pause. An overriding concern was not only the “sneering at politics” by comedy, but also corresponding incentives for politicians, newsmakers, and other prominent public figures to participate in the new culture of irony and levity, with a television imperative to be (in the words of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) “amusing at all costs.”<sup>325</sup>

Against this televisual backdrop, it is necessary to unpack the specific articulations of irony to nihilism that were already burgeoning in popular and academic criticism by the turn of the 1990s, as hip irony, loser-themed humor, and assorted anti-sitcoms and anti-relevance shows arrived in the wake of a comedy boom. Shifting focus now beyond industry narratives explaining

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<sup>325</sup> See Rapping, “Seinfeld Syndrome,” 38 (“sneering at politics” is her phrase, quoted earlier); Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: New Press, 1998), who writes, “In a world ruled by the fear of being boring and anxiety about being amusing at all costs, politics is bound to be unappealing” (p. 2); and Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 242, contextualizing Bourdieu’s critique and other “lamentations” over the increasingly permeable boundaries between “politics” and “entertainment” during the 1990s.

these programming trends, the next chapter expands on the problematics of irony in a broader intellectual context, foregrounding theories of postmodernism, with particular attention to how the questions of viewer identification, ambivalent laughter, and social stakes and *meanings* of humor are taken up within competing theoretical frameworks.

## Interlude

### **Theorizing Irony in Postmodernity**

Before moving on to the broader contours of conflicts and realignments in comedy from the mid and late 1990s through the 2000s, it may be useful to provide critical context and review concepts of postmodern irony that inform subsequent chapters of this work. Expanding on theory outlined in my Introduction, this Interlude offers an overview of scholarly perspectives accounting for irony's ambiguity and clarifies analytic terms including stable versus unstable, traditional versus postmodern, and engaged versus detached as applied to irony. First, I consider what light rhetorical theory sheds on television programs called ironic and on the discourse surrounding irony, and I briefly outline objectives of my discursive approach as a poststructuralist humor historian. Next, I review meanings and uses of "postmodern irony" both as a critical construct and set of programming practices that fall under that rubric, highlighting key arguments about the subversive potential of irony in the arts and associated critiques lamenting the institutionalization of "hip irony" on commercial television. Focusing on television comedy, I challenge a tendency to corral programming as diverse as *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and *The Man Show* under the sign of postmodern irony into the rather singular cultural narrative about the fomenting of cynicism and nihilism in U.S. media culture. I argue for specificity in scrutiny of comedic irony and analyses of the cultural politics of texts and comics hailed as ironic.

Applying the analytic concepts reviewed in the initial segments, the chapter's inquiry then unpacks prevailing theories of irony as a pop-culture phenomenon said to be rooted in such negative practices as "detachment" and "never meaning what I say." The fourth section examines the connotations of this former term, ironic detachment, commonly invoked in popular criticism since the mid-1980s as a synonym or symptom of nihilism. Here, the 1970s sitcom

*All in the Family*, which as the previous chapter acknowledged remains the most celebrated historical example—both of socially “relevant” sitcom realism and of politically “engaged” irony as a rhetorical strategy on U.S. television from the classic network era—will serve as a defining point of contrast setting off nineties irony and contemporary “politically incorrect” comedy in critical debates. The emergence of “hip” postmodern irony not only departs from the didactic model of comedy as liberal-skewing social criticism and sociodrama, as we have seen, but in doing so also significantly complicates for scholars of rhetoric and media the traditional theories of ironic distance and of the author–reader bond. As I explore questions of viewer identification and popular pleasure in programming that defies traditional ideological analysis, Chapter 1’s case studies *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld* will continue to be the featured examples in my own analysis as well as reference points in the theory debates under discussion.

The second half of the chapter deals specifically with the mounting attentions to nihilism in social and academic discourse at the onset of the 1990s. I address the interplay of critical conceptions of nihilism and the carnivalesque, two bodies of theory that have shaped much of the debate and led to different conclusions about the implications of comedy that lacks clear “ideological” investments. While my own interest in humor’s political potential as a subversive social and cultural force is heavily informed by the populist pleasures of the carnivalesque, my project overall aims to complicate the steady infusion of anti-PC social rhetoric into postmodern comedy texts that are (at least gesturally) carnivalesque.

To that end, the chapter’s last section explores cultural and comedic implications of structured polysemy in irony—and of modes of speech marked by qualities of *not-meaning-ness*—coinciding with the rise of “politically incorrect” humor. Looking briefly at the evolution of deliberately “offensive” joking modes from 1980s stand-up through the recent “rape joke” culture

in live comedy, presently posed in popular media discourse as a struggle of “comedians versus feminists,” I consider the slippery rhetorical platform that “edgy” irony establishes as the basis for pleasure in contemporary masculinist humor. In addition to laying the theoretical foundation for the historical survey of laddism that follows in Chapter 2, this focus allows me to distill some of the more contentious uses of comedic irony that demonstrably benefit from yet complicate the master narrative of “meaningless” comic nihilism.

### **Rhetorical Uses of Stable and Unstable Irony**

Noted literary critic Wayne C. Booth in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) theorizes qualitative differences between what he terms “stable” and “unstable” irony. For Booth, stable irony is the result of an author’s clear (but unstated) intent to subvert the literal or surface meaning. The four “marks” or defining qualities of stable irony, Booth states, are that it is: *intended*; *covert* (i.e., “intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those of the surface”); *fixed* (i.e., does not further undercut the hidden meaning once detected); and *finite* (i.e., subverts a specific position or ideology, never truth, belief, and meaning in general).<sup>1</sup> Such irony functions as double-layered speech, where what is said is a direct contradiction of what is *meant*, and is recognized as being such. This builds upon the traditional concept of irony that Samuel Johnson’s eighteenth century Dictionary enshrined in the vernacular with his now textbook definition: “A mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words.”<sup>2</sup> Similar definitions date back over two thousand years, to first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian drawing on Socrates.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 5–7. It is this premise that the reader/interpreter is expected to discern the actual “covert” meaning that prevents such speech acts from being characterized as forms of deception or hypocrisy.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Clingham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.



But Booth identifies a second form, which aptly describes much contemporary comedic irony falling well outside the scope of his literary study, in which the author “refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies.”<sup>4</sup> This *unstable* irony represents a more radical break with the ‘rules’ of rational discourse; here, no underlying message exists to be discerned, but rather a surplus of potential readings all of which are as likely to be undercut as is the surface meaning.

For Booth, who is principally concerned with rhetorical uses of irony in literature, these qualities of stability or instability inhere in the text and are determined by authorial intent. He stipulates, “Whether a given word or passage or work *is* ironic depends... not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act [emphasis in original].” In this view, both rhetor and reader must share the same understanding of the proper subtext or “covert” meaning in order for successful communication of (stable) irony to occur.<sup>5</sup> In assessing if and when irony succeeds at reliably conveying a discrete and coherent message, some have criticized Booth’s arguments for a textualist bias. One such critique emerges from a branch of communication studies. As media scholar John Fiske explains, there are two main competing analytic paradigms: one concerned with the “*transmission of messages*” in texts (hence, a textualist approach) and a second focused on the cultural circulation and *uses* of texts.<sup>6</sup> This latter, contextual approach, consistent with my project’s grounding in poststructuralist media theory, does not discount Booth’s abiding interest in the reception of intended meanings but regards meaning as a thoroughly interactive process between texts and individuals who experience them.

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<sup>4</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 240.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 6, (quoted passage) 91.

<sup>6</sup> See John Fiske, “Introduction: What Is Communication?” in *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1–23; emphasis in original.

Of particular note is a debate initiated by American literary theorist Stanley Fish, who resists Booth's emphasis on crediting "the work itself" with the capacity to regulate the interpretive process and to legitimate certain readings over others. Fish counters with the crucial concept of "interpretive communities," emphasizing the role of readers as meaning-makers and arguing that cultural assumptions and contexts of reception always shape the reading process. This model contemplates popular media alongside literary works, and in fact Fish takes a pop song by Randy Newman as the title and central example in his seminal essay "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony."<sup>7</sup> For Fish, the *intended* irony of a work is significant/extant only insofar as it is perceived and accepted as such by readers, yet he is still ultimately interested in questions of authorial intention, scholar Glenn S. Holland notes, as that which is "either realized or not in the reader's interpretation."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Fish does not disregard authorial intent, but subsumes it into a broader set of influences comprising cultural context. While Booth in turn does not dispute the potential for cultural readers to misapprehend the intentions of an author, his argument anticipates competent readers primed to interpret the text 'correctly.'<sup>9</sup> Working to reconcile these competing approaches, humor theorist Viveca Greene skillfully argues that Fish's attentions to the "complex interaction between author, text, and received audience," and consequent emphasis on interpretive variance and the contingency of meaning, serve less to refute Booth's categories of textual irony than to stress the need for "nuance and sophistication" in specific instances of analysis.<sup>10</sup> I take the same view.

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Fish, "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony," *Daedalus* 112 (winter 1983): 175–91. For a more extensive look at interpretive communities, see also Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Glenn S. Holland, *Divine Irony* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>9</sup> Holland, *ibid.*, 26, explores this contrast in detail.

<sup>10</sup> Viveca Greene, "Critique, Counternarratives, and Ironic Intervention in *South Park* and (continued...)

A similar set of positions was being articulated in television studies during the mid-1970s through 1980s as scholars sought to account for the “encoded” meanings of television texts and the role of viewers in actively “reading” and making meaning from the media they consume. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s widely adopted “Encoding/Decoding” model, theorizing that television programs have a likely or “preferred” reading, also stresses that individual audience members may arrive at their own “negotiated” or “oppositional” readings.<sup>11</sup> For Hall, the act of “preferring” certain meanings over others occurs during the *encoding* process—i.e., the stage when meanings are intended by authors and producers and conformed to existing industry conventions such as genre—this being “the point at which power intersects with the discourse.” The preferred reading is “an attempt to hegemonize” the audience by imposing a singular or a narrow range of correct ways to interpret the text.<sup>12</sup> However, as this model anticipates, actual audience members may ultimately arrive at their own readings influenced by their personal history, preferences, and social position.

Although Wayne Booth’s argument recounted above resembles Stuart Hall’s notion that a particular reading is strongly encouraged by the text, as reinforced by the reader’s presumed familiarity with dominant production codes and cultural norms, Hall (like Fish) sees authorial intent as but one of the significant influences or “frameworks of knowledge” that work to

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Stephen Colbert,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 133, echoing Holland, *Divine Irony*, 25–29.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1972–1979)*, ed. Stuart Hall, et al. (London: Hutchinson/CCCS, 1980), 128–38.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hall, “Reflections on the Encoding/Decoding Model: An Interview with Stuart Hall” (transcription of a February 1989 interview), in *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, ed. Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 262. Somewhat in contrast to Fiske’s notion of semiotic democracy, Hall stresses limits on audience agency and places more weight on how encoding circumscribes decoding: “I don’t think audiences are in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them” (261).

encode meaning in a text.<sup>13</sup> John Fiske likewise concludes that “the text cannot enforce its preferred meaning.” Accordingly, he argues that with television, “Irony can never be totally controlled by the structure of the text: it always leaves semiotic space for some readers to exploit.” Here, Fiske is discussing irony under the “classic and simple definition” of “a statement that appears to say one thing while actually meaning another.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, empirical audience studies have pointed to the limits of authorial intention as a reliable predictor of the interpretations and pleasures that audiences may derive from even “stable” forms of irony in television programs.<sup>15</sup>

To the extent that scholars have taken up and extended Booth’s schema to the study of comedic irony in contemporary popular media, his categories are of particular interest to those evaluating irony as a *property of texts*. Such literary models pose certain challenges for adaptation to industrial arts including television, where authorship is a multi-tiered collaborative enterprise. The underlying dyadic principle that is at work in some theories of literary irony—positing a relationship between rhetor and reader—is disrupted by collaborative production in that there is no singular point of enunciation. Television comedies exist through the combined efforts of scriptwriting teams, production companies, and networks intent on branding their programming, and may additionally be subject to content modifications to appease audiences and to secure

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<sup>13</sup> Hall, “Encoding, Decoding.” Following Hall, numerous scholarly works emphasize the role of viewers in the meaning-making process. Notably, feminist film scholars were instrumental in the shift to a more audience-centered approach to media studies in the 1980s, re-theorizing the spectator as, in Annette Kuhn’s words, a *social subject* who “produces meaning by decoding messages, an activity which is always socially situated.” See her “Women’s Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera, and Theory,” *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 18–28. By the time of Henry Jenkins’s landmark work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and the emergence of fan studies, Fish’s term “interpretive communities” was also regularly cited in TV studies.

<sup>14</sup> John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1987; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 85–86 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>15</sup> One notable example, which I will return to, is Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, “Archie Bunker’s Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure,” *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (March 1974): 36–47.

sponsors (as was the case with *Married... With Children* following the Rakolta protest). That said, analyses of irony and satire on television when drawing on the canonical works of literary or rhetorical theory often place greater emphasis on encoding through authorial intention and on literary, philosophical, or political value than perhaps is typical of assessments of network comedy.

With irony on American television, when celebrated by cultural critics and scholars, we thus see a tendency to elevate the sitcom from its lowly status as “unworthy discourse”<sup>16</sup> to that of popular “art.” We can see this achieved through the appeals to the *authored* nature and “literate” credentials of sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld*. This form of legitimation is certainly not new, with the notable televisual precursor being the 1970s “litcoms” (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *All in the Family*) that were the pioneers of prime-time “quality” comedy.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Jane Feuer documents, the 1980s saw a rise in “art discourses” assigning aesthetic value to certain kinds of self-reflexive or “postmodern” programming on network television.<sup>18</sup> Although discourse designating TV texts as literary and/or postmodern art adhered insistently to highbrow baby-boomer fare for the “yuppie” quality audience of that time

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<sup>16</sup> See Paul Attallah, “The Unworthy Discourse: Situation Comedy in Television,” in *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives*, ed. Willard Rowland and Bruce Watkins (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 222–49.

<sup>17</sup> The term “litcom” I borrow from David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 166, 174. For examples from each era, see Linda W. Wagner, “‘As I Lay Dying’: Faulkner’s *All in the Family*,” *College Literature* 1, no. 2 (spring, 1974), 73–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111019> (accessed January 28, 2012), who draws a parallel between novelist William Faulkner and sitcom mogul Norman Lear as ironists faced with similar challenges in “audience reaction” to their characters; and Barbara Ching, “They Laughed Unhappily Ever After: *Seinfeld* and the Sitcom Encounter with Nothingness,” in *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television’s Greatest Sitcom*, ed. David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne (New York: Continuum, 2006), 58–69, providing textual analysis of *Seinfeld* informed both by Sartre’s theory of the comedy of “nothingness” in the work of nineteenth-century novelist Gustave Flaubert and by literary critic Northrop Frye’s theorization of romantic comic plots.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Feuer in “Art Discourse in 1980s Television: Modernism and Postmodernism,” chap. 4 of *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 82–100, analyzes “art discourses” surrounding “aesthetically significant” yuppie programs of the 1980s, for which “antirealism” afforded prestige alternately as Brechtian modernist art (e.g., *thirtysomething*) or self-aware postmodern art (e.g., *Moonlighting*). For an example emphasizing sitcom irony as television art, see Mathew Henry, “The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism, and *The Simpsons*,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 17, no. 1 (October 1994): 85–99.

(Feuer's focus), we can also find a parallel push lauding the ironists of Generation X in the eighties and beyond for daring artistic vision and *avant-garde* style. In these instances, the determinacy of meaning ascribed to a particular type of irony—stable or unstable—is secondary to the way claims to “smart” irony or postmodernism situate programs in systems of legitimation.

For the purposes of this project, as outlined in my Introduction, I am not concerned with what irony *is* so much as what it *does* and for whom, the cultural work performed by irony as constructed in public discourse and the popular imagination. It is not my aim to identify or favor instances of stable versus unstable irony, nor determine the extents to which irony is a function of the text, audience, or social context. Rather, in exploring the popular critical conception of irony, I focus on the salient cultural meanings, whether aesthetic or political, that irony acquires for critics, comics, and programmers.<sup>19</sup> In popular criticism, irony is most widely discussed not as a rhetorical textual device and an artistic or marketing decision so much as a certain pervasive generational “attitude” or epochal “sensibility” finding expression through programs and performers. My object of study includes not only trends in comic practice and programming, but also the critical invocation of irony in the evaluation and interpretation of texts, and various articulations of irony to/through related terms in its orbit such as *cynicism*, *smugness*, *indifference*, *detachment*, *nihilism*, and *relativism*.

To that end, although my focus is not on the ability of audiences to successfully interpret irony as communication and I do not advocate for one kind to the exclusion of the other, it will sometimes be constructive for me to extend Booth's distinction between stable and unstable ironies when discussing debates over media texts' political and social value. I find that this distinction can be illuminating in examining the varied acclamations and condemnations of

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<sup>19</sup> For a compelling analysis of the critical discourse on irony in literary studies, which is outside the scope of my study, see Joseph A. Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

television irony. Since I will be dealing with questions of stability of meaning in several chapters, let me emphasize here that these remain analytic, not historical, categories—that is, Booth’s terminology (“stable” and “unstable”) often informs academic analysis but is not part of the critical vocabulary in general use in mainstream discourse on irony.

I approach irony as a discursive formation *in progress*, one that has for the past several decades been an ongoing site of struggle where we can see competing social ideals and visions for comedy vying for dominance.<sup>20</sup> The matter of televisual irony has remained a persistent topic in cultural conversations about the nature of television and national character, and certainly, specific interpretive communities influence the shared meanings of ironic programming, as has been the case with noteworthy movements such as “laddism” in the 1990s and “*South Park* conservatism” in the 2000s (explored in Chapters 2 and 5 respectively). For programmers and audiences, there have often been clear winners and losers in the wars of position between “ironic” and “earnest,” “cynical” and “sincere,” “detached” and “engaged” comedic discourse. This project’s archaeology is less concerned with putting critical statements about irony into a particular taxonomy than with mapping out historical uses of the term and consequent meanings that get attached to the texts upheld as the exemplars of that irony.

### **“All Statement Becomes Suspect”: The “Political Perils” of Postmodern Irony**

Irony’s guns face in every direction; it is committedly uncommitted,  
in its essence anti-political, or anti-ideological, whatever the ideology.  
.... [I]t is sneaky.

— D. J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem*, 1986<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The poststructuralist concept of a “discursive formation” I use in the sense theorized by Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> D. J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 110.

The label postmodern irony enjoyed broad and varied applications to television by the 1990s. For enthusiasts it signaled formal innovation, whereas for cultural conservatives and some intellectuals it carried distinctly negative connotations of collapsing cultural values and assaults on truth and meaning. In popular journalism and scholarly discourse, a wide range of programs has been subsumed under the umbrella of this irony. Most bear the aesthetic markers of the “postmodern” text, which replaces purpose with play, and generic stability with generic deconstruction and intertextuality.<sup>22</sup> However, programs hewing more closely to the conventions for narrative sitcom or observational stand-up comedy formats have also been cited as proof of postmodern cynicism as a cultural affliction. Any claim on irony was often sufficient to flag a program as postmodern and cynical in critical discourse during the 1990s. With *Seinfeld* and similar programs, critics cited self-reflexivity and irony, frequently articulated as a “glib” and “detached” attitude, as indices of postmodernism.

Linked with the increasingly mainstreamed *avant-garde* aesthetics of antirealism and self-reflexivity, scholars find irony of the postmodern stripe to undermine both political and semiotic certainties. “Postmodern irony,” according to Helene Shugart, “is characterized by multiplicity, instability, inconsistency, and paradox... which raises questions with respect to the meaning of said irony.”<sup>23</sup> If traditional, stable rhetorical irony is used to subvert a belief or system of belief, unstable irony may undermine the concept of truth or meaning altogether.<sup>24</sup> With the latter, Booth contends, “all statement becomes suspect.”<sup>25</sup> The only underlying “truth

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<sup>22</sup> See Ihab Hassan, “The Culture of Postmodernism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 119–32, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Helene A. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (fall 1999), 435, ProQuest Research Library.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ed., *Double-Talking: Essays on Verbal and Visual Ironies in Canadian Contemporary Art and Literature* (Toronto: ECW, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 244, quoted in Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 435.



asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony. [...] No statement can really ‘mean what it says.’” Here Booth invokes “infinite ironies” as a logical extreme and deduces that these treat discourse as “inherently absurd,” such that “all statements are subject to ironic undermining.”<sup>26</sup> Glenn Holland poetically asserts, “Unstable irony leaves us to wallow through the quicksand of absolute relativism where there is no such thing as a correct interpretation, but where there are only interesting ones.”<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on extreme “relativism” points to the significant overlap in critical conceptions of *unstable* and *postmodern* irony. Both labels describe irony that eschews a true or essential underlying meaning, and that may be subversive without clear targets or stakes.

While rhetorical scholars do not necessarily classify stable (or “traditional”) irony as a modernist form and unstable irony solely as a product of postmodernism, there is a clear basis for pursuing the distinction along these lines.<sup>28</sup> Stable ironies in works of fiction as theorized by Booth and others are invested in ideas of truth, affirmative values, and depth of meaning, whereas unstable ironies are marked instead by what postmodern theorists call the “play of surfaces” without concern for depth. In the visual arts, modernism challenged conventional ways of seeing by disrupting the relationship between image and reality to find deeper meaning *beneath* appearances, and stable irony illustrates this disjuncture between surface and actual or “true” meaning. With the postmodernist turn, distinctions between image and reality were collapsed and meaning

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<sup>26</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 240–41.

<sup>27</sup> Holland, *Divine Irony*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), proposes a historical framework of premodern, modern, and postmodern uses of irony. Ernst Behler’s *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (n.p.: University of Washington Press, 1990) situates irony in relation to modernity and considers “what is at stake in our attempts to come to grips with irony as the central mode of postmodern thought” (iv). Linda Hutcheon makes a non-canonical case that “the ‘postmodern’ has little to do with nostalgia and much to do with irony,” as stated in her “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” University of Toronto English Library, last updated January 19, 1998, <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

became “relative” for those embracing the provocative idea that there is no one truth but only multiple expressions and perspectives. The latter also facilitates a looser, more contingent and flexible relationship between signifier and signified. Thus, semantic instability and greater ambiguity, resulting in the absence of a readily extracted message lurking beneath the surface of the text, are among the defining characteristics attributed to postmodern media and art.

It is this highly complex and unstable irony, embracing contradiction, that scholars such as Claire Colebrook are describing when observing also that in philosophy under poststructuralist thought “some of the most complex forms of irony... do not allow for a truth or sense behind the speech act. The speech act produces a conflict of sense, expressing both sides of an assertion with equal force.” The influential theorist and ironist Richard Rorty, Colebrook avers, “would happily allow us to *say* and *not-say* at one and the same time [emphasis added],” by adopting a personal philosophy where we agree to play by the rules of discourse as members of society but ultimately view meaning as socially produced and thus privately do “not really mean what we say.”<sup>29</sup>

Rorty’s approach to “private irony” as a liberating philosophical perspective accommodates such extremes of flexibility and self-reflexivity out of necessity.<sup>30</sup> While poststructuralist scholarship seeks to critique hegemonic power relations, oppressive social regimes, and knowledge systems, a radically deconstructive approach that sees social reality and truth as discursively constructed must acknowledge its own *complicity* in producing truth claims through the established laws of rational discourse.<sup>31</sup> Any ‘solution’ a critic offers is always-already ideological. Michel Foucault

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<sup>29</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 166–67, 169; see also 154–58.

<sup>30</sup> See Richard Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” chap. 4 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73, mentioned briefly in my Introduction.

<sup>31</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 168–69. Furthermore, feminist and post-colonialist scholars, artists, and activists in the poststructuralist tradition face the paradox that to show or “quote” a representation or discourse for purposes of critique (such as pornographic images demeaning to women) can “[give] further life and force to the object [one] aims to destroy” (167).

warned, “As soon as one ‘proposes’—one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination.”<sup>32</sup> This inability to critique the workings of ideology without speaking from *within* some ideological tradition constitutes a double-bind that philosopher Michael Roth dubs “the ironist’s cage.” Roth observes that revolutionary thinkers such as Foucault when revealing our “imprisonment” in ideology can only offer “a description of the *inside* of the cage.”<sup>33</sup>

If I may make the leap from philosophical ironism back to mass media and the cultural sphere, postmodern irony as a televisual ‘art’ is saddled with its own versions of this predicament. Programming engaged in self-reflexive satire or parody of television form and content bears some complicity (acknowledged or not) in the strictures of textuality and televisuality when proposing the ironic alternative. In terms of style, as Feuer observes in *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism*, texts like ABC’s *Moonlighting* (ABC, 1985–89) and *Max Headroom* (ABC, 1987–88) when innovating in the mid to late 1980s a postmodern TV aesthetics of “antirealism” managed to be “*both deconstructive and complicitous*, both critical of television’s realist conventions and complicitous in becoming... *conventional* [emphases added].”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, whether aiming for social or mainly stylistic subversiveness, a program deconstructing established generic structures must inevitably activate the rhetorical and aesthetic codes it calls attention to, objectifies, and dismantles. Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* makes this key point about the use of irony to imply “distance” when texts mimic a representation or discourse parodically: “In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces.” The transgressive impulses of

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Michael Roth, “The Ironist’s Cage,” *Political Theory* 19, no. 3 (August 1991), 427.

<sup>33</sup> Roth, “Ironist’s Cage,” 426–27; emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties*, 105.

postmodern metatextuality open the door to ambivalence that, she argues, “stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces.”<sup>35</sup>

The phrase postmodern irony was routinely used by the 1990s by television critics and scholars, sometimes interchangeably with irony, to describe the omnidirectional, often ideologically inscrutable humor of ‘schizophrenic’ programs marked by discontinuities and disruptions such as MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993–97, 2011) and FOX’s *Family Guy* (1999–present). As these examples suggest, many of the most prominent or enduring of the programs displaying these characteristics of postmodern irony in the U.S. market have tended to be animated sitcoms, in the anarchic traditions of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, as well as showcases featuring animation combined with comedy (notably MTV’s *Liquid Television* in its original run, 1991–94, and the Cartoon Network’s *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, 1994–2004, and entire *Adult Swim* comedy block).

In recent decades a growing body of scholarship in animation studies has worked to foreground possibilities for ironic distance as a basis for social satire in such programming. Media and humor scholar Michael V. Tueth argues that with the arrival of animated comedies on FOX and cable networks as an invasion of the family sitcom genre (see Chapter 1), comic discourse was “free to pursue a more subversive function” on American television by the 1990s. He reasons that animation is the optimal vehicle for outrageously comic-grotesque assaults on bourgeois taste culture, as the cartoon format itself provides the “aesthetic distance” to support a detached mode of viewing.<sup>36</sup> As Rachel Paine Caufield asserts:

[A]nimated characters can serve as “the dunce” or “the jester” who may represent the worst characteristics of human behavior or speak truth to power without the

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<sup>35</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Michael V. Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, ed. Carole A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2003), 139, 146.

same repercussions that a human would encounter. In short, they are caricatures who can push boundaries in ways that human actors cannot because animated characters are removed enough from our reality to be true “outsiders.”<sup>37</sup>

David Marc likewise observes the “jester’s privilege afforded by cartooning,” which he contends allowed *The Simpsons* to go “where no sitcom has dared go before” with its satire of suburbia.<sup>38</sup>

With the portrayals of “dysfunctional” families on programs like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*, Tueth further speculates that cartoon-ness provides a comforting distance specifically for “mainstream viewers” (who, he argues, may be wary of subversive representations that challenge normativity outside of a cartoon fantasy space), while these shows appeal more directly to “viewers who feel marginalized from the dominant culture” and who—he suggests—may need no such distance.<sup>39</sup> The mechanics of ironic distance, explored further in upcoming sections, remain a topic of scrutiny for television studies, informing our understandings of the cultural work that comedy performs, as well as a recurrent sticking point in the irony debates.

Irony as a rebellious postmodern aesthetic sensibility is by no means limited to animation, as suggested by the significant role that *Married... With Children* played as an exemplar and prototype for the “dysfunctional” or “anti-” family sitcom. The animated postmodern, subversive sitcom as an overall trend has perhaps generated more cumulative critical accolades or attention, but there have consistently been attempts to introduce unruly postmodern elements into live

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<sup>37</sup> Rachel Paine Caufield, “The Influence of ‘Infoenterpropagainment’: Exploring the Power of Political Satire as a Distinct Form of Political Humor,” in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11. Caufield’s examples of political satire in animation include *South Park* and Seth MacFarlane’s *Family Guy* and *American Dad!* (FOX, 2005–present). Scholarship examining irony as an element of postmodernism in provocative animated comedies is abundant, and will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5.

<sup>38</sup> Marc, *Comic Visions*, 192.

<sup>39</sup> Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board,” 146. By *Family Guy*’s arrival of in 1999, he observes that “the innovative had become formulaic” in this trend as animated “subversive families” resembling TV’s *Simpsons* and/or *Beavis and Butt-Head* multiplied in prime time (140).

action sitcoms, through unbridled non-naturalism and the bucking of realist pretenses as seen in programs savagely mocking generic and social convention such as Comedy Central's *Strangers with Candy* (1999–2000) and *That's My Bush!* (2001). While not animation, such hyperbolically antirealist programs, bordering on sketch comedy and often distinguished by a blend of comic-grotesquery and camp style, are in effect cartoon-ish (a description we saw applied to *Married*) and afforded a similar “jester’s privilege.”<sup>40</sup> Some have relied on uncanny fantasy elements such as puppets to provide an escape hatch from realism as the point of access to postmodern play, as with *Unhappily Ever After* (WB, 1995–99) and *Greg the Bunny* (FOX, 2002–05), discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 respectively, and many emulate *Married... With Children* in deconstructing sitcom and television conventions in the interest of provocative style and content, tauntingly encoded as oppositional comedy that makes no social “statement.”

In the case of FOX’s ironic family sitcoms, although *Married... With Children* and *The Simpsons* were hailed as “antiestablishment” satire subverting both the genre’s conventions and the Reagan era’s utopian nuclear family imagery in equal measure, these series have also been considered each in their own way potentially conservative, straddling various discursive and ideological lines while potentially reinscribing certain representational norms at the level of narrative paradigm and/or style. For example, Richard Butsch reduces both sitcoms at their core to a ruder version of television’s persistent class stereotypes of “working-class men as inadequate breadwinners and models for their children,” images cemented over half a century of

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<sup>40</sup> As I discussed previously, such postmodern assaults on realism were common on imported British sitcoms on U.S. cable television throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a key factor in launching MTV’s ribald and rowdy alternative brand of youth-oriented humor and a precursor to *Beavis and Butt-Head*, luring teen and twentysomething audiences away from formally and ideologically conservative domestic comedies that at that time dominated U.S. network prime time. Additional exemplars of live action comedy on U.S. network and cable TV bearing aesthetic signifiers of postmodern subversion, to varying degrees, include *Sledge Hammer!* (ABC, 1986–88), *That ‘70s Show* (FOX, 1997–2006), *The Tick* (FOX, 2001–02), *The Rerun Show* (NBC, 2002), and *The Mullets* (UPN, 2003–04), among others.

sitcoms.<sup>41</sup> Whereas scholars have tended to laud *The Simpsons* as the more substantive and subversive in its social satire, some challenge its reputation for being revolutionary and point out the show's reliance on "traditional sitcom sentimentality in conflict resolution."<sup>42</sup> Ted Gournelos, for instance, considers whether the series romanticizes a white nuclear family and whether ultimately a "centrist politics and family sitcom structure prevent it from making broader, institutional social criticisms."<sup>43</sup> Here we might extend the metaphor of the ironist's cage, as various arguments rest on this core critique: an "anti-sitcom" mocks the genre from within, and when *imitating* (as with any parodic discourse) perhaps inadvertently *reinforces* its rules.

Doyle Greene takes the critique further, delineating how *The Simpsons* lost its early edge and gradually skewed more conservative over the years, and he concludes that the series "masks a traditional world-view with postmodern flair, and... its greatest coup has been repackaging the Golden Age domestic sitcoms and dominant ideology into the fair and balanced satire of postmodern sitcoms even liberal intellectuals can appreciate." He cautions, "The myth of satire and comedy is that it is inherently subversive, oppositional, or anti-Establishment. However, and intentionally or not, satire and comedy can very much work to support rather than oppose the *status quo*."<sup>44</sup> To further problematize the notion of postmodern sitcom burlesques as essentially oppositional, Greene highlights how *Family Guy*, Seth MacFarlane's coarser *Simpsons* imitator

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Butsch, "Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms about Class and Gender," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 125. He does also note that the "unapologetic" working-class Bundy and Connor families of postmodern sitcom "were allowed to be themselves instead of inferior copies of middle-class characters" (127–28).

<sup>42</sup> See Doyle Greene, "Fair and Balanced Satire: Against *The Simpsons*," chap. 11 of *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), 215.

<sup>43</sup> Ted Gournelos, *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics: Cultural Studies and the Tao of South Park* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), 16, 88.

<sup>44</sup> D. Greene, "Fair and Balanced Satire," 210–11; italics (denoting Latin term not emphasis) in original.

known for its similarly rapid fire intertextual pop-culture references but aiming for Dada-esque “moral shock effect,” metes out mostly jokes “directed at women, gays, and minorities in general” dubiously posed as a kind of clever social criticism.<sup>45</sup>

This “*unbearable slipperiness*,” and the blurring line between socially dominant and transgressive content, leads humor and postmodern theorists to wrestle with, in Hutcheon’s words, the “political perils of irony.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, scholars such as Hutcheon and Shugart credit postmodern-ironic art with great subversive potential. Hutcheon sees postmodern irony as a formal mode that grants disenfranchised groups the “ability to subvert *from within*, to speak the language of the dominant order and at the same time suggest another meaning and another evaluation. This... mode of address deconstructs one discourse, even as it constructs another.”<sup>47</sup> Introducing a recent issue of *Electronic Journal of Communication* devoted to irony in media culture, Megan Boler and Ted Gournelos similarly assert, “Irony has come to function as what [philosopher Gilles] Deleuze termed a ‘minor language.’”<sup>48</sup> Even so, Hutcheon underscores, irony is not “*intrinsically* subversive” and “there is no *necessary* relationship between irony and radical politics or even radical formal innovation [emphases in original].”<sup>49</sup> As Viveca Greene following Hutcheon reminds, irony “can be used by the dominant and the subaltern, racists and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 116–23, 177, 204; emphasis added. For further theorization of postmodern irony as unstable, see also Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Colebrook, *Irony*, 150–72.

<sup>47</sup> Hutcheon, *Double-Talking*, 16; quoted in Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 435.

<sup>48</sup> Megan Boler and Ted Gournelos, “Editor’s Introduction: Irony and Politics,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v18n24toc.htm#introduction>.

<sup>49</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 10; see also 15. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 454–55, even considers whether postmodern “subversive” irony “may be an inherently hegemonic rhetorical device, one that features an illusion of choice but whose options and parameters are firmly established by the rhetor.”



antiracists, progressives and conservatives.”<sup>50</sup> By extension, regardless of intention at the encoding end in specific instances, cultural forms that mock dominant “sexist” or “racist” representations and discourses by repeatedly subjecting them to ambiguous and “cool” ironic voice may extend the life and power of a given discourse or representational trope. In sum, irony in postmodernity, even if regarded as having progressive potential, is seen as lacking the political guarantees desired by some literary and cultural critics.

### “TV’s Institutionalization of Hip Irony”

[I]rony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is *impossible to pin down* [emphasis in original]. All irony is a variation on a sort of existential poker-face.

— David Foster Wallace, 1993<sup>51</sup>

There are those intellectual activists who have taken pains to distinguish the political and artistic relevance of the early postmodern *avant-garde* in literature and the fine arts from what the novelist David Foster Wallace in 1993 famously denounced as “TV’s institutionalization of hip irony.” Wallace’s influential essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” incited fiction-writers and telephiles to interrogate the allure of irony (boomers’ generational affinity for it as well as the youth culture’s) as “the dominant mode of hip expression.”<sup>52</sup> He argued at that time that “[t]he best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could have dreamed of.” For a critic such as Wallace, considered an idealist at heart, the rebellious spirit of postmodern ironists of the sixties counterculture (who

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<sup>50</sup> V. Greene, “Critique, Counternarratives,” 133; she cites Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 10. Greene warns of the “political limitations” of unstable irony modeled by the comedy of *South Park*, a critique I will touch upon in Chapter 5.

<sup>51</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (summer 1993): 183.

<sup>52</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 181, 183.

themselves acquired reputations for nihilism and creative anarchism) represented a motivated aesthetic and political critique of the *status quo*, long since replaced by the “jaded, jeering” and aloof disposition he saw being internalized by television and the culture at large.<sup>53</sup>

Wallace’s essay posited that postmodern irony in 1960s literature was not only more “credible as art” but also more “socially useful” (as a means “to illuminate and explode hypocrisy”), whereas by the onset of the 1990s he, like many cultural critics, saw irony having devolved into a “cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon.” Wallace detected an *idealistic* thrust in early postmodern irony that he believed was subsequently displaced in television culture by the attitude of *indifference*. Consequently, he worried, “avant-garde irony and rebellion have become dilute and malign,” and irony—which he designated “our best rebellious art”—is reduced to “mere gestures, shticks, not only sterile but perversely enslaving.”<sup>54</sup> If postmodern irony was forged in the fires of the counterculture’s discontent with capitalism and conformity, he opined, then the popularization of irony strips it of any political virtue: “[F]or at least ten years now television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative.” In short, this critique, widely taken up, puts two faces on subversive postmodern irony: counter-establishment irony versus irony as pop-culture phenomenon. If the former was “liberating” and “productive,” the latter he feared is “enfeebling” and “oppressive.”<sup>55</sup>

This dialectic highlights the central tension in the critical discourse on irony between investment and indifference, or social and political engagement versus detachment, imagined as

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>54</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 181–84.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 173, 183; *productive* is italicized for emphasis in his text. Where Hutcheon (above) holds that the ironic address potentially *constructs* alternatives to the discourses it subverts, Wallace stresses that even at its most “liberating” a postmodern ironic mode is useful only as deconstruction and cannot be seen as building new alternatives (183).

opposing pulls that determine the cultural and aesthetic value of irony. Underwriting many such theoretical accounts of postmodern media and art is a desire for the “rebellion” that irony represents to disrupt hegemony with subversive statements that may be discovered by the skilled reader. In this instance, Wallace’s analysis of various novels in a postmodern tradition seeks to uncover authorial intention and perhaps locate some focused, coherent critique still residing in literary irony, an impulse that may carry over—albeit not for Wallace—to some scholarly analyses of comedy of the era. In particular, the article contemplates the possibilities in postmodern-ironic fiction for critiques of the very conditions of postmodernity itself, including ‘hyperreality’ and the commercial saturation of U.S. life in the image culture, political critiques that he feared are doomed to obsolescence by the cumulative impact of television irony from the eighties onwards.

The more promiscuous the irony and ambiguous the ironist’s intentions, the less neatly irony accommodates a system of valuation such as Wallace’s and the more likely it is to rouse the anxieties he voices. Wallace finds no substance in the new breed of irony, arguing that on U.S. television irony not only “tyrannizes us” but ultimately is as “unsatisfying” as it is oppressive precisely because “an ironist is *impossible to pin down* [emphasis in original]. . . . All U.S. irony is based on an implicit ‘I don’t really mean what I say.’”<sup>56</sup> For Wallace, such irony fails to establish worthy targets for ridicule, or rather, as previously argued by media scholar Mark Crispin Miller, television seizes on self-ridicule to render all external ideological critique superfluous and impotent. Wallace draws extensively on Miller’s argument that “TV protects itself from criticism” through pervasive irony “forever flattering the viewer.”<sup>57</sup> Building on that premise,

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<sup>56</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 185.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Crispin Miller, “Deride and Conquer,” in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 194, whose more specific critiques of irony in TV sitcoms I will return to in a later section.

the central concern of his essay is TV's capacity to *inoculate* itself against "postmodernism's rebellious irony" by recuperating or "co-opting" ironic rebellion and postmodern aesthetics—in the form of clever self-mocking programs and advertisements that are "too hip to hate"—leaving no room for irony that makes any *meaningful statement* in protest of mass culture and the hyper-commercialization of U.S. life. He concludes that writers can no longer deploy postmodern irony productively to ridicule "a TV-culture whose ironic mockery of itself and all 'outdated' value absorbs all ridicule."<sup>58</sup>

Wallace's treatise, besides being a polemic about television's postmodern aesthetics, was also a meditation on the viewer's investment in irony's promise of "cool" distance. As a self-professed TV watcher who found irony entertaining as well as deeply troubling, he explored the experience of being awash in a sea of irony and invitations to laugh cynically at TV. His essay theorizes pleasurable and paradoxical ways in which television as a "postmodern allusion- and attitude-fest" hails its audience through a mixture of appeals to transcendent individuality and in-group belonging. In Wallace's account, ironic detachment serves television's imperative to keep the typical viewer, whom he dubs Joe Briefcase, tuning in for the average six-hours-a-day—a bargain struck with promises of cultural distinction:

[I]f television can invite Joe Briefcase into itself via in-gags and irony, it can ease that painful tension between Joe's need to transcend the crowd and his status as Audience member. For to the extent that TV can flatter Joe about "seeing through" the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it's taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling.<sup>59</sup>

This theorization of the psychic bribe extended to the viewing public serves his stated thesis that television by 1990 had mastered sustained self-ironizing on an institutional scale to "neutralize

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<sup>58</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 192.

<sup>59</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 179, 180.

any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable” as a daily habit.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, this critique sees television’s trends toward self-reflexivity and meta-humor over several decades as “homogenizing” the rebel language of irony, and thus working to foreclose the channels formerly available for the arts to succeed as cultural commentary deploying humor to subvert and question mass culture. The alternative for Wallace was uncertain. He wondered whether U.S. fiction writing in the 1990s might be on the brink of a pendulum swing back toward unvarnished earnestness, supplanting irony as the new “rebellious” art. While Wallace was circumspect, and somewhat affectionate toward irony and even television, his essay is seen as having inspired a “post-ironic” project in the American literary imagination and among cultural critics at large. The argument approaches TV irony, notably, not in terms of fiction authorship or mediated cultural discourse, but almost exclusively as a manipulative, formulaic, omnipresent form fully absorbed by the television industry as an agent of consumer mass culture, where the sole remarkable function of novelty and irreverence in a program like *Married... With Children* is “demographic viability.”<sup>61</sup>

While the commonplace usage of the term postmodern irony tends to refer to texts that are blatantly tonally promiscuous and aesthetically subversive, Wallace paints his portrait with the broadest brush and considers the extent to which postmodern irony may be an attitudinal shift endemic by the late 1980s to *all* of contemporary television. His prime-time examples

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 171. Psychic bribe is a notion derived from Frederic Jameson’s concept that mass media texts “cannot manipulate unless they offer... a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated”—consistent with the Gramscian view that hegemony works by winning the consent of the many to the interests of the few—in his essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (winter 1979), 144.

<sup>61</sup> Pointing to *Married... With Children*, Wallace, *ibid.*, asserts: “Now, it is true that certain PR techniques—e.g., shock, grotesquerie, or irreverence—can ease novel sorts of shows’ rise to demographic viability. ... But these programs, like most of those touted by the industry as ‘fresh’ or ‘outrageous,’ turn out to be just tiny transparent variations on old formulas” (165).

range from yuppie quality dramas *St. Elsewhere* (one of the more earnest postmodern prime-time soaps) and *Moonlighting* to generically deconstructionist Gen-X fare including FOX's subversive sitcoms and MTV's game show *Remote Control* to the rather conventional domestic comedies like *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains* that anchored the Big Three's reputation for normative, conservative comedy in the Reagan era. By casting such a wide net, he provides a portrait of U.S. television as a medium utterly in the thrall of postmodern irony at a moment when experiments in what Wallace identifies as "the rise of hip metatelevision" were still a celebrated novelty rather than the norm in prime time.<sup>62</sup> Although conscientious about theorizing the text/audience relationship when noting an "unsatisfying" flexibility of meaning, the global nature of Wallace's critique obscures and oversimplifies industrial logics and collapses various comedic and programming trends into a rather one-dimensional, damning narrative about the ferment of irony.

This line of critique is underpinned by Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson's argument that the postmodern as the "dominant cultural logic" of late capitalism yields not only depthlessness and loss of "critical distance" in cultural texts but in fact a diminished capacity for genuine defiance in political art. According to Jameson, the countercultural and rebellious impulses of modernist satirical forms are "institutionalized" as dissent is "disarmed and reabsorbed" by commodity culture due to the postmodern market's ceaseless demand for novel, innovative, hence unconventional styles—put simply, "revolt" sells.<sup>63</sup> Satire lacks subversive

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<sup>62</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 165. The onset of the post-network era and increasing importance of niche marketing significantly inform the rise of postmodern self-reflexivity and "high-concept" programs on network TV in the 1980s and early 1990s, the period he is addressing, and he does refer to this industrial context and the exclusivity and ratings imperatives of "Quality television" briefly on p. 165. We have seen how experimentation with postmodern programming as daring genre innovation on the Big Three was heavily motivated by the need to compete with bolder fare on cable television and FOX by reinventing established genres to woo the "quality" audience.

<sup>63</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984), 56–61, 87. On U.S. TV, significantly, youth-oriented networks like FOX and Comedy Central have aggressively pursued a "self-consciously oppositional branding strategy," as Gournelos notes of Comedy Central's programming in *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics: Cultural Studies and the Tao of South Park* (cover note).

substance and moral “conviction,” parody is diluted to pastiche (“a neutral practice”), and to borrow Booth’s terms the stable ironies of modern literature and art give way to unstable ironies. In other words, satire, parody, and irony become uncritical or “blank” forms of play. In this system, Jameson argues, “the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable.”<sup>64</sup> Timothy Bewes in *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (1997), drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), likewise proclaims, “Irony as an end in itself represents the rapid commodification of a strategy that once provided a legitimate means of challenging the dominant ideology,” and we are left with “ideological sophistry.”<sup>65</sup> Colebrook’s theoretical history *Irony* (2004), too, asserts that irony in its broadest definition today “refer[s] to the huge problems of postmodernity.” Beyond texts and genres, she contends that “our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation, and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony.”<sup>66</sup> With his insistence on the blankness of play under late capitalism, Jameson doubts whether postmodern culture grants access to experience any “moment of truth,” asking whether this set of conditions shuts down the avenues for “radical cultural politics” altogether.<sup>67</sup>

Various scholars have challenged Jameson’s take on pastiche, as well as the emptiness of postmodern irony. Notably, Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* refutes the premise that pastiche falls outside the parameters of parody, which she clarifies need not by definition perform a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 65, 86.

<sup>65</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 41. See also Slavoj Žižek, “Cynicism as a Form of Ideology,” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 28–30.

<sup>66</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 86, 89.

ridiculing function oriented “against” some target but has for centuries ranged from mocking to respectful mimicry.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, she elsewhere rejects as reductive Jameson’s view of postmodern art as “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion,” and argues, “To include irony and play is *never* necessarily to exclude seriousness of purpose in postmodernist art [emphasis in original].”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, Jameson’s contention that “pastiche eclipses parody” and irony is stripped of purpose animates critical understandings of postmodern textuality and the politics of comic style.<sup>70</sup>

Jameson’s critique continues to loom large in political economic and cultural analyses of comedy forms today among those who worry, as scholar Lisa Colletta does, that “postmodernity has killed irony and satire.”<sup>71</sup> The argument follows several tracks, first being the condemnation of irony as “cynical knowingness” and postmodern moral relativism, which Colletta sees as the death knell for effective social satire, and the impetus for “most of our cultural output today.” “The irony of postmodernity denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance and even embraces incoherence,” she stresses, resulting in a comedy culture that “replaces... meaning with appearance of meaning” and conscripts “a postmodern audience” into celebrating self-referentiality for self-referentiality’s sake. Satire loses its power to critique, she maintains, “because meaningful political and moral oppositions collapse and are replaced by spectacle and competing opinions.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, especially 1–2, 32, 50, 53–54.

<sup>69</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 26–27, quoted in John N. Duvall, “Troping History: Modernist Residue in Frederic Jameson’s Pastiche and Linda Hutcheon’s Parody,” *Style* 33, no. 3 (fall 1999): 380.

<sup>70</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 64.

<sup>71</sup> Lisa Colletta, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009): 872.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 856, 866.



A related trope further criticizes programs that use self-reflexive irony and parody (or pastiche) to lampoon TV convention, as popularized by *The Simpsons*, for their complicity in sustaining the same commercial television culture they mock (an argument touched on above).<sup>73</sup> Colletta advances this second critique as well, echoing Wallace, to warn that postmodern-ironic shows may ridicule TV's power yet "seduce" us to keep watching television (rather than spurring consumers to take any action).<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Stephen Groening points to *South Park* as proof of "cynicism, manifesting as... ironic detachment" in "postideological" times and sees such TV plying Gen-Xers with pseudo-satire, bereft of ideological critique, that "depends on its viewers' lack of motivation."<sup>75</sup> Before television meta-comedy satirizing the medium was widespread, perhaps the sharpest rebuttal to such arguments came in 1984 from Marc, in defense of the sketch comedy *SCTV* (ending its run that year), who wrote: "The pseudo-Marxist supposition that *SCTV* is still guilty of selling the products is boring—the show is not." Heralding *SCTV* as "the first television program absolutely to demand of its viewers a knowledge of the traditions of TV," he sees its self-reflexive postmodern play—as did many of *The Simpsons*'s defenders in the 1990s—as igniting in the "TV-lifer" an active and "critical relationship to TV viewing."<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the more absolutist arguments equating reflexive television with cynicism through "ironic detachment" set the terms for postmodern comedy studies in ways I will address, contextualize, and interrogate in my specific case studies in later chapters. Viewed from these perspectives, virtually any "hip" confrontational comedy texts (whether seemingly counter-

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<sup>73</sup> For a succinct overview of this popular argument and a thoughtful rebuttal, see Simone Knox, "Reading the Ungraspable Double-Codedness of *The Simpsons*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34, no. 2 (2006): 72–81.

<sup>74</sup> Colletta, "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony," 868.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen Groening, "Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in *South Park*," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 114–15. Often, generational politics are compounded with Jamesonian (and boomer-friendly) valorizations of a prior counterculture.

<sup>76</sup> David Marc, "Understanding Television," *The Atlantic Monthly* 254 (August 1984): 44.

hegemonic or reactionary) can be said to exemplify the commodification of oppositionality that Jameson describes in late-capitalist production, and thus lose their subversive sheen.

### **Of Bunkers, Bundys, and Hipsters: Irony as “Detachment”**

David Gates’s December 1999 *Newsweek* editorial responding to the “backlash” against irony associated with writers like David Foster Wallace and Jedediah Purdy reflected on the preoccupation with ironic “distance” in that decade’s popular culture. His piece speculated about the “post-ironic” turn, expected to rid the culture of ironic world-weariness, while also contemplating the value of irony inflected with a “postmodern perversity.”<sup>77</sup> Like so many critics, Gates was inclined to recoil from “arid postmodernism” and the “smirking cynic,” but ultimately he applauded certain contortions enabling irony to double back on itself as the object of its own critique, or allowing irony and earnestness to coexist as mutual critique in works of such tonal complexity that they cannot be simply called either sentimental or cynical. Gates ventured that the ironic text “*depersonalizes* its characters” because it is “supposed to . . . *distance and protect us* [emphases added],” yet also suggested that postmodern irony may mostly fail in this latter goal.<sup>78</sup>

This section examines the prevailing meanings and critiques of ironic distance or detachment, terms that have transformed in the critical and popular imagination and taken on increasingly negative connotations in the move from stable to unstable ironies. For purposes of rhetorical textual analysis, detachment as a function of irony continues to describe a reading position encouraged by authors or texts—a means of “depersonalizing” characters to limit our

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<sup>77</sup> David Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?” *Newsweek*, December 27, 1999–January 3, 2000, 90–94, LexisNexis Academic. The extent to which Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram” (as Gates states) “predicts” a culture-wide post-ironic shift toward sincerity has been somewhat overstated. Later chapters will explore the discourse of the “new sincerity.” See also Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Austin, Tex.: SSMG Press, 2010), 129–44.

<sup>78</sup> His examples of irony at its postmodern best include director Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, a 1996 single by recording artist Beck, and a 1997 short story by humor fiction writer Lorrie Moore in *The New Yorker*.

identification (and in comedy to discourage empathetic laughter) with them. At the same time, with the overriding emphasis in recent decades on the broader pseudo-subversive aesthetics and media contexts of postmodernism, the assumed significance of a “detached” cultural sensibility regularly dictates the terms on which irony in television and comedy programming is said to “distance and protect us” in any specific instance. Briefly revisiting first *All in the Family* and then the postmodern sitcoms as contrasting examples, of stable versus unstable textual ironies, we will review the encoded dynamics of laughter: both relevance and post-relevance comedies worked to foster ironic distance and ostensibly discourage identification with characters on-screen, while pursuing different pleasurable relationships with the authorial voice(s) of the text.

In popular discourse today, “ironic detachment” generally refers to a set of relationships we are encouraged to have with media and cultural artifacts and carries at least two distinct but overlapping sets of connotations. Firstly, as I discussed briefly in my Introduction, the phrase by the 1990s came to signify certain elitist practices of cultural consumption, exemplified by audience members who may partake in “unhip” programming (and/or music, art, and fashion, etc.) with “ironic” appreciation as a statement of the ironist’s (here a term denoting the viewer/consumer) superior cultural capital. In the yuppie and Gen-X hipster practice of “ironically” liking dull, outdated, or kitschy cultural artefacts/activities, we do find the clear rhetorical remnant of meaning-the-opposite-of-what-I-say irony. That is, in cases of superficial displays of approval that express covert contempt, statements of enthusiasm or love (perhaps set off with air quotes or tonal sarcasm) for cultural schlock are presumed to convey an intended meaning of disdain. This was the gist of journalist Charles Gordon’s assertion that irony “attacks bad taste by seeming to celebrate it.” *Spy*’s Rudnick and Andersen as well as Purdy sought to complicate this simple equation, however, finding in this practice a certain *ambivalence* and in the new ironists a distaste

for authentic “commitment” that runs so deep that even investment in such ridicule (befitting postmodern ambiguity) tends to be curiously non-committal.<sup>79</sup>

A second, related use of “detachment” in popular and scholarly criticism (as we encountered in the previous section and second half of Chapter 1) refers to the form internalized by television, especially self-consciously ironic programming that caters to the “smart,” postmodern-literate audience. In the case of television fiction, objectors condemn ironic detachment not in the sense of a “critical distance” from characters and narratives, but rather, decry the detachment *of* characters and narratives—and ostensibly of ironist-creators and viewers—from a coherent system of values or sincere convictions. Implicit in these critiques of textual irony is the double-edged anxiety that, on the one hand, the “dysfunctional” characters, from Beavis and Butt-Head to the Bundys to Seinfeld’s gang, are encoded and endorsed by popular culture as perverse postmodern role models or reflections of ourselves rather than offered as (stable) objects of derision, and on the other hand, to the extent that ironic texts do consistently cultivate a *critical* distance for viewers, that television irony indiscriminately exults an attitude of “smug” superiority over *all* subject matter in its scope. Either way, critics contend, this cult of irony inculcates a sweeping lack of interest in social value systems beyond their utility as grist for the comic mill—a complaint sufficiently widespread to seal the marriage of irony with cynicism in popular discourse.

Rhetorical scholars find that textual irony involves an interplay of meaning and attitude. The role of attitude is not directly addressed by cultural studies’ foundational Encoding/Decoding model, which focuses on meaning-making, but is essential to theorizations of irony and its structures of preference. The *interpreter* of irony is engaged in a decoding process that Hutcheon

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<sup>79</sup> As cited in my Introduction, Charles Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Maclean’s* 112, no. 41 (October 11, 1999): 67; Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, “The Irony Epidemic,” *Spy* (March 1989): 93–98; and Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). Please refer to the Introduction for detailed discussion of these authors’ arguments.

argues involves the “making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid [boldface in original].” At the encoding end, the *ironist* (in Hutcheon’s use this term refers to the author/creator) will have imbued the statement, she asserts, with an “*evaluative attitude* other than what is explicitly presented [emphasis added].”<sup>80</sup> The audience’s awareness and acceptance of this authorial stance facilitates what Shugart calls the audience-rhetor “cohesion,” drawing on Booth’s notion of a “brotherly cohesion” or “bond” between author-ironist and reader.<sup>81</sup> Conventionally, Shugart explains, this attitude has been understood in terms of “*the traditional ironic principle of detachment* [emphasis added].”<sup>82</sup> Here, the incongruity between two (or several) contradictory meanings is believed to foster emotional and critical distance.

With television, this may entail conscripting the audience to stand apart rather than become emotionally invested in—i.e., sympathize or identify with—the central characters. Chesebro’s analysis of 1970s prime-time programming, referenced in the previous chapter, applies this rhetorical principle to narrative television when defining the “ironic communication system” as an atypical but prominent mode of didactic programs in the late classic network era. In contrast to the “mimetic form” common to network sitcoms, designed to give viewers the sense that “typical behaviors and values are being reflected” through a central character who is “one of us,” Chesebro posited, the “ironic form” mobilizes “the rhetoric of the loser.”<sup>83</sup> That is,

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<sup>80</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 11. Hutcheon is not here invoking these terms *encoding* and *decoding*, which I use to frame this discussion in the theoretical language of television studies. Elsewhere, she does discuss ironic codes shared “between encoders and decoders,” as the basis of what Booth (1974) termed “amicable communities”; see Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 94.

<sup>81</sup> Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 452; Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 13–14, 28–29.

<sup>82</sup> Shugart, *ibid.*, 434.

<sup>83</sup> James W. Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series—A Four-Year Assessment,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21, 30, 43.

we as members of the audience are meant to find the “ironic character” whose foibles propel the narrative to be “inferior”—both less intelligent and less in control than we ourselves would expect to be in similar real-world situations—and a kind of agent of chaos whose values sow “pollution” in the social system.<sup>84</sup>

We can see this process theorized in scholarly accounts of the rhetorical and comedic functions of irony in Lear’s *All in the Family* (examined below), the exemplar of the ironic form in Chesebro’s analytic model, but also to some extent in the aforementioned arguments for the animated aesthetic in postmodern series like *The Simpsons* as “politically engaged” (even when unstable) satire.<sup>85</sup> The former tradition has been praised for demanding greater social realism of sitcom, while the latter is prized for its subversive antirealism. In either case, the arguments for ironic distance indirectly build upon, yet complicate, a particular Marxist (and modernist) aesthetic approach to textual analysis informed by Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theater,” where as Feuer explains, use of “flat characters” is thought “more politically progressive” than character depth because this flatness serves to “take us away from our identification with the characters and force us to think about how the play is constructed,” thereby encouraging the spectator to observe from a critical remove (rather than accept as normal) the values that characters embody.<sup>86</sup>

The “evaluative attitude” enacted by unstable ironies need not be primarily concerned with weighing the *said* against the *unsaid* in a given program, but rather, veers away from Chesebro’s model (and Brechtian theory for that matter) by undercutting any such stable concept of signification. I argued in the previous chapter that even the rhetoric and archetype of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 24–25, 43.

<sup>85</sup> See Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>86</sup> Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 129. According to this branch of Marxist criticism, as she summarizes, sitcom realism through “character complexity and development is merely a representation of bourgeois values.”

“the loser” is disembedded from a didactic and moral paradigm in anti-traditional sitcoms, from *The Simpsons* and *Married... With Children* to *Seinfeld*, which may actively poach or parody the logics of mimetic sitcoms. Academics and artists celebrating postmodern irony have regarded this anarchic attitude, or sensibility, in specific texts as a disruption of the processes of representation and meaning-making, thus potentially denaturalizing and destabilizing hegemonic codes and conventions and, as Hutcheon argues, “open[ing] up new spaces, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen.”<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, those broadly condemning irony under postmodernism as either impotent (as critique) or a destructive cultural force, as outlined above, tend to characterize it as an attitude of complacency, a world-weary “detachment” from reality and matters of consequence.

We saw in Chapter 1 that a persistent critique of *Seinfeld*, not unlike “loser television,” focused on the apparent refusal to advocate, through comic protagonists, for any belief or moral principle, and presumed that this absence corroborated a creeping contempt for “reverence and conviction” in the culture at large.<sup>88</sup> It was for this reason that *Seinfeld*, in light of its immense popularity and reputation as “the greatest TV show of all time” (says *TV Guide*) and “the show that changed the face of television” (says *Seinfeld* owner Sony Pictures)—overshadowing relatively issue-oriented sitcoms like *Murphy Brown*, *Designing Women*, and *Roseanne*—became the centerpiece in the cultural conversation on postmodern nihilism.<sup>89</sup> With *Seinfeldian* irony as comedy purportedly about “nothing,” critics argued, the value of believing in something at all

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<sup>87</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30–31, quoted in Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 435.

<sup>88</sup> While Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram” does not comment directly on *Seinfeld*, I poach this couplet from his concluding discussion of earnestness versus irony (193).

<sup>89</sup> *TV Guide*’s May 4–10, 2002, issue named *Seinfeld* number one of “50 Greatest TV Shows of All Time.” The second ovation is a cover note blurb on *Seinfeld*’s seasons 1 & 2 DVD (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012).

comes under attack. While Learean irony is remembered and revered for its conscientious and ultimately earnest *engagement* with social themes, establishing a standard against which “ironic nihilism” or “cynical detachment” of both boomer yuppies and Generation X has been measured, ironic distance nevertheless informs each tradition. Thus, to the extent that U.S. television’s increased reliance on ironic distance is an inciting factor in the backlash spearheaded by Wallace and later Purdy against “hip irony” as an oppressive “pop ethic” (Wallace’s phrases), it becomes necessary to distinguish the prevalent discourse of *cynical detachment* from irony’s traditional rhetorical *principle of detachment*.<sup>90</sup> Because Lear’s relevance programming provided a backdrop in TV studies and pop culture histories for what many deemed a more problematic and unruly irony in the 1990s, I want to now briefly review critical perspectives on the rhetorical use of “stable” irony and significance of satire in his signature sitcom.

*Learean Relevance: Distance and Conviction in “Stable” Irony*

*All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–79) remains perhaps the most industrially and socially significant example of ironic and satirical situation comedy for the “quality” audience on U.S. television, and the model for “relevance” programming. While certainly the meanings and pleasures of this program varied for different audiences, the meanings *intended* by series creator Norman Lear remained relatively stable. Lear became, as Randall Rothenberg reflected in a 1990 *New York Times* essay on auteur theory and art discourses of TV, “the exemplar of the executive producer-as-public ideologue.”<sup>91</sup> Lear’s social comedies from the 1970s exhibit a more traditional irony casting into sharp relief the postmodern variety of subsequent decades that

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<sup>90</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 181, 182; and Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 434, term introduced above.

<sup>91</sup> Randall Rothenberg, “Yesterday’s Boob Tube Is Today’s High Art,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1990, 1, 39.



transformed irony in the minds of television critics from a vehicle for relevance to a platform for nihilism. This program would remain for several decades the benchmark of “engaged” irony, a reference point and defining-other first for the didacticism and sentimentality of *The Cosby Show* and then again for the ironic detachment of later comedies (and characters) like *Seinfeld*.

Television scholarship has examined the structures of identification and dispositions towards characters in American comedy’s dominant genre, the sitcom, with particular attention to the distinctions between the house styles of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin’s Tandem Productions and Mary Tyler Moore and Grant Tinker’s MTM Enterprises in the 1970s and 1980s. Comedies from both production houses, including MTM’s *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Rhoda*, and *Phyllis* and Tandem’s *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *Sanford and Son*, fell within and expanded the format Newcomb termed the “domestic comedy,” although they were a dramatic departure from the codes and conventions of both traditional “domestic” and “situation” comedies.<sup>92</sup> In today’s standard usage, the term situation comedy (sitcom) encompasses both of these subtypes—and the distinctions have increasingly blurred in recent decades—but in Newcomb’s precise taxonomy the classic network situation comedy is tonally closer to vaudeville comedian-centered or clown comedy (wacky and absurd), whereas domestic comedy initially hewed to utopian patriarchal sociodrama (as reprised in the 1980s by *The Cosby Show*). The domestic comedies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Newcomb writes, avoided engaging with “significant” political or social problems and topically relevant themes in order to paint a romanticized portrait of family life seemingly removed from “present-day America.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Horace Newcomb, “Situation and Domestic Comedies: Problems, Families, and Fathers,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), 25–58.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–57.

Jane Feuer extensively examines the creative role and overarching house style of MTM and Tandem as “corporate ‘authors.’” While MTM established self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and *character complexity* as markers of “quality” comedy, setting a standard for visual and narrative sophistication in sitcom that would be emulated and finessed in subsequent decades, she specifies, Tandem’s productions achieved their relevance through satire with a more spare style and overtly politicized content.<sup>94</sup> Feuer contrasts the “empathetic” laughter and relatability of MTM’s “character comedies,” a laughter of recognition and identification, with the subversive humor of Lear’s social comedies that relied upon comic stereotyping to provide “social commentary.” If the MTM formula promised “little epiphanies” into character interiority and the human condition, she asserts, the Lear comedies presented “flat” and static characters—one-dimensional stereotypes incapable of growth and, she contends, existing to-be-laughed-at. It is this “*detachment* from character [emphasis in original]” as the basis for laughter that allows Lear’s comedies to function as “overt satire,” Feuer deduces: “We laugh *at* Archie or Maude because they are self-deluded [emphasis in original].”<sup>95</sup> To transform domestic comedy from the established formulas, Lear notably turned to the BBC for inspiration and an alternative model, adapting British sitcoms, known for deep satire and the use of grotesques as central characters, to create *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son*.<sup>96</sup> According to Feuer’s reading of the Tandem comedies, Lear consistently refuses a “sympathetic *attitude* toward character

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<sup>94</sup> Jane Feuer, “The MTM Style,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th ed., 52–84. For the phrase “corporate ‘authors,’” see p. 53. Kimberly Springer, “Good Times for Florida and Black Feminism,” *Cercles* 8 (2003), draws a related distinction between MTM’s “embodying the politics of the time in its characters” and Tandem’s “confronting the social issues of the day directly” at the level of narrative (128).

<sup>95</sup> Feuer, “MTM Style,” 55–57, 62.

<sup>96</sup> The BBC’s *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–75), created by Johnny Speight, and *Steptoe and Son* (1962–74), written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, were templates for *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77).

[emphasis added]” and instead, particularly with *All in the Family*, uses “characters as stick figures in a political allegory.”<sup>97</sup>

Television scholar David Barker and others have argued that this distance is further encouraged in *All in the Family* through elements of style, such as flat lighting, grainy video stock, and oblique camera angles that hinder point-of-view shots.<sup>98</sup> Ethan Thompson infers that because “[t]he viewer never shares Archie’s perspective,” as a consequence of camerawork and editing that directs the gaze at this central character (played by Carroll O’Connor) and limits access to his point of view, “the audience is encouraged to laugh at Archie’s dinosaur-like attitudes, not with him.”<sup>99</sup> Compared to the MTM sitcoms, Feuer further suggests “that *All in the Family* retains the simplistic, insult-ridden, joke-machine apparatus” of prior situation (as opposed to domestic) comedies.<sup>100</sup> I would add that the show leverages simplicity in characterization and in style to achieve tonal and attitudinal complexity. The stylistic simplicity is working toward distancing but also toward intimacy. Repeated use of tight close-ups for Archie’s reaction shots asks the viewer to witness his humiliation up close and often, in ways that are unlikely to be purely pleasurable, even for a socially liberal audience who may delight in seeing him get his comeuppance. Thus, ironic distance not only creates a vantage point of

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<sup>97</sup> Feuer, “MTM Style,” 62, 66, and 69. Although Feuer sets up the contrast between MTM’s and Lear’s characters in terms of complexity vs. flatness, elsewhere she considers Archie psychologically developed and “rounded,” when compared to the Clampetts of *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–71). For those adopting a Brechtian view, she contends, one may deem the “flat characters” of *The Beverly Hillbillies* “more socially critical” than *All in the Family* because “our identification with the more well-rounded Archie Bunker was likely to outweigh the positive liberal benefits of the show’s intended satire.” Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” 124–25.

<sup>98</sup> David Barker, “Television Production Techniques as Communication,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 3 (September 1985): 234–46.

<sup>99</sup> Ethan Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste: *South Park* as Carnavalesque Satire,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 215.

<sup>100</sup> Feuer, “The MTM Style,” 56.

superiority from which the viewer is encouraged to “laugh at” repellent or pathetic characters (as Feuer’s and Thompson’s critiques assert), but also perhaps, as Enright suggests, “Irony’s armour helps us to bear the sufferings of others.”<sup>101</sup>

Marc perceives a much greater depth of characterization in this show than does Feuer, but agrees that Norman Lear’s comedy *does* position the viewer at a critical distance:

In *All in the Family*, racism is embedded as a character flaw of Archie, who is ultimately sympathetic, even lovable. There is an implicit assumption, fostered in part by Archie’s constant malapropisms, that the audience—both the audience at home and its “live” surrogate—knows more than Archie and is therefore laughing at him and not with him. We can be confident that Norman Lear will punish Archie Bunker for his sins.<sup>102</sup>

This argument foregrounds the presumed stability of the audience-rhetor bond. Here, creator/producer Lear serves as a guiding perspective and moral compass of the text, a function not filled by a protagonist in the diegesis. “Archie, though the center of viewer attention, is by no means the persona of *All in the Family*. Instead, Lear’s omniscient narrative sensibility serves that function,” Marc explains. “Unseen, but never unfelt, the Lear zeitgeist continuously intervenes to point out Archie’s errors and... its own vision of the brighter day.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, the axial character is not offered as a “sympathetic center” or consistent point of viewer identification.<sup>104</sup>

Marc’s cogent analysis in the passage above anticipates that even those audiences following Lear’s cues and perceiving the satire as intended may still invest emotionally and on some level sympathize with the show’s “flawed” main character. Regardless, Lear’s use of ironic distance to retool sitcom’s familiar structures of identification for purposes of social satire

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<sup>101</sup> Enright, *Alluring Problem*, 151.

<sup>102</sup> Marc, *Comic Visions*, 22.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>104</sup> The quoted phrase I borrow from Wagner, “As I Lay Dying,” 73.

is designed to activate awareness of a wiser authorial voice ‘behind’ the fiction/allegory. Subverting the generic reliance on what Newcomb termed the “magic of the wise father” to achieve happy endings in traditional domestic comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, *All in the Family* subjected fatherly advice and the patriarch himself to withering ridicule.<sup>105</sup> The *preferred reading* of any single episode calls attention to the authored nature of the text so that it may be recognized as a satirization of bigoted viewpoints expressed by Archie Bunker on the program. In sum, the viewer is expected to take up the evaluative attitude implied by an ever-present authorial voice, and to sense that what the program ‘means’ to communicate is contrary to what is ‘said’ by/through Archie.

Much has been made of the fact that actual audiences during the program’s run could not reliably be compelled by the text to read Archie through Lear’s ironic lens. *All in the Family* in its popularity became a curiosity and cautionary tale in ideological criticism and humor studies as a text demonstrating the potential for significant and reactionary audience “misreadings” of satire and irony. The primary risk associated with stable ironies is that audiences may fail (or decline) to arrive at the intended meaning of the text. Literary scholar Linda Wagner comments on the dangers facing the author who deploys irony to present a character as a “mockery”:

Any ironist must know that his mode has inherent dangers. If his readers do not understand the conventions of his method, if they do not understand the culture in which he writes, if their sympathies are at the opposite pole, the irony simply fails, or rather, more dangerously, it misfires and takes the reader in exactly the opposite direction.

Wagner cites the character Archie Bunker as a prominent example of irony backfiring or “misfiring” in this way, noting that “audience reaction” does not adhere to authorial intent.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See Newcomb, “Situation and Domestic Comedies,” 57.

<sup>106</sup> Wagner, “As I Lay Dying,” 73. Wagner’s use of the term ironist in this passage refers both to Norman Lear and William Faulkner, drawing a parallel; here is an instance of emphasis on literary irony serving to elevate sitcom.

Vidmar and Rokeach's 1974 U.S.-Canadian audience study found that some viewers understood *All in the Family* to be a satire on bigotry, as intended by the series' creator, but others identified with and "applauded" Archie Bunker's racist worldview. The researchers concluded that the program either mocked or affirmed prejudices, depending upon the "selective perception" of individual audience members.<sup>107</sup> As television scholar Norma Schulman explains, drawing a comparison to the satirization of racial and sexual stereotypes in FOX's sketch show *In Living Color* in the early 1990s, the comic representations "allowed both viewers high in prejudice and viewers low in prejudice to perceive confirmation of their existing attitudes."<sup>108</sup> Similarly selective readings were observed in Britain for the BBC sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, on which *All in the Family* is based, with some British viewers treating the reactionary, racist central character Alf Garnett (played by Warren Mitchell) as a white working-class folk hero. British humor scholar Charles Husband has described the embrace of that show's bigoted patriarch by a portion of the audience resistant to the author's satire as a "*boomerang effect*."<sup>109</sup>

When *All in the Family* premiered in 1971, CBS introduced the series with a message stating outright the intention behind the humor, and thus suggesting a preferred reading strategy:

The program you are about to see is *All in the Family*. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter we hope to show—in a mature fashion—just how absurd they are.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Vidmar and Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry." See also John C. Brigham and Linda W. Giesbrecht, "'All in the Family': Racial Attitudes," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 4 (December 1976): 69–74.

<sup>108</sup> Norma Miriam Schulman, "Laughing Across the Color Barrier: *In Living Color*," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 20, no. 1 (spring 1992): 2.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Husband, "Racist Humour and Racist Ideology in British Television, or I Laughed Till You Cried," in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*, ed. Chris Powell and George E.C. Paton (London: MacMillan, 1988), 158; emphasis added. Husband, too, concludes that "what you find in such a programme is a function of what attitudes and values you bring to it" (162).

<sup>110</sup> "Meet the Bunkers," episode 1.1, written by Norman Lear, first aired January 12, 1971, on CBS.

The network, concerned about how the program would be received, aired this “disclaimer” (as series co-star Rob Reiner has called it) before the first six episodes.<sup>111</sup> While there is a heavy authorial presence (that of the executive producer), the show’s mode of address aims to be more dialogic than didactic. *All in the Family* regularly concluded on a bittersweet note with a tenuous resolution that asked audiences to continue wrestling with the attitudes and character conflicts depicted in episodes from week to week. The comedy is designed to spark discussion on a broad range of sensitive social issues rather than provide what the television theorists Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch would call “firm ideological conclusions.”<sup>112</sup> To this end, we might say that two impulses compete in the Lear house style: a quasi-Brechtian impulse toward distancing, as implied by David Barker above, and a more realist impulse asking the viewer to consider honestly each character’s views in the interests of generating a frank and open-ended cultural dialogue. The viewer is enlisted to reflect critically and form, reconsider, or affirm her own convictions. In contrast to *Seinfeld*, said to lack and shun conviction, then, *All in the Family* is doubly invested in ethical and political convictions. That is, the text not only implicitly espouses a liberal-progressive politics but also presumes that, whether or not individual viewers share the show’s guiding social politics, the questions under consideration do *matter* to them.

*Ironic Detachment and Postmodern Ambivalence: Characters We Love To Hate To Love*

By more thoroughly dispensing with admirable and humanized characters with whom we might like to align ourselves, postmodern irony, it is often maintained, encourages a consistently detached mode of spectatorship, even while foregoing clear-cut political goals and consequences.

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<sup>111</sup> Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2007), 10–11.

<sup>112</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th ed., 461.

We have already encountered the well established argument from animation studies that depersonalized “jester” or “outsider” characters in a cartoonal comic mode foster critical viewing by means of “aesthetic distance.”<sup>113</sup> Celebrants of irony and satire hope but are reluctant to presume that popular live-action sitcoms in the aesthetically subversive style and “attitude” of *Married... With Children* or *Seinfeld* do foster and reward the kind of ironic distance that includes such critical detachment from characters on-screen. Kervin, for instance, drawing on Marc’s aesthetic and political analysis of *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–71) as a social caricature and satire, suggests a parallel to *Married... With Children* to argue that “such two-dimensional characters as the Bundys *would seem to* forestall audience identification [emphasis added], and instead encourage viewers to turn their attention to the characters’ ‘outlooks, beliefs, and methods of coping with the world and evaluate these in terms of our own—and official—wisdom’.”<sup>114</sup> Doyle Greene finds in *Married* a “seemingly incompatible marriage of Brecht and burlesque... consciously intended to make the show difficult to enjoy as sitcom entertainment.”<sup>115</sup> This distancing is similar in some respects to the “detachment from character” that many find in Lear’s sitcoms.<sup>116</sup> However, scholars face considerable challenges in accounting for how the destabilization of irony signaled by such programs substantively redefines the relationship between viewer and ironist. Booth suggests that the authorial voice (and thus intention) of unstable ironies is less available to the reader, that “the author—insofar as we can discover him...

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<sup>113</sup> Cited above, Caufield, “Influence of ‘Infoenterpropagainment,’” 11; Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board,” 146.

<sup>114</sup> Denise J. Kervin, “Ambivalent Pleasures from *Married... with Children*,” *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 2 (summer 1990): 46, drawing on and quoting from David Marc’s analysis of *The Beverly Hillbillies* in *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 54.

<sup>115</sup> D. Greene, “Fair and Balanced Satire,” 204, is responding to Marc’s complaint in *Comic Visions*, 192, that *Married... With Children*’s “self-congratulatory, more irreverent-than-thou, tone makes it difficult to enjoy.”

<sup>116</sup> See Feuer, “The MTM Style,” 62, quoted above.



is often very remote indeed.”<sup>117</sup> While the postmodern-ironic text may still invite viewers to “laugh at” characters and perhaps identify with a guiding ironic hand orchestrating the comedy (two concepts that, as seen above, shape TV comedy criticism of the traditional ironic form), authorial presence is no longer a political or moral “compass.”

If irony is not defined by the expectation of a clear, singular, critical message lurking behind the dialogue and action on-screen, but becomes a non-specific attitude of rebelliousness that marks the TV text as anti-conventional or a cynicism that extends to the characters themselves, we must sift through the multiple layers on which ironic voice operates. With contemporary ironic programming, the “bond” between encoders and decoders may take several forms, ranging from the viewer’s identification of and with an iconoclast-author or creative team as the source of humor (e.g., fan appreciation for *Beavis and Butt-Head* creator Mike Judge, *South Park*’s Trey Parker and Matt Stone, or *Adult Swim*’s producer-programmer team Williams Street Studios) to a more abstract sense of rapport with the ironic sensibility modeled by a text that may entail no specific attention to its authorship—the disembodied knowing ironic gaze.<sup>118</sup> To the extent that “hip” postmodern programming presents itself less as a spectator sport than an “attitude-fest” (in Wallace’s terms above), hailing audience members into a sense of personal distinction and communal participation in irony, the viewer-ironist is granted a certain license to reimagine the relationship between spectator and televisual spectacle. Here, even the distinction between ironist and interpreter is destabilized, allowing the “postmodern-literate” viewer to occupy more fully irony (or *ironic-ness*) as a reading position and way-of-being suggested by

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<sup>117</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 240.

<sup>118</sup> Closer to this latter pole is the phenomenon described by Jeffrey Sconce in “What If? Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” in *Television after TV*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 105–6, when explaining *Seinfeld*’s experimental narratives as creating, in abstract terms, “a state of Seinfeldicity” (arguably somewhat independent of authorship) as the basis for the viewer’s pleasure, by rewarding fans’ “knowledge of the series’ characteristic modes... and the controlling tone of the series’ humor.”

the text. In a participatory act of consuming ironic programming, that is, it becomes possible to *be* the ironist—to identify the point of enunciation of the irony as yourself and the encoded attitude as your own.<sup>119</sup>

On the other hand, as I have noted, numerous critics maintained (and worried) in the 1990s that the ironic ideal enticed viewers simply to *identify* with such self-involved and morally-challenged characters as Beavis and Butt-Head, Al Bundy, the Simpsons, the boys of South Park, or Seinfeld as a so-called paragon of “empty cleverness”—to see themselves reflected in these characters however absurd and “depersonalized.”<sup>120</sup> Traditional ideological analysis, which dominates the scholarship on 1950s through 1980s sitcoms, as we saw in the work on Lear’s and other 1970s social comedies, would seek to determine whether a comic character is primarily an object to-be-laughed-at as “inferior” (thus imparting to the viewer a sense of superiority) or in the alternative the subject of the laughter (a somewhat relatable, agential figure with whom the viewer may identify). The critical conundrum of whether audiences laugh *at* or laugh *with* antiheroes of fictional ironic programming continues to resurface and is often addressed through conjecture and anecdote. For example, essayist David Beers looking back at *Seinfeld* in 2001 speculated that Americans surely had not watched “to identify with the cast.”<sup>121</sup>

I argue that this laugh-at/identify-with binary has outlived its usefulness. Though it has sometimes provided a convenient shorthand, it obscures the complex, ambivalent relationships

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<sup>119</sup> Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss et al. (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983) theorizes a postmodern “hyperreal” in which TV viewers become subject and object of our own gaze: “A turnabout of affairs by which it becomes impossible to locate an instance of... power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since *you* are always already on the other side. No more subject, focal point, center or periphery: but pure flexion or circular inflection” (53–54).

<sup>120</sup> See also Wells, *Animation and America*, 98–99, on the “dominant discourse of the assumed harm that may be caused by representing ‘dysfunctionality’” (on shows like *The Simpsons*) in the 1990s. The phrase “empty cleverness” is from Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” 67.

<sup>121</sup> David Beers, “Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!” *Salon.com*, September 25, 2001, [http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony\\_lives/](http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony_lives/) (accessed fall 2001).

we as laughers often enter into with the on-screen ‘objects’ (a term that reinforces the binary) of our laughter, as well as with the ironists ‘behind’ the text and with ourselves and fellow fans off-screen as consumers or agents of cultural irony. This critical conceit has likely always been overly limiting (as I underscored earlier when highlighting Marc’s reading of Lear’s Archie Bunker as “sympathetic” and “loveable” even if we are supposed to be “laughing at him”). Even in texts not marked as postmodern, scholars have tended to disagree on the dynamics of “laughter at” as pertains to structures of identification.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, as a schema biased toward the superiority theory of humor and laughter (where we get to feel superior to the fool), the at/with dualism is of limited use for exploring more playful pleasures of incongruity as a parallel, persistent impulse in humor.<sup>123</sup>

This is not to suggest that laughter generated with the use of bigoted or “sexist” comedy characters lacks rhetorical stakes or psychic pleasures of superiority over others, but on the contrary, that it becomes necessary to reassess longstanding assumptions about the author–character–reader triad. The question of whether and why we laugh “at” a self-centered grotesque like Archie Bunker, Al Bundy, or George Costanza (as a fictionalization of *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David), as a speaker within a comedic text, tends to hinge on presumed and conventional relationships of authors to their characters: namely, that to laugh “with” a character is specifically a means of aligning with the comedian or author (who may at times use that character as a mouthpiece or “sounding board,” and/or a sympathetic figure), or in the alternative, that we are expected to

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<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, Feuer (above) reads Lear’s opinionated sitcom lead characters Maude and Archie both through the ironic optic, whereas Chesebro’s schema instead classifies *Maude* as an example of “leader-centered” programs, where the dramatic process treats the central character as a role model displaying “prodigious courage and endurance” whose values are challenged then “reestablished and explicitly recognized as controlling” the text. Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series,” especially 21, 24–25, and 33.

<sup>123</sup> For a concise overview of the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories of humor as three main branches of humor studies, see Brett Mills, “Humour Theory,” in “Studying Comedy,” *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 63.

laugh “at” characters when they serve as stereotypes or (to borrow Feuer’s term) “stick figures” to be manipulated by the wise author or clever social satirist.<sup>124</sup>

Certainly, the laughter at-or-with dichotomy continues to be posed by those desiring to assign *stable* meanings to contemporary comedy and to its consumption, as we will see in Chapter 2 in interpretations of “ladcoms” like *Men Behaving Badly* and Chapter 5 in debates over *South Park*. However, postmodern irony favors inconsistency and paradox in ways that challenge us to arrive at a both/and formulation in response to this persistent question. Much postmodern programming potentially creates spaces where both viewing strategies are equally in play or blurred from moment to moment. It is not a stretch for texts that send (as Shugart asserts of postmodern irony) “multiple and contradictory messages” also to support multiple and contradictory modes of spectatorship simultaneously.<sup>125</sup>

Postmodern criticism does begin to collapse the analytical distinction between laughter-at and identification or laughter-with, demonstrating the limits of this binary opposition, often by recourse to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque that supports liminality, unruly meaning, undisciplined behavior, affective ambivalence, and omnidirectional laughter in comedy. For instance, Roseanne Barr’s public persona as an “unruly woman,” humor scholar Kathleen Rowe argues, works ultimately to inspire cultural “ambivalence,” a concept and argument I return to shortly.<sup>126</sup> Putting ambivalence into words to describe another of the “shouting” comedians of the time, John J. O’Connor in his *New York Times* review of Bobcat Goldthwait’s 1987 HBO special *Share the Warmth* ventured that viewers would find watching the comic’s intense, tousled,

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<sup>124</sup> Marc, *Comic Visions*, 154, notes that Lear used Archie Bunker “as a sounding board for his political agenda.”

<sup>125</sup> Shugart, “Postmodern Irony,” 452.

<sup>126</sup> Kathleen Rowe, chaps. 1–2 of *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 25–91 (“Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the Carnavalesque” and “Roseanne: The Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess”).

and tremulous stage persona “an unsettling experience as *repulsion* competes with *fascination* and a certain amount of *sympathy* [emphasis added].”<sup>127</sup> With the postmodern-ironic sitcoms like *Married... With Children*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *South Park*, or *Strangers with Candy*, likewise, comic-grotesque antiheroes may play on conflicting impulses toward desire and disgust for the viewing public, and do so perhaps without asking the viewer to choose. These and similar texts amplify character flaws with relish, accentuating without necessarily invalidating appreciation for cynical or even offensive views that a character may embody and voice.

In sum, the popularity of programs like *Seinfeld* and *Married... With Children* on U.S. television provoked social unease precisely because their pleasures could not be neatly predicted or policed. In breaking with the familiar, established structures of viewing for American domestic and situation comedies, they discarded role models and relatable, desirable, “functional” comic heroes full of wisdom and advice, but also to some extent “flat” comic stereotypes and quirky screw-ups, and replaced them with hyper-dysfunctional (albeit sometimes “cool”) and deliciously contemptible creatures endlessly impressed with their own vices. These gleeful comic-grotesque fictions structured in irony, while a staple of British comedy and of sketch comedy, had been an anomaly for network prime time, prompting critics to fret that the antisocial behaviors and “nihilism” on display were somehow being glamorized and floated into the social contract.<sup>128</sup> The next section revisits the period that marked the arrival of these

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<sup>127</sup> John J. O’Connor, “HBO Comedy Special Stars Bob Goldthwait,” review of *Share the Warmth: An Evening with Bobcat Goldthwait* (HBO, recorded live at New York’s Bottom Line), *New York Times*, February 24, 1987, C18.

<sup>128</sup> British TV comedy has a rich tradition of comic-grotesque characters, and I have argued that this influence can be felt in U.S. comedy through importation, adaptation, and imitation throughout the post-network era. “Britcoms” such as *Fawlty Towers*, *The Young Ones* (see Chapter 2), *Absolutely Fabulous*, *The League of Gentlemen*, and *The Office* undoubtedly *depersonalize* characters to “distance and protect us” (to borrow Gates’s phrase, cited above) but simultaneously and sumptuously pull the viewer into exquisitely uncomfortable, awkward explorations of the grotesque and absurd in the human condition; such humor wrings from audiences a hysterical laughter that is not only laughter-at pathetic or ‘monstrous’ figures but ultimately also laughter turned on ourselves.

provocative representational shifts to consider intellectual frameworks that oversaw their academic reception, examining in greater depth key perspectives at the turn of the 1990s (roughly 1987 to 1993) as social theorists sought to account for “postideological” television and irony in postmodern media broadly in terms of nihilism or, alternatively, the carnivalesque.

### “In a World Where Nothing Matters”: Scandalizing Ideology

[O]ne cannot exist in a world where nothing matters (including the fact that nothing matters).

— Cultural scholar Lawrence Grossberg, 1992<sup>129</sup>

There is no more hope for meaning. . . .

This is where the seduction begins.

— Jean Baudrillard, “On Nihilism,” 1994<sup>130</sup>

Nihilism remains a key term in debates over postmodernism, which the *Utne Reader* in its summer 1989 issue decried as “the cool, cynical, detached, pastichy culture” dancing on the grave of modernism.<sup>131</sup> This cover story devoted to demystifying the topic is an exemplary instance of concerns taking shape in the alternative and critical press of the era, setting the terms that framed critical understandings of accelerating irony. The postmodernists of pop culture, *Utne*’s editors demurred, shunned modernism’s search for truth and beauty and refused to “make art as if the world mattered.”<sup>132</sup> Prefacing this critique with an admission that the issue had been postponed for two years to puzzle over entangled definitions of postmodernism (was it a

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<sup>129</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 63.

<sup>130</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “On Nihilism,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 164.

<sup>131</sup> “Postmodernism and Beyond... (It’s Time to Return to the Good, the True and the Beautiful),” *Utne Reader* 34 (July/August 1989): 51.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting art critic Suzi Gablik.

yuppie Sniglet trotted out at cocktail parties? a post-industrial worldview? a “who cares” attitude overtaking the culture?), the magazine deferred to sociology and media scholar Todd Gitlin and *Spy* magazine’s Bruce Handy to guide readers through the hotly contested term and phenomenon. In the intersections of these guides’ assessments of the stakes and meanings of postmodernism, I want to highlight several articulations crystallizing across academic and popular discourse during the late 1980s, the same transitional moment for mainstream television comedy that some media scholars came to christen the dawn of the new “postmodern era” of sitcoms with the arrival of texts like *Married... With Children*, *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, and *Seinfeld*.<sup>133</sup>

Gitlin’s contribution “Postmodernism Defined, at Last!” distilled the case against postmodernism, as an aesthetic movement and cultural disposition that “disdains” history and originality alike, in contrast to modernism’s project (wherein, succinctly, “Art set out to remake life. Audacious individual style threw off the dead hand of the past.”). While both movements share strong impulses toward self-reflexivity and irony, under modernism these techniques are associated with passionate pursuit of meaning and authenticity, whereas postmodern art, according to its detractors, differs in “its blasé tone, its sense of exhaustion, its self-conscious bemusement with surfaces.”<sup>134</sup> Of the latter, Gitlin asserted:

Postmodernism... fancies copies, repetition, the recombination of hand-me-down scraps. It neither embraces nor criticizes, but beholds the world blankly, with a knowingness that dissolves feeling and commitment into irony. It pulls the rug out from under itself, displaying an acute self-consciousness about the work’s constructed nature. It takes pleasure in the play of surfaces, and derides the search for depth as mere nostalgia.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Richard Butsch, for example, names this moment as the turning point to postmodern sitcoms in his survey “Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms about Class and Gender,” 125.

<sup>134</sup> Todd Gitlin, “Postmodernism Defined, at Last!” *Utne Reader* 34 (July/August 1989): 52–58; see 54.

<sup>135</sup> Gitlin, “Postmodernism Defined,” 52.

Factoring in socio-cultural arguments assigning such bemusement to “the television generation,” Gitlin further contemplated theories explaining postmodernism as an outcome of American multi-cultural eclecticism, a “post-60s syndrome,” and specifically “a yuppie outlook.” However we theorize its origins, he wrote, “Postmodernism is an art of erosion. Make the most of stagnation, it says, and give up gracefully.”<sup>136</sup>

Bruce Handy’s “A *Spy* Guide to Postmodern Everything” published in the same volume (and featured as a theory-lite sidebar in the margins of Gitlin’s piece) echoed *Spy*’s March 1989 exposé on “The Irony Epidemic,” pooh-poohing postmodernism as pretentious yuppie-speak for whatever happened to be “cool now.”<sup>137</sup> Slicing through the television industry discourse celebrating self-reflexive genre play as novel or quality entertainment, Handy held TV in contempt for the trend of shows fixated on their “artness.” His gloss on Postmodern Television chided: “Do the characters talk to the camera sometimes? Does the program have a ‘look’? Does it remind you of an old TV show, only it’s insincere and has better production values?”<sup>138</sup> In Gitlin’s view, notably, postmodernism’s preference for “recombinant culture”—imitating and arranging elements of recognized past forms and styles in novel ways in lieu of setting out to produce genuinely “new” expressions—accords with U.S. broadcasting’s overriding commercial imperatives to regenerate proven formats and imitate (or in industry lingo, “clone”) hit shows.<sup>139</sup> The ready equation of irony, as a facet of postmodern textuality, with “insincerity” and smugness

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

<sup>137</sup> Bruce Handy, “A *Spy* Guide to Postmodern Everything,” *Utne Reader* 34 (July/August 1989): 53, 55, 57, 61. My Introduction discusses *Spy*’s “The Irony Epidemic” by Rudnick and Andersen.

<sup>138</sup> Handy, *ibid.*, 55, 57.

<sup>139</sup> See Todd Gitlin, “The Triumph of the Synthetic: Spinoffs, Copies, Recombinant Culture,” chap. 5 of *Inside Primetime* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 63–85.



would become a major thread in cultural criticism hostile to “postmodern” media, particularly television comedy, over the decade that followed.

Looking forward, as Jedediah Purdy would do more famously one decade later in his polemic *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* lamenting an “absence of politics” in the postmodern era, Gitlin called for a sense of urgency to redress the problems inherent in a debased political and media culture he saw being eroded by the tides of a cynical postmodernism.<sup>140</sup> In search of a “workable” political outlook for postmodern times, Gitlin was cautiously optimistic. Like many contemporary theorists, he hoped to salvage a “democratic, vital edge” being obscured by what he saw as a stagnant postmodern culture of stylized disingenuousness, stretching from TV’s *Moonlighting* (also the target of the above *Spy* snippet) and David Letterman to the politics of Ronald Reagan, obscuring the line between kitsch and contempt for “the common people.” “Alongside the blasé brand of postmodernism we see around us,” he opined, “. . . there is another kind—one in which pluralist exuberance and critical intelligence reinforce each other. Here we find jubilant disrespect for the boundaries that are supposed to segregate cultural currents.”<sup>141</sup>

A supplementary graphic titled “The Temperaments of Our Time,” attached to Gitlin’s essay, highlights this argument by juxtaposing two lists of cultural influences and ways-of-being under the headings “cool” versus “hot” postmodernism (in the familiar style of the “what’s hot/what’s not” tables from pop magazines) (fig. I.1).<sup>142</sup> In the “hot” column, adjectives including

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<sup>140</sup> For Purdy’s account of “The Absence of Politics,” see chap. 2 of *For Common Things*, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Gitlin, “Postmodernism Defined,” 58.

<sup>142</sup> “The Temperaments of Our Time,” chart by authors not identified, *Utne Reader* 34 (July/August 1989): 56. The title is also a twist on Marshall McLuhan’s coinage of “hot” and “cool” media in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), although in his schema “cool” refers to media that command a high degree of conscious participation on the part of the viewer.

Passionate, Engaged, Romantic, Visionary, and Empathetic are paired with such categories as Fantasy Fiction and Realism, along with cable television's 24-hour news service CNN and public figures ranging from Joseph Campbell to Abbey Hoffman to the Beatles. These are posed in binary opposition with a "cool" camp, characterized as Ironic, Detached, Cynical, Mannerist, and Academic (all Head and no Heart), and represented in turn by 24-hour MTV, the Cyberpunk genre, and iconic Davids Letterman and Byrne. The contrast is explicitly framed by the editors as "a 'cool' postmodernism to revile and a 'hot' postmodernism from which to draw hope."<sup>143</sup>

This bald attempt to bifurcate postmodernism into risible and valuable strands testifies to a number of competing impulses to discipline and rationalize this culturally and economically productive trend. Here at the outset of the 1990s, we can see anxiety lingering on a "temperament" gap—conceived in terms of an interplay of affect, attitude, artistic loyalties, and ultimately formal politics—projecting separate taste profiles that also roughly (if implicitly) map onto generational psychographics: namely, the "detached" MTV Generation ironist is categorically pitted against the warm-hearted, politically engaged baby boomer with a news habit (a split foregrounded by the MTV logo looming opposite CNN's in the visual aid). As the 1990s wore on, this generational friction would be etched more deeply and divisively, and explicitly, into the critical discourse on irony. Early on, as the press grappled with the what-is-postmodernism debates, it was common to see blame or credit for "cool" and "hip" irony laid alternately, often ambiguously, at the feet of boomer yuppie culture and Generation X, as the principle audience fragments scolded for reveling in a cultural aura of "postmodern nihilism" seen as eclipsing the political idealism of a prior era.

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<sup>143</sup> "Postmodernism and Beyond," *Utne Reader*, 52.

*The Temperaments of Our Time*

<b>Cool</b> Postmodernism	<b>Hot</b> Postmodernism
Office	Home
White Collar	No Collar
Urban/Multinational	Local/Global
Ironic	Passionate
Head	Heart
Fusion	Solar
IBM	Apple
Hobbes	Calvin
Memphis Group	Zona
New York/LA	Montreal/New Orleans
Michael Graves	Christopher Alexander
Philip Johnson	Andres Duany
Cyberpunk	Fantasy Fiction
Cynical	Romantic
Detached	Engaged
Ted Koppel	Morton Downey, Jr.
Neither Left Nor Right	Both Left and Right
Philip Glass	Enya
Blade Runner	Koyaanisqatsi
Apocalypse/Arcadia	Realism
Laurie Anderson	Queen Ida
Academic	Empathetic
MTV	CNN
Mannerist	Visionary
East European novels	Latin American novels
Allan Bloom	Joseph Campbell
Bowling	Ballroom Dancing
Sharper Image	Smith & Hawken
Jean Baudrillard	Ivan Illich
The Three Davids (Hockney, Letterman, Byrne)	The Three Abbeys (Hoffman, Edward, Road)

PHOTOS BY WIDE WORLD

Figure I.1.  
The *Utne Reader*'s cheat sheet for parsing postmodernism into the contemptible versus the commendable. "The Temperaments of Our Time," July/August 1989, p. 56.

A handful of cultural critics directly implicated relatively conventional family-centered programs like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* in the groundswell of "cool" irony on television. In Mark Crispin Miller's formulation, perhaps the most influential argument in this vein, such programs exemplified corporate television sneering at its own past to extend a sense of "enlightened irony" to the regular viewer.<sup>144</sup> The same qualities of postmodern-literacy

<sup>144</sup> Miller, "Deride and Conquer," 222.

celebrated as viewer sophistication in industry discourse are reframed in this branch of Marxist criticism as pervasive manipulation of audiences by commercial television. Published in 1986, Miller's account of sitcom irony extensively dissects Cosby's character Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable as a self-subverting TV dad. Over a decade before the comedy phenomenon of "equal opportunity offenders" like *South Park*, he contended that "the ridicule of all by all, is the very essence of the modern sitcom. Cliff [Huxtable], at once the joker and a joke, infantilizing others and yet infantile himself, is exemplary of everybody's status in the sitcoms... No one, finally, is immune." Anticipating the eventual critiques of the *Seinfeld* era's overtly "self-mocking" sitcoms, as well as providing the theoretical ammunition for Wallace's indictment of "hip meta-television," Miller's thesis here is that "the sitcom ironist comes across as so superior and hip because he imitates the sort of viewer that TV has finally produced for itself—not a credulous and ardent fan, but a jaded devotee" who feels superior to yet is seduced by television.<sup>145</sup> Whereas Gitlin's conceit of "cool" versus "hot" temperaments defines hip irony in opposition to civic passion and heartfelt art, Miller sees 1980s sitcoms as pairing cool irony with self-indulgent melodrama or "warm" sentiment:

Each "warm" climactic moment... seems intended to make up for the derision that precedes it: "Hey, deep down, we're very *caring!*" the moment shouts at us [emphasis in original]. We are invited to believe that all the prior nastiness was really motivated by a lot of love, and so the sitcom's barbs and jeering are exempt from criticism.

In these ways, he argues, family sitcoms combined irony's preemptive self-mockery with melodrama's "tear-jerking" or "sentimental outbursts" to stave off critical viewing.<sup>146</sup>

At the same time, Miller describes an "archetype of boyish irony," embodied by "cool young" comedy stars like Chevy Chase, Bill Murray, Martin Mull, Tom Hanks, and Michael J.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 211, 214, 218; Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 159, 165.

<sup>146</sup> Miller, "Deride and Conquer," 216, 217.

Fox (*Family Ties*'s Gen-X breakout star), radiating outward from television and taking root across popular culture and politics. Through the "boyish" culture of irony, Miller saw popular TV and film presenting a seductively rebellious front against "archaic" values in ways designed to "make a smirking audience feel powerful," namely by validating "the smart shopper."<sup>147</sup> Likewise with sitcoms casting off antiquated images of the authoritarian "early TV Dad" and offering cuddly or nonauthoritative "neo-Dads," he stresses that shows by the eighties masterfully implied, "Our laughter at each butt, or with each cool new father, must... be the joyous laughter of emancipation from a tyranny that once required our stiff respect." Yet, in his view, all such seeming subversion "suffused with the enlightened irony of the common man" is evacuated of any real meaning or purpose beyond selling a form of cynicism itself.<sup>148</sup>

Foremost among the boomer set's "boyish" TV ironists, as we have already seen in several examples, David Letterman and subsequently Jerry Seinfeld came to be widely regarded as the mascots of clever, cool irony as mundane sport for "the common man." *The New York Times* in 1987, as cited in the previous chapter, reported that Seinfeld's stand-up comedy ruminated on the "ordinary" in life with knowing irony and sarcasm cushioned by his "ingratiating boyishness."<sup>149</sup> Charles Bremner of the London *Times* two years later, like countless journalists in the late 1980s, supposed that it was the late-night talk show host and people's prankster who had, like a smirking Prometheus, "first brought irony to the masses" in

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<sup>147</sup> Miller, *ibid.*, 221–22.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 204, 206, 222. Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 44, among others, questions the pessimism of Miller's framework and thesis about sitcom and *The Cosby Show*. I would stress that *Father Knows Best* (unlike *Leave It to Beaver*) incorporated mildly goofish father humor and occasionally even self-reflexive commentary on stereotypes of the 1950s TV Dad as buffoon (most notably, the fall 1955 second season episode "Father Is a Dope"), and indeed, many have speculated that the show's title may have offered a note of irony, though certainly upholding patriarchy.

<sup>149</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Stand-Up Comedy Specials on HBO," review of *Jerry Seinfeld: Stand-Up Confidential*, *New York Times*, September 8, 1987, C19.

its new folksy form: “Letterman, who speaks in the whining, self-mocking language that has become the irony hallmark, specializes in an affectionate irreverence towards everything, including himself....”<sup>150</sup> *Spy*’s Rudnick and Andersen dismissed yuppie fervor for Letterman segments like “Stupid Pet Tricks” and camp-nostalgic Americana bric-a-brac as “a smug reflex” and “a mask for easy condescension.”<sup>151</sup> This postmodern sensibility hyping cultural “trash” and triviality acquired nicknames such as “Camp Lite,” coined in *Spy* and parroted in *The Times*, and the “Letterman Comedy Attitude,” a term suggested in 1987 by journalist Ken Tucker to describe comedy that “is simultaneously ironic and goofy, eager to make fun of ordinary people while winking as if to say, hey, I’m just a big jerk, too.”<sup>152</sup> With their disarming blend of genial sarcasm, insouciant chatter, and “ingratiating boyishness,” figures like Letterman and Seinfeld, in the 1980s and 1990s respectively, presided over this comedy attitude that purported to convey absolutely no message and pursue no moral goal.

Much like Gitlin’s article expressly likens Reagan to Letterman as a powerful adopter of the irony idiom, Bremner designated his successor George Bush America’s new Ironist-in-chief. From “hip” White House barbecues to repurposed pop music bunting the Presidential campaign (Bremner deemed Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” to be both Bush’s 1988 “semi-official theme song” and “the anthem of the irony era”) to sharing punch lines with comedy guest Garry Shandling at the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner to salty yet slyly self-deprecating press conferences—including one in which the President “glossed over sections

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<sup>150</sup> Charles Bremner, “Caught in the Grip of the Smirk,” *Times* (London), June 10 1989, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 20, 2008).

<sup>151</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, “Irony Epidemic,” 94, 98.

<sup>152</sup> Rudnick and Andersen, *ibid.*, 94–98, also cited in Bremner, “Caught in the Grip of the Smirk”; Ken Tucker, “Cinemax Laughs,” *The Record*, July 22, 1987, E23. Unlike Gitlin or Bremner, Tucker welcomes Lettermania and applauds “LCA,” exemplified in projects including Rob Reiner’s 1984 rock mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* and a 1987 *Cinemax Comedy Experiment* special by Merrill Markoe and Harry Shearer.

of a formal statement with the words: ‘Blah blah’”—he found the Bush administration disturbingly “in tune with the new ambivalence.” Of this “‘everybody’s hip’ mentality” and “knowing, insider’s tone” spanning from late-night TV to news magazines to national politics, Bremner added, “Irony is probably not quite the right definition. What we are talking about is a blend of faux-nostalgia, old-fashioned camp and the fear of taking anything seriously.”<sup>153</sup>

“Today’s nihilism is no angst and all play,” objected political philosopher Susan Shell in 1990, denouncing postmodernism as a “cheerful assault,” an obsession with style at the expense of substance in popular culture and theory alike, compromising the foundations of society, art, and academics.<sup>154</sup>

Theoretical accounts of postmodern nihilism powerfully shaped not only academic-flavored debates of this period, but increasingly also national narratives about the state of American culture during the final decade of the twentieth century. Critiques of Reagan and Bush as skilled navigators of the new irony notwithstanding, the political and cultural leaders of the right consistently branded themselves as the forces of earnestness and optimism. For conservatives, pointing to nihilism as a sinister omnipresent force deluging culture afforded a potent platform from which to shore up appeals to traditional values under Reagan and beyond, while diverting attention from ideological agendas and a widening economic gap that accompanied the rise of the New Right. Cultural scholar Lawrence Grossberg astutely seized on this rhetorical tactic in a 1988 essay on politics in postmodernity:

The crisis of America, according to the New Right, is neither economic nor ideological but rather, affective. It is a crisis of our lack of passion, of our

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<sup>153</sup> Bremner, “Caught in the Grip of the Smirk.”

<sup>154</sup> Susan Shell, “No Angst and All Play: Today’s Cheerful Assault on the Humanities,” *Academic Questions* 3, no. 3 (summer 1990): 29.

*not caring* enough about the values we hold [emphasis added]. It is a crisis of nihilism....<sup>155</sup>

While Grossberg directly challenged the New Right's maneuvering on this terrain, he did not disagree with the core premise of a crisis of disaffection. Rather, he charged leftist thinkers with an urgent task of reconceiving the cultural battlefields of hegemony in *affective* rather than purely ideological terms. He concluded, "[W]e are not losing some grand hegemonic war to the nihilism of postmodernity, nor to the commodification of late capitalism, nor to the ideological conservatism of political ideologies. But we are losing a specific set of battles, and... we have not yet grasped its specificity." In sum, he suggested, the New Right was "winning the popular" by opportunistically claiming and rearticulating in its own political interests those affective pleasures and sensibilities being generated beyond the political sphere on the playing fields of popular culture.<sup>156</sup>

Grossberg found countercultural ideology to be a prime target of this hegemonic project, warning of the New Right's investment in seeing the counterculture dismantled by "displacing any ideological content from youth culture and transforming it into purely affective relations." We may perceive this at work in the era's ironic nostalgia for the TV relics of the sixties and its bustling me-centric celebration of "lifestyle politics," for instance, where consumer taste and "*affective* identities [emphasis in original]" trumped the pursuit of political agency.<sup>157</sup> A text need not be encoded with conservative messages or moral judgments, he stressed, to be enfolded into the New Right's restructuring of the American "national popular" along affective

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<sup>155</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "It's a Sin: Politics, Post-Modernity and the Popular," in *It's a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics & Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Tony Fry, Ann Curthoys, and Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988), 31.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34, 37; see also 62.

<sup>157</sup> Grossberg, "It's a Sin," 59–60.



lines.<sup>158</sup> Rather, he saw the right as colonizing the postmodern frontier of popular culture, closing spaces for legitimate ideological opposition.

Combating this push proved difficult in Grossberg's estimation because the left's models of ideological struggle and populist political "resistance" did not contemplate a terrain shaped by the presumption of meaninglessness.<sup>159</sup> For cultural studies as a progressive academic movement confounded by the New Right's strengthening grasp on popular culture and populist sentiment in the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism presented a potentially formidable obstacle to maintaining the interest of the populace and culture-makers in recognizable forms of meaningful, counter-hegemonic discourse. This was, of course, especially true of postmodernism conceived in terms of nihilism. The prospect of a cultural wave of "not caring," combined with the comedic substitution of ostensibly blank irony for bald didacticism, would render traditional ideological criticism insufficient and demand greater consideration of the affective registers and ambivalent reading positions constructed by much contemporary programming. Grossberg's contemporary Paul Patton in the same 1988 essay collection stressed that postmodernism "scrambles the codes by which critics seek to read off the 'politics' of cultural objects," blurring genres and embracing contradiction in ways that bedevil a straightforward political or ideological assessment. Championing postmodernism's "anti-nihilist" potential, Patton took pains to distinguish the intellectual project of cultural pluralism from those "nihilist postmodernisms" said to celebrate a "fog of meaninglessness in which... nothing really matters any more, not even

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, especially 32, 62.

<sup>159</sup> Grossberg, "It's a Sin," 18. Specifically, Grossberg argued that Reaganism did "not attempt to restructure our common sense assumptions about the world" so much as it worked to render "ideological differences less important than the passion of one's commitment," prioritizing platforms with emotional resonance over explicit ideology (32). The blossoming of "truthiness" in right-wing political discourse of the 2000s, examined in later chapters, is arguably an eventual mutation and amplification of this particular hegemonic strategy.

the fact that nothing matters.”<sup>160</sup> In this way, similar to Gitlin’s (and *Utne Reader*’s) schema of vibrant versus blasé versions of postmodernism, some theorists passionately defending consensus-oriented democratic postmodernism as the future of leftist politics worked to bracket out nihilism as an unfortunate distraction.

For Grossberg, however, postmodernity indeed signals “a crisis in our ability to locate any meaning as a possible and appropriate source for an impassioned commitment.” That is, he theorized that the postwar generations in America found it “increasingly difficult to locate places where it is possible to care about something enough... that one can actually make a commitment to it and invest oneself in it.”<sup>161</sup> Baby boomers and post-sixties youth, he reasoned, regarded values and institutions passed down from their parents (e.g., love and family) from a “cynical” remove, having grown disillusioned by heightened awareness of the ideological trappings of modern life and reality. In an argument that closely parallels Peter Sloterdijk’s influential *Critique of Cynical Reason* (first published in English the same year) designating cynicism as the dominant disposition of the age and a kind of “enlightened false consciousness,” Grossberg hypothesized that people now entered freely into ideology not as unwitting dupes (as surmised by Marxism) but knowingly and with brazen indifference.<sup>162</sup> English literary theorist Terry Eagleton advanced a related argument (at the outset of the nineties) that the “endless self-ironizing” of a postmodern culture produces a social subject seemingly “conveniently insulated against ‘ideology critique’ of the traditional kind.”<sup>163</sup> Grossberg posited “*ironic nihilism*” as the

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<sup>160</sup> Paul Patton, “Giving up the Ghost: Postmodernism and Anti-Nihilism,” in *It’s a Sin*, 88–89.

<sup>161</sup> Grossberg, “It’s a Sin,” 39–40.

<sup>162</sup> See also Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), first published as *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (n.p., Germany: Suhrkamp, 1983).

<sup>163</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 39; quoted in V. Greene, “Critique, Counternarratives,” 128.

defining logic of a culture cynically “refusing to take its own ideological positions—or anything for that matter—too seriously. In fact, the only real evil is taking any ideological belief too seriously, whatever its politics.” Armed with this “‘hip’ attitude” exalting ironic distance, he contended, the postwar generations learned to walk in a world of inherited values without exactly investing in them.<sup>164</sup>

In this emerging portrait of postmodern media consumers and texts, the growing disdain for conventional television formulas and didacticism (see Chapter 1) is mapped onto a deeper-seated disenchantment with traditional value systems and overall estrangement from ideology. Grossberg further theorizes how “ironic nihilism” functions in textual practices to shore up the “hip” sense of removal from emotional or ideological investment:

It does not provide rules for learning because the question of its credibility (or incredibility) becomes irrelevant; narratives, when they are present, go nowhere. For whatever reasons, these are no longer situations we can even imagine ourselves into, despite the fact that all situations are personalized and presented as if they were ideologically related to our own lives (i.e., the characters are often “just like us” yet fantastically different). Within this logic, cultural practices refuse to make judgments or even to involve themselves in the world.<sup>165</sup>

In such a media environment, Grossberg conceded a certain “impossibility of cultural analysis,” cautioning, like Patton, that “not only can we no longer confidently read the meaning or ideology of a text off its surfaces, but even the notion of a single identifiable fixed text is problematic.”<sup>166</sup>

While I do not share Grossberg’s conviction that postmodern conditions engender an inability to channel “impassioned commitment,” it is certainly the case that much television comedy by the 1990s was actively indulging a sense of compassion fatigue and becoming a lightening rod for cultural anxieties about “ironic nihilism.” Such affective work is key for understanding

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<sup>164</sup> Grossberg, “It’s a Sin,” 40–42; emphasis added.

<sup>165</sup> Grossberg, “It’s a Sin,” 41–42.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

the cultural uses of irony in this changing media context. Going by Grossberg's gloss, *Seinfeld* and *Married... With Children* provide clear and striking examples, as television texts seeming to abdicate a stake in ideology while harvesting irony as a set of cultural and viewing pleasures: in the anti-didactic and anti-relevant sitcom, we are given no "rules for learning" ("No hugging, no learning"); narratives that "go nowhere" (e.g., *Seinfeld*'s "The Chinese Restaurant"); characters who "are often 'just like us' yet fantastically different" (relatable "losers" puncturing the conventional, comfortable barrier that separates the ironic from the mimetic mode); and texts that may "refuse to make judgments or even to involve themselves in the world."<sup>167</sup>

Scholars seeking to recover a sense of the ongoing oppositional potential of humor turned to concepts of the carnivalesque as an undercurrent of postmodernism. A surge of interest within American cultural studies in the populist dimensions and class politics of "vulgar" postmodern media spectacle made the Bakhtinian view a provocative and controversial alternative to the dominant accounts equating postmodernism with a blasé nihilism. There is considerable overlap between those programs and genres of popular culture labeled ironic nihilism and those heralded as postmodern carnivalesque. Hibbs, as background for his exploration of *Seinfeld*'s comic nihilism in his book *Shows About Nothing*, begins by tracing traditional nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of nihilism, as articulated by Nietzsche among others, as "a state where everything is permitted, where there is no scale of higher and lower, noble and base."<sup>168</sup> This succinct definition is striking in its similarity, on the surface, to Bakhtin's distillation of carnival as a state of radical abasement and inversions of the moral and social order. "Within carnival, all hierarchical distinctions, all barriers, all norms and prohibitions, are temporarily suspended," as

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<sup>167</sup> Grossberg, "It's a Sin," 41–42, as cited above.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 136.

media scholar Robert Stam writes, “while a qualitatively different kind of communication... is established.”<sup>169</sup> The parallels are limited, however, as the political and affective stakes of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque are at odds with a Nietzschean nihilism. As Stam observes, “Bakhtin’s predilection for the ‘low’—the lower classes, the ‘lower bodily stratum’—clashes with Nietzsche’s affection for the ‘higher souls’ and ‘finer sensibilities.’” Whereas for Nietzsche the promise of the Bacchanalia was individual transcendence, for Bakhtin the festive spirit and “promiscuous interminglings” of the carnivalesque allow for visions of egalitarian community.<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, with a new popular nihilism under postmodernism being characterized as “no angst and all play,” a definitional overlap was undeniable.<sup>171</sup>

For parsing how these philosophies when revised for a postmodern world are ascribed to ironic media forms, a critical distinction becomes that between negation or *absence* of meaning (comedy “about nothing”) and *surplus* of meaning. Those looking through the first lens diagnose nihilism, where those who behold radical polysemy as yet another dimension of Bakhtinian “excess” and vitality are more likely to seize on what John Fiske calls the “playful freedom” of carnival. Fiske in his 1987 theory primer *Television Culture*, a key work of American cultural studies, compellingly calls on carnival to make the case that “popular pleasure offered by television can evade, resist, or scandalize ideology and social control.”<sup>172</sup> According to Bakhtin,

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1989), 86.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>171</sup> The phrase is the title and thesis of Shell’s critique “No Angst and All Play,” cited above. Several of the authors I cited in Chapter 1 analyze *Seinfeld* in terms of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, including Joanne Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye: The Cultural Spectacle of *Seinfeld*’s Last Episode,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 114; and David P. Pierson, “A Show About Nothing: *Seinfeld* and the Modern Comedy of Manners,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (summer 2000): 49–64, who reads *Seinfeld* as “extremely egalitarian” social satire combined with a carnivalesque wallowing in human materiality (59–61).

<sup>172</sup> John Fiske, “Carnival and Style,” chap. 13 of *Television Culture*, 240 (alluded to in my section header), 242.

the life of carnival is about liminality and liberation, excessiveness and offensiveness, comic inversions and transgressions, all creating as Fiske says “a world upside down.”<sup>173</sup> In such a forum, ambiguity and plurality of meaning is in and of itself culturally substantive and subversive, and comic discourse need not make its oppositional statement at the level of (and in the official language of) *ideology*:

[I]deology works... to construct and control meanings of self and of social relations. This can be resisted on its own terms by producing counter-ideologies, counter-meanings that serve the interests of the subordinate rather than those of the dominant. But there is an alternative semiotic strategy of resistance or evasion that refuses to accept the terrain within which ideology works so well, and instead substitutes one that favors popular pleasures rather than social control.<sup>174</sup>

Whereas for Grossberg a kind of cynical refusal of ideology finds media texts and fans coping with the prospect of “a world where nothing matters” (to revisit his woeful words on nihilism from this section’s epigraph), Fiske’s competing vision regards any refusal to play by the rules of ideology as, potentially, a politically charged and significant practice for participants. That is, defiance of the systems of language and taste *matters*.

In a 1993 article Fiske singled out *Married... With Children* for its clear carnivalesque potential, using the program to apply Bakhtin’s ideas about “popular agency” to a modern media audience. His analysis focuses on the use of blatant “bad taste” and ostentatiously objectionable jokes to undermine, through comic inversion, the repressive power of socially conservative values and norms, which dictate and define “good taste” in the interest of the dominant class. “By publicly inverting the norms of the ‘good’ family,” he ascertains, the program “offends many formulations of the power-bloc and some of the people (particularly some women), but to

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 241–44, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968).

<sup>174</sup> Fiske, *ibid.*, 240, 241.

its core audience of young people of both sexes its offensiveness is carnivalesque.” Whereas Butsch’s critique saw the show as a continuation of the decades-old sitcom stereotypes belittling working-class men as “inadequate,” Fiske’s assertion that Al Bundy “inverts the social norms of masculine power by being economically and sexually inadequate” asks us to consider that *this* representation resists rather than reproduces dominant interests.<sup>175</sup> Likewise, he argues that Peg Bundy’s “over-coiffed” and hyperbolic sexual objectification of her own body, by wearing skin-tight clothing and high heels that restrict her movements as “she teeters across the room,” functions comedically as an exaggeration of the prescribed codes of female beauty and as such “exposes to mocking laughter the patriarchal control over feminine bodies.”<sup>176</sup> In defense of the vulgar and “rude” speech, common to carnivalesque TV comedy, Fiske stresses, “Politeness is, of course, a social system of control... ultimately over the social relations of the body politic.” Moreover, the humor overall enables viewer-fans to share in, even relate to, the show’s shunning “of official family values and its emphasis on the bodily pleasures of eating, drinking and sexuality.” Combining Bakhtinian theory with Foucault’s ideas about the body as the ultimate site of social control and resistance (by means of unruliness), he explains, “The impoliteness and vulgarity of carnival are liberatory to the people and offensive to the power-bloc both because

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<sup>175</sup> John Fiske, “Family Discipline: A TV Text and an Audience,” *Journal of Communication & Culture* no. 1 (1993): 5–6, 10; and (quoted earlier) Butsch, “Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms about Class and Gender,” 125.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. Mrs. Bundy’s over-the-top taste in fashion, seeming to combine a retro 1950s vibe with a high degree of artificiality to create a living Barbie doll in hot pants, is coded as cheap and trashy yet vain and materialistic—the superficial “bimbo.” Her garish personal style of dress (“dolloed up” rather than a “couch potato” as initially written) was a detail added to the role by actress Katey Sagal to fit her vision of the character, while Peg owes her signature walk to Frederick’s of Hollywood stiletto mules, as Sagal discusses in the *Married... With Children* “Reunion Special,” broadcast February 16, 2003, on FOX. Sagal took a dismissive view of feminist critiques and press looking to extract social significance: “We’re just trying to be funny. We’re not trying to make any big statement here. But they [the creators/writers] really did have a view of women that was... why our show really appealed to a male audience. Men don’t classically watch sitcoms, but men *loved Married... With Children*,” she said in excerpted cast interview footage included with the sitcom’s third season DVD (Sony Pictures/Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2005).

they are refusals of the normal disciplinary system, and because they assert the validity of other ways of behaving that discipline normally represses.”<sup>177</sup>



Figure I.2. Master of his Domain: Al Bundy (Ed O’Neill) is the king of all he surveys from atop his new power-flush Ferguson toilet. *Married... With Children’s* frequent and literal toilet humor lingers on the “low” comedy of the carnivalesque. “A Dump of My Own,” originally aired January 8, 1989, on FOX.

Bakhtinian attention to humor and parody as productive means for the disenfranchised to thwart sociopolitical systems of power and domination reopens avenues for ‘liberal hope.’<sup>178</sup> Confined to the symbolic sphere, such play is of interest to the left for its potential to subvert and disrupt dominant discourse. As Fiske argues in *Television Culture*, “The fact that this subversive or resistive activity is semiotic or cultural rather than social... does not denude it of any effectivity.” He explains, “The carnival is both a product and a celebration of the yawning gap between the interests and experiences of the dominant and the subordinated,” and carnivalesque media provides “the arena” where the people can symbolically depose authorities and give expression to “the experience of... repression.”<sup>179</sup> This celebratory space combines “offensive”

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 8–10. Fiske observes that these attitudes and carnal pleasures “reproduced and were reproduced in” the viewing practices of a sample “typical audience of young people” at a Catholic university, for example, who regularly watched the comedy every Sunday as a group activity after mass from the beer-soaked, stained couch in a student apartment, mobilizing a sense of “emancipation” from family and “officially approved” social identities (10).

<sup>178</sup> Recalling Rorty’s sense of “liberal hope” from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, it is possible to strive for solidarity while recognizing meaning as relative and contingent.

<sup>179</sup> Fiske, “Carnival and Style,” 241, 249.



speech (in today's parlance, this includes cringe and insult humor) with the visual language of the comic-grotesque by indulging bodily excess, scatology (read 'toilet humor'), and mockery. Carnival's spectacular rituals and "gross" figures ideally evoke both disgust and delight—like the porcine creatures that were the symbolic center of the medieval fair they are to be “celebrated as well as reviled,” as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write—facilitating a festive laughter born of ambivalence.<sup>180</sup> Fiske takes as another prominent example the world of televised professional wrestling, a defiantly populist genre devoted as is medieval “folk carnival” to the joyful display of the degradation of bodies: in this parodic sport, the performers and boisterous live crowd “all participate spectacularly,” transgressing relations of power typical of “normal” television by emphatically blurring the line “between spectacle and spectator.” In a more abstract sense, Fiske further contends that postmodern *style* itself as televisual spectacle on the rise in the 1980s “performs many of the functions of carnival,” in effect “acting as an empowering language.... in its excessiveness, its ability to offend good taste (bourgeois taste).”<sup>181</sup> In a parallel vein, much of the scholarship on adult animation as a subversive new genre and televisual style on the rise since the 1990s relies heavily upon notions of the carnivalesque to account for the transgressive potential and popular appeal of the “crude” animated comedies, and to theorize the participatory pleasures of their joyful postmodern parody of media culture.<sup>182</sup>

Stam's *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, published in 1989, also makes crucial contributions acknowledging Bakhtinian theory's tremendous “explanatory

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<sup>180</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 44, emphasis in original, discussing pigs, celebrated/reviled in carnival as a symbol of the “low.”

<sup>181</sup> Fiske, “Carnival and Style,” 243–45, 249. See also John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), on how “style itself became the subject... of television” (5).

<sup>182</sup> Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board,” 140–41, when analyzing subversive representations of family in U.S. animated sitcoms, in fact posits, “Animation... is television's version of the carnivalesque” (141).

power” for television culture’s messy and anarchical forms and impulses, while articulating the *limits* of such a perspective for mapping the “cultural politics of mass media.”<sup>183</sup> Stam’s is not a call for a utopian approach to replace critical pessimism surrounding campy postmodern media spectacle. On the contrary, he cautions that “American mass media are fond of weak or truncated forms of carnival that capitalize on the frustrated desire for a truly egalitarian society by serving up distorted versions of carnival’s utopian promise.” Consequently, he urges, “Any euphoric evaluation that regards television as authentically ‘carnavalesque’ must moderate its euphoria with an awareness of the political constraints involved in any ‘situated utterance.’”<sup>184</sup> As for ‘authentic’ carnival, some scholars find fault with Bakhtin for overstating utopian possibilities, given that he presumes what Stam calls “a kind of orgiastic egalitarianism” in carnival’s gleeful disruption of the moral and social order. “All carnivals must be seen as complex crisscrossings of ideological manipulation and utopian desire,” Stam astutely concludes, when we consider that “carnivals are inserted into specific historical moments and are inevitably inflected by the hierarchical arrangements of everyday social life.”<sup>185</sup>

Taking as an example the combative ‘trash’ talk format of *The Morton Downey, Jr. Show* (syndicated, 1987–89), in which the host baited liberals and hailed his audience as fellow Loudmouths, Stam points to the potential “appropriation of the imagery and practices of carnival, ultimately, to solidify official culture even while providing the enjoyment found in the exercise of a verbal gestural freedom.”<sup>186</sup> In this case, through shouting, hooting, and obscenity, the text promulgates affective identities that are framed as oppositional and pleasures posed as carnivalesque,

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<sup>183</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 219, 225.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, 96.

<sup>186</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 157n6.

while never quite “dethroning” or degrading the host himself as a pompous authority (albeit ironized) and agent of anti-liberal fervor. Stam’s nuanced analysis reveals how such a program, plunging viewers into “noisy confrontation of diverse social discourses,” may be at once highly suggestive of carnivalesque leveling and yet ultimately uninterested in putting its anarchic energies to egalitarian ends.<sup>187</sup> Such programming, which could easily be classified as symptomatic of “ironic nihilism,” may resonate with Grossberg’s related assessment (the year before) of the new conservative movement as co-opting the language of the popular and favoring hollow simulations of ideological struggle. Although using different frameworks, Stam’s argument runs parallel and reinforces Grossberg’s pragmatic insistence on prioritizing alternatives to purely ideological analysis and problematizing communication theory approaches based in simple models of power-and-resistance, while pursuing a middle way between the extremes of “elitist pessimism... and the naïve affirmative celebrations of the uncritical apologists for mass-mediated culture.”<sup>188</sup> While acknowledging the limits, Stam challenges the left to draw hope from and more fully engage the carnivalesque’s subversive terrain and tactics (not only in critical theory but political strategy) rather than react to the “popularity” of Reaganism with either earnest sanctimony or despair.<sup>189</sup>

Critical thinkers working in (or skeptical of) the Bakhtinian tradition additionally raise legitimate concerns, as Kathleen Rowe suggests, about “a tendency to romanticize ‘the people’ and to overestimate both their power and their good will,” in medieval carnival as well as today. What Bakhtin theorized as vital anarchic and transformative energies in folk carnival were not

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid. I am extending a metaphor and language suggested by Stam, who argues, “Part of the pleasure of the program derives from the irreverent dethroning of the avatars of liberal (and occasionally conservative) authority.” Interestingly, *Utne Reader*’s cool/hot temperaments chart (fig. I.1) lists Morton Downey, Jr. under “hot” postmodernism, aligning him temperamentally with media that is “Engaged” and ideologically flexible yet invested (“Both Left and Right” not “Neither Left Nor Right”).

<sup>188</sup> Stam’s phrase, *ibid.*, 220, commenting on a persistent schism in the field.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–28.

purely anti-hierarchical in actual practice, nor did the festivities unleash aggression only toward officialdom but sometimes, Rowe cautions, involved “the turning of one oppressed group on another that is even weaker.”<sup>190</sup> Her critique builds on Stallybrass and White’s account of the dangers that go along with the problematic “politics of carnival.” Not only does carnival not “do away with the official dominant culture” in any sustaining sense, they stress in their 1986 book *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression*, but transgression within the confines of the carnival “often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’—in a process of *displaced abjection* [emphasis in original].”<sup>191</sup> In this and other respects, folk carnival revelry had, like its modern equivalent, the potential to uphold existing social power relations when irreverently redrawing the lines of high and low.

Bakhtin himself perceived that the carnivalesque grew, Rowe asserts, “increasingly elusive” under modernity and late capitalism. In media and popular culture, she contends, the profound and life-affirming ambivalence that for Bakhtin defined carnival, reveling in contradiction through the dual emphasis on “degradation” and “regeneration,” may be less prevalent and palpable particularly when it comes to cultural consumption of comic-grotesque depictions of the “unruly woman” and “unruly mother.” Published in 1995, Rowe’s book is inflected with the critical discourse on 1990s irony, when she warns: “Without such ambivalence, dualities become oppositions and laughter alienated, ironic, and detached. Popular culture no longer stands for vulgarity and vitality but only for vulgarity.”<sup>192</sup> Much like we saw in Chapter 1 with the joking structure of “Crimes Against Obesity,” where the humor springs from displaced abjection with the

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<sup>190</sup> Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 43–44, in a subsection asserting “The Decline of Carnavalesque Ambivalence.”

<sup>191</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 19.

<sup>192</sup> Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 44–45.

lower-class male protagonist/antagonist verbally abusing and reviling “big” women, Rowe points out that humor coursing through mainstream media channels often skews toward degrading the “fat lady” (the most persistent symbol of “the unruly woman”) as the basis for a derisive laughter, although in notable cases we may find some residual sense of the celebratory dimension and uncanny allure that accounts for the other side of carnivalesque ambivalence, as in the case (noted previously) of Roseanne’s self-representation as the loud-mouthed “Domestic Goddess.”<sup>193</sup>

Although Fiske likewise stresses that “[p]ure carnival no longer survives in late capitalism” and calls for specificity and scrutiny of gender representations, his enthusiasm for audience agency or activity as popular resistance leaves him open to the same critiques of utopianism leveled against Bakhtin.<sup>194</sup> In response to Fiske’s impassioned defense of the “stylized comic violence” and “mockingly ritualized” combat of televised wrestling culture, for example, Stam queries, “To what extent does such a spectacle merely provide an arena for the acting-out of the ambient aggressivity of late-capitalist culture?” And how do we discern “*oppositional* culture of the oppressed [emphasis in original]” from a “bread-and-circuses” profit venture “managed from above”? Fiske’s emphasis on *popular pleasures* (rather than subversive-style-as-quality and the cultural capital that this entails), as Stam rightly praises, “cuts through the kind of class snobbery that would applaud the more cerebral, ‘hip’ intertextuality of the ‘David Letterman Show’ while deploring the palpable and gross physicality of ‘Rock-‘n’-Wrestling’” (and we could certainly substitute “hip” *Seinfeld* and “crude” *Married... With Children* as the opposing examples here, with their

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 3, 31, 50–91. Inverting the gendered hierarchy of looking and historically also of joke-telling, Roseanne’s comic persona is the “woman on top,” Rowe emphasizes, the laughing *subject*, who “makes jokes and laughs herself,” rather than an *object* of laughter (see pp. 3, 31). Here again, in critical deliberations on the shifts in or “decline” of carnivalesque ambivalence, we may sense the persistent underlying question of laughter “at” versus “with” (where ambivalence implies both/and), albeit not directly posed in these terms in Rowe’s assessment.

<sup>194</sup> Fiske, “Family Discipline,” 5.

respective fan cultures built around catchy phrases versus untamped rowdiness). However, for Stam and many on the academic left, there is no easy answer to questions of whether such a text can be hoped to “loosen up progressive social energies,” as opposed to reify the social relations of white patriarchal capitalism or “merely colonize and exploit the popular imaginary.”<sup>195</sup> As for audiences, comedy even at its most carnivalesque does not “in itself do anything positive,” Fiske agrees. “The carnivalesque can do no more than open up spaces,” which the members of any given viewing community then fill with their own identities and relations as a social formation, he writes, arguing ultimately “it is upon what fills them that we should base our analysis and evaluation.”<sup>196</sup>

The fact that television has continued to incorporate carnival-like elements, particularly in programs aspiring to postmodern subversive comedy and irony, makes these questions all the more germane today. I wrestle with these and similar considerations in upcoming case studies when discussing television comedy programs as “situated utterances,” and I repeatedly find that social discourses circumscribing the television culture of irony have considerable bearing on the putative affective pleasures and critical meanings made of comedic texts. While I incline to seek out the “cosmic gaiety” of the carnivalesque as the ideal and a rare achievement in comedy, I argue that much television comedy staking a claim on that anarchical sense of “freedom” and all-inclusive mockery is, to borrow Stam’s language, *inflected* by and *inserted* into social and political narratives of free expression and, persistently since the 1990s, often inextricably linked to anti-PC rhetoric (more readily harnessed in American media to heroic individualism of comics or consumers than to visions of community and equality).<sup>197</sup> This is equally the case with losercoms blamed

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<sup>195</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 227, referencing Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), 243–50. Fiske (p. 244) analyzes a *Rock ‘n’ Wrestling* match featuring “King Kong Bundy [*sic*],” the Bundys’ namesake.

<sup>196</sup> Fiske, “Family Discipline,” 8.

<sup>197</sup> The phrase “cosmic gaiety” is from Stam’s (p. 87) description of carnival laughter, cited in my Introduction.

for plunging TV into vulgarity and quality sitcoms credited with “raising the sophistication level of prime time,” a categorical distinction that can at times seem quite tenuous.<sup>198</sup>

While my project seeks to avoid the blanket condemnations of irony and postmodernism and pursues specificity, I want to pull focus back onto ideological dimensions of “slippery” irony. I do so as I proceed not to the exclusion of examining the affective work of comedy, crucial to any consideration of the cultural politics of niche and mass culture. Particularly where comedic irony is concerned, questions of how television texts *mean* and *matter* to audiences are unavoidably bound up with considerations of affective identities and interpretive communities structured in generational, national, social, and subcultural layers of subjectivity. As later chapters will demonstrate, the political right has grown increasingly adept and willing to re-accent and re-route certain ideologically ambiguous or supposedly “apolitical” pleasures of oppositionality found in abundance in popular culture into a loosely knit matrix of anti-liberal sentiment. Given the standing association of political and social relevance in comedy with a “liberal” vision of social progress, the rise of network comedies disavowing relevancy—and reveling in “politically incorrect” attitudes presented as carnival-like play—seemed ripe for such rearticulation.

Having touched upon several arguments that contemplate the possibilities and limitations for postmodern irony and irreverence as viable tools for social and political critique or “popular revolt,” I return to questions of stable versus unstable irony. These are not rigid categories nor “binary opposites,” but rather, as Viveca Greene argues, it is constructive to

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<sup>198</sup> As I have argued, *Married... With Children* in particular actively works to collapse the distinction between “smart” irony and “trash” television, rejecting the hierarchy of high and low in the spirit of the postmodern carnival. TV scholarship when praising quality and relevance, as Mark Alvey describes in “‘Too Many Kids and Old Ladies’: Quality Demographics in 1960s US Television,” *Screen* 45, no. 1 (spring 2004): 40–62, has tended to perpetuate a certain industry mythology of a “demographic revolution” credited with transforming TV in the 1960s and 1970s, and thereafter—as “the pursuit of upscale demographics” continues to be “applauded for raising the sophistication level of prime time and clearing away the vulgar, raucous escapism of the wasteland” (60–61). For thoughtful analysis examining quality television’s critical reception in the contemporary context, see also Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

conceive of stable and unstable irony as “positions on a continuum that is highly contingent on context.”<sup>199</sup> The final section explores how both concepts, which bring forth rather different ideas about intent and meaning, inform articulations of irony as a cultural and comic practice. Comedic irony of the 1980s onwards does in some instances expressly work to deflect criticism and, for all its “openness” and polysemy, often functions to shut down rather than open up dialogue. My point is not a restatement of Wallace’s concern that Television as a commercial enterprise uses irony to shield itself and produce numb viewers. Rather, I look more closely at the slippery cultural politics of irony as the primary comic vehicle for subverting “political correctness.”

Irony and especially unstable irony extends a certain license to the comedian to craft jokes for pure comedic shock value without any guarantees or expectations that the speaker/writer stands for or against statements uttered “ironically.” Under cover of irony as the preferred mode of humor skirting or subverting the social and linguistic pretenses to “political correctness,” jokes and attitudes off limits to the mainstream comedian of the 1970s or early 1980s were increasingly in bounds. Irony has become for comedy writers the ultimate disclaimer. In the age of politically incorrect comedy, just about anything goes provided that irony is invoked or implied.

### **To Mean or Not To Mean? Political Incorrectness and Tactical Polysemy**

If I’ve learned one thing, ... it’s don’t tell the truth.

— Sam Kinison preaches “Breaking the Rules”  
in an HBO comedy special, 1987<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> V. Greene, “Critique, Counternarratives,” 122.

<sup>200</sup> *Sam Kinison: Breaking the Rules*, taped at L.A.’s Roxy Theater, quoted in John J. O’Connor, “Sam Kinison in a Comedy Special,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1987, C18.



Cultural critics producing much of the discourse on irony during the 1990s and 2000s were not using terms like “stable” and “unstable” to describe irony, as I noted above, nor necessarily structuring their thought along these distinctions. In many instances, definitions circulating in the popular press at the height of the “Irony Epidemic” or “Age of Irony” discourse worked to blur these categories and at times to collapse distinctions between modernist and postmodernist impulses in media culture. It was not unusual for journalists to invoke the classic definition of irony as “a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words” in essays and editorials expounding on the “I-never-mean-what-I-say smugness” of iconic ironists like Letterman and Seinfeld.<sup>201</sup> Some did draw a firm line, hoping to recover a more purposeful irony with satirical teeth. But many were less concerned to split the two definitively.<sup>202</sup> Vague notions of traditional (stable) irony as a rhetorical technique, through persistent reminders of the default dictionary definition, became bound up with a more nebulous form of “insincere” speech. In the former, the calculated incongruity between literal and actual meaning calls attention to the fact that the author/speaker means to critique or at least invalidate the very position to which he is giving voice. In the latter, the fact of never-meaning-what-I-say is itself the intended statement. The mode is the message. If irony becomes an end in itself, then *earnestness* as a foundation for polite discourse is the only position consistently being invalidated. This form of play may not so much be about *meaning-the-opposite-of-what-I-say*

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<sup>201</sup> The first phrase is Samuel Johnson’s definition penned in 1751, as quoted earlier from Clingham, *Samuel Johnson*, 91. The second is Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” 67, an editorial that seeks to separate these two concepts of irony.

<sup>202</sup> For examples of the former, see Gordon, *ibid.*; and Rudnick and Andersen, “Irony Epidemic,” 93–98. Instances of the latter can be found in some journalistic and academic sources, as well as popular media—e.g., in *Reality Bites* (1994), Ethan Hawke’s character, as the brooding male co-lead who embodies cynical-ironist chic, confidently rattles off this textbook definition of irony: “It’s when the actual meaning is the complete opposite from the literal meaning.” Scholar Kathy M. Newman finds this classic definition to be a suitable description of “Gen-X” irony, as exemplified by both this film and MTV’s animated sitcom *Daria* (the *Beavis and Butt-Head* spin-off), in her essay “‘Misery Chick’: Irony, Alienation and Animation in MTV’s *Daria*,” in *Prime Time Animation*, 185–204.

as it is about *not-meaning-what-I-say*. I argue that the persistent blurring of such distinctions (regardless of intentionality on the part of critics or comics) is integral to the cultural politics of contemporary irony, especially in the service of “politically incorrect” humor.

Semiotic instability in broadcast irony provides for a productive polysemy that allows many comic texts and performances to call out simultaneously to different audience segments. In the age of niche marketing, humor and irony that flirt with multiple meanings and obscure the ideological stakes augment the bottom line in the television industry. For a network like Comedy Central, as media scholar Ethan Thompson argues in the case of *South Park* (the subject of Chapter 5), polyvalence in political satire has proven advantageous for gaining popularity with the sought-after demographic of males 18 to 34, who share a rebellious “cultural sensibility” and carnivalesque love of “bad taste” but not a uniform political orientation.<sup>203</sup> With that demographic skew generating much comedy again called “edgy” and “politically incorrect” that is chiefly designed to appeal to straight young men, ironic ambiguity in the presentation of male-centric, gendered humor additionally helps to ensure crossover appeal with other audience fragments. Explored in the next chapter, niche comedies like Comedy Central’s *The Man Show* can viably be read as an invitation to laugh “at” male chauvinism yet also (especially for heterosexual, masculine subjects) to embrace it with gusto and without comeuppance; that a show like this one pulls much more strongly in the second direction speaks to my previous points—i.e., that the subversive power of postmodern irony as a basis for oppositional comedy is not inherently *counter-hegemonic*, nor can political incorrectness as a dominant thrust of such irony be explained away as “*postideological*” play. Television scholars have drawn similar conclusions about the market advantages of the structured ambiguity, and “political perils” of the

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<sup>203</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 214.

consequent unstable meanings, of race-themed humor in comedies like FOX's *In Living Color* and Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show* aimed at a crossover market.<sup>204</sup>

In addressing such exploitations of postmodern irony's polysemy, it is necessary to take into account that some degree of polyvalence is structured into all televisual and social discourse. Media scholars such as Fiske argue that television's political economy by necessity encourages a degree of polysemy in order to aggregate an audience. Fiske sees the television text existing in "a state of tension between forces of *closure*... and forces of *openness* [emphasis in original]," such as irony, jokes, and excess, "which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings."<sup>205</sup> According to the theory of cultural hegemony, developed by Italian Marxist political theorist Antonio Gramsci and adapted for race and gender and communication studies by Hall, Fiske, and others, the mass media are a key site of struggle where the "power-bloc" in a society meets resistance and must continually re-win the consent of the people to the dominant social order. The capacity for television to "mean differently" for varied audiences with potentially contradictory interests is fundamental to this process of hegemony, with popular culture as a staging ground for symbolic struggles of power and resistance.<sup>206</sup>

Similarly, Stam, again drawing on the literary theorist Bakhtin, persuasively advocates a "dialectic" view that enables television studies to contemplate "the critical and utopian potential of mass-mediated texts." He adapts Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* (which roughly translates to multi-voiced speech in works of literature) to contemporary television: "Within a Bakhtinian

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<sup>204</sup> See Schulman, "Laughing Across the Color Barrier," 2–7; Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by FOX: The FOX Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Bambi Haggins, "In the Wake of 'The Nigger Pixie': Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy," in *Satire TV*, 233–51.

<sup>205</sup> Fiske, *Television Culture*, 84.

<sup>206</sup> See Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge 1996), 411–40; and Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 176–78.

approach, there is no unitary text, no unitary producer, and no unitary spectator; rather, there is a conflictual heteroglossia pervading producer, text, context, and reader/viewer. Each category is traversed by... the hegemonic and the oppositional. The proportion might vary, of course, with category and situation.”<sup>207</sup> That is, within the televisual apparatus, even when producers, networks, or sponsors operate in dominant-hegemonic interests, the resulting programs are bound to be sites where differing “voices” coexist in a potentially fraught dialogue. “The issue is not to impose an *interpretation* [emphasis added] but rather to bring out the text’s muffled voices,” Stam stresses, and moreover, to “see television programming as ‘situated utterance’” always “penetrated by both hegemony and resistance.”<sup>208</sup> No given text is created or consumed in a cultural vacuum, and “resistant” messages and readings are likely to occur with some frequency.

Looking beyond the specific imperatives of television as an economic and social institution, poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault has argued that cultural discourse in general is characterized by “tactical polyvalence.” Discourse while operating in the interests of power is a “complex and unstable process,” sufficiently flexible to support a push and pull against dominant values.<sup>209</sup> The unspoken rules of discourse, including the utility of structured polysemy to the subtle operations of power in a society, are meant to be internalized by and “invisible to the speakers involved,” contends feminist television scholar Mary Ellen Brown following

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<sup>207</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 221. Heteroglossia is Bakhtin’s term for describing how a work of literary fiction incorporates different levels of “utterances,” such that authorial voice coexists with (and may conflict with) the speech of characters and/or narrators in a novel. See M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422, first published in Moscow in 1975. Coming full circle to Jameson’s view of postmodernism, it is interesting to note that Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990), considers heteroglossia to be “the linguistic equivalent of pastiche” (106).

<sup>208</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, 221–22.

<sup>209</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 100–2, especially 101.

Foucault and Fiske.<sup>210</sup> Foucault's theorization of discourse itself as fundamentally polyvalent and unstable frustrates authorial or institutional attempts to encode a preferred reading in a text, as well as scholarly attempts to assert the final meaning of any text.

The trends in comedic irony that I am exploring exemplify a more radical refusal of stable, preferred readings. Postmodern-ironic and anti-PC tropes in comedy complicate models of analysis, such as Fiske's concept of "semiotic democracy" outlined in my Introduction, that primarily see irony's strategic ambiguity and contradictory meanings—the polysemy of the text—as facilitating readings that subvert dominant social ideologies. Fiske approaches the television text principally as a product of hegemonic media culture, and rightly so. He therefore sees transgressive and oppositional programs as the exception; his point that greater polysemy through irony allows for resistant readings is organized around the notion of a society and system of signs structured in dominance.<sup>211</sup> The Encoding/Decoding model, with Hall's concept of preferred, dominant readings, is designed for this kind of analysis of the viewer's encounter with media texts laden with ideology, and presumes that both society and the system of signs are pulling in the same direction, toward a dominant-hegemonic reading. That is, the "preferred reading" of a TV program's content more often than not can be presumed to work with, not against, hegemonic social discourses.<sup>212</sup>

Significantly, the politically incorrect comedy text with its automatic claim on oppositionality by virtue of "offensiveness" to bourgeois values tends to assert itself as in some

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<sup>210</sup> Mary Ellen Brown, *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (London: Sage, 1990), 205.

<sup>211</sup> Fiske, *Television Culture*.

<sup>212</sup> Hall in his "Reflections on the Encoding/Decoding Model" maintains that the majority of texts prefer "the hegemonic message" (upholding society's dominant ideologies), although he also addresses the existence of "minority programs and oppositional programs" and concedes that "the encoding side itself is a much more contested and variable space" than contemplated by his original model. He clarifies, "This model does make the media institutions sound rather homogenous in their ideological character, and they're not" (263).

sense *counter-hegemonic*, and as disputable as that framing may be in many specific instances, the dynamic relationships between power and resistance, between closure and openness, thus take on different significance. At the same time, while laying claim to an attitudinal subversiveness, postmodern irony as we know commonly presents itself as having no “message,” counter-hegemonic or otherwise. The resulting authorial and institutional *encouragement* of instability and of self-awareness about ambiguity pushes strategic polysemy to a level far beyond the pragmatic polyvalence theorized by Foucault as a function of discourse in general. Openness and resistance are foregrounded and flaunted in texts that may actively obscure the extent to which preferred readings reside on surfaces or in subtexts, or else support no stable sense of cultural politics beyond having a rebellious, oppositional élan.

The backlash against “political correctness” has been something of a national obsession in U.S. comedy since the onset of the 1990s. The pairing of irony with political incorrectness cuts across various programming trends serving different taste fragments and demographic constituencies. Consequently, political incorrectness conjures up several competing associations ranging from a broadly reactionary joking culture scornful of multiculturalism and liberal-progressive social politics to an ostensibly neutral or egalitarian spirit of anarchic play to a “post-PC” outlook surmising that society is sufficiently socially enlightened to render multiculturalist and feminist “hypersensitivity” preposterous and passé. The now ubiquitous phrase also encompasses virtually any comic incursions into controversial “political” subject matter (as popularized by *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, the landmark quasi-carnavalesque comedy debate show on Comedy Central/ABC, discussed in Chapter 3). For purposes of brevity, my examples in the next few pages are drawn primarily from forms of masculinist comedy and media, instrumental in popularizing anti-PC humor and indebted to both stable and unstable conceptions

of irony. The next chapter will explore the comic roots of this “laddism” (British and American) in depth, and subsequent chapters will touch on recent variations as integral to carving out dominant meanings of irony and political incorrectness in U.S. television and popular culture.

Confrontationally anti-PC comic speech in particular, along with gentler humor not based in hostility or any critical agenda beyond seeking to be colorfully *un-PC* for the sake of irreverence, benefits from dual access to the rhetorical functions of stable and unstable ironies. By laying claim to irony in a stable sense, the comedian or comic text is granted a particular latitude to make contentious statements and *not* “mean” them. This empowers the comedian/text to present politically incorrect jokes “winkingly” (a favorite characterization of irony for American journalists). Here irony brings a certain “edge” through daring statements,<sup>213</sup> while at the same time evacuating those statements of any significance besides testifying to comic audacity. For example, when comedian Ricky Gervais called feminists “mental bean-flickers” and hurled insults at gays on a “fake news” comedy program on British television in spring 2000 (see Chapter 2), the statements are *intended* on one level to satirize backward attitudes, with his flagrantly insensitive speech offered tongue-in-cheek, but also, moreover, to revel in ‘risky’ humor by poking the bear of Political Correctness.

With politically incorrect humor overwhelmingly trending toward unstable irony, meanwhile, postmodernism’s “play of surfaces” potentially puts even the surface statement back into play and indeed defies that distinction. This provides fertile ground on which the cultural backlash against feminism, multiculturalism, and gay civil rights may thrive, enjoying rhetorical and perhaps psychological cover for indulgences of prejudice and attacks on liberal-progressive ideals. As a key example, controversial stand-up comic/actor Andrew Clay in the mid to late

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<sup>213</sup> See Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 10.

1980s crafted his larger-than-life “Dice Man” stage persona, a hyper-macho mook designated as an ironic character, for the telling of jokes like this one about “faggots”: “I don’t see how any man could look at another guy’s hairy ass and wanna bang it, y’ know? ... They’re not from this planet, they’re from Faggotron, c’mon!”<sup>214</sup> In *GQ* magazine’s 1989 Comedy Issue, journalist Gerri Hirshey dubbed Dice’s stand-up “The Comedy of Hate,” asserting that his and Sam Kinison’s school of offense humor “borders on neo-Nazism.”<sup>215</sup> Questioning this assessment the following year, *The Washington Post*’s David Mills (who recounted Clay’s transformation from a goofy impressionist into the “X-rated” Fonzie) diagnosed his new act not as hate humor but an over-the-top bid for attention. Mills deemed Clay cowardly and “terrifically insecure” but wrote that feminists’ scorn was somewhat misspent: “Of course it’s a put-on. The whole testosterone’d ‘Diceman’ trip—the profane tirades about ‘chicks,’ gays, immigrants, the Japanese.... but mostly ‘chicks’—it’s all a goof. He doesn’t really mean it.”<sup>216</sup>

In the club circuit and stand-up showcases, comics like Clay and ex-minister Kinison (or much more recently Stephen Lynch and Daniel Tosh) wishing to include overtly misogynist, homophobic, and/or racist content in their acts to achieve notoriety found a powerful ally in irony, and a failsafe defense in writing off their critics as politically correct bores. Wallace alighted on the postmodern ironist’s impenetrable shield of cool when he wrote, “Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig.”<sup>217</sup> Through this process, otherwise *verboten*, deliberately “offensive” meanings and/or

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<sup>214</sup> Andrew “Dice” Clay: *One Night with Dice*, dir. Kevin Padden, 46 min., videocassette (Vestron Video, 1987).

<sup>215</sup> Gerri Hirshey, “The Comedy of Hate,” *GQ: Gentlemen’s Quarterly* 59, no. 8 (August 1989): 226–29, 270–72; see p. 6. Hirshey takes a critical eye to assertions that Dice’s “bad-boy humor” as the “X-rated Fonz” is all “an act.”

<sup>216</sup> David Mills, “The Devil and Andrew Clay: Without the Diceman, He’d Still Be Doing Elvis Impressions,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 1990, G1, G6.

<sup>217</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 184.



intents find a new place in the cultural conversation, with the ironist in the role of anti-PC provocateur—or “bad-boy.”

Such comic stage acts sometimes touted as fringe (though undeniably popular) were anchored and mainstreamed by the comparatively more mundane, sustained, gestural irony of figures like the “shock jock” and self-anointed “King of All Media” Howard Stern, the American syndicated radio show host and *New York Times* bestselling author. Famous for his “politically incorrect” personality, Stern has been publicly testing the limits of taboo with ambiguous affect, “unserious” banter, and performatively “poor taste” since the 1980s, managing to subvert feminist interests with unrelenting valorization of regressive gender attitudes. He plies his craft less winkingly than oglingly on *The Howard Stern Show* with content like erotic competitions (often featuring strippers and porn stars). Here, Bakhtinian emphasis on excessive/transgressive bodies (especially female) and festive lewdness are continually reinscribed within hierarchies of looking. Notably, the presence of his black female sidekick Robin Quivers, who provides bursts of laughter on-air in response to Stern’s antics, not only expressly codes the text as comic discourse (more so than his own deadpan affect) but also affords a kind of symbolic female and minority approval deflecting accusations of sexism.<sup>218</sup> Taken together, uniting aggressive stand-up acts and jocular shock jockery, we can see a discursive formation in which irony at the level of persona is defined by moral shock value through a tightly articulated cluster of terms with intertwined connotations of transgression—often framed as reassertions of male agency—namely, “political incorrectness,” “edginess,” and “cool.”

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<sup>218</sup> While Stern’s act is less routinely defended as an ironic performance than Clay’s, some stress a distinction between his hyperbolically offensive on-air “jerk” persona and a more subdued and “polite” off-air reputation, a dichotomy underscored by his autobiographical book and movie *Private Parts* (1997). *The Howard Stern Show* was heavily fined by the FCC for indecency in the 1990s through early 2000s, adding to the host’s rebel image as a free-speech crusader. The sexual content underpinning Stern’s “I’m a horndog not a sexist” shtick has intensified somewhat since he moved to satellite radio in 2006.

Douglas Kellner in examining these trends as an extension of the “loser television” phenomenon, in his 1995 book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, forcefully condemned a more malevolent breed of ‘boyish’ irony than Mark Crispin Miller had described a decade earlier. For Kellner, figures like Clay, Stern, and MTV’s fictional Beavis and Butt-Head as a pervasive presence in media culture by the early 1990s modeled ironic identities and “narcissism” that he argued hid deep-seated emptiness behind extremes of “infantile” vulgarity, antisocial displays, and nihilistic hostility. “These figures are basically buffoons, sometimes entertaining and often offensive...,” he argued (echoing *The Washington Post*’s Mills), who “masquerade their... insecurity in verbal bravado and aggressiveness and attention-seeking action” and who “display... fear of women, who they continually objectify, and engage in puerile... sexual jokes and gestures.”<sup>219</sup> This argument converges with the case sometimes put forward against “screaming” comedy, as this trend, too, was loosely centered on the controversial Kinison, beloved and reviled as the avatar of “aggressive” white heterosexual male comedy.

The *New York Times*’s O’Connor (whose objections to “infantile screaming” comics we encountered in Chapter 1) in a 1987 review notes the social privilege of the “paying customers” for the HBO stand-up special *Sam Kinison: Breaking the Rules*, taped in a live club in Los Angeles:

Overwhelmingly young and white and seemingly well heeled, they are divided about equally into two camps. There are the ones who laugh even while looking a bit soiled for finding such questionable viciousness funny. And there are those who joyously celebrate the unfettered brutality, poking each other with boundless delight. Nothing is beyond the bounds of sneering ridicule. A routine on AIDS, far more callous than the one that brought Eddie Murphy some problems..., turns into a diatribe against homosexuals.

Noting an appearance by *Playboy*’s Hugh Hefner, shown savoring Kinison’s anti-marriage rants,

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<sup>219</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 148–49, 152.

O'Connor submits, "Tell me who your friends are... and I'll tell you who you are."<sup>220</sup> This line of inquiry, not uncommon in the critical response to Kinison (a.k.a. The Beast), exposes the limits of the carnival metaphor by reminding that this "joyous" and "unfettered" speech of "boundless" ridicule is overwhelmingly exercised from positions of straight male privilege.

O'Connor's assessment of an affective split in an arguably homogenous (i.e., white, male, moneyed) audience for Kinison's 'edgy' material also hits upon an underexplored yet key sense in which the postmodern ironic text or performance "invites multiple readings on multiple levels, thereby creating multiple audiences."<sup>221</sup> Namely, rather than differing interpretations of joke content at the level of *meaning*, he highlights in the above passage somewhat distinct structures of *feeling* that are possible avenues for pleasure for the target audience. His concern over what motivates this audience to laughter when presented with "offensive" material gets to the meat of the rhetorical dilemmas associated with unstable irony, as well as the slippery politics of popular pleasures. One implication here is that whether or not the speaker actually subscribes to the "callous" views voiced in a joking context, or posits his act as just comic theatrics, may be ultimately somewhat immaterial on the decoding end.

When the stage for carnival-like play with excessiveness and offensiveness is coded as a masculine space, and women, gays, minorities, and other socially marginalized or disadvantaged groups become persistent targets of the joking culture, the comedy would seem to lose its claim on being "bottom-up" resistance to power. As Fiske argues, carnivalesque offense and laughter "flows upward" and must be "categorically distinguished (and in practice this is often extremely difficult) from *top-down* offense [emphasis added]. Sexist or racist name-calling contributes to

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<sup>220</sup> O'Connor, "Sam Kinison in a Comedy Special," C18.

<sup>221</sup> Shugart, "Postmodern Irony," 433, as discussed in my Introduction chapter.

oppression and there is nothing carnivalesque about it.” With comedy that walks that line, he stresses (offering his variation on the concerns raised by Stallybrass and White and by Rowe), “As a cultural weapon, offense is problematic, for it... often causes ‘collateral damage’.... When the offense is scatological the civilians wounded are often women because in patriarchy sexual offensiveness is all too perpetuity used in an anti-carnavalesque manner to demean women and keep them in their place.”<sup>222</sup> However, anti-PC humor regularly dodges this critique not only through the assertions of non-meaningness but moreover through the commonly articulated understanding that this comedy culture is not actually attacking the butt of any particular joke made in “bad taste” *per se* but instead asks to be read as a spirited popular revolt against “PC” speech itself, viewed as an oppressive and elitist system of politeness.

“I’m not sexist or racist, I just like the jokes,” comedian Daniel Tosh told the Television Critics Association in 2011, prompting *Entertainment Weekly* to translate, “In other words: He’s not racist, he just plays one on TV.”<sup>223</sup> The following year, after a much publicized incident during a live show at the Laugh Factory, Tosh’s act triggered a still ongoing debate about the acceptability of “rape jokes” in standup club culture. Some feminist critics in particular, like Elissa Bassist in *The Daily Beast*, objected that “when comedian Daniel Tosh laughed about a female audience member being gang-raped, he used humor to humiliate the woman—and assert his power.”<sup>224</sup> The questions cascade from here in the critical imagination: Does not-meaning-ness excuse “viciousness”? Does nihilism as a comic platform

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<sup>222</sup> Fiske, “Family Discipline,” 5–6, 10.

<sup>223</sup> James Hibberd, “Daniel Tosh at TCA: ‘I’m not sexist or racist, I just like the jokes,’” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 5, 2011, <http://insidetv.ew.com/2011/01/05/daniel-tosh-defends-jokes/> (accessed October 1, 2013).

<sup>224</sup> Elissa Bassist, “Why Daniel Tosh’s ‘Rape Joke’ at the Laugh Factory Wasn’t Funny,” *The Daily Beast*, July 11, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/11/why-daniel-tosh-s-rape-joke-at-the-laugh-factory-wasn-t-funny.html> (accessed October 1, 2013).

nullify the “brutality” of utterances? Does the laughter spring from a place of ambivalence or callousness? To what extent does the laughter provide comic relief, affording ironic distance from the struggles and suffering of others, or instead a sense of superiority?

Comedians like scholars can tend to overestimate the good will of ‘the people,’ as the genial host of FX’s comedy talk show *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell* found in May 2013 after airing a segment called “Comedian Versus Feminist.” On the show, guest Jim Norton, introduced as “a no-holds-barred comic who thinks nothing is off limits” and “makes fun of cancer, AIDS, and even his own passion for getting peed on,” defended comedians’ right to tell rape jokes, in a debate-style dialogue with *Jezebel.com* blogger Lindy West, who countered that comic speech must be considered in its larger cultural context and seen as contributing to social attitudes.<sup>225</sup> Comedians should not be “censored,” she agreed, but subject to critique. Unpersuaded by her concerns that jokes mocking women in the audience and “trivializing” rape victims’ trauma feed a mindset of misogyny and may indirectly perpetuate sexual violence, Norton maintained that joking about such touchy topics provides emotional release and *distance* from “offensive” and depressing social realities. “Reasonable people can sense when you’re trying to be funny” versus “angry,” Norton insisted, generalizing that “the *relief* of comedy is you take things that aren’t funny, and it allows us to laugh about them for an hour, and then we have the rest of the day to look at them like they’re as horrible and sad as they really are.” His remark was met with cheers from the studio audience, and louder applause followed when he suggested the best way to end the segment would be for his female debate partner to “make out” with him on stage.

W. Kamau Bell, in his role as mild-mannered moderator, set an intention for the program to spark civilized discussion on the “raging” controversy stirred by Tosh, encouraging

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<sup>225</sup> *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*, “Jim Norton and Lindy West,” episode 2.10, first aired May 30, 2013, on FX.

fans to ponder the question he posed to his guests: “Do you think that comedians should be allowed to say anything they want without any repercussions?” Following the debate/interview, guest Lindy West’s webpage was inundated with abusive and derogatory comments from viewers, alternately suggesting that she deserved or wanted to sexually violated, was too “fat” and ugly to be rape-worthy, or had been symbolically raped and put in her place by Norton on air. Bell, self-identified as both a black comedian and a feminist, voiced his dismay on air the following week, addressing men in his audience:

Thousands of men protested Lindy’s claim that rape jokes encourage a culture of violence against women. And how did they do that? But flooding her inbox with threats of violence against women. ... Men, we’re the worst! C’mon, men, what are we doing? I feel gross being a part of a group this terrible. Is this what it’s like to be white? Hmm. [audience laughter] .... Now people are saying Lindy’s against free speech. She’s *not*. She wasn’t even arguing against rape jokes. She was arguing against what many of you ass-hats are doing right now to her: attempting to silence a woman by using threats and intimidation.<sup>226</sup>

In this instance, we can see the comedians involved struggling to define or discipline fan behavior, from Norton’s assurances that stand-up comics reliably address their audiences as discerning adults (and his certainty that “reasonable” people can all agree “rape is an offensive, awful thing”) to Bell’s reprimand of a certain bully mentality peeking through in the open forum of the Internet.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*, “Unlocking the Truth,” episode 2.11, first aired June 6, 2013, on FX. For brevity I have trimmed several jokes from this speech that cushioned Bell’s tone of chagrin with levity.

<sup>227</sup> A version of Norton’s “comic relief” defense together with the “comedian versus feminist” theme was featured a year later in a ripped-from-the-headlines episode of NBC’s sex-crimes detective drama *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, titled “Comic Perversions” (February 26, 2014). Sex offender of the week Josh Galloway, a gritty fortysomething stand-up comic and serial date rapist who preys on his drunk young female fans, is shown tormenting a ‘serious’ feminist protester at a campus gig with gang-rape jokes at her expense that result in her being physically assaulted immediately afterwards by rowdy male college students from the audience. The comic (menacing and surly though played by *The Single Guy*’s Jonathan Silverman, sweet-faced sitcom nice guy of 1990s TV) defends his material in court using claims cribbed (by scriptwriters) from Norton’s speech on *Totally Biased*, here recoded as purely disingenuous deflection. Though bearing little temperamental similarity to either comic, Galloway in his controversy-courting reputation and rhetoric thus serves as a fictionalized Daniel Tosh/Jim Norton hybrid, although likely also inspired by the comedy industry rumors of at least one (unnamed) popular male headliner reputed to have “rapey” intentions toward female fans.

In sum, polysemy in excess does not guarantee a more subversive comedy product, or rather, postmodern subversive irony is no guarantor of challenges to dominant discourses and representations. The comedic discourse of political incorrectness remains fungible and inconsistent in its relationship to power (stretching as it does to accommodate acts as far-flung as Sam Kinison, Margaret Cho, Bernie Mac, and Jerry Seinfeld). In stand-up and narrative comedy, a wide range of speakers deploy irony from varied subject positions to fashion politically incorrect humor. Political incorrectness is an oppositional discourse (or an “anti-” sensibility) by its very nature, albeit standing as an affront to “PC” propriety, rather than as a challenge to hegemony’s naturalization of domination along the lines of race, class, sex, or gender. Even those comics and texts using irony as a vehicle for retrogressive gender and sexual politics, Chapter 2 will demonstrate, have seized on the idea that humor grants liberation from “oppressive” social ideologies and norms, by fairly successfully establishing the now dominant view of “Political Correctness” as hegemonic and unduly restrictive of personal (and comedic) freedoms.

In right-wing discourse and some reactionary humor, political correctness (a catchall for multiculturalism and associated social equality movements like feminism) amounts to liberal hegemony. Mainstream media and many on the left, meanwhile, eager to retire associations of socially liberal comedy with sanctimony and sentimentality, as the case of *Seinfeld* revealed, have welcomed broad comic assaults on political correctness (conceived in less political terms as enforced politeness or banal niceties) through “hip” irony. Case studies in Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6 specifically explore aspects of this oppositionality and address the popular defense of irony as a mechanism that enables comedy writers to “joke honestly”<sup>228</sup> and evade censure for “politically incorrect” attitudes—that is, the articulation of ironic discourse (particularly in laddism

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<sup>228</sup> Joel Stein, “In Defense of Irony,” *Time* 154, no. 14 (October 5, 1999): 42, ProQuest Research Library.

but also in more progressive humor) as “truthful,” “honest,” “authentic,” or “common sense” speech and a necessary response to PC dogma. At the same time, as we will see, radically unstable forms and postmodern media contexts significantly complicate the classical assertions of “truth in irony,”<sup>229</sup> as well as attempts to assign a coherent message or purpose to ironic texts.

### **Conclusions: Let Them Have Cake and Eat It, Too**

[T]he ironist... is not bound by what he says, albeit he isn't exactly unbound by it. He may be virtuous, and yet indulge in cakes and ale, and then suffer from indigestion and crapulence.

— D. J. Enright, 1986<sup>230</sup>

Spanning from Socrates to *South Park*, scholars and critics have sought to know the mind of the ironist. Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century philosopher who embraced the subversive power of irony in his own writing to escape the strictures of dominant and habituated thought, anticipated the argument common today that irony can, as Wayne Booth observes, “become some kind of end in itself.”<sup>231</sup> “The purpose is none other than the irony itself,” wrote Kierkegaard, suggesting in one passage that the ultimate satisfaction for the ironist may lie not in manipulating meaning and belief but rather gaining for himself a sense of freedom from constraint. The ironist “cuts loose” in order to “feel free.”<sup>232</sup> D. J. Enright in his 1986 essay on irony cautions us to consider this a “negative freedom,” however, in which the ironist insulates

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<sup>229</sup> Phrase from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates* (a published version of his 1841 thesis), translated by Lee M. Capel (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 270.

<sup>230</sup> Enright, *Alluring Problem*, 149.

<sup>231</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 138.

<sup>232</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 272–73. Inspired by Socrates, Kierkegaard employed irony, satire, and incongruity to deconstruct accepted knowledge claims or received truths and encourage self-directed critical thought. William McDonald, “Søren Kierkegaard,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, summer 2009 edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/kierkegaard/> (accessed August 30, 2011).



himself from external censure and wards off existential suffering, yet may still be subject to the metaphorical/metaphysical hangover suggested by the epigraph above: the ironist when feeling “not bound by what he says” in wit to distance himself from the misery or misfortunes of others may “indulge in cakes and ale, and then suffer from indigestion and crapulence.”<sup>233</sup> Both insights probe the psyche of the ironist and ask us to look deeply into what motivates him/her.

Yet, we must also account for external and institutional incentives for exercising the “freedoms” promised by irony. Irony affords the comic performer or writer in today’s marketplace the status of an ideological free agent while also providing, as I have argued, a convenient polysemy—media culture’s version of having your cake and eating it, too. In a comedy business where irony allows exceptional flexibility to mean and not-mean, entertainment media forms enjoying these freedoms to attain marketable “edginess” walk the political/aesthetic tightrope with increasing immunity from ideological critique. Considering the insulation that irony offers, the cultural and political impact of ironized political incorrectness remains a subject of dispute, with critics placing as much focus on the affect and attitude of ironists and audiences as on what is said and “meant.”

This Interlude’s overview of critical theory bearing on “postmodern” television, comedy, and irony studies through the 1990s has aimed to establish parameters for mapping the messy meanings and cultural politics of irony at a time when the nation’s media critics were deeply divided on the implications of a new irony culture. While persistent associations of postmodernism with postideological, nihilistic, and morally or politically “blank” forms of play have a place in academic dialogues about irony on a macro level, sweeping cultural diagnoses also potentially foreclose alternative avenues of inquiry into politics, polysemy, and the popular imaginary in

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<sup>233</sup> Enright, *Alluring Problem*, 149.

cultural histories of television comedy. The broad dismissals (or celebrations) of contemporary irony as apolitical detachment can come at the cost of overlooking distinctions in uses/users of comedic irony and underestimating the kinds of ideological work that irreverence and irony still perform, in the name of free expression and fun transgression. I find that the national narrative of smirking irony and empty cleverness (whether serving to rebuke popular comics or audience passivity or television in general) downplays and at times altogether obscures the movements of discourse *in* and *through* the lenses of ironic humor, as the spaces opened up by carnivalesque offensiveness are filled with the rhetoric of personal autonomy and courageous audacity.

Carnavalesque comedy as it exists today in its mediated forms is never quite outside of the domain of social hierarchy or beyond the tug of ideological narratives and rhetoric, but is always, borrowing Stam's term, "situated utterance" inflected with significance by the culture that creates and consumes it. While much post-seventies comedy may participate in a spectacular postmodernism that suspends the demand for absolute meaning in the interest of provocative humor, the postmodern carnival's utopian promise of comic freedoms in recent decades not only remains bound up with media's commercial imperatives (as emphasized by the political economic critiques) but also in TV comedy continues to harvest humor from cultural politics, domestic and social relations, and moral lessons. The entire concept of political incorrectness, on the broadest level, could be considered a carnivalesque *inversion*, continually being reenacted on the cultural stage through a wide variety of programs, as the nation's humorists collectively assert comic license to turn the moral and linguistic world of political correctness upside down and inside out. Yet, given the swift rise to dominance of politically incorrect comedy by the close of the 1990s, and taking into account the hegemonic thrust of many jokes, it is fair to say that the specific formations of politeness and sanctimony under attack are

not strictly representative of “officialdom.” Like any carnival, irreverent comedy in this tradition does not simply subvert the power of dominant discourse but also, in many examples considered thus far, tends to target already disparaged or “weaker” discourses—such as feminism, tolerance, social activism, or spirituality—all well trampled ground for joke writing because such topics bear the stigma of sincerity and seriousness.

Despite the continued salience of irony in U.S. media culture, some have predicted or asserted, particularly since the early 2000s, the arrival of a post-ironic age and the end of television’s postmodern moment. While postmodern aesthetics may no longer be ascendant in television, the conditions of postmodernity still prevail both in television’s institutions and the culture at large. As Chapters 3 through 6 will discuss, the so-called anti-irony and post-postmodern movement (what *Utne Reader* in 1989 christened “PoPoMo”<sup>234</sup>) was most vocal in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, which sparked not only temporary speculation about the “death” of irony, but also vigorous discussion about irony in its “detached” versus “engaged” forms. These became buzzwords cementing a distinction between irony as a kind of global cynicism and irony with a sharper sense of political purpose or what Wallace would call “social usefulness.” With calls for “ironic engagement,” we see efforts to imbue irony with renewed social relevance in ways that pull against the branding of ironic programming during the 1990s as the comedy of anti-relevance. We find a longing for a more stable irony as a rhetorical tool for social and political critique, and a desire to recover the ironist as a cultural figure who cares deeply about social issues as “things that matter.”

Revisiting postmodern theory and questions of political “stability” in irony in later chapters, I will consider how a sense of urgency and rekindled critical aspirations for comedy in

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<sup>234</sup> “Postmodernism and Beyond,” *Utne Reader* staff, 51.

the 2000s carved out new directions for debate and lines of inquiry, in media studies and other fields concerned with irony and satire as political arts, amidst the talk of newly “sincere” and of post-postmodern modes of comedy. Before moving on to the shifting critical assessments of and professional perspectives on irony in the post-9/11 context and their impact on the broader political discourse in the United States, it is necessary to widen the scope of this study in order to better navigate the comedic uses and cultural salience of tactical polysemy. The next chapter explores more closely how postmodern comedy’s refusals of meaning come to lend layered social significance to political incorrectness in comedy and its complex interplay with irony. Moving beyond the critiques of irony as an American television “attitude-fest” and tracing the emergent discourse of anti-political correctness in the early 1990s through early 2000s, Chapter 2 brings together case studies drawn from both the British and U.S. comedy scenes to explore the transnational roots and appeal and gendered uses of postmodern irony. We will see how parallel developments in Britain with the onset of “laddism” laid groundwork for a male-centered irony culture with broad reach, combining the ambiguities and ambivalence of postmodernism with certain pseudo- or “anti-carnavalesque” tendencies. Encompassing acts like of Kinison, Clay, and Stern, this school of irony produces (though it is not limited to) strains of utopian comic discourse ironically dedicated to defending masculine power, and often employs carnival’s tactics of playful inversions and offensiveness less for leveling than reveling in social hierarchy. The resulting cross-generic and cross-cultural lad movement defies neat categorization and has grown increasingly integral to ironic programming trends, themes, and archetypes in the comic mainstream.

## Chapter 2

### **The Impotence of Being Earnest: Irony, Masculinity, and the New Laddism**

During the 1990s, media critics and scholars identified a new breed of masculinist text, notable for its ostentatious celebration of manhood and exaltation of attitudes marked culturally as adolescent male fantasies. Popular in Britain half a decade or more before infiltrating the U.S. mainstream, this social phenomenon was dubbed the culture of the “new lad,” or simply “laddism.” Describing a “boys-will-be-boys” attitude, American journalist Kent Williams has characterized this laddism as “a loosely organized movement that sees life as one brawl after another, after which you retire to the local pub to have a pint with the lads.”<sup>1</sup> Lad-themed humor thrived in comedy culture, from clubs to prime time. Some cultural critics fell under the spell of the lovably loutish new lads of TV and film, while others thought they spelled trouble, and began questioning implications for youth and men’s culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Both pro- and anti-lad press in the 1990s agreed on the new lad’s (or as often written, New Lad’s) undeniable pulling power as a media creation capable of generating ratings and advertising dollars, as well as controversy.

The spread of laddism was described by cultural critics and media makers as a retaliation against attempts to rebuke and reform “traditional” masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s. In the United States, as in Britain, laddism pushed back against progressive images of new masculinities fashioned by urbane men’s magazines and by Hollywood for socially liberal audiences, representations that satisfied cultural demand for the socially enlightened, “politically correct” modern man. Consequently, the new lad subculture and related media trends have routinely been

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Williams, “The Man Show,” review of *Snatch* (Sony Pictures, 2000), written and directed by Guy Ritchie, *The Isthmus* (Madison, Wis.), January 19, 2001, 28.

greeted or condemned as a revival of pre-feminist attitudes and TV traditions in the name of “politically incorrect” irreverence. By the time the new lad made his mark on mainstream media, some critics began asking whether old-fashioned chauvinism was back in style, armed this time with an impenetrable shield of “postmodern irony” that deflects accusations of sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, cynicism, and boorishness.

This chapter investigates the cultural politics of postmodern irony in laddish humor. Tracking the new laddism’s emergence as a culturally and economically viable media force, I consider implications of the laddist turn along two lines of inquiry, as a trend in comedic irony and a response to postmodernity. I examine constructions of ironic masculinity and mediated masculine spaces across several types of laddist texts: men’s magazines, non-narrative television formats featuring comedians, and situation comedies. I begin by contemplating the new lad’s positioning within postmodernity as a product of market segmentation, transnational media flows, and redistribution of cultural power. My initial case study for this inquiry is style and lifestyle magazines, which from the late 1980s onwards were instrumental in branding a profitable male youth market and cultivating a masculinity of excess and irony. Specifically, I trace tensions between the “openness” of postmodern play and the hegemonic representations of gender in the “lad mag” industry that influenced the popular critical discourse on media irony. With the arrival of “lad TV,” likewise, I argue that the recourse to ironic modes of humor, while branded as oppositional and transgressive, may not work to expose the fissures in hegemony (as often celebrated by champions of ironic postmodern art), but to stake out and defend positions of social privilege in the shifting terrain of postmodern media culture.

Next, I situate laddism within a comedy backlash against the presumed stranglehold of “political correctness” and “hypersensitivity” in both American and British society and culture.

As extended examples, I look at the American variety and sketch comedy series *The Man Show* as well as sitcom *Men Behaving Badly* in both its U.K. and U.S. iterations to examine the intersections among form, ironic modes of address, and the reading positions constructed by these texts and to explore the potential for viewer identification with the lad on-screen. Laddism as a cultural movement, though heavily invested in affirming audiences' postmodern literacy and exploiting the inscrutability of irony, I argue, has tended to reject certain defining attributes of "postmodern" subjectivity and textuality, reinstating ideological and formal conventions of comedy that were already being aggressively subverted and critiqued by the more radically postmodern British and American "alternative" comedy texts during the 1980s and 1990s.

Laddism has proven inconstant in its commitment to any avowedly postmodernist project. The new lad was a child of postmodernism, but like any adolescent grew to resist his parentage. In terms of formal innovation, much "lad TV" from the outset exemplified postmodern pastiche, genre hybridity, and deconstructive impulses; yet, this reflexivity exists in tension with these programs' investment in a sense of community anchored in masculine verities and shared culture, particularly nostalgia for sport and classic media texts (free of the critiques of liberal feminism). Laddist sitcoms, meanwhile, have displayed a tendency to set aside the "schizophrenic" sensibility of postmodernism in favor of cohesion, legitimacy, and political and tonal legibility. The masculinity constructed across the spectrum of laddist comedies is not the fragmented, de-centered, flexible subject imagined by postmodern theory, but a strategically essentialist vision of men, however qualified by or cloaked in irony a program's politics may be.

Finally, I revisit critical theory to compare competing perspectives on postmodern irony in light of laddism's structuring ambiguities and limited investment in the subversive potential of postmodern textuality. While a variety of texts advancing the comic agendas of laddism adopt a

playful self-reflexivity, much of this material undersells the satirical dimensions of self-mocking discourse and clears the playing field for white patriarchal retrenchment as comic sport. A dominant trend in postmodern media and literature, Claire Colebrook observes in *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)*, has been the use of irony to “express a masculinist, imperialist, racist or elitist discourse” in ways that lay bare the symbolic and visceral “violence” of such discourse, as seen in indie cinema like *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and shock-lit adaptation *American Psycho* (2000). While this has enabled many cultural producers to identify brutality or oppression in society and the image culture, ironic presentation does not necessarily uninstall or demystify such discourses. As ironic critique inevitably recirculates the images and ideas it opens to scrutiny, their cultural power can linger or even thrive.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Colebrook argues in reference to recent popular media, irony has become a way of perhaps even sustaining forms of domination while silencing opposition:

Violence is presented, with the critique of this violence already anticipated and silenced. Any objection to these works as violent or masculinist could be rejected as being too literal, as having missed the subtlety of the irony. In criticising himself the white male subject of capitalism allows its images and fantasies to be given one more viewing.<sup>3</sup>

Although my study focuses on irony as light entertainment in television and print rather than the more graphic or violent expressions of lad masculinity in cinema and elsewhere, it is constructive to approach the popular humor of laddism as a substantial slice of a cultural dialogue taking place in this larger media context. Extending Colebrook’s line of critique, I interrogate how the rebelliousness of irony as articulated through laddist culture stimulated a return to comedic forms and political postures of a prior era that had come to be scrutinized and criticized for cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 157–58; see also 168–69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 158. The films cited above are among her specific examples.



insensitivity. Through comparative analysis of a range of texts, I also find political and cultural complexity and variable stability of irony in the era of the new lad.

Given laddism's persistent and even proprietary claims on postmodern irony and reflexivity, the dueling impulses at play within laddism—to be or not to be postmodern—are crucial to the understandings of irony that would become prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s. Laddism of this period was not interested in the suffering of hard choices but rather enabling a generation of men to “have it both ways.” As comedy texts walked the line between critique and celebration of laddish attitudes and behaviors, they often managed to be both at the same time. Laddism has thrived on the potential for ambiguity afforded by an ironic mode of discourse, a mode that as the previous chapter discussed traditionally depends upon polysemy to establish a contradiction between statement and meaning, requiring the cultural reader to distinguish surfaces from subtexts. Indeed, the brand of comedic irony, or ironic masculinity, fashioned by laddism overall did not seek to play up internal contradictions, or the clash between statement and hidden meaning, so much as it sought the pleasurable blurring between what is said and what is meant. Laddist irony has arguably been less about creating the optimal conditions to decipher covert subtexts than about asserting flexibility in overt statements—put simply, less about audiences “getting it” than, in the words of British magazine mogul Tim Southwell, “getting away with it.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Defining Laddism as a Transnational Media Phenomenon**

Journalists routinely described new lad programming as a nostalgic nod to the halcyon days of the 1960s and 1970s, before the televisual landscape had been complicated by “politically correct” accountability—days when derogatory jokes about women, gays, ethnic minorities, and

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase is the title and thesis of Tim Southwell's chronicle *Getting Away With It: The Inside Story of Loaded* (London: Ebury Press, 1998).

foreigners had been in bounds, and men bonded over sport, drink, and sexual exploits. Nineties British audiences nostalgic for the bygone “jiggle TV” era of *The Benny Hill Show* (ITV, 1969–89) and *Man About the House* (ITV, 1973–76) welcomed repeats, re-releases, and throw-backs. Laddism’s complementary American texts, as we will see, also glanced to decades past for ironic inspiration. *The Irish Times*’s Brian Boyd in 1995 characterized the new laddism or “blokism” as “simply ironic exaggerations of a mythical prototype,” the old-school lad but with a college degree. “There was never anything virtuous or commendable about Old Lad,” wrote Boyd, “...he was a foulmouthed, beer swilling racist” and domestic bully better known in the U.S. “as ‘white trash.’”<sup>5</sup> The descriptor “New Lad” caught on as a way to distinguish this supposedly ironic 1990s variant from the pre-ironic “Old Lad” of 1970s British television, as well as his rival the “New Man” reformed by liberal feminism in the interim.

British prime-time television launched a flotilla of irony- and testosterone-drenched comedies in the 1990s including *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV, 1992/BBC1, 1994–98), *Men of the World* (BBC1, 1994–95), *Game On* (BBC2, 1995–98), and *Fantasy Football League* (BBC2, 1994–96/ITV, 1998/ITV1, 2004). By comparison, on American television laddish humor, though prominent in stand-up comedy, remained more of a fringe phenomenon during the 1990s, while making its presence felt in cult shows like USA’s animated sitcom *Duckman: Private Dick/Family Man* (1994–97), MTV’s *The Tom Green Show* (1999–2001), and Comedy Central’s *The Man Show* (1999–2004), as well as NBC’s attempt at its own *Men Behaving Badly* (1996–97) based on the British hit. By the early 2000s, however, American laddism was an undeniably formidable force on cable television. Among the networks capitalizing on the trend were TNN, relaunched and rebranded in summer 2003 as Spike TV, “The First Network for Men,” showcasing animated

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Boyd, “The Rise of the New Lad,” *The Irish Times*, Weekend Supplement, February 25, 1995, 3.

sitcoms *Gary the Rat* (2003) and Stan Lee's *Stripperella* (2003–04), the latter introducing a comic-stripper superheroine named Erotica Jones based on and voiced by Pamela Anderson, and the FX Network, with abundant original programming for men (discussed in Chapter 6) including *Son of the Beach* (2000–02), *Rescue Me* (2004–11), and *Seinfeld-meets-new-lad* dramedy *Starved* (2005).

The new lad for all his uniformity—embodying a back-to-basics brand of masculinity predicated on a love of bars, babes, brawls, and bawdy banter—is a remarkably versatile and malleable media creation suited to a range of venues. The cheeky lads of television comedy find their darker, more sadistic cinematic complement in the work of film directors Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs*, as mentioned above, and *Pulp Fiction*), David Fincher (*Fight Club*), and Guy Ritchie (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*), whom one columnist dubbed “the British Ambassador of Laddism” to the United States.<sup>6</sup> In popular music, laddism as an English subculture in the 1990s grew to prominence and traversed the Atlantic with Britpop bands Blur and Oasis (with lad anthems like “Cigarettes & Alcohol”) who personified roguishness and “traditional masculine values.”<sup>7</sup> With lad literature like *Loaded* (U.K., 1994–present), *Maxim* (U.K., 1994–2009/U.S., 1998–present), and other glossy men’s magazines accommodating and expanding this market, magazine-style websites and television programs emerged emulating their success. For example, The Romp, a “men’s site” online which *USA Today* in 2000 described as “geared toward the *Maxim*-magazine-meets-*South-Park* crowd,” offered comedy

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, “The Man Show,” 28. As this review’s title articulates, the dark and violent humor of Ritchie’s *oeuvre* is, for critics and fans of laddism, a distant cousin of U.S. comedy program *The Man Show*, launched in 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Savage, “Lads and Asses,” *Guardian*, December 16, 1994, 2–3, quoted in Martin Cloonan, “State of the Nation: ‘Englishness,’ Pop, and Politics in the Mid-1990s,” *Popular Music and Society* 21, no. 2 (summer 1997): 47–70, ProQuest Research Library (accessed February 28, 2012). Blur’s music video “Country House” in 1995 featured band members with comedians Keith Allen (a known cockney tough) and Matt Lucas (*Shooting Stars*, *Little Britain*) surrounded by busty young women cavorting in a style reminiscent of the original lad text *The Benny Hill Show*.

video content including animated shorts with titles like “Booty Call,” some of which were also featured on the FX cable network’s *The X Show*.<sup>8</sup> Romp co-creator Eric Eisner (son of Disney chair Michael Eisner) described the upstart website’s “raw,” “irreverent” humor as an answer to “sugarcoated,” apologist masculinity, advocating the “backlash toward political correctness.”<sup>9</sup>

The portrait provided in this chapter is limited to the transmedia phenomenon of the new lad in popular culture of the 1990s and into the 2000s, with an emphasis on irony as a defining feature of lad masculinity. Cross-pollination between the men’s lifestyle magazine and comedy industries was essential for carving out lad-friendly media spaces and crafting lad culture as it came to exist in Britain and the United States. Although “lad” itself is a British colloquialism, not a term as commonly used stateside, there is a distinct cultural and identity formation that shares an aesthetics and ethos with this type that is so well known in Britain. Indeed, American cultural commentators do refer to the trend by this name, as when *Time* media critic James Poniewozik reported that TNN’s rebranding as the “unapologetically male” Spike TV, mirroring *Maxim* with its youthful and masculine skew, catered to the target demographic’s “inner lad.”<sup>10</sup> This constructed lad identity as both a media creation and a new type of social subjectivity for young men has also been dubbed the “mook” in some media criticism and occasionally in U.S. slang.

The new lad or mook is sometimes approached as a distinct historical identity formation. Cultural historians and media critics delineate and dispute the ways in which a specific type of male subjectivity is being either catered to or cultivated through young men’s consumption and

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<sup>8</sup> Jefferson Graham, “For Men, a Bawdy Romp Online,” *USA Today*, August 24, 2000, 3D. *The X Show* (FX, 1999–2001) was a televised version of men’s lifestyle magazines, with segments such as bikinied beauties modeling men’s Mach-3 razors, and a game in which men from the studio audience could win a prize by correctly matching three sexy women with cards stating each one’s occupation (*Hustler* model, *Playboy* model, or school teacher?) or her cosmetic surgery (lip enlargement, facelift, or breast enhancement?).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Graham, “Bawdy Romp Online,” 3D.

<sup>10</sup> James Poniewozik, “What Do Men Want? The Identity-Swapping TNN Is Now Trying to Lure Male Viewers by Appealing to Their Inner Lad,” *Time*, June 16, 2003, 62.

identification with media representations that glorify laddism as a “cool” subculture and lifestyle. For example, American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff in his acclaimed *Frontline* documentary “The Merchants of Cool” for PBS in 2001 cautioned that Viacom productions like *The Man Show* and *Jackass* (MTV, 2000–02) sell teenage boys on the desire to be a “mook,” while young girls are encouraged to aspire to the crop-topped, sexualized femininity he dubs the “midriff.”<sup>11</sup>

Although there is a case to be made for the existence of a social formation that tracks with the proliferation of texts hailing male consumers as lads, or in Rushkoff’s lingo mooks, the tasks of examining the motivations, values, and gender politics of “real-life” lads or lad-identified audiences are beyond the scope of this study. Instead, my focus is on the articulation of shared masculine codes and values through media representations, performances, and personas that loosely comprise the comedy canon of laddism.

When I do approach the lad as a historical entity, referring to certain comedians, media personalities, or comedy communities as (new) lads, I do so because a reputation for being a lad is an established part of their public personas. Comedians who embraced and embodied laddism with varying degrees of caricature (from individual performers such as Andrew “Dice” Clay to comic tag teams like David Baddiel and Frank Skinner in the U.K. or Adam Carolla and Jimmy Kimmel in the U.S.) became key players in harnessing irony to a project of deposing political correctness. The mediated understandings of laddism loom large in the broader discourse on irony, such that lad culture sometimes seemed to enjoy a monopoly on the meanings of irony, particularly on American television during the late 1990s where waves of laddism and irony reached the comic mainstream at roughly the same moment.

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<sup>11</sup> *Frontline*, “The Merchants of Cool,” written by Rachel Dretzin and directed by Barak Goodman, with consulting producer and correspondent Douglas Rushkoff, was first broadcast on February 27, 2001, by PBS. For related reports on media giants and “what teens think,” see PBS’s page at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>.

This work's examination of laddism's trans-Atlantic roots and reliance on irony introduces a significant complication to the tendency to frame the rise of irony in U.S. comedy and popular culture as a nationwide phenomenon driven by Generation X and yuppie cynicism. My case studies include a blend of American and British examples suggestive of the dynamic interplay that cuts across national borders and television systems. While in the U.K. laddism emerged as a cultural movement deeply entrenched in British identity, and similarly in the U.S. lad texts have typically hailed male viewers into a fraternity of red-blooded American men, a mutual anti-PC agenda informs and unifies these turns in comedy. Moreover, the circulation of performers, international publications, and industry conceptions of the men's market all worked to create cross-currents of laddism within the U.S. and U.K. from the 1990s to the present day. Laddism reinforces the pleasurable imagination of a "natural" masculinity ultimately capable of transcending national difference and cultural specificity.

To open an interrogation of the uses of postmodern irony in lad comedies—exploring both its potential as a subversive tool and its popularity as a license to resurrect a dubious politics of exclusions—the next section begins by situating the "new lad" with respect to postmodern media culture and wider social shifts associated with postmodernity. I find a set of contradictions in laddism's interaction with the liberatory imaginations of postmodernism. The emergent figure of the new lad appeared deeply ambivalent about the changes taking place around him. Lad culture came to occupy an ambiguous, at times dualistic, position in relation to the surrounding postmodern ethos. Laddism leveraged the idealization of postmodern flexibility to reimpose order, and the conceit of complexity to reinstall simplicity or essentialism. On one level, the postmodern sense of a loss of 'authenticity' seems to provoke these appeals to essentialism.<sup>12</sup> In

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<sup>12</sup> By the turn of the century, gender essentialism is not divorced from postmodernism; appeals to biological verities can be a compensatory move as postmodernity instills awareness of the loss of referents and stable meanings.

this context, the idealization of postmodern leveling worked to reify old hierarchies, voiding calls for social “diversity” and “sensitivity” with the blanket retort, “Why are you being so serious?”

### **A Tribe Called Lad: Ironic Masculinity in Postmodernity**

Today men are more and more conscious of maleness  
not as a fact but as a problem.

— Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 1958, in *Esquire*, 1991<sup>13</sup>

Fast breads. Fast cars. Fashion. Fart jokes.  
That’s what modern man is made of.

— Journalist Tenaya Darlington, 2000<sup>14</sup>

Cultural historian David Harvey sees postmodernity marked by sweeping transformations in society, capital, and culture.<sup>15</sup> John Fiske following Harvey calls for attention to the changes and flows affecting all three of these spheres—social diversity, the economy, and cultural artifacts—when tracking trends of late-capitalism flagged as postmodern.<sup>16</sup> With attention to the dynamic interactions among these domains, I turn now to laddism and the lad “lifestyle” as a marketing phenomenon. “Lad mags” perhaps more than any other genre (broadly construed) have shaped definitions and public perceptions of new lad culture. We will first consider the postmodern ingredients and the cultural and comedic politics of these productive sites of gendered discourse, to provide the necessary foundation and context before turning to the related phenomenon of “lad TV” which emerged somewhat in the shadow of the “lad mag” revolution.

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” *Esquire*, November 1958, quoted in “It Takes More than Balls to Be a Man,” *Esquire* 116, no. 4 (October 1991): 107.

<sup>14</sup> Tenaya Darlington, “Where the Boys Are: Still Lost in the Illusions of Chicks, Fast Cars and Machismo,” *The Isthmus* (Madison, Wis.), January 14, 2000, 38. She sums up “the boy basics” as “beer, gear and women’s rears.”

<sup>15</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> John Fiske, “Global, National, Local? Some Problems of Culture in a Postmodern World,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 40 (fall 1997): 56–66.

From a political-economic perspective, the new lad began as, and perhaps remains, a mere marketing conceit; he is the product of a post-Fordist capitalist economy that manufactures and markets difference through what cultural scholar Frank Mort has termed “lifestyle market segmentation.”<sup>17</sup> This was the argument put forth by Douglas Rushkoff and his fellow American media theorists Robert McChesney and Mark Crispin Miller in *Frontline*’s “The Merchants of Cool,” which condemned the “mook” as a character devised by media conglomerate Viacom to propagate a marketable identity across its television and radio empire with its programs like *The Man Show*, *South Park*, *The Tom Green Show*, and *The Howard Stern Show*. Rushkoff objected, “There is no mook *in nature* [emphasis added]. He is a creation designed to capitalize on the testosterone-driven madness of adolescents. He grabs them below the belt and then reaches for their wallets.”<sup>18</sup> Post-Fordism thrives on large niche markets (in this instance the male youth market) with a tribal loyalty to products and attitudes they deem uniquely “their own.”

Laddism is equally indebted to newly fluid class identities, however, which Mort attributes to the erosion of “postwar class certainties” and, broadly speaking, of “fixed” identity categories in the personal, political, cultural, *and* economic spheres.<sup>19</sup> The British new lad was reared in an era of political conservatism and economic libertarianism. Thatcherism’s constant “appeal to individualism” spawned a culture of feverish consumption and enterprise.<sup>20</sup> Like Reaganomics, the Thatcher economy was erected on a foundation of self-employment, self-sufficiency, self-help, and arguably, selfishness. Among its beneficiaries/heroes was the small business man, the

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Mort, “The Politics of Consumption,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jaques (London: Verso, 1989), 160–72.

<sup>18</sup> *Frontline*, “Merchants of Cool.”

<sup>19</sup> Mort, “Politics of Consumption.”

<sup>20</sup> See Lynne Segal, “The Heat in the Kitchen,” in *The Politics of Thatcherism*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jaques (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983), 207–15.



self-starter (like the sitcom *Men Behaving Badly*'s protagonist Gary, who runs a modest business selling home security systems). Both Thatcher's and Reagan's administrations utilized anti-feminist rhetoric and policies combined with conservative nostalgia to hail women as homemakers and caretakers and fortify the articulation of masculinity to money and capitalist power.<sup>21</sup>

Traditional masculinity, finding its "natural" status under review or attack in the 1980s, retreated behind economic lines to maintain its social and cultural sovereignty. It is in this context that the lad would begin to surface as a symbol capable of uniting disparate masculinities. The affluent young lads of television, film, and magazines stood for and spoke to the middle- *and* the working-class male capitalist subject. In a new lad's world, men can forget their fiscal differences at the pub or strip club. Economic disparities are smoothed and a coalitional masculinity begins to take form, defining difference along gendered and nationalistic rather than rigid class lines.

Britain's white working class in urban centers comprised the core of a new conservatism by the late 1970s, perceiving a threat to their neighborhoods, jobs, and personal safety with the influx of black and ethnic immigrants.<sup>22</sup> In the 1990s both Britain and the United States continued to move away from a white statistical majority, and as Fiske notes, the result was not necessarily happy cohabitation, but more often a *fragmented* and *segmented* multiculturalism.<sup>23</sup> The new lad while constructed as predominantly white was a hybrid figure, part "cockney loudmouth" or "yob" and part Thatcherite "nouveau-riche." Of course, not all lads were rolling in dosh like British comedian Harry Enfield's sketch character "Loadsamoney," the cockney caricature shown luring

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<sup>21</sup> Lynne Segal in "Heat in the Kitchen," 213, notes that the Thatcher government's stance on women was less "directly" repressive, and was fraught with ambivalence. Thatcherism may not have hurt women *disproportionately* as sometimes speculated, yet it actively reduced women's "choices over whether and how to engage in waged work" (211–12). See also Jean Gardiner, "Women, Recession and the Tories," in *Politics of Thatcherism*, 188–206.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York: Homes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Fiske, "Global, National, Local?"

the birds with bricks of cash in his 1988 parodic electronic dance music video “£oadsa Money (Doin’ Up the House),” but many belonged to a rising class faction, and all were privy to the changing class discourses. Although the new lad is not a direct descendent or synonym for the working-class “yob,” he inherited a similar social anxiety about multiculturalism, feminism, and the transnational flow of culture, commerce, and bodies. At a historical moment when Western cities, nations, and the marketplace were growing steadily more multiethnic, and cultural hybridization was fast becoming the “norm,”<sup>24</sup> the new lad reasserted white privilege and his normativity. Confronted with the mainstreaming of the women’s and gay rights movements, meanwhile, laddism trumpeted male dominance and heterosexual prowess.

Thus, while laddism was an effective marketing and branding strategy for a post-Fordist economy, it bucked parallel developments of postmodernity in the social and cultural spheres. Harvey drawing on the journal *PRÉCIS* notes that postmodernity purportedly “privileges ‘heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse.’” Postmodern identities are said to be fragmented, de-centered, indeterminate, and distrustful of totalizing, essentializing statements.<sup>25</sup> As a product of the socio-economic conditions of postmodernity, laddist media navigated and often cut against the grain of postmodern art and identities, working to re-naturalize gender and re-center the male ego. Laddism’s contradictions may provide insight into the disjuncture between postmodernity and postmodernism, and specifically, the operations of humor in negotiating that tension. In the men’s magazine industry from the mid-1980s on we

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<sup>24</sup> See Fiske, *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 9, is quoting from the architectural journal *PRECIS* no. 6 (1987): 7–24. Postmodern theory holds that, whereas modernity delved beneath exteriors in search of truth and cleaved to “grand narratives,” postmodernity abandons appeals to deep meaning and fetishizes the play of surfaces, signs, and sound bites. As distinctions between art and advertising converged in mainstream media, advertisers fluent in postmodern aesthetics addressed the ‘lifestyle’ consumer as de-centered and appealed to *avant-garde* sensibilities.

find the seeds of laddism, bearing fruit by the mid-1990s as an emergent cultural movement, as a “lifestyle” brand, and as a set of textual conventions. New lad publications, while flirting with the instability of irony, reclaim maleness itself as a stabilizing sign—something knowable, definite, and secure—casting the phallus as an anchor in the turbulent tides of postmodernity.

*Fashioning Masculinity and Irony: The “Lad Mag” Revolution*

Most accounts point to 1994 through 1995 as the moment of the new lad’s official arrival, with publications such as *Loaded*, *FHM (For Him Magazine)*, and *Maxim*. However, laddism was making its presence felt even earlier. Sitcom writer Andrew Davies (*Game On*) recounts that by 1990 the qualifier “laddish” had caught on as a British colloquialism, gaining popularity first as a female “term of abuse.”<sup>26</sup> Frank Mort provides a partial lineage of the term in *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain*, a richly textured history of 1980s men’s lifestyle magazines examining how a distinctive male youth market emerged out of changes in consumption and marketing practices in Thatcher’s Britain.<sup>27</sup> His findings, essential for understanding the initial motivations, media presence, and critical reception of laddism, warrant sustained consideration as foundation for analysis of the varied uses of lad attitude and irony as a branding strategy. Mort’s study provides crucial insights into the specific market forces, taste cultures, personalities, and emergent discourses about gender and diversity that gave rise to the new lad as a prominent media creation and profitable brand

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Richard Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” *Radio Times*, June 17–23, 1995, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1996). See also Bethan Benwell, ed., *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines (Sociological Review Monographs)* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), especially chapters by Benwell (“Ambiguous Masculinities: Heroism and Anti-Heroism in the Men’s Lifestyle Magazine,” 151–68) and Rosalind Gill (“Power and the Production of Subjects: A Genealogy of the New Man and the New Lad,” 34–56).

identity, honed by the British style press and rapidly replicated across media, generic, and national borders.

The 1980s, Mort observes, were a time of “extended interrogation into masculinity.” The metropolitan “new man” (the focus of his study) rapidly became an “icon of commercial masculinity.” The burgeoning industry of men’s lifestyle magazines heralded the new man as a connoisseur of culture and fashion, and hailed readers as part of this elite taste fraction. Defined alternately as professional and chic yet “progressive” and “caring,” this new man was also a figure in flux, thrust into self-doubt by shifting sexual and identity politics in the culture at large.<sup>28</sup> Alternative style magazines in the U.K. like *Blitz* (1980–91), *The Face* (1980–2004), and *Arena* (1986–2009) dedicated to culture and fashion put forth a pluralistic vision of male identity—depicting not a stable or “unitary” masculinity, but contingent, diverse, and fluid “masculinities.” With this emphasis on multiplicity and the march of diverse “looks” across the page, the new men’s “style press” bore the markers of postmodern media. Like new wave or alternative comedy of the same historical moment (see figs. 2.1a–c), these publications were at first conceived as *alternative* to traditional men’s fare (e.g., magazines devoted to hobbies, cars, sports, and pornography). The early style press met with some opposition precisely because it disturbed and de-naturalized conventional meanings of masculinity. As Mort notes, these magazines encouraged a “culture of homosociality”—indeed, a homosocial gaze—by articulating masculinity to fashion, to-be-looked-at-ness, and even sexual ambiguity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 3, 15–16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10, 21, 45. For a relevant feminist inquiry into the counter-hegemonic limits of fashion magazines’ postmodern blurring of gender binaries, see Diana Crane, “Gender and Hegemony in Fashion Magazines: Women’s Interpretations of Fashion Photographs,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (fall 1999): 541–63. In an audience study examining female readers’ reactions to “postmodern role playing” in images that disrupt “‘traditional’ hegemonic femininity,” Crane finds that participants mostly rejected the liberatory implications of “postmodern ambiguity” and its “conflicting messages” in favor of personally “stable” gender identities (560).



Figures 2.1a–c. New-wave pop culture “style” magazine *Blitz* profiled alternative comedy stars and “Young Ones” Rik Mayall (issue no. 16, November 1983), Alexei Sayle (no. 20, April 1984), and Ben Elton (no. 59, November 1987), featured in cover art from left to right above.<sup>30</sup>

Presented with the diverse new men’s market, these non-traditional publications seized on *irony* and found it to be an invaluable tool for rendering meaning ambiguous. Mort explains:

Representational closure was avoided on both commercial and aesthetic grounds. In this fledgling market for men’s commodities the emphasis was on keeping options open, until such time as a successful consumer prototype could be discovered.<sup>31</sup>

Edgy humor distinguished the style press from other men’s journalism of the era. *The Face*, for instance, stitched threads of camp, burlesque, shock-value, and black humor into a tapestry of comic styles. Against a backdrop of whimsical fashion spreads and vitriolic rants, the tone ranged from cheeky and surreal to acerbic, rancorous, and rude. By writing with a “comic openness,” Mort suggests, this new men’s journalism managed to “render masculinity available for public discussion.”<sup>32</sup> As laddish irony began dictating the terms of that discussion in the 1990s, however, it reanimated a narrower vision of masculinity across the spectrum of magazines aimed at men.

<sup>30</sup> *Blitz* magazine covers are archived online at <http://www.blitzmagazine.co.uk/>.

<sup>31</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 78.

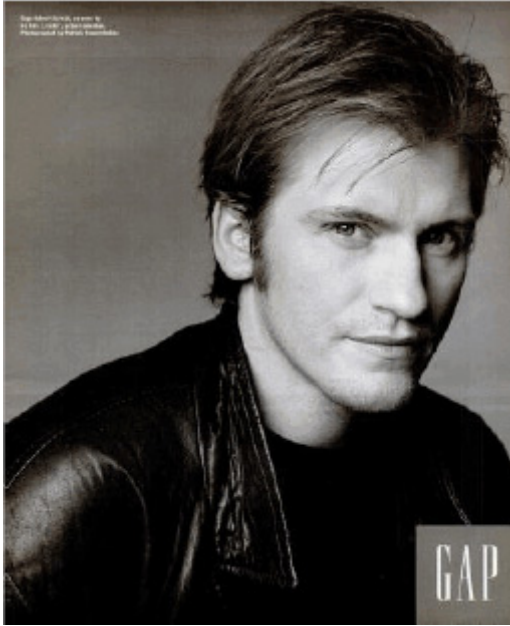


Figure 2.2. The Model Comedian?

With the “comedy boom” of the 1980s and 1990s, celebrity comics became a fashionable commodity in pop culture magazines. This Denis Leary magazine spot worked at least as much to confer edgy chic on clothing retailer Gap Inc. as to sell the “ribbed-t” that was purportedly the object of the advertisement. *SPIN* 9, no. 2 (May 1993), p. 23.

The alternative style press of the mid-1980s was already betraying laddish leanings. The space these magazines secured for men to explore new identity options became a potential breeding ground for sexist content. *Arena*, for example, Mort observes, “profiled femininity much less frequently than its male heroes. A large part of its journalism implicitly worked to construct a homosocial space, ‘liberated’ from the other sex. At times this perspective degenerated into overt misogyny.”<sup>33</sup> Highbrow magazines for the new man like *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* (*GQ*) and *Esquire* were influenced by and conversant with feminist thought throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>34</sup> However, feminism rapidly became a favorite target for journalists

<sup>33</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> A 1991 *Esquire* U.S. poll surveyed 1,001 American men on “adventuresome” questions about masculinity, desire, and private gender attitudes. When asked “Which terms might you use for women when there are none around?” the highest-rated answer among the upscale new-man mag’s respondents was “women” (32.7%) and the lowest “sluts” (1.6%). “Babes” and “chicks” outranked “bitches” at 12.5, 10.8, and 9.3% respectively. Dr. Herbert Rappaport, saluting the magazine’s view of masculinity as an adaptive social construct, concluded that “the answers show what men think is expected of them. And from those expectations we can infer how men see the abstraction we call masculinity.” The same issue featured women’s essays, introduced by feminist Naomi Wolf, interrogating men as “unwilling to pay their debts” to the women’s movement. Wolf et al., “Pigs, Dudes, Slimeballs, Victims, Studs, Wimps, Girl Toys, Fools, Heroes, Human Beings?” *Esquire* 116, no. 4 (October 1991): 136–45; “Would You Speak Sadly of Your Beloved Brother’s Assassination to a Woman You Just Met if It Would Help You Seduce Her?” in *ibid.*, 154.

of both sexes in the style press, where the “mature,” “reflective” new man fashioned under liberal feminism’s tutelage was deemed a “wimp” and a “bore.”<sup>35</sup>

By 1986, the first rumblings of new laddism were beginning to be felt in this magazine culture, as with stand-up comedy. In a February editorial that year, journalist Julie Burchill at *The Face* was among the first to identify “the lad” as the *new new* masculinity. The lad she espied, Mort tells us, was “the archetypal product of democracy and affluence, who was ‘on the make’ in both a social and a sexual sense.” Mort categorizes Burchill herself as the first of two distinctly gendered journalistic personas that predominated in the style press of that period: the “bitch” and the “cockney loudmouth.” The latter type (a lad prototype) made heroes of football hooligans, gangsters, hedonists, and other “wild men of the city” and celebrated a “collective masculinity, driven by alcohol, violence and sexual threat.”<sup>36</sup> Both were openly hostile to feminism, speaking for a generational and working-class politics that disavowed liberalism and the assumed bourgeois “moral righteousness” of the women’s movement.

We will see later how comedy’s new laddism is at once an outgrowth or corollary of alternative comedy of the 1980s and 1990s and a recoil and expunging of its supposedly more “po-faced,” pro-feminist politics. New style and masculinity magazines, in sync with comedy trends, became an increasingly welcoming forum to showcase laddish interests, attitudes, and humor. If we chart changes in tone in men’s magazines and media in these decades, we can see laddism starting to monopolize the cultural meanings of masculinity. The meditative, adaptive, and prismatic masculinity imagined in the men’s lifestyle press of the 1980s was overshadowed in the 1990s by a narrowing, cohering vision of male solidarity under the sign of the new lad.

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<sup>35</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 43, 83.

<sup>36</sup> This paragraph draws on Mort, *ibid.*, 40–43. This second sensibility describes Burchill’s male complement at *The Face*, freelance journalist Robert Elms, who Mort notes typified the “cockney loudmouth” persona.

The mid-1990s saw lad magazines emerge as a distinct genre and profitable industry. *Loaded*, launched in 1994, cornered and defined the market niche with an irreverent, sexy style that was immediately copied by competitors. Billing itself as the magazine “for men who should know better,” *Loaded* set out to snub the upscale new man’s magazines. *Loaded*’s founder, journalist James Brown, takes credit for inventing the “lad mag” genre and market, saying,

Men’s magazines were all trying to project a sophisticated image, but it wasn’t speaking to the millions of *real blokes* who love football and want to pull women, but who also like good writing... [emphasis added]. I’m very proud to say we’ve lowered the tone. We’ve given all the others a kick up the arse.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas *GQ* and *Esquire* featured tasteful content for the sophisticated, socially conscious modern man, *Loaded* lined its pages with semi-nude women and sharp, edgy prose, taking inspiration from the satirical comic magazine *Viz* (known for its dark and sexual humor and comic characters like the Fat Slags and Spoilt Bastard).<sup>38</sup> *The Observer*’s Tim Adams asserts that “the New Lad brand became perhaps the defining male attitude of the decade.”<sup>39</sup> *Loaded* inspired imitators such as *FHM* and *Maxim*. What *Loaded* did to announce new lad culture to the world, *Maxim* did for the American lad or mook, quickly becoming the top-selling U.S. men’s magazine while expanding its market into more than twenty-five countries.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kira Cochrane, “The Dark World of Lads’ Mags,” *NewStatesman.com*, August 23, 2007, <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2007/08/lad-culture-cochrane-loaded> (accessed May 18, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> William Cook, “All in the Worst Possible Taste,” *Guardian*, November 18, 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/nov/18/comedy> (accessed May 2011). *Viz*’s U.S. equivalent was *Mad Magazine*.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Adams, “New Kid on the Newsstand,” *Observer*, January 23, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2005/jan/23/features.review7> (accessed May 18, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> *For Him Magazine* was first published as *For Him* in the U.K. in 1985 and relaunched in 1993 as *FHM*, becoming the chief competition for *Loaded* in the mid-1990s. *FHM* concluded its print run in 2006, and continues to publish its online version at [www.fhmonline.com](http://www.fhmonline.com). *Maxim*’s assets have continued to increase, and are reported to include as many as 31 international editions sold in 45 countries (estimates vary in the industry press) as of 2007, according to Stephen Brook, “Dennis Looks To Sell *Maxim* Magazine,” *Guardian*, February 15, 2007, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 29, 2014).



Developments in men’s journalism—this popularizing of a humorous, glib, or ironic mode of address and the rise to prominence of the “bitch” and “cockney loudmouth”—laid much of the groundwork for TV variants of laddism. A two-way flow informs trends in both arenas. Television comedians were frequently featured as popular heroes in publications like *The Face*, *Arena*, *Blitz*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*. Comedians with lad appeal joined the gallery of British rogues, such as Liam Gallagher and Paul Gascoigne, on the covers of *Loaded* and *FHM* (see figs. 2.3a–b). These magazines have also served as a promotional platform for cutting-edge stand-up and television comedy, most notably with *Loaded*’s annual LAFTA Comedy Awards.<sup>41</sup>



Figures 2.3a–c. On the left, alternative/lad comic and noted “cockney loudmouth” Keith Allen was one of *FHM*’s first celebrity covers (November 1993). Other comedians receiving *FHM* covers in the 1990s included former *Men Behaving Badly* star Harry Enfield (December 1994, center image), Jack Dee (March 1993), and lovely ladettes Ulrika Jonsson (February 1996) and Jenny McCarthy (February 1997 and April 1998, shown on the right).<sup>42</sup>

Across media formats the lad was often accompanied by the “ladette,” an evolution of the “bitch” type. Post-feminist Girl Power or Girlie culture of the 1990s dovetailed with the

<sup>41</sup> The name plays off the prestigious British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards, a.k.a. BAFTAS.

<sup>42</sup> *FHM* back issue cover photos are available online at <http://fhmbackissues.com/>.

new laddism, paving the way for the drinking, swearing ladette in popular culture. This term entered the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* in 2001, defined by her “boisterously assertive and crude manner” and love of liquor.<sup>43</sup> Prominent ladettes pushing politically incorrect femininity included Swedish-British television personality Ulrika Jonsson (the “queen of speed lager drinking” and farting jokes from BBC2’s *Shooting Stars*), English comedian Jenny Eclair (whose girl’s guide to “bad behaviour” released in 1994 preceded *Men Behaving Badly*’s own handbook by a year), the British and American presenters of late-night magazine show *The Girlie Show* (Channel 4, U.K., 1996–97), and American comedians Sarah Silverman and Jenny McCarthy (fig. 2.3c).<sup>44</sup> One industry commentator dubbed this new class of women “Notional New Lads.”<sup>45</sup>

Before *Loaded* and its clones came under attack for promulgating and profiting from a more celebratory sexism, the prior style press already had some women feeling pushed to the margins by the often sarcastic journalistic tone and typical features. In 1986, the same month *The Face* introduced “the lad” in print, a female reader wrote in to censure the magazine for “contemptuously ignoring femininity.” A year later, another objected:

[N]ot a woman in sight.... Boys, boys, boys and yet more boys. Working-class on-the-make and made-it boys; ... self-obsessed, self-congratulatory, self-very-well-packaged-and-doing-nicely-thank-you boys; designer-made boys with their boy-made designs.... Oh boy, don’t you ever get sick of yourselves. I do.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Ladettes Enter Dictionary,” BBC News, July 12, 2001, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/1434906.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1434906.stm) (accessed May 18, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Jenny Eclair’s *The Book of Bad Behaviour* (London: Virgin Books, 1994) boasts on its cover that the author “is forever bending over, having forgotten to put her pants on.” Jonsson is *Loaded*’s May 1998 (issue 49) cover girl, shown chained in leather bondage cuffs under the text “Ulrika turned on, tuned in, chained up.”

<sup>45</sup> Mick Pilsworth, “In My View: Lads’ TV—It’s a New Lads’ World,” *Televisual*, February 1997, 15. See also Geoff Ellis, “Girls on Top—New Lads Are Out: Now It’s the Women Behaving Badly,” *Radio Times* (U.K.), January 27–February 2, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Letters in *The Face*, no. 70 (February 1986), 81, and no. 84 (April 1987), 95, both cited in Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 82–83.

Tired of the new man's seriousness, as Mort documents, journalists purporting to speak for "the collective 'we' of masculinity" began reclaiming the freedoms men had 'lost.'<sup>47</sup> Finding the new man's ideological vestments constricting, they began asking for more latitude—and the result was an increasingly cynical lad attitude couched in irony.

Reflecting on this trend, feminist media critics have taken a more critical view of humor in men's magazines. Kira Cochrane, women's editor of *The Guardian*, faults men's magazine culture for "using the excuse that this 'humour' was 'ironic' to shut down all criticism." In a 2007 retrospective for the *New Statesman* on the impact of "Lads' Mags," Cochrane argued:

The worst crime of lad culture as a whole was that it took old-fashioned sexism (chauvinism), served it up in exactly the same format—endless pictures of scantily clad women, for instance, beside captions about how "up for it" they were—and slapped the label "irony" on it. Once it had been established that this culture was ironic, if a woman dared to use the word "sexist" it simply proved that she had no sense of humour, that she was out of touch.

Any young woman who felt that there might be something a bit offensive about blokes talking loudly about ogling women's "tits", who might have wondered why the men around her—often middle-class men—were acting out some sort of tired cartoon of male dominance, was simply derided as po-faced. Lad culture was, as one journalist put it, a "blokelash", a reaction to the gains of feminism which, although it was based on the idea of having big cojones, didn't even have the balls to be open and honest about what it was doing. This was the old-style sexism dressed up as the new-style irony.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in a January 2000 editorial, American journalist Tenaya Darlington complained, "Despite the pretense of marketing to 'intelligent' and 'urbane' men, these rags read like the floor plan of a frat boy's psyche." She lamented the hollow, hardened masculinity that results when, in the name of irony, earnestness evaporates leaving only an empty joke culture:

If there's one thing today's gent doesn't dig, men's mags reveal, it's sincerity. Seriousness is a serious threat. A quip, a gag, an off-color innuendo help the

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<sup>47</sup> Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Cochrane, "Dark World of Lads' Mags."

modern man maneuver through the maze of masculinity. *Maxim*'s joke section jauntily urges: "Collect them. Trade them. Use them to avoid meaningful exchanges with other men."<sup>49</sup>

For Darlington, disingenuous humor is only one way the style press siphons sincerity out of male identity. Her worry was that such media culture was as "anti-man" as it was "anti-woman." In the same way that fashion magazines like *Cosmo* and *Glamour* offer a slender range of options for femininity, she claimed, men's magazines replace the "human element" with "product—Viagra, fitness pills, Porsches, Powerbooks—to morph men into, of course 'real men.'"<sup>50</sup>

Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson, and Kate Brooks in 2001 published the findings of an extensive study of gender politics in men's lifestyle magazines. They find that the irony these magazines deploy "as a warning against taking anything that is said too seriously" is thoroughly interlaced with "the language of 'common sense'" in ways that flatter and authenticate "laddishness" as *real* masculinity.<sup>51</sup> In addition to content analysis and interviews with editorial staff, they conducted focus groups to reveal how consumers may have read and related to new lad magazines and their trademark irony in the 1990s. Stevenson summarizes as follows:

Media constructions of "laddishness" had come to seem so "natural" that for many respondents there was no need to defend them or to consider alternative forms of masculinity. While some participants were critical of the magazines' celebration of "laddish" masculinities, many more revelled in the lack of restraint implied by what they construed as a return to more "natural" expressions of masculinity, including, for example, the opportunity to look at pictures of "sexy" women in an unselfconscious and relatively guilt-free way. However, returning

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<sup>49</sup> Darlington, "Where the Boys Are," 38.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, suggests that as men's magazines paraded hip commodities and designer clothes, consuming a diversity of products stood in for the "diversity" championed by the civic-minded, multicultural, sensitive new man who had materialized under the watchful eye of second wave feminism.

<sup>51</sup> See Nick Stevenson, *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication*, 2d ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2002), 111–12, detailing findings of his co-authored study with Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks, *Making Sense of Men's Magazines* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2001).

to a more “honest” or “natural” expression of men’s “true selves” is partly contradicted by some of the magazines’ encouragement of a greater sense of “openness” to new forms of masculinity.<sup>52</sup>

Here their findings underscore Mort’s central point that a market prerogative of irony is “keeping options open.” Notably, from the standpoint of *Loaded* co-founder Tim Southwell, quoted at the outset of this chapter, irony is also the rhetorical art of “getting away with” the unsayable as he suggests in his memoir about the magazine that utilized irony “to galvanise a nation of men into realising that you didn’t have to be ashamed of being a bloke.”<sup>53</sup>

My project argues that lad irony is dedicated to the principle of “having it both ways.” To summarize, from its conception as a “galvanizing” movement with shared objectives of recovering and relegitimizing traditional masculine pursuits in guilt-free spaces, laddish media favored modes of humor and talk that refused the semantic certainties and ideological restraints of Booth’s “stable” ironies by continually dodging the distinction of covert versus literal meaning. This strategic preference for unstable or postmodern irony that sees meaning multiplied and options “open” is potentially subordinated to the master code of authentic, singular, immutable identity (“being a bloke”) that frames laddish discourse.

#### *Make Room for Laddie: Nostalgia TV and the New Lad*

Just as men’s magazines fostered a sense of pleasurable homosociality, lad-centered television programming hailed male viewers as a taste community with certain inherent interests and a shared ironic sensibility. By the mid-1990s, the lad had graduated from the printed page to prime time, leading Mick Pilsworth in *Televsual* to observe, “*Loaded* has a lot to answer for: New Laddism has spawned a raft of New Lad TV shows. Almost every new entertainment

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<sup>52</sup> Stevenson, *Understanding Media Cultures*, 111–12.

<sup>53</sup> Southwell, *Getting Away With It*, 14.

show is either presented by New Lads or features New Lads' interests."<sup>54</sup> *Radio Times* designated 1995 "the year of the lad."<sup>55</sup> London's *Daily Mail* teased:

Women had it coming to them, of course. They objected to being treated as sex objects, they banned beer and made us drink white wine; they took us shopping and insisted we learn to cook. Finally, they made us attend the birth of their children.... Then, having neutered us like cats, women curled up happily in their executive offices, wearing their power suits, and purred.

But it couldn't last, could it? The worm has turned and the male of the species is exacting his revenge. On television he has *Men Behaving Badly*, *Fantasy Football League*, *They Think It's All Over* and wall-to-wall sports coverage. One cable channel is even showing topless darts.<sup>56</sup>

Lad humor and irony spilled over into a range of programming genres. Not only were new lads carousing in television sitcom, but they were also colonizing the quiz show and other popular formats: stand-up/sketch comedy blends (*The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, *Newman and Baddiel in Pieces*), the comedian-hosted sport quiz (*They Think It's All Over*) and sport-themed chat show (*Fantasy Football League*), the music trivia quiz (*Never Mind the Buzzcocks*), topical satire (*The 11 O'Clock Show*), the comedy news quiz (*Have I Got News for You*), and the talk show (*Room 101*).<sup>57</sup> The proliferation of sport- and trivia-based quiz and contest shows not only catered to "New Lads' interests," but affirmed areas of specialized knowledge and expertise—giving the affluent, college-educated new lad forums in which to competitively assert intellectual and cultural capital as well as comic bravado.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Pilsworth, "New Lads' World," 15.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, "Girls on Top."

<sup>56</sup> Rory Clements, "What Is This Man's Attraction?" *Daily Mail* (London), "Femail: His View," February 2, 1996, 32–33, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> *The Mary Whitehouse Experience's* title pokes fun at the ultra-conservative censorship crusader of that name who, with her National Viewers and Listeners Association, lobbied against programs with sexual content or gritty language.

<sup>58</sup> The comedy panel programs such as *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*, *Shooting Stars*, and *Have I Got News for You*, though to some extent discursively aligned with new lad taste culture and programming trends, regularly included one or more female comedians or media personalities as featured guests and many male participants who were decidedly not coded as "new lads," as did talk and late-night fare. Notable non-lad frontmen included (continued...)



Figure 2.4. Two Men and a Couch: *Fantasy Football League* hosts David Baddiel and Frank Skinner greeted viewers from their bachelor-pad studio set to jest about the week in football, chat with team managers, watch pre-recorded clips on telly, and recreate great moments in sport history. Episode 114, originally aired April 15, 1994, on BBC2.

Mick Pilsworth mused that lad comedy across the board seemed on a “post-modernist mission... to rediscover and then deconstruct the sad old shows we watched when we were kids.” Just as *Men Behaving Badly* “dusted off and realigned” the 1970s sitcom *The Likely Lads*, he argued, comedy’s new lads were ironically “doing” traditional TV with a “post-modern twist” on a variety of panel games, chat shows, and other program formats.<sup>59</sup> Regularly combining talk, song, stand-up, and skits, lad reworkings of “classic” TV exploited the possibilities for cross-generic as well as cross-generational allusion. Hybrid sketch/talk programs like Channel 5’s *The Jack Docherty Show* and Channel 4’s *TFI Friday* (a lad-ified *Letterman* clone) exhibited the postmodernist trappings of intertextual play, “irreverent pastiche,” and “contrived depthlessness.”<sup>60</sup>

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*Have I Got News for You* host Angus Deayton and *Buzzcocks* regulars Sean Hughes (the Irish comedian whose *Sean’s Show* on Channel 4, 1992–93, whimsically deconstructed sitcom in ways similar to *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show*) and Bill Bailey (erudite surrealist stand-up who went on to co-star in the off-beat Channel 4 sitcom *Black Books*, 2000–04). As spaces not at all exclusive to laddish personalities, we could draw a parallel to U.S. TV panel and talk shows such as ABC’s *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and its lad-hosted replacement *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*

<sup>59</sup> Pilsworth, “New Lads’ World,” 15. *Fantasy Football League* drew its inspiration from *Football Focus*; *They Think It’s All Over* from *A Question of Sport*; *Room 101* from *The Antiques Roadshow*; *The Frank Skinner Show* from *Wogan*; and *Never Mind the Buzzcocks* from *Pop Quiz*.

<sup>60</sup> These terms I borrow from Terry Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity,” *Times Literary Supplement*, February 20, 1987, quoted in Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 7.

Critics and creators were divided on the question of whether the new lads were in some sense satirically “deconstructing” yesterday’s lad, as Pilsworth says, or were more interested in resurrecting him. In some iterations the new lad seemed simply to be, as *Men Behaving Badly*’s creator Simon Nye says, “the old lad with a new title really.”<sup>61</sup>

Whereas modernity is forward-looking and, Harvey writes, “can have no respect even for its own past,”<sup>62</sup> postmodernity is said to be more reflective and reminiscent, constantly looking over its shoulder to summon fragments of history for fresh contemplation. Television scholar Tim O’Sullivan in 1998 speculated that “the 1990s has witnessed the triumphant return of old television, sometimes in new clothes,” owing in part to television’s attempts to come to terms with its own waning novelty. O’Sullivan attributed the rise of what he terms “nostalgia TV” to an “absence of a real sense of communal history.”<sup>63</sup> Significantly, he sees satire and sentimentality commingling in these “postmodernist” pangs for the past: “There are deep forms of cultural and emotional (in)security in play here, often in tension with the ‘kitsch’, slightly disturbing or comic-archaic qualities revealed in the juxtaposition of the ‘dated’ old within the flow of the new.” Yet, much of the pleasure in televisual nostalgia may lie in its restorative impulses, its capacity to mend community and amend memory. “Many of these recollections function as quite powerful points of symbolic, biographical and generational reference. Many consist of memories of the ‘live’, televised event,” O’Sullivan contends.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” 6.

<sup>62</sup> Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 11–12.

<sup>63</sup> Tim O’Sullivan, “Nostalgia, Revelation and Intimacy: Tendencies in the Flow of Modern Popular Television,” in *The Television Studies Book*, ed. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (New York: Arnold, 1998), 201–3. National nostalgia was a structuring presence on 1990s British TV, not always presented as irony or self-reflexivity. Tonally diverse examples of heritage TV from the 1990s include *TV Heaven* (Channel 4, 1992, re-broadcasting gems from the archives), classics clip shows like ITV’s *Schofield’s TV Gold*, and comedian Victor Lewis-Smith’s absurdist *Ads Infinitum* (BBC2, 1998–99) making oddities of old commercials and products.

<sup>64</sup> O’Sullivan, “Nostalgia, Revelation and Intimacy,” 202–3.



Lad TV texts are notable for their collective dedication to this remembering and revival of moments from popular culture history (primarily sport, music, and comedy) as an expression of present community. Moreover, TV's new lads gravitated to "live" recorded studio formats, as listed above, with a sense of spontaneous interactions, unpredictable comic disruptions, and conversations that often unfold unrehearsed or with the appearance of minimal scripting. The emphasis on liveness has interesting implications in light of the nostalgia for the lost "real" that partly motivates a departure from narrative comedy. Additionally, with their habitual referencing and de-/re-construction of television and other cultural texts from their youth (for instance, *Fantasy Football League's* reenactment of famous football moments), as well as their occasional use or stylistic mimicry of actual archival footage, shows geared toward new lads participated and at times commented on an industry-wide surge of interest in television's own "heritage."<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, new lad comics were rediscovering the classic multi-camera situation comedy. Somewhat paradoxically, despite new lad comedy's preoccupation with self-reflexivity, the overriding nostalgic ethos would mean an embrace of a more traditional style of sitcom, as opposed to deconstruction of the genre. Self-written sitcom vehicles for both David Baddiel and Frank Skinner, among others, aimed for broad appeal and character identification, rather than a pseudo-Brechtian distanciation. There remained, certainly, elements of reflexivity, as seen with *Baddiel's Syndrome* (Sky One, 2001), described by one British comedy guide as the would-be "British *Seinfeld*," with its eponymous hero and use of an atypical structuring narrative conceit to build a sense of character interiority and exceptionality: a therapist's office rather than a comedy club serves as a framing device and venue for the star's stand-up material to introduce

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<sup>65</sup> The title of BBC's *They Think It's All Over* (comedy panel quiz show) was itself a reference to a famous commentator line in football history, instantly recognizable to any fan. A line with similar resonance in the U.S. might be Al Michaels's "Do you believe in miracles?" call from the 1980 U.S. hockey team's defeat of the Soviets.

episodes.<sup>66</sup> The titles scroll through a list of psychiatric jargon (Gender Disorientation, Superiority Complex, etc.) as labels inadequate for the protagonist's "disorder" (New Laddism?). The series was deemed a failure critically, but noteworthy as a gestural exploration of lad psychology in a fairly conventional sitcom while rendering the modern lad a likeable, benign, sympathetic fellow.

By 1999, *Radio Times* was characterizing similar series as a "revival of traditional sitcom," and deducing from this generation of sitcoms or "neo-sitcoms" that writing narrative comedy, without all the postmodern bells and whistles, is "cool" again.<sup>67</sup> With industry insiders complaining that British sitcoms lacked the polish and relatability of must-see U.S. sitcoms like *Cheers* and *Seinfeld*, enthusiasm for absurdist "postmodern" sitcoms was reportedly waning. Producer Geoff Posner lamented, "Too many British sitcoms are about unreal people doing unreal things in unreal situations."<sup>68</sup> When we later examine *Men Behaving Badly* as a specific case that helped launch this "revival" trend, we will see how such programming pulls against the postmodernist impulses and ironic distancing of alternative comedy. Laddism again delivered on the call for something more familiar if not also more "real."

Seeing the surge of pastiche and revivalist programming under the new lad's media reign, British cultural criticism occasionally paralleled Purdy-esque critiques of the postmodern "echo chamber." This criticism focused on the kitsch-obsessed yuppie ironist who reclaims relics from the cultural scrapheap but, as *Spy* magazine argued, is too noncommittal to choose

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<sup>66</sup> The fictionalized "David" is a builder who muddles through unsatisfying relationships with a greedy psychiatrist (Stephen Fry), problematic ex-wife, illegal immigrant housekeeper plotting to marry him, and American "posh" neighbor. His free time is spent at the pub dissecting the male vs. female outlook on sexual conquest, and mundane matters, with his *Seinfeld*-ish co-ed clique. The British Comedy Guide at [http://www.sitcom.co.uk/sitcoms/baddiels\\_syndrome.shtml](http://www.sitcom.co.uk/sitcoms/baddiels_syndrome.shtml) diagnoses Baddiel's doomed-to-therapy protagonist as a "world-weary thirty-something."

<sup>67</sup> John Dugdale, with Geoff Ellis, Nick Griffiths, Tina Ogle, and Daniela Soave, "And for Our Next Trick..." *Radio Times*, February 6–12, 1999, 24. Skinner described his latest project as an "across-the-board sitcom."

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

between ridicule and reverence.<sup>69</sup> What is meant by “irony” in popular usage is not always consistent as the term circulates in “post-PC” culture, particularly when it is coupled with the equally slippery signifier “postmodern.” When looking at how the phrase “postmodern irony” has been mobilized about and by the new lad, it is necessary to keep in mind that in the 1990s vernacular it came to denote a “glib,” “smirking,” antisocial attitude, and this loose definition often overshadowed attention to irony as a specific rhetorical device or media practice. Indeed, new lad comics occasionally joined in cross-cultural mockery of the “irony-stricken yuppie” (to borrow *Spy*’s phrase). For example, *Baddiel’s Syndrome* assigns this widely maligned form of irony to the star’s pretentious American quirky-neighbor character who likes things “ironically” and who gloats: “Ahh, postmodern irony, how it eats away at the foundations of taste and value that underpin our culture. Don’t you just love it?”<sup>70</sup> Significantly, from the onset of irony panic in America, however, irony in British comedy and culture was a mainstay and cherished institution, hence not so readily discursively framed as a recent or corrosive “epidemic.”

Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt jointly critiqued “Seventies revivalism” and wider nostalgia in a 1994 essay for the high-minded “low culture” British journal *The Modern Review*. Dissecting both the “commodification of irony” and “reconstructing [of] the Seventies” rampant in Generation X media culture, from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Reality Bites*, they theorize the slippage between ironic and post-ironic sensibilities and the awkward feeling spaces in-between.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 12; and Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, “The Irony Epidemic,” *Spy* (March 1989): 94, discussed in my Introduction. See also Charles Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Maclean’s* 112, no. 41 (October 11, 1999): 67.

<sup>70</sup> *Baddiel’s Syndrome*, “Dream Home,” episode 1.10, first aired March 19, 2001, on Sky One. The episode’s plot entails a themed nostalgia night in ironic tribute to U.S. pop icon (and guest star) Dean Friedman.

<sup>71</sup> Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt, “The End of Irony? The Tragedy of the Post-Ironic Condition,” *The Modern Review* (London) 1, no. 14 (April–May 1994): 6–7. Julie Burchill (*The Face*) co-founded *Modern Review*. Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* “Sounds of the ‘70s” soundtrack (featuring funk rape anthem “I Gotcha” by Joe Tex) is narrated by droll alternative comic Steven Wright, enhancing ironic distance without diminishing nostalgic pleasure.

Vanderbilt detects multiple “overlapping” forms of cultural nostalgia at work (instant, simultaneous, conservative, revolutionary, etc.) that likely inform these trends. Nostalgia for the sake of nostalgia itself, the domain of the postmodern “hyperreal,” is but one breed, commingling in nineties discourse with the kind of conservative nostalgia deployed in political rhetoric of the New Right, in which he says “perceived authenticity can create a longing for an existence which is no longer possible and was in fact never possible.”<sup>72</sup> I suggest that new lad culture not only exemplifies the fetishizing of irony as marketable commodity, but is especially difficult to pin down ideologically precisely because it routinely pokes fun at or ironizes even as it may enact and encourage the sorts of nostalgic longings promulgated in conservative rhetoric.

Some new lad stand-up comedy and television fare could be aggressively “insensitive,” intolerant, and sometimes sadistic in its comic treatment of disempowered groups, including not just women but immigrants and ethnic or religious minorities. Novelist Will Self is among those who have critiqued British comedy’s leading new lads Baddiel and Skinner (the comedian-hosts of *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned* and *Fantasy Football League*, shown in fig. 2.4) as “the most repulsive men on television” and charged the “dull” duo with flaunting “casual” racism (in jokes directed at foreign audience members), crude misogyny, homophobia, and adolescent poor taste.<sup>73</sup> In deflecting such criticisms, it is perhaps significant that Baddiel himself occupies a certain ethnic “other” status as an Anglo-Jewish comedian (whose mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany), a factor generally downplayed in his comedy and the press where his British nationality and resolute regular-blokeness are emphasized. In his own words,

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<sup>72</sup> Vanderbilt, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Will Self, “Footie and the Most Repulsive Men on Television,” review of Euro 2000 on BBC1/ITV and *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned* on ITV, *Independent* (London), June 18, 2000, 18. Some deem Self a New Lad.

“I don’t want to make that much of a fuss about my ethnicity.”<sup>74</sup> Lad cultural texts collectively resisted discourses of “diversity” and reasserted not just male but white privilege, heteronormativity, nationalism, and nostalgia for the “old” ways of life, and (as boasted by lad mags) the unmitigated pleasures of the male gaze.<sup>75</sup>

As lad media staked out homosocial havens, these spaces largely worked to exclude homosexual men. This was sometimes overt, as with the avowedly heterosexual politics of *The Man Show* and, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the more controversial, homophobic material of early “political incorrectness” pioneers like Sam Kinison and Andrew “Dice” Clay. With homosexuality gaining visibility on TV and in society in the “Gay Nineties,” new lads were broadcasting their straightness. The “queering” of television, coinciding with the rise of laddism, challenged the conceit of essentialized sexual solidarity adamantly (and reactively) articulated by new lad culture.<sup>76</sup> The persistent reliance on jokes about gays and buggery in both British and American lad comedy traditions bears witness to deep discomfort with sexual difference and with postmodern ambiguity and fluid sexual identities. Moreover, insult humor of men challenging one another’s

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<sup>74</sup> David Baddiel, “What It’s Like To Be the World’s Sixth Sexiest Jew,” *New Statesman*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/ideas/2012/05/david-baddiel-what-its-be-worlds-sixth-sexiest-jew> (accessed June 12, 2012). Baddiel in his advanced career wrote and co-produced the 2010 independent film comedy *The Infidel*, starring Omid Djalili (of *Whoopi*), about the identity struggles of a British Muslim coming to terms with Jewishness. Growing more interested in his own roots, Baddiel also wrote a novel based on the story of his grandparents who fled the Holocaust (*The Secret Purposes*, Little, Brown, 2004) and participated in the BBC genealogy series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/whodoyouthinkyouare/past-stories/david-baddiel.shtml>).

<sup>75</sup> For the concept “gaze,” see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1975): 6–18. According to Mulvey, the basic structures of looking constructed by the language of the Classical Hollywood Cinema present women as “to-be-looked-at” and foster a pattern of identification in which the spectator is compelled to take up a point-of-view structured by heterosexual male desire known as the “male gaze.” Though the mechanics and implications of this remain a matter of contention, and theorists extend the concept to other forms of visual culture, the patriarchal structures of looking in dominant film style are relatively undisputed.

<sup>76</sup> For theorization of straight audiences for gay-themed TV and cultural anxieties over the “queering” of TV, see Ron Becker, “Prime Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 42 (fall 1998): 36–47; and Diane Raymond, “Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 98–110.

claim on heterosexuality enjoys a long history as part of locker-room bonding culture that buttresses homosocial affiliation by disavowal (mockery) of homosexual desire.

More broadly, as a movement that re-centers the heterosexual male subject, “anti-PC” laddism is in part a refurbishing of comedy forms and forums for hegemonic white masculinity to assert its druthers and subjugate “others.” In wars of position against the anticipated incursions of political correctness into basic freedoms of expression and pleasure, laddism launched its comedic assault on PC pieties in defense of hegemonic masculinity. The resulting vision of men as a unified bloc asserts a commercially and politically exploitable identity that promises safe harbor from the predations of postmodernity on male privilege.

### **“Blokelash” Against Political Correctness**

Adrift in the cultural and economic sea-changes of postmodernity, new lad masculinity paddled against the currents of feminism, multiculturalism, and heterogeneity in social discourse. Perhaps *the* defining characteristic of laddism seems to have been the imperative to re-essentialize masculinity, coding gender in terms of hard-wired inevitabilities. “Being a man” means liking meat, beer, belching, farting, sport, sex, and sexism; it’s unnatural to deny these cravings, and unhealthy to suppress them, as “feminazis” or “health-nazis” would have men do. Nineties lads on both sides of the Atlantic thumbed their noses at what *Los Angeles Times* media critic David Shaw (alongside countless others) deemed “the pleasure police.” Taking that phrase as the title for a polemic published in 1996, Shaw complained of a moralizing society overrun by “pushy, whiny, misinformed nutrition nazis, teetotalers, prudes and abstainers,” and posed the question, “When did enjoying oneself become a crime?”<sup>77</sup> This alarmist image of

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<sup>77</sup> David Shaw, *The Pleasure Police: How Bluenose Busybodies and Lily-Livered Alarmists Are Taking All the Fun out of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), inside jacket cover.

multifarious, self-righteous, humorless “thought police” on the prowl quashing free speech underpins virtually all rhetorical attacks on political correctness.

As cultural theorist Todd Gitlin deftly argues, the “demonization” of political correctness proceeded apace during the 1990s as a set of strategic articulations in conservative political rhetoric to defend and preserve the social “center.” He traces the trajectory of the PC pullback in the American context, where it gained momentum with the transition from the Reagan era into the first Bush presidency, and explains:

The tribute to American greatness joins three themes: the embrace of canonized American (and Western) history and literature, the opposition to group rights, and the affirmation of free speech. The genius of the attack on “political correctness” in the nineties has been to fuse the three, polarize opinion against them, and thereby seize the initiative.<sup>78</sup>

Literary theorist Wayne Booth, who as Gitlin notes wrote in to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1994 to condemn the term PC’s propagation in journalism, is among those who sought to expose the specious phrase as a right-wing cudgel for mocking what he deemed core democratic *virtues*. Fittingly, the noted scholar of rhetorical irony crafted his epistle in the form of a (stable) irony, advising journalists to “reprogram your computers” to run a macro that substitutes the unstated synonyms for political correctness such as “justice,” “anti-bigotry,” “anti-sexism,” “courtesy,” and “sympathetic support for the jobless, the homeless, the impoverished, or the abused.”<sup>79</sup>

While the “counteroffensive” (Gitlin’s term) against PC stems from anti-left propaganda ultimately underwritten by the political agenda of the New Right, it also must be considered more broadly in terms of cultural hegemony—the processes by which the power bloc (as theorized by Antonio Gramsci) wins popular “consent” of social fractions to that which is in the

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<sup>78</sup> Todd Gitlin, “The Demonization of Political Correctness,” *Dissent* 42, no. 4 (fall 1995): 486–97; see p. 486. See also Gitlin’s “The Recoil,” chap. 6 of *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Owl Books, 1996), 166–99.

<sup>79</sup> Wayne Booth, Letter to the Editor, *Chicago Tribune*, February 14, 1994, quoted in *ibid.*, 488.

ruling class's interests by means of ideological appeals using the language of "common sense" and the promise of psychic rewards. In the case of PC panic, white heterosexual men and especially but not exclusively working-class men (who may or may not identify as socially or politically conservative) were brought into accord with the readymade language of neoconservative and libertarian anti-PC propaganda.

Gitlin provides a striking description of this hegemonic process of forging an alliance with and of men, writing in 1995 right on the cusp of laddism and before it was acknowledged as a media trend in the U.S.:

For many a white male (and not only him), the most attractive receptacle was the conservative counterforce. Conservatives apparently cared more for his freedom than liberals who, in the name of diversity, counseled discretion that he could easily mistake for self-censorship. He grew less likely to care about racist, sexist, or homophobic harassment, and cared more about being the victim of stereotyping himself. If he had started out with a tolerant disposition, he was dismayed to find that integration had become the goal that dared not speak its outdated name.... He was caught between his individualism, which wanted to be color-blind, and his social liberalism, which acknowledged a history of racial oppression. If he was not conflicted, he got the idea that everyone else got to speak bitterness but himself. If he was aggressive or self-pitying enough, he would complain anyway.

... *[I]n a world of interest groups, he felt that he had his, too* [emphasis added]. If the world was divided up by identity cards, he, too, would learn to define his discomfort as a stigma, identify with it, wear it with pride. ... He was ready to have conservatives name his malaise: victim of PC.<sup>80</sup>

Gitlin's prescient passage aptly describes the clear incentives for the emergence of the American lad as an identity formation and as a subject position constructed (by various names) across many media texts, eclipsing and even converting the erstwhile new man. Into the would-be "tolerant" and "conflicted" contingent on this spectrum falls the neo-yuppie niche of socially liberal young professionals discussed in Chapter 1 that scholar Ron Becker calls the "slumpy" psychographic. They comprised the 1990s Quality TV audience who relished *Seinfeld's* nervous

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<sup>80</sup> Gitlin, "Demonization of Political Correctness," 496–97.



outlook on difference (Jerry on homosexuality: “We’re not gay! Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”) and his aloof, alienated masculinity.<sup>81</sup> Laddism splintered off to form the surlier second strand in Gitlin’s historical narrative. Where they managed to meet in the “center” is in their mutual distaste and distrust for, hence rebelliousness against, political correctness.

Numerous cultural critics and social scientists sought to account for this profusion of anti-PC discourse in terms of a commonly remarked upon “crisis” in/of masculinity. In British culture, the term “blokelash,” coined by social and political scientist Angus Bancroft of Cardiff University, caught on in 1998 as a neologism to describe—and admonish—this PC brush-off. Bancroft asserts that “the lad is not a witty and ironic challenge to politically correct feminism, but an attempt to avoid its challenges, a cop-out.”<sup>82</sup> Dr. Bancroft’s profile of lad subjecthood as a *cloak* for male insecurity was taken up by major British newspapers including the *Daily Mail* and *Independent*, which backed his sociological study by denouncing the new lad as a façade for embittered, wounded men. The former reported that “in reality New Lads are vulnerable, wimpish, out of their depth and unable to take responsibility for their actions.”<sup>83</sup> *The Independent*’s Science Editor Steve Connor agreed that “the boisterous image of young men today is a smokescreen for males who cannot take the rise of feminism.”<sup>84</sup> American journalist

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<sup>81</sup> Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), chaps. 3 (“Network Narrowcasting and the Slumpy Demographic,” 80–107) and 6 (“‘We’re Not Gay!’: Heterosexuality and Gay-Themed Programming,” 189–213). See also 108–35 and his “Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties,” *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 2006): 184–215, describing a generation whose professional class was propagandized into multiculturalism through college diversity requirements and human resource departments at large corporations, but who wanted a multiculturalism that would not impinge on their neoliberal economic position.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Steve Connor, “New Lad Emerges as Old-Style Wimp,” *Independent* (London), September 7, 1998, 4, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 18, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> “Anxious Wimp Hiding Under Macho Image of a 90s New Lad,” *Daily Mail* (London), September 7, 1998, 33, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 18, 2011).

<sup>84</sup> S. Connor, “New Lad Emerges,” 4, with reference to the target readership of magazines *Loaded* and *FHM*.

David Mills of *The Washington Post* voiced the same critique earlier in the decade about irony-armored comic Andrew Clay's shock humor antagonizing feminists and the "sensitivity police," opining: "He seems terrifically insecure, and resolutely unwilling to confront it."<sup>85</sup>

Prominent feminist cultural critic Susan Faludi, having documented the cultural backlash against second-wave feminism in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), offers an American perspective on the masculinity "crisis" in her follow-up work *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999). She catalogues and critiques commercial social researchers' attempts to make sense and profit of new male identity formations during the 1990s:

Pollsters investigated the electoral habits of a new voting block they called "the Angry White Male" and researched the shopping choices of an emerging men-in-crisis demographic they had dubbed as early as the late eighties "the Contenders" or, less charitably, "the Change Resisters." Marketeers hastened to turn the crisis into entertainment and profits—from TV shows like *Men Behaving Badly* to sporting-goods sales of T-shirts that proclaimed DESTROY ALL GIRLS or WIFE BEATER (a retail phenomenon described in one newspaper headline as CASHING IN ON THE BAD BOY IMAGE) to advertising campaigns meant to salve the crisis-ridden male's wounds like Brut's aftershave slogan for the nineties, "Men Are Back!"<sup>86</sup>

Faludi's attempts to probe male vulnerability deemphasize the irony quite present in her examples from marketing in order to accentuate the common thread of misogyny, underscored as a defensive posture stemming from economic and cultural dispossession, that cuts across contemporary culture from politics to religion to entertainment to fashion. For Faludi, the advanced backlash occurs not because of feminism's incursions on male privilege, but rather because late capitalism could not deliver on the dreams it had promised to the American man.

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<sup>85</sup> See Chapter 1; David Mills, "The Devil and Andrew Clay," *Washington Post*, July 22, 1990, G1.

<sup>86</sup> Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1999), 6–7; emphasis (capitalization) in original.

Tim Adams writing for London's *The Observer* has suggested, in turn, that "laddism was also a very British response to the American-led backlash against feminism." He points out its rather skewed interpretation of the Men's Movement, pioneered by American activist Robert Bly, that roused men to recover primal drives and get in touch with the inner warrior. Adams opines:

Bly intended his movement to be a model for how men, diminished in his view by the women's movement, could find a way to regain their self-esteem. To British eyes, this apparently looked like an excuse for one long stag party, an endless skool disco, and a host of magazines devoted to the coarse glamour of being a bloke.<sup>87</sup>

The new laddism with its bad-boy attitude avoided soulful self-reflection at all costs, never taking itself as seriously as Bly's (often ridiculed) Men's Movement. While laddish media initially functioned to distract men from focusing on structural changes in the economy or engaging in a sustained meditation on healing a crisis in masculinity, it did start from a similar script of aggrievement. Framing multicultural and gender sensitivity as emasculating, the reconstituted laddism worked tirelessly to pin the plight of the modern man (British "bloke" or American "regular guy") on abuses wrought by feminism, multiculturalism, and political correctness.<sup>88</sup>

British journalist Sean O'Hagan is credited with officially coining the term "New Lad" in a 1991 article in *World Press Review*, titled "The New Man Bows to the New Lad: A Chameleon Has More Fun than a Wimp." Compared with Julie Burchill's profile of "the lad" in *The Face* five years prior, he described an entirely more versatile ("chameleon") figure who regards the New Man as a far-fetched fantasy, yet has learned to be notionally New Mannish

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<sup>87</sup> Adams, "New Kid on the Newsstand."

<sup>88</sup> The 1999 U.S. film *Magnolia*, directed/written by Paul Thomas Anderson, warrants mention as a strikingly ambivalent dramatization of lad masculinity in cinema. Tom Cruise plays motivational speaker Frank T. J. Mackey, a caricature of the Men's Movement gone wrong. This charismatic, narcissistic bad-boy leads men's empowerment seminars, coaching clients to deprogram socialized "sensitivity" and reclaim sexual dominance as their true nature (with tutorials like "How to turn that 'friend' into your sperm receptacle"). Unlike lad films listed above, *Magnolia* shines a critical light on rampant recidivist masculinity. The narrative problematizes Mackey's callous philosophy, yet simultaneously weaves a deeply sympathetic tale of the wounded male psyche underwritten by Robert Bly's theories.

when it serves him: “Basically, the New Lad aspires to New Man status when he is with women but reverts to Old Lad type when he is out with the boys.”<sup>89</sup> This is an educated, post-feminist player schooled in the art of seduction and performance, who “preys on” modern women’s hopeful expectations of a “sensitive,” “perceptive” partner before invariably disappointing his mark. This is not the cockney loudmouth or roguish rabble-rouser who would come to dominate Guy Ritchie’s films (though a likely consumer of such images), but rather a polished, “stylish” rake well versed in the yuppie codes of self-conscious masculinity. Thus, O’Hagan argued, “This half-(new) man, half-lad is a tentatively positive reaction to three decades of feminism.” With such a broad and cross-cultural definition of a protean type “molded by prolonged exposure to . . . the entire spectrum of postmodern media,” the New Lad becomes a category capable of stretching from suave early 1990s comics Rob Newman and David Baddiel of *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* all the way to U.S. sitcom *Two and a Half Men*’s playboy protagonist Charlie Harper in the 2000s, and aptly describes many media creations throughout the era in-between dominated by lad-resonant *Seinfeld*.

Having sketched the discursive terrain of laddism in broad strokes, let us turn now to formative, representative examples of this trend on American and British television, including *The Man Show* and *Men Behaving Badly*, with specific attention to structuring jokes and formal devices, including irony, that earned laddish comedy its reputation as “politically incorrect” television. The vision of American laddism promoted by Comedy Central’s *The Man Show* positions itself explicitly, if ironically, against the feminist left and other calls for sensitivity,

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<sup>89</sup> Sean O’Hagan, “The New Man Bows to the New Lad: A Chameleon Has More Fun than a Wimp,” *World Press Review* 38, no. 8 (August 1991), 28–29. All language quoted in this paragraph is from p. 28. Adams, “New Kid on the Newsstand,” claims, in what appears to be a factual error, that O’Hagan introduced the term in *Arena* in 1994.

proffering a sense of solidarity and sanctuary for men to enjoy the company of other men and indulge carnal appetites and cultural vices.

**“A Joyous Celebration of Chauvinism”: The Brotherhood of *The Man Show***

Why don't contemporary men rise up in protest against their betrayal? If they have experienced so many of the same injuries as women, the same humiliations, why don't they challenge the culture as women did? Why can't men seem to act?

— Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, 1999<sup>90</sup>

And now, girls jumping on trampolines!

— Adam Carolla, *The Man Show*, 1999

“Grab a beer, and drop your pants....” This invitation greeted viewers when they tuned into *The Man Show* to hear a chorus of butch, beery voices belting out the show's theme song. The lyrics capture the oppositional comic ethos and defiantly crass, bawdy definition of manhood the program nurtured:

Grab a beer, and drop your pants. Send your wife and kids to France.  
It's *The Man Show*!  
Quit your job, and light a fart. Yank your favorite private part.  
It's *The Man Show*!  
It's a place where men can come together.  
Look at the cans on this chick named Heather.  
Juggy girls on trampolines. Time to loosen those blue jeans.  
It's *The Man Show*!

*The Man Show* beckoned men to enter a sensitivity-free zone: a place where men are “liberated” from responsibility to nagging wives and children; a place where men can learn about the history of farting, laugh at “monkeys and midgets,” and marvel at “the fastest beer drinker in the world”; a place where men can frolic like Benny Hill did with buxom beauties; a place where the

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<sup>90</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed*, 603.

scantly-clad babes bounce on command for men's amusement; in sum, a place Al Bundy would call paradise.<sup>91</sup> Aside from "Girls Jumping on Trampolines" as the denouement to every episode, the only women featured regularly on the program were its Juggy Dance Squad, the *Man Show* equivalent of Hill's Angels. The "Juggies" cascaded onto the set in skimpy theme costumes each week (which ranged from Jungle Jane skins to cheerleader skirts to Catholic schoolgirl uniforms) to obligingly jiggle and silently serve up beer and caresses.

*The Man Show* flaunts a more avowedly anti-feminist position than much lad comedy. Adam Carolla and Jimmy Kimmel partnered to create the series after Kimmel was advised by industry insiders that in order to have a career in television he must "try and appeal to women more." Comedy Central's website boasted, "Unable to stomach the notion... Kimmel decided to do exactly the opposite and develop a show that would appeal to men like never before. A show about regular guys doing stuff guys like."<sup>92</sup> The twosome's "regular guy" shtick, emulated by their successors Joe Rogan and Doug Stanhope who took over in the fifth season, drew enthusiastic audiences in the coveted demographic of males 18-to-49 for six seasons in total and helped make *The Man Show* the epicenter of lad humor on U.S. television.

In the June 1999 series premiere, original co-hosts Kimmel and Carolla stood before Las Vegas's Hoover Dam to proclaim their anti-PC agenda:

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<sup>91</sup> The show delivered on the pilot's promise of "monkeys and midgets" with episodes like "Monkey Wife" (2.15, production no. 216), first aired December 10, 2000, and "Midget Porn" (5.7, prod. no. 518), September 28, 2003. *The Man Show* was no place for PC terms like "little people" that replaced "midget" in popular discourse. Before it landed at Comedy Central, Bill Carter's *Desperate Networks* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 80, reports, ABC executive Michael Davies, a Brit, pitched the "wild misogynistic comedy pilot called *The Man Show*" to his network with disastrous results that Davies says "essentially killed my career at ABC, it was such a high-profile miss."

<sup>92</sup> "Regular guy" Carolla, after nearly failing out of high school, went on to dabble in handiwork as a carpet layer, construction worker, and carpenter. He was also a boxer before finally finding fame giving sarcastic sex advice for *Loveline* on KROQ-FM radio in Los Angeles and later MTV. Kimmel also started local, at KROQ, serving a several-year stint as "Jimmy the Sports Guy" on the *Kevin and Bean Show* before going on to co-host Comedy Central's game show *Win Ben Stein's Money* and *The Man Show* simultaneously. The quotation and biographical details were obtained from Comedy Central's website, <http://www.comedycentral.com/manshow/home.shtml>, April 17, 2001.

We are building a dam, a dam to hold back the tidal wave of feminization that is flooding this country, a dam to stop the river of estrogen that is drowning us in political correctness, a dam to urinate off of when we're really drunk. We call this dam *The Man Show*.<sup>93</sup>

They stated their mission to rescue television from “feminizing” icons like Rosie O’Donnell, FOX’s *Ally McBeal*, the hosts of ABC daytime talk show *The View*, and *Man Show* public enemy number one, Oprah Winfrey: “We are here today to reclaim the airwaves, to take back the medium *we* [men] invented!” Met with explosive cheers from their studio audience, the comedian-hosts accused the daytime diva of “brainwashing” America’s women, *their* women:

She tells them what to read, what to eat, what to do.... We’re the ones that are supposed to be telling them what to do, right? This Oprah needs to do a little less brainwashing, and a little more sock washing!

Carolla and Kimmel demanded to know: whatever happened to the simpler days of *Charlie’s Angels*, *Hogan’s Heroes*, and *Starsky and Hutch*? “We want to return to that era, and that is what this show will be,” they pledged, “a joyous celebration of chauvinism.”

Like other lad comedies, *The Man Show* did not play with a plurality of masculinities. The show is a monument to the monolithic Man, using humor to patch over the fissures wrought by “new” masculinities of the 1980s and 1990s and celebrate a cohesive crudeness. While the show succeeded in using humor to open a space for discussing the meanings of masculinity, that conversation was narrow, exclusionary, and reactionary by design. With the program’s stated comic mission being to provide a fortress and forge a united front against the flood of “feminization,” the central joke rests on this preposterous yet affectively powerful conceit of one final holdout on TV where men’s tastes still count: *the* show for the all-but-forgotten adult male demographic.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *The Man Show* from Jackhole Productions, created by Jimmy Kimmel, Daniel Kellison, and Adam Carolla. “Oprahization,” episode 1.1, first aired June 16, 1999, on Comedy Central.

<sup>94</sup> *Time* observed of the network Spike TV, likewise, that “while young men are not exactly underserved by TV (Comedy Central? *Two* ESPNs?), Spike may let them believe they are.” Poniewozik, “What Do Men Want?” 62.



Figures 2.5a–b. *Left*: Fraternalizing from La-Z-boy chairs on their “man cave” set, schlub comics Carolla and Kimmel toast the fastest beer drinker in the world. *Right*: Juggies rouse the studio audience. “Oprahization,” *The Man Show*, originally aired June 16, 1999, on Comedy Central.

The comic premise is not only that “regular guys” and “stuff guys like” are being driven off the TV dial, but also that men are denied communal spaces where they “can come together.”

This lamentation of men’s lost rituals in a (post)modern world perhaps resonated with the core demographic partly because it had some basis in lived experience. Men’s Movement leaders in the 1990s like Robert Bly, after all, pursued similar themes (though entirely without irony) with the invention of “Wild Man” retreats and “man caves.” Bly attributed men’s suffering to the suppression of their wild, unchanging, true nature and “the disappearance of male initiating rites in our culture.”<sup>95</sup> *The Man Show* tapped directly, if irreverently, into these same potent discourses of masculinity-in-crisis: on the one hand, the sense of primal truths and desires being betrayed by civilized society and imprisoned behind performances of the “tamed” man in his suit and tie (as Bly argued), and at the same time, anger over the fading status of fraternal society as a cost of accommodating more “feminized” culture. Around the turn of the twentieth century, according to historian David Beito, at least one-third of American men aged twenty and over

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1990), cover note.



were affiliated with some sort of lodge or fraternal order like the Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, or Ancient Order of United Workmen.<sup>96</sup> Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, adds that such groups welcomed both middle- and working-class initiates, offering “social solidarity and ritual.”<sup>97</sup> For Putnam, TV is a contributing factor in the “collapse” of such community in contemporary life. Kimmel and Carolla held out the promise that TV could give a little of that back, that it could compensate for the loss of male homosocial spaces by promoting a virtual fraternal society for male viewers with its own rituals, chants, in-jokes, and a shared ironic code.

“No, Ma’am!”

Women, can’t live with them.... The end.

— Al Hercules Bundy, 1994<sup>98</sup>

Kimmel and Carolla’s lodge-style men’s club takes advantage of the dynamic stand-up/sketch comedy format, featuring interaction with an on-camera live studio audience, to recapture and render more “real” the ironic legacy of *Married... With Children*’s fictional fraternal club NO MA’AM, from the many memorable themed episodes (over a dozen) in which Al Bundy and his blue-collar buddies (and white-collar neighbor) organized to protest their oppression by women, crusade for beer, baseball, and anti-feminism, and frequent the “nudie bar.”<sup>99</sup> If a

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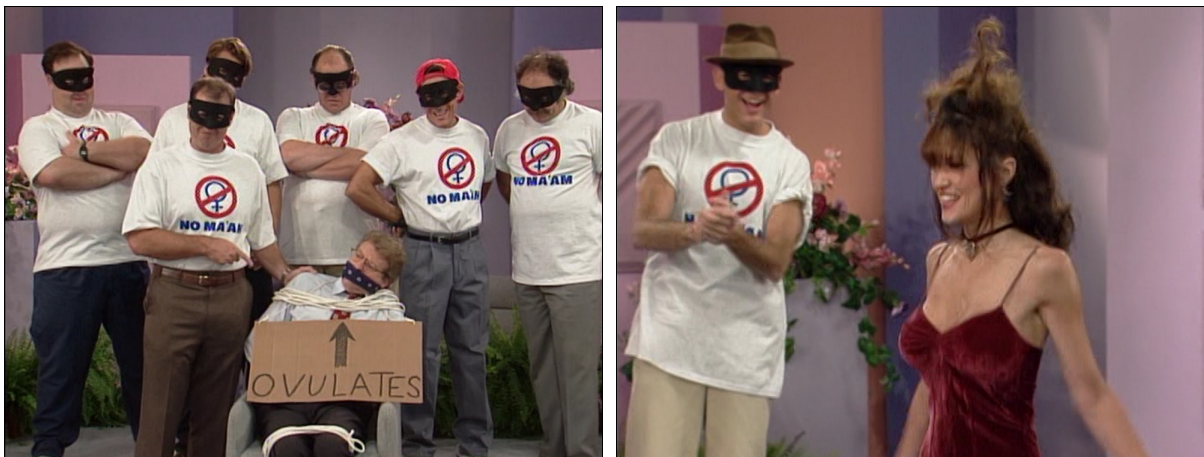
<sup>96</sup> David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000), cited in Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 389.

<sup>97</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 389.

<sup>98</sup> *Married... With Children*, “Get Outta Dodge,” 8.18, written by Mark Driscoll, February 20, 1994, on FOX.

<sup>99</sup> Al Bundy founded NO MA’AM (National Organization of Men Against Amazonian Masterhood) with his friends in *Married... With Children*, “No Ma’am,” episode 8.9, first broadcast November 14, 1993, by FOX. The organization was featured in multiple episodes through spring 1997, spanning the last four seasons. NO MA’AM’s and Al’s odes in praise of the Jiggly Room club (e.g., “Hooters, hooters, yum, yum, yum. Hooters, hooters on a girl that’s dumb.”) are echoed by *Man Show* drinking song culture (naughty rhyming songs like “I know a girl from ol’ Kentucky, she can’t cook but she can...” and the show’s chanted toast “Zicke, Zacke, Zicke, Zacke, Hoi, Hoi, Hoi!”).

laugh track invites viewers to imagine we are laughing socially with others from the privacy of our homes, *The Man Show*'s elimination of any "fourth wall" device to bring the studio audience (which, significantly, does include some women) directly into in the activity of the set magnifies that effect, and may strengthen the sense of audience cohesion and inclusion in a like-minded community engaged in the "group sport" of irony.<sup>100</sup> In this instance, the comedy constructs a participatory audience on-screen and by implication at home that gets to embrace and enact a version of operation NO MA'AM, which at one point was entirely ironic and fictive, and cathect to this organized brotherhood and its politics through *The Man Show*.



Figures 2.6a–b. *Left*: NO MA'AM infiltrates daytime talk show *The Masculine Feminist* and threatens to perform a "sexorcism" on host/hostage Jerry Springer (played by himself) unless women stop blaming men and meet their demands. *Right*: NO MA'AM's ideal working woman, "Bubbles Double-D," taking questions from the group's members in the audience, is asked, "Would you jump up and down?" "No Ma'am," *Married... With Children*, aired November 14, 1993, on FOX.

*Married... With Children* itself rapidly developed into a proto-text for American laddish comedy in the early 1990s and moreover provided the not-so-thin edge of the wedge for anti-PC sitcoms on network television, as an insurgent text that premiered at the zenith of the "new man."

<sup>100</sup> As television theorist Rick Altman argues in "Television Sound," in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 575–76, the laughter and applause of an "internal audience" (live in the studio) affords the viewer at home a sense of being closer to the televised spectacle/event. The phrase "group sport" is from Rudnick and Andersen, "Irony Epidemic," 98.

Nevertheless, that series pursued a far more satirical (if somewhat unstable) irony in its initial seasons by comparison, when Al Bundy emerged nursing his nostalgia for the Good Ol' Days of TV westerns, golden oldies, and men-only bowling leagues. He pined for traditional gender roles, as with this rant to neighbor Steve from the show's fourth episode in 1987 inflected with a hint of pathos:

Oh sure, our rights are not important. Anything a woman says is fine with us. Geez, when did men become such losers? It used to be so great to be a man. Women were there to please us. They'd look after the kids, and we'd go out and have a good time. That's the *natural order* of things. [audience laughter]<sup>101</sup>

His speech would not be out of place on *The Man Show*, but rather than representing an outright "celebration of chauvinism," the sitcom subjected its antihero and his worldview to a degree of sustained mockery and humiliation. The text marked Bundy as a problematic, regressive figure (for instance, the king of "trash TV" Jerry Springer rebukes Al in NO MA'AM's inaugural episode: "And where are you calling from, Sir, 1952?"). By several seasons into its run, as the sitcom "went organic" and settled into its niche, it largely abandoned a consistent air of critique to pursue the sheer revelry in anti-PC statements and standpoints for their own sake.

The cumulative effect of raucous, approving studio laughter helped tip the comedy tonally away from the show's early claims on being reflexive satire, in which representations of "Al's unabashed sexism" amounted to a burlesque of chauvinism.<sup>102</sup> Though certainly less "participatory" than *The Man Show*, *Married... With Children*'s studio laugh track is notable for its loud and enthusiastic cheering, atypical for multi-camera studio sitcom, that greeted the cast and punctuated character dialogue. The result was a heavily perforated "fourth wall" and

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<sup>101</sup> *Married... With Children*, "Whose Room Is It Anyway?" episode 1.4 (production no. 106), written by Marcy Vosburgh and Sandy Sprung and directed by Zane Buzby, first aired April 26, 1987, on FOX.

<sup>102</sup> Description from Steve Weinstein, "'Married'... With Controversy: Stars Defend Sitcom That's Getting Ratings," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1989, E12. See Chapter 1.

exaggerated theatricality, as I noted in Chapter 1, creating at times an almost call-and-response dynamic between the live audience and performers on the set. This contributed to Al Bundy's recoding over time as a beloved blue-collar hero and spokesman for anti-PC masculinity. The same attitudes that led contemporary audiences to embrace the backward-looking Al Bundy (like Archie Bunker before him, not foremost as a satire on sexism and un-evolved thinking but a working man's man or a man of "the people") are projected by *The Man Show* onto its target audience, albeit still under the veneer of irony.

### *Live Rude Boys*

*The Man Show's* devotion to pre-PC "jiggle television" of the 1970s—its quest to reinstate "Charlie and his Angels, Hogan and his Heroes, Starsky and his Hutch"—mirrored the British new lad's preoccupation with classic TV of his childhood and with intertextual allusion. For example, the program's second season featured spoofs like "Antique Porn Show" and reenacted scenes from *Porky's* and *The Benny Hill Show*.<sup>103</sup> I have suggested that the new lads' non-narrative comedy formats through their blend of pastiche and nostalgia not only tapped into the wider cultural sway of seventies revivalism (popular with the Generation X ironist), affirming viewers' postmodern competencies and a sense of collective cultural memory, but also fetishized community and "liveness." The comedians were not exactly in "character" but ostensibly being themselves, engaging guests and eliciting real laughter (not "canned") and group participation from studio audiences. Texts combined elements of postmodernism (e.g., participation, intertextuality, irony) with prerogatives of modernism (opting for hierarchy over anarchy, centering over de-centering, and the phallic over androgyny or blurring the gender

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<sup>103</sup> The 2000 episode "Monkey Wife" cited above was a Benny Hill tribute; "Antique Porn Show," episode 2.18 (prod. no. 220), first aired January 14, 2001; and "Porky's," episode 2.24 (prod. no. 224), first aired March 4, 2001.

binary).<sup>104</sup> To the extent that programs like *The Man Show*, or Britain's remarkably stylistically similar *Fantasy Football League*, were staking a position about what masculinity is and should be, the markers they bore of liveness, simplicity, and spontaneity shored up claims to authenticity.

Sketch/variety hybrids like *The Man Show* and *Fantasy Football League* that parodically appropriated "talk" formats garnered some truth effects by opting for an informal, "low tech" aesthetic. Both shows achieved roughly the feel of a cable public access program taped in your home basement den or bachelor flat.<sup>105</sup> Fiske argues that society is inclined to ascribe authenticity to those with "limited power (economic, social, discursive)" and thus to imagine "the blue collar in closer proximity to a 'real' reality than the white." He sees this articulation of "low" art to "high authenticity" contributing to the popularity of "a low-tech mode of representation" in much contemporary media in the era of "reality" television.<sup>106</sup> *The Man Show* constructs a *symbolically* blue-collar, populist, anti-elitist space through style and iconography (like Baddiel and Skinner, they need not literally be without economic power), while also eschewing cerebral and conceptual humor in favor of gags about life's concrete, physical pleasures: beer, food, sex. True to Pierre Bourdieu's category of "popular" entertainment, the comedy delights in the material world, rejecting "bourgeois" culture that values a transcendent intellectual experience and puts sense above sensation.<sup>107</sup> Also in keeping with Bourdieu's theorization of the popular,

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<sup>104</sup> See Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 43, Table 1.1 "Schematic Differences Between Modernism and Post-modernism," from Ihab Hassan, "The Culture of Postmodernism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 123–24.

<sup>105</sup> Though their fetish of choice was the sports hero instead of the female bosom, Baddiel and Skinner cultivated a comparable on-set fraternalism. They, too, downplayed affluence and emphasized casual set design and decor, with mates seated side by side presenting scripted chat supplemented with real-time and cut-away comedy sketches, and "activated" their audience (for example, prompting the studio to shout in unison during certain video clips).

<sup>106</sup> John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 127.

<sup>107</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 485–500.

the text breaks down the divide between spectator and participant. On the set each week, Carolla and Kimmel shared a beer with their studio audience. Viewers at home, up to a point, were given a taste of this intimacy, no longer asked to play the Peeping Tom peering covertly through the invisible “fourth wall” of the set to gaze at beautiful women (like Kelly Bundy) on the screen. *The Man Show* sought to redraw the lines of voyeurism, aligning the gaze of camera, cast, and audience (on set and at home) as Carolla and Kimmel invited eager voyeurs to join with them in ogling their “girls jumping on trampolines.”

Moreover, *The Man Show*'s low-budget look served the central comic conceit that women had robbed men of their rightful social standing, co-opting the airwaves and leaving men this one meager corner of the spectrum—Oprah had banished the boys to their proverbial room. It was no accident that the *Man Show* stage was “domestic” space, arranged not like a conventional talk program nor with the proscenium setup of variety shows but a cross between a dad's den and his teenage son's dorm room decorated with sport memorabilia and “mudflap girls.” This was an environment tailored to reflect the liminal masculinity, suspended between boyhood and adulthood, that the show valorized. If a man's home is his castle, his easy chair is his throne. As Archie Bunker had his armchair, Al Bundy his saggy seventies-era sofa, and Steve Dallas's *Bloom County* cohort their mythical Men's Couch in the meadow to cavort in their underwear, so too did Carolla and Kimmel have their *Man Show* La-Z-boys and barstools.

From these seats of reclaimed power, they issued their proclamations and disingenuous advice when answering questions such as, “What's the best way to tell my girlfriend I'm cheating?” TV audiences first encountered Carolla giving guidance, glibly, about actual sexual and relationship problems on MTV's *Loveline*. On *The Man Show*, Carolla perverts his own star persona as amateur sex therapist, handing out cynical “advice” and insults. Modeling the show's

ideal of manhood, which envies the televisual reign of the Fifties TV patriarch but shuns the seriousness and accountability that comes with that social role, Carolla and Kimmel honed the comic persona of the “cool” but “irresponsible” guy in extended adolescence, who will teach you to be a successful slacker, practical joker, or pickup artist. At its core, laddism as a gendered discourse seeks to preserve the social privileges and pleasures that traditional patriarchy afforded men while simultaneously rejecting the implied terms of that power, essentially breaking the patriarchal social contract that includes ideas such as familial and civic duty, replacing responsibility with the absolute freedoms associated with perpetual bachelorhood.<sup>108</sup>

*The Man Show*'s version of “authentic” masculine identity and culture upheld laddism's (and *Married... With Children*'s) implied rivalry with established representations of the mythic TV Dad of domestic comedies from *The Cosby Show* to *Full House* (ABC, 1987–95). The beer-swilling wisenheimer trapped in puberty is *The Man Show*'s answer to the tea-sipping wise father flanked by his responsibilities to family and career. Laddish comedy of this period thus presented men with a dubious choice between the self-serving, shallow lech and the other-directed, “feminized,” and ridiculed new man. Later chapters will explore variations on the new lad archetype as television reconfigured and matured the archetypal lad as a devoted husband and father while still laying claim to a sense of bacheloresque liberty and of rebellious fraternity.

At the same time as new lad television often invoked a sense of liveness and the real, a parallel trope in American laddism, significantly, has involved the use of non-naturalistic formats to suggest heightened ironic distance. In particular, puppets, cartoons for adults, and fictional children (as proxies for comedy writers) have played a substantial role in softening the “edge”

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<sup>108</sup> Carolla's personal philosophy captures the libertarian ethos that underpins laddism: “My feeling is this whole country is founded on the principle of ‘if you are not hurting anyone, and you're not fucking with someone else's shit, and you are paying your taxes, you should be able to just do what you want to do.’ It's the freedom and the independence.” Quoted in <http://standupcomedyportal.com/quotes/Adam-Carolla> (accessed June 1, 2012).

of laddish discourse on U.S. television. With puppet comedies such as Comedy Central's *Crank Yankers* (2002–05, 2007) from the creators of *The Man Show*, the WB's *Unhappily Ever After* (a *Married... With Children* clone, 1995–99), and FOX's *Greg the Bunny* (2002, 2005–06), preachers of felt and foam were licensed to speak particular types of masculine truth (see figs. 2.7 and 2.8).



Figures 2.7 and 2.8. *Left*: After failed family man Jack Malloy's (Geoffrey Pierson) wife banishes him to the basement, his alter ego "Mr. Floppy" (gruffly voiced by Bob Goldthwait) coaches him to flee responsibility and reclaim his manhood. "Pilot," *Unhappily Ever After*, originally aired January 11, 1995, on the WB. *Right*: The friendly felted folk of Yankerville, USA, invite you to laugh "at the expense of others." *Crank Yankers*, premiered June 2, 2002, on Comedy Central.

Somewhat differently, in the cartoon iterations such as USA's *Duckman: Private Dick/Family Man*, Spike's *Gary the Rat*, and FX's *Archer* (satirical series whose titular lad characters are voiced, respectively, by *Seinfeld* co-star Jason Alexander, *Frasier*'s Kelsey Grammer, and comic H. Jon Benjamin), stories could achieve a sharper break with reality while also claiming a greater libidinal realism and illustrating an unrestrained male id. Finally, in the case of imagined children, adult-oriented cartoons may additionally inscribe frank and free-wheeling self-centeredness as a fact of nature, or male nature, and portray antisocial behavior as a truth ("out of the mouths of babes") about humanity. Examples include truculent toddler Stewie Griffin on FOX's *Family Guy*, and on Comedy Central the "foul-mouthed" boys of *South Park*



and of *Shorties Watchin' Shorties* (2004), an animated clip show of (mostly male) stand-up comedy routines like Dane Cook's "Don't Cheat on Your Girl" and Bill Burr's "The Anti-Woman Show" linked by scenes of two profanity spewing lad babies (voiced by Nick DiPaolo and Patrice O'Neal) watching from their couch. In this and other masculinist comedian forums of the early 2000s like *Crank Yankers* and *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* (2002–04), Comedy Central painted laddism with a broader racial and ethnic brush.

On *Crank Yankers*, Carolla and Kimmel and various featured comedians provided the voices for puppets making prank calls to unwitting members of the public (rendered as puppets), breaching barriers between fiction and reality. An opening statement assured that the calls were all "real." Like *The Man Show*, the title song again promised community and sport in irony:

Come one, come all, 'cause we're havin' a ball.  
 We're just makin' some calls to strangers.  
 Come one, come all. You can say what you want.  
 And they'll never know if you're deranged... or what.

But it doesn't really matter. (No, it doesn't really matter.)  
 'Cause we'll all be doubled over with laughter  
 At the expense of others (... maybe even your mother).  
 Won't you join the crank yankers tonight?

These lyrics double as a philosophy about irony as an in-group practice that revels in the inability of those who are not in on the joke to comprehend the antics of the ironist. That formula, usually implicit but here literalized, entails laughter at the expense of outsiders we presume won't "get it." Moreover, these lines are an apt description of post-PC, postmodern irony as license to "say what you want" because meaning "doesn't really matter." Collectively, these antirealist strains of laddish comedies, shirking any claim to being the comedy of consequence or relevance, are emblematic of a genre of humor critics deemed "low" or "adolescent."

### The Bawdy and the Body in Anti-PC Comedy

By the end of the 1990s, comedy more broadly had become ensnared in the debates over the deficiencies of “PC” and its cultural costs. One strand of argument blamed political correctness itself (rather than the backlash against it) for ushering in an era of vulgar, lowbrow, “tasteless” comedy in western culture by limiting the kinds of material one could joke about to the most universal of themes: body gags. At the same time, many critics (progressive and conservative) painted a bleak picture of Hollywood product “dumbing down” media audiences with scatological humor appealing to the public’s basest impulses. American columnist Kent Williams in 2000 declared, “There’s no denying that the PC debate has had an effect, potty humor being the one thing that everybody can still laugh at.”<sup>109</sup> *Time* film critic Richard Schickel the same year complained of Hollywood’s “smug” and “lazy” adolescent humor spawned by “the ironic ideal.”<sup>110</sup> In this line of criticism, the prime offenders on both sides of the Atlantic were movies and programs rife with physical humor, including cartoonish or “childish” elements but especially gross-out humor, such as the Farrelly Brothers’ *Dumb & Dumber* (1994) and other Jim Carrey slapstick movies, MTV’s *Jackass*, and the focus of Chapter 5, Comedy Central’s shock-toon *South Park*.

Essayist Peter Smith in *Life* magazine was another who sought to explain an upsurge of silly and sick humor as an inevitable consequence of enforced multicultural sensitivities, claiming that the imperative to be PC had displaced political comedy with physical comedy. Political correctness, he averred, had fostered an anti-intellectual comedic climate where it was “not safe” to dabble in the “ethnic or political humor” that often distinguishes topical satire. Instead, he believed, the culture cried out for physical comedy because it is more universally

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<sup>109</sup> Kent Williams, “Gross National Product,” *The Isthmus* (Madison, Wis.), June 30, 2000, 18.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Schickel, “Can Irony Kill Comedy?” review of *What Planet Are You From?* (Columbia Pictures, 2000), written by and starring Garry Shandling, *Time* 155, no. 9 (March 6, 2000): 72. See also my Introduction.

understood and accepted than cerebral satire. Smith concluded that if comedies “offer something to offend everybody, they will offend no one in particular—and, along the way, convulse quite a few.”<sup>111</sup> The implication that bodily humor is definitionally apolitical is contradicted by a number of major humor theorists, particularly Bakhtin, whose theory of the carnivalesque, as discussed elsewhere in this work, sees radical potential in bodily excess and the comic-grotesque.<sup>112</sup> Pulling against both of these positions, British feminist film theorist Nicole Matthews offers a more damning political critique approaching Hollywood’s new regime of “sophomoric” comedies as *hegemonic* texts. She links a rise in body and “bathroom” humor not to political correctness, but on the contrary, argues (sweepingly but often persuasively) that a cultural fascination with physical comedy throughout the 1980s and 1990s had accommodated the ascendancy of New Right cultural policy and signaled the saturation of popular culture with neoconservative ideologies of gender, agency, and individualism.<sup>113</sup>

Whether or not one accepts the view that political correctness prompted a revival of physical and schoolyard comedy, or that these forms should be viewed as de-politicized and universal, there is no question that the onset of laddism and the anti-PC push in the 1990s escalated the preoccupation with the body and the bawdy. “Lad” in British culture also carries certain undeniable connotations of childhood or adolescence (“when I was a lad”) and,

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<sup>111</sup> Peter J. Smith, “Essay,” *Life* 23, no. 4 (April 2000): 86. His examples include Farrelly Brothers films *There’s Something About Mary* (1998) and *Me, Myself & Irene* (2000), as salutes to slapstick screen comedies of yesteryear. This argument echoed those defending TV comedies (like the ones above) billed as “equal opportunity offenders.” Chapter 5 discusses particular notions of “political incorrectness” that factor into this discursive positioning of programs like *South Park*.

<sup>112</sup> Smith’s basic point that body humor is harder to pin down to a specific politics is in fact somewhat borne out by Bakhtin’s theory of carnival’s “leveling” of social hierarchy, but such transgression is political for Bakhtin. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>113</sup> Nicole Matthews, *Comic Politics: Gender in Hollywood Comedy after the New Right* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), especially 41–47. Critiquing an extensive sampling of comedian comedies, she sees “childish” humor (*The Naked Gun* series, *Ace Ventura* films, *Austin Powers*), along with self-reflexivity and the “smart-ass star” (*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, *Wayne’s World*), evidencing Hollywood’s complicity with a New Right agenda.

accordingly, in this movement the lad subject position reclaims for grown men a defiant sense of puerility liberated from the constraints of adult society. Lad comedy that revels in physicality may bear many of the markers of postmodern carnival, which in television culture as Fiske tells us is “characterized by laughter, by excessiveness (particularly of the body and bodily functions), by bad taste and offensiveness, and by degradation.”<sup>114</sup> Laddish offense indeed promotes a comedy of celebratory degradation and excess. However, I maintain, Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory is ultimately ill-matched or insufficient as a primary explanatory schema for the dynamic of oppositional yet hegemonic impulses in laddish comedy. Laddism largely resists social leveling or the abdication of power, as I have argued, while aiming to be antithetical and even hostile to an emergent “goodie-goodie” PC politics, defying affective and political identities attributed or assigned to the sensitive, cultured and domesticated, metropolitan/cosmopolitan “new man.”

### *Benny Hill's Revenge*

As journalists alternately rhapsodized about the “new lad” and penned eulogies for the “new man,” they regularly acknowledged these models of masculinity as defining others in media and society. For instance, *Radio Times* contributor Richard Johnson in 1995 quipped:

The New Man promised so much. All day he would raise his consciousness; all night he would smile that fennel toothpaste smile and empathise with his partner's period pains. He would end centuries of sex war and gender inequality by rejecting the masculine side of his nature and embracing the feminine—but we got bored with his earnestness....

Meet the new social phenomenon, the New Lad, who embraces a bit of feminine every chance he gets. In his search for close encounters of the bird kind he has escaped the confines of the lounge bar and is currently running amok in the world of television sitcom.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> John Fiske, “Carnival and Style,” chap. 13 of *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1987; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 241.

<sup>115</sup> Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” 6.

The rhetoric of laddism adopted a platform of hedonism in retaliation against what scholar John Beynon calls the “new man-as-nurturer” strand of discourse infusing media since the 1980s.<sup>116</sup>

Commenting on the liberating ethos of *Men Behaving Badly*, the sitcom at the forefront of this trend, television critic Mark Lewisohn in his encyclopedic *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* contrasts these two supposedly diametrically opposed models of masculinity as follows:

The antidote to all that 1980s talk of the New Man, *MBB* has made the New Lad into a *cause célèbre*, crystallising “traditional” male behaviour that had never really gone away but had certainly been out of vogue for a while. To be what the media categorised as a New Man, you had to care and share with your partner, and children if you had them, be responsible and recognise your place in the home and the community. To be a New Lad meant saying “bollocks” to all of that, being self-centred, rude, crude and boorish, getting pissed on beer, swearing, bragging, belching, farting, fantasising, spewing and publicly rearranging the position of your genitals.<sup>117</sup>

As Johnson’s and Lewisohn’s declarations for *Radio Times* indicate, to the extent that discursive constructions of laddism did set it in contrast to feminism in British media, this tension was framed foremost as a struggle between competing forms of masculinity, with the new lad being defined as distinct from the new man (often framed as a capitulation to feminism) and his presumed PC proclivities. As Sean O’Hagan wrote in his 1991 piece first greeting the “New Lad” as a cunning response to feminism, “A chameleon has more fun than a wimp.”<sup>118</sup> Despite O’Hagan’s emphasis on the complex psychology and skillful maneuvering of this alternately perceptive and predatory social creature, the dominant definitions would come to favor a fairly one-dimensional picture of the “rude, crude, and boorish” new lad.

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<sup>116</sup> John Beynon, “The Commercialization of Masculinities: From the ‘New Man’ to the ‘New Lad,’” chap. 5 of *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 2002), 98–121, especially 100–1.

<sup>117</sup> Mark Lewisohn, “Men Behaving Badly,” in *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 1998), 431.

<sup>118</sup> O’Hagan, “New Man Bows to the New Lad,” 28.

Nevertheless, the new laddism both as a movement and category of media representations was at the outset and would remain multi-faceted and fraught with contradictions. The new lad school of comedy sits at the intersection of competing comedic traditions, just as it straddles postmodern and essentialist paradigms, and consequently it has ambivalent loyalties. Moreover, innovation in the comedy business takes the form of cycles and generational struggles as newer comics and writers define themselves against the preceding fashions, and this is certainly evident with the laddist turn in British stand-up and television comedy. The social and industrial imperatives for anti-PC, masculinist ironic comedy are both accentuated and complicated by this generational comedic struggle. Locating laddism as an attitudinal thrust not bounded by any one format or genre requires taking stock of significant continuities and points of departure from existing comic traditions that set the new lad school of comedy apart in the 1990s.

*“Saying ‘Bollocks’ to All of That”: New Lad Comedy Versus New Wave Comedy*

When defining the new lad as the antithesis of the new man, critics emphasized the lad’s lewdness, vulgarity, violence, immaturity, self-indulgence, and other displays of masculine excess such as those elaborated above by *Radio Times* humor historian Mark Lewisohn. On U.S. television, similarly, Rushkoff’s narration for “The Merchants of Cool” disapprovingly characterized “the lads of *The Man Show*” and other “mooks” manufactured for the youth market as “crude, loud, obnoxious, and in-your-face.” The opposition between the anti-“PC” versus “PC” comedians becomes less clear-cut, however, when juxtaposing the new lads of comedy with the ostentatiously crude, hostile, and puerile fictive worlds of male-centered 1980s and 1990s alternative comedy programs like the BBC’s *The Young Ones* (1982–84), *Filthy Rich & Catflap* (1987), and *Bottom* (1991–95), and their sister texts, ITV’s *Girls on Top* (1985–86) and the BBC’s *French & Saunders* (six seasons and assorted specials spanning 1987–2009) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (original run

1992–96, with encore series 2001–04 and anniversary specials 2011–12). Lewisohn celebrates *The Young Ones* and “alternative” comedy in general as “swaggeringly, staggeringly, joyously infantile” and rude.<sup>119</sup> London’s *Independent* describes the “toilet humor” of *Bottom*, likewise, as “childish and obsessed with bodily functions.”<sup>120</sup> These accounts suggest puerile pleasures that at first glance may seem to be of a piece with those ultimately attributed to lad texts.

Some critics perceived new lad humor as an offshoot of this comedy movement launched at the outset of the 1980s (alongside the new style press) and popularized by such “crude” and “nasty” comics as Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Alexei Sayle (shown in figs. 2.1a–c) credited with creating and defining early alternative comedy. New lad comics seemed at first to stem from this same alternative comedy boom, notorious (at least in Britain) for an aggressive anti-elitism and preoccupation with bodily emissions, drinking, swearing, rude gestures, and slapstick violence. As the trend took off, the next wave of alternative (or “post-alternative”) comedy coincided and converged with the laddist turn, leading humor critic Julian Hall to characterize Frank Skinner’s “grossout” tactics as a “New Lad fusion of mainstream and alternative comedy.”<sup>121</sup> However, the first generation of alternative comedians were (and continued to be) repeatedly framed by the press as a political/aesthetic movement expressing an anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-conservative cultural and gender politics. Despite the surface similarities of fart gags and ribald jokes, therefore, lad humor was itself a kind of counterstroke, in turn, denigrating and even halting the momentum of this alternative comedy movement noted for a more subversive postmodern ethos and progressive politics.

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<sup>119</sup> Lewisohn, “The Young Ones,” *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*, 739.

<sup>120</sup> Ben Thompson, “Comedy: Toilet Humour Puts Bums on Seats,” *Independent* (London), October 1, 1995, 15, commends *Bottom*’s live “Big Number Two Tour” for “authentic tastelessness” and embrace of the “infantile.”

<sup>121</sup> Julian Hall, “Top Ten Comedians Working Today,” *Independent*, June 1, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/arts-books/top-ten-comedians-working-today-1694128.html> (accessed June 19, 2012).

Several factors worked to thrust the alternative comedians increasingly into an unfolding public discourse on political correctness by the 1990s. But it may first bear asking, how did the “anarchistic” alternative comedies, obsessed with talk of farting, wanking, bottoms, and boozing, and depicting unrepentantly boorish behavior, belong to an “anti-sexist” and “progressive” programming trend? The comics had earned this reputation by making Thatcherism the ongoing butt of jokes throughout the 1980s.<sup>122</sup> This generation of comedians had also expressly represented themselves as a conscious “alternative,” not only to traditional working men’s comedy club acts that typically consisted of formulaic, contemptuous jokes about mothers-in-law, wives, and foreigners, but also to Benny Hill’s light-heartedly lecherous brand of slapstick humor objectifying women—in short, the original lads of comedy. As humor historian Roger Wilmut describes, the practitioners of this new wave comedy set out to “avoid the easy but offensive laugh,” and they especially rejected “the easy techniques of racist or sexist jokes on which so many mainstream television and club comics rely.”<sup>123</sup> Stand-up comic Ben Elton (co-writer of *The Young Ones* and *Blackadder*), in particular, became perhaps Britain’s most vocal comic advocate of reformed masculinity, and was chided accordingly by journalists and lad-friendly comedians, in response to his stand-up material targeting male sexism and calling for greater sensitivity to women as romantic partners and human beings. In 1992, the same year *Men Behaving Badly* premiered, select members of the press scolded this new man’s comic for

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<sup>122</sup> John Connor in *Comics: A Decade at the Assembly Rooms* (London: Papermac, 1990) points out that the Thatcher economy inadvertently underwrote the rise of alternative cabaret comics who savaged her policies. Under Thatcherism, stand-up comedy rapidly relocated from an eccentric avocation supported in a few isolated nightspots to a profitable profession at the center of a thriving commercial industry: “Ironically alternative cabaret fitted right into the Thatcherite ethos—you really could get on a bike, then get on a stage and run your own business” (81).

<sup>123</sup> Roger Wilmut, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from The Comedy Store to Saturday Live* (London: Methuen, 1989), xiii. The classic *Carry On* film series also exemplified the sexualized slapstick and double entendre resisted by the alternative comedians (U.S. TV had its tamer equivalent in red-neck jiggle TV show *Hee Haw*). Contemporary “traditional” acts still going for the offensive laugh in the 1980s and 1990s included Bernard Manning, Jim Davison, and Roy “Chubby” Brown (an X-rated Benny Hill).



casting a critical light on old lad Benny Hill or even driving him to an early grave. One newspaper ran the headline, “Ranting Ben Elton and his po-faced pals branded Benny ‘sexist.’” Another fumed, “Benny was a shy genius betrayed by Leftie killjoys.”<sup>124</sup>

Beyond “leftie” jokes, alternative comedy programming of the 1980s and into the 1990s pushed back against Thatcherism’s politics of cultural insularity and exclusion through its subversive use of the comic-grotesque to denaturalize social scripts of national superiority and unity. The alternative situation and sketch comedies of that era were not designed to deliver an intellectual critique of sexism, racism, and class divisions; rather, they utilized vulgarity and the transgressive pleasures of Rabelaisian abasement to render absurd the social hierarchy and any pretensions to normalcy. Warring class positions, gender codes, and social “tribes” were mercilessly buffooned, subjecting all social categories of identity equally to the carnival impulses of unbridled laughter, bodily excess, bad taste, and degradation. Indeed, the raw and “lowbrow” spaces of alternative texts regularly brought together the Oxbridge comedy elite (such as Rowan Atkinson, double-act Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, and Emma Thompson) in artistic collaborations as upper-class joined working- and middle-class comics in projects of mutual self-satire and clowning under the “alternative” umbrella. Narrative comedy emerging out of this tradition favors the hyperbolic, “cartoonish” mode of live-action performance that both encourages ironic distance and alienation and embraces postmodernism’s ambivalence and participatory spirit.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> These headlines appear on-screen on “John Lloyd’s A–Z of Comedy,” episode 17.12 of *The South Bank Show*, LWT Productions, first broadcast December 5, 1993, by ITV.

<sup>125</sup> I use the concept of “alienating” comedy here to refer to an authorial strategy of orienting readers as distanced from a text to problematize identification with characters on-screen, by foregrounding the constructedness of social subjectivity and hierarchy. This is similar to Brecht’s concept of “distanciation,” as previously noted in the Interlude, where theatrical artworks serve as a point of fracture with lived experience.

Beyond their disruptions of Thatcherite mythology, this first generation of alternative comedians were even more notable as pioneers in postmodern meta-textuality, or television about television. Programs like *The Young Ones*, *The Comic Strip Presents* (Channel 4/BBC2, 1982–2012), and *French & Saunders* stood as reflexive “assaults on the forms and functions of comedy itself,” in the words of television critic and historian Barry Putterman, who stresses that “the constant factor in their varied styles was a revolt against the unctuous and comforting qualities of the television sitcoms and variety shows they had grown up watching.”<sup>126</sup> Alternative comedies of this period were radically self-referential, openly commenting on formulaic generic devices, jokes, and script content. Literary theorist Terry Eagleton asserts that the “postmodernist artefact” is distinguished by its “playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid” style that “undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetic of ‘squalor and shock.’”<sup>127</sup> *The Young Ones* became the benchmark for “squalor and shock” in an aesthetic movement intent on deconstructing the sitcom with a chaotic style that Wilmut’s history of British alternative comedy characterizes as “an alternative to the bland prolefeed of the situation comedies which form the staple diet of television entertainment.”<sup>128</sup> Just as punk introduced “noise” into the music scene, the alternative comedians brought din and disorder to the domestic sitcom as another relatively tame “bourgeois” cultural form.

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<sup>126</sup> Barry Putterman, “Ernie Kovacs’ Nastiest Whelps: The Comic Strip and British ‘Alternative Comedy,’” chap. 11 of *On Television and Comedy: Essays on Style, Theme, Performer and Writer* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1995), 162, 166. *The Comic Strip Presents* began with four seasons on Channel 4 (1982–88), then moved to BBC2 for seasons five through seven (1990–93), with a handful of bonus episodes between 1998–2005 and reunion specials in 2011–12. Alternative comedy’s alienating guerrilla tactics peaked with the surreal, schizophrenic situation/sketch comedy *The Glam Metal Detectives* (BBC2, 1995), pushing ironic bricolage to its extreme. Lewisohn’s *Radio Times Guide* describes that series as a cacophonous blend of “cliché-shattering” and “contemporary kitsch” (274).

<sup>127</sup> Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity,” cited in Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 7–8.

<sup>128</sup> Wilmut, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?* xiii.

Routinely described in the press as “anarchic,” *The Young Ones* was nothing short of a kick in the teeth of sitcom convention. The premiere episode, titled “Demolition,” saw the flatmates tearing apart their flimsy apartment set from the inside out, reducing it to rubble after learning of the city’s plans to raze the building.<sup>129</sup> Throughout the series, characters were free to step out of character, swap roles, move the physical walls of the set, ingest household appliances, and venture into parallel realities like C. S. Lewis’s fantasy world Narnia. Viewers witnessed the Horsemen of the Apocalypse crushing the living room set with a colossal sandwich, crusty socks fleeing the hamper on laundry day, and rotting vegetable matter wooing same in the kitchen sink.<sup>130</sup> Like other alternative comedies, this show performed self-conscious genre parodies as well as providing opportunities for the comedian-clowns to break the “fourth wall” with moments of direct address, mugging for the camera or joking about their off-screen political reputation as “lefties.”<sup>131</sup> This worked to subvert the pretense of a self-contained story world and denaturalize sitcom convention, rather than to establish a sense of live, unbounded access to the “real” as in the case of participatory variety comedy such as *The Man Show* that flaunted the non-existence of any such fourth wall.

The U.S. comedy scene fostered its own brand of alternative stand-up and sketch comedy, exemplified by nontraditional nineties headliners such as Bob Odenkirk and David Cross, Andy

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<sup>129</sup> *The Young Ones*, “Demolition,” episode 1.1, written by Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Lise Mayer and directed by Paul Jackson, first aired November 9, 1982, on BBC1. The assertions of textual “anarchy” in alternative comedy are too numerous to cite. See, for example, “Profile: Cabaret’s Artful Dodger: Ben Elton, Right-on Comedian,” *Independent* (London), September 30, 1989, 16.

<sup>130</sup> Michael O’Shaughnessy, “Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony,” in *Understanding Television*, ed. Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel (New York: Routledge, 1990), 95, remarks that the series as “non-realist” programming was capable of tapping into cultural fantasies.

<sup>131</sup> Murray Smith’s essay “Flatulent Conceptions: ‘The Young Ones,’ Inoculation, and Emesis,” in *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*, ed. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989), 59, 64–65, examines the comedic functions of direct address or the “fourth look” in this text, characterizing the over-the-top, clownish performance style as “bombastic” to distinguish from “naturalistic acting conventions” typical of the genre at the time.

Dick, Janeane Garofalo, and Michael Ian Black.<sup>132</sup> As in Britain, America's alternative comedy movement began with fringe comics rejecting the familiar joke structures and themes of observational comedy in favor of surreal, challenging, and uncomfortable humor. Additionally, the influence of the British alternative can be felt in the influx of irony, ambivalence, and absurdism in American comedy during and since the 1980s. Both *The Young Ones*, through its importation, and to a lesser extent lad text *Men Behaving Badly*, through its adaptation, were differently positioned influences on programming in an industry bent on ousting the "traditional" sitcom. British comedy provided and inspired provocative alternatives to U.S. network fare.<sup>133</sup>

The FOX network's early subversive sitcom *Get a Life* (1990–92), starring alternative comedian Chris Elliott, closely resembled the first British alternative sitcoms aesthetically and tonally. Indeed, the show's producer had previously sought to cast Elliott in an American version of *The Young Ones*.<sup>134</sup> *Get a Life* created similar pleasure in the comic-grotesque spectacle of antisocial behavior, as the story of a daft adult paperboy with no ambition to achieve manhood, inviting viewers to wallow in a nasty neverland where male immaturity reigns often without comeuppance but also without validation.<sup>135</sup> The worlds of depravity depicted in *The Young Ones*,

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<sup>132</sup> For late-1990s perspectives on the "alternative-comedy movement" in the West Coast comedy scene, see Rick Marin, "Gurus of Meta-Humor: 'Alternative' Sketch Comedy on HBO's 'Mr. Show,'" *Newsweek*, September 29, 1997, 67; and Chuck Crisafulli, "What's the Frequency, Andy?" *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1997, F1.

<sup>133</sup> *The Young Ones*, after becoming established as MTV's flagship youth comedy in the late 1980s, was brought to Comedy Central in 1995 on the heels of that network's success with *Absolutely Fabulous* in 1994.

<sup>134</sup> Rick Marin, "'Get a Life' Star Is Dim Bulb in Dark Fox Lineup," *Washington Times*, February 28, 1991, E1, reports on producer David Mirkin's ill-fated attempt to develop the American *Young Ones*.

<sup>135</sup> For example, in "SPEWEY and Me," episode 2.11 (prod. no. 02SO149109), first broadcast February 9, 1992, Elliott's character adopts a vile, punching, vomiting E.T. as a beloved playmate, then eats him. The tendency to lump this sitcom with *Married... With Children* (as FOX's other groundbreaking, vulgar, ironic live-action sitcom during this period) further demonstrates the proximity and slippage between alternative and laddish impulses in television comedy. Indeed, the distinction is not fixed and is subject both to audience decodings and changes at the level of scripting, cinematography, and interactions with the studio audience (whose howls and cheers, as I noted, helped to redeem/recode Al Bundy as more of a rebel-hero than object of derision).

*Bottom*, and *Get a Life* reduce their male protagonists to hideous grotesques and make transparent the social constructedness of competing masculinities. Collectively across texts, the men and women of alternative comedy generated laughter with outlandishly vulgar and violent displays of pubescent, unruly behavior, without emphasizing any redeeming qualities or unifying gender code. Female double-act Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, for instance, who masqueraded as grotesque male slobs on their popular sketch show *French & Saunders*, joined in the imagination of perverse and problematic masculinities by inverting the British tradition of drag.<sup>136</sup>

In contrast, lad sitcoms model a consistently (if variably and ironically) chauvinist or misogynist masculinity. In the *Men Behaving Badly* universe, when social codes and niceties prove too restricting for “the male of the species” (phrasing used above by the *Daily Mail*) the misbehaving male ‘fool’ is treated as a fallible but forgivable figure at the mercy of biology. To the extent that male-centered texts of the alternative comedy canon fall more squarely under the rubric of postmodern play than does the breakout lad hit *Men Behaving Badly*, a comparison of how this leading ladcom and the “bachelor” alternative sitcoms *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* make masculinities a persistent topic of discussion spotlights this representational shift.

#### *Bachelor Boys of Sitcom: From The Young Ones to Men Behaving Badly*

*Men Behaving Badly*, the signature lad sitcom, depicts the lives, lusts, and possibly loves of two lager-swilling louts who divide their time between going to the pub, watching telly, and sizing up “birds.” From this brief synopsis, the show’s premise resembles that of *The Young Ones*

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<sup>136</sup> French & Saunders’s two fat old men, recurring characters, touch themselves and gesticulate wildly while making lewd comments about the women in magazines, on television, and even the queen. For the alternative comedians, women and social performance of femininity were also targets of mockery, from jokes aimed at “Mrs. Thatcher” to a menagerie of darkly comic female grotesques in texts like *The Comic Strip Presents*, *Happy Families* (BBC2, 1985), *Girls on Top*, and *Absolutely Fabulous*.

as the story of aimless male roommates in a squalid student flat, or its follow-up *Bottom*, which Lewisohn describes as “[a]dventures in the sordid life of two of the world’s most repellent bachelors.... [who] pour all their energies into drinking, gluttony, masturbating and gambling.”<sup>137</sup> These series could be cut from the same comedic cloth. They differ, however, in their representations of difference.

*The Young Ones* strips gender of its status as a unifying sign. No common male essence binds the “bachelor boys” together.<sup>138</sup> Bookended by the 1970s old lad and 1990s new lad texts, the preeminent cult alternative sitcom stands out in this respect. Gender is de-naturalized and difference reconfigured along social rather than biological lines. Whereas *Men Behaving Badly* centers on a primordial, “genuine” masculinity, *The Young Ones* suggests there is no true masculinity, just a jumble of competing cultural types or “styles,” at a time when the youth market was splintered into various social “tribes” such as the yuppies, preppies, rude boys, and skinheads.<sup>139</sup> In this respect, the humor reinforces the pluralistic presentation of masculinities in the alternative style magazines of the same cultural moment. The series seized on these fractures, navigating the divergent definitions of man with a sense of open-ended irony, and exploited the comedic potential of forcing together representatives of divisive class and regional identities. In the show’s narrative universe populated by mismatched dissident youths, Thatcher’s narrative of a vibrant, unified nation is supplanted with a nightmarish vision of urban decline, youth unemployment, and subcultural sparring.

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<sup>137</sup> Lewisohn, “Bottom,” in *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*, 95.

<sup>138</sup> This phrase enters the show’s metatext with the publication of *Bachelor Boys: The Young Ones Book* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 1988), by the scriptwriters Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Lise Mayer.

<sup>139</sup> See Peter York’s *Style Wars* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980) and *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook* (London: Ebury Press, 1982), cited in Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, 105.

Stereotypical male traits are two-dimensionalized and distributed among the cast: The punk Vyvyan Basterd (Adrian Edmondson) is defined by pure aggression, and Mike “The Cool Person” (Christopher Ryan) by his suave machismo. Hippie Neil Pye (Nigel Planer) has been largely stripped of his sex, a casualty of sixties sexual revolutionaries, and fills the role of the long-suffering “mom” in this sitcom family, as he toils in the kitchen making pots of lentil gruel for his ungrateful, whinging flatmates.<sup>140</sup> Feeble poet and self-righteous sociology student Rick (Rik Mayall), the resident sissy, proudly eschews the primal and the primitive of masculinity in favor of a prissy and prim “new” masculinity, while perverting progressive social politics to the point of militant anarchy. These representations stood in stark contrast to Thatcher’s projected ideal of a single normative Englishness. The show is engaged in strategic anti-essentialism, specifically rendering white male Englishness “other,” out of place, strange and estranged. In the absence of any legitimizing or totalizing narrative of masculinity, it becomes, in the spirit of postmodern play and pluralism, “just another set of narratives.”<sup>141</sup> Masculinity here offers no common point of reference, but divergent identities supplied by subcultural taste factions.

*Men Behaving Badly*, in contrast, is above all an exercise in male bonding. It imagines difference very clearly along gender lines: your “mates” are allies and co-conspirators, while “birds” are your adversaries, secretaries, or future conquests. Time spent together with your male flatmates is a respite from outside pressures; your mates *understand* you. Mates retreat with you to the sofa or the pub, in either case for lager and televised football, and to chat about how “shaggable” or unreasonable women are. *Men Behaving Badly*’s 1995 handbook decrees,

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<sup>140</sup> Lewisohn, “The Young Ones,” 740, points out that “anarchic though *The Young Ones* was, ... the four members were cast as a conventional surrogate family unit,” with “Neil in the mother role.”

<sup>141</sup> Eagleton, “Awakening from Modernity,” describing postmodernism, quoted in Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 9.

Let's face it, nothing but nothing is more important to the modern man than his mates. Indeed it's no exaggeration to say that we believe that having good mates are [*sic*] really what makes the world go round, what really makes a man's life worth living. Certainly a man can't really even begin to Behave Badly without at least one mate at his side. For as the good book says a man can have all the material, sporting and job success that he likes, all the beautiful young birds flocking to his bed at all hours of the day and night, yea he can even have the latest Audi Quattro soft top with dual airbags but if he has not mates to envy him and take the piss out of him then he is but an empty bell tolling in a hollow room.<sup>142</sup>

With this inversion of "Corinthians" 13:1–13, a traditional wedding selection stating that without love we are nothing, *Men Behaving Badly* demotes marital love. Marriage is optional, but mates are mandatory.

The structuring crisis of the show's 1996 season was the danger posed when "birds" come between "mates," and worse, feminize the domestic domain by covering up the soft-porn posters that adorn the kitchen walls and filling the flat with cushions and frilly things. In the episode "Your Mate V. Your Bird," mooching flatmate Tony (Neil Morrissey), after having slept with his best mate Gary's bird Dorothy (Caroline Quentin), has departed for Europe to give his friend some space to recover.<sup>143</sup> Meanwhile, Dorothy informs Gary (Martin Clunes) that she is moving into his flat so that their relationship can progress to the next level. The event that disturbs the equilibrium, throwing Gary's life into crisis, is not his lover's infidelity or friend's betrayal, but the wedge that Dorothy drives between mates by co-opting their shared space. All is resolved when Dorothy instead moves in with their upstairs neighbor Deborah (Tony's love interest), so that Tony can reclaim his rightful place on the sofa at Gary's side. With proper gender segregation, order is restored in the narrative universe.

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<sup>142</sup> Simon Nye and Paul Dornan, *The A–Z of Behaving Badly* (London: Pavilion, 1995), 2.

<sup>143</sup> *Men Behaving Badly*, "Your Mate V. Your Bird," episode 5.4, written by Simon Nye and directed by Martin Dennis, first aired July 11, 1996, on BBC1.





Figure 2.9. Mates Before Birds: Missing Tony, Gary (Martin Clunes) finds companionship in a blow-up doll version of his beer buddy, in whom he confides that living with your bird is no better than “living with your parents ’cause you have to keep your room quite tidy, you can’t put up the posters that you want to, and you can’t ask any girls back.” “Your Mate V. Your Bird,” *Men Behaving Badly*, originally aired July 11, 1996, on BBC1.

The contrasts between alternative comedy’s and the new lads’ flagship bachelor sitcoms did not just occur at the level of character and narrative thematics, but extended to stylistics, narrative form, mode of address, and consequently, the forms of identification fostered by the texts. These comedies evidence differing engagements with postmodernism that inform the structuring logics of character identification. Moving forward, we will consider the uses and limitations of irony to foster degrees of critical detachment or emotional identification with characters who are “behaving badly,” and thus to govern the available range of reading positions—or what Fiske calls the text’s “structures of preference.”<sup>144</sup>

*“Men Can Be Sad Berks”: The New Lad’s Prospects for Audience Identification*

Lad comedies like *Men Behaving Badly* reimagined the domestic sitcom set as a cohesive male social space, “masculinizing” the *mise en scène*, in much the same way that non-narrative, chat-based comedies under new laddism reclaimed the TV studio as a place “where men can come together.” Certainly, programs like *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* also “shabbied” the

<sup>144</sup> Fiske, *Television Culture*, 65.

bachelor sitcom set, and the latter even tinkered with the “two men and a couch” formula (see fig. 2.10). However, ladcoms retreated from the radically absurdist de(con)structive postmodern ethos that characterized more than a decade of alternative comedies. Comedy writers rebuffing the “right-on” politics ascribed to the alternative comics also grew somewhat disenchanted with their anarchistic visual and narrative style. The resulting post-alternative pushback against the comedy of alienation, disruption, and interrogation, it may be argued, brought renewed prospects for audience identification with the aforementioned “revival of traditional sitcom.”<sup>145</sup>

*The Young Ones* discourages identification with the characters in favor of identification of their foibles and myriad inter- and extra-textual references that flatter the viewer as a savvy participant in postmodernist transgression. Throughout the 1990s, the alternative comedians continued to pursue reflexive strategies. This is illustrated by the opening credit sequence of Mayall and Edmondson’s *Bottom*, which foregrounds its artificiality by revealing the exterior of the squabbling bachelor couple’s apartment to be a billboard towering over a studio production lot. A consistently self-ironizing style and mode of narration serves to underline the repellant behaviors and indeed identities of the characters, marking them as oddities rather than strong candidates for stable identification. While the characters had cult appeal as beloved grotesques, it was primarily the comedian-stars who provided alternative comedy with its subversive chic. The alternative comedies may invite identification with an ironist author/performer, encouraging viewers to take pleasure in a sense of transgressive superiority to both the character failings on display and the cultural norms being trampled.

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<sup>145</sup> Dugdale, “Our Next Trick,” 24.



Figure 2.10. Trousers Talk: As mates Richie Richard and Eddie Hitler (Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson) prepare to go on holiday, their packing attempts are thwarted by limb amputations and compulsive digressions about soiled pants, knobs, flatulence, and other “mindless trouser banter.” “Break,” *Bottom*, originally aired January 20, 1995, on BBC2.

Although the authorial status of *Men Behaving Badly*'s Simon Nye was widely recognized, the structures of identification in this text work quite differently from *The Young Ones* or *Bottom* and the entire alternative sitcom tradition. *Men Behaving Badly* was not known for moments of narrative rupture, direct address, or radical reflexivity. Indeed, intertextuality in the show rarely goes beyond Gary and Tony's common desire for real-life pop sensation Kylie Minogue—a desire which the male viewer is also presumed and encouraged to share.<sup>146</sup> From the opening titles, *Men Behaving Badly* aims for a veneer of realism never aspired to by shows like *Bottom*. Home video style footage of the two best friends drinking, pranking, and goofing off sets a sentimental tone, complemented by jaunty music. This sequence clearly establishes the two men as the primary “couple,” with their girlfriends appearing as secondary characters, while also building a sense of backstory to draw viewers more deeply into the characters' fictional lives.

<sup>146</sup> A notable exception is when Minogue shows up playing herself for the 1997 Comic Relief special, in which Tony and Gary reflexively comment upon a Kylie-centric flashback montage—incongruously featuring co-lead Neil Morrissey's season 1 predecessor Harry Enfield (whose character “Dermot” has been long since replaced by “Tony”)—and ultimately burst through the wall of the flat to chase after the object of their mutual desire. This sequence demonstrates the limits of reflexivity on the show, as it is both less *avant* than what was typical of alternative sitcoms and also entirely underwritten by the carnival nature of Comic Relief.

In this respect, *Men Behaving Badly* worked to restore what media theorists Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik deem the “naturalistic” narrative and stylistic devices of traditional sitcom.<sup>147</sup> The text positions the viewer to identify to some degree with Gary and Tony, foibles and all, to like them and to see oneself as like them. Along with other 1990s lad sitcoms such as *Game On* and *Men of the World*, it signaled a departure from the “unreal” characters and situations of a generation of postmodern deconstructionist sitcom. On the whole, these shows upheld sitcom convention, seldom breaking illusion to highlight the constructedness of either the story or set.<sup>148</sup>

Irony is nonetheless of central importance to the structures of meaning in *Men Behaving Badly*, as well as the transnational understanding of new lad comedies. Intriguingly, American *Men Behaving Badly* is perhaps lad TV’s most overt use of irony to depersonalize characters and create a critical distance, aligning the viewer with an “implied author” whose perspective trumps the character-protagonists on-screen.<sup>149</sup> The series adaptation premiered on NBC in fall 1996 with Ron Eldard (known to U.S. audiences as the romantic rival of George Clooney in the 1995–96 season of NBC’s *ER* and love interest of Phoebe Cates in the 1991 Rik Mayall film *Drop Dead Fred*) in the starring role as occasional screw-up Kevin, Justine Bateman (former

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<sup>147</sup> Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 242. “Naturalistic” is their term for sitcoms that do not draw attention to their own status as authored or constructed texts, but instead position spectators as Peeping Toms “eavesdropping” on the action.

<sup>148</sup> In contrast, quite a few “post-alternative” comedy writer-performers through the 1990s continued to radically deconstruct generic conventions and experiment with postmodern textuality, as had the early alternative comics, and Monty Python and The Goons before them. Noteworthy innovators in the absurdist camp included Chris Morris (*Brass Eye*), Steve Coogan (*I’m Alan Partridge*), Armando Iannucci (*The Saturday Night Armistice*), Victor Lewis-Smith (*Inside Victor Lewis-Smith*), Stewart Lee and Richard Herring (*This Morning With Richard Not Judy*), and surreal double-act Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer (*Shooting Stars*). The latter duo were lad favorites (repeatedly honored as best double-act at the *Loaded* LAFTA awards); they, too, were heralded as successors or next-generation alternative comedians, but seen as reclaiming “irrelevant” comedy as a “throwback” to less politically motivated humor “to fill the gap left by the oppositional humorists who had thrived on [Thatcher’s] presence in the previous decade.” Alan Franks, “Vic’s Alternative Comedy Sketches,” *Times* (London), September 18, 1999, 15–18 [S5].

<sup>149</sup> Wayne C. Booth uses this term *implied author* in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) to distinguish from ‘real’ creator. Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody* approaches his term with caution, since the encoder is knowable “only as a position to be filled within the text” or “inferred” (84–86).

teen star of *Family Ties*) as Sarah, the girlfriend who will either put up with or reform him, and *Saturday Night Live* veteran goofball Rob Schneider as his unruly, sex-starved sidekick Jamie.<sup>150</sup> To ensure the series would not appear to condone male insensitivity and chauvinism, NBC foregrounded the irony of its *Men Behaving Badly*.



Figures 2.11 and 2.12. *Left*: The British series title is superimposed over nostalgic ‘home video’ footage. *Right*: Though largely unremarked upon, American *Men Behaving Badly*’s cartoon title art by Ralph Steadman, a Brit and the long-time collaborator with and illustrator for preeminent American bad-boy and gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, lent the show both a vestige of Britishness and a distinctly American masculinist transgressive chic.

The most blatant revision the network made when re-conceiving the series to appeal to U.S. mainstream audiences was the addition of voice-over “links” provided by female co-star. Mimicking the familiar style of wildlife documentaries like *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, Bateman’s narration adopts a rational, authoritative tone while explaining what makes the male of the human species tick. These voice-overs served as a framing device to establish critical distance by commenting on the men’s supposed bad behavior and primitive urges, and also provided comic relief as a parody of nature films, comparing men at home to beasts in the wild under the watchful eye of civilized humanity (here equated with the female perspective). As a

<sup>150</sup> When aired in New Zealand, the series was retitled *It’s a Man’s World*, to distinguish from the British version. In the second season, Eldard and Bateman were replaced by Ken Marino (of MTV’s *The State*) and Jenica Bergere.

result of this distancing tactic, British humor scholar Brett Mills has suggested that with the American *Men Behaving Badly* “any emotional involvement in the male characters is avoided.” The show’s irony functions primarily as a “get-out clause,” argues Mills, allowing viewers to avoid feeling that taking pleasure in watching “bad” behaviour amounts to an admission of approval. “The lack of such voice-overs in the British version,” he adds, “positions the audience-character relationship as similar to that of other programmes, suggesting that we’re not meant to be distanced from them, and instead enjoy their company in a manner akin to that of most sitcom.”<sup>151</sup> In other words, the British series, his analysis suggests, hews to certain pleasures of the mimetic sitcom tradition, inviting recognition of central characters as like “us.”

To the extent that the U.S. series employs its female narrator to promote ironic distance from the men on-screen, priming us to expect the narrative to pursue a fairly stable irony about the male of the “species,” the show also keeps the mimetic mode sufficiently in play to accommodate readings of Sarah (Bateman) and ultimately also Kevin (Eldard) as “likable” lead characters. As we saw in the preceding chapters, *Seinfeld*-era prime-time sitcoms moved the goal posts for relatability and realism, and as Tueth argues, increasingly made sitcom heroes of characters defined by comic charisma or intensity not admirability.<sup>152</sup> It is worth noting that NBC in 1997 was reportedly “eyeing” *Men Behaving Badly* for the coveted Thursday night spot between *Seinfeld* and *ER*, where assorted sitcoms with strong female leads “had a tough time holding onto ‘Seinfeld’s’ male viewers,” as *Variety* put it, and had put the Peacock in the difficult position of “sacrificing” a key part of that hit’s hard-won audience while winning the genre’s core viewership

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<sup>151</sup> Brett Mills, “Sitcom Behaving Badly: Television Humour in Transatlantic Transplants” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Humor Studies, Oklahoma City, Okla., July 1997).

<sup>152</sup> See Michael V. Tueth, “Fun City: TV’s Urban Situation Comedies of the 1990s,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 102–3, 106–7.

of women 18-to-49.<sup>153</sup> Bateman's character as the forbearing and quick-witted girlfriend, like her British counterpart Dorothy, is no doormat and is coded as generally sensible, patient, self-reliant, and sympathetic, although not offered as the (consistent) comic focus. From this perspective, in the U.S. series, identification with the main female character would seem to be less actively barred by the text's structuring irony. Yet, even if the American *Men Behaving Badly* did not invite "emotional involvement" with its lads to the same degree as the British series, it certainly facilitated identification by making its central character a potentially "cool" figure. Laddish leading men on U.S. television were often bound by industry convention to appear hip and conventionally attractive, or at least to perceive themselves in that way.<sup>154</sup> This tendency plays out in the contrast between Eldard's Kevin on NBC's *Men Behaving Badly* and Martin Clunes's Gary on the BBC show. In casting, performance, and characterization, Gary is presented as a more clownish and self-absorbed figure than Kevin, and this distinction is underwritten by the differences between these U.K. and U.S. lad protagonists' relationships with their roommates.

In the British *Men Behaving Badly*, mates Gary and Tony are essentially equals, and their fraternizing in the masculine space of their flat offers a pleasurable sense of inclusion for audiences (men in particular). The American series shifts the dynamic of the male duo to elevate its protagonist and de-center the clown. With the mild-mannered and handsome Kevin coded as the "regular guy" and playing the straight-man, more of the show's hilarity owes to the wildly inappropriate antics of

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<sup>153</sup> Joe Flint and Gary Levin, "NBC's 'Seinfeld' Proves Troublesome Act to Follow," *Variety*, March 31, 1997, 35. The string of woman-centered shows in *Seinfeld*'s shadow include *Suddenly Susan* (1996–2000) starring Brooke Shields, *The Naked Truth* (1997–98, formerly ABC, 1995–96) with Téa Leoni, *Fired Up* (1997–98) with Sharon Lawrence, *Veronica's Closet* (1997–2000) with Kirstie Alley, and initially, *Caroline in the City* (1995–99) with Lea Thompson. Instead, *Men Behaving Badly*'s second season landed on Sundays at 8 p.m., opposite *The Simpsons*, where it was the lead-in for former *Playboy* Playmate Jenny McCarthy's sitcom *Jenny* (NBC, 1997–98).

<sup>154</sup> American sitcoms have typically revolved around cool, cleverly caustic, sometimes churlish or foolish but ultimately sympathetic, defensible, or desirable protagonists (as seen in *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Roseanne*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, or *Home Improvement*, itself a lad comedy of sorts for the married thirtysomething set). A sizeable subset of British sitcoms by comparison are built around socially awkward, off-putting, pathetic, damaged, or even tragic main characters (e.g., *Brittas Empire*, *Mr. Bean*, *Father Ted*, *Keeping Up Appearances*, and *One Foot in the Grave*).



his romantically uncoupled flatmate, Rob Schneider's Jamie, a cartoonish figure taking sexual/sexist impulses to the absolute extreme and functioning as a sort of laddish super-Id. Thus, Jamie provides the Kevin character (a paragon of politeness by comparison) with an excuse for his occasional loutish behavior—that is, loyalty to his friend—as well as a foil who makes his own transgressions appear minimal and forgivable. Across a wide array of texts on U.S. television, the undisciplined perpetual bachelor with a predatory sexuality became a stock character. Here, the outlandish supporting character, a sitcom staple, is repurposed as a hyperbolic grotesque whose excess works to normalize a lead character who would otherwise be substantially more transgressive.<sup>155</sup>

The irony of the original *Men Behaving Badly* does less to telegraph its intent. According to Mills, this is due to the more pervasive presence of irony in British television. He argues that British audiences were conditioned to expect and appreciate irony, approached less as a device employed by certain programs or performers than a deeply ingrained (even “inescapable”) mode. British *Men Behaving Badly*'s irony, Mills contends, could thus afford to be more diffuse and understated than that of its American successor.<sup>156</sup> The series exercises this license and is perhaps

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<sup>155</sup> Other contemporary examples of outlandishly laddish ‘deviant’ characters who fill a similar function include David Spade’s weasely womanizing scoundrels on *Just Shoot Me!* (NBC, 1997–2003) and *Rules of Engagement* (CBS, 2007–13) and Neil Patrick Harris’s impenitent pickup artist Barney Stinson on *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–14). This is a time-honored sitcom convention. Classic American domestic comedies such as *Father Knows Best* and *Bewitched* utilized one-off or regular supporting characters to present alternative gender ideologies (either old-fashioned or proto-feminist) as aberrant, such that protagonists appeared “normal” by comparison. At the same time, this dynamic is also an inversion of the classic formula for situation comedy derived from farce and slapstick starring the comedian clown, in which *central* characters are “wacky” or absurd grotesques who operate outside of social norms (e.g., *I Love Lucy*), while more reasonable supporting characters help to ground the fantasy in reality. See Horace Newcomb, “Situation and Domestic Comedies: Problems, Families, and Fathers,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1974), 25–58. Newcomb’s generic distinctions between “situation comedy” and “domestic comedy” cross-pollinate in the 1970s, such that by the 1980s programs like *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne* easily straddle the definitional divide that once separated the normative domestic comedy from the clown comedy of sitcom. Examples of man-centered shows in the 1990s that somewhat follow the wacky-central-character formula include *Home Improvement* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, in which the archetypal “sensible” wife or coworker represents a voice of reason but also, typically, is constructed as the “nag” and “killjoy.”

<sup>156</sup> B. Mills, “Sitcom Behaving Badly,” 2, cites Elaine Showalter, “Britannia Rules the Waves...,” *Guardian*, September 20, 1996, 4–5, who points to David Letterman, *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and *M\*A\*S\*H* as noteworthy examples of comedic irony she saw as possible but atypical on U.S. television.



more rife with polysemic potential as a result. Nye's scripts do not compel audiences to view character behavior through a contrived critical lens, nor does his program work anywhere near as hard as the American remake to discourage emotional identification with "men behaving badly" or circumscribe interpretation. This may help to account for the program's more enthusiastic reception.

The British *Men Behaving Badly* drew loyal audiences, both male and female, for seven seasons, owing both to the skillful writing and authorial stamp of series creator Simon Nye and a beloved cast, and the fact that there is undeniably wiggle room on the decoding end. Critical appraisals consistently asserted that women viewers were invited to laugh at men making fools of themselves, while men might laugh with and/or at the men on-screen. Lewisohn remarks in his 1998 *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*:

Not surprisingly, plenty of men love *MBB*, identifying with the two male lead characters, while a good many women tend to like it because it proves what they have always known: that men can be sad berks, interested only in alcohol and sex....<sup>157</sup>

Julian Hall, author of *The Rough Guide to British Cult Comedy*, asserts that "*Men Behaving Badly* was the seminal mainstream sitcom of the 1990s," and he attributes this popularity to its "timely look at lad culture..., rebuffing all that nonsense about 'new men.'"<sup>158</sup> In the absence of voice-overs and similar framing devices, Britain's *Men Behaving Badly* achieved greater latitude for interpretation compared to its American counterpart and supplied the viewer with a variety of possible subject positions from which to derive pleasure, whether reading the text as "seeming to celebrate" bad taste/behavior or openly celebrating it.<sup>159</sup> While *Men Behaving Badly* may be remembered as the quintessential new lad show, Hall's cult comedy guide insists

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<sup>157</sup> Lewisohn, "Men Behaving Badly," 431.

<sup>158</sup> Julian Hall, *The Rough Guide to British Cult Comedy* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), 126.

<sup>159</sup> For the critique of nineties irony as an attitude "seeming to celebrate" bad taste by attacking it, see Gordon, "When Irony Becomes Cynicism," 67, quoted in my Introduction.

the program avoids being pigeonholed as a “lad ad” by “poking fun at the downside of such a lifestyle.”<sup>160</sup>

*Men Behaving Badly* became, by most accounts, a watershed for political incorrectness in nineties Britain, in much the same way that *Seinfeld* came to define the shifting contours of American sitcom in that decade. The *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* calls the series “the British sitcom of the 1990s, rivalled only by *Absolutely Fabulous*.”<sup>161</sup> Like *Seinfeld*, *Men Behaving Badly* fixated on the empty minutia in the lives of four friends and neighbors and promised no narratives of personal growth but instead comedy unapologetically “about nothing.” Just as *Seinfeld* was heralded as “the first television comedy that systematically violated the new taboos of political correctness”<sup>162</sup> (and at the time, it achieved as much or more than did laddism to launch an era of anti-PC American comedy), *Men Behaving Badly* was similarly cited as the show most responsible for doing away with the sensitive “new man” of 1980s television. In the words of Chrysalis Visual Entertainment’s chief executive Mick Pilsworth, Nye’s series served as “the first chink in PC-TV’s armour.”<sup>163</sup> Subsequent series on both sides of the Atlantic chipped away at that armor, such that by the time *The Man Show* secured American laddism’s foothold on cable television in 1999, PC TV was a soft but still high pay-off target.

It remains an open question when/whether audiences are being asked to laugh at “traditional” masculinity depicted in lad comedy in all its lewd, crude, aggressive, and repressive glory. Is *The Man Show* or *The X Show* a send up of coarse “frat boy” machismo, or a “lad ad”?

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<sup>160</sup> J. Hall, *British Cult Comedy*, 126.

<sup>161</sup> Lewisohn, “Men Behaving Badly,” 431; emphasis in original.

<sup>162</sup> Paul A. Cantor, “The Invisible Gnomes and the Invisible Hand: *South Park* and Libertarian Philosophy,” in *South Park and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Arp (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 100.

<sup>163</sup> Pilsworth, “New Lads’ World,” 15.

Do these spoof sexism or salute it? Do they declare “We should know better” or taunt “You’ll never change us”? This textual ambiguity led television critic Richard Johnson, writing about the explosive popularity of *Men Behaving Badly* and similar shows, to query: “They’re leery, they’re beery and they’re all over television! But is the rash of lager sagas on our screens just an excuse for old-fashioned chauvinism?”<sup>164</sup>

While Britain’s new lad sitcoms and comedy stars were not engaging in the formal self-ironizing typical of alternative comedies and comedians, they laid claim to irony in their comedic explorations of conventional heteronormative masculinity. New lad texts consistently staked out an ironic masculinity defined against the supposed sincerity and austerity of the new man. In a *Radio Times* passage cited above, Johnson averred that British audiences quickly tired of the new man’s self-righteous “earnestness.”<sup>165</sup> The new lad discovered that, as *Time*’s Joel Stein (echoing Sean O’Hagan) quips, “irony is much more fun than earnestness” and “much cooler.”<sup>166</sup> This coolness factor set slick laddish 1990s comedy acts (such as Newman and Baddiel, Carolla and Kimmel, or Denis Leary) apart from their more anarchic and unrestrained predecessors (Mayall and Edmondson, Chris Elliott, or Bob Goldthwait, among others), whose clowning often made a farce of the social codes of masculinity. The repeated articulation of irony to an anti- or post-politically correct sensibility enabled the new lads of comedy to seize for themselves that most valuable of alternative comedy’s calling cards—its claim on oppositionality and transgression.

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<sup>164</sup> Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” 7.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>166</sup> Joel Stein, “In Defense of Irony,” *Time* 154, no. 14 (October 5, 1999): 42; excerpted from my Introduction.

### Irony as “Postmodern Safety Net” (Chauvinism with an Out-Clause)

Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon.  
That’s more than my lazy wife does,  
The fat, fuckin’ smelly baboon.

— Andrew Dice Clay<sup>167</sup>

That’s what people didn’t understand about Andrew Dice Clay. He wasn’t belittling women, he was making those guys who belittle women look stupid. He’s on your side! Geddit? ... Dice had the same performance-art streak as Andy Kaufman: *never fucking break the character*.

— Matt Stone, co-creator of *South Park*<sup>168</sup>

*Men Behaving Badly* co-star Caroline Quentin posed the following question when narrating the 1998 television documentary retrospective *One Million Years PC*, featured as part of a specially designated “Politically Incorrect Night” on BBC2: “Which was worse... the ‘dinosaurs’ of traditional comedy or the PC ‘virus’ that threatened to make them extinct?”<sup>169</sup> Matthew Cole, the producer behind this theme-night event, speculated that by the late 1990s comedy could once again safely look and sound like the pre-PC programming of the past by arming itself with irony. Irony, he surmised, provides a “post-modern safety net... that lets you off the hook more these days....” Cole continued, “[I]t’s safe again to come out with a joke that seven or eight years ago might not have been acceptable. The time is right to ask, ‘How much did political correctness achieve?’”<sup>170</sup> I want to conclude by interrogating, in this

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<sup>167</sup> Andrew Dice Clay’s dirty nursery rhymes are widely available online and were a staple of his act in the 1980s and 1990s. He was banned indefinitely from MTV for telling jokes of this kind at the 1989 Video Music Awards.

<sup>168</sup> Matt Stone, in response to the question, “Is there any value to sick humour?” in Andrew Collins, “Dead Funny,” an interview with Trey Parker and Matt Stone, *Empire* (U.K.), no. 132 (June 2000): 94; emphasis in original. Partner Trey Parker counts Dice among their heroes as a master of “don’t-say-that-jokes” who was “ahead of his time.”

<sup>169</sup> *One Million Years PC*, BBC Manchester, broadcast April 13, 1998, on BBC2.

<sup>170</sup> Quoted in Nick Griffiths, “Tell a Mother-in-Law Joke,” *Radio Times*, April 11–17, 1998, 15.

context, the varied applications and perceptions of postmodern irony in lad comedy texts and the discourses that encircle and inform them.

As discussed in the preceding chapters, postmodern irony produces greater semantic ambiguity and frustrates attempts to locate a stable “intended” message lurking beneath the surface of the text. Some postmodern theorists regard irony as a potentially liberating or democratic tool that subverts the dominant ideology often found in “preferred” readings, enabling multiple audiences and readings by promoting polysemy. In the case of much lad humor, I have suggested thus far, irony may work toward hegemonic rather than subversive ends. Overwhelmingly, laddish humor and irony functions culturally to affirm rather than to critique or interrogate the veracity and bluster of “blokishness.”

*“They Think You Mean What You Say!”*

In reorienting transgression as a brave challenge to socially conscious comedy and political correctness, comics of the “blokesh” relied heavily on the irony defense. One of the first and most outspoken adversaries of “PC” and the alternative comedy movement was Glaswegian stand-up comic and magician Jerry Sadowitz. Known for his “sick” humor, offensive jokes, and obscene language, Sadowitz positioned himself irreverently as a “post-alternative” comic, rejecting socially progressive or ‘right-on’ comedy and championing cultural insensitivity as his artistic prerogative. Sadowitz, whose statements of open contempt for various national/ethnic groups earned him the title “the Bernard Manning of the New Wave,”<sup>171</sup> defends his brand of vitriolic shock-humor with direct appeals to irony and truth-telling. In a typical sketch from his 1992 BBC2 series *The Pall Bearer’s Revue*, Sadowitz sporting a Hitler costume launches into a lengthy rant justifying his material to a band of sycophantic stooges:

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<sup>171</sup> J. Connor, *Comics*, 103. Bernard Manning (1930–2007) was a working-man’s club comic, controversial for his adult-themed, explicitly racist and sexist material.

Sadowitz: I have struggled to produce comedy that is a combination of truth and nonsense. How can anyone be offended by truth? How can anyone be offended by nonsense? It is a double irony! [To sycophant 1] Give me an example of double irony!

Sycophant 1: "I'm not a sexist. It's just women I can't stand."

Sadowitz: Good, good.... And still they refuse to laugh. Still these dogs compare me to Bernard Manning. ...

Sycophant 2: Well, Sadowitz, Sir, people are worried that you will promote sexism and racism.

Sadowitz: Dah! When they go to see a horror film, they come out with a chainsaw and start killing people? Nonsense. We must learn to be objective.

Sycophant 1: They are scared of you, Sadowitz. They think you *mean* what you say!<sup>172</sup>

The episode concludes with Sadowitz fleeing from a stampede of PC Police who storm the BBC studio and gun him down, as he fearlessly fires back a barrage of sexist and racist jokes.

In the same segment, Sadowitz aligns himself with Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison, the abrasive and confrontational American lad heroes, as his persecuted peers—imagining a trans-Atlantic alliance of the Angry White Man stand-up comics of the 1980s and early 1990s. A key influence himself among the angry comedians in Britain, Sadowitz is put forward as authentic and honest in his “willingness to say the unsayable.” Using this phrase, *The Guardian*'s James Kettle, for instance, makes a case that “genuine rage” and “real” vitriol set Sadowitz apart from the “fake” offensiveness of comedians like Ricky Gervais and various “PC-baiting” acts in his wake.<sup>173</sup> Behind the dark public persona, the controversial performer, ever the illusionist, remains shrouded in political inscrutability. The same mastery of the sleight of hand that has

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<sup>172</sup> *The Pall Bearer's Revue*, “The Intellectual Comedians,” episode 1.5, produced by J. Rix, first broadcast February 3, 1992, on BBC2.

<sup>173</sup> James Kettle, “Jerry Sadowitz: His Dark Materials,” *Guardian*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/nov/09/jerry-sadowitz-interview> (accessed April 1, 2014).

made Sadowitz a renowned magician enables him to play with symbolic misdirection in his deployment of irony. Like his American heroes, his act simultaneously manages to lay claim to being deliberately offensive, boldly truthful, and just harmless fun. Sadowitz joins a tradition of misogynist cult comics whose appeals to irony to justify offensiveness secured a beachhead for the laddist attack on political correctness, from which lad texts like *Men Behaving Badly* (premiering within weeks of this episode) seem mild and mainstream by comparison, while still enjoying the spoils of ironic transgression's edgy allure.

Although the structuring ambiguity and "openness" of the ironic text may empower audiences as meaning-makers, as Fiske suggests, and disrupt dominant-hegemonic tendencies in media culture, it bears repeating that irony has no inherent politics.<sup>174</sup> With an ironic mode, even when put to subversive ends, postmodernism's increased polysemy destabilizes preferred meanings. When aspiring to critique in its postmodern forms, Shugart explains, irony continues to be marked by types of "internal contradiction" that audiences must detect for the (intended) meaning and humor to unfold. While traditionally irony "commands a simultaneous engagement with the artifact and a detachment from it," subversive irony as seen in satirical postmodern art, she suggests, can function to sabotage the dominant order from within: it "simultaneously reiterates and contradicts dominant representations."<sup>175</sup> Social audiences are likely to negotiate their own interpretations nestled somewhere between the opposing pulls of engagement and detachment, endorsement and subversion, or a dominant-hegemonic and a counter-hegemonic reading. The broader climate of postmodern irony, as well as the cultural impact of laddism as an influential

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<sup>174</sup> Fiske, *Television Culture*, 85–87, posited that irony ensures the "openness" of texts and thus may disrupt the work of hegemony by carving out a space for alternative or resistant readings that test the limits of dominant ideology.

<sup>175</sup> Helene A. Shugart, "Postmodern Irony as Subversive Rhetorical Strategy," *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (fall 1999): especially 434, 436. With the latter assertion, Shugart is summarizing Karen Bernard, "Ironing out the Differences: Female Iconography in the Paintings of Joanne Tod," in *Double Talking: Essays on Verbal and Visual Ironies in Canadian Contemporary Art and Literature*, ed. Linda Hutcheon (Toronto: ECW, 1992), 136, 143.

interpretive community, may further obscure or overshadow authorial intention to shade texts and their uses in “unintended” ways.

*When Audiences Behave Badly*

*Times* of London TV critic and columnist Caitlin Moran complained in 2000 that satirical late-night comedy *The 11 O’Clock Show* (Channel 4, U.K., 1998–2000) was abusing its “post-PC” ironic license with its insistent use of “gay,” “lezza,” “dyke,” “mong,” and “gaylord” as insults.<sup>176</sup> Even if the running joke was devised and delivered “in the spirit of lampooning a sexist pub bore,” Moran argued, relentless repetition may undermine any ironic intent. She worried that “if you say something ‘ironically’ enough times, it stops sounding like irony at all.” In other words, she cautioned that cultural producers and critics cannot prevent *audiences* behaving badly. Inevitably, some viewers’ negotiated readings will miss or dismiss the cues that signpost a representation as ironic when it is convenient or desirable to do so. As Moran warned:

... [I]f a small clique of comedians finds that a corollary of the hard-won victory against media homophobia is being able to resurrect the word “gay” and use it ironically, it doesn’t follow that the reasoning behind its sudden permissableness will be taken into account in playgrounds in Birmingham.

*The 11 O’Clock Show*’s stand-out contributors Ricky Gervais (who went on to create *The Office*) and Sacha Baron Cohen (*Da Ali G Show*) pushed the envelope with satirical segments that didn’t play it safe but did play it entirely straight, creating optimal conditions for postmodern ambiguity and polysemy.

Moran felt the show crossed a line in skits such as one in which Gervais objects to women’s right to vote, calling early feminists “lezzas” and “mental bean-flickers.” In the sketch,

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<sup>176</sup> Caitlin Moran, “Trouble at the Eleventh Hour,” *Times* (London), April 21, 2000, Arts, 25. Moran is a noted feminist and author of *New York Times* best-seller *How To Be a Woman* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).



onlookers cheer as the King's horse tramples a suffragette underfoot because "it was the first time the lezza had ever been jumped."<sup>177</sup> Gervais's poking fun at the stereotype (or as Moran fears playing to the stereotype) of women's rights activists as lesbians in need of a "jump" has all the basic ingredients for lad hilarity: irony, insults, innuendo, gay jokes, feminist baiting, and the message "only joking." Moran's concern raises, again, a key question about ultimate "meaning" and the uses of a text: At the point of reception does subversive postmodern irony reinstall or, in Shugart's words, "reify the very ideological tenets that it seeks to subvert"?<sup>178</sup> Colebrook directs the question at postmodern ironic masculinist discourse specifically, asking, "[H]ow do we avoid the enjoyment, repetition and reinforcement of violence that these texts also make possible?"<sup>179</sup>

A telling example of an ironic critique's vulnerability to "misreading" is comic Al Murray, who deployed irony to poke fun at male bravado and xenophobia in the 1990s with his satirical character the Pub Landlord, a conservative British chauvinist. As Murray discovered, the jokester dealing in subversive irony has no failsafe mechanism for guiding audiences to recognize or accept the preferred reading. Drawing a connection to Sacha Baron Cohen's comic alter ego Ali G (originally from *The 11 O'Clock Show*) and Harry Enfield's creation Loadsamoney, Hettie Judah at *The Times* (London) reported:

Anyone actually listening to the act will realise that the Landlord is intended to be an idiot, not a figurehead, and that the very hooliganism he apparently appeals to is precisely what he is putting forward to attack. Sadly, there is a considerable portion of the Pub Landlord's fans who do not view his small-minded swaggering in quite the ironic sense that it is intended.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Moran, "Trouble at the Eleventh Hour."

<sup>178</sup> Shugart, "Postmodern Irony," 451.

<sup>179</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 158.

<sup>180</sup> Hettie Judah, "Awful, but We Like Them: The Pub Landlord and Ali G Are Today's Loadsamoney, Reckons Hettie Judah," *Times* (London), March 10, 2000, 46.

Murray expressed concern that his act was not necessarily being “taken in the right spirit.”<sup>181</sup> Beyond irony’s problematic polysemy, this example points to the ways in which the specific conjuncture of laddist irony threatened to further undercut postmodern humor’s anti-hierarchical potential. The values articulated through laddism built a sort of momentum during the 1990s such that even texts ironically commenting upon shallow self-interest and chauvinism were open or even likely to be read as refreshingly honest endorsements. Much like the cockney braggart Loadsamoney in Thatcher’s eighties was “simultaneously a monster and a national mascot,” and took on a life of his own beyond Enfield’s satirical vision for the character, Judah speculated, Baron Cohen’s “dumb” yet “cool” persona Ali G, whose ethnically ambiguous imitation rude boy speech is festooned with hip-hop “street slang” and ironic talk of “bitches and slags,” by 2000 had “inadvertently become the chosen Voice of Youth.” As the character’s popularity grew, she suspected that Ali G’s satirical swagger too was being gradually stripped of political potential, as humor “poking fun at mass-marketed hip-hop culture” and the Establishment, and embraced as an ironic idol by young men.<sup>182</sup> Not only did the culture of laddism use irony as an excuse to be retrogressive in many instances, but it also created a climate in which otherwise subversive irony was readily refracted through a lad lens, or retrofitted with a pro-lad politics.

Thus, texts conceived or designated at the point of enunciation as social critique may just as easily work to advance the interests of hegemonic masculinity or stoke widely held prejudices. As the unanticipated reactionary readings of Norman Lear’s *All in the Family* and its British precursor *Till Death Us Do Part* attest, even fairly stable ironies do not guarantee a uniform reading. We know that although bigotry was the intended target of satire in both of these sitcoms

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<sup>181</sup> Al Murray, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Judah, *ibid.*

hailing from the 1970s—at the height of “Old Lad’s” reign—a sizeable portion of the audiences welcomed the lovable bigots Archie Bunker and Alf Garnett as spokesmen for the disgruntled white working stiff.<sup>183</sup> Audience activity goes a long way to negotiate and potentially even “recode” the textual meanings at the level of both individual and cultural reception. With the postmodern ironic ethos of *Married... With Children* that encouraged FOX audiences to greet Al Bundy “ironically” with similar enthusiasm in the late 1980s through 1990s, the concept of audience “misreadings” is particularly inadequate to account for the character’s evolution from a satirical perversion/inversion of the romanticized TV Dad archetype into a full-fledged lad icon. Reading formations project or reflect back upon the cultural text the preferred meanings of cultural irony. In this case, laddism as a dominant brand of “politically incorrect” humor increasingly colonized the text and steered its structuring pleasures.

Denis Leary, one of the few performers to work comedy clubs on both sides of the Atlantic and become an internationally celebrated lad of film and television in the 1990s, managed simultaneously to poke fun at and give voice to the “Angry White Male” demographic. As a stand-up comic, Leary became known in the early 1990s for fast-paced angry “rants,” on MTV and as a host/performer for the BBC’s *Paramount City* (later repackaged as Comedy Central’s stand-up show *London Underground*), railing against pet peeves and infringements on personal freedoms.<sup>184</sup> The Irish-American comedian’s act traveled well in part because he stuck to the “boy basics” of cigarettes, alcohol, meat, and sex, with vigorous contempt for health gurus, yuppie coffee-bar culture, and sensitivity, while occasionally taking up more political and social themes. Without breaking character, Leary let audiences glimpse a sophisticated authorial voice

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<sup>183</sup> For discussion of widespread “racist” fan appreciation for the avowedly anti-racist sitcom *All in the Family* and its British source text, see the Interlude that precedes this chapter.

<sup>184</sup> Leary shared the *Paramount City* stage with rising comics like Rob Newman and David Baddiel.

and appeals to humanity behind his rancorous stage persona, in performances such as his live concert and album *No Cure for Cancer* recorded in 1992 (a comic salute to smoking and drugs). Contributing to Leary's transnational appeal was his ironic deployment of the proud, red-blooded American "asshole" as an object for derision. Like the Pub Landlord, Leary's act disturbed the purely celebratory impulses typical of lad humor.

For example, in his notorious 1993 song "Asshole," Leary adopted the point of view of "your average white suburbanite slob" who likes "football and porno" and "hav[ing] fun at someone else's expense." When channeling this "just-a-regular-Joe" character, Leary mocked a certain mindset of American greed, waste, and entitlement:

... I'm gonna get myself a 1967 Cadillac Eldorado convertible, hot pink, with whale-skin hubcaps and all leather cow interior and big brown baby seal eyes for headlights. Yeah! And I'm gonna drive around in that baby at 115 miles an hour, getting 1 mile per gallon, sucking down quarter pounder cheeseburgers from McDonald's in the old-fashioned non-biodegradable Styrofoam containers! And when I'm done suckin' down those grease ball burgers I'm gonna wipe my mouth on the American flag and then toss the Styrofoam containers right out the side, and there ain't a God-damned thing anybody can do about it.

The audience sang along with the chorus of "A – S – S – H – O – L – E" as Leary bellowed, "I'm an asshole and I'm proud of it!"<sup>185</sup> With the potential to be read as just another of the comedian's signature rants, the song's relatively "stable" irony may be obscured in certain negotiated readings that ironically embrace the message "I'm an asshole" to affirm the persistent themes of hedonism and personal liberty endorsed by Leary's overarching comic persona as a lover of cigarettes, alcohol, and swagger. While Leary's stand-up was salient for this earlier moment of laddism, as we will see, his eventual move into narrative television in the 2000s, with first *The Job* and later *Rescue Me*, would help to uplift and usher in a later stage of laddism on U.S. television.

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<sup>185</sup> In a similar 2012 single "Kiss My Ass," Leary again "plays the part of the indulgent-and-proud-of-it American alpha male," as Ross Luippold asserts in "Denis Leary's 'Kiss My Ass' Exclusive Premiere," *The Huffington Post*, June 27, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/27/denis-learys-kiss-my-ass-\\_n\\_1631022.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/27/denis-learys-kiss-my-ass-_n_1631022.html). Notably, the character blurs into the artist ("Kiss my skinny, Irish, Emmy-losing ass.").

Comedy texts with no discernible progressive or counter-hegemonic agenda or intent especially stood to benefit from the transgressive chic of postmodern irony. Lad culture routinely exploited irony in the service of entrenched cultural hierarchy, undermining the critical potential of irony's polysemy. Ongoing dispute over the political implications of Andrew Clay's "Dice Man" stand-up persona's unbridled bigotry and inflated ego revolve around questions of encoded meaning as well as reception. As I noted in the Interlude preceding this chapter, Clay's self-reinvention in the public eye as the Dice Man was alternately interpreted in the press as "the comedy of hate" or a kind of profane performance art ("Of course it's a put-on. ... He doesn't really mean it.")<sup>186</sup> *South Park* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker, interviewed by the British film magazine *Empire* in June 2000, went further with the latter line of argument, defending the controversial comic as a misunderstood "genius" sending up sexism. They regard his act as "making those guys who belittle women look stupid" and suggested that those who take offense are missing the point.<sup>187</sup> While I may disagree, this reading nonetheless adheres and lends legitimacy (given their comedic and cultural clout) to the operative interpretive framework that was actively encouraged by the prevailing discourse of "postmodern irony."

Indeed, the motif of being "misunderstood" by humorless PC do-gooders remained one of the core in-group pleasures extended to laddist reading formations which, as we saw with *Loaded*, collapse the pleasures of "getting it" into those of "getting away with it." There is no one "true" ultimate meaning of Clay's act, covert or literal, only warring reading schemes and questions of degree. As a model for laddism to follow, Clay's cagey brand of humor maximally

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<sup>186</sup> See Gerri Hirshey, "The Comedy of Hate," *GQ: Gentlemen's Quarterly* 59, no. 8 (August 1989): 226–29, 270–72; and D. Mills, "Devil and Andrew Clay," G1.

<sup>187</sup> Stone in Collins, "Dead Funny," 94. "Genius" is Trey Parker's description from the same interview.

exploited ambiguity to hopelessly obscure the distinction between what is said and meant, between surface and depth, and fully utilize the irony “get-out clause.”

*Time*'s James Poniewozik remarked on the industry-wide appeal of the irony out-clause in the early 2000s as it was fast becoming U.S. television's preferred branding scheme for wooing young male audiences. He described this irony as the engine for TNN's (formerly The Nashville Network) relaunch as Spike TV “for men,” as confirmed by network president Albie Hecht:

Cars, gross-out jokes, T. and A.—not the most elevated definition of manhood, but Hecht says it's all delivered with a wink. “[Men] know we're buffoons,” he says. “We know that we can be made fun of.” This notion is of a piece with the have-your-cheesecake-and-eat-it-too approach of men's TV from *The Man Show* to Coors' “Twins” beer commercials: we'll ironically acknowledge that we're drooling idiots in exchange for getting to look at boobies.<sup>188</sup>

*The Man Show*'s “winking” performance of a heavy-handed sexism pays homage to Clay, while sufficiently toning down the chauvinist shtick and playing up the “drooling idiots” angle to more successfully herald itself as harmless sport and avoid accusations of “hate” humor. At the same time, their gimmick of “regular guyness” affords these comedians closer proximity to “reality,” eschewing the express theatricality of the Dice Man's character. Because this series became the stand-out example of American lad television popularizing irony as a “post-modern safety net,” it is worth revisiting with one final illustration of how this text teasingly transgresses the boundaries of fiction and disallows any pretense to a stable preferred reading.

The year before Caitlin Moran in *The Times* reprimanded *The 11 O'Clock Show* for playing into prejudice, *The Man Show* had similarly taunted modern-day feminists and the “PC police” by remembering the year 1920 in a comedy segment called “Worst Moments in Man's History.”

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<sup>188</sup> Poniewozik, “What Do Men Want?” 62. See also John M. Higgins, “Freston's Mission: Digesting Comedy, Fixing Spike, VH-1,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 23 (June 9, 2003): 1, who reports that Albie Hecht resisted the comparisons of Spike to the “shallow, sex-obsessed” *Maxim* market leading up to the network's launch party at the Playboy Mansion. Hecht called Spike “the ultimate brand for [the] post-modern, post-feminist guy.”

The sketch's treatment of similar themes enacted a deliberately antagonistic or mean-spirited mode of irony, divested of even the gesture to social critique, staking its subversiveness purely to the art of the masterfully offensive utterance. Men should never have "given" women the right to vote, Carolla and Kimmel wryly declared, denouncing nineteenth-century women's movement leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony as "pioneers in the field of bitching, moaning, and complaining." The comedians took to the streets where they collected signatures for a petition to Stop Women's Suffrage (fig. 2.13). Implying that "suffrage" means suffering, and targeting individuals they expected would display ignorance of Constitutional history, the pair managed to dupe vocabulary-impaired passersby (including immigrants, girl scouts, and young school children) into supporting their cause, and even sweet-talked elderly ladies into chanting, "Stop women's suffrage now!" By asserting that women are too "lazy" to take initiative and protest suffrage, Carolla and Kimmel enlisted one well-meaning non-native English speaker to circulate their petition, until a young feminist pulled her aside to explain solemnly that these "white men" are "making fun of you."



Figure 2.13.

Taking Back the Vote:

Adam Carolla and Jimmy Kimmel explain to women that "the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment is very unjust," persuading members of the public to sign and circulate a petition to end women's suffrage.

*The Man Show*, originally aired June 16, 1999, on Comedy Central.

This ruse of making real women appear ignorant (or in the case of those who “get it,” too serious to play along) advances the show’s cheeky thesis that women “deserve” aggressive comic treatment if not the loss of their rights.<sup>189</sup> Potentially humiliating actual present (and future) voters and provoking several concerned citizens to intercept, this mode of humor—with the comedians performing as obstinately sexist versions of themselves and never “breaking character”—playfully effaces the gap between performance and reality, and further blurs the line between feigned and actual chauvinism.

The more brazenly laddish comics, for all their claims to irony and its connotations of subversion, made a game of cloaking these “offensive” utterances (cf. *The Man Show*’s “women are lazy” trope and Clay’s “lazy wife” bit) behind the veil of “just joking.” Stone and Parker’s protestations aside, typically lad texts put forth minimal effort to make the viewer’s *disavowal* of laddish attitudes on display a prerequisite for taking pleasure in the comedy. In fact, the material seems not to “work” as well when they do (as seen when NBC’s *Men Behaving Badly*, with its men-are-animals voice-overs, fell flat with critics and audiences). Lad-identified audiences, it seems, didn’t appreciate external cues instructing them when to laugh at themselves. The ridiculing must issue from *inside* lad culture, not be directed from without. Carolla and Kimmel had sufficient lad credentials to get away with mocking their fellow men, but woe betide the woman or wife who wishes to make her own “perspective” heard in such a forum. To make this silencing overt, in *The Man Show*’s pilot, a segment called “The Wife’s Perspective” with Mrs. Kimmel is abruptly preempted to make room for “Girls Jumping on Trampolines,” while Jimmy’s Juggy “girlfriend” serves him a beer.

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<sup>189</sup> This well-known skit, from the pilot, has also been interpreted as straightforward political satire, for example in an entry on *The Man Show*’s user-edited Wikipedia page ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Man\\_Show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_Show), accessed April 2, 2014) summarizing, “This sketch humorously revealed widespread fundamental political ignorance in the general population and how terminology could be used to manipulate public opinion.”



*“Man Talk”: Irony and Minor Discourse*

Even the most retrogressive or reactionary uses of ironic voice in comedy have tended to lay claim to irony’s emancipatory power as a daring, subversive protest of the *status quo*. Positing liberal-progressive values and “PC” as the dominant order allowed laddism in the nineties to assert an identity for white heterosexual men as a disenfranchised group, using irony as a rhetorical strategy to deconstruct the supposedly “dominant” bloc of feminism, multiculturalism, and queerness. In this way, laddish irony of the period is patterned after the “minor discourse” of non-dominant social groups. In critical theory, minor discourse refers to forms of in-group speech (such as “black talk” or “gayspeak”) that function both to “exclude outsiders” and foster a sense of membership in a social tribe based on a shared experience of oppression.<sup>190</sup> As humor scholar Norma Schulman argues, African-American stand-up comedy constitutes a productive site of minor discourse, one with “its own irony” and anti-PC imperatives, defined in opposition to “polite (read ‘white’) society.”<sup>191</sup> Minority discourses, Schulman tells us, are “always oppositional,” as they exist in dialectical relation and reaction to the majority discourse: “Minor discourse enacts the internal tensions that minority groups experience as outsiders by deliberately breaking some of the many rules of communication that the larger culture enforces.”<sup>192</sup> Lad comedy in its rebellion against mainstream taste culture and PC propriety constructs an adjacent

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<sup>190</sup> The Urban Dictionary defines gayspeak as “communication between homosexual males (usually in private) who speak in a familiar manner that comes across, initially, as polite discourse but it is usually loaded with rancor and/or sarcasm.” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gayspeak> (accessed June 11, 2012).

<sup>191</sup> Norma Schulman, “The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 22, no. 3 (autumn 1994): 109, 113. Black stand-up comedy is itself a masculine sphere and “sexist” joking culture, in ways Schulman dissects, designed to rebel against bourgeois tastes and PC. Minor discourse in her analysis is not a synonym for minor language (or in this case, Black English); certainly it incorporates “black talk” but also supplies its own ironic codes and comic stereotypes. Though I refer to both terms, I am mindful of this key distinction.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–11.

“outsider” standpoint and form of “oppositional consciousness” for heterosexual white men that draws upon the rhetorical trope from black and minority stand-up comedy of “keeping it real.”

The ironic “man talk” of comic forums like *The Man Show* and lads’ magazines poses playfully as a coded and liberatory language, creating safe spaces where white heterosexual men can speak freely amongst themselves about their “real” desires without getting into trouble with Oprah-watching, *Cosmo*-reading women, “brainwashed” New Men, and other ostensibly oppressive figures said to be creating a world hostile to the interests of Real Men. These texts frame resistant readings from those outside the implied community as censorious acts by the “dominant” culture of PC liberal elites, thus effectively obscuring white, male, and heterosexual privilege through humor about feminine and other forces conspiring to keep “regular guys” from being true to their nature. We saw that, like Al Bundy’s usurping of Jerry Springer’s stage (fig. 2.6a), *The Man Show* declares itself against women’s “talk” TV (the “Oprahization” of America).<sup>193</sup>

*The Man Show* and similar texts most directly mimic, invert, and ironically co-opt the codes of what feminist media theorists have termed “feminine discourse.” As defined by feminist media theorist Mary Ellen Brown, “Feminine discourse is a way of talking and acting among feminine subjects (usually women) in which they acknowledge their position of subordination within patriarchal society” and perhaps entertain forms of resistance. She maintains that women, like other subordinated groups, must create alternative spaces on the social margins “where they can talk directly, where their opinions are valued, and where listeners share the same or similar perceptions of the world.”<sup>194</sup> Gossip culture and women’s television genres, Brown argues,

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<sup>193</sup> *The Man Show* directly parodies daytime women’s television with “The Woman Show,” episode 1.15 (production no. 116), first aired December 1, 1999, on Comedy Central.

<sup>194</sup> Mary Ellen Brown, *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 204, 206.

provide places and opportunities to address the felt contradictions between private versus public perception of gender roles, when lived experience pulls against normative notions of how women should ‘naturally’ think, feel, and behave as wives or mothers. Women and girls may be inclined to share “illegitimate” or “private knowledge” once outside of the watchful eye of patriarchal institutions, even if they publicly perform and subscribe to socially sanctioned, hegemonic attitudes about motherhood, marriage, or sexuality. In short, feminine discourse is intermittently subversive and supports a subaltern subjectivity based on self-awareness about “how one gets by in relation to the rules of patriarchal society.”<sup>195</sup>

Brown contends that the contextual pleasures of “women’s genres,” though widely denigrated, potentially provide avenues of “empowerment” for women as both producers and consumers of popular culture. Humor is very much a part of such discourse, as she observes:

Often, feminine discourse... is parodic: that is, it makes fun of dominant practices and discursive notions. By playing in this way with the conventions of the dominant discourse, feminine discourse constitutes itself as “other” to it, and displays a potential resistance.<sup>196</sup>

During the 1990s, I would add, the politicized spaces for talking back to dominant culture created by third-wave feminist texts like *Bitch* magazine and Eve Ensler’s off-Broadway play *The Vagina Monologues* (both of which were reliant upon irony) provide further examples of feminine discourse as an oppositional and in-group practice. Significantly, feminine discourse, as Brown suggests, does “not assume that the status quo in terms of gender roles is a natural, preordained condition.”<sup>197</sup> In turn, laddish humor as masculine discourse, in the men’s genres

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 203–8. Brown draws on case studies including (on 205, 208) Shirley Prendergast and Alim Prout’s work on “illegitimate” knowledge in “What Will I Do? Teenage Girls and the Construction of Motherhood,” *The Sociological Review* 28, no. 3 (August 1980): 517–35.

<sup>196</sup> Brown, *Television and Women’s Culture*, 206.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 190.

under discussion in this chapter, works to reinforce ritualistically the idea of “natural” rules for gender relations, even as the humor ironizes masculinity and its “private knowledges.”

Imitating minor discourses that use ironic codes to talk back to dominant-hegemonic discourse, the mediatized culture of “man talk” stakes its claim on a sense of not only alterity but authenticity and social marginalization. By appropriating and/or parodying alternative cultural sites and practices of minority and feminine discourse, lad comedy constructs its own logics of self and group empowerment. Sidling up to the subaltern and playing its own “identity card,” the discourse of lad masculinity builds upon the existing foundation of New Right rhetoric that, as Gitlin describes, invites the masculine subject to define himself as stigmatized and persecuted—the “victim of PC.”<sup>198</sup>

*Truth in Nonsense, Honesty in Irony*

While some media producers and critics upheld postmodern irony as a subversive art or tool for critique (e.g., Al Murray’s Pub Landlord character), the standard defense of irony in nineties popular culture was to attack or ridicule the opposition as humorless “squares.” When most questioning of misogynist or homophobic joking culture is dismissed as “politically correct” propaganda, the resulting climate of anti-PC fervor short-circuits inquiry into the cultural politics of irony. Consider the polemical view espoused by shock-jock Howard Stern and dittoed by fans of conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh: if you find jokes about women “sexist” instead of funny, you must be a prude, a sex-starved harridan, or worse, a bitter lesbian or uptight “feminazi.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Gitlin, “Demonization of Political Correctness,” from a passage quoted above in relation to the backlash.

<sup>199</sup> Limbaugh helped to make “feminazi” the knee-jerk term of abuse for feminists in the 1990s, although his *The Way Things Ought to Be* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992) claims that he intended the term for pro-choice activists. On his July 3, 2012, radio show, Limbaugh echoed the *Man Show* skit above by stating, “When women got the right to vote is when it all went downhill,” then amidst ensuing protest reassured his skittish sponsors that he was “joking.” EMILY’s List, a women’s political action committee, launched a campaign to “stand against Rush Limbaugh’s misogynistic ‘jokes!’” See [http://emilyslist.org/take-action/joke?ws=FBADS\\_07.25](http://emilyslist.org/take-action/joke?ws=FBADS_07.25) Rush 20Jokes\_Progressives-W\_Rights\_Against\_stand.jpg (accessed July 6, 2012).

In his essay “In Defense of Irony,” *Time*’s Joel Stein in 1999 dusted off a less incendiary variation on this argument to condemn Jedediah Purdy’s *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* as a mere “excuse for not having a sense of humor.” Stein invoked the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard to insist that irony keeps us honest: “By constantly checking ourselves for phoniness, irony forces us either to think more closely about how we feel or to joke honestly about the fact that we feel nothing.”<sup>200</sup> Appeals to *honesty without earnestness* are key to the self-positioning of lad comedy heroes from Sam Kinison to Jerry Sadowitz to Jimmy Kimmel to Colin Quinn.

The two creators of the hit lad sitcoms *Men Behaving Badly* and *Game On*, Simon Nye and Andrew Davies, upheld this view of authenticity in irony. Both indicated that although lad humor may not be *earnest*, it is more importantly *honest*. Their insights prompted *Radio Times* to question whether laddism was really such a “backlash” against political correctness after all, or might it just be an indication that male writers were being more open and forthright. Simon Nye attributed the new lad boom to nothing more sinister or subtle than “a lot of male writers liking scenes with men chatting.”<sup>201</sup> *Game On*’s Andrew Davies concurred, claiming that men “are trying too hard to be what they think women want them to be.” He surmised that male scriptwriters under the regime of the new man were not being true to themselves. “They should talk about how much they like sex rather than say things like ‘Oh, isn’t being a man terribly out of fashion?’” insisted Davies. “Being so barefaced is what sets the New Lad apart.”<sup>202</sup> Each episode of *Men Behaving Badly* concludes, as Lewisohn writes, in a “non-reflexive, inconsequential

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<sup>200</sup> Stein, “In Defense of Irony,” 42.

<sup>201</sup> Simon Nye, quoted in Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” 6.

<sup>202</sup> Andrew Davies, quoted in *ibid.*

way, with the two guys sprawled on the couch, licking their wounds by guzzling from a can of lager, having advanced not a whit from the Neanderthal.”<sup>203</sup> For these writers and their fans, lad television jettisons “phoney emotion” to offer a more “honest” glimpse into the psyche of the man who would prefer to shoot the breeze with his buddies about mundane matters like boozing, bragging, and shagging free of any imperative for self-improvement.<sup>204</sup>

Lad sitcoms thus discard the sentimental or “sugary happy ending” typical of traditional domestic comedies, from *Father Knows Best* to *The Cosby Show*.<sup>205</sup> Chuck Lorre, co-creator/co-writer of CBS’s *Two and a Half Men* (2003–), the longest running ladcom on U.S. television and one of the highest-rated network sitcoms of its era, pledged to viewers at the series’ outset: “There will be no pedantic, socially conscious stories. No matter how poignant the moment, we will never broadcast our studio audience going, ‘ahhh’.”<sup>206</sup> This sitcom in its original iteration adhered to the two-men-on-a-couch tradition but with a twist, as the saga of brothers—a bachelor ‘lad’ and a divorced ‘new man’—forced to cohabitate. Cynical womanizer Charlie Harper (loosely modeled on the show’s real-life lad star Charlie Sheen) was forced to endure the whining of his prissy, preachy, sniveling sibling Alan (Jon Cryer).<sup>207</sup> In this equation, the guiding sympathies of the text invariably fell with the confirmed lad secure in his rascal masculinity and “getting away with it” (fig. 2.14). Notably, when actor Sheen’s too-laddish lifestyle got his character

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<sup>203</sup> Lewisohn, “Men Behaving Badly,” 431.

<sup>204</sup> Johnson, “Come On You Lads!” 6.

<sup>205</sup> The genre’s detractors invariably emphasize artificiality. See Gordon, “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” 67.

<sup>206</sup> Chuck Lorre’s “The Two and a Half Men Pledge” was Chuck Lorre Productions Vanity Card #109, and appeared after the closing titles of *Two and a Half Men*, episode 1.2, first broadcast September 29, 2003, by CBS.

<sup>207</sup> *Married... With Children* is once again an important comic precedent, where a similar tension plays out in the first four seasons between Al Bundy and his effete new-man neighbor Steve Rhoades, who (like Alan) is dimly “enlightened” by feminism and emasculated by a feminist wife, as outlined in Chapter 1.

written off the show after eight seasons (with the double-whammy of being both married-off and killed-off in the story, and the suggestion that the former is worse than the latter), the series reverted to the familiar formula of guy-friend flatmates—although Charlie’s replacement Walden Schmidt (Ashton Kutcher) notably models a more boyish, loyal, lovelorn, and reflective masculine ideal. As with *Men Behaving Badly*, part of *Two and a Half Men*’s implicit appeal resides in a sense of owning the truth about what men really think and believe. This aura of politically incorrect truth-telling is further underwritten by the use of vanity cards that conclude each episode, in which writer-producer Lorre lays bare his personal philosophies with a confessional blend of irreverence and poignancy, and chronicles his troubles with censorship.<sup>208</sup>



Figure 2.14. Bro Banter: Hedonist Charlie (Charlie Sheen) offers thin comfort as divorcé Alan (Jon Cryer) copes with news that he’s impregnated his ex-wife: “I lost eight thousand dollars playing poker, I have no idea where my car is, I threw up in my mouth three times, and I’m *still* having a better night than you are.” “I Think You Offended Don,” *Two and a Half Men*, originally aired January 19, 2009, on CBS.

Parallel with Lorre/Sheen’s imagination of the likeable lad in *Two and a Half Men*, the number one network comedy of the 2000s, laddism meanwhile gained pathos in cutting-edge serial programs, such as ABC’s single-camera urban police dramedy *The Job* (2001–02) from perennial lad icon Denis Leary. At the same time as his humor has often challenged racism and

<sup>208</sup> Like *Men Behaving Badly* writer Simon Nye, Chuck Lorre channels the spirit of lad hedonism in his sitcom (through drunken playboy main character Charlie) but identifies himself closer to the sensitive end of the new man/lad continuum (albeit much more self-aware than the Alan character). This is reflected in his often soulful vanity cards.

ethnocentric tropes within laddism, Leary has done more than perhaps any other comedy writer/performer to craft sympathetic and psychologically complex portraits that establish the lad persona as an unambiguously “cool,” clever, and relatable figure on U.S. television. While consistently providing ironic and ambivalent commentary on masculinist, selfish American identities, Leary in collaboration with his long-time production partner Jim Serpico (in addition to co-producing televised stand-up comedy events and showcases like *Shorties Watchin’ Shorties*) outfitted a repertoire of rebellious lad lead and supporting characters with ironic sensibilities that enable them to straddle differing cultural attitudes toward male privilege. Representations such as Leary’s suave, adulterous hero Detective Mike McNeil in *The Job*, whose overt sexism and predatory sexuality are simultaneously problematized and glamorized by the text, reveal and revel in the charismatic “chameleon” masculinity that Sean O’Hagan first described for men in a post-feminist world. Casting the new lad as damaged but eminently likeable and desirable, the exuberantly chauvinist and anti-“metrosexual” male enclaves in Leary’s edgy television fictions can be read, on the one hand, as a trenchant investigation of masculinity’s self-definitions and, on the other, as a celebration of what it means to be a guy. Here again, laddism is ultimately about having it “both ways.” In either case, the humor is staked to a notion of political incorrectness in the sense of saying uncomfortable truths.

## **Conclusions**

Simultaneous claims to being irony and barefaced honesty imbue the new lad texts with a particular type of polysemy that volatilizes conventional understandings of “preferred readings.” Irony as “out-clause” proved instrumental in empowering a generation of lad comics and comedy writers to pick at the scabs of the wounded male ego in the aftermath of feminism and say that which is socially taboo or at least “insensitive” in defense of unapologetically unreformed masculinity.



Particularly in the context of the restrictions and the alleged hegemony of political correctness, the irony boom that tilled the fertile ground for laddism to take root in popular culture was increasingly the purview of politically evasive humor. Uses of multilayered irony to joke overtly with/about sexist, racist, or homophobic views without “meaning” them or answering for them became a dominant mode of comic discourse in man-centric comedy in both Britain and the United States.

In sum, lad humor, if broadly construed, puts irony to varied uses ranging from the reactionary to the more reflexive and subversive. Although it may be tempting to view laddism as a narrow taste culture espousing a regressive gender and sexual politics, this cultural movement’s enduring influence on humor can be felt across a wide range of texts and traditions that differ in comic tone and ideological inflection, a fact that I revisit in later chapters with more recent examples from U.S. television. Laddish programs from the 2000s onward began to pursue a stronger sense of character depth and interiority, retreating further from the postmodern play of surfaces and the comic codes of insincerity (or anti-earnestness) to probe into the wounded male psyche with representations of masculinity in crisis, both in narrative comedy (as seen with the therapeutic overtones of sitcoms like *Baddiel’s Syndrome*, *Titus*, *Starved*, and even *Two and a Half Men*) and drama (especially quality serialized masculine melodramas like FX’s *Rescue Me*, *Nip/Tuck*, and *The Shield*, HBO’s *The Sopranos*, and AMC’s *Mad Men*).

Although laddism continued to be a popular and profitable comic trend throughout the 2000s and indeed into the 2010s, irony and especially “postmodern irony” would undergo a set of cultural renegotiations during the early 2000s. In the U.S., cultural tensions about irony’s (in)stability erupted into a full-blown debate about the appropriate modes for comedic discourse during wartime in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Laddism would boom in this decade on U.S. television, particularly on the cable networks Comedy Central, Spike, and FX. At the same

time, much laddish programming would come to revolve more explicitly around dominant media themes of family, patriotism, suffering, accountability, and heroism, dabbling in moments of “earnest” emotion while still reliant on laddism’s established ironic ethos. The next two chapters explore the ways in which irony in American comedy would become inflected by nationalism and questions of national identity. The changing discourse on irony and demand for sincerity would further foster appeals to unity, truth, authenticity, and the real in humor and irony.

## Chapter 3

### Comedy in Crisis: The “End of Irony” and the “New Earnestness”

Irony, already the target of much negative attention in public and political discourse, was thrust into the center of protracted debates over the future of American freedoms in the 2000s. Under the ubiquitous “new patriotism” in U.S. media following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., irony and its consort postmodernism were tarred with the brush of “anti-Americanism.” Comedic irony rapidly regained ground, however, through assertions of democratic and social relevance across a variety of texts. Critics called for irony in public life and in comedy culture to be divested of the “aloof,” “detached,” ultracynical attitude attributed to the *Seinfeld* era, and outfitted with a renewed sense of truth and purpose. Comics seeking to position themselves as “hip” dabbled in greater degrees of social commentary and occasional displays of conviction. Meanwhile, political satirists redoubled their efforts to use irony as a mode of subversion and critique, emphasizing the cultural and political stakes for comedy. Irony in certain guises was upheld as an “engaged” and even patriotic practice of critical thinking for the modern citizen, and pressed into service by various comedians as agents or arbiters in the culture wars. Attempts to discipline and dispense with “irony” by calling it a mere instrument of “cynicism,” or the passive repose of a smugly apathetic nihilist, persisted yet proved largely unsuccessful. Countervailing efforts to reclaim irony as a critical tool, and even reconceive of cynicism as a potentially constructive force, enjoyed greater success.

This chapter examines how American humor as a national discursive formation was destabilized and cautiously reconstructed in the wake of “September 11” as various pressures regulated comedy as a social force, political presence, and creative enterprise in U.S. media.

Early discussions of humor after 9/11 focused on containing comedy in national crisis. With the onset of the government's and media's War on Terror, the lines of transgression shifted as moral absolutes overcame a straw man called moral relativism in public debates. Comedians were urged to use their humor to bring the nation together, and dissenting voices were censured, even censored. Not only humorists, but the media more broadly and audiences, were entreated to shed an ironic sensibility and espouse a "new sincerity," alternately written "the New Sincerity."<sup>1</sup> While numerous sources have pointed out that irony did not disappear as widely predicted, it did become a heavily contested mode. I argue that as the popular critical discourse on humor grew especially transparent, in certain respects cultural meanings of irony and cynicism were malleable and opened for revision.

The main part of the chapter deals with the "death of irony" as a cultural conceit, revisiting key statements and outlining three rhetorical tropes that, combined, gave this discourse such salience and staying power even as many scoffed and dismissed it as a "flavor-of-the-month quote."<sup>2</sup> Expectations of "the end of irony," interspersed with pleas for "irony of another kind," brought to the forefront of public debate the conflicting meanings of irony as a cultural sensibility and as a comedic practice. The resulting irony debates were ultimately as invested in redefining and refurbishing irony as they were about disciplining the unruly ironist.

Taking comedian Bill Maher as a key case study, I consider how this controversial figure boasting "politically incorrect" and "cynical" perspectives on current affairs became a lightning rod in what some critics have alternately termed the "anti-irony movement" or "war on irony" in the aftermath of 9/11. For a time Maher put a public face on the political problems of both

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase, often capitalized to signal a new epoch and used interchangeably with "New Earnestness," was most widely adopted by those not subscribing to the discourse it names but assigning gravitas and quasi-proper noun status.

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Froelke Coburn, "No Kidding," *Chicago* 50, no. 12 (December 2001): 46.

irony and dissent, particularly in the conservative press where he became the go-to example of unserious and “unthoughtful” cynical attitudes. He remains, I argue, an important reference point in theoretical and ideological struggles over the implications of cynicism, alternately seen as “detachment” or defiance.

With critics calling for an end to ironic detachment, the supposed turn to sincerity saw efforts either to renounce irony altogether or, across a range of comedy venues, to reassert irony as a politically engaged form and thrust the ironist more prominently into the national cultural forum. Political comedians were subject to more intense scrutiny as the press worked to refashion the mantle of comedian and reconcile that identity with humorists’ persistent assertions of adjacent identities as citizen and public representative. As media personalities like Bill Maher and Jon Stewart settled into the liminal spaces between these roles, the comedian’s cultural significance and place within imaginings of the public sphere underwent significant redefinition during the first half of the 2000s by comics, the press, broadcasters, and audiences.

The remainder of the chapter moves beyond the expected “end” that many say never materialized to subsequent efforts to redeem irony, calling forth a new “golden age” of ironic engagement and dark or subversive humor. In particular, news parody and comedy talk formats were instrumental in refashioning irony as a politically invested mode. Alongside *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, the chapter considers critical and fan responses to *The Onion* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, taking these texts as prominent sites of alternative comic discourse that in the wake of 9/11 stood as models or evidence of a “new sincerity” in subversive irony. Finally, turning to trends in broadcast television, I will begin to survey the ways and extent to which network sitcoms gained a renewed sense of “sincerity” throughout the formative phases of the new patriotism sweeping prime-time programming in the early to mid-2000s.

## Irony, Interrupted

Irony was the voice of the city—a voice easily assigned to a town without heroes—smartness without wisdom. *Seinfeld*'s epic whine was our “Leaves of Grass.” Sincerity, purpose, emotion were déclassé.

— Peter Kaplan, recollecting “premillennial”  
New York, 2011<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, cultural critics anticipated immediate and lasting changes in America's shared cultural sensibility. A nation does not change “sense of humor” overnight, but some sources ambitiously announced America was doing just that. The events of that day and the ensuing War on Terror also sparked a national dialogue about humor's role in times of crisis. Broadcasters, entertainers, and the press weighed humor's capacity to comfort and unify or corrupt and divide the nation, contemplating what forms comedy should take in a “post-9/11” world. This brief and brooding period of deliberation made explicit the presumed or preferred social functions of humor and set out new ‘rules’ for comedy. The resulting discourse overwhelmingly focused on irony, scrutinizing its cultural failings and prescribing an ethos of earnestness, compassion, and caution. Guiding this cultural conversation were hopes and assertions that the American public had lost all taste or tolerance for “smug” and “corrosive” humor. Many in the television industry looked to comedy to affirm and not undermine fragile media narratives of national unity.

### *The Comedy Blackout*

For several days or even weeks following September 11, humor and laughter were said to be off-limits. During this comedy blackout, the cultural circuit of humor was thrown into an

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<sup>3</sup> Peter W. Kaplan, “What We Were Before; What We Are Now,” in “The Encyclopedia of 9/11,” *New York*, August 27, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/new-york/> (accessed July 17, 2012).

identity crisis. Comedians and comedy writers touched by the tragedy reassessed their role and responsibilities. The edifice of irony collapsed, for the moment, leaving humorists of all stripes disoriented and introspective. Syndicated newspaper columnist Dave Barry on September 13 promised his readers “no humor column today” and instead offered a solemn tribute to American virtue, decency, and resilience, assuring, “[W]e... have the heart of a good and generous people, and we will get through this.”<sup>4</sup> *The New Yorker*, in a similar gesture, suspended levity by publishing an issue without its staple whimsical cartoons. Meanwhile, the major broadcast networks halted production on late-night comedy programs and aired re-runs. *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* put themselves on hiatus. Comedy Central pulled repeats of its 2001 cult hit *That’s My Bush!*, a satirical sitcom by the creators of *South Park* buffooning the First Family, and avoided subversive jokes aimed at the Bush administration and other “insensitive” material.<sup>5</sup> The prohibitions on humor and irony were not limited to comic texts, but extended to such cultural genres as advertising and popular music, with some speculation that classic rock and pop songs with any potential to be read/played ironically as “sick” jokes or gallows humor commenting on the tragedy were being stricken from radio playlists.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of situation and sketch comedy, broadcasters proceeded with caution as the nation’s favorite series returned to the airwaves. When the fall television season began in late

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<sup>4</sup> Dave Barry, “Just for Being Americans,” *Miami Herald*, September 13, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 22, 2005). Barry asserted Americans’ blamelessness, reviling the acts of “evil men” against “a good country.”

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press, “Humor Muted on Late-Night Shows,” *USA Today*, September 17, 2001, <http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/2001-09-17-late-night-humor.htm> (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The Clear Channel corporation was rumored to have flagged 160 songs as “inappropriate” for airplay on its 1,200 stations in radio markets across the U.S. The supposedly “banned” songs included classics that could be taken in this context as alluding ironically to airlines or explosions, such as The Beatles’ “Ticket to Ride,” Blue Oyster Cult’s “Burnin’ for You,” Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Great Balls of Fire,” and Alanis Morissette’s “Ironic.” “Musical Responses to September 11th: The List of Allegedly ‘Banned’ Songs,” *Freemuse: Freedom of Musical Expression*, December 9, 2004, <http://www.freemuse.org/sw21095.asp> (accessed February 2011).

September, sitcom writers stayed away from topical and expressly political content and provided comic “relief” amidst an escalating mood of national crisis. Jokes penned prior to 9/11 were scrutinized by network censors to sidestep sensitive subjects. The *Friends* seventh season premiere on September 27, for example, aired without a scene that contained too-timely jokes about air travel, a topic suddenly closed for comedy. A week later when *Saturday Night Live* tested the waters for light political satire, gags about George Bush and Osama bin Laden played poorly in rehearsals with the studio audience and did not air.<sup>7</sup> An episode of FOX’s *The Simpsons* from February 2001 was re-edited, removing from repeat broadcasts and syndication a scene in which a navy ship launches a missile that blows up the *Mad Magazine* building, to avoid any unintended irony or suggested similarity to widely televised explosion footage of the World Trade Center.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, these relatively high budget productions with long lead time and a constant eye on their aftermarket shied away from risky content.

The more immediately topical and ad hoc humor of late-night also tellingly remained “muted,” as *USA Today* reported, when these shows made an earlier return to the air.<sup>9</sup> The masks of comedy were lifted as David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Jon Stewart, among others, rejoined audiences one by one with emotional monologues that captured the national mood of outrage and bewilderment. One week after the attacks, *The Late Show with David Letterman* was one of the first to resume taping new shows. Toning down his usual snark, Letterman

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<sup>7</sup> Tad Friend, “Is It Funny Yet? Jon Stewart and the Comedy of Crisis,” *The New Yorker*, February 11, 2002, 28, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). Also see B. J. Sigismund, “What’s Funny About War?” *Newsweek*, April 12, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 18, 2004), detailing a sketch dropped during the war with Iraq to stay “funny” and in step with wartime news.

<sup>8</sup> *The Simpsons*, “New Kids on the Blech,” episode 12.14 (no. CABF12), first aired February 25, 2001, on FOX.

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press, “Humor Muted.” See also Associated Press (New York), “Media’s Joke Factories Put Usual Funny Fare into Storage for Now,” September 18, 2001, via *Tennessean.com* <http://www.tennessean.com/special/worldtrade/national/archives/01/08/08731697.shtml> (accessed March 22, 2005).



interviewed network newsman Dan Rather with a quiet dignity, and in a later show—which various critics pointed to as evidence of a “new earnestness” displacing irony—expressed heartfelt thanks to New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani.<sup>10</sup> ABC’s comedy debate show *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, returning to the air on September 17, made the powerful gesture of reserving an empty seat that week for conservative commentator Barbara Olson, who had died on the plane that terrorists hijacked and crashed into the Pentagon the week before. Maher’s studio audience applauded as he pledged that his show would become “more serious” but would also recognize the need for comic relief. “We’ve lived through shock, anger, grief, fear. We’re going to live through some more of it. But you know what, we need a release too,” Maher assured viewers.

*The Daily Show*’s first post-attack episode, on September 20, left little room for doubt that television’s top ironists were embracing earnestness. Jon Stewart’s tearful and virtually joke-free monologue, which he self-consciously characterized on-air as the “overwrought speech of a shaken host,” invited viewers to share in his memories, grief, and hopes and to renounce despair. In tones of hushed humility and reverence, he honored New York’s firefighters and police force and praised Americans for advancing Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of a community undivided by skin color: “Whatever barriers we put up are gone, even if it’s just momentary.” Similar to Maher, Stewart also indicated, “Our show has changed.” He expressed gratitude for the “privilege” of making comedy in a free society where “open satire” is possible, adding that the *Daily Show* staff writers “don’t take that for granted.” The comedian ended on a patriotic and poetic note, remarking that beyond the void where the Twin Towers formerly stood, the view from his window was now the undaunted Statue of Liberty. “You can’t beat that,” he said.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joe Queenan, “Unemployment Among Ironists Rose 65% Last Month,” *GQ* 71, no. 12 (December 2001): 246, suggested Letterman’s “touching” retreat from his trademark irony meant “sneering detachment had come to an end.”

<sup>11</sup> *The Daily Show*, “Post 9/11 Clip Show,” episode 6.108, first aired September 20, 2001, on Comedy Central.

With this insight, America's preeminent satirical news anchor fully embraced the mood of national pride and pain sweeping U.S. media and pragmatically acknowledged that comedy could not surmount this moment of powerfully shared sentiment. Comedy Central's vice president of corporate communications Tony Fox, relaying a view voiced by one staff member at *The Daily Show*, announced that "irony is dead for the moment."<sup>12</sup> This verdict was soon circulating in all corners of the media.

Significantly, the same week that saw Jon Stewart commemorating satire as the mark of an open society also brought attempts to shut down public debate occurring in comedy. Most notably, *Politically Incorrect* became the target of intense criticism because, in its aforementioned return episode, Maher had challenged President Bush's characterization of the terrorists as "cowardly" evildoers with his infamous retort: "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2000 miles away.... Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."<sup>13</sup> In response, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer issued an ominous "reminder" impressing upon "all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like that."<sup>14</sup> Echoing Fleischer, conservative activists Craig Shirley and L. Brent Bozell, calling for a boycott of *Politically Incorrect*, warned that "Mr. Maher, his parent company Disney, and his

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Lynn Elber, Associated Press, "Comedy Central's 'Daily Show' Returns after Attacks," September 21, 2001, [http://jon.happyjoyfun.net/tran/2001/01\\_0921apon.html](http://jon.happyjoyfun.net/tran/2001/01_0921apon.html) (accessed September 2007); and Eric Randall, "Cliché Watch: The 'Death of Irony,' and Its Many Reincarnations," *The Atlantic Wire*, September 9, 2011, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298> (accessed July 10, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, episode 1164, first aired September 17, 2001, on ABC.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Lisa de Moraes, "WJLA Pulls 'PI' a Second Time," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2001, C07, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

sponsors must learn that free speech comes with responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> Several major sponsors withdrew ads from the program.<sup>16</sup> Maher was forced to apologize on air, and soon afterward ABC cancelled his show. Given the close articulation between “political incorrectness” and irony, *Politically Incorrect*’s cancellation seemed to many a clear harbinger that the age of “irony and cynicism” was indeed drawing to an end.<sup>17</sup>

“*The End of the Age of Irony*”

One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. [...] In short, people may at last be ready to say what they wholeheartedly believe.

— Roger Rosenblatt, *Time*, September 24, 2001<sup>18</sup>

The rumored “death” of irony rapidly permeated news media in the weeks after 9/11. Comedy Central executive Tony Fox’s decree stood out as one among a smattering of professionals in the comedy business quoted on the matter. Another was Stephen Thompson, an editor at *The Onion*, who within days of the attacks made a comparable, if more portentous, second-hand statement: “I heard a staff member say something chilling, ‘The age of irony is dead.’”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Paul Bedard, Betsy Streisand, and Richard J. Newman, “Press Agrees to Bush’s Self-Censorship Request,” *U.S. News & World Report* 131, no. 14 (October 8, 2001): 4, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). Fleischer further urged the press to practice discretion and self-censorship to safeguard national security.

<sup>16</sup> Tad Friend, “You Can’t Say That; the Networks Play Word Games,” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2001, 44, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> *Politically Incorrect* was not immediately pulled from ABC’s schedule. The ninth and final season spanned from September 3, 2001, to June 28, 2002. For detailed consideration of how Maher’s post-9/11 comments shaped the show’s fate, see David Gurney, “Everything Changes Forever (Temporarily): Late-Night Television Comedy after 9/11,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 3–19; and Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 80–84.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” *Time* 158, no. 13 (September 24, 2001): 77.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Rob Hiaasen and Lisa Pollak, “When Will It Feel Right to Feel Right Again?” *Baltimore Sun*, September 14, 2001, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/custom/attack/bal-to.normal14sep14.story> (accessed March 22, 2005).

Far more common were proclamations of irony's obsolescence from popular cultural critics and pundits. Among the most heavily cited was journalist Roger Rosenblatt's September 24th *Time* magazine column announcing that a clean break with "the age of irony" was precisely what America needed. "With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes—our columnists and pop culture makers—declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life," Rosenblatt protested. "The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything," he wrote, promising readers that this "new and chastened time" would see serious-minded people finally rewinning the hearts and minds of a public and a media culture long overrun with these chronic gigglers who did not take "even the most serious things... seriously."<sup>20</sup>

The claim was most famously uttered by Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* and a founding editor of the defunct satirical magazine *Spy*. Speculating that we could expect a more "serious" America with a vastly reduced appetite for "frivolous" pop culture, he was quoted on September 18 in the media industry webzine *Inside.com* heralding this "seismic change" as "the end of the age of irony" and the dawn of a "new era of earnestness."<sup>21</sup> Many have concluded that Carter's coinage and vivid prediction of an epochal shift, though not the first such declaration, "set the tone for the discussion."<sup>22</sup> "Irony that is cynical and reactive and unserious and detached,"

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<sup>20</sup> Rosenblatt, "Irony Comes to an End," 77.

<sup>21</sup> The original quote, from Seth Mnookin, "In Disaster's Aftermath, Once-Cocky Media Culture Disses the Age of Irony," *Inside.com*, September 18, 2001, is prolifically cited by diverse sources. *Inside* was co-founded by Carter's former *Spy* colleague Kurt Andersen, who as I've noted previously decried the "irony epidemic" in 1989.

<sup>22</sup> The quoted language is from Alex Steiner, "The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends," *Permanent Revolution*, March 2002, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/end\\_irony.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/end_irony.pdf) (last accessed February 1, 2012). Andrew Coyne of Canada's *National Post* was reportedly the first to claim "The Age of Irony died," one day after Sept. 11, as pointed out by the American linguist Geoffrey Nunberg and subsequently journalist Eric Randall. Andrew Coyne, "We Are Not Afraid," *National Post* (Ontario, Canada), September 12, 2001, 18; quoted in Geoffrey Nunberg, "Since Sept. 11, We're Watching Our Words," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/nov/04/opinion/op-65510>, and retrospectively in Randall, "Cliché Watch."

he foretold, would now “seem foolish and dated.”<sup>23</sup> Peter Kaplan, editor of the New York *Observer*, an upscale weekly tabloid boasting “insouciance” and the column that inspired TV’s *Sex and the City*, confirmed that those in the media business were relegating irony to “the junk heap now,” and agreed, “Nobody will ever see things in the same way.” Kaplan envisioned the arts abandoning the ironic impulse to deconstruct the “cultural sensibility” of prior generations with detached amusement, characterizing such irony as “the mold that grows on old things.”<sup>24</sup> “It is no longer uncool to have a moral compass,” remarked editorial director Henry Finder of *The New Yorker* the following spring, relaying that his magazine and the culture did indeed seem to be entering a new phase for which “nihilistic irony” was a poor fit.<sup>25</sup>

These critics were adamant that irony, or in Rosenblatt’s terms the “oh-so-cool life” of intellectuals and pop culture snobs, would be an unmourned casualty of September 11.<sup>26</sup> Editors like Graydon Carter and Peter Kaplan, speaking for prominent publications fairly entrenched in the business of cool detachment and celebrity gossip, inflected this dialogue with a certain note of contrition and the implication that industry insiders, from Hollywood to New York, were now prepared to retire irony. However, Carter was quick to clarify that he meant only to impugn irony of a certain kind. “If I was talking about irony, I was talking about a specific form of television irony,” he assured one week after his original proclamation, by

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<sup>23</sup> Carter interview excerpt, quoted by David D. Kirkpatrick, “A Nation Challenged: Pronouncements on Irony Draw a Line in the Sand,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/24/business/nation-challenged-commentators-pronouncements-irony-draw-line-sand.html> (accessed March 8, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Kirkpatrick, “Nation Challenged.” Kaplan, “What We Were Before,” remarks on *The Observer*’s “insouciance” as an “attitude... put in cold storage.”

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in David Carr, “The New Yorker: Add Hard News, Hold the Glitter,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/29/business/the-new-yorker-add-hard-news-hold-the-glitter.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenblatt, “Irony Comes to an End.”

which point he was already backing off his own claim and reverting to self-ridicule.<sup>27</sup>

Narrowing in on this target, his statements and those of other publishing insiders increasingly deflected blame from the literary circuit. Carter drew a sharp line between irony “well done in print” that would endure and “[t]his... smirky, detached sort of self-referential irony [that] will go away.” In specifying self-reflexive television comedy as the real culprit in the spread of anti-sincerity and anti-relevance, it became increasingly clear that this line of attack would stay the course of late-1990s criticism that named “nihilism” as the engine of popular entertainment. Those critiques now gained newfound credibility and rhetorical sway, however, with the backlash against irony blossoming into a set of interlocking arguments with more urgent cultural and political stakes. Irony—the term and all that it had come to imply—emerged as a key salient in hegemonic wars of position over such charged concepts as truth, authenticity, moral vision, and patriotism.

Before addressing the assertions of and arguments for irony’s persistence or revival, it is useful to look more closely at several significant tropes in discourse surrounding the “death of irony.” This phrase not only conjures up the claims that irony supposedly was disappearing, but also testifies to explicit efforts to roll back irony, or certain forms, and limit if not prevent its use. Opposition to irony pursued three main, interrelated and overlapping arguments, each decrying a particular type of “threat” to national unity or resolve. The menace was alternately explained in terms of postmodern relativism, youth indolence, and/or pervasive public and media cynicism. In popular usage, detached irony denoted any one or combination of these perceived social ills.

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<sup>27</sup> Carter scored points with his critics by joking that he had meant to say “age of ironing.” These statements, from late September 2001 interviews Carter gave in *The Washington Post* (the one-liner) and *Inside.com* (the television remark), were quoted by Coburn, “No Kidding,” 48, and others.

*Farewell to Relativism: "Postmodernism Is Dead"*

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there.

— Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989<sup>28</sup>

There is nothing like a good dose of death to bring one out of the realm of theory and verbal games, and to cement one firmly to the realm of fact, experience, and action. There is nothing like a good dose of death to force one to... understand at some very basic level that freeplay is never completely free....

— Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*, 1990<sup>29</sup>

“Postmodernism is dead.” This statement appeared in *The New Yorker* in a September 2002 essay by the noted cultural historian Louis Menand listing oft-heard reflections on 9/11.<sup>30</sup> Postmodernism, particularly its investments in plurality and the contingency of truth, became an early target in the war on irony. The broadest attack, heard in publications ranging from the neo-conservative *National Review Online* (“NRO”) to the nominally more liberal *The New Republic* (“TNR”), aimed to banish postmodernism as an outright assault upon truth, moral certitude, and American values. Since the 1990s postmodernism had also been implicated in the spread of “crude, rude and obnoxious behavior” and declining civility in American popular culture and public life.<sup>31</sup> This view was linked but not limited to social and cultural conservatives’ criticisms of a “permissive” society. Journalist John Marks, for example, when leveling precisely

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 119.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Menand, “Faith, Hope, and Clarity; September 11 and the American Soul,” *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002, 98, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> John Marks, “The American Uncivil Wars: How Crude, Rude and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners and Why That Hurts Our Politics and Culture” (cover story), *U.S. News & World Report* 120, no. 16 (April 22, 1996): 66, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 2005).

these charges in a 1996 cover story for *U.S. News & World Report*, found the right and left equally culpable in disseminating a problematic postmodernism that “makes hash of” the shared meanings of good citizenship and “hurts our politics and culture.”<sup>32</sup>

One immediate and enduring effect of 9/11 on public discourse in the United States, and consequently humor and irony, was a rapid reinvestment in ideas of the *real* and the *true*, across the political spectrum. The Bush war effort worked to rein in relativism and subjective morality and reinstall firm ideas of True and False, Good and Evil, Right and Wrong. Meanwhile, the language of “truth” versus “lies” permeated and preoccupied American political culture, drawing contributions from journalists, sociologists, philosophers, and satirists in the U.S. and abroad. As for the staunch “anti-ironists,” the irony these critics deplored was specifically the postmodern variety, which in popular parlance (found in the statements of Carter and countless others) meant “cynical” and “unserious” and “detached.” There are some striking parallels between conservatives’ and progressives’ main arguments for a cultural reinvestment in honesty and earnestness, as well as glaring inconsistencies, as we might expect, in what otherwise could be mistaken as a united stand against the “postmodern” and its “excessive” irony as a cultural vice.

As moral absolutes dominated the wartime rhetoric of the Bush administration, pundits of the political right stepped up the attack on the notion of *relative* or *contingent* truths as a fanciful philosophy of boomer liberalism that America could no longer afford to indulge. Publications such as *National Review* celebrated Americans’ reinvestment in Truth as a victory for the right. *NRO* editor Jonah Goldberg in a September 19, 2001, editorial declared, “People

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<sup>32</sup> Marks, *ibid.*, objects that postmodernism disregards dictionary definitions of *civility* as politeness and courtesy among citizens, reducing it to a mere “code word” to be hitched to competing agendas of the political right and left.



are recognizing that words have fixed meanings again. Capital-‘T’ Truth can be gotten at, it can be described and illuminated by words accessible to all. This is great news.” He hoped the embrace of Truth would steer the nation, finally, clear of the Scylla of identity micropolitics and Charybdis of postmodern constructivism:

It seems to me that objective meaning is flowing, like transfused blood, into all sorts of concepts which were tragically anemic not too long ago. Patriotism is of course the most obvious example. Freedom is another word people are reacquainting themselves with. But we’ve also seen good and evil (and even capitalized Good and Evil) used by all sorts of politicians and commentators normally embarrassed by such morally loaded... words.<sup>33</sup>

This response was representative of conservative thought at the time, equating multiculturalism with an irresponsible morality perpetuated by a liberal elite hostile to ideas of truth and fairness. In Goldberg’s view, the American public was awakening from a spell cast by leftist intellectuals engaged in a “subjective alchemy” tantamount to semantic terrorism with their insistence on a flexible, contingent relationship between words and their meanings. He warned that “tyranny” must follow when a society “unhitches words from their moorings.”<sup>34</sup> Here, polysemy was posed as an affront to American freedoms and democracy itself, a contention that contradicts media scholars’ theorizations of semantic ambiguities (including irony) in cultural texts as indices of a salutary ideological openness.<sup>35</sup>

During the year after the attacks, with urgent demand for “moral clarity” in the War on Terror, those anxieties would be regularly reprised and amplified. Conservative political theorist William J. Bennett in *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* (2002) wrote,

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<sup>33</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Truth Makes a Comeback,” *National Review Online*, September 19, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Goldberg condemned colleges as “fever swamps of political correctness” where liberal professors preach against words like “individual” and “merit” because meanings could be personally construed as “bigoted” or “offensive.”

<sup>35</sup> I discuss Fiske’s concept of a “semiotic democracy” and interpretive agency in my Introduction and Chapter 5.

“What I fear is the erosion of moral clarity, and the spread of indifference and confusion, as a thousand voices discourse with energy and zeal on the questionable nature, if not the outright legitimacy, of our methods and our cause.” Bennett hoped that 9/11 would, as paraphrased by Louis Menand, “purge our nation of the cant of relativism and multiculturalism.”<sup>36</sup> Relativism was by this time not only thoroughly articulated in the conservative imagination to both “postmodern nihilism” and “political correctness,” but was equated with the Democrat worldview.<sup>37</sup> Postmodernism and multiculturalism, the twin threats routinely yoked to the conservative catchphrase “moral relativism,” were branded as “valueless” liberal-speak. Political rhetoric worked to evacuate these intellectual traditions of their moral and ethical dimensions (as philosophical movements concerned with social equality and challenging abuses of power), and especially accused scholars teaching postmodernist and poststructuralist inquiry of spreading this “confusion” to undermine the clear national sense of us (virtuous) versus them (evil) necessary to defend the American way of life.

A number of public intellectuals, from moral philosophers to theologians, by mid-decade added ammunition for the backlash against relativism. In philosophical literature the tide was set to turn against poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Michel Foucault, who theorized the world in terms of “discourse” rather than “objective reality.” *Truth: A Guide* (2005) by Cambridge ethicist Simon Blackburn named “postmodern irony and cynicism” as a direct threat to truth:

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<sup>36</sup> William J. Bennett’s *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), quoted and paraphrased in Menand, “Faith, Hope, and Clarity.”

<sup>37</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s “The Right Rules,” *National Review Online*, June 16, 2004, notes, “For the Right, terrorism is a simple thing; for the rest of the world, it is a complex debate.” They quote a Republican strategist: “Our people, like the president, deal in absolutes. They [Europeans and Democrats] are relativists.”

We must fight soggy nihilism, scepticism and cynicism. We must not believe that anything goes. We must not believe that all opinion is ideology, ... that there is no truth to prevail. Without defences against postmodern irony and cynicism, multiculturalism and relativism, we will all go to hell in a handbasket.<sup>38</sup>

It is a familiar image from the anti-irony backlash, that of postmodern irony bobbing along on a raft of free-floating signifiers that carries us further adrift from the solid ground of truth.

American philosopher Harry Frankfurt in his best-selling monograph *On Bullshit* (2005) and follow-up *On Truth* (2006) condemned the “cavalier attitude toward truth” taken by politicians who “luxuriate in the production of bullshit, of lies, and of whatever other modes of fraudulence and fakery they are able to devise.” He wrote, “We really cannot live without truth.”<sup>39</sup>

Appearing on *The Daily Show* in March 2005, Frankfurt hashed out the dangers and differences between “spin” and “bullshit” with comedian Jon Stewart.<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt, too, reserved the harshest criticism for intellectual “postmodernists,” complaining of academics who object to the insidious culture of “bullshit” in political discourse yet “remain stubbornly unwilling to acknowledge... such a thing as *truth* [emphasis in original].”<sup>41</sup>

At the same time as conservatives vied for a monopoly on the language of Truth, Freedom, and Patriotism, journalists and cultural critics oriented to the left accused “the right-wing propaganda machine” of deceiving the public and manipulating facts. This line of critique tended to plead for truth and accountability as the basis for a functioning democracy, while

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<sup>38</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xiii. From an altogether different paradigm, some progressive spiritualists were also speaking against relativism as a barrier to “absolute Truth.” For instance, new age prophet of consciousness Eckhart Tolle in his best-seller *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (New York: Penguin, 2005)—that inspired an online course with Oprah Winfrey—deemed relativism “one of the evils of our time” (70–71).

<sup>39</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 17, 36. See also Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> *The Daily Show*, episode 10.35 (production no. 10035), first aired March 14, 2005, on Comedy Central.

<sup>41</sup> Frankfurt, *On Truth*, 7–8, 18–19.

simultaneously interrogating the kinds of *truth claims* manufactured in political discourse. For example, *New York Times* columnist and author Frank Rich in 2006 interrogated the version of truth advanced by the Bush White House, analyzing the official “story” of the Iraq War as a dishonest and dysfunctional national narrative.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, media and cultural scholars sought to call attention to and challenge the right’s deft and calculated discursive construction of reality, which Douglas Kellner has characterized as the height of “postmodern sophistry.”<sup>43</sup> These scholarly critiques of conservative rhetorical tactics were not, however, full-blown attacks on postmodernism and poststructuralism. Nonetheless, some career postmodernists in the academy and the arts, beholding the vast empire of public relations and press spin erected by right-wing strategists to “create our own reality” and cancel out “scientific facts” by means of discourse, voiced deep ambivalence about the impact of their life’s work.<sup>44</sup> The right proved

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<sup>42</sup> Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin, 2006). See also Joe Conason, *Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003); David Corn, *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003); Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About BIAS and the News* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); and Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), quoted in Jamie Warner, “Political Culture Jamming: The Dissident Humor of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart,” *Popular Communication* 5, no. 1 (spring 2007): 21, note 3.

<sup>44</sup> Megan Boler, “Introduction” to *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 8–10, reports that eminent postmodern scholar Bruno Latour came “to question his entire lifetime of scholarship that sought to question how facts are constructed,” upon perceiving that that entire academic enterprise “had backfired” (8). Boler gives voice to a growing concern among the academic left that the Republican political/media machine has no qualms about using “social construction when it suits them” (10).

A senior adviser to President Bush in 2004 told *The New York Times*’s Ron Suskind that the political right’s agenda makers now eschewed “what we call the reality-based community.” Unlike empirically-minded students of truth and “discernible reality,” the Bush aide stated, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality... we’ll act again, creating other new realities.... [A]nd you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, 44, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 9, 2012). Also quoted in reference to the “end of irony” by Michael Hirschorn, “The End of Irony: Why Graydon Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong,” in “The Encyclopedia of 9/11,” *New York* magazine, August 27, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/irony/>.

proficient in exploiting the lessons of a radical postmodernism even as it avidly disavowed that very same foe, and countered with its own accusations of crimes against the truth.<sup>45</sup>

The imperative to erect an era of earnestness on the ashes of irony gained momentum and legitimacy through the appeals to truth/truthfulness. Irony's longstanding association with irrelevance was unmistakable in Rosenblatt's *Time* op-ed column, fairly representative of the dominant discourse, explicitly equating the end of irony with a return to the "real" and a rediscovery that truth matters. He famously complained,

For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real.

... The consequence of thinking that nothing is real—apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity—is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace.<sup>46</sup>

Such sentiments built upon the anti-irony arguments set in motion by the mid-1990s rebuking the ironist as a shallow and "smirking" nuisance—nay, menace. What distinguished the post-9/11 "end of irony" pronouncements from those that came before, in part, was their heightened sense of urgency in reclaiming the real. Immediately after repudiating the ironic/intellectual life, Rosenblatt declared, "No more. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens—real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets—all real."<sup>47</sup> His remarks held out truth as a transcendent yet visceral *knowing* of what is so and what matters, based in felt experience and emotion, not thought experiments run amok:

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<sup>45</sup> For example, J. Michael Waller, "Dispelling Myths About George Bush," *The Nation*, March 15, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 25, 2007), accused "Bush-bashing extremists" of mounting "a global smear campaign that is feeding the masses a steady diet of misinformation."

<sup>46</sup> Rosenblatt, "Irony Comes to an End."

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* For analysis of the "passion for the real" after September 11, see Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill's critical anthology *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture* (Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), positing a preoccupation with visceral "truth" as a persistent presence in post-9/11 visual culture (43).

we do not create our reality, we behold it. He decreed that irony suborns intellectual play, whimsy, and “prancing” pretense, whereas the *reality* of pain demands our serious attention.

Even those more wary of a spontaneous “New Earnestness” were loathe to defend postmodernism, or the plurality and play implied by postmodern irony. In this journalistic minority was David Beers of the progressive webzine *Salon*, who questioned the operative definition circulating in the press. He stressed, “If any of this does bespeak a kind of ironic stance, it is one of severe ironic *detachment* [emphasis in original].”<sup>48</sup> In sharp contrast to *Vanity Fair*’s Carter and *Time*’s Rosenblatt, Beers did not regard irony as irredeemable, and we will see his arguments serving as a rallying cry and primer on “Ironic Engagement” (his capitalization) for which he put himself forward as a spokesperson. “As jingoists call for a New Sincerity,” he wrote, “we need irony—the serious kind—more than ever.” Nevertheless, his passionate plea to jettison the “end of irony” thesis mirrored, up to a point, the prevailing sentiment of sweeping discontent with those trendy cultural products and postures claiming the mantle of *irony*. This was a “low-grade irony,” Beers argued, the same breed Jedediah Purdy two years prior (in *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*) had deemed “a quiet refusal to believe in... the sincerity of motivation or the truth of speech—especially earnest speech.” Beers remained sympathetic to Purdy’s premise when summarizing, “Letterman, Seinfeld, an entire culture bracketed by air quotes had taught Americans that [as Purdy wrote] ‘nothing is real, true or ours. Irony makes us wary and abashed in our belief’”—and he was eager to see Americans lay that “detached” attitude aside.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> David Beers, “Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!” *Salon.com*, September 25, 2001, [http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony\\_lives/](http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony_lives/) (accessed fall 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Beers, *ibid.*, quoting (and paraphrasing) from Purdy’s *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999); “low-grade irony” is his own phrase.

Nevertheless, Beers was one of a select few leery pop-culture critics resisting the hasty consensus and blanket condemnations of irony, by critiquing “misuse” of the term. He objected,

Just when we need an ironic sensibility to remain cleareyed in dangerous times, we’re told irony is obsolete. And this from some people who’ve made it their business to peddle a cheapened grade of irony over the past couple of decades until we’ve almost forgotten the *true* meaning of the word [emphasis added].<sup>50</sup>

For this critic, irony—the “real stuff”—was necessary and eye-opening precisely because it “pays attention to contradictions and embraces paradoxes, rather than wishing them away in an orgy of purpose and certainty.” Invoking Socrates, he intimated that real ironic awareness springs from a passion for uncovering truth while unraveling our deceptive and convenient self-rationalizations, owning complexity but not flaunting ambiguity and clever misdirection for their own sake. Beers’s treatise contemplated irony as a deeply personal, hence subjective, practice, but made no defense of postmodern attentions to paradox in the forms of conspicuous/excessive polysemy and self-reflexivity in media or subcultural in-jokes as a “refusal” of sincerity. “The day of the smartass shrug may be over . . .,” he granted, “But let us hope a golden age of irony, engaged irony, is upon us.”<sup>51</sup>

The “Irony Epidemic” in the nineties saw similar definitional disputes, as arts critics contemplated the death/dearth of irony-proper and protested the “debased” usage of the term. Journalist Leah McLaren was another cautioning against “perverted” popular perceptions and agitating for “a return to a true ironic ideal,” in January 2000 for Canada’s *The Globe and Mail*.<sup>52</sup> Adjacent to U.S. media’s sporadic self-scrutiny and semiotic struggles, then, some in the

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<sup>50</sup> Beers, “Long Live Irony!”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Leah McLaren, “Critics Complain We’re Oversaturated with Irony. But that Debased Rhetorical Currency May Yet Be Civilization’s Best Defence,” *Globe and Mail* (Canada), January 1, 2000, R3, LexisNexis Academic (last accessed February 28, 2012).

international press parsed definitions and scoffed at messy mislabeling of cultural irony. The London *Guardian*'s Zoe Williams, for instance, in 2003 schooled readers in the importance of conquering “sloppy” semantics and catalogued common “misconceptions,” including the notion “that postmodernism and irony are interchangeable, and can be conflated into one handy word” in so-called postmodern or “*post-ironic*” times.<sup>53</sup> These “prescriptivists,” as humor anthologist Jon Winokur calls them, demanded that irony—classical irony, that is—be re-cognized as a literary and rhetorical device distinct from cynicism, sarcasm, whimsy, hyperbole, and other related concepts with which it was so regularly confused or compounded.<sup>54</sup>

To assist with navigating the debates and the different kinds of irony (and not-irony), Winokur's handbook *The Big Book of Irony* (2007) offered annotated definitions illustrated by pop-culture examples and the pithy insights of assorted cultural authorities. His entry defining “postmodern irony” (receiving two of the volume's 174 pages) adopted the dominant disapproving tone. He, too, described an excessively “subjective” form *inferior* to irony proper:

Postmodern irony is allusive, multilayered, preemptive, cynical, and above all, nihilistic. It assumes that everything is subjective and nothing means what it says. It's a sneering, world-weary, *bad* irony [emphasis in original], a mentality that condemns before it can be condemned, preferring cleverness to sincerity and quotation to originality. Postmodern irony rejects tradition, but offers nothing in its place.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Williams's piece perceptively outlines overlapping or alternating (and she says, *false*) assumptions captured by the trendy coinage “post-ironic” in the vernacular: (1) that “irony has ended”; (2) that postmodernism and irony are joined at the (pardon the pun) hip; and/or (3) that “we are more ironic than we used to be, and therefore need to add a prefix suggesting even greater ironic distance....” Zoe Williams, “The Final Irony,” *Guardian* (London), June 28, 2003, 28, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 9, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Jon Winokur, *The Big Book of Irony* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 5. As a further example, the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg in 2001 sought to clarify, “Wherever you look, irony's moving out and sarcasm's moving in,” citing Johnny Carson and *Peanuts* as genuinely “ironic” but Letterman and *South Park* as simply “sarcastic.” Nunberg, *The Way We Talk Now* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), quoted by Kylopod, *Daily Kos*, March 18, 2009, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/03/18/709645/-Linguist-commentators-2-Geoffrey-Nunberg>.

<sup>55</sup> Winokur, “Forms of Irony: Postmodern Irony,” in *Big Book of Irony*, 34.



By extension, irony uncoupled from postmodernism—*good* irony?—neither excludes sincerity nor exalts cynicism and the promise of “nothing.” For Winokur, that high-grade irony “is a means of reaching or expressing the truth” and thus “the ironist respects [the truth].”<sup>56</sup>

These reigning dualisms of true/false, good/bad, right/wrong penetrated the critical discourse, with postmodern irony frequently framed as “bad” or “false irony.” We can witness this impulse, as well, in some more scholarly dialogue on the subject generated in the 2000s. For example, Alex Steiner’s cogent analysis of the “end of irony” discourse and its philosophical antecedents for the Marxist journal *Permanent Revolution* in March 2002 culminates in a resolute rejection of Romantic Irony—as a tradition that tempers nihilistic despair by recourse to “endless playfulness with infinite possibilities”—which he argues most deeply informs the “postmodern condition.”<sup>57</sup> Steiner traces the historical trajectory of this “new form of irony” from Friedrich von Schlegel (who pioneered irony as an *absolute egotism*, of which Hegel warned, “... nothing is treated... as valuable in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the ego”) to Friedrich Nietzsche to poststructuralist theorists of the late twentieth century like Michel Foucault whose standpoint finally affirmatively “denies the objective nature of truth.”<sup>58</sup> It was the fruits of this “self-indulgent” irony, Steiner says, which ultimately inspired Jedediah Purdy’s critique of everything from *Seinfeld* to the columns of Maureen Dowd wherein political commentary simulates gossip culture. Like Purdy, Steiner sees contemporary culture under the

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<sup>56</sup> Winokur, “Irony Versus Bullshit,” in *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Steiner, “Irony of Ends,” 23. Steiner’s study is an important contribution to the cultural and discursive history of irony, situating “The End of Irony” claims with respect to the intellectual arguments for “The End of History,” “The End of Ideology,” “The End of Modernism,” “The End of Art,” “The End of Politics,” “The End of Liberalism,” and other asserted “ends.” He provides both a sharp synopsis of irony’s sojourn through post-9/11 popular discourse and instructive inquiry into whether “[t]he end of irony is... the logical continuation of the earlier proclamation [by Francis Fukuyama in 1989] of the end of history” (14).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–23; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is quoted on p. 19.

sway of “a false irony,” when this tool’s “proper use” is to defy dogma and thus to liberate.<sup>59</sup> From this premise, he concludes that postmodern “posturing of an infinite plurality of minds” constitutes a “noxious form” and “abuse of irony.”<sup>60</sup>

Conservative critics when drawing similar conclusions did so to entirely different ends, articulating postmodern irony as a morally destabilizing, “anti-American” threat. Stephen Goode, a senior writer for the conservative magazine *Insight on the News*, in January 2002 reviewed the reigning rationales for the End of Irony and made his case for curbing the “worst forms” of irony, namely those that “undermine meaning in life and stability in society.” Goode specifically welcomed the “toning down or cessation of” this unstable irony. “It’s irony used to excess that can be dangerous and damaging—irony not balanced by sincerity and earnestness,” he wrote, somewhat in harmony with Beers of *Salon* (in fact, citing the identical excerpt from Purdy on “sincerity of motivation or the truth of speech”).<sup>61</sup> Although making a similar point that irony could and should be deployed more “constructively,” Goode was less optimistic and articulated the problematic culture of irony differently, effectively designating the ethos of ironic detachment a societal symptom of liberal entitlement. Quoting Bruce Tinsley, creator of the right-wing cartoon *Mallard Fillmore*, Goode heralded “not so much the death of an age of irony as the appearance of a new respect for patriotism and religion.” Those “most responsible

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 23, 24. We should “restrict ourselves just to the use of irony as a rhetorical device,” Steiner expressly states, in the style of Socrates: “In order for the ironist to be successful, the challenge to dogma must be made in such a way as to seem at first to reinforce the prejudices of the reader, only to draw out conclusions that challenge the foundations of the reader’s beliefs” (24–25). Chapter 5 of this work will look more closely at scholarly arguments from the years that followed pleading (similarly) for dialectical thinking and “stable” ironies.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Goode, “Tragedy Spells ‘The End of Irony,’” *Insight on the News* 18, no. 2 (January 14–21, 2002): 24–25, ProQuest Research Library (accessed July 10, 2012). Goode was one of many to offer up literary figures like Jonathan Swift (who in the eighteenth century penned “A Modest Proposal”) when making the case for a defensible, desired alternative—irony as deliberate, accessible, coherent satire that values “meaning” and “stability.”

for the heavy dose of irony in popular culture and on the left,” Goode contended, were, as Tinsley charged, a “pampered,” “sophisticated,” “jaded” elite minority enamored of “nihilistic art.” The kind of irony that had indeed “suffered” a deserving setback, he opined, was “[t]his deeply anti-American irony” with its roots in the sixties counterculture and since propagated by intellectuals and “the academic left.”<sup>62</sup>

The ultimate targets of this “End of Irony” opinion piece were not ironists per se, but prominent non-conservatives in “serious” positions to influence public opinion: colleges, news, and entertainment media.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, relatively centrist publications like *Vanity Fair* and *Time* by holding “the chattering classes” in contempt, as Steiner notes, resonated remarkably well with right-wing Republicanism’s “cultural agenda that blames all evils on the sins of a ‘permissive’ society” fostered by intellectuals and the media. Steiner cites the same Bruce Tinsley statement as a clear instance where “‘earnestness’ became equated with unthinking ‘patriotism,’” and sees this as the subtext and dominant sentiment rippling through the “Age of Earnestness” proclamations in the mainstream press.<sup>64</sup> We could also draw a parallel between Rosenblatt’s emotional appeals to truth, as something felt or intuited not intellectualized, and right-wing rearticulations of knowledge as an unassailable “gut sense”—what comedian Stephen Colbert several years later wryly dubbed “truthiness.”

From pundits to public intellectuals to leftist academics and activists, there was a consistent recourse to discipline irony and forsake its supposed frivolous polyvalence and to

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Goode gave the final say to Tinsley and to Roger Kimball, editor of the literary magazine *The New Criterion*, both deeply suspicious of any “support of the war and America” (presumed temporary) by Washington news men like CBS’s Dan Rather and ABC’s Peter Jennings. Kimball (quoted in *ibid.*) described a sanctimonious elite “in the universities and in Hollywood and in the *New York Times*” as “a school of piranhas” who, Goode added, were biding their time “looking for any... license to unleash their venom.”

<sup>64</sup> Steiner, “Irony of Ends,” 1–2, responding to Graydon Carter’s and Roger Rosenblatt’s aforementioned essays.

reassert truth as the end game, the final measure against which the social speaker will be judged. If the right pinned the “worst” of irony on boomer liberalism and leftist intellectuals, in turn mainstream boomer-centric media wagged a collective finger at the “oh-so-cool” culture of Generation X. Restoring irony as a politically *engaged* form—what David Beers called “the serious kind” of irony—would mean not only putting some distance between irony and postmodernism, but also recovering irony from the subcultural clutches of the “hipsters,” “wisenheimers,” and “slackers” blamed for perpetuating inferior forms of irony as a loosely construed identity formation.

*Farewell to Hipsterdom: “The Death of Apathy” and “Gen X Irony”*

GEN X IRONY, CYNICISM MAY BE PERMANENTLY OBSOLETE.

— *The Onion* headline, September 27, 2001<sup>65</sup>

*Où sont les trucker caps d’antan?*

[Where are the trucker caps of yesteryear?]

—“The Encyclopedia of 9/11,” August 2011<sup>66</sup>

A second, overlapping trope in the anti-irony discourse specifically implicated post-boomer culture and generational politics as the source of the problem when demanding an end to “fashionable irony” and the “detachment” it implied. In popular discourse, ironic *disengagement* was code connoting a cowardly and insincere structure of feeling and “slacker”

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<sup>65</sup> Ironic headline, posted September 26, 2001, in *The Onion* online edition available at <http://www.theonion.com/articles/report-gen-x-irony-cynicism-may-be-permanently-obs,3299/>. Also quoted in James Sullivan, “Comedians End Silence on Attacks/Laughter Makes Cautious Return,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 1, 2001, G1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 10, 2012); and in Winokur, “Irony Takes a Holiday,” in *Big Book of Irony*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Hirschorn in “Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong” (Encyclopedia entry on “The End of Irony”) imagined this phrase rolling from the tongues of “self-congratulatory spokie” hipsters “earnestly” reinventing their subculture after 9/11, from Brooklyn to Montauk. In the reader comments, “pete186” posted the translation as shown and responded that “every generation is trying to find a way to change reality into something better, something real, something theirs.”

mentality supposedly spawned by Generation X, although also endlessly repackaged in increasingly commodified forms for Generation Y or the “echo boom.”<sup>67</sup> The ironic gaze cultivated by cable brands like MTV and Comedy Central to attract young male viewers in particular came under scrutiny, as the “cool” irony attributed to and marketed to youth by the culture industries was blamed for inculcating a certain numbness in the nation’s pre-thirtysomethings. Social historian John M. Ulrich in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)culture* (2003) observes that after September 11 mainstream media sources—from major newspapers to CNN to National Public Radio—were quick to predict “the end of Generation X’s cynical, self-indulgent, quietistic attitude.” Newsmakers named 9/11 as the “defining moment” expected to jolt Gen Xers out of their alleged “apathy” and moral malaise and bestow on them a sense of “coherent, meaningful purpose.”<sup>68</sup>

Irony, as a badge of Gen-X and subsequent youth culture, stood accused of shunning all displays of earnest emotion or sincerity and generating this “apathetic” attitude. Once again, these charges were not new, but intensified and accelerated after 9/11. Popular critics of various stripes channeled contempt toward “hipster” culture, in particular, indicting the ironic consumption of fashion and retro relics as a morally reprehensible, antisocial, self-absorbed lifestyle choice.<sup>69</sup> On the one hand, “serious” commentators, soured by the stereotype of the sneering ironist, greeted the “end of irony” with statements of relief. Irony’s most vocal advocates, in turn, were

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<sup>67</sup> The insistence in boomer discourse on framing Gen-X “slacker” culture as inherently apolitical denies any sense in which a certain generational reflex of non-action and noncompliance with dominant culture’s cues/priorities may in itself constitute a valid action (“action without action,” as Taoism contemplates) or meaningful political statement.

<sup>68</sup> John M. Ulrich, “Generation X: A (Sub)Cultural Genealogy,” in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)culture*, ed. John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 29–30.

<sup>69</sup> Hipster irony includes countercultural codes of dress and “fashionably unfashionable” self-expression. Winokur’s *Big Book of Irony* helpfully defines ironic consumption per common usage: “Acquisition of pop-culture artifacts from bygone eras not for their intrinsic worth but for their very lameness, ... such kitsch memorabilia as Lava lamps, sushi shower curtains, Rat Pack postcards, Robert Goulet CDs, [and] velvet Elvises” (19–20).

bent on breaking its ties to the stigmatized subculture of the “poser” in order to defend and restore the subversive legacy of irony, with cultural essayists invariably invoking names like Socrates, Jonathan Swift, and Mark Twain when pushing back against the “anti-ironists.”

The pre-9/11 irony debates again directly prefigured this latter push for redefinition and/or rehabilitation of contemporary irony. For example, McLaren’s piece for the *Globe and Mail* complained that *irony* had “come to connote little more than a fashion choice, a snide, sarcastic pose.” She elaborated, “A pair of orange Adidas smugly worn; rapper Jay-Z sampling from the musical *Annie*; a Seinfeld gag. By branding the shallowest trappings of young urban life as ‘ironic,’ we are doing a grave disservice to the term itself.” Berating young Hollywood celebrities for aspiring to the “‘fashionably ironic’ stance,” McLaren deplored this irony as an imposter that “bears no relation” to Socratic inquiry or Shakespearean wit, and concluded, “Irony, in the *truest* sense [emphasis added], is not an arrogant pose, but the deflation of an arrogant pose.”<sup>70</sup> Beers’s post-9/11 vision for a new era of “ironic engagement” was a reformulation and extension of this same critique, when lamenting and contesting the definition that had become the dominant social meaning of irony:

The word seems to represent, in the current public discourse, the nihilistic shrug of an irritatingly shallow smartass. (Thus: Wipe that smirk off your face, young ironist, while terrorists are attacking us!) Somehow, irony has come to be a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption, for consuming all that is puerile while considering oneself too hip to be implicated in the supply and demand economics of schlock. With numb and glib.<sup>71</sup>

In a later piece for *The Wilson Quarterly*, Beers again took pains to distinguish “the thoughtful ironist” from “the sarcastic slacker.”<sup>72</sup> As these arguments accentuate, implicit in this cultural

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<sup>70</sup> McLaren, “Oversaturated with Irony.”

<sup>71</sup> Beers, “Long Live Irony!”

<sup>72</sup> David Beers, “The Cold Eye,” review of *Chic Ironic Bitterness* by R. Jay Magill, *The Wilson Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (autumn 2007): 100–2, ProQuest Research Library (accessed May 10, 2012).

agenda for reforming the “disengaged,” “shallowest” irony were acts of discipline directed literally and figuratively on the (young urban) body and its attire—the “smirk,” the “smartass shrug,” the sarcastic “fashion choice,” the “vain” pose of perpetual disinterest. Various cultural authorities sought to impress upon this hypothesized “young ironist” the inappropriateness of cultural expressions seen as exulting in apathy.

Gen-X commentators and bloggers joined the media chorus of voices rebuking the “smartass” slacker ironist. “Maybe a coddled generation that bathed itself in sarcasm will get serious,” scolded twenty-five-year-old Camille Doderro on Alternet.org who, as quoted by Beers, exhorted her contemporaries to “stop acting so jaded” and seek solutions to social problems.<sup>73</sup> Some youth-oriented websites ridiculed irony as a subcultural stance or in-group sensibility. The editor of webzine *The Black Table*, for example, in 2003 denounced the “post-modern notion of ironic posturing” as an “onanistic in-joke,” and sought to blacklist this “post-ironic hipsterism.”<sup>74</sup> Online store YankTheChain.com marketed T-shirts that obscured the line between confirming “Irony Is Dead” and mocking that conceit. The accompanying graphic tied irony’s fate once again to fashion choices (fig. 3.1), in this case invoking the commodification of countercultural irony or slacker chic—signified in this visual joke by the combination of the bland/safe GAP brand and the mildly transgressive or “edgy” reversal of the baseball cap—as the death blow.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Beers, “Long Live Irony!”

<sup>74</sup> Eric Gillin, “I Break for Irony, Then I Back up and Run It Over Until It’s Dead,” *The Black Table*, September 23, 2003, <http://www.blacktable.com/blacklist030923.htm>. This site, self-described as “random,” was a quasi-tribute to the slacker lifestyle featuring columns like “Life as a Loser,” “Big Ol’ Beer Run,” and “How To Do Idiotic Things.”

<sup>75</sup> For some readers, this particular sketch may also have carried connotations of “frat boy” style, further signaling the recuperation of the backward cap, if initially a marker of countercultural difference, into mainstream culture.



Figure 3.1.  
Online store YankTheChain.com in 2003 marketed T-shirts and stickers with an image of a GAP baseball cap worn backwards and the text, “*Irony is Dead and This is its Tombstone!*”

Another trendspotter website, *Magmascope*, more damningly condemned irony, signified by fashion statements such as “secondhand mechanics’ clothes or expensive novelty T-shirts with Spam labels emblazoned on them,” as a desperate bid for attention (similar to the “arrogant pose” McLaren decried):

*Irony is, in essence, a method for individuals to validate their presence in social scenarios by exploiting behavior that deliberately tries to elevate its user above a certain threshold of hipness by way of ridicule, and/or subverting the boundaries of accepted or mainstream opinion on a subject, and thereby garnering desired attention [emphasis added]. ... [I]t’s a convenient tool for simpering punks with Chuck Taylors and trucker hats to feel clever and get noticed.<sup>76</sup>*

With this narrow view of ironic subjectivity, the author lashed irony (“in essence”) to persistent cultural meanings, which prescriptivists such as McLaren and Beers found problematic not solely as a (sub)cultural pathology but a discursive distraction—an inauthentic concept of irony. These examples of anti-irony sentiment circulating on the internet in the early 2000s bear out Beers’s point that those critics gunning for “ironists” generally allowed increasingly derided images to stand as the operative definition, rather than acknowledging irony as a potentially constructive cultural and personal strategy for managing contradictions. This trivializing of targets in the “war on irony” obscured broader implications of the proposed cultural boycott of irony.

<sup>76</sup> Rahul Kamath, “Irony: The Great American Psyche-Out,” *Magmascope*, n.d., [http://www.blackpitchpress.com/magmascope/archives/irony\\_the\\_great\\_american\\_psycheout.html](http://www.blackpitchpress.com/magmascope/archives/irony_the_great_american_psycheout.html) (accessed spring 2005). Kamath reprises a familiar critique, forged in the early 1990s, that faults the ironist’s faux nostalgia for cultural relics (e.g., *He-Man* cartoons and 1980s hair bands) both for being overly fond *and* disingenuous.





Figure 3.2. Slacker Anti-Chic: *30 Rock*'s Frank Rossitano (Judah Friedlander), poster boy for the stereotype of the confirmed slacker with his perpetual slack-jawed expression, sported a trucker hat with a different “smartass” ironic slogan each week. Image available on Fanpop.com, from “Jack Meets Dennis,” *30 Rock*, originally aired November 30, 2006, on NBC.<sup>77</sup>

Comedy writers conscientiously presenting alternatives to these “debased” definitions, and shedding the stigma of “bad” irony after 9/11, disavowed detachment (rhetorically and in practice) to reassert and perhaps refine irony’s reputation as clever, provocative, layered humor. Gen-X media makers and critics mobilized these derogatory stereotypes of the shrugging ironist with increasing regularity and reflexivity in the 2000s, in ways that chiefly worked to reestablish irony’s “smart” edge. As the decade progressed, the cult of the slacker—prominently enshrined in early defining cultural texts by and for Generation X that had long propped up a kind of hyper-jaded self-image still anchored in adolescent alienation (cf. *Slackers*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Reality Bites*, *Daria*, and Bart Simpson)—would be gradually pushed to the textual and taste margins, even recast as a frequent object of derision if not the abject in certain spheres of comedy and culture at large. In particular, “quality” sitcoms aimed at urban-minded, educated audiences evidenced this shift by the mid-2000s, as the “irritatingly shallow smartass” became a self-reflexive running joke in comedies designed to resonate with aging Gen Xers, such as NBC’s *30 Rock* (2006–13) (see fig. 3.2) and later *Community* (2009–14).<sup>78</sup> While this rearticulation of

<sup>77</sup> Image from <http://www.fanpop.com/spots/30-rock/picks/results/42122/which-favorite-franks-trucker-hats>, where fans voted for their favorite trucker hat slogans. For further fan-directed commemoration of Frank’s ironic hat collection, see also Wikipedia’s page at [http://30rock.wikia.com/wiki/Frank\\_Rossitano's\\_Trucker\\_hat\\_slogans](http://30rock.wikia.com/wiki/Frank_Rossitano's_Trucker_hat_slogans).

<sup>78</sup> Such programming took strides to downplay or lampoon hipster as well as yuppie culture’s claims on irony. Chapter 6 explores ways in which these and other sitcoms of the 2000s offered viewers alternative points of identification, often aligned with a strong authorial voice—distinguished from the maligned “smirking” ironist or “smartass”—prone to navigating sincere and ironic impulses.

slacker/hipster stereotypes would refurbish irony as the 2000s went on, a somewhat different recuperation was staged in the weeks and months immediately following the supposed death of hipster irony after 9/11.

At a moment when the press was ruthlessly dissecting and dictating new terms for humor, professional ironists were more forthcoming and self-theorizing about their craft and questions of authorial “intention,” lifting the veil of irony just enough to offer assurances of its legitimate cultural contribution. For example, *Onion* contributor Mark Krewson in late September 2001 pointedly stated, “What we’re seeing isn’t the death of irony, it’s the death of apathy. And thank fucking God. You can’t have irony with apathy.”<sup>79</sup> *Onion* senior editor Carol Kolb made a similar statement, quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on October 1, assuring that irony was not actually “obsolete” and “if used correctly, is criticism, and a legitimate way to comment on the news.”<sup>80</sup> Such comments by spokespersons for *The Onion*—an alternative publication that had proved to be a pioneering voice in “Gen-X irony,” and a leading example we will revisit later as a site of oppositional discourse in the post-9/11 moment—worked to shield the generational irony of its target audience from the stigmatized “detachment” being broadly assigned to this demographic by both conservative and liberal media. In effect, statements like Krewson’s and Kolb’s worked discursively to disarticulate irony from *indifference*, separating the wit from the chaff.

A handful of cultural commentators, in related efforts to salvage Gen X’s claim on irony, highlighted the unspoken intergenerational politics underlying the backlash against irony. For example, Tim Cavanaugh, columnist for the libertarian magazine *Reason* and former editor

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey Benner, “Onion’s Bitter Tears of Irony,” *Wired News*, September 27, 2001, <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2001/09/47155>, cited by Sean Zwagerman, “A Day That Will Live in Irony: September 11 and the War on Humor,” in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, 211.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Sullivan, “Comedians End Silence.”

of Suck.com, an influential satirical webzine devoted to Generation X pop-culture and politics that had just folded in summer 2001, interrogated the terms set by the mainstream media's demonization of irony and sought to expose a "hidden agenda of the anti-ironists." "The War On Irony never had a clear enemy," stated Cavanaugh, who nonetheless shrewdly observed that the unmistakable engine driving this discourse from the late 1980s into the 2000s was boomer disdain for "smirky" Generation X. Rosenblatt's *Time* editorial served as his key example, with its dismissal of irony as merely a cult of "personal whimsy." In sidestepping irony's long-standing associations with "deadpan japey" and "Juvenalian satire," Cavanaugh deduced, Rosenblatt's diatribe was primarily, if obliquely,

a scolding of a younger crew that never took generational spokesman [*sic*] like himself seriously. Note that his chosen time frame of "the last 30 years" coincided neatly with the decline of baby boomer impregnability.... What has vanished from the earth isn't irony or skepticism. It's the ability of the generational priesthood to keep claiming that kids today never had it tough.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to pinning the anti-irony backlash on boomers' need to assert cultural sovereignty, Cavanaugh doubted that wiseass and celebrity culture deserved all the blame for what Rosenblatt regarded as "vain stupidity" dominating American media. The real culprits, Cavanaugh felt, were "self-important" ideologues in politics and the news industry and a credulous public. "The wisenheimers who paid no respects to such dolts did not get us into this mess," he suggested, "straightfaced true believers of all stripes did."<sup>82</sup> Such circumstances might have engendered a new appreciation for skepticism and calculation of political pragmatics, but instead this moment was met with a push back against such canny perspectives riding behind the banner of a campaign against cynicism.

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<sup>81</sup> Tim Cavanaugh, "Ironic Engagement: The Hidden Agenda of the Anti-Ironists," *Reason* 33, no. 7 (December 2001): 31–32, ProQuest Research Library (accessed July 10, 2012); also available online at <http://reason.com/archives/2001/12/01/ironic-engagement>.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

*Farewell to Cynicism: “Be Constructive”*

Be constructive.... Patriotism is inconsistent with cynicism and fatalism.

— Jonathan Alter, *Newsweek*, September 27, 2001<sup>83</sup>

With cynicism consistently named as a synonym, symptom, or source of irony in critiques both of postmodern and post-boomer culture, the threat of a disengaged citizenry was itself a key target in the unfolding war on irony. Irony’s critics increasingly posed cynical attitudes as both the cause and most objectionable consequence of the “detached” ethos they saw dominating popular magazines and television comedies. In this usage, cynicism continued to signify a lack of conviction, a private commitment to *nothing* as ascribed to the nineties ironist who was said to mock mercilessly anyone with sincere beliefs. For those cautioning against cynicism as a destructive force in the public sphere and calling for “constructive” activity and sincere speech, the term also carried broader connotations of a dysfunctional media system steeped in spin and a commensurate public loss of faith in political leaders and democratic ideals. Cynicism, and by extension irony, as a societal and personal disposition of “world-weariness” was repeatedly defined in popular and political discourse after September 11 as a significant barrier to the desired expressions of patriotism, as well as hope, humility, caring, and community spirit.

In the 1990s and early 2000s as irony was said to have reached “epidemic” levels, its detractors on both sides of the political aisle contended that it was bad for America—that it fostered incivility, divisiveness, moral decline, and contempt for shared societal ideals. In the words of National Education Association president Bob Chase, “People in media and politics should be promoting integrity. But they give us a sense that... everyone’s out for themselves,

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<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Alter, “Patriotism,” *Newsweek*, September 27, 2001, 78, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

and that working for a larger common good is impossible.” This quote, found in Paul Rogat Loeb’s *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* (1999), captures a growing concern among social activists regarding cynicism as a media-fueled phenomenon corrupting the channels of public discourse.<sup>84</sup> In a 2002 article “What’s Wrong with Cynicism” repurposing his book’s premise to promote hope and citizen activism in post-9/11 America, Loeb continued to behold cynicism as the “treacherous” refuge of a society that devalues empathy and conviction:

Cynicism implies that no institutions, truths, or community bonds are worth fighting for. [...] More and more, cynicism occupies the mental and psychological space we once reserved for hope... the kind of hope that might inspire us to take public stands. Better to expect *nothing*, in this view, than to risk disappointment. Yet this very *detachment* renders us impotent.... [emphasis added]<sup>85</sup>

He saw irony, in this guise, persisting in a “more insidious” form than that found in the 1980s, presenting an ever more real social danger by breeding fatalism and political passivity.

In the same vein, U.S. news media characterized irony less as a frivolous fad or pretentious pose than a pervasive cynicism that had overtaken public life and estranged the “national family.” A typical example is the December 31, 2001, edition of CNN’s *Greenfield at Large*, in which host Jeff Greenfield led a panel of journalists, satirists, and political strategists in reviewing “the most astonishing year of our lives” and speculating about whether the “overarching irony or cynicism... that characterize a lot of the approach to politics on the part of the media, both humorists and otherwise” had suddenly “been knocked out of the system.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bob Chase quoted in Paul Rogat Loeb, “What’s Wrong with Cynicism,” excerpt of *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*, *Earth Island Journal* 17, no. 3 (autumn 2002): 32, ProQuest Research Library.

<sup>85</sup> Loeb, *ibid.*, 32–33. *Soul of a Citizen*’s message about irony ran parallel to Jedediah Purdy’s *For Common Things* published the same year. Loeb advanced, from a socially liberal perspective, *Seinfeld*-era critiques of the ironist as a cynic content to “mock those who dare act on their beliefs” (*ibid.*). As a college handbook for civic engagement, *Soul of a Citizen* has since been updated (St. Martin’s Press, 2010) with case studies profiling individuals renouncing apathy and cynicism and practicing grassroots activism in the 2000s.

<sup>86</sup> Jeff Greenfield, *Greenfield at Large*, transcript of “Traditions: Looking Back, Looking Ahead,” aired December 31, 2001, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/transcripts/0112/31/gal.00.html> (accessed 2004). Humorists participating in the round-table were Mo Rocca (*The Daily Show*) and columnist Andy Borowitz (*The Borowitz Report*).

Elaine Kamarck, former Senior Policy Adviser for Al Gore, set the tone with her assertion that even while differences “are still going to remain there between the two parties,” the stark reality of recent events had “knocked a lot of the cynicism out of our public life.” Writer Nancy Collins (a Hollywood celebrity profiler for such magazines as *Vanity Fair*) welcomed this renewed “sense of national family” and of the “real” that she believed Americans were “longing for” after two decades of self-absorption and artificiality. “And the virtue of it,” she added, was that “Democrats and Republicans finally agreed on something.”<sup>87</sup> Although the fate of irony and humor in U.S. media would soon become a renewed source of friction in the culture wars, various political commentators initially embraced this notion. Echoing Collins and Kamarck but in a quite different venue, *NRO*’s Michael Long, too, found the demise of irony (again coupled with cynicism) to be the silver lining to the national tragedy, promising new common ground in a divided polity:

Scores of journalists and politicians say that September 11, 2001, was the day everything changed. They usually appear to mean how we see the world and our own security or how American priorities have changed or some such thing. But I think there’s more to it than that. A lot of ironic detachment and cynicism has been washed away, and on the whole that’s a good thing.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, rampant speculation after September 11 that (in Greenfield’s words) “the country has changed and will change forever” suggested that at least in the short term U.S. media had witnessed a nationwide priority adjustment that transcended partisan politics.<sup>89</sup>

This unfolding media discourse placed the offending vices of irony and cynicism in direct opposition to a constellation of “serious” virtues, at the center of which was sincerity.

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<sup>87</sup> Kamarck and Collins in *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Michael Long, “Black Humor,” in “Comedy on NRO Weekend,” *National Review Online*, November 12, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>89</sup> Media analyst Jeff Greenfield, *Greenfield at Large* (same as above). As Long insinuates, such statements were made so often that they were already beginning to be regarded as a cliché.

Particularly representative were the words of *Newsday* columnist and Republican political analyst James Pinkerton on September 16, who (similar to Long) called the attacks “a crushing defeat for irony, cynicism and hipness”—a list he attached to the superficiality of New York qua *Seinfeld* (which he invoked three times) and *Sex and the City*—and wrote that “the victors now are sincerity, patriotism, and earnestness.”<sup>90</sup> Here the prevailing martial vocabulary or rhetoric of war (victory and defeat) and of good versus evil drifted over into the characterization of irony as an enemy of patriotism. Rosenblatt’s much-quoted editorial, likewise, castigated yesterday’s ironic smirker as a self-impressed social “menace” incapable of taking “even the most serious things... seriously” or caring about “real” values like kindness, honor, fairness, and pride in one’s country. “Are you looking for something to take seriously? Begin with evil,” he scolded.<sup>91</sup> Such commentators were not alone in wanting to leverage the crushing “reality” of September 11 to pry American culture free from the grasp of rampant media-driven cynicism and recover qualities of “sincerity, purpose, emotion” that, according to Peter Kaplan in *New York’s* “Encyclopedia of 9/11,” had drained out of urban life over the course of a quarter-century spent “without heroes” that culminated in “*Seinfeld’s* epic whine.”<sup>92</sup>

In heralding the dawn of a new age of earnestness and national unity, post-9/11 media discourse thus pitted cynicism against sincerity, and routinely conflated irony with the former of these supposedly dueling impulses in comedy and culture. For example, *Dateline NBC* on October 16 described cynical humor as a “virus” that must be overcome. Announcing a “new attitude” in comedy, the news magazine show claimed that “in a fundamental way what’s funny

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<sup>90</sup> James Pinkerton, “Tuesday’s Act Was Not About Nothing,” *Newsday*, September 16, 2001, [http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2001/tuesdays\\_act\\_was\\_not\\_about\\_nothing](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2001/tuesdays_act_was_not_about_nothing) (accessed July 17, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Rosenblatt, “Irony Comes to an End.”

<sup>92</sup> Kaplan, “What We Were Before.”

has changed” and with it the comedian’s job description.<sup>93</sup> Comics and television writers found themselves “walking a fine line between what’s ‘in’ and what’s out of bounds,” *Dateline* reported. The segment presented interview clips from comedy veterans such as Jay Leno, Chris Rock, and indeed Jerry Seinfeld as testimony that in clubs across the country the comic tide had turned and comedians now wanted to stand for something. Voiceover narration for the piece authoritatively proclaimed that the cult of cynicism and the “world-weary smirk” had “disappeared” amidst growing conviction that “some things are worth being sincere about.”

With the press promising and prescribing the end of cool cynicism, comedians were presumed, indeed pressured, to rally around this more earnest position. “Cynical” and dissenting voices in comedy were actively discouraged and even silenced. Some critics called for comedy to be a site for either consensus building or gentler social commentary, while those insisting that humor’s chief function is comic relief were demarcating which topics were not laughing matters. The Editors of *U.S. News & World Report* in December 2001 wondered whether Americans were now ready to embrace humor as “a tonic for tough times.”<sup>94</sup> “Terror drives us apart,” the paper quoted Yale psychologist Peter Salovey as saying, “but humor can help bring us together.”<sup>95</sup> This dominant attitude was exemplified by such comics as Jay Leno, who sought to provide comforting laughs with his *Tonight Show* monologues. As Leno told *Dateline* matter-of-factly, “When things are good, you make fun of the king. When things are bad, you make fun of the enemy.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Dateline NBC*, Peacock Productions/NBC News, 60 min., broadcast October 16, 2001, by NBC.

<sup>94</sup> To gauge if humor was “a tonic” or “inappropriate,” the editors invited readers to write in: “Has humor helped you cope with the 9/11 tragedies? If it hasn’t, then why not?” “A Few Good Yuks,” by the editors, *U.S. News and World Report* 131, no. 25 (December 17, 2001): 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> Peter Salovey quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> From the October 16, 2001, *Dateline NBC* segment described above. “In peacetime, humor is aimed at people in positions of power,” echoed media professor Robert Thompson in *U.S. News & World Report*’s piece two months later, “But the minute war breaks out, we aim our humor to external threats.” Quoted in “A Few Good Yuks,” 6.



On the *Greenfield at Large* year-end show, *Daily Show* contributor Mo Rocca stressed that for late-night comedy writers it was “still not safe” to joke at the President’s expense, predicting no hasty return to ad hominem jokes about Bush’s idiosyncratic speaking style or intelligence. Such statements upheld the *U.S. News* editors’ contention that “the kind of humor that makes us laugh has definitely changed since September 11.”<sup>97</sup> *Newsweek*’s Chris Matthews named “irreverence for politics” in humor as a significant impediment to “coming together,” however, speculating that kids reared on *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* were primed to regard the “war spirit” and continuous media coverage with greater cynicism than their more idealistic parents. “Like me, they root for the good guys and jeer the bad guys,” he wrote of his own children, “but they have far less faith in the contest.”<sup>98</sup>

The next section examines how ABC’s *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* came to be the focal point of much of this negative attention to cynicism in comedy and politics. The “censorship” of Bill Maher gave rise to far-reaching and vigorous discussion of cynicism versus sincerity, cowardice versus courage, and consent versus dissent in democracy that would have a lasting impact on both political discourse and comedy writing for the next half-decade or longer. The major strands of the anti-irony discourse that I have outlined converge in the case of Bill Maher, whose status as the host of a “postmodern” political entertainment show, blurring comedy and politics and supposedly sullyng the latter, made him an ideal target in the multi-faceted war on irony. In the aftermath of 9/11, I argue, he became a convenient symbol of irony in all three of its offending guises: media/political “cynicism,” juvenile “antics,” and a certain strain of intellectual “dissidence” informed by moral relativism.

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<sup>97</sup> *Greenfield at Large*, “Traditions” (transcript); “A Few Good Yuks,” 6.

<sup>98</sup> As seen here, the dominant concern about a generational disparity in capacity for ‘sincerity’ haunted broader critiques of media cynicism. Chris Matthews, “Coming Together in an Age of 24/7,” *Newsweek*, November 5, 2001, 60, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004), addressing readers as “us boomers.”

## Patriotically Incorrect with Bill Maher

If the mighty censor or punish the comedian, as they do in oppressive regimes, the power and freedom of public opinion is curtailed or abolished altogether.

— Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,” 1975<sup>99</sup>

Whether the 9/11 attacks “changed everything,” as people have been wont to suggest, they certainly scrambled American humor, first by sucking the oxygen out of public joking, then by reshuffling the order of butts: whom we joked about and how.

— Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, 2006<sup>100</sup>

Following a decade in which virtually every “edgy” comedian vied to be seen as subverting political correctness, suddenly the prescribed social sensitivities derided as “PC” dogma cramping comic speech were eclipsed, if only temporarily, by an altogether different set of strictures on appropriate political sensibilities, opinions, and speech. As gadfly comic Bill Maher discovered, the phrase *politically incorrect* acquired a special salience in this period of patriotic fervor that saw a rapid “reshuffling” (as humor scholar Paul Lewis remarks in the epigraph) of targets and taboos for American comedy. People in powerful positions were prepared to say that there were *correct* political opinions. It was “right” in the post-9/11 moment to articulate geopolitical conflict in terms of good and evil. In joke writing, it was in-bounds to use humor to heal divisions and conquer fear. But more to the point, it was *incorrect*—morally

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<sup>99</sup> Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,” trans. Robert Jackall, *American Journal of Sociology* 103 no. 5 (1998): 1386, doi:10.1086/599247 (accessed March 10, 2012), from the German text (1975).

<sup>100</sup> Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 174.

“wrong” and, as comics like Jay Leno and Mo Rocca acknowledged, professionally unwise—to lampoon or otherwise undermine the administration. The warning to “watch what you say” handed down from the White House by Ari Fleischer cultivated a lasting cautionary climate in comedy writing.

Bill Maher’s fateful career turn became an index of this disjuncture in which comics contended with a different order of “censorship” beyond the industrially and culturally ordained niceties of either family-friendly television or political correctness. Despite the fact that his job as host of ABC’s *Politically Incorrect* was not only to amuse but to provoke, stirring the political pot with contentious and nonconformist viewpoints, in September 2001 and for much of the following year, the agonistic entertainer found himself branded “unpatriotic” for doing just that. The network’s choice to make an example of Maher after he criticized U.S. foreign policy on his show sent a clear message to comedians and other entertainers that they were obliged to aim their barbs cautiously and preferably at “the enemy.”

The First Amendment Center, a nonpartisan research group, concluded from national survey data in early 2002 that a significant segment of the American public was “reluctant” to extend the full protection of the First Amendment to “comedic speech.” The survey suggested that 39% of Americans would approve of government censorship of “tasteless” comedy routines about events like the World Trade Center attacks. Respondents were even more likely (up to 63%) to favor restrictions on offensive “public comments—funny or not” about racial or religious groups. Notably but perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings also indicated that Americans were largely willing to let such “offensive” material pass on subscription cable channels like HBO and Showtime, while considerably fewer of those polled would afford the same freedoms or defend politically-incorrect speech acts by comedy writers/performers on NBC, ABC, or

CBS.<sup>101</sup> As we might expect, new cultural sanctions on politically or racially sensitive humor and the directive to “tone down” irony on television did not necessarily apply beyond broadcast. Not only premium cable comedy offerings like HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* but also basic cable fare such as Comedy Central’s *South Park* thrived on violating taboo. Nevertheless, questions of patriotic, respectful, and responsible comic speech held powerful sway in the national conversations about comedy in this moment.

Significantly, for those conservatives who sought more centralized control over the instruments of cultural production (and persisted in decrying a liberal media bias, despite the claims of a temporary truce in the culture wars), the perception of 9/11 as the moment that “everything changed” afforded that chance. While the War on Terror did not cause or even pre-date the war on irony, it did create the sought-after *opportunity* to discipline if not eradicate irony, whether in its subversive or “frivolous” forms, and impose “the new sincerity.” So long as ironic subversion was directed at political correctness, it was acceptable and even laudable to some conservatives (as detailed in Chapter 5), but to the extent that it could be turned on the new patriotism and its message of “one nation, one voice” it became an inconvenient critical disposition.

Cultural scholar Sean Zwagerman has explored ideological motives driving the anti-irony backlash and “war on humor” during the period in question. Where Tim Cavanaugh of *Reason* saw the “anti-ironists” enacting a fairly straightforward generational conflict as previously noted, Zwagerman calls attention instead to a repressive political agenda, stressing

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<sup>101</sup> Whereas nearly 80% objected to censorship in the first instance, that support dropped to less than 60% in the hypothetical case of identical comedy material being aired by the broadcast networks. Due to an affiliation with the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, the survey report, with the original questionnaire reprinted therein, incidentally includes the language “sponsored by HBO.” First Amendment Center, “Comedy and Freedom of Speech: A Survey Conducted by the First Amendment Center and the University of Connecticut with the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival,” 2002, 1–2, document available online at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/madison/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/ComedyandFreedomofSpeech2002.pdf>. The poll results were widely referenced by the press; see, for instance, Carolyn Kleiner, “What’s So Funny? It’s Business as Usual for Comedians after 9/11—Mostly,” *U.S. News & World Report* 132, no. 9 (March 25, 2002): 38, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

ways those in power sought to shut down spaces for critique and dissent in popular culture in the interests of preserving “official” political narratives in the War on Terror(ism). “[T]he presidency needed the events of September 11 to be taken in one and only one way: as, fundamentally, a battle between good and evil,” explains Zwagerman. Addressing the repeated framing of “seriousness vs. irony” as opposing forces in post-9/11 discourse, he sheds light on the ideological implications of this “false binary” as a national preoccupation:

... [I]rony’s critics endorsed—in what appeared to be pious calls for serious discourse—an unthinking, uncritical, patriotic conformity grounded in the exiling of any use of language that is not straight-forward and literal. ... Equating seriousness with good and irony with evil and telling Americans that it was time to choose, the anti-ironists endorsed, wittingly or not, the official governmental ideology and its suppression of critique and dissent.<sup>102</sup>

For Zwagerman, mainstream critics railing against irony thus helped make the case for the suppression of critique, though as he intimates here such support was often inadvertent.

In support of Beers’s assessment of irony as a “critical stance of engagement,” Zwagerman argues that irony was “singled out” as unpatriotic after 9/11 precisely because of its subversive potential—*not* because it is “frivolous” or “smug” as so many claimed. This insight parallels that of Steiner who in 2002 discerned, “Times of reaction invariably find the ironic voice intolerable. The suppression of irony is the philosophical equivalent of the attempt to reassert blind obedience to authority.”<sup>103</sup> Humor and particularly irony, by inviting paradox and indulging contradiction, Zwagerman rightly reminds, encourage the reader to continually

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<sup>102</sup> Zwagerman, “Day That Will Live in Irony,” 210–11, 215.

<sup>103</sup> Steiner, “Irony of Ends,” 14, who also picked up on the seeming sympathy if not collusion of mainstream anti-irony press with Republican rhetoric. Certainly, I would stress, some of irony’s biggest critics from centrist or center-left publications meant no endorsement of the right’s war on ‘liberal media’ or dissent. By the mid-2000s, Graydon Carter—alarmed by the Bush government’s silencing of opposing voices in the press—dedicated himself to critiquing that agenda; see his book *What We’ve Lost* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), and Ingrid Sischy, “From the Editor’s Desk: A Conversation Between Ingrid Sischy and Graydon Carter,” *Vanity Fair* 34, no. 10 (November 2004): 80, 82, 84, ProQuest Research Library (accessed July 10, 2012).

question language and the intentions of a speaker. The “multivalent” language of irony was, therefore, contrary to the resounding calls for moral clarity, political conformity, and unquestioning support of presidential authority in the wake of 9/11.<sup>104</sup>

Irony’s ambiguity has certainly proven its considerable power to connote alterity in a politically and economically productive fashion, and we have seen that that same fertile polyvalence leaves irony and its practitioners vulnerable to attacks that may misconstrue (inadvertently or tactically) the basic intentions behind an utterance. Significantly, however, the comments for which Maher was pilloried did not come in the context of either a joke or rhetorical irony. Though critics most hostile to his meaning suggested otherwise, his views were expressed as a sincere speech act and delivered with passion and conviction, and were largely shared by non-comedian guests on his show.<sup>105</sup> This took place, after all, in the atypically somber setting of the return episode after 9/11 in which he promised a “serious” tone. The extent to which his remarks were considered ironic was therefore gestural; that is, it came down to the venue and how critics interpreted Maher’s manner, affect, and professional persona. Although in this case Maher offered his statement as a specific, literal, and forthright opinion, he was sufficiently tied to irony as a comedic brand that the reputation stuck. Furthermore, to those denouncing irony as reckless relativism and asserting one *true* position that people of good conscience could hold, he represented the postmodern ironist-cynic constitutionally opposed to truth and moral unity.

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<sup>104</sup> Zwagerman, “Day That Will Live in Irony,” especially 212–13, 215, 218.

<sup>105</sup> The setup had come from guest Dinesh D’Souza, a conservative political commentator, insisting that terrorist “warriors” are not cowardly. Maher reiterated and ran with the claim, on which they agreed. Though only D’Souza assured that “Americans shouldn’t blame themselves because other people want to bomb them,” Maher concurred that they should resist self-blame but seek to understand why people in other parts of the world resent the U.S. As Menand notes in “Faith, Hope, and Clarity,” Maher “was only amplifying D’Souza’s point” yet “took all the flack.”

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the impulses to suppress comedic irony as a possible critical tool were intimately bound up with the enduring attacks on intellectual postmodernists and on cynicism seen as the defining mentality of modern times. This set of articulations is fairly explicit in arguments from prominent conservative pundits. In a typical example from late September 2001, *NRO*'s Jonah Goldberg fingered *Politically Incorrect* as “one of the last icons of the 1990s conflation of celebrity and politics” responsible for encouraging “a profoundly cynical approach to important questions.” He added, “In the wake of the Sept. 11 murders, Maher’s style of cynical mocking, sophomoric sex-talk, and knee-jerk America-bashing was destined to die on the vine no matter what, because it’s inappropriate....”<sup>106</sup> Goldberg’s account of *Politically Incorrect*’s sins against American decency underscores how seamlessly conservative criticism from this period weaves together the threads of anti-irony discourse to position Maher as a triple-threat, aligning him with the supposed evils of insincerity or cynical humor (“cynical mocking”), juvenile foolishness (“sophomoric” talk), and moral relativism (“America-bashing”). The last of these is cast as the most menacing, yet with the implication of a kind of destructive synergy where each is abetted and emboldened by the other two.<sup>107</sup>

In conservatives’ retaliation against *Politically Incorrect* and its host, comedy and irony were mostly targets of opportunity in criticism ultimately aimed at the voices of political dissent. The negative press around irony and the “inappropriateness” of humor served to thrust upon this comedian-host the strategic stigma of insincerity and unseriousness while opening up a larger line of attack on oppositional speech and thought. Those wishing to condemn or

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<sup>106</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Maher’s Final Half Hour,” *National Review Online*, September 28, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>107</sup> This stacking or conflation was not limited to the conservative press, but ran throughout the anti-irony discourse. We saw Beers in his “Long Live Irony!” essay for *Salon.com* summarize the dominant negative view which articulated irony as “a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption, [and] for consuming all that is puerile.”

discredit the *Politically Incorrect* host, and his outright rejection of President Bush's moral vocabulary and vision, reached for qualifiers like "smug" and "smirking" to trivialize Maher's point of view.<sup>108</sup> These words had become metonymy for irony, and as such succinctly deployed existing anti-irony arguments to reduce the fortysomething political comedian to the diminished status of juvenile wisenheimer inappropriately cracking wise. This image of the foolish boy or class clown speaking out of turn was perhaps reinforced by the fact (and phrasing) of Fleischer's very public scolding, suggesting as it did that Maher's comments were not carefully considered.<sup>109</sup> In this way, the protean nature of the irony label was leveraged against comedians and critics who fairly straightforwardly "meant" what they said. The ease with which Maher's political opposition was able to reframe his views and values (including in this instance his deliberate focus on the power of language and his skepticism toward jingoistic verities) as "sophomoric" and "glib" speaks to how the discursive deck was stacked against leftist practitioners of irony.

### *Enter "Patriotic Correctness"*

The punditocracy leveraged the Maher incident to revitalize the culture wars and to establish and exploit a presumed dichotomy between patriotism and dissent. By repeatedly designating dissenting voices unpatriotic, much coverage of the War on Terror strongly suggested that being patriotic meant being pro-war and answering the urgent call to "unite and support our

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<sup>108</sup> According to Thomas S. Hibbs, Maher had "opined smugly" about the terrorists. In *TNR*, Leon Wieseltier reviled Maher as "the smirking personification of the American confusion of show business with dissent," while Ryan Lizza called his comment "dumb." His capacity for "seriousness" was thus downplayed by critics preferring to uphold the retaliation against Maher's September 17 show as proof of irony's death. See Hibbs, "Meaning in Terror," *National Review Online*, October 4, 2001; Lizza, "Spin-Off," and Wieseltier, "Heroes; Washington Diarist," both in *The New Republic*, October 15, 2001, 14 and 66, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>109</sup> By the following decade, Maher acquired the title of "the classless clown" as a term of derision among his right-wing refuters in the blogosphere (See, for example, <http://www.rantrave.com/Rant/Bill-Maher-The-Classless-Clown.aspx>, March 2012, and <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1821912/posts>, April 2007.).



government in one voice.”<sup>110</sup> Maher, on the other hand, had told his audience, in the episode that sealed his fate at ABC, “I do not relinquish, nor should any of you, the right to criticize, even as we support, our government. This is still a democracy, and they’re still politicians.” In staking out a right or even duty to criticize, Maher thus disrupted the discourse demanding one united voice. Subsequently, his name came up consistently in the conservative press as the darling of the “America-bashing” left, with some right-wing critics contesting his self-positioning as a libertarian or centrist. Goldberg’s *NRO* harangue further accused Maher of having ensured *Politically Incorrect*’s anti-conservative bias all along by unleashing a bevy of cool “lefty” comics and Hollywood celebrities (in lieu of bookish liberals) on a pathetic array of “mockable right-wingers” throughout the show’s run.<sup>111</sup> Although Maher had indisputably been a key player in comedy’s assault on political correctness (as the show’s title boasts), his brand of libertarian laddism and avowedly anti-PC stance were trumped for conservative critics by his contrarian position on the war and his program’s continued commitment to casual, open debate.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Phrasing is from a University of California-Berkeley pledge taken by student Republicans and Democrats, quoted by Linda Kulman, Mary Lord, Lewis Lord, Dan Gilgoff, Carolyn Kleiner, Holly J. Morris, Nancy L. Bentrup, Betsy Streisand, and Jeff Glasser, “Lost Innocence: Everyday Life, When Everything Feels Different,” *U.S. News & World Report* 131, no. 14 (October 8, 2001), 44, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>111</sup> “Maher calls himself a libertarian,” he objected, “but the fact is he’s a libertine socialist.” Goldberg, “Maher’s Final Half Hour.”

<sup>112</sup> Maher does not fall squarely within the currents of U.S. ‘laddism’ but earns certain lad credentials. As Chapter 2 argued, central tenets of laddism as a comic philosophy include a hedonistic libertarianism and a contention that media representations are weightless (creative freedom includes the ability to “say what you want” in performance). While Maher has often modeled these values as an entertainer and free-speech icon, his defining laddish role was in the 1989 film *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death*, a low-budget adventure comedy about “a war between men and women” written/directed by J.F. Lawton, co-starring Maher and former *Playboy* Playmate of the Year Shannon Tweed—which enjoyed heavy play on cable in the 1990s. Maher plays a male chauvinist (he insists that men invented all the “important” things like muscle cars, beer, and meat) as the hired guide who leads a no-nonsense feminist anthropologist (“I am not a chick”) into a jungle inhabited by the “Piranha” and “Barracuda” tribes of scantily clad, man-eating women. Maher’s character bickers with the sexy professor (Tweed) and ends up betrothed to her ditzy student “Bunny,” after narrowly escaping ritual male sacrifice. While gesturally poking fun at the “B” sexploitation genre, the film’s satire of 1980s gender relations sends up everything from feminist consciousness-raising to female rivalries to commercial culture for women (e.g., *Cosmopolitan* and daytime talk show *Donahue*). To the extent that Maher went on to be chastised by his critics as a man “behaving badly” in the public forum, that complaint bore little if any relation to the steady trickle of cultural criticism of laddism, given his appreciable value and appeal to liberal activists and constant comparisons of his values after 9/11 to those of leftist intellectuals.

Following Bill Maher's ill-fated outburst, several prominent public intellectuals and activists likewise questioned the President's claim that the terrorists were "cowardly." Where the mainstream press mostly called for support of Presidential authority, these outliers stressed the need for conscientious, candid disagreement. Maher's name headed up a growing watch-list of such notable "anti-American" agitators as Susan Sontag, documentarian and humorist Michael Moore, feminist Katha Pollitt, Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, and novelist Gore Vidal, all berated in the pages of magazines like *NRO* and the conservative blogosphere throughout fall 2001 and 2002. Most provocatively, Sontag in *The New Yorker* had reprimanded the U.S. press for trafficking in simplistic, manipulative, morally charged vocabulary in lockstep with Bush's war campaign, arguing, "The unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy."<sup>113</sup> *Vanity Fair*'s Leslie Bennetts later lamented, "Virtually overnight, public tolerance for any criticism of President Bush... seemed to vanish" and with it any leeway in "what passes for patriotism and what is seen as dissent in this country."<sup>114</sup>

Phrases like "patriotic correctness" and "the political police" surfaced in some alternative media forums and radical publications such as the U.S. Revolutionary Communist Party's paper *Revolutionary Worker*, putting a name to the suppression of dissent and enforcement of "pro-war patriotism" by those spearheading the government war initiative.<sup>115</sup> That newspaper (now retitled *Revolution*) mobilized both concepts, pointed inversions of anti-PC expressions, to

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<sup>113</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, 32, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 7, 2005). Goode's "Tragedy Spells 'The End of Irony'" identified "intellectuals such as Sontag" as the "worst," "most nihilistic" kind of ironist, stating outright an articulation elsewhere often achieved through subtext or by deputizing Bill Maher and/or Michael Moore as representative ironists of this intellectual set.

<sup>114</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "One Nation, One Mind?" *Vanity Fair* no. 496 (December 2001): 176.

<sup>115</sup> "The Fight Over 'Patriotic Correctness' in the Universities," *Revolutionary Worker* no. 1140, February 24, 2002, <http://rwor.org/a/v23/1140-1147/1140/cheneylist.htm> (new home [www.revcom.us](http://www.revcom.us), last accessed July 27, 2012).

critique a report issued in November 2001 by the think tank American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and sponsored by Vice President Dick Cheney's wife Lynne Cheney that targeted university curricula and campuses as trouble spots of anti-war speech/activity.

Pointing to Cheney's report, alongside Ari Fleischer's cautionary sound bite, *Revolutionary Worker* argued that the same right-wing forces that had long attacked "political correctness" were now the watch force dictating and enforcing appropriate public discourse:

... [T]his government clearly feels emboldened to demand political obedience and increase the activities of the political police. Now, after September 11, the ACTA want to apply the Bush Doctrine of "you are either with us or you are with the terrorists" to intellectual life. If you are "out of step" with the war effort, if you are not gung-ho and patriotic enough—then they say you should have no right to teach in the classroom or speak from a public stage.

This piece characterized the attempted silencing of university professors as "cowardly" and drew comparisons—as did others on the far left—to McCarthyism and even Nazism.<sup>116</sup>

In stride with the ACTA, William Bennett's *Why We Fight* went on to condemn an "influential" minority of academics, intellectuals, and media figures for not standing united with the majority "in the defense of and belief in our country" to ensure victory in the war but instead "preach[ing] the same *self-doubt* about America and her traditions that have steadily undermined our national confidence and resolve in recent decades [emphasis added]."<sup>117</sup> Louis Menand, troubled by this crusade against "unpatriotic" dissent led by Bennett and others, proposed a firm distinction between "Anti-Americanism" and "dissenting patriotism," and emphasized a certain

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. When turning Bush's talk of "cowards" against the Republicans, the authors did not complicate it as some, like Sontag, aimed to do. For a right-wing rebuttal of the McCarthyism comparisons and the "fantasy of intellectual martyrdom," see Ross Douthat, "Kumbaya Watch: Scheer Nonsense," *National Review Online*, October 24, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004), denouncing Maher's defenders as delusional and deceptive.

<sup>117</sup> Précis from the book jacket for Bennett, *Why We Fight* (2002).

idealism espoused in the latter.<sup>118</sup> Few in the press at that time proposed or pursued this as a meaningful or necessary distinction. The idea of benign and patriotic dissenters neither advanced the urgent national narrative espousing a unified voice and purpose, in the near term, nor served the right-wing's long-term aims to oppugn the left in the culture wars.

*“Cowards, Courageous Martyrs, or Nihilists?”*

The few prominent media personalities who came to *Politically Incorrect's* defense denounced what they saw as a decision to “censor” unpopular opinion and radically restrict opportunities for comic and political expression. Maher's supporters included Arianna Huffington, the columnist and some said recent liberal convert, and television writer/producer Aaron Sorkin, creator of NBC's acclaimed political drama *The West Wing* (1999–2006). “In the fifties there was a blacklist, and it ruined lives....,” Sorkin declared at a college speaking engagement in late October 2001. “It's happening all over again.”<sup>119</sup> This comment reinforcing the comparisons of the new patriotism regime to McCarthyism earned Sorkin a spot on *TNR's* “Idiocy Watch,” a collection of offending quotations from the left. Watch-lists such as this one and *NRO's* “Kumbaya Watch” vigilantly flagged oppositional ideas as “poisonous nonsense,”<sup>120</sup> articulating anti-war arguments as both “dangerous” and “dumb” and deeming these the two sides of the liberal coin.

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<sup>118</sup> Where Anti-Americans vilify the U.S. as a global tyrant, he argued, the dissenting patriot seeks to repair the nation and perceives “a virtuous republic... betrayed by runaway corporate capitalism and... a national-security state contemptuous of individual liberties and international law.” In the first school of thought he placed Noam Chomsky, and in the latter category Gore Vidal and by implication Maher. Menand, “Faith, Hope, and Clarity.”

<sup>119</sup> Sorkin speaking at Occidental College on October 22, quoted in “Notebook; Idiocy Watch,” *New Republic*, November 5, 2001, 12, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). Intriguingly, an early 2001 *West Wing* storyline saw the fictional White House press secretary dissuading a controversial comedian from performing at a Presidential dinner. *The West Wing*, “The Drop-In,” episode 2.12 (production no. 226212), first aired January 24, 2001, on NBC.

<sup>120</sup> This is how Ross Douthat characterized a published statement by novelist Barbara Kingsolver in which she called the pro-war “patriotism” arguments brutal intimidation that “threatens free speech with death.” Douthat, “Kumbaya Watch: Barbara Kingsolver's America,” *National Review*, September 26, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 2, 2012).

At a moment when even a few mainstream publications like *Newsweek* entertained the notion that Bush's aides were the new breed of "thought police,"<sup>121</sup> conservative strategists redoubled their efforts to project their preferred image of progressives (in colleges and liberal media) as "the PC police" restricting free expression. With leftist activists championing the First Amendment and with the Republican government accused of scaling back civil liberties, right-wing rhetoricians fought to explain away this seeming inconsistency in their proprietary claims to anti-censorship as a conservative platform to which liberals are supposedly hostile. In particular, some insisted that "the dissidents" on the left were not sincere about safeguarding free speech, but rather were recklessly romanticizing criticism of U.S. government and America itself. *TNR* editor Peter Beinart took this view when rebuking those "warning that war fever threatens free speech":

... [T]he specter of censorship has become a way to discredit the war against terrorism, so some on the left have appropriated the free speech rhetoric that until last month they generally eschewed. ... What distinguishes leftists from other Americans... isn't their commitment to civil liberties but their lack of commitment to the anti-terrorism efforts....<sup>122</sup>

Republican pundits pursued this and additional lines of argument when managing the fallout from Fleischer's call for self-censorship, such as invoking democracy and the free "marketplace of ideas" to decree that the dissenters had been proven "wrong" by rule of majority opinion.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Alter, "The Media's 'Balancing' Act," *Newsweek*, October 8, 2001, 60, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). I contextualize this claim below.

<sup>122</sup> The "warnings" he opposed included *New York Times* column "Patriotism Calls out the Censor" by Richard Reeves (October 1, A23), and Kingsolver's "Patriotism threatens free speech with death" remark. *TNR*'s Wieseltier also complained of "idiotic" statements—including Maher's—posing as "heroic" ideas. Peter Beinart, "Talk Show," *New Republic*, October 22, 2001, 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004); Wieseltier, "Heroes."

<sup>123</sup> Jonah Goldberg, "Remembering the Obvious," *National Review Online*, October 8, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004), among others, suggested that "the majority of Americans are right and the dissidents are wrong"—i.e., the likes of Sontag, Michael Moore, Katha Pollitt, and *Village Voice*'s "jabberers." In "Dissenting Adults," a Letter to the Editor of *Vanity Fair* no. 498 (February 2002): 46, ProQuest Research Library (accessed July 10, 2012), reader Michael T. Jarvis used the same argument, adding the phrase "marketplace of ideas."

Some scoffed at the notion that dissenting voices were in any significant way being silenced. Others insisted the Press Secretary's statement was misconstrued and wrote it off as a gaffe.<sup>124</sup>

When Jonah Goldberg and others charged that "the Left has long been infected with a virulent strain of anti-Americanism," they did not necessarily place all liberals in this category. Rather, Goldberg specifically condemned anyone who called for awareness and tolerance of competing worldviews on the global stage (in his words, the "Who are we to judge?" position).<sup>125</sup> In the same vein, *TNR*'s "Idiocy Watch" singled out poststructuralist literary theorist Stanley Fish for the following statement he made on the FOX News talk show *The O'Reilly Factor* on October 17, 2001, emphasizing the existence of different ethical frameworks or "moralities":

The moral vision of Hitler is a moral vision. We have to distinguish between moralities we approve and moralities we despise. A morality simply means... [having] a world view in which certain kinds of outcomes are desired and certain kinds of strategies are necessary.<sup>126</sup>

In targeting quotes such as this from the academic left and the "pseudo-literati,"<sup>127</sup> a current running through the polemics outing "anti-Americans" was, again, the repudiation of postmodern relativism and, accordingly, of irony in the Rortian sense. Rorty's ironist resists moral absolutes because she lives by postmodern principles and sees values and identities as contingent. In Rorty's postmodern politics, irony is a personal philosophical standpoint that

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<sup>124</sup> See Tim Graham, "Appreciating Ari," *National Review Online*, July 14, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>125</sup> Jonah Goldberg, "Strange Bedfellows," *National Review Online*, September 25, 2001, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). In the spirit of being a "uniter," he credited several media liberals with "sincere" pro-America patriotism.

<sup>126</sup> Fish quoted in "Notebook; Idiocy Watch," *New Republic*, November 5, 2001, 12, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>127</sup> Douthat, "Kumbaya Watch: Barbara Kingsolver's America."

values plurality and allows for “competing accounts” in place of grand narratives.<sup>128</sup> This ironist, as R. Jay Magill paraphrases, is “self-consciously aware of the absence or impossibility of a ‘correct’ interpretation of the world or reality” and so acknowledges that radically different perspectives may potentially be “valid.”<sup>129</sup> Such an individual self-consciously holds her *own* moral lens up for scrutiny and harbors “continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses.”<sup>130</sup> This would stand in contrast to the certainty and consensus articulated by Goldberg, as well as Bennett who counseled that Americans must not allow a cacophony of voices questioning “our cause” to weaken the nation’s “moral clarity.”<sup>131</sup> In sum, right-wing discourse consistently caricatured other points of view as lacking a moral vision or genuine concern for America’s shared values.

This begs three points of clarification. First, the Rortian ironist is not actually opposed to holding a moral vision, nor indeed to basing society on shared values (e.g., nation, democracy, rights, freedom, progress, or civility). Yet, she does inwardly regard these guiding ideas (what Rorty calls a person’s “final vocabulary”) as *constructs* historically shaped by cultural context.<sup>132</sup> Second, the Rortian does not seek to create a culture of rampant ironist rhetoric that endlessly undercuts our own socialization, as that “would preclude the necessary agreement and stability

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<sup>128</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 155. John Gray’s *Isaiah Berlin* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) offers the related concept of *agonistic liberalism*, his category for liberal theorists who support value pluralism. The agonistic liberal does not presume to possess the ultimate and correct political or social vision, and thus seeks to bring differing value systems into “uneasy equilibrium” (as phrased by social theorist Isaiah Berlin). See also <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Agonistic+liberalism>.

<sup>129</sup> R. Jay Magill Jr., *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 37. Magill approaches “the postmodern ironist as the leading mentality of the educated West, seen in figures such as Rorty” (57).

<sup>130</sup> Richard Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” chap. 4 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 73.

<sup>131</sup> Bennett in *Why We Fight* wrote that the peace party’s “goal” was to erode “consensus... about our purposes” by “casting a shadow of moral doubt over our righteous and justified anger” (20).

<sup>132</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” especially 73–74.

that enable democracy to function.”<sup>133</sup> That is to say, some solidarity and constructs are more worthwhile and defensible than others, as Fish plainly expressed in his account of “moral vision” quoted above.<sup>134</sup> And third, it is worth noting that Maher is arguably not a prime example of such an ironist. He has consistently asserted what he regards as realistic and commonsensical positions, largely untempered by a full appreciation of competing truth claims—whereas Rorty holds “commonsense” at arm’s length.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, Maher and Sontag were counted together as “anti-American relativists” (Goldberg’s phrase) precisely because they asked us to: shift perspective on the “enemies” in a way that requires contemplating, however briefly, “their” interior life; think outside of rigid moral binaries; and/or acknowledge and amend our moral vocabulary, the words and concepts (e.g., “courage”) with which we rationalize our actions.

Philosophy professor Thomas S. Hibbs, author of *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture* (1999), in an October 2001 guest column for *NRO* called Stanley Fish’s deconstructionism radical but seized on the title of his 1994 book *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech... and It’s a Good Thing Too* to argue that our words do have “consequences.” “So which are they? Cowards, courageous martyrs, or nihilists?” Hibbs queried, pointing to heated dispute over how best to define the Islamist terrorists.<sup>136</sup> So phrased, the question

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<sup>133</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 155; see 154–58 for her incisive synopsis of Rortian irony as an inner life or “private attitude.”

<sup>134</sup> Fish clarified to Bill O’Reilly that to say someone has a different “moral vision” doesn’t mean we accept or defend their vision; we may fight it “with every reserve that we have.” Fish rejected Bush’s view of the terrorists as “evildoers”—because that label implied deeds done “for no reason”—but he did not *approve* of their reasons. For a partial transcript, see Doug Henwood, “Six-figure Existentialism,” <http://mailman.lbo-talk.org/2001/2001-October/022422.html> (accessed July 31, 2012).

<sup>135</sup> “Commonsensical talk” is the basis for Maher’s approach to populist political television, as Jeffrey Jones argues in *Entertaining Politics*, x, 29, and 156. Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, writes: “The opposite of irony is common sense. For that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies” (74).

<sup>136</sup> Hibbs, “Meaning in Terror.”



uncannily mirrored the simultaneous debate surrounding U.S. ironists and dissenters. Taken out of context, Hibbs might have been listing categories into which people were tempted to slot Maher and friends. Indeed, among anti-ironists Maher's significance was alternately being cast in terms of cowardly "cynicism," "martyrdom" (a term his critics picked up mockingly after the cancellation scandal), and "postmodern nihilism" (this being Hibbs's catchall for *Seinfeld*-era popular culture). Hibbs's editorial reproached Maher and Sontag for working from the limiting concepts "courage and cowardice" and using the former term incautiously or ignorantly to misconstrue acts of religious fanaticism as bravery. I would note here that *NRO* managed to have it both ways by attributing the false binary of courage vs. cowardice at its most reductive to the very individuals seeking more or less to complicate it,<sup>137</sup> even as conservative writers during this period actively mobilized a Manichean worldview that called their opponents (abroad and at home) cowards and praised American heroes and righteousness. The conservative press thus took a two-pronged attack damning "dissenters" like Maher for, on the one hand, peddling naïve or simplistic ideas, and on the other, clouding moral clarity by indulging a perversely pluralist paradigm.

Meanwhile, major mainstream news publications made modest allowances for dissent as "constructive" criticism in the War on Terror, while also setting the terms for patriotic correctness. In *Newsweek*, for example, columnist and senior editor Jonathan Alter's essay defining "Patriotism" for a late September 2001 series on "the American spirit" outlined a checklist of vital virtues for Americans to aspire to and perform as their civic duty in wartime. That list demanded constructiveness along with bravery, bullishness, critical engagement, education, independence, moral clarity, patience, supportiveness, tolerance, and vigilance.

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<sup>137</sup> In Sontag's case more than Maher's, her response to war rhetoric was designed to invalidate a reductive frame set in place by the President's earlier statement calling the terrorists' acts "cowardly," which Hibbs sidestepped entirely.

“In an ‘I Want My MTV’ culture,” Alter warned (here quite expressly implicating Gen Xers in civic decline), “this won’t be easy.”<sup>138</sup> Prescribing “selfless commitment to country,” he defined and updated each essential virtue for the current context. For example, he advised citizens:

Be supportive. This is the classic definition of patriotism in wartime—to support the government in its war aims. Dissenters have the right to criticize the war on terrorism. They can examine the motivations of the terrorists, and the conditions that may have influenced their behavior. But it’s a short step from there to rationalizing terrorism. Appeasing evil—by shifting the blame to U.S. policies or Israel or anything other than the evil itself—is dangerous.

While critique is acceptable, even necessary in a democracy, Alter urged, it should be “generous,” “constructive” (meaning not cynical), and always “in the national interest.”<sup>139</sup>

As a testament to tensions in the surrounding national discourse on patriotism, Alter’s arguments in the coming months would be fraught with a certain pressure to reconcile these simultaneous calls for *supportiveness* (“to support the government in its war aims”) and *critical engagement*. Even as he warned against turning blame on America and its leaders, Alter first tentatively called for “tolerance” towards such dissenters as Maher, cautiously defending the comedian’s right to question and criticize. “Letting terrorists prevent us from hearing politically incorrect ideas,” he argued, “just gives them another victory in their war against democracy.”<sup>140</sup> In an October editorial analyzing Ari Fleischer’s rebukes of loose tongues in the media, however, he probed deeper into the “‘delicate balance’ between rights and responsibilities” to conclude that while those in media are free to say what they will, “There’s a

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<sup>138</sup> Alter, “Patriotism.” Alter also underscored that echo-boomers are “more disconnected from public life” than their parents and see patriotism as a “quaint” idea. Again, I would point out that with the discourse(s) against irony, although each of the major tropes I discuss (i.e., yoking irony to postmodernism, youth culture, and media cynicism) took on a life of its own, these were interlocking cultural arguments and regularly rhetorically deployed in combination.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Note that the quoted passage does not provide for a right to “examine motivations” of U.S. government.

<sup>140</sup> Alter, “Patriotism.”

big difference between the right to do something—and the right thing to do.”<sup>141</sup> By allowing for criticism (if aimed at an external evil) and stipulating clear limits to patriotic dissent, this version of constructive commitment to country attempted to unite competing views on the proper displays of “the new patriotism.”<sup>142</sup>

Whereas critique had its rightful place according to *Newsweek*'s portrait of “the spirit of America,” irony and cynical humor did not. To the extent that such a vision accommodated competing impulses to consent and dissent within the polity, and a “balancing act” between truth and diplomacy in the media, it demanded of the vigilant post-9/11 citizen not only fealty to the nation’s leadership but (again) sincerity and hopefulness as necessary alternatives to the evils of “cynicism and fatalism.” Compared with Maher’s less generous critics cited above, Alter was clearly more troubled by Fleischer’s role as “a thought policeman” inciting the media to be cautious or (as the Press Secretary had put it) “more thoughtful.” Nevertheless, he too went on to dismiss Maher’s on-air comment as foolish banter (“an obnoxious aside” from “some TV yakker”).<sup>143</sup> Looking back in mid-2002, Alter ultimately more decisively denounced Maher as a destructive cynic—“a ‘September 10th’ kind of guy”—to be regarded along with other celebrity players in the political arena like Jesse Ventura as novelty acts amusing voters with their “independent centrist politics” and indulging the idea that “politics is a big joke.” “Farewell to antics,” Alter opined. “Send out the clowns.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Alter, “Media’s ‘Balancing’ Act.” The government’s demand for wartime secrecy curbed truth in reporting, warned Alter, and the result was rampant spin, “phony” information, and a neutered press corps advised to “watch what they say.” Grappling with the latter dilemma, he defended freedom of the press yet saw the necessity of selective reporting to safeguard national security.

<sup>142</sup> Phrase adopted by Alter, “Media’s ‘Balancing’ Act.”

<sup>143</sup> Alter, “Media’s ‘Balancing’ Act.” Ari Fleischer’s phrasing is quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Alter, “‘The Body’: So September 10,” *Newsweek*, July 1, 2002, 37, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004). Here his argument dovetails with Goldberg’s in “Maher’s Final Half Hour,” nesting cynicism within “antics” and postmodern play and rejecting this as a fatal formula for America going forward.

## Don't Call It a Comeback: Redeeming Irony, Redirecting Cynicism

We few, tattered and bedraggled irony survivors  
may actually thrive in the post-ironic landscape.  
Less competition, more targets.

— Columnist Lewis Grossberger,  
*MediaWeek*, October 2001<sup>145</sup>

[T]his time around, the national comedic voices  
aren't falling into lockstep behind the administration.  
... Cynicism has kicked patriotism out of the house  
of humor, reclaiming the seat it has held since the  
height of Vietnam.

— Satirist Will Durst, *Mother Jones*,  
October 2002<sup>146</sup>

With sources as far-flung as Comedy Central, CNN, NPR, and *National Review* all pronouncing irony dead, numerous critics performed a post-mortem. Indeed, the “death of irony” claim was so repeated that it gained some notoriety as a naïve and hasty hypothesis and, as the decade progressed, a cliché.<sup>147</sup> Almost immediately, contrarian columnists and comedy makers began calling for a second opinion. A small but vocal subset of journalists resisted the consensus view of irony as “cool” cynical detachment, as we saw with David Beers’s *Salon* essay, eager to revise the referents and upgrade the uses of irony. Cultural critics and scholars surveyed “serious” uses of humor and paid homage to the “honorable history” of ironic inquisitiveness from Socrates to Swift to Jon Stewart.<sup>148</sup> Collectively, this push for an irony revival renounced

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<sup>145</sup> Lewis Grossberger, “Old Ironysides,” *MediaWeek* 11, no. 36 (October 1, 2001): 34, ProQuest Research Library (accessed July 10, 2012).

<sup>146</sup> Will Durst, “It’s Okay. You Can Laugh Now,” *Mother Jones*, October 7, 2002, [http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/2002/10/we\\_138\\_01.html](http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/2002/10/we_138_01.html) (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>147</sup> See Randall, “Cliché Watch,” revisiting the phrase for the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

<sup>148</sup> Phrase used by Laurel Wellman, “Ironically Speaking, It’s All Over,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 25, 2001, A2, LexisNexis Academic (accessed February 1, 2012).

what many concurred was a culture of “mindless, snark-based humor”<sup>149</sup> to lay foundation for more irony of the “engaged” kind.

Advocates of a revitalized irony were slow to defend or lay claim to cynicism, being almost unilaterally defined in post-9/11 media as an affront to hope, compassion, purpose, or patriotism. Irony’s defenders for the most part allowed this term to stand in for the problematic pessimism and “detachment” to be shorn when redeeming irony as a tool of civic engagement. Firm distinctions were made not only by linguistic and cultural prescriptivists but also practitioners fending off irony’s attackers from the 1990s into the 2000s. For example, Douglas Coupland, author of the 1991 novel *Generation X* (popularizing that term) and self-proclaimed “Joe Irony,” had warned at the outset of the new decade that “people confuse irony with cynicism, which is like battery acid. It just wrecks everything.”<sup>150</sup> However, as with the contested term irony itself, a subset of comics and critics in turn staked out a “good” version of cynicism reconstrued as a valid and productive political posture, positing the self-appointed cynic and skeptic as a courageous dissenting voice in a climate of enforced conformity. When championing irony and perhaps also cynicism of “another kind,” these voices continued to downplay “frivolous” postmodern impulses in humor, preferring to reassert a politically legible irony.

### *“Another Kind of Irony”*

Self-proclaimed ironists rallied in the pages of the alternative press to justify their existence and refute accusations of shallowness, insensitivity, and a “nothing matters” mindset. Laurel Wellman of *The San Francisco Chronicle* on September 25, 2001, in a withering rebuttal

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<sup>149</sup> Marc Peyser, ventriloquizing Carter, in “Worst Predictions: #6—Graydon Carter Proclaims the End of Irony,” in “20/10: The Decade in Rewind,” *Newsweek*, December 2009, <http://2010.newsweek.com/top-10/worst-predictions/raydon-carter.html> (accessed July 10, 2010).

<sup>150</sup> Quoted by Steve Rabey, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 11, 2000, cited in Winokur, *Big Book of Irony*, 9.

to Rosenblatt's public scolding (in *Time*) of "oh-so-cool columnists" like herself, accused those parroting his complaints of harboring a "fundamental mistrust of their fellow humans." Like Beers, she charged irony's critics with ignoring the rich complexity and power of a rhetorical device by relentlessly equating irony with "the nihilistic acceptance of the worst of human nature, the universal 'Whatever.'" "An appreciation of irony doesn't preclude genuine emotion," she averred, nor did finding laughter in the ludicrous deny room for moral outrage or comprehension of tragedy. Persevering with an "ironic" style just two weeks after the terrorist attacks, Wellman saw room for humor in the war ahead. The nation fights "absolute evil" with guns, she reasoned, but keeps irony and ridicule in its arsenal for doing day-to-day battle against all forms of "petty evil."<sup>151</sup>

Beers's manifesto "Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!" (published the same day) more thoroughly theorized "ironic engagement" as the deeply felt response of thoughtful individuals and, across history, a profound personal and cultural mechanism for managing the horrors of war. He seized on the words of Randolph Bourne, an early twentieth century progressive anti-war activist (and "20-something") opposing the bloodshed of World War I, to make his central point, "The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much."<sup>152</sup> While hoping to see this higher "grade" of conscientious irony take hold, Beers bid his own glad "goodbyes to the über-smartass" largely because he did not believe "shallow cynicism" to be the national norm that present panic was making it out to be.<sup>153</sup>

Lewis Grossberger, the "Media Person" columnist for *MediaWeek*, made no apologies for his school of feisty, joke-ridden journalism with its ingrained "ironic ways." "Never... shall I ever abandon irony," he wrote on October 1, upholding "wise-guy" humor as his cultural heritage

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<sup>151</sup> Wellman, "Ironically Speaking," A2.

<sup>152</sup> Randolph Bourne, quoted in Beers, "Long Live Irony!"

<sup>153</sup> Beers, *ibid.*

and vowing, as Wellman did, to carry on ridiculing anyone adding to the pain and absurdity of the world. “[A]fter a respectful silence... we who can and must returned to the vital work of mockery, japes and snide derision,” Grossberger proclaimed, seeing ironists as outnumbered but undaunted by “Graydon Carter and his... vast, earnest throng.”<sup>154</sup> Despite an obvious congruence with Wellman and Beers, his defense was less a bid to establish the ironist’s emotional depth or literary *bona fides* than a testimonial on the timelessness of “sick humor.” Pausing between one-liners about “a hand grenade up my wazoo,” Graydon Carter’s Byronesque/Bozoesque hairstyle, and hunting down “grim guy” Osama bin Laden, he pooh-poohed the end-of-irony claims as just a trendy contrivance of culture vultures clamoring to “stay five minutes ahead” in the culture columns.

The few prominent humorists who ventured into the *verboten* territory of topical and subversive political comedy within a month of September 11 upheld irony as the vital tool of their trade. “Irony lives forever,” Lewis Black of *The Daily Show* told students at a live appearance in Northwestern University on October 4, where he did not shy away from caustic jokes taking aim at Bush’s policies.<sup>155</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*’s editors four days later conjectured that despite a “bunker mentality” and media climate of enforced “national unity and purpose,” in which several journalists lost their jobs for criticizing the President’s decisions, comedy was nevertheless “slowly regaining its footing.”<sup>156</sup> Satirist Harry Shearer, quoted in that piece, advocated a return to comedy as political critique of “Bush’s rhetoric,” saying,

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<sup>154</sup> Grossberger, “Old Ironysides.”

<sup>155</sup> Matthew Defour, “Black, [David] Cross Get Laughs with Sardonic Humor: Comedians Set Political Correctness Aside to Poke Fun at President Bush,” *Daily Northwestern*, October 5, 2001, <http://www.daily.northwestern.com/daily/issues/2001/10/05/campus/comedy.shtml> (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>156</sup> Kulman, et al., “Lost Innocence.”

“There is a service to perform.... The job [now] is to point out the ways that people, especially those in power, go off the sanity tracks.” To grant the nation’s leader “papal infallibility” in wartime, comedian Janeane Garofalo objected six months later, is “just a way to keep people enslaved to slogans, a way to keep you not participating in your own democracy.”<sup>157</sup> By spring 2002, Garofalo was “still one of only a few comics currently doing Bush jokes,” *U.S. News*’s Carolyn Kleiner reported, “but [felt it was] entirely patriotic to rip on his public speaking habits and unlikely path to the presidency.”<sup>158</sup> New York theater critic Glenn Loney that summer concurred, “Some sage said Irony Is Dead after 9/11. Don’t you believe it! Nor is it Treason to mock Our Leaders & Legislators when they behave famously fatuously.”<sup>159</sup>

Irony gained some unlikely champions, as well, including Jedediah Purdy, widely regarded as the instigator of a full-blown “anti-irony” movement only two years before. Pitting Purdy against veteran journalist Graydon Carter in an adversarial “game” of wits, *Slate*’s Michael Kinsley declared that the younger author “wins” the irony debates by recognizing “the time for irony.”<sup>160</sup> Purdy’s earlier words were a template for the likes of Carter, but upon hearing his own arguments oversimplified, he was quoted in *The New York Times* testifying that “another kind of irony” can “work to keep dangerous excesses of passion and self-righteousness and extreme conviction at bay” in wartime.<sup>161</sup> For similar reasons, various critics of media and

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<sup>157</sup> Quoted by Kleiner, “What’s So Funny?”

<sup>158</sup> Kleiner, *ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Glenn Loney, “Show Notes,” review of *Capitol Steps: When Bush Comes to Shove*, *The New York Theatre Wire*, July 6, 2002, <http://www.nytheatre-wire.com/lt02071.htm> (accessed March 22, 2005); capitalization in original.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Kinsley quoted in Kirkpatrick, “Nation Challenged.”

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in Kirkpatrick, “Nation Challenged.” We have seen the phrase or concept “another kind of irony” figuring prominently in arguments by the various sources endorsing one mode or school of irony (e.g., classical or engaged irony) over another (postmodern, cynical, detached, sarcastic, or Romantic irony), including Beers, “Long Live Irony!”; Goode, “Tragedy Spells ‘The End of Irony’”; and Steiner, “Irony of Ends.”



the arts bristled at the suggestion that irony was “obsolete,” citing and seeking evidence to the contrary in theatre, film, and literature.<sup>162</sup> *St. Petersburg Times* book editor Margo Hammond, in recognition of World Laughter Day in May 2003, pleaded for an *increase* in irony to fend against hypocrisy, self-absorption, and corruption, asking, “Where... are today’s Jonathan Swifts, Mark Twains and Evelyn Waugh’s?”<sup>163</sup>

Scholars and literary critics including the distinguished irony expert Wayne C. Booth weighed in to segregate irony from cynicism in critical thinking, preferring to see irony revalued and the latter in decline. “What people mean when they talk about the death of irony now is really the death of cynicism,” Booth told *Chicago* magazine in a December 2001 interview.<sup>164</sup> Calling irony a “marvelous social gift,” he stressed its cohesive power as a form that bonds speaker and audience, while cautioning that cynicism is solipsistic and “lacks the application of any real values—that is, the values that are not just personal opinion or taste.” While offering this analytical clarification, his emphasis on the need for ‘real’ values and relationships mapped neatly on the existing popular and political distrust of subjective morality and relativism. “There can be no real values that hold that the terrorist acts were a good thing...,” he averred. “The general idea that you can say anything as long as it’s nasty isn’t my definition of irony.”<sup>165</sup> Although Booth was speaking as a rhetorical critic and descriptivist, not a commentator or polemicist, his description grounded in critique and laced with appeals to moral certainty was

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<sup>162</sup> E.g., Bill Gallo, “Some *Life*,” review of *Life or Something Like It* (20th Century Fox), *Denver Westword*, April 25, 2002, <http://www.westword.com/issues/2002-04-25/movies2.html>; and Jane Ganahl, “Writer Pollack Spoofs, Honors Literary Idols,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 28, 2002, E1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 2005).

<sup>163</sup> Margo Hammond, “The Irony of Satire,” *Poynteronline*, April 28, 2003, <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=57&aid=31763> (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>164</sup> For Booth’s full views on irony’s survival and cynicism’s retreat after 9/11, see Coburn, “No Kidding,” 46–48.

<sup>165</sup> Booth, quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

vaguely reminiscent of Rosenblatt's concerns (about "personal whimsy") and even Goldberg's complaints (about "subjective alchemy").<sup>166</sup> Booth was confident that, given half a decade to bring the culture in line with a reawakened value system, Americans would "rediscover the good use of irony."<sup>167</sup>

One year after the attacks, critics were acknowledging that the informal hiatus on laughter was lifted. Headlines asking "When will it feel right to feel right again?" gave way to assurances that "It's okay. You can laugh now."<sup>168</sup> By mid-decade, as Booth anticipated, prominent periodicals would speak more enthusiastically of irony regained and of "laughing without guilt."<sup>169</sup> What forms joking should take, and what "kinds" of irony did or should survive, were still very much matters in dispute. In the sphere of political humor especially, these tense years saw some of the nation's top "ironists" and "cynics" becoming even more revered by fans and scholars. Next, we will consider how the rapid rebounds of Bill Maher, *The Onion*, and *The Daily Show* not only stimulated renewed critical interest in irony as a sophisticated delivery system for "dissident" ideas but also, each in their own way, prompted revised and more nuanced perspectives on functions (good and bad) of cynicism.

### *"Be More Cynical"*

With the emerging consensus in the press that cynicism was a destructive force with the power to undermine patriotism and the newly forged sense of national unity, political humorists

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<sup>166</sup> Rosenblatt, "Irony Comes to an End"; Goldberg, "Truth Makes a Comeback."

<sup>167</sup> Booth, quoted in Coburn, "No Kidding," 48.

<sup>168</sup> Hiaasen and Pollak, "When Will It Feel Right" (*Baltimore Sun*); Durst, "You Can Laugh Now" (*Mother Jones*).

<sup>169</sup> Neil Genzlinger, "Chronicle Humor; Laughing Without Guilt," *New York Times Book Review*, October 3, 2004, 18, Academic Search Premier and <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/books/review/03GENZLIN.html> (accessed July 10, 2012).

were among those social critics most wary of the ban on so-called cynicism. Before September 11 and after, Bill Maher attached importance to his cynical approach, urging viewers to do the same, as made explicit by the title of his HBO comedy special *Be More Cynical* (2000). With *Politically Incorrect* earmarked as television for cynics from its earliest days (on Comedy Central and subsequently ABC), even favorably disposed reviewers seized on that term. In 1996 *Newsweek*'s Rick Marin, for example, offhandedly described Maher as “smug in his comedy-club cynicism” while simultaneously saluting him as one of a few savvy satirists pioneering the next wave of subversive political humor—and one-to-watch as an advocate for the “mushball middle” in the culture wars.<sup>170</sup> Embracing the label, Maher consistently worked to articulate his brand of cynicism to a clear-eyed political pragmatism.

Cynicism as a basis for independent and critical thinking thus remained Maher's prescription for good citizenship in his post-9/11 material. His sixth HBO special *Victory Begins at Home* (2003) tackled touchy topics from national identity to “wartime loyalty” with the same unflinching politically incorrect sensibility that audiences had come to expect (fig. 3.3a). In his relaunched career as host of the premium cable talk show *Real Time with Bill Maher* (HBO, 2003–), the comedic commentator rebooted his comedy-caucus format, trading in *Politically Incorrect*'s deliberate “cocktail party” vibe for a somewhat more distinguished guest list and set, and promptly resumed dissecting the state of post-9/11 American politics and patriotism.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Rick Marin, “Primary Comics: Political Satire Is Back, with Three Subversive Candidates out Front,” *Newsweek*, February 19, 1996, 75, LexisNexis Academic (accessed February 22, 2005).

<sup>171</sup> The quoted phrase is from Marin, “Primary Comics.” See also Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, for analysis of *Politically Incorrect*'s “televized cocktail party” concept/design (see 11, 53, 69, and 73) that, in Maher's words, functioned to “make current affairs cool” (86).



Figures 3.3a–b. In the cover graphic (left) for *Bill Maher: Victory Begins at Home* (HBO, 2003), the comic wields his microphone as a ‘tool’ of free speech. A star-spangled Maher rolling up his sleeves alludes to the stalwart Uncle Sam (right) of U.S. government World War II posters, poised to beat back the enemies of America’s freedom and press her citizens into participatory action.

Comic Will Durst similarly strove to restore cynicism to the political satirist’s toolkit, a point he made clear in an October 2002 opinion piece for *Mother Jones* on the transformative power of humor. “Comedy is defiance...,” he affirmed, “a snort of contempt in the face of fear and anxiety. Laughing, we create room for hope to creep back in on the inhale.”<sup>172</sup> In contrast to critics such as Loeb (*Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*), Durst found this “room for hope” in cynicism, as well as healthy catharsis in the laughter born of contempt and defiance. He heralded cynical humor as a valid and vital response to the new patriotism or jingoism when he approvingly wrote that cynicism was “reclaiming the seat it has held since the height of Vietnam.” “I doubt [the national comedic] voices will be muffled again,” he cheered. “At least not to the degree they were post 911.” In drawing a direct historical comparison between the sixties counterculture’s antiestablishment politics and today’s comedy firebrands, Durst rearticulated an affirmative vision of current cynicism as political engagement and productive dissent compatible with (and inheriting) boomer values.

<sup>172</sup> Durst, “You Can Laugh Now.”

Enthusiastic regard for “Gen-X cynicism” on its own merits was rarely explicitly voiced, but did also surface as a parallel perspective to bolster defenses of a comedy of cynicism. For example, in October 2001 Paul O’Donnell, culture producer of the nondenominational religious online community Beliefnet.com, argued that American unity after September 11 was being “greatly exaggerated” and a Gen-X worldview could yet impart a healthy skepticism. He questioned a prevailing belief that renewed faith in “heroes” was uniting and awakening the nation from “a kind of moral coma.” “GenXers fell out of love with American heroes for real reasons,” O’Donnell reminded, as a generation reared in the shadow of Watergate and Vietnam that had “watched as history indicted the entire American pantheon [of Great Men]... as opportunists and oppressors.” He added,

Their disaffection wasn’t all bad for the rest of us, either. Politicians still lie to us, but we’re less likely to lie to ourselves when they do. We don’t trust the media to get the whole story right the first time. ... Increasingly, we see the flawed human core of every noble endeavor....<sup>173</sup>

In posing Gen-X “disaffection” and cynicism as a rational and perhaps salutary response to a manipulative mainstream, O’Donnell saw some value in that generation’s supposed affect.

Cultural scholars including the historian Ulrich (*GenXegesis*) went further, envisioning irony in the alternative media venues of Gen-X performing vital cultural work to puncture the pretense of consensus and deflate propagandistic verities. Ulrich, in keeping with Beers, Steiner, and even Purdy, resolved that post-9/11 life would not yield the “end of irony” but rather necessitated “irony of another kind.” Specifically, he called for Generation X’s “alternative voices” to “*engage* in a deliberate, self-conscious negotiation [emphasis added]”

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<sup>173</sup> Paul O’Donnell, “The End of Irony? Not! The Demise of Our Society’s Divisions Has Been Greatly Exaggerated,” Beliefnet, October 2001, <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2001/10/The-End-Of-Irony-Not.aspx> (accessed July 10, 2012).

with the pro-war platforms, slogans, and sentiments of the cultural mainstream.<sup>174</sup> Ulrich's and O'Donnell's arguments challenging the "anti-ironists" and the preferred national narrative of Gen-X apathy exemplify a marginal but persistent counterdiscourse that sought to legitimize, if also mobilize, generational irony and "wisenheimer" skepticism *cum* cynicism as valid and fruitful cultural practices.

The satirical news of *The Onion* ("America's Finest News Source") and *The Daily Show*, as two of the most acclaimed "alternative voices" indebted to a Generation X sensibility and popular with college-aged and young adult audiences, garnered attention as fertile sites of oppositional discourse. Both texts underwent tonal shifts after 9/11, inviting reflection on the relationships among humor, irony, and critique and reopening questions about the meanings and motives of youth "cynicism."

"The Onion *to the Rescue!*"

This earnestness can't last forever. Can it?

— Fictional Generation X spokesperson,  
*The Onion*, September 2001<sup>175</sup>

*The Onion*'s return issue on September 27, 2001, leading with a cover photo of President Bush and his advisors above a fiery graphic that reads "Holy Fucking Shit: Attack on America" and the top side bar proclaiming "Hugging Up 76,000 Percent," was cited by many at the time as a sure sign that irony was alive and kicking.<sup>176</sup> Another front-page headline read "American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie," while the News in Brief reported "Bush Sr.

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<sup>174</sup> Ulrich, "Generation X," 30–31. See also Cavanaugh on "Ironic Engagement" in *Reason*, discussed above.

<sup>175</sup> In "Gen X Irony, Cynicism May Be Permanently Obsolete," *The Onion* 37, no. 34 (online ed. Sept. 26, 2001).

<sup>176</sup> *Chicago* magazine, for instance, celebrated, "Evidently no one told the editors at *The Onion* that September 11th marked the end of irony in America," calling this issue the "most successful ever." Coburn, "No Kidding," 48.

Apologizes To Son For Funding Bin Laden In '80s" and featured human interest stories such as "Arab-American Third-Grader Returns From Recess Crying, Saying He Didn't Kill Anyone." The issue sparked lively discussion on the Internet about the political and affective functions of ironic humor.

"*The Onion* to the rescue!" one reader enthused. "America's most trusted insightful ironists seem to have risen to the challenge."<sup>177</sup> Another scolded the nation's comedians for failing their public by not following suit after Maher "stuck his head out of the comedian foxhole and almost got his head shot off," exclaiming, "Where the hell was George Carlin this past week? When we really needed the bastard?! Thank GOD for *The Onion*! At least they have some guts!" Still others sharing these sentiments were nervous that the "new sincerity" was infiltrating even this safe house of sardonic humor. One fan, for instance, was wary of a "treacly sentimentality tacked on" to stories, a quality he hoped would not supplant the paper's usual "ultra-snarky 'ironic' parody" of national news. Yet, he took *The Onion*'s return-to-press as confirmation, "Now we can all be... 'ironic' and tasteless again." Testimonials applauding tastelessness as an end unto itself, sticking it to sentimentality, were by no means the most popular view expressed in fan forums that September. More remarkable was the intermixture and inconsistency of interpretations, some professing ambivalence and uncertainty about how to read *The Onion* as a response to 9/11 or decide what was "funny."

Overall, the response from journalists and fans alike was a resounding vote of confidence, but even those eager to see the ironists prove naysayers wrong were often circumspect about how to make sense of ironic humor in this emotionally charged context. Aware of the paper's now more acute focus on national mood, and shadowing of actual unfolding top news stories,

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<sup>177</sup> The reader opinions I quote in this paragraph and the next are a small sampling chosen from hundreds of comments posted by *Onion* readers in the final week of September 2001 online at <http://www.iamnotaddictedto.metafilter.com/mefi/10822> (accessed March 21, 2005).

readers strove to gauge intended tone and meaning. One fan, responding to the previous post touting “ultra-snarky” jokes, agreed that the paper was staying true to its ironic “style,” but this reader was not averse to emotional layers and new tonal directions suggested by some of the faux reporting and wondered if the issue was “actually funny. Or necessarily intended to be.” Pointing to the “Hugging” headline, this reader reasoned, “You could read the whole thing with a sad spin on it, and not laugh once.” Yet another added that *The Onion* “comments on the events in a way that is less funny than it is truly a statement of the sadness and confusion that surrounds this tragic event.” Comments like these grappled with the prospect of heightened sincerity in comedic irony and probed for a consistent message cutting through the humor and clever jokes, a “statement” wrapped in irony.

Much of the deliberation over *The Onion*’s tone and content in the months that followed wrestled with the cultural meanings of irony itself and implicitly worked through the broader national questions about its legitimate uses (when was it tasteless or truthful, gratuitous or necessary, detached or engaged, callous or cathartic, subversive or patriotic, reckless or brave?). The humor’s targets and subtexts seemed less transparent, the pleasures less turnkey. One reader found the September 27 cover article “Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake” heartrending and wondered if this pathos-ridden piece might be “satire with a broken heart.” If read through the lens of a “new sincerity,” this and similar stories over the following months (e.g., “Area Man Not Exactly Sure When To Take Down American Flags”) leant themselves to a sympathetic reading, acknowledging the public’s bewilderment and widely felt helplessness in the midst of national tragedy and escalating terrorism alerts.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Cf. “Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake,” *The Onion* 37, no. 34 (September 27–October 3, 2001): 1, 12; “Aftermath: A Shattered Nation Longs To Care About Stupid Bullshit Again,” *The Onion* 37, no. 35 (October 4–10, 2001): 1, 6; “Area Man Not Exactly Sure When To Take Down American Flags,” *The Onion* 38, no. 1 (January 17–23, 2002): 1, 6.



At the same time, such content also served to lampoon the spontaneous flag-waving and what some in the alternative press dubbed “unthinking patriotism” rippling through media and culture.

For those taking up the latter reading position, *The Onion*’s post-9/11 issues evidenced and supported an oppositional discourse that looked with increasing skepticism at herd mentality and propaganda as the mainstream media lectured the public about how to be patriotic. Political communications scholar Jamie Warner offers a compelling analysis of *The Onion*’s role “as a sly critic of the Bush Administration and their policies, especially during early days of the War on Terror when critique was difficult.”<sup>179</sup> She argues that the paper and website’s humor repeatedly deployed *ambiguity* supplied by irony to disrupt the administration’s preferred rhetorical frame, and specifically the dominant dualism of “Good versus Evil” then being used to police dissent. According to Warner, the satirical news source “talked back” through this overarching critique, and taken as a whole this humorous counter-discourse urged readers to reject simplistic moral binaries by offering “a much more complex picture” than the hegemonic frame allowed. Moreover, she contends that *The Onion* provided “one of the few effective forms of critique” *possible* at that time, as satire “stealthily” introducing criticism of powerful ideas and people under cover of “ironic discourse.”<sup>180</sup>

Even the conservative commentator Jonah Goldberg regretted the “inability to make jokes” and began acknowledging ironic humor as a way to access ideas otherwise left unspoken.<sup>181</sup> On the one-year anniversary of 9/11, an occasion reserved for mourning and solemn reflection,

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<sup>179</sup> Jamie Warner, “Tyranny of the Dichotomy: Prophetic Dualism, Irony, and the Onion,” in *Conference Papers—Western Political Science Association* (2008), author’s abstract for the unpublished manuscript.

<sup>180</sup> Jamie Warner, “Humor, Terror, and Dissent: *The Onion* after 9/11,” a published version of the manuscript cited above, in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 62–63, 69.

<sup>181</sup> The quotation was a side remark in Goldberg, “Truth Makes a Comeback,” eight days after 9/11.

he instead resolved to “find some humor amidst all of this seriousness.” Goldberg took up the position that “the best and most effective kind” of humor “tells the truth.” Somewhat revising his prior position on “the truth,” he clarified that he did not “necessarily mean capital ‘T’ Truth or immutable truth.... I just mean jokes can be *more honest* than speeches or dirges, because we tend to avoid telling the truth when we can’t sugarcoat it with humor [emphasis added].”<sup>182</sup> He especially approved of *The Onion*’s first September 11-themed headlines like “Hijackers Surprised To Find Selves in Hell” and “God Angrily Clarifies ‘Don’t Kill’ Rule” (vol. 37, no. 4), these being his chief examples of the “most effective kind” of irony. With these selections, Goldberg focused on a kind of emotional truth based in moral outrage, indicating that humor of this kind channeled Americans’ hostility toward their aggressors and perhaps even validated a distinctly Christian vision of punishment. Brushing off pleas for peace, he felt such humor aired the desire of Americans like himself to see vengeance visited on “these psychopaths.” Indulging a rather literal reading that treats the “Hijackers Surprised” headline as the paper’s official position, he stated, “If ‘The Onion’ is right, [Mohammed] Atta and his evil troupe are in Hell right now,” opportunistically taking this premise as a springboard to add his own humorous commentary deriding Muslim religious beliefs.

In fact, Goldberg characterized the resistance to ironic humor and cynical speech as misguided, calling now for focused and strategic cynicism. Framing this reappraisal as a change of heart, he announced:

In the aftermath of 9/11, a lot of people, myself included, wrote a lot about the death of irony and cynicism. ... But in a sense, 9/11 didn’t expunge cynicism (as we use the word today), it *redirected* it to where it belongs [emphasis added].<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “What’s So Funny about Peace, Love & Understanding,” *National Review Online*, September 11, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>183</sup> Goldberg, “What’s So Funny.”

In particular, Goldberg welcomed disdain for the “false pieties” of left-wing “peace marchers” and intellectuals and projected a public loss of faith in their insistence that “understanding” our antagonists helps resolve conflict. “We’ve turned our skepticism and cynicism, albeit briefly, away from institutions which make our nation great, and pointed it at the hateful-yet-fashionable propaganda which says America is somehow inferior...,” he opined, again impugning self-scrutiny as anti-American. With his selective focus on seemingly ‘pro-American’ jokes and his rhetoric of properly channeled humor, Goldberg placed *The Onion* into a category of *productive* cynicism the ultimate target of which, he claimed, was this liberal mythology preaching “peace, love and understanding.”<sup>184</sup>

Despite *The Onion*’s numerous jokes at the expense of the Bush administration and poking fun at pro-war zealotry (e.g., “U.S. Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We’re At War With,” September 27, 2001, and “Bush Won’t Stop Asking Cheney If We Can Invade Yet,” September 12, 2002), the writers heaped derision as well on the foreign enemy as Goldberg chose to emphasize. This flexibility with targets of humor speaks directly to Warner’s point that the paper flirted with moral and ideological “complexity” in ways that complicated the “either/or” constructions of Good/Evil and heroes/victims. The ironist may “stealthily” slip oppositional ideas past ideological gatekeepers, as Warner rightly suggests. But it is also significant that this reliance on ironic ambiguity opened up such diametrically opposed reading positions. It would be a mistake to disregard Goldberg’s slant on *The Onion*’s emotional “honesty” as an unsavvy or even aberrant reading—or evidence of ironists getting away with misdirection. The greater the ambiguity in ironic discourse, the greater its cross-appeal and utility for those looking to find their preferred political ideology affirmed in the irony of a popular cultural text.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

The insight that (as Goldberg posited) “jokes can be more honest” informed humor studies, as well, with cultural scholars such as Jeffrey P. Jones and Megan Boler observing that comedy granted license for satirists Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, and others to speak about politics in ways “objective” news or “real” journalists cannot.<sup>185</sup> Boler’s extensive study of “digital dissent” in the 2000s finds a belief that “truth can *only* be achieved through [certain kinds] of humor” emerging as a frequent theme in online forums.<sup>186</sup> That idea had appeal for the intellectual left and the political right, a point explored more fully in later chapters. Warner and Goldberg, occupying these respective positions, took different meanings and gratifications from the text of *The Onion*, each perceiving a stable irony. It is a testament to humor’s “relevance” to the national discourse in the post-9/11 moment that both seriously contemplated ironic discourse as a means to steer around “myths” and “falsities” and arrive at truth.

*Send in the Clown—Jon Stewart, the Earnest Ironist and the Caring Cynic*

*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* possesses unprecedented prestige as one of the few television comedies consistently credited with fostering a new kind of “ironic engagement.” Stewart has emerged as a figure almost synonymous in many critics’ minds with politically engaged irony. Since 9/11, cultural scholars have been keen to acclaim his courage and capacity to “speak truth to power” through comedy.<sup>187</sup> Stewart throughout the 2000s garnered a loyal

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<sup>185</sup> See Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 6, 13–14, and 138; Megan Boler, “*The Daily Show*, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth,” *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture* 3, no. 1 (June 2006), <http://scan.net.au/> (accessed February 26, 2012).

<sup>186</sup> Boler, “*The Daily Show*, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth.”

<sup>187</sup> Cf. Boler, “*The Daily Show*, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth”; Judith Barad, “Stewart and Socrates: Speaking Truth to Power,” in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 69–80; and Jamie Warner, “*The Daily Show* and the Politics of Truth,” in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent through American Popular Culture*, ed. Timothy M. Dale and Joseph J. Foy (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 37–58.

following of fans regarding him as a “voice of sanity” and “heroic truth-teller.”<sup>188</sup> Recent volumes analyzing *The Daily Show*’s impact as satirical news emphasize that this congenial comedy news anchorman addresses his viewers as concerned fellow citizens and stakeholders in the future of American democracy.<sup>189</sup> It has become a cultural commonplace and a critical imperative to account for Stewart’s style of humor and popularity using language like *caring*, *sincere*, *serious*, *honest*, *trustworthy*, and indeed *patriotic*.

The convictions Jon Stewart shared in his first post-9/11 monologue foregrounded *The Daily Show*’s ambitions to create comedy and satire in the service of an “open” and “free” America. Following Stewart’s decree that he and his program were “changed” by 9/11, *The Daily Show* did proceed to reinvent and raise the stakes for so-called “fake news.” The program started to shed its late-night talk show image, booking fewer Hollywood celebrities to make way for substantive interviews with diverse high-profile political commentators, journalists, and politicians, still leading with humorous headlines and skits but now focused almost exclusively on national crisis. In a February 2002 *New Yorker* profile of Stewart, journalist Tad Friend observed that the show “since September 11th... has been transforming itself nearly every day” into a vital venue for analysis of the war coverage.<sup>190</sup> The show’s satire now revolved around the media’s role in presenting the conflicts. With such recurring segments as “America Freaks Out” (playing on national headline “America Strikes Back”) and “Operation Enduring Coverage,” the program’s lead news recap offered ongoing commentary on the anthrax mail scare, the hunt for Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and war in Afghanistan. In a typical monologue from mid-

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<sup>188</sup> These are claims phrased and explored, respectively, by Boler, “*The Daily Show...*”; and Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 78.

<sup>189</sup> See Day’s *Satire and Dissent*; Boler’s “*The Daily Show...*” and *Digital Media and Democracy*; and Geoffrey Baym’s *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

<sup>190</sup> Friend’s “Is It Funny Yet?” looks behind-the-scenes at *The Daily Show*’s reinvention under Stewart’s reign.

October, Stewart opened with an ice breaker, “We’re journalists, baby. And... we’re scared. Are you guys scared? I’m scared.”<sup>191</sup>

As the program swiftly regained its comic footing, that season (the show’s sixth) saw Stewart and his team jockeying between their aspirations to civic-minded but savvy media criticism and the show’s continued commitment to light clowning, abundant body humor, and the occasional off-color joke (due to germ warfare, “Santa only accepts emails now”).<sup>192</sup> Addressing the climate of fear, segments that fall ranged from faux field reporting on airport security to an absurdist mock panic piece about “Girls Gone Wild” in the style of crisis coverage to a sobering interview with *Newsweek International* editor Fareed Zakaria (author of a recent U.S. cover article on “Why They Hate Us”) exploring the question “What are the roots of all this incredible hatred?”<sup>193</sup> The second week of November, opening with another statement of shared “feeling” with the audience, the host empathized, “Americans—me, you—have yearned for a return to normalcy,” a moment that resonates as sincerity while also setting up a joke about a televised truck chase on cable news: “What will be the sign that our country is ready to emerge from the enormous shadow of terrorism? What will be the sign? Three words... truck on fire. That’s right, baby. We’re back.”<sup>194</sup> With frequent and fairly scathing parody of news networks’

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<sup>191</sup> *The Daily Show*, episode 6.120, first aired October 16, 2001, on Comedy Central.

<sup>192</sup> This goofily macabre joke is from an anthrax segment in episode 6.123, first aired October 22, 2001.

<sup>193</sup> *The Daily Show*, episodes 6.130 (November 5, 2001), 6.121 (October 17, 2001), and 6.122 (October 18, 2001). Echoing Stanley Fish (see note 134), Zakaria, interviewed October 18, qualifies his examination of terrorists’ motives by emphasizing, “I think that these guys are extremist lunatics.... By *understanding* it, I’m not trying to *justify* it.”

<sup>194</sup> This instance of irony posing as praise is from *The Daily Show*, episode 6.132, first aired November 8, 2001. The lead-in for the October 16 episode (with its “We’re scared” monologue) was, incongruously, *The Man Show*’s Girls Jumping on Trampolines, shown jabbing each other with ice cream cones, while some episodes followed Comedy Central’s kitschy game show *Let’s Bowl* and many were laced with promos for the network’s New York Friars Club “Roast” of Hugh Hefner that November (taped in late September). Against this bawdy backdrop, *The Daily Show* with its forays into serious themes for topical satire was simultaneously an alternative venue unto itself stretching the Comedy Central brand and somewhat contained within the network’s larger comic supertext.

“scare-mongering,” sensationalism, questionable sensitivity, and “filler,” the program’s skits routinely deployed a mix of self-mocking television irony together with rhetorical irony in the more traditional sense, while interviews seamlessly moved between moments of gravity and levity.<sup>195</sup>

In his *New Yorker* piece, Friend ascertained that the *Daily Show* host’s bemused worldview “solemnizes the value of irony” with an approach that “both mocks and embraces” the cultural mainstream without judging or shaming his viewing public versed in media trivia. This made Stewart and his “nonpartisan” comedy ideally suited, Friend contended, to cater to the “disenfranchised center” the host claims as his comic constituency, those confounded like himself by the culture wars.<sup>196</sup> Setting aside news media’s brief utopian hopes of a new collegiality healing the political divide, *The Daily Show* attuned to how quickly “the politics” returned. “More jokes for us,” said Stewart, “but it’s disappointing.”<sup>197</sup>

Journalists such as Friend assisted in performing a kind of discursive exorcism of the ‘bad’ irony when pointing out that the lingering influence of the “smug” and “smirking” former host Craig Kilborn had finally been expunged, completing Stewart’s two-year transformation of

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<sup>195</sup> Key episodes laying these lines of critique include 6.120 (October 16, 2001) spoofing CNN’s “scare mongering” ticker, 6.125 (October 24) condemning CNN’s Virtual Studio in which a newswoman stood astride a map of the conflict-ridden countries as “insensitive” to the people of the Middle East, and 6.150 (December 18) charging that 24-hour news programming breeds hype and repetitive “filler.” As an example of “self-mocking” irony, Stewart (November 5, 2001) cheekily thanked his audience for “tuning in to basic cable to watch a certain fake television journalist do his best to entertain you with his off-beat and well, let’s face it, oftentimes inane take on what’s going on in the news,” before delivering the barbed punch line, “I’m speaking, of course, of Geraldo Rivera”—redirecting a humble gesture of self-subverting humor to double as snarky condemnation of FOX News’s latest recruit. The show’s reliance on irony in the traditional definition, as a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary or the opposite of what is said in words, could be seen in contributions from correspondents Stephen Colbert (see also Chapter 5), who never broke character and once joked on air that his “deadpan delivery is in fact a fundamental soullessness” (8.30, March 6, 2003), and Steve Carell. Carell’s skit “Ad Nauseam” (episode 6.132, November 8, 2001), for example, dissected CNN’s and FOX News’s use of sensational graphics and music to “jazz up” and package “our horrible, horrible reality” as news product. With his critique taking the form of ironic praise for exploitative marketing that turns “disturbing images” into “an advertising goldmine,” he raved, “CNN has gone that extra mile to scare you into watching” and “FOX offers the kind of loud, pounding journalism I can trust.”

<sup>196</sup> Friend, “Is It Funny Yet?” The “disenfranchised center” is Stewart’s phrase, quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

the Comedy Central stalwart from occasionally mean-spirited mischief into issue-driven satire.<sup>198</sup> Stewart would later reveal that he almost left *The Daily Show* early on over creative disagreements with the writing staff he inherited, who did not share his vision. Although the September 20th show famously claimed a new direction for the program, Stewart's comments reflecting on this era describe a gradual "winnowing process," ongoing from his arrival in 1999 into early 2002, to refocus away from Kilbornian snark and toward comedic consideration of policy and the nature of our polity.<sup>199</sup> During the half-year after 9/11, the program purged the last of its Kilborn-era 'lad' leanings, at roughly the same time as ABC groomed Comedy Central lad favorite Jimmy Kimmel (famous for *The Man Show*) to replace Maher in the "late-night locker room."<sup>200</sup> This round of reshuffling occurred at a moment when cable comedy was growing bolder and its broadcast counterpart kept a low political profile. In Kimmel's assessment, his hire signaled his new network's departure from Maher's "controversial... serious, important stuff" to embrace frothier comedy of "nonsense."<sup>201</sup>

Given Comedy Central's demographic skew, much journalistic and scholarly scrutiny of *The Daily Show* is preoccupied with ascertaining Stewart's influence on young viewers,

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<sup>198</sup> Friend, *ibid.* One TV blog in 2004 debating whether Stewart "improved" the show pitted his fans against Kilborn's, with some comments calling Kilborn (who moved to CBS's *Late Late Show*) "smug" and "misogynistic." "The Daily Show," *Jump the Shark*, <http://www.jumptheshark.com/d/dailyshow.htm> (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>199</sup> Jon Stewart interviewed by Stephen Colbert at the Montclair Film Festival on December 7, 2012, as quoted by Sharilyn Johnson, "Jon Stewart Almost Quit *Daily Show* Over 'Asshole' Coworkers," *Third Beat Magazine*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.third-beat.com/2012/12/10/jon-stewart-almost-quit-daily-show-asshole-coworkers-and-secrets-revealed-conversation-stephen-colbert/> (accessed December 11, 2012).

<sup>200</sup> I borrow this phrase from Nancy Franklin, "Boy Talk: The Late-Night Locker Room," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2003, 152–53, who described *Politically Incorrect*'s replacement *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* as stupefying humor targeting "pre-adolescent male viewers" aged eighteen to thirty-four. Franklin is one critic who unequivocally slots Maher into the same lad tradition: "He's a jerk of the old school, full of unexamined anxiety and arrogance, with a habit of using sexual stereotypes from a half a century ago both to put down and to compliment people," she underscores, objecting to "Maher's self-regarding, *Playboy* Party Joke mentality" she deems "low on wit and full of easy ironies."

<sup>201</sup> Jimmy Kimmel interviewed by Devin Gordon, "Newsmakers," *Newsweek*, May 27, 2002, 81, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004), who called the hire surprising and chatted with Kimmel about boobs and monkey penises.



rehearsing or else revising the persistent cultural narratives about Gen-X apathy and cynicism. By the end of 2002, Stewart was reportedly the “favorite TV personality” of Americans aged 18-to-29, according to a nationwide survey conducted by Harris Interactive Inc.<sup>202</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2004 found that over one-fifth of that same age bracket turned to satirical programs *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* for campaign coverage and election news.<sup>203</sup> Noting a sizeable ratings bump for *The Daily Show* among young adults (18-to-34) over the preceding year, *USA Today* called Stewart a “magnet for Generations X and Y” and inferred that he was rousting an “otherwise apathetic electorate” of “cynically conditioned youth” with his bracingly ironic approach to politics, compensating for the comparative “earnestness” of youth-oriented initiatives like MTV’s Choose or Lose.<sup>204</sup> Such press welcomed *The Daily Show*’s irony as the right tactic for engaging a cynical audience. Others maintained that irreverence and ironic distance perpetuated and even glamorized the problem. The National Communication Association went so far as to host a mock trial event prosecuting Jon Stewart *in absentia* for the crime of cynicism.<sup>205</sup> Operating on that same presumption of guilt, a few media effects scholars conducted quantitative studies seeking to prove that *The Daily Show* engenders a more cynical outlook on news media and politics and promotes “hip aloofness.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Stewart tied with David Letterman for the overall number two position, among respondents across age groups. “For Third Year in a Row Oprah Retains her Position as America’s Favorite TV Personality; Top-Ten List Made up Mainly of Comedians and Talk Show Hosts,” PR Newswire US (Rochester, N.Y.), December 29, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>203</sup> Cited in Olivia Barker, “Look out, Jon Stewart,” *USA Today*, November 2, 2004, 1D, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>204</sup> Barker, “Look out, Jon Stewart.”

<sup>205</sup> Transcripts of the proceedings are published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007), doi:10.1080/07393180701520991. For the prosecution team’s position paper accusing Stewart of “political heresy,” see Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius, “The Political Sins of Jon Stewart,” 263–72.

<sup>206</sup> See Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, “The *Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, (continued...) ”

While *The Daily Show*'s perspective on news and politics is widely characterized as cynical, the program summarily rejects the premise that its audience, or for that matter the body politic, is complacent. With the publication in 2004 of *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, the show's writers trained their satirical lens on panic and presumptions about citizen "inaction" (fig. 3.4). Promising to "present to you the **absolute truth** [boldface in original]," *America (The Book)* pretends to indoctrinate a gullible reader into a propagandistic version of U.S. government and history, mimicking the patronizing didactic address of a primary-school textbook (complete with activities, geography lessons, and margin factoids, and also available in a "Teacher's Edition"). The "teaching" material mocks a narrow moral vision based in simplistic scripts of American entitlement, superiority, and global dominance (e.g., "The President of the United States is the most powerful, most recognizable, and best person on Earth."<sup>207</sup> The irony and layers of sarcasm in the text are easily peeled back, however, to arrive at the authors' implicit sense of respect for their readers, especially if we contemplate a readership familiar with *The Daily Show*'s ironic address, undergirded by the host's affable on-air persona consistently assuring Americans that 'we're in this together.' Regular contributor Stephen Colbert, guest hosting on March 6, 2003 (episode 8.30), summarized Stewart's ingratiating style: "Jon usually brings up something in the popular currency and by riffing on it in some engaging manner provides the audience a soft landing, if you will, charming you into a world of satire."

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and American Youth," *American Politics Research* 34, no. 3 (2006): 341–67; also Morris and Baumgartner, "The Daily Show and Attitudes Toward the News Media," in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Baumgartner and Morris (New York: Routledge, 2007), 315–31; and *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impacts of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2011).

<sup>207</sup> *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), 35, 170. To parody political and news discourse aggressively eliding distinctions between truth and spin, the text adopts and exaggerates what John Fiske terms "the tone of the author-god." See Fiske's discussion of news "objectivity" in *Reading the Popular* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 193. In a different sense, the book irreverently acknowledges the increased public pressure on Stewart to act as an educator.



Figure 3.4. Jon Stewart anchors “the disenfranchised center,” while seated among the icons of American patriotism. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), cover image.

Several scholarly volumes published in the 2000s posit a hidden idealism in irony absent in cynicism. R. Jay Magill Jr., in his intellectual history of irony, *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (2007), argues that hope is what sets the ironist apart from the cynic—beneath the former’s defenses lurks the “persistent hope” of a better society freed of “superficiality, mindless consumerism, incivility, and ubiquitous political spin,” while the latter individual is too “alienated from political life and broader social aspirations” to entertain alternatives for America.<sup>208</sup> However, he sees contemporary popular culture producing ironists who must somehow straddle “cynical leanings and social hope.” Similarly, Jeffrey P. Jones’s *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (2005) reveals that the new school of political television humor pioneered by figures such as Bill Maher and Jon Stewart combines a “cynical outlook” on the present state of politics with “a measure of idealism about our common political values.” Their humor is ultimately not so much based in cynicism, he clarifies, as “disappointed idealism.”<sup>209</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, 60–65, 230–31. Building on Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988), he argues that the modern cynic “does not see any alternative to fill the social space left empty... by failed promises of Enlightenment progress” (63).

<sup>209</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 121, drawing on Charles Schutz, *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin* (New York: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1977). See also Megan Boler, “Mediated Publics and the Crises of Democracy,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 33, <http://www.ovpes.org/2006.htm> (accessed March 6, 2012), on Stewart and idealism.

As traditionally defined, cynicism implies a certain self-imposed outsider status and a willful disregard for the social/political status quo. Humor theorist Hans Speier's 1975 essay "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power" identified "the cynical joke" generically as one that "mocks the belief in the value of things and does not take seriously the very issues that citizens are supposed to treat with gravity." This class of joke, he noted, appears in different cultures and eras as "a general expression of moral alienation from the political order."<sup>210</sup> As a purely descriptive profile of a popular subgenre of political humor, Speier's gloss does not presume to posit a moral order and political status quo beyond reproach, but merely locates alienation as one possible (and persistent) point of comic enunciation. It is remarkable how such a description, nevertheless, supports and perfectly mirrors phrasing typical of the most negative reviews of "nihilistic" humor premised on an ironist-cynic who "does not care" and "takes nothing seriously." As rearticulated by political humorists like Maher and Stewart, however, cynicism is outfitted with a sense of righteous anger and of purposeful estrangement (as opposed to "shrugging" detachment) from the dominant order. Jones effectively demonstrates that for these civic-minded celebrity comedians, it is precisely their "outsider position" as non-experts reacting to the political establishment that not only affords populist appeal but empowers them to "uncover" and talk back to the norms, language, and spectacle that dominate politics.<sup>211</sup>

Nevertheless, as a reputed "cynic," Stewart has found himself and his show the subject of deadlocked debate over the nature of said cynicism. Stewart himself, taking cynical to mean "disingenuous," has rejected the label and identified himself as ultimately "an earnest

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<sup>210</sup> Speier, "Wit and Politics," 1359, 1391–92.

<sup>211</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, especially x, 10–11, 44, 62, and 121.

person.”<sup>212</sup> In a December 2003 *Newsweek* cover story, he spoke of how his writers “truly care” and clarified, “This is a show grounded in passion, not cynicism.”<sup>213</sup> As I have argued throughout this chapter, the post-9/11 moment called discursive constructions of comedy and comedians sharply into focus and drew comedy writers/performers into fairly explicit acts of self-theorization, explanation, and definition. “We are separate, we are peripheral,” said Stewart interviewed on *Nightline*, describing his show’s collaborative comic voice as “reactive” and “not actual news.”<sup>214</sup> Although Stewart, there and elsewhere, sought to sequester his work from import, it is precisely this ironic distance and comic license that his advocates said let Stewart get away with “saying the unsaid,” as Boler argues, “for the unheard populace.”<sup>215</sup>

For scholars seeking to insulate Stewart from accusations of deleterious cynicism, an opening premise was to point out the surrounding cynicism of American political culture, with its pretenses to earnestness in the service of constant rhetorical gamesmanship. A range of theorists see Stewart emblemizing an ironic worldview that preserves personal integrity in cynical times. Jones notes that it was with a sense of “patriotic duty” that *The Daily Show* took to aggressively deconstructing cable news “falsities,” and suggests that “Stewart’s honesty is his ultimate value.”<sup>216</sup> Amber Day upholds the host’s self-reflexive, ironic commentary as a “refreshingly

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<sup>212</sup> Stewart quoted in Warner, “*The Daily Show* and the Politics of Truth,” 54, and (the second claim) in Friend, “Is It Funny Yet?”

<sup>213</sup> Stewart quoted by Marc Peyser with Sarah Childress, “Red, White & Funny” (cover story), *Newsweek*, December 29, 2003, 70, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 18, 2004).

<sup>214</sup> *Nightline*, broadcast July 28, 2004, on ABC, cited by Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, “*The Daily Show* as the New Journalism: In Their Own Words,” in *Laughing Matters*, 244.

<sup>215</sup> Boler, “*The Daily Show*, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth.” For additional analyses of Stewart’s rhetorical efficacy as a political “outsider” and “Everyman” figure who speaks “layperson” vernacular, see Young, “*Daily Show* as the New Journalism,” 244, 256; and Ryan McGeogh, “The Voice of the People: Jon Stewart, Public Argument, and Political Satire,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 118.

<sup>216</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 109, 116.

authentic” response to a media culture where “earnestness can seem suspect.”<sup>217</sup> She stipulates that irony was “not inseparably linked to cynicism” but was “instead... becoming a new marker of sincerity,” with Stewart and various political ironists of the 2000s nurturing a “striking blend of both irony and earnestness.”<sup>218</sup> In a media environment rife with “‘sincerity-marketing’ politicos,” Magill, too, sees ironists such as Stewart safeguarding “ideals of sincerity, honesty, and authenticity” and salvaging “a private vision of a better society and culture” when choosing to “distance themselves from a culture and politics they regard as worthy of disavowal.” He contends, “In a culture dense with spin, [irony]’s one of the most honest things we have going.”<sup>219</sup> Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin likewise ascribe “profound sincerity” to Stewart’s irony as the “court jester” subverting the spectacle of politics.<sup>220</sup>

A subset of his supporters more fully embraced an identity for Stewart as “the cynic,” recovering classical understandings of cynicism aligned with irony as a *purposeful* tool of civic engagement. Various rhetoricians and philosophers, who likened Stewart to Socrates as a figure similarly ‘persecuted’ for teaching cynicism, saw him combating political sophistry.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Amber Day, “And Now... the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 101. For in-depth discussion of “overproduced earnestness seeming suspect, while ironic self-referentiality maintains an aura of sincerity,” see also her *Satire and Dissent*, 86.

<sup>218</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 22, 42.

<sup>219</sup> Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, x and 12–13; see also 234. Magill expands on themes of “cascading cynicism” and the cultural (and hipster) embrace of “sincerity” in his recent work, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion that We All Have Something To Say (No Matter How Dull)* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), chaps. 6–8.

<sup>220</sup> Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin, “Ironic Citizenship: Coping with Complicity in Spectacular Society” (paper presented at the New Network Culture Theory Conference, Amsterdam, June 2007), 10, [http://www.meganboler.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/ironiccitizenship\\_bolerturpin.pdf](http://www.meganboler.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/ironiccitizenship_bolerturpin.pdf) (last accessed February 26, 2012).

<sup>221</sup> Barad, “Stewart and Socrates,” 69–71, positions Stewart as a “reformer” in the tradition of Socratic irony challenging modern-day political sophists. See also Alejandro Bárcenas, “Jon the Cynic: Dog Philosophy 101,” in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, 93–104 (subsections “Humor Leads to Truth” and “A Healthy Dose of Cynicism”), who asserts that “Jon the cynic” embodies “earnestness, honesty, and integrity” (102).

“Cynicism, when properly targeted, can redress the corruption of a political order...,” media scholar W. Lance Bennett has argued, perceiving that *The Daily Show* employs its alternative, reactive brand of cynicism as a tactic for “probing and illuminating” the “prevailing [cynical] tone of public life.”<sup>222</sup> This ideal of *targeted* cynicism as popular resistance to the status quo is sometimes called kynicism, a classical term updated for contemporary criticism by German theorist Peter Sloterdijk, who draws an analytical distinction along lines of power when accounting for the uses of irony and cynicism. For Slavoj Žižek and others sharing Sloterdijk’s convictions of revolutionary potential in irony, kynicism refers to populist uses of irony, sarcasm, and ridicule to confront official discourse—the practice that many see exemplified by texts like *The Daily Show* and *The Onion*. “Cynicism,” Žižek explains, is then “the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion.”<sup>223</sup> Thus, in this schema cynicism names a repressive function of dominant media, while kynicism refers to an empowering strategy of the disenfranchised or those positioned outside official political culture.

The lag time between the return of comedy programming and the re-embrace of laughter after 9/11, and brief suspension of comic license in the interim, also occasioned defenses of irony that did not always hinge on humor, or on circulating transgressive ideas under cover of comedy. In that cultural pause, expectations that irony traveled exclusively with or within “the funny” grew more tenuous. A partial disarticulation freed up irony, presented as a knowing or wary consciousness of incongruity, to go where humor supposedly could not, including commenting

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<sup>222</sup> Here, Bennett echoes yet contradicts Jonah Goldberg’s defense of cynicism “redirected to where it belongs” (per *The Onion*), by tagging systemic corruption rather than dissent (‘anti-Americanism’) as that deserving target. W. Lance Bennett, “Relief in Hard Times: A Defense of Jon Stewart’s Comedy in an Age of Cynicism,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 280, 282, doi:10.1080/07393180701521072. Upholding the emphasis on media effects, he stipulates that “people exposed to Jon Stewart do not retreat behind a smug veil of cynicism, but, instead, employ cynicism as a perspective-building tool to engage with politics and civic life” (283).

<sup>223</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Cynicism as a Form of Ideology,” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 28–30, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/cynicism-as-a-form-of-ideology/> (accessed March 5, 2012).

on the nation's mournful affect. As with *The Onion*, fan discourse discussing *The Daily Show* as irony after 9/11 made allowances for heightened emotion without the need to be "funny," with some viewers seizing on the irony of what they considered humorless segments. "Irony was alive all the while, of course, even if nothing seemed funny at the time," insisted one blogger, pointing to the September 20th return episode of *The Daily Show* that ended with Stewart (as described by the fan) "sobbing and hugging his puppy" during the credits. The author asserted, "It was touching, and there was certainly nothing humorous about it, but you can't deny that it was ironic."<sup>224</sup> A somewhat different strategic decoupling of irony and humor, approached as isolated elements, increasingly informed rhetorical analyses of the program—particularly when assigning it greater political import—with some scholars bracketing out comedy as one discrete rhetorical frame and not necessarily the show's format or governing principle.<sup>225</sup> The attempts to solemnify Stewart's commentary at the expense of his comedic thrust (and professional investments in comedy) are echoed in the efforts to absolve him of the taint of cynicism.

Whether refuting or reclassifying Stewart's status as "the cynic" as outlined above, many find in *The Daily Show*'s irony a fierce "faith in democracy," even a new model of citizenship.<sup>226</sup> Political scientist William Chaloupka perceives "citizen-cynics" to be a "mass" presence rather than a marginal mentality in American life, demanding our attention.<sup>227</sup> Cultural scholars

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<sup>224</sup> "Of Muppets and Cake," *PantsTalk*, October 16, 2001, <http://www.pantstalk.com/2001/pt101601.html> (accessed March 22, 2005).

<sup>225</sup> For differing views on the relative importance of comedy to the text, see *The Daily Show and Rhetoric*, especially Penina Weisman, "We Frame to Please: A Preliminary Examination of *The Daily Show*'s Use of Frames," 131–51, defending "the comic element"; and C. Wesley Buerkle, "Gaywatch: A Burkean Frame Analysis of *The Daily Show*'s Treatment of Queer Topics," 189–206, arguing the humor "clouds" and compromises a genuine message.

<sup>226</sup> Megan Boler, "The Transmission of Political Critique after 9/11: 'A New Form of Desperation'?" *M/C Journal* 9, no. 1 (March 2006), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0603/11-boler.php> (accessed March 6, 2012), writes that "Jon Stewart emblemizes a faith in democracy" (paragraph 12).

<sup>227</sup> William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), cited in Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, 28.



Boler and Turpin posit and welcome “ironic citizenship” as Stewart’s answer to the society of the spectacle.<sup>228</sup> On the playing field of postmodern politics, Jones finds that comics like Maher and Stewart hone a flexible, adaptive model of engaged citizenship through their “personas built on paradoxes.” Their irony accommodates both postmodern reflexivity and a modern rational-critical approach to truth, just as it allows for “being both a cynic and an idealist.”<sup>229</sup> In sum, the political comedy of Stewart and others who stand not only “outside” of official news media but also on the edges of established cultural categories for humor—blurring and defying such dominant dualisms as irony vs. sincerity, cynicism vs. idealism, and humor vs. seriousness—compelled critics to expand the cultural conversation on humor. To greater and lesser degrees, these disquisitions on the nature of humor and its political impact and responsibilities intersected with potent presumptions about comedy’s relation to knowing and telling the truth.

*“Tell Us the Truth”*

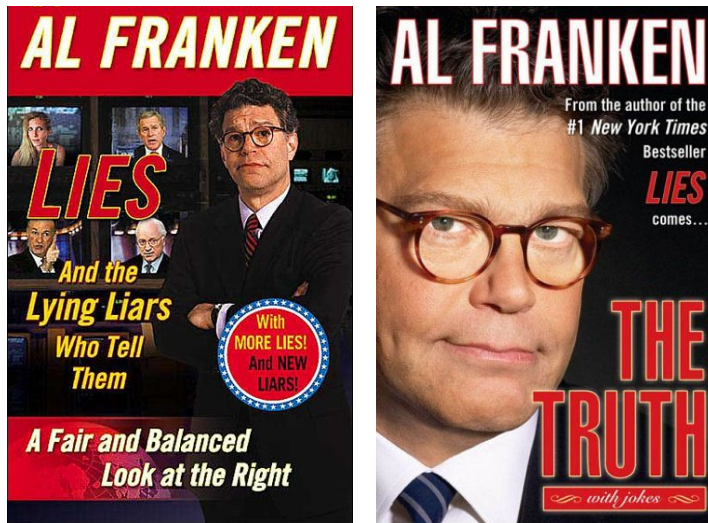
The nation’s satirists and parodists participated in the political dialogue about Truth after 9/11, demanding accountability and responsible reporting while ruthlessly ironizing truth claims. To take several other noteworthy examples, *Saturday Night Live* alum Al Franken lampooned yet honored the spirit of bipartisan rivalry with his latest volumes of political satire, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right* (Dutton, 2003) and *The Truth (with Jokes)* (Dutton, 2005), before hanging up his humorist’s hat in 2008 to pursue a political career as a Senator for Minnesota. Stand-up comic Janeane Garofalo in fall 2003 emceed the Tell Us the Truth Tour, an anti-war themed concert series spearheaded by a nonprofit coalition of activist musicians and performers demanding media reform and spreading

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<sup>228</sup> Boler and Turpin, “Ironic Citizenship.”

<sup>229</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 122.

the message “no power without accountability.”<sup>230</sup> In October 2004, Garofalo was one of 100 prominent American signatories of the “9/11 Truth Statement,” a document and movement seeking to compel the current administration to give the citizenry “real answers” and assume responsibility for the events of 9/11.<sup>231</sup>



Figures 3.5a–b. After his comedic exposé of political “liars,” Al Franken used humor and irony to lobby for “the truth.”

Undoubtedly the most memorable and comedic contribution to all the talk of “capital-‘T’ Truth” did not come until 2005 when *Daily Show* “fake news” correspondent Stephen Colbert spun off with his own deeply ironic current affairs talk show *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central. Relishing his fictional role as mock right-wing pundit in this elaborate parody of FOX News’s *The O’Reilly Factor* (notorious with Stewart’s set for its “No Spin Zone” tagline), the comedian kicked off his inaugural episode and every one thereafter for his first season with increasingly absurd promises to single-handedly heal the nation with his invented facts and

<sup>230</sup> David Skinner, “‘Truth’ Hurts: The ‘Tell Us the Truth’ Tour Hits Washington, with Janeane Garofalo, Tom Morello, Billy Bragg, Steve Earle, and Other Sages,” *Daily Standard*, November 26, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 25, 2007).

<sup>231</sup> “9/11 Truth Statement: Respected Leaders and Families Launch 9/11 Truth Statement Demanding Deeper Investigation into the Events of 9/11,” October 26, 2004 (updated September 11, 2009), <http://www.911truth.org/911-truth-statement/> (last accessed November 2012).

ironclad gut-sense, or “truthiness.” The American Dialect Society subsequently voted *truthiness* the Word of the Year, and it was widely adopted by critics.<sup>232</sup> Thrusting this concept into the national dialogue, Colbert effectively revised the vernacular of political “truth” talk.

The preoccupation with truth in national discourse played a key role in the theory and practice of irony, in ways we will see unfolding in the remaining chapters of this work. These “crises of truth,” Boler as a poststructuralist astutely argues, “expresse[d] simultaneously a demand for truthfulness, alongside a contradictory ‘postmodern’ sensibility that ‘all the world’s a fiction.’”<sup>233</sup> This “double-edged” stance left scholars and critics faced with the prospect of reconciling, on the one hand, the powerful “affective desire for truth and an urgent political need for accuracy and responsible reporting” with, on the other, an intellectual “awareness that all truths are constructed.”<sup>234</sup> I find that these dueling impulses—to speak and plead for “the truth” while vigilantly deconstructing truth claims—not only shape the contours of contemporary political comedy but also permeate the scholarship and critical discourse on irony.

Striking an artful balance with these aims became a necessary and highly regarded skill for political and topical humorists when employing irony as a subversive rhetorical art in the 2000s. At the same time, it fell to comics, broadly speaking, to navigate the cultural demands for “engaged irony” and “new sincerity,” tempering each with the other, as the decade progressed. This oscillation honed a “double-edged” consciousness in another sense, rewarding a comic

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<sup>232</sup> This title was held in prior years by “9/11,” “WMD (weapons of mass destruction),” and “World Wide Web.” American Dialect Society, “*Truthiness* Voted 2005 Word of the Year,” January 6, 2006, [http://www.american-dialect.org/Words\\_of\\_the\\_Year\\_2005.pdf](http://www.american-dialect.org/Words_of_the_Year_2005.pdf). Also see Frank Rich, “Truthiness 101: From Frey to Alito,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2006, C16.

<sup>233</sup> Boler, *Digital Media and Democracy*, 5. Cf. Sloterdijk’s concept of the “cynical subject... quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality,” as paraphrased by Žižek, “Cynicism as a Form of Ideology.”

<sup>234</sup> Boler, *ibid.*, 6, 8.

critical awareness fully able to dwell in contradictions but without entirely subscribing to the old postmodern tricks. Satirists like Jon Stewart were tasked with a constant negotiation between the dominant practices of postmodern television humor and the reemergent traditional ideal of “truth in irony.” Later in this work, we will revisit the comedy of Stewart and Colbert to explore more fully their provocative engagement with and satirical interventions into the discourse of “truth,” and the transformation of “fake news” in the critical imagination from the pinnacle of postmodern television comedy (as a subgenre distinguished by self-reflexivity, genre hybridity, and a deconstructivist approach to the medium) into what scholars such as Geoffrey Baym identify as a self-conscious break with or alternative to “postmodern” media discourse.<sup>235</sup>

*“A Golden Age of Irony”*

The “end of irony” claims were gradually laid to rest, and eventually memorialized in a *Newsweek* retrospective identifying Graydon Carter’s proclamation as one of the decade’s “Worst Predictions.”<sup>236</sup> Carter did not disagree. In a 2004 *Vanity Fair* interview, he retracted his prior hopeful remarks. “I thought America would become more serious, that we would focus on things that mattered here, and that it would be the end of irony,” he recalled. But with hindsight, considering the proliferation of celebrity gossip rags and reality TV shows, Carter was convinced that audiences’ appetite for “escape” won out instead, and he suspected “nothing’s changed.”<sup>237</sup> The failure of the arts to produce the “seismic change” that Carter first predicted led to wide speculation and repetition that “*nothing changed*” in popular culture or comedy. According to

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<sup>235</sup> Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, especially 20–24, 173.

<sup>236</sup> Marc Peyser, “Worst Predictions: #6—Graydon Carter Proclaims the End of Irony” (full citation above).

<sup>237</sup> Quoted in Sischy, “Conversation Between Ingrid Sischy and Graydon Carter.”

Eric Randall of the *Atlantic Wire*, this new national “narrative” vying to replace the earlier “false claim” of irony’s death was also greatly exaggerated and ultimately unsupportable.<sup>238</sup>

The years between 2004 and 2006 saw the well-publicized “death of irony” not only being shuffled aside as a dated and laughable idea but replaced by enthusiasms about the rise of a “revitalized” and “darker” irony. By some accounts, the aughts were shaping up to be, in the words of humorist Brian Unger, a National Public Radio commentator and former member of the *Daily Show* staff, the “golden age of irony” Beers envisioned. Unger in 2006 surmised, “Like a game of Whack-a-Mole, on 9/11 comedy was hit on the head with a hammer, went underground, and popped up in new places” often “fully charged with a current of war, religion and politics. In most media, ironically, what makes us laugh after 9/11 comes from out of darkness.” Unger named such comedians as Stewart, Maher, and Letterman among the architects of this remodeled irony.<sup>239</sup> Daryl Lang, another critic using the phrase “golden age,” agreed, “After a post-9/11 wave of homespun patriotism..., a sense of cynicism, dark humor and sarcasm swept in like a creeping shadow.”<sup>240</sup> In retrospect, humor makers and media scholars alike have hailed this as a prolific period for “darkly” cynical humor, as commemorated by such titles as *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans: The Best of McSweeney’s Humor Category* (2004), collected from the literary journal and humor website founded by author/editor and celebrated ironist Dave Eggers, and Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene’s

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<sup>238</sup> Randall, “Cliché Watch,” sought to refute on the tenth anniversary this persistent “narrative” which supposed “that, culturally, 9/11 did not prove a turning point or dividing line.”

<sup>239</sup> Brian Unger, “The ‘Age of Irony’ Is Alive and Well,” *The Unger Report*, first aired September 11, 2006, on National Public Radio; transcript available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6053478>. Unger’s credentials include a stint (1996–98) as an original producer, writer, and correspondent for *The Daily Show*.

<sup>240</sup> Daryl Lang, “Irony Refuses to Die,” in “Visions of the Decade,” *Photo District News* 30, no. 1 (January 2010): 20–28, 30, 32–33, ProQuest Research Library (accessed February 28, 2012).

critical anthology *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* (2011).<sup>241</sup>

The cultural and personal significance of a renaissance of “dark humor” were grey areas. Popular theories often included the observation that irony blooms in war and crisis, but explained that likelihood alternately as a function of universal human nature (e.g., ironic distance helps people face tragedy), social systems (irony is useful for speaking truth to power), and/or specific cultural circumstances. Exemplifying the first approach, *The Vancouver Sun*’s Matthew Mallon predicted and rationalized an upsurge of “black humour” in late September 2001 saying, “Out of misery comes humour, often of an ironic nature. It is a life-affirming response, ... an acceptance that the worst can and does happen, and that life goes on.”<sup>242</sup> He found plumbing these comic depths a “more appealing” prospect than “hypocritical repetitions of saccharine truisms.” Irony, not to be confused “with cynicism or nihilism,” Mallon asserted, “is the only sane and tempered response.” “Dark times” call for “dark humor,” *Salon* TV critic Carina Chocano, the same week, agreed. Advocating “sarcastic and ironic humor” as a historically proven means for the disenfranchised to challenge “insincerity and exploitation,” she concluded, “Irony is the last resort of the angry and powerless, and will not be going away soon.”<sup>243</sup> Proponents of “Ironic Engagement” such as Beers, while anchoring the concept of

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<sup>241</sup> Dave Eggers, Kevin Shay, Lee Epstein, John Warner, and Suzanne Kleid, eds., *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans: The Best of McSweeney’s Humor Category* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); Gournelos and Greene, eds., *A Decade of Dark Humor* (cited above).

<sup>242</sup> Matthew Mallon, “The Laughs Stop Here: When David Letterman and the Rest of the Late-Night Hosts Returned after the Attack, Nothing Seemed Funny,” *Vancouver Sun* (British Columbia), September 22, 2001, D3, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 10, 2012). Goode, “Tragedy Spells ‘The End of Irony,’” cites a portion of this quote to illustrate the idea that humor “helps people deal” with tragedy and therefore we can expect irony to “deepen” in war, disaster, or crisis.

<sup>243</sup> Carina Chocano, “Dark Times. Dark Humor: Memo to Jeff Greenfield (and Bill Maher): Irony Lives.” *Salon.com*, September 21, 2001, [http://www.salon.com/2001/09/21/terror\\_humor/](http://www.salon.com/2001/09/21/terror_humor/) (accessed November 10, 2012).

authentic irony in prior eras, combined trans-historical insights with a keen focus on present utility. “If irony is hot again,” Beers wondered in his review of Magill’s *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, did this mean ironists could be relied upon to point the way to “political reform” or was irony “merely a personal style of coping?”<sup>244</sup> In this mix of statements, we again find some speakers invoking cynicism as a necessary and/or desirable corollary of irony but others drawing a hard line (as Beers does) between ironic and cynical humor.<sup>245</sup>

Although many critics found in cynicism a poisonous solipsism, the imagined togetherness and cultural reset of the post-9/11 moment came with significant costs. Proponents of a newly engaged “Gen X irony” gradually came to rue the “New Earnestness” as a failing of the next generation to grasp or cultivate a sophisticated ironic sensibility, with some critics finding the younger set insufficiently subversive to “evolve” irony in interesting directions. Michael Hirschorn’s “Encyclopedia of 9/11” entry on “The End of Irony” for *New York* magazine, notably, bemoaned the “millennials” as history’s most “dewy-eyed” generation of “earnest-ists” and fretted that even the “Swiftian” irony of news parodists Stewart and Colbert was insufficient to mobilize contemporary youth against the financial-political establishment’s “forces of darkness.”<sup>246</sup> These worries about the worldliness of a younger generation supposedly seduced by a fantasy of an amiable public sphere melded with a vision of viewers enervated by television comedy’s failure to provide an ideal cultural forum.

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<sup>244</sup> Beers, “Cold Eye.”

<sup>245</sup> Beers, *ibid.*, appreciates that Magill “draws a vital line” between the civic-minded ironist and the cynic who (Magill writes) “has given up entirely on performing a social role.”

<sup>246</sup> Hirschorn, “Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong.” One online reader response raved that “hipsterism” had at last reformed from within and discovered in irony “the carnival of critique,” wryly enthusing: “Let us rejoice, you and I, for once the hipster was muddled in the nostalgia...! But I am heartened... the harbingers of hipsterdom carry the firey flames to ignite the furnaces of the revolution, or as we say, *evolution* [emphasis in original].” Post by “whygodwhy” in the “Comments” section for *ibid.*

Many of irony's defenders ultimately shared *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter's categorical disdain for "television irony" and particularly broadcast comedy, which as the reader will recall was the primary target of his original critique. The recoil from irony was, somewhat paradoxically, doubly motivated by class and aesthetic hierarchies (namely, the longstanding elitist derogation of popular TV as "low" culture) and, as we have also seen, more reactionary rhetoric with heavy overtones of anti-elitism (blaming irony on the "intellectual life"). Likewise with the re-embrace of irony and demand for new expressions, in turn, the network sitcom was often designated a struggling form and breeding ground for a lesser irony. There were undeniably significant industrial factors precipitating the decline in critically acclaimed sitcoms during this period. Television's novelty imperative predictably leaves the sitcom genre vulnerable to periodic lulls, and the occasional much publicized "death," as each format innovation cycles through successive phases of imitation and saturation. However, such explanations were somewhat overshadowed by the culturally determinist conceit that the "death of the sitcom" was perhaps one appreciable manifestation of the "death of irony."

The "new" irony was not to be the humor of hipster air-quote culture nor the residual "whine" that echoed across an array of post-*Seinfeld* sitcoms. This time around, if irony was thriving, critics said, it was not because of but *in spite of* the network sitcom. By the 2003–04 season, as industry scribe Bill Carter writes, the next great sitcom trend eluded "desperate" broadcasters at the Big Four networks who were contending with a confirmed "comedy drought."<sup>247</sup> Restocking NBC's Must-See TV stable to fill the void left by *Seinfeld* and later *Friends*, and seeking out innovative sitcom offerings to suit the current comic and political climate, proved daunting. Nevertheless, the *New York Times Book Review* three years after 9/11 was surveying

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<sup>247</sup> Bill Carter, *Desperate Networks* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 265.



a “revived humor landscape.”<sup>248</sup> Significantly, the prime-time sitcom was declared irrelevant to cutting-edge comedy. The magazine’s Neil Genzlinger observed that, in spite of the fact that the sitcom genre in 2004 appeared (yet again) moribund, humor and irony had “returned with a vengeance, more scathing than ever” on cable television and in the publishing industry. “The apparent death of the formulaic sitcom has come not because nothing is funny anymore,” he claimed, “but because such warmed-over gruel isn’t funny enough.”<sup>249</sup> Unger’s account similarly stressed, “The fact is, Hollywood hasn’t been able to make a hit sitcom like *Seinfeld* since 9/11,” a factor he, too, deemed no deterrent when greeting a bright future for “dark” ironists.<sup>250</sup>

On the Big Four, comedy writers contended with increased network caution, the new sanctions on both the use of cynical humor and jokes aimed at those in power, and moreover, the alleged changes in national affect and humor. The institutional structures of broadcast comedy were minimally disrupted, according to many insiders and onlookers who have noted that very little of significance actually changed on the business end of programming as a result of the proclaimed “death” of irony. Yet, the powerful discourse of sincerity did reach into television writers’ rooms, influencing comic content in the interests of increased social sensitivity and political cautiousness, and in the longer term, re-engineering television irony.

Commenting on the cultural import of the “new sincerity” in the immediate post-9/11 moment with its nationalistic focus on unity and heroism, some media critics and scholars saw it as having an especially short shelf-life. *Newsweek*’s Marc Peyser quipped that “the end of irony came to a quick end—just in time for *Zoolander*.”<sup>251</sup> Television scholar Lynn Spigel reasoned

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<sup>248</sup> Genzlinger, “Laughing Without Guilt.”

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Unger, “‘Age of Irony’ Is Alive and Well.”

<sup>251</sup> Peyser, “Worst Predictions.”

that the new sincerity was doomed to (and did) fail the popularity test when competing with irony in the “narrowcast media markets” of television’s postnetwork era.<sup>252</sup> I do not disagree, up to a point. However, in reviewing comic trends of the last decade, I also find that ‘sincere’ impulses deeply penetrated enduring comic forms throughout the era. The network sitcom, initially and over many seasons, I argue, served as another major site of negotiation and experimentation for balancing cultural sensibilities of irony and sincerity.

### **Prime-time Patriotism and the “New Sincerity”**

As the media cultivated what was being called “the new sincerity,” certain subject matter remained closed off to humor and irony on network television. This included not only jokes about national security, but pride in country, national community, and cherished American freedoms. In place of the noncommittal or “nihilistic” stance attributed to both yuppie and youth humor of the preceding decade (the favorite examples still being *Seinfeld* and *Beavis and Butt-Head*, respectively), the turn to sincerity demanded a collective faith and reinvestment in core democratic values and a sense of national cohesion, somewhat at odds with the market logics of the narrowcasting age.<sup>253</sup> Yet, a range of prime-time programs pulled focus onto patriotism with stories exploring courage, camaraderie, heroism, and civic duty, treating these as serious and sensitive topics. Network TV narratives reflecting upon these themes tended to rehearse the dominant meanings of good citizenship (e.g., “be constructive”), and for several

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<sup>252</sup> For analysis of the new sincerity as a short-lived detour in irony’s steady rise, see Lynn Spigel, “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004): 235–70, pointing out that “within a month” irony was “back in vogue, especially on late-night TV, but increasingly also on entertainment programs” (258).

<sup>253</sup> Spigel’s “Entertainment Wars” suggests audiences watched at a critical distance when presented with “highly sentimental” programs that exemplified TV’s “newfound patriotism.” She suspects “many viewers” were not drawn in by “grand narratives of national unity that sprang up,” deeming these “more performative than sincere” (254–56).

years largely avoided challenging, by means of joke or critique, the spirit of the new patriotism and fantasies of political consensus or even conformity.

For prime-time comedy, this occasionally meant that direct displays of patriotism, musings on morality, and aspirations to social relevance would become fashionable again for the first time since perhaps the end of the Cold War. This did not produce a return to Cosby-era earnestness or the “living room lectures” of the past, but it would be a time of tonal uncertainty and fluctuation as the possibilities for comedy after irony were brought more sharply into focus. From fall 2001 onward, the “new sincerity” was promptly on display, but its impact on televisual irony was not immediately clear, nor was it one uniform push. It did not yield a monolithic vision of either earnestness or community. Instead, the “new sincerity” was a work in progress, a set of impulses held in check by the entrenched attitudes of irony and institutional embrace of niche marketing that underpinned the contemporary sitcom. Initially, throughout the 2001–03 seasons and beyond, the performance of unity and allegiance across U.S. media largely escaped the ironic wink of sitcom joke writers at the major broadcast networks.

The first and most obvious manifestation of the “newfound patriotism” in prime-time programming was major networks’ prominent placement of the American flag in watermarks or “bugs” in the corner of the television screen. The presence of flag iconography, as a constant reminder of a national mourning period, worked to enfold light entertainment fare like NBC’s *Friends* (figs. 3.6a–b) and more “cynical” comedies like *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) within the new patriotism with its aura of sincerity. The stars and stripes not only served as graphic shorthand for national unity, but their use provided a kind of ideological cover against the early accusations that comedy and laughter were in poor taste while the nation grieved. The flag motif signaled to viewers that the entertainers they invited into their homes each week, as well as

the executives in charge of programming the national broadcast networks, were devoted Americans like themselves.



Figures 3.6a–b. NBC’s peacock logo superimposed with stars and stripes hovers over Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston) as she shares news of her pregnancy with friends Monica and Phoebe and 31.7 million viewers nationwide in the fall 2001 season premiere of *Friends*, dedicated “to the people of New York City.” “The One After ‘I Do,’” originally aired September 27, 2001, on NBC.<sup>254</sup>

By spring 2002 the flag migrated from the network bug on-screen to the *mise-en-scène* to become a regular feature of set décor for prime-time comedies like *Friends* and *Becker* (CBS, 1998–2004) (figs. 3.7–9), a trend that persisted with mid-decade arrivals like CBS’s *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–14). American flags decorating domestic, public, or work spaces of sitcom sets sent a message of national solidarity, again hailing viewers as loyal citizens. The flag as a fixture of set dressing coded characters on these programs as proud Americans, even as patriotism was not explicitly addressed in weekly plots or seasonal story arcs. In this way, comedies acknowledged a larger political context and gently gestured to relevance without disrupting a tenuous national unity forged on a shared affect of anger and grief that, for a brief time, seemed to bridge the political divide.

<sup>254</sup> This was among the “most-watched” episodes, and seasons, of *Friends*. For ratings data see “*Friends* Nielsen Ratings Archive,” <http://newmusicandmore.tripod.com/friendsratings.html>.



Figure 3.7. The flag centered in the frame over Joey's (Matt LeBlanc) shoulder provides a visual anchor for this scene, as he enlists friend Chandler's (Matthew Perry) help to rehearse a script for the quirky game show *Bamboozled*. "The One with the Baby Shower," *Friends*, originally aired April 22, 2002, on NBC.



Figure 3.8. Providing an element of narrative continuity between *Friends* and spin-off *Joey*, Joey Tribbiani's wall-mounted flag moved with him to Los Angeles in fall 2004. "Joey and the Fancy Sister," *Joey*, originally aired February 24, 2005, on NBC.



Figure 3.9. A child's paper collage flag hangs in the receptionist's doorway in Dr. Becker's office, shown here behind guest star Gilbert Gottfried, in a scene cautiously putting air travel jokes back into play. "A First Class Flight," *Becker*, originally aired December 17, 2003, on CBS.

While the patriotic spirit surfaced on sitcoms primarily through such subtle incorporation of nationalist imagery, that focus occasionally carried over into narratives attending to the meanings and boundaries of American identity. Thus, a parallel development in prime-time patriotism

was the appearance of moral messages attending to values of family and nation in sitcoms and dramedies that otherwise bore the markers of irony, including masculinist irony. Amidst the calls to curb irony, the moment was ripe to bring comedy's loveably egoistic, insensitive lads more firmly in line with the discourses of strength, character, and duty that dominated national media. Family-themed comedies provided a platform for nesting laddism within the codes of patriarchy or heroic masculinity and patriotism. Narratives reworking the new lad archetype as a strong (if reluctant) father figure were ideal for taking up or smoothing over the paradoxes of a culture that, on a national level, was calling for both heightened sensitivity and open displays of power. In sitcoms like *George Lopez* (examined in the next chapter) and dramedies like FX's *Rescue Me* (in Chapter 6), the new lad's comedy domain began to open the door to explorations of certain types of masculine sensitivity. Television's lads were given greater three-dimensionality through stories of familial and civic responsibility shot through with notes of paternal and patriarchal melodrama. Such shows found everyday heroes in the unlikely lads, trading their dens and "nudie" bars for family rooms and the noble workplace—factories, offices, and firehouses. This push to domesticate the fortysomething lad was initially most evident on black and ethnic family shows and those with multiracial ensemble casts, which were perhaps the fiction genres most directly impacted and shaped by the constant attention in social discourse to cultural difference and assimilation.

The national unity theme also gave rise to hopeful depictions of a new sense of urban community, with multiculturalist sitcoms serving as a staging ground for rearticulating irony as a supporting player in the new sincerity. Multiracial comedies leveraged representations of ethnic, class, and cultural difference within communities to simultaneously portray diversity of political views. As the next chapter will discuss, a few series depicting political as well as ethnic diversity helped to usher in a more contentious period of inquiry in comedy, in which dissent

and free speech would be reclaimed as markers of American openness, for example through the trope of the minority comedian in conversation with President Bush or his devoted supporters. Programs depicting, or in some cases mocking, forms of protest were at least superficially laudatory of open public debate, though in family sitcoms such celebration was matched by an equally strong impulse to regulate and discipline the appropriate modes of political discourse.

This attention to questions of dissent in comedy picked up where debate over the silencing of Bill Maher had left off in 2001–02, with the significance of the comedian-citizen as an icon of free speech sometimes alluded to or underscored. *Politically Incorrect*'s downfall seeded industry tensions over the price of nonconformity (insufficiently “patriotic” expression) in the television forum that left a lingering impression on writers as well as comics. The eventual restagings of conflicts and questions raised by the Maher media scandal, through the lenses of narrative television, point to its retrospective significance to the entertainment industry and changing perceptions of comedy's stakes in the national conversation. Comedy writers' readiness to depict the nation as politically fractured involved recognition of the cultural forum as a societal ideal and the knowing presentation of the television text as part of that forum, with gestures to political relevance and social satire typically shrugged off by ironic comedies in the preceding years.

NBC's Must-See flagship *Will & Grace* was one program that picked at the *Politically Incorrect* scab, with a playful plot about corporate control of the media and America's compromised cultural forum. In the March 2006 final season episode “Buy, Buy Baby,” the gay-themed network OutTV, home to Jack McFarland's talk show, is purchased by a division of the Department of Homeland Security to promote a right-wing political agenda that includes enforcing heterosexuality.<sup>255</sup> *Jack Talk*'s host and guests are promptly closeted as the show adopts the

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<sup>255</sup> *Will & Grace*, “Buy, Buy Baby,” episode 8.18, written by Kirk J. Rudell and directed by James Burrows, first aired March 30, 2006, on NBC, just two months before the series finale.



Republican party line of family values, flag-waving, and unwavering support for George W. Bush. Overseeing *Jack Talk*'s transformation into the all-American *Talk Time USA* is a new conservative co-host, Alabama belle Amber-Louise, who chirps, "If you question our President, then you're a dirty traitor!" (fig. 3.10). This is one of only a few network programs that self-consciously poked fun at nationalistic jingoism and the ostentatious enactment of patriotism, somewhat belatedly skewering television's complicity in closing down debate in the name of national unity.



Figure 3.10. Buxom Bush backer Amber-Louise (guest Britney Spears) gives a TV show hosted by Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes) a patriotic makeover. "Buy, Buy Baby," *Will & Grace*, originally aired March 30, 2006, on NBC.

The following season, writer/producer Aaron Sorkin reprised his earlier arguments in defense of Maher with heated dialogue in his series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006–07). This NBC drama is set behind-the-scenes of a late-night satirical sketch show, loosely based on *Saturday Night Live*, that has undergone a "patriotic" overhaul. The story centers on two head writers returning to the "*Studio 60*" creative team after a four-year absence, as they battle network censors in the name of art and truth and bicker with executives at the fictional NBS network who are overanxious to assure audiences of the show's patriotic *bona fides* and keep the political peace. The writing staff's reunion is fraught with tension because, as we learn in the third episode, protagonists Matt Albie (Matthew Perry of *Friends*) and Danny Tripp (Bradley Whitford of *The West Wing*) were forced off their program shortly after 9/11 due to Albie's



open support for Maher.<sup>256</sup> Tripp belatedly vents his outrage over their team's unwillingness to stand by his partner, channeling Sorkin's sentiments on behalf of the writer as social critic:

Bill Maher, he made a politically incorrect observation on his own show, helpfully titled *Politically Incorrect*, and the sky fell down on him. Matt [Albie] was one of the first guys to take up his side, and so the sky fell down on *him*.<sup>257</sup>

With this speech upholding Maher as a heroic figure and victim of network cowardice, the program exposed rifts that went largely unrepresented at the time and, moreover, constructed a brotherhood of wronged writers by aligning Albie, Maher, and by extension, Sorkin himself, as one of those few who had in fact come to Maher's defense in 2001. With his *Studio 60* scripts, Sorkin advocated courage in comedy and a principled refusal to self-censor under network, sponsor, or public pressure. What is perhaps most remarkable in this tribute to the expelled class clown of TV's late-night is the exceedingly earnest and emotional presentation of that message.<sup>258</sup> As a sober meditation on the business of comedy and the meanings of patriotism, *Studio 60* was in some sense emblematic of the sought-after sincerity, even as Sorkin's program struck at the heart of any conservative opposition to irony and/as dissent that at least initially underwrote much political talk of the "New Sincerity."<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> The story paralleled its creator-producer's own much anticipated return to NBC after being asked to leave *The West Wing* in 2003. To the extent that *Studio 60*'s protagonists give voice to Sorkin's writer persona and experience, his story is split between these two haunted heroes, one with a drug problem and the other with a political problem.

<sup>257</sup> *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, "The Focus Group," episode 1.3 (production no. 3TS052), written by Aaron Sorkin and directed by Christopher Misiano, first aired October 2, 2006, on NBC.

<sup>258</sup> Some professional comics have criticized (as unrealistic) *Studio 60*'s heroic, high-stakes view of comedy writing, as noted in "Louis C.K.'s Love/Hate Relationship with Aaron Sorkin Explained on Bill Simmons' Podcast," *Huffington Post*, June 28, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/28/louis-cks-love-hate-relationship-aaron-sorkin\\_n\\_1635476.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/28/louis-cks-love-hate-relationship-aaron-sorkin_n_1635476.html) (accessed August 11, 2012).

<sup>259</sup> Although Spigel's critique in "Entertainment Wars" of U.S. TV's post-9/11 new sincerity implicates an episode of Sorkin's earlier series *The West Wing* in American constructions of the Arab "other" as "the antithesis of Western humanity and progress" (243–44), the broader contours of that series, as well, were marked by skepticism, ambivalence, and nuance.

The mid and late 2000s would see a rise in representations of characters with clear political affiliations in prime-time programming, with central conflicts as well as familial love, friendship, or romance being staged across the political divide. For example, the sitcom *30 Rock*, another series granting backstage access to the interlocked lives of comedy writers and NBC executives at a fictional late-night sketch show, makes comic sport of entangled personal, political, and professional allegiances. In the fall 2007 season, devout Republican media mogul and GE acolyte Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) pursues a forbidden love affair with a Democratic Congresswoman (Edie Falco), while liberal guilt leads addled head writer Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) to agonize over reporting her Middle Eastern neighbor to the Department of Homeland Security as a possible terrorist. Alongside *Will & Grace*, this program stands as another rare example



Figures 3.11a–b. *Left*: *30 Rock* was among the few U.S. sitcoms to feature jokes about the War on Terror and to spoof the conspicuous placement of American flags. *Right*: To lampoon propagandistic verities, a message from NBC’s corporate master, the Sheinhardt Wig Company. “Somebody to Love,” *30 Rock*, originally aired November 15, 2007, on NBC.

of prime-time quality sitcom deploying ironic self-referentiality to ridicule the network’s own performative patriotism and here also to joke about the War on Terror (figs. 3.11a–b). These were at least somewhat politically invested exercises in irony.<sup>260</sup>

<sup>260</sup> *30 Rock*, “Somebody to Love,” episode 2.6, written by Kay Cannon and Tina Fey and directed by Beth McCarthy Miller, first aired November 15, 2007, on NBC. Like *Will & Grace*, *30 Rock* regularly jokingly nipped at the corporate hand that feeds. Such series claimed for NBC a measure of reflexivity as the willing target of its own humor. *30 Rock*, in particular, satirized corporate power and NBC’s parent company General Electric. (continued...)

Ultimately, the new sincerity was not so powerful a discourse that it shut down irony as “glibness” and “detached” laughter in prime time. As broadcasters addressed the “drought” in viable post-*Seinfeld* comedy hits throughout the early 2000s, a range of sitcoms billed as ironic remained a fortress against earnestness and relevance. The FOX network, in particular, continued to favor experimental comedies that advanced the tradition of the self-reflexive, postmodern-ironic sitcom, with offerings (most short-lived) like *The Tick* (2001–02), *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* (2002–03), *Greg the Bunny* (2002, 2005–06), *That ‘80s Show* (2002), *Method & Red* (2004), and *Arrested Development* (2003–06). FOX’s *Luis* (2003) and *Wanda at Large* (2003), discussed in the next chapter, are outliers here, edging toward social relevance while still exemplifying their network’s “politically incorrect” brand of humor. Other networks similarly flirted with manifestly “ironic” sitcoms, such as UPN’s *The Mulletts* (2003–04), the WB’s *Nikki* (2000–02), and NBC’s postmodern sendup of classic sitcoms *The Rerun Show* (2002). Such programs poked fun to varying degrees at their own sitcom-ness and subverted representational norms, as with the later examples noted above from *Will & Grace* and *30 Rock*, boasting unbridled intertextuality and self-awareness as television about television.

Many of these postmodern-ironic sitcoms had a gentle touch, achieving whimsical and some said “escapist” humor with their absurd premises and strong currents of non-realism.<sup>261</sup>

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These gestures to challenge media conglomerates and hyper-commercialization of U.S. TV ironically—common in the late stages of the post-network era—should not be mistaken for radically subversive satire. For contrast, Robert Smigel’s 1998 satirical animated short “Media-opoly” on *Saturday Night Live* caused a stir by accusing NBC of betraying the public interest by conspiring to conceal GE’s ties to manufacturing military weapons and dangerous pollutants. NBC pulled the cartoon from reruns, inspiring the media activist group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) to produce the documentary *Saturday Night Censorship: Comedy and Corporate Control*. By decade’s end, however, comedy targeting corporate owners of network and cable TV was commonplace, and such jokes—typically less confrontational than Smigel’s sketch—stood as a testament to owners’ power and, arguably, inoculated them from more serious, sustained critique.

<sup>261</sup> Graydon Carter felt Americans had turned to entertainment as “an escape” much like “screwball comedies were during the depths of the Depression.” Sischy, “Conversation Between Ingrid Sischy and Graydon Carter,” 80.

Others like the irrepressible *Family Guy* (1999–2000 and 2001–present) emulated cable sensation *South Park* in pushing the limits of transgression with deliberately offensive content. Irony remained a fail-safe defense for “edgy” comedy invoking stereotypes of race or sexuality, with the irony “out-clause” continuing to grant license to exercise politically incorrect freedoms. Indeed, politically incorrect comedy as a cultural institution emerged virtually unscathed from the repeated attacks on irony. Allowances were made for anti-PC jokes and representations as topical humor, whether directed at foreign enemies or political rivals in the culture wars at home. Irony acquired a new legitimacy and, as Chapter 5 will discuss, began to be reconfigured along expressly political lines. The “television irony” that Graydon Carter and others had branded inferior and cynical thus adapted, evolved, and ultimately thrived in various markets.

## Conclusions

The consensus on what constituted comic irony was fractured in the wake of 9/11, with one constituency saying “nothing changed” and another saying it would never be the same. Jon Winokur in *The Big Book of Irony* discerns (along with numerous critics ranging from Graydon Carter to Lynn Spigel) that the “New Earnestness failed to take hold.”<sup>262</sup> On the other hand, some perceive that, in the words of journalist Michael Hirschorn, “irony never really did make a comeback after 9/11.”<sup>263</sup> How then do we navigate the competing claims as to irony’s significance within the new cultural and comedic landscape? Television comedy’s continual negotiations between irony and sincerity during and since the 2000s—the strategies pursued by texts and audiences to balance the dual pulls of ironic distance, on the one hand, and emotional involvement, on the other—are the subject of the remaining chapters of this work.

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<sup>262</sup> Winokur, “Irony Takes a Holiday,” in *Big Book of Irony*, 77.

<sup>263</sup> Hirschorn, “Graydon Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong” (“Encyclopedia of 9/11” entry on “The End of Irony”).

While the “new sincerity” as a phenomenon of U.S. media culture was unquestionably an umbrella for both sentimental, emotive programming and austere nationalism after 9/11, it also provided the foundation for newfound interest in earnest or sincere attributes of the comedic ironist that has not abated. As we have seen, the emergent discourse of ironic engagement worked to dissolve the dualism that defined irony and sincerity as opposing cultural forces, rejecting that contrast by underscoring a sincere commitment to truth or free expression as the impetus for a superior, subversive form of irony. In this critical discourse approaching irony as a stalking horse for the comedian to deliver truth and oppositional ideas in a climate hostile to dissenting voices, tactical and truthful irony represents a ‘higher grade’ than the unmoored postmodern (i.e., nihilistic) variety. Not unlike the anti-irony or “end of irony” arguments they replace, such critical perspectives thus place a premium on reviving a sense of purpose, conviction, and authenticity in humor and public life, ideas that *New York* magazine’s Peter Kaplan states “were déclassé” in premillennial (urban) America.<sup>264</sup>

Just as irony was not ‘one thing,’ sincerity as a televisual sensibility took on different forms and inflections. Moreover, in the case of the “quality” network sitcom, the re-embrace of earnestness would be creatively counterbalanced by continued commitments to the niche appeal of irony and postmodern tonal complexity, as exemplified by such early- and mid-decade standouts as ABC’s *The Job* (see Chapter 2), CBS’s *How I Met Your Mother*, and at NBC, breakout hits including *Scrubs* (2001–10), *My Name Is Earl* (2005–09), and *The Office* (2005–13) that eventually inherited the “Must See” Thursday night programming block vacated by *Seinfeld* (in 1998) and *Friends* (in 2004). Such programs paired television’s self-reflexive ironic ethos with melodrama, inviting investments in relationships and in themes of loyalty and community

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<sup>264</sup> Kaplan, “What We Were Before.”

but always artfully offset by an overarching claim on ironic sophistication that eschews or buffers sentimentality.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at the “sincering” of irony on network television after 9/11, expanding the discussion of prime-time patriotism to consider how ethnic sitcoms in particular responded to the racial tensions and crisis in national identity spurred on by the War on Terror. Turning to representations of race and ethnicity in network comedies of the early to mid-2000s, the chapter looks at articulations of nation, courage, and dissent. A selection of black and ethnic sitcoms from this period carried forward an ironic sensibility, modeling a more “engaged” irony with a sense of social relevance within the allowances of network prime time and the “new sincerity.” We will consider how these comedies espousing a socially progressive agenda fueled by pluralist or multiculturalist aspirations seized on post-9/11 rhetoric of national unity, while also valorizing irony and “politically incorrect” humor.

## Chapter 4

### **Ethnicoms after 9/11: Profiles in Courage, Lessons in Citizenship**

The period between 2001 and 2004 saw revived interest among broadcasters in ethnic and multiculturalist sitcoms. In prime-time comedy the call to a “new sincerity” was initially as intimately bound up with ideologies of American identity and national community as it was tied to the search for a reconfigured irony. Ethnic and multiracial sitcoms in the shadow of 9/11 began to draw upon and dialogue with the dominant discourses of patriotism and unity to smooth over social differences and anxieties about the nation’s “porous” boundaries. In the process, such programming played an important role in ushering in the new comedy of sincerity.

In this chapter I examine the ethnic-themed sitcom as a venue for renegotiating the terms and stakes for comedic irony at the outset of the 2000s. Two subgenres of Black and ethnic comedies emerging roughly contemporaneously, which for brevity I refer to as the ethnicoms of the early 2000s, together inflected the new sincerity with elements of irony and suggested further possibilities for forms of “post-9/11” irony imbued with claims to social relevance.<sup>1</sup> The first of these consists of a handful of suburban family sitcoms, updated to allow for a distinctly laddist influence and starring a wisecracking male comic in the role of reluctant patriarch or domesticated lad. Against a backdrop of the new sincerity and the question of the cultural and industrial viability of irony, a return to ethnicity as a focus for family comedy through sitcoms including *The Bernie Mac Show* (FOX, 2001–06), *My Wife and Kids* (ABC,

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<sup>1</sup> The term “ethnicom” is commonly adopted by television historians to discuss earlier cycles of network sitcoms that represented the experiences of Black, Jewish, Latino, European, or various immigrant families and communities. It is most often applied to clusters of working-class ethnic sitcoms from both the early 1950s (*The Goldbergs*, *Life with Luigi*, *Mama*, and *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, among others) and the mid-1970s (including *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, *What’s Happening!!*, and *Chico and the Man*), but is also extended to programming from the 1980s and 1990s such as *Amen*, *227*, and Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl*. Expanding the use of this term to contemporary examples allows for drawing parallels and contrasts to the prior cycles on American TV.

2001–05), and *George Lopez* (ABC, 2002–07) allowed both for representations of racial and ethnic authenticity that could be mapped onto the new sincerity and for a different version of edginess that could reinforce irony’s claim on alterity. For the purposes of this chapter, I designate these a strain of “lad dad” shows, due to their privileging and celebration of the edgy, smart-mouthed male comic star as a champion of anti-“politically correct” humor.<sup>2</sup> I argue that these programs collectively participated in the recoding of the Black sitcom dad, and on Lopez’s show the Latino patriarch, as a “cooler” and more ironic figure to establish comedic distance from the dignified, earnest, authoritative *Cosby* role model even as they drew upon the powerful prototype established by *The Cosby Show*. In the first half of this chapter, I explore these programs for their domestication and strategic rearticulation of aspects of American lad culture, at a moment when the type of irony linked to laddism from the prior decade was at odds with the heightened pressure to curb insensitivity and irrelevance—the much lamented “glibness,” “narcissism,” and “shallowness” explored in the previous chapters. To situate these shows within prime-time television’s open displays of patriotism and renewed emphasis on sincerity, I also broadly examine such programs’ articulations of national identity, ethnic subjectivity, and familial and civic responsibility from the fall 2001 season onward.

The remainder of the chapter examines a brief cycle of urban ethnic sitcoms that followed on the heels of these programs but proved, by comparison, to be critical and ratings failures. In this category I place *Wanda at Large* (FOX), *Luis* (FOX), and *Whoopi* (NBC), all introduced during 2003 (with only *Whoopi* lasting through spring of 2004), each of which capitalized on the emergent rhetoric of national unity and utilized the conceit of the sitcom as

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<sup>2</sup> In coining this term I am aware that the label easily extends beyond these particular shows to include examples of ‘white’ family comedies from the same period like *Grounded for Life* (FOX, 2001–03/WB, 2003–05), and beyond sitcom to parallel programming trends such as FX’s masculine melodramas (e.g., *Rescue Me* and *Nip/Tuck*), as Chapter 6 will discuss.



social microcosm to envision a culturally diverse America. Despite their limited run and perhaps premature cancellation, these programs, I argue, warrant consideration as experiments in resurrecting and rearticulating what cultural scholar Herman Gray terms the “multiculturalist” sitcom, as well as staking out spaces in comedy for dissenting voices during a moment when the discourse of the national family and the meanings of membership were somewhat in flux and open for comment.<sup>3</sup> I consider these programs for the ways in which they sought to align a sense of irony and cynicism with patriotism and free speech, efforts that ran parallel to certain political comedians discussed in the previous chapter. These series are notable, moreover, as platforms for reaccenting concepts of “political incorrectness” in comedy. With American multiculturalism long having been conflated with progressive “PC” politics as the target of much derision, and consequently central to constructions of “political incorrectness” as a comedic stance, TV comedies either marked as or commenting on multiculturalist representations are automatically part of the national comedic conversation about “PC.”

Through plotlines and casting this brief cycle of urban ethnic sitcoms, like the suburban ethnic family sitcoms that preceded and outlasted them, challenged ethnocentrism and xenophobia in ways that built on and affirmed the sweeping mood of patriotism. These programs reasserted the viewpoint rapidly achieving dominance across mainstream U.S. media that Americans should emerge from national tragedy as proud citizens with a renewed faith in home-grown heroes, yet must vigilantly practice tolerance upon finding ethnic, cultural, or religious (if not necessarily political) difference in their midst. Though also strongly invested in the importance of family,

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<sup>3</sup> Gray identifies three categories of racial discourse in his analysis of Black television comedies in the 1990s: assimilationist (“invisibility” of racial difference), pluralist (“separate-but-equal”), and multiculturalist (“diversity”). These discourses are not always found in isolation and may mutually inform a text. See his “Politics of Representation in Network Television,” chap. 5 of *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), subsection “Discursive Practices and Contemporary Television Representations of Blackness,” 84–91.

this new breed of urban comedies made significant departures from the more conventionally patriarchal family sitcoms in several ways. The narrative premises allowed these comedies to be more expressly and conscientiously about the metaphorical national family, depicting urban close-quarter dwellings and multiracial workplace settings in place of the comparatively homogenizing suburban spaces occupied by the breadwinner “lad dads.” Trading assimilationist and pluralist fantasies of racial harmony and class rise for multiculturalist visions that included clashing identities and ideals, these comic portraits of America were fraught with cultural and political friction. Yet, they seized on the powerful affect of national family and togetherness in the post-9/11 moment to re-envision the American melting pot with a potent blend of irony and aspiration, depicting cultural hybridity and heterogeneity while openly flaunting their rejection of “political correctness” as a basis for multiculturalist representations. They emerged at the same moment that multiculturalist sketch comedy was also making a comeback, with the race-themed satire of FOX’s similarly ill-fated *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* (2002–03, cancelled before its second season) and Comedy Central’s celebrated *Chappelle’s Show* (2003–06) likewise bringing multiculturalist fare firmly into the fold of “political incorrectness.” While the lad dad family shows tended toward assimilationist and pluralist discourses of race, the new multiculturalist urban ethnicoms ultimately shared their emphasis on installing “politically incorrect” humor into the television family and blending irony with sincerity in comedy.

There is a tendency in television studies to put a premium on the popularity of shows, as measured through ratings and renewals, as the index of cultural importance. This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it can re-inscribe media’s historical disparities in cultural power along axes of race, class, and gender, legitimating the marginalization of non-normative representations, as Gray demonstrated in his influential 1991 essay arguing the social relevance

of the cancelled yet landmark multiculturalist comedy/drama *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987–88).<sup>4</sup> Second, this analytical habit falls into the trap that Eileen Meehan warns against in her seminal critique of ratings as a source of legitimation for programs and programming practices, reminding that ratings are not a reliable “mirror of public taste.”<sup>5</sup> Third, sitcom trends have historically been faddish, marked by periods of uncertainty and many small genre “deaths” followed by eruptions of programs attempting reinvention. These cyclical lulls can be moments of innovation, experimentation, and aspiration in which the failures have stylistic and cultural significance that often rivals the successes, as Philip Sewell demonstrates in his study of the industrial logics that underwrote and ultimately doomed the quality “dramedies” of 1987.<sup>6</sup> During the period examined in this chapter, the television seasons of 2002 through 2004 in particular proved inhospitable for new comedies across the prime-time schedule, inspiring phrases in the television industry like “comedy drought.”<sup>7</sup> It is precisely for this reason that I focus on several short-lived or so-called failed sitcoms, from *Luis* (fall 2003) and *Whoopi* (2003–04) to the lavishly ironic *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* (FOX, 2002–03), as these texts, among the first new sitcoms surfacing “post-9/11,” modeled differing responses to the perceived opportunities and obligations for ironists in a transitional comedy climate.

Each of these assorted family and neo-multiculturalist sitcoms was developed around the star persona of a popular comedian, or in the case of *Luis* a highly regarded character actor. The

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<sup>4</sup> See Herman Gray, “Recodings: Possibilities and Limitations in Commercial Television Representations of African American Culture,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 13, nos. 1–3 (1991): 117–30, positing mainstream white America’s resistance to progressive racial representations and ideologies in CBS dramedy *Frank's Place*.

<sup>5</sup> Eileen Meehan, “Why We Don’t Count: The Commodity of Audience,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Philip W. Sewell, “From Discourse to Discord: Quality and Dramedy at the End of the Classic Network System,” *Television & New Media* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 235–59.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Carter, *Desperate Networks* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 265, as cited in the previous chapter.

most promising comedy offerings of the early 2000s were often talent-centered, continuing in the tradition of such hits as *Roseanne* and *Seinfeld* that David Marc dubbed the “stand-up personacoms.”<sup>8</sup> As of spring 2003, however, as reported in *The Washington Post*, no comedy series to debut in the new millennium had “consistently ranked among TV’s 10 most popular” programs, although that honor was still enjoyed by such stalwart hits as *Friends* and *Will & Grace*.<sup>9</sup> The sense of the sitcom as a genre once again in “crisis” was exacerbated by the latest surge of reality TV fare, the popularity and quick-profit prospects of which had begun to alter significantly the economics of the industry and scheduling of prime time, encroaching on sitcom’s turf (in ways that would continue into the 2010s).<sup>10</sup> A decade prior, in contrast, *Variety* had reported on “the preference for situation comedies over all genres,” when prime time was packed with performer-driven contenders in 1993–94.<sup>11</sup> Although plenty such vehicles had flopped in the sitcom market’s stand-up comedian feeding “frenzy” of the early and mid 1990s, as Chapter 1 discussed, that was undeniably a period of sustained optimism that half-hour comedies were the right stuff to dominate prime time.<sup>12</sup> In the interim, the novelty of stand-up/sitcom hybrids and enthusiasm propelling that earlier comedian star-power push had arguably waned, moving such programming conceits into the realm of the familiar and expected, and although the eager reception of certain stand-out vehicles like Bernie Mac’s rekindled that

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<sup>8</sup> David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 196–97.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Farhi, “TV’s New Reality: Hit Shows Are Here Today, Gone Tomorrow,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2003, A1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed June 15, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* See also Kate Fitzgerald, “So Many Realities, So Few Slots,” *Advertising Age* 74, no. 19 (May 12, 2003): S6; Paige Albinak, “Can *Friends* Beat a Month of Reality?” *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 5 (February 3, 2003): 18, 35; *idem*, “New Reality Comes to Hollywood,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 7 (February 17, 2003): 14.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Lowry, “Ad Coin Rolls to Youth,” *Variety*, December 27, 1993, 33. See Chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> The “frenzy” for stand-up personacoms is reported in John Brodie’s “Low-Concept Season (TV Season High on Talent, Low on Concept),” *Variety*, November 22, 1993, 21, 73.

flame, by 2003 the industry's faith in the sitcom format was shaken, and broadcasters lurched into uncertain terrain with the overtly "political" humor of *Whoopi*, *Wanda at Large*, and *Luis*.

Viewed together, the ethnicom offerings of the early to mid-2000s were a key site for rehearsing or contesting topical discourses of race, nation, difference, and dissent through narratives about American family life and community. Their reliance on irony and at times cynicism to do so was instrumental in securing the comedian-as-ironist's and the ironic sitcom's revised status as "relevant" and "engaged" rather than indifferent, nihilistic, and self-absorbed. The fact that these network ethnicoms were deemed family-friendly and often combined a fairly stable ironic sensibility with elements of moral and ethical commentary at times approaching didacticism, anathema to certain sitcom ironists of the 1990s, also illustrates the primary directions available for irony at that time to be rehabilitated on network prime time. With these shows, irony was brought in line with established modes for "sincere" situation and domestic comedy, principally through their mixture of family-centered humor and socially progressive representations with either cultural pluralist or multiculturalist aspirations.

### **Situating Ethnic Comedy in the Shadow of 9/11**

The night of September 10, 2001, hours before the World Trade Center attacks, the FOX News Network's *Hannity & Colmes* featured Pat Buchanan lamenting the state of immigration policy in the United States. He warned that immigrants were eroding the national borders, but his objection was less their coming to America than their maintaining ties to their cultures of origin after they did so. The picture painted by Buchanan was of a singular, unified, and Anglophonic America under siege by foreign-born residents *within* U.S. borders with misplaced loyalties.

Look, these people—a lot of these people [who] come here are very courageous. They come through the desert, they do want to work. But one thing... they don't want: They don't want to become Americans. They are good, loyal Mexicans. ...

[C]ulturally, folks may belong to Mexico and politically to the United States; then they will demand open borders, just like Sinn Fein does. They will demand easy transit back and forth, and that's how you lose your country.

Buchanan worked to foreclose discourses of cultural hybridity, globalization, and multiculturalism with his uncompromising view of cultural assimilation as an all-or-nothing proposition:

Let's go right to assimilation. My folks are from Ireland and Germany. I don't speak German. I don't speak Gaelic. I study Shakespeare, I know Edgar Allan Poe. I know American history, not Irish history. The folks coming from Mexico listen to Hispanic stations. They watch Hispanic TV, radio, they belong there. They're trying to change the main holiday in California from the Fourth of July to Cinco De Mayo. ... They're not coming here to become Americans.<sup>13</sup>

As this example makes plain, in national political discourse the loyalties of immigrants were already under close scrutiny prior to September 11, and that surveillance intensified as President Bush faced pressure from advisors and interest groups to tighten U.S. border security and to vigilantly track visa holders in “the post-September 11th world.”<sup>14</sup> Longstanding anxieties over breaches of the Mexican border were eclipsed only by the escalating concern over the “flow” of people from the Arab world, and almost immediately these panics converged. Reporting on Bush's trip to Latin America, for example, the Associated Press described the President's vision for “a boundary that allows the free, back-and-forth flow of people and goods but not would-be terrorists or drug smugglers,” a statement that evidences the ready articulation of Arab and Latino criminal stereotypes.<sup>15</sup> Later in spring 2002 the conservative *Washington Times* printed reader letters under the header “Porous Borders, Alien Amnesties Undermine Bush's Terrorism Tough Talk” that scolded the President for a too lax attitude about securing the border with Mexico.

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<sup>13</sup> “How Should America Deal With Illegal Immigration?” *Hannity & Colmes*, first aired September 10, 2001, on FOX News Network. Transcript # 091002cb.253, load date July 10, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 1, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Phrase used by Tom Brokaw on *NBC News*, quoted in “Bush Signs Bill Tightening Security for Student Visa Holders,” *The Bulletin's Frontrunner*, May 15, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 2, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Sonya Ross, “With an Eye on a More Secure but Open Border, Bush Leaves for Mexico to Start Latin American Trip,” Associated Press State & Local Wire, March 21, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 2, 2007).

One letter from an outraged Republican and self-described Hispanic “legal immigrant” did not mince words in equating the problem of “wetbacks” with terrorists when exhorting the Bush government to emulate Eisenhower’s “illegal alien sweep (Operation Wetback)” in which the “INS showed up at the alien’s door, watched him pack and then put him on a plane for home.”<sup>16</sup>

At a time when broadcasters were gently reconfiguring the contours of the American comic sensibility, it is significant that racial and ethnic others had become the subject of intense national discussion and numerous meditations on securing America’s borders and on the meanings of courage and citizenship in narrative television. As described in Chapter 3, American media forged a sense of national unity in the wake of 9/11. Imagining this unity as vulnerable, and positing American identity as the product of careful discernment between categories of good/evil and us/them, was initially left to dramas. Assorted prime-time programs reassured the national audience that America remained a land of racial, ethnic, and religious tolerance, but were quick to envision this celebrated diversity within narrow boundaries and assert that “freedom isn’t free.” Cop shows and suspenseful legal or political programs such as *Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002–09), *24* (FOX, original run 2001–10), *The American Embassy* (FOX, 2002), and *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–2010) when mounting storylines stirred by the War on Terror dramatized the terrorist threat directly and looked for ways to reconcile heightened racial profiling as a national security measure with America’s self-image as a “melting pot.” This metaphor had lost some of its allure as a result of the direct articulation of terrorism to loose immigration policies by groups such as the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), who questioned the loyalty of Arabs and Muslims. In response, the Arab American Institute warned that “[t]he politics of terrorism have only reinforced decades of negative stereotypes,” and

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<sup>16</sup> “Porous Borders, Alien Amnesties Undermine Bush’s Terrorism Tough Talk,” *Washington Times*, May 29, 2002, “Letters,” A14, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 2, 2007).

demanded distinctions “between stereotypes and real threats.” Television fictions like *24* and the police procedurals attempted to rise to such challenges with narratives that questioned the CIS’s contention that “the terrorist threat comes almost exclusively from foreign-born individuals.”<sup>17</sup> However, such programs provided haunting images of Islamic extremism which, despite storylines ultimately bent on showing that racism clouds judgment, perhaps fanned the same fears of Islam that they worked to question or quell.

At the other extreme were representations that put distance between Arab ethnicity and signifiers of Islam. The hit comedy detective series *Monk*, premiering on the USA cable network in July 2002, for example, did not draw attention to the ethnicity of star Tony Shalhoub, a Lebanese-American, playing the shy and quirky genius Adrian Monk.<sup>18</sup> As one of television’s most prominent Arab-Americans, Shalhoub still shouldered much of the burden of representing his race in a favorable light and this comedy-drama was thus a timely intervention with its gentle counter-stereotyping amidst the dehumanizing depictions splashed across fictional and news media. The actor spoke out against Hollywood’s typecasting of the “evil” Arab and urged the entertainment industry to “unravel those images” and deracialize evil.<sup>19</sup> While *Monk* (throughout its eight seasons, 2002–09) downplays race, detective Monk’s outsider status—both as an eccentric, skittish chronic therapy patient (suffering from pathologies exacerbated by the trauma

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<sup>17</sup> Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF) executive director Helen Hatab Samhan, “Labels and Suspicion,” *Washington Times*, January 28, 2002, A15, LexisNexis Academic (accessed November 2, 2007); and Center for Immigration Studies, quoted in *ibid.* One favorite plot device, exemplified by *24*’s second season (2002–03) and the *Law & Order* episode “Fear America” (17.4, October 13, 2006), was the bait-and-switch of revealing white Americans to be terrorists in instances where investigation was focused on Middle Eastern immigrants.

<sup>18</sup> According to the 2000 Census and the Arab American Institute, Lebanese Americans constituted the largest Arab minority in the United States; <http://www.aausa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics> (accessed February 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Shalhoub was interviewed for the televised documentary *Casting Calls*, aired in May 2003 on the Discovery Times Channel, a program speculating that Hollywood bad-guy narratives perpetuate social discrimination with their reliance on racial and ethnic stereotypes. The documentary spotlights Shalhoub’s involvement with director Hesham Issawi’s award-winning short film *T for Terrorist* (2003), a dark comedy satirizing the stereotype of the “gun-wielding Middle Eastern fanatic.”



of his journalist wife's assassination by car bomb) and a reclusive genius—is the entire focus of the show's bittersweet humor, and a main story arc explores his painful struggle with marginality and exclusion as he is repeatedly barred from serving on the police force on the grounds that he is abnormal and cannot quite be trusted.

Over the following two seasons, fall 2002 and 2003, a small handful of network comedies carefully began to take up themes of xenophobia and courage to confront racial prejudice while working within the new logics of appropriate assimilation. While dramas were much more expressly concerned with finding and catching terrorists, issues of immigration and the political loyalties of newcomers were a key avenue for comedy aspiring to topicality. Here humor spoke powerfully to cultural ambivalences, as captured by a joke told by stand-up comic Richard Jeni at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in March 2002: “There are two things that get me jumpy. The disgraceful practice of racial profiling and Arabs on my aircraft.”<sup>20</sup> The “suspicious” Middle Easterner became the subject of jokes and storylines pointing out xenophobia's problematic fit with the national mythology of the melting pot, whether the latter is construed as a recipe for cultural hybridity or hegemonic assimilation. That second notion, which is sometimes celebrated in immigrant narratives about the American Dream and assertions of “progress” toward a post-racist society, is critiqued by cultural critics such as Gray as an erasure both of cultural heritage and of the persistence of structural racism.<sup>21</sup> Gradually prime-time series would introduce a handful of amiable Arab (or other Middle Eastern) characters to counteract negative images and

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Carolyn Kleiner, “What’s So Funny? It’s Business as Usual for Comedians After 9/11—Mostly,” *U.S. News & World Report* 132, no. 9 (March 25, 2002): 38, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> See H. Gray's “Politics of Representation” and his “Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 376–86. As a key example, Gray critiques *The Cosby Show* (in his “American Dream” article) as assimilationist programming that overlooks the barriers to upward mobility faced by social minorities, while also crediting the show (in “Politics of Representation,” 89) with commencing a shift “away from assimilationist and pluralist practices” and pointing the way toward a new multiculturalist paradigm.

stereotypes. With measured optimism, at the forefront of this effort, a select few comedy programs cautiously made room for the Arab “other” in the national family. Ethnic sitcoms in particular accepted responsibility for recoding the Middle Eastern immigrant as a non-threatening figure and a model employee/minority.<sup>22</sup> Disarming depictions such as *George Lopez*’s polite and mild-mannered Egyptian character “Hosni” and *Whoopi*’s more volatile but affable sidekick “Nasim”—an Iranian-born New Yorker who constantly has to correct Americans on the distinction between Persian and Arab ethnicity—are the most notable examples. These and other representations will be explored below with particular attention to the tone as well as content of comedies opening up a dialogue about ideologies of race and national identity.

With politicians and voters debating the desirability of and means to achieve a “more secure but open border,”<sup>23</sup> sitcoms were engaged in their own border crossings. Firstly, greater attention was being paid to representations of immigrants in comedy. In ethnic and multicultural shows, a main trope was to arouse minority sympathies for the Arab community by drawing parallels to the racial profiling and prejudice experienced by Blacks and Latinos.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the ethnicoms of the early 2000s staked out positions from which they could teach tolerance and simultaneously confer privilege on already American-identified and native-born ethnic minorities. That is, redrawing lines of difference through the placement of immigrants, from the Middle East or elsewhere, next to U.S. citizens of African, Latino, and Asian descent shored up the latter groups’ claims on essential values of ‘Americanness’ while articulating ways for

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<sup>22</sup> The term “recoding” borrowed from semiotics here refers to the process of conscientiously replacing one set of representations, the connotations of which are arguably “negative” or damaging to a certain social group, with more desirable images and associations. See Michael Real, “Structuralist Analysis 1: Bill Cosby and Recoding Ethnicity,” in *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1989), 106–31; and H. Gray, “Recodings: Possibilities and Limitations in Commercial Television Representations of African American Culture,” 117–30.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, “With an Eye on a More Secure but Open Border.”

<sup>24</sup> See also Lanita Jacobs-Huey, “‘The Arab Is the New Nigger’: African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11,” *Transforming Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006): 60–64.

newcomers to become more readily assimilated. Meanwhile, Black domestic sitcoms put forth a discourse of strong kinship bonds under patriarchal leadership that at times resonated with appeals to a unified national family, and were hailed as part of a revival of “family values” in American comedy. Comfortably upper-middle class sitcoms such as *The Bernie Mac Show* and *My Wife and Kids* regularly used irony to negotiate among ideologies of American individualism, cultural assimilation, and racial and national pride, with the Black comedian conferring on ironic masculinity greater degrees of respectability and responsibility than was the case with the superficial lad narcissism of *Seinfeld*, *Men Behaving Badly*, or *The Man Show*.

Secondly and more sweepingly, in terms of comedy’s own generic and tonal boundaries, this was a transitional moment during which writers no longer strived to maintain a clear barrier between earnest and ironic humor or between cynical and sincere modes of address. Instead, a variety of new sitcoms experimented with ways to bridge the two, using an authorial voice—or juxtaposition of voices ranging from glib to downright soulful—to allow for the *free flow back and forth* between irony and earnestness. The latter meant resorting to established “sincerity” formulas such as raising moral questions and delivering a “lesson” that would keep meanings relatively stable and accessible. As opposed to sitcoms in a “postmodern ironic” tradition that seek to deconstruct the genre and signpost the supposed flaws of sitcom convention, this moral lesson was not offered for purposes of pure parody but rather was a toned down version of the didacticism of traditional, more nakedly ideological sitcoms. However, American audiences were by this time acclimated to an ironic sensibility in mainstream comedy and thus newer network sitcoms were expected to maintain the transgressive chic and “openness” of irony and, perhaps most importantly, to keep humor “politically incorrect” within the tolerances of a temporarily more censor-friendly climate.

The new black, ethnic, and multiracial comedies were among the prototypes, and provided a main template for reaccenting irony and cynicism under the new sincerity. With the case studies in the sections that follow I offer extended examples including analysis of two programs that participated in this trend, highlighting shifts in the tone, address, and ideological content of broadcast sitcoms with particular attention to race and gender politics.<sup>25</sup> In network comedies emerging with the supposed “death of irony,” individual Black and Latino comics in particular became potential symbolic spokespersons for irony’s role in the “new sincerity,” as well as being willing advocates for irony’s continued use in general. Comedies starring non-white stand-ups, such as George Lopez, Bernie Mac, Damon Wayans, Cedric the Entertainer, Whoopi Goldberg, Tracy Morgan, Wanda Sykes, and on cable Dave Chappelle, were among those that most clearly evidenced the powerful pull of sincerity *and* the desire to hold onto the iconoclastic élan of irony.<sup>26</sup> Their shows had in common a powerful resistance to the notion that irony was a defunct cultural practice, and by refusing to pay heed to the “death of irony” discourse were instrumental in articulating irony to a parallel discourse of “keeping it real” that would afford the irony movement greater authenticity through continual appeals to truth, if not sincerity, a move that has remained integral to white laddism but takes on new meaning in the mouths of social minorities.

Before looking at the more radically multiculturalist, and shorter-lived, examples, which generated comparisons to social comedy in the tradition of Norman Lear’s *All in the Family*, our first two case studies belong to a cluster of more conventionally assimilationist and pluralist

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<sup>25</sup> Other exemplars of this broader trend, which soon began to dominate both “quality” and laddish programming, included NBC’s *Scrubs* and *My Name Is Earl* and FX’s *Rescue Me*, all discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>26</sup> Comedy Central’s leading stand-ups during this period included Dave Chappelle and Latin lad Carlos Mencia. *Mind of Mencia* star Carlos Mencia’s authenticity as both a true Latino (Mencia is a stage name) and a legitimate comic were being called into question in the press, in the latter instance through a feud with rival and white lad Joe Rogan, who accused Mencia of being a hack who steals his material from Lopez, among others.

domestic sitcoms introduced in 2001 and 2002, more apt to draw tentative comparisons to *The Cosby Show*, that steadily worked to punctuate their ironic humor with displays of heartfelt emotion.<sup>27</sup> In their early seasons these programs could be seen grappling with emerging attitudes and anxieties in the wake of the national tragedy and actively negotiating the acceptable limits for importing a bolder irony into the family-oriented sitcom.

### **Lad Dads and “The New Family Sitcom”**

From the comedy boom onwards, minority and women comics in the shadow of laddism have recognized irony’s politically subversive potential as a key component of minor discourse and feminine discourse. As the irony of laddism bolstered the backlash against feminism, multiculturalism, and political correctness, ethnic and female comics of the 1990s and beyond have been instrumental in politicizing and disrupting the exclusive uses of ironic humor as the conspiratorial language of disgruntled (white) masculinity in the lad tradition stretching from Kinison to Kimmel.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while assorted new lads and “Angry White Men” of comedy employed irony to dare to dabble in potentially racist or misogynist material, and many comics

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<sup>27</sup> As above, when using these terms I am drawing on H. Gray’s “Politics of Representation” for his theorization of the categories of assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalist representations or discourses. Similar to Gray’s assessment of *The Cosby Show* (p. 89), this first set of sitcoms I discuss in this chapter draws upon all three discursive practices but, owing to their normative focus on individualism and comfortable (upper) middle class privilege, are most strongly based in pluralism and (to a lesser degree than *The Cosby Show*) assimilation.

<sup>28</sup> For elaboration on “minor discourse” and its centrality in traditions of African-American stand-up comedy throughout the period under discussion, see Norma Schulman, “The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 22, no. 3 (autumn 1994): 108–15. I am again drawing on Schulman’s definition of minor discourse (introduced in Chapter 2) as “stylized communication that is perpetuated by an oppressed group (such as homosexuals, blacks, or Jews) to cement its own distinctive identity,” as well as her supposition that “It works in two directions: to allow minority groups to become insiders in an exchange of in-group, subcultural allusions; and, conversely, to exclude outsiders” (109). A variant of minor discourse, “feminine discourse” as I noted previously refers to “a way of talking and acting” whereby women (often in women’s genres) may “acknowledge their position of subordination within patriarchal society,” as defined by Mary Ellen Brown, *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, ed. Brown (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 204. Many women of comedy, such as Roseanne Barr (see Chapter 1), Sandra Bernhard, Judy Tenuta, Margaret Cho, and ‘female-female-impersonator’ Amy Sedaris, have engaged in forms of feminine discourse with an ironic edge.

of color and women participated in that movement, some non-white and female comics found irony at times to be an effective tool for talking back to that trend. The uses of irony to speak for dominance *and* from subordination that come together powerfully in the public personas of comedians like Jenny McCarthy and Sarah Silverman, the bullish babes of post-feminism who stood as honorary lads (or ladettes), were similarly expressed and held in balance or in tension through the figure of the minority “lad dad” explored in this section.

FOX’s *The Bernie Mac Show* and ABC’s *George Lopez* and *My Wife and Kids*, among other vehicles for male stand-up comics, actively resituated ironic masculinity within a family setting during the early 2000s. The humor in these shows was neither crushingly earnest nor witheringly cynical, but overwhelmingly favored sarcastic and cutting jokes while self-consciously avoiding syrupy “family-friendly” humor. All in development prior to 9/11, these sitcoms were poised to carry forward the hard-edged, masculinist ironic ethos, but quickly found themselves cited as signs of a softer irony under the “new sincerity.” Specifically, these shows were hailed as leaders in a trend toward a renewed focus on family on post-9/11 television. Whereas suburban family comedies had been critically regarded as “unhip” (even while they performed well in the ratings) in the 1990s as advertisers paid a premium for *Seinfeld* and *Friends* to court single urbanites, television critics now proclaimed that family comedies were back in vogue and possessed a new edge. For example, critic Diane Holloway in perusing the fall 2002 prime-time schedule pointed out that twelve of fourteen network sitcoms premiering that season were “family-centric,” but remarked that “the new family sitcoms are geared toward adult (some would say sophomoric) humor, even though kids are in the cast. In other words, double-entendres, gross-out jokes and crude language aren’t relegated to nonfamily sitcoms.” As her point of contrast, Holloway chose *The Cosby Show* (and *Father Knows Best*) along with 1990s hit *Home Improvement* as

exemplars of “the old days.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Eric Deggans of *The St. Petersburg Times* sensed that “the trend toward TV families” focused less on the wise patriarch than the patriarch’s wisecracks, writing, “Ward Cleaver move over; the Eddie Haskell’s have taken over the TV dial.”<sup>30</sup>

These “edgy” domestic sitcoms strived to be “not” *The Cosby Show* while working from a similar foundation of humor focusing on the shortcomings or errors in judgment of one or more family members each week, usually children but also unruly spouses and grandparents, and their need for familial correction. This “who’s stupid this week?” formula dates back to the earliest domestic comedies. Thus, while these “new” shows broke the *Cosby Show* mold with their aggressive comic sensibility and familial sparring, more closely resembling *The Honeymooners* or *Married... With Children* than *Father Knows Best* or *The Cosby Show*, they did not stray far from the latter’s familiar figure of the loveable, sometimes buffoonish father who may make mistakes but ultimately does know best. Rather, they upheld and updated domestic comedy’s constitutional celebration of patriarchy by applying a thick coat of laddish humor, giving sitcom dads bigger egos and greater license to “trash talk” and make politically incorrect jokes at the expense of their families.<sup>31</sup> These were the lad dads of sitcom—poker playing, insult trading,

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<sup>29</sup> Diane Holloway, “Family’ Shows Not Always Suitable for All in the Family,” Cox News Service, September 29, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012). In addition to *Bernie Mac* which is deemed “edgy” but “appropriate for the whole family,” Holloway cites CBS’s *Still Standing* and ABC’s “Happy Hour” lineup including *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter*, *According to Jim*, and *My Wife and Kids*.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Deggans, “Tightening the Family Ties,” *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), September 15, 2002, 1F, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, these new programs undeniably fit within Mark Crispin Miller’s definition of “neo-Dads,” the broad category into which he placed Bill Cosby’s Cliff Huxtable as a self-subverting TV dad (“at once the joker and a joke”) and that he argues by the 1980s entirely dominated U.S. sitcom as a formula for “self-mocking” irony, as I noted in the Interlude. In that school of criticism, what I am calling the “lad dads” can readily be seen as simply an extension of that decades-old trend perpetuating TV’s claim on hipness—leveraging a mythology of the stodgy and stern TV Dad Past (as in “Ward Cleaver move over...”) to assert cuddly and cool difference for those of the present. Certainly, many sitcoms infusing irony with renewed “sincerity” in the 2000s nicely illustrate Miller’s account of established sitcom strategies for following irony with “warm” and “sentimental outbursts” of melodrama such that, according to Miller, any “derision that precedes” a warm resolution is coded as “motivated by a lot of love” on the part of characters and writers and “the sitcom’s barbs and jeering are exempt from criticism.” (continued...)

ego- or libido-driven graduates of the 1990s new lad school of humor whose masculine bravado is on perpetual display and whose “soft” sons are subjected to merciless ridicule.

### *Domesticating the Lad*

The first season of *The Bernie Mac Show* in particular generated continuous critical buzz with its startlingly bold language and extreme interpretation of tough love. Mac plays “Uncle Bernie,” a celebrity comedian whose drug-addicted sister’s three children have come to live with him in his palatial Los Angeles home. The show’s premise establishes Mac as a magnanimous figure, the reluctant hero, in spite of his occasional conspicuously “bad” behavior. The first few episodes feature stories in which Mac delights white stay-at-home moms in his kids’ carpool with his unvarnished talk of throttling the children, and laments that he cannot dust off “Big Mama’s belt” to teach them some discipline.<sup>32</sup> Raising children “with an iron fist and a heart of gold,”<sup>33</sup> like his fellow lad dads George Lopez and Michael Kyle (Damon Wayans), Uncle Bernie is a proud protector when at his best, and at his worst a foolish and even ghoulish figure who takes perverse, sadistic pleasure in embarrassing the children. In the February 2002 episode “Handle

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See Miller’s “Deride and Conquer,” in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 204–11, 214–18. Yet, despite clear continuities with this larger pattern so condemned by critics of TV irony in general, my focus here instead is on the utility of “politically incorrect” and laddish strains of humor, combined with minority inflections of irony, as tools for specific televisual recodings and discursive repositioning of TV Dads as loveable sitcom ironists. With neo-Dads of 1980s and 1990s family shows now themselves designated as relics of “the old days,” stakes were raised for practitioners of a “new” sincerity still affixed to irony. Meanwhile, just as the New Lad was a reaction against the sensitive New Man reformed by feminism, Mac and other New Black Lads of comedy in the 1990s and 2000s continued to push back against the politely progressive media archetype that Herman Gray termed the “New Black Man” from 1980s U.S. sitcoms. See Herman Gray, “Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy,” *Media, Culture and Society* 8 (1986): 223–42.

<sup>32</sup> *The Bernie Mac Show*, “Bernie Mac, Ladies Man” and “Saving Bernie Mac,” episodes 1.4 and 1.5 (production nos. MAC-108 and MAC-104), written by Kriss Turner, first aired November 28 and December 5, 2001, on FOX. Uncle Bernie does not let up in the second season, saying, “Look, America, it’s not me that wants to hit them kids. It’s the belt. It’s been locked up for thirty years. It’s hungry, America, hungry. And you know what it’s hungry for.” “Welcome to the Jungle,” episode 2.5 (MAC-210), first aired November 13, 2002, on FOX.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Gilbert, “Looking for a Laugh?” *Boston Globe*, April 18, 2004, 3d ed., N9, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012).



Your Business,” Bernie humiliates his entire family on talk radio when he makes fun of his gawky nephew (“the boy is soft”) and fantasizes on-air about bringing Halle Berry to his wife’s funeral, and later to make amends he must bare his heart and assure the children that he does actually care for them.<sup>34</sup> “I went on the radio with great intentions. I went on the radio to make people laugh, ‘cuz that’s what I do, I’m a comedian. The last thing I want to do is hurt the people I love the most, but y’all gotta let me *be me*...,” Bernie pleads, adding, “No matter what the outcome is, I love you guys, *despite* what I might say.” In stride with the new laddism, Mac delighted in the comedian’s prerogative to joke offensively without causing real offense and freedom to shock without “meaning” what he says, while at other moments appealing to a sense of bold honesty in irony.

Critics for the most part welcomed the compromise being struck between “edgy humor” and embedded “touching moments” and dwelled on the “frankness” of these funny men, finding them refreshing and relatable.<sup>35</sup> *The Austin Chronicle*’s Belinda Acosta described Bernie’s parenting struggles as “honestly sweet, yet sharply funny,” saying, “Bernie Mac may bark, but he doesn’t bite.”<sup>36</sup> Caryn James in *The New York Times* contended that “George’s [Lopez] and Bernie’s tough talk makes them funny and their soft-hearted emotions make them lovable, but it’s their distance from familiar white-bread father figures that makes them most real.” James was not alone in complaining that *Lopez* and *Mac* “rely too much on old, learn-a-lesson-at-the-end

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<sup>34</sup> *The Bernie Mac Show*, “Handle Your Business,” episode 1.13 (production no. MAC-112), written by Warren Hutcherson and directed by Robert Berlinger, first aired February 13, 2002, on FOX.

<sup>35</sup> Fairly typical of positive press surrounding the show, the descriptors quoted here are from Jenelle Riley, “Bernie Mac Has a Hit TV Show and a Thriving Film Career. Who Needs Hollywood?” BPI Entertainment News Wire, August 20, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Belinda Acosta, “TV Top 10s,” *Austin Chronicle*, January 4, 2002, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2002-01-04/84295/> (accessed January 15, 2012).

conventions,” but she preferred to praise them along with “reality-sitcom” *The Osbournes* (MTV, 2002–05) for finally dispensing with “the sappy, stilted dialogue of regulation sitcom parents.”<sup>37</sup>

Cultural conservatives celebrated the new sitcoms as sincere and better than the “old” irony. As family shows they lacked some of the sexually racy humor of *Friends*, *Frasier*, and *Will & Grace*.<sup>38</sup> While they did include running jokes about dark topics like grandparental alcoholism or “swinging the belt,” these texts featuring patriotic patriarchs as strong central characters yielded more readily to culturally conservative readings that were predisposed either to dismiss or deemphasize the ironic voices in the text. Some conservative commentators welcomed the “tough talking” Mac and Lopez and found them to be exemplary of the “new sincerity,” commending the shows’ emphasis on personal character and family togetherness. Such a reading stressed their similarities to *The Cosby Show* while downplaying and forgiving the differences. Cliff Huxtable’s even-tempered chiding of his children and rare angry outbursts (“I brought you into this world, I’ll take you out!”) had been innocent, charming, and remarkably tame compared to Benita Lopez’s (Belita Moreno) drunken contempt for her son George or Bernie Mac’s gleeful and graphic threats to “kill those kids.” However, *The Bernie Mac Show* gradually dialed down the references to child abuse/discipline that worried some critics and delighted others and by its third season was more focused on revealing Bernie’s soft side. In spite of their deliberate edginess, both *The Bernie Mac Show* and *George Lopez* were picked by The Parents Television Council as the outstanding examples from 2002 of “strong family values” on television,

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<sup>37</sup> Caryn James, “Finally, Families That Look and Act Like Us,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2002, A32.

<sup>38</sup> See Nancy San Martín, “‘Must See TV’: Programming Identity on NBC Thursdays,” in *Popular Quality Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*, ed. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 32–47. San Martín argues that NBC’s “must see” sitcoms *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Frasier*, and *Will & Grace* suggested a promiscuous embrace of alternative sexualities, which was, however, by evening’s end policed and disciplined by the dramatic narratives of *ER* that followed. By positing an ideological push-and-pull across a sequence of programs, she approaches this three-hour weekly block as what Newcomb and Hirsch would call a “viewing strip” or what television studies conceives of as “flow” (see their “Television as a Cultural Forum”).

alongside *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven*. This conservative pressure group endorsed the sitcoms for combining a “positive” image of minority families with “important lessons imparted in each episode” and excused them for being “occasionally marred by mild profanities.”<sup>39</sup>



Figures 4.1a–b. Bernie Mac entertains carpool moms (and television critics) with his graphic descriptions of parental violence and his oft-quoted desire to “bust they head till the white meat shows!” *Neighbors* and the children are among Mac’s surrogate audiences standing in for the invisible broadcast audience “America.” “Bernie Mac, Ladies Man,” *The Bernie Mac Show*, originally aired November 28, 2001, on FOX.



Figures 4.2a–b. Uncle Bernie assures the children that his radio routine ridiculing their family was just entertainment. “Handle Your Business,” *The Bernie Mac Show*, originally aired February 13, 2002, on FOX.

<sup>39</sup> Parents Television Council, “The PTC Presents The 2001–2002 Top 10 Best and Worst Shows on Network TV,” <https://www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/top10bestandworst/2002/top10best.asp> (accessed spring 2005). The other sitcoms that made the list were the WB’s *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (“reminiscent of...*Mary Poppins*”) and new arrivals *Baby Bob* on CBS (about a talking infant) and *Reba* on the WB (starring country singer Reba McEntire as the feisty head of “an all-American dysfunctional family”).

The humor of these programs manages to be as socially transgressive as it is conciliatory, with their plentiful moments of laddish irony that break with polite family sitcom etiquette. In scene after scene, the comedian talks smack about and talks back to the family he loves with remarks that push the boundaries of acceptable speech to the limits. This smarting off was not regularly directed at authority figures but usually saved for “my wife and kids,” the harmless chest-beating of a man, exasperated by uncooperative children, performing displays of dominance on his home turf. But the Macs, Lopezes, and Kyles were not the latest iteration of The Bundys, despite their bickering, name-calling, and insult humor. Firstly, these shows constructed masculine power and the breadwinner role with considerably less irony; George’s “vato power” or Bernie Mac’s status as “the lead dog” was not a travesty of patriarchal authority in the same way as Al Bundy’s need to be reassured by Peg, “You’re the king, Baby!” The stakes for representing the comedian/character as a proud, if not always dignified, Black or Latin man placed limits on depictions of paternal buffoonery, and these sitcom dads’ capacity to double as dysfunctional yet “positive” examples helped to steer the humor away from generalized mockery of non-white masculinities.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, these hard working men were everyday heroes, part of a trend to situate the lad within the established discourse of heroic masculinity and the current tropes of heroism in normalcy (without it “the terrorists have won”) circulating in American media.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> While *Married... With Children* (alongside *The Simpsons*) clearly demonstrated a market for “dysfunctional family” sitcoms, such cartoonish humor degrading the father figure as a lazy and devious comic-grotesque buffoon would have generated heavy criticism as minstrelsy if this had been a black sitcom, as Clarence Lusane argued in “Assessing the Disconnect between Black & White Television Audiences: The Race, Class and Gender Politics of *Married... With Children*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 1 (1990): 12–20. According to Lusane, as Chapter 1 noted, the remarkable popularity of “white trash” sitcom *Married... With Children* with black audiences can be attributed in part to the show’s embrace of insult humor, a staple of African-American comedy and familiar territory for executive producer Michael Moye (whose earlier writer credits included *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times*).

<sup>41</sup> The sentiment quoted to the point of cliché, “If we give in to fear, if we aren’t able to do these simple and ordinary things, the terrorists have won the war,” is credited to an open letter by Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president Frank Pierson on October 15, 2001, defending his choice not to let the war on terrorism prevent the 74th Academy Awards. Quoted in “Oscars ‘Will Not Be Beaten by Terror,’” *BBC News*, October 17, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1603303.stm> (accessed April 30, 2014).

Their love and loyalty was never cast into doubt, and these lad dads were not afraid to grow emotionally, speak with conviction, or be role models for their children. On *George Lopez* the wisecracks are not just his but a never-ending duet between George and his spiteful mother, “Benny” (short for Benita), a boozing, gambling single mom whose long list of vices make her the “laddest” of them all. With the negligent barfly or drug-addicted “bad mother” as their chief point of reference, George and Bernie even at their most stubborn are easily redeemed within the story worlds as model parents.

Race is central to these programs’ ability to weave back and forth between irony and sincerity, as they exploit notions of racial authenticity (and “keeping it real”) combined with strong visions of patriarchy, where in the tradition of lad humor male privilege is grandfathered in under irony’s “get-out clause.”<sup>42</sup> That is, like earlier lad shows, these texts manage to “have it both ways.” The move to assimilate or make-over the self-absorbed lad in the image of the family man comes with frequent re-assertions of that laddishness as the mark of successful assimilation into American or Black/Latino culture or both. The strong central characters’ liminal status as lads and dads allows them to oscillate between “prankish, spiky humour”<sup>43</sup> and firm authoritative speech, while their clout as prominent minority comics enables them to exploit ironic ambiguity to teasingly walk the thin line between celebratory and satirical use of the stereotypes of regressive African-American or Mexican-American masculinity. Both the irony and the sincerity in these shows depends upon the strong authorial presence/voice of the comedian.

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<sup>42</sup> This term, introduced in Chapter 2, I borrow from Brett Mills, “Sitcom Behaving Badly: Television Humour in Transatlantic Transplants” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Humor Studies, Oklahoma City, Okla., July 1997).

<sup>43</sup> John Doyle, “Jingo Factor Boosted to Code Red on American TV,” *Globe and Mail* (Canada), September 18, 2002, R2, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012), describing *The Bernie Mac Show*, alongside competitor *My Wife and Kids*.

“America, We’re Family”

Of these series *The Bernie Mac Show* achieves the strongest moments of authorial voice, through the device of the comedian breaking the “fourth wall” to speak intimately with the viewing audience at home, whom he congenially addresses as “America.”<sup>44</sup> Mac’s comic monologues, his sidebars speaking directly to camera, serve as a clever means of embedding stand-up comedy bits within the narrative conceit of the sitcom. At key intervals in each episode, Mac’s character slips away to his den (the equivalent of the “man cave” in the popular parlance of the day) for private, one-on-one time with “America,” to whom he confides his pet peeves or defends his blustering, stubborn behavior, but ultimately imparts a lesson that he has learned about parenting in the course of the week’s episode. With his “tough talk” and take-no-prisoners attitude combined with his warm national address consistently and affectionately invoking America, Bernie Mac’s loosely autobiographical show about a stand-up guy/comic was an instant critical favorite and well suited to the atmosphere of patriotic pride and unity when it premiered in November 2001.

While Mac’s monologues posit a rapport with the national family and imaginatively unify the viewing audience, *The Bernie Mac Show* also acquires a kind of “bimodal appeal” as crossover comedy designed to attract both non-white and white audiences, adapting Mac’s potentially controversial stage routine for the world of network sitcom.<sup>45</sup> Mac’s reputation was

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<sup>44</sup> Breaking the “fourth wall,” mentioned briefly in Chapters 1 and 2 as a feature of anti-sitcoms and once considered a rupture of realism, now became increasingly a signifier of realism within postmodern quality comedy. Notably, characters directly addressing the camera in contemporary one-camera comedies has become a gesture toward evolving and elevating the sitcom form, a marker of genre innovation often without claims to being a radical breach or formal critique per se, but rather with claims to whimsical postmodern license (e.g., NBC’s *Scrubs*) and/or stylistic sophistication and narrative complexity (e.g., *Bernie Mac*, as well as ABC’s *Modern Family* and NBC’s *The Office*, both of which by virtue of their documentary conceit arguably do not constitute a formal breaking of the fourth wall in the traditional usage of this term).

<sup>45</sup> The quoted phrase is from Schulman’s cogent analysis of FOX’s early 1990s sketch comedy *In Living Color*, which featured a multiracial cast and regularly satirized racial stereotypes. She argues that a degree of tactical polysemy or “ambiguity” with regards to satirical intent is what gives that show “a bimodal appeal—a quality deemed all-important in a commercial medium for whom the aggregate minority viewing audience is insufficient in itself to garner the kinds of ratings that yield substantial revenue.” Norma Miriam Schulman, “Laughing Across the Color Barrier: *In Living Color*,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 20, no. 1 (spring 1992): 2.

built on saying the unsayable, sharing his uncensored thoughts about family, child-rearing, and sex, among other delicate subjects—treading and sometimes crossing the lines of polite discourse. The year before FOX picked up *The Bernie Mac Show*, Mac complained/boasted between sets in Spike Lee's concert film *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000) that he was one black comic who would never get his own sitcom because his act was too daring and threatening for timid executives of network television. This is significant when considering *The Bernie Mac Show* as crossover comedy catering both to Mac's established fan base and a more mainstream network audience. As a stand-up star Mac was revered for "profane" material that "trampled over P.C. niceties," in the words of *New York Times Magazine's* Chris Norris, who adduces that Mac's ability to translate that boldness less the obscenity is what made his "one of the first black sitcoms since 'The Cosby Show' to develop truly mainstream appeal."<sup>46</sup>

Given that his armchair monologues and indeed the sitcom's story premise strategically call attention back to his status as a successful stand-up comedian, Mac's hailing of his audience as "America" is in itself a calculated negotiation between the conventions of African-American stand-up culture and the imperatives of the commercial sitcom. In keeping with the latter, these segments can be read as a sincere gesture giving white mainstream America direct access to Mac's comedic persona. At the same time, his sitcom direct address potentially invites non-white viewers and fans of his stage act to read an added dimension of irony and reflexivity into his performance, particularly this abidingly polite and even deferential weekly greeting of a singular national audience. As television scholar Norma Schulman argues, African-American comedy showcases since the 1990s such as BET's *Comicview* and HBO's *Def Comedy Jam* (which boasts Mac as one of its All-Stars) have consistently relied upon coded communication—with

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Norris, "Bernie Mac Smacks a Nerve," *New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 2002, 30–33; see 32.

irony, language play, and “politically incorrect” humor—to create in-group identification for black or non-white audiences and rebel against “polite (read ‘white’) society.” Typical greetings spoken by comics in predominantly African-American clubs work to exclude or marginalize white audience members (e.g., “What’s up, black people?”) in an inversion of the dominant culture’s practices privileging the white gaze. Outside such venues, minority comics frequently must navigate between subcultural discourse and the accepted, official discourse of the majority:

As one television comic succinctly put it, black folk “have to be bilingual in America.” That is, they communicate one way when left to their own devices, and another when the white establishment insists on being part of the conversation.<sup>47</sup>

Serving as a point of intersection for the competing comic modes of black stand-up and crossover sitcom, *The Bernie Mac Show* arguably does adapt and play upon this “bilingual” quality. Mac’s explicit broadening of his implied audience, through the repeated use of direct address hailing viewers as America/Americans rather than raced subjects, manages to invite “the white establishment” into “the conversation” and silence the dynamics of societal racism that inform black stand-up comedy, yet this unifying rhetoric may continue to function as minor discourse to the extent that Black America is privy to the contexts and subtexts of black comedy culture.

The device of the open-hearted central character serving as narrator was emerging as a trend for creatively offbeat early 2000s sitcoms, such as FOX’s leading lad show *Titus* (2000–02), which was blocked with *Bernie Mac* on the same night, and *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–06) and NBC’s *Scrubs* (2001–08).<sup>48</sup> While Mac’s direct address itself can be read as ironic—that is,

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<sup>47</sup> Schulman, “House That Black Built,” 111–13. African-American stand-up comedy has its own codes of irony deployed in the service of anti-PC humor, as Chapter 2 noted, functioning as minor discourse, or a strategic form of communication used by an oppressed social minority to express an “oppositional consciousness” (110). Schulman writes, “African American stand-up routines on television assert, emphasize, and embellish upon contrasts between blacks and whites in what can be called a comedy of political incorrectness” (109). These are also heavily masculinized spaces marked by often “sexist” strains of humor (113), a factor that further adds to their capacity to be absorbed within laddist discourse.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 6 explores sitcom narrators’ role in the new sincerity and looks at contingent constructions of a sensitive interiority for television’s lads in the 2000s.



the conceit that he is giving white America a backstage pass, as well as the playful parallels between his monologues and the confession booth (see figs. 4.3a–b)—the ironic dimensions (both subversive and “insensitive”) of his performance are contained by periodic displays of seemingly authentic emotion. One reviewer for *The Boston Globe* stated that the most compelling reason to watch was “because Bernie’s direct pleas to America are so persuasive,” citing this show’s and fellow new arrival *Scrubs*’s similar ability to “move you to laugh, or just move you” as proof that “irony isn’t dead” but has, perhaps, grown a little.<sup>49</sup>



Figures 4.3a–b. Outside the Catholic confessional where nephew Jordan (Jeremy Suarez) is hiding out after Bernie Mac’s radio routine makes the “soft” boy a target of teasing by his peers, the star pauses for a sidebar with “America” to explain his predicament and resolves to make things right. “Handle Your Business,” *The Bernie Mac Show*, originally aired February 13, 2002, on FOX.

Breaking the fourth wall on several of these shows thus becomes a device in the service of irony that, at strategic moments, nonetheless promises to pierce the veil of irony itself. For example, *Bernie Mac*’s March 2002 episode “Lock Down” paused dramatically to reflect on fears of home ‘invasion’ haunting the national family in the months after 9/11. Early in the episode, Bernie grows paranoid after his house is burglarized and takes extreme measures to protect his family from intruders, installing a high-tech security system and insisting that the family must stay together at all times. The home security storyline served as an allegory for working through

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert, “Looking for a Laugh?”

American anxiety about national security, a linkage explicitly revealed by the episode's conclusion. In a tensely emotional scene as his family gathers around the TV set to watch a news story about a gas explosion that devastated a nearby home, Bernie finally conquers his fear and shares this insight with his public:

You know something, America? You try to protect your family the best you can, but in the end there's not really much you can do. Because, see, gas pipes burst, people rob houses. Planes fly into buildings. So what you gonna do? You gonna live in fear? You've got to live your life. Have fun, be yourself, make mistakes. See, Bernie Mac may have overreacted, but one thing he did get right is it's important to be together. See, I told you once before, America, we're family. You and I. We *are* family. Always and forever. Y'all take care.<sup>50</sup>

*The Bernie Mac Show* throughout its run was manifestly invested in cultural assimilation, not only the work of fitting three kids from inner-city Chicago into suburban Southern California life but also that of assimilating Mac, one of the "Original Kings of Comedy," into parental domesticity. The ideal of a family that sticks together remained a structuring ideology for the series, though the direct and metaphorical invocation of a fortress America in "Lock Down" was the exception rather than the rule for *Bernie Mac*. In contrast, *George Lopez*'s premise and setting in a Southern California defense plant made it a more apt vehicle for periodic forays into topical issues of border security as well as assimilationist ethnic and immigrant narratives.

*"What Kind of Example Am I?"*

*George Lopez* began as a fairly straightforward celebration of the American Dream laced with cynical humor when it premiered in March 2002, dropped into the ABC lineup at the height of the national focus on border security. Like its contemporaries *The Bernie Mac Show* and *My Wife and Kids*, *George Lopez* was being described as *The Cosby Show* with a sarcastic twist,

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<sup>50</sup> *The Bernie Mac Show*, "Lock Down," episode 1.15 (production no. MAC-116), written by Teri Schaffer and directed by David Grossman, first aired March 6, 2002, on FOX.

stripped of its innocence and sentimentality. Eponymous protagonist George is a proud, hard-working Mexican-American family man who enjoys “the good life” in between fending off constant intrusions by his extended family, consisting of George’s bitter mother Benita, the “illegal” father who abandoned them, and meddlesome Cuban exile in-laws. The show regularly mined questions of national identity and immigration as a key source of both humor and character conflict, creating a structured polysemy that leavens an essentially assimilationist narrative with measured gestures to cultural diversity. Gendered humor is equally central to the show, which exploited the comic potential of contrasting but also merging Latin machismo with red-blooded American masculinity as embodied by the title character. The assimilationist fantasy of race and class rise underpinning the series, with its idyllic white-picket-fenced suburban setting and strong themes of patriarchal privilege, was held in check by well-placed moments of biting irony. That irony in turn was frequently eclipsed by scenes of characters showing compassion and acting on principle.

In the episode “Profiles in Courage,” aired in spring 2003 just over a week before the United States invaded Iraq, the show contemplated anti-Arab prejudice. The particular conjuncture of Mexican-American and Middle Eastern immigrant experiences of discrimination as well as freedoms explored in the episode is a noteworthy instance of the sitcom’s willingness to tone down irony (including ironic ambiguity and “glibness”) and offer a sincere meditation on the nature of American citizenship and the limits of idealism. In his job as plant manager at Powers Brothers Aviation, George is asked by his bosses to demote his head quality control inspector, Hosni (Jason Antoon), an Egyptian whose pilot training could cost the company an important military contract if he fails a government background check. The depiction of an American melting pot is hopeful but not without cynicism, and the episode wryly envisions racial harmony

in obviously contingent and fragile terms with George joking, “It’s a great day in America when white people, black people, and Latinos can all come together and pick on another minority.”<sup>51</sup> The show mildly imagines Mexican-American and Arab(-American) solidarity as George articulates his own experiences of racial profiling to build sympathy for Hosni. When mother Benita displays no empathy (insisting coldly, “He’s an Arab. He’s gotta go!”), George confronts her hypocrisy with the retort, “How many times in your life have you had people judge you because of your background?” He takes this opportunity to teach his teenage daughter a lesson in tolerance, as well: “Carmen, you can’t judge people by the way they look. You know, it happens to me all the time. When I go shopping, security follows me. When I cut my grass, people want to know how much I charge.” The Hosni story was a departure from the program’s typically caustic family humor and bore the markers of the “very special episode,” a vestige of eighties earnest sitcoms.

Rather than defending immigrants’ rights to distinct ethnic, or especially religious, identities, this story goes to great lengths to conform Hosni to American norms. Viewers are assured that, to borrow Pat Buchanan’s rhetoric, culturally and politically he “belong[s]... to the United States.” The dialogue takes pains to disarticulate Hosni from Islam and imbue him with “Americanness” as signified by such shared national pastimes as bidding competitively for SuperBalls on eBay and enjoying reality television. In the episode’s first scene, George invites Hosni to dinner at his home:

George: Hey Hosni, what are you doing Friday night?

Hosni: Is this about overtime? Because I can’t do it on Fridays.

George: Oh, something religious?

Hosni: No, I like to watch *America’s Funniest Home Videos*.  
But, I do it religiously.

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<sup>51</sup> George Lopez, “Profiles in Courage,” episode 2.18 (production no. 175409), written by George Lopez and directed by Andrew Tsao, first aired March 12, 2003, on ABC.

Hosni's own jokes making fun of Islamic religious and cultural practices (e.g., "How many of my wives can I bring?") mark him as properly assimilated and raise western Orientalist fears in order to simultaneously indulge and contingently contain them.<sup>52</sup> The first step in this containment is the invocation of moral binaries. When George's son Max (Luis Armand Garcia) asks, "Why do you hate us?" Hosni explains, "I don't hate you. Like anywhere else, where I come from there are good people and there are bad people." This statement has particular salience viewed against a political backdrop that saw a resurgence of the language of good and evil in American political life ("axis of evil" and "evildoers"). Max, who accepts this explanation with a child's innocence, soon afterward puts principled protagonist George on the spot. "Dad, if Hosni's a good guy and you do this [demote him], doesn't that make you one of the bad guys?" "No," his father resolutely replies, "because I'm going to tell the Powers Brothers I can't do this to Hosni!"

However, George ultimately capitulates to his bosses' argument that saving one employee's dignity is not worth losing business and costing twenty other employees their jobs. What began as a narrative about welcoming Hosni into the American family, with George inviting the guest into his own home, ends up being about betraying that promise of welcome. The wise choice for George turns out to be the one that serves his business and his government as well. At the level of subtext, the economic security of the factory stands in for the security of the nation, with the program delivering a rather explicit message that it is necessary to discriminate against the few for good of the many. The episode's title alluding to John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* is at least superficially meant as irony, with no one here modeling "that most admirable of human virtues,"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A term popularized by cultural scholar Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), Orientalist images perpetuate Western stereotypes "seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous," as examined by the Arab American National Museum's public relations website "Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes," 2011, <http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism> (accessed fall 2013).

<sup>53</sup> John F. Kennedy Jr., *Profiles in Courage* (n.p.: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 1.

yet by the episode's end George *is* depicted as noble (and not a coward or “bad guy”) by virtue of both his wrestling with weighty questions of fairness and ultimately his conscientious acceptance of the blatant exercise of power demanded of him in his position as plant manager. As the boss, we are told, George has a duty to think of the workplace family and by extension the national family. He must learn that it is possible to be one of the “good guys” while discriminating against another on the basis of race. His loyal wife, Angie (Constance Marie), lends words of reassurance that reinforce the text's sympathetic view of his difficult decision.

George: I don't know what to do. What kind of *example* am I for my kids if I can't stand up for what I believe in?

Angie: Well, what kind of manager would you be if you let twenty people get fired to save one?

George: I can either do the practical thing or the right thing. I can't do both. I hate being manager. I hate having this kind of responsibility, it's killing me.

Angie: That's why you're exactly the kind of guy who *should* be manager. You suffer like this because you actually give a damn about people.

The show credits its star with maintaining the moral high ground, first as he demonstrates the courage to question authority and the compassion to resist racial profiling, and then as he displays the wisdom/willingness to set aside his personal reservations and do “the practical thing” to benefit the factory.<sup>54</sup>

At the conclusion of the episode, when George gives Hosni the bad news that he is being reassigned to a job doing menial paperwork, his pragmatic decision to act in the greater good is visually reinforced by a wall sign centered in the shot that reads “Think Safety,” reminding plant

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<sup>54</sup> This parallels a pattern in dramas likewise aimed at socially liberal audiences, as analyzed by Evelyn Alsultany in “The Prime-Time Plight of the Arab Muslim American after 9/11: Configurations of Race and Nation in TV Dramas,” in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 204–28. Interrogating themes of “ambivalent racism” and “momentary multiculturalism” in such series as ABC's *The Practice*, Alsultany detects that “discourses of the nation in crisis not only trump the Arab American plight but also inadvertently support U.S. government initiatives in the ‘war on terror’” while positioning viewers as virtual participants in “a racial project to redefine... the position of Arabs and Muslims vis-à-vis the U.S. nation” (207–8).

workers that safety “is everyone’s job” (fig. 4.4). Hosni, by taking one for the team, earns his stars and stripes and his right to be called an American in the making. With dignity and without protest, he accepts his “degrading” fate and thanks his boss for being honest and delivering the bad news as “a friend.” Notions of friendship, honesty, and square dealing thus serve to frame and ameliorate what is nakedly an act of oppression, with the episode participating in the larger media trend of justifying and rationalizing discriminatory practices in the interest of group security.



Figure 4.4.  
Thinking of the safety of his other employees, manager George Lopez reluctantly demotes an Arab machinist (Jason Antoon) whose pilot training raises a red flag for the Powers Brothers. “Profiles in Courage,” *George Lopez*, originally aired March 12, 2003, on ABC.



Figure 4.5.  
Uncle Bernie urges America to “be together” and not live in fear. “Lock Down,” *The Bernie Mac Show*, originally aired March 6, 2002, on FOX.

This storyline also offers a rather literal example of the American sitcom’s persistent symbolic investment in rehearsing and validating, as humor historian Gerard Jones has argued, the principles of corporate culture and “bureaucratic democracy.” Jones, who deems this genre “the Miracle Play of consumer society,” contends:

The ideals upheld by the sitcom are the ideals on which modern bureaucratic business and government are founded: The consensual solution is the best solution; ideology and self-interest only stand in the way of mutual benefit; the boss is the boss because he is more experienced at operating the systems of social life; the boss's wisdom must be respected, but only when he is responsive to the needs of his charges; ... there is no real conflict between our various interests; we all benefit by compromising, not by standing on principle.... The promises of bureaucratic democracy, managerial capitalism, secular humanism, and mass consumption are miniaturized, tested, and found true in the funny travails of TV families.<sup>55</sup>

While Jones is theorizing traditional domestic sitcoms, with *The Cosby Show* as his leading example, and positing the gently commanding TV dad as the metaphorical “manager” of the family unit, we are shown George Lopez as the wisecracking but benevolent “boss” both at home and at work. The workplace narrative and concluding “message” in the Hosni episode recapitulate precisely this ideology of managerial capitalism, emphasizing a need for consensus-driven solutions and compromise (for both George and his “charges”) over personal convictions.

As apt as Jones's description of sitcom as an ideological apparatus may seem, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch's alternative theorization calling for specific consideration of television's fictions (alongside nonfiction programs) as constant participants in the “cultural forum” powerfully illuminates the layered cultural work performed by this text. In this view, meaning lies not in the dramatic structure and tidy resolutions whereby episodic television “reproduces dominant ideology,” but rather in the messier cultural “conversations” that take place along the way—both in the midst of conflict and disruption of the status quo in any given program and intertextually across series and genres—ritualizing, dramatizing, and participating in the processes that shape “public thought.” For Newcomb and Hirsch, in television texts “the raising of questions is as important as the answering of them.” Their thesis holds “that television

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<sup>55</sup> Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 4.



does not present firm ideological conclusions—despite its *formal* conclusions—so much as it *comments on* ideological problems [emphasis in original].”<sup>56</sup> Viewed through the lens of this cultural forum model, *George Lopez* is as notable for its posing of open-ended questions that the show cannot resolve in the space of thirty minutes, about racial prejudice and profiling, the War on Terror, duties to nation, and personal principles, among others—as well as leveraging irreverent irony at key moments to further keep options “open”—as it is hegemonic with its convenient embrace of the prevailing cultural politics at the episode’s conclusion. Nevertheless, in this instance, the program’s contributions to the surrounding “public” discussion on race and nation taking place in post-9/11 American popular culture and politics stay resolutely within the comfort zone of established liberal pluralist ideology which, as critical race theorist and sitcom historian Darrell Hamamoto argues, rarely challenges the “mechanisms of social repression and domination” even while pursuing democratic ideals of equality and freedom.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Newcomb and Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 460–61. A crucial intervention in television studies during the 1980s, their cultural forum model acknowledges the tendency toward ideological closure in episodic narrative television but is expressly less concerned with the repressive dimensions of fictional programming—including “‘dominant’ messages embedded in the pleasant disguise of fictional entertainment” and the ways in which resistance is neatly “contained” by the conclusion of individual programs—than with television’s intertextuality and “rhetoric of discussion” (456).

Like *Father Knows Best*, which Newcomb and Hirsch argue demonstrated a degree of ideological openness primarily by using family disagreements as a springboard for discussions of contentious topics, such as women in the workplace, these contemporary domestic comedies can also be read as raising different viewpoints to comment on current gender ideologies as a source of domestic tension (e.g., working moms or stay-at-home dads), but often doing so ritualistically in order to somewhat contain them under patriarchal authority. For example, on *My Wife and Kids* portrayals of housewife Janet’s desire for a career outside the home code her as an irrational, hysterical female in episodes such as “Working Relationship” (2.22, production no. W734), first aired March 20, 2002, on ABC.

<sup>57</sup> Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989), x, 4. Newcomb and Hirsch in “Television as a Cultural Forum,” as well, concede that the scope of television’s cultural conversation “works for the most part within the limits of American monopoly-capitalism and within the range of American pluralism” (461), a position elaborated in Hamamoto’s history of sitcom in *Nervous Laughter*. For Hamamoto, even the “ethnicoms” of the 1970s which favorably depict the black underclass and which television historians uphold as a pinnacle of social relevance and race/class critique in comedy—including Norman Lear’s “ghetto” social comedies *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* as well as *All in the Family*—likewise “retained the liberal world view undergirding capitalist relations of production and society. The basic assumptions of capitalist society—competitive individualism, materialism, the sanctity of private property, profit taking, and the primacy of the market—remained consistent throughout” (104).

Given that *George Lopez* as a series regularly reflected on issues of Latino immigration with pretensions to being a relatively diverse and open cultural forum, this episode stands out for its unmistakably rhetorical and didactic address, rehearsing the dominant perspectives on what it means to be a proper, security-conscious American who is a team player. Placing “Profiles in Courage” in its social context of rampant fears about terrorism and immigration, it is not only Hosni’s loyalties and commitment to assimilation (or in Buchanan’s parlance, “becoming an American”) that are being questioned and then affirmed, but also those of George and his family, a fact that did not escape the show’s writers who further built up George’s identity as a devoted citizen in subsequent episodes.

In the 2003 two-part third season opener “Dubya, Dad and Dating,” President George W. Bush (played by Brent Mendenhall) visits Lopez’s factory while campaigning for more defense spending.<sup>58</sup> As a Latino man from a humble past, George is excited and honored to “meet the leader of the free world.” The only thing standing between him and enjoying this privilege is his wannabe-peacenik teenage daughter, Carmen (Masiela Lusha), going through a rebellious phase, who decides to protest the President’s speech. George’s combative relationship with Carmen throughout the series mirrors Bernie Mac’s rivalry with eldest child Vanessa (Camille Winbush), a fellow agitator against paternal authority, and both girls are strong characters who provide a potential point of identification for teen viewers. “Read the shirt, Dad,” Carmen demands, pointing to the words “Smart Bombs Are Dumb” embossed in silver glitter on her babydoll tee. Testing her parents’ patience, she pouts, “Everyone hates us because we’re always starting wars. Iraq, Vietnam, World War I, World War II, the Civil War. I’m embarrassed to be from America!”

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<sup>58</sup> *George Lopez*, “Dubya, Dad and Dating,” episodes 3.1–3.2 (production nos. 176751 and 176752), 60 min., written by Rick Nyholm and directed by John Pasquin, first aired September 26, 2003, on ABC.

The scene briefly allows her impassioned criticisms to play on the viewer's sympathies, but Carmen's obvious misstatement of historical facts and silly self-contradictions undercut her position and make her sound increasingly foolish. "Trust me, America's not bragging about you either, kid," George snaps back, while proudly sporting an American flag tie (that he claims to have borrowed from a Sikh at work who keeps it in his locker "in case there's a terrorist attack") (fig. 4.6a). "You don't get what a great country this is. Where else can a second generation Mexican-American factory worker who can't name his Congressman and who ignores all his jury summons meet the President of the United States?" Although George himself is overtly coded here as a politically uninformed and even apathetic citizen, he "wins" the argument by pointing out all the ways in which Carmen's outbursts are a betrayal of her family's roots and hard-won achievement of the American Dream.

In the context of the ostensible turn from irony, this episode is remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, the hour-long show includes no jokes made at the President's expense, apart from a passing remark about "crazy daughters" intended by George as a gesture of paternal solidarity with the President, and instead steers most of its barbs toward the unruly Lopez women Carmen and Benny (who we learn used to put bourbon in baby George's sippy-cup and have sex with strangers in their garage). Bush is depicted as awkward and out of touch with the common man as he shakes George's hand and robotically recites, "Thanks for your support, Amigo," but he is never the target of open ridicule, and George's ego is effectively stroked by political platitudes affirming "this country is strong because of the quiet decency of working people." George, so giddy with excitement that he must be "shushed" by the President during his speech, is ashamed and apologetic when his defiant daughter shows up at the factory to protest the war. Humiliated, he later grounds Carmen as punishment for her conviction that

“sometimes you have to break the rules to stand up for what you believe in.” More forgiving is the fictional President, who politely endures her political outburst, saying, “That’s the great thing about this nation. You don’t have to agree with me.”

The hour additionally lays bare the patriarchal politics of the series, with a parallel second plot in which George is finally reconciled with his estranged father, Manny (William Marquez). Benny’s protests like Carmen’s fall on deaf ears as George welcomes back into his life the “deadbeat dad” who was never there for them. This reunion subplot reinforces the national family metaphor with its message of finding forgiveness for the wayward patriarch who was never adequate, competent, or chosen. The Lopezes do not support Bush politically (George admits to not voting, and so takes no political “side”), but the episode demands deference to the President and makes a hard break with glib, satirical portrayals like (on cable) *That’s My Bush!* a few years earlier. A particularly telling point of contrast from the late 1990s is a similar narrative device in the ironically nostalgic family sitcom *That ‘70s Show* (FOX, 1998–2006), early in its first season with the September 1998 episode “Streaking.” In that series, a Presidential visit prompts teen high jinks, as the core cast of stoner boys fight their boredom by plotting to streak at a Republican rally, while also provoking political displeasure and dissent on the part of the program’s patriarch, embittered everyman Reginald “Red” Forman (Kurtwood Smith), who bristles at being given fawning scripted questions to ask President Ford (fig. 4.7b). *That ‘70s Show*’s “Streaking” ultimately emphasized the importance of family *over* nation, whereas *George Lopez*’s “Dubya, Dad and Dating” more expressly articulates family *to* nation. The lesson in citizenship here is clear: respect the President even if privately you do not like “Dubya.” Though heavy-handed, this is not as much of a stretch for this show as it might at first seem, given that the series’ premise is that George Lopez is a good man whose machismo leads

him to behave in idiotic, stubborn, and aggressive ways—as in this episode where he is arrested for assault because he “punched on” his dad in the prior season. Weekly plots and seasonal arcs poke fun at but always forgive the lovable Lopez as he (like Mac) learns to “handle my business.”



Figures 4.6a–b. *Left*: The flag motif moves from the TV set (see Chapter 3) to the comedian’s body on *George Lopez*, while daughter Carmen’s glittery protest T-shirt is ridiculed with Bedazzler jokes. *Right*: George is eager to shake President Bush’s hand and apologize for his daughter’s protest. “Dubya, Dad and Dating,” *George Lopez*, originally aired September 26, 2003, on ABC.



Figures 4.7a–b. *Left*: Donna’s (Laura Prepon) parents embarrass her with an unhip patriotic family flag costume at a political rally, but boyfriend Eric saves the day by streaking. *Right*: Emboldened by his son’s streaking prank during the town hall meeting with Ford, citizen Red gains the courage to grill the President, “Hey, Jerry, here’s my question! How the hell could you pardon Nixon?” “Streaking,” *That ‘70s Show*, originally aired September 6, 1998, on FOX.

Thirdly, the story also stakes out a reputation for Lopez—both the comedian and the character—as a rebel. Not unlike *That ‘70s Show*’s wiseass teen Eric Forman (series star Topher

Grace), George pulls high-profile pranks and defies his boss's orders to cut his moppish long hair. His chief act of juvenile "rebelliousness against authority" is both more serious than his daughter's transgression and less radical: he steals the President's speech because he is so proud to have been mentioned in it. The boldness as well as the sincerity of this stunt are further emphasized in the tag for this episode with the comedian's on-screen confession that he did in fact steal the real President Bush's speech when invited to the White House. Lopez shares this personal anecdote as the inspiration for the story by breaking the fourth wall and speaking to "America" as himself with an intimacy familiar from *The Bernie Mac Show*. As the season continues, George consents to donate a kidney to save his dying father in a poignant story arc that again loosely parallels the actor's own life.<sup>59</sup> Both the situations and the comedy of George Lopez's and Bernie Mac's shows draw added authenticity through such elements of autobiography that enhance the characters' edginess, heart, and heroism.<sup>60</sup>

Passing up political satire, *George Lopez* adopts the attitude being given voice in the text by George himself, as stated most directly in the scene where he punishes his daughter for "heckling" the President, right before he brags to his wife that he has pilfered the speech:

Carmen: So it's not okay for you to *speak your mind* to the President, but it's okay for you to steal from him?

George: Here's the difference. He doesn't *know* I stole it.

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<sup>59</sup> *George Lopez*, "Would You Like a Drumstick or a Kidney?" episode 3.10, first aired November 21, 2003. The comedian's genetic battle with degenerative kidney disease, that soon saw his health deteriorating in 2004 and required an organ transplant (donated by his wife) in 2005, indirectly entered the program in season five as a diagnosis for his fictional son Max in "The Kidney Stays in the Picture," episode 5.14, first aired February 8, 2006, on ABC.

<sup>60</sup> Kristal Brent Zook stresses that autobiography, or "collective and individual authorship of black experience," was important to the authentication of black-produced sitcoms of the prior decade, in *Color by FOX: The FOX Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5, an argument that invites parallels to Latino, Jewish, and other minority-produced sitcoms. The "aesthetics" defined by Zook as a "pride in visual signifiers of blackness" is also present in the set design for *The Bernie Mac Show* and *My Wife and Kids*.

Throughout the episode, lines like this highlight that George's performance of respect for the President's authority is just that, a performance, to some degree exposing the limits of the new sincerity. The suggestion of "support" and unanimity as a forced march has tremendous ironic potential, when read as a response to Ari Fleisher's demands to "watch what you say" and the high-profile cancellation of Bill Maher's ABC show for inspiring that comment. However, *George Lopez*'s gestural display of political complaisance comes packaged with a much less ambivalent stance on patriarchal authority. A consistent articulation of the father as provider breaks up the humor to revisit the importance of family solidarity in scenes like this one, as George explains to Carmen that she crossed the line because by disobeying him she endangered his job and their family's security.

These examples from *George Lopez* demonstrate how ethnic-themed situation comedy, like the majority of sitcoms in the first few years after 9/11, invoked the new points of consensus and addressed an audience presumed to share certain core values as Americans. The resulting humor is a half-hearted, half-ironic engagement with the spirit of patriotism, as when George blurts to his wife, "Angie, the next time you buy stamps, forget about Lucy and Desi, get the one with the flags. I'm ready, *tambien!* I'll go to war right now!" As the "edgy" ethnic and black family sitcoms were drawn to greater or lesser degrees into the national discussions of what it means to be American, one of their main contributions to the fabric of cultural hegemony was to affirm the freedoms enjoyed by ethnic minorities, rather than to question government policy or critique social prejudice. There is clear precedent for this in U.S. broadcasting. According to historian George Lipsitz, ethnicoms popular in U.S. television's formative years such as *Life with Luigi* (CBS, 1952–53) and *The Goldbergs* (CBS/NBC/DuMont and first-run syndication, 1949–56) had as one of their chief ideological functions the job of assimilating

minorities and immigrants into consumer culture. Yet, Lipsitz's ideological criticism of those first ethnicoms at the same time contemplates the likelihood that ambivalences and "oppositional" or counter-discourses seeped up through the cracks being opened in dominant-hegemonic ideologies by the representation of difference.<sup>61</sup> "Profiles in Courage" is a striking contemporary instance with its takeaway messages that smart business ("doing the practical thing") comes before interethnic solidarity ("doing the right thing") and that sometimes there is courage in conformity. While close reading of this text suggests that the general thrust of the Hosni and Bush subplots is unflinchingly assimilationist, that pull is met with some internal resistance—finding expression first in George's desire and later daughter Carmen's conviction to "stand up" to power and push back.

Additionally, comedian Lopez's voice had the potential to disrupt cozy consensus and uproot assumptions about Latino loyalties through his strategically ambiguous self-positioning over the next two seasons. For example, further into the 2003 season George helps his father-in-law smuggle Angie's uncle Octavio (Bert Rosario) into the country on a raft from Cuba.<sup>62</sup> In 2004 the comedian was censored by CBS and celebrated in the liberal Latin press when at the Latin Grammys he slyly insulted George Bush in Spanish. Omayra Zaragoza Cruz in her editorial "Let's Talk @!#?%!# Politics" applauded Lopez's jab—loosely translated as "Stop messing around already, jackass!" or "Stop lying, you jerk!"—as a shout out to Mexican-

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<sup>61</sup> George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no. 4 (November 1986): 355–87, analyzes how the early 1950s urban ethnicoms instructed immigrants on proper assimilation into American consumer culture. These shows would displace behaviors problematic for capitalism onto the ethnic other and then show the need for correction. Lipsitz (p. 378) draws on Stuart Hall when theorizing representations and readings as "oppositional or negotiated." See Hall's "Culture, The Media and the 'Ideological Effect,'" in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications), 315–48, cited in Lipsitz; and "Encoding, Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1972–1979)*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson/CCCS, 1980), 128–38.

<sup>62</sup> George Lopez, "Fishing Cubans," episode 3.9 (production no. 176357), first aired November 14, 2003, on ABC.



Americans appalled by Bush's "schizophrenic relationship to immigration policy." Speculating on "the significance of CBS deleting political criticism that was meant for Spanish-speaking viewers," Cruz saw the silencing as evidence of anxieties over giving this left-leaning, voting demographic a voice and argued that the incident "demonstrated that the language within which a political message is delivered does matter. It matters a great deal."<sup>63</sup> *George Lopez* by its sixth and final season hailed an audience presumed to be accepting of or even flattered by Spanglish, with 2007 episodes like "George's Mom Faces Hard Tambien" and "George Uses His Vato Power to Save Dinero Que La," and well acquainted with irony's bimodal appeal.<sup>64</sup>

As we saw previously, ironic ambiguity often serves as an insider language similar to, and sometimes in combination with, the minor discourse of stand-up comics. Just as Bernie Mac's teaching of white middle-class norms to America carries certain notes of irreverence, treading the line between irony and sincerity, George Lopez's performance of deference asks to be taken lightly. These texts remain open to "negotiated" readings emphasizing irony, and such readings may be supported by the on- and off-screen personas of edgy or mischievous comedians who greet the viewer with a nod and a wink, though in the final instance these texts only flirt, without foregrounding irony's subversive potential to destabilize the "preferred reading."<sup>65</sup>

These family shows, which television critics hailed as proof that American irony persisted after its much publicized "death," were an obvious departure from the brand of comedic

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<sup>63</sup> Omayra Zaragoza Cruz, "Let's Talk @!#?%!# Politics," *AlterNet*, October 12, 2004, <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/20157> (accessed spring 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Here used as a pun for veto power, *Vato* is East L.A. Mexican slang—sometimes interchangeable with *Ése*—meaning "homeboy," "dude," or a Latino man, as defined by online slang dictionaries including [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com) and [rapdict.org](http://rapdict.org). These *George Lopez* episodes, 6.1 and 6.12 respectively, first aired January 24 and April 11, 2007, on ABC. Lopez modified the aforementioned phrase "handle my business" with Mexican exclamation "*jórale!*"

<sup>65</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, the notions of a text's "preferred reading" and of "negotiated readings" originate with Hall's Encoding Decoding model of television criticism.

irony popularized by *Seinfeld* and its imitators a few years earlier. Not only are ironic voices more subdued or intermittent under the “new sincerity,” but these shows took greater pains to find the humanity in mean-spirited characters, periodically peeking beneath their vices, viciousness, insults, or selfishness to probe the wounded psyches of comedy’s grotesques, adding character depth and complexity that prevented them being readily reduced to racial stereotypes or open to accusations of minstrelsy. As we have seen, these programs were nonetheless also a categorical break with *The Cosby Show* template based on dignified representations of the loving, cohesive, model family. Through the use of edgy jokes and uncouth characters, collectively ethnic comedies of the late 1990s and 2000s maneuvered to rid racially inclusive representations in comedy of the longstanding stigma of wholesome “politically correct” humor.

Espousing liberal-pluralist ideologies of racial harmony, the new minority suburban family sitcoms continued to offer assimilationist fantasies of class rise and were hailed as “colorblind” at the same time as they depicted minority families with “deep cultural roots” and flirted with cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.<sup>66</sup> In so doing, they managed to tap into conservative as well as progressive visions of racial and American identity, and their anti-“PC” bias may have actually heightened their appeal for cultural conservatives, an argument pursued further in the next chapter with several strains of comedy programming on cable. Here again, setting ironic readings aside, it helped that Uncle Bernie spoke with humility and deference when addressing his audience “America”—rarely hailing Black America as his core audience, and in

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<sup>66</sup> James, “Finally, Families,” remarks that Mac is like Lopez in that he “embraces his cultural background.” For an example of the colorblind claim, see Vinay Menon, “Fox Leads the Pack in Race Relations,” *Toronto Star* (Ontario, Can.), November 30, 2002, J07, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012). Hoping to rival ABC’s success with *George Lopez*, FOX sought to lure Latino audiences with several new fall 2003 series, including *Luis* discussed below and another sitcom (cancelled before it aired), *The Ortegas* with Cheech Marin and Al Madrigal, a family show about Mexican-Americans set in Southern California. Paige Albiniak, “Fox Promos Target Latinos,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 36 (September 8, 2003): 34, reports that FOX enlisted Reyes Entertainment to “brand” and promote both comedies to Latino communities via festivals and cultural events in New York and Los Angeles.

the press standing behind FOX's claims to be a colorblind network—and that Lopez, for all his mouthing off, always chose in the end to respect authority and taught his children to do the same.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast, several series introduced in the spring and fall of 2003 featured the comedy of more politically outspoken minority comics and, participating in the call for “engaged” irony and satire, aired liberal critiques of race, gender, and social policy with far fewer pretensions to being a “colorblind” nation. This provocative cluster of programs thus deployed irony in the service of “relevance,” breaking with the supposed ironic detachment of the prior decade, and were tentatively being called the new social comedies, a purported throwback to Norman Lear's uses of irony and character conflict for social commentary in his seventies ethnicoms.<sup>68</sup>

### “Ground Zero” Multiculturalism

Urban ethnic sitcoms enjoyed a brief revival from 2003 to 2004 with vehicles showcasing minority stand-up comics including Wanda Sykes, Whoopi Goldberg, Omid Djalili (in a prominent supporting role on Goldberg's show), and acclaimed comic actor Luis Guzmán. Venturing into overt political satire and completely dispensing with gestures to celebrate the “invisibility” of race as a societal ideal, these comedies were bolder in their depictions of diversity and dissent. They were more willing to use the cranky “politically incorrect” comedian as a mouthpiece for racially identified, politically controversial opinions and social critique. In

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<sup>67</sup> When FOX moved *The Bernie Mac Show* opposite Damon Wayans's ABC show *My Wife and Kids* in May 2002, Mac refused to support Wayans in protesting this counter-programming that could kill one or both shows. “It comes down to principle,” said Wayans, pointing out the paucity of Black sitcoms and insisting FOX had an ethical “responsibility to the black community, which is to put some diversity on television.” A dispute broke out as Mac accused Wayans of fearing healthy competition and made it personal, stating, “I think Damon should worry about Damon. I think Damon should worry about *My Wife and Kids*.” Meanwhile, FOX's *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* was slated to compete with ABC's *George Lopez* on the same night and was soon cancelled. Mike Duffy, “Television Takes Baby Steps in Showcasing Racial Minorities,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 19, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 15, 2012); see also Doyle, “Jingo Factor Boosted.”

<sup>68</sup> Norman Lear's entire canon including his “white” sitcoms *All in the Family* and *Maude* are often considered exemplary “ethnicoms.” See Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*, 102–4.

contrast to the family-oriented sitcoms, these shows used similarly cutting and cynical humor but here to pick at rather than to patch over the differences that divided the nation. They were arguably more radical as commentary on the state of racial and political tensions in the United States, and were potentially more utopian than their assimilationist or pluralist counterparts as well with their steady attention to competing value systems and conscientious embrace of cultural diversity and complexity, positing “unity in difference.”<sup>69</sup>

The new urban ethnicoms promoted not ironic indifference but irony in difference while encouraging viewers to laugh at and from gendered, generational, ethnic, and various other(ed) subject positions. These aspirationally inclusive comedies embraced the emergent sense of urban collectivity that swept American television following 9/11. With a media focus on Americans banding together to grieve and rebuild, the “Ground Zero” discourse temporarily opened a space for reimagining New York and other urban centers.<sup>70</sup> *Whoopi* and *Luis*, both set in New York City, particularly resonated with the national rhetoric of rising from the ashes of “Ground Zero” and forging a new unity, while eschewing narrow definitions of Americanness in favor of ethnic and cultural diversity. With *Wanda at Large* set in Washington, D.C., together these programs give insight into cultural imaginings of Americans getting “back to work” in the two cities attacked on 9/11 (figs. 4.8a–c). The political content of the humor

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<sup>69</sup> This phrase I borrow from Lawrence Grossberg, “The Formations of Cultural Studies: An American in Birmingham,” in *Relocating Cultural Studies*, ed. Valda Blundell et al. (New York: Routledge 1993), 32. Grossberg argues that cultural studies, as an “open-ended” field potentially divided by disparate theoretical traditions and methodologies, relies upon a model of “unity in difference” to support this diversity of focus in scholarship. In my own usage of the term here, I am seizing on this notion for its broader application as a societal ideal of national cohesion under multiculturalism, which is predicated on acceptance and appreciation of diversity in the social body.

<sup>70</sup> One of the most poetically fascinating consequences of the September 11 attacks is the way in which cosmopolitan, multicultural New York was rendered sacred space for Middle-America. This was not an erasure of cultural tensions between town and country, red and blue, but rather a symbolic colonization that not only imposed hegemonic notions of ‘American’ on resolutely heterogeneous space but also sought to conscript the city and its citizens in another round of the culture wars.

hinged on race relations, forsaking the customary affirmations of a colorblind body politic that had almost come to be expected on U.S. television. Instead, stories presented playful sparring across ethnic lines and frequent jokes about inter-ethnic racism in the city. Both *Whoopi* and *Luis* placed major characters in interracial romances while depicting and commenting upon interminority racism. Race was also the primary lens through which questions of national identity and belonging were being posed. *Whoopi*, *Luis*, and *Wanda at Large* sifted through concepts of citizenship and patriotism and finessed the definitions of freedom circulating in the wider social context in terms of their significance to shaping ethnic and racial subjectivities.



Figures 4.8a–c.  
 The New Urban Multicultural Sitcoms:  
*Whoopi* and *Luis*, set in New York City,  
 and *Wanda at Large*, set in Washington,  
 D.C., the two American cities targeted  
 in the 9/11 attacks, used humor to  
 highlight cultural and political divisions.  
 Cast promotional stills available online  
 at <http://epguides.com>.

This was not the “affordable multiculturalism” that Ron Becker attributes to television targeting the quality viewer in the “Gay Nineties,” which placed value on superficial identification and tolerance without asking for economic sacrifice. The fashionable diversity

and gay-friendly chic of cliquish comedies like *Will & Grace* and *Friends* imagined difference narrowly and primarily along lines of exoticized sexual freedom, and did not dwell on uncomfortable issues such as class struggle or poverty.<sup>71</sup> Television and cultural critics were quick to point out the whitewashing of New York on NBC's "Must See TV" lineup. Pointing to the paucity of roles for Latinos, African-Americans, and other minorities in urban comedies of the 1990s, including quasi-ethnicoms *Seinfeld* and *Mad About You*, Michael Tueth notes that urban life and its promises of happiness and hipness were implicitly claimed for white people in these hit shows that glamorized "the city" as a "fun" place for young, amorous professionals to socialize.<sup>72</sup> Albert Auster has described the fictional spaces of *Friends* as a "totally sanitized Bohemia." From the friends' coffee house hangout Central Perk to their spacious Greenwich Village apartments, he observes, "their New York is without any poor, or the ethnic and racial tensions that plague the city."<sup>73</sup> *The Cosby Show* was similarly critiqued for erasing class and race tensions escalating in the city in the preceding decade.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to these cosmopolitan quality comedies, the New York City of *Whoopi* and *Luis* made visible the signs of class struggle and crime. These shows come closer to Gray's multiculturalist ideal, as discussed in greater

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<sup>71</sup> As Chapter 1 noted, Becker argues that the "Gay Nineties" invited straight America to consume a gay-friendly identity flattering to socially liberal, urban-minded professionals. Media representations of gayness, overwhelmingly constructed as affluent, added "spice" to cosmopolitan fantasies of an upscale, white-centric world. Ron Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 2006): 184–215.

<sup>72</sup> Michael V. Tueth, "Fun City: TV's Urban Situation Comedies of the 1990s," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 28, no. 3 (fall 2000): 98–107, discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>73</sup> Albert Auster, "Friends" (a.k.a. "It's Friendship..."), *Television Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1996): 2–7; see p. 6. Auster's trenchant phrase "sanitized Bohemia" has been widely adopted and applied to the "Must See" comedies in general. See San Martín "'Must See TV,'" 40; Brian L. Ott, *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 118; and Lisa Marie Marshall, "'I'll Be There for You' If You Are Just Like Me: An Analysis of Hegemonic Social Structures in 'Friends'" (Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 2007), 181.

<sup>74</sup> See Sut Jhally & Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

depth below, in which intraracial divisions are explored and experiences of oppression are represented and raised for discussion.<sup>75</sup>

The post-9/11 multiculturalist sitcoms eschewed the didacticism and resolute earnestness of the favored examples from the 1980s and 1990s, including *Frank's Place*, *Cosby's A Different World* (NBC, 1987–93), and *Roc* (FOX, 1991–94), however, and instead offered an irony more evocative of 1970s era social satire than the post-*Cosby Show* generation of social comedies. While tonally distinct from these earlier shows and less favorably received, *Luis* and *Whoopi*, both of which premiered in September 2003, serve as remarkably uncompromising illustrations of a multiculturalist urban America that simultaneously depict a contentious ethnic space and offer optimistic visions of unity and community in keeping with the spirit of American togetherness and cooperative effort that had characterized Ground Zero.

*Not Your Mama's Multiculturalism: A Push Toward Relevance in "Post-PC" Comedy*

Enthusiasms for subversive irony as a critical tool, as well as concerns over that irony misfiring, were rekindled by the arrival of this next wave of multiculturalist and black-themed comedy programs with strong crossover appeal for non-white and white audiences, as they reopened a wide array of racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes to satire. These included not only the sitcoms analyzed here, but also the provocative ethnic-themed sketch comedy programs (mentioned previously) introduced in the same brief period. Comedy Central's critically acclaimed *Chappelle's Show* (premiering in January 2003) foregrounded and satirized racial stereotypes and politics with sketches such as "Black George Bush" and "The Racial Draft," as did FOX's high-profile prime-time variety show *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* (2002–03), with its talented, racially mixed ensemble cast and skits designed for a fairly heterogeneous audience,

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<sup>75</sup> H. Gray, "Politics of Representation," 89–91.

building on the legacy of the groundbreaking, irreverent *In Living Color* (FOX, 1990–94).<sup>76</sup> As sketch comedy, these shows made no pretense to look for humanity and hidden depth in potentially comic-grotesque or uni-dimensional characters, as I have suggested was sometimes the case on “lad dad” sitcoms, but like the multiculturalist ethnicoms did participate in the same trend of calling upon the professional credibility and integrity of the comedian-star to embody and speak for racial authenticity and guide the “preferred” meanings of comic stereotyping. Television scholars have praised these shows for their inclusion of multiculturalist discourses that challenge social prejudices, while also cautioning that cultural producers do not control the types of meanings and pleasures made by audiences, who may supply their own more reactionary readings to laugh “with” rather than “at” racist representations or expressions of bigotry. Significantly, Dave Chappelle was so distressed by unintended, problematic readings of his comedy exploring racial stereotypes that he abandoned his acclaimed and successful sketch show and came to regard such humor as “socially irresponsible.”<sup>77</sup>

Because irony and satire with their propensity for ambiguity and ambivalence provided an unstable foundation for a multiculturalist ideal, many critics and activists have historically

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<sup>76</sup> *Chappelle’s Show* was raw and youth-oriented with a comedy club vibe, while *Cedric* was a more slick, polished production with touches of highbrow theatricality. Notable recurring sketches on *Cedric* invoking racial stereotypes included “Spencer Elwood: America’s First Black President,” “Thug Prankz,” and “*Que Hora Es*.” In one sketch about “Dual Conscience,” Cedric plays a job interviewee plagued by conflicting guidance from his “inner Sidney Poitier” and “inner Toby” (a slave mentality). Other memorable sketches such as “’50s Diner” and “Cicely & Cash,” and on *Chappelle’s Show* the infamous “pixie” sketches inspired by minstrelsy (in each of which an otherwise dignified character is tormented by an imaginary avatar enacting potently racist imagery demeaning his own race), among others, took up similar themes reflecting on minority groups’ internalization of stereotypes.

<sup>77</sup> For close analysis of *Chappelle’s Show* and its star’s conflicted perspective on the satire of stereotypes for mixed audiences, including this quote (p. 243), see Bambi Haggins, “In the Wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie’: Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 233–51. See also her “Dave Chappelle: Provocateur in the Promised Land,” chap. 5 of *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007). There are competing schools of thought on what constitutes socially relevant and responsible or progressive comedy, as performers and critics weigh the relative merits and risks of skewering problematic social stereotypes (see Schulman’s “Laughing Across the Color Barrier”) as a provocative alternative to “positive” counter-stereotyping (see Real’s “Structuralist Analysis 1”).



held out hope for realist modes of representation, seeking out exemplary programs with the greatest potential for sincerely recoding the social meanings of race. For Gray, as theorized in his *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness,"* multiculturalist comedies distinguish themselves from both assimilationist and pluralist representations by strategically representing the complexity and diversity of Blackness (and where applicable other non-white ethnicities as well) as a spectrum of cultural identities. Gray's influential schema for analyzing the politics of racial representations in comedy draws on a realist emphasis, similar to the "attitude to reality" championed by Raymond Williams that has been called democratic realism.<sup>78</sup> This model values a particular aesthetic political sensibility for academic television criticism, where character complexity translates into political complexity and dignified representations are the mark of excellence and artistic as well as ideological integrity for the (here black or ethnic) producer, writer, or star as auteur.

In contrast to Gray's democratic realist critiques of television sitcom, in another camp are those upholding the supposedly stable ironic mode that distinguished seventies social comedies as the paradigm for progressive satire of racism and bigotry. Here, it bears mention that despite the enduring status of Tandem's iconic comedies as the exemplars of "relevance,"

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<sup>78</sup> See Raymond Williams, "A Defense of Realism," in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 228; Nick Stevenson, *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2002), 15. Stevenson characterizes Williams's writings on an ideal media system as "democratic realism" and explains that in this model, "The cultural contributor should make an attempt to capture 'what is really going on', while seeking to connect with the structure of feeling of the audience. For the democratic realist, communication can be conceived as successful only if social processes have been presented truthfully, and in a way in which the audience can understand." While realism is the goal, he clarifies that for Williams "artistic practices do not reflect reality, but actively produce it through material and symbolic forms." This critical approach informs Herman Gray's analyses of racial representations in television comedies outlined in his "Politics of Representation in Network Television." Gray's highly regarded ideological criticism of TV texts understands and critiques the mythical functions of realism, but, like Williams, he holds that social progressives should reorient realism in the interest of informing the people or raising consciousness, rather than abandoning claims on the real. At the same time, Gray shares Schulman's appreciation for the multiculturalist discourses in carnivalesque sketch comedy *In Living Color* (discussed in her "Laughing Across the Color Barrier" article), yet both authors contemplate and caution that the structured "ambiguity" of such satire and irony leaves the door open for racist readings. See Herman Gray, "Spectacles, Sideshows, and Irreverence: *In Living Color*," chap. 8 of *Watching Race*, 130–46.

some critics denounce this Lear/Yorkin brand of ethnicoms as vehicles for simplistic comic stereotyping or even racism.<sup>79</sup> The same sorts of critiques, as we will see, would be leveled against 2003's *Luis*. The multiculturalist ethnicoms surfacing after 9/11 used Lear as a main reference point in their bid for "quality" sitcom status, although they lacked the sustained pathos and sense of outrage typical of Lear's social comedies (and of liberal sociodrama like *M\*A\*S\*H*) designed to make viewers squirm and reflect. These were not the only irony-laden sitcoms that openly invited comparisons to Lear's comedy in ways that helped to downplay the ironist-as-detached-smirker and rearticulate irony to relevance in comedy. The most celebrated example at the time was the animated cable sitcom *South Park* (the politics and reception of which I examine in depth in Chapter 5), whose creators not only earned kudos for describing the show's bigoted, anti-Semitic, ill-tempered antihero Eric Cartman as a miniature version of Archie Bunker, but also took it a step further by collaborating with Lear in 2003 as a guest and creative consultant for their seventh season. However, the new network ethnicoms were far less successful in making the comparison stick and drew less praise from critics.

These shows were neither democratic realism nor Learean irony per se, but charted an uneasy middle ground. *Whoopi*, for example, strikes a shaky compromise between *Cosby Show* optimism and 1990s sitcom cynicism, given voice by the cantankerous comic star. Politically, these series are more pointed and multivocal than either *The Bernie Mac Show* or *George Lopez*; however, stylistically they are more pedestrian and spare, lacking the slick writing, depth of narrative, and visual sophistication, and consequently they suffered in the ratings, leaving critics leery of their claims to being the new social comedy.

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<sup>79</sup> J. Fred MacDonald's "Norman Lear, Bud Yorkin, and the Flourishing of Racial Humor," in *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 176–87, faults the mid-1970s ethnicoms for ushering in an "Age of the New Minstrelsy" with the "coon" and "mammy" stereotypes revived by such sitcoms as *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975–85), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–79), and *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77).

Given that Gray's theorization of and appreciation for multiculturalist representations on network prime time at the outset of the 1990s was based on programs that for the most part bore a sophisticated realist aesthetic (exemplified by *Frank's Place* and *Roc*) and that modeled a sincere guiding sensibility (closely governing the uses of hip irony and comic stereotypes on noted hits like NBC's youth-themed *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 1990–96, and *A Different World*), he too would perhaps find this early 2000s version wanting. The new ethnicoms did not seek to reproduce the types of earnest ethical discussions about social discrimination found in these earlier programs.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, like the preeminent examples of socially relevant multiculturalist sitcoms of the late eighties and early nineties, the racially diverse post-9/11 sitcoms did strive to represent ethnicity as a multi-layered experience. They did not sneer at social relevance in the ways late 1990s ironic sitcoms had made a habit of doing. They were an anomaly in that they acknowledged that racism and poverty have structural causes rather than just personal dimensions and displayed a rare willingness to comment on a society structured in dominance, even as they defended ethnic minorities' and immigrants' pursuit of the American Dream. Also, at a time when other ironic sitcoms as we will see continued to mock multiculturalist discourses openly to gain an edge as non-“PC” humor, they instead innovated forms of “politically incorrect” humor friendlier to multiculturalism.

By bringing multiculturalist themes under the umbrella of politically incorrect comedy, these post-9/11 ethnicoms broke with the dominant tropes in hip ironic programming. While these shows certainly bear the markers of what many cultural critics have dubbed “post-PC comedy”—a label widely adopted during and since the 2000s to describe an era that revels in

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<sup>80</sup> Examples are plentiful, such as *A Different World's* cross-cultural critique of Apartheid in “A World Alike” (episode 3.16, written by Susan Fales, first aired February 15, 1990, on NBC) or *Roc's* run-in with neighborhood drug dealers in “Nightmare on Emerson Street” (1.22, story by Russell Sherman, first aired March 29, 1992, on FOX).

“politically incorrect” jokes and representations and thus is said to be liberated from the supposed strictures of “PC”—they also worked to refurbish comedy that took questions of racial and class difference seriously. As a historical discursive formation, in the 1990s political correctness had become thoroughly articulated to multiculturalism. Emerging in that context, I have argued, laddism and comedic irony more broadly began pushing back against both multiculturalism and the realist mode of “earnest” comedies that promoted progressive representations. This backlash continued through the 2000s largely undeterred by the imperatives of the “new sincerity,” and as I indicated in Chapter 3, despite the example made of Bill Maher “politically incorrect” humor was rarely directly singled out per se in the attack on irony. In this potential disjuncture, it seemed there was wiggle room for challenging the perfunctory equation of PC with multiculturalism. Much as irony was open to rebranding through appeals to relevance, so too was multiculturalism rendered available for recoding through appeals to “post-PC” irreverence.

*“O! Say Can You See, America!”*

FOX’s *Luis* premiered on September 19, 2003, in the 8:30 p.m. slot after *Wanda at Large*, and starred Luis Guzmán in the title role as an irascible Puerto Rican immigrant, a donut shop proprietor and “cheap-ass landlord” of an apartment building in Upper Manhattan’s Spanish Harlem, a.k.a. “El Barrio.” This setting serves as an ethnic crossroads bringing together a spectrum of Latino identities as well as Irish, Jewish, Asian, Black, and Anglo characters rounding out the cast. Much of the basis for the show’s humor is the collision and cross-pollination of ethnicities, played for laughs in scenes featuring characters like Zhing Zhang (Reggie Lee), a cardiologist in his homeland but here scraping by as a Chinese-food delivery man, who chats with Luis in rapid-fire Spanish spoken with a Chinese accent. *Luis* posits the *barrio* as a Rube Golbergian contraption of interethnic accommodation. The show

openly acknowledges Spanish Harlem as a site of racial tensions marred by crime and urban blight (“Taxis only come here when they get lost,” Luis explains, and “ambulances only come here when taxis get lost.”), but at the same time, as a *community* in which neighborliness and teamwork tend to trump the very differences that are the source of the comedy.

Nevertheless, the show is rife with ethnic jokes, and like any comedy that engages racial stereotypes for purposes of satire, *Luis* drew heat from critics who accused its writers of reinforcing prejudices and likened Luis to a Latino Archie Bunker. A review by TV critic Roger Catlin titled “‘Luis’ Leans on Stereotypes” speaks to both points, finding fault with this formula:

The idea behind brash sitcoms like “Whoopi” and tonight’s new “Luis” (Fox, 8:30 p.m.) is that by speaking boldly about topics such as race, they can reach the comedy heights of “All in the Family.” The lesson is that it’s not as easy as it looks. On tonight’s premiere, there are jokes at the expense of Puerto Ricans, Jews, Dominicans, Irish and Chinese. The glowering Luis Guzman, used to being a tough guy in movies, can be funny in his give-and-take and can show some heart. But he can hardly rise above stereotype jokes that seem borrowed from shock jocks.<sup>81</sup>

Insult slinging between Puerto Rican Luis and his Dominican ex-wife Isabella (Diana Maria Riva) raised the hackles of Latino critics in particular. These complaints notwithstanding, the show knowingly made sport of media representations and their consequences. Within the first minute, the pilot episode takes aim at media racism as Luis lectures his clueless Caucasian counter-boy (Charlie Day) on the perils of stocking jelly donuts during the Puerto Rican Day Parade: “A couple of dudes get jelly on their shirt, Channel 9 makes it look like the Ricans are shooting each other!” The program is concerned not only with the consequences of representation, but also with reclaiming urban space as something other than a consumerist playground for white cosmopolitans.

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<sup>81</sup> Roger Catlin, “‘Luis’ Leans on Stereotypes,” *Hartford Courant*, Courant.com, September 19, 2003, [http://articles.courant.com/2003-09-19/features/0309190512\\_1\\_new-jersey-governor-shock-jocks-new-night](http://articles.courant.com/2003-09-19/features/0309190512_1_new-jersey-governor-shock-jocks-new-night) (accessed spring 2004). The “Pilot” episode of *Luis* was written by Will Gluck and directed by Jeff Melman.

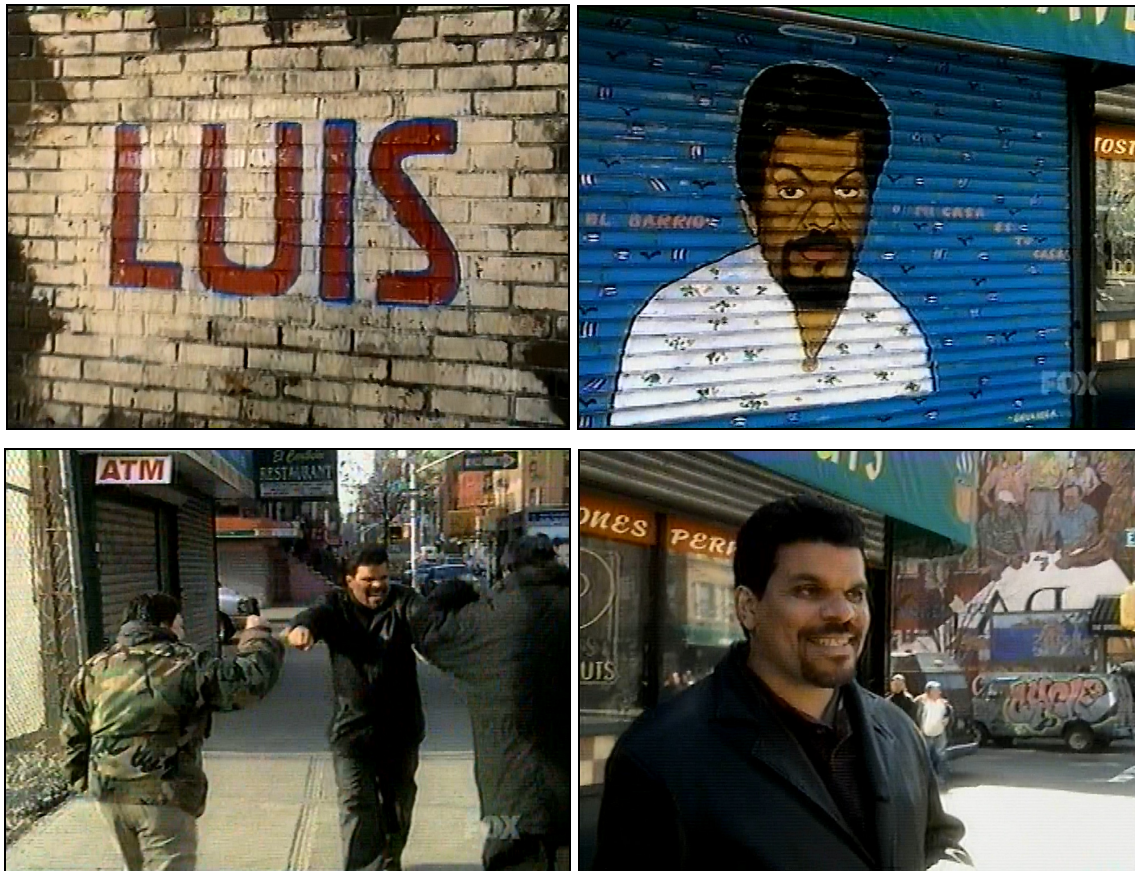
In contrast to the white, affluent, yuppie New York of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, as well as working class domestic sitcoms launched in the late 1990s like *King of Queens* (CBS, 1998–2007), the ethnic space of *Luis* is a negotiation of diverse poor and working class identities with the central question of whether “we can all get along.”<sup>82</sup> *Luis* harkens back to pre-Reagan representations of urban ethnic space, self-consciously nodding to a tradition that Greg Oguss has termed the “integrated ghetto shows” of the 1970s while winking to Lear’s working-class social comedies. The title sequence stylistically references *Chico and the Man*’s wistful scenes and lingering shots of Latinos in East Los Angeles, constructing a sense of El Barrio as a homey, communal space (figs. 4.9a–d).<sup>83</sup> Signposting that distinctive setting and promise of welcome in the opening seconds of the show, the name Spanish Harlem can be seen splashed on a building wall in colorful paint, one of several street murals, as the smiling star strolls the city. As media scholar Jonathan Gray has argued, the opening credit sequence of a sitcom or any television program functions in part to guide audiences to certain “‘proper’ and ‘preferred’ interpretations” of the text.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> That the premiere episode of *Luis* brings up the Puerto Rican Day Parade is a telling contrast with *Seinfeld*’s penultimate episode “The Puerto Rican Day” (a.k.a. “The Parade,” May 7, 1998, NBC). Vincent Brook’s “From the Cozy to the Carceral: Trans-formations of Ethnic Space in *The Goldbergs* and *Seinfeld*,” *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 44, (1999): 54–67, critiques this ninth season *Seinfeld* episode as indicative of the show’s erasure of ethnicity and/or habitual treatment of ethnic pride as a nuisance or target for ridicule. Drawing a contrast to 1950s ethnicom *The Goldbergs*’s portrayal of urban, ethnic life as communal/congenial, Brook see *Seinfeld* painting a “Kafkaesque” picture of cramped urban spaces in a city reluctantly shared with a “host of ethnic ‘others’” (56). *Seinfeld*’s “yuppie space” is a fragile domain that Jerry and his cohort must defend against the incursions of homosexuals, immigrants, and even tradition-bound Jews, argues Brook, who “get in the way” of the group’s hedonistic lifestyle (60).

<sup>83</sup> Greg Oguss in “‘Whose Barrio Is It?’ *Chico and the Man* and the Integrated Ghetto Shows of the 1970s,” *Television & New Media* 6, no. 1 (2005): 3–21, has argued that *Chico and the Man* was engaged ideologically in an act of historical erasure to rearticulate Los Angeles as an area being invaded by Latinos. While *Luis*’s title sequence is self-consciously evocative of *Chico*’s, I am not suggesting that *Luis* performs a similar erasure.

<sup>84</sup> Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 72–73, discusses introductory sequences as a significant means by which producers establish a sense of “the characters, tone, genre, and style of the show.” Horace Newcomb’s seminal genre study “Situation and Domestic Comedies: Problems, Families, and Fathers,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), 43–44, also alights on the importance of title sequences and opening shots to creating a sense of character, tone, and particularly in domestic comedies also “place.”



Figures 4.9a–d. Luis Cortez’s (Luis Guzmán) name and visage are inscribed upon the walls of his community, while the connotations of graffiti invoke both ethnicity and an urban sense of place. “Pilot,” *Luis*, originally aired September 19, 2003, on FOX.

*Luis*’s opening titles consist of a fast-paced montage of shots showing Luis connecting with his neighbors—walking the streets, playing stickball, bumping fists with young toughs, joining children skipping rope, and handing a piece of fruit to an elderly woman. Images that have become clichés of urban decay—the subway, a woman lounging on her front stoop, young men clad in black and camouflage jackets—are stripped of connotations of poverty or crime and become symbols of vibrant public space. The yearning yet upbeat theme song (with the repeated lyric, “O! Say can you see... America!”) is potently aspirational and works with these images to set a tone that is straightforwardly hopeful, cushioning the cutting and ironic remarks that dominate the show’s dialogue, to assure that Luis is read as a character who *cares*. This opening

sequence, though atypically brief at 15 seconds, is noteworthy for the way in which it tonally fulfills the obligations of the “new sincerity”—doing affective work similar to the flag graphics of the prior network season.

In sum, the *Luis* title sequence serves several crucial narrative functions. It not only humanizes the curmudgeonly central character but also effectively centers his perspective, while clearly marking the *barrio* as *his* space and a cohesive community. We are promised humor with heart and a message of brotherhood despite the star character’s reflexive cynicism and comic performance of misanthropy. Even as Luis’s actual close relationships are constantly shown as being in conflict within the narrative, his relationship with New York—and the America that New York is standing in for—is on solid foundation. Once again, the message being foregrounded is that we are “all in the family”; we may squabble but all belong.

By attempting to build upon *All in the Family*’s reputation for no-holds-barred social commentary, *Luis* and its contemporaries helped to usher in the “engaged irony” being called for after 9/11 (see Chapter 3) by mining the golden era of seventies satire, effectively bypassing the *Cosby*-inspired decades of polite Black and ethnic sitcoms. These new social comedies were powerfully invested in freeing multiculturalism of its prevailing “PC” connotations. In seeming defiance of the social sensitivity and sophistication that earned dramedies and sitcoms such as *Frank’s Place* and *A Different World* their reputation as both socially progressive and quality television, *Luis* along with *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large* sought to rearticulate multiculturalist comedy within the revised terms being imposed on irony. The similarity to Lear’s brand of irony, which engendered profound ambivalence toward characters and frequently pushed right past levity into painful extremes of pathos and provocative debate, is limited. Nevertheless, the comparison was often drawn because these shows each featured an opinionated, hot-headed



central character prone to ranting and they dared to air heated political differences when that was *not* the going trend in sitcom under the new sincerity. Even on the lad dad domestic sitcoms, which similarly spotlighted the cranky comic as seasoned cynic, this was done infrequently with serious and ‘special’ episodes, and handled with considerably greater caution.<sup>85</sup>

As ethnic and black sitcoms more aggressively worked to disarticulate the pairing of multiculturalism and political correctness, fused together in national political discourse, they set about restoring irony to prominence and making claims to comedic authenticity by rejecting “sensitive” representations and perspectives. As already noted, one tactic was to exploit racially insensitive stereotypes (a taboo of so-called PC texts) as the fodder for social and political satire. Another strategy was to displace the cultural politics of *Cosby*-era earnestness and/or political correctness onto a comic foil within the text. In *Luis*’s pilot, a posture of excessive earnestness is mocked primarily through the character of the daughter’s white boyfriend, Greg (Wes Ramsey), the stereotypical sensitive new age guy. Greg, or “Goldilocks” to Luis, is a floppy haired peacenik with a pretentious vocabulary, pie-eyed ideas about equality, and—most offensive to Luis—no paying job. While daughter Marly (Jaclyn DeSantis) is a bank teller or “capitalista” enjoying the promise of class rise, boyfriend Greg is hounded by Luis for his freeloading ways. The friction between Luis and Greg is what most begs the comparison to *All in the Family*, with “Goldilocks” as a pretty-boy version of Rob Reiner’s “Meathead.” Greg is a reasonably sympathetic and articulate figure, similar to “Meathead” who outshined father-in-law Archie Bunker with his intellect yet remained throughout the series a sort of buffoon and continual comic foil.

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<sup>85</sup> Luis’s demeanor might mark him as kindred to the lad dads of sitcom; however, the power dynamic and comedic relationship between characters here is significantly different. Luis’s greatest source of pride is his daughter’s social and professional achievements that surpass his own, and his fiercely independent ex-wife is far from the doting spouse (whether career woman or housewife) of the more patriarchal lad dad shows.

Luis, though a grotesque like Archie, is more forcefully endorsed as a guiding sensibility and point of comic identification. *Luis*'s sympathies lie with the title character, and with his cynicism, which wins out over Greg's unrealistic notions of social justice and interracial harmony. Greg as the voice of naïve idealism in the text provides ample opportunities for the razor-tongued Luis to heap scorn on white liberal fantasies of an equal-opportunity, colorblind America. For example, when the privileged younger man insists that in any medical emergency hospitals "have to take people, whether they can afford it or not," Luis mocks, "This world you live in—are there, like, wizards and unicorns?" In this way, cool cynicism is the show's answer to misbegotten optimism and "politically correct" proselytizing. Character credibility is bolstered by wariness of dominant/idealistic discourse, claims on authenticity underwritten by oppositional identity, and a certain adherence to gender norms in both the expectation and exercise of cultural power. While the show does not entirely endorse its title character's worldview, and the comedy sometimes undermines its multiculturalist intentions by too ardently expressing Luis's Puerto Rican perspective, it clearly frames his perspective as savvy.

*"Don't Ever Think You Can Figure Me Out"*

*Wanda at Large* joined the FOX lineup as a mid-season replacement in March 2003 in the hour anchored by *The Bernie Mac Show*, scheduled opposite ABC's *My Wife and Kids* and *George Lopez*.<sup>86</sup> Much like these vehicles for male comics, *Wanda*'s arrival in prime time was greeted as a refreshing change of pace by television critics, who for the most part fashioned compliments out of words like brash, brassy, loud, and lewd to characterize its star Wanda Sykes in the role of Wanda Hawkins, a larger than life version of the comedian herself. The match

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<sup>86</sup> The first season premiere aired on March 26, 2003, in *The Bernie Mac Show*'s regular time slot, and thereafter the program remained blocked with *Bernie Mac* as its chaser. Aggressive counter-programming pitted these programs against ABC's leading ethnicoms, which were in their third and second seasons respectively.

with *Bernie Mac* was well made, with *Wanda* emulating that show's hook as a story about an ornery career comic and tough-talking, reluctant role model to a fatherless niece and nephew. Top on her list of priorities are swearing and boozing, but "Aunt Wanda" manages to be a decent de facto parental figure to her deceased brother's kids, who live down the hall with her white sister-in-law and sometimes sidekick, Jenny Hawkins (Tammy Lauren).<sup>87</sup> While this storyline lends the feel of family-oriented comedy, *Wanda at Large* is foremost a workplace family sitcom about a staid news team at the fictional television station WHDC. Wanda is a stand-up comic struggling to pay the bills until she gets her big break when her big mouth lands her a steady gig bringing a new perspective and "edge" as a field correspondent on the ratings-challenged D.C. Sunday morning political talk show, *The Beltway Gang*.

Wanda joins the gang as the liberal-ish counterweight to the staunch conservative news anchor, Bradley Grimes (*Seinfeld*'s Phil Morris). Her woman-on-the-street video segments commenting irreverently on hot-button issues such as segregation, gun control, reparations for slavery, and the inheritance tax offend the sensibilities of this Bentley-driving, silk suit-wearing, proud black Republican. In the pilot episode, we meet Bradley Grimes when Wanda crashes a party where she takes potshots at the snooty newsman. A station manager overhears her caustic comments and sees green, hiring Wanda to "shake things up" at the flagging public-affairs show. With its emphasis on her market appeal, *Wanda at Large* is self-reflexively acknowledging irony's edge as a commodity to be sold on network television. Significantly, the premise is based on Sykes's own career, as a comedian who insulted her way into a correspondent position on HBO's *Inside the NFL* when a producer noticed her at a party loudly accosting Bob Costas

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<sup>87</sup> Sister-in-law Jenny's interracial marriage and status as a single white mother of African-American children are not subjects that the show draws attention to nor deemphasizes, but are treated as unproblematic and allowed to stand as presumed progressive representations.

with her acerbic wit.<sup>88</sup> In the fiction inspired by that event, Wanda spares no offense when challenging Bradley's right-wing views on immigration and the meaning of America:

Bradley: I don't know if you've noticed, but you're the loudest person in this room. And if you're going to be the loudest, you might want to have something intelligent to say.

Wanda: So you acting all cocky with your little peanut head. You make me sick with your boring editorials, always knocking the poor, talking about closing our borders, pretending that's what America stands for. I'm sick of your whole station with your little *flag* ties and your little *flag* pins. You all ain't nothing but a bunch of flag-ists.<sup>89</sup>

With this heated encounter the series establishes its central conflict and lays the foundation for its humor as a comedy not ultimately about non-traditional family life, but about politics, American identity, and the uncensored comedian.

As its premiere suggests, the series participated in the prevailing mood of prime-time patriotism, yet did so in a way that celebrated cynicism and dissent as the marks of a politically engaged comedian and citizen. Bradley's flag tie in the above scene takes on quite different connotations than the one sported by George Lopez for his Presidential encounter four months later, with this show's comedian-star taking a more cynical view and demanding a closer look at policies mobilized in the name of that symbol. In mocking the fictional television station's recourse to flag iconography as a display of patriotic pride, *Wanda at Large* was one of the few and first prime-time comedies to raise a satirical brow or even broach the subject of American network television's patriotic makeover after 9/11. Programming flow accentuated the ways in which this show was conversant with ongoing patriotic discourse in prime time. Notably, the lead-in from *American Idol* to this premiere night episode showed the *Idol* competitors all

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<sup>88</sup> Mike Hughes, "Comedian Wanda Sykes Lands Her Own Sitcom," Gannett News Service, March 7, 2003, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 9, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> *Wanda at Large*, "Pilot," episode 1.1 (production no. 475357), written by series creators Bruce Helford, Les Firestein, Wanda Sykes, and Lance Crouther and directed by Gerry Cohen, first aired March 23, 2003, on FOX.

joining together onstage to honor the troops with a tearful rendition of the G.O.P.'s favorite post-9/11 patriotic anthem, Lee Greenwood's single "God Bless the USA" (famous for its refrain, "I'm proud to be an American / Where at least I know I'm free"). *Wanda at Large* pulled against the grain of respectful or cautious programming with its jokes about such sensitive topics as dirty bombs, anthrax, and chemical warfare. In one satirical video short for her station, Wanda thanks the troops for defending her right as an American to drive any gas-guzzling vehicle she wants. In another, she dunks an oversized rubber replica of Saddam Hussein's head in a basketball hoop after decapitating him with a machete.<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that in this example, while the humor is not respectful, it does espouse pro-American sentiments and join in lobbing jokes at the nation's enemies. Within the narrative the Hussein bit is deemed too "offensive" by WHDC's timid censor, a detail that flatters the FOX network's reputation for supplying risky, politically incorrect comedy.

FOX sought to market Wanda as a bold comic voice. For example, a snappy bumper promoting the fall 2003 Friday lineup with *Wanda at Large*, *Luis*, and *Boston Public* promised "Outspoken, Outrageous, Outstanding" television. While also outgunned in the ratings, the ethnic-themed sitcoms in this block are signposted as superior programming through this articulation of transgressive (outspoken and outrageous) comedy to the discourse of quality (outstanding) television.<sup>91</sup> Editing worked to pair the word outspoken with Wanda specifically, emphasizing her desirability as an unruly and uninhibited comic voice. This articulation is

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<sup>90</sup> These are second season examples from *Wanda at Large*, episodes 2.4 ("Leave Your Daughter at Home Day") and 2.2 ("Where's Roger?"), first aired October 17 and September 26, 2003, on FOX.

<sup>91</sup> *Wanda at Large* in its first season averaged 12.2 million viewers, including presumably a sizeable lead-in audience from *The Bernie Mac Show*, but that number dropped to 4.4 million viewers for its second season premiere blocked with *Luis*. Teresa Wiltz, "Wanda Sykes, Saying It Loud: With Wit and a Wicked Tongue, the Fox Sitcom Star Has Cranked Up the Volume on a Promising Career," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2003, N01, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 9, 2012). The lower rating, while unimpressive for network prime-time television, was about twice that averaged by popular cable satirical political talk show *The Daily Show* early in the 2000s.

reinforced by the show's title sequence, particularly for season one, which shows Sykes wielding a microphone as she struts and poses in front of the title *Wanda at Large* towering in 3D block letters. Here the microphone is a symbol of the power of the comedian's voice, as satirist and straight shooter (similar to the cover art for *Bill Maher: Victory Begins at Home* shown in Chapter 3). The theme song by rap artist Method Man gives Wanda props for getting her "own show, doing it big" where she's "gonna tell it like it T-I is." This introductory sequence pulls focus onto Wanda Sykes the performer/star, while doubling as a fitting theme for her character, whose comic candor as emphasized by the iconic microphone is the selling point of the show. In each episode this is reinforced with opening shots of Wanda prominently holding the bulky WHDC microphone on location for her correspondent shoots.

*Wanda at Large* is notable for its use of atypical form to politicize sitcom. The show hybridizes the family and workplace sitcom with stand-up and topical sketch comedy, while also (through the device of the show-within-a-show) seeking to leverage the popularity of comedy-themed political panel shows (see figs. 4.10–4.11). Wanda's woman-on-the-street satirical segments addressing various political topics are essentially self-contained comedy sketches (also incorporating stand-up) embedded within the sitcom format—typically one per show averaging three to four minutes and often introducing the episode. These sequences advance the narrative but are also fully coherent as stand-alone pieces, sharply written and executed, that remain perhaps the most unique and memorable feature of the show. In addition to integrating political satire in the form of sketch comedy, this sitcom also conceptually imports and dramatizes another contemporary political satire genre, the comedy forum as popularized by *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*. While Wanda Hawkins is not the host of her own political talk show, her presence immediately transforms *The Beltway Gang* and she tends to get the final word.



Figures 4.10a–b. *Top left*: Wanda Hawkins (Sykes) takes on President Bush and the Republican initiative to abolish the inheritance tax in a sketch imagining “greedy” heirs pulling the plug on their rich elderly. *Bottom left*: Comedian commentator Wanda “spices up” a dreary Washington public affairs show. “Hurricane Hawkins,” *Wanda at Large*, originally aired October 31, 2003, on FOX.

Figures 4.11a–b. *Right*: Images from CNBC’s *Dennis Miller* illustrate conventions of satirical news, including the use of inset video, and political panel shows mirrored by *Wanda at Large*. In this episode aired March 15, 2005, Miller pokes fun at Condoleezza Rice in the headlines (above) and later dialogues with nominees for the 36th NAACP Image Awards including *A Different World*’s Jasmine Guy (below) about the politics of representing Black diversity, while joking, “Just coincidentally, my entire audience is black today.”

Thus, the show’s premise participates in and exploits the trend of the “comedian commentator” becoming, as media scholar Amber Day observes of *The Daily Show*’s host Jon Stewart, “elevated to the status of legitimate political pundit.”<sup>92</sup> With cable news satire shows attracting

<sup>92</sup> Amber Day, “And Now... the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*,” in *Satire TV*, 96–97. Day is drawing on Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 93.

significant political guests and with comedians like Dennis Miller, Bill Maher, and Colin Quinn being hailed as players in the culture wars, a development discussed further in Chapter 5, the line between comedians and political commentators grew fuzzier.

Wanda's seat at the political round-table allows the comedian a platform from which to talk back to newsmakers and dominant media. While that dissenting voice is undoubtedly more constrained by the conventions of narrative sitcom than it would be on comic political talk shows such as *Politically Incorrect* or Quinn's *Tough Crowd* (Comedy Central, 2002–04) or satirical news like *The Daily Show*, this device of the fictional debate show presents Wanda as a member of the public empowered to question the nation's opinion-makers. With Wanda standing in as the loud but unpretentious voice of regular folk, the sitcom offers the vicarious pleasure of talking back to television news and political discourse through this figure of the angry citizen-comedian. This representation piggybacks on the appeal of a political satirist like Jon Stewart who, in Day's analysis, serves as a kind of "comedic interrogator" and "everyman surrogate."<sup>93</sup>

Stretching this comparison a step further, as with Stewart and his *Daily Show* correspondents, Wanda's precise political identity on the show is kept loosely defined. Obscured by her trickster persona, the degree of Wanda's left-of-center loyalties remains ambiguous and, like Stewart, she regards herself as foremost a comedian opposing foolishness where she finds it, rather than claiming a political "side." Seeing her as the opposition, Bradley brands her a "liberal," but in one second season episode she is named as the voice of "the middle" for a WHDC station promo that shows her sitting sandwiched on *The Beltway Gang* set between its (Asian female) liberal pundit and (black male) conservative pundit. The latter, Bradley, meanwhile is deemed the voice of the "lunatic fringe" when he elaborates his position on immigration, advocating the

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<sup>93</sup> Day, "Mimesis and the Real," 95, 101.



elimination of marriage visas in order to remove Iranian immigrants and goading Wanda with his radical solution for securing the Mexican border: “I think we should line our borders with electric fences. Now if you can make it past ten thousand volts, welcome to America, my brother.”<sup>94</sup>

The pivotal rivalry between this “pompous right-wing stooge” and the liberal-minded “two-bit stand-up comic” calls attention to differing cultural and political subjectivities and puts these into dialogue.<sup>95</sup> This is the key dynamic through which the program, with its persistent emphasis on clashing class and political identities among African-Americans, participates in constructions of “multiculturalism/diversity” in television representations of Blackness as theorized by Gray.<sup>96</sup> The text approaches Bradley with ambivalence, as he shifts between being a two-dimensional comic stereotype open to derision and a character with hidden dimensions and potential “likeability.” Several tropes encourage the viewer to reevaluate his character and avoid presuming to have him all figured out from surfaces. Firstly, this black conservative is stuffy but streetwise, and off-camera we see an unbuttoned side of him (cursing, using black slang and colloquialisms correctly, confronting a thug who harasses Wanda, and even breakdancing) that inches him closer to Wanda’s world.<sup>97</sup> Secondly, Bradley is afforded a sex appeal, as a handsome, debonair local celebrity, that does not escape the notice of Wanda herself, her niece and mother, or his public, with the text working the angle that a hidden sexual tension or even

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<sup>94</sup> These examples are from *Wanda at Large*, “Leave Your Daughter at Home Day,” episode 2.4, written by Jennifer Fisher and directed by Leonard R. Garner Jr., first aired October 17, 2003, and “Death of a Councilman,” episode 1.5, written by Wanda Sykes and directed by Leonard R. Garner Jr., first aired April 23, 2003, on FOX.

<sup>95</sup> These are insults the two exchange off camera in *Wanda at Large*, “Wanda & Bradley,” episode 1.3 (production no. 175803), written by Lance Crouther and directed by John Blanchard, first aired April 9, 2003, on FOX.

<sup>96</sup> H. Gray, “Politics of Representation,” 89–91.

<sup>97</sup> Relevant episodes include “Wanda & Bradley” (cited above) and “Bradley Has a Friend,” 2.3 (production no. 177354), written by Jack Kenny and Brian Hargrove and directed by Lee Shallat-Chemel, first aired October 3, 2003, on FOX.

affection may drive the adversarial relationship between Bradley and Wanda despite their mutual denials.<sup>98</sup> Although the show gives Bradley a certain cultural credibility, it is consistent in delegitimizing the positions he advocates, as with a montage showing a litany of his misbegotten predictions over the years (“I guarantee you, Osama bin Laden is not a threat.”).<sup>99</sup> While Bush and his policies may be the ultimate target, Bradley is the proximate embodiment of unwarranted authority and thus the butt of much of the show’s humor. Despite the character’s role in broadening representations of Blackness, Bradley is nonetheless the comic foil who primarily serves to ventriloquize right-wing talking points so that they can be satirically dissected by the comedian-star.

In addition to lampooning ideologues and the culture wars, *Wanda at Large* also features moments where the comedian talks back to the President (as seen in fig. 4.10a) and white authority. In season two’s “Back to the Club” (November 7, 2003), the fearless Wanda gives her station’s obtuse and ultimately racist white owner Glen Chalmers (character actor Madison Mason) a piece of her mind, risking the fate of *The Beltway Gang*, after he repeatedly calls her “sassy” at a banquet (fig. 4.12). The gloves come off when Chalmers ignores her request to refrain from using that word, and she proceeds to berate the “Head Dummy in Charge” without regard for the consequences. This display of audacity/courage earns Wanda the contempt of her coworkers, who pressure her to eat humble pie. She stands on principle in refusing to apologize, however, even if it costs her paycheck and sends her back to her old job entertaining drunks at the comedy club (where she alienates yet another boss). This story, the last episode to air before cancellation, concludes with Bradley and Wanda seeing eye to eye for once when momentarily

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<sup>98</sup> In an unaired episode titled “Did Wanda Say a Four Letter Word?” (production no. 177359), according to the online episode guide at TV.com, “Wanda admits the dreaded ‘L’ word to Bradley.” But it seems that word is love, perhaps skirting around the other L-words, liberal and lesbian. Unlike then-closeted Sykes, her character Hawkins is heterosexual, with guest star Dave Chappelle making an appearance in season two as her ex-husband.

<sup>99</sup> *Wanda at Large*, “Back to the Club,” episode 2.8 (production no. 177358), written by Sue Murphy and directed by Leonard R. Garner Jr., first aired November 7, 2003, on FOX.

joined against the common enemy of ‘friendly’ racism in the workplace. Bradley finds himself following her example when he becomes the next victim of their white boss’s demeaning compliments. “It always surprises me how well spoken you are,” beams Chalmers with a condescending pat, “Good for you.” We see a lingering reaction shot of Wanda and Bradley side by side in stunned silence. “Your turn,” she shrugs, as Bradley strides after the station owner to speak his mind. In this instance and a few others, Wanda and Bradley enjoy a contingent camaraderie, and the show again gives insight into depths of his character beyond a man who fills out a suit. Thus, the two of them can ultimately agree on the need to speak up when provoked, whatever the cost to coworkers. With this, the series ended on a note that valorizes dissent and defies American sitcom’s usual pragmatic emphasis on the “consensual solution” over personal principle or ethnic solidarity.<sup>100</sup>



Figure 4.12.

Wanda lashes out when the WHDC station owner calls her “sassy” at a banquet honoring *The Beltway Gang*. “Back to the Club,” originally aired November 7, 2003, on FOX.

While Wanda’s coding as a voice for the left is accomplished through the contrast with her rival Bradley, it is also strategically undercut by the program. For example, the penultimate fall 2003 episode “Clowns to the Left of Me” draws a bright line between Wanda and both

<sup>100</sup> G. Jones, *Honey, I’m Home*, 4. This stands in contrast to the *George Lopez* episodes analyzed above, which are more typical of the genre’s longstanding ideological investment in bureaucratic democracy and managerial capitalism.

“liberals” and “feminists.”<sup>101</sup> When she refuses to apologize for a piece making fun of animal rights activists, Wanda becomes the target of a protest led by a prim and idealistic white liberal, Charlotte Rankin (guest star Jenny McCarthy). This confident young activist decides that beneath Wanda’s gruff exterior is the heart of a liberal softie, and embraces her into the sisterhood of women, supposedly united by suffering, with a line that raises Wanda’s hackles: “You’re an African-American woman, and I’m a liberal. We’re practically twins!” With this revelation comes a patronizing invitation for Wanda to be the entertainment and share her “struggles” at a women’s rights organization’s award ceremony where Charlotte is the guest of honor. Wanda uses this opportunity as payback, alienating the packed house of feminist humanitarians at the Women Working For Women dinner in order to humiliate the honoree. Between quips about ovaries and uteruses and women’s place being in the kitchen, Wanda gives “a big ups to all the men who allowed you gals to put down your brooms and put on some shoes and come on out ‘n’ celebrate.” This scene mobilizes the stereotype of the stodgy, humorless feminist in order to revel in politically incorrect humor. Moreover, this storyline illustrates the show’s prerogative to celebrate the comedian as a maverick and free agent who defies labels and operates independent of anyone else’s agenda.

The fact that Charlotte-the-liberal is played by the noted post-feminist ‘ladette’ icon Jenny McCarthy adds a curious dimension of disingenuousness to the portrayal, although the activist is not shown in an entirely unfavorable light. Even if Wanda scoffs at her comparison of animals to slaves or her walkathon to aid battered women, it is the feminist’s earnest, self-righteous, entitled attitude that comes under attack more so than her political views or humanitarian efforts. Ultimately, it is how she treats Wanda as a category and not an individual that puts a

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<sup>101</sup> *Wanda at Large*, “Clowns to the Left of Me,” episode 2.7 (production no. 177356), written by Wanda Sykes and directed by Bob Koherr, aired together with “Back to the Club” in a one-hour block on November 7, 2003, the series’ final night on air.

target on this character's back and declares open season on PC, with the story framing critiques of oppression as hollow victim narratives.<sup>102</sup> In fact, this outsider's chief offense is to presume that she knows the real Wanda. "Don't ever think you can figure me out," the comedian whispers as the mortified Charlotte joins her on the stage. "You're just a hateful, evil woman," Charlotte realizes, to which a smiling Wanda replies, "Now you know me."

This conversation is a miniaturized version of the central message that much comedic irony, with its structured ambiguity and political polyvalence, sends to mainstream audiences. Inscrutability is the ironist's prerogative. *Wanda at Large*, like *Seinfeld* and *South Park*, and other ironic sitcoms to varying degrees, reserves the right to cast its barbs in all directions and presents its own "true" meanings as a moving target. Even as *The Bernie Mac Show* promises, "America, we're family," *Wanda at Large* reminds America, you don't know me. At the same time, this episode's depiction of the un-laughing, uptight internal audience at the women's group dinner facilitates a preferred reading that establishes a sense of distinction, in which viewers at home who can appreciate Wanda's jokes are *validated* for both their sense of humor and their liberation from PC's dogma. In this way, the scene invites the viewer to identify as part of an in-group that is hip enough to appreciate Wanda's ironic mode of joking (e.g., her asking the feminists to applaud Hugh Hefner for providing employment for so many women). Affirming this reading is the presence of Wanda's socially liberal, white sister-in-law in the internal audience: as the only woman on-screen laughing at the jokes, she offers a point of reference for the entertained viewer, primed to see Wanda's ad-hoc criticisms of gender and identity politics as both funny and fitting.

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<sup>102</sup> As I have argued throughout this work, much of the impugning of "PC" in American culture and comedy is informed by the idea of political correctness as an affront to American individualism. The project of "political incorrectness" as a movement in American comedy is informed by an undercurrent of libertarian individualist thought, perhaps irrespective of the political leanings of individual comics, as Chapter 5 explores further.

While *Wanda at Large*'s theme song praises her for "doing it big," some reviewers found such a "big" personality problematic. For example, *The New Yorker*'s Nancy Franklin welcomed this as a milestone for black women in comedy, but also found Wanda *too* large and in charge: "Sykes, who also serves as a writer and producer of her own show, has an oversized and combative personality: she's not just in the house; she's in your room and she's in your face." Franklin predicted that Sykes/Hawkins would prove too overpowering a stage presence for the show to survive, casting a shadow over the rest of the ensemble and "sucking up all the oxygen in the room." To the extent that this critic is correct in her assessment that contemporary "sitcoms that highlight big personalities to the exclusion of the other characters tend to have short lives," the evidence would suggest that the risk is particularly acute when those big personalities are minority women voicing strong political opinions.<sup>103</sup>

*"You Call Yourselves a Melting Pot?!"*

NBC's *Whoopi*, a Carsey-Werner production which had a single-season run with strong to middling ratings, was perhaps the most self-conscious attempt to reinvent and reinvigorate the multiculturalist sitcom.<sup>104</sup> African-American comedian Whoopi Goldberg, whose stand-up material has consistently had a political flavor with strong appeal for socially liberal, educated audiences, saw her role more than ever as that of social critic. When asked about the comedian's

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<sup>103</sup> Nancy Franklin, "Watching Wanda: A Big Personality Hits the Small Screen," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2003, 102.

<sup>104</sup> Despite ending in cancellation after twenty-two episodes, *Whoopi* was nonetheless the year's strongest new NBC sitcom, and Tuesday night comedies were key to the network's plan to hold onto its dominance of prime time. The show's September 2003 premiere "logged big numbers," winning its 8 p.m. Tuesday time slot among adults 18-to-49 (with a 4.9 rating in the demo), a figure cited as "the network's best number for regular programming in the time period" since fall 2000, a promising start, although industry insiders reportedly held modest expectations for the series' ratings over the long term, according to Paige Albiniak, "NBC Scores Big with Early Tuesday Debuts," *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 37 (September 15, 2003): 8, ProQuest Research Library (accessed March 5, 2004). See also "NBC Prepares Ground for Life After *Friends*," *Broadcasting & Cable* 133, no. 20 (May 19, 2003): 20; and Rick Kissell, "'Whoopi'-ing It Up: NBC Laffer Surges Despite Big Baseball Aud.," *Daily Variety* 281, no. 9 (October 16, 2003): 3.

job after 9/11, Goldberg said, “It’s a brand new world and comedy is no longer quiet; it’s no longer cutesy-poo. It really has something to say now—and not just because we as artists have something to say but because the world needs us to say it.”<sup>105</sup> In *Whoopi* that message is best summed up by the personal philosophy of Goldberg’s character, Manhattan hotel manager and singer Mavis Rae, “This is America. When you get angry, you can squawk about it!”<sup>106</sup>

The call for comedies with “something to say” was not new for broadcast television, of course, but it did directly contradict the anti-relevance formula driving many popular ironic sitcoms of the day. Goldberg’s vision was political comedy with a seed of sincerity at its core, but that did not imply neat narrative resolutions that would advance clear-cut ideological agendas, nor did it necessarily require an “earnest” veneer. Setting the tone for the show, Mavis Rae’s sense of humor is abrasive and, in the words of one inarticulately insightful character, “ironical and stuff,” but we are repeatedly shown that under her tough, jaded exterior (similar to the sympathetic prickly protagonists of *Luis*, *Bernie Mac*, and *George Lopez*) is the proverbial heart of gold. The program itself works on dual levels, often cynical on its surface but harboring a genuine passion for democracy and commitment to diversity and social justice.

As with *Luis*, television critics sought to explain *Whoopi*’s liberal-friendly “hip” blend of stinging humor and pointed social commentary by comparing the series to *All in the Family*. TV reporter Dinah Eng observed, “Many critics have referred to ‘Whoopi’ as the new ‘All in the Family,’ as it uses politically incorrect devices to spark dialogue about life post 9-11.” Goldberg expressly stated this as a goal, and irony as the means to creating a cultural forum: “I hope... that we’ll be able to tackle more topics others haven’t, and *with more irony* [emphasis

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Kleiner, “What’s So Funny?” 38.

<sup>106</sup> *Whoopi*, “Shout,” episode 1.4 (production no. 103), written by Mike Larsen and directed by Terry Hughes, first aired September 30, 2003, on NBC. The series was created by Bonnie and Terry Turner and developed by Goldberg.

added].... I want the shows to have truth to them, to look at things like fear of people who look different. Do we paint everyone from the same tar brush, or is there a dialogue to be had?"<sup>107</sup>

The show regularly used jokes to critique a climate of fear and racial tension. In the pilot, about one-quarter of the jokes dealt with anxieties about terrorism—a topic other network sitcoms were still avoiding apart from a brief quip on *Wanda*—wryly delivered by Mavis's "terrorist handyman" and concierge Nasim Khatenjami. For example, Nasim alarms Mavis's uptight brother Courtney Rae (Wren T. Brown), a zealous conservative, by repeatedly letting slip details of his shady past:

Nasim: I was trained by the Iranian militia to build a missile system. [He pauses.]  
Which we do *not* have.

Mavis: Nasim, you never told me you were in the militia.

Nasim: I took it off my résumé.

Mavis: See, that's a smart man. That's why *he* got a job. [This line is directed at Courtney, who was left unemployed by the Enron collapse.]

The plot of the second episode ratcheted up the tension with an Orange Alert and bomb scare in the hotel, prompting Mavis to ask America, "Are we just gonna live in fear?"<sup>108</sup>

*Whoopi's* exploration of diversity plays out most prominently in her chummy relationship with Nasim, a Persian immigrant, who flies into a fit of rage whenever he is mistaken for "Arab" by the hotel's patrons. Nasim is played by Omid Djalili, a British stand-up comic of Iranian descent who himself was detained by airport security when trying to enter the country to

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<sup>107</sup> Dinah Eng, "Goldberg Says 'Whoopi' Is Platform for Issues Ignored on TV," Gannett News Service, October 23, 2003. For further comparison to *All in the Family*, see also Bill Brioux, "Making *Whoopi*: Comedian Hopes to Hit a Nerve with Her Latest TV Outing," *Toronto Sun* (Canada), September 7, 2003, *TV Magazine*, TV2; and Eric Deggans, "Can New Comedies Deliver for NBC?" *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), July 26, 2003, 2B, LexisNexis Academic (all accessed November 9, 2007). Similar to Eng, Deggans retrospectively regards Lear's classic as the original "politically incorrect sitcom."

<sup>108</sup> *Whoopi*, "Pilot," episode 1.1 (production no. 101), written by co-creators Bonnie Turner and Terry Turner, and "Don't Hide Your Bag," episode 1.2 (prod. no. 102), written by Mike Chessler and Chris Alberghini, both directed by Terry Hughes, first aired September 9 and 16, 2003, on NBC.



audition for this role.<sup>109</sup> While Mavis/Whoopi is the main point of comic identification, Nasim has nearly equal screen time and an almost equal share of the jokes. Mavis and Nasim bond as minorities with common experiences of oppression. For example, in the fourth episode of the series, September 2003's "Shout," Mavis urges Nasim to contest a ticket for spitting on a public street, but fearing deportation he pleads with his boss not to "make waves" with the authorities: "You don't know what it's like to live under a constant cloud of suspicion." "Child," Mavis replies, "I'm a black woman who likes to shop at nice stores. I know all about suspicion."

The camaraderie between Mavis and Nasim is depicted at times as codependence, or a mutual enabling of pathological distrusts. Their shared "paranoia" during the government Orange Alert escalates, for instance, in the B-plot of the bomb scare episode, on a visit to China Town where Nasim's inconsolable fear of the SARS virus is matched by Mavis's claustrophobia. More often, the comedy revolves around their attempts to reach an understanding of one another as they maintain a wariness of authority figures and of the unfamiliar. In the pilot, after Nasim runs off a well-meaning white couple who try to apologize to him for America's poor treatment of "Arabs," Mavis confides:

Mavis: All you people look alike to me. [...] I don't care what you are.... I like you.

Nasim: I like you, too. I'm sorry. I don't mean to get crazy.

Mavis: Well, you got a little crazy. Scared the white people. You know, that's my bread and butter. [...] I gotta be honest with you. Your people do scare me.... I mean, I see three or four of you guys on an airplane, I'm off.

Nasim: You know, I hear you. I feel exactly the same way about the Portuguese.

Mavis: The Portuguese? What's up with the Portuguese?

Nasim: The Portuguese are taking over the world. That's the problem with America, they let anybody in. What's that all about? That is the big problem with democracy.... In this country, you don't know who the hell you've living next to!

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<sup>109</sup> Some of his experiences made it into the script. Eng, "'Whoopi' Is Platform."

This scene exemplifies the comedy's basis in Mavis and Nasim's mutual respect, friendship, and sense that "we're family," posing their parallel suspicions as a point of commonality and establishing a shared perspective on the minority experience.

This in turn allows Mavis to instruct her protégé in the folkways of dominant culture, and strategies for resistance. In the episode "Sticky Fingers," for example, Mavis teaches Nasim about racial profiling at a department store, where store security tails Mavis but not Nasim:

Mavis: Natural black trumps possible terrorist every time.

Nasim: Hey, what if we are at the airport? We have you beat there?

Mavis: Not in the airport gift shop.

This scene culminates in Mavis's arrest on bogus shoplifting charges. Such cynical "lessons" in citizenship from the point of view of an oppressed minority are a playful ironic inversion of the familiar trope from assimilationist ethnicoms.<sup>110</sup> In other episodes, Mavis embroils Nasim in such tactics of resistance as fighting his ticket in court (in "Shout") and breaking a credit contract in order to return a big-screen TV that she can't afford (in the "Pilot"), a scenario for which she plans to use her angry "Arab" companion to intimidate the white salesman.

In place of *George Lopez's* clear assurances of the Egyptian Hosni's loyalties, *Whoopi* further deploys irony to play with the fact that viewers do not know where Nasim's allegiances actually lie. Though played for humor when the cagey handyman claims to have sent the first warhead to Pakistan, no comforting assurances that he is "joking" are forthcoming. The show does

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<sup>110</sup> *Whoopi*, "Sticky Fingers," episode 1.9 (production no. 110), written by Mike Chessler and Chris Alberghini and directed by Terry Hughes, first aired November 11, 2003, on NBC. The ethnicom paradigm from the early 1950s promoted assimilation (for "average" citizens and immigrants alike) through lavish consumer spending including "installment buying," as analyzed by Lipsitz, "Meaning of Memory," 378 (also 359–70). For example, in CBS's 1953 series *The New Life with Luigi*, the title character, an Italian immigrant, learns how to buy on credit in a department store thanks to the efforts of an unusually attentive credit bureau manager and the store detective. Like *Luis*, that series succumbed to complaints about the comic stereotyping of immigrants, as noted in the Classic TV Archive's episode guide at <http://ctva.biz/US/Comedy/LifeWithLuigi.htm> (last accessed April 2014).

not take the same pains as *Lopez* to mark him as the “good guy” from a distant land and demonstrate his successful assimilation. That said, *Whoopi* stops short of foregrounding the quarrelsome Persian’s political or religious convictions, instead focusing on ethnic pride and personal bonds that establish a basis for a workplace family and promise to transcend cultural barriers.

While race was their main lens on current events, the new versions of social comedies repeatedly depicted economic and ideological (more than racial) differences as posing the greatest obstacles to personal friendships or peaceful communities. As already noted, Luis’s problem with his daughter’s live-in boyfriend is not primarily his whiteness, but rather that he is an underemployed artist who can’t pay his own rent. Meanwhile, the cultural conversation taking place on *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large* centers upon divided loyalties and political rifts *within* Black America in the Bush era that saw African-Americans such as Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell appointed to prominent positions within the government. In contrast to the paradigmatic multiculturalist sitcoms of the prior two decades, which had conscientiously and sometimes subtly posed Blackness as a spectrum of regional, cultural, and class differences, *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large* tackle difference most forcefully through diametrically opposed political allegiances that drive a wedge into the family or workplace family and by extension the national family.<sup>111</sup> Both shows draw contrasts between their cynical, ironic heroines and a humorless, right-wing ideologue who serves as the voice of misdirected idealism and sanctimony.

Whereas *Luis* mocks rampant earnestness through the naïve white liberal, on *Whoopi* as with *Wanda at Large* the Black Republican figure of propriety becomes the primary object of the

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<sup>111</sup> In *Whoopi*, “Don’t Hide Love,” episode 1.18 (production no. 120), written by Alison McDonald, first aired March 23, 2004, on NBC, the invitation to attend their sister’s lesbian wedding divides Mavis and Courtney; when the bride-to-be challenges her brother’s devotion to “the man who’s denying me... and millions of Americans their basic civil rights,” he must choose between loyalty to his family or the G.O.P. For Gray’s analysis of diversity as a *spectrum* of “perspectives and representations of black life in America,” again see his “Politics of Representation,” 89–91.

comic star's derision and her political sparring partner. On *Whoopi*, idealistic (and excessively earnest) Courtney consistently makes black support of the Bush administration look foolish. He has been forced to move into his sister's hotel but is still in the thrall of the Republican economic ideology that hung him out to dry after the Enron collapse.

Mavis: You're unemployed. You've been screwed by big business.  
Tell me, what have the Republicans done for you?

Courtney: Well, for one, they freed the slaves.

Mavis: You had to go back 140 years to find that.

Courtney: Well, what have the Democrats given, besides the welfare state that keeps people in a cycle of poverty? [...]

Mavis: There's the Voting Rights Act, there's the Civil Rights Act, and affirmative action.<sup>112</sup>

With exchanges such as this, in which both sides' convictions are heartfelt, the show's creators purported to be, in Goldberg's words, "giving voice to some liberals, some conservatives, some middle of the road folks."<sup>113</sup> However, Courtney's opinions are undercut by jokes constantly reminding that he lacks his big sister's street smarts and African-American cultural competencies. Indeed, Mavis remarks that his white girlfriend, Rita (Elizabeth Regen), a hip-hop gangsta girl, is teaching him to be "black."

While *Whoopi* adopts a similar central conflict to that of *Wanda at Large* by pitting a loud, liberal 'sister' against a dignified, conservative 'brother,' there are significant differences. Firstly, Courtney is accorded lesser status than Bradley, who is gainfully employed, self-sufficient, and culturally "blacker." Of these black preppies it is Courtney who more fully bears the stigma

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<sup>112</sup> *Whoopi*, "The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy," episode 1.6 (production no. 107), written by Larry Wilmore and directed by Terry Hughes, first aired October 14, 2003, on NBC.

<sup>113</sup> Whoopi Goldberg, quoted in Brioux, "Making *Whoopi*."

of the “white negro” stereotype.<sup>114</sup> Secondly, Courtney is not depicted as the suave ladies’ man, but an emasculated figure whose implausible involvement with the hot, free-spirited Rita is treated by the program as a curiosity. Unlike Bradley, his role in the narrative is not to provide chemistry as a potential romantic interest for the star, but as a younger sibling who still needs to grow up.<sup>115</sup> Thirdly, because Mavis sees him fondly as a work-in-progress, the viewer is encouraged to invest in Courtney. Compared with *Wanda at Large*’s callous version of the “pompous right-wing stooge,” he is ultimately a more sympathetic and “likeable” figure, with the show allowing him frequent moments of pathos. To a certain extent *Whoopi* excuses his convictions as gullibility and misplaced trust in a corrupt administration, coding Courtney as a gentle-natured, innocent dupe of Republican rhetoric.

In addition to ridiculing the right wing, *Whoopi* like *Wanda at Large* also features storylines where the comedian more directly talks back to white authority and to President Bush. Jokes challenging the President and his leadership, which along with terrorism jokes were off-limits on most network sitcoms, were a staple of *Whoopi*’s humor. The show was a rare instance of backtalk in an otherwise conciliatory comic climate. In the October 2003 episode “The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy,” George W. Bush (played by impressionist Steve Bridges) pays a visit to the hotel to use its lavatory, prompting an outraged Mavis to remark, “I can’t believe he’s in there doing to my bathroom what he’s done to the economy!” (see fig. 4.13). Characteristically, Courtney serves as the intermediary and proximate target in jokes made by

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<sup>114</sup> *Whoopi*’s Courtney Rae and *Wanda at Large*’s Bradley Grimes are updated, adult versions of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*’s assimilated and “whitified” prep-schooler Carlton Banks (Alfonso Ribeiro), whose naivete shored up the urban “cool” of that show’s hip-hop star. While still the butt of jokes about economic privilege, lack of street smarts, and country club tastes like their 1990s predecessors, black preppies in these later texts were expressly ridiculed for their (selfish or self-negating) support of conservative governmental politics and social policy.

<sup>115</sup> Notably, the sitcom tendency to have opposites attract can be played out in *Wanda at Large* with Bradley and Wanda in ways that the sibling relationship between Courtney and Mavis cannot.

the star and her Persian comic wing-man about the President and his policies. In one typical instance, Nasim taunts him with “an Iranian fable about a little man named George W. Bush” who “plunged a rich nation into poverty and couldn’t even pronounce ‘terrorist.’”<sup>116</sup> Mavis, likewise, rarely misses an opportunity to bait her brother with barbs about his “hero.”



Figure 4.13.

Mavis Rae (Whoopi Goldberg) is overjoyed when she believes Bruce Springsteen has visited her hotel, but soon learns that “The Boss” in her commode is George W. Bush. “The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy,” *Whoopi*, originally aired October 14, 2003, on NBC.

The hot-headed hotelier can’t resist when, as thanks for the use of her toilet, she is promised “face time” with the Commander-in-Chief at a banquet in his honor. Mavis loses her chance to speak her mind, however, because at the party she not only causes a scene by insulting snooty African-American Republicans but also refuses to let Bush’s aide pre-screen and coach her comments, which results in her being hauled off by the Secret Service. In the process, she at least manages to convince the inhibited Courtney of the value of *speaking up* for oneself (advice that backfires as he finally gains the courage after this public humiliation to give his big sister a piece of his mind). As we saw with *George Lopez*, the narrative conceit of a Presidential visit was used by comedy writers to dramatize dissent and imagine the possibilities or limitations for a participatory democracy. Both instances dealt with anxieties about talking back to an

<sup>116</sup> *Whoopi*, “Rita Plays Poker,” episode 1.8 (production no. 108), written by Terry Turner and directed by Terry Hughes, first aired October 28, 2003, on NBC.

administration calling for loyalty and consensus, but with *Whoopi* the dissenter has the comedic upper-hand, and her eventual silencing in the narrative—in a year when the President was shielded from protest by such devices as “free speech zones” and comics were being literally banned from public performance spaces—more pointedly critiques incursions on citizens’ right to “squawk.”<sup>117</sup>

It bears mentioning that, generically, *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large* exemplify the tradition that scholars deem the unruly woman sitcom, although as we have seen these particular iterations brought a new mix of attentions to the intersections of gender, race, and conventional politics. In keeping with this potentially subversive subgenre based in carnivalesque “excess,” their heroines’ oversized attitudes along with their characteristic loudness, drinking, sexual and all-around assertiveness, and most of all “loose” tongues, are the signifiers of their unruliness. As Jane Feuer details in *The Television Genre Book* (2001), these are among the salient defining qualities that have distinguished television’s most transgressive comic heroines for over half a century, from 1950s mischievous housewife Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) to 1980s sarcastic matriarch Roseanne Connor (Roseanne Barr/Arnold), in series centered on the “grotesque female whose excesses break social boundaries.”<sup>118</sup> Big bodies, voices, and/or personalities remain signifiers of this comic-grotesque figure who cannot be contained by polite norms, and mark her as “other” to the demure, unimposing feminine ideal of a patriarchal society. “The unruly woman

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<sup>117</sup> Circus/street performer Jerry Rowan was banned from Baltimore’s Inner Harbor amphitheater in October 2002 for telling this joke about racial profiling and the D.C. sniper: “I heard that they’ve finally come out with a composite of the sniper. Apparently, he’s a white guy that speaks Spanish and looks like he’s Arab.” See Darragh Johnson, “Silenced Comic Sues Baltimore; Banned for Joke, Performer Returns to Inner Harbor,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2003, B07. For reports on free speech zones, see Charles Levendosky, “Keeping the Protesters out of Sight and out of Hearing; ‘Free Speech Zones,’” *New York Times*, November 6, 2003, Opinion, 9; Brady Dennis, “Protests Won’t Be Hidden from Bush’s Eyesight,” *St. Petersburg Times*, South Pinellas ed., June 30, 2003, 1B; and “Restrictions Overreach—Today’s Debate: Free Speech ‘Zones,’” *USA Today*, May 27, 2003, 14A, LexisNexis Academic (all accessed July 29, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> Jane Feuer, “The Unruly Woman Sitcom (*I Love Lucy*, *Roseanne*, *Absolutely Fabulous*),” in *The Television Genre Book*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 68.

creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place,” explains Kathleen Rowe in her definition of the “woman on top” as a comic archetype. “Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone,” and “She makes jokes, or laughs herself.”<sup>119</sup>

As I discussed previously with reference to carnivalesque sitcoms including *Married... With Children*, comic representations of the physically and verbally “excessive” or “loose” woman by defying the norm and inverting gender codes ideally invite carnival’s festive laughter of ambivalence. But as Rowe cautions, dominant media tropes fixating on forms of female unruliness as *too much* may all too frequently tap into latent misogyny in contemporary popular culture to direct laughter “at women.” Rowe’s critique could be aptly applied to *George Lopez*’s Benita Lopez (a clear example of the “masculinized crone” who dominates men and has an active sexuality)<sup>120</sup> and *My Wife and Kids*’s Janet “Jay” Kyle (Tisha Campbell-Martin), for example, from among the female grotesques of the lad dad shows. In contrast, like *Roseanne*’s creator-star, who instead manages to be the subject rather than the object of laughter, Goldberg and Sykes maintain a measure of creative control as writer-producers of their own shows and each effectively renders her character the comic *subject* and sensibility at the center of the text in a way that resists misogynist and racist readings.<sup>121</sup>

Beyond their significance as contemporary examples of the “unruly woman” of comedy, the screen personas of Goldberg and Sykes break ground as rare representations of black female

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<sup>119</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>120</sup> Depictions such as the “masculinized crone” may be “coded with misogyny,” as Rowe argues, because “old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.” Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 31.

<sup>121</sup> Previously cited in the Interlude, see Rowe, *ibid.*, especially 60–91, for close analysis of Roseanne Arnold’s “carnavalesque body,” comic persona, authorship role, and avoidance of the “male point of view that informs most classics of the domestic sitcom genre” and that directs laughter “at women [emphasis in original]” (68, 81).



unruliness in a sitcom protagonist. Their programs question or avoid altogether certain enduring archetypes and derogatory stereotypes of black female unruliness in U.S. media, such as the “sassy” woman (see fig. 4.12), “Welfare Queen,” or “Big Mama,” and do so without preferring dignified representations and positive counter-stereotyping as the alternative. Consequently, these sitcoms like *Roseanne* allow for, if not privilege, a female gaze—and indeed a Black female gaze. Within the narratives, Mavis and Wanda are in some respects, including socioeconomic status, more agential than the struggling Roseanne Connor of early seasons.<sup>122</sup> Both shows’ claim on relevance is rooted in their engagement with the cultural politics of class, gender, and race, as with *Roseanne*, but also their overtly topical themes.

Significantly, with Mavis and Wanda it is their unchecked political speech and appetite for confrontation that marks these heroines as especially unruly. Rowe says of the unruly woman, “Through her body, her speech, and her laughter, *especially in the public sphere*, she creates a disruptive spectacle of herself [emphasis added].”<sup>123</sup> It is precisely into the public forum that *Whoopi* and *Wanda at Large* thrust the “outspoken” female comedian as a representative of comic dissent in national discussions of party politics and public policy. Such topicality is atypical of the subgenre, focusing on political discourse and current affairs to a degree not seen since *Murphy Brown* in the 1990s. Goldberg and Sykes are writer-producers with (as Goldberg proclaimed) *something to say*, and their express political focus encodes the ironic and comic-grotesque dimensions of their sitcoms with fairly overt appeals to social “relevance.”

In sum, whereas the lad dad comedies were chiefly vehicles for minority male stand-up comics talking smack to family members in predominantly domestic settings, *Whoopi* and *Wanda*

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<sup>122</sup> Gray, *Watching Race*, 90–91, stresses that multiculturalist discourses in television comedy and drama present “Black Subjects” who resist “the hegemonic gaze of whiteness” even when privileging middle-class perspectives.

<sup>123</sup> Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 31.

*at Large* featured black “unruly women” of comedy raising hell and talking back to authority in the public forum. The latter shows’ failure to secure a beachhead in prime time testifies to the limits of acceptable representations in the post-9/11 moment.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, I have argued, *Whoopi*, together with *Wanda at Large* and *Luis*, stands out for its efforts to recuperate and rebrand multiculturalism by absolving it of the stigma of “political correctness.” These ethnicoms subvert the demand for dignified, “positive” representations and messages in ethnic-themed television programming, instead relishing “politically incorrect” representations and jokes. They dispense with role models, still to be found in the ethnic family comedies, and embrace cynicism (or like Jon Stewart, “disappointed idealism”) as the very basis for their sincerity.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, they more actively imagine a multiculturalist America, aspiring to accommodate a dynamic interplay of opinionated and dissenting voices. Judging by their ultimately disappointing ratings and limited runs, they did not set the trend for ethnic-themed humor moving forward so much as they pulled against dominant tropes and pushed in new directions for unity in difference and for sincerity in irony. As avowedly un-PC comedy, these shows are tonally similar to yet ideologically distinct from other sitcoms of the era using irony to ruminate on race relations.

### **“We’re All the Same, Only Different”**

For the most part, other “post-PC” sitcoms at the outset of the 2000s, especially those with predominantly white casts, continued to conflate the discourses of multiculturalism and political correctness. In this regard, the ethnicoms of 2003 are a compelling contrast to ironic takes on race and pretenses toward a post-racial society from the surrounding television seasons.

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<sup>124</sup> In a year marked by cancellations, the standout sitcom success story of 2003 is CBS’s frolicsome bachelor-com (with an all-white cast) *Two and a Half Men*, discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>125</sup> See Chapter 3’s account of Stewart’s comic stance on *The Daily Show*, alternately viewed by critics as cynicism or “disappointed idealism,” a term suggested in Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 121.

For example, drawing from FOX's prospective "best new shows"<sup>126</sup> of the 2001–02 season, episodes of *Greg the Bunny* from April 2002 and *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* from December 2002 attacked the multiculturalist ideal, one to celebrate laddish brotherhood at the expense of ethnic solidarity and the other lampooning celebrations of diversity and color blindness as naïve and contradictory marching orders befuddling white liberal America.

In "Greg Gets Puppish," protagonist and button-eyed hand puppet Greg the Bunny, beloved cast member of the fictional children's program *Sweetknuckle Junction*, is recruited by a "puppet power" organization (a thinly veiled caricature of African-American activism), whose charismatic leader instructs Greg to embrace his heritage and distance himself from his "Fleshie" (i.e. human) friends.<sup>127</sup> With this plotline, the humor hinges on a blatant trivialization of Black nationalism and separatist racial pride initiatives but manages simultaneously to get in subtle swipes at Bill Cosby, the premiere spokesperson for "positive" representations of racial harmony in American sitcom. This is achieved through the rather Cosbyfied figure of Greg's new mentor "Hurbada Hymina" (voiced by James Murray), head of the International Puppet Alliance, whose multicolored garb mimics the iconic Huxtable sweaters and whose Puppish patois, and name, imparts a deliberate silliness evocative of Cosby's trademark playful speech affectations (fig. 4.14). The conflict and disruption in the status quo caused by this reminder of Greg's cultural roots is easily resolved by episode's end when Greg (voiced by series co-creator Dan Milano) renounces his Puppish ways. Fed up with being a spokesman for difference, Greg casts off his

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<sup>126</sup> One review that praised FOX for delivering the year's "best new shows" *Andy Richter* and *Greg the Bunny*, on the heels of *Bernie Mac* and *The Tick* (2001–02), heralded these as quality comedy programming despite anticipated disappointing ratings, while citing Fox Television Entertainment Group chairman Sandy Grushow who singled out *Bernie Mac* as that season's best "genuine success" story. "Shows Can't Live by Quality Alone, Says Fox Exec," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 12, 2002, B16, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 24, 2004).

<sup>127</sup> *Greg the Bunny*, "Greg Gets Puppish," episode 1.4 (production no. 1AEV09), written by Paul Lieberstein and directed by Michael Spiller, first aired April 10, 2002, on FOX.

traditional garb and tosses aside his new Puppish-language television script, re-embracing English to declare loyalty to his human (Caucasian) friend and roommate Jimmy, with the clear message that friendship between best buds trumps identity politics and racial allegiance.<sup>128</sup> The bunny's change of heart is inspired by hearing Jimmy (Seth Green) leap to his defense with a supposedly stirring speech reminding *Sweetknuckle Junction*'s cast and crew that "humans have been mistreating puppets for centuries" (with false promises of tartar sauce, lollipops, and sparklers) and yet, "What's really at issue here is our friend, and how we're going to stick up for him."<sup>129</sup> Tonally this resolution rested on what critics had come to regard as "smirking" irony, while fully enacting a performance of sincerity and (homosocial supplanting racial) solidarity.

While *Greg the Bunny* dispenses with ethnic pride, *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* in an episode entitled "We're All the Same, Only Different" renders ridiculous the notions of both "diversity" and "color blindness."<sup>130</sup> These racial discourses are presented as futile and facile social scripts competing for dominance in corporate America. The title character, a technical writer for a company in the midst of an affirmative action hire, is subjected to sensitivity training and consequently grows "very sensitive about race." Determined to figure out "this race thing," Andy turns to his idealistic coworker and fellow Caucasian Byron (Jonathan Slavin), who educates him on the ways to be socially enlightened about race and blithely doles

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<sup>128</sup> This show is easily brought under the rubric of laddism. Beyond the focus on indivisible male roommates as the most significant relationship, the potential "laddish" thrust of the series is reinforced by its surface similarities to the ironic puppetry of *Unhappily Ever After* and to a lesser extent *Crank Yankers*, and by the presence in the cast of Sarah Silverman (a leading ladette of American comedy) and U.S. *Men Behaving Badly*'s Dina Waters.

<sup>129</sup> Again, this is typical of American sitcom's well-documented bias toward individualism, and tendency to posit the cause and solution for social problems like racism at the interpersonal rather than structural level. See Newcomb and Hirsch's "Television as a Cultural Forum," which points out that "Traditional ideological criticism, constructed from the communications or the textual analysis perspective, would remark on the way in which social conflict is ultimately subordinated in [a show's] dramatic structure to the personal, the emotional" (460).

<sup>130</sup> *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, "We're All the Same, Only Different," episode 2.1 (production no. 011), written by series creator Victor Fresco and directed by Andy Ackerman, first aired December 1, 2002, on FOX.

out nuggets of wisdom about “not *seeing*” color and yet “celebrating our differences.”<sup>131</sup> This advice backfires as Andy struggles to persuade his new girlfriend Jackie (guest star Dawnn Lewis) that she need not make her “Irish” heritage known (fig. 4.15). The story strategically ignores this character’s more obvious racial identity as African-American to accentuate the irony of its structuring joke about the invisibility of race. Jackie’s insistence that Andy “embrace and celebrate” her uniqueness adds to his distress, as he attempts to sift through contradictory ideals and solve the race riddle: “How are we supposed to celebrate our differences if we can’t *see* them?”



Figure 4.14.

Under the sway of radical puppet reform activist Hurbada Hymina (shown here), children’s television star Greg the Bunny demands that his producers rewrite his show in the Puppish language and call him by his Puppish name, Bizzelburp. “Greg Gets Puppish,” *Greg the Bunny*, originally aired April 10, 2002, on FOX.

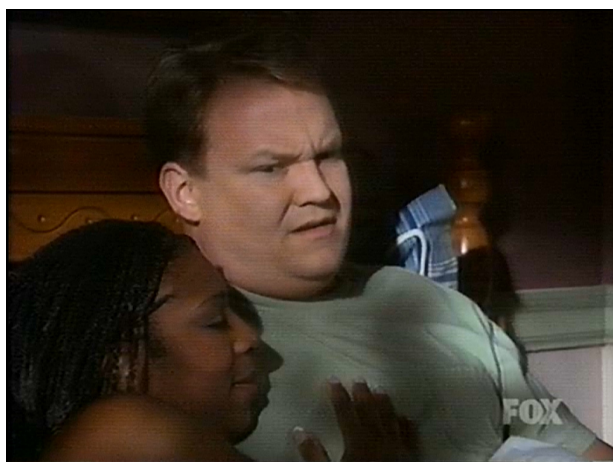


Figure 4.15.

Andy’s storybook romance is doomed from the moment his new girlfriend (*A Different World*’s Dawnn Lewis) asks him to celebrate her roots as a “proud Irish woman.” “We’re All the Same, Only Different,” *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, originally aired December 1, 2002, on FOX.

<sup>131</sup> Jokes about sensitivity training, or indoctrination into socially acceptable ways of thinking and speaking about race and sex in the workplace, remain a popular premise since the 1990s for humor attacking “political correctness.” A later example is *Rescue Me*, “Sensitivity,” episode 2.5, first aired July 19, 2005, on FX, discussed briefly in Chapter 6.

Andy's training is complete when he finally comprehends that he must "ignore as well as celebrate what makes Jackie exactly the same and completely different from everyone else." Addled by the sheer nonsense of this lesson, Andy convinces himself, "That didn't make any sense, and yet I knew it was *the right thing to do*." Shrugging off the core dilemma, the episode presents engagement with the underlying questions of multiculturalism as a contradictory set of empty gestures, and equates multiculturalism with color blindness as equally simplistic discourses doomed to failure.

Structural similarities drive the irony in these stories. Firstly, the hyperbolic sincerity of the protagonists on these shows amounts to a travesty, a carnivalizing of television sitcom representations of earnestness and narratives of personal growth. Secondly, these episodes both carry forward the ironic sensibility of a *Seinfeld* or *Married... With Children* while also including formal irony as double-layered speech, with "Puppish" and "Irish" as code for "Black" in both instances. Embedded in this central joke about speaking in code, which marks both episodes as clever, is a further attack on "PC"-speak as a mode of discourse that forbids certain words and forces us into roundabout ways of speaking. Thirdly, and building on the initial point of commonality, there is ironic distance across programs between the passionate monologues made by characters and the position taken by the text itself. Main characters are marked as sincere but naïve. Both of the example episodes culminate in a lecture on "the right thing to do," absent the integrity assigned to *Lopez's* inner conflict over doing the right thing.

This earnestness ranging from textbook to bombastic to clueless extends to supporting characters. For example, Andy's colleague Keith (James Patrick Stuart), who "always says the right thing," is uncannily articulate about affirmative action, leaving the office team scrambling to agree with his 'correct' attitude, when he avers: "I think it's important to help those who historically have been denied opportunities based solely on their race. If it falls to us to correct

the deeds of generations past, well that's a responsibility *I* welcome." Indeed, secondary characters are the most likely to proselytize, as with Jimmy's tirade against the mistreatment of puppets or Byron's sermonettes on racial sensitivity. Such eloquent but empty speeches are sincere for the characters in a way that testifies most often to their naivety, and are consequently rendered ironic from the program's position of enunciation. In the first instance, the foregrounded corny lecture by Jimmy allows the program to mock the sitcom convention of a "moral" moments before it slips in its actual message, delivered in the form of philosophical exposition on friendship from Greg in voice-over narration stating that his heritage "just blows" if it cannot accommodate his assimilationist desires. The fact that both programs present their final message via voice-over narration by the main character plays with layering of voices (granted varying degrees of authority) in a manner that not only anchors but also pluralizes meaning.

As these and other "post-PC" sitcoms began reflexively foregrounding discourses of racial harmony and multiculturalism, the endgame was to deride liberal pluralist rhetoric as naivety, nuisance, or nonsense. When these "white" sitcoms used irony expressly to take on themes of racial "invisibility" or "diversity," they tended to deny racism and prejudice as ongoing problems and dwell on the finger-wagging of misguided, out-of-touch social reformers, kooky activists, and regular folk desperate to say (more so than do) the right thing. Only periodically visiting questions of race and ethnicity, these shows attached problematic discourses of "difference" to non-white characters external to the continuing situation, whose arrival disrupts the status quo and threatens to unsettle the comfortable philosophies and self-image of well-meaning white or fully ethnically assimilated characters by prompting them to be more conscious of "race."

Of my two examples, *Andy Richter* is more circumspect in its stance on race and does not entirely fall back on assimilationism as a convenient solution or offer an easy out to shut

down discussion. Rather, the narrative is about the nature of discursive struggle. In this regard, the episode exemplifies sitcom as a willing participant in the cultural forum as theorized by Newcomb and Hirsch, raising open-ended questions in a way that “*comments on ideological problems*” without offering “firm ideological conclusions.”<sup>132</sup> Even as the show avoids a resolute message on race, it is nevertheless strongly committed to affirming an anti- or post-PC agenda. This episode with its ersatz moral is meant as meta commentary, with PC and the white angst it provokes as the targets of the satire. Indeed, the story premise makes this assault felt from the opening scene explicitly invoking “political correctness,” with the white staff overcautiously deliberating on the company’s “politically correct” hiring initiative, a subplot laced with politically incorrect jokes about a “one-armed, gay, Native American, little person” and about Saudi Arabian women being stoned to death for owning modern conveniences. Recounting this storyline, one critic praised the show for “subverting the fatuous dictates of our politically correct culture.”<sup>133</sup> To the extent that this episode has a lesson, its protagonist is entirely incapable of learning it.

Such programming resembles the “nihilism” attributed to shows like *Seinfeld* and *Will & Grace* that purported to advocate nothing and regularly ridiculed the having of sincere political beliefs. As Chapter 6 explores further, however, a variety of ironic sitcoms of the 2000s would favor not snarky self-awareness in a protagonist but instead sweet and unself-conscious characters as the source and/or object of laughter, such that the irony is in the authorial perspective and not necessarily in the character. The point of enunciation shifts away from hip characters who

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<sup>132</sup> Newcomb and Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” 461; emphasis in original.

<sup>133</sup> Menon, “Fox Leads the Pack.” Menon bemoans the ethnic “mosaic” or “multiculturalist sitcom” as a trend on Canadian TV, arguing that “diversity” is divisive. In calling for more programming like “the assimilating Fox shows” *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* and *The Bernie Mac Show* (which he deems “essentially colour-blind”), Menon overlooks both *Andy Richter*’s stinging critique of the colorblind discourse and *Bernie Mac*’s celebration of distinctly African-American culture. Notably, as the author perceives in these programs a “progressive” message of assimilation, here the articulation of social progress to multiculturalism has been entirely inverted.



embody the “ironic” attitude. In such instances, with emphasis increasingly being placed on mode of storytelling and meta humor, irony would come to reside at the level of form and style more so than characterization.<sup>134</sup>

Emerging at a moment when irony was expressly being reconfigured, the ethnicoms of the early 2000s occupy a curious middle space with title characters who are permitted to care about something and to mean what they say, and consequently are offered more readily as points of identification for the viewer as opposed to objects of ridicule, all while continuing to privilege the figure of the snarky, cynical grump beloved of 1990s television. For each of the ethnicoms discussed in this chapter, the protagonist’s statements are overwhelmingly coded as cynical—and yet sincere—and are aligned with the sensibility of the program as a whole. Unlike the “white” ironic sitcoms of the early 2000s, these shows were poised to redeem and reaccent irony through a blend of claims to racialized or ethnic authenticity and political relevance, and were on the whole less reliant on a particular type of reflexivity of television ‘about’ television. As biting satire these shows were profiles in comic mettle for their stars, but they were not meta comedy on the order of *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, *Greg the Bunny*, *South Park*, or later in the decade *30 Rock* and *Community*. Certainly, the humor and rhetorical slant of the new ethnicoms participated in the questioning of bourgeois white liberalism, or even derision as occurs in the examples from *Luis* and *Wanda at Large*. However, we find in these texts neither a disavowal or discomfort with difference nor detachment from the sense that there are things that matter.

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<sup>134</sup> There are certainly notable exceptions, like the narrator protagonist of *Malcolm in the Middle* (FOX, 2000–06). Rather, I am referring to a general trend that includes *Greg the Bunny* and *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* alongside such programs as *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–06), *My Name Is Earl* (NBC, 2005–09), and others that walked the line with a balance of characters variously coded to accommodate an earnest and/or ironic sensibility such as *Scrubs* (NBC/ABC, 2001–10), *The Office* (NBC, 2005–13), *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–14), and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009–).

## Reflections on Race and Representation in an Age of “Post-PC” Comedy

In hindsight the 2000s are remembered as an era in which anti- and “post-PC comedy” thrived in television and popular culture, as it had done in the 1990s. Under the rubric of post-PC humor, almost anything goes provided it is rooted in irony; “incredibly offensive” stereotypes become permissible again when clearly designated as ironic, as the whimsical postmodern sitcom *30 Rock* demonstrated and celebrated in a 2008 episode featuring blackface and minstrelsy, as did comedian/director Ben Stiller’s Hollywood action comedy *Tropic Thunder* the same year.<sup>135</sup> Questions of “positive images” and progressive “recoding” of race cannot adequately accommodate this turn, a fact that has made traditional ideological criticism and democratic realism especially ill suited and out of fashion as analytical models for studies of contemporary comedy. Cracking the codes of such irony requires analysis that locates meaning both in and beyond textual surfaces of “representations” and “messages,” placing increasing emphasis on context, tone, slippery subtexts, and authorial voice and credibility.<sup>136</sup> The politics of racial representation

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<sup>135</sup> In *30 Rock*’s “Believe in the Stars” (episode 3.2, written by Robert Carlock and directed by Don Scardino, first broadcast November 6, 2008, by NBC), white actress Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski) appears in blackface and a men’s suit and her masculine African-American co-star Tracy Jordan (comedian Tracy Morgan) in whiteface and a blonde woman’s wig as a “social experiment” to “prove who has it harder in America, women or black men.” Upon seeing Jenna shuck and jive down the hall singing *The Wiz*’s “Ease on Down the Road,” the erudite black writer on staff (Keith Powell) scolds, “You realize this is *incredibly offensive*... blackface makeup reignites stereotypes African-Americans have worked for hundreds of years to overcome!” Overhearing this history lesson, rich white Republican network boss Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) rolls his eyes and mutters, “Here we go....” To settle the dispute, he then declares that white men have it harder than either women *or* blacks because “we make the unpopular, difficult decisions, the tough choices. ... And yet they resent us.” This conclusion, Jack’s self-serving victim narrative, is rendered ironic along with the rest of the dialogue, with no singular point of entry for a straight reading of scenes like this. In this example, the presumed socially liberal “quality” audience and satirical signature of writer-star Tina Fey and co-star Baldwin (noted liberals) fend against racist or sexist readings, and if that is not enough the presence of icon Oprah Winfrey as a guest star magnifies the comedy’s claim on tonal complexity and provides a sort of symbolic sanction or de facto blessing for the presence of ironized stereotypes. *30 Rock* was one of the few ironic sitcoms of the 2000s to comment openly on constructions of whiteness as a racial identity, as well, particularly in its first season, and one of several to self-consciously deploy stereotypes of white awkwardness as a running joke.

<sup>136</sup> As the Interlude discussed, cultural scholars since the 1980s have increasingly, and much more broadly, invoked culturally entrenched cynicism or postmodern irony to suggest that, in the words of Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 28–30, “the traditional critique of ideology no longer works.” “We can no longer subject the ideological text to ‘symptomatic reading,’” Žižek cautions, in an era when ideology does not presume “to be taken seriously.” Even in such a context, he reminds, we should be mindful of the ways in which “ideological fantasy” persists in shaping our collective social reality. (continued...)

and realism in the 2000s and beyond have been incrementally displaced in television and cultural criticism by growing emphasis on style, attitude, and taste fragments in acclaimed comedies such as *South Park*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Arrested Development*, and *30 Rock*. Often, this programming is regarded as beyond reproach, and indeed any critique of “racist” themes or images is readily dismissed as a failure to appreciate irony.

While there is much to commend sophisticated ironic sitcoms stretching from *Seinfeld* to *30 Rock* as cutting-edge and quality television, I would caution against uncritical acceptance of “post-PC comedy” in itself as a liberatory discourse.<sup>137</sup> Sitcoms in a “post-PC” ironic tradition are not inherently counter-hegemonic and, as some of this chapter’s examples including *George Lopez* and *Greg the Bunny* demonstrate, most certainly do have ideological implications that warrant scrutiny. As scholar Stephen Groening suggests in his critique of *South Park* as postmodern (and supposedly “postideological”) comedy, “Irony may be used as a tool to help viewers feel better about themselves and their position in society, but it does not neutralize the political consequences of representation.”<sup>138</sup> This “post-PC” era, then, signals a turning point for

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Here, again, H. Gray’s “Spectacles,” Schulman’s “Laughing Across the Color Barrier,” and Haggins’s “In the Wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie’” are useful models for their emphasis on discursive contexts of reception and on textual ambivalence, ambiguity, and other complexities introduced by ironic satire that limit the viability of textual analysis seeking to pin down meanings.

<sup>137</sup> As journalists in the United States and abroad adopted this label to characterize the general thrust of 2000s U.S. TV and film comedy, some were enthusiastic but others more circumspect, such as critic Jim Schembri whose article “What’s So Funny? How Comedy Can Make a Joke of Race,” *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), September 20, 2008, 7, marveled at the ironic use of blackface in *Tropic Thunder* and the audacity of racial humor in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *South Park*, and *Chappelle’s Show*, and speculated that Australia’s entertainment industry might be reluctant to join American and British comedians in the “post-PC era.”

<sup>138</sup> Stephen Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in *South Park*,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 120. Dissecting *South Park*’s postmodern humor targeting “political correctness and the politics of identity,” Groening credits that show’s irony with satirical potential to mock the “reductive” logic of stereotyping but stresses, “Excusing certain representations in a television program because the program makes fun of itself is a defense through misdirection. It is the equivalent of the rhetorical opening, ‘I’m not a racist, but...’ which is invariably followed by a racist statement. ... Postmodern irony creates the comfort of laughter in an impossible situation and excuses characterizing the situation as inevitable.”

television studies of race and ethnicity, in which it becomes necessary to revisit and retheorize the stakes for comedic representation.

The discourse hailing an era of “post-PC comedy” as the triumph of transgressive chic in American comedy has worked in part to obscure the particular ideological investments of ironic texts, and perhaps also the uses of ironic programming by various interpretive communities. The “post-PC” designation emphasizes expressions of comic boldness, valorizing the use of irony in wars of position against the celebrated threat of political correctness. Thus, this discourse potentially assigns a broad set of programs a primary rhetorical, cultural, and political significance *as* irony, more so than calling attention to how texts work as ironic commentary or critique in the service of specific social and political interests. The conscription of irony as already-already “post-PC” not only works to collapse disparate programs into a few overlapping political and industrial impulses, but also positions irony in a cultural narrative that takes as its premise the hard-won liberation from political correctness. Moreover, the “post-PC” label (supplanting the concept of “anti-PC” in the 2000s) bears connotations of having moved beyond entrenched systems of oppression, and consequently it performs a historical erasure of the cultural backlash against feminism and various civil rights movements that so heavily underwrote the discourse of “political incorrectness,” and particularly lad irony, in the 1990s.<sup>139</sup> This now dominant discourse continues to invoke the specter of knee-jerk “PC” liberalism as comic enemy number one, and affords comedians a platform on which to stand for expressive and comedic freedoms that, the prevalence of politically incorrect humor suggests, are not particularly endangered. Surveying the sprawling empire that irony has established in television comedy, we may lose sight of the points of distinction that account for the push and pull between “regressive” versus “progressive,”

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<sup>139</sup> Indeed, the term anti-PC more adequately captures the oppositional nature of much comic discourse.

or dominant-hegemonic versus subversive, uses of irony, whether in the shifting contours of laddism and post-feminism, anti-/post-PC, or post-9/11 humor.

## Conclusions

Whereas established network sitcoms largely retrofitted their formulas and conformed to life after 9/11 with signifiers of patriotism and a cautious avoidance of politics, the comedian-driven new multiculturalist and new family sitcoms brought infusions of topical humor and broke with the detached cynicism of the *Seinfeld* era to grapple with themes of social injustice, political freedoms, and class tensions while negotiating between ethnic and national pride. Although “Ground Zero multiculturalism” as a basis for sitcom did not earn the same critical praise as the “lad dad” comedies, and as a programming trend was a mere blip on the cultural radar, it too proved a significant transitional moment in hashing out the terms of post-9/11 irony. Comedy programming in these seasons saw many ratings casualties, with *Luis*, *Wanda at Large*, and *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* as bids to bounce back after *Greg the Bunny*, *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, *Family Guy*, *Titus*, and a raft of other cancellations during a stretch that one critic at *The Boston Globe* had deemed “an identity crisis” for the ever “provocative” FOX network.<sup>140</sup> Such experiments reflected a larger period of recalibration.

By the 2003 and 2004 seasons it was nevertheless clear that the new sincerity had not edged out irony. Indeed, irony and caustic humor seemed to be on the upswing with the programs built on the reputations of edgy comics like Bernie Mac, George Lopez, Wanda Sykes, and Whoopi Goldberg. These sitcoms set about answering the question, what will the new irony, the sincere and engaged irony, look like in practice? It seemed the reformed irony would have a

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<sup>140</sup> Suzanne C. Ryan, “For Fox, a New Reality as Its Longtime Hits ‘Ally McBeal’ and ‘X-Files’ Near the End, Some Wonder How the Network Will Regroup,” *Boston Globe*, May 16, 2002, D1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed January 9, 2012).

heart but not worn on its sleeve. It would have a political voice (to varying degrees) but, as much as possible, retain the former irony's taste for "shock jock" and "brash" humor. It would continue to be cynical, but in some cases reclaim cynicism for political dissent rather than disengaged apathy. Cutting and insult humor would still be used to keep political correctness at arm's length, as will be explored further in the remaining chapters. But these comedies were sincere in their own way, seeking to repair irony rather than repair to the earnestness or didacticism of the prior era. Together, these programs began to close the gap in the discourses of the "new sincerity" and the newly "engaged" irony.

Turning to youth-oriented cable comedy of the same period where a similar set of negotiations was taking place, the next chapter considers *South Park* as a special case, exploring the provocative postmodern sitcom's reputation and critical reception in the early to mid-2000s, and that of its network Comedy Central, as an increasingly politically charged site of subversive irony. With its carnivalesque take on divisive social politics and life in America, *South Park* in particular leveraged ironic ambiguity and omnidirectional laughter in ways that would curry favor with young conservatives and significantly complicate the right's rhetorical stance on irony and vision for a New Sincerity. Comedy Central's animated cash cow performed ironic engagement for the "Gen-X" set, side by side with the sharp news satire of Stewart and Colbert in the late night comedy schedule, yet inspired its own discursive niche and rival reading formations as the champion of politically incorrect irreverence in the culture wars.

## Chapter 5

**Comedy in the Culture Wars: The Case of *South Park* Conservatism**

These days, wherever politics goes, comedy follows.  
Or maybe ... it's the other way around.

— *New York Times* reporter Bruce Weber, 2004<sup>1</sup>

As the War on Terror launched another round in the “culture wars,” comedic irony became one of the spoils that conservatives and liberals warred over in the 2000s. In spite of the persistent pleas to rid the airwaves of cynical ironists, irony remained a lucrative means for programmers and advertisers to access youth markets and thus attracted political interests eyeing those same viewers as potential swing demographics. Politicians and pundits increasingly saw satirical cable comedies including *South Park* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as influential voices in the public forum garnering the loyalty of young viewers—and voters. Despite the use of humor in these programs to target all sides in matters of public debate, political factions were eager to recruit these and other cultural texts with an ironic sensibility, and their viewers, into an expressly conservative or liberal agenda. Thus, efforts to discipline and rehabilitate irony in American media and culture, as seen with the condemning of so-called “detached” or “glib” irony and calls for a more “engaged” irony discussed in Chapter 3, were paralleled in certain instances by attempts to *fix* irony in the alternate sense—that is, to stabilize the meanings of ironic texts and of the consumption of those texts.

This chapter considers the phenomenon of “South Park Conservatism” as a case study in the changing uses and perceptions of comedic irony in national political discourse during the 2000s. Throughout its run, Comedy Central’s breakout hit *South Park* has remained a key text for

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Weber, “Strategy and Spin Are Cool, but Voters Like to Laugh,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/08/arts/strategy-and-spin-are-cool-but-voters-like-to-laugh.html>.

getting at irony's openness to divergent interpretations and the knitting of irony into the fabric of American politics and culture. Despite the program's and its creators' claims to be nonpartisan in their approach to topical satire, praise for *South Park* somewhat surprisingly began steadily to emerge from certain right-leaning constituencies in the culture wars. The publication of Brian C. Anderson's *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* in 2005 brought to mainstream attention selectively conservative readings of cable's preeminent "equal opportunity offender." In his book and other publications, Anderson welcomed what he identified as the comedic subversion of liberal media, as exemplified by *South Park*, and his argument is emblematic of recent attempts to profit politically from and rein in openness in irony by instructing audiences in the proper terms for consumption of the national comedic conversation. As with proclamations of irony's demise and "the new sincerity" that followed, such efforts seek to shut down the semiotic ambiguities structured into irony. However, the same slipperiness that makes irony so industrially and politically profitable, I argue, also renders it largely impervious to such attempts to fence in meaning and discipline comedy and audiences.

My analysis approaches South Park Conservatism as a discursive formation that remained somewhat in flux in the early and mid 2000s, during which time this category was continually contested and negotiated by onlookers as well as self-identified *South Park* viewers/fans. Articulations of South Park Conservatism served not only as motivation for rigorous scrutiny into the encoded meanings of *South Park* itself (and other works by its co-creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone)—inciting popular 'analysis' of and attention to the show's ideological thrust to a much greater degree than is typical for television comedies—but also became a productive site for extensive debate over the political loyalties of American youth and their penchant for either cynicism or engagement. I argue that *South Park* and an array of other comedy products in its orbit that were branded as ironic, irreverent, and politically incorrect rapidly acquired a newfound



reputation for *relevance* (political and social) that they likely lacked in the pre-9/11 context. Some of the same comedy texts, writers, and performers who previously stood as exemplars of a cynical, detached ironic ethos were in effect recuperated and brought firmly under the mantle of engaged political satire, such that “hip” television irony was poised to acquire a markedly different significance in public discourse. In their attempts to seize on *South Park* as signaling a rising conservative youth movement and “major rightward shift”<sup>2</sup> in U.S. popular culture, as I will discuss, Anderson and his confederates also drew heavily on the oppositional comic currency of American laddism with its aggressive strains of anti-“PC” humor, in effect seeking to conform this evolving trend to their desired political agenda.

While South Park Conservatives certainly do not have the final say on the slippery meanings of this text, those asserting and identifying with such a group warrant attention as an influential interpretive community.<sup>3</sup> Here is a telling instance in which we must look beyond the text-viewer encounter, and beyond authorial intent and audience decodings, to examine the role that secondary discourses play in shaping a program’s political purchase, ideological meanings, and social significance. Even while conservatives’ proprietary claim on the show’s humor generated much disagreement, proponents of South Park Conservatism effectively shifted the nature of national discussion about this particular program, and about the place of comedy in the public forum and political discourse. The outpouring of rhetoric bent on designating *South Park* as a coup for Republicans and Libertarians impacted public perception of the series and invited intense speculation about the political values of the show’s creators and its fan base.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald J. Russello, “Exposing Liberal Pieties,” review of *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* by Brian C. Anderson, *Washington Times*, May 3, 2005, A15, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For my purposes, I approach “South Park Conservatives” as both a discursive construct mobilized by bloggers and journalists and a self-defined subset of fans upholding that discourse. While advocates for this group apply the label rather broadly, I aim to avoid sweeping proclamations about viewers who do not expressly take up this identity.

What follows in the first and main section of this chapter is an extended examination of the discourse on South Park Conservatism, including the key tropes and tensions in political circles surrounding the shift in cultural temperament invoked by this label. I then turn from conservative viewpoints to competing political readings of *South Park* to consider how groups with differing values locate meaning in the text, and finally, address reasons why scholars in cultural studies and other fields with a broadly progressive politics have simultaneously taken an interest in this program as political television and “oppositional” culture. While I place myself within this latter interpretive community, I argue that scholarly readings have in their own ways worked to discipline the unruly text marked by “postmodern” and “unstable” ironies.

For scholars looking to comedy to provide incisive and subversive social and political critique, the “instability” of irony presents a highly problematic and unreliable delivery system.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade television scholarship on cable comedy programs has participated in rearticulating an ideal of engaged (if not stable) irony, calling for and championing political humor with directed satire and oppositional or anti-hierarchical discourse thought to foster democratic modes of civic engagement. The chapter explores how the repositioning of irony in both popular and scholarly discourse as a new form of social relevance throughout this period (in contrast to the *Seinfeld* era with irony’s reputation as a vehicle of anti-relevance in comedy) involves foregrounding its role as a rhetorical mode in the service of political satire or satirical parody. I examine the growing emphasis on concepts of truth and democracy resurfacing, in critical theory and in comedy programming itself, that are in tension with existing televisual and theoretical models of postmodern irony.

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2. This chapter’s argument refers to stable and unstable ironies. Wayne C. Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) theorizes this distinction in depth, and I discuss his definitions in the Interlude.

Often cited in contrast to *South Park* in the culture wars, Comedy Central's Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert remain central examples in critical debate over the shifting terrain of postmodern irony. The chapter concludes with a look at the comic politics and critical reception of their brand of satiric news, engaging with scholarly interrogation of the invested ironic persona as a basis for purposeful or "serious" comedy. Recent scholarship illuminating these comedians' respective approaches suggests that, despite their differing ironic styles, their combined influential brand of political humor is defined by a shared sense of urgency, agency, and moral accountability rooted in a necessary recoil from the postmodern worldview that gave us "truthiness." We will revisit these celebrated leaders in parodic news to consider key current arguments that update and refocus established critiques of postmodernism introduced in the first half of this work, and explore the implications and aspirations they call into focus for irony going forward.

### **Jokers to the Right**

It is political correctness when the Left is allowed to insult and make fun of people on the right, but the Right is not allowed to do the same to leftists.

— Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America's Future*, 2005<sup>5</sup>

The powerful rhetoric of national unity in the shadow of 9/11 spurred a short-lived ceasefire in the "culture wars" that divide the nation ideologically along party lines. Americans' shared outrage had brought a certain unity of purpose to discussions of national defense, but the culture wars quickly regained momentum with competing claims of media bias surrounding the global War on Terror. From the left were heard accusations that the right had too long exploited the myth of Liberal Media Bias to shield the right-wing agenda from scrutiny and to camouflage

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America's Future* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 170.

a growing conservative bias within transnational media conglomerates. Within two years of 9/11, conservatives began to acknowledge and openly celebrate a rightward “turn” in American news and entertainment media.

Brian C. Anderson, as senior editor of *City Journal*, in autumn 2003 assured his conservative readers, “We’re Not Losing the Culture Wars Anymore.” Anderson’s essay, so titled, envisioned the liberal media fracturing under the demand for “multiculti sensitivity,” and predicted that the result would be “broader national debate—and a more conservative America.”<sup>6</sup> Sources ranging from *National Review* to *The New York Times* also reported on the remarkable efficiency of the conservative media machine.<sup>7</sup> According to Anderson, “The Left’s near monopoly over the institutions of opinion and information” was at last “skidding to a startlingly swift halt”:

The transformation has gone far beyond the rise of conservative talk radio, that, ever since Rush Limbaugh’s debut 15 years ago, has chipped away at the power of the *New York Times*, the networks, and the rest of the elite media to set the terms of the nation’s political and cultural debate. Almost overnight, three huge changes in communications have injected conservative ideas right into the heart of that debate. ... [T]hey add up to a revolution: no longer can the Left keep conservative views out of the mainstream or dismiss them with bromide instead of argument. Everything has changed.<sup>8</sup>

The three watershed events that Anderson credited with spontaneously eroding liberal media dominance were the rise of cable television, the blogging culture of the Internet, and conservative

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson argued that “the non-liberal sphere is expanding, encroaching into the liberal sphere, which is both shrinking and breaking up into much smaller sectarian spheres—one for blacks, one for Hispanics, one for feminists, and so on.” Brian C. Anderson, “We’re Not Losing the Culture Wars Anymore,” *City Journal* 13, no. 4 (autumn 2003): 14–30, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 29, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *NRO*’s John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge attributed the right’s success less to the *popularity* of American conservatism than its *cohesion* as an organized movement, in their editorial “The Right Rules. Conservatism Goes to the Heart of What it Means to be an American,” *National Review Online*, June 16, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (also available archived at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1154625/posts>). David Brooks in *The New York Times* remarked that conservative media “cohered to form a dazzlingly efficient ideology delivery system that swamps liberal efforts to get their ideas out,” quoted in John Leo, “A Surprising Jog to the Right,” *U.S. News & World Report* 135, no. 18 (November 23, 2003): 64, LexisNexis Academic (both accessed September 29, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, “We’re Not Losing.”

book publishing.<sup>9</sup> The conservative *coup d'état* of cable television is Rupert Murdoch's FOX News Channel, but alongside the "Foxification of cable news" Anderson devoted several pages in *City Journal*, and a chapter of his 2005 book, to cable comedy as a hotbed of the "hippest" anti-liberalism, citing such programs as Comedy Central's *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* (2002–04) and *South Park*.<sup>10</sup> He focused on cable's niche marketing as carving out profitable terrain for right-leaning humor to thrive, asserting that network television comedy had been churning out "jokes primarily aimed at conservatives" for over three decades (his account draws a line from Lear's *All in the Family* and *Maude* to Goldberg's *Whoopi* and ignores everything in between).<sup>11</sup> Cable comedy straight-shooters Dennis Miller and Colin Quinn were among those Anderson praised for being "unapologetically hawkish in the War on Terror" and echoing FOX News with their berating of liberal sanctimony and anyone protesting the war.<sup>12</sup>

As for *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, who rarely shoot straight but frequently take aim at the sacred cows of right-wing ideology, Anderson awarded them the status of honorary conservatives by virtue of their being "anti-liberal" and "anti-PC." Following former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan, who had recently endorsed *South Park* and coined the

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *ibid.*, characterized the "blogosphere" as an open arena where populist (conservative) polemics can circumvent elitist (left-wing) "gatekeepers" who manipulate the flow of news and information in print and broadcast media. He praised professional and amateur commentator websites such as *Drudge Report*, *National Review Online*, and blogs including *Andrew Sullivan* and *InstaPundit* for their passion and candor, along with netizen-consumers who post their own book reviews in Amazon.com's "truly democratic marketplace of ideas."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* The rise of FOX News was especially significant given the emerging perception that 9/11 had "ended the dominance of network TV news, giving the edge to cable news," as reported by Paul Bedard, "CNN, Fox News Eclipse Big Three Nets After 9/11," *U.S. News & World Report*, 137, no. 10 (September 27, 2004): 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed August 25, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Apparently, *Whoopi* touched a nerve; he invokes her sitcom repeatedly as a contrast to *South Park*. Brian C. Anderson quoted in "South Park Conservatives: Subversive Humor Spills into Mainstream," *MSNBC TV: Morning Joe*, April 27, 2005, [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7658026/ns/msnbc\\_tv-morning\\_joe/t/south-park-conservatives/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7658026/ns/msnbc_tv-morning_joe/t/south-park-conservatives/). See also Anderson's "South Park Republicans," *Dallas Morning News*, April 15, 2005, [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/\\_dmn\\_southpark\\_reps.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/_dmn_southpark_reps.htm) (both accessed August 2008); and his *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), 99.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, "We're Not Losing."

term “South Park Republicans” on his weblog in recognition of the show’s devoted following of young conservatives, Anderson saluted *South Park* as a valuable ally to Republicans.<sup>13</sup> The crude and vitriolic humor of episodes like “Rainforest Schmainforest” (1999) and “Cripple Fight” (2001) was, he contended, a perfect weapon against the political correctness espoused by bleeding-heart liberals:

Many conservatives have attacked *South Park* for its exuberant vulgarity, calling it “twisted,” “vile trash,” a “threat to our youth.” Such denunciations are misguided. Conservative critics should play closer attention to what *South Park* so irreverently jeers at and mocks. As the show’s co-creator, 32-year-old Matt Stone, sums it up: “I hate conservatives, but I really fucking hate liberals.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, as a tactical move in the culture wars Anderson entreated Republicans to seize upon the outpouring of anti-liberal sentiment in popular culture regardless of whether or not consistently pro-conservative messages or values were in evidence; that is, cultural products did not need to be conservative, they just needed to be anti-liberal.

Although Anderson’s specific argument was that the right was finally “encroaching” on the giants of liberal media, his critics took this claim as a long overdue admission of the right’s considerable influence over culture and the media. For example, political commentator and *Slate* columnist Timothy Noah simultaneously welcomed the right’s admission (in his view belated) that “it won the culture wars” and responded by laying the blame for “crude beliefs and cultural trends” of the nihilistic nineties at the right’s feet.<sup>15</sup> “Conservatives chortle over their seizure of

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “South Park Republicans Are the Future,” *Sunday Times*, December 21, 2003, cited in Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, xiv–xv.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, “We’re Not Losing.” This statement by Stone, spoken when he and creative partner Trey Parker accepted an award from Norman Lear’s progressive advocacy group the People for the American Way in 2001, is widely quoted as the original inspiration for the term South Park Republicans.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Noah’s “The Right Declares Victory: It Finally Admits It Won the Culture Wars,” November 10, 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/chatterbox/2003/11/the\\_right\\_declares\\_victory.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/chatterbox/2003/11/the_right_declares_victory.html) (accessed August 25, 2008) noted that “liberalism has been in retreat for a good quarter-century” and maintained, “No one can plausibly claim that liberals continued to exert greater influence than conservatives over the culture through the 1990s.”

the youth culture,” Noah chided, but he wagered that the children of *South Park* gleefully singing that the rainforest “truly sucks ass” are not “particularly flattering to conservatism” if considered as icons.<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of the relentlessly transgressive *South Park* as a conservative cultural text that caters to “a new breed of kid that isn’t afraid to embrace conservatism,” as suggested by youth-market trend shapers like Vice corporation co-founder Gavin McInnes, is examined in greater detail in the next section.<sup>17</sup> This reassessment of *South Park* was central to conservative imaginings of the role of comedic “cynicism” in public debate, but such talk of humor and irony invigorating the right did not begin and end with *South Park*.

More broadly, the irony and cynicism condemned as anti-American in the months after 9/11 were eventually rearticulated in conservative discourse as valid and effective means of sparring with the liberal opposition. As Jonah Goldberg wrote in *National Review Online* on the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., when he argued for “redirected” cynicism: “We’ve turned our skepticism and cynicism... away from institutions which make our nation great and pointed it at the false pieties and hateful-yet-fashionable propaganda which says America is somehow inferior to every crapulent backwater and European debating society alike.”<sup>18</sup> The “engaged” irony practiced by liberal and centrist political comedians discussed in Chapter 3 was resisted on the right by efforts to assert politically engaged irony increasingly as a conservative cultural practice. For this articulation,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. The implication that conservatives would seize upon the characters of *South Park* as embodying their values somewhat misapprehends the South Park Conservatives’ position, which is presumably not interested in turning young Republicans into Eric Cartman (the cartoon’s nihilist bad boy) so much as making allies of those cultural producers and audiences positioned to bait and berate the liberal opposition.

<sup>17</sup> Gavin McInnes quoted in Anderson, “We’re Not Losing.” The Vice corporation, a “youth culture brand” purporting to infuse capitalism with punk-rock attitude, publishes hipster lad rag *Vice Magazine* (discussed below) and markets cutting-edge fashion, music, and entertainment to teens and twentysomethings “disgusted with the Left.”

<sup>18</sup> Previously cited in Chapter 3, Jonah Goldberg, “What’s So Funny about Peace, Love & Understanding,” *National Review Online*, September 11, 2002, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 28, 2004).

political incorrectness (long associated with the practice of comedic irony) and anti-liberalism were compatible or even interchangeable labels. In laying claim to the ironic aesthetics of certain strains of contemporary comedy as triumphantly right-of-center, American conservatism worked from the existing caricature of “PC” earnestness. Such earnestness was already conflated with liberalism, thus irony *qua* anti-PC humor was readily incorporated into conservative rhetoric and cultural criticism.

The notion that “political incorrectness” was a cultural push predominantly anti-liberal in its sweep, although occasionally noted, was a factor long downplayed by the mainstream press and until this point an argument rarely heard from the right. As we have seen, feminist critiques of the irony found in 1990s comedies like *The Man Show*, and to some extent hits on the order of *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld*, regarded these cultural products as part of the backlash against feminism and multiculturalism, but because such comedies were also an attack on the discourse of “family values” they were slow to attract conservative approval. In fact, social conservatives were among the most outspoken critics. With the rise of the so-called South Park Republicans, however, conservative media criticism was no longer the province of the Parents Television Council or housewife-activists like Terry Rakolta, but increasingly became the domain of the boys of the blogosphere.

This is a key shift where the conservative bloc comes to see itself as *making* popular culture rather than needing protection from popular culture. Populist conservative bloggers like Matt Drudge and Andrew Sullivan were finding fame as witty provocateurs in their own right. “Conventional liberalism is the old, rigid establishment. The antiliberals are brash, funny, and cool,” exulted *U.S. News & World Report* in an article by conservative John Leo affirming anti-liberalism as the “new paradigm in pop culture.” To corroborate the left’s former monopoly on



media culture, Leo offered this piece of anecdotal evidence: “I once asked a thoughtful liberal friend: ‘Why does the message of the left seem to penetrate the whole of pop culture?’ His answer—‘We make the culture; you don’t’—doesn’t seem so obvious now.” Under the banner of “antiliberal humor,” Leo saw the fraternity of “mostly young and often very funny” Internet commentators including Jonah Goldberg, Mark Steyn, and Jeff Jacoby, among others, working alongside cable television comedians like Miller and Quinn to ensure “democratization of the media” by bringing “broader and fairer” debate. While not exactly proceeding in lockstep with this movement, *South Park* was once again named as “the showpiece of antiliberal humor” and the template text for this new paradigm.<sup>19</sup>

With the formation of South Park Republicanism as a political discursive construct, ironist-iconoclasts Trey Parker and Matt Stone rather suddenly and unexpectedly acquired a legitimized voice in the political forum. They went from being viewed foremost as vulgarians—“lowbrow and proud of it”<sup>20</sup>—to fearless advocates for free speech and the free market. The “lowbrow” and “puerile” *South Park* was elevated from its status as *deviant* comedy, seen as having the power to corrupt youth and spread apathy, to *democratic* comedy, seen as having the power to mobilize or at least motivate young voters and impart a shared set of conservative (politically and economically, if not necessarily socially) values.

Before mapping out the contours of South Park Republicanism/Conservatism as a loosely defined “growing political and social force,”<sup>21</sup> I want to stress the productive polysemy of this cultural text and clarify that I will not in the end be asserting a correct political reading of

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<sup>19</sup> Leo, “Surprising Jog to the Right.”

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Lim, “Lowbrow and Proud of It; ‘South Park’ Is the Biggest Thing in American Animation Since ‘The Simpsons’—Only It’s Cruder, and All About Children, and Punkishly Rude,” *The Independent* (London), March 29, 1998, 26, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Russello, “Exposing Liberal Pieties,” A15.

the program as many have endeavored to do. In the words of media scholar Ethan Thompson, “Nailing down the politics of *South Park* is a tricky—perhaps ultimately futile—exercise.”<sup>22</sup> While media scholarship today comports with Anderson’s assessment that TV’s post-network era creates spaces including Comedy Central where sharper niche-oriented satire can flourish that need not conform to the Big Three network model historically built on mass-appeal programming, scholars also illuminate the industrial incentives for encouraging multiple and even contradictory pleasures in cable comedy programming.<sup>23</sup> The structured ambiguity of irony remains central to the *South Park* brand and other aggressively politically incorrect humor of the past two decades. As Thompson points out, *South Park*’s political polyvalence made it a vehicle ideally suited to attract Comedy Central’s sought-after demographic of males 18-to-34, a taste fragment noted for sharing a rebellious cultural sensibility while differing in their political attitudes. Appealing to this core audience, Comedy Central’s signature show cuts across ideological lines with a “profound antiestablishment attitude and mocking of self-righteousness throughout the political and cultural spectrum,” as Thompson contends, “creating points of identification that may make the program meaningful in different ways for *South Park* conservatives *and* liberals.”<sup>24</sup> I return to academic perspectives on the tactical polyvalence of *South Park* and “oppositional potential”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ethan Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste: *South Park* as Carnavalesque Satire,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 214.

<sup>23</sup> Gray et al.’s *Satire TV* includes compelling case studies addressing niche markets and cable’s role in opening new spaces for risky humor in the post-network media environment. In addition to Thompson’s chapter, see Jeffrey P. Jones, “With All Due Respect: Satirizing Presidents from *Saturday Night Live* to *Lil’ Bush*,” 37–63; Heather Osborne-Thompson, “Tracing the ‘Fake’ Candidate in American Television Comedy,” 64–82 (see 77); and, referenced in the previous chapter, Bambi Haggins, “In the Wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie’: Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy,” 233–51.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 215.

<sup>25</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 17, quoted in Ted Goumelos, *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics: Cultural Studies and the Tao of South Park* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), 1.

of its humor later in this chapter, after first exploring the meanings staked out by avowedly conservative readings of this text and of its ironic ethos.

*Rebranding Republicanism: G.O.P. Pundits Lay Claim to South Park*

Everyone wants to label everything.

— Trey Parker on producing “satire,” 2000<sup>26</sup>

Comedy Central’s *South Park* has been repeatedly designated an “equal opportunity offender,” a phrase attributed to the show by its creators and widely circulated by the press and fans due to Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s well-documented writing philosophy that “you have to offend everybody and you can’t draw any lines.”<sup>27</sup> Since its debut with the scatologically themed August 1997 episode “Cartman Gets and Anal Probe,” the calculatedly crude adult animated series has been best known for its unflinching assault on middlebrow values. When *South Park* began its run, it belonged to a tradition of postmodern-ironic comedy precipitated by FOX’s *Married... With Children*, MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and USA’s *Duckman: Private Dick/Family Man*, noted for their status as controversial television as much as for their novelty as next-generation sitcoms or anti-sitcoms. Such comedies throughout the 1990s were, as Chapter 1 discussed, denounced by a fair number of social conservatives and liberals alike and the mainstream press as a virulent strain of nihilism, cynicism, and incivility. Like these antecedent texts, *South Park* was nonetheless applauded by television critics for formal innovation and fearless satire, even as it fed social anxieties about ironic detachment and the “dumbing down” of entertainment.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Andrew Collins, “Dead Funny,” an interview with Trey Parker and Matt Stone, *Empire* (U.K.), no. 132 (June 2000): 93; they discuss comedy influences, genre, and their reactions to being called satirists.

<sup>27</sup> The team claims that their integrity as comics requires they neither deem any group off-limits nor make apologies or concessions to groups who protest their treatment on the show. Matt Stone, quoted in Scott Mervis, “Generation Next? The Third-Graders of ‘South Park’ Are Spreading Like a Virus,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pennsylvania), May 22, 1998, 39, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

Critics responding to the early pronouncements about South Park Conservatism reminded that this program known foremost for its gleeful offensiveness and grotesquerie was “routinely condemned by conservative watchdogs”<sup>28</sup> and “right-leaning cultural scolds.”<sup>29</sup> Writing nine months after *South Park*’s debut, conservative political essayist and religious activist David Klinghoffer carried on this tradition when he complained in *National Review* that since the premiere of *South Park* “our national IQ has dropped a few points,” and he denounced the show as “irony for dumb-dumbs, the worst kind.”<sup>30</sup> His critique echoed the familiar response from religious and cultural conservatives decrying “vulgar” comedies in this ironic tradition as assaults on the moral fiber and intelligence of American audiences. One critic interviewing Parker and Stone about the subversive TV series and their 1997 movie *Orgazmo* (the saga of a Mormon porn star) remarked, “When someone like [conservative pundit] George Will speaks about the coarsening and vulgarization of America, this is undoubtedly what he had in mind.”<sup>31</sup> As its popularity and cultural reach grew, *South Park* with its “foul-mouthed” children, assorted morally challenged parents and deranged authority figures, and profane themes would continue to haunt the conservative imagination as a harbinger of moral decline and catalyst for the “corruption of children.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jeff Shannon, “Roll on, Timmy! The Kid in the Wheelchair in the No-Holds-Barred Cartoon ‘South Park’ Challenges Viewers’ Attitudes About People with Disabilities,” *Seattle Times* (Washington), November 28, 2005, C1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Eli Lehrer, “*South Park*: Libertarian TV,” *FrontPage Magazine*, April 16, 2003, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=18659> (accessed September 2008).

<sup>30</sup> David Klinghoffer, “Dirty Joke,” review of *South Park*, *National Review* 50, no. 4 (March 9, 1998), 48, 51. He demonstrates some familiarity with the text, seeking to expose the mechanics of irony by offering an interesting (albeit narrow) dissection of comic formula focusing on the show’s reliance on comedic inversion and incongruity.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Bibby, “Five Questions with the ‘South Park’ Boys: Construction Paper Pathos,” *Associated Press*, *Entertainment News*, November 12, 1997, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> The latter phrase is from Lim, “Lowbrow and Proud,” 26, reporting on (not endorsing) this argument. (continued...)

Nevertheless, a competing strand of conservative discourse laid claim to the program, seeing its use of irony, “hip” cultural references, and puncturing of PC verities as a “great recruiting tool”<sup>33</sup> attracting youth to the conservative movement. Between 2002 and 2006 a profile of South Park Republicans took shape and a range of Internet sources chimed in to further define and defend this abstract trend. Those pundits and commentators adopting the label sought to update the public image of Republicans and distance themselves from the religious right. One blogger hopeful that South Park Republicans could “shatter the unfair stereotype” of Republicans as “stodgy, affluent, religious white guys” was *Tech Central Station*’s Stephen W. Stanton, who in 2002 (three years before Anderson’s book popularizing the subject) offered this early definition:

South Park Republicans are true Republicans, though they do not look or act like Pat Robertson. They believe in liberty, not conformity. They can enjoy watching *The Sopranos*.... They can appreciate the tight abs of Britney Spears or Brad Pitt without worrying about the nation’s decaying moral fiber. They strongly believe in liberty, personal responsibility, limited government, and free markets. However, they do not live by the edicts of political correctness.

Insisting that the label covers “an incredibly diverse group,” Stanton’s snapshot singles out celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and LL Cool J as prominent examples, but stresses that this nontraditional conservatism rightfully belongs to the “millions of people of every age, race, sex, and religion” who “know a nation cannot tax its way to greatness.”<sup>34</sup>

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See also Mervis, “Generation Next,” who notes that *South Park* “is one of those shows credited with hastening the decline of Western civilization” and is even accused by such liberal Hollywood celebrities as Barbra Streisand of cultivating cynicism and callousness.

<sup>33</sup> John Tierney, “South Park Refugees,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2006, A19, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen W. Stanton, “South Park Republicans,” *TCS Daily* (an online magazine promising free-market views), October 7, 2002, [http://www.ideasinactiontv.com/tcs\\_daily/2002/10/south-park-republicans.html](http://www.ideasinactiontv.com/tcs_daily/2002/10/south-park-republicans.html) (accessed August 2008). Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, xv, credits Stanton with honing the term. Anderson’s “We’re Not Losing” further discusses South Park Republicans undoing “the image of conservatives as uptight squares,” with statements by college students who find their right-leaning politics reflected in *South Park*. Says one, “We might have long hair, smoke cigarettes, get drunk on weekends, have sex before marriage, watch R-rated movies, cuss like sailors—and also happen to be conservative, or at least libertarian.”

*The Wall Street Journal's* Bridget Johnson offered a similar description stating, "The South Park Republican generally agrees with the party line, but just prioritizes the elements within differently than his more staid fellow partisans. He has most likely done an upside-down margarita at some point in life... and recognizes the artistic merit in [punk rock bands] the Ramones and Black Flag."<sup>35</sup> Her portrait is vague and inclusive and, like Stanton's above, relies on a litany of pop culture references to circumscribe an anti-elitist, anti-establishment taste culture hostile to dominant (read liberal) media. Various journalists invoked texts as diverse as *FHM*, *Desperate Housewives*, and Marvel Comics' *X-Men* movies when sketching out the "anti-leftie" media terrain of South Park Conservatism. Johnson's piece suggests that South Park Republicans were reared on a diet of alternative media that includes *Blender* (a music magazine linked by corporate ownership to *Maxim*), Alice Cooper concerts, Quentin Tarantino movies, and FOX's "non-PC tutorial" *In Living Color*. In this way, editorials in the right-leaning press seeing the *South Park* generation as the future of the G.O.P. painted a compelling picture of a feisty cohort with strong opinions but a "who cares what people think?" collegiate spirit."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the very same who-cares attitude that was being relentlessly demonized as the nihilism of disaffected youth by countless conservatives when *South Park* arrived in the late 1990s was slowly spun as a defiantly principled response to the supposed censorious overreach of PC.

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<sup>35</sup> Bridget Johnson, "Screen Righters: Tired of Michael Moore's Film-Flam? There Are Alternatives," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2004, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122703417769438117.html> (accessed June 2008).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* Johnson's list squares with Parker and Stone's well-documented assertions that punk rock was a key inspiration for their anarchic comic sensibility, yet her choice to articulate such a disparate constellation of countercultural media products within a certain Republican ethos is problematic. Specifically, it speaks to the attempt to strip popular culture texts of their manifest content and intent (in this case, the socially progressive, multicultural politics of *In Living Color* or the anti-capitalist underpinnings of punk) and consume them for their confrontational image and attitude alone.

As these examples illustrate, attempts to give shape to South Park Conservatism tended to focus expressly on a new “bloc of voters,” or “*South Park* voters.”<sup>37</sup> This group was said to be overwhelmingly comprised of “right-of-center college students” who are heavy media consumers rallying against the “over PC-ing” of America.<sup>38</sup> However, the denomination South Park Republican or Conservative was by no means limited to fans of the Comedy Central cartoon. *South Park* merely served within this discourse as a convenient symbol, the barometer of a larger phenomenon. In Stanton’s account, television is not essential to the lifestyle—he alternately dubs this psychographic “Average Joes” or “*Maxim* Republicans,” after the lad mag wildly popular with young men—and the majority of South Park Republicans may be oblivious to pundits’ fascination with them as they neither read nor heed “the political chattering classes.”<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, South Park Conservatism as conceived by Anderson and others is a movement elastic enough to include iconoclastic conservative pundits and polemicists, some of whom have no preference for the program that lends his book’s title and thesis its sheen of pop-culture notoriety. In the ensuing debates over South Park Conservatives, the punditocracy emerged as a small but significant interpretive community that included even those members who had not watched *South Park* eagerly themselves, and indeed some who rejected or abhorred the program. A vocal community comprised of fans, non-fans and anti-fans, commentators, and strategists generated robust partisan discourse circumscribing the show that placed *South Park* in

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<sup>37</sup> The first of these two phrases is used by Matt Bai, “‘King of the Hill’ Democrats?” *New York Times*, June 26, 2005, 15, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007). DemocraticUnderground.com archives extensive viewer discussion threads on such topics as “Why do ‘South Park’ voters hate Liberals?” (September 27, 2007) and “Do the South Park guys have a hidden [anti-liberal] agenda?” (October 18, 2004). For example, see [http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view\\_all&address=389x1909470](http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=389x1909470) (accessed May 5, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Edward B. Driscoll Jr., “South Park Conservatives: Snapshot of the Culture Wars,” *TechCentralStation.com* and *FreeRepublic.com*, April 15, 2005, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1384266/posts> (accessed August 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Stephen W. Stanton, “Do South Park Republicans Exist?” *TCS Daily*, December 5, 2003, [http://www.ideasinactiontv.com/tcs\\_daily/2003/12/do-south-park-republicans-exist.html](http://www.ideasinactiontv.com/tcs_daily/2003/12/do-south-park-republicans-exist.html) (accessed August 2008).

the political spotlight and initiated considerable, if ultimately rather one-sided, dialogue about the program's meanings and cultural relevance.<sup>40</sup>

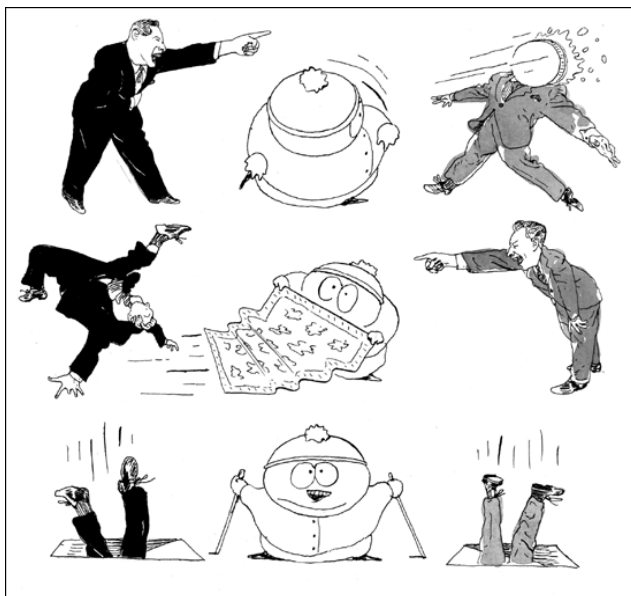


Figure 5.1.  
*South Park*'s multi-directional humor as an "equal opportunity offender" is the subject of this political cartoon by Barry Blitt from the May 1, 2005, issue of *The New York Times*.<sup>41</sup>

While many have protested that Anderson, in the words of one letter published in *The New York Times*, "sees only what he wants to see,"<sup>42</sup> his position is more self-aware and tactical than such criticism might suggest. Anderson acknowledges that conservative values, views, and VIPs are regularly the butt of *South Park* jokes, although he is eager to maintain that liberalism is the show's *primary* target. "Conservatives do not escape the show's satirical sword..." he

<sup>40</sup> As scholar Jonathan Gray argues, cultural studies' explorations of TV reception and textuality must account for passionate interactions with media texts that extend beyond the basic models of viewer meaning-making. Some "anti-fans," which can include deliberate *non*-viewers, Gray notes, apply the "moral lens" to make sense of and/or evaluate programs based on summaries or secondary criticism. See his "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (March 2005): 840–58, doi: 10.1177/0002764204273171; and "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 2003): 64–81, doi: 10.1177/1367877903006001004 (both accessed April 18, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Graphic for Frank Rich, "Conservatives ♥ 'South Park,'" *New York Times*, May 1, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/01/opinion/01rich.html> (accessed May 2, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Victor A. Gallis, "'South Park' Politics," letter to the editor, *New York Times*, July 24, 2005, 5, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).



writes, “But the deepest thrust of the program’s politics is pretty clear. Mr. Parker and Mr. Stone have made their show the most hostile to liberalism in television history.”<sup>43</sup> Anderson tends not to overreach in his specific claims when doing textual analysis, but rather ventures that *South Park* “exhibits a socially conservative streak *from time to time* [emphasis added].”<sup>44</sup> It is more accurate, therefore, to say that he is engaged in a strategic articulation. In the hegemonic struggle over the meaning of the program, and the millennial generation, his statements about *South Park*’s (latent or blatant) conservative potential are not so much the result of a blinkered reading as they are a purposeful framing. Those advocating South Park Conservatism adopt an aggressively partisan interpretive strategy to stabilize the ironic text, to tame postmodern polysemy and offer assurances that the final meaning of this program (and others) is “pretty clear.”<sup>45</sup>

In addition, South Park Republicans’ practices of selective reading extend beyond the text of the comedy itself to public statements by its creators, from making do with Parker and Stone’s tongue-in-cheek claims of liking President Bush to deemphasizing their more critical wise cracks.<sup>46</sup> The repeated assertions that *South Park* is an anti-liberal, and perhaps even pro-conservative, text amount to political spin and have the potential to shape public perception and audience readings of the program—indeed, that is part of the point, to hijack the “hip” and harness

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<sup>43</sup> Anderson, “South Park Republicans.” See also Anderson, “We’re Not Losing,” quoting a young Republican college graduate who states that since *South Park* targets hypocrisy wherever it may be found, it follows that the show is ultimately anti-liberal since “most hypocrisy and stupidity take place within the liberal camp.”

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson’s “South Park Republicans” (quoted above); also *South Park Conservatives*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Andrew Sullivan in a post titled “South Park Republican Watch” on his blog *The Dish* (October 28, 2003, retrieved August 2008, now archived at <http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2003/10/page/2/>) seized on a recent interview nugget by Matt Stone in the Californian “left-liberal arts mag” *Newtopia*, in which the humorist complained that former President Bill Clinton and most Democrats today “are a bunch of squares in suits saying ts-k-ts-k-ts-k.” Sullivan excerpted that remark and simply agreed, “Yep, Clinton was such a square,” while ignoring that Stone’s interview goes on to lament the Democratic party’s marginalizing of its “true intellects and creative forces” and to make light of Republican leaders’ achievements.

it to a conservative agenda. As *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart pointedly quipped in one of his many satirical exposés on pundits' use of repetition to bend reality to the party line, "talking points: they're true because they're said a lot."<sup>47</sup> While Anderson is tempted to speak of "South Park Anti-Liberals" (a chapter title in his book), his popularizing instead of "South Park Conservatives" as a label and archetype eschews even pseudo-scholarly nuance for the rhetorical advantages of conscripting the program into the service of a coherent political movement.

The conservative preoccupation with *South Park* and "edgy" comedy was rooted in efforts to rebrand the G.O.P. and garner youth appeal. "Cynics might say that conservatives, flummoxed by the popularity of Jon Stewart, are eager to endorse any bigger hit on Comedy Central," noted *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich in a 2005 review and rebuttal to Anderson's *South Park Conservatives*. "Conservatives can't stop whining about Hollywood," wrote Rich, "but the embarrassing reality is that they want to be hip, too."<sup>48</sup> Conservative contempt for Hollywood notwithstanding, political commentators such as Sullivan and Anderson recognized the political leverage of cozying up to "cool" media and sharp-witted celebrity provocateurs like Dennis Miller and the *South Park* team. Comedy and politics since the 1990s had become increasingly interpenetrating spheres as the lines that long segregated entertainment from serious news and public affairs programming were considerably more relaxed in the postmodern mediascape.<sup>49</sup> Grasping after Comedy Central's success with news satire and parody, in 2007 the FOX News Channel launched *The 1/2 Hour News Hour*, described by *Slate* as

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<sup>47</sup> *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, episode 9.115, originally aired September 3, 2004, on Comedy Central. Quoted in Amber Day, "And Now... the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*," in *Satire TV*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Rich, "Conservatives ♥ 'South Park.'"

<sup>49</sup> See Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

“*The Daily Show* for conservatives,” a critical and commercial failure.<sup>50</sup> The satirical news show was conceived by avid right-winger Joel Surnow (executive producer of the FOX drama *24*) and featured confrontational ultra-conservative personality Rush Limbaugh as a guest on its premiere episode.<sup>51</sup> FOX News that same spring also offered satirical late-night talk show *Red Eye w/Greg Gutfeld*, fronted by a former *Maxim UK* editor who boasted that he could say “douche” on his program. Contemplating conservatives’ motivations for competing with Comedy Central’s Jon Stewart, *Maclean’s* concluded that American conservatism had to “find the funny, or watch its movement slip into irrelevance.”<sup>52</sup>

This threat of “irrelevance” partly drove the celebration and courting of South Park Republicans, since the parallels between Comedy Central’s and youth-oriented magazines like *Maxim’s* prized male 18-to-34 demographic was readily apparent to both activists and cultural commentators. We see this point underscored by Stanton’s remark coining “*Maxim* Republicans” as a fitting synonym for “South Park Republicans.”<sup>53</sup> It is telling that Anderson in order to articulate a rightward swing in popular culture essentially singles out and politicizes the laddist turn—its latest iterations—as a wellspring of anti-PC (and by extension anti-“multiculti” and anti-feminist) impulses in American comedy, a development that he seeks to overlay with a

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<sup>50</sup> Troy Patterson, “Republicans Make Jokes: *The Daily Show* for Conservatives Shows up on YouTube,” *Slate*, February 15, 2007, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2007/02/republicans\\_make\\_jokes.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2007/02/republicans_make_jokes.html) (accessed August 25, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Jaime J. Weinman, “The War Against Jon Stewart: Afraid It’s Losing the Youth Vote to Comedy Central, Fox News Attempts to Get Funny,” *Maclean’s*, March 5, 2007, LexisNexis Academic (accessed August 25, 2008); Stephen Battaglio, “The Right to Laugh: *24’s* Joel Surnow on His Conservative News Satire and Jack Bauer’s Torture Tactics,” February 14, 2007, <http://www.tvguide.com/biz/Right-Laugh-24s-35170.aspx> (accessed April 21, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Weinman, “War Against Jon Stewart.” See also FOX News, <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/red-eye>.

<sup>53</sup> Stanton’s “Do South Park Republicans Exist?” quotes *Maxim* founding editor Keith Blanchard as a model spokesperson for South Park Republicans, fed up with government curbing personal freedom: “[Y]ou can’t even smoke in bars now. We citizens definitely don’t challenge this crap enough. . . . [A]nti-vice legislation remains the low hanging fruit for uninspired politicians. So let’s do something! Oh, wait—*South Park* is on.”

Republican agenda. *South Park* with its ‘puerile’ insult humor and bawdy boy talk was arguably a darling of American laddism and, though rarely outed as such, it hovers on the periphery of cultural commentary tracking lad-friendly media trends. For example, in 1999 *Slate* magazine, when reporting a dip in circulation for *FHM*, *Loaded*, and other “lad mags,” speculated that political incorrectness as a cultural fixation had reached its saturation point by the arrival of the “equal-opportunity offenders” such as TV’s *South Park*. “Political incorrectness was a refreshing response back in 1994, when the culture seemed snared in a net of sanctimony,” wrote *Slate*’s Michael Hirschorn and Ellen Willis, but the assault on “early-‘90s hypersensitivity” was wearing thin and “the lads and the towel-snappers” seemed to be losing their market edge.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, media critic Douglas Rushkoff in his 2001 documentary exposé the “The Merchants of Cool” (discussed in Chapter 2) saw the trend as escalating when he grouped the boys of *South Park* together with “the lads” of *The Man Show* and *The Howard Stern Show* and with *MTV Spring Break* “frat boys” as related Viacom products marketing a “mook” identity to young males.<sup>55</sup>

For Anderson and his peers to claim the current crop of laddish comics as a beachhead for conservatives in the culture wars is itself a means of marketing “cool,” embellishing the Republican “brand” for teens and twentysomethings. Labels like “edgy” and “hip” in comedy as linked to “political incorrectness,” as we have seen, are often code for styles of irony ushered in by laddish media predominantly (though not exclusively) catering to straight white masculinity. The attempts to leverage comedy to rebrand Republicanism as hip, despite nominally appealing to “every age, race, sex, and religion” (as *TCS*’s Stanton does above), have tended to revel in the re-centering of white, middle-class, straight male identity that laddism and associated styles of

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Hirschorn and Ellen Willis, “The Last Gasps of the Towel-Snappers,” *Slate*, March 11, 1999, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> *Frontline*, “The Merchants of Cool,” presented by Douglas Rushkoff, first aired February 27, 2001, on PBS.

“non-PC” humor afford, in the case of *South Park* by virtue of authorship, narrative focus, and target audience. While at odds with certain tenets of social conservatism, laddism with its untethered attitudes and appetites offered a promising and to some degree proven approach for bringing in young men.

For his part in the “war against Jon Stewart,”<sup>56</sup> to borrow *Maclean’s* phrase, Anderson’s profile of prominent South Park Conservatives focuses on two former *Saturday Night Live* “Weekend Update” anchors, the newly right-wing Dennis Miller and the hot-headed host of Comedy Central’s own *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*, which immediately followed *The Daily Show* in the channel’s nightly lineup. Both fake-news veterans are American lad icons, with the latter’s talk show drawing criticism in some liberal and mainstream papers, he notes, as a “racist” and “misogynist” comedian clique. Anderson also heralds lesser known cringe-comics like Nick DiPaolo (co-star of Comedy Central’s animated *Shorties Watchin’ Shorties*, 2004, and a recurring guest on *The Howard Stern Show*), Jim Norton (*Last Comic Standing*), and Greg Giraldo as headliners in the insurgent “antiliberal counterculture.” All three had recently gained visibility as members of *Tough Crowd’s* rotating panel of acrimonious guest-commentators. These “anti-PC humorists,” Anderson boasts, are called “insensitive,” “offensive,” and “boorish” and agitate the liberal press with their populist appeal and “politically incorrect repartee.”<sup>57</sup> Of DiPaolo’s stand-up shows he says, “The incorrect comedy offers a liberating release for [college] students whose left-wing profs seek to impose on them the ‘right’ thoughts about race and sex, making such topics all but undiscussable except in terms of the prescribed dogma.”<sup>58</sup> *Mens News Daily*

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<sup>56</sup> Weinman, “War Against Jon Stewart.”

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, “South Park Anti-Liberals,” chap. 5 of *South Park Conservatives*, 91, 93; claims are repeated in Anderson’s “South Park Republicans.”

<sup>58</sup> Anderson, “South Park Republicans.”

applauds Anderson for pulling focus onto these “inspiring” anti-sensitivity club comics and especially *Tough Crowd* as a counterweight to the “PC pap” of mainstream comedy.<sup>59</sup> Anderson celebrates political incorrectness for granting these comedians license to voice what he sees as frank, uncensored attitudes that will resonate with the same “ordinary Joes” who avidly consume conservative talk radio to hear “their complaints about what liberals have wrought” aired in a public forum.<sup>60</sup> Some of these angry comics were avowedly Republican, although laddism as a cultural and aesthetic movement is, much like *South Park*, not so easily politically defined.<sup>61</sup>

Again it is important to note that the praise for South Park Conservatism was not the dominant position of the Republican punditocracy. Nevertheless, a handful of conservative commentators continued to fight to put comedy on the party’s agenda and enlist comedians as foot soldiers in the culture wars. Doug Giles of Townhall.com in 2007 pleaded with the movement to appreciate the importance of humor for appealing to young Americans. “[A]s far as comedy goes, Mr. and Mrs. Conservative, you must bow and kiss the Left’s ring. They slay us,” he fretted. “You can count on one hand how many conservatives are making a semi-distinct blip on the comedic scene.” Pointing to the success of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert who “have the ear of millions of 18–35 year olds,” Giles reasoned that conservatives need to “get their comedic act together” and “crank out comedians” in order to defeat the liberal enemy:

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<sup>59</sup> Bernard Chapin, “Viva La South Park Revolucion!” *Mens News Daily*, April 24, 2005, <http://www.mensnewsdaily.com/archive/c-e/chapin/2005/chapin042405.htm> (accessed August 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Anderson’s phrase and argument from *South Park Conservatives*, quoted in Liesl Schillinger, “Bullying Liberals Back,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2005, 19, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> For example, there were various discussion threads on the Internet with fans musing about whether or not Denis Leary (who models the qualities of these “South Park Anti-Liberals” and appeared on *Tough Crowd*) is a Democrat or Republican. Leary resolves the mystery with a *South Park*-esque answer in a 2007 interview with CNN’s Glenn Beck saying, “I was a life-long Democrat, but ... I’ve come to realize that the Democrats suck, and the Republicans suck, and basically the entire system sucks. But you have to go within the system to find what you want.” Quoted in Glenn Beck, “Honest Questions with Denis Leary,” transcript, *CNN.com*, air date June 13, 2007, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0706/13/gb.01.html> (accessed April 30, 2012).

“Comedy is a tool the conservatives have got to champion and use against the secularists [*sic*] tools on the left.”<sup>62</sup> Small-time bloggers entertained similar arguments. One Irish-South African reflecting on Anderson’s book in his personal blog encouraged American and British conservatives to harvest these valuable lessons: “Attract comics: Use humour as your chief weapon in policy making and cultural warfare,” and, “Keep in mind The South Park Principle: Do not reflexively attack apparent enemies that in reality are powerful allies.”<sup>63</sup> Readers posting on conservative Jay Reding’s personal weblog debated the validity of South Park Republicans, a discussion thread that ends with speculation that the concept failed to penetrate and reform the party’s “hard right atmosphere.”<sup>64</sup> *Tech Central Station*’s Stephen W. Stanton, in a 2003 follow-up to his “South Park Republicans” manifesto described above, urged the G.O.P. to move decisively to secure its hold on this constituency whose “vote is clearly up for grabs,” and warned, “The Republicans can’t maintain the majority without the South Park Republicans; and they can’t keep the South Park Republicans by pretending they don’t exist.”<sup>65</sup> The matter of whether or not such a voting bloc existed and was in play would be a crucial point of debate.

In certain corners of the conservative blogosphere, the proposed embrace of *South Park* and its fans met with internal resistance and proved a divisive issue. Republicans wrestled with these questions of whether South Park Republicans “exist” in any useful sense, whether they are

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<sup>62</sup> Doug Giles, “It’s Time for Conservatives to Take Comedy Seriously,” *Townhall.com*, February 4, 2007, [http://townhall.com/columnists/dougiles/2007/02/04/it's\\_time\\_for\\_conservatives\\_to\\_take\\_comedy\\_seriously](http://townhall.com/columnists/dougiles/2007/02/04/it's_time_for_conservatives_to_take_comedy_seriously) (accessed April 18, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Davis, “How Did American Conservatives Do It?” *Limbicnutrition Weblog*, October 29, 2003, <http://www.limbicnutrition.com/blog/how-did-american-conservatives-do-it/> (accessed August 2008).

<sup>64</sup> Jay Reding, “South Park Republicans Redux,” October 27, 2003, <http://www.jayreding.com/archives/2003/10/27/south-park-republicans-redux/> (accessed August 2008). Comment by “Dave,” posted on December 20, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Stanton, “Do South Park Republicans Exist?” For a further example of how this question of the existence of South Park Republicans/Conservatives was generally posed and answered with personal testimony (I “meet many of them,” I am one, etc.), see Chapin, “Viva La *South Park* Revolucion!”

“true” Republicans, whether the party would or should woo them, and whether conservatives were guilty of excessive “pandering” to the “cool-kids clique on the Right.”<sup>66</sup> For example, a cluster of articles in *VDARE*, an extremist right-wing webzine devoted to strict enforcement of immigration laws and accused of promoting white nationalism, struggled to reconcile South Park Conservatives with their specific agenda. A spring 2005 article on *South Park* and immigration reform sparked a stream of reader emails commenting on the cartoon’s recent reputation as conservative television, some from self-declared South Park Republicans.<sup>67</sup> The first in a series of responses came from author Michelle Malkin, who bristled at being placed under the “South Park Conservatives” umbrella by Anderson. Insisting that “‘politically incorrect’ is not always a synonym for ‘conservative,’” she assured her readers, “I’m 34 and no fan of *South Park*. ... I find that the characters’ foul language overwhelms any entertainment I might otherwise derive from the show’s occasional, right-leaning iconoclastic themes.”<sup>68</sup>

Another *VDARE* contributor, political consultant Bryanna Bevens, set aside her own considerable reservations about the show to argue that *South Park* performs a vital “public service” by leading “the underground resistance movement against political correctness and

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<sup>66</sup> Michelle Malkin, “Why I’m Not a ‘South Park Conservative,’” *VDARE.com*, May 3, 2005, <http://www.vdare.com/articles/why-im-not-a-south-park-conservative> (accessed August 2008). Malkin sees such “pandering” in First Lady Laura Bush’s “bawdy stand-up routine” at the 2005 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, telling horse masturbation jokes to score cool points.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Brimelow (editor of *VDARE*), “South Park Immigration Reformers?” *VDARE.com*, April 18, 2005, <http://www.vdare.com/articles/south-park-immigration-reformers-peter-brimelow>. An earlier example is reader Taylor Yu’s letter signed “Proud to Be a South Park Republican,” refuting *VDARE* blogger Kevin Beary’s textual analysis that decried “Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo” (the cartoon’s 1997 yuletide episode named for its ironic Santa substitute) as a “revolting” attack on the Christian faith. Beary, “War Against Christmas Competition 2002 [IV]: South Park Offensive,” *VDARE.com*, December 23, 2002, <http://www.vdare.com/letters/war-against-christmas-competition-2002-iv-south-park-offensive>; Yu, “A South Park Republican Pooh-Poohs *VDARE.com*,” *VDARE.com*, January 7, 2003, <http://www.vdare.com/letters/a-south-park-republican-pooh-poohs-vdarecom> (all accessed August 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Malkin, “Why I’m Not a ‘South Park Conservative.’” Anderson’s book jacket lists her among the bloggers representing the anti-liberal movement he’s calling the “South Park Conservatives.”



multiculturalism.”<sup>69</sup> She cautiously upheld the 2004 episode “Goobacks” (in which the fictionalized Colorado town is plagued by time-traveling refugees from an overpopulated, post-racial future society who supply cheap labor and take all “our” crappy jobs) as the series at its conservative best, overlooking the “potty comedy” to laud the narrative as a stinging critique of a society too soft on illegal immigration. Bevens entreated her contemporaries to watch *South Park* strictly for the pleasure of “revenge,” as an act of defiance against “race-baiting” Democrats and college professors who construe conservative social and tax reforms as racist. In her assessment, the series is “not designed to promote the left or the right” yet supports a bold anti-leftist platform attacking progressive ideals of ethnic diversity and sensitivity. Though insisting that she would forbid her children to watch, and recoiling from the episode’s conclusion which she finds too crude and immoral to reveal to her readers (her plot synopsis, as a courtesy, edits out the “solution” to the town’s crisis that shows male residents form a mass gay orgy to fight future overpopulation), she contends that the “gist” is what matters. That is, the ideological ends excuse the unseemly comic means.<sup>70</sup> Such selective, heavily negotiated readings form the foundation for politically and socially conservative anti-fans or reformed anti-fans like Bevens to shore up an accord, however provisional or hesitant, with *South Park*’s brand of anti-liberalism.

There is little dispute that *South Park* is rife with ridicule of liberal attitudes and icons. Conservative readings ascribing an anti-liberal bias invariably focus on the program’s predilection for depicting Hollywood celebrity activists as crazed villains or self-righteous hypocrites, deriding environmentalists, satirizing the sixties counterculture, and ostensibly taking a pro-business stance.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bryanna Bevens, “*South Park*: Timecists vs. Goobacks,” *VDARE.com*, May 12, 2005, <http://www.vdare.com/articles/south-park-timecists-vs-goobacks> (accessed August 2008).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Bevens argues that “vulgar” media is a necessary cost of competing for young voters.

<sup>71</sup> See Anderson, “South Park Republicans.”

Favorite examples include the episodes “Butt Out,” in which liberal actor/director Rob Reiner (of *All in the Family* fame) fronts a sinister anti-smoking campaign, preaching about public health while gorging on hamburgers resulting in his morbid obesity (fig. 5.2); “Rainforest Schmainforest,” mentioned above, in which we learn that “being an activist is totally gay”; “Die Hippie, Die” [*sic*], where hippie infestations are presented as a blight upon South Park; and “Smug Alert!” where the running joke is that San Franciscan hybrid car owners pollute the air with noxious emissions of smugness and relish sniffing their own farts.<sup>72</sup>



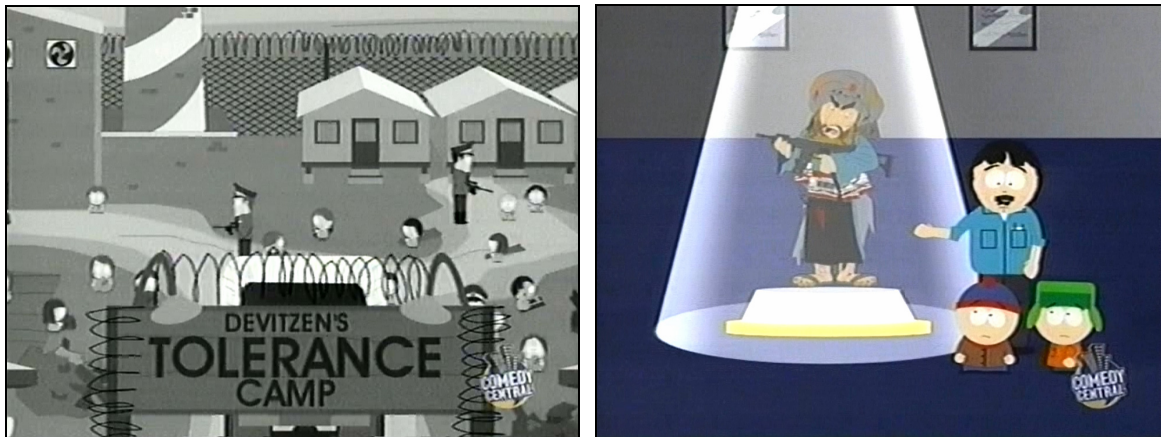
Figure 5.2.

A gluttonous, homicidal Rob Reiner plots to destroy his corporate enemy, Big Tobacco Co. “Butt Out,” *South Park*, originally aired December 3, 2003, on Comedy Central.

With its mockery of preachy progressives, *South Park* according to its conservative defenders is especially heroic for attacking cultural diversity, sensitivity, and tolerance as fascist “PC” dictates in such celebrated episodes as 2001’s “Cripple Fight” and 2002’s “Death Camp of Tolerance.”<sup>73</sup> In the latter, South Park Elementary teacher Mr. Garrison calculatedly flaunts his alternative sexuality in the classroom with his submissive partner “Mr. Slave,” hoping to get fired for being gay so that he can sue the school for millions of dollars, but his plan misfires.

<sup>72</sup> “Butt Out,” episode 7.13, first aired December 3, 2003; “Die Hippie, Die,” 9.2, first aired March 16, 2005; “Rainforest Schmainforest,” 3.1, first aired April 7, 1999; and “Smug Alert!” 10.2, first aired March 29, 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Episode 5.2 (production no. 503), first aired June 27, 2001; and 6.14 (no. 614), first aired November 20, 2002.



Figures 5.3a–b. *Left*: South Park children are sentenced to Tolerance Camp for sensitivity training. *Right*: Fourth-graders and their parents tour the Hall of Stereotypes at the Museum of Tolerance. “Death Camp of Tolerance,” *South Park*, originally aired November 20, 2002.

Instead, students who complain to the principal about his outrageous classroom exhibitionism are sent to Tolerance Camp (depicted as a Nazi concentration camp) where they must learn to “accept people’s differences” and respect the “life choices” of homosexuals, while Mr. Garrison receives a commendation for enduring prejudice (figs. 5.3a–b).<sup>74</sup> Conservatives savored such content as incontrovertible evidence of the series’ anti-liberal agenda. “If you really look at episode after episode, they go after multiculturalism, radical environmentalism, hate-crime legislation, even abortion rights,” Anderson assures.<sup>75</sup> Although there are elements within some of these episodes that undercut a staunchly conservative reading, especially in combination with other episodes that are not so supportive of contemporary conservative politics, these narratives

<sup>74</sup> Right-wing polemicists deem political correctness to be a cultural mechanism of “liberal fascism.” Jonah Goldberg draws parallels between Nazism and American liberalism in *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Interestingly, the right’s current preoccupation with comedians is reflected in Goldberg’s book introduction, which kicks off by contrasting the views of Bill Maher (wrong) and George Carlin (right) on fascism.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in *MSNBC TV’s “South Park Conservatives.”* Other oft-cited examples of such themes include “Cartman’s Mom is Still a Dirty Slut” (episode 2.2, April 22, 1998), in which said mom demands a legal right to abort her child in the “42nd trimester”; “Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime 2000” (4.2, April 12, 2000), in which Cartman’s abuse of Token Black lands him in juvenile detention; and “Chef Goes Nanners” (4.7, July 5, 2000), which sees South Park’s flag condemned as racist (its depicts a lynching) and therefore redesigned to reflect “diversity” (the revised flag depicts a multicultural lynch mob).

do provide a strong basis for understanding how certain reading formations see the program as validating an irreverent new conservatism.

In addition to the *South Park* cartoon, Parker and Stone's marionette movie *Team America: World Police* garnered praise as the right's counterpunch to liberal humorist/activist Michael Moore's summer 2004 release *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which conservatives rallied against as "the left's masterwork."<sup>76</sup> Like *South Park*'s creators, the political filmmaker and noted hoaxster was actively being positioned by the punditocracy as a powerful figure in the culture wars. Conservative sources such as *City Journal* despised Moore as a "virtuoso of lying," and groaned that his populist reach exceeded that of Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and Ann Coulter.<sup>77</sup> In the case of Michael Moore and Jon Stewart (on the left) and Dennis Miller (on the right), it was not uncommon to see political satirists being equated in this way with pundits throughout this period—and the reverse, as when *Salon* dubbed Limbaugh and Coulter "stand-up comedians of resentment."<sup>78</sup> Regardless of attempts to establish edgy conservative credibility, Republicans were struggling to match Moore's mastery and marketability with satirical documentaries, unable to achieve similar critical success with right-wing political films.<sup>79</sup> Conservatives also sought to gain a foothold in mainstream Hollywood. "If they can create a popular cinema that artistically

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<sup>76</sup> James S. Robbins, "The Left's Masterwork," *National Review*, June 29, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed August 25, 2008). See also Johnson, "Screen Righters"; Russello, "Exposing Liberal Pieties"; Tierney, "South Park Refugees."

<sup>77</sup> Kay S. Hymowitz, "Michael Moore, Humbug," *City Journal* 13, no. 3 (summer 2003), 55–65, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 25, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Gary Kamiya, "The Coulterization of the American Right," *Salon.com*, March 13, 2007, [http://www.salon.com/2007/03/13/coulter\\_41/](http://www.salon.com/2007/03/13/coulter_41/) (accessed August 25, 2008). Communication scholars Michael A. Xenos, Patricia Moy, and Amy B. Becker contend that *The Daily Show*'s rhetorical "cues" construct for Stewart "a role akin to a left-leaning political pundit," in their article "Making Sense of *The Daily Show*: Understanding the Role of Partisan Heuristics in Political Comedy Effects," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impacts of Fake News*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2011), 51.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Gumbel, "Michael Moore, It Ain't: US Right Hits Back with Its Own Film Festival," *Independent on Sunday* (London), September 19, 2004, Foreign News, 21, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

reflects a right-of-center worldview—rather than crudely imposes it—it would be a huge advance for the right,” Anderson argued, advocating “an if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them approach.”<sup>80</sup>



Figure 5.4.

Some culture warriors heralded puppet action movie spoof *Team America: World Police* as a comedic right hook to Michael Moore’s leftist polemic *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Shown here, marionette Moore is belchingly double-fisting hot dogs while coaching a bystander to falsely condemn Team America on camera as murderous “fascists.”<sup>80</sup>

In the context of the right’s bid for Hollywood product, and released weeks before the 2004 Presidential election, *Team America* was upheld as a box office strike for South Park Conservatism. Stylistically quoting the British mid-1960s children’s TV series *Thunderbirds* and spoofing overblown Hollywood action-hero blockbusters, *Team America* is named for its premise of a fictional elite paramilitary squad of American supercops sent on missions to save (and “police”) the world from the global threat of terrorism. A South Park Republican reading formation is primed to see the film as taking up Bush’s conceptualization of the “axis of evil,” as further evidenced by its comic assault on North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il, the terrorist supervillain of the movie. Conservative commentators praised the film for satirically skewering

<sup>80</sup> He heralds popular films including *Cast Away* (2000), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *The Incredibles* (2004), and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) as evidence of a growing conservative consciousness in Hollywood cinema and a boon for the right in the culture wars. Brian C. Anderson, “Conservatives in Hollywood?!” *City Journal* 15, no. 4 (autumn 2005), [http://www.city-journal.org/html/15\\_4\\_urbanities-conservatives.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/15_4_urbanities-conservatives.html) (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>81</sup> For his final war protest in the film, the pizza-scoffing puppet Michael Moore straps on a bomb and blows up the Team’s base. The scene inspired fan art/merchandise for the South Park Republican set such as a Jihad Suicide Bomber Magnet from A&T Designs (formerly for sale at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/shops/storefront/index.html?ie=UTF8&marketplaceID=ATVPDKIKX0DER&sellerID=A21YYV7FYEB82>, accessed May 21, 2012) that reads “MICHAEL MOORE, DEAD TRAITOR.”

Michael Moore in particular (fig. 5.4)—and Hollywood liberals in general who opposed U.S. military action in the Middle East—if not supporting the ‘pro-war’ Bush administration.

Given the comedy duo’s reputation as “equal opportunity offenders,” film critics in mainstream publications for the most part presumed that *Team America* “is just meant to provoke people, regardless of their politics.”<sup>82</sup> One such critic perceived the film making the blatant “leftist point” that dispatching the U.S. Army to neutralize the terrorist threat overseas “is akin to relying on one of those childish fantasy squads,” but suggested it simultaneously undercuts that critique with a viable right-wing message.<sup>83</sup> Even among those acknowledging that Parker and Stone’s satire *purportedly* targets all sides, however, some did credit the film instead with an unmistakable “pro-Bush agenda,” even speculating that it could “tilt voters, especially younger ones, towards Bush.”<sup>84</sup> *Village Voice* cautioned its liberal readers to keep a thick skin: “No matter how you parse it, the South Park guys’ election-season intervention is a flag-waving, fag-baiting farce,” and liberals get the worst roasting. While surmising that its profane content would alienate “Bush’s fundamentalist base,” the *Voice*’s James Hoberman found the film and its break-out song “America, Fuck Yeah” to be a barely ironic, pro-military “anthem” for jingoistic conservatives and American troops.<sup>85</sup> Even Andrew Sullivan and his blog readers, reflecting six years later on the movie’s wartime influence, voiced concern

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<sup>82</sup> Anthony Breznican, “‘Team America’ Takes on the World ... and Moviegoers,” Associated Press State & Local Wire, October 12, 2004, LexisNexis Academic. See also Gary Arnold, “The Guilty Pleasure of ‘Team America,’” *Washington Times*, May 28, 2005, B01, LexisNexis Academic (both accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Daniel Neman, “‘Team America’ Is a Tangle of Laughs,” *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Virginia), October 15, 2004, D3, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> “Politics and Flicks a Lot Like the ‘60s,” *Toronto Star* (Canada), October 22, 2004, D01, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>85</sup> J. [James] Hoberman, “Unstrung Heroes,” *Village Voice*, October 26, 2004, 60, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

about U.S. soldiers stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq callously quoting Team America-isms (along with *South Park*'s Eric Cartman-isms), a trend Sullivan called "South Park macho." A handful of his readers posted comments debating whether or not the troops failed to grasp the "intended irony."<sup>86</sup> While liberal sources such as the *Voice* saw the film as lacking irony and taking a tone of "belligerent patriotism,"<sup>87</sup> the conservative and libertarian press was more willing to see the text as ironic (while relishing any patriotic overtones) and lay claim to the connotations of smart and cool that irony could bestow.

Despite some initial enthusiasm among pundits and bloggers, many conservatives remained circumspect and questioned the reality and political significance of South Park Conservatives in general and South Park Republicans in particular. *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg doubted that "you can extrapolate from the fact that some Republican kids like *South Park* that, therefore, there's any such thing as a unifying set of beliefs among them."<sup>88</sup> Gerald J. Russello of *The Washington Times* voiced similar skepticism. While sharing Anderson's enthusiasm for a program that "mercilessly exposes liberal pieties... with an intensity and wit that has perhaps never before been seen on television," he wondered if this translated into a politically mobilized viewership: "Whether these rejections of liberal groupthink will blossom

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "South Park Macho," *The Dish*, June 23, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/06/south-park-macho/185558/> and <http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2010/06/page/20/>; and "South Park Macho, Ctd," reader responses to "South Park Macho," *The Dish*, June 25, 2010, <http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2010/06/south-park-macho-ctd-1.html> and [/south-park.html](http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2010/06/south-park.html) (all accessed March 2012). Having blogged "South Park Republican" updates since 2002, Sullivan continued to keep tabs on *South Park* into the next decade. For the period between January 2006 and January 2012 his website archive at [dish.andrewsullivan.com](http://dish.andrewsullivan.com) (formerly [andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com](http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com)) includes 383 *South Park*-related posts.

<sup>87</sup> Hoberman, "Unstrung Heroes."

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Stanton, "Do South Park Republicans Exist?" Though he questions Anderson's argument, Goldberg in a cover blurb endorses *South Park Conservatives* as essential reading about the future of American conservatism. By 2006 blogger Andrew Sullivan had retired "South Park Republican," the label he coined five years prior, and begun calling himself a "South Park conservative." Tierney, "South Park Refugees." The latter, more flexible term gradually replaced the former.

into a more substantive conservatism remains to be seen.”<sup>89</sup> After all, were these not potentially the same twentysomething Comedy Central viewers that FOX News’s Bill O’Reilly was disparaging as “stoned slackers” in his rants against *The Daily Show*’s audience?<sup>90</sup> Vice’s Gavin McInnes, writing as a *VDARE* guest columnist, insisted that “to assume laughing at the left means blindly embracing the right is naïve.” Piggybacking on the reservations of *VDARE* “paleocons” such as Malkin and Bevens, McInnes averred, “South Park conservatives are not conservatives at all. They are simply well-informed Gen-Xers who are not slaves to either end of the political spectrum’s dogma.” Here he reinterprets the anti-leftie impulses of South Park Conservatism as a refusal of the culture war “camps” by the irony-saturated Generations X and Y who are disillusioned with politics and “replacing conservative and liberal with—nothing.”<sup>91</sup>

Several young scholars extended this line of argument to position *South Park* as detached or cynical postmodern irony. Echoing McInnes, American Studies scholar Matt Becker posits that *South Park* is “antipolitical” and protests that “Anderson chooses to read only in terms that support his own political views.” According to Becker, Parker and Stone’s comic ethos channels the worldview of Generation X “characterized by irony, apathy, feelings of disenfranchisement, and deep cynicism toward official political institutions.”<sup>92</sup> In his reading, episodes like October 2004’s election-themed “Douche and Turd” illustrate that “political ambivalence is central to

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<sup>89</sup> Russello, “Exposing Liberal Pieties,” A15.

<sup>90</sup> “‘Stoned Slackers’ Watch Jon Stewart? Bill O’Reilly’s Viewers Are Actually Less Educated than Stewart’s,” Associated Press, September 28, 2004, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/6117542/ns/today-entertainment/t/stoned-slackers-watch-jon-stewart> (accessed April 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Gavin McInnes, “South Park Conservatives: Is This New Anti-Left Trend Right?” *VDARE.com*, May 31, 2005, <http://www.vdare.com/articles/south-park-conservatives-is-this-new-anti-left-trend-right> (accessed August 2008). He stated, “The truth is this new generation is too sexually promiscuous, drug friendly, atheist and... informed to let the pendulum swing back all the way to the right.”

<sup>92</sup> Matt Becker, “‘I Hate Hippies’: *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 145–64; see especially 147–48. In contrast, Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 57, notes that the show “repeatedly asserts” that it is not “apolitical.”



Gen Xers, and it has resulted from their widespread disengagement from the political sphere.”<sup>93</sup>

Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s and Slavoj Žižek’s theorizations of cynicism as the defining consciousness (or “enlightened false consciousness” in Sloterdijk’s terms) of the present epoch, media and cultural theorist Stephen Groening concurs: “For *South Park* and its viewers, cynicism, manifesting as irony and ironic detachment, justifies withdrawal from political action.”<sup>94</sup>

The contrasts among some pundits’ initial enthusiasms, certain conservatives’ skepticism, and scholarly findings of political isolation illustrate the considerable work required to bring this “amorphous voting bloc”<sup>95</sup> in line with any partisan political agenda.

*“In the Name of Freedom”*: South Park as Libertarian TV

Meanwhile, in response to Anderson’s thesis, competing arguments surfaced almost immediately debating the ‘correct’ ideological interpretation of *South Park* and its creators’ true political orientation, as competing interpretive communities vied for political and cultural ownership of *South Park*’s irony and satire. In particular, the phrase “South Park Libertarians” quickly caught on as numerous critics and fans in online forums insisted that *South Park*’s core message supports a “persistently libertarian politics.”<sup>96</sup> This argument was advanced by political polemicists such as Eli Lehrer, a legal fellow with conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation, who in keeping with South Park Republicans extracted capitalist, corporation-friendly

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<sup>93</sup> Becker, *ibid.*, 161. For an insightful analysis of *South Park*’s carnivalesque critique of the state of electoral politics in “Douche and Turd” (episode 8.8, October 27, 2004), see Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 223–27.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in *South Park*,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 114, drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), and Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989). His argument that Generations X–Y’s irony cultivates/reflects a “cynical worldview” (125) mirrors concerns voiced by political communication scholars about Comedy Central’s satirical news shows, and I return to these critiques later.

<sup>95</sup> Stanton, “Do South Park Republicans Exist?”

<sup>96</sup> Lehrer, “*South Park*: Libertarian TV.”

messages from episodes such as “Gnomes” (December 1998) and “Cartmanland” (July 2001) but contended that “the show’s political positions almost always tend to favor Libertarian outcomes.”<sup>97</sup> Such a reading is reinforced by a few academics including literature professor Paul Cantor, whose textual analysis of “Gnomes” and other episodes exalts *South Park* as a refreshing alternative to the “anti-corporate propaganda normally coming out of Hollywood” and a vital philosophical attack on political correctness “in the name of freedom.” Writing in a liberal-baiting style highly evocative of bloggers in the trenches of the culture wars, Cantor avers, “Nothing could be more calculated to make *South Park* offensive to the politically correct than this libertarianism, for if applied consistently it would dismantle the whole apparatus of speech control and thought manipulation that do-gooders have tried to construct to protect their favored minorities.”<sup>98</sup> Like South Park Republicans, then, South Park Libertarians claim a decisive political identity for the show. In addition to free-market ideology, the latter especially revere episodes that satirize hate-crime laws, sexual harassment, and censorship. For these critics, *South Park* can be relied upon to promote personal, political, and economic liberty, and particularly free speech.<sup>99</sup>

The label “South Park Republicans” for some journalists presumes and subsumes this slant, hence the term was readily being defined as “twentysomething males who favour rampant

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. These two episodes, “Gnomes” (2.17, December 16, 1998) and “Cartmanland” (5.6, July 25, 2001), are among the most frequently cited as examples of the show’s (capital-“L”) Libertarian bent.

<sup>98</sup> Paul A. Cantor, “The Invisible Gnomes and the Invisible Hand: *South Park* and Libertarian Philosophy,” in *South Park and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Arp (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 100, 101, 107. For a critical view, see Richard Johnson and David McAvoy, “Truthiness and Consequences: Chewbacca and the Defense of Political Perfection,” in *The Deep End of South Park: Critical Essays on Television’s Shocking Cartoon Series*, ed. Leslie Strayner and James Keller (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2009), 28–41, who agree “the South Park conservative operates under a classically Libertarian model” in which “the personal is ... sovereign over the state” (39), but proceed to condemn (and conflate in odd ways) *South Park* and South Park Conservatives.

<sup>99</sup> Celebrated examples include “Sexual Harassment Panda” (episode 3.6, July 7, 1999), and again “Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime 2000” (4.2, April 12, 2000) and “Cripple Fight” (5.2, June 27, 2001). The online collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia at one point defined the views of the show and its creators as “socially liberal and politically conservative,” later revised to read “fiscally conservative.” Wikipedia, “Subject Matter in *South Park*,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subject\\_matter\\_in\\_South\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subject_matter_in_South_Park) (accessed August 2008 and April 2012).

libertarianism over liberal sensitivities.”<sup>100</sup> However, a particular political movement mobilized the designation “libertarian” to further distance the new breed of anti-leftie youth culture from the traditional, “average conservative.”<sup>101</sup> To reinforce the distinction, various hybrid terms and neologisms entered the blogosphere—gaining some traction as potential synonyms for South Park Conservatives—such as Hipublicans (coined by *The New York Times*), Neoliberalians, and even Republitanians or Conservatibertarians.<sup>102</sup> Market researcher and demographics expert Michael Adams coined “Social Hedonists.”<sup>103</sup> The hipster-lad magazine *Vice* christened them simply “The New Conservatives.”<sup>104</sup> *Vice*’s own Gavin McInnes in 2003 described them (just as he would “South Park Conservatives” in his *VDARE* piece two years later) as a new cynical counterculture, rejecting the idealism espoused by youth in the sixties or even as recently as the eighties, and disavowing allegiance to any political party.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Jonathan Brown, “From Homer to Scooby Doo: Our Love Affair with the Cartoon,” *Independent* (London), February 28, 2005, 12–13, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007). See also Johnson, “Screen Righters.”

<sup>101</sup> Chapin, “Viva La South Park Revolucion!”

<sup>102</sup> For the first term, see John Colapinto, “The Young Hipublicans,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/25/magazine/25REPUBLICANS.html> (accessed April 18, 2012). “Hipublicans” was for a time a buzzword interchangeable with “South Park Conservatives,” as McInnes notes in “Anti-Left Trend Right?” Wikipedia for several years had a lengthy entry for “Neoliberalianism” that listed Dennis Miller as a prominent example but which has since been removed; *Urban Dictionary* reproduced a portion for its definition at <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Neo-Libertarian> (accessed April 19, 2012). For this term, see also back issues of the now defunct journal *The New Libertarian* from 2005, archived at <http://www.qando.net/articles/>. One *New York Magazine* reader identified himself as a “Conservatibertarian (a ‘South Park Republican’)” when submitting commentary on the “culture war” in blogging, in “Readers Sound Off on Blogging, Insensitive Fashion Spreads, Deepak Chopra, David Smith, and More,” *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2006, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Gavin McInnes, “Hip to Be Square: It’s Getting Cooler To Be Conservative,” *The American Conservative*, August 11, 2003, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/article/2003/aug/11/00019/> (accessed April 19, 2012).

<sup>104</sup> “The New Conservatives,” *Vice Fashion* (a division of *Vice*), photography by Tim Barber with stylist Emily Nadeau, December 1, 2002, <http://www.vice.com/read/fashion2-v9n7> (accessed April 19, 2012). This article is a poetic fashion photo spread with no author identified for the text.

<sup>105</sup> McInnes, “Hip to Be Square.” McInnes is himself an edgy right-of-center humorist, and author of pieces like “The Vice Guide to Eating Pussy,” [http://www.viceland.com/nl/v1n1b/htdocs/eating\\_pussy.php](http://www.viceland.com/nl/v1n1b/htdocs/eating_pussy.php) (accessed May 2012).

According to *Vice Fashion*, this “new political consciousness” pooh-poohs neo-conservatives while favoring reactionary social policies mixed with un-orthodox attitudes. They are said to be post-feminist, urban-minded, pro-drugs (or at least legalization), fashion-savvy, and powerfully opposed to censorship and other limits on (their) autonomy—a portrait that resonates with the image projected by/as South Park Libertarians. Anti-PC contrariness is at the core of this value system, as *Vice* approvingly reported: “The New conservatives [*sic*] use words like nigger, paki and chink with reckless abandon. They claim politically correct words are the result of liberals trying to shape fear and guilt into meaningless syntax.”<sup>106</sup> In championing this version of politically incorrect rebellion, *Vice*, like *Tough Crowd* and other lad media, has drawn criticism for presenting racist, sexist, or homophobic attitudes “ironically” in the name of edgy comedy, where irony may function primarily as an out-clause for reactionary readers.<sup>107</sup> *The New York Times* dubs *Vice* “a lad magazine for the Williamsburg set” that “embrac[es] frat-boy crudity and ethnic stereotypes.” Comedian Jimmy Kimmel (*The Man Show*) enthuses, “People throw the term ‘politically incorrect’ around a lot, and normally it’s a lot of bluster, but *Vice* truly is un-p.c. Their brand of humor is what I would do if there were no ‘standards and practices’ on TV.”<sup>108</sup>

Taken together, these freshly minted labels (e.g., Hipublicans and New Conservatives) mobilize a politicized vision of youth (counter)culture and subdue the suspicions that *South*

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<sup>106</sup> “The New Conservatives,” *Vice Fashion*. The magazine profiles these “New Conservatives” as a loose-knit western (Anglo-American and Canadian) youth movement that abhors affirmative action, illegal immigration, the welfare system, same-sex marriage (but not homosexuality), abortion (but not pro-choice legislation), anti-gun legislation, and diversity (but not ethnic Others who undergo cultural assimilation).

<sup>107</sup> Brendan Bailey, “From Hardcore Punk to Fashion Mainstream: Mesh Caps, Vice Magazine and the Trouble with Irony,” *Counter Punch*, July 2–4, 2005, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2005/07/02/mesh-caps-vice-magazine-and-the-trouble-with-irony/> (accessed May 22, 2012), cautions that if “the statements reach people outside of this community... the ‘irony’ implicit in them is lost, and the explicitly stated discrimination is all that is left.”

<sup>108</sup> Vanessa Grigoriadis, “The Edge of Hip: Vice, the Brand,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/28/style/the-edge-of-hip-vice-the-brand.html> (accessed May 22, 2012); and Jimmy Kimmel, quoted in *ibid.*

*Park*-esque humor plays to generational disenchantment with all politics and might be ultimately “anti-political.” Although McInnes’s remarks celebrating cynicism complicate this picture, such constructs together with *Vice*’s gradual expansion of its politically themed coverage worked to reaccent and reclaim politics as a complement to “un-PC” humor and playful acts of self-definition/expression for a hipster youth market. Also downplayed in the partisan and libertarian rhapsodizing about a new generation are the forces of marketing and branding that enable the “merchants of cool,”<sup>109</sup> from Viacom to *Vice*, to fashion and profit from this heavily mediated youth counterculture (and in the case of *Vice Fashion*, its trendy political subjectivities). Celebrated above all in this discourse is individual choice and agency—in politics, in personal lives, and in assumed or purported authority over meaning.

#### **“I Learned Something Today...”: The Search for Preferred Meaning in *South Park***

The Republican and Libertarian readings of *South Park* are rooted in appeals to authorial intent and textual transparency, or stable “messages” attributed to the program. Several persistent impulses that guide these readings are: (1) efforts to wring a demonstrable politics and clear targets of satire from the show’s well-trod *themes and comic stereotypes*; (2) the desire to distill an actual *moral lesson* couched within the “semi-ironic soliloquy by Stan”<sup>110</sup> that ends most episodes and thereby determine a preferred reading encoded in the text; and (3) to anchor such a reading, invocation of *authorship* and attempts to establish the political affiliations of the show’s writer-creators. The first of these points is illustrated by the framing of the various episode synopses mentioned above as “conservative” or “libertarian” statements.

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<sup>109</sup> This is Douglas Rushkoff’s phrase, introduced in Chapter 2 and above, from PBS’s *Frontline*.

<sup>110</sup> Joe Dellosa, “Authoritah Respected: ‘South Park’ Wins a Peabody,” *inletspin.com*, April 7, 2006 (accessed August 2008); this magazine’s URL *inletspin.com* is no longer active. While it is often Stan Marsh who fills this “semi-ironic” moralizing role, another character may deliver the week’s lesson or “moral.”

The remaining two warrant consideration. Some degree of certainty about the ironist's 'intended' meaning is necessary for any conception of irony as stable. While *South Park* is a radically polysemic text, widely discussed as postmodern irony, the interpretive communities that I am discussing here take steps to counteract the instability of the show's irony and privilege one from among a proliferation of potential reading positions, thwarting alternative meanings.<sup>111</sup> South Park Conservatism seeks to *determine* (in Raymond Williams's sense of "setting limits and exerting pressures"<sup>112</sup>) the ultimate meaning of the strategically ambiguous comic text.

Parker and Stone do seed their material with overt opinions but not necessarily their own. They remain, as critics are fond of pointing out, "reluctant to be pigeonholed ideologically."<sup>113</sup> The child characters and primary protagonists Stan Marsh (voiced by Parker) and Kyle Broflovski (by Stone) double as the co-creators' alter-egos within the text, lending credibility to many of their monologues or "soliloquies" as signposts for a discernible authorial point-of-view. We might say that Eric Cartman (also voiced by Parker) serves then as the Id in the comedy's perverse moral universe; alternately impish and vicious, he is consistently selfish and an ideal vessel for channeling politically incorrect attitudes while affording the authors considerable ironic distance from his blatant bigotry. Put another way, if Stan and Kyle stand as the de facto "moral center," then Cartman is the "immoral center" of the series.

The question of whether or not the text invites viewer identification with its central and perhaps peripheral characters underlies and fuels conflicting understandings of the show's

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<sup>111</sup> James Rennie, "'You Know, I Learned Something Today...': Cultural Pedagogy and the Limits of Formal Education in *South Park*," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 197, argues that Brian C. Anderson and "pundits who search for deeper meanings and partisan leanings ignore the role the audience plays in interpreting" the text; however, I would qualify that to say that Anderson's argument valorizes young conservatives as keen readers (he talks to real people about the show) and Sullivan's blog community actively dialogues about textual meaning.

<sup>112</sup> Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (New York: Verso, 1980), 31–49.

<sup>113</sup> Tierney, "South Park Refugees."

cultural politics. Notably, academic and cultural critics during this same period were divided on the issue. Some scholars invoking ironic detachment have insisted that the pleasures of this “postmodern” text with its heavy reliance on flat comic stereotypes prevent viewer identification with characters. For example, literary critic Alison Halsall proclaims, “Emotional involvement is not encouraged on *South Park*: Not a single character... elicits a complicated emotional reaction from the viewer.”<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, often analyses of *South Park* intimate or state outright that viewers are expected to identify with key characters, including antihero Cartman.<sup>115</sup> Certainly, the structures and patterns of identification are somewhat of a grey area, and the laughter-at/laughter-with debate that dogs comedy studies (and that I interrogate in the Interlude) continues to structure critical understandings of this program.<sup>116</sup>

Academic textual analysis only gives us part of the story, as audiences and fan communities fashion their own theories and rules of engagement with the text. Those viewers self-identifying as South Park Conservatives or Libertarians may indeed choose to empathize with the principal characters, potentially seeing their own values, mindsets, and even a certain fashionable “social hedonism” reflected in the children’s antics and attitudes, particularly the “South Park boys.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Alison Halsall, “Bigger Longer & Uncut: *South Park* and the Carnavalesque,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 32–33.

<sup>115</sup> See Jason Boyd and Marc R. Plamondon, “Orphic Persuasions and Siren Seductions: Vocal Music in *South Park*,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 70 (who discuss ways the text elicits “the viewer’s sympathy for Kyle”); Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures,” 116–17; and Johnson and McAvoy, “Truthiness and Consequences,” 31 (who stipulate that “*South Park* ultimately aligns the viewers’ response with that of the characters onscreen” such that “we implicitly identify with Cartman’s desire” in a given scene).

<sup>116</sup> Doyle Greene illuminates *South Park*’s use of “*overdetermined* stereotypes [emphasis his]” and absurdist pathos, and provides exceptional, nuanced analysis of the series in conversation with prior traditions of American TV comedy. See his “Comedy Is Not Pretty: In Praise of *South Park*,” in *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2008), 215–16.

<sup>117</sup> Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 23–24 and 48, points out that the minor (but principled) character Wendy Testaburger, the boys’ classmate, is “often the moral-ethical voice” of the show and its in-text representative for “standard ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ views.” She also serves as the show’s most favorable portrayal of a strong female. Notably, South Park Republican readings do *not* acknowledge Wendy as a moral compass.

This tendency aligns the reader with the authorial presence of Parker and Stone as political allies and imagines an affective community of like-minded fans, with all the conspiratorial pleasures of the in-group and the ironist-reader bond.

In interviews the *South Park* co-creators have stated that their work expresses their distinctive artistic voice and perspective, while at the same time they steadfastly deny that they set out “to make statements” or “proselytise.”<sup>118</sup> In their role as authors they tell us, “[W]e may have differing political viewpoints.”<sup>119</sup> As Matt Stone explains in their 2005 dialogue with PBS’s Charlie Rose (who confides that he himself turns to the South Park boys as “moral and ideological guides”): “[W]e always try to make it feel like, ‘*Where are those guys coming from?*’ ... And lots of times we’ll do shows with moral points of view that we don’t necessarily agree with. It just makes a better story.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, attempts to ascertain the political meanings of any particular episode are confounded by the fact that the writers’ personal values are in competition with their aesthetics and sense of comedic authenticity.

*South Park*’s first new episode after the terrorist attacks on the United States, “Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants” in November 2001, set a precedent for the program’s heightened focus on political themes in the post-9/11 world. This episode, among others, has led television scholars to remark upon the program’s oblique and multivalent takes on war and nationalism.<sup>121</sup>

After the fourth-graders send a dollar to children in Afghanistan as a class assignment,

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Lim, “Lowbrow and Proud,” 26.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Jesse Walker and Nick Gillespie, “South Park Libertarians: Trey Parker and Matt Stone on Liberals, Conservatives, Censorship, and Religion” (cover story), *Reason*, December 5, 2006, <http://reason.com/archives/2006/12/05/south-park-libertarians> (accessed March 6, 2012).

<sup>120</sup> *Charlie Rose*, interview with Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 30 min., Corporation for Public Broadcasting, first broadcast September 25, 2005, by PBS.

<sup>121</sup> See especially Becker, “‘I Hate Hippies’: *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X,” 157–58; Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 177–78, 207–14; D. Greene, “Comedy Is Not Pretty: In Praise of *South Park*,” 213; and Lynn Spigel, “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004): 258–59.



Stan Marsh receives a goat in return and travels to that war-torn land with his friends to return the unwanted gift. The boys are promptly captured by Qaeda/Taliban forces and taken to bin Laden's lair, at which point the story devolves into a pastiche of WWII propaganda cartoons with their exuberant racism, and Eric Cartman is cast as the archetypal animated trickster (*à la* "Bugs Bunny") sadistically taunting before vanquishing his pursuer (figs. 5.5a–d).



Figures 5.5a–d. With visual references to classic *Looney Toons*, *South Park*'s first post-9/11 episode combines the pleasures of pastiche, nostalgia, and conspiratorial "nods and winks" (see the top images) to regard viewers as insiders in jokes at the expense of a national enemy. Eric Theodore Cartman emasculates, bamboozles, and finally defeats Osama bin Laden in this homage to Warner Bros.' Bugs Bunny and a long tradition of patriotic wartime cartoons. "Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants," *South Park*, first aired November 7, 2001, on Comedy Central.

Such scenes, while tonally almost impenetrable, may nevertheless anchor a conservative reading to the extent that they direct laughter at the national enemy bin Laden (who is further dehumanized

by a more caricatured animation style and mock-Arabic gibberish dialogue, as well as beastiality jokes) and indulge American fantasies of seeing him hunted down and killed.

In contrast, the four Afghan children are relatively humanized as *doppelgangers* for Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny, whose unshakable anti-American sentiments challenge the comfortable worldview of their Coloradan counterparts. Afghani Stan delivers a cogent critique of prior U.S. military action that gives at least partial voice to certain arguments of anti-war protestors and others seeking to complicate narratives of a blameless United States. He then quashes (U.S.) Stan's first attempt at articulating a naïvely hopeful "lesson" for the episode, that most Americans are good people and "we're not so different after all," and counters that Stan and Kyle should get used to being hated. Despite the program's often ambivalent commentary on American foreign policy and patriotic fervor, boomer culture is a consistent target of the humor. Boomers are shown to be out-of-touch and ill-equipped to deal with national crisis, from Stan's mom Sharon who spends the month in catatonic state induced by endless CNN coverage to teacher Ms. Choksondik (drawn to resemble former Attorney General Janet Reno) with her woefully inadequate help-the-needy gesture to a running joke that the goat is mistaken for emblematic boomer rocker Stevie Nicks. Even while Sharon Marsh's cowering on the couch is arguably a sympathetic depiction of the shell-shocked American news junkie during a period of shared national trauma, taken together these representations are congruent with conservative attempts to repudiate the sixties counterculture.

"Farty Pants" ends with a poignant moment of reflection on the call to patriotism as Stan plants a flag (fig. 5.6) and delivers his revised moral that "if you don't want to root for your team, then you should get the hell out the stadium." As the boys salute the flag and Kyle adds, "Go America! Go Broncos," the structuring irony is momentarily muted then foregrounded.



Figure 5.6.  
Stan Marsh salutes the flag  
in a moment of sincere patriotic  
sentiment uncharacteristic of  
*South Park* during the concluding  
scene of “Osama Bin Laden Has  
Farty Pants,” November 7, 2001,  
on Comedy Central.

The encoded “moral” in this instance is ironically sincere, managing to convey at one and the same time that the stated message is *meant* (or founded in genuine sentiment) and yet is absurd (or unavoidably simplistic and troubling). Thus, a moral conclusion is simultaneously revealed and undercut, allowing the text to accommodate several reading positions along a continuum from the sincere to the cynical and moreover resonate with viewers who may themselves hold conflicted and deeply ambivalent views on the unfolding events.

*South Park* participates in the anti-didacticism that defined the ironic 1990s sitcom, and initially the end-of-episode morals (Stan’s perfunctory sermonizing: “I learned something today...”) were presented, and ostensibly received by the postmodern-literate audience, as a send-up of domestic sitcom convention. In later seasons, as the novelty of this joke wore off, these embedded moments of mock moral clarity would begin to take on an increasingly sincere hue, sustaining the implied genre critique while amplifying hints of genuine ideological conviction or inquiry still tucked within the same ironic packaging (as in the example above). This overt social commentary helps to account for the show’s repositioning in critical discourse as the

comedy of “relevance” (as opposed to mere vulgar silliness or “anarchic randomness”<sup>122</sup>), retiring comedic irony’s reputation for anti-relevance on 1990s television, with sources like *The New York Times* by the mid-2000s touting the show for its “topical parables.”<sup>123</sup> Despite the authors’ purported anti-didacticism, a variety of sources in the 2000s increasingly charged that, in the words of a Wikipedia entry, the show gets “quite preachy” with its “directly explained moral.”<sup>124</sup> Virginia Heffernan of *The New York Times* even argues that “in spite of [its rebellious] pose, ‘South Park’ does not lay claim to bad-boy television’s principle of ‘no learning, no hugs,’ the mandate Larry David laid out for ‘Seinfeld’ [emphasis added]. ‘South Park’ can even be overtly pious.”<sup>125</sup>

As these declarations suggest, for some television critics and aspiring South Park Republicans or Libertarians, the episode “lessons” are all but stripped of irony and ultimately function rather like “earnest” speech—an edgier, contemporary version of classic television’s “living room lectures.”<sup>126</sup> While I would argue that the text installs numerous ironic gestures and nuances to destabilize such literal readings, the choice to assert that the program contains and foregrounds particular stable moral meanings affords a sense of community for Republican- and Libertarian-identified viewers and pundits rallying around the show, who if empathizing with its child-protagonists as the authors’ stand-ins are more likely to regard these lectures as

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<sup>122</sup> Helen Nixon, “Adults Watching Children Watch *South Park*,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 43, no. 1 (September 1999): 12–16. In the show’s early seasons, Nixon felt that “serious adult critics” including educators were discounting *South Park*’s significance due to “the anarchic randomness of its humour” (15).

<sup>123</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “Critic’s Notebook; What? Morals in ‘South Park?’” *New York Times*, April 28, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/28/arts/critic-s-notebook-what-morals-in-south-park.html> (accessed April 26, 2012).

<sup>124</sup> Wikipedia, “South Park,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_park) (accessed August 2008).

<sup>125</sup> Heffernan, “Morals in ‘South Park?’”

<sup>126</sup> Again I borrow this pithy phrase, shorthand for traditional domestic comedies’ didacticism, from Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film & Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

pitch-perfect rather than preachy.<sup>127</sup> It is less productive to regard this moral-driven communal interpretation of the text as a misreading of irony (indeed, as I've already noted these episode endcaps blend notes of sincerity with irony and cynicism) than to consider the cultural work being done by South Park Conservatism's on-again-off-again relationship to textual irony and negotiated attention to its markers in the *South Park* metatext.

Compared with the commentary on South Park Republicans from social conservatives, the libertarian press was less conflicted and apologetic about *South Park*'s coarse comedy, tending to accept the show on its own terms as deliberately offensive, vulgar humor.<sup>128</sup> It seems fair to say that some Republicans, at least when participating in the South Park Republican discourse, saw themselves taking up a negotiated reading position, content to sidestep any "anti-conservative" ideology in the text, while Libertarians were even more insistent that theirs was the actual preferred reading.<sup>129</sup> *The New York Times*'s Frank Rich, who agreed that *South Park* reflects its creators' "butt-out libertarianism," argued that conservatives' newfound faith in the mercurial cartoon was ill-considered and misplaced. Even before Anderson's *South Park Conservatives* had hit the bookshelves, Rich reasoned, the cartoon had already shifted its satirical gaze once again onto faith-based and big-government conservatives, such that its role "in the culture wars now looks like a harbinger of an anti-conservative backlash."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> That said, select conservative *critiques* of the show in fact dispute the primacy of authorial intent, detecting a "message" contrary to Parker and Stone's stated or supposed intentions. See Beary, "War Against Christmas."

<sup>128</sup> Toni Johnson-Woods, *Blame Canada! South Park and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 204–5, writes: "Libertarianism promotes freedom of speech, no matter how offensive."

<sup>129</sup> These terms "negotiated" and "preferred" reading, as referenced in prior chapters, are from Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1972–1979)*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson/CCCS, 1980), 128–38.

<sup>130</sup> Rich, "Conservatives ♥ 'South Park.'" Anti-conservative readings highlight episodes satirizing religious fanaticism, Church, and/or prominent Republicans, such as "Best Friends Forever" (9.4, March 30, 2005). (continued...)

Praise for *South Park* as left-of-center or even anti-conservative fare surfaces elsewhere, as well. Indeed, although Anderson expressly pits *South Park* against the “anti-conservative” comedy of *All in the Family*, his book came on the heels of Norman Lear’s creative collaboration with Parker and Stone as a guest and contributing influence on their seventh season in 2003, drawing the notice of socially liberal fans. Lear served as a consultant on several scripts and provided the voice of Benjamin Franklin in the hundredth episode.<sup>131</sup> As I noted in Chapter 4, Parker and Stone claimed to somewhat model Eric Cartman on Lear’s notorious bigot Archie Bunker. In contrast to Republican and Libertarian readings that lay claim to the show, some critics credit *South Park* (or at least certain elements and characterizations) with social relevance as liberal-humanist television, rescuing progressive comedy from its tainted status as “PC” (much like network sitcoms discussed in the previous chapter charted new territory for entertaining or espousing progressive and politically liberal values in “un-PC” social comedy). Capturing this perspective, *The Seattle Times*’s Jeff Shannon commends *South Park* for providing “the most progressive, provocative and socially relevant disability humor ever presented on American television.” Shannon deduces that there is not actually a “liberal agenda” per se, but rather a textual openness that allows for “blunt-force honesty, free from the politically correct restrictions that curtail open discourse in more ‘respectable’ forums of debate.”<sup>132</sup> This reasoning is remarkably similar to conservatives’ and libertarians’ praise for the show (and for politically incorrect humor as a “public service”<sup>133</sup>), as we have seen, except for the presumption here that the text *appears*

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Alluding to the Terri Schiavo euthanasia debate spearheaded by the Christian right that spurred a national news frenzy, this episode features brain-dead Kenny McKormick (Matt Stone) being kept on life support to feed the media’s appetite for controversy and depicts President Bush as Satan’s unwitting pawn in a war of Good and Evil.

<sup>131</sup> *South Park*, “I’m a Little Bit Country,” episode 7.4, first aired April 9, 2003, on Comedy Central.

<sup>132</sup> Shannon, “Roll on, Timmy!”

<sup>133</sup> Bevens, “*South Park*: Timecists vs. Goobacks,” quoted previously.

to skew liberal. Scholar Lindsay Coleman takes this notion farther, seeing *South Park*'s racial plots as assimilation narratives that encourage "liberal bridge building" in the "spirit of generosity and open-mindedness."<sup>134</sup> Likewise, web-based critic Joe Delloso in a 2006 review finds that *South Park*'s child protagonists "often advocate tolerance,"<sup>135</sup> a contention that again complicates a major premise of conservative readings that regard the show singularly as sneering at "tolerance."

Notably, as a program that frequently disturbs comfortable categories of sexual identity, some critics and scholars regard the text as queer-friendly, with hyperbolic characters such as "Big Gay Al" and transsexual Mr./Mrs. Garrison serving to exaggerate gay stereotypes to the point of absurdity and to destabilize conventional gender roles and binaries.<sup>136</sup> Such readings clash with the South Park Republican contention that the program uses Mr. Garrison's eventual sex-change, in season nine, expressly to trample on reproductive and "transgender rights."<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, Conservapedia (the anti-liberal Wikipedia knock-off owned by conservative activist Andrew Schlafly) alleges that *South Park* does uphold "the homosexual agenda" and complains that certain episodes portray gays as decent role models or sanction gay marriage, noting this as "one of the few liberal causes which is consistently supported by the show."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Lindsay Coleman, "Shopping at J-Mart with the Williams: Race, Ethnicity, and Belonging in *South Park*," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 141. Wikipedia's entry for "South Park Republican," subject to revision by site users, for a time included the following statement (retrieved April 2012 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_park\\_republican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_park_republican)): "While the show often lampoons political correctness it is equally critical of racism and homophobia."

<sup>135</sup> Delloso, "Authoritah Respected."

<sup>136</sup> Gournelos, in chaps. 1 and 3 of his *Tao of South Park*, 41–58, 101–22, provides detailed analysis of gender performance and of Mr. Garrison's fluid sexuality in *South Park*.

<sup>137</sup> Anderson, "South Park Republicans," analyzing "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina" (9.1, March 9, 2005).

<sup>138</sup> Conservapedia ("The Trustworthy Encyclopedia"), "South Park," [http://www.conservapedia.com/South\\_Park](http://www.conservapedia.com/South_Park), edited by the site's registered users (accessed April 25, 2012). Episodes cited as examples include "Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride" (1.4, September 3, 1997), which received a GLAAD Award; "Cripple Fight" (5.2, June 27, 2001), because it "attempted to portray homosexuals as individuals capable of being responsible leaders for today's youth"; and "Follow That Egg" (9.10, November 2, 2005), about same-sex marriage.

One South Park Republican's blog provoked a liberal reader, in late 2003, to scold this fan community, insisting that "it's obvious to the most casual observers that the *South Park* guys are *liberal* in the truest sense of the word [emphasis added]." <sup>139</sup>

Politically, Parker and Stone have positioned themselves as "middle-ground guys." <sup>140</sup> As media scholar Nick Marx notes, they make ample use of publicity around their creations to fashion an "authorial persona" as ideological free-agents. <sup>141</sup> Even if the satirists' actual voting record remained "a deliberate mystery," <sup>142</sup> the South Park Republican/Libertarian communities in the 2000s were keen to glimpse behind the curtain to validate their respective arguments. At various points one or both of the rebel comics professed to be non-partisan, a non-voter, a registered Republican, or a libertarian at heart. Their political personae are radically contingent, motivated by a dedication to shock and to confound expectations. Confirmed contrarians, they skew anti-liberal to buck the particular west-coast milieu where they are based. Having been "really liberal" to mix things up growing up in Colorado during the Reagan era, Trey Parker told Charlie Rose in their 2005 PBS interview, he and his writing partner realized "the only way to be punk rock in L.A. is to be a Republican." Parker revealed that their claims of liking Bush began with a desire to stun people at parties to amuse themselves. <sup>143</sup> For their 2001 Comedy

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<sup>139</sup> "South Park Republicans Redux," reader comment by "Chet," October 27, 2003, <http://www.jayreding.com/archives/2003/10/27/south-park-republicans-redux/> (accessed August 2008). His focus is not gay-themed content.

<sup>140</sup> "Trey Parker and Matt Stone Talk 'Team America: World Police,'" interview, MovieWeb, October 4, 2004, <http://www.movieweb.com/news/trey-parker-and-matt-stone-talk-team-america-world-police> (accessed April 27, 2012); also excerpted on Wikipedia, "South Park Republican," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_park\\_republican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_park_republican) (accessed April 2012).

<sup>141</sup> Nick Marx provides trenchant analysis of Parker/Stone's "author-function" as negotiated via interviews and secondary texts, in which they stake their authorial identity to oppositionality. See his "Respecting 'Authoritah': Trey Parker, Matt Stone, and Authorship in *South Park* and Beyond," in *Deconstructing South Park: Critical Examinations of Animated Transgression*, ed. Brian Cogan (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012), 165–77.

<sup>142</sup> Johnson, "Screen Righters."

<sup>143</sup> *Charlie Rose*, 2005.



Central sitcom *That's My Bush!*, the duo sensed that in the national political climate of the time it would be “way more subversive,” in Stone’s words, to make Bush a “likable” character.<sup>144</sup>

While Republicans seized on the comedy team’s professed hatred of liberals and some said pro-Bush stance, conservative pundits noted and even endorsed their apparent philosophy of “don’t-tread-on-me-libertarianism.”<sup>145</sup> As I suggested above, Republican fans and commentators were comfortable claiming the libertarian bloc as a subset, hence conflating the two under the “South Park Republican” banner, but self-proclaimed Libertarians were wary of such an incorporation. In August 2006, during a break in *South Park*’s tenth season, Parker and Stone spoke at a Libertarian conference sponsored by the Reason Foundation’s *Reason* magazine in Amsterdam about free expression and anti-censorship. The appearance was trumpeted as the comedians’ coming-out moment as proud Libertarians.<sup>146</sup> When asked at the event about their politics, the two told *Reason* that *South Park* and *Team America* treat the far right and left as equally absurd, encouraging audiences to laugh at extremists while “saying that there is a middle ground, that most of us actually live in.”<sup>147</sup> Parker had made the same point in an October 2004 interview about *Team America*, brushing off the label “South Park Republican” by saying that he and Stone regarded Michael Moore and a right-wing Christian fundamentalist as “the exact same person.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, they used the *Reason* event as a further opportunity to define

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<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Joel Stein, “Presidential Misconduct,” *Time* 157, no. 11 (March 19, 2001): 70, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 18, 2004).

<sup>145</sup> Catherine Seipp, “Cruising on Comedy Central: Ten Years of *South Park*,” *National Review*, October 4, 2006, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/218891/cruising-comedy-central/catherine-seipp> (accessed April 16, 2012).

<sup>146</sup> Tierney, “South Park Refugees,” reporting the duo’s involvement with the *Reason* conference, announced “bad news for the G.O.P.,” that the “promising new bloc of voters” are *not* Republicans but instead Libertarians. Others point to the 2005 *Charlie Rose* interview, in which Trey Parker was pressed on the matter and admitted rather hesitantly that he may be “a little” libertarian, making a joke of the question.

<sup>147</sup> Trey Parker quoted in Walker and Gillespie, “South Park Libertarians.”

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in “Trey Parker and Matt Stone Talk ‘Team America: World Police,’” *MovieWeb*.

themselves (and seemingly their libertarian-identified fans by extension) as representatives of the “disenfranchised center”—a category that Jon Stewart and Bill Maher also laid claim to (see Chapter 3) as the refuge of the comedian-of-the-people and the ideal vantage point for hurling satire from the sidelines of the culture wars.<sup>149</sup>

The fact that Parker and Stone’s on-screen personas and other central characters are children navigating an insane world helps to position the comics in this way. “*South Park* is viewed through the eyes of the disenfranchised,” argues Toni Johnson-Woods. “The boys, like the disenfranchised classes of the carnival, view the world through fresh eyes.”<sup>150</sup> This conceit, of innocents spouting observations about life and cracking wise, sweetens any elements of laddish irony that frame the text. As I have argued, cartoons (e.g., *Duckman*, *Gary the Rat*, *Shorties Watchin’ Shorties*) and puppet humor (*Crank Yankers*, *Unhappily Ever After*, *Greg the Bunny*) worked to “soften” the aggressive edge of lad comedy on U.S. television in the late 1990s and early 2000s and may be said to facilitate greater degrees of ironic distance. Similarly, with *Team America*, as the Associated Press’s Christy Lemire gleans: “[Parker and Stone] ridicule both Michael Moore and the U.S. government. And by placing their words in the mouths of marionettes, their observations never seem heavy-handed.”<sup>151</sup> This “softening” does not blunt the satiric blade, but rather contributes to a sometimes dubious claim to equanimity made by *South Park* and its cohorts.

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<sup>149</sup> See Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), examining comedian-commentators Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, and Dennis Miller as populist, “Everyman” figures outside of the political establishment who encourage citizen engagement with politics and talk back to power.

<sup>150</sup> “Like Shakespeare’s naïve fools, they speak the ‘truth,’” asserts Johnson-Woods in *Blame Canada!*, 163; she goes on to identify Eric Cartman specifically also as a “mouthpiece for the disenfranchised male” (169). Even Cartman’s monstrous selfishness and prejudices are rendered naïve and “cute.” Spigel, “Entertainment Wars,” 258, on the other hand, sees *South Park* subjecting “American claims of childish innocence” to “comic interrogation” after 9/11.

<sup>151</sup> Christy Lemire, “At the Movies: ‘Team America: World Police,’” Associated Press, October 12, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 5, 2007).

## The Defense of “Equal Opportunity Offense”

[Vice President Al] Gore’s effort to ban the laughter in “South Park” is... a threat to us all.

— Conservative activist David Horowitz, 1999<sup>152</sup>

Those accepting Parker and Stone’s self-definition as “equal opportunity offenders” tend to argue that there is one consistent target of satire in their work, namely hypocrisy, or extremism that leads to abuses of power for personal or political gain. For example, humor scholar Lori Lipoma believes “that Parker and Stone’s *point has always been very straightforward*: people, especially those in authority, and particularly those who hold ideological sway over others, simply cannot be trusted [emphasis added].”<sup>153</sup> Television critics often seize on the pleasures of superiority humor afforded by this text with its derisive laughter aimed at ignorance, blind dogma, self-righteousness, and sanctimony of all stripes. Wikipedia’s collaborative proclamation of the common sense of *South Park* in 2008 included this assessment of its politics: “Liberals are portrayed as being snobby intellectuals, arrogant hippies or anxious yuppies, and conservatives as bible thumpers, angry rednecks and greedy businessmen.... Both sides are portrayed as imposing their views on others and generally having a malignant influence.” This widely shared understanding of the show’s omnidirectional offensiveness stresses that the satirists do not take “a concrete position” on controversial issues.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> David Horowitz, “Why Gore Would Censor ‘South Park,’” *Salon.com*, July 19, 1999, [http://www.salon.com/1999/07/19/south\\_park](http://www.salon.com/1999/07/19/south_park) (accessed May 21, 2012), reporting on a conference at which Al Gore unveiled the V-chip.

<sup>153</sup> Lori Lipoma, “Kierkegaard, Contradiction, and *South Park*,” in *Deep End of South Park*, 25. Similarly, Heffernan’s “Morals in ‘South Park?’” in *The New York Times* asserts that the show’s moral and satirical mission dissects “American hypocrisy, the combination of greed and sanctimony” that fuels religious fervor and runaway political ambition. Such assertions are a staple of *South Park* reviews.

<sup>154</sup> Wikipedia, “South Park” (accessed August 2008).

Yet, certain interpretive schemes contradict this premise, on the grounds that it denies the writers' willingness to deliver a "meaningful message." Particularly in the post-9/11 context with the emerging consensus that comedians with 'something to say' were *in* (and courageous) and comedy 'about nothing' was *out*, we see this objection surface.<sup>155</sup> Insightful analysis by media scholars such as Lynn Spigel and Viveca Greene, both examining *South Park* as political television after 9/11, underscores that *South Park* favors (in Spigel's words) a "blank ironic sensibility" or (in Greene's) inescapably "unstable irony."<sup>156</sup> However, as we have seen, *South Park* Conservatism emerges in this moment as one such popular reading strategy that seeks in this way to retire *South Park*'s public image as an "equal opportunity offender," in order to credit the text with a forceful (ostensibly preferred) "message" as trailblazing anti-liberal television. In this instance, it is important to stay focused on the fact that the taste culture of *South Park* Conservatism as conceived by Anderson and others is not driven by *South Park* itself, but broadly inclusive of a laddish comedy ethos whose common signature is an aggressively politically incorrect humor and conflicted relationship to new social movements (feminism, multiculturalism, gay rights) and identity politics.

Virtually unspoken in this debate are the built-in connotations of the expression "equal opportunity offenders" in the context of the wider backlash against political correctness and multiculturalism. As a play on equal opportunity employers, the phrase packs a punch with its

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<sup>155</sup> Dellosa, "Authoritah Respected," asserts: "The truth is, *South Park* isn't an equal-opportunity offender; to attack everything is just as spineless as attacking nothing because both indicate an unwillingness to actually have any meaningful message."

<sup>156</sup> I revisit the second argument later in this chapter. Spigel, "Entertainment Wars," 258; and Viveca Greene, "Critique, Counternarratives, and Ironic Intervention in *South Park* and Stephen Colbert," in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 119–36.

subversive reference to “PC” lingo and policies.<sup>157</sup> *South Park*’s reputation for political incorrectness stems not only from “insensitive” treatment of social groups, but also manifests in the occasional narrative inquiry into (or attack on) “progressive” logics and policies promoting diversity.<sup>158</sup> As seen in examples above, the latter (i.e. narrative thrust) was being emphatically pointed out in conservatives’ analyses of the show, although any scorn that the humor heaped along the way on “PC” finger-waggers and words likewise found an eager audience in this community. We saw this also with the reappropriation of ethnic slurs, by *Vice*’s New Conservatives and assorted lad comics, as a liberating gesture to slip the bonds of PC’s “meaningless syntax.”<sup>159</sup> Anderson’s praise for *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* extends to its open, explicit discussion taking the edge off of “the N-word,” and its freely flung “racial gibes” among black and ethnic white comics. In his overarching critique of what he derides as liberal language games, Anderson’s book demonizes phrases like “creating a hostile environment.”<sup>160</sup> This “gibberish,” adds Bernard Chapin of *Men’s News Daily*, is a leftist form of *censorship* used to “silence” conservative speakers ranging from Rush Limbaugh to campus conservatives to politically incorrect jokesters.<sup>161</sup> Seen here, during this moment the right was rehearsing a particular victimization narrative about the unfair practices of the “sensitivity police” (Chapin’s phrase), framing calls for civility

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<sup>157</sup> The alluded to phrase, equal opportunity employers, is historically linked to affirmative action and spurned by the right as “liberal” double-speak for “reverse discrimination.” See Dumbledore, “Dictionary of Politically Correct Liberal Terms and Phrases,” November 2, 2010, <http://dumbledore.hubpages.com/hub/Dictionary-of-Liberal-Terms> (accessed April 28, 2012). For a gloss on the term’s roots in U.S. politics, see Geoffrey Hughes, *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 98.

<sup>158</sup> See also Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 109–10, 191–92, for textual analysis of applicable episodes.

<sup>159</sup> Phrase introduced above from *Vice Fashion*’s “The New Conservatives.”

<sup>160</sup> Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, 17, 90–91. He complains: “‘Racist,’ ‘homophobe,’ ‘sexist,’ ‘mean-spirited,’ ‘insensitive’—it has become an ugly habit of left-liberal political argument to dismiss conservative ideas as if they don’t deserve a hearing, and to redefine mainstream conservative views as extremism and bigotry” (17). See also Jonah Goldberg, *The Tyranny of Clichés: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012).

<sup>161</sup> Chapin, “Viva La South Park Revolucion!”

and special consideration of the needs of oppressed and bullied groups (e.g., LGBT students, women, or ethnic minorities) on college campuses and in other public settings as onerous impositions on freedom of expression.

When *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* was cancelled after a two-year run due to low ratings, the comedian-host blamed a liberally biased press's refusal to acknowledge the program's existence and value. Proudly comparing his final monologue in the farewell episode (November 5, 2004) to a less "gracious" version of the concession speech that Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry gave earlier that week, Quinn addressed the camera with a hushed tone of moral indignation on behalf of his production staff, fans, and fellow comics:

To all the comedians that were on this show, keep telling the *truth* as you see it. We're the only ones that can do it. ... I'll explain to alleged comedic experts in the industry what comedic integrity is once: The ability to critique all the hypocrisies in society, yes, but also to be *real* enough to see that you're as guilty as everybody else in the game. ... Now excuse me while I go talk to what *The New York Times* called "those mean-spirited, sometimes racist, sometimes sexist, sometimes ignorant"—sounds like every human being I've ever met, who's honest with themselves—yes, these dummies who had the balls to reveal all of their ugliness and their humanity for the sake of honesty and comedy. Let's start the show!<sup>162</sup>

The first question Quinn put before his comedy panel further posed scenarios of an emasculated liberal mainstream press hostile to free speech and fearful of dangerous ("truthful") comedy:

Do you think the media didn't review us most because:  
 (a) we made them feel ignorant because they couldn't categorize us;  
 (b) they only like edgy comedy when it matches their ideology; or  
 (c) we were too testosterone-driven and it irked them (because they got beat up in high school)?

Although the other comics' joking repartee somewhat deflated this script of aggrievement, teasing the host and one another, the program in this instance stated its comic aims in absolute terms, while naming the 'enemy' (liberal media) as an effeminate elite beholden to multiculturalist

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<sup>162</sup> *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*, series finale, first aired November 5, 2004, on Comedy Central.

ideology. At the same time, Quinn's account asserts political incorrectness in comedy as a leveling force (i.e., with comics owning up to attitudes harbored by "every human being"), effectively eliding any distinction between the utopian Rabelaisian pleasures of wallowing in our own base nature and a more combative ideological push or anti-PC agenda.

With "politically correct" speech and enforced "sensitivity" being critiqued as affronts to American individualism and self-expression, anti-PC humor on the rise since the late 1980s and early 1990s has grown closely aligned with libertarian thought. In earlier chapters I noted this undercurrent. The articulation of politically incorrect comedy to a kind of libertarian project is in some instances more overt, as seen with *Politically Incorrect*'s Bill Maher and subsequently *South Park*'s Parker and Stone being hailed as libertarians with an "Everyman" quality.<sup>163</sup> More broadly, the expanding profile of libertarianism in cultural politics and as a youth sensibility arguably coincides with the rise of political incorrectness as a cultural/aesthetic movement that pushes back against multiculturalism and identity politics from the 1990s onwards. Against this backdrop—of neoconservative rhetoric and anti-PC agitation—free-wheeling political incorrectness in comedy is all the more readily endowed with an anti-liberal or libertarian bent somewhat independent of a text's or its writers' personal politics or stated goals. As Hall's Encoding/Decoding model suggests, preferred meaning is not perfectly congruent with producerly intent; rather, the television text is always meaningful within a preconstituted field of ideas and discourses that shape its production and reception.<sup>164</sup>

With regard to *South Park*'s humor founded on designed-to-offend jokes and stereotypes, it is worth noting that fans and scholars alike have often ventured that the ironic use of

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<sup>163</sup> Like Parker and Stone, Maher has identified himself as both libertarian and a voice of the "mushball middle," as Chapter 3 noted, a phrase quoted in Rick Marin, "Primary Comics: Political Satire Is Back, with Three Subversive Candidates out Front," *Newsweek*, February 19, 1996, 75, LexisNexis Academic (accessed February 22, 2005).

<sup>164</sup> Hall, "Encoding, Decoding."

“politically incorrect” representations is by definition “not hateful”<sup>165</sup> and even “neutral.”<sup>166</sup>

Two contributors to the 2008 anthology *Taking South Park Seriously* begin a vital process of interrogating the pretense to neutrality of “equal opportunity offensiveness.” Robert Samuels argues that *South Park*, whether “knowingly” or not, is complicit with the pervasive conservative rhetoric that vilifies political correctness as the “true source of intolerance” and prejudice in U.S. society while downplaying actual historical and ongoing oppression of minorities.<sup>167</sup>

While I do not share Samuels’s limiting assessment of the show as fostering “equal opportunity hatred,” he lays out crucial rhetorical context in U.S. political and media culture. Stephen Groening reinforces this critique: “This idea that ‘equal opportunity’ for offense can be given to all groups avoids the notion that different groups have different histories of oppression in the United States,” namely it “ignores the historical bases—such as slavery, genocide, patriarchy” that inform identity politics.<sup>168</sup> Extrapolating from Samuels’s argument, I would emphasize that the larger discourse condemning “PC” stacks the rhetorical deck for the show’s reception such that *South Park* performs cultural work in keeping with the “anti-PC” agenda. Even when the comics opt out of any such project (with comments like Stone’s “I don’t give a shit about being PC or anti-PC”<sup>169</sup>), this discursive context imparts layers of connotation that trump the text and

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<sup>165</sup> Yu, “Pooh-Poohs VDARE.com,” makes this argument in defense of South Park Republicans.

<sup>166</sup> Brian L. Ott rebukes critics for “naïvely arguing that ‘texts’ such as *South Park*, which use ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes self-consciously and ironically, are racist, sexist, and homophobic,” and he posits instead that “the ironic attitude is neutral.” Ott, “The Pleasures of South Park (And Experiment in Media Erotics),” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 39–40, 47. While I do not consider *South Park* –ist or –phobic, my thesis does caution against the temptation to invoke postmodern textuality to let ironic material entirely off the hook for ideology and complicity in hegemonic power struggles. I am wary of criticism that does not question contemporary irony’s all-purpose out-clause.

<sup>167</sup> Robert Samuels, “Freud Goes to South Park: Teaching Against Postmodern Prejudices and Equal Opportunity Hatred,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, 99–111. Samuels considers himself a “politically correct” teacher (105). Such critiques remain unpopular even on the academic left because they do invite accusations of political correctness.

<sup>168</sup> Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures,” 115, 122.

<sup>169</sup> Quoted in Lim, “Lowbrow and Proud.”



place it potentially in opposition to liberal-progressive social movements, on a level beyond the text's structuring logic of multidirectional satire.

Left-leaning scholars have detected an overt libertarian thrust to the program, but have suggested that *South Park* is inconsistent even in its libertarian leanings, sending “mixed messages” about capitalism, government at home and abroad, and morality.<sup>170</sup> For instance, pointing out the futility of the liberal–conservative struggle to pin down this text, Doyle Greene approaches *South Park* as an ideological cage match between classical liberal and conservative worldviews. Contrary to Cantor's unilaterally Libertarian reading, Greene notes that while the program seems to come down on the side of individual liberty, mocking paternalistic government and meddling moralizers, it also takes sadistic pleasure in depicting the collapse of civil society under the chaos of individuals exercising such unchecked freedom, in order to show how the clashing of “self-interested parties results in intolerant views, selective ethics, and uncivil behavior.” To the extent the show is conservative, he argues, it strikes a Hobbesian bargain:

*South Park's* fundamental skepticism of human nature—and the disturbing, Sadean depths humanity can sink to (read: Eric Cartman)—become a “hidden message” and the crux of *South Park's* conservatism (“All people are born bad and made good by society”). More correctly, it is the *contradiction* between *South Park's* classical liberal philosophy and classical conservative pessimism concerning the free, rational individual which becomes the fulcrum for political satire....<sup>171</sup>

The parenthetical quotation refers to an interview with Trey Parker and Matt Stone in *Time's* March 13, 2006, issue, in which Stone asserted, “We still believe that all people are born bad and are made good by society, rather than the opposite.” Viewed through this lens the show becomes less “a celebration of the non-conformist individual,” Greene contends, than an extended comic meditation on “the simple fact that cruel, stupid individuals acting on personal self-interest

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<sup>170</sup> See Becker, “I Hate Hippies”: *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X,” 156–57; Johnson-Woods, *Blame Canada!*, 204–6; and Spigel, “Entertainment Wars,” 258.

<sup>171</sup> D. Greene, “Comedy Is Not Pretty: In Praise of *South Park*,” 221; emphasis in original.

form crueler, stupider groups acting on organized self-interest.”<sup>172</sup> Like Greene’s, much of the growing body of scholarship devoted to *South Park* lays aside traditional ideological criticism (pinning down a specific meaning or political thrust to the program) and explores *meaningful contradictions* as the basis for the show’s social relevance and irreverence.

At the same time, media scholars are engaged in their own attempts to secure the slippery meanings of this program and assign clear significance, not as a partisan voice in the culture wars but as a dialogic text that promotes critical thinking and civic engagement. Next, to round out my survey of *South Park*’s intense scrutiny in the 2000s by competing interpretive communities, I consider how critical cultural studies (as a field committed to progressive politics) has come to understand the program’s role in the cultural forum and has participated in defining its social “relevance.” As we have seen, conservative rhetoric pits anti-PC comedy against the perceived multiculturalist/feminist agenda of humanities professors and other “left-wing indoctrinators.”<sup>173</sup> Cantor insists that *South Park*’s Libertarianism is fundamentally “at odds with the intellectual establishment,” and particularly academics who critique capitalist ideology.<sup>174</sup> Despite this presumed political impasse, scholars on the left and indeed those in the neo-Marxist tradition of cultural studies have largely endorsed the series, regardless of the supposed biases or “messages” of particular episodes, as an asset to democracy and a vibrant example of media dissent. In the remainder of this chapter, I highlight key arguments and focus on shifting perspectives on irony emerging in scholarship in the decade after 9/11 that collectively work to negotiate and manage the “unstable” meanings of irony.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 222; and “Ten Questions with Matt Stone and Trey Parker,” *Time*, March 16, 2006, quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

<sup>173</sup> Anderson, “South Park Republicans.”

<sup>174</sup> Cantor, “Invisible Gnomes,” 103. Yet, his argument appears in a collection of academic essays that celebrates *South Park* as “the most important series on TV.” Robert Arp, ed., *South Park and Philosophy*, 1.

### The Comic Public Sphere: Funny Things Are Happening in the Cultural Forum

In 1998, Action for Children's Television founder Peggy Charren (among others) pronounced *South Park* "dangerous to the democracy."<sup>175</sup> Over the course of the decade that followed, the tenor of the discussion about comedy in the political sphere shifted, as we have seen, with *South Park* and other late-night comedy staples becoming the focus of renewed faith in an engaged citizen-viewer. Scholarly responses to *South Park*, even among academics coming from avowedly liberal or leftist critical paradigms, displayed at least two compelling similarities to the arguments made by some conservatives in the ways they thought and talked about the program. The first thread linking the discourse of conservative activists to that of the literati and of academic analysts, although with divergent explanations, has been the creeping concern in recent decades over detachment as a pervasive sensibility said to define youth-oriented programming and signal a culture of *cynicism*.<sup>176</sup> In each case *South Park*, along with *The Daily Show*, has been a flashpoint in the debate over cynicism and political disaffection in U.S. audiences. Secondly, more favorable critiques discuss the series' political value expressly in terms of its novelty and potency as *oppositional* media. While conservatives peg *South Park*'s confrontational humor as courageously anti-liberal (the sure thrust of counter-hegemonic resistance if one presumes a dominant "Liberal" mainstream media), media theorists on the other hand see its oppositionality in both the comedic mode and challenge to conventional television didacticism (long regarded as a "conservative" impulse to preserve the status quo).

Moreover, as Spigel observes, "9/11 provoked counternarratives and political dialogues," or counterdiscourses, and recent work in media and cultural studies and adjacent fields maps out

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<sup>175</sup> Quoted in Rick Marin, "The Rude Tube," *Newsweek*, March 23, 1998, 56, LexisNexis Academic (accessed May 5, 2012). Parker and Stone discuss early criticism of *South Park* as the "end of democracy" on *Charlie Rose*, 2005.

<sup>176</sup> Grossberg's *Caught in the Crossfire* examines the discourse on apathetic youth in the "culture wars."

this terrain seeking to theorize the current status of comedy in the national conversation.<sup>177</sup> Researchers scrutinizing comedy and politics in the 2000s seized upon *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* in particular, among other cable comedies, as important sites for these “oppositional” views and narratives in commercial media. As conservative bloggers fretted that the right has not been as successful at churning out satire and irony, some academics with left-liberal sympathies concurred.<sup>178</sup> Much of this attention cohered around Comedy Central programming, viewing this channel and related internet fan sites as hotbeds of satirical activity. However, like *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and other comedy round-tables, the aforementioned programs irrespective of their creators’ particular political leanings (*South Park* with its assumed libertarian—if any—slant and Stewart’s and Colbert’s shows being called left-of-center) are all upheld by their academic defenders as open-ended, dialogic texts challenging viewers to think for themselves and form their own conclusions, and thus seen as salutary contemporary instances of television as a cultural forum.

“*Serious Comedy*”: *Satiric Irony as Rhetorical Activism*

Political satire has increasingly become a focal point, particularly in the years after 9/11, for television scholars interested in popular culture that talks back or “speaks truth” to power. Significantly, satire as a genre has undergone a boom on cable television, leading Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson in their 2009 anthology *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy*

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<sup>177</sup> Spigel, “Entertainment Wars,” 260. Murray Edelman defines *counterdiscourses* as “texts that challenge hegemony by undermining its presuppositions and offering alternatives.” Murray Edelman, *Constructing Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 128, quoted in Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, “*The Daily Show* as the New Journalism: In Their Own Words,” in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris (New York: Routledge, 2007), 244.

<sup>178</sup> For example, see Joseph J. Foy, “Tuning in to Democratic Dissent: Oppositional Messaging in Popular Culture,” in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent Through American Popular Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 1–17. This introduction to a multi-disciplinary essay collection surveying oppositional voices in popular entertainment between 2000–2006 holds that media dissent mostly skewed liberal in this “period when conservative politics prevailed in the national political landscape and culture” (11).

in the *Post-Network Era* to contend that “today’s class of satire TV forms a key part of television political culture.”<sup>179</sup> To illustrate, Jones argues that the blatantly satirical treatment of the powerful found in Comedy Central’s *That’s My Bush!* (2001) and hitting its apogee in the cartoon *Lil’ Bush* (2007–08) during Bush’s two-term presidency marks the dawn of an “age of brutal satire.” He describes this aggressive new breed of cable comedy stepping into the “satirical watchdog” role that NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* had largely abandoned by the Reagan era. For Jones, the “satire so damning” of the ruling administration seen in *Lil’ Bush* is culturally significant because it gives voice to public anger or “extreme displeasure” with those in power and affirms freedom to dissent.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, these programs “help shape a broader comedic framework through which citizens make interpretive sense of political life” and in turn they “help shape political culture.”<sup>181</sup> Amber Day, author of *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (2011), also documents the recent “renaissance” in satire, linking it to an “upsurge” in purposeful or sincerely motivated ironic activism, arguing that the prime movers in both are overwhelmingly oriented to “the political left” and resonate with young liberal audiences who share an engaged (not cynical) ironic sensibility. Her study maps out the shifting media environment in which satirists like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Michael Moore are actively “influencing the political discussion,” fostering politically engaged “counterpublics,” and fashioning satire as “one of the most vibrant arenas of public debate in operation

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<sup>179</sup> Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, “The State of Satire, the Satire of State,” introduction to *Satire TV*, 6.

<sup>180</sup> Jones, “With All Due Respect: Satirizing Presidents from *Saturday Night Live* to *Lil’ Bush*,” in *Satire TV*, especially 45, 50, 53, 55, 58, 59.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. See also Carl Bergetz, “It’s Not Funny ‘Cause It’s True: The Mainstream Media’s Response to Media Satire in the Bush Years,” in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington*, 257–76, who argues that Stewart, Colbert, and *SNL*’s Tina Fey cast a satirical spotlight on “political theater” and potentially inspired change within mainstream journalism.

today.”<sup>182</sup> Particularly in light of the eroding wall between comedy and politics, as Geoffrey Baym documents, a new kind of “serious comedy” is “expanding the boundaries of political discourse.”<sup>183</sup>

As these arguments make clear, scholarly studies articulating an engaged irony as the new comedy of relevance focus upon the places where irony converges with political satire and by extension activism. As Jamie Warner states, “almost all satire is ironic, but not all irony is satirical.”<sup>184</sup> Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* explains that irony is the preferred rhetorical mode for both satire and parody. Whereas irony on its own need not function as pointed social commentary or critique, satire by definition has underlying “moral and social” aims. Irony, whatever its degree of “instability,” acquires this *moral and social function* when conjoined with satire. According to Hutcheon, when “irony overlaps with satire” the contemptuous mockery of the ironic ethos “will merge with the scornful satiric ethos (which always implies a *corrective intent*) [emphasis added].”<sup>185</sup> This synergistic pairing, “satiric irony” or “ironic satire” as it is sometimes called, is more readily politicized and brought under the rubric of social relevance, from Lear’s social comedies of the 1970s to *South Park* and *Colbert* today. To be clear, scholars such as Day, while hailing a recent groundswell of “politically engaged, earnestly sincere forms of irony” as a much needed corrective, scrupulously remind (as does Hutcheon) that ironic humor is no more “inherently subversive” than it is structurally conservative.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1, 5, 10–16, 22–23.

<sup>183</sup> See Geoffrey Baym, “Serious Comedy: Expanding the Boundaries of Political Discourse,” in *Laughing Matters*, 21–37; and his *From Cronkite to Colbert*, 30–35, 125.

<sup>184</sup> Jamie Warner, “Humor, Terror, and Dissent: *The Onion* after 9/11,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor*, 63.

<sup>185</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 16, 61, 62. Like irony, parody too lacks an intrinsic “social function,” but gains one when assigned a satirical purpose (p. 43). See also Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 2, for her discussion of the inevitable “instability” of irony.

<sup>186</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 3, 22. See also Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 10; and Warner, “Humor, Terror, and Dissent,” 74 (note 7), who likewise cautions that “irony and satire are not inherently subversive or radical.”

Critics contesting the anti-irony movement's "catchall" definition of irony and objecting that the term is widely "misused" (i.e., confused with cynicism or sarcasm) have therefore sought to recover the classical definitions of irony as a *rhetorical strategy* and to emphasize its intimate ties to satire and/or satirical parody, while also projecting irony forward as an evolving *social attitude* rooted in hope not despair.<sup>187</sup> R. Jay Magill Jr.'s cultural history *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, which traces irony's lineage both as literary trope and philosophical disposition, enfolds today's television irony broadly within "the satiric tradition," buttressing the revisionist view that "irony serves to liberate thinking from deadening social forces, old clichés and stereotypes, stupid biases, hypocrisy, and oppressive public mores." Stacking *South Park* with Stewart and Colbert and texts as wide-ranging as *The Simpsons*, *Adult Swim*, *Da Ali G Show*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad!* as representative of what he calls "the ironic, satiric turn," Magill takes the argument a step further to suggest that "ironic critique has grown into the dominant operative strategy of social criticism in popular culture over the past decade."<sup>188</sup> This position signals a conscientious reframing of postmodern theory debates that have long dominated the literature on television irony (particularly the enduring arguments about the political sterility and ubiquity of irony and satire in their "blank" forms), where some or all of these same TV titles are still tagged as examples of postmodern metatextuality's morally and politically ambiguous utterances.

We have seen in the previous chapters that scholarly debate surrounding satirical programs like *In Living Color*, *Chappelle's Show*, and to some extent *Married... With Children* has been wary of structured ambiguities and the possibility of contradictory or reactionary reading

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<sup>187</sup> The quoted language and accompanying claims are from, respectively, Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 28; and R. Jay Magill Jr., *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>188</sup> Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, x, 19–20.

positions.<sup>189</sup> *South Park* scholarship places considerably less emphasis on the dilemma of ‘mis-readings,’ given that there is not generally presumed to be a stable progressive politics to the show.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, the notion of a cultural dominant has been significantly destabilized since the FOX moment, with subversiveness fast becoming the industry ideal rather than the exception in television comedy. The growing hegemony of an ironic ethos (the “countercultural dominant” as Day deems it<sup>191</sup>) necessitates a recalibration of critical theory. This together with the rampant crosspollination of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses in comedy, I have noted, complicates our working models of ideological criticism and of encoding/decoding.<sup>192</sup> As Ted Gournelos argues in his in-depth study of the “dissonant cultural politics” of *South Park* and other transgressive post-network comedy programming including *The Daily Show* and *Boondocks*, such texts “rely on oppositional brand identities that blur the boundaries between ‘dominant’ and ‘alternative’ cultural production.” He correctly points out the limited utility of the simplistic binaries that have for too long compelled comedy studies to approach programs alternately as instances of either power *or* resistance, espousing oppressive *or* liberating ideas. According to Gournelos, *South Park*’s interventions in public debate “neither serve the dominant nor any one set of sub- or countercultures, but rather interrogate the processes through which culture evolves or reifies.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> See Chapter 4 for relevant citations by Herman Gray, Norma Schulman, and Bambi Haggins.

<sup>190</sup> Scholars nevertheless do note the likelihood of reactionary readings that may suppress the show’s more progressive elements, as with *All in the Family*. See Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 19; and Halsall, “Bigger Longer & Uncut,” 28.

<sup>191</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 150.

<sup>192</sup> See the theory Interlude for elaboration on this point and shifting perspectives on encoding/decoding.

<sup>193</sup> Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 8–9, 17, 122. Gournelos offers one of the most exhaustive, theoretically sophisticated critiques of *South Park*, as an extended case study of oppositionality in media culture. For a concise historical overview tracing *South Park*’s satirical heritage and trajectory, see also Jonathan Gray, “From Whence Came Cartman: *South Park*’s Intertextual Lineage,” in *Deconstructing South Park*, 3–16.



*Theorizing the Comic Sphere: Bakhtin, Gramsci, and Habermas Walk into a Bar...*

*South Park* is enfolded within these arguments not as left-leaning satire, then, but a “disruptive” cultural production that continually deconstructs dominant media discourse, attacks political dogma, and dismantles any and all prevailing rhetorical frames. In this regard, scholars such as Gournelos and Thompson argue, the show is rather revolutionary in carving out a liminal space for alternative ways of thinking politics outside of the established left/right binaries and accepted rhetoric of various “sides.”<sup>194</sup> Gournelos’s argument hinges on the idea of ambiguity in humor and irony as a *destabilizing* force, seen in the way the series navigates the culture wars:

The show is obviously not containable within the processes of conservative, neoconservative, libertarian, or neo-liberal ideologies.... However, *South Park*’s engagement with those ideologies, made most clear through its interactions with the atmosphere of the post-9/11 United States, demonstrate [*sic*] an ability and commitment to form *a constantly changing culture of opposition*... [emphasis added]. This does not necessarily change our political reality, but it might indeed change the ways in which we think about and discuss that reality.<sup>195</sup>

Through this “chaotic” opposition, the humor confronts and exaggerates the flaws of “existing cultural logics to demonstrate the inadequacy of contemporary ideological discourse.”<sup>196</sup>

Similarly, Thompson sees *South Park* striving “to recapture politics for a pissed-off public” bored with bipartisan bickering. Specifically, he seeks to explain how the show “uses the carnivalesque to recapture the public sphere, reopening the discussion of ‘serious’ affairs to a crude language that signals that anyone can participate in it.” *South Park*’s lawless comedic realm with its “alternative, unofficial, offensive language”—like carnival’s “low” or folk

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<sup>194</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 222, 226, 231; Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 32, 58, 102, 114, 122, 144. Gournelos examines “disruptive ontologies” as one of three main oppositional tactics pursued by *South Park*.

<sup>195</sup> Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 222. Recall Frank Rich’s analysis of the show’s political pirouette (i.e., from anti-liberal to anti-conservative) in his 2005 editorial “Conservatives ♥ ‘South Park.’”

<sup>196</sup> Gournelos, *ibid.*, 114.

vernacular—undercuts the legitimated discourses of the public sphere proper.<sup>197</sup> “The category of carnival” as oppositional culture, Robert Stam explains, “has relevance for the political strategies of the left” because Bakhtin emphasizes parodic playfulness as a tactic whereby the powerless or disadvantaged may mimic, pilfer, and contort dominant discourse to pursue an agenda “*against* domination [emphasis in original].”<sup>198</sup> While *South Park* is not primarily parodic in the sense that there is a central text or genre being lampooned, it has promiscuously burlesqued a wide variety of media forms from action films to situation comedy to cable news reporting, giving the program at least the appearance of hitting all targets equally.

The popular argument that *South Park* is an impartial inquiry into human hypocrisy and grotesquerie, an “equal opportunity offender” with satire cutting in all directions, is reinforced by the Bakhtinian analyses of the text as a carnivalesque of American society. The program’s comedic aesthetic is widely discussed in terms of postmodern or carnivalesque play, or a combination of the two, to account for its anarchic and ambivalent aura. Animation historians Terrance R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton articulate carnival’s deep and playful ambivalence about disturbing themes as an abiding feature of postmodernism.<sup>199</sup> On the other hand, Hutcheon cautions that there are limitations inherent in conflating “Bakhtin’s optimistic utopianism” with the “ironic pessimism” that she sees displacing it in contemporary, postmodern popular culture.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, a number of scholars do see *South Park*, by virtue of its joyous excessiveness,

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<sup>197</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 222, 223, 231.

<sup>198</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1989), 227–28. See his epilogue “Bakhtin and Mass-Media Critique” discussing television (219–39).

<sup>199</sup> Following Bakhtin, they define this comic ambivalence in cartoons (e.g., Bugs Bunny films) as “a perpetual dynamic relationship between opposites such as life and death” (218). Terrance R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton, “Towards a Post-Modern Animated Discourse: Bakhtin, Intertextuality and the Cartoon Carnival,” *A Reader in Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling (Sydney, Australia: John Libbey & Company Pty. Ltd.), 203–20.

<sup>200</sup> Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 71–74. See also Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1997).

bad taste, and scatological humor, delivering precisely the radical abasement that Bakhtin described as a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and... all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.”<sup>201</sup> Parker and Stone’s satire “‘excrementalizes’ the U.S. sociopolitical landscape,” Halsall avers, deploying “low-brow humor to deflate established American cultural icons and ideologies.” Her contention that Parker and Stone’s irreverent attack on “political correctness” (read social etiquette) “provides liberation from constraint” overlaps with certain conservatives’ praise of anti-PC humor, but without inferring (as they do) anti-liberal bias.<sup>202</sup> Likewise, Deirdre Pike urges environmentalists/activists to read the text not as hostile to their causes but as “open-ended anarchic carnival speech” that inspires critical reflection.<sup>203</sup>

Bakhtin’s assertion that “[c]arnival laughter is the laughter of the people... universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” is framed by these critics in a manner congruent with the discourse of equal-opportunity offense.<sup>204</sup> Thus, as global mockery, *South Park* constructs a world in which all social groups—whether celebrities, politicians, minorities, immigrants, environmentalists, or terrorists—are deemed equally fitting targets for ridicule. Bracketed out of such analyses are considerations of affluent white male privilege as the source of enunciation and presumed social positioning of much of the target

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<sup>201</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10. Johnson-Woods’s *Blame Canada!* is a book-length exploration of *South Park* as a carnivalesque text.

<sup>202</sup> Halsall, “Bigger Longer & Uncut,” 24, 35. She goes on to posit that the show not only compels viewers to scorn sentiment with its self-reflexive “satire of corny morals,” but uses postmodern irony and carnival laughter to *desensitize* viewers to violence and foster “free-floating, intense enjoyment of socially unacceptable behavior” (32–33). This conclusion sidesteps the life-affirming aspects of carnival laughter about violence and death, as theorized by Bakhtin and astutely applied to *South Park* by Thompson in “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 221–23.

<sup>203</sup> As an eco-activist, she defends the program’s ‘anti-environmentalist’ representations as incentive for those with “a deeply held commitment to the planet” to laugh at and reassess their own public image and verities. Deirdre Pike, “A Carnival in the Rainforest: Familiarizing Environmental Rhetoric,” in *Deep End of South Park*, 134–36.

<sup>204</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11. Applied to self-reflexivity in animation more broadly, Lindvall and Melton in “Post-Modern Animated Discourse,” 218, maintain that “the universal demands that the comedy laugh at everyone and everything, including itself and its forms.”

audience.<sup>205</sup> As Kathleen Rowe following Peter Stallybrass and Allon White has argued, there are limits to the emancipatory, transformative potential of the carnivalesque, and under late capitalism it loses some of its unifying ambivalence and may well foster displaced abjection thus reinstating power.<sup>206</sup> This non-necessary correspondence between political incorrectness and the carnivalesque's promise of radical disruption of social dominance illustrates why Antonio Gramsci's theorization of flexible and fluid structures of domination and consent provide a necessary corrective to Bakhtinian enthusiasms. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque retains a manifest significance in the comic texts and trends under discussion.

Consequently, a number of scholars have worked to harness this unruly concept to the adjacent theories of Gramscian cultural hegemony and the Habermasian public sphere. I agree that it is necessary to situate present-day political humor at the intersection of these theoretical frameworks, although it takes some work to reconcile them, particularly in the case of irony. Irony is a problematic fit for Jürgen Habermas's model of the idealized "bourgeois public sphere," which emphasizes rational-critical debate as the means of forging public opinion. For Habermas, productive democratic dialogue consists of meaningful, sincere statements uttered by speakers who mean what they say.<sup>207</sup> However, Day rightly argues, "social communication about all matters of collective concern," as well as that bearing directly on politics, often "occurs not as serious, rational argument, but in every other register of exchange, including sarcasm, irony,

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<sup>205</sup> Groening's and Samuels's objections (see above) that the text is not read in a vacuum but a stratified society offer a counterpoint. Namely, placed in the larger context of political incorrectness as an attempt to push back against multiculturalism, the program is poised to participate and may inherit or project a sustained political leaning.

<sup>206</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 43–45; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>207</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

parody, and satire, all of which afford the opportunity to say things one otherwise might not in ‘serious’ debate.”<sup>208</sup> Moreover, as noted by scholars such as feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser, one of the most significant features of the Habermasian idealized public sphere is *what* and *whom* it leaves out (and the ways in which those who are left out form what Fraser deems “counterpublics”), a point that hasn’t escaped these comedy scholars.<sup>209</sup>

Again, even the “disenfranchised center” may be considered an excluded group in the divisive, hyperpartisan discourse of the culture wars. Jones argues that the “entertainment politics” of folksy comedy round-tables and satirical news like *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show* “creates an alternative public space” where comedian-hosts with an “Everyman” quality open public debate to the “laity” by bypassing the specialist jargon and ‘wonkiness’ of the political establishment.<sup>210</sup> Jones sees this comedian “outsider” language working in much the same way as Thompson theorizes *South Park*, arguing: “Humor (with its semantic authority rooted in commonsense thinking) provides a vernacular that all audiences speak and a vehicle for attracting broader audiences to politics.”<sup>211</sup> Intriguingly, Brian C. Anderson makes a strikingly similar point, to a different end, advocating for common sense and lay speak in the public forum when defending *Tough Crowd*, which he deems a new kind of politically incorrect “comedic republic” where “equal citizens” engage in unfiltered, frank verbal sparring.<sup>212</sup> Gournelos takes a decidedly more Gramscian approach than Jones in his

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<sup>208</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 19–20; for her retheorization of the public sphere, see 14–22, 143–44. See also Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 145, 197.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 15; Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 109–42.

<sup>210</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 14, 62, 121, 156–57, 193.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 188–89.

<sup>212</sup> Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, 91.

own theorization of popular culture as a site of struggle where chaotic comedy with its disruptive force may serve more as an agent of *uncommon sense* by “breaking opening” hegemonic logics (including “common sense”), but similar to Jones he finds it in much the same way summoning liminal spaces where an alternative politics can be explored.<sup>213</sup>

These critiques of rationality and exclusions notwithstanding, contemporary comedy scholars want to hold onto the notion of a Habermasian forum to the extent that it can be revised to accommodate and account for comic voices and spaces as legitimate sites of dialogue. While the “serious comedy” of revered satirists presently dominates the discussion of comedy’s interventions into legitimated sites of public dialogue, the enduring cultural work of the carnival as a more carnal space demands renewed attention to expressly transgressive and unruly comic utterances/images and their cultural relevance in today’s media environment. In reintroducing carnivalesque theory into this discussion, Thompson highlights Stallybrass and White’s crucial reminder, from their 1986 keywork *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, that the rational public sphere eclipses and even suppresses alternative *libidinal* means of expression “in the interests of serious, productive, and *rational* discourse [emphasis in original].”<sup>214</sup> Taken together, the substantial recent contributions and critical dialogue generated by these satire scholars, among others, challenge us to combine key insights from these analytic traditions—theorizing cultural hegemony, the carnivalesque, and the public sphere—and revise our working models to account for the ideological complexity, polymorphous perversity, and political-economic paradoxes of contemporary “oppositional” comedy.

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<sup>213</sup> Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 8–9; see p. 101 where he advances Gramsci’s critique of “common sense” itself as a hegemonic conceit. Jones, in contrast, as he explains in *Entertaining Politics*, 27, is not working from Gramsci’s definition.

<sup>214</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 97, quoted in Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 223.

Attempts to fashion the carnivalesque as a non-rational comic sphere encounter a number of challenges that frustrate even some of the most astute critics' attempts to bring a program like *South Park* in line with a desired political intentionality as satire. For example, Thompson reasons that in order to have political efficacy, communication in the carnivalesque mode "ought to be *saying something*, to offer some alternative to the 'official' discourses and power structures [emphasis added]," or else we are left with "a whole lot of offensive noise, signifying nothing." Beyond the sheer transgression of carnival culture (which for Bakhtin is in itself liberating and therefore political), here those oppositional, anti-authoritarian impulses are also enlisted to do a different order of political work as "television that *makes people think* [emphasis added]."<sup>215</sup> Consequently, Thompson struggles to reconcile episodes like "The Snuke," in which Hilary Clinton's vagina harbors a nuclear bomb—an episode that he notes aired during her 2008 campaign as the first viable female presidential candidate—with his vision for an emancipatory carnivalesque politics and is forced to conclude, "*South Park's* carnivalesque culture is not always political; its critique is often muddled and may as reliably violate as articulate progressive politics."<sup>216</sup> That is, the program's revelry in grotesque themes affords no coherent political and indeed satirical positionality. Gournelos, too, observes that "audiences are encouraged to interpret [*South Park*] as transgressing the lines of acceptable speech even if this transgression takes the form of *reactionary* politics [emphasis added]." However, perceptively, he stresses that this emphasis on pure transgression as an end unto itself, rather

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<sup>215</sup> Thompson, "Good Demo, Bad Taste," 227, 231.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 229. As I noted earlier in this work, Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 24–49, examines the modern trend toward misogynist TV representations of the monstrous, excessive female body that evoke only disgust and not also desire, thus lacking the profound ambivalence that defined the "unruly woman" of medieval folk culture. With *South Park*, "The Snuke" (11.4, March 28, 2007) is an apt example.

than in the service of a consistent counter-hegemonic critique, is what enables the text to position itself outside of and apart from those discourses that would claim moral authority.<sup>217</sup>

*Open Text, Open Society? Debating Radical Polysemy*

The problem with much of the cultural production of the power bloc is that it remains insufficiently polysemic and too concerned with the discovery of objective truth. The search for a final universal truth, which this position implies, is totalitarian rather than democratic. The result is the closing down of the plurality of truths that should be allowed expression under a democratic order.

— Media theorist Nick Stevenson, 2004<sup>218</sup>

While much of the existing literature on *South Park* is in agreement that the text is polysemically pliant and “determinedly frustrates interpretation,”<sup>219</sup> scholars disagree about the political implications of this radical textual openness. According to one enduring argument, today’s ironists speak the language of a noncommittal generation by saying *nothing* of consequence (the familiar *Seinfeld* critique) and nursing a “cynical worldview.” This line of critique holds that excessive polysemy reflects an unwillingness on the part of text and by implication consumer to “commit” to firm ideals and ideologies. For example, Groening believes that *South Park*’s “ambiguous satire encourages the detached and cynical viewer because it requires no commitment one way or the other,” while solution-less narratives indulge the notion that “nothing can be done about a flawed and corrupt political system.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 249.

<sup>218</sup> Nick Stevenson, *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication*, 2d ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2004), 93.

<sup>219</sup> D. Greene, “Comedy Is Not Pretty: In Praise of *South Park*,” 223.

<sup>220</sup> Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures,” 117, 125.



Postmodern theory reinforces this understanding of irony as anti-political or (as Groening claims) postideological. Brian L. Ott explains: “No singular, static, unified message... exists to recover or exhume in postmodern textuality. Rather than being organized to say ‘something,’ postmodern textuality recombines the countless somethings that have already been said.”<sup>221</sup> Matt Becker, though not tying his Generation X argument expressly to postmodern theory, agrees that “because of its ambivalence, *South Park* offers... no political *solutions* [emphasis added],” and instead ensures “every political stripe can see its own ideologies reflected and thus seemingly justified.”<sup>222</sup> In much the same way, Richard Van Heertum sees Stewart and Colbert, too, as “mocking politicians and the media from a safe distance without ever offering any alternative,” prompting him to protest that their programs lack the elements of “critique and hope” necessary to realize irony’s potential as “a powerful force for social change.” These views reprise the dominant understanding of irony as detached cynicism that shields postmodern youth from “authentic commitment.”<sup>223</sup>

With the current push to recover irony as a rhetorical tool and affective stance for comics and citizens who care deeply about social issues, some progressive critics are prepared to invest radical polysemy with a great deal more democratic potential. For television scholars this argument has deep roots in Newcomb and Hirsch’s cultural forum model, positing that the television text “*comments on* ideological problems [emphasis in original]” rather than transmitting hegemonic thought to the viewer, and Fiske’s related theorization of meaningful play

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<sup>221</sup> Ott, “Pleasures of *South Park*,” 40.

<sup>222</sup> Becker, “‘I Hate Hippies’: *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X,” 160–61.

<sup>223</sup> Richard Van Heertum, “Irony and the News: Speaking through Cool to American Youth,” in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*, 117, 132. As noted above, influential works by Sloterdijk and Žižek presently inform this position; see *ibid.*, 117, 125.

and audience interpretive agency.<sup>224</sup> Polysemic playfulness empowers viewers, according to Fiske, to take an active role in “authoring” the meaning of texts we consume, producing a “semiotic democracy.”<sup>225</sup> Adjacent fields of political theory, philosophy, and literary criticism also draw upon foundational thinkers like John Dewey and Karl Popper to contemplate irony as a lubricant for cultural dialogue and critical reflection on the state of modern democratic society.<sup>226</sup> *South Park* is sometimes cited as a text that champions free expression and inquiry and, David Valleau Curtis and Gerald J. Erion assure us, helps ignite “the open discussion that is so essential to a healthy democracy.”<sup>227</sup> Rachel Paine Caufield asserts the importance of satire in both *South Park* and *The Daily Show* not only to “attack perceived wrongs or ills within society” but, more importantly, generate “critical debate.”<sup>228</sup> While briefly noting television’s penchant for economically opportunistic polysemy, Halsall also advances this position emphasizing freedom and dissent:

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<sup>224</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research” in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (summer 1983): 49; John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1987; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 1995), especially “Pleasure and Play,” 224–39.

<sup>225</sup> Fiske, *Television Culture*, 236. Postmodern irony, with its profusion of available (including reactionary) readings, is not the focus of Fiske’s account of ironic ambiguity as a device for subverting dominant-hegemonic ideology in texts, as I discuss in the Interlude. Curbing Fiske’s utopianism about active audiences is Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 92: On the subject of parodic metatexts that “involve the reader in a participatory hermeneutic activity,” she warns that “being made to feel that we are actively participating in the generation of meaning is no guarantee of freedom; manipulators who make us feel in control are no less present for all their careful concealment.”

<sup>226</sup> See Megan Boler, “Mediated Publics and the Crises of Democracy,” in *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 25–38, <http://www.ovpes.org/2006.htm> (accessed March 6, 2012); Terrance MacMullan, “Jon Stewart and the New Public Intellectual,” in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, ed. Jason Holt (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 57–68; and Ryan McGeogh, “The Voice of the People: Jon Stewart, Public Argument, and Political Satire,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 113–27.

<sup>227</sup> David Valleau Curtis and Gerald J. Erion, “*South Park* and the Open Society,” in *South Park and Philosophy*, 117.

<sup>228</sup> Rachel Paine Caufield, “The Influence of ‘Infoenterpropagainment’: Exploring the Power of Political Satire as a Distinct Form of Political Humor,” in *Laughing Matters*, 4–5, 7, 16. She calls on literary studies to recognize the value of satire to “political dialogue” (4), focusing on animated sitcoms’ license to “speak truth to power” (11).

Texts that become tools of popular culture critique generally are characterized by a certain measure of interpretive ambiguity and by a resistance to providing any heavy-handed, didactic narration of intention or meaning. *South Park* is... possessed of many, often conflicting, meanings. In its polysemy *South Park* embodies the spirit of American Revolution, liberty, and passion for resistance.<sup>229</sup>

Despite the surface similarities to South Park Libertarian arguments, these authors ascribe no consistent (e.g., anti-censorship) message to the text nor a fixed political subjectivity to its authors and audiences, and moreover they articulate ideals of a democracy that may prove an awkward fit with libertarian values.

Although also an unlikely union at first glance, postmodern textuality in all its “anarchy and randomness”<sup>230</sup> (together with the chaotic carnivalesque) is recuperated within this ultimately coherent vision of a democratic society, and its irony assigned a certain de(con)structive value as a “carnival funhouse mirror”<sup>231</sup> magnifying the myriad distorted logics within our cherished cultural narratives, norms, and belief systems. In its capacity as “postmodern” art that “recombines the countless somethings that have already been said” (as Ott stated), *South Park* may be seen as performing important critical work without needing to supply new answers and solve our social riddles. In his own praise for the series, Ott reinforces this argument that “the ironist’s aim is not to provide the ‘correct’ view, but to demystify prevailing views—to show how prevailing discourses imprison thinking.”<sup>232</sup> Indeed, Matt Stone put forth a similar explanation of the program as engaged in dialogic truth-seeking when he asserted, “There’s a

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<sup>229</sup> Halsall, “Bigger Longer & Uncut,” 28. Like Thompson, she acknowledges that the show’s popularity rides on “this invitation” to divergent interpretations. I discuss commercial TV’s “tactical polyvalence” in the Interlude. Also note, Halsall’s argument upholds the power/resistance dualism that Gourmelos in *Tao of South Park*, 122, cautions is reductive and ill-equipped to account satisfactorily for Comedy Central’s self-branding as oppositional culture.

<sup>230</sup> Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 80.

<sup>231</sup> I borrow this phrase from Aaron Hess, “Purifying Laughter: Carnavalesque Self-Parody as Argument Scheme in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric*, 109.

<sup>232</sup> Ott, “Pleasures of *South Park*,” 47.

group think, and you only get to some new truth by argument and by dissent... [W]e just play devil's advocate all the time."<sup>233</sup> For these critics, as for the showrunners, the comedy's dodging of ideological determinacy is not a cop-out but rather a virtue.

In contrast to political humor that is nakedly ideological, *South Park* seeks to separate the viewer from the ideologies on display in a way that 'makes strange' the social world we all inhabit. When I first analyzed the program in 2004, I suggested that with this deconstructionist and noncommittal use of assorted ideological points of view to revel in "mixed messages" the text lends itself to what Russian linguist/literary theorist Volosinov termed "multiaccentuality," and in this respect resists the conservative impulse of ideological closure in sitcom and narrative television comedy.<sup>234</sup> This Fiskean take on *South Park* is called into question by some recent humor scholarship, for reasons that differ from my own reservations about the repressive tendencies of "political incorrectness" as a discursive formation. For example, Day's *Satire and Dissent* grants that if any political humor serves the ideologically "conservative function" of restoring the status quo, it may be "the 'equal opportunity offender' school of comedy," with its potential "message that everyone is equally inept and immoral and that there is not much to be done about it."<sup>235</sup> Against critiques like Van Heertum's above placing Stewart and Colbert within this same tradition, Day seeks to draw a bright line between these news satirists and the

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<sup>233</sup> Charlie Rose, 2005.

<sup>234</sup> Valentin Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 23; cited by Fiske, *Television Culture*, 316–17, to explain how polysemy may thwart "a structure of domination." For Volosinov, the *multiaccentuality* of signs opens up spaces for popular resistance, as the ruling class may impose a *uniaccentual* or singular official meaning (as described in Nick Stevenson's block quotation introducing this section). Although class struggle alone does not account for TV's varied inflections of irony, this is an instructive concept for moving beyond polysemy as a property of texts to get at the dialogic dimensions of humor as a practice within social systems.

<sup>235</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 89. Here conservative refers to texts restoring or otherwise 'conserving' the status quo (not a Republican agenda), a function we typically see tied to didactic domestic sitcoms as I discuss in Chapter 1.

cynicism of “smug detachment.”<sup>236</sup> *The Daily Show/Colbert Report* and *South Park* butt up against one another not only as companion programs in Comedy Central’s late-night schedule but as chief reference points in analytic and broader cultural acts of defining and contrasting “detached” versus “engaged” forms of irony and of cynicism.

One of the most compelling examples in media and cultural studies is Viveca Greene’s comparative analysis of *South Park* and *The Colbert Report* as competing models for irony in political humor after 9/11, in which she argues the latter is the superior rallying point for scholars serious about progressive politics. She meticulously dissects *South Park*’s 2003 episode “I’m a Little Bit Country” from several angles to demonstrate that no clear politics is espoused as “all of the political views and commitments the show represents find themselves the subject of ridicule.” The closest this episode comes to a coherent message, which she calls into focus, is its ironic shilling for hypocrisy—and for irony itself—with a nudge-nudge lesson that “having your cake, and eating it, too” is the founding fathers’ vision for democracy.<sup>237</sup> Beyond her own close reading of the text, she notes that the inability of scholars despite sustained and robust analysis to reach consistent conclusions about the series underscores its “failure to suggest a viable counternarrative” and, more broadly, discloses intractable “political limitations of unstable irony.”<sup>238</sup> For this reason, she finds greater value in Colbert as a politically engaged ironist who, in contrast, delivers a clear and consistently “liberal-progressive” critique: “Colbert’s performance gives us ample evidence to construct a sense of what he is against and *what he is for*:

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.; Day prefers “constructive” over “simply mean-spirited” comedy (95). Cf. Van Heertum, “Irony and the News,” 131, on *The Daily Show* as “equal opportunity mockery.”

<sup>237</sup> John Adams speaks these words in a flashback sequence (episode 7.4, April 9, 2003), after Benjamin Franklin (Lear) intones: “If we allow people to protest what the government does, then the country will be forever blameless.” V. Greene, “Critique, Counternarratives, and Ironic Intervention,” 123–29; for the direct quotations see 123, 125.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 128, 134 (note 3).

liberal democracy, effective government, and... reasoned discourse [emphasis added].” Greene is one of a number of progressive thinkers who have begun to “advocate for an irony of political engagement, not detachment, in a post-9/11 world,” calling with a sense of urgency for “a politics of grounded commitment” in comedy.<sup>239</sup>

Underlying this debate that sees critics divided on the question of whether *South Park*'s brand of humor and irony is fundamentally cynical or democratic, as Viveca Greene makes explicit by recourse to rhetorical theory, is the long-standing disagreement concerning the political utility of unstable or postmodern irony.<sup>240</sup> Ironies without any stable intended message pull down the edifice of literal meaning, but as Glenn S. Holland drawing on Wayne Booth explains:

The shifting sands of unstable irony allow no building to be constructed after the demolition of the surface meaning of the ironic work, and the interpreter must either despair or build what shelter he or she can from the debris left in the wake of the havoc wreaked by irony.<sup>241</sup>

It is in this tradition that, as Doyle Greene ascertains (and unlike Viveca Greene, praises), *South Park* defies “satire’s inherent binary of literal versus ironic ‘double-meaning’ to the point that no definitive interpretation of the message is even possible,” a formula that ensures the show works “to confuse and confront rather than elucidate and educate.”<sup>242</sup> Hutcheon’s school of thought champions postmodern irony as a potentially (contingently not intrinsically) liberatory rhetorical mode that “deconstructs one discourse, even as it constructs another,” creating space

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 120, 127, 131. Again, the ‘engaged’ ironist is defined as one who stands/speaks ‘for’ a system of values.

<sup>240</sup> For definitions of these terms, which for my purposes I use here interchangeably, see the Interlude chapter.

<sup>241</sup> Glenn S. Holland, *Divine Irony* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>242</sup> D. Greene, “Comedy Is Not Pretty: In Praise of *South Park*,” 223; see also 217. We saw that *South Park*'s weekly ‘lessons learned,’ crafted in this way, often include statements that gesture toward both the literal and ironic.

and opportunity for the disenfranchised to erect alternative, non-dominant discourses.<sup>243</sup> In contrast, novelist David Foster Wallace's influential critique of postmodern irony as an epochal affliction anchors the more pessimistic view. Although conceding that postmodern irony at its best can be a "liberating" tool, he insists that it always "serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing" and is "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."<sup>244</sup> Put simply, the debate boils down to this: Does the destabilizing of dominant discourses suffice, or must the ironist make a "meaningful" statement? If the latter is our answer, then only *stable* irony makes a politically substantive intervention, a "constructive" contribution, to public discourse. Yet, such a view perhaps underestimates the political necessity and organic potency of a "ground-clearing" and the fertile destabilizing power of the postmodern carnival. Here I would emphasize that the carnivalesque as theorized by Bakhtin is at once a deconstructive *and* reconstructive ritual space (invested in death and renewal), which may further account for the attractiveness and explanatory power of this critical framework for scholars looking to stake out an 'engaged' ironic practice in public debate.

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<sup>243</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ed., *Double-Talking: Essays on Verbal and Visual Ironies in Canadian Contemporary Art and Literature* (Toronto: ECW, 1992), 16. See also Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, for discussion of the counter-hegemonic potential of contemporary irony; he argues that "the ironic mentality is rooted in a belief that individuals have the legitimacy to challenge ... structures of power" (58).

<sup>244</sup> David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (summer 1993): 183.

## The Stewart/Colbert Factor

[O]nly fools and professional humorists may laughingly say the truth in the presence of the mighty. ... [B]ut fools, whether professional or not, are not taken seriously.

— Humor theorist Hans Speier, 1975<sup>245</sup>

[T]he fact that Mr. Stewart, a comedian, is perhaps the most influential political commentator on television is in itself a sign of the times....

— *The New York Times*, 2005<sup>246</sup>

I want to conclude this discussion of the political values assigned to humor and irony by differently positioned interpretive communities by looking more closely at how Comedy Central's news satire franchise has reaccented the postmodern and irony in critical theory. Alongside *South Park*, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert occupy a privileged place in current scholarly deliberations over the political ends (in both senses, aims and limits) of postmodern irony. While their programs may be considerably less polyvalent politically than *South Park*, academic criticism charts a similar course with some authors praising and other faulting the series for serving up scornful laughter but “no political alternatives.”<sup>247</sup> In certain corners of the academy *The Daily Show* remains mired in the cynicism debate and media effects studies that seek to prove the perils of “fake news” as televisual candy lulling young people into political apathy.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,” trans. Robert Jackall, *American Journal of Sociology* 103 no. 5 (1998): 1393, doi:10.1086/599247 (accessed March 10, 2012), from the German text (1975).

<sup>246</sup> “Exit, Snarling,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2005, C12.

<sup>247</sup> This phrase is from Jamie Warner, “*The Daily Show* and the Politics of Truth,” in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington*, 37, who defends Jon Stewart’s “purely diagnostic” humor (her phrase) as a constructive contribution.

<sup>248</sup> For a representative argument, see Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, “Stoned Slackers or Super-Citizens? *The Daily Show* Viewing and Political Engagement of Young Adults,” in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*, 63–78; and for a counter-argument and thorough overview of this debate within political communication studies, see Dannagal Goldthwaite Young and Sarah E. Esralew, “Jon Stewart a Heretic? Surely You Jest: Political Participation and Discussion Among Viewers of Late-Night Comedy Programming,” in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*, 99–115, concluding that *Daily Show* viewers are “more engaged” and exhibit “positive political behaviors” (112–13).



Such views are forcefully and persuasively countered, however, by media and political theorists who perceive instead an unmistakable democratic idealism wrapped in the savvy dressings of the engaged irony of Stewart and Colbert.<sup>249</sup> I agree. This emerging body of scholarship since the mid-2000s plays a decisive role in the larger cultural project of rehabilitating and redeeming irony in critical discourse, I contend, by affirming its value through repeated appeals to message-bearing political satire and to truth, concepts anchored in a modernist vision of politics, art, and what Booth termed stable ironies. Exploring these arguments and the unifying ideals of the scholarly interpretive community they represent, I want to reflect on the stakes involved in this trans-disciplinary intellectual enterprise of calling forth, defending and defining, a new era of “engaged” irony.

Chapter 3 touched upon *The Daily Show*’s significance as a fulcrum point for the shifting discourse on irony and sincerity, with Stewart in a rather unique position to rewrite his job description as that of exasperated citizen and conscientious objector in the divisive culture wars. He emerged as the emblematic *sincere* ironist with “something to say” and was heralded as a “voice of the people.”<sup>250</sup> Launching spin-off *The Colbert Report* in 2005, Stewart’s fake-news protégé Colbert inverted this formula, assuming the part of an egomaniacal conservative pundit to ironize and push to its absurd limits the ostentatious performance of ‘earnest’ outrage by FOX News personalities decrying the “Liberal agenda.” Colbert’s mission to exnominate “truthiness”—his term for the grandiose emotional appeals whereby political elites manipulate the public by playing fast and loose with facts and brandishing (non-rational) opinion as truth—

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<sup>249</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 87–98, characterizes Jon Stewart as a voice for *healthy* cynicism/skepticism; Boler, “Mediated Publics,” explores Stewart’s idealism; and as Chapter 3 noted, Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 100, 113, 121–24, considers the impact of the political comedian-host as a “disappointed idealist.”

<sup>250</sup> McGeogh, “Voice of the People,” 113–27. For discussion of Stewart as a voice of “common sense,” see also Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 11, 121–22; and Warner, “*The Daily Show* and the Politics of Truth,” 52, who calls him “the voice of common sense in a crazy, artificial world.”

was widely understood as a scathing comic assault on the “right-wing noise machine,”<sup>251</sup> or what Kellner deems “postmodern sophistry.”<sup>252</sup> Where *The Daily Show* had crested the wave of so-called ironic nihilism (in its early days hosted by aloof, laddish Craig Kilborn), Stewart and his team together with Colbert were instrumental in changing that script and propelling parodic news to a previously unthinkable status as legitimate political analysis and even “the new journalism.”<sup>253</sup> Critics and audiences increasingly looked to the wisecracking satirist—figures such as Stewart, Colbert, and Bill Maher—as “a new type of democratic watchdog,” with that role purportedly vacated by the administration’s lapdog press corps in the Bush years.<sup>254</sup>

“*Citizen Stewart*”

“Stop. Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.”

— Jon Stewart on *Crossfire*, 2004<sup>255</sup>

In October 2004, Jon Stewart appearing on CNN’s *Crossfire* launched what was widely regarded as a very “unfunny” volley in the culture wars. Calling co-hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala partisan “hacks,” Stewart scolded the cable news veterans for their part in evacuating political talk of reasoned analysis of the issues. “You’re doing theater, when you should be

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<sup>251</sup> Kevin S. Decker, “Stephen Colbert, Irony, and Speaking Truthiness to Power,” in *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, 246.

<sup>252</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), quoted in Jamie Warner, “Political Culture Jamming: The Dissident Humor of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart,” *Popular Communication* 5, no. 1 (spring 2007): 21, note 3.

<sup>253</sup> See Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): 259–76; and Young, “*The Daily Show* as the New Journalism.”

<sup>254</sup> The quoted phrase is from Warner, “*The Daily Show* and the Politics of Truth,” 37–38. The subsequent claim about post-9/11 news media’s lack of “critical inquiry” is advanced by Baym, “*Daily Show*: Discursive Integration,” 268, among others.

<sup>255</sup> *Crossfire*, broadcast October 15, 2004, on CNN. Transcript titled “Jon Stewart’s America,” available online at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0410/15/cf.01.html> (accessed March 21, 2005).

doing debate.... What you do is not honest.” The *Daily Show* host charged that CNN should be tuning the instruments of democracy, not wallowing in the din of left-vs.-right shouting matches. “[Y]ou have a responsibility to the public discourse,” he asserted, “and you fail miserably.” Carlson and Begala accused Stewart, in turn, of failing his own obligations as a comedian. “I thought you were going to be funny. Come on. Be funny,” pleaded Carlson. Stewart refused, “I’m not going to be your monkey.”<sup>256</sup> As the *Los Angeles Times*’s Lynn Smith remarked soon after, Carlson and Begala “expected... zany and sophisticated satirist Jon Stewart.... Instead, they got Citizen Stewart, a passionate and earnest media watchdog who snarled and begged them to ‘stop hurting America’ with theatrical news.”<sup>257</sup> Stewart’s opinions were replicated across the blogosphere where they prompted heated rounds of debate and post-mortems.

The conflict was reportedly the “most blogged news item of 2004” and enjoyed a lengthy digital afterlife as video of the interview went viral.<sup>258</sup> *Crossfire*’s cross-examination of their accuser carried over into statements Tucker Carlson gave after the show that circulated in the press, dismissing Stewart’s “unfunny” allegations as inappropriate coming from a comedian and insisting that a skilled comic disguises his own opinions for the sake of his craft. “I don’t think he’s funny,” *Crossfire*’s Robert Novak agreed on air the following week. Stewart, when pressed in the contentious interview, had clearly defined himself as a comedian, insisting that his own show satirizing the news did not share CNN’s duty to uphold decency and reasoned discourse because, after all, it aired after *Crank Yankers* (“puppets making crank phone calls”)

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<sup>256</sup> *Crossfire* transcript, “Jon Stewart’s America.”

<sup>257</sup> Lynn Smith, “On the Other Side of the Desk, Stewart Puts the Jokes Aside; Comedy Central Wit Pulls No Punches on ‘Crossfire,’ Chastising CNN’s Tucker Carlson for Trivializing the News,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2004, E1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>258</sup> Business Editors, “Jon Stewart’s ‘Crossfire’ Transcript Most Blogged News Item of 2004, Intelliseek Finds,” *Business Wire*, December 15, 2004 (accessed March 8, 2005).

on the nation's premier comedy network. One of the persistent follow-up questions posed by the press, fans, and "netizens" concerned the proper and perhaps changing place of the comedian in the arenas of politics and public discourse. Many considered Stewart's unexpected speech a courageous act, a heroic display of honesty.<sup>259</sup> For others, it was an example of the comedian overstepping his bounds and misapprehending his job description.

The showdown between the hosts of Comedy Central's *Daily Show* and CNN's *Crossfire* cast into sharp relief competing ideas about comedy's relevance to national discourse. Carlson's rebuke of Stewart makes explicit the desire to bracket the "comedian" out of public debate or at least consign comedy to the margins.<sup>260</sup> David Bianculli of New York's *Daily News* drew a parallel between Stewart's "genuine outrage" and that vented by other comics including Bill Maher on HBO and even Triumph the Insult Comic Dog on MSNBC for the Republican National Convention.<sup>261</sup> Triumph, the German-Jewish Rottweiler hand puppet voiced by satirist Robert Smigel for *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, was, intriguingly, *Crossfire*'s go-to guest in a gimmick designed to inject levity after a "snarling" Stewart savaged the show, but Carlson's attempts at face-saving repartee backfired when the dog-puppet called him Stewart's "bitch" and gave an encore watchdog performance shouting, "Stop Hurting America!" and "You people have a responsibility!"<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> A viewer letter published in *The Toronto Star* praised, "Rarely do we see such an honest opinion on network television. Stewart simply expressed what many people think.... The media, by not holding politicians accountable for their blatant stretching of the truth and outright lies, do a disservice to society." The author argued that Stewart's own program "is not solely comedy, but a social commentary told with wit and irony. It deplores our present state of political dishonesty and the media's seeming compliance. Most would have loved... to do what Stewart had the opportunity to do, but likely would not have had the courage to do." Mark Shim, "Missed Purpose of Stewart's Attack," letter to the editor, *Toronto Star* (Canada), October 26, 2004, A23, in response to op-ed piece "Jon Stewart Should Stick to Comedy" published October 23, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>260</sup> The accusation "not funny" echoed Rush Limbaugh's on-air criticisms of *Murphy Brown* ten years prior when that show offered its scathing critique of Vice President Quayle's prescriptive definition of American "family."

<sup>261</sup> David Bianculli, "Cranky, but Still Very Comical," *Daily News* (New York), November 1, 2004, 78, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>262</sup> Transcript dialogue as quoted in Lisa de Moraes, "And Your Mama Has Fleas," *Washington* (continued...)

The *Crossfire* confrontation is remembered as “a milestone moment” setting Stewart firmly on the path to serious political commentary and sealing his role as a media reformer.<sup>263</sup> When CNN canceled *Crossfire* less than three months later, he was being called “our nation’s most powerful media critic.”<sup>264</sup> Despite some protestations about the perils of postmodern media culture breeding “celebrity politics,”<sup>265</sup> the press and viewer response was primarily positive, congratulating Stewart for using his popular influence to make an important political point, by satire or sermon. *The Daily Show* was inundated with e-mails thanking him and voicing support for his message.<sup>266</sup> Fans also aired their gratitude in Internet forums and petitioned Stewart to publicly endorse a candidate in the 2004 election.<sup>267</sup> *The Washington Post*, among other sources, reported now with greater certainty that “fake journalism enjoys real political impact.”<sup>268</sup> *USA Today*’s Olivia Barker called *The Daily Show* star a “phenomenon” and “a cultural force, if not hero, influencing discourse at the dinner table and in the college dorm and

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*Post*, November 2, 2004, C07, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005). For additional press describing Stewart as “snarling,” see Bianculli, “Cranky, but Still”; “Exit, Snarling”; and Smith, “On the Other Side of the Desk.”

<sup>263</sup> See Megan Boler, “*The Daily Show*, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth,” *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture* 3, no. 1 (June 2006), <http://scan.net.au/> (accessed February 26, 2012).

<sup>264</sup> Tim Goodman, “Taking a Comic Seriously, CNN Opts to Focus on What It Does Best: News,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 10, 2005, C1, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>265</sup> See Darrell M. West and John Orman, *Celebrity Politics* (Pearson, 2002). Damien Cave’s editorial “Jon Stewart Gets Serious; If You Interview Kissinger, Are You Still a Comedian?” *New York Times*, October 24, 2004, 5, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 12, 2012), consults author Darrell M. West to argue that “the line between television news and entertainment is blurred beyond all recognition.”

<sup>266</sup> “Stewart’s ‘Crossfire’ Segment Tops on Web,” United Press International, New York, October 19, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>267</sup> “Dear Jon Stewart,” an open letter with petition posted October 2004 at <http://www.dearjonstewart.com/> (accessed March 9, 2005), received nearly 2,000 signatures. The text asked Stewart to “stand with” the “undersigned Young Americans,” stating, “For many of us, *The Daily Show* was our first engagement with politics. Because of your program, more young Americans than ever are aware of the sad state of the country.”

<sup>268</sup> Howard Kurtz, “The Campaign of a Comedian; Jon Stewart’s Fake Journalism Enjoys Real Political Impact,” *Washington Post*, October 23, 2004, A01, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

even, some believe, turnout at polls.”<sup>269</sup> Web satirist Ana Marie Cox, too, perceived that young people view Stewart “as a kind of hero who will lead us out of the darkness,” but she insisted that as a comedian “that’s not his job.”<sup>270</sup>

Amidst the sustained speculation that Stewart had a “new role as serious media critic”<sup>271</sup> to fill, several writers directly challenged his self-characterization as a jokester. “If you interview Henry Kissinger, are you still a comedian?” objected Damien Cave of the *New York Times*, opining that the “I’m just a comedian” defense “came off as slippery and disingenuous.”<sup>272</sup> Scholar Robert N. Spicer considered its consequences as a “dishonest” form of “political cover.”<sup>273</sup> Another *New York Times* piece in January 2005 ventured that audiences’ embrace of a comedian as “perhaps the most influential political commentator on television” was “a sign of the times.”<sup>274</sup> Quite a few cultural critics upheld this latter view stressing the merging of two identities, preferring to cast Stewart in the role of comic crusader or, more neutrally, “comedian-commentator.”<sup>275</sup> Stewart’s unprecedented clout as comedian folk-hero was further mythologized in writer/director

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<sup>269</sup> Olivia Barker, “Look Out, Jon Stewart,” *USA Today*, November 2, 2004, 1D, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>270</sup> “Wonkette” of *Wonkette.com*, quoted in Kurtz, “Campaign of a Comedian.”

<sup>271</sup> Ben Fritz and Pamela McClintock, “Burning ‘Cross’: Stewart’s CNN Seg Still Generating Web Heat,” *Variety*, October 25–31, 2004, 6, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>272</sup> Cave, “Jon Stewart Gets Serious”; see also Tim Goodman, “Stewart Puts Smackdown on ‘Crossfire,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 20, 2004, LexisNexis Academic (accessed March 8, 2005).

<sup>273</sup> Robert N. Spicer, “Before and After *The Daily Show*: Freedom and Consequences in Political Satire,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), especially 33–35. Chapter 2 considered how “politically incorrect” comics have invoked the label of comedian to provide “cover” of a different kind, deflecting criticisms of “humorless feminists” and “lefties.”

<sup>274</sup> “Exit, Snarling,” C12.

<sup>275</sup> The phrase “comedian commentator” was adopted by such sources as the *San Francisco Chronicle* (“Chron Quiz,” October 24, 2004, E2). For analysis of this emergent, contested category, see Day, “And Now... the News?” 96–99; and Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 92–94.

Barry Levinson's 2006 film *Man of the Year*, starring comedy icon Robin Williams as the beloved host of a satirical political talk show, loosely based on Stewart, who after publicly venting frustration over the divisive two-party system runs a "fake" campaign for President, and wins.

The question of whether the comedian's job is to be funny or to be a referee or conscript in the culture wars is one of the abiding questions of the decade's writings on political humor. The persistent effort to fit a liminal figure such as Stewart neatly into one of several narrowly defined categories—"comedian" or "journalist" or "serious media critic"—speaks to anxiety about humorists scaling the barriers erected between comedic and "serious" modes of public discourse. Media scholar Jeffrey Jones asks us to consider "what exactly is so disturbing about humorists participating in political discourse?"<sup>276</sup> The interpenetration of culture and politics, particularly as engendered by the culture wars, sees popular culture serving as a staging ground for political maneuvering, and the political sphere in turn vulnerable to incursions by the voices of popular culture. The result has been some crossfire—yielding in the 1990s such tense moments as Vice President Dan Quayle's "family values" feud (discussed in my Introduction) with sitcom single mother Murphy Brown, New York Governor Mario Cuomo's faceoff against radio personality Howard Stern's Libertarian "shock politics,"<sup>277</sup> and mutual contempt refreshed every few years between the G.O.P. and filmmaker Michael Moore. The post-network media environment of the 2000s cultivated considerably more *crosstalk* as cable programs like *The Daily Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and *Dennis Miller Live* carved out spaces for civilized comic *and* political dialogue.

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<sup>276</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 92.

<sup>277</sup> Todd S. Purdum, "Gov. Howard Stern? Some Fail to See Humor," *New York Times*, April 3, 1994, 1–2.

As the early and mid-2000s saw ongoing attempts in conservative political discourse to assert greater control over comedy, alternately condemning or asserting a controlling interest in irony as dissent, a politicized voice became more central to the cultural construction of the comedian as a public figure. The promiscuous interplay of politics with irony that *The New Yorker*'s Elizabeth Kolbert in 2004 deemed the "new comic order,"<sup>278</sup> in which politicians must "make fun of themselves" and perform a willingness not to take themselves too seriously, was perhaps briefly disrupted by irony's much publicized decline. In the longer term, increasingly, public exchanges between the politician and the comedian testified less to the former's sense of humor than the latter's political savvy, as seen in the studios of Stewart and Colbert. Comedians, in turn, appeared as featured guests on programs like CNN's *Headline Prime* and *Larry King Live* and MSNBC's *Hardball*.<sup>279</sup> In this context, Jon Stewart's conversion and that of *The Daily Show* into an "earnest media watchdog" not only signaled a turning point for reconciling earnestness and irony but also saw the comic forum gaining legitimacy in its own right as a site of open political dialogue, with the comedian-host not in the role of moderator but rather "citizen."

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<sup>278</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, "Stooping to Conquer: Why Candidates Need to Make Fun of Themselves," *The New Yorker* (April 19, 2004): 116–22.

<sup>279</sup> Denis Leary gave a politically substantive interview on *Headline Prime* on July 4, 2007, for example, and on October 12, 2006, while promoting *Man of the Year*, Robin Williams and Barry Levinson joined MSNBC host Chris Matthews to talk politics on "Hardball College Tour" before a live audience at Georgetown University.



*The “New Political Art” of Stewart and Colbert*

Apply Truth liberally to the inflamed area.

— Stephen Colbert, 2005<sup>280</sup>

When facts are made stupid things and there is no coherent center to mediate truth, most irony starts falling on deaf ears because there is no lingua franca—the reference points are fuzzy, or the jokes hit but without breaking skin.

—*New York* magazine’s “Encyclopedia of 9/11”<sup>281</sup>

*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are together heralded as an oasis and antidote to the surrounding media culture of political bluster and “bullshit.” These programs introduce irony into a cable news culture so reliant on spin and superficial sincerity that ironic codes have become a necessary intervention. The Stewart/Colbert tag team use a blend of sarcasm, irony, parody, and satire as tools for contesting the chronic insincerity in the wider political culture. As Day argues, Stewart’s ironic voice delivers a relatable, refreshing alternative to the artificiality of political theater and the contrived earnestness that “overproduced public figures bend over backward attempting to convey.”<sup>282</sup> Magill again takes the argument much broader, to propose that, in American culture and television, irony is being “recalled as a liberating cultural and personal force; one that, when used wisely, can be a psychological strategy for maintaining personal integrity in the face of a complex and often contradictory world” of sincerity marketing.<sup>283</sup> As quite a few rhetorical scholars have noted, *The Daily Show* with its

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<sup>280</sup> *The Colbert Report*, episode 1.24, first aired December 1, 2005, on Comedy Central.

<sup>281</sup> Michael Hirschorn, “The End of Irony: Why Graydon Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong,” in “The Encyclopedia of 9/11,” *New York*, August 27, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/irony/> (accessed July 10, 2012), alluding (in his opening phrase) to a well-known quote from Ronald Reagan.

<sup>282</sup> Day, “And Now... the News?” 101.

<sup>283</sup> Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, 12.

parodic news segments and Colbert with his “double-voiced” persona *ironize* truth claims, humorously deconstructing and talking back to the conventions of news reporting and in effect teaching media literacy, while at the same time they make, as Baym argues, “a quite serious demand for fact, accountability, and reason.”<sup>284</sup>

These arguments are powerfully reminiscent of Frederic Jameson’s prescient calls for a “*new political art*” that defies the dominant thrust of postmodern culture under late capitalism.<sup>285</sup> Jameson by the 1980s had begun urging leftist cultural producers and thinkers to envision ways for political art (a category that includes satire, parody, and irony) to recover a sense of urgency and impact—which he felt requires reclaiming a “pedagogical” and “didactic” function—pulling against the grain of postmodern hegemony. He argued that such a radical comic vision, if it were possible, would need to operate *within* the logic of postmodernism while at the same time effecting a “breakthrough” to dispel powerlessness and restore our sense of agency as social and political subjects able to “act and struggle.” While Stewart and his fellow practitioners of “satiric irony” avoid traditional didacticism, as scholars emphasize, he is viewed as a public intellectual using irony to educate and articulate a clear stance.<sup>286</sup>

For scholars rising to the Jamesonian challenge, the key has been framing irony’s utility in terms of a rational, precise political agenda. Progressive political scientists, such as Jamie Warner and Megan Boler, are among those leading this shift in critical thought in humor studies.

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<sup>284</sup> Baym, “*Daily Show*: Discursive Integration,” 273.

<sup>285</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 89, 92. Emphasis added.

<sup>286</sup> For discussion distinguishing satiric irony from overtly “didactic” modes, see Warner, “Political Culture Jamming,” 29; Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 161, 167, 174; and Jones *Entertaining Politics*, 99, 114, 119. For rhetorical analysis asserting a didactic component of his humor, see also Joanne Morreale, “Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*: I Thought You Were Going to Be Funny!” in *Satire TV*, 104–23, who emphasizes Stewart “teaching deliberation” (121).

Warner argues that in the cautious media climate after 9/11, which in the United States shut down dialogue and brought forth “profound consequences for dissent,” ironic ambiguity enabled satirists like those at *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* to critique the rhetoric and policies of the Bush administration and “stealthily” mount a cunning counter-discourse. This irony was not only “one of the few effective forms of critique” available to comics, according to Warner, but as we saw in Chapter 3, also a means of activating audiences by “prompting the reader to reevaluate” dominant rhetorical frames.<sup>287</sup> Boler, likewise, explores how this “public use of humor works to ‘pop’ one out of placid acceptance of the *status quo*.”<sup>288</sup> She sees Stewart (among others) promoting “critical media literacy” and ushering in an age of “ironic citizenship.”<sup>289</sup> Boler with Gournelos in 2008 reported that media producers and their publics during the 2000s “increasingly adopted irony as a language of dissent.”<sup>290</sup>

The reader will recall that conservatives were also discussing irony at this moment as a public service (namely, its political incorrectness), a notion rerouted in the present examples. Warner and Day, respectively, celebrate these texts and ironic stunts in the public arena as

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<sup>287</sup> Warner, “Humor, Terror, and Dissent,” 62–63. As Chapter 3 noted, Warner cogently analyzes *The Onion*’s use of ironic ambiguity and satirical parody to subvert hegemonic discursive frames deployed by the political right, uninterrogated by mainstream journalism, after 9/11. Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 23, similarly elucidates how ironists and parodists were satirically “poking holes in the preframed narratives, talking points, and public relations screens.”

<sup>288</sup> Boler, “Mediated Publics.” Her case studies include *The Daily Show*, MoveOn.org’s Bushin30Seconds contest, and The Yes Men, in “The Transmission of Political Critique after 9/11: ‘A New Form of Desperation?’” *M/C Journal* 9, no. 1 (March 2006), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0603/11-boler.php>. See also her “Changing the World, One Laugh at a Time: *The Daily Show* and Political Activism,” *Counterpunch*, February 20, 2007, <http://www.counterpunch.org/boler02202007.html> (both accessed March 2012).

<sup>289</sup> Term introduced in Chapter 3, from Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin, “Ironic Citizenship: Coping with Complicity in Spectacular Society” (paper presented at the New Network Culture Theory Conference, Amsterdam, June 2007), [http://www.meganbolter.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/ironiccitizenship\\_bolerturpin.pdf](http://www.meganbolter.net/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/ironiccitizenship_bolerturpin.pdf) (accessed February 26, 2012); see also their “*The Daily Show* and *Crossfire*: Satire and Sincerity as Truth to Power,” in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 383–404.

<sup>290</sup> Megan Boler and Ted Gournelos, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v18n24toc.htm#introduction>. This volume devoted to irony charts a course for media-effects theory amidst new media convergence, with contributions on Colbert, Stewart, and *The Onion*.

examples of political “culture jamming.”<sup>291</sup> This cutting-edge genre of activism (originally used to subvert advertising but in this case political parties’ “branding” strategies) is defined by Christine Harold as “rhetorical sabotage,” “an amping up of contradictory rhetorical messages in an effort to engender a qualitative change.”<sup>292</sup> Warner argues that in this way *The Daily Show* works to “*disrupt* the transmission of the dominant political brand messages so competing conversations can occur [emphasis in original].”<sup>293</sup> This view celebrates Stewart as citizen-ironist in effect waging counter-hegemonic wars of position with comedy, such that an alternative ‘common sense’ might gain rhetorical ground.

Again we hear an echo of the trope of creative destruction, or satirical demystification and revelation, that we likewise find in recent scholarship on *South Park* that regards the show as needed “noise.” As we saw in Thompson’s analysis above, for example, although he suggests that politically *South Park*’s humor at times “may function as a whole lot of offensive noise, signifying nothing,” he also sees the text’s carnival chaos overall as a meaningful “refus[al] to endorse the official ways of speaking that limit political debate and participation” to left/right power plays, and thus expanding dialogue and creating space for an alternative politics to germinate. His notion that *South Park* speaks “politics for a pissed-off public” parallels the praise for Jon Stewart, since his *Crossfire* confrontation, as spokesman for the angry citizen Everyman.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> See Warner, “Political Culture Jamming,” 17–36; and Amber Day’s “Irony in Activism,” chap. 5 of *Satire and Dissent*, 145–85, and “Are They For Real? Activism and Ironic Identities,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01846.html> (accessed May 12, 2012).

<sup>292</sup> Christine Harold, “Pranking Rhetoric: ‘Culture Jamming’ as Media Activism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 21, no. 3 (2004): 190, 192, doi:10.1080/0739318042000212693. The purpose of culture jamming is to “introduce noise into the signal,” asserts Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of the Signs* (Westfield, N.J.: Open Pamphlet Series, 1993), quoted in Harold, *ibid.*, 192.

<sup>293</sup> Warner, “Political Culture Jamming,” 18. Gournelos, *Tao of South Park*, 147–62, also applies the concept to *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* to identify and contrast “responsive” and “disruptive” rhetorical tactics.

<sup>294</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 227, 231.

With the expressly political humor of Stewart and Colbert, in addition to the Gramscian and at times Bakhtinian regard for comedy's power to disrupt hegemonic or 'official' discourse, the Habermasian ideal powerfully informs the literature on "satiric irony" as dissent. Boler suggests *The Daily Show* "represents a new public sphere" by instigating "critical questioning" of news media and partisan hype, and sees the program fostering a social movement of disgruntled centrists.<sup>295</sup> She asserts that "irony and satire are among our best salvations" as tools "to create more robust forms of democracy," looking to figures like Stewart and Colbert using irony "to revitalize the public sphere." Her research into online networks of "digital dissent" inspired by these shows bears out the vision of oppositional comedy "translating into action."<sup>296</sup> Day in her complementary study of web-based counterpublics seeks a broad definition of what counts as political "engagement," emphasizing that these programs strengthen affective communities.<sup>297</sup> Moreover, *The Daily Show*'s comic voice is not "cloistered" as entertainment but "very much part of the general political discussion," Day points out in her related textual analysis of the genre hybridity that affords the show such "unpredictable" potential that can and does transform the "real."<sup>298</sup>

Those endorsing *The Daily Show*'s contributions to democracy point especially to the interview segments that generally fill the final third of the program, some seeing the episode

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<sup>295</sup> Boler, "Mediated Publics," 27. Like Warner, Boler also reminds us of the "explicit suppression of dissent, and perverse manipulation of facts, to manipulate publics" in dominant media in the early years after post-9/11 in her "Introduction" to *Digital Media and Democracy*, 3.

<sup>296</sup> Megan Boler, "Introduction" to *Digital Media and Democracy*, 19, 22, and see 26–31. See also Boler, "Transmission of Political Critique after 9/11"; and Catherine Burwell and Megan Boler, "Calling on the Colbert Nation: Fandom, Politics and Parody in an Age of Media Convergence," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01845.html> (accessed May 12, 2012).

<sup>297</sup> Day, *Satire and Dissent*, especially 137–39.

<sup>298</sup> Day, "And Now... the News?" 92.

structure as a progression moving from satirical back-talk to open-ended dialogue. An array of critics have suggested that Stewart's nightly interviews with a wide range of political and other public figures, building on the dialogic structure that is more playfully established in the earlier segments featuring Stewart talking back to the day's headlines and cable news clips from his anchor desk, offer as Kelly Wilz suggests a "useful model of democratic deliberation."<sup>299</sup> Elaborating on this point, Baym argues that in essence the show "advocates a conversational or deliberative theory of democracy—a notion that only open conversation can provide the legitimate foundation for governance."<sup>300</sup> The longing for rational critical consensus is ultimately rooted in a modernist perspective in which the better facts and arguments will prevail. Thus, scholars praising Stewart for encouraging critical interrogation by and of news media and raising viewers' consciousness as citizens find Habermasian potential and a modernist core in this satirical comic practice.

The dual pull of modernist and postmodernist worldviews, I suggested in Chapter 3, could be powerfully felt in the prevalent language of "truthfulness" in U.S. media in the 2000s, filtered through the comic lenses of these programs. As Boler perceptively voices in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* (2008), "This desire and longing for truth expressed by public demands for media accountability is in tension with the coexisting recognition of the slipperiness of meaning."<sup>301</sup> Faced with the real stakes of postmodern "ideological sophistry" in the political sphere, progressive pundits and scholars were increasingly reluctant to surrender the clear language of "truth and lies" to right-wing

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<sup>299</sup> See Kelly Wilz, "Models of Democratic Deliberation: Pharmacodynamic Agonism in *The Daily Show*," in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric*, 87, 89. Unlike *Crossfire* shout-fests, Stewart and guests "perform a model of democracy where people may disagree vehemently" but respectfully "allow the other to speak his or her mind" (90).

<sup>300</sup> Baym, "*Daily Show*: Discursive Integration," 272.

<sup>301</sup> Boler, *Digital Media and Democracy*, 7.

rhetoric.<sup>302</sup> Boler astutely argues that the Stewart/Colbert school of comic news emerges as a prototype for a more ethical journalism in this climate precisely because these programs affirm and help audiences to reconcile these dueling impulses—by conscientiously demanding truth while honing a healthy skepticism and deconstructing truth claims. To the extent that these forms of satiric irony do potentially stimulate political action/activism, they suggest possibilities for wriggling out of what theorists deem the “ironist’s cage”—the trap of cynical fatalism or paralyzing pessimism that haunts poststructuralist thought and postmodern irony as a philosophical stance.<sup>303</sup>

Against those who insist that the comedic interrogation of news breeds “unhealthy distrust”<sup>304</sup> for politics and media, Baym following Jones has further shown that these charges

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<sup>302</sup> In this climate even avowed social constructivists, Boler notes, began to address the political dangers of a postmodern theoretical paradigm that teaches that knowledge is constructed and truth is relative, in light of the right’s remarkable success spinning fragmented and destabilized meanings to suit its immediate political ends. Boler, *Digital Media and Democracy*, 8–9. While academic leftists saw some liberating disruption in postmodern relativism, right-wing pundits and strategists saw an opportunity to destabilize traditional liberal coalitions. In the words of John Powers writing in *The Nation* in 2006, “After years of shrieking about postmodern relativism in the modern university, . . . today’s conservatives now embrace the same thing when it comes to politics. Talk about breaking the connection between signifiers and referents. With his disdain for ‘reality-based’ behavior, Karl Rove makes Jacques Derrida seem as stodgy as Andy Rooney.” John Powers, “Not the President’s Men,” *The Nation*, October 23, 2006, issue, posted October 5, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20061023/powers/2> (accessed October 15, 2006).

<sup>303</sup> See the Interlude for relevant discussion of this term as defined by Michael Roth, “The Ironist’s Cage,” *Political Theory* 19, no. 3 (August 1991): 419–32. As I discussed previously, Roth analyzes how the work of philosophers such as Michel Foucault engenders a “critical pessimism” he terms the “ironist’s cage.” That is, by deconstructing truth claims, poststructuralism reveals our “imprisonment” in ideology, but it can only offer “a description of the *inside* of the cage,” not a way out of discourse. “Irony is the trope of sophistication in postmodern talk,” Roth asserts. “Under the guise of reflexivity, it can create . . . distance between the intellectual and the community of which he or she is a member. Of course, a blanket condemnation of a rhetorical form is not helpful,” he argues, while emphasizing that poststructuralist theory cannot “[lead] toward specific kinds of action.” To be clear, Roth’s piece deals with philosophical irony not humor, but here I would note that modernist hopes for the satiric irony of Jon Stewart steer around the poststructuralist dimension (“postmodern talk”) to privilege principles Roth traces to Hegelian irony, where “irony is meant to wake us from our dogmatic slumbers and to provoke self-consciousness. And self-consciousness is tied to action, which can be given meaning and direction” (430). Notably, modernist theory was not without its “iron cage” (424). For a direct comparison of Jon Stewart with Foucault as “two practitioners of critical irony,” see also Matthew Jordan, “Thinking with Foucault about Truth-Telling and *The Daily Show*,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01844.html> (accessed May 12, 2012), who argues that both offer “ethical models for an ongoing and sustained engagement with *untruth* and artifice in the mass media that is directly related to the care of the self and society” (Abstract par.).

<sup>304</sup> Phrase from Jonathan S. Morris and Jody C. Baumgartner, “*The Daily Show* and Attitudes Toward the News Media,” in *Laughing Matters*, 328.

stem from a fundamental misrepresentation of the texts in question, and, importantly, their historical context. Retiring the term “fake news,” Baym shares Boler’s conviction that *The Daily Show*’s rise to prominence as a vital mode of “political journalism” ushers in a new era for media discourse.<sup>305</sup> His overview *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (2009) charts changes in U.S. news leading up to what he deems a critical juncture where the postmodern, as the dominant cultural logic today, commingles with a *re-emergent* high-modernist journalistic ideal. Baym’s thesis, with important similarities to Jones’s account of the rise of a “New Political Television” in *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture* (2005), contemplates *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* as pioneers and models transforming media culture, and sees these flourishing sites of political humor as a necessary course correction in response to the surrounding cynical culture of political discourse.

Baym argues that Stewart and Colbert, crucially, each manage to resurrect a “modernist sensibility” upholding “faith in fact and accountability, in truth and not truthiness.” Although both programs function *stylistically* as postmodern television, performing the sorts of blurring viewers have come to expect as a hybridization of news and entertainment genres, Baym sees them pursuing “a high-modern agenda” in order to “raise the fundamentally serious question of truth in a postmodern world.” Thus, he concludes that the “serious comedy represented by Stewart and Colbert can better be understood as a fusion of postmodern style and modernist intentions.”<sup>306</sup> Jones’s *Entertaining Politics* likewise designates Stewart, alongside comedian-hosts Bill Maher and Dennis Miller, as “quintessential modernists.” He additionally argues

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<sup>305</sup> Baym substitutes the terms “alternative journalism” and “*oppositional news*” [emphasis his] for “fake news.” See, respectively, his essays “*Daily Show: Discursive Integration*,” 261, and in the anthology *Satire TV*, “Stephen Colbert’s Parody of the Postmodern,” 127; and for further explanation, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, 112.

<sup>306</sup> Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, 32, 35, 111. See also pages 126 and 173 in *ibid.*; and Baym, “Serious Comedy,” 35.



that they are adept “postmodern citizens” fluent in the rhetorical arts of bricolage, but not postmodernists in the final instance. Although these satirists do not advance stable, singular, authoritative truth claims, they are each in their own way “committed to breaking the spell of the hyperreal through their comedy precisely because they still believe that something ‘real’ exists,” Jones ascertains.<sup>307</sup> Both arguments thus place these comedies at a critical crossroads between postmodernist and modernist imperatives.

*The Colbert Report*, Baym maintains, asks to be read as pointed parody of its postmodern media environment, “satirical theater” delivering a blistering critique of “political spectacle” and rampant relativism. At its oppositional core, he concludes, the show attacks the postmodern premise that reality is socially constructed and truth relative: “Colbert helps us realize the implications of a postmodern episteme: he constructs a powerful view of what public speech and democratic politics may have already become if we truly have abandoned modernity’s commitments to objectivity, rationality, and accountability.”<sup>308</sup> Like Viveca Greene, he stresses the *stability* of Colbert’s irony as “double-layered” speech, with the comic’s “literal language always placed in juxtaposition with its implied meaning” such that a discernible *intended* “meaning lies below the surface” as he spouts his fabricated “truthy” facts and ludicrous opinions. This is signaled by Colbert’s recurring segment “The Wørd” in which on-screen captions contradict the host’s spoken commentary, unveiling a “second level” to the show’s comic voice that punctures and invalidates the character’s dogma. In contrast to Stewart’s interview approach of respectful, reasoned dialogue, Baym examines how Colbert’s “ironic duality” extends into his political talk forum. Conducting interviews without breaking character, Colbert the pundit’s self-aggrandizing statements, rhetorical one-upmanship (with his right-wing guests),

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<sup>307</sup> Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 119.

<sup>308</sup> Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, 134–35, 138, and 142.

and antagonistic tactics (with liberals) amplify the absurdity and dysfunctionality of political theater.<sup>309</sup>

On and off the set of his program, Colbert has worked to build notoriety and fan solidarity with a series of political stunts and public pranks, such as campaigning to put himself on his home state South Carolina's ballot in the 2008 presidential primaries, enlisting his audience (affectionately hailed as citizens of Colbert Nation) to litter Wikipedia pages with false "facts," and in 2011 forming the Colbert Super PAC (accepting donations from "heroes" in the viewing audience) to fund parodic political ads and various secretive missions, to name a few.<sup>310</sup> Writing about Colbert's "fake" presidential campaign of fall 2007, media scholar Heather Osborne-Thompson sees the comedian opening up "new possibilities for participation" in American democracy even as he persists in postmodern play "blurring of the lines between 'real' and 'fantasy.'" Breaching generic and discursive boundaries with his guerrilla tactics and deadpan performance of self-impressed punditry, Colbert consistently manages to "infiltrate the mainstream political arena" and "the most venerated platforms of political journalism," she observes, making these his own bully pulpit to "talk back" from *within* the political sphere.<sup>311</sup> Most infamously, Colbert's use of irony to speak "truth to power" reached its apogee when he addressed President George W. Bush as an invited speaker at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in April 2006, a "watershed" event rivaling Stewart's *Crossfire* upset in its retrospective significance.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," in *Satire TV*, 127, 130. For his analysis of Colbert's ironic interview tactics, see 131–34.

<sup>310</sup> Baym, *ibid.*, 137–38, examines how the Wikipedia stunts involve the audience as participants in Colbert's comic assault on "truthiness." The super PAC (or political action committee) is an organization established to raise unlimited funds for political spending not affiliated with any candidate or party.

<sup>311</sup> Osborne-Thompson, "Tracing the 'Fake' Candidate," 77, 80.

<sup>312</sup> Boler "The Daily Show, *Crossfire*, and the Will to Truth," sec. 5, and *Digital Media and Democracy*, 5; and Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert*, 123.

Colbert used the opportunity to “roast” the President (seated just a few feet away), savagely condemning his policies and “truthiness” and reprimanding a toothless press corps all in the guise of sycophantic praise gushing from the lips of his Republican character, while TV cameras captured the obvious discomfort of the President and high-stature guests.<sup>313</sup>

Although fans and supporters behold and connect with a stealthy, stable liberal-friendly politics under the “cover” of irony in Colbert’s act, his humor is subject to scrutiny as postmodern irony. Media scholar Lisa Colletta, among others, insists that Colbert, Stewart, and virtually all current television satirists uphold the “irony of postmodernity” that “denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance and even embraces incoherence.” Echoing the cynicism critiques we encountered above, her 2009 essay in *The Journal of Popular Culture* approaches *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, alongside postmodern-ironic sitcoms like *The Simpsons*, as politically impotent experiments in metatextuality that gesture to solutions only to renege, as “the better moral standard is also ironically presented as just another construction”<sup>314</sup>—in other words, placing them decisively within the ironist’s cage. An empirical reception study of *The Colbert Report* published the same year in the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, from a team of researchers at Ohio State University, further contested the show’s stability/utility as satire, concluding that Americans unacquainted with his shtick will not necessarily separate Colbert the comedian’s “political ideology” from that of his character. Similar to the Archie Bunker boomerang effect, the study’s authors reported that the affective pleasures of the text are sufficiently malleable that some conservatives may find exuberant validation of their views in his humor. Much like Matt Becker argued with *South Park*,

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<sup>313</sup> Boler, “*The Daily Show, Crossfire...*,” sec. 5, par. 8, draws this apt comparison to a comedy “roast.”

<sup>314</sup> Lisa Colletta, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009): 846, 856, 860.

they contend that the text enables the viewer to “see what you want to see,” reflecting back competing ideologies.<sup>315</sup>

While an avowedly pro-conservative appreciation for *Colbert* seizes upon elements within the text to create a negotiated, if highly contorted, reading position, such “anti-liberal” interpretations are presumably rarer with this text than *South Park*. These analyses questioning the political efficacy of even this more ‘stable’ form of satire dwell on the risk of irony *misfiring*. When placing Colbert back under the umbrella of postmodern irony’s “cynical knowingness” and fuzzy moral legibility, Colletta concedes that his satire is “committed” and “deeply serious” about “attacking the conservative agenda,” yet she is troubled by the prospect that “people cannot be counted on to laugh at the ‘right’ things.”<sup>316</sup> Regarding the character as “irony brought to life,” Spicer, likewise, warns that if Colbert’s covert meaning is “lost on the receiver” the “performance is folded back into that which it critiques.” Even as Stewart and Colbert offer sharply satirical performances and attacks on the postmodern media circus, he further contends, with events like *Crossfire* and the White House Correspondents’ Dinner their specific critiques and “alternative perspectives” are swallowed in the press din and publicly consumed as media spectacle.<sup>317</sup>

The revisionist Habermasian readings of these programs advance our understandings of comic discourse in the public sphere (acknowledging the satire’s “sincere” contributions), and find more fertile soil to till here than in *South Park*. On the other hand, when disavowing the comedy’s postmodern dimension, they potentially fall into a troubling pattern that subordinates

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<sup>315</sup> Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, “The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 2 (April 2009): 212–31.

<sup>316</sup> Colletta, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony,” 856, 863–64, 868. In her college classroom, she reports observing that her conservative students laugh along with Colbert’s anti-liberal screen persona.

<sup>317</sup> Spicer, “Before and After *The Daily Show*,” 33, 31.

or even suppresses the more unruly pleasures of carnival abasement and ambivalence. That is, some portion of critics prefer to approach *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as “the truth (with jokes)” (to borrow Al Franken’s phrase). In these cases, the effort required to extract the preferred “rational” message in comedy has led to attempts to reinstall a firm partition between legitimate and comedic discourse—to take the “serious” out of the humorous and vice versa. Much as a subset of political and social conservatives make apologies for the “crude” aspects of *South Park*, some academics and liberal intellectuals complain that Jon Stewart stoops to tell “lowbrow” or “juvenile” jokes, or seek to explain away the comedy as little more than a rhetorically useful if sometimes distasteful means to an end. Spicer suggests, for instance, that readers must “look past the jokes” and “[attempt] to make our way through the vulgarity to get to the kernel of political criticism.”<sup>318</sup> This despite ample evidence that Stewart and Colbert immensely respect the comic craft and relish clowning and a well-placed penis pun. As Colbert tells interviewer (and fellow comedian) Paul Provenza, “I think when we do the show well, or when I do my job well, on some level it reflects honest, passionately held beliefs. Now, could those influence people? ... [T]hat’s not my goal and it’s not the definition of my success. I’m out for laughs.”<sup>319</sup> It is in their postmodern tactics and populist vernacular (fluent in pop culture and “vulgarity”) that these comedies level the discursive playing field, destabilize the dominant rhetoric, and bring political talk onto new “common” ground.

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<sup>318</sup> Spicer, *ibid.*, 34–35, 38. MacMullan, “Jon Stewart and the New Public Intellectual,” 64, describes Stewart doing “critical intellectual work dolled up as yuks.” Various authors treat *The Daily Show*’s humor as secondary, a mere tactic to reach ‘legitimate’ aims; see Chapter 3. For a foundational essay on the problematics of critics “cleansing” comedy to deemphasize scatology and body humor and focus on the comic’s nobler, high-minded achievements, see William Paul’s “Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality,” in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 109–30.

<sup>319</sup> Interviewed in Paul Provenza and Dan Dion, *¡Satiristas! Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs & Vulgarians* (New York: It Books, 2010), 27.

Thus, here again it is useful to hold Habermas in dialogue with Bakhtin when theorizing the comic in/as public sphere. As rhetorical scholar Aaron Hess rightly reminds, *The Daily Show* “is framed as funny before social critique, although the critique is not far behind,” and Stewart’s potential “preference for laughter above all else” may disturb interlocutors like Bill O’Reilly who square off against him in the public arena (not to mention some of his own avid political supporters).<sup>320</sup> Similar to certain critiques of *South Park*, Hess sees *The Daily Show* performing “a vital, comic social service” as postmodern parody that wriggles free of the codes of “rational” argument to speak the leveling language of omnidirectional carnival laughter:

As radical critique, *The Daily Show* offers a position of constant pointing; pointing at its own flaws, pointing out the flaws of others, and pointing out the flaws in all of us. Arguably, *The Daily Show* does *not* argue for anything... [emphasis added]. [I]ts performances do not necessarily invite rational discourse.... However, they do offer a corrective.<sup>321</sup>

The critical impulse to ‘elevate’ the comedian-hosts and writers to the rational tier of public discourse not only devalues their comic skill, but also disregards the transformative power of laughter as a lease on (in Bakhtin’s words) “*another truth*.”<sup>322</sup> Such an elision, common in attempts to recuperate stable meaning from the postmodern and serious messages from the comedic, problematically risks foreclosing comedy’s liberating potential for leveling in the interest of policing the “dangerous” liminality and slipperiness of humor and irony.

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<sup>320</sup> Aaron Hess, “Purifying Laughter: Carnavalesque Self-Parody as Argument Scheme in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric*, 103. The *Crossfire* incident notwithstanding, a survey of Stewart’s stand-up and talk show roots (MTV’s *The Jon Stewart Show*) and Colbert’s legacy (in improvisational comedy and as a founding member of *Exit 57* and *Strangers with Candy*) gives credence to the performers’ repeated assertions that they are led by the comic’s credo to follow the funny.

<sup>321</sup> Hess, *ibid.*, 109–10. See also Osborne-Thompson, “Tracing the ‘Fake’ Candidate,” 81, on Colbert circulating an alternative language to ‘official’ political discourse by *carnivalizing* the political process to broaden the public discussion about “the limits of our current version of American democracy.” As Day argues in *Satire and Dissent*, 167, paraphrasing Baz Kershaw’s *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theater as Cultural Intervention* (1992), and demonstrates in her case studies of ironic activism, “‘satiric irony’ allows for the liberating energies of carnivalesque humor to meet the didacticism of agit-prop theater.”

<sup>322</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 94, quoted in Hess, “Purifying Laughter,” 104; emphasis mine.

## Conclusions

In the initial years after 9/11, irony rebounded and was actively re-envisioned in more politically ‘meaningful’ and motivated forms. Before the “brutal satire” of programs like *Lil’ Bush* and Stephen Colbert’s daring in-character performance art that dotted the mid- and late 2000s, the culture of irony was in a state of flux and regeneration. The half-decade between fall 2001 and 2005 proved an especially tense and transitional time for the nation’s ironists, during which irony did not fade away as some had predicted or hoped, but rather its more “engaged” forms came sharply into focus through the combined efforts of comedic practice and critical deliberation. Such leading examples as *South Park* and *The Daily Show*, having arrived on the scene in the “ironic” 1990s, were celebrated cultural institutions well before becoming emblems of a post-9/11 purposefulness that cast them in a new, more favorable light as the architects of a burgeoning “golden era” in television irony. Neither did “hipster” or “stoned slacker” irony à la *Adult Swim* and *Family Guy* wither on the proverbial vine as an embarrassing relic of nineties negativity and so-called postmodern nihilism in response to 9/11—the *Crank Yankers* years were, after all, looming on the cable comedy horizon. Scholarly and popular critics, however, focused their collective awareness increasingly away from the entrenched debates about both cynical youth and self-absorbed *Seinfeldian* yuppies to reanimate arguments for irony as a valid and vital (as opposed to enervating or nihilistic) cultural practice.

This chapter has traced emerging constructions of ironic engagement, being defined in opposition to ironic detachment, with *South Park* as a significant case study for the 2000s. A central idea of this chapter is that recent work in both political and academic circles has sought to *stabilize* the unruly polysemy of *South Park*, if not by assigning fixed political meanings (as seen with the South Park Conservatives’ claims of anti-liberalism or libertarianism) then by aligning

the chaotic ambiguity itself with a coherent vision of productive democratic dialogue and dissent. In the latter formulation, some thinkers on the left approach the perversely polysemic text as a populist site of resistance and disruption of dominant cultural narratives and norms (though not necessarily “progressive” or “countercultural”), and irony emerges as a valued vehicle for rhetorical agitation if not activism. This is not to suggest that *South Park* is neatly containable within even these analytic frames, nor that they have been wholly successful in silencing the accusations of corrosive cynicism. Indeed, as a corollary to these arguments, proponents of media and democratic reform are also dedicating greater attention to more “constructive” and “committed” forms of irony and satire, as modeled by Stewart and Colbert, that do lend themselves to consistent counter-hegemonic rhetorical work, or comedic “counternarratives.”

With the recent calls for a return to stable forms of satiric irony, I am reluctant to disregard the pleasures and possibilities of the postmodern carnival as a foundation for comedy. The era of postmodern irony opened up unrulier forms of comic play that have not been extinguished, thankfully, nor lost their ritual, and yes, rhetorical potency. While I welcome the recent renaissance in pointed satire with enthusiasm, I am also convinced that contemporary comedic irony holds cultural significance beyond its role in the culture wars, media reform, or political activism. The ironic sitcom, whether anarchic or congenial, is as much the whetstone for honing the tools of cutting-edge humor as is satirical news, and both genres cling with the force of a vise-grip to their postmodern textuality as the stage for comic subversion.

That said, I find it worthwhile to draw a distinction between the omnidirectional laughter of postmodern carnival, as a leveling force, and “political incorrectness,” often used as a rationale for promulgating cultural hierarchy and privilege in the name of personal liberties. As the standard defenses of “equal opportunity offense” as freedom of expression in both right-wing



rhetoric and laddist media illustrate, the overarching anti-PC claims to carnival licentiousness extended to much contemporary comedy are less about carving out liminal spaces for radical play—transporting participants into a moment of common humanity with the suspension of the normative rules and ways of being as Bakhtin envisioned—than a means of “having your cake and eating it, too,” especially for those laying claim to victimization while redeploying and enjoying old prejudices or rivalries. In this context, many of the attempts to stabilize irony and quash the postmodern and the polysemic in a text like *South Park* work to conscript even its most carnivalesque moments into a project antithetical to the promise of Rabelaisian revelry. If *South Park* Conservatism co-opts the carnival, one competing impulse on the left has been to tame it, in the interest of political engagement and “commitment” in irony, to some extent bracketing out the postmodern or even the comedic dimensions of programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Such work may truncate, even as it celebrates, the radical potential of these programs to reframe public affairs or claim the power to laugh at legitimated political discourse. In these ways, various politically oriented interpretive communities have sought to transform comedy into coherent or convenient truths.

The final chapter surveys a broader cross-section of cable and network programming, focusing on the period from 2005 through 2010 and beyond, to highlight significant tropes in narrative television balancing the competing pulls of postmodern textuality and truth seeking, surface and depth, the “cool” of irony and “warmth” of sincerity. Sitcoms and dramedies of the mid 2000s through early 2010s actively negotiated dueling comic impulses and the demand for moral legibility in comedy, with various texts perforating self-referential irony with appeals to raw emotion and values like honesty, compassion, courage, and moral strength or conviction. Tracing transformations in the still unfolding discourse and practice deemed the “new sincerity,”

I explore how programs reasserting comedic irony's potential for emotional and/or moral engagement called a truce in the Irony-versus-Sincerity debates, favoring what critics often celebrate as a powerful fusion. Alongside cable comedy trends, I have repeatedly chosen in this work to focus my analysis ultimately on developments in network prime time to track the mainstreaming of currents in irony, partly because this is less trammled territory in the recent literature, in contrast to the intensively-studied *Daily Show* and *South Park*, but also because even in the age of narrowcasting it is here that we see often see comedy's ritual functions playing out most tellingly for national audiences. It is here that we must look to begin to answer the question, if "Not the Cosbys," if "not *Seinfeld*," then what?

## Chapter 6

### **Beyond Postmodern Irony? The Search for Truth, Depth, and Purpose**

In place of the romantic idea that each of us harbors a true self struggling for expression, the ironist offers the suspicion that we are just quantum selves—all spin, all the way down.

— Jedediah Purdy, 1999<sup>1</sup>

One of the striking changes to the critical and popular discourse on irony after 9/11, as we have seen over the preceding three chapters, was the reification and subsequent rejection of the binary opposition routinely posed between irony and sincerity. Hailed as a savvy if not necessary language for speaking truth to power, irony was rearticulated across the political spectrum as an ally of truthfulness, honesty, and authenticity. Comics as agitators in the public sphere salvaged a reputation for ironic humor as social critique. With irony being widely named as a cynical force undermining sincere speech, we have seen how satirists in particular worked to reassert television comedy as a site of social commentary and relevance, cultivating a comedy of conviction and an irony laced with sincerity but not sanctimony. Political humorists such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Bill Maher, alongside outspoken comics like Whoopi Goldberg, nudged the definition of irony and to some extent cynicism from vice to democratic virtue. To the extent that comedic irony, and by extension “political incorrectness,” reemerged to be greeted as a politicized social tool, in some of the same texts and genres previously saddled with a reputation for “frivolous” postmodern nihilism (e.g., “fake news,” comedian chat forums, and subversive animated sitcom), a revitalized sense of truth-in-irony suffused the cultural conversation on comedy. In theory if not always in practice, this push served to shush the call of

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<sup>1</sup> Jedediah Purdy, “Avoiding the World,” chap. 1 of *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Random House, 1999), 10.

clever irrelevance, radical depthlessness, cynical detachment, and genre subversion as the bread and butter of smart, innovative television comedy and affirm that it was finally cool again for “edgy” comedy to have (in post-9/11 lingo) a moral compass.

The aim of this concluding chapter is to rethink the “new sincerity” in recent practice. Analysis will focus here not on the mainstreamed conservative discourse, examined in Chapter 3, which gave that phrase its brief ubiquity and lasting notoriety after 9/11, but rather we will look more closely at how U.S. television comedy has accommodated, internalized, and yet contained, an ethos of sincerity within the house of irony. Arguably, as numerous others have observed, the “New Earnestness” as initially conjured by cultural critics ranging from *Vanity Fair*’s Graydon Carter to such right-wing pundits as Jonah Goldberg had a short shelf-life.<sup>2</sup> However, it is equally true that comedians and comedy programming by the mid-2000s seized upon a certain ‘new’ spirit of sincerity in ways that continue to impact irony as a brand, in addition to igniting ongoing critical interest in the changing cultural uses of irony as a social and political phenomenon.

In prime time, the decade from the early 2000s into the early 2010s witnessed a firm resolve to embrace heartfelt melodrama and, moreover, impart a distinctively soulful quality to the ironic sitcom, with such noted network hits as *Scrubs* (NBC/ABC, 2001–10), *My Name Is Earl* (NBC, 2005–09), *The Office* (NBC, 2005–13), *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–14), *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–), *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009–15), and *Raising Hope* (FOX, 2010–14). This creative impulse is as much mirrored as it is darkened and refined on late-night cable with FX’s irony-tinged male-centered melodramas and dramedies such as *Rescue Me* (2004–11), *Starved* (2005), and *Louie* (2010–). Taken together, these and other

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<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 3, I noted competing views including that the new sincerity failed outright, irony failed to recover, or “nothing changed.” As cited previously, Lynn Spigel’s “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004), 258, suggests that the new sincerity proved defunct within a month as irony returned to the airwaves after September 11, 2001, a claim echoed in Jon Winokur’s assessment in *The Big Book of Irony* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 77, that the “New Earnestness failed to take hold.”

programs have hailed viewers simultaneously as savvy consumers of postmodern “detached” irony and emotionally invested social subjects with a conscience and capacity to feel and care deeply. A dual or layered mode of address, catering to cynical distance with a wry play of surfaces but also accommodating a depth of meaning and of feeling, is found to varying degrees across a spectrum of comedic genres ranging from Comedy Central’s satirical political programming to the neo-laddish FX comedy brand to the quality network sitcom.

Turning from the previous chapter’s discussions of stable irony as a sought-after quality of political satire, this chapter focuses on a diverse selection of texts from these latter two categories, FX original programming and prime-time network fare—the one targeting the young male demographic with “edgy” humor and content in the masculinist tradition of political incorrectness and the other courting “hip” socially liberal audiences with innovations on the quality sitcom genre—as parallel sites of stylistic and temperamental shifts shaping “sincere” meanings and uses of television irony. Across network niches, many television comedies of the mid and late 2000s took a special interest in uncovering a “sensitive” and compassionate side of laddish or cynical characters and fused postmodern style and self-reflexive irony with appeals to sincere sentiment.

It would be a significant oversight to suggest that the 1990s lacked examples of “heart” and “sincerity” in irony or that network TV of that era offered no precedents for recent tonal hybrids of irony and melodrama. While negative press and mild social panic over 1990s irony tended to zero in on subversive or counter-generic (postmodern) shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Married... With Children*, or on cable *Beavis and Butt-Head*, fixating on their “antisocial” implications, there was arguably no shortage of either “warm” or family-friendly programming offered at the time under the ever-expanding irony label. Even FOX staple *The Simpsons* tempered its wily post-modern irony with overt sentimentality and touching moments. Egoistic comic-grotesques loomed

large in the milestone postmodern-ironic sitcoms, many displaying little inclination to evolve, empathize, or “care” about much beyond self-serving desires and schemes (not unlike the clowns of TV’s classic situation comedy genre as theorized by Newcomb<sup>3</sup>), but as an influx of irony begat tonal overhauls of domestic comedy and workplace sitcom more broadly, the viewer was often asked to invest deeply in the growth of characters and advancing relationships. Sitcoms such as ABC’s *Roseanne* (1988–97), CBS’s *Murphy Brown* (1988–98), NBC’s *Friends* (1994–2004), and from producer David E. Kelley FOX’s hour-long dramedy *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) in particular, for example, had broken ground with their marriages of edgy irony with sudsy melodrama, while others such as *Will & Grace* split the difference by smuggling sentimental storylines under a blanket of “detached” irony and endless insult humor.

The ironic sitcom as a carnivalesque winking embrace of social ugliness and the absurd by no means disappeared in the 2000s, as evidenced by the cult appeal of FOX fare like *Arrested Development* (2003–06, reprised with new episodes on Netflix in 2013) and cable offerings like *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX 2005–12, FXX 2013–), FX’s flagship bachelor comedy which alongside *South Park* taunted the arbiters of “good taste” in ways I will consider in context at the outset of this chapter. Even network quality vehicles like NBC’s *30 Rock* regularly exploited the comic-grotesque potential of nihilistic narcissism as a static lifestyle choice for monstrously self-absorbed (albeit mainly secondary) characters. Nevertheless, I suggest, the balance shifted for U.S. television and its cultural appraisal in the 2000s in favor

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<sup>3</sup> Often criticized for the “arrested development” of their characters, postmodern sitcoms presumed audience familiarity with this static aspect of traditional sitcom formula and thus tended to relish if not exaggerate it in their ironic send-ups of not only “situation comedy” per se but also (as seen in *Married... With Children*, *The Simpsons*, and *Strangers with Candy*) “domestic comedy” known for its tidier weekly resolutions *cum* lessons. For Horace Newcomb’s influential take on classic network era situation and domestic comedies, again please see his genre study “Situation and Domestic Comedies: Problems, Families, and Fathers,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), 25–58. A key distinction is that, unlike classic fools of situation comedy like Lucy Ricardo and Ralph Kramden, various 1990s postmodern sit-com antiheroes such as Beavis and Butt-Head and Jerry Seinfeld (until his incarceration in the finale, that is), tended to ‘get away with’ breaking the social contract.

of what critics sometimes call irony “with heart.” The post-9/11 mantra that it was not only permissible but advisable to hold strong personal convictions and cherished national values created a welcoming forum for a cultural re-embrace of poignancy and values-driven comedy.

In the first of two sections, the chapter explores post-1990s neo-laddism as refracted through the various lenses of men’s television genres. I begin by briefly revisiting and reframing questions of honesty, authenticity, and intensity raised by comedian-centered talk formats that echo through other men’s genres and complicate the prevailing logics of “postmodern irony.” Building on this foundation, we will then turn our attention to emotionally charged fictional programming, taking comedic masculine melodrama on FX as a special case for the sincering of ironic masculinity and the main focus of my analysis in the first half of the chapter. The second half expands to consider “irony with a heart” as a broader discourse and television phenomenon, highlighting network sitcoms’ complementary role in the cultural quest for truth, depth, and sincerity. The reader will recall that Chapters 3 and 4 included some initial discussion of the ‘sincering’ of irony as well as the return to ‘relevance’ on post-*Seinfeld* prime-time television.<sup>4</sup> In those chapters, I first traced expressions of patriotic pride and national unity in network sitcoms in broad terms and then outlined specific tropes whereby network comedy ventured into debates taking place in the cultural forum over American identity and values. I offered an in-depth look at differing approaches to race and ethnicity in ironic or quasi-ironic domestic and workplace sitcoms at a time when multiculturalism was an especially hot-button issue in the culture wars. Chapter 5 turned to more overtly subversive cable programming, exploring the

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms ‘sincering of irony’ or ‘sincerated irony’ (rather than asserting a new ‘sincere irony’) to signify and maintain focus on the culture-wide pressures that called for an improved “kind of irony,” as detailed in Chapter 3. In keeping with my methodology focusing on discursive constructions of irony, this phrasing is meant in part to distinguish my argument from critical assessments that assert one program or another as being “sincere” or “insincere” forms, but also to avoid *static* meanings (of sincerity and irony) and instead emphasize the active, ongoing processes whereby comedy writers, critics, and audiences were participants in renegotiating the affective stakes of cultural irony.

oppositional tactics of *South Park* and other satirical vehicles and their prospective value for different reading communities, whether as bargaining chips in political bids for cultural/media dominance or as confirmation that comedy carved out spaces for (affective if not actual) resistance and afforded the “disenfranchised center” a reliable refuge from political cross-fire. In this chapter, I bridge and expand those discussions of the cultural and identity politics at play in ironic programming, mapping out constellations of cable and network programs that not only punctuated cool irony with warm humor or pathos but also promised insight into aspirational and authentic identity, self-betterment, personal convictions, private pain, and moral liability.

Exploring these themes, the chapter offers a survey of specific strategies employed in television’s narrative comedies by the mid-2000s that sought to civilize, enlighten, or rehabilitate, sometimes literally, the sympathetic “cynical” hero. I approach these programming trends as signposts mapping some of the salient structures and encoded pleasures of ironic or post-ironic humor on contemporary television, with attention to laddish dimensions of ironic masculinity (defined in Chapter 2)—in representations of the ill-behaved yet caring “bad boy”—as well as how the ironic subject more broadly was addressed in the context of the “new patriotism” (Chapter 3) on U.S. television. The distinctive blends of irony and sincerity that we find in texts such as *My Name Is Earl*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Samantha Who?* (ABC, 2007–09), and *Community* (NBC, 2009–14), among the noteworthy exemplars of representational and attitudinal shifts framed with irony that we will consider, signaled a crossroads for world-weary irony—as cynical perspectives were thrust into constant dialogue with hopeful belief systems.

In particular, we will look at a set of soul-based conceits that establish a moral code and signal a probable progress narrative within television’s more introspective irony-based fictions, which did not necessarily proffer the protagonist as a stable moral center. Taking FX’s *Rescue*



*Me and Starved* and NBC's *My Name Is Earl* as key case studies, I examine how the structuring premise of a complex and dynamic moral universe provides a backdrop for what are essentially voyages of self-discovery and recovery. Such programs hail a viewer sympathetic to or even anchored in an ironic worldview yet, somewhat paradoxically, invested in plumbing the nature of the sincere or 'true' self. Toggling between essentialized and ironized approaches to identity, these tales of the recovering bad-boy present the flawed hero as a work-in-progress bound by vice and virtue. Such comic fictions explored parallel paths of recalcitrance and rehabilitation and contemplated redemption for the loveable rogue, lad/ladette, or self-absorbed cynic, while cultural critics seeking to rehabilitate irony (that is, overcome ironic nihilism) and recover truth debated the responsibilities of the comedian in the public sphere.

### **Of Vice and Men: Rehabbing the Lad**

If the new lad of nineties television was unencumbered by a social conscience or code of ethics, in the 2000s he began to battle his demons on a spate of programs that offered post-9/11 portraits of men coping with angst and various forms of addiction. A sense of enduring national trauma echoes through some of these recent representations of American masculinity in crisis. Programming aimed at the male consumer in the mid and late 2000s offered narratives of masculine agency and self-examination bound up with issues of loyalty, patriotism, truth, moral strength, self-worth, and mortality. These programs accommodated competing pleasures and cultural demands for "cowboy" masculinity tempered by a sense of the new sincerity. Moreover, they cultivated a structure of feeling that affirmed a capacity for deep and authentic emotion—anger, longing, devotion, concern, regret—without laying claim to a masculinity that is overly "sensitive," or in comedian Denis Leary's parlance "pussified."

Ironic codes continued to dominate in representations of cool and desirable masculinity. The new lad as a television presence did not relinquish his proprietary claim on irony, but joined in the national impulse to redirect cynicism and reposition, redeem, or reform the ironist. A wide range of programs and genres while carrying forward an ironic sensibility sought to incorporate and foreground appeals to humanity, depth, and substance, offering meditations on modern identity and in some cases dramatizing the process of becoming “a better person.” In this section, I highlight specific intersections of neo-laddist discourse with these broader trends.

Before looking at *Rescue Me* and *Starved* as extended examples of generically distinctive texts that fused self-referential irony with soulful sincerity in the service of exploring emotional truths and asserting social relevance, I first want to establish the pertinent industrial and comedic context for this programming push and consider shifting meanings of masculinist irony as a cultural formation in this moment. For contrast, we will briefly revisit Comedy Central’s surly comedian caucus show *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* (2002–04), then consider FX’s satirical sitcom *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005–), as adjacent approaches to the comic forum, the former gesturing to a fiercely post-ironic laddism and the latter joining *South Park* as a resolutely postmodern-ironic carnivalesque. After considering these texts that suggest somewhat opposing poles for comedic irony targeting young male viewers, we will more fully explore how FX’s network identity and comic brand as “quality” television negotiates differing masculine and ironic ideals and cultivates a more circumspect culture of laddism straddling “vulgar” and “serious” humor.

*“Comics with Issues”*: *The Lad Republic and the Comic Politics of Anger*

With postmodernism being pronounced dead or at least passé, television of the 2000s put some distance between laddish masculinities and their reputation for postmodern irony, setting aside the “postmodern safety net” for appeals to courage in the name of non-PC honesty.

As the longstanding comic campaign against political correctness found fresh expression and momentum, entertaining more topical themes, conspicuously laddish strains of irony continued to shape the contours of provocative cable and late-night “locker-room” comedy with programs like Comedy Central’s *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*, referenced in the previous chapter as a celebrated leader in anti-liberal comedy lumped with *South Park* by some conservatives, and more recently and puckishly *Tosh.0* (2009–). A persistent discourse of honesty and authenticity frames laddish representations and irony, with comics like *Tough Crowd*’s core set and even sitcoms like *Two and a Half Men* (in its early iteration) each in their own way credited with daring to speak the kinds of truth supposedly suppressed by the gatekeepers of a liberal-feminist PC culture.

Explored in the last chapter, programs in which comics discuss “the issues,” from *South Park* to *Tough Crowd* to *The Daily Show*, assert comedy as a site for quasi-public debate and the comedian as an interlocutor and defender of the public interest, as well as finding ways to involve and “activate” the audience. Quinn’s show, as we saw, put a strongly masculinist spin on the comic round-table format pioneered by *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and took politicians, experts, and celebrities out of the equation to create an insular, informal space for tough-talking comics to trade insults and shoot the breeze about politics—turning topical jokey banter into a competitive sport—under the series’ tagline “Comics with Issues.” Rivaling yet also mocking the sense of *gravitas* surrounding *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central’s official *Tough Crowd* webpage, in the spirit of irony, encouraged fans to “be brash and outspoken” like the cast and “get involved” by posting “uninformed opinions” on “very important topics... like hottie presidential daughters.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* message board, [http://www.comedycentral.com/tv\\_shows/colinquinn/](http://www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/colinquinn/) (accessed September 18, 2004). The site featured discussion threads such as the board moderator’s “No more anti-homo comments allowed on this board...” (met with retorts like “OK you f@ggot d!ck sucker”), interspersed with criticism of the network’s schedule and pro-Bush vs. anti-Bush vitriol from posters assuming names (some ironic) like Joe Bushsupporter, Jesus Christ, mrpoon, allWhite, FreeThinker13, Smarterthanthou, and FuckCensorship. Arguably, Comedy Central’s web promotion invited cyberfans to enact a kind of comedy version of *Crossfire*’s “shout-fest,” not officially acknowledging yet indulging anti-liberal *Tough Crowd* fans’ contempt for *The Daily Show*.

On the one hand, *Tough Crowd*'s more aggressive humor is fueled by the same "language of 'common sense'" that simultaneously legitimates laddism's culture of irony and signals to viewers not to take it "too seriously."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, programs like this one by positioning themselves as raw, unfiltered "truth" delivered with "comedic integrity"<sup>7</sup> (to quote Quinn) also began to propose a bolder, de-ironized variant, renouncing certain pretenses of "not meaning what I say" that first configured the new laddism as a retreat and shield from what countless sources deemed the "hypersensitivity" of the early 1990s. These aging and next-generation lads still have the attitude and swagger but scale back ambiguity to articulate irony more adamantly as keeping it "real."

For our purposes in this chapter, it bears emphasizing that *Tough Crowd*'s entire concept as a talk forum for "Comics with Issues" doubly lays claim to social relevance (as topical debate) and to a depth of unresolved anger (emotional triggers or "issues") as the basis for its "edgy, ... testosterone-driven" comedy, as Quinn reminded in the finale when saluting the men on his panel for having "the balls to *reveal all of their ugliness and their humanity* for the sake of honesty and comedy [emphasis added]."<sup>8</sup> Whereas media criticism increasingly upholds *The Daily Show* as a model for stable irony as pointed satire, recovering a modernist plea for truth grounded in citizen anger, *Tough Crowd*'s competing "ordinary Joe" vernacular enacts an altogether different comic politics of anger. This round-table, in appealing to the disgruntled "Everyman," privileges tough-talk as performance in lieu of substantive "serious" deliberation, anchoring that talk often non-ironically (if not exactly earnestly) in the language of "ballsy" honesty.

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<sup>6</sup> Similar to that mobilized by men's magazines like *Loaded*, irony serves a dual purpose in this anti-PC male putdown culture: it tempers verbal displays of aggression with the overlaid message "I don't really mean it" and, as Nick Stevenson says of men's magazines in *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication*, 2d ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002), 111–12, generally serves "as a warning against taking anything that is said too seriously," while the "language of 'common sense'" validates laddish taste culture as natural masculinity.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 5's excerpt of Quinn's monologue on the subject of "telling the truth" and "comedic integrity" from *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*'s series finale, first aired November 5, 2004, on Comedy Central.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Given its rhetorical emphasis on boldly bringing the unspoken to the surface, as a showcase for comics to “reveal” certain populist (anti-liberal) attitudes and feelings denied and demonized by cultural elites (that is, mainstream media), the master-text eschews the “insincerity” of slippery irony—even the mask of double-voiced stable irony—in favor of uncensored masculine discourse or “men’s talk,” while still allowing for constant jokey ambiguity and the chic of bitter irony which persist at the level of the individual barbed and “un-PC” utterances that dominate the show’s panel conversations.

*It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, which premiered the following year, approaches boorish masculinities and socially “insensitive” attitudes from a radically different comic angle, as a carnivalesque de-emphasizing humanity to plumb the depths of man’s—and woman’s—“low” animalistic nature as the base of its “sick” humor. The FX sitcom exploits an antirealist aesthetic and postmodern-ironic ethos to depict a dystopic ideological underworld, extolling the “ugliness” of characters who wallow in the figurative mud of American entitlement, ignorant attitudes, social intolerance, and alternately, egomania and mob mentality. Both programs boast subversive edginess as “cringe” comedy for and about men. In drawing a distinction between the relationship to irony modeled by these roughly contemporaneous texts courting the same sought-after demographic of males 18-to-34 with antiestablishment and “vulgar” humor, it is perhaps telling that the more insistently polysemic “postmodern” text, again like *South Park*, proved to have more cultural staying power, and greater potential for sharp satire than the blunter, opinion-driven alternative. In much the same way that humor scholar Doyle Greene described in his praise (outlined in the previous chapter) for *South Park*, *It’s Always Sunny*’s cringe-humor does not call for a “celebration of the non-conformist individual” but instead irreverently comments on “cruel, stupid individuals acting on personal self-interest” who “form crueller,

stupider groups acting on organized self-interest.”<sup>9</sup> Taken together, these competing approaches to the comic forum, with their differing claims on irony and/as social relevance, illustrate the two-way pull in “testosterone-driven” comedy programming of the 2000s, between outright celebration of the lad as “brash and outspoken” antihero (read anti-PC hero) and an increasingly satirical strain of self-referential irony (per the spread of “satiric irony” discussed in Chapter 5).

“*Rock, Flag, and Eagle!*”: It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia *Parodies the Public Forum*

*It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* was instrumental in carving its network’s comic niche, offering a unique blend of “politically incorrect” bachelor humor and metacommentary on spectacular failures of self-awareness, affirming the critical ironic gaze. The series is set in an Irish pub subsisting in a sketchy urban neighborhood and run by a sketchier band of miscreants. “The Gang” consists of narcissist twins Dennis and Deandra “Sweet Dee” Reynolds (Glenn Howerton and Kaitlin Olson) and their more congenial yet equally ethically challenged sidekicks Charlie Kelly (Charlie Day) and Mac (Rob McElhenney), with actor Danny DeVito, introduced in season two, playing the siblings’ rich yet deadbeat dad Frank Reynolds. In contrast to the satire of *The Daily Show* and “comedic republic”<sup>10</sup> of *Tough Crowd*, FX’s longest-running comedy series is notable as an outlier, a stronghold of radically “detached” irony, in the tradition of postmodern-subversive sitcoms like the perversely ‘topical’ *Strangers with Candy* (Comedy Central, 1999–2000). The show enfolds satirical social commentary on ‘the issues’ of the day—racism, environmentalism, welfare, religion, abortion, gun control, disability rights, the homeless, voter apathy, political corruption, gay marriage, and the mortgage crisis, among

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<sup>9</sup> Doyle Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2008), 222, in reference to *South Park*.

<sup>10</sup> Introduced in Chapter 5, this is Brian C. Anderson’s phrase characterizing *Tough Crowd*, in *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), 91.

others—within a sustained grotesque of American small-mindedness, self-importance, and greed. Whereas many prominent postmodern-ironic sitcoms, including *Seinfeld* and *South Park*, often allow for some degree of sympathy for their grotesques, flirting with viewers' capacity for recognition of and repulsion from our own foibles, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* plunges the viewer into a monstrous world so alienating and teeming with "lowlifes" so repellent that the comedy escorts us to the outer limits of ironic distance as the starting point for its brand of social satire. Despite clear similarities in its comic thrust to *South Park*, moreover, the program offers no "sincere" voice (ironic or otherwise) to latch onto in the text, dispenses with the device of "the moral" altogether, and pursues political incorrectness further outside of the confines of "anti-liberal" comedy.

The comedy does not cede an inch to the "new sincerity," but is, somewhat paradoxically, its complement, as a gruesome portrait of citizen cynicism in action. For example, the second season episode "The Gang Runs for Office" opens with a scene hashing out the pointlessness of electoral politics. "Who am I supposed to vote for," Dennis Reynolds scoffs, "... the Democrat who's going to blast me in the ass, or the Republican who's blasting my ass?!" Just as the boys achieve consensus that politics is just one big "nationwide ass-blasting," their outlook on public office immediately changes, when their elder, Frank, points out that local candidates are often in it for an easy payday and may accept illegal bribes to vacate the race before having to perform any actual public service. "I mean," Frank adds, "you have to be a real lowlife piece of shit to get involved in politics." Cue the theme music and on-screen episode title card, informing us that "The Gang" has decided to enter politics.<sup>11</sup> In "The Gang Gives Back," the friends are all

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<sup>11</sup> *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, "The Gang Runs for Office," episode 2.8, first aired August 3, 2006, on FX. Such jokes playfully register an understanding implied between the authorial presence (rhetor) and viewer (cultural reader) that these naughty characters on display are "lowlife" scum—an understanding rarely so directly articulated by prior postmodern-ironic series like *Beavis & Butt-Head*, *Married... With Children*, and *Seinfeld*, and even less so by laddish comedies like *The Man Show* and *Two and a Half Men*, to the chagrin of socially conservative and anti-irony critics.

sentenced to community service, and Charlie uses his court-mandated stint in Alcoholics Anonymous to try to manipulate his crush into sleeping with him, while the others exploit their newfound roles coaching opposing basketball teams for under-privileged children as an opportunity for illegal gambling and foul play, with the kids as pawns in their vicious rivalry.<sup>12</sup>

*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* regularly divides its cast into opposing "sides" of any issue to render the culture wars in miniature as pure farce. Downgrading every national conflict to petty in-group squabbles, the program ventures into touchy topics of terrorism, global politics, and the war, with episodes such as "The Gang Goes Jihad" (2.2, June 29, 2006), "The Gang Solves the Gas Crisis" (4.2, September 18, 2008), and "The Gang Wrestles for the Troops" (5.7, October 29, 2009). With the characters prone to continuous and open-ended yelling sessions, *It's Always Sunny* manages to give the Rabelaisian pleasure of voluble excess while at the same time satirizing the media "shout-fest" as empty spectacle. The text does not stop at staging disagreements or antagonism, but delights in the characters egging each other on into a manic reverie, whether "solving" a national crisis or deciding what boat to buy (pimped-out "Diddy" yacht or Gumpesque shrimping vessel?).<sup>13</sup> When taking on social and political themes, the series subjects 'democratic' deliberation and divisive sparring, and civic engagement and disengagement alike, to the distorting mirrors of carnival.

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<sup>12</sup> *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, "The Gang Gives Back," episode 2.6, first aired July 30, 2006, on FX.

<sup>13</sup> *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, "The Gang Buys a Boat," episode 6.3, first aired September 30, 2010, on FX. With its hyperbolically manic and loud characters, *It's Always Sunny* bears strong resemblance to the comic-grotesquery of British alternative sitcoms like *The Young Ones* that buffooned gender and social tribes (see Chapter 2). Additionally, the story titles (and theme music) are strikingly evocative of alternative cult-comedy *The Comic Strip Presents'* "Five Go Mad" telefilms, spoofing Enid Blyton's "Famous Five" children's adventure books, that aired on U.K. Channel Four in 1982–83 (with a reunion in 2012) and acquired a U.S. fandom via MTV in the late 1980s. Moreover, as a parodic meta sitcom, *It's Always Sunny*, through the on-screen titles and in-story dialogue, self-consciously and irreverently owns its direct generic debt to "the gang" as an entrenched convention of American TV. See David Marc's *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2d ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), in which he defines "gang comedy" as "a standard sitcom formula in which emphasis is placed on the building up of a repertoire of interacting characters, rather than the featuring of a single star personality" (171, note 24).



In an exemplary instance of the carnivalizing of the national political scene, the series satirized the ‘new patriotism’ and framed recent appeals to freedom as an unleashing of the American Id with “Charlie Goes America All Over Everybody’s Ass.” In this August 2006 episode, when barkeep Charlie demands a smoking ban, he is accused of being “un-American” by fellow pub co-owners Mac and Dennis.<sup>14</sup> To model the true meaning of patriotism, Mac and Dennis pledge to make Paddy’s Irish Pub “the most American bar in all of America, a place with Absolute Freedom.” Working from a narrow notion of freedom based in white male heterosexual fantasy, they envision a Mardi Gras-like haven where “girls go wild” and freely express their sexuality. However, the proprietors of Paddy’s soon learn a lesson about giving customers “too much freedom” and find themselves imposing rules and boundaries to protect their voyeuristic privilege from an unruly clientele that “exploits” freedom and rapidly turns the bar into a den of heroin, incest, and anarchic violence. With Mac and Dennis’s failure to cultivate a Bacchanalian “utopia” of pure freedom, or gain the recognition they seek as American heroes for recovering the Mardi Gras experience from the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina, the episode subjects self-serving and contingent definitions of freedom to ridicule.

Charlie’s vendetta against smokers, meanwhile, framing freedom as the freedom to police others’ behavior, thrusts the episode not only into the domestic debates taking place over dissent and public bans but also alludes to U.S. foreign policy and the rearranging of governments in the name of spreading “American freedoms.” When Charlie first takes to the streets with Sweet Dee eager to champion the public smoking ban, his plan to join a protest group is foiled by a professionalization of activism and blatant hypocrisy (fig. 6.1a): the demonstrators, wearing

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<sup>14</sup> *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, “Charlie Goes America All Over Everybody’s Ass,” episode 2.9 (production no. IP02008), first aired, August 10, 2006, on FX.



Figures 6.1a–b. *Left*: “Patriot” Charlie Kelly (Charlie Day) challenges a Let’s Talk Truth demonstrator to a fist fight when he learns that the protestors’ message is not *sincere* but just *public theater*. *Right*: In the same scene, flag-festooned Charlie’s hyperbolic commitment clashes with the anti-smoking campaigners’ disloyally noncommittal attitude. This rival camp’s slogan is an extratextual allusion to the 9/11 Truth movement, or Truthers. “Charlie Goes America All Over Everybody’s Ass,” *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, originally aired August 10, 2006, on FX.

T-shirts bearing the slogan “Let’s Talk Truth,” are just an acting troupe with no interest in “the cause,” who smoke cigarettes between gigs. Anti-smoking activism is a favorite target of laddish and libertarian comedy, often framed in terms of hypocrisy as with *South Park*’s “Butt Out,” but in the present example it is also a broad metaphor covering both anti-war protest—here comically conflating pacifism with a passive or noncommittal attitude—and the 9/11 Truth movement. When Sweet Dee does not share in his zealotry and moral outrage, self-proclaimed super-citizen Charlie is so overcome with ‘patriotic’ fervor that he bursts into a spontaneous song/rant:

I’m gonna rise up, gonna kick a little ass  
 Gonna kick some ass in the U.S.A.  
 Gonna climb a mountain, gonna soar a flag with a flying eagle  
 I’m gonna kick some butt, gonna drive a big truck  
 Gonna rule the road, gonna kick some ass  
 I’m gonna rise up, gonna kick a little ass  
 ROCK, FLAG, AND EAGLE!

The lyrics mirror Charlie’s spirited attire, a flag-and-eagle embroidered jean jacket and stars-and-stripes bandana (fig. 6.1b), an ensemble both serving as a burlesque of veteran costuming stereotypes and evocative of iconic “protest” media texts ranging from *Born on the Fourth of July*

to Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* The impromptu anthem is a send-up of country music star Toby Keith's 2001 hit song "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)," which included the lyric, "You'll be sorry you messed with the U.S. of A. 'cause we'll put a boot in your ass. It's the American way." Despite having huge fan appeal as an expression of Americans' outrage, Keith's tough-talk represented a knee-jerk jingoism that was widely dismissed and similarly satirized by programs such as *South Park*.

The program lacks a specific critique but makes sport of widespread frustration and channels ambivalence about limits being placed on civil rights in the name of heightened national security. The script finds humor in the vast grey area between freedom and anarchy at a moment when the meanings of American freedoms and constitutionality of various bans were subject to continuous debate. Swimming in the multiple definitions of freedom then circulating in U.S. media, the overarching joke dissects the contradictions in freedom *from* versus freedom *to*, or what Isaiah Berlin called "positive" and "negative" concepts of liberty.<sup>15</sup> Although the show by design avoids any clear agenda or affirmative politics, and instead upholds ironic ambiguity and unbridled political incorrectness as the basis for viewing pleasure, *It's Always Sunny* consistently encourages skepticism and a critical remove from the culture wars. In this respect, the underlying cynicism espoused by the program is politically engaged and satirical, as many predicted the new "darker" irony of this decade could or must be, but more exceptional is the program's blatant buffoonery of and self-reflexive running commentary on the social sins of so-called "bad" cynicism as a cultural vice.

While the central conceit of *The Gang*'s endless divisive and duplicitous bickering serves to parody the public forum (fallen prey to petty partisan rivalries and self-serving belief systems),

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<sup>15</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," an essay based on a lecture first delivered in 1958, published in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969).

at the level of character the humor further functions as a burlesque of youth apathy and cynicism. Here, dark comedy gives free rein to the fearful image of Gen-X culture that sprang from the recesses of both the liberal *and* conservative imaginations. The cast, collectively, embodies the alarming stereotypes of the Gen-X slacker-cynic that haunt popular discourse, giving form to those qualities we have seen routinely demonized in the press on irony and rendering that caricature in 3D in all its demonstrably destructive ugliness: narcissism, antisocial impulses, self-entitlement, ignorance, and a lacking moral compass (Dennis is a vain and smug sociopath, Deandra a violent drama queen, Mac an ill-informed ideologue, Charlie functionally illiterate, and Frank a faulty parental role model).<sup>16</sup> Paddy's Pub presents an absurd and grim "worst case scenario," giving a glimpse into the modern salon of the bourgeois public sphere gone wrong, where emotional compulsions and irrational opinions thrive. The Gang's staggering lack of self-awareness, meanwhile, extends to the viewer a superior sense of perspective and self-possession.

*It's Always Sunny in Paddy's Pub* is also coded as a lad (and ladette) space and bastion of politically incorrect humor, by virtue of its male-centered jokes (we learn in the pilot that the lad trio acquired the bar as a venture to pick up chicks) and affiliation with the "edgy" FX brand. The protagonists' watering hole, often depicted in off-hours and uncluttered by customers, is the private workshop in which all The Gang's ill-advised plans are hatched. However, like their narrow worldview and the in-group identity it sustains, their 'private' public gathering place is subject to constant incursions from unwanted outside forces—Israeli capitalists, Vietnamese gamblers, Korean competitors, gay patrons, the mentally handicapped, a rival gang of inbred sexual deviants, and various "others." Paddy's is expressly configured as a symbolic site of negotiation, like the fictionalized South Park,

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<sup>16</sup> Misled by Frank, his children and Mac try to overcome their disposition as "cynical" youth by being more enthusiastic and generous in "Charlie Kelly: King of the Rats," episode 6.10, first aired November 18, 2010, on FX.

where white and male social privilege and libertarian ideas of unfettered personal freedoms must confront a barrage of challenges posed by multiculturalism, and where insular American attitudes are unsettled. The text does not readily lend itself to the kinds of sympathetically pro-libertarian readings affixed to *South Park*, although they do exist,<sup>17</sup> but dwells on the discomfort surrounding social difference and continued erosion of stable white, heterosexual identity.

Moreover, the show specifically mocks the open celebration of ladsness, exiling of others, and cynical strategies for degrading women “taught” in TV man-caves like *The Man Show*. For example, in season five’s “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System” in fall 2009, with the pub as his classroom, Dennis imparts his step-by-step method for “winning any girl’s heart” by destroying her independence and crushing her self-esteem (fig. 6.2a). With Step 5 (I for “Inspire Hope”), the debaucher attains “the best bang of all” because now his seductee feels *emotionally invested* and secure: “You see, she thinks she’s broken through my tough exterior and coerced affection from a man who is afraid to love. And then I slink out into the night, never to talk to her again” (Step 6 being “Separate Entirely”). When his sister Deandra objects that this sounds like a recipe for torturing not wooing a woman, the lads aggressively shout her down in unison with macho heckling (“You just don’t *get* it.... This is what men DO,” “This is MEN stuff!”), accompanied by phallic gestures, hoots, and animalistic grunting (fig. 6.2b).<sup>18</sup> The system is adapted by wing-man Mac, who is waiting in the wings to “swoop” in and re-seduce maestro Dennis’s vulnerable cast-offs, by impersonating the “sensitive intellectual type.”

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<sup>17</sup> “The Top Television Programs of the Decade,” *The Lonely Libertarian*, January 3, 2010, <http://lonelylibertarian.blogspot.com/2010/01/top-television-programs-of-decade.html>; “It’s Always Sunny with Libertarianism,” *PonyTube*, December 2012, <http://www.ponytubeblog.com/2012/12/Sunny.html> (both accessed April 12, 2013). Some bloggers endorsing the show cite DeVito’s Frank Reynolds as an overtly libertarian-friendly character.

<sup>18</sup> *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System,” episode 5.10, first aired November 19, 2009, on FX. Early in the next season, in “The Gang Buys a Boat” (6.3), Dennis endeavors to teach Mac to foster the “implication” of danger (namely, the threat of rape or death) to compel his dates to say yes to sex of their own free will.



Figures 6.2a–b. Dennis (Glenn Howerton), Mac (Rob McElhenney), and Charlie (Day) rejoice in man-ness and phallic privilege with rude gestures and monkey grunts. Cropped screenshots from “The D.E.N.N.I.S. System,” *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, originally aired November 19, 2009, on FX.

But the key, Dennis insists, lies in a man’s ability to disorient his target by representing himself, alternately, as both emotionally “distant” (on the surface) *and* sensitive (beneath the “tough exterior”). This joke provocatively pokes fun at the postmodern play of masculinities as a series of strategic masks (recall from Chapter 2 examples like *Magnolia*’s cynical men’s coach “Frank T.J. Mackey”); but also perhaps, more abstractly, such an acknowledgement speaks to the duality demanded of ironic reading positions (laying claim alternately to distance and engagement). As pure comic-grotesque, this text never breaks through the “surfaces” of representation to reveal a “caring” authorial voice behind the irony curtain (McElhenney and Howerton are the creator-producers, writing with co-star/co-producer Day), but rather retains the slipperiness of meaning that scholars of postmodernism warn “risks disaster” by obscuring subversive intent. Nevertheless, while denying a singular stable preferred reading or coherent moral ‘meta-narrative,’ such meta-comedy by leveraging ironic “detachment” in the service of sustained satire goes further to problematize dominant laddish tropes, cool cynicism, and “behaving badly” than new lad texts of the prior era.

Turning from the postmodern-ironic sitcom to more “serious” fictional programs of the same period, the next section delves further into the changing contours of American laddism on cable television, maintaining a focus on FX. While *It’s Always Sunny in the Bar* brandished comedy about the bar-bound antics of “degenerates” (a word featured on-screen in FX’s initial promos launching the series in 2005), dramas and dramedies on the same network, aspiring to greater realism, similarly favored characters who represented a grab bag of vices and pathologies, leading the *Los Angeles Times* to describe FX’s schedule as “rich in aggressive dysfunctional maleness.”<sup>19</sup> Such programming largely dispenses with appeals to “being ironic” as a postmodern posture, instead laying claim to a deeper sense of irony while upholding the shared pleasures of partaking in the culture of neo-laddism. TV critic Melanie McFarland in 2005, discussing “debauched” sitcoms *It’s Always Sunny in the Bar* and *Starved* as the comedy complement to *Nip/Tuck*, *The Shield*, and *Rescue Me*, remarked that FX staked its “bold” reputation on “un-PC” content and distinctive dramas combining “dark humor, rich plots and the channel’s specialty: intriguing anti-heroes.”<sup>20</sup> We will look at two of these other FX shows, *Rescue Me* and *Starved* in turn, as examples of masculine melodrama that, alongside some broadcast programs, eschewed the broad burlesque of *It’s Always Sunny in the Bar* in favor of a tonal and thematic emphasis on male woundedness that displaces ‘bad’ lad behavior onto the suffering of embattled antiheroes and, in our specific examples, the psychodynamics of addiction.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Lloyd, “‘Starved’ for Substance,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/aug/03/entertainment/et-starved3> (accessed April 29, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Melanie McFarland, “Sick and Debauched? Must Be Comedy on FX,” *Seattle PI*, August 3, 2005, <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/tv/article/Sick-and-debauched-Must-be-comedy-on-FX-1179775.php> (accessed June 6, 2013). For a relevant overview of the growing importance of “branding genres” as a key tactic for defining a cable network’s identity and targeting niche audiences, see Gary R. Edgerton and Kyle Nicholas, “‘I Want My Niche TV’: Genre as a Networking Strategy in the Digital Era,” in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 247–70, especially 253–58. Since network branding has become “the all-important strategy” in the multi-channel age, they observe, “TV genres are now stretched to conform to their respective network brands” (pp. 248, 255).

*Reflections on Post-'90s Neo-Laddism: FX and Masculine Melodramas*

You wanna know how big my balls are? My balls are bigger than two of your heads duct-taped together. I've been in the middle of shit that would make you piss your pants, right now. ... But... I ain't no hero. We're not in the business of making heroes here. We're in the business of discovering cowards. Cuz that's what you are if you can't take the heat. You're a pussy. And there ain't no room for pussies in the FDNY.

— Tommy Gavin's (Denis Leary) opening lines, initiating probationary firefighters, in the *Rescue Me* series premiere, 2004

I have argued that the mixture of melodramatic elements and comedic irony proved a winning combination for U.S. television in the 2000s. The FX network built its brand identity on the strength of this blend, not necessarily consistently fusing comedy and melodrama within each of its signature programs, though *Rescue Me*, discussed below, offered precisely such a mix, but rather by establishing FX as the hub where the post-9/11 melodramatic imagination and anti-PC ironic irreverence came together—*belonged* together—as the twin sides of a coherent taste culture: television for the *new* new lad. FX won a loyal following among the desirable male 18-to-49 demographic in the 2000s and early 2010s with this dual strategy that paired critically acclaimed 'masculine melodramas' like *Nip/Tuck* (2003–10), *The Shield* (2002–08), *Rescue Me* (2004–11), *Over There* (2005), and *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–), with such cutting-edge comedies as *Starved* (2005), *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005–), *Archer* (2009–), *Wilfred* (2011–14), and *Legit* (2013–), each tailored to an American laddish sensibility.

Melodrama, defined by and often faulted for its “excessiveness” and “obviousness”<sup>21</sup> of emotions and motivations, historically affords a clear moral legibility that ironic ambiguity

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<sup>21</sup> These terms, widely applied to melodrama in film theory, are borrowed and adapted from David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's analysis more broadly designating mainstream Hollywood fare “an excessively obvious cinema” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3–12.



The image is a screenshot of a website interface for FX Networks. At the top, the FX logo is visible in a stylized green font. Below it, there is a large promotional banner for the TV show *Nip/Tuck*. The banner features a photograph of two men in suits, one of whom is examining a woman's back. To the right of the photo, the text reads "NIP/TUCK BEHIND THE SCENES" in white and green. Below this, it says "Watch new media for Nip/Tuck." and "PLAY IT NOW >>".

Below the *Nip/Tuck* banner is a section titled "LATEST ADDITIONS". This section contains three smaller promotional cards, each with a thumbnail image, a title, and a description with a right-pointing arrow:

- RESCUE ME**: "See the episodes from Season 2. >>"
- ITS ALWAYS SUNNY...**: "Watch season 1 comedic clips. >>"
- OVER THERE**: "See season 1 gallery. >>"

Figure 6.3. FX's televised promos and web content, through artful juxtapositions, reinforced a sense that the programs fit and flowed together as a unified cutting-edge brand. In this December 18, 2005, screen capture from *fxnetworks.com*, note how thumbnail arrangement and video arrows visually link the discrete programs, with "comedic clips" of *It's Always Sunny* seamlessly nested between dramedy *Rescue Me* and Iraq war serial *Over There*. With *Nip/Tuck* receiving 'top dog' status, as seen here, network promotion articulated sexual agency/appetite as a hook on which to hang secondary viewing pleasures of heroic masculinity and comic prowess.

so often obscures. Programs that merged melodrama with comedy were especially conducive to meeting competing cultural demands post-9/11 to provide for American anger, catharsis, healing, and moral righteousness and, somewhat paradoxically, repair (or repair to) the fortress of irony. Whereas Classical Hollywood Cinema promises the male spectator a masterful/voyeuristic relationship to texts, and feelings of being in control (as Laura Mulvey and others have argued), melodrama offers more masochistic pleasures of being made to weep, being subject *to* and giving yourself over to the text—potentially a threat to such structures of mastery. In U.S. media, melodrama is most closely associated with "feminized," derided mass culture forms including

the soap opera.<sup>22</sup> The past decade has seen cable original series like FX's *Nip/Tuck* and AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–15) carving an unmistakable niche for the masculine melodrama as a fierce competitor and alternative to quality network prime-time soaps.

Not only were the original cable dramas with charismatic male antiheroes in the 2000s acclaimed as the apex of “quality television,” with the exception of the lurid *Nip/Tuck*, but they were also specifically praised for disturbing simplistic moral dualisms and shifting the stakes of affective engagement. In these respects, with “edgy” style and tone, FX's *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, and *Sons of Anarchy* came to exemplify a movement that also included HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001–05), *The Wire* (2002–08), and *Deadwood* (2004–06), Showtime's *Dexter* (2006–13), and AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008–13), as nuanced, dark studies of humanity and society that “explored the moral complexity of the world,” as scholar Douglas L. Howard notes in *Critical Studies in Television*, “and forced us to come to grips with it by getting us to like characters who are inherently reprehensible or asking us to sympathize with good people doing bad things.”<sup>23</sup> While it can be said that these narratives were the latest mileposts in an ongoing cultural descent into nihilism, lamented by numerous theorists in the 1990s, by further animating popular fascination with “dark” heroes in whom it is “increasingly difficult for us to distinguish between evil and goodness”—this had been the crux of the case put forward against Hollywood's “amoral” heroes by philosopher Thomas Hibbs in 1999—some of this programming

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<sup>22</sup> In addition to the reputation for being “excessively obvious” (neither subtle nor highbrow), melodrama has historically been de-legitimized for its long associations with ‘feminized’ formats on the margins of accepted taste culture (including “women’s pictures” and “soap operas”), and on U.S. TV, commercial underpinnings. Media scholar Lynn Joyrich identifies melodrama as a defining function of TV as a postmodern medium, arguing that its reliance on emotion and excess creates a conducive media environment for the selling of consumer goods. See Lynn Joyrich, “All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture,” *Camera Obscura* 6, no. 116 (January 1988): 128–53. This recognition leads some to regard melodrama as further evidence of commercial TV's fundamentally cynical and manipulative functions.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Howard, “Quality Television: The Next Generation,” *Critical Studies in Television*, September 20, 2013, <http://cstonline.tv/quality-television-the-next-generation> (accessed October 31, 2013).

also significantly complicated the established critiques of American nihilism.<sup>24</sup> In some instances, what Hibbs and others deemed the “cultural markers” of ironic nihilism, inviting pleasures of detachment and desensitization, became poignantly interlaced with the thematic pursuit of ideas of justice, friendship, and brotherhood, in programs that either presuppose or make room for the viewer’s emotional investment in, and perhaps even identification with or sympathy for, “likeable” flawed central characters.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike popular “boy soaps” of the 2000s on the teen-oriented netlets, these men-centered cable melodramas did not prioritize progressive values of social liberalism, despite a common focus on homosocial spaces, male bonding culture, and men’s feelings. The neo-laddist programs in particular have more often worked to tease and twist the prevailing liberal perspectives—and mainstream TV’s constructions of a gay-friendly, “hip” heterosexuality—with brazenly anti-PC speech and representations of sexual difference and/as deviance, centering a strong male heterosexual focus.<sup>26</sup> Competing with the prestige soaps like *The Sopranos* on premium cable, FX’s original dramatic series promised edgy sexual content, gritty stories, adult language,

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<sup>24</sup> Discussed in depth in Chapter 1, see Thomas S. Hibbs’s *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 49. “As the detachment and irony of the audience increase, it becomes desensitized to evil, which ceases to terrify and becomes funny,” he warned (51).

<sup>25</sup> When Hibbs in 2012 published *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press), the revised edition of his 1999 work, his new preface sought to separate nihilistic media from classic forms of drama in which “longings for justice, love, reconciliation, and friendship” are held to be “natural and noble even where those desires are unrealized or frustrated,” and he stressed, “Dark stories... are not necessarily nihilistic.... Nihilism arises only where these desires are treated as pointless and absurd, where they are... mocked” (xi). He argued that *Mad Men* and director Alan Rudolph’s *The Secret Lives of Dentists* (2002), with Denis Leary, stand as compelling efforts by American TV and filmmakers in the 2000s to “depict nihilism without falling prey to it” (39).

<sup>26</sup> As a point of contrast, see Allison McCracken’s “Boy Soaps: Liberalism without Women,” *FLOW* 1, no. 12, March 18, 2005, <http://flowtv.org/2005/03/boy-soaps-liberalism-without-women>, for an account of the rise of “prime-time boy soaps” in the 2000s like *Everwood*, *The OC*, *One Tree Hill*, and *Smallville*, replacing “girl-centered teen dramas” like *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* that reigned in the 1990s, on the teen-centered netlets and major networks. FX’s man-centric soaps shared their primary focus on male bonds, but narratives expressly did *not* hinge on themes of “gendered character growth,” a spirit of “gay inclusiveness,” or “liberal ‘awakenings,’” all of which McCracken identifies as central to the “boy soaps” of this same period. The Hip Heterosexual is one of several main, interrelated prime-time representational tropes (in comedy and drama) named by Ron Becker in *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 194–99.

innovative cinematic style, and a no-holds-barred attitude that assures “we know what men like” (see fig. 6.3). The ongoing sense that “regular guys” and “stuff guys like” (as *The Man Show* proclaimed) are under constant attack by feminism, political correctness, and multiculturalism was not diminished by a national focus on more immediate external threats and “evildoers.” As the culture wars raged on in domestic politics, laddist media delved deeper into the tensions posed between “political correctness” and the dramatic and comedic pursuit of “real” masculinity.

When adapted for the “hip” young adult male demographic, melodrama is rarely served up straight, but fitted with ironic elements. In the case of the new cable masculine melodrama, the culture industries here again leverage irony as a means to have it both ways: combining visceral thrills (of sex, vulgarity, voyeurism) with the poignant search for the male soul (or probing of the hero’s or antihero’s psyche with potentially heartfelt explorations of the modern masculine condition). Inviting the male-identified viewer to yield to pleasures of melodrama’s emotional catharsis, programs like *Rescue Me* deployed ironic touches to great effect to build in a degree of distance and flatter a different sense of mastery—namely, by affirming the cultural competencies of the viewer-as-ironist. Thus, we may detect a push and pull, between the “excessiveness” of emotion that melodrama invites and that of the playful inscrutability or caginess of “politically incorrect” irony.

*“Ain’t No Room for Pussies”:* Ironic John’s Cage

These representations call into focus an emergent cultural archetype I call “Ironic John,” an ironized corollary to the mythic inner Wild Man imagined by author Robert Bly. As noted in Chapter 2, Bly’s best-seller *Iron John* (1990) provided a roadmap for a modern men’s movement in reaction to feminism, promising to recover a sense of male community based in a “new vision of what it means to be a man” that is at once *emotionally aware* and *fierce*. Bly attributed men’s

suffering culture-wide to a dual cause: the problem of “remote fathers” and the repressive strictures of a feminized (read emasculating) corporate culture that denies men’s authentic needs. He urged American men to free their inner “wildman,” not submit to be tamed by cultural demands to perform sensitivity. Iron John was his name for this mythic Wild Man (borrowed from a nineteenth century Grimm fairy tale), a forest-dwelling primitive hairy wise man imprisoned in an iron cage. Bly wrote, “Contact with Iron John requires a willingness to descend into the male psyche and accept what’s dark down there, including the *nourishing* dark.”<sup>27</sup> While Bly’s message had appeal and resonance in popular culture, as evidenced by the eruption of TV “man caves,” his and similar works were unrelentingly earnest, and consequently widely mocked.

Nevertheless, across a wide range of television texts, a remarkably similar story is being told and tailored to an ironic taste culture, the story of the (sometimes but not always comic) masculine hero’s descent into the dark recesses of his psyche to confront truths about himself. The woundedness of such a character is often presented as a hardened cynicism and bitter irony, but his claim on ironic wit as a way of relating to the world is also revealed as a strength not a flaw. With the complex protagonists of programs like *House, M.D.* (FOX, 2004–12), *Rescue Me*, *Starved*, and *Louie*, irony is not a ‘front’ but cuts to the core, and with each layer we peel back we find it has penetrated deeper into the character’s soul. Deep irony and dark humor are an essential piece of the “nourishing darkness” in our televisual encounters with Ironic John, even as these exercises in character psychology grant us access to hidden pain and private reserves of sincerity.

Not all contemporary television texts offering male protagonists in existential crisis fall squarely within this shift, as some have only limited relevance for laddism or cultural irony. Several of today’s prominent masculine melodramas, despite clear overlap, more straight-forwardly

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1990), 6, 27; emphasis in original.

conform to Bly's social and psychological narrative of masculinity estranged by modern life. On AMC, notably, *Breaking Bad* takes the deeply earnest family man gone rogue as its wounded antihero, while *Mad Men*'s brooding Don Draper (Jon Hamm) is expressly a pre-ironic figure.<sup>28</sup> I would further emphasize that not all sympathetic TV narratives that invite us to invest emotionally in the ill-tempered, boozing, lecherous, or cynical bad-boy in pain presume a viewer with a laddish sensibility. In the case of *House, M.D.*, aired on FX's corporate sibling FOX targeting a broader audience, star Hugh Laurie, a renowned British alternative comedian, is expressly not affiliated with the comic or cultural politics of the "new lad."

In 1990s media the "new lad" was a celebration of the superficial. His shallowness was on proud display in popular film and television, a winking invitation to behave badly. American versions of new lad irony, on loan from Britain by way of comedies like *Men Behaving Badly* and features like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*, have often favored quite two-dimensional portraits and downplayed complexities of laddish masculinity. Popular variations on "men behaving badly," with TV's *The Man Show* and stage acts such as Andrew Dice Clay's, as we saw, stripped the lad down to the fundamentals of chauvinism, performed to some extent ironically. Lad media in this tradition perfected postmodern irony's "play of surfaces" and the notion of identity as a performance, even while boasting an essentialized meaning of Real Men. Thus, the question of "true" masculinity was not absent but in fact the point of these iconic iterations of the new lad. Laddish media from *The Man Show* to *Maxim* relentlessly asserted and defended a vision of authentic male desire, however couched in irony.

Although the new laddism as a movement celebrating 'angry' and 'rude' man-centric comedy persists to the present day, that cultural push was outpaced and somewhat displaced in

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<sup>28</sup> Significantly, *Mad Men* does trade in irony, if obliquely, as a text that exploits its sixties setting to wallow in the conquests of pre-New Man, old-lad masculinity, inviting but not demanding a critical-detached mode of viewing.

the 2000s by television narratives extensively exploring and explaining male woundedness. FX through its combination of serious dramas and dramedies actively worked to break the singular association of laddish masculinity with a “nihilistic” shrugging irony, while similarly invested in recovering a sense of stable male identity, or in Bly’s terms “what it means to be a man.” With network branding establishing a sense of gendered “place” on the television dial, lad-TV of this era has less need of the conceit of the studio set as virtual “man cave” (e.g., the men’s sitcom as “bachelor pad,” or *The Man Show*’s den as “a place where men can come together”). As the FX network (among others) itself affords that communal space, its niche programming allows the new lad to occupy fully and reign over the domestic, work, and play spaces of his narrative universe. Reimagining the thirty- and fortysomething new lad, turning the corner to middle age, as a more conflicted figure marked by contradiction and navigating various identities as civil servant or career man, father, friend, and occasional family man, FX’s dramatic programming effected a rapprochement—or at least a negotiation—between laddism’s adolescent fantasies and grown-up emotions.<sup>29</sup> FX’s preeminent dramedy *Louie* is a notable outlier in this trend. The title character in comedian Louis C.K.’s critically acclaimed series, a subdued stand-up comic and single dad with a philosophical streak, is not coded as a new lad by any stretch of the definition, though he does surround himself with a circle of noted laddish (and ladette) comics on the show, such as *Tough Crowd*’s Jim Norton and Nick DiPaolo, *Crank Yankers*’s Sarah Silverman, and Dane Cook. Rather, I include this text as a recent, revered example of FX programming that thoroughly melds an ironic sensibility with appeals to authentic and poignant feeling, aspiring to offer raw, honest, indeed “edgy” commentary on the modern male condition by probing into the protagonist’s disheveled interior life.

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<sup>29</sup> In Chapter 2’s subsection “Live Rude Boys,” I discussed how the new laddism movement laid claim to a spirit of perpetual adolescence and social irresponsibility, while guarding the social privileges of traditional patriarchy.

As FX cornered the market on late-lad programming, the network took the lad dad trope further than any other venue on U.S. television through paternal melodramas featuring loveable rogues like *Nip/Tuck*'s plastic surgeon Christian Troy (Julian McMahon), extravagant playboy and shadow father to an illegitimate son born of a tryst with his best friend's wife, and *The Shield*'s Detective Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) who must balance (corrupt) police work with raising an autistic child. Similar themes of the damaged, self-destructive, stubbornly "insensitive" yet heroic alpha-male protagonist who must come to terms with (having or being) a "remote father" underwrite *Mad Men* (as the story highlights Don Draper's lack of a father figure and his own detachment as a father) and *House, M.D.* (Dr. House is the estranged son of an emotionally distant, austere military father), among others. Turning now to *Rescue Me*, fatherhood is the motivating force behind the protagonist's struggle to subdue his personal demons, while brotherhood, the fraternal order of the FDNY, is his strength and sanctuary.

In Chapter 2, I noted Denis Leary's influence as one of stand-up comedy's notable new lads of the 1990s, or the "angry white men" of comedy, and I argued his subsequent significance to the three-dimensionalizing of American lad representations throughout his film and television career, including his ABC dramedy *The Job* (2001–02). Like his fictional studies of the cop and fireman brotherhoods, his comedy material has tended to valorize ironic masculinity while at the same time turning the sharp edge of irony back onto contemptible tough-guy behaviors, as with his satirical "Asshole" song from *No Cure for Cancer* (1993), to some degree self-reflexively problematizing lad vices while more thoroughly indicting lax suburban entitlement (the music video alternates between Leary in *character* as Average "Joe" Asshole, who uses a silicon breast implant as a Koosh ball, and Leary as chain-smoking MTV comic who makes a kind of visual pun of "blowing smoke"). I also touched upon his production company's preference for painting



the new lad's world with a multiracial brush, confronting racism and embracing deepening diversity *within* laddism, while working firmly within the logics of anti-political correctness. "Denis Leary is an a\*\*hole and proud of it," boasted a Comedy Central web ad in fall 2004 targeted to fans of *Tough Crowd* (which also promoted interracial laddism and on which Leary was an occasional featured guest).<sup>30</sup> With *Rescue Me*, Leary's more rounded and multi-dimensional vision of laddism is fully realized, representing the red-blooded, white, and blue-collar American lad as a noble figure of considerable depth and complexity. Beneath his 'tough exterior' lies the heart of an everyday hero, no saint (and certainly not a 'sensitive new man' in the making) but a 'regular guy' learning to reconcile cynicism with hope.

"*Things Were Good When We Were Young...*": *Rescue Me*

One sign that we've entered fully into a post-9/11 world may be the release last week of the 9/11 commission's report. But a better sign may be the premiere last Wednesday of "Rescue Me," the new FX series. [...] Rough as its humor can be, raw as its language is, there is also a tact and delicacy here that provides a better measure of the 9/11 in our blood than anything that has come before it on television.

— *The New York Times* Op-Ed, 2004<sup>31</sup>

Humor for the post-9/11 consumer was charged with being "raw" and "rough" and real, but also, as suggested in the passage above from a *New York Times* editorial that greeted the series premiere of *Rescue Me* in July 2004, "delicate" and profound. In much the same way that reviewers regarded the "tact and delicacy" and "raw" emotion displayed by satirists like Jon Stewart (or alternatively Colin Quinn, albeit to a lesser degree vis-à-vis tact) on Comedy Central

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<sup>30</sup> Ad for Comedy Central's *Denis Leary: Roast Of Denis Leary Uncensored!* on DVD, included on the official fan page of *Tough Crowd*, [http://www.comedycentral.com/tv\\_shows/colinquinn/](http://www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/colinquinn/) (accessed September 18, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> "62 Truck," *New York Times*, July 25, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/25/opinion/25sun3.html> (accessed July 29, 2004).

as truth-tellers, some turned a hopeful eye on other cable venues to channel those qualities in the interest of the Everyman and perhaps similarly compensate for the shortcomings of news media. *The New York Times*'s Frank Rich in a May 2005 Op-Ed piece titled "Ground Zero Is So Over," warning that that "sacred ground" had been put aside by politicians and reduced to "crude comic fodder for late-night comics," credited television fiction and specifically FX with providing commentary and dramatizing the human costs of the war in ways lacking on network news. Rich pointed to FX's "powerful" series *Over There* (produced by Steven Bochco and set in Iraq), which he underscored was not the work of "some liberal cabal but [presented] by the rising cable network that 'Nip/Tuck' built—FX—a franchise of Rupert Murdoch," as well as *Rescue Me*, a show he deemed more jaded with a "jaundiced" take on the post-9/11 life of firefighters.<sup>32</sup>

*Rescue Me*, then entering its second season, included a memorable scene in which, in Rich's words, "the hero throws a bag of 'twin-tower cookies' back at the [street] vendor selling them, heaving in anger that those who died that fateful morning have been usurped by kitsch."<sup>33</sup> The "hero," firefighter Tommy Gavin (Leary), berates the scavenger-merchant and tourist passersby alike for desecrating the memory of fallen heroes: "Tell all your friends all across America: ... come down here to honor 343 brave, brave men who gave their lives. Bow your head to 'em! ... You want cookies, then call Pepperidge Farm." Unzipping to urinate on the merchandise, Tommy is promptly arrested for drunken disorderly conduct and public indecency. Rich's reading of what proved to be one of the defining moments of the series is notable for its invocation of "kitsch," a word choice that affixes connotations of anti-irony sentiment to this

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<sup>32</sup> Frank Rich, "Ground Zero Is So Over," *New York Times*, May 29, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/29/opinion/> (accessed May 30, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Rich, "Ground Zero Is So Over."

pivotal scene by pinpointing the hero's anger as a refusal to let the memory of 9/11 fall prey to a kind of instant nostalgia as we might expect from a culture of 'detached' irony.<sup>34</sup>

While the text and certainly the context support this reading, given that anti-irony rants were widespread, the more direct critique or "preferred" reading is aimed at the rampant *commodification* of the tragedy with tacky tourist and commemorative knick-knacks and flag memorabilia (shallow perhaps but not the products of ironic smugger). This distinction matters because a critique of cynically 'superficial' or 'performed' patriotism (as opposed to 'kitsch') enables the text to lay claim to a position outside of and adjacent to the dominant conservative discourse of the new patriotism even as the star makes a passionate stand for American heroes as patriots.<sup>35</sup> With its countless anti-PC jokes, the program establishes its *bona fides* as what Brian C. Anderson would welcome as "anti-liberal" TV, but moments like this one work to complicate right-wing narratives, as well, by disturbing some of the more simplistic, perfunctory post-9/11 expressions of unity that liberals branded "unthinking patriotism" (much like we see with *South Park* episodes like "I'm a Little Bit Country" and, as noted in Chapter 3, *The Onion's* "Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake").

Moreover, this scene (among many) encourages deep ambivalence, as it signals Tommy Gavin's descent into new depths of despair and relapse into raging alcoholism. In the words of his brother Johnny (Dean Winters), an NYPD detective who must bail him out, Tommy is behaving like a "drunk-ass lowlife" undeserving of his family's respect and support. In the surrounding

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<sup>34</sup> For a definition and critique of "instant nostalgia," see Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt, "The End of Irony? The Tragedy of the Post-Ironic Condition," *The Modern Review* (London) 1, no. 14 (April–May 1994): 6–7.

<sup>35</sup> Like Rich, Tommy Gavin is unready to see the nation move on, and cheapen sacred ground. In the final season episode "Press" (7.3, July 27, 2011), he fantasizes about driving his truck into a bookstore window display lined with colorful photos of the exploding Twin Towers on gimmicky posters ("Where Were You on that Day?"), then setting fire to glossy books (with Bush on the cover) 'selling' the memory of 9/11 on the tenth anniversary. In "Initiation" (5.15, July 14, 2009), Tommy physically assaults a politician who uses a firefighter tribute as a photo op.

scenes, his lover, most loyal friend, Chief, and cousin (a former priest and his AA sponsor) all reinforce the message that Tommy must “clean up his act” and “get off the booze” to recover/prove his place as respected firefighter and devoted father. The new season finds Tommy in a kind of exile, as his actions have cost him both families he loves: his estranged wife, Janet (Andrea Roth), has “kidnapped” their children to escape his reach and perhaps punish him, and Tommy has left 62 Truck on bad terms after endangering the life of a member of his unit by succumbing to a self-loathing hallucination during a fire. His resulting reassignment to a staid, straight-laced firehouse in Staten Island tears Tommy from the action and camaraderie he craves (his new crew makes him clean, use a swear jar, and smoke outside). The episode sees him staggering from crisis to crisis culminating in a near suicide attempt after listening to a voicemail from his absent children. Ditching the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting he agreed to attend, he douses himself with vodka and must fight the impulse to light himself on fire as he watches a home video of his loving unbroken family from a happier time serenading him with chants of “We love Dad!”<sup>36</sup> In the final shots, we see the hero stumble drunk into the AA meeting now already in session, the camera registering pained resignation in his expression perhaps competing with a strained flicker of hope.

While his habitual ‘bad behavior’ is shown to be problematic and self-destructive, the text’s sympathies lie squarely with Tommy, the suffering hero, throughout his many indiscretions. His recalcitrance is born of trauma and testifies to legitimate pain. The show’s repeated designation of its protagonist as a self-centered alcoholic “lowlife” living on-the-edge, in contrast to the satire of *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, humanizes him, as a man whose addictions and hard-wired habits leave him vulnerable to constant scorn and seemingly powerless to prevent those he loves from leaving him. These themes of loss and helplessness ripple through the parallel

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<sup>36</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Voicemail,” episode 2.1, written by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan and directed by Jace Alexander, first aired June 21, 2005, on FX.

story-lines of his fellow firemen: Chief Jerry Reilly (Jack McGee) loses his wife to dementia and son to homosexuality, the shame of which is compounded as he discovers each of them having sex with strange men in his home; Lt. “Lou” Kenneth Shea (John Scurti) loses his wife to mutual infidelity and life savings to a con-artist hooker he trusted with his heart, and suffers a heart attack brought on by years of compulsively over-eating to stuff down his feelings; Franco Rivera (Daniel Sunjata) loses custody of his daughter and battles Vicodin addiction; Sean Garrity (Steven Pasquale) loses his kidney to cancer, while several peers die of cancer, all linked to Ground Zero; and Mike “Probie” Silletti (Mike Lombardi) loses his dignity, regularly, to crises of sexual identity. These interlocking narrative threads explore “deepened wounds” (a phrase from the show’s theme song, “C’mon C’mon” by the Von Bondies) as a deeply private yet shared male experience.

Whereas the program lashes out (through its protagonist) at exploitative/superficial nostalgia about 9/11, *Rescue Me*’s heartfelt meditations on loss lay claim to a sense of valid, deep nostalgia, as revealed in the scene with Tommy’s home videos and voiced in the theme song’s pulsing, poignant refrain, “Now we grieve ‘cause now it’s gone / Things were good when we were young.” Certainly, nostalgia for pre-PC times has informed the irony of new laddism since its inception as a ‘movement,’ but in this case, the nostalgic impulse is much more neatly contained within codes of sincerity and harnessed to the nation’s grieving. This is not a disavowal of laddism or irony, but rather a vigorous reframing of both within the emergent discourses of patriotism and legitimate anger. Rearticulating an ironic sensibility able to accommodate both “cool” humor *and* fiercely passionate values, *Rescue Me* strives to show that even smartasses “care about something.”

Lynn Spigel’s essay “Entertainment Wars” suggests that melodramatic structures worked across a range of post-9/11 U.S. media to affirm American moral virtue and heroic masculinity.

Drawing on Linda Williams's account of the "'suffering' moral victim" as a fixture of American film and TV melodramas, she finds the political equivalent in certain news stories about victims of 9/11 at home and abroad—which she argues not only served a similar "sentimental/compensatory" function but also reinforced the traditional construction of hero/victim as a gendered dualism. Typically in melodramas, as theorized by Williams, viewer sympathies are aligned with the moral victim. Sentiment encourages identification not only with this "suffering" character, but with the experience of injustice and the virtue that she (for this victimized figure is often female) represents. In Spigel's synopsis: "By offering audiences a structure of feeling (the identification with victims, their revealed goodness, and their pain), melodrama compensates for tragic injustices and human sacrifice."<sup>37</sup> Highlighting the role of gender, she points out that in the wake of 9/11, while U.S. media generally sought to position America and Americans as the "innocent victims" of tragedy, more specifically "news narratives typically portrayed men as heroes (firemen, policemen, Giuliani) and women as victims (suffering and often pregnant widows)," downplaying the existence of women rescue workers to selectively celebrate male "media portraits of heroism" as the basis for reestablishing moral and social order.

*Rescue Me* (as hinted in its title) masterfully modifies this formula, as a text that merges the roles of victim and hero into a single male archetype: the rescue worker as suffering victim-hero. The narrative universe revolves around the 'regular guy' as reluctant hero. As Tommy Gavin articulates in his speech initiating probational firefighters at the outset of the series, he does not call himself *hero* but his identity rests in the certainty of not being a *coward*.

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<sup>37</sup> Spigel, "Entertainment Wars," 246–48. Extending this logic to "political melodramas," or stories taken up in emotionally charged political discourse, she demonstrates that pathos was a key rhetorical means of mobilizing support for the war effort. Spigel's critique is aimed at the Bush administration, which she contends exploited images of oppressed women suffering in Afghanistan as a rhetorical gambit to shore up American "moral righteousness and virtue." Following Linda Williams (author of *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), she warns that such sentiment may also distract from (by symbolically "compensating" for) a lack of actual political justice.



Figure 6.4.

In this screen capture from a *Rescue Me* one-minute promo aired June 29, 2004, on FX, Tommy Gavin's (Denis Leary) silhouetted reflection looms over the American flag lined with memorial plaques for New York firefighters who lost their lives on 9/11.

Taking this figure of the wounded, bitter, irrepressible, and resilient rescuer-in-need-of-rescuing as the primary point of identification, this quality masculine melodrama (among others, such as *House, M.D.*) allows for identification with the pain of the victim and the exceptionality of the hero, with both positions affording a sense of uncontested virtue and social value that compensates for the protagonist's extreme character flaws and vices—the “lad basics” of philandering, excessive drinking, reckless violence, and gratuitous political incorrectness. These are the hard-won privileges and survival tactics of the rebel wounded hero. On *Rescue Me* this is a masculinized role reserved for the protagonist (Tommy) and his fellow FDNY firefighters emotionally and psychologically scarred by 9/11. The text gesturally acknowledges female colleagues from the pilot onwards, and most notably with the early cast addition of Laura (*The Job's* Diane Farr)—a temporary member of 62 Truck in the first two seasons, who earns the crew's respect but primarily serves to introduce gender and romantic conflict and raise issues of “sensitivity”—but these women are not focused upon in the narrative as suffering heroes, and are shown to be an emasculating presence.

On the home front, wives and widows are not narratively crafted as victims, although their losses and sacrifices are acknowledged, but rather tend to be formidable figures who wield power (sexual, decision-making, etc.) and disapproval over the men in their lives. As Tommy

confides in his best friend and commanding officer “Lou,” in an effort to justify sleeping with the widow of a dead crew member (Tommy’s beloved cousin Jimmy Keefe), his own marriage soured when wife Janet came to regard him with constant “disappointment and acrimony and disbelief” instead of desire.<sup>38</sup> Over the seasons, Tommy’s on-again-off-again wife and mistress compete for his affections, a love triangle that repeatedly plays out the protagonist’s difficult choice between domesticity and promiscuity. The mistress Sheila (Callie Thorne), Jimmy Keefe’s widow and a fiery alternative to the icy no-nonsense Janet, quickly emerges as the more passionate, appreciative, and not coincidentally, sympathetic character, such that her criticisms of Tommy (“Neanderthal,” “self-centered animal!”) at times carry more credibility within the affective logics of the text. However, she is revealed to be just as demanding and manipulative as his wife, and a far more explosively unstable figure, sowing chaos in Tommy’s life. Sheila as the coquettish wildwoman bears the textual markers of the “fun” ladette (i.e., sexually aggressive, playfully bicurious, heavy drinking), a more liminal gender role that together with her fire-widow status means she is ‘one of the guys’ welcome in the inner sanctum of the firehouse.<sup>39</sup>

The codes of ironic masculinity and laddish humor underpin the text’s negotiation of pleasure and pain, of identity and belonging, bracketing the more “sentimental” moments. The firehouse is their “sanctuary” (as the title of the first season finale makes explicit), where the bonds of brotherhood are built on male rites of hazing, trash talk, penis-related pranks (measuring contests and the like), and endless gay jokes. Clowning and “dick” stunts are primarily left to impressionable younger members of the crew, the dim-witted duo Sean and Mike, whose goofy naïveté, unfortunate taste for domineering girlfriends (earning Mike a reputation as “gayish”), and

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<sup>38</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Sanctuary,” episode 1.13, written by Peter Tolan and Denis Leary and directed by Peter Tolan, first aired October 13, 2004, on FX.

<sup>39</sup> This dynamic is occasionally emphasized, for instance when her son Damien joins 62 Truck in “Initiation.”



wide-eyed susceptibility to ideas like “metrosexuality” are steadily mined for laughs.<sup>40</sup> Locker-room humor and laddish dialogue not only provide intervals of comic relief, punctuating the heavy pathos of story arcs about dissolving families and the suspense of emotionally-wrought fire rescue sequences, but in fact also provide a foundation for approaching tragedy with dark humor.

In season five, for example, the writers opted to make the saga of Sean’s cancer surgery, in the word’s of actor Steven Pasquale, “largely comedic,” subjecting the helpless patient to his “affectionless” mother and obnoxious spoiled sibling.<sup>41</sup> When the guys visit Sean in the hospital in the June 2009 episode “Disease,” they shun direct displays of “love” for their unconscious friend, preferring to verbally abuse him then huddle outside his room to strategize about seducing an attractive nurse. Pulling the “sensitive weeping man routine,” Mike takes the prize with a performance so convincing he even has his elder pick-up artists fooled into sheepishly consoling him, until their protégé owns the deceit with an impish grin as he strolls away in the concerned nurse’s embrace.<sup>42</sup> While we see FX comedy double back on this line of humor in adjacent texts like *It’s Always Sunny in the City* (“The D.E.N.N.I.S. System” aired five months later), *Archer*, and the network’s syndicated reruns of *Married... With Children* and *Two and a Half Men*, on *Rescue Me* such guy talk, while often obliquely satirical, functions to ironize a moment of melodrama, dryly disturbing and masculinizing the mode’s “weeping” dimension.

The program sporadically deploys ironic self-reflexivity to poke fun at melodramatic plot machinations, but more often to crack open the door for conflicted readings of laddish masculinity.

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Sean Garrity experiments with “metrosexual” masculinity by waxing his scrotum in “Gay” (1.2, July 28, 2004), agrees to prank the female recruit, Laura, by photographing his penis with her camera in “Voicemail” (2.1, June 21, 2005), and is caught in a compromising position cupping Mike’s testicles in “Happy” (2.12, September 6, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Adam Bryant, “*Rescue Me*: Sean Garrity Finally Gets Serious,” *TVGuide.com*, May 6, 2009, <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Rescue-Me-Garrity-1005803.aspx> (accessed April 17, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Disease,” episode 5.12, written by Evan Reilly and directed by John Fortenberry, first aired June 23, 2009, on FX.

The clearest examples are present in season four with “Pussified,” in which Tommy and Janet decide to give their marriage another try, but scare off an incredulous marriage counselor with their impromptu synopsis of the many soap operatic twists in their relationship (the kidnapping, the shocking death of their first son, a resulting murder and prison sentence for Tommy’s uncle, a baby born of uncertain Gavin paternity, a rape, and so forth).<sup>43</sup> This rekindling of the marital flame occurs after Tommy has been rendered sexually impotent by a series of encounters with a sexy, assertive volunteer female firefighter who, to his profound embarrassment, carried him out of a burning house. Her predatory sexual advances further deflate his manhood and disturb his sense of the natural order, converting the renowned “pussy-hound” into a resigned one-woman man. Acting on an epiphany that *all* women are unreasonable and incapable of being satisfied, Tommy coaches crewmate Franco to forget sex and focus on listening, hugging, and (the dubious young bachelor translates) “caring and sharing.” While Tommy’s pro-marriage (“and spooning!”) speech is heavily coded as ironic, and “pussified” male sensitivity is subjected to mockery, the program extends its reflexivity to destabilize retrogressive gender politics. Typical of the series, laddish insecurities and stereotypically “sexist” truisms (e.g., all women are “illogical,” strong women are “brutes”) are put on display, wryly defended, and yet opened to comic interrogation.

Whereas private conversations (like the above exchange on impotence as cause for fidelity) and pranks often take place in the locker room, the kitchen is the central forum of the firehouse’s ‘domestic’ space. In this gathering place, simulating the informal ‘comic forum’ of programs like *Tough Crowd*, the men engage in competitive joking and repartee comparing attitudes *as* men. These dialogues not only expressly flirt with television’s function as cultural forum, but also tend to champion a reigning lad perspective, often posed as a dialogic, with secondary characters

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<sup>43</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Pussified,” episode 4.4, written by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan and directed by Jace Alexander, first aired July 11, 2007, on FX.

or outsiders and less experienced insiders playing pupil or foil to the seasoned lad. Thus, in addition to staging irreverent interventions into the public forum on this symbolic common ground, with group deliberations on identity politics and the meanings of masculinity, this is also the stage on which the star's authorial influence as a comedian is most clearly felt.<sup>44</sup>

This indelicate ecosystem and happy hierarchy is first thrown off balance with the arrival of the female firefighter Laura, who inserts a feminist perspective into the mix with her opinions about “empowering” and respecting women. Shortly into her stay, she files a grievance against the Lieutenant after he calls her a “twat” for botching a job.<sup>45</sup> Hoping to restore order, the other men gather around the kitchen table to school Laura in the logic of guy-talk, explaining that name-calling is a “part of being on the team.” “This shit doesn’t *mean* anything, Laura,” Franco assures her. “We all use every ethnic slur in the book against each other. You name it, we say it. [The others shout out examples.] And that’s not even getting into the gay stuff.” While the men teasingly brainstorm ways to combine “twat” and “cunt” into one convenient word women might prefer, Tommy turns serious: “Now you work in a job with men... a job *you chose* to do. So you’ve got to cut the men you work with a little slack.” The scene dramatically mirrors the man-cave-as-classroom thematic of other lad comedies defending “men’s stuff” and “what men do” (as we saw spoofed in *It’s Always Sunny*). With this outburst of earnest ‘lecturing,’ *Rescue Me* models a more barefaced laddism, as the comedian-star gives the newbie a reality check on what is truly important—not respectful speech but accountability, sportsmanship, and “guts.”

In “Sensitivity,” aired the following week in July 2005, the escalating battle of wills between Lou and this “disgruntled female firefighter” nevertheless lands the entire station in a

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<sup>44</sup> Much like the quirky sidebar dialogues that are a comic signature of lad director Quentin Tarantino’s films (such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Kill Bill*), these isolated moments of masculine discourse hover over the narrative, revealing a fairly singular authorial comic voice guiding the conversation.

<sup>45</sup> “Twat,” a.k.a. “!@#,” episode 2.4, written by Peter Tolan and Denis Leary, first aired July 12, 2005, on FX.

mandatory sensitivity class. Recreating the dynamic of the firehouse kitchen, Tommy shocks the seminar leader by freely admitting that he *is* prejudiced, instigating a mini mutiny in which his fellow wise-asses casually compare lists of racial slurs (while Laura grimaces) to goad the priggish suit, who timidly scrambles to regain control of his classroom. After suffering through a stereotypically ‘PC propaganda’ video—in which a well-intentioned white businessman is shown clumsily offending people of color in his community with phrases like “you people,” but apologizes and is rewarded with group hugs in a cheery thumbs-up-to-camera moment—the bemused crew rejects this narrow definition of racism as a “white people” problem. Tommy loses his patience with bureaucratic “bullshit” and walks out, exclaiming: “The next time I run into a burning building and refuse to bring out anybody who’s not the same color as me, that’s when you can bring my angry, sober, pink, Irish ass back down here! Got it? I’m going outside for a smoke.”<sup>46</sup> This barbed comic confrontation once again, now more forcefully, draws the line between language and action—framed in terms of empty semantics versus real heroism.

With its steady attack on “sensitivity,” *Rescue Me* rehearses the same prevalent anti-PC mindset espoused by *Tough Crowd* and championed by lad-mag *Vice* as a “new conservative” push in youth culture, the latest current in the backlash against multiculturalism. As Chapter 5 discussed, advocates of this “movement” invoke ironic license to sling racial slurs “with reckless abandon” because, *Vice* assures, they regard “politically correct words” as “meaningless syntax.”<sup>47</sup> There is a definite topicality to *Rescue Me*’s depictions of “political correctness” encroaching on the men’s turf, given that conflicts between constituencies within the FDNY and multiculturalist

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<sup>46</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Sensitivity,” episode 2.5, written by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan and directed by Peter Tolan, first aired July 19, 2005, on FX.

<sup>47</sup> “The New Conservatives,” *Vice Fashion*, December 1, 2002, <http://www.vice.com/read/fashion2-v9n7> (accessed April 19, 2012). Please see the Chapter 5 subsection “In the Name of Freedom” for relevant discussion, as well as Chapter 3’s account of the case mounted against “postmodern relativism” in right-wing discourse.

interests made news in actual attempts to memorialize the 9/11 fallen.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the show's embedded anti-PC comic 'rants' and 'lessons' are more expressly, I argue, overdetermined and enabled by, and effortlessly folded into, the existing laddish project of political incorrectness.

Examining the language and imagery of "real American heroes" in U.S. media, scholar Michan Andrew Connor makes the related point that the intensive focus after 9/11 on (working-class, white) New York firemen as the "symbolic embodiments of American courage and self-sacrifice in the face of danger" strengthened the political right's already established rhetorical attack on multiculturalism. Looking back at pre-9/11 cinematic war melodramas as an important precursor to the not-so-new discursive construct of "heroic sacrifice," Connor is chiefly concerned with reactionary right-wing rhetorical uses of the symbolic language of sacrifice to obstruct progressive politics and prop up white hegemony.<sup>49</sup> The example of *Rescue Me* complicates this picture, as a text that expressly takes up the dominant discourse of "heroic sacrifice" as the noblest suffering, but at the same time pluralizes white and working-class "mook" masculinity and favors an ambivalent, polyvalent approach to race and ethnicity.<sup>50</sup> When attacking

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<sup>48</sup> For rhetorical analysis of a well-publicized case, see Mathilde Roza, "'America Under Attack': Unity and Division after 9/11," in *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, ed. Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul (Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 105–18.

<sup>49</sup> Michan Andrew Connor, "Real American Heroes: Attacking Multiculturalism through the Discourse of Heroic Sacrifice," in *American Multiculturalism after 9/11* (anthology cited above), 93. His thesis that a prevalent masculinist discourse "valorizing white sacrifice" in the wake of 9/11 was not new, but an opportunistic revival/extension of the long established right-wing attack on multiculturalism, partially parallels my own claims above about the ongoing cultural work of laddism in the anti-PC backlash. With regard to melodrama's "moral economy" of heroes and victims, Connor perceives that post-9/11 U.S. media overwhelmingly seized on the "sacrifice" of male rescue workers (and I would add, soldiers) as a more exceptional form of "suffering," with "the free will" of the "the sacrificing subject" emerging as a trope "potentially more rhetorically powerful, and certainly more suited to right-wing discourses, than suffering" (96). *Rescue Me*'s moral universe, as I argued above, does not present such an either/or and indeed effectively dissolves the heroes/victims dichotomy. *Rescue Me* not only emphasizes self-sacrifice as a heroic virtue, but in fact also centers upon the larger *existential suffering* of its heroes, representing them as victims of fate, not just of cultural politics.

<sup>50</sup> In "Initiation" (episode 5.15), Battalion Chief "Needles" (comedian Adam Ferrara) affectionately addresses the team as "mooks," a term relevant to the discourse of American laddism as we saw in Chapter 2.

multiculturalism as tied to “political correctness,” the program expressly articulates an alternative multiracial politics that emphasizes individuality and intention, unburdening itself of attention to institutional and linguistic structures of racism or sexism.<sup>51</sup> Modeling what we may be tempted to call a lad-libertarian version of “post-PC” multiculturalism (a problematic claim to the extent that the show’s focus on self-sacrifice and civil service breaks with libertarian thought), the show avoids looking at structural disparities and espouses the belief that what matters is whether or not the individual has “a good heart” and “guts.”<sup>52</sup>

Laura’s oppositional/outsider perspective is not exactly invalidated in the aforementioned episodes nor any plotline where she interjects ‘feminist’ commentary. Rather, she is entreated to let men be men. The text encourages a preferred reading that not only sees Lou’s language as justified (Tommy: “You let Lou down. He called you a twat. Get over it.”), but recognizes this character’s fundamental decency as a suffering and sacrificing subject, qualities reemphasized in this subplot. We see Lou take the moral high ground by *opting* to attend the sensitivity training in the first place, a decision depicted as being in itself a modest act of self-sacrifice (his desk-bound superiors try to tempt Lou to keep his record clean by denying the allegation made by his female crew member, and offer to “freeze her out,” but he refuses on principle). Lou and Laura ultimately resolve their conflict privately on his cigar break outside the training hall. Echoing Tommy’s call for “a little slack,” Lou begs latitude as an old dog set in his ways and reeling from a bad divorce and even worse marriage. He offers a non-apology in the form of a plea:

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<sup>51</sup> The text depicts a proudly multiracial FDNY brotherhood and, moreover, actively articulates whiteness in terms of discrete ethnicities (e.g., Irishness, Italianness, Native American roots), refuting the ubiquity and uniformity of whiteness. *Rescue Me* thus disrupts and re-inflects traditional narratives of heroic white masculinity, without needing to subvert them (much like *South Park* “anti-liberalism” is not outright “conservatism”). In reemphasizing ethnicity, *Rescue Me* frames white masculinities as commensurate with various Latino nationalities and blackness—and arguably femininity and non-straight sexualities—acknowledging difference while eschewing “diversity.”

<sup>52</sup> “Guts” is the pilot’s title, and in the finale the Lieutenant’s funeral service reminds that he had “a good heart.”

“I got no future. This is all I got, it’s all I am [gesturing to his uniform, his voice shaking]. Don’t make me change how I do it, Laura. One more change, and I think I’m done.” Laura takes the sentiment as sincere, even as Lou’s stubbornness causes her to roll her eyes, and lets her grievance drop, choosing to pick her battles. She transfers out of the station soon after for unrelated reasons (an unraveling workplace romance with unfaithful Franco), but her place on “the team” seals a dynamic that places both “masculine discourse” (as defined in Chapter 2) and men’s feelings ever on the defensive.

“Sensitivity” training is not the first instance in which the firehouse is subjected to professional help, shown as a feminized bureaucratic intrusion. The scene is a reprise of a thematic established in the series pilot “Guts,” where a woman psychotherapist is brought in to administer grief counseling to the crew of 62 Truck.<sup>53</sup> In both instances, it is Tommy alone who seizes the floor to challenge the interloper’s authority with an extended philosophical monologue. Here, the other men stage a walk out in solidarity, refusing therapy, yet the scene simultaneously attests to their communal suffering and lays bare the protagonist’s psychic wounds. Compared with the milquetoast male sensitivity trainer, whom the text holds in contempt as an enfeebled PC pawn, the female “shrink” is a sympathetic albeit equally unwelcome presence. Tommy feels compelled to open up to her, accounting for his “hostility,” if only to prove his point that she cannot possibly comprehend his private hell. The guys listen in reverential silence outside the kitchen door, as Tommy recounts in graphic detail horrific deaths of children he failed to save and of his FDNY brothers, tearing up over the loss of his favorite cousin and crewmate Jimmy (James McCaffrey), who died a hero on 9/11. The impromptu therapy session grants the viewer privileged access to the protagonist’s interior world, revealing that he cares deeply even as he

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<sup>53</sup> *Rescue Me*, “Guts,” episode 1.1., written by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan and directed by Peter Tolan, first aired July 21, 2004, on FX.

rejects “sensitivity” and earnest sentimentality as empty gestures. On this level, the text’s construction of masculine subjectivity converges with the discourse of ironic engagement, staking a position similar to journalist David Beers’s post-9/11 defense of wartime irony that decreed, “The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much.”<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, Tommy’s brush with psychotherapy makes explicit his strained inward search for higher meaning and truth, as he concludes his speech by snarling, “If there is a God, he’s got a whole shitload of explaining to do!” The confrontation ends as Tommy, frustrated over letting his guard down in this way within earshot of the men, drives off into the night in a melancholic music montage hauntingly set to Coldplay’s song “Beautiful World.”<sup>55</sup> Images of Tommy numbing his angst with alcohol are inter-cut with shots of the other crew members passing the night in solitude: Lou composing a poem called “Ode to the Heroes,” Franco working out his anger with a punching bag, and Billy Warren (Ed Sullivan) receiving news of his terminal prostate cancer, all while Tommy stares at the ocean waves and drowns his sorrows in a bottle of liquor until dawn. The sequence builds to a heartrending final shot of the lost souls of Tommy’s dead victims and heroes trailing behind him into the sunrise. Throughout the series, Tommy’s frequent lapses into altered states of consciousness lend steady pathos as the hero is literally haunted by Jimmy’s ghost and other dead loved ones and fire victims who appear to him in (often drunken) hallucinations and give voice to his survivor’s guilt and self-loathing (taunting, “Your whole life is shit”). His otherworldly encounters also include uncanny comic mystical visions of a disarmingly mundane, modernized Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene

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<sup>54</sup> As cited in Chapter 3, David Beers, “Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!” *Salon.com*, September 25, 2001, [http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony\\_lives/](http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony_lives/), quoting WWI-era activist/ironist Randolph Bourne.

<sup>55</sup> The soulful music montage, used repeatedly and reverentially to powerful effect on *Rescue Me*, also featured on *Nip/Tuck* in a more baroque form that breaks with realism. In *Nip/Tuck*’s “Gala Gallardo” (4.15, December 12, 2006), subplots converge into an embedded music video in the third act as characters lip sync to “Brighter Discontent” by The Submarines (key lyric: “all these things should make me happy...”).



(similar to *South Park*'s "Jesus and Pals"), who offer none of the answers he seeks and only add to his exasperation and existential dilemma.

In the September 2011 series closer "Ashes," aired on the week of the tenth anniversary of 9/11, ball-busting banter and insult humor blend effortlessly with poetic sentiment commemorating "the end of an era" as the guys prepare to go their separate ways.<sup>56</sup> Following the Lieutenant's death in a devastating fire, from which the others narrowly escaped, the team must again bury one of their own. Transporting the cremated Lou to the funeral, Franco self-consciously admits to feeling a "sentimental" sadness, but this display of earnestness erupts into comic bickering and horseplay that causes Lou's ashes to explode inside Tommy's truck. True to the spirit of guyish gallows humor and no-holds-barred revelry in the lower bodily strata, large portions of Lou are inhaled, swallowed, or end up lodged in Sean's "ass-crack" (he must squat roadside to liberate the remains). In a grand gesture of cosmic irony ("God knows he loved to eat"), the men resort to replacing the ashes with red velvet cake mix to scatter at the seaside ceremony. Lou, the closet poet, posthumously extends the cake metaphor in a letter, read by Tommy at the funeral service, reflecting on the "recipe" for his interracial crew's rare chemistry—and pausing between affectionate slurs and swipes at his friends to make apologies (like Franco) for voicing "cornball" sentiment.

Tommy's own accumulated wisdom and life lesson is offered as a moral in a final speech addressing a new graduating class of probational firefighters, the story thus coming full circle. Returning to the question of the divine plan and how to make sense of senseless tragedy—the same dilemma he posed to the grief therapist in the first episode—we find the hero has gleaned new perspective, survival skills beyond the lad basics, and hope, but no easy spiritual answers:

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<sup>56</sup> *Rescue Me*, "Ashes," episode 7.9, written by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan and directed by Peter Tolan, first aired September 7, 2011, on FX.

The answer... is not at the bottom of a bottle. You can't drink or fight or screw your way to figuring out that question. ... Some people say it's God's will. I don't know. I don't even know if there is a God. I hope there is. Because that would mean that one day all this shit is gonna make some sense. That's all I got for you assholes. ... Good luck, douchebags.<sup>57</sup>

An American flag composed of the 343's names towers over them as he hands the reins to Franco, now Lieutenant. To honor Lou's last request, the men of 62 Truck, meanwhile, keep the team together to "keep fighting the fight," with even Lou inevitably returning to Tommy's side in ghost form, busting his chops until the credits roll. The series ends as it began, then, with Tommy breaking in new recruits, the next generation of "the brotherhood of dysfunctional junkies,"<sup>58</sup> then climbing into his truck to debrief once again with his personal ghost. Lou, taking Jimmy Keefe's place in the passenger seat, gets the final word, and that word is irony: "Duncan Hines cake mix, huh? Well, I guess that's kind of symbolic. Or ironic, I'm not quite sure which." This upbeat ending, series co-creator Peter Tolan suggests, marks the hero's turning point to healing and signals the triumph of laughter and hope over despair and tragedy. "The show was saying, on some level, 'Look: We go on, we laugh, we survive. ... [T]hat's the choice we had to make—to offer some glimmer of hope,'" Tolan told *TV Guide*.<sup>59</sup> In this way, the story arc as a recovery

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<sup>57</sup> This signoff speech also winkingly encapsulates Leary's comedic career arc in laddism, from 1993's "Asshole" to January 2011's DVD release of his Comedy Central stand-up comedy special *Denis Leary and Friends Present: Douchebags and Donuts* featuring fellow *Rescue Me* cast members Lenny Clarke and Adam Ferrara.

<sup>58</sup> This is a phrase coined by Franco when initiating new firefighter Damien Keefe in "Initiation" (5.15).

<sup>59</sup> "This is a ghost that he's comforted by," added Tolan (who also co-created *The Job* and whose earlier writer credits in TV comedy notably include domcom *Home Improvement* and nearly a dozen episodes of the 'feminist' sitcom *Murphy Brown*). "It's not a contentious thing or something that takes [Tommy] to a dark place. ... It's the continuation of a beautiful friendship." Interviewed in Adam Bryant, "Rescue Me Postmortem: Creators Talk Lou's Heroism and Tommy's Happy Ending," *TV Guide*, May 6, 2009, <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Rescue-Me-Finale-Denis-Leary-1037104.aspx>. Various reviewers beheld this "embrace of optimism," a phrase used by TV columnist Meredith O'Brien in "Rescue Me—Laughter and Optimism Amid Lou-mageddon," *ClickClack*, September 8, 2011, <http://cliqueclack.com/tv/2011/09/08/rescue-me-series-finale-review/> (both accessed June 6, 2013). While many critics and the creators preferred this reading and some said Tommy's "demons" were defeated, the text neither provides closure nor does it plausibly demonstrate that the members of 62 Truck have suddenly "grown." We are assured they will resume "fighting the fight" together as before, an open-ended conceit that does not (a.) dismantle the established structure of feeling built on identification with their moral virtue and pain as self-sacrificing/suffering heroes, nor (b.) relinquish bitter irony as a defining force unifying their experience as men.

and redemption narrative parallels the larger national discourse that worked to darken, deepen, and redeem irony and pair humor with hope (as we saw in Chapter 3) over the course of a decade.

While not political satire, *Rescue Me* helped to stake FX's claim on "serious comedy." The *L.A. Times* remembers Tommy Gavin as "one of the most riveting, foul-mouthed, battle-scarred, wise-cracking, unforgettable characters FX has ever produced."<sup>60</sup> When the series began its run, a review in *The New York Times* (seizing on the pervasive language of *true* and *real*) credited *Rescue Me* with separating "genuine emotions" aroused by 9/11 from "false sentiments."<sup>61</sup> The program repeatedly draws this distinction, as we saw with its protagonist's personal crusade against opportunistic and voyeuristic 9/11 nostalgia, in ways that function as a political critique of performative patriotism and staged sincerity while valorizing an authentic version of both. On another level, this reviewer's (and the program's and network's) impulse to distinguish the cable quality drama from the "self-poisoningly sentimental realm of television" speaks to a popular revision of the irony-versus-sincerity trope. Whereas press in the 1980s and 1990s posed a simple dualism setting "irony" against the "sentimentality" of prime-time soaps and sitcoms (going hand-in-hand with "earnestness" and "sugary happy endings"), the re-embrace of ("real") emotion and sentiment in the 2000s called for renewed abjectification of the *other* kind of sentiment, associated with disparaged, feminized cultural genres (namely, domestic comedies and women's melodramas). We can see this repackaging of cultural and gendered meanings of "genuine" sentiment (still posed in tension with syrupy "sentimentality") in the content and critical reception of alternative 'soaps' and dramedies like *Rescue Me*. As we have seen, *Rescue Me* holds "weeping" and "cornball" expressions of caring at arm's length.

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<sup>60</sup> Nate Jackson, "'Rescue Me' Finale Recap: The End of the Road," *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2011/09/rescue-me-recap-the-end-of-the-road.html> (accessed June 6, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> "62 Truck," *New York Times*.

Significantly, these elements are not *excluded* from the masculine melodrama, but are in fact *named*, confessed, and placed back in the service of self-aware irony.

In this seven-season tour through the tormented souls of heroes in recovery from tragedy, the themes of rehabilitation and relapse, guts and glory, sacrifice and suffering, mortality and the modern man are all ultimately brought within the domain of comedic irony and laddism. Revelations and lessons the characters are privy to are not consistently presented “under cover” of irony. A more forthright neo-laddism is put on display that claims to speak truth courageously for men, political correctness be damned, making no apologies and rarely concealing its cultural politics behind a “postmodern safety net.” With *Rescue Me* the playful masculine discourse of new laddism is effectively dramatized and humanized, and shown as fundamental to the character and community of American heroes. By anchoring appeals to ironic masculinity in the dominant post-9/11 discourse celebrating working-class male bravery, laddism and its claim on irony achieve new legitimacy. The deep irony on display in *Rescue Me* cuts to the core—the heart—of the masculine subject positions of the protagonist(s) and ideal viewer as conceived by the text.

“*It’s Not Okay!*”: *Starved’s Comedy of Accountability and the Sensitive New Lad*

“When you build it, she will come.” That’s what you’re told all your life as an American man. The girls are just going to line up when you say the word. ... I can’t even meet someone I want to have a second date with let alone make my wife. ... Just a regular guy looking for love and unable to find it... so far.

— Author/actor/director Eric Schaeffer, 2008<sup>62</sup>

In August 2005 FX added a night of original comedy programming into the mix with the joint premieres of *Starved* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. If *It’s Always Sunny* brings

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<sup>62</sup> Cover note on the first season DVD of *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single* (Big Vision Entertainment, 2008).

narcissistic and insensitive “degenerates” into its burlesque embrace, *Starved* takes as its hero the egocentric, arrogant “asshole” in search of his humanity. Although it ran only one season, this program remains one of the era’s stand-out cult comedies and most compelling examples of the turn to a darker and more soulful irony. The series builds on the *Seinfeld* formula as the story of four adult friends, three men and a woman, who regularly meet up in a New York diner and discuss the dating exploits of their fortyish ringleader Sam, loosely based on “slightly neurotic” creator/star Eric Schaeffer, who fixates on the micro flaws of each prospective girlfriend.<sup>63</sup> This is where the similarity ends, however, as *Starved* is perhaps best regarded as the anti-*Seinfeld* of the 2000s, promising comedy *about* something ‘real’ and ultimately ‘sincere,’ the desire to better oneself. Every line of seemingly trivial banter invites us deeper into the psychology of compulsion, selfishness, and self-sabotage, as defining forces in the lives and relationships of addicts.

*Starved* extends the thematics of the FX melodrama into the half-hour “sitcom” format. The program proved difficult to categorize into a clear generic niche, and the content was deemed highly controversial, bringing the taboo topic of devastating eating disorders and the obsessive pursuit of the perfect body (incidentally also the focus of FX’s plastic surgery soap *Nip/Tuck*) within the sphere of dark comedy.<sup>64</sup> Packaged with *It’s Always Sunny in a* comedy block, the series more closely resembled *Rescue Me*, as a comedy/drama blend that revolves around the private pain of addicts and imagines a community of longing. Heavy cross-promotion worked

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<sup>63</sup> I am quoting Schaeffer’s memoir, *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single: Sane, Slightly Neurotic (but in a Sane Way) Filmmaker into Good Yoga, Bad Reality TV, Too Much Chocolate, and a Little Kinky Sex Seeks Smart, Emotionally Evolved... oh Hell, at this Point Anyone Who’ll Let Me Watch Football* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> The National Eating Disorders Association issued a press release before the premiere denouncing the “sitcom” as “dangerous” and calling for advertisers and viewers to boycott it. See “National Eating Disorders Association Calls New TV Sitcom ‘Starved’ ‘No Laughing Matter,’” *Market Wired*, August 1, 2005, <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/national-eating-disorders-association-calls-new-tv-sitcom-starved-no-laughing-matter-666367.htm>. Prominent news sources latched onto the question of whether the series “promotes” eating disorders. See Victoria Clayton, “Do TV Shows, Web Sites Fuel Eating Disorders? Critics Take Aim at ‘Starved,’ ‘Fat Actress’ and ‘Pro-ana’ Online Forums,” *NBCNews.com*, September 6, 2005, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9164550/#.UXgEUcqE61Q>.

to knit the three texts together and encourage identification with the FX brand (*Starved* episodes aired interlaced with promos for *Rescue Me* and *It's Always Sunny in the City*, and vice versa, as well as *House, M.D.*, on sibling network FOX and DVD). As a story focused on internal crises with no clear external cause, in contrast to *Rescue Me*, *Starved*'s central characters are not offered as heroes, but victims of their own emotional issues and impulses, and, in the protagonist's case, a ripened "negativity" born of romantic ideals that reality does not rise to meet. Beholding these suffering subjects who desperately desire to get better and to be better people, but whose actions betray that goal time and again, we are similarly invited to identify with an underlying goodness and strength they must draw from daily to confront their own vices. The authorial guiding hand of the text extends sympathy and compassion equally to the main characters without demanding or offering justification for their self-destruction.

Network promotion billed the *Starved/Sunny* block, its first designated comedy hour, as "The Other Side of Comedy." FX had dabbled in comedy previously, from game shows to parodic jiggle TV romp *Son of the Beach* (2000–02), heavily vested in laddish appeals to postmodern irony's "out-clause."<sup>65</sup> Refinements to its comedy brand from the mid-2000s onwards have routinely called for and flattered a depth of self-awareness in the viewer, alternately through satire staging a spectacular shallowness or incapacity for introspection on the part of 'dysfunctional' characters (as with *It's Always Sunny in the City*, and cartoon *Archer*'s oversexed narcissistic manchild title character, among others), or by inviting cathartic pleasure in compulsive self-scrutiny (as seen in *Louie*'s quasi-therapeutics of observational comedy as personal inventory). *Starved* bridges these modes of viewing, extending both sets of pleasures, to offer its protagonist

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<sup>65</sup> Programs like the lad-magazine inspired *The X Show* (1999–2001), mentioned in Chapter 2, and campy *Son of the Beach* captured FX's early comic sensibility. Increased focus on dramedy and melodrama yielded other notable projects breaking out of this mold, like the sophisticated single-camera half-hour series *Lucky* (2003), a dark comedy starring John Corbett as a gambling addict, nominated for an Emmy Award for comedy writing but (like *Starved*) not renewed for a second season, another example of the tonal and thematic shifts in the network's fare under discussion here.

as outrageously destructive, superficial, vain, and dishonest, and yet endearingly, self-consciously, deeply human in his flaws.

Early in the pilot episode, we find Sam (Eric Schaeffer) devouring cake out of a garbage can, cake sprinkled with a powdered detergent he uses to thwart such lapses in willpower. Feeling the sting of a rejection by a younger woman in an online dating forum, the demoralized serial dater foregoes his healthy breakfast and raids the remnants of last night's binge. Witnessing this moment of weakness, a bemused building custodian asks Sam if he isn't concerned about ingesting the toxic chemicals. "Never happens," the tenant answers matter-of-factly, his face smeared with fudge. "The icing acts as an impenetrable barrier." Ne-Mo's chocolate cake squares, we learn, are Sam's "trigger food," the substance that tests his strength nightly in the solitude of his apartment. During his days at the office, his spindly secretary is under strict orders to keep his stash under lock and key. Unlike other series discussed thus far, profession is incidental to this protagonist's identity and to the narrative, although there is a certain dark symmetry between his private life and his career as a commodities broker, buying and selling futures in foodstuffs, who on a typical morning is empowered to invest in "a shitload of cocoa beans."<sup>66</sup>

Sam's circle of friends relate to his compulsion and self-destruction, and provide a network of support. For Adam (Sterling K. Brown), an NYPD beat cop, bulimia jeopardizes his health and livelihood every day, as he abuses his badge to extort bribes from food trucks and restaurant workers and then vomits his spoils onto the city's sidewalks. Dan (Del Pentecost), a struggling writer and obese "obsessive overeater," eventually (in the final two episodes) suffers a heart attack on the day of his long delayed gastric bypass surgery and must have his jaw wired shut. All three men are fueled by loneliness and sexual frustration. Adam dines alone with an

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<sup>66</sup> *Starved*, "Pilot," episode 1.1, first aired August 4, 2005, on FX. Sam's profession, identified by a door sign at his workplace, is not mentioned explicitly until the final episode. This series ran through September 15, 2005.

imaginary girlfriend he has dreamt of all his life, and Dan, trapped in a one-sided marriage with an amorous wife, resorts to hiring a dominatrix to fulfill his Al Bundyesque fantasy of watching football unmolested as his substitute “wife” sits in forced silence feeding him snacks.<sup>67</sup> The female in this tight-knit group, Billie (Laura Benanti), a bisexual beauty and nightclub singer, struggles with her sexual identity, convinced she must conceal her attraction to men because her fans prefer her gay. As a recovering anorexic, she turns to alcohol and sex addiction (as Sam puts it, “binging on pussy”) as a substitute for food. Across the series, melancholic music montages again serve to interlace their stories and heighten the melodrama. The premiere episode (much like *Rescue Me*’s) concludes with one such sequence, juxtaposing shots of the four principles suffering in solitude late into the night, the three men facing off against their respective binge foods spread invitingly before them and Billie curled up on her bed as her date departs, wallowing in her emptiness after another lesbian one-night stand. Rising from his sofa with determination he knows is doomed, Sam douses his Ne-Mo’s in detergent, repeating the ritual of self-control and denial that we now recognize as a prelude to tomorrow’s shame.

It is Sam’s preoccupation with his weight and flaccid gut that consistently frame the text’s comedic explorations of body consciousness, offering a full-disclosure male perspective on the modern man’s felt need for physical perfection and expectation of such perfection in women. Like Tommy Gavin, he is offered as the point of identification, a figure as charismatic and daring as he is damaged. As the pilot’s plot plays out, reacting to that morning’s rejection, Sam seduces a sweet-natured and submissive (and acceptably thin) 26-year-old blonde, but soon grows bored with her personality. He can only endure her presence if she is acting out one of his sexual fantasies, by speaking in an English accent and wearing red sneakers identical to those he saw

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<sup>67</sup> *Starved*, “Please Release Me, Let Me Go,” episode 1.2, first aired August 11, 2005, on FX.



on a “supermodel” actress in an erotic commercial for English cookies. To amuse himself, he manipulates the young woman, Sarah, into fellating him in his entryway while she unwittingly acts out this part. As she kneels obligingly, the scene is captured in a point-of-view shot aligning the camera’s and viewer’s gaze with Sam’s. His hands reach into the frame, holding her head firmly at his pelvis as she pauses in the act offering to share details of her day (which he ignores) in stilted cockney. Billie, as his closest friend privy to his conquests, later objects to this elaborate deceit and (bringing a woman’s perspective to “the gang” much like Sweet Dee) calls him an “evil little man,” demanding he cease his “sick Svengali ways.” To appease Billie, Sam attempts to cast Sarah back into the dating pool, suggesting they see other people, but is then outraged to learn she is out with another man when he phones desiring a late-night booty call. “You’re an asshole,” Sarah informs him succinctly, after his long-winded hypocritical harangue accusing her of cruel emotional inconsistency and disregard for their relationship’s potential. The text does not offer grounds to disagree with either woman’s criticisms, but rather pulls focus onto Sam’s ongoing search for love, from a suitable soulmate, and more formidably, from himself.

While we see Sam manipulating and discarding women throughout the series, the viewer is keenly aware that he feels vulnerable, desperate to be desired and believing or hoping that real connection is possible—with the next one. He wants it all, the mythical perfect woman and happiness that, the author says, you are promised “all your life as an American man.”<sup>68</sup> His search is marked as selfish and unrealistic, but sincere. In the mid-season episode “3D,” Sam fortuitously meets, and woos, the English TV commercial actress he covets. In what he interprets as jealousy but she deems tough love, Billie sets out to teach Sam a life lesson about pining for “imaginary women,” and is willing to break his heart to get the message across that “you desperately need

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<sup>68</sup> Cover note on the DVD release of *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single*, as quoted above in this section’s epigraph.

to change if you want a chance at being an actual person.” “People in real life aren’t always as perfect as you imagine them to be,” she warns, and proceeds to prove by seducing and absconding with his dream girl during their date.<sup>69</sup> The scene unfolds at a bar where Billie is headlining called The Bitter End, a flourish of irony (*cum* beer pun) signposting that Sam’s hopes are crushed as his fantasy date and, more importantly, devotion to Billie backfire. Brushing the actress aside, Sam reveals that his true feelings are for Billie, pleading with her not to use her addictions and promiscuous lesbianism to deny herself and push him away: “Love, intimacy, friendship, great sex, all rolled into one. It just scares the shit out of you, doesn’t it?” Retaliating, and seeming to relish being a mean drunk, she uses this information to torture him, pausing between vicious taunts to point out that no woman can compete with his cake, “You are an active junkie, Sam. Why would I want to sign up for that?” “Because *real life is messy* sometimes,” he offers, “and I’m in love with you.” This is the only love we see him cling to somewhat selflessly, forgiving her cruelty after the fact (her memory of this night is a blur) and shepherding her into Alcoholics Anonymous to address these dark drunken spells. He carries his faith in their right-for-each-other-ness to the series’ bitter end. On the night in question, however, he proves Billie right, as he is unable to rise to the challenge she sets before him as a test of his love: ninety days of abstinence from binging. Seeing her still content to saunter off with the sexy stranger (his TV crush), the pain of the betrayal is too much to bear, and he is left with only cake to console him, the camera alone bearing witness to his private torment.

The viewer is offered several such opportunities to relate to Sam’s feeling of victimization, but also sees another tender side of the protagonist as he supports the others through their own crises, leaving no room for doubt that he loves all his friends and is secure enough as a man to

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<sup>69</sup> *Starved*, “3D,” episode 1.4, first aired August 25, 2005, on FX. Billie, supplying in-text feminist critique, twice uses the word “mythical” (in 1.1 and 1.4) to describe Sam’s preference for TV actresses/models.

tell them so. In “Scrotal Origami,” for example, Sam coaches Dan through a rough patch with sage advice and gentle encouragement, saying “I love you” in all earnestness, then immediately lends a shoulder to Billie, whom he finds fighting back tears.<sup>70</sup> As the two share an intimate moment that transcends sexual flirtation, they discuss divine intervention, entertaining her idea that his “addictive arrogance” set in motion a perverse chain of events (enlarged testicles from a scrotal-shaving experiment left him wheelchair-bound) that ultimately helped limit the extent of her own backslide toward anorexia. The program takes a turn into the metaphysical, as Sam in the second half of the series undertakes a voyage of self-discovery into the spiritual realm of veganism, yoga, and loving-kindness, and is persuaded by his latest girlfriend to think about cleansing his bad karma. At its most superficial, this transformation is doubly motivated by his lust for this new woman, a svelte yoga instructor named Shanti (Robyn Cohen), and his vanity—he eagerly converts to her ethical diet because it enables him to binge guilt-free on low-fat vegan cake and ice cream that he is convinced will slim his waistline. Sam’s search for transcendent meaning is revealed to be shallow, as his ulterior motives are clear, although the star’s own convictions as a yoga enthusiast inform the text in subtle ways, from soundtrack selections (Eastern spiritual music simmers through the emotional climax of the Bitter End betrayal) to vaguely spiritual subtexts of patience and forgiveness.

Breaking up the flow of melodramatic moments and complicating the progressive pathos that unfolds with each episode are linking segments in which the gang attend meetings of their food addicts’ support group, Belt Tighteners. Eschewing the sensitive approach, this “radical” alternative to Twelve-Step programs nurtures a “community of accountability and shame,” leveraging humiliation to compel members to reform. “It’s NOT okay!” is the group mantra,

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<sup>70</sup> *Starved*, “Scrotal Origami,” episode 1.3, first aired August 18, 2005, on FX.



Figure 6.5. Sam’s new “positive attitude” and conversion to veganism confound his cohort at Belt Tighteners. “Viva La Cucaracha,” *Starved*, originally aired September 8, 2005, on FX.

shouted in unison at each attendee who confesses a relapse. Tonally, these scenes operate in a different register, more heavily coded as ironic and excessive, bordering on sketch comedy. The group leader (played for maximal comic-grotesque effect by Jewish stand-up and improv comedienne Jackie Hoffman) hurls abuse at each habitual offender, for example calling Dan a “fat pussy,” and is subsequently thanked for delivering such blows of raw truth. Articulating a philosophy of honest *insensitivity*, with heavy overtones of the comic politics of political incorrectness, she barks at a confused newcomer who wishes to hear more “supportive” words, “Go suck on the mommy tit of some Twelve-Step group or some therapist, if you want [switching to sarcastic drawl] *suppooort*,” adding, “Here we say how we feel whether it’s pretty or not.” In a typical exchange, Sam (in the series pilot) breezily accepts her verbal assaults as constructive and deserved:

Sam: I ate chocolate cake out of the trash can this morning.  
 Group Leader: If you were a dog, I’d kick you in the face!  
 Sam: Thank you.

Here, name-calling and insults, based in a group dynamic of mutual scorn not sport, signify that self-loathing runs so deep for these characters that they hurt themselves and each other even in the name of recovery, a system that ultimately fails them. At the conclusion of the series, Sam and friends are voted out of Belt Tighteners (viewed as outsiders in their own support group) for being too “whiny,” indeed too sensitive. This marks a turning point as they embrace forgiveness and seek more heartfelt “support,” and opt to give gentler Overeaters Anonymous meetings a try.

As with Sarah and prior doomed relationships, new-ager Shanti falls for his Sam’s charms only to be deceived and then dumped in a conspicuously thoughtless way. As Shanti takes in the full extent of his self-serving lies in the climactic scene of the series finale, again we hear the familiar refrain, “You’re an asshole. You’re an *asshole!*” Sam’s *own* pain is the more palpable, however, and immediately seizes the focus. Turning on the heels of this ill-matched romance, he once again professes his abiding love for Billie, deludedly angling to steal her away from her date. Gently and firmly declining this offer and again citing his “disease” as the reason, this time with concern not venom, Billie chooses her new girlfriend and newfound self-respect, explaining, “I’m not in love with you. I’m so sorry.” “I am so over being betrayed by you,” Sam growls. “I have done nothing but give you my *heart*.”<sup>71</sup> The series ends on this bittersweet note, with Billie finding her bearings and love, and Sam losing his.

The final scene closely parallels that of *Rescue Me*’s second season premiere discussed above, aired three months earlier, in which Tommy Gavin abandons his AA sponsor for a vodka-soaked date with his couch (see figs. 6.6–6.7). In the throes of a similar downward spiral, Sam ditches the OA meeting he agreed to attend with his friends and hides out at home, smashing his bathroom scale in a tearful rage before retreating to his sofa with his emergency Ne-Mo’s for an

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<sup>71</sup> *Starved*, “The Breatharians,” episode 1.7, first aired September 15, 2005, on FX.

epic bender. Unlike Tommy who breaks through his defenses and stumbles into AA, we leave Sam in his darkest hour, but the character's resilience and capacity to soldier on is not in question. The text does not work to justify the protagonist's self-destructive behavior or in this case rationalize his self-delusions, just as it does not let him fully off the hook for his shrugging mistreatment of women who fall prey to his (as he puts it) "wily" charm. Rather, in dwelling on each character's 'shadow' and 'goodness' as parts of a dynamic whole, the structure of feeling invites compassion and identification with Sam and friends' "messy" humanity and sense of longing.



Figure 6.6.

From "two men and a couch" to one man and a crutch: *Rescue Me*'s Tommy Gavin (Denis Leary) drowns his sorrows with vodka while watching old home movies. Cropped screen capture, "Voicemail," *Rescue Me*, originally aired June 21, 2005, on FX.



Figure 6.7.

Starved for love, self-saboteur Sam (Eric Schaeffer) deadens his despair with cake and sports talk TV. "The Breatharians," *Starved*, originally aired September 15, 2005, on FX.

Eric Schaeffer, the creative voice behind the series, has been called the “*enfant terrible* of the New York dating scene.”<sup>72</sup> With his subsequent Showtime reality series *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single* (2008–11)—a cross-country book tour/dating spree—the actor further played to his reputation as a narcissist and womanizer. His body of work as writer/director of various semi-autobiographical projects, exploring the inner landscape of the single man sabotaged by his own arrogance and hypercritical eye, extends an invitation to tour his private thoughts and motivations as he searches for transcendent sex and love.<sup>73</sup> Schaeffer consistently represents himself as a seasoned bachelor daring to say the unsayable truth about what men want, often blending confessional humor with explicit material touching on transgressive or “kinky” sexual practices. “I’m... the guy that... has the balls and the courage to show and do everything that everyone else thinks about doing but is too afraid to,” he declares in the opening segment of his reality show. “That’s my calling.” Kneeling on the floor at the command of a “hot” dominatrix wearing a strap-on phallus (effectively a reversal of the Sarah fellatio scene above), he speculates to the cameraman in a medium close-up shot that such honesty will likely cost him an ABC sitcom deal or *Oprah* booking but boasts he has more guts than most, taunting with resolve, “I fucking *man up*. You think you’re tough with your fucking SUV? Try sucking fake cock, you fucking tough guy.”<sup>74</sup> Embracing fetish and sadomasochism, Schaeffer’s work articulates an alternative masculine heteronormativity that sexualizes and to an extent celebrates self-loathing, taking this as an essential step toward self-acceptance.

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<sup>72</sup> Tracy Quan (author of *Diary of a Married Call Girl*), in a cover blurb for Schaeffer’s autobiographical *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single* (cited above), reproduced on product pages by online booksellers including Amazon.com.

<sup>73</sup> See also his web series, *Eric Schaeffer: Life Coach* (2013–), which reprises themes of *Starved*, available on My Damn Channel ([http://www.mydamnchannel.com/channel/eric\\_shaeffer\\_\\_life\\_coach\\_7526](http://www.mydamnchannel.com/channel/eric_shaeffer__life_coach_7526)) and YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7GlhFmcqSbRjazLH3qiUgA>).

<sup>74</sup> *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single*, episode 1.1, first aired June 22, 2008, on Showtime.

Compared with *Rescue Me*, somewhat paradoxically, *Starved* more closely guards the perimeters of male heterosexuality, recuperating and re-masculinizing unconventional practices the other show relegates to the vast grey area of the “gayish.” On Leary’s show it is the younger men, as comic foils, who entertain non-traditional ideas about sex and preening, and are teased for it, shoring up the superior lad credentials of their senior “pussy-hounds.” On Schaeffer’s, it is the protagonist, whose openness to alternative practices, deeming male-male sex as out-of-bounds but little else, deflects and trivializes familiar male anxieties (most directly voiced by Adam, who objects to Sam’s interest in rectal stimulation, in the second episode, saying, “I’m not having any part of your rationalized gay sex.”).<sup>75</sup> Alongside *Nip/Tuck*, the series also takes up and de-stigmatizes the desire to possess the slender, groomed, aesthetically appealing male body (even as it pathologizes extreme vanity), extending the definition of “tough” and even predatory male sexuality to foreground this desire.

While this portrait is quite distinct from the working-class masculinity valorized on *Rescue Me*, smooth-talking Sam is no less central a figure for contemporary laddism. Schaeffer’s public persona as reality star and author is a close match for journalist Sean O’Hagan’s initial

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<sup>75</sup> Sam strenuously asserts his own not-gayness in 1.1, in comic banter with Billie, after the three men use her food scale at the diner to determine whose penis weighs the most. Like much laddish media, both programs freely conceive of a queered female sexuality (sometimes voyeuristically) for their primary ‘ladette’ characters, Sheila and Billie, among others (e.g., Tommy Gavin’s daughter Colleen, Sam’s TV actress crush), while actively stigmatizing “gayishness” for men. Both texts feature guy-talk debating the “gayness” of practices like letting a woman insert her fingers into one’s rectum during sex (a guilty pleasure Sam fears is causing him rectal seepage in *Starved* 1.2; and that shocks Colleen Gavin’s firefighter boyfriend who gossips about her “whorish” skills in *Rescue Me* 5.11) and manscaping (Dan persuades Sam to shave his scrotum to enhance penis size in *Starved* 1.3, “Scrotal Origami”; Sean Garrity dabbles in *Rescue Me* 1.2). Mike on *Rescue Me* is a thoroughly queered character, ridiculed for his “gayish” tendencies (which do include attraction to men) but accepted by the group. With its shorter run and smaller cast, *Starved* does not expand to include actual queered masculinities. Instead, the series falls back on the “gay pretender” trope common to prime-time sitcom, with Adam and Dan posing as gay to save Adam’s job (1.5, “Thank You. I Love You”) but reasserting their straightness. The shows have a supporting actor (Jimmy Burke) in common playing a gay male grotesque, who forces himself on *Rescue Me*’s Mike and on *Starved* exposes Adam’s gay lie. For analysis of the “gay pretender” trope and the “queering” of mainstream U.S. TV, see Diane Raymond, “Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 98–110. Resembling *Rescue Me*, Leary and co-producer Jim Serpico’s subsequent EMT ensemble series *Sirens* (USA, 2014–), a half-hour comedy, pursues an altogether less ambivalent attitude of “gay inclusiveness” within gay culture.



characterization (see Chapter 2) of the “New Lad” from the early 1990s. Although in popular culture of that moment the label chiefly came to connote a boorish masculinity openly hostile to feminism, O’Hagan described a polished, sophisticated ladies’ man and “chameleon” who speaks the language of feminism’s New Man as a matter of convenience.<sup>76</sup> This social Svengali, to borrow Billie’s term from *Starved*, is adept at charming women with a mask of sensitivity (and in Sam’s case also shaming them, as when he scolds Sarah in the aforementioned rant as a guilt tactic, “You’re dangerous to me... I need ‘emotional consistency.’”). This definition, with its keen focus on the psychology of the “postmodern” masculine subject and malleable identity, anticipates not only the “sensitive man routine” trope that is a fixture of laddish comedy, but also rounded representations like this one that seek to peel back the layers of masculine desire in search of *substance* behind such performance.

To this end, *Starved* stands out as one of U.S. TV’s most provocative representations recoding the new lad as a more *sensitive* figure of substance and depth, possessing “genuine emotions” even as he performs emotional sincerity more superficially in calculated acts of seduction. This “sensitive new lad,” an emergent trope that carries over into FX’s and other masculine melodramas, as we have seen, remains shielded by deliberately offensive humor from the stigma of PC and lords his “asshole” status over the “pussified” sensitive new man. While these representations continue to present a united front against “sensitivity” defined as a politically correct posture, the texts I have examined here also actively negotiate room for caring, compassion, community, and sincerity within the codes of ironic masculinity. By anchoring cynicism in disappointed idealism and introducing themes of moral accountability,

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<sup>76</sup> As cited in Chapter 2, Sean O’Hagan, “The New Man Bows to the New Lad: A Chameleon Has More Fun than a Wimp,” *World Press Review* 38, no. 8 (August 1991), 28–29.

self-betterment, and the soul, these programs expanded the cultural meanings and possibilities for anti-PC irony.

Such cable comedies rode the crest of a wave of “heartfelt” humor that many critics saw surfacing in the mid-2000s and reshaping the contours of television irony. One reviewer holding up *Starved* as the benchmark, Cody Clarke of the weblog *Smug Film*, says of Schaeffer that “his art will *rip your fucking heart out of your chest and hug it* [emphasis in original].”<sup>77</sup> Positioned quite differently from the political satire of Stewart and Colbert yet likewise invested in the post-9/11 push for new forms of “ironic engagement,” these shows intent on sincering the new lad sought less to be politically engaged than emotionally engaging. Rather than consistently favoring satirical irony or dispensing altogether with the comic structures of ironic distance, the dramedy hybrids of “politically incorrect” comedic irony and melodrama, being similarly foregrounded in popular network sitcoms of the same moment, actively worked to articulate a sincere irony, and affirm an identity for author and fan as sincere ironist, through appeals to “heart” without “sugary” sentimentality. The texts representing the new lad as a man of conviction and hope willing to “better” himself, a man with a calling, thus overlap with less lad-centric programming on mainstream network television. Indeed, nestled between the heartrending final scene and end credits of *Starved* aired an extended promo for

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<sup>77</sup> Cody Clarke, “Eric Schaeffer: The Most Underrated Writer-Director-Actor Ever,” *Smug Film*, March 11, 2013, <http://smugfilm.com/tag/starved-tv-show/> (accessed June 6, 2013). *I Can’t Believe I’m Still Single*, Schaeffer’s Showtime series, is described on the DVD cover as a collection of candid “heartfelt” interviews on sex and singledom. Schaeffer’s critics are suspicious of his self-representation as sensitive. For example, Lloyd’s *Los Angeles Times* review, “‘Starved’ for Substance,” noting his reputation as a director of cult “Age of Irony romantic comedies,” scolded Schaeffer’s self-casting in his sitcom as an “unappealing” leading man who flaunts “shallow” confidence and “[s]elf-involved cruelty” then “busts out all sensitive” in scenes extolling his virtues as a friend. Taking issue with *Starved*’s pairing of purposely “unpleasant” comedy with pathos, Lloyd complained of a “wobbly tone that garnishes its central sourness with lashings of sentimentality.” Fan responses online, in contrast, tended to praise Schaeffer for fearless, raw honesty confronting tragedy with humor. On TV.com, one fan called the pilot “[e]dgy, daring, humorous and not afraid to speak the truth” (“Marlene,” September 30, 2005); another welcomed its story of people “trying to better themselves, even if they don’t always succeed” (“drewshack,” February 28, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/shows/starved/pilot-451253/>, accessed June 6, 2013).

NBC's new sitcom *My Name Is Earl*, a frothier comedy about karma and self-betterment, a telling instance of televisual flow connecting the dots between parallel programming trends. Next, in the remaining section, we will explore variations on this push in cultural criticism and network prime-time comedy.

### **“Irony with a Heart”**

What is The New Sincerity? Think of it as irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power.

— Public radio host Jesse Thorn, “A Manifesto for the New Sincerity,” 2006<sup>78</sup>

Adjacent to calls for a synergy of irony and sincerity that we find in the discourse of “ironic engagement” was an overlapping but somewhat distinct articulation of “irony with a heart.” The latter phrase evokes a not necessarily politically motivated or even satirically invested comic practice, but certainly presumes a caring authorial presence and specifically lays claim to a shared (essentialized) humanity. *The Atlantic* in a 1998 literary review defined “irony with heart” in contrast to “fashionable cynicism,” conceding a meaningful distinction in literary fiction.<sup>79</sup> Music critic Jennifer Kelly of *Splendid Magazine* several years later called the former concept “almost a contradiction in terms,” emphasizing “heartfelt” irony as a rare and precious commodity in the pop arts.<sup>80</sup> In the same vein, the *Phoenix New Times* staff recently averred,

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<sup>78</sup> Jesse Thorn (host of Public Radio International show *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*), “A Manifesto for the New Sincerity,” *Maximum Fun*, March 26, 2006, <http://www.maximumfun.org/blog/2006/02/manifesto-for-new-sincerity.html>. Also cited in a more abbreviated form by Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age’s Ethos,” *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/> (accessed December 2012).

<sup>79</sup> Katie Bolick, “As the World Thrums: A Conversation with Francine Prose,” *The Atlantic*, March 11, 1998, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/factfict/ff9803.htm> (accessed January 21, 2013).

<sup>80</sup> Jennifer Kelly’s review of Aka “The Hots”’s self-released album *Touchy EP*, in *Splendid Magazine*, September 28, 2004, <http://www.splendidezine.com/review.html?reviewid=1095415289200476> (accessed January 21, 2013).

“If there’s such a thing as irony with a heart... [i]t’s a combination that’s almost impossible to pull off—just ask David Foster Wallace.”<sup>81</sup>

While “poignant,” “soulful,” and “meaningful” irony has proved a holy grail for critics of literature, music, and art, it is rarer to find this combination foregrounded or praised in TV fictions. However, as illustrated in Chapter 4, television critics by 2004 did greet the arrival of a new cycle of family-friendly sitcoms with some enthusiasm, hailing comedies like *The Bernie Mac Show* and *Scrubs* as evidence that irony was not “dead” but rather growing a conscience and taking on forms that “move” us emotionally.<sup>82</sup> Reviewers tended to see such programs striking a novel and necessary balance between “edgy humor” and “touching elements,” or “sharply funny” and “honestly sweet” content, and some felt this signaled a refreshing change of heart for network prime-time TV.<sup>83</sup> More recently, non-traditional family sitcoms like *Modern Family*, blending self-reflexivity and touching sentiment, are similarly cited as evidence of the “new sincerity” on the rise and reshaping irony from within.<sup>84</sup>

Nearly a decade before Graydon Carter’s and David Beers’s pleas for irony’s eradication or rehabilitation, David Foster Wallace’s cautionary critique of “TV’s institutionalization of hip irony,” as I recounted in the literature review included in the Interlude, was widely taken up as a mission statement and eulogy, envisioning a new age of earnestness and declaring the end of

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<sup>81</sup> “Al Perry, Hans Olson, Nina Curri, Kevin Daly, Rhythm Room, 7/18/12,” *Phoenix New Times*, July 19, 2012, [http://blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com/uonsun/2012/07/al\\_perry\\_hans\\_olson\\_nina\\_curri\\_kevin\\_daly.php](http://blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com/uonsun/2012/07/al_perry_hans_olson_nina_curri_kevin_daly.php) (accessed January 21, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Gilbert, “Looking for a Laugh?” *Boston Globe* (April 18, 2004, third ed.), N9.

<sup>83</sup> Please see Chapter 4 for context for these quotes from Jenelle Riley, “Bernie Mac Has a Hit TV Show and a Thriving Film Career. Who Needs Hollywood?” BPI Entertainment News Wire, August 20, 2003, and Belinda Acosta, “TV Top 10s,” *Austin Chronicle*, January 4, 2002, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2002-01-04/84295/> (accessed January 15, 2012).

<sup>84</sup> Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony,” notes this show’s resonance with “what some call the ‘New Sincerity.’”

“socially useful” irony.<sup>85</sup> Wallace had warned, in the throes of the *Seinfeld* era, that a culture of disingenuous self-mockery spawned by 1980s and 1990s “hip metatelevision” guaranteed a toothless postmodern irony robbed of its rebellious roots, leaving only its shadow forms in a mass-marketed cynical aesthetic, which he unilaterally ascribed to the self-reflexive aura of most modern programming.<sup>86</sup> Wallace is said to have called for a post-ironic, post-cynical culture with this polemic. While the thrust of the piece is deeply critical of the entrenchment of irony in U.S. and televisual culture, it does not exactly idealize or even forecast an anti-irony ethos *per se*. Rather, in a brief conclusion after extensively lamenting the loss of postmodern irony as a genuinely countercultural impulse, Wallace tentatively imagined a coming trend of “anti-rebels” among fiction writers—who might riskily “treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.” He contemplated possibilities for forms of sincerity that would displace irony as, in their own right, a “rebellious” art.<sup>87</sup>

Among those who deemed sincerity and irony to be fundamentally at odds in media and society, some expressed doubt that a new sincerity was gaining traction, while others saw it

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<sup>85</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (summer 1993): 181–84.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 165. His essay cites, for example, FOX’s ironic sitcoms *Married... With Children* and *The Simpsons* alongside quality “yuppie” postmodern prime-time soaps like *St. Elsewhere* and *Moonlighting*. As the Interlude noted, his thesis rests on (and condemns) a unified ironic televisual practice, whereas my project seeks to differentiate among a number of contending and purposeful uses of irony (as practice and label) on U.S. television. Several of his examples serve as antecedent texts for trends explored in this chapter. That is, for my purposes, various postmodern sitcoms including *The Simpsons* and prime-time soaps in the tradition of *Moonlighting* further illustrate my earlier point that the duals pulls of irony and sincerity were already deeply entwined and manifest on TV by the 1990s. However, as we saw, such programs were generally not discursively positioned as “irony with heart” but rather, alternately, as “smart” antirealism or as “vulgar,” and in the case of *The Simpsons* initially even “anti-family,” TV.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 192–93. Wallace saw this as one *possible* response in literary circles to the “problem” of U.S. televisual culture’s “absorption” and “institutionalization” of irony and to the consequent loss of postmodern irony’s viability/credibility as *avant-garde* art and as a tool for “socially useful” rebellion. The essay did not outright endorse this singular response but predicted that the post-ironic writer lurking on the horizon would be called “[t]oo sincere” and “quaint, naive, anachronistic” (193). Such a possibility does not seem to have been, for him, so desirable an alternative as to stifle lingering pangs for irony in what he felt were its superior, rebel forms.

supplanting irony as “the Next Big Thing.”<sup>88</sup> Scholar R. Jay Magill Jr.’s history of sincerity as a moral ideal, published in 2012, documents “the curious notion that we all have something to say (no matter how dull)” as a recent attitude vying to supplant a Seinfeldian fascination with saying ‘nothing’ seriously.<sup>89</sup> Unimpressed with such developments, Princeton professor Christy Wampole, seeking to safeguard sincerity as a core human value and life skill, recently reported a troubling absence of that ideal in today’s resiliently “ironic” culture. In a 2012 *New York Times* editorial calling for the post-ironic life, she refuted the premise that a “loosely defined New Sincerity movement in the arts” is underway, positing instead that we have now entered a “new age of Deep Irony,” once again at the behest of the hipster with a voracious appetite for insincere forms of expression. Wampole reasoned that for Americans “to overcome the cultural pull of irony” would require a kind of sincerity based in sustained “honest self-inventory,” a practice she insisted does not interest “the ironic clique” whose “narcissism” continues to “hold sway.”<sup>90</sup> With sincerity at least nominally on the rise, there are still competing whispers and occasional roars of an Earnestness epidemic encroaching on irony and cynicism, for better or worse. Recall that journalist Michael Hirschorn, among others, concluded that “irony never really did

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<sup>88</sup> Thorn’s “Manifesto for the New Sincerity” used this capitalized phrase, in effect ironically, in a passage ‘preciously’ illustrated by a sepia-toned, polka-dot bordered pastel graphic of two kitties clasped in a hugging embrace beneath the phrase “The New Sincerity.”

<sup>89</sup> Magill covers extensive ground spanning five centuries. Of note here, he charts how the hipster subculture has repositioned itself in relation to sincerity in recent years. His study also highlights the political marketing of sincerity—the same troubling trend that Colbert termed *truthiness*—and thus adds to the growing body of critique interrogating the strategic sincerity performed/modeled in U.S. political culture by major public figures like George W. Bush and Sarah Palin, politicians championing highly subjective forms of argumentation that privilege personal *feeling* (read sincerity) over objective fact and rational critical debate. R. Jay Magill Jr., *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion that We All Have Something To Say (No Matter How Dull)* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

<sup>90</sup> Christy Wampole, “How To Live Without Irony,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2012, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/> (accessed November 17, 2012).

make a comeback after 9/11,” contending that the relative cultural earnestness and “dewy-eyed” innocence of the Millennials has dulled the nation’s ironic edge.<sup>91</sup>

Wampole’s thesis, lacking nuance, stirred up strenuous objections from cultural critics like Jonathan D. Fitzgerald of *The Atlantic*, who countered that “Sincerity, not irony, is our age’s ethos.” Fitzgerald, finding the label “post-ironic” insufficient, beheld a cultural melding of irony and sincerity, with “ironic detachment” giving way to sitcoms and “bromance” stories that “depict authentic characters determined to live good lives.”<sup>92</sup> Jen Doll of *The Atlantic Wire* weighed in to say that “the seesaw of earnest to irony” is a timeless tension in humor and society and a “thing of value,” each keeping the other relevant and in play.<sup>93</sup> The new sincerity, to the extent that this discourse has been taken up in the arts, today rarely refers to pop culture *sans* irony but instead irony-with-a-difference—the familiar “distancing tactics” held in check by “honest emotion” (two phrases supplied by Doll). In a 2003 *SPIN* Magazine interview titled “Sincerity Is the New Irony,” for example, music artist Beck speculated that a “mixture” of irony and sincerity—or “tongue-in-cheek” and “heartfelt” elements—is especially powerful.<sup>94</sup> In the epigraph that begins this section, radio personality Jesse Thorn in 2006 used the whimsical metaphor of *Transformers*-inspired super-robot Voltron to characterize “The New Sincerity,”

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<sup>91</sup> Please refer to Chapter 3 for my commentary placing this argument in context in the “end of irony” debates. Michael Hirschorn, “The End of Irony: Why Graydon Carter Wasn’t Entirely Wrong,” in “The Encyclopedia of 9/11,” *New York* magazine, August 27, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/irony/>.

<sup>92</sup> Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony.”

<sup>93</sup> Jen Doll, “Irony’s Not Dead, Long Live Irony,” *Atlantic Wire*, November 19, 2012, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/entertainment/2012/11/ironys-not-dead-long-live-irony/59119/> (accessed April 29, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> “Beck: Sincerity Is the New Irony,” *SPIN*, June 20, 2003, <http://www.spin.com/articles/beck-sincerity-new-irony>, also cited in Magill, *Sincerity*, 207, in a chapter devoted to “Hip Affected Earnestness.” Grappling with his interviewer’s assertion that people “need sincerity over inauthenticity” (the latter term standing in for irony), the *avant-garde* singer politely resisted that reductive reasoning and reframed the conversation to value what irony’s ambiguity brings to the table in a semiotic democracy where “meaning exists within the listener.”

not as the absence of irony but a new aesthetic and cultural paradigm that presents irony and sincerity in partnership, transforming both in the process.

The sampling of prime-time television's 'sincerced irony' explored in this chapter would, certainly, not rise to the standard that Wallace and his contemporaries set for a post-ironic culture and art. On the contrary, network comedies remain vested in irony as a hallmark of "hip" and "meta" television. At the same time, we may find a corollary to what Wallace termed an "anti-rebel" writing streak, as this period managed to infuse irony across an array of television texts and genres with thoughtful treatment of "old untrendy human troubles and emotions" at times presented with a sense of "reverence and conviction."<sup>95</sup> Programs like *Scrubs* and *House, M.D.*, for instance, as melodramatic medical series with a strong comedy dimension, exemplify some of the decade's more potent tonal hybrids of humor and pathos on prime time, taking weekly themes of human mortality, professional morality, and personal integrity as the basis for serious study into the human condition and the unhealed emotional wounds of protagonists. Both programs give the comic upper-hand and a kind of narrative centrality to an insult-spewing, incurable cynic (a detached male doctor and in *House's* case a physical and emotional "cripple" and Vicodin addict) encircled by relative innocents who, while tyrannized by the reluctant hero's bitter irony, are dependent upon his jaded but unmatched wisdom. As these examples illustrate, even in mainstream comedy/drama blends not offering a laddish perspective as a primary point of identification and enunciation, recent representations have expanded on the motivations and meanings of "cynical" and "insensitive" masculinity when exploring darkness, depth, and pain.

*Scrubs*, as one of the earliest series to become somewhat synonymous with a new sincerity on prime time was, notably, developed prior to and premiered three weeks after 9/11, meshing

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<sup>95</sup> Wallace's phrasing from "E Unibus Pluram," as cited earlier in this section.



with the national mood of heightened emotion as sitcom laced with unusually intense melodrama for the genre. In the pilot episode, bright-eyed medical school graduate John “J.D.” Dorian (Zach Braff) on his first day interning at Sacred Heart teaching hospital finds an unlikely father figure and mentor in the acid-tongued attending physician, Dr. Perry Cox (John C. McGinley). Discovering that the chipper Chief of Medicine’s (Ken Jenkins) smiles and avuncular platitudes are pure propaganda masking a sinister disregard for basic human kindness, J.D. wonders, “I don’t get it. If he’s the jerk, then who’s the *good guy*?” Although J.D. is dumbfounded by what he sees as blatant insensitivity in Dr. Cox’s bedside manner, and must endure his cruel taunts and name-calling, much like Dr. House’s subordinates on the subsequent FOX drama, he quickly learns that in a crisis Cox is the one to count on.<sup>96</sup> From the series outset, we are invited to join J.D. in appreciating Cox as “the good guy,” armored in bitter irony in his private war against an uncaring bureaucracy. Whereas J.D. wears his heart on his sleeve, Cox is a deeply private man, and in subsequent episodes we are gradually allowed glimpses of his hidden torment.<sup>97</sup>

While childlike J.D., or “Bambi” as he is nicknamed by a coworker, is not strictly speaking the “hero” in this ensemble comedy, he is offered as the comparatively sincere, sanguine point of identification and puts a cherubic face on boyish irony. The viewer is invited into his imagination and privy to his private thoughts in the form of voice-overs and fantasy sequences that frequently interrupt, interpret, and take precedence over the action in most episodes. For example, in the 2005 season four episode “My Life in Four Cameras,” after delivering a terminal diagnosis to a former *Cheers* writer, physician/fan J.D. briefly escapes the depressing reality by experiencing the final stages of his patient’s cancer as if living in a multi-camera situation comedy shot before

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<sup>96</sup> *Scrubs*, “My First Day,” episode 1.1 (production no. 535G), written by Bill Lawrence and directed by Adam Bernstein, first aired October 2, 2001, on NBC.

<sup>97</sup> Dr. Cox has an emotional breakdown in “My Lunch” (5.20, April 25, 2006), and he is poignantly haunted after his best friend, a leukemia patient, dies under J.D.’s care in “My Screw Up” (3.14, February 24, 2004).

a live studio audience. His reflexive commentary dwells nostalgically on the genre's traditional predilection for happy closure, yet expressly serves to celebrate the stylistic and ideological complexity of the single-camera contemporary postmodern situation comedy, securing the show's own claim on emotional intensity and heightened realism.<sup>98</sup> Postmodern irony and self-reflexivity are not set in contradiction to affective or moral depth, but rather mobilized in their service. In these brief examples from *Scrubs*, we can already see several of the key structures and tropes that will play out and be developed in programs attempting irony with humanity and compassion over the subsequent decade: the use of voice-over for both irony and intimacy; a constellation of characters representing degrees of cynicism and sincerity, often juxtaposing Generation X with Millennial and/or Baby Boomer sensibilities for comic tension; an ironic yet 'heartfelt' vision of comic-grotesque community; and character self-reflection with the learning of lessons.

### *Splitting the Difference*

With network television of the 2000s favoring stories of personal growth and community, many sitcoms sought a happy medium between Seinfeldian cynicism and Cosbyesque sincerity. NBC's next-generation Must See sitcoms, in particular, finessed the interplay of irony and earnestness, integrating them into a coherent, revised "quality" brand. While cool irony remained a fixture of comedies like *Scrubs*, *My Name Is Earl*, and *The Office*, these signature NBC shows "with heart" sealed the marriage of irony and sentimentality, a union proposed by earlier programs like *Friends* but significantly refined and highlighted throughout this period. These and similar

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<sup>98</sup> *Scrubs*, "My Life in Four Cameras," episode 4.17, written by Debra Fordham and directed by Adam Bernstein, first aired February 15, 2005, on NBC. J.D.'s "sitcom fantasy," inspired by his fondness for the classic TV of his youth, indulges his (and the viewer's) nostalgic familiarity with the "neat and tidy" resolutions and comfortable escapism of yesteryear's light entertainment—in looking backward, the narrative simultaneously confers favor on *Happy Days* era sitcoms as *kitsch* and pays tribute to *Cheers* as an innovator in studio sitcom technique—but moreover, such episodes work to elevate and legitimate *Scrubs*'s own moralizing weekly "lessons" as stylistically superior and emotionally authentic television, proposing an introspective 'realism' that supersedes the text's whimsical absurdism and aspires to emulate the messiness of 'real life.'

so-called “post-ironic” programs at once strive for sharper irony and a more remarkable or surprising sweetness, favoring a type of tonal oscillation that appreciates the contrast and savors the *process* of push-and-pull. They anticipate and reward the postmodern-literate audience’s ability to play on the seesaw of ironic detachment and emotional engagement. The mode of viewing encouraged by these texts recognizes an ironic authorial voice while also investing in a set of moral conclusions when the half-hour wraps up. Comedy writers devised creative solutions to the problem of how to reinstall a “moral compass” or sense of social accountability in the postmodern sitcom without recourse to obvious episodic morals like the traditional family sitcom, the “living room lectures” that were the stuff of the ironist’s cutting spoofery.

With strategic intermixture of cool irony and warm sentiment emerging as the preferred paradigm for the contemporary quality sitcom, prime-time comedies embraced a certain sense of duality. Conceits such as split identity and friendships of opposites posed by much recent programming seem expressly designed to scale the sincerity/cynicism divide, yet do so by fixating on and romanticizing that split. The remaining subsections examine specific approaches to narrative and character that forge a fraught and productive bond between sincere and cynical, sensitive and insensitive, social and antisocial, “good” and “bad” personhood, in network comedies rehearsing that cultural tension. In keeping with earlier postmodern ironies, the pleasures on offer work on a principle of both-and. Various storytelling devices facilitate contemporary comedy’s dual impulse to outgrow yet indulge in the ‘old’ irony, to reform yet fondly recall the allure of ‘bad’ cynicism.

Inter-ensemble dynamics in TV “families of affinity” and workplace comedies have enabled tensions and alliances between glib sarcasm and earnestness as character traits to play out in a vast array of series and comic contexts. Self-reflexive television persistently and often

provocatively places portraits of the pleasure-seeking wildcard (or wildman) and socially minded good citizen side by side, competing for the viewer's attention. The partnering of world-weary cynicism and fresh-eyed innocence has become a dominant comic "hook," one of several persistent tropes we will consider. Additionally, through the use of split timelines, voice-over narration, and various other structuring narrative devices (including the critically celebrated faux documentary form), a number of prominent series grant the viewer access to alternative versions of a single comic protagonist. Particularly in shows that expose hidden dimensions, propose different possible selves, or juxtapose competing "sides" of the sitcom hero, comedy of this period makes manifest the cultural preoccupation with reconciling sincerity and cynicism.

*Now-stalgia, Past Selves, and Do-overs: The Comedy of New Beginnings*

He won't be *that* guy anymore.

— Christopher Titus's sitcom fiancée Erin  
on FOX's *Titus*, 2002<sup>99</sup>

Damn you, Past Ted!

— Ted Mosby on CBS's *How I Met Your  
Mother*, 2005<sup>100</sup>

*Old* me really screwed *new* me over. I mean, how am I  
supposed to start fresh when my past just keeps  
reaching into my future and pulling me into my present?

— Christina Applegate as Samantha Newly  
on ABC's *Samantha Who?*, 2007<sup>101</sup>

As the language of good and bad, truth and deception, righteousness and wrongdoers rippled through political and media discourse, television fictions grappled with ethical and

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<sup>99</sup> *Titus*, "Bachelor Party," episode 3.13, first aired February 13, 2002, on FOX.

<sup>100</sup> *How I Met Your Mother*, "The Duel," episode 1.8, first aired November 14, 2005, on CBS.

<sup>101</sup> *Samantha Who?*, "The Job," episode 1.2, first aired October 22, 2007, on ABC.

existential questions, often through the lenses of postmodern self-reflexivity. Millennial television from sci-fi soaps like *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10), *Medium* (NBC/CBS, 2005–11), and *Saving Grace* (TNT, 2007–10) to sitcoms about dysfunctional community or identity in crisis scrutinized the ethics of character and variously entertained themes of transformation, choices and consequences, stagnating versus thriving, looking back and forward, and embracing new beginnings. Much like we saw in *Starved* and *Rescue Me*, several network sitcoms and dramedies of this period tasked their protagonists with self-reinvention or recovery from a major life setback, compelling them to perform (borrowing Christine Wampole’s phrase from her definition of the sincere life) an “honest self-inventory.” Even ironic sitcoms increasingly focused on character interiority and “untrendy” human emotions like regret, hope, and humility.

By mid-decade character-supplied narration was becoming a regular feature of the new quality sitcom, already being revived with gusto between 2000 and 2002 by *Malcolm in the Middle* (FOX, 2000–06), *Titus* (FOX, 2000–02), and *Scrubs* and further popularized with the arrival in fall 2005 of *How I Met Your Mother*, *My Name Is Earl*, and *The Office*. Several of these shows relied on voice-over narration allowing the central character to reflect upon the events in each episode and place the action into symbolic context. *The Office*, a format adaptation of the BBC2 sitcom of the same name, and subsequently *Parks and Recreation* and *Modern Family*, offer a variation on the trend using the conceit of an ever-present documentary crew gathering commentary from the entire cast of characters, who provide competing perspectives on events as the narrative unfolds.<sup>102</sup> Like *The Bernie Mac Show*, discussed in Chapter 4, where the star’s direct address to camera establishes a confidence with the audience, revealing a sensitive interiority and softening the “tough” talk of television’s preeminent New Black Lad,

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<sup>102</sup> For detailed genre analysis of the uses of “docusoap” style in self-reflexive TV including sitcom *The Office*, please see Brett Mills, “Comedy Verite: Contemporary Sitcom Form,” *Screen* 45, no. 1 (2004): 63–78.

these assorted approaches to in-text running commentary by characters each extend a sense of intimacy and sometimes similarly border on the confessional. In contrast to the late-1990s American adaptation of *Men Behaving Badly*, which used the wise-girlfriend-as-commentator to limit audience identification with the wisenheimer bachelor men at the center of the narrative (see Chapter 2), these more recent instances do not presume to micromanage the pleasures of irony. More often, they hold space for the intersection of sincere and ironic voice in comedy, teasingly blurring and moving that line.

A handful of programs combined wistful narration with extensive use of flashbacks or dual timelines to engender a kind of aspirational longing for the new and the now, tinkering with cultural and generational meanings of nostalgia and by extension irony. Signaling optimism, hope, and openness with disarmingly upbeat voice-overs, the amiable protagonists of these texts eased viewers into their episodic adventures. Just as the addition of embedded character monologues or narration layers the diegesis, requiring the viewer to navigate between encountering characters “up close” and at a “distance,” timeline manipulation compounds that effect, splitting characters into somewhat distinct selves. This temporal play is yet another level on which the tug from ironic to sincere (and back) can be felt, with certain ways of being—and unruly pleasures of textual irony—rendered in “past” tense.

CBS’s *How I Met Your Mother* stands apart as one major variant of this nostalgia for the present, or what we may deem “now-stalgia,” in sitcom. Inverting and ironizing the premise of family dramedy prototype *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–93), a show epitomizing Reagan-era boomer nostalgia and unhalting earnestness with its dreamy take on life in a sixties suburb in California as a “golden age for kids,” *How I Met Your Mother* looks back on its 2000s urban New York setting from twenty-five years in the future. In the earlier series, the guiding sensibility

is established by a teacherly disembodied adult male voice, the future self of the on-screen child protagonist, as he recounts misty memories of his youth with the wisdom of hindsight, setting a tone of reverence, longing, and historical import. The subdued humor hailed ‘yuppie’ adult viewers as serious and thoughtful, while the kid-centric story allowed the show to double as family quality-time TV to share with their echo boom children.<sup>103</sup> Targeting that same younger set now in their post-college years, *How I Met Your Mother*’s narration is more tongue-in-cheek. The unseen future self of protagonist and hopeless romantic Ted Mosby sits his own eye-rolling kids down in the year 2029 to tell them the story of his unfolding destiny as a twenty-something bachelor searching for his true love in the vast city. Here, “Future Ted” is less a point of identification than a promissory note of narrative resolution to come and of a stable late adulthood on the horizon, granting license to commemorate the freedoms of young adulthood and singledom. “Kids...,” he begins each episode, as an address directed at his own too-cool teenaged offspring but also a chummy invitation extended to today’s twenty- to thirtysomething viewer to gather ‘round the TV hearth for the next installment of his saga (a more youth-oriented version of Bernie Mac’s salutation, “America, ...”). This weekly lead-in, in which we glimpse future cool kids merely tolerating the winding story, is the first of many comic devices that

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<sup>103</sup> While the text falls clearly into the category critics deem “earnest,” literary irony in at least two guises is a regular presence on *The Wonder Years*: (1) historical irony, where the characters’ expectations (in the past) are set against what the historically knowledgeable present-day viewer knows will unfold, and (2) a mild discontinuity between what we see of the protagonist and we hear from the narrator as he remembers his past with advantages. The “golden age” line is from the opening narration by Daniel Stern, “Pilot,” first aired January 31, 1988, on ABC.

A handful of sitcoms in the 2000s were called clones of *The Wonder Years*, including the WB’s *Do Over* (fall 2002), a nostalgic-for-youth fantasy about a salesman in his thirties who literally relives his high school years in the 1980s, and FOX’s *Oliver Beene* (2003–04), in which an adult narrator more satirically recalls childhood in the sixties. “If you’re anxious about life today, TV this fall is inviting you to journey to a happier time” and “escape into the past,” began *Time* TV critic James Poniewozik’s preview of the 2002–03 schedule. Accounting for said escapism, he quoted *Do Over* producer Warren Littlefield (formerly of NBC): “I’m sure [Sept. 11] was a factor.... We’re in a conservative time, where simplification and wish fulfillment are very appealing.” However, this reviewer cautioned against misty nostalgia and “spun-sugar” characters, complaining that in at least one such series, NBC’s sixties drama *American Dreams*, the new “cloying earnestness makes jadedness look attractive.” James Poniewozik, “Look Back in Angst: This Fall the Networks Bet that Anxious Viewers Will Take Refuge in Nostalgia. What Does It Say about Post-9/11 America if the Cold War Now Seems Cozy?” *Time* 160, no. 13 (September 23, 2002): 73–74.

guards against taking the character's pie-eyed sincerity and ideals "too seriously" while placing the open-hearted eternal optimist firmly at the center of the narrative.

In some ways a conventional romantic sitcom and hailed by critics as a *Friends* clone for the Millennial generation, the series ups the self-reflexive ante with its retrospective narrative that, while anchored in the present day, is especially temporally convoluted as a result of its system of flashbacks within flashbacks, a technique that fans refer to as "deep frying" (in recognition of series co-showrunner and director Pamela Fryman). Future Ted recalls having "this whole other life" pre-marriage, and his former self (the viewer's present day reference point), a clean-cut young professional, in turn revisits his own "Past Ted," the college-aged, hippie-phase Ted with big dreams, geeky foibles, and a love of weed. This last (and supposedly past) habit is winkingly edited in memory flashbacks, depicting marijuana joints as submarine sandwiches across episodes, inviting viewers to share in this private joke among friends as in-group irony. Youthful foolishness, indiscretions, and indulgences are incrementally "outgrown," and fully in the past by the hypothetical point of enunciation. As a further metatextual shout-out to Generation Y, two iconic stars of "earnest" late 1980s kids' sitcoms are repurposed in the show, Bob Saget (the voice of "Future Ted"), best known as the straight-laced TV dad of saccharine kiddie-com *Full House* (ABC, 1987–95), and cast against type, Neil Patrick Harris, former child star of *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (ABC, 1989–93), as Ted's self-appointed best friend ("bro") and wing man, *anti-romantic* lothario Barney Stinson. Rounding out the cast are the other members of Ted's inner circle, commitment-phobic ladette and intermittent love interest Robin (Cobie Smulders) and happily coupled, sexually adventurous Lily (Alyson Hannigan) and Marshall (Jason Segel).

In the opening shots of the pilot episode (September 19, 2005), Future Ted sets the scene: "It was way back in 2005. I was 27, just starting to make it as an architect, and living in New York



with Marshall, my best friend from college. My life was good, and then Uncle Marshall went and screwed the whole thing up.” This monologue is set to a montage of time-aged photographs of 27-year-old Ted (Josh Radnor) living the Bacchanalian co-bachelor life (fig. 6.8). The sequence ends abruptly, interrupted by a real-time memory of Marshall preparing a marriage proposal for his steady girlfriend Lily. Thus, we have met Ted, on the eve of his own evolution beyond bachelor “bromance,” about to discover he’s tired of chasing girls and ready to chase after his destiny.



Figures 6.8a–d. Ted Mosby’s (Josh Radnor) bro-mantic memory montage of his fading bachelor days ends abruptly with best mate Marshall’s (Jason Segel) marriage proposal—practiced on Ted. “Pilot,” *How I Met Your Mother*, originally aired September 19, 2005, on CBS.

*How I Met Your Mother*’s construction of affectionate male friendship or “bromance,” alongside *Scrubs* and similar shows, effects a rigorous renegotiation and softening of enduring lad comedy tropes. With the notable exception of CBS’s exceedingly popular *Two and a Half*

*Men*, a more traditional sitcom defying the progressive and style markers of “quality” television, much bachelor-themed humor yielded to the tug of the new sincerity.<sup>104</sup> By the mid-2000s on U.S. television, even the new lad lived by a moral code of conduct, whether that was the firefighter honor system on *Rescue Me* (“You don’t mess with the widows”) or *How I Met Your Mother*’s “Bro Code.” The latter is blatantly ironic, to be sure, but conversant nonetheless with the cultural focus on a “moral compass.” “Everyone’s life is governed by an internal code of conduct. Some call it morality. Others call it religion. I call it ‘the Bro Code,’” declares the introduction to Barney Stinson’s *The Bro Code*, a best-seller by staff writer Matt Kuhn based on the hyperbolic sitcom character, played by non-lad gay actor (adding to the irony) Harris.<sup>105</sup> The libertine super-lad Barney Stinson is a prime example of network television’s efforts to bring the new lad as a cultural archetype—and here one-dimensional comic stereotype—within the fold of *caring* community, furnishing him with a Bly-esque backstory (the revelation of an emptiness traced to a fatherless childhood) and patiently ‘evolving’ him toward a loving commitment and marriage, to the suitably roguish Robin. In the meantime and for the series’ duration, whereas FX’s recovery-themed sitcoms *Starved* and later Charlie Sheen’s *Anger Management* (2012–) offer variations on a more sensitive new lad in late adulthood, *How I Met Your Mother* leverages the hard-core next-generation laddism of this past Barney “behaving badly” as a counterweight to emotionally sensitive, and overtly sentimental, Ted and Marshall. His inclusion in the gang negotiates a liminal, lad-adjacent status for Ted of 2005, clearly marking him as not-laddish yet worthy of the lad seal of approval.

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<sup>104</sup> For precise analysis of transformations in sitcom style, and of industry and critical discourse legitimizing the non-traditional sitcom during this period, see Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman, “Upgrading the Situation Comedy,” chap. 4 of *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 59–79. *How I Met Your Mother*’s standing as a “quality” sitcom is contested, despite intricate narrative contortions and a playful use of style, because like the traditional multi-camera sitcom it was filmed in-studio and retains a laugh track.

<sup>105</sup> “Barney Stinson” with Matt Kuhn, *The Bro Code* (New York, N.Y.: Fireside, 2008), ix.

If *How I Met Your Mother*'s time-capsule premise performs distance from the present day, a second variant of now-stalgia came in the form of sitcom stories of personal awakening, celebrating the present moment as a time of transformation and new beginnings. Two prime-time sitcoms took as their "situation" a protagonist's sudden self-reinvention and soul searching in response to tragic circumstances. With *My Name Is Earl* as well as *Samantha Who?*, a major life-altering event at the series' outset calls for a profound change in identity and priorities. Compared with shows like *Rescue Me* and TNT's *Saving Grace*, these texts altogether avoided approaching tragedy as a shared national experience, yet each in their own way grappled with the questions of morality, divine plan, identity crisis, and existential truths. Where *How I Met Your Mother* embraces destiny, these shows run on the principle of karma as the invisible hand overseeing a dynamic moral universe. Seeing the world with new eyes, the humbled—and newly awakened—hero commits to a course correction, embarking on a path of righting past wrongs to become "a better person."

Deviating from the comic preoccupations with "arrested development" and nihilism ascribed to such leading 1990s ironic sitcoms as *Seinfeld* and even the more sentimentally inclined *The Simpsons*, the viewer is primed to expect exposition on the central character's growth and search for meaning. The role of comic coincidence in governing these later series, which mobilize the language of karma and destiny to supply a moral roadmap for the characters, constitutes a palpable point of contrast with *Seinfeld*'s "amoral" universe in which all goals and hopes are frustrated and all rules arbitrary. In that flagship show of nineties irony, as Hibbs observed in *Shows About Nothing* (1999), "chance events seem ordered to a malevolent end" as if orchestrated by "a capricious, whimsical, detached, and perhaps malevolent deity," and the characters themselves mirror the same "comic detachment from the spectacle of human life."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 1st ed., 164–66.

This structuring joke of the meaningless cosmic “game” was the basis for that show’s exemplary form of comic nihilism, Hibbs argued, wringing laughter from characters’ callousness and suffering and rendering the quest for “self-knowledge” trivial or aimless. On *Seinfeld* the body is not “ensouled,” he remarked, but an awkward object of amusements and nuisances. “From *Seinfeld* to *Ally McBeal* to *The Simpsons*, characters are all surface, no depth.... [T]he amoral hero substitutes surface for surface, since... depth is itself an illusion. Evil is revealed as banal,” he contended, stressing, “If there is a secret truth, it is that there is no truth.”<sup>107</sup> Purdy likewise argued the same year in *For Common Things* (as quoted in this chapter’s opening epigraph), when defining *Seinfeld*’s star character as “irony incarnate” and its spokesman, channeling the ambivalence of an era supposedly disinclined from the pursuit of authenticity and sincere conviction: “There is some of him in all of us. ... In place of the romantic idea that each of us harbors a true self struggling for expression, the ironist offers the suspicion that we are just quantum selves—all spin, all the way down.”<sup>108</sup>

While the sitcoms I’m discussing here certainly fall within Hibbs’s definition of contemporary irony depicting “suffering as funny,” and may even emulate *Seinfeld*’s deconstructive flair in self-reflexively shining a spotlight on coincidence as a sitcom convention, they nevertheless reinstall a sense of “providential order” and “benign, instructive purpose.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 158, 166, 176; emphasis added.

<sup>108</sup> Purdy, “Avoiding the World,” chap. 1 of *For Common Things*, 9–10.

<sup>109</sup> In sitcoms traditionally, Hibbs suggested, we find “coincidence operating as a sign of a benign providential order beyond our comprehension,” inspiring a sense of “wonder” in the audience—whereas *Seinfeld* got tremendous mileage out of inverting and subverting that tradition by deploying coincidence as “a kind of anti-providence” (164). Here it is worth reiterating that comedies “with heart” such as *The Simpsons* and dramedy *Ally McBeal* are swept under the mantle of this comic nihilism: “The harm done in classical comedy... is seen to have a benign, instructive purpose. By contrast, most contemporary sitcoms specialize in detached, ironic humor that portrays genuine suffering as funny. *The Simpsons*, for example, treats the arbitrary infliction of misery as a source of amusement, though even *The Simpsons* alternates between mocking cruelty and sentimental, familial embraces,” asserted Hibbs in his book’s Introduction entitled “Beyond Good and Evil” (8–9).

In doing so, shows like *My Name Is Earl*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Scrubs* ambitiously altered the terms and temperament of “cool” irony, striving for greater tonal and moral complexity yet retaining a certain aura of cynical detachment born of “hip” post-didacticism even as the narratives expressly engage ideas of the “true self struggling for expression” and culminate in the learning of lessons. Alongside the decade’s brooding masculine melodramas where flawed antiheroes and suffering heroes confounded neat categories of “good” and “bad” character, with greater levity *My Name Is Earl* and *Samantha Who?* as sitcoms about karmic balance (and retribution) could be seen grappling with the “struggle between good and evil” impulses in human nature.<sup>110</sup>

While these karma-coms contemplate personal ethics and responsibility, they also ironize identity, with the duality of past and present self locked in continual conflict. Although they are tonally dissimilar, both bear the markers of quality style as single-camera sitcoms with no laugh track, while aiming for light entertainment as opposed to the dark comedy of karma-themed *Starved*. In the preferred reading of either show, the viewer is to understand that the protagonist spent decades as a “bad” person, but being newly reformed aspires to goodness, eager to overcome past misdeeds. Frequent flashbacks allow these dual selves to coexist, fragmenting the narrative into “then” and “now” stories that run parallel and occupy different comic registers. The past lingers and resurfaces to sow chaos for the present in ways that structure the narrative tension and, I argue, ensure more than one level on which the viewer may take pleasure in the text. As the protagonist of *Samantha Who?* says, loosely trading on the psychoanalytic notion of the return of the repressed, “I never know when Old Sam’s craziness is just going to bubble up!”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Somewhat contrary to my own arguments, Hibbs’s 2012 update of his earlier work, while acknowledging that certain programs and films from the 2000s did depict characters with “admirable goals” or optimistically “engage without succumbing to nihilism,” nevertheless maintains that Hollywood continued overall to “lack... complex and nuanced depictions of goodness or of the struggle between good and evil in weak and flawed but nonetheless admirable characters” (38).

<sup>111</sup> *Samantha Who?*, “The Restraining Order,” episode 1.5, first aired November 12, 2007, on ABC.

The later show *Samantha Who?*, more than any other sitcom of the decade, literalizes the new sincerity, dramatizing the desire to shed a culture of narcissism and the “shallow” life. This series ran for two seasons (2007–09) and featured the former teen queen of Generation X postmodern sitcom irony, *Married... With Children*’s Christina Applegate, as Samantha Newly, a vain, vicious Chicago real estate executive and party girl turning over a new leaf after a near-death experience. In the pilot, Samantha awakens from a coma with retrograde amnesia, having been struck by a hit-and-run driver. Her search for answers to the inevitable question “Who am I?” leads to one unpleasant revelation after another. Within her first day as a new person, Samantha learns that her pre-coma or ‘true’ self is not only embroiled in an affair with a married man but is a recovering drunk—and when she tries to pick up where she left off, sober Sam is promptly kicked out of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting for bad behavior.<sup>112</sup> Vowing not to be this “Bad Sam” anymore, the suddenly sweet-tempered and altruistic amnesiac must nonetheless pull at the threads of returning memories that pose considerable obstacles to “starting fresh.” New Sam can only emerge by confronting what she would rather deny in her nature. In her own words (compiled from several episodes), the “new and improved Sam” is up against her shallow, selfish, high maintenance side that (not unlike *Starved*’s Sam) thrives on lying and cheating. Despite her protestations that “I’m not that person anymore” and determination to be more “thoughtful and considerate” and “make good choices,” Sam finds herself stumbling into hidden habits and endlessly apologizing for irrepressible “Old Sam’s” ways.<sup>113</sup>

While even the character’s name, Newly, is a distancing tactic, signaling allegory and playing on the idea of the “new me,” she sets a decidedly sincere tone with narration imparting

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<sup>112</sup> *Samantha Who?*, “Pilot,” episode 1.1, first aired October 15, 2007, on ABC.

<sup>113</sup> *Samantha Who?*, “The Job,” episode 1.2, first aired October 22, 2007; “The Wedding,” episode 1.3, first aired October 29, 2007; “The Restraining Order,” episode 1.5, first aired November 12, 2007; and “Pilot.”

a moral for each episode. Over the first season, Sam learns and imparts lessons about forgiveness (“Who among us doesn’t need a new beginning, or forgiveness?”), trust and truthfulness (“I can’t afford to have relationships that are based in lies.”), self-reliance and gratitude (“The road to independence takes time, but... the journey’s always better when you get to turn to someone and say, ‘Thanks for being there.’”), and synchronicity (“Today I learned that you never know how one thing will affect another.”).<sup>114</sup> As a result of her “near-death experience,” Sam by the second episode has decided everything happens for a reason. Hoping that more fulfilling work will give her life meaning, she rewrites her job description so that she can serve her community, starting with saving a small church from demolition. The episode culminates in a poetic piece of self-directed advice, baldly earnest, addressing the audience as if reading an entry from her journal:

I had this dream... I wake up clean and white as snow, my debts forgiven and sins all washed away. That sounds awesome, but it’s a bunch of crap. I mean, yesterday can’t be un-lived... you drag it along, like a big ol’ dog. Today is all we can control. We do today right, we may even have a shot at tomorrow.

The fifth episode builds on this philosophy, as Sam begins to see all the pieces of her life, the bad along with the good, as interconnected and ultimately setting her on a path of healing. After accidentally terrorizing a man she learns has a restraining order against her, Sam is struck by a calming sense of unity underlying life’s chaos. Running into this ex-boyfriend she wronged in the past was fortuitous, she concludes (similar to Billie’s spiritual insight in *Starved*), as it set in motion a circuitous chain of events creating opportunity for her to connect with her father on a deeper level in the present. Self-reflexive irony and meta-humor balance out these moments of undisguised sentimentality. Earlier in the same episode, for example, Sam’s stalkee Nathan (Todd Grinnell) is suspicious of her claims to have changed and refuses her amends, insisting, “Amnesia doesn’t exist! It’s just a cheap and lazy storytelling device.”

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<sup>114</sup> These examples are from the episodes “The Wedding” (1.3), “The Hypnotherapist” (1.6, the second and third quotes), and “The Restraining Order” (1.5), aired October 28, November 19, and November 12, 2007, on ABC.

Sam seeks “the Truth” about who she is, a point underlined by using this phrase in a title card in the sixth episode (“The Hypnotherapist”), in which Sam wrongly surmises that she is adopted. In the sequences that follow, somewhat echoing the larger political-comedic context, she attempts to establish a “Liar-Free Zone!” around herself, waging a private war against her parents’ truthiness as they concoct what she believes are emotionally convenient truths about her past with no basis in fact. But she soon learns that line is not so clear, and people are not as easy to read as she imagines. On the one hand, even a “good and decent human being” like Old Sam’s faithful and supportive boyfriend Todd (Barry Watson) is not always forthcoming with the facts, and on the other, her mother’s (Jean Smart) outlandish excuses for not producing viable paperwork and photographic evidence of her ‘normal’ childhood prove true. Similarly, the series taken as a whole slowly begins to disrupt, though not altogether abandon, the conveniently simple moral language of “bad” and “good” selfhood, and grants that both are comedically attractive. We are permitted to see that Old Sam was not all bad (as suggested by the devotion of her remarkably “decent” boyfriend), much like Sam in this and other episodes finds hidden dimensions of character behind her mother’s superficial airs and seeming callous indifference.

Notably, the program strikes a generic balance between urban and suburban sitcom traditions, with the protagonist oscillating between single life as a “hip” young professional in the city (the mainstay of quality demographics) and family life as she retreats to the shelter of her parents’ home in the suburbs to rediscover her roots. Rather than treating cynicism as an acquired urban vice foreign to the cozy suburban nuclear family, both locations mirror through supporting characters the central tension between the hardened “cynic” and the sweet-hearted “softy.” As for the protagonist, she possesses neither the goofy, saintly innocence of her loyal childhood friend Dena (who is overjoyed that amnesia short-circuited Sam’s mean-girl phase and carries on



as if those adolescent/adult years never happened), nor the profound self-centeredness of Old Sam's hedonistic barfly sidekick Andrea (who casually ignores Sam's "new" outlook and continues on as her wing-woman as if nothing has changed). Much like Ted Mosby is situated on a "committedness" continuum between happily married Marshall and happily debauched bachelor Barney, Sam's newfound sincerity is cushioned and contrasted by these friends (played by Melissa McCarthy and Jennifer Esposito) who fall to two extremes on a spectrum.

With Samantha's "true" old self competing with her ideal new self for authenticity (and screen time), the idea that the person she was and who she wants to be are irreconcilable is mined for comic tension. At the same time, there is the suggestion that "improved" Sam was perhaps always possible and waiting to emerge, just as the person she *was* is still lurking. As "new" Sam cautions when apologizing to Dena for a recent backslide into selfishness, "You never know when Old Sam's gonna come up and just do horrible things."<sup>115</sup> Read in the context of the new sincerity discourse, especially if we accept the gesture to allegory, the show anticipates and accommodates ambivalence about throwing out the old, and anxiety about pushback when rising to that challenge, while placing hope in a new era and sincere philosophy. *My Name Is Earl*, the milestone mid-decade sitcom with a similar premise, to some extent cloned by *Samantha Who?*, models a considerably more complex and transgressive comic politics, pushing postmodern ambivalence further when staking out a "newly" sincerer ironic ethos. Whereas *Samantha Who?*'s redemption tale centers on a big city sophisticate, *My Name Is Earl*'s protagonist is a small-town rakish rube, or "hick." Taken together, these programs extend the new sincerity from urban and suburban to rural sitcom settings and across the class divide.

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<sup>115</sup> *Samantha Who?*, "The Wedding," 1.3.

“*I’m Just Trying To Be a Better Person*”: My Name Is Earl

You know that show that tries really hard to be quirky and unconventional? The show that winks at all its own jokes and, inevitably, shows someone throwing up into the toilet from the point of view of the toilet? Well, that show is this one. Its name is “My Name Is Earl.”

— *The New Yorker*, 2005<sup>116</sup>

*My Name Is Earl*, not unlike *The Cosby Show* two decades earlier, in its first season was credited with resuscitating the ailing sitcom genre. As industry historian Bill Carter reports in his post-network era retrospective *Desperate Networks*, the fall 2005 season finally saw NBC’s comedy schedule rebounding after the much fretted about post-*Seinfeld* “drought.” *Earl* enjoyed early hit status despite some initial resistance within NBC’s entertainment division, which struggled to envision this eccentric comedy about a rural redneck lowlife representing the network’s “hip urban” brand.<sup>117</sup> The series, created by Greg Garcia, modeled a “quirky” comic sensibility while adopting the single-camera style and tonal complexity of the new quality sitcom. Some critics, like *The New Yorker*’s Nancy Franklin, quoted in the epigraph above mocking *Earl*’s opening monologue, found the show’s unrelentingly “camp” aesthetic obvious and off-putting. Franklin’s critique proclaimed “fake sincerity” to be the screen specialty of the sitcom’s star Jason Lee, citing his career roots playing a loveable loser in Gen-X director Kevin Smith’s cult “slacker” movie *Mallrats* (1995).<sup>118</sup> Yet, many saw something novel and affecting in this sitcom’s strange, counter-intuitive fusion of excessive irony with ‘genuinely’ sweet and hopeful

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<sup>116</sup> Nancy Franklin, “Boys in the Hood: ‘My Name Is Earl’ and ‘Everybody Hates Chris,’” *The New Yorker*, November 7, 2005, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/07/051107crte\\_television](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/07/051107crte_television) (accessed May 9, 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Bill Carter, *Desperate Networks* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 17, 365, 382. Despite its rural redneck premise supposedly “antithetical to NBC’s identity,” Carter notes, *Earl* was consistently a top-ranked comedy in its first season, second only in the ratings to CBS’s perennial hit *Two and a Half Men* (382).

<sup>118</sup> Franklin, “Boys in the Hood,” summarizes the industry talk of *Earl* as the format’s next savior, writing, “Apparently, the sitcom, which had been strangled by the kudzulike growth of reality shows, has been reborn.”

sentiment about humanity. As a bold experiment in irony “with heart,” Garcia’s affectionate grotesque of lower-class life and community, a formula that would later carry over into follow-up series *Raising Hope* on FOX, struck a chord with comedy fans and many critics.

Jason Lee plays Earl J. Hickey, an unkempt, mustachioed small-time crook, self-described in the pilot as “the sort of shifty looking fellow” you wisely avoid if you spot him loitering “at a convenience store when you stop off in that little town on the way to Grandma’s house.” In the opening shots, illustrating the character’s plucky voice-over prologue, we watch as he buys beer, cigarettes, and a lottery scratch ticket before sneakily breaking into a young family’s car at the convenience store, stuffing his arms with their kid-friendly road trip CDs and, with a shrug, a small American flag, and fleeing with his loot.<sup>119</sup> This mythic little town of ne’er-do-wells is nestled in the fictional Camden County, whose most illustrious citizen is “TV’s Tim Stack,” alcoholic retired star of *Son of the Beach* (FX’s millennial *Baywatch* parody wallowing in vulgarian laddist cable irony, co-produced by shock-jock Howard Stern). The rural setting is dappled with palm trees, wind-blown trash, and such seedy venues as a men’s club called Club Chubby (whose proprietor is played by 1970s macho icon Burt Reynolds), a bar called the Crab Shack where Earl and his dimwitted, dependent brother Randy (Ethan Suplee) hang out with assorted wastrels, and the trailer park and ramshackle motel this shabby duo alternately call home.

The protagonist’s genial, guileless narration relating “what kind of person I truly am” fills the first third of the series premiere, recounting how his life as a petty thief was recently derailed by a twist of fate compelling him to take an ethical self-inventory. We learn that the hapless antihero (turned hero) was tricked into marriage six years ago by a pregnant “little firecracker” named Joy in a drunken haze (a good reason to carry on drinking heavily, he recalls,

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<sup>119</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, “Pilot,” episode 1.1, written by Greg Garcia and directed by Marc Buckland, first aired September 20, 2005, on NBC.

as we watch him vomiting into the toilet of their marital suite). After nominally helping raise her two illegitimate children with extreme indifference (including a black son she claims is his, Earl Jr.), the deadbeat dad/husband was again tricked three weeks ago into granting her a divorce while laid up in a hospital bed on morphine.<sup>120</sup> As Earl's easygoing exposition drifts between layered flashbacks, we rejoin him moments after the theft we witnessed in the opening scene as he finds he has purchased a winning lottery ticket worth \$100,000 and, running into the street elated, is immediately struck down by a car. The timely accident sends the ticket hurling and confines Earl to his hospital bed where, broke and homeless, he fortuitously overhears talk show host Carson Daly explain the concept of karma. "He says he does good things in life, and that's why his life is so great," Earl later recounts to brother Randy and their motel's Mexican maid Catalina (Nadine Velazquez). Scrutinizing his own life, while casting his eyes over the garbage-strewn pavement outside the squalid room he inhabits now that his wife and Earl Jr.'s father have claimed his trailer for their love nest, he begins to grasp a bigger picture. "Got me thinking. ... I ain't ever done anything good I can think of," Earl reflects, resolving, "If I want a better life, I need to be a better person."

Despite Randy's skepticism and refusal to squander beer money on his brother's "stupid-ass crusade," Earl's faith in karma grows when a gust of wind returns his winning lotto ticket during his first act of atonement, picking up the parking lot trash to make up for being "a litter bug." For his next good deed, Earl sets out to help a lonely man he bullied as a kid, Kenny (Gregg Binkley), find happiness as an adult—by getting him laid—and in the process, "Karma" forces Earl to conquer his own homophobia. This time he is rewarded with heartfelt gratitude

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<sup>120</sup> The surname Hickey, suggestive of "hick," also takes on some sexual innuendo with the names Randy and Joy. Series creator Greg Garcia uses allegorical naming, more irreverently than *Samantha Who?*, with Earl's Joy, whose remarried name is Joy Turner, and more explicitly with *Raising Hope*'s toddler Hope Chance, born into poverty, bastard child of a deranged serial killer and feckless teen dad with more heart than smarts.

and friendship, as Kenny gains the courage to embrace life as a gay man, saying, “Earl Hickey, the one man I was the most scared of in my whole life, has accepted me as I am. ... [W]hen we were kids, you took away my confidence. But today you gave it back. Thanks, Earl.” Standing in a gay club likewise secure in himself, Earl’s nodding acceptance of this praise and final narration conceding the power of “a little enlightenment” imbue his shrugging demeanor and crooked smile with benevolent satisfaction, recoding his ‘slacker’ affect as the unassuming, self-possessed calm of a wiseass turned wise man.

From episode two onwards, the protagonist’s self-definition has changed, and the series begins to draw the distinction between the present-day reformed hero “Good Earl” and former “Bad Earl” (although these actual labels emerge later in the series). Earl makes his humble self-introduction as a recovering crook each week in the new title sequence voice-over, in which the unprincipled miscreant whom Earl insists he truly “is” in the pilot is demoted to past tense:

You know the kind of guy who does nothing but bad things and then wonders why his life sucks? Well, that was me. ... Karma. That’s when I realized I had to change. So I made a list of everything bad I’ve ever done, and one by one I’m gonna make up for all my mistakes. I’m just trying to be a better person. My name is Earl.<sup>121</sup>

By the second season, this setup is edited down to consist only of his familiar signoff, vaguely echoing a twelve-step group meeting. In each episode, Earl, with his brother in tow, dutifully tackles one or more list items—for example, in the second episode, apologizing to a friend who served jail time for a crime Earl committed, and making amends with that same friend’s mother for the lost years with her son by forcing her to quit smoking to prolong her life.<sup>122</sup> Where the

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<sup>121</sup> Introduces episodes 1.2 through 1.23 (September 27, 2005–May 4, 2006), and is then abbreviated from the first season’s finale on, with the exception of the second season premiere (September 21, 2006) which uses the full version.

<sup>122</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, “Quit Smoking,” episode 1.2 (production no. 1ALJ01), written by Kat Likkell and John Hoberg and directed by Marc Buckland, first aired September 27, 2005, on NBC.

list is concerned, the ends justify legally dubious means, such as breaking and entering to research Kenny's private life, and, in this example, kidnapping. What begins as self-preservation (Earl exclaims in the pilot, "That karma stuff is gonna *kill* me unless I make up for everything on that list!") gradually develops into a personal mission Earl pursues with conviction, taking pride in crossing items off his list and learning that the rewards for 'goodness' need not all be tangible.

Several first season episodes more decisively part the sea of irony when emphasizing Earl's growth, participating in the new sincerity with expressly patriotic themes and unambiguous morals. In the March 2006 episode "Didn't Pay Taxes," when bureaucracy blocks his attempts to pay back-taxes for unreported income, an exasperated Earl resorts again to criminal means. "My whole life the government only paid attention to me when they thought I was being bad, so I had no choice. I was gonna be bad," he rationalizes.<sup>123</sup> Plotting to settle his debt indirectly, Earl climbs a public water tower hoping for a trespassing fine, but this scheme goes awry as he and Randy rupture the roof by roughhousing and so spend several days stuck dangling from rope inside the abandoned structure. Denying responsibility, Earl blames government inefficiency for his predicament. "They think *I'm* bad..." he lashes out. "Screw the government. They never did anything for us." The protagonist's prideful outlook takes a patriotic turn, however, as the brothers are lifted out to freedom by a local policeman, city worker, postal carrier, and fireman, working together on the government's (and taxpayer's) dime. The story puts a human face on public service, joining in the larger discourse paying tribute to rescue workers as everyday heroes. As the assembled team hoists Earl out by his rope, he is carrying an American flag—the same symbol we saw him steal with shrugging indifference at the outset of the series.

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<sup>123</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, "Didn't Pay Taxes," episode 1.17 (production no. 1ALJ16), written by Michael Pennie and directed by Craig Zisk, first aired March 2, 2006, on NBC.



Figure 6.9. *Left*: A rescue team of government employees raises Earl Hickey (Jason Lee), and with him the American flag, from an abandoned water tower. “Didn’t Pay Taxes,” *My Name Is Earl*, originally aired March 2, 2006, on NBC.

Figure 6.10. *Right*: An American flag mounted at the entrance to the Hickey family home hovers over dad Carl’s (Beau Bridges) shoulder, as he teaches Earl to rebuild a classic Mustang. “Dad’s Car,” *My Name Is Earl*, originally aired March 16, 2006, on NBC.

The flag, which stood erect on the tower roof before its collapse, remains relevant in the *mise-en-scène* throughout the trespassing storyline (fig. 6.9). “Maybe the government doesn’t always just see people as bad or good. Sometimes it just sees people who need help,” Earl’s narration reflects, disturbing the simple moral dualism, and distilling the lesson. “And even if you don’t see the government working for you every day, it’s out there working for somebody.” The plot concludes with Earl not only happily paying his fine, but offering to cover the additional \$4,000 it cost to rescue him, only this time he is humbled when his money is refused. “Turns out being saved by the government is free to taxpayers. Taxpayers like me,” he beams, pulling away from the county clerk’s office on the back of Randy’s scooter, while his brother sports a motorcycle helmet emblazoned with the stars and stripes.

In the following week’s episode, Earl learns the value of spending “quality time” with his dad when he attempts to make up for being a selfish kid and perpetual disappointment to his parents. After returning his father’s prized ‘65 Mustang, winning the car back from a drag racing

degenerate (guest star Timothy Olyphant) to whom juvenile Earl lost it on a dare twenty years earlier, he belatedly learns that the elder Hickey had intended for them to restore it together, for him to inherit on his sixteenth birthday. Recreating the father-son bonding experience he had sabotaged (“cheated myself out of”), Earl devotes several weeks to rebuilding the classic American automobile in his parents’ driveway, where he finally comes to appreciate his dad’s company (fig. 6.10). Hoping for him to retain this “first good memory” of their time together, Earl leaves the car in his dad’s care. “Some people might think that... was an unselfish act. But I wasn’t doing it for him,” narrator Earl earnestly confides, as the episode concludes with the two enjoying a ride on a country road. In the final shot, pulling tonal focus back onto the comedy of the transgressive, they cruise past the aged drag racer who is parked on the shoulder in his ragged Pontiac Trans Am, consoling himself in defeat by suckling the toes of Camden’s prolific daytime prostitute Patty (Dale Dickey), while she fends off his pet ferret in the back seat.<sup>124</sup>

While the narrative framework of the series does not shy away from episodic “lessons,” offered as sincere or heartfelt character insights in the above examples, the show’s overarching absurdist ethos is categorically carnivalesque. The comedy continually reopens the seam of naughtiness, indulging Camden’s spirit of communal outlawry. Particularly in the subsequent seasons, the series favors extended flashbacks and other narrative devices that enable unreformed Earl to reassert himself prominently. Wallowing in Earl’s badness, the text fosters a kind of appreciation for the antihero in his own right as loveable rascal and carefree trickster, operating outside of the social order. Illustrating this pull, the mid-second season episode “Our ‘Cops’ Is On” places us in the Crab Shack to join the accumulated cast of side characters

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<sup>124</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, “Dad’s Car” is episode 1.18, written by Barbie Feldman Adler and Brad Copeland and directed by Chris Koch. In the automotive symbology of the show, which features American-made cars and crucks in various states of disrepair, significantly, it is Earl’s ex-wife Joy’s Japanese Subaru BRAT that bears an American flag motif—a key example of *My Name Is Earl*’s insistent use of irony at the level of art direction and *mise-en-scène*.



as they gather around the bar (the virtuous alongside the vice-ridden) and enjoy a favorite rerun of *Cops*, FOX's sensationalistic reality show about "bad boys," shot in their home town.<sup>125</sup>

The fictive broadcast documents pre-list Earl's cheeky crime spree as he steals the police car for a joy ride, a narrative pun as he picks up then-wife Joy (Jaime Pressly) and forces the hostage *Cops* cameraman to record their celebratory sex. Along the way, they also terrorize a gentle-natured young woman Earl long ago robbed of her virginity. At the episode's conclusion, real-time Earl updates his list to add these misdeeds, but mostly basks in a lingering sense of local celebrity with his fellow patrons at the Crab Shack (and shared nostalgia as they relive the 'old' times of 2003) for their collective televised public mischief.

Later episodes expand on this strategy of extensive narrative interruptions ceding screen time to "Bad Earl." In season two's "The Birthday Party," for instance, Earl is discouraged when his family and friends dredge up past misdeeds at a party celebrating his first year of abstinence from crookery. He pleads, "That was Bad Earl. I was kind of hoping we could focus on *Good Earl* tonight. You know, the one who *fixes* things?" Instead, the story highlights Bad Earl's mookish masculinity, dabbling more than is typical of the series in light-heartedly laddish humor that largely celebrates his behaving badly and banks cool irony and bad-boy credibility for the usually serious-talking character, particularly with Joy's memory montage recalling his (endearingly) insensitive jokes and pranks during her pregnancy. Embedded memory flashbacks are edited together in the style of a "clip show," winkingly marking the episode as an exception to the established formula, much like the *Cops* conceit—and Earl's party guests in the end

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<sup>125</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, "Our 'Cops' Is On," episode 2.12, written by Timothy Stack and directed by Ken Whittingham, first aired January 4, 2007, on NBC. The denizens of Camden County are decidedly not depicted as *working*-class, but criminal class. Among the main characters, only Crab Shack cook Darnell "Crabman" Turner (Joy's new husband, employed courtesy of the Federal Witness Protection Program) and maid/stripper Catalina (an illegal alien) have steady jobs. Even Camden's successful elite, such as Tim Stack and Club Chubby's owners, are drunks, wrongdoers, or layabouts. Good Earl is notably unemployed, funded by the lottery, until "Get a Real Job" (2.22, May 3, 2007), when he tackles list item #273 "kept myself from being an adult" by taking steady work at an appliance store.

reveal that their grudges are a ruse and honor his progress by each excusing one past offense from his list.<sup>126</sup> In a 2008 episode titled “Bad Earl,” midway through the third season, Earl in real time reverts to the wicked life, convinced that his good works have gone unrewarded, and insists Karma by now owes him some “good thing,” but regains perspective when Karma acquiesces by delivering his dream girl—a costly reward that tips the karmic scales and, arriving in a speeding motor vehicle, consigns him to a coma.<sup>127</sup>

The show’s focus on the communal criminality that characterizes much of life in Camden, however bracketed by the structuring narrative emphasis on “Karma,” revels in carnival’s chaotic, liberating lawlessness. Earl’s dogmatic understanding of karma as an exacting system of punishment and rewards (“Karma makes the rules.”<sup>128</sup>) is in constant dialogue with the show’s more anarchic, absurdist impulses. These carnivalesque crosscurrents playfully destabilize, and at times temporarily suspend, the text’s tidy moral hierarchy of “good” and “bad,” amplifying transgression, if only to imagine forms of belonging unbounded by difference, as in the “Our ‘Cops’ Is On” example. Even egomaniacal Joy, a scheming vortex of sex and malice, is slowly

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<sup>126</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, “The Birthday Party,” 2.17, written by Hilary Winston and directed by Eyal Gordin, first aired February 15, 2007, on NBC. While most episodes integrate lengthy backstory sequences, several besides “Our ‘Cops’” feature full-episode meta “flashbacks.” Other examples include “Buried Treasure” (2.13, January 11, 2007, written by Erika Kaestle and Patrick McCarthy), in which one burglary is proudly recalled differently from each main character’s perspective; and hour-long “Our Other ‘Cops’ Is On!” (3.7–3.8, November 1, 2007, written by Timothy Stack and Vali Chandrasekaran), revisiting Camden County’s first Independence Day Fair after 9/11.

<sup>127</sup> *My Name Is Earl*, “Bad Earl,” 3.13, written by Alan Kirschenbaum and directed by Eyal Gordin, first aired January 10, 2008, on NBC. Similarly, in “O Karma, Where Art Thou?” (1.12, January 12, 2006), he loses confidence in Karma’s fairness when an abusive rich boss goes unpunished. But after punching the man, Earl has the epiphany that he himself can serve as an instrument of justice—“Karma’s fists”—in a scene wryly playing on a spiritual precept voiced by Christian mystics such as St. Teresa of Ávila (who taught, “Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours. . . . and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.”). *Earl*’s Karma is by no means a purely or transparently benevolent force in the life of the main character, but actively subjects the hero to chaos, misfortune, and violence with results bordering on the more sadistic aspects of *Seinfeld*’s comedy. Karma is treated as a ‘personality’ and indeed an unseen character within the text, a feminized divine entity who cannot be reasoned or bargained with, and the humor implicitly builds on the colloquialism that “Karma’s a bitch.” But as with *Samantha Who?* and *Starved*, the viewer is encouraged to trust that Karma (driving chance, coincidence, synchronicity, . . . and cars) is working for the greater good and steadily nudging the characters toward personal growth.

<sup>128</sup> “I may have made the list, but I do not make the rules” is Earl’s takeaway lesson in the pilot episode.

configured by the text as a loveable character with “heart.”<sup>129</sup> *Earl*’s postmodern carnival plays outside the parameters of political incorrectness as “anti-liberal” comedy, modeled by “equal opportunity offenders” like *South Park* and *Family Guy*, adopting a more utopian spirit of inclusion and shared (fallible) humanity. Even at those moments when the show is most transgressive of the social order, it actively articulates and cultivates desire for a kind of stability based in supportive family and cooperative community. While *Earl* is something of an outlier in the way it combines irony and sincerity, transgression and aspiration, it is part of the broader impulse to negotiate between competing comic imperatives at the height of the turn to sincerity. In the next and final trope we will look at under the umbrella of “irony with a heart,” we revisit sitcom constructions of community that (as touched upon in several examples above including *Samantha Who?*) use constellations of characters more expressly to work through the cultural stereotypes of irony and/as cynicism.

*Irony Loves Company: The Cynic’s Circle of Friends*

As we have seen, the ironist as perpetual “cynic” in the 1990s emerged as an ambivalent figure in the popular imagination, a figure whose “bad-boy irreverence,” “empty cleverness,” self-impressed snarkiness, and other vices have remained a fixation for U.S. television comedy.<sup>130</sup> In the 2000s we can see network sitcoms internalizing the Purdyesque cultural critiques of irony or the ironist through portrayals of deeply flawed characters whose clever, cynical, or sarcastic banter often masks a more profound loneliness or alienation. Contemporary prime-time comedy

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<sup>129</sup> Actress Jaime Pressly, during the fourth/final season, said of her character Joy, “[S]he’s deeply disturbed, yes, but there has been a lot of heart put back into her. We’ve made her more human.” Interviewed in Donna Freydkin, “New Film, Memoir Keep Jaime Pressly on the Move,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2009, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2009-03-16-jaime-pressly\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2009-03-16-jaime-pressly_N.htm) (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>130</sup> The two descriptive phrases quoted here are from Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram,” 178, and Charles Gordon’s “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Maclean’s* 112, no. 41 (October 11, 1999), 67, respectively.

actively negotiates the meanings of this fraught figure through an array of characters marked as shallow, smug, or jaded (as well as being unrelenting lads or ladettes) often defined by their “commitment issues,” who exist to rehearse and exorcise cultural ambivalence about the ironist as an antisocial influence. This embedded ironist occupies a continuum from the outright grotesque to the wry participant-observer in a fictional comic ethnography of human failings. We can no longer simply talk about the ironist as an authorial presence behind a comedy text, without also acknowledging this growing in-text presence of the ironist as a kind of stock character in narrative television, particularly network sitcoms.

This character sometimes channels the voice of the hip comedian (as seen on NBC’s *Whitney* starring neo-ladette Whitney Cummings) or is the point of emotional intelligibility and not-so-secret owner of the show’s humor (as with *The Office*’s Jim Halpert played by John Krasinski). Alternatively, and increasingly, such a character may also serve as a foil to absolve comedy writers of the crimes of the “self-absorbed” cultural ironist through a kind of abjection of irony and pure cynicism. A leading example of the latter trope, whom we will return to momentarily as an extended example, is *Community*’s Jeff Winger (Joe McHale). For the most part, such portraits invite the viewer to laugh both with and at a program’s signature cynic character, who is equally the source and butt of jokes. A number of programs feature the hip ironist *qua* cynic in a quite flattering light, as lovably ‘damaged’ but a stand-out individual and a viable point of identification or at least sympathetic.<sup>131</sup> Still others to varying degrees reconfigure the ‘smart-ass’ as a clever but consistently contemptible, narcissistic, and/or more pathetic figure

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<sup>131</sup> In this category broadly conceived, we might place such memorable characters as *Will & Grace*’s Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes), *Scrubs*’s sneering power-couple Perry Cox and Jordan Sullivan (Christa Miller), *Community*’s Winger, and, perhaps the most consistently favorable representation, *The Office*’s Halpert. Other examples could include *Titus*’s Chris Titus, and in the 2010s, *Happy Endings*’s slacker Max (Adam Pally), *2 Broke Girls*’s sarcastic, ‘ironically’ trashy Max Black (Kat Dennings), and again, *Whitney*’s eponymous bad-girl star.

(comedian David Spade famously fills this role, for example, as petulant Dennis Finch on NBC's *Just Shoot Me!* and scheming 'Lad Aeternus' Russell Dunbar on CBS's *Rules of Engagement*).

With these representations we may indeed find encoded an invitation to watch from a critical distance, to set ourselves above and apart from the sins of the self-impressed social cynic. In some instances, sitcoms adopting irony as a guiding comic sensibility flirt with storylines that expressly heap scorn on irony as a cultural practice, usually with episodes deriding "hipster" rituals of mock-worshipping outdated or bad taste. Such one-off episodes work to distance the program's own ironic sensibility or that of its main characters from "bad" irony framed as a superficial, vain, elitist, subcultural youth practice. This trope, though sporadic, was particularly noticeable in the late 2000s and early 2010s, with programs including *Happy Endings*, *2 Broke Girls*, and *Rules of Engagement* registering and flattering anti-hipster sentiment, in ways somewhat distinct and more cutting than the enigmatic running joke of Frank's trucker hats on *30 Rock* (see Chapter 3).<sup>132</sup> Alternatively, in select comedy formats and forums catering to the avowedly postmodern-ironic Gen-X viewer, audiences are asked to celebrate self-reflexively, and as a taste subculture to embrace irreverently, the cultural stigma of the ironist as nihilistic ne'er-do-well. For example, in 2012, Adult Swim's website promoting merchandise for The Cartoon Network's *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2001–), the surreal sitcom about sentient fast food, praised the "self-absorbed, tactless" appeal of its ultra-snarky, egomaniacal talking milkshake character, Master Shake. Ironic ad copy for a ceramic drinking mug bearing his likeness boasted that any fan who purchased it could own, display, and endlessly savor the "smug" experience of Shake's

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<sup>132</sup> These recent examples include *Happy Endings*, "Dave of the Dead," episode 1.7 (production no. 103), first aired May 4, 2011, on ABC; *2 Broke Girls*, "And the '90s Horse Party," episode 1.5 (production no. 2J6355), first aired October 17, 2011, on CBS; and *Rules of Engagement*, "Cheating," episode 6.6 (production no. 524), first aired December 8, 2011, on CBS. There also exist much earlier instances including on British TV the *Seinfeld*-inspired *Baddiel's Syndrome* (Sky One, 2001).

supreme “self-satisfaction” and “manly charisma.”<sup>133</sup> Not unlike the programs drawing a bright line between metatextual and hipster irony, this kind of self-reflexivity anticipates an audience attuned to both the in-group pleasures of partaking in televisual irony and social incentives for sitting in judgment of “smug” irony.

More typical in contemporary prime-time sitcom is a sustained comedic tension built-in to the “situation” at the level of continuing characters, with shows that play witheringly cynical and sweetly sincere personalities against each other in the same text. Qualities of “dewy-eyed” sincerity and idealism are strategically paired with hard-core cynicism, sometimes poignantly, as we see in the contrast represented by *Scrubs* doctors Dorian and Cox or *How I Met Your Mother* bachelors Ted and Barney. In these and other post-nineties sitcoms, perhaps especially those that dare to place an earnest and idealistic character at their narrative center, we routinely find a cynical alter-ego and/or sidekick acting as a buffer against narrative outbursts of overt sentimentality, allowing comedy writers to accommodate an ironic and a sincere voice as dueling yet mutually sustaining impulses in U.S. comedy. A similar dynamic is reproduced across many series, whether as a foundation for touching TV friendships or to accentuate clashing personalities.<sup>134</sup> With this becoming a dominant approach to representing difference in ensemble and buddy comedies, the contest between cynicism and earnestness—in the program, the viewer, the cultural forum, and perhaps by implication the American psyche—is continually staged

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<sup>133</sup> Hovering beside the ad text was a webvideo mimicking the Home Shopping Network, pure parody presented as “real” marketing gimmick, in which banal elevator music plays while a stiff, coiffed, middle-aged sales lady coos, “We know how much you *love* these characters!” Adult Swim Shop, <http://www.adultswimshop.com/cat/Aqua-Teen-Hunger-Force/Aqua-Teen-Hunger-Force-Master-Shake-Ceramic-Cup.html> (accessed February 22, 2012).

<sup>134</sup> Additional relevant examples of TV friend couples accentuating a sincerity/cynicism contrast include *New Girl*'s romantically entangled roommates Jessica Day (Zooey Deschanel) and Nick Miller (Jake M. Johnson) and *2 Broke Girls*'s down-on-luck entrepreneurs Caroline Channing (Beth Behrs) and Max Black (Kat Dennings). In the drama *House, M.D.* (referenced earlier as masculine melodrama), ironical maverick Gregory House's tumultuous, affectionate bromantic bond with exceedingly earnest, straight-laced colleague Dr. James Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) provided for comic buddy capers and pranks throughout the show's run.

week after week somewhat independent of plot conflicts driving any episode. Here, difference in ideology and identity are supplanted or overshadowed by differences in affect and *attitude*.

As this dialectic plays out in terms of taste and temperament in sitcoms, the dual emphasis on earnest and ironic or cynical subjectivities is often most acute in multi-generational workplace and family comedies. Among the most high profile examples, *The Office* contrasts boss Michael Scott's (Steve Carell) childlike enthusiasm, emotional hypersensitivity, and often pathetic naïveté with Jim Halpert's knowing irony, and *Modern Family* pits the sentimentality of soft-hearted dreamer dad Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell) against the world-weariness of pragmatic patriarch Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill, in a role we will return to shortly), along with other persistent tensions in these ensemble comedies. While the documentary framework in both shows allows each character to build a rapport with the audience in talking-head segments, *The Office*, as many have noted, actively aligns the viewer with Halpert's dry and detached (youthful) perspective on his office environment, by means of his conspiratorial sideways looks and shrugs directed to the camera as he sits in silent judgment of the unfolding action. Dubbing this "the Halpert shrug," scholar Christopher Kocela, among others, contends that it encourages the audience to take up a consistent position of "cynical detachment."<sup>135</sup> NBC's *Parks and Recreation*, using a similar quasi-documentary style, replicates and complicates this distancing tactic using secondary characters. Protagonist Leslie Knope's (Amy Poehler) exuberant optimism, as a public servant in local government whole-heartedly committed to community, is self-reflexively reined in by means of several supporting cast members who represent forms of cynicism, including anti-

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<sup>135</sup> Kocela further argues that the audience (being detached) laughs at Michael Scott's "painfully earnest" and unselfconsciously hypocritical attempts at corporate family and fealty in part because he represents a "cynical corporate attitude towards political correctness" (165). Although here Kocela allows that the self-reflexivity of *The Office* (U.S.) invites forms of critical reflection, the working premise behind his thesis is Žižek's absolute assertion that TV sitcom and society are "fundamentally cynical." Christopher Kocela, "Cynics Encouraged to Apply: *The Office* as Reality Viewer Training," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37, no. 4 (winter 2009): 161–68.

government bureaucrat Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman) and non-emotive, perpetually bored twenty-ish office slacker April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza), an ostentatiously nihilist youth constitutionally opposed to “caring” about anything.

Identifying with the position of cynical subject is frustrated to a greater extent in this latter show than in *The Office*. In addition to being a more marginal character, April’s furtive glances to camera (emphasized from the second season on) lack the warmth and arguably the charm of “the Halpert shrug,” limiting connection with the character and underscoring alienation in her insistence on taking the ironic life to antisocial extremes—with occasional hints that her aggressively apathetic stance is defensive and ambivalent.<sup>136</sup> Although April’s glaring indifference, along with coolly noncommittal attitudes of other nay-sayers in the office crew, ensures some distance between authorial voice and Knope’s utopian and sentimental perspective, we see the protagonist’s affable commitment and good-heartedness regularly overwhelm the cynical contingent of her team, enticing them to support her in various initiatives in spite of themselves. Tonally, like many sitcoms of the last decade, each of these series brokers a comic compromise between bitter ironic chic and a sweeter sentimentality, managing to wring heartfelt humor in moments of rupture where that distinction begins to break down or is tentatively transcended. By continually restaging the contest between cynical detachment and open-hearted idealism at the level of interacting personalities, these programs symbolically rehearse competing cultural sensibilities as embodied character traits and potential subject positions, often cleverly splitting the difference.

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<sup>136</sup> One significant moment of rupture comes in “Galentine’s Day,” episode 2.16, first broadcast February 11, 2010, by NBC. The episode approaches hipster irony with marked ambivalence, as April grows conflicted and ultimately rebukes her ironically-straight gay boyfriend, complaining, “God, why does everything we do have to be cloaked in like fifteen layers of irony?”



Ultimately, the various textual tactics for marking, and sometimes mocking, the ironist through assorted comic stereotypes are one more sense in which U.S. self-reflexive television irony is about “having it both ways.” A possible and perhaps preferred reading strategy in some such texts is to occupy both positions: to adopt an ironic stance *and* transcend irony (or at least laugh at its caricature). On the one hand, the viewer can comfortably align with the “smart” ironic voice of the hip contemporary television text, and on the other, simultaneously, join in ritual ridicule of the irredeemable cynic.<sup>137</sup> These tropes that I’ve just outlined serve to reify and yet also to pluralize the cultural meanings of irony, through representations that alternately seek to pin down irony as a discrete, de-legitimated cultural practice (linked to youth and “hipsters”) and to multiply not only the categories of cultural ironist but also the levels on which the television viewer can identify and respond to irony. It becomes possible to embrace and disavow the ironist within us as we consume these programs.

*“Everyone Stay Perfectly Sincere!”: Community*

This productive tension is not new, certainly, but is especially in evidence as a persistent formula from the 2000s onwards. Indeed, by decade’s end this dynamic was foregrounded as a structuring premise of NBC’s hip meta-comedy *Community*, as a “sitcom about sitcoms” rife with pop culture references tailored to the Generation X ironist, which both openly satirizes and fully participates in this trend. The show repeatedly underlines its use of a loner cynic as a main character, aloof hipster Jeff Winger, while also reflecting on his potential for social integration—that is, the show scratches away at the veneer of his hardened cynicism to hint, albeit parodically,

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<sup>137</sup> I would include the insult-slinging, shallow, laddish bad-boy here (e.g., *Just Shoot Me!*’s Dennis Finch, *How I Met Your Mother*’s Barney Stinson). Serialized story arcs and glimpses of back-story routinely groom these comic stereotypes to earn our affection, while relentless sexism ostensibly marks TV’s lovable louts as worthy of scorn. Again, there are certain clear precedents for this in sitcoms of a prior era (e.g., *Night Court*’s Reinhold “Dan” Fielding, played by John Larroquette, 1984–92 on NBC).

at a “caring” and “better” person in-the-making. Jeff is portrayed as smart, clever, and the one character perhaps most capable of understanding the likely consequences of the various types of zaniness in which he’s embroiled in weekly plots—making him a somewhat plausible point of identification for the viewer.<sup>138</sup> Yet, he is routinely harangued by several relentlessly earnest members of his Greendale Community College study group (Britta, Annie, and Shirley) and either ‘punished’ by the text for his cynicism (e.g., by missing out on life’s joys or deeper meanings) or recuperated into a shared lesson about the value of community by episode’s end.

In one particularly ‘meta’ and cagily sentimental episode about TV-obsessed classmate Abed’s (Danny Pudi) search for “the meaning” of Christmas, a claymation Jeff Winger is attacked by a swarm of Humbugs that feast upon his sarcasm, while self-righteous gal pal Britta (Gillian Jacobs) declares this a fitting fate for a “smug douche” such as himself (see fig. 6.11).<sup>139</sup> Britta is the show’s parody of the uptight liberal/feminist stereotype, pretentiously performing interest in various social causes, whose perpetual incredulity, clashing with Jeff’s don’t-care-about-anything attitude, allows the show to spoof the “done-to-death will-they-or-won’t-they” sitcom hook of the unlikely romance.<sup>140</sup> In the episode in question, Britta, too, is deemed flawed and unworthy to complete the quest for *true meaning* with Abed and is exiled from his fantasy narrative—that is, until both offenders are redeemed in the third act when, together, they begrudgingly agree to “*commit* to something” by joining their friends in a group song.

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<sup>138</sup> Newcomb’s “Situation and Domestic Comedies” notes that in traditional situation comedies it is secondary characters who possess a sense of “probability” that helps to make the story world relatable for the audience, as these characters will reflect the reasonable audience member’s distance from the “wacky” clown in an “improbable” world of his own (37–38). That formula breaks down completely in this program, where non-wacky characters “who will react similarly to the audience” (ibid.) are thrust into a story world in which unlikeliness reigns.

<sup>139</sup> *Community*, “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas,” episode 2.11 (production no. 222), written by Dino Stamatopoulos (“Star-Burns”) and series creator Dan Harmon, first aired December 9, 2010, on NBC.

<sup>140</sup> The quotation is from critic Hampton Stevens, “The Meta Innovative Genius of ‘Community,’ *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/05/the-meta-innovative-genius-of-community/238740/> (accessed August 28, 2011). In the early seasons, Britta is the Diane Chambers to Jeff’s Sam Malone.

As a further postmodern flourish, their song affirms the absolute relativism of meaning (in this case the meaning of Christmas), while doubling as the group's collective rebellion against a meddling therapist who is bent on spoiling Abed's whimsical fantasy/delusion by imposing a rigid singular, rational meaning that lacks imagination as well as compassion.



Figure 6.11.

The Greendale gang watch as “bitter, shallow hipster” Jeff Winger is devoured by insects after he fails to heed Abed’s warning, “*Everyone stay perfectly sincere! Humbugs are attracted to sarcasm.*” “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas,” *Community*, originally aired December 9, 2010, on NBC.



Figure 6.12.

Later in the same episode, Abed takes a runaway train through the harsh, wintry terrain of Planet Abed in search of meaning and insight into his deepest buried emotions. The train’s control panel settings (as further metacommentary on “cool” irony) include: “Aloof,” “Detached,” “Distant,” and Icelandic singer “Björk.”

While Jeff is situated as the star of the sitcom, it is Abed who with cool detachment but also a deeper insight and capacity for *caring* about possibilities and outcomes consistently provides metacommentary, and whose mastery of navigating the generic structures of media texts flatters the “smart,” ironic audience (see fig. 6.12). Though cynical and aloof, Jeff has the

greatest set of social abilities and sense of probability, but these often fail him because he does not view his world as a media text. The show thus builds a contrast between the differing claims on self-awareness and detachment represented by the pragmatic Jeff (in-the-know about the “real” world) versus the fanciful Abed (likely autistic, perplexed by social probabilities and cues but a media savant profoundly self-aware about pop culture). In Abed’s claymation journey of self-discovery, the answer he seeks appears, to his dismay, in the form of a gift package containing a DVD box-set of *Lost*—the cult TV hit that notoriously left fans dissatisfied with a series finale that many felt did not deliver on the promise that deep secrets about the storyworld would be revealed and the audience’s patience rewarded. In addition to showcasing *Community*’s hyper-awareness of its *own* constructedness and extreme intertextuality, this “inside” joke’s greater affective pay-off lies in its acknowledgment of the fan community as seekers and makers of meaning. With scenes like this one, the authorial voice validates the viewer as both detached postmodern-ironic subject *and* emotionally invested audience member/fan.

Throughout the series, the familiar structures of identification for U.S. situation comedy are relentlessly undercut and satirized, leading *The Atlantic*’s Hampton Stevens to question whether it is possible for audiences to “feel emotionally connected to the characters.”<sup>141</sup> Stevens in a May 2011 editorial warned that this show, to the extent that it asks to be read as a pure satire of sitcom gimmicks, runs the risk of pushing ironic distance too far by providing no “real” relationships to care about, and he drew a direct contrast to *How I Met Your Mother* which he argued “thrives because audiences feel emotionally connected.” Stevens’s assessment sparked discussion in the magazine’s online edition among readers posting to debate *Community*’s merits, with fan comments defending the comedy as “character-driven,” “poignant,” and satire “with heart.”

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<sup>141</sup> Stevens, “Meta Innovative Genius.”

*Community*'s blatant, self-conscious cannibalization of formulaic sitcom conventions (and other cultural genres) demands/flatters an emotionally detached mode of viewing, ensuring that "endearing" and "teachable" moments in the text are always-already bracketed by heavy irony. Curiously, as character relationships are refined and fan investments in this show deepen over the seasons, that barrier proves somewhat permeable. Not only is viewer fondness for certain characters encouraged, and anchored by the sweetness of the in-text "bromance" between best friends Troy (Donald Glover) and Abed with their childlike sense of wonder (celebrated by the implied authorial voice), but also (much as we saw with sympathetic readings of *South Park*) the embedded sincere "messages" of community and personal growth are not necessarily "cynically" canceled out, and consequently never entirely contained. Didacticism and piety as a basis for sitcom resolution are held up for ridicule, approaching the weekly "moral" as a contrivance and obstacle bedeviling a spirit of imaginative play that the show valorizes (and affirms by ceding the tag sequences to the "Troy-and-Abed" duo for quirky mini-sketches that often stand apart from the narrative). However, wisdom gleaned and feelings expressed in Jeff's many come-to-God moments in which he verbalizes his takeaway lessons are (similar to Stan Marsh's) tonally liminal and not specifically crushed by the knowing smirk. Indeed, warm moments of comic reflection on humanity are scattered through this text like (in video-game parlance) Easter Eggs, as if to reveal these as a hidden or lost dimension of our cultural irony. Fully embracing the spirit of postmodern irony, the show's ironic frame does not wholly undercut the nuggets of heartfelt sentiment, but rather dangles them before the viewer as curiosities to consume as suits your desire, facilitating a flexible and strategic mode of viewing intent on "having it both ways."

**Conclusions: “... we somehow fit together”**

In the September 2009 series premiere of ABC’s acclaimed *Modern Family*, stalwart alpha-male Jay Pritchett (Ed O’Neill) delivers the program’s ultimate punch line in a curious instance of double-voiced narration. With a meandering closing voice-over, this character who embodies cool, drama-free, dignified ‘real’ masculinity seemingly opens up emotionally with a tender, lyrical speech about familial love transcending difference, framed within the documentary conceit of the show as sincere direct address to the audience. “We’re from different worlds, yet we somehow fit together. Love is what binds us, through fair or stormy weather. I stand before you now with only one agenda. To let you know my heart is yours...,” we hear him say, as we watch Jay with his extended family gathered to meet his gay son Marshall’s adopted infant Vietnamese daughter for the first time. The camera cuts from this touching scene of family togetherness to show Jay recontextualized, seated on his couch, not speaking these words directly from “my heart” but rather reading from a love poem penned by his hyper-earnest, pudgy, pre-teen stepson meant for his crush, a 16-year-old “older woman” at the local mall. With the sentiment now resignified for the audience as the drippy ramblings of a young boy in love and overreaching, Jay, resuming his role in the story as long-suffering father not wise narrator, proceeds to brush it off with an incredulous tone and wry smile as he belts out the ill-rhymed conclusion (the poem ends fumblingly with the girl’s name) and laughingly editorializes, “I mean, *seriously!*”—in much the same way that TV critics were prone to dismiss “sugary” sentimentality across a broad swath of *Cosby*-era domestic sitcoms. Avoiding that fate, with this signoff the program teasingly gestures to privileging the sensitive side beneath Jay’s world-weary, tough-guy exterior, then pulls back just enough to keep his dry and cynically slanted wit once again sharply in focus.

So it is that the contemporary sitcom strikes a subtle balance of ironic voice and sincere sentiment. With the most heartfelt moments, the net of irony is never far behind to stop our fall into “saccharine” or “cornball” sentimentality. Typical of the tonal bargain many series like this one would strike in the seasons to come, by the outset of the 2010s, cynical perspectives commingle with earnest voices—in the above example, with two distinct voices literally fusing through the narration, before pulling apart again for the joke “reveal.” Such uses of irony as a distancing tactic are not ultimately designed to undermine the embedded textual elements of sincere humor “with heart,” but indeed often serve as a prelude for cynical detachment (of characters and by invitation viewers) to succumb to the lure of emotional engagement, with much contemporary comedy enacting a kind of ritualized push-and-pull. What journalist Jen Doll calls the cultural “seesaw of earnest to irony” is not only enacted *across* media texts and genres (or generations, as she describes) but in contemporary television comedy fairly openly oscillates *within* them.<sup>142</sup>

I have chosen to conclude this chapter with this glimpse into *Modern Family*'s purposeful marriage of irony and sincerity as a testament to current trends for several reasons. The series was widely greeted in the press as the “best” and breakout comedy hit of the early 2010s and upheld in the industry as the latest savior of the sitcom genre, and consequently heavily imitated. It is also notable as one of prime-time comedy's most elaborate meditations on competing masculinities, posed as distinct cultural/comic sensibilities, with Jay Pritchett heading up a multi-household hierarchy as the vaguely obsolete late-middle-aged white patriarch overseeing his own and his adult children's closely intertwined family units in this post-nuclear, multi-generational, multiracial family show. *Entertainment Weekly* praised the series for perfecting TV's portrait of a charmingly dysfunctional “postmodern modern family,” and congratulated

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<sup>142</sup> Doll, “Irony's Not Dead,” as cited above.

O'Neill for rising to the "trickiest" challenge with his performance rendering Jay at once "deadpan sarcastic and a genuinely decent guy."<sup>143</sup> The character is presented as a defiant vestige of archetypally stoic masculinity, a by-the-bootstraps self-made working man's success story surrounded by alternative and new masculinities (high-strung gay son Marshall and his flamboyant boyfriend; the bookish and genteel adopted stepson, who goes by "Manny" and is a mama's boy coddled by Jay's Latina-bombshell second wife; and to his eternal disappointment, hypersensitive son-in-law Phil). While idealistic, sensitive guy Phil is arguably the show's "gooey" emotional center, bringing a gentler clownish sense of humor as the comedy counterweight to Jay's dry sarcasm, and indeed gets the final word in the aforementioned episode with a sillier tag sequence, it seems fitting that the more hardened and pokerfaced Jay should be the one to set the tone for the series in the pilot by supplying a "moral" for the story couched in irony. The same distinctive, deadpan voice known to national audiences as that of *Married... With Children's* Al Bundy, ambassador of postmodern-subversive sitcom and head of TV's foremost dysfunctional "Not the Cosbys" family that helped launch American comedy into the "Irony Age," is poignantly repurposed to reimagine the postmodern TV family for different times. Certainly, the series leverages O'Neill's star persona, as the preeminent wiseass anti-*Cosby* TV dad, yet significantly rebrands him in the image of the "new sincerity" as a character defined by his decency and big heart.

This chapter has traced trends in writing and programming on American television from the latter half of the 2000s that set about severing the dominant associations of irony with postmodern nihilism and "cynical detachment" in the critical imagination. We have explored appeals to depth, compassion, caring, and authenticity in texts that uphold an ironic sensibility

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<sup>143</sup> Ken Tucker, "Modern Family" (TV review), *Entertainment Weekly*, October 9, 2009, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20310552,00.html> (accessed May 28, 2013).



and playfully self-reflexive postmodern style as the markers of quality television and basis for “hip” comedy, yet place a premium on both emotional engagement and ironic distance as the key ingredients in the heady brew of “special” television. Especially in the brief period of heightened emotion and patriotic fervor that set a “serious” mood for national deliberations on American character and morality in the mid-2000s, openly exploring themes of truth, humanity, and the taking of an “honest personal inventory” was in bounds and in its own way an “edgy” move in ironic comedy, ranging from melodrama *Rescue Me* to campy sitcom *My Name Is Earl*.

Masculinity, I have argued, once again serves as a key staging ground for renegotiating the terms of irony as a cultural formation and comic practice, as well as personal disposition. From men’s genres such as masculine melodrama (comedic or otherwise) to the family sitcom, we find constructions of erratically sincere, soulful masculinity often supplying “the heart” of television’s sincerest ironies. “Tough,” “sarcastic,” and “anti-PC” masculinities acquire a multi-dimensionality and claim on sincerity lacking in most 1990s representations of laddishness. Stubbornly “insensitive” or “bad” behavior provides the impetus for change and renewal in many of our examples (even “Bad Sam” in *Samantha Who?* is arguably a female masculinity as the archetypal insensitive ladette or “notional” lad), but the portraits of the ill-behaved rebel also ultimately provide the foundation for claims to character depth, complexity, and heroic resolve. Man-centered dramas and dramedies have utilized the affective structures of melodrama to allow for and process intense feeling and explore meanings of courage, heroism, and “genuine emotion,” while often deploying forms of irony to masculinize and bracket the “weepy” dimensions of the genre. The FX strategy, notably, further buffers the “emotionality” of its serious and comedic melodramas by allying them through scheduling and cross-promotion with

its slate of more ostentatiously postmodern-ironic sitcoms that duck the call to sincerity, even as those shows may have “something to say” in the furtive tongues of satiric irony.

A program like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, in this latter category, provides a compelling contrast to dominant trends as comedy prioritizing pure transgression and taboo and calling on so-called insincere irony to say “the unsayable.” By no means singularly voiced or “stable” as social commentary in its fluid critique carnivalizing American cynicism, apathy, entitlement, privilege, and laddish brotherhood, *It's Always Sunny*'s comedy of disorderly conduct stakes out a more pointed irony willing to ridicule even the codes and logics of laddism. This conspicuously postmodern, slippery comedy is uniquely equipped to comment as and about the lawlessness and avowed insensitivity of “political incorrectness,” managing both to *be* politically incorrect humor and to use that comic license to satirize and render grotesque the notes of “selfishness” and “antisociality” that underpin standard rhetorical defenses of anti-PC attitudes. As I argued in Chapter 5 when focusing on aspirations that specific interpretive communities have expressed for irony as political “engagement,” and will reiterate here also with regard to the parallel strains of *emotionally* engaging comedy that do not as readily conform to those reading formation's ideas for Ironic Engagement, the sincering of irony by comedy writers and critics precipitates a particular type of policing of the anarchic utopian pleasures and potential of postmodern irony. If *Rescue Me*, somewhat reproducing the comic rationales and “issues” of *Tough Crowd*, surrenders much of its postmodern promise in the interest of authenticity and “real” feeling, *It's Always Sunny* and the denizens of Paddy's Pub make no such compromise, defying the disciplinary dimensions of the new sincerity.

A handful of prime-time sitcoms likewise upholding “postmodern” absurdism, ambiguity, and ambivalence, from *My Name Is Earl* to *Community*, similarly rely on radical

self-reflexivity to ironize identity and the politics of representation in ways that ritualize and exaggerate ironic distance—and thereby covertly fixate on and teasingly pull at the barriers to empathetic and ideological identification with characters. Like *It's Always Sunny in the Park*, I would point out, they do so less antagonistically than the prominent brand of “equal opportunity offense” promulgated by *South Park* and by various “anti-liberal” comics, largely laying aside the reactionary threads of political incorrectness as a cultural backlash to more fully recover the anti-hierarchical vision of “pure” carnival. These network examples, cult hits in their own right, invert the “negative” or dystopic dark ironies of *It's Always Sunny in the Park* and indeed *South Park* to suspend cultural difference in the interest of an inclusive and at times sentimental vision of community in flawed humanity, however absurdist and cushioned by “knowing” irony they may be. We see in texts like *Earl* and *Community* fruitful and “engaging” efforts to harness the power of carnival and “hipness” of postmodern self-referential irony to comic codes of sincerity in ways that revitalize postmodern carnival’s utopian spirit elsewhere being eclipsed by comedy’s newfound role in the culture wars.

At the same time, in these two examples and other prime-time sitcoms, I have suggested, the recent emphasis on overcoming tensions presumed to exist between ironic and sincere sensibilities has had lasting implications for representations of social “difference” in comedy. Posing affect and attitude as the kinds of difference that count in the current social and comedic climate, contemporary television has seen identity politics effectively reconfigured around these qualities in the sitcom as “social microcosm.” In keeping with the logics of an emergent “post-PC” comic order (as interrogated in Chapter 4), this next generation of liberal-pluralist comedies bargains for the continued “hipness” and the stabilization of irony at the cost of the end of the multiculturalist project. Even shows like *Modern Family* that directly foreground family

dynamics of gender, class, race, and sexuality regularly conceive of colliding or converging “different worlds” in these terms, focusing on affective and comic sensibilities (e.g., cool and sarcastic versus goofy, earnest, emotive, and sentimental masculinities). With sitcoms routinely contrasting cool cynicism with earnest idealism, deadpan sarcasm with sweet sincerity, or “snarky” irony with heart-warming sentimentality as essential elements of character, these become the qualities around which new TV family ensembles and families of affinity are perhaps most consistently organized. Conflicts of cynical versus earnest worldviews are symbolically resolved at the level of interpersonal relationships and to a certain extent celebrated as a “diversity” of temperament.

## Conclusion

### “‘Sincerity’ Is Not Enough”: In Praise of the Unserious

[T]here are other creative sensibilities besides the seriousness (both tragic and comic) of high culture and of the high style of evaluating people. And one cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has respect only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly.

— Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 1964<sup>1</sup>

[T]he greatest sin in the postmodern era was to be duped into sincerity by an insincere artifact.

— Scholar Nicholas Rombes, on “The New Sincerity,” ca. 2002<sup>2</sup>

In Susan Sontag’s germinal essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” published in 1964, she shrewdly advised, “To name a sensibility, to draw the contours of it, to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.” Writing on the cusp of the baby boomers’ youth counterculture, she went on to exhort: “To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble.”<sup>3</sup> Her analysis, an elegant and almost poetic series of impressionistic observations, demonstrates this nuance when regarding the private pleasures and deeper implications of a disposition infused with the comic, enamored of artifice, and averse to the straightly “serious”:

The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious.” One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (fall 1964): 526, note 36.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Rombes, “The Razor’s Edge of American Cinema: The New Sincerity of Post-Ironic Films,” *SolPix* webzine, n.d. (2002 or later), <http://webdelsol.com/SolPix/sp-nicknew2.htm> (accessed July 19, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 515–16.

One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that “sincerity” is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness.<sup>4</sup>

Sontag’s historical sketch traced the evolution of Camp as a “comic vision of the world” three-quarters of a century in-the-making that theatrically sets itself apart from sincerity and morality and instead “sponsors playfulness” through “an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.” This creative inclination, with its taste for whimsy and irony gradually gelling into an artistic and subcultural undercurrent by the mid twentieth century, offered a way to expand one’s perspective beyond high culture’s rigidly rational pursuit of “truth, beauty, and seriousness,” she intuited, by beholding vulgarity not with a reproachful eye (that recoils and takes *offense*) but instead with the playful “way of looking” that enjoys distance from the aesthetic and social codes of sincerity. “Camp sees everything in quotation marks,” she found.<sup>5</sup>

By the time popular magazines such as *Spy* and *Utne Reader* and public intellectuals such as David Foster Wallace presented the case against irony as a yuppie “epidemic” and television institution—propelled by postmodern cynicism as an “enervating” cultural affliction—a quarter-century later, revulsion could be seen steadily overtaking sympathy as a governing stance for critics naming the “new” ironic sensibility. The “anti-serious” taste and “*tender feeling*”<sup>6</sup> that Sontag had so nimbly sketched into an essence of Camp were seen as casualties of a callousness rippling through American popular culture. Consequently, in much cultural criticism during what *Spy*’s Rudnick and Andersen in 1989 proclaimed to be an era of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 527, notes 41–42. The practitioner of such a sensibility, whether assuming the role of cultural consumer or producer, imagines oneself into this “more complex relationship to ‘the serious,’” she suggested, when taking delight and making sport of appreciating seriousness in its “failed” and fantastically extravagant forms (see notes 23–28, 36, and 55, on pages 522–24, 526, 530).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., notes 3, 10, 35, 44, 48, and 52, on pages 517, 519, 525, 527–29.

<sup>6</sup> Sontag, *ibid.*, 530, note 56; emphasis in original.

shallow irony and of formulaic kitsch, or “Camp Lite,”<sup>7</sup> stretching from arch fashion to the media consumed cleverly in the name of hipness, the ironist loomed large as the societal symbol of indifference and insincerity constitutionally and comedically opposed to “honest” emotion.

Irony as it came to be defined by the culturati and shaped by comic practice had grown increasingly mainstream, commercial, and brazen, irreverently embracing “bad” taste yet becoming a stranger to early notions of camp as a liminal and sprightly sensibility hovering in the social margins. There is, however, no hard break that signals the divorce of these closely intertwined sensibilities with a mutual claim on the mischievously unserious and the “apolitical.” “Camp” perspectives on aesthetics were readily absorbed within the logics of postmodern television irony, as exemplified by comedies from Norman Lear’s *Fernwood 2Night* in the 1970s to Chris Elliott’s *Get a Life* in the 1990s (Chapter 1) to Greg Garcia’s *My Name Is Earl* in the 2000s (Chapter 6) and *Raising Hope* in the 2010s. The “loving” distance and benign or “sweet cynicism” of the former sensibility—though by no means absent from these examples—had, according to a particular narrative of decline, metastasized into a jaded hipster irony (or air-quote culture) and a cancerous cynicism draining the social body of “passion and commitment.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, “The Irony Epidemic,” *Spy* (March 1989): 93–98, especially 95–98.

<sup>8</sup> Journalist Charles Gordon, as quoted in my Introduction, in 1999 complained: “In today’s context, irony is a sensibility that values cleverness and style above passion and commitment. . . . It ridicules politics and lauds garage sales.” “When Irony Becomes Cynicism,” *Maclean’s* 112, no. 41, October 11, 1999, 67. Sontag (1964) had asserted, “Camp taste is a kind of love... for human nature” paired with “not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism,” and stressed that such taste neither lacks pathos nor does it “sneer” where seriousness prevails in the dramatic arts or the self-expression of others (notes 39, 55–56, on pp. 526, 530). While some programming (as listed above) knowingly enacts such a camp sensibility, it should be noted that for Sontag, “intending to be campy is always harmful.” She stipulated, “When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals... a contempt for one’s themes and one’s materials... the results are forced and heavy-handed.... Perfect Camp... even when it rests on self-parody, reeks of self-love” (note 20, pp. 521–22). Many though not all of the “self-mocking” sitcoms—particularly those in the tradition of *Married... With Children* or *Seinfeld* that banishes pathos—get equated, in turn, with a “sneering” and contemptuous irony. Although Sontag’s analysis seized on the “apolitical” dimensions (note 2, p. 517) and celebratory frivolousness (note 41, p. 527) of a particular comic vision—and lingered on historical examples cohering into a Camp canon—for today’s reader her larger object of inquiry may carry a particular aura of authenticity and vibrancy associated with the sixties, given that decade’s parallel claim on “rebellious” and “useful” irony.

Sontag's words, taken out of context and transported through time into the "Age of Irony" in American media, nevertheless hold a certain salience as a philosophical prelude to Jerry Seinfeld's comedy of the quotidian, where the comedian-ironist famously reserved 'serious' attention only for the trivial. She had chronicled a mode of experience that "incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy," and that by this logic proposes artifice itself as "a new standard."<sup>9</sup> Critics, as we have seen, would eventually speak of these same conquests when grappling with *Seinfeld's* everyman ironic hero, for whom purposefulness dissolves into laughter in all acts and who, Hibbs's *Shows About Nothing* asserts, embodies "the preeminence of lifestyle over morality,"<sup>10</sup> much as the program itself signaled a victory for playful style over sitcom sanctimony. The sitcom upheld for having "worn artifice like a badge" and seen as sponsoring "privatized rituals of amusement" as the basis for ironic agency for a generation of viewers,<sup>11</sup> was credited with raising (or, its critics said, lowering) irony to the unprecedented status of national pastime and new network norm. The ability to be "serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (to borrow Sontag's fecund phrasing) was widely said to have hardened into ironic nihilism: a cultural refusal to make "meaningful" statements or "take anything seriously." Thus, while "*Seinfeld*-type" humor tested intellectual tolerances for "hip" meta-comedy and "empty cleverness"<sup>12</sup> achieving

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 287–88, notes 38, 43; wording varies from original 1964 publication.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 137.

<sup>11</sup> For these arguments (covered in Chapter 1), see John Thornton Caldwell, *Telesuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 60; and Shane Gunster, "'All About Nothing': Difference, Affect, and *Seinfeld*," *Television & New Media* 6, no. 2 (2005): 219, who delineates and defends *Seinfeld's* thematics of making-something-out-of-nothing as useful ironic strategies for audiences navigating the media currents of nihilism.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, "When Irony Becomes Cynicism," 67.



dominance as a pop-culture aesthetic, the terms on which it was routinely condemned suggest that ultimately it is less irony's institutionalization and commodification under late capitalism than what it has in common with camp and with the carnivalesque—an unruly orientation to the “serious” and the “sincere”—that have made it a continued source of cultural anxiety and an irritant in the eye of social visionaries. Deemed an affront to seriousness, sincerity, and discernible morality, postmodern-ironic comedy was consistently evaluated and devalued as a refusal to “make art as if the world mattered.”<sup>13</sup>

At the outset of this work, I stated my intention to approach the recent history of irony not only as a sensibility ascribed to the present era, but a set of interlocking discourses that have infused that label with its shared meanings as a cultural (or cross-cultural) and comedic category. With my primary focus on American television culture, I have sought to hold the social definitions of irony in a productive tension with the intellectual ambitions for this term and all that it signifies as a concept that by the 1980s had become inextricably bound up with national dialogues about postmodernism and its implications for media and society. While irony's flexibility of meaning has proven attractive and institutionally productive as a strategy for narrowcasters in pursuit of desired demographics, the ambiguity and ambivalence that accompany ironic voice and permeate the postmodern text, destabilizing and “scandalizing” ideology, have fundamentally altered the role of the ironist in the critical imagination.

The first two chapters of this study examined a surge in anti-conventional programming together with influential theoretical perspectives arising at the turn of the 1990s that thrust irony and “hip metatelevision” to the forefront of debates about television's political and cultural

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<sup>13</sup> This quote is from the *Utne Reader's* special edition rallying for a “PoPoMo” movement, as referenced in my Interlude chapter. “Postmodernism and Beyond... (It's Time To Return to the Good, the True and the Beautiful),” *Utne Reader* 34 (July/August 1989): 51.

import. I considered the dispersal of these arguments not only through academic circuits but also popular channels of cultural criticism, as concerns about postmodern irony and cynical detachment fueled a national narrative of a “crisis of nihilism.” As the vanguard of postmodern metatelevision, subversive situation comedies played a lead role in bucking the traditional codes of realism, melodrama, and morality, significantly redefining relatability and disturbing the genre’s own investments in “the serious” and in “earnest” social relevance. The new sitcom ironists offered narratives of neurosis and narcissism, without deeming it necessary to attach any clear or consistent thread of social critique. Comic-grotesque characters often coded as “unlikable” (and demonstrably nihilistic) such as *Married... With Children*’s perennial “loser” Al Bundy, *Seinfeld*’s callous and malevolent New York Four, Mike Judge’s cartoon cretins Beavis and Butt-Head, and *Simpsons* Homer and Bart, alongside more sympathetic sitcom curmudgeons including *Roseanne*’s caustic Roseanne Connor, with their idiosyncrasies and antisocial behavior, became beloved cultural icons as they pushed apathy, discontentment, selfishness, rudeness, and sarcasm to comic excess and allowed viewers to set their own terms for loving or hating these characters. With these sitcoms, and “anti-sitcoms,” broadcasters flattered the viewer’s desire to be ironic, leveraging irony’s ability to create insider discourse to lend networks and audiences a sense of distinction in an increasingly niche media marketplace.

American television comedy’s retreat from “earnestness,” as the slate of postmodern, ironic sitcoms struck a collective blow to the didacticism and clear moralistic vision that dominated *The Cosby Show* years, defied traditional ideological criticism by “scrambl[ing] the codes by which critics seek to read off the ‘politics’” of programming.<sup>14</sup> For the “quality”

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Patton, “Giving up the Ghost: Postmodernism and Anti-Nihilism,” in *It’s a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics & Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Tony Fry, Ann Curthoys, and Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988), 88–89, as quoted in the Interlude.

network sitcom, this push nonetheless largely succeeded in updating without negating the genre's thematic significance for social liberalism, with programs such as *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, and *Will & Grace* seizing on the ironic register to renew network comedy's lease on hipness and claim a sense of progressive sexual politics for socially liberal viewers, while ducking under the radar of 1990s critics who took to routinely faulting feminism and multiculturalism as the stuff of "politically correct" sanctimony and "hyper-sensitivity." In the same decade, anti-political correctness became increasingly linked with "men behaving badly" as a defining trope for comedy both in U.S. media and overseas, laying the groundwork for what some American conservatives today champion as an aggressive "anti-liberal" atmosphere in certain well-lined pockets of the media marketplace. In avowedly masculinist media formats over the past few decades, political incorrectness and irony proved fertile comic strategies for updating and repackaging old-fashioned hegemonic masculinity as newly rebellious and liberating, through an irreverent ironizing of identity politics, asserting the "regular guy" as "victim of PC." This new 'laddism' asserted a proprietary claim on irony that, although by no means enjoying a unilaterally anti-feminist or heterosexist bent—given that this loose collection of performers and programs is broad enough to encompass some provocatively progressive-friendly comic voices—is notable for its role in effectively silencing calls for social sensitivity in media representation. The new lads of comedy were instrumental in sealing the reputation of the ironist as a figure of postmodern paradoxes who "never means" what he says.

The intersections of postmodern-ironic sitcoms such as *Married... With Children* and *Seinfeld* with laddism's celebratory comic thematics of "behaving badly" and portraits of ironic masculinity as an "insincere" ideal, I argued in the opening chapters of this study, put greater distance between the network sitcom and a continued expectation of deliberate progressive

ideology (however destabilized by the postmodern and the un-PC) as the basis for prime-time representations. As political incorrectness and irony became somewhat interchangeable conceits for comedy writers and critics (on the left as well as the right), irony acquired a special and primary purchase as a tool for thwarting “sanctimoniousness,” whether that foe was framed foremost as a grand pitfall of liberal progressivism or as a relic of the sitcom format’s long association with safe, sentimental, formulaic “family viewing.”

As I detailed in Chapter 3, cultural rumblings of an emergent post-9/11 ethos of sincerity reorganizing American life and media displaced attentions to the postmodern as an operative lens for approaching ironic (and post-ironic) subjectivity and TV comedy in the 2000s. The nominal decoupling of “postmodern irony” and rearticulation of irony as a feature of “post-9/11” comic and cultural sensibilities, serving as the context for the remaining chapters, gave rise to the robust and impassioned discourse of Ironic Engagement. With postmodernism giving way to dominant conceptions of a post-9/11 world anchored in the language of truth and “genuine” emotions, the latter became for a time the post that mattered most for the nation’s artists, critics, and consumers, and thus also broadcasters. The result has been the critical and creative desire to disavow or else qualify television irony’s rootedness in the postmodern, and usher in a new ideal of comedy as a more sincere and/or serious art.

The dissertation’s second half tracked refinements to the discourse of a “new sincerity,” which at its broadest has been imagined as both a cultural affect and programming ethos. I contemplated the revitalization and re-inflection of irony as a “socially useful” tool across a range of comic programs and genres during the 2000s, as broadcasters, creator-performers, and critics navigated the cultural demands for sincerity *and* irony. A common thematic and iconography of patriotism stretched across prime time, often accompanying network sitcoms

shoring up a sense of the national family. In select hit shows ranging from FOX sitcom *The Bernie Mac Show* and ABC's *George Lopez* to FX's acclaimed dramedy *Rescue Me*, domestic and work spaces were commandeered as comic stages for proud (and patriotic) patriarchs and, in a smattering of urban multiculturalist programs that likewise showcased sharp-witted and sharp-tongued comedian-stars, iconoclastic voices tried new tactics for asserting diversity—both ethnic and political—as the realization of an American dream. As comedy writers alloyed hip humor with melodrama, or vice versa, “cool” irony and cynicism reasserted themselves with strong overtones of sincerity in both of these trends (discussed in Chapters 4 and 6), while also resurfacing more forcefully in satirical and comedy-talk programs, notably *The Daily Show* and its spin-off *The Colbert Report* (discussed in Chapters 3 and 5), where unflinchingly irreverent comedian-hosts articulated principled dissent as a right and responsibility of the engaged citizen.

Across these venues, truth, community, courage, compassion, and in some cases dissent, remained salient themes for comedy makers throughout the early and mid 2000s. The merging of discourses of civic or moral duty with representations appealing to ironic masculinity, in particular, delivered tonally and morally complex characters—from the inscrutable truth-seeker eliding satire and sincerity (exemplified by Colbert) to recent reformulations of the comic archetype of the cynic “with a heart” in television fiction—equipped to express and exploit contradictions between earnestness and irony, gravity and levity. These and other strains of comedy programming aimed for poignancy or topicality, earning their stars a reputation as “sincere” and model ironists. At the same time, so-called “frivolous” irony continued to be a staple of cable comedy and network prime time, with an abundance of outlandish and antirealist sitcom premises, complicating the national narrative of a “new and improved” era of irony and exacerbating the cultural tension posed between “true” subversive irony and presumably

domesticated, toothless television irony. As we peer beyond the fading narratives of irony's death and renewal, phrases like *post-9/11* begin to lose their salience and fall out of use. Yet, as scholars and critics contemplate a new status quo for a culture reared on irony, the negotiations spurred and foregrounded by the tumultuous 2000s between postmodern irony and its competing or complementary modes—e.g., cynicism, sincerity, satire, and stable or high-modernist irony—continue to shape the critical discourse on comedy and its cultural obligations.

The upsurge in political satire spanning from the late 1990s into the early 2000s intensified what many critics already saw as a problematic blurring of the lines between comedy and news media, as well as comedy and politics itself. Irony, as the key ingredient in this “new comic order,”<sup>15</sup> stood at the center of renewed cultural anxieties about the postmodern. As the distinctions were increasingly eroded between the public roles of the political “comedian” and “commentator,” critics actively reassessed humor's place in civic discourse. On the frontlines of what was being greeted as a nascent “golden age” of dark irony and “serious” comedy in the years after 9/11, some of the same public figures and programs blamed for propagating ironic detachment were also heralded as leaders in recovering the subversive art of satiric irony. As British media scholar John Caughie ascertains in a discussion of intellectual and/or emotional engagement that may accompany forms of ironic “detachment,” and as I have endeavored to argue, “Irony carries no guarantees of value, but it may be the condition in which values are put in play, and in which the viewer exercises her creativity.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the cases of Bill Maher, *The Daily Show*, and *South Park*, among others I have examined, satirists were alternately

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Stooping to Conquer: Why Candidates Need to Make Fun of Themselves,” *The New Yorker* (April 19, 2004): 116–22, as cited previously.

<sup>16</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 215, quoted in Michael Kackman, *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 77.

embraced as informal spokespersons for specific value systems and saluted as daring dissidents or “sane” voices whose irony slashes through the din of political theater and the culture wars.<sup>17</sup>

When seizing on the potential for an “engaged” irony with a political and social conscience, contemporary humor scholarship in communication and media studies has tended to reframe the social value and rhetorical stakes of irony through combined appeals to truth, satirical conviction, and modernist media tactics. Together these focal points form an emerging critical framework that rejects cynicism and postmodernism as the cultural dominant and articulates desired models of irony as a sincere and politically invested cultural practice. The ironist as political satirist is called upon to recover truth in irony (if not also expunge cynicism) and to chart a course through—and beyond—postmodern media discourse. On the one hand, contemporary fictional comedy programs and political satire formats alike have retained and refreshed the deconstructivist and self-reflexive qualities of postmodern “meta” television and irony. Yet, postmodernism for its own sake is not quite the selling point it once was and indeed, as Chapter 5 argued, for anyone who hopes to wring stable meanings from the text, radical polysemy demands complex negotiations in the political imagination as we navigate and deliberate on the intended message or “true” significance of satirical programming in the present media environment.

I am hesitant to look punitively, as some current scholarship and journalism does, on the supposedly “postideological” or “apolitical” postmodern and polyvalent facets of contemporary comedy or faculties of media audiences. One potential cost for the academic left of a pendulum swing away from postmodern theory to focus on the need for a reformed, revitalized public sphere is that we may lose sight of the poststructuralist recovery of the concept of purposeful nonsense, with outrageous play being in itself a politically significant exercise in subversion.

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<sup>17</sup> As Chapter 3 noted, in the “war on irony” after 9/11, Sontag’s reputed relativism was linked to Bill Maher’s in conservative discourse and they mutually came under fire as agents of the “most nihilistic” strain of intellectual irony.

That is, to the extent that we suppress, deny, or explain away the unseemly pleasures of Rabelaisian abasement and ask to conform comedy to any coherent political narrative, we sacrifice some of comedy's most profound cultural contributions as a disruptive and a leveling force. Postmodern textuality, for all its commercialism and ubiquity, springs from this potentially potent foundation for comedic subversion with its collapse of any firm division between "low" play or silliness and "high" mindedness or art. If we celebrate comedy's "destructive" impulses only insofar as they offer up a "constructive" alternative, I maintain, we foreclose on rich possibilities and overlook key irreverent dimensions of the texts under consideration and the ironic subjectivities they cultivate.

As Sontag urged, in the opening epigraph above, "one cheats oneself, as a human being," if one denies the lure of unserious modes of experience and adheres narrowly to social scripts of sincerity as the basis for evaluating and living in the world. The universal laughter and play of carnival shares with the camp sensibility, which Sontag saw as based in a kind of *non-judgment* (that is, a will-to-enjoyment that supersedes a sense of superiority), a certain capacity for upending the traditional logics of taste and "official" systems of value.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, whereas camp's claim on "[d]etachment is the prerogative of an elite" in affluent societies,<sup>19</sup> carnival's "low" themes, vernacular, and vulgarity are by definition populist, of the people. In the commingling

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<sup>18</sup> Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), 530, note 55, writes of "a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment." Again, we have seen how these same qualities (of non-judgment and of playful removal from 'rules' of the official social order) that inform theories of camp and of the carnivalesque likewise form the basis for the definitions of nihilism as a culture-wide phenomenon. Grossberg in 1988 designated ironic nihilism a pervasive "logic" within which "cultural practices refuse to make judgments or even to involve themselves in the world," while Purdy later lamented, "The ironic sensibility inhibits the act of remembering how to value what you value." Lawrence Grossberg, "It's a Sin: Politics, Post-Modernity and the Popular," in *It's a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics & Culture*, 41–42; and Jedediah Purdy interviewed by Marshall Sella, "Against Irony," *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 1999, <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/19990905mag-sincere-culture.html>, as cited in my Interlude and Introduction respectively.

<sup>19</sup> See Sontag's note 45 in "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), p. 527.



and comedic cross-breeding (as well as the mainstreaming) of these sensibilities within postmodern media culture arises a certain impasse for critics who would “read off” the class politics and subversive salience in textual surfaces, or in the ironist’s slippery statements laced with the resilient comic rhetoric of not-meaningness. Yet, I suggest, they converge in their mutual and fruitful project of anti-serious play.

Scholars such as Olsen have emphasized that postmodernism’s “antisystem” comic vision invariably installed its own forms of elitism for audiences to seize upon, while the Fiskean view emphasizing audience agency not only holds out hope for “bottom-up” resistance (as a potential, not an inevitability, in the offensiveness of carnivalesque comedies such as *Married... With Children*) but also finds in postmodern play and televisual irony the foundations for a “semiotic democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Ironic distance is no guarantor of counter-hegemonic resolve nor genuine populist “resistance,” and under the rubric of political incorrectness, certainly not of political progressiveness, but as some of the most stimulating scholarship on *South Park* illuminates, the instability and ambivalence of the unruly text can open up potent channels for disrupting dominant rhetorical frames, without demanding any “fixed” interpretive outcome. Such programming resists or retires the traditional logics of irony as a “communication system” for relaying values from author to audience. Much comedy in this anarchic (anti-)tradition addresses the viewer as a co-conspirator and indeed co-owner of the ironic sensibility, in ways that challenge scholars and comedy enthusiasts to recognize irony as a set of pleasurable negotiations that may carry personal “meaning” for the consumer far exceeding any individual text-viewer encounter.

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<sup>20</sup> See my Introduction for the relevant arguments from Lance Olsen’s *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 120, and John Fiske’s *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 85–87, and my Interlude for Fiske’s key claims from “Family Discipline: A TV Text and an Audience,” *Journal of Communication & Culture* no. 1 (1993): 3–12.

At the same time, as I argued in Chapter 2 and throughout this work, we must be equally aware (and wary) of the cultural reliance on the postmodern irony label as the go-to ideological cover for contentious statements spoken from positions of privilege. Particularly for certain early strains of “politically incorrect” humor and laddism, that label lent power, legitimacy, and considerable countercultural clout to systems of joking that were potentially more based in bigotry and the backlash against multiculturalism, feminism, and the “queering” of mainstream culture than they were invested in joyous absurdism or in ironizing and exploding inflexible systems of hierarchical thought. I say this not as a prescriptivist calling to bracket out these instances as “false” postmodern irony, passing for the real thing.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, I have stressed that postmodern irony in popular usage and consequently as a cultural and discursive formation rapidly came to encompass forms of speech that need not so much be “unstable” in meaning as cleverly claim to be. More often than not in popular culture, moreover, the term named the art of exploiting polysemy to have it “both ways.” The comedy industry that sustains laddism in all of its various and evolving forms has since profited from the steady emphasis on truth-in-irony in recent years, which affords the anti-PC mouthpiece his own status as a kind of heroic truth-teller, even as the new lad’s lingering reputation as a postmodern player grants a degree of political cover.

Bobcat Goldthwait, a long-time adversary of the Sam Kinison school of comedy despite their supposed surface similarities as the “screaming” comedians of the 1980s stand-up scene, is one of the few public figures who has directly challenged the more aggressively boorish comic strands and corresponding discourse of “politically incorrect” and “edgy” comedy, most notably in his 2011 film *God Bless America*, about alienation amidst the ““oh no, you didn’t say that”

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<sup>21</sup> Such a position would piggyback on the prescriptivist critiques discussed in Chapter 3 that spurn postmodern irony itself in general as “bad” (versus “true”) irony precisely because it is multilayered and lacks a guiding sense of truth and value. In the words of Jon Winokur’s *The Big Book of Irony* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), echoed in critiques we heard leveled against *The Daily Show* and *South Park* in Chapters 3 and 5 that seek to reduce these shows to cynicism, “Postmodern irony rejects tradition, but offers nothing in its place” (34).

generation.” Goldthwait’s directorial/authorial voice hovers over the narrative as commentary in embedded bits of dialogue spoken by harried protagonist Frank (Joel Murray), in lines like this one venting about radio shock jocks who rail against the PC Police: “Well, seeing as how I’m not afraid of foreigners or people with vaginas, I guess I’m just not their target audience” (a sentiment also voiced elsewhere by Goldthwait himself, but in reference to Kinison, when interviewed promoting the film).<sup>22</sup> “*You* don’t get it. If you *got* it, you wouldn’t be so offended,” accuses a male coworker, appealing to his duty to defend comic freedom as a fellow “bro.” Frank’s reply, presented with pathos and an air of righteous anger, places knee-jerk defenses of anti-PC in the crosshairs:

Oh, I get it. ... [T]hey act like it’s my responsibility to protect their rights to pick on the weak like pack animals.... I would defend their freedom of speech if I thought it was in jeopardy. I would defend their freedom of speech to tell uninspired, bigoted, blowjob, gay-bashing, racist and rape jokes all under the guise of being “edgy.” But that’s not the edge. That’s what sells.

Prevailing definitions would potentially see this satirical black comedy, a Bonnie-and-Clyde-style murder/revenge fantasy aimed at the reality television craze (tagline: “Taking out the trash, one jerk at a time”), hewing to extremes of ironic “detachment” and comic nihilism (a concept discussed in Chapters 1 and 6).<sup>23</sup> As with *South Park*, such labeling, concerned with locating a

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<sup>22</sup> Goldthwait has said of the frequent comparisons of his earlier stage persona to Kinison’s: “I’m the one that’s not threatened by foreigners or vaginas. I’m the one that was not a misogynistic bully.” Interviewed in 2012 for CNN Comedy, available on YouTube at [http://youtu.be/bG\\_L3OiNwTs](http://youtu.be/bG_L3OiNwTs) (accessed June 7, 2014). For the movie dialogue excerpted here, see *God Bless America*, written and directed by Bobcat Goldthwait, 105 min., DVD (Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> The text positions its jaded fortysomething outlaw protagonist (and his precocious teen rebel accomplice) ‘beyond good and evil’ in their quest to rid the world of bullies, and relegates their ensuing killing spree to the realm of the ‘funny’ and vaguely admirable. With the above, precipitating speech at the outset of the film—which builds over several minutes and culminates in a close-up diatribe against Americans choosing “shocking” entertainment and nastiness over “truth” and civility—the lead character clearly “means what he says,” and to some extent may serve to channel the comedian-author as social critic, even as the film mobilizes dark irony with no stable “moral compass” and does so expressly to explore desensitization, with content commonly regarded as shocking. In this instance, the embedded voice of the comedian retains its own vector that exists somewhat independent of, and for some audiences likely supersedes, the framing devices of narrative containment.

work's moral center and messages as self-contained story, eclipses the comedy's rhetorical potency at the level of intertextuality in the comic forum.

In sum, irony in its postmodern forms, as theorized and as practiced in the interests of comic transgression, or “the edge,” has not been exempt from the hegemonic struggles that shape contemporary society and media culture—whereas the postmodern carnival in its hypothetical utopian, liberating eruptions entices us to suspend the established social hierarchies and truths. Even at its most egalitarian, comedy's promises of freedom and oppositionality are inserted into social narratives and are, like carnival itself, best approached as “situated utterance.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, taking comedic irony and its cultural/political import *seriously* should not force us to abandon humor's productively disruptive potential, nor diminish its ability to serve as a seed for pure enjoyment.

With all the press and debate dedicated to improving upon the ironic sensibility, the past two decades yielded virtually no sustained demand for unchecked sentimentalism. In media criticism, the cries for a retreat from “arid postmodernism” and for “a resurgence of reverence and conviction”<sup>25</sup> were met with a strong desire, renewed every few years, to see *the ironic* artfully infused and recombined with *the sincere* in novel formulations. From one popular critical perspective that has continued to gain traction, the “new sincerity” or so-called “post-ironic” turn as an informal movement has cautiously rekindled what literary and film scholar Nicholas Rombes deems a conscientious fusion or “delicately playful and treacherous balance between

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1989), 96, 222, 226, drawing on Bakhtin, as discussed in my Interlude. In reality all carnival bears the traces of ideology within its utopian alternative—just as a parody is composed from elements of the parodied and irony calls into view the ironized—and, as Stam argues, carnivals are ultimately “inflected by the hierarchical arrangements of everyday social life” (96).

<sup>25</sup> The quoted language is David Gates, “Will We Ever Get Over Irony?” *Newsweek* (December 27, 1999–January 3, 2000): 90–94, LexisNexis Academic (accessed September 2004), summarizing David Foster Wallace's view of “irony's deadening effect on the arts.” Countering with a brief survey of Tarantino films and other works, Gates glimpsed an intermittent capacity for “unironic tenderness” within the crème of the postmodern-ironic.

irony and sincerity”—that is, between “detachment” and “caring” as the basis for both identification and pleasure in select strains of contemporary media aiming for sophistication.<sup>26</sup>

The declarations of and prospects for a “new sincerity,” pursued in this way, as I detailed in the final chapter, have worked to recontextualize and reroute but not reject—and certainly not *replace*—irony as a creative or cultural prerogative. As Sontag’s definitions had underscored for a prior generation, there is ample room for tenderness and “feeling” to act as a filter to the ironic lens, however riddled with paradox this pairing has grown in the postmodern era. Remarking on the irony-earnestness “seesaw” we find society seated upon half a century later, *The Atlantic*’s Jen Doll recently asserted that a taste for the ironic has never been just a generational “thing,” however common the tendency to frame it in this way, but does and will remain a “thing of value” even as we enter what so many now regard as post-ironic or even post-postmodern times: “There are incongruities of life that can be reflected in no healthier way than with a clever ironic retort.”<sup>27</sup> The resiliency and continued cultural currency of irony, as both a ‘private’ disposition and shared sensibility, speak to the powerful recognition not only that the ironic need not dissolve the sincere or discard the serious but moreover that “sincerity” is quite often not enough.

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<sup>26</sup> Rombes, “Razor’s Edge of American Cinema: The New Sincerity of Post-Ironic Films” (quoted in the epigraph), looks for contemporary contributions to a prior “experimental strain” of films “where the intersections of sincerity and irony are explored in complex, and often beautiful, ways.” For related discussion of network sitcoms’ recent “earnest” experiments with doing post-meta television, see Lili Loofbourow, “Are Sitcoms Sincere Again?” (featured post in a series titled “Dear Television, The New Sitcom”), *Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB), the Blog*, October 15, 2013, <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/deartv/sitcoms-sincere/> (accessed October 16, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Jen Doll, “Irony’s Not Dead, Long Live Irony,” *Atlantic Wire*, November 19, 2012, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/entertainment/2012/11/ironys-not-dead-long-live-irony/59119/> (accessed April 29, 2013).

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