FROM BITS TO BYTES: SKETCH COMEDY IN THE MULTI-CHANNEL AND

DIGITAL CONVERGENCE ERAS

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines sketch comedy on television, film, and the Internet in the last 30 years, particularly its role within media industry constructions of innovation and differentiation. I argue that sketch comedy's textual qualities mirror recent media industrial infrastructures and practices that prize malleable content able to move flexibly across platforms and serve a number of commercial needs. But at the same time, the producers and performers of sketch comedy use this textual variability to negotiate their own notions of distinction, ones that often do not align with the industry's pursuit of profit. I elaborate the tension between these two forces in case studies of the television sketch comedy *The State*, the comedic film performances of former *Saturday Night Live* stars, and Internet shorts from FunnyorDie.com and *The Onion*, utilizing original archival material, production ethnography, interviews, and scholarly, trade, and popular press resources. These analyses shed new light on the production and performative strategies of popular comedic media, as well as how those media serve as a site for negotiating preferred industry practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Sketch Comedy within Media Industry Innovation and Differentiation

For as long as I can remember, comedy has been an essential part of my existence,

something inextricable from the many ordinary biological functions and social

interactions common to all human beings. I do not consider myself a "funny" person, but

I do think that funniness constitutes an important part of my identity and the identities of

many people close to me. Growing up, my brothers and I regularly peppered dinner

conversations with barbs about family foibles; I bonded with childhood friends over

copies of *The Onion* and reruns of *The Simpsons*; and more recently, my wife and I have

built a life together on equal parts laughter and love. Nauseating schmaltz aside, I

believe these experiences contain powerful truths about humor's socio-cultural functions,

ones that led me to want to understand it better.

When I entered graduate school and made comedy the central focus of my

research, I came increasingly to see that it is, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, ordinary.

Many of my students, colleagues, and even faculty advisors regularly engaged everything

from their work to their personal lives with comedic modes of discourse. As I studied

historical discussions of the genre, however, I noticed a tendency for it to be bracketed

off and treated as something distinct, both from more high-minded genres like drama and

from the domains of everyday lived experiences. Comedy, humor, laughter—and their

manifold, shape-shifting variants—were often characterized as release, distraction, or

diversion from the material conditions of consumer culture early in the 20th century.

Many analyses from a cultural studies perspective would later revise this view, taking into account the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate textual, reception, socio-historical, and production contexts. Recently, a number of important studies have focused on comedy as a nexus of this interconnectedness in exploring broader shifts in politics, intertextuality, and constructions of race and gender. Today, evidence abounds both within and beyond the academy of comedy's importance as a site of American cultural identity-formation. In the spring of 2011, for instance, The New School for Social Research offered an undergraduate course titled "Youth Culture: Sex, Drugs, Comedy," substituting comedy where rock 'n roll once stood in.[1] And in news akin to Hershey's semi-regular findings about the cancer-fighting power of chocolate, the cable netlet Comedy Central commissioned research in 2012 that found "[m]ore than music, more than sports, more than 'personal style,' comedy has become essential to how young men view themselves and others."[2] Clearly, comedy has come to be seen not only as integrated with other popular activities, but constitutive of them as well.

Yet even this characterization requires additional parsing, particularly because much of the popular discourse about "comedy" today increasingly emphasizes media created and distributed for profit by entertainment industries. As such, comedic mass media are shaped by the conditions of their production and encoded by the dominant ideas of those conditions. In a broad sense, comedy differs little from other forms of media that reflect established power structures in America, as decades of sitcoms and film comedies have privileged certain kinds of performers and stories (i.e. often those centering on white, middle-class, heteronormativity) over others. Thus my family's dinnertime banter took the form of dialogue from the *National Lampoon's Vacation*

movies for the same reasons that the young men in the Comedy Central survey might incorporate the crude disposition of *Tosh.0* host Daniel Tosh in how they view themselves. But the relationships among comedic texts, performers, publicity campaigns, and production, distribution, and consumption contexts, are rarely, if ever, so straightforward, particularly in a contemporary media culture that provides myriad forums for the ongoing reinterpretation and re-articulation of these relationships. Moreover, the fluid meanings of popular comedy texts themselves—variously created by extratextual references, disparate narrative strands, and insider/outsider positioning of their viewers—open them to interpretive possibilities that can both undermine dominant ideology at the same time that they re-inscribe it. Comedians from Fred Allen to Roseanne Barr to Dave Chappelle, for instance, have all worked within the strictures of commercial mass media while critiquing their conventions and representational strategies. Instead of isolating their objects of analyses, then, productive studies of comedic media account for the political-economic pressures bearing on their creation, the polysemy with which those pressures can manifest in the text, and the circumstances under which those texts circulate in particular cultural contexts.

This dissertation follows the model of such studies while seeking to fill a gap in them. It examines how media industries construct notions of innovation and differentiation through sketch comedy. Specifically, I argue that sketch comedy's textual qualities mirror recent media industrial infrastructures and practices that prize malleable content able to move flexibly across platforms and serve a number of commercial needs. But at the same time, the producers and performers of sketch comedy use this textual variability to negotiate their own notions of distinction, ones that often do not align with

the industry's pursuit of profit. Interrogating the tension between these two forces sheds

new light on the relationships among media industries, the entertainment products they

create, and the cultural contexts in which they circulate. In doing so, I intervene into

media scholarship that has largely characterized comedy as serving or defying a clearly

defined industrial goal. But sketch comedy, I argue, explicitly lays bare the process of

negotiation between these competing impulses. It is a testing ground for industrial forces

striving to define best practices and a cultural forum for creative forces attempting to

articulate their own identities.

In choosing to center my project on this topic, I elucidate how sketch comedies

operate in ways that often contrast with the industrial, aesthetic, and cultural conventions

of what we might call "long-form" comedy. For the purposes of this study, I define

"sketch comedy," in part, as mediated, comedic narratives or performances running

between roughly one and seven minutes in length, and "long-form" comedy as formats

adhering to conventional media production and distribution practices of episode- or

feature-length (typically 30 to 120 minutes). Sketch comedy also describes a genre of

broadcast programming whose long-form episodes are comprised of short-form, often

interchangeable comedy sketches. Sketch comedy, then, can and often does make up the

component parts not only of programs in the broader sketch comedy genre, but also of

long-form sitcoms and feature films as well. Radio programs like *The Bob and Ray Show*

and television shows like *In Living Color*, for instance, are 30-minute sketch comedies

made up of short comedy sketches. Sitcoms like *30 Rock* and feature films like *Hot Rod*,

though, incorporate comedy sketches into more conventional long-form narratives and

cannot be as easily categorized as sketch comedies. While a temporal definition provides

one way to analyze the differences between sketch and long-form comedies, a clear

distinction between the two is not so simple or even very useful. In order to better

understand how sketch comedy functions as a mode of differentiation, we must consider

how and to what ends the differences between sketch and conventional long-form

comedies are constructed. Accordingly, I also define sketch comedy as a mode of

expressing a particular comedic sensibility, an active process of negotiating the

performative impulses of comedians and producers with industrial imperatives

structuring these impulses around the pursuit of profit. Media industries have constructed

and structured sketch comedy in the multi-channel and digital convergence eras primarily

around the perceived tastes of small segments of young, white, male consumers. This

audience niche, as I explore throughout this dissertation, has come to be seen by the

industry as its most valuable commodity audience and most viable target for the kinds of

edgy aesthetics often found in sketch comedy. My analyses of key sketch comedies,

then, point to broader patterns in the ways in which recent industrial and cultural forces

use this "edgy" humor to reinforce the social power of an already-powerful social group.

The analyses also uncover fissures in this dynamic, highlighting instances where sketch

comedy functions as an oppositional force to dominant power.

Sketch's integration within and among myriad other comedic formats makes it

difficult to isolate, necessitating analyses that account for how sketch draws from other

comedic traditions and interacts with broader industrial and cultural discourses.[3]

Therefore, this project does not necessarily seek to challenge existing scholarship on

radio variety shows, television situation comedies, and comedian comedy feature films;

indeed, it heavily draws on and is very much in dialogue with these works. Instead, it

provides a complementary perspective to many of these same works by understanding

mediated comedy, as Henry Jenkins suggests, "atomistically, as a loosely linked

succession of comic 'bits.'"[4] While a number of studies referenced throughout this

dissertation have examined comedy bits, sketches, and monologues as constitutive of

long-form comedy formats, my analyses of these component parts reveal how and why

they have become more prevalent recently as media industries have sought to balance

mass market fare with flexible modes of production and distribution serving increasingly

fragmented consumption patterns.

This project is grounded in the integrated cultural studies approach granting equal

analytic weight to media technologies, industries, and texts. It follows in the tradition of

numerous studies from scholars at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's media and

cultural studies program that identify how popular media variously reflect, reproduce,

and resist social power structures. Throughout this dissertation, I borrow Jason Mittell's

notion of television genre as a discursive construction;[5] Jonathan Gray's characterization

of comedy as fostering critical sensibilities via intertextuality;[6] Derek Kompare and

Michele Hilmes's study of media technological infrastructures and the labor routines that

surround them;[7] and Elana Levine and Ron Becker's studies of how popular media reflect

the historical contexts of their creation and consumption.[8] The primary analytic sites of

my study are the sketch comedy personnel, production/distribution practices, publicity

campaigns, performative strategies, and entertainment products of American commercial

media industries in the last three decades, as well as the social, historical, and cultural

contexts in which those products circulate. By delimiting my case studies in this way, I

do not wish to dismiss how the reception practices of sketch comedy converge with the

discursive practices and meanings of other analytic domains. Indeed, part of the challenge of developing this project was trying to account specifically for the myriad ways viewers consume, re-distribute, and re-articulate sketch comedy and its attendant constructions of distinction. I also do not presume to provide a comprehensive picture of how comedic content has operated within media industries. As Julie D'Acci notes in outlining a circuit model of media study, the researcher cannot hope to examine fully any given site of analysis, but must strive to find relationships among them.[9] Such an approach can emphasize a research object like sketch comedy as an interaction among industrial, socio-historical, and textual discourses at the same time that it affords the researcher opportunities to punctuate hegemonic processes and their articulations. In centering on three of the discursive domains—text, industry/production, and socio-historical context—posited by D'Acci, then, my study explores, in part, how and to what ends they have constructed preferred reception practices of sketch comedy, and it also acknowledges the ones marginalized by this dynamic.

Identifying how industrial formations attempt to guide preferences of any given cultural practice or artifact over another is particularly important when considered in the context of innovation and differentiation. In the contemporary mediascape of ever-proliferating content across outlets, producers must compel viewers to see any given show or movie instead of another. Publicity materials and production decisions seek a careful balance between invoking similarities to past successes and not repeating those successes too closely. Even archived material re-released must be made to seem fresh or contain added value from its original iteration. Media trade reports relentlessly analyze overnight television ratings and weekend box office results with an eye on how these

distinguish winners from losers. Popular commentary about hits and misses breathlessly prognosticates the success of forthcoming releases or bemoans ones that only offered more of the same. Framing a text as innovative or distinctive from others, then, serves a basic economic function for entertainment industries. But these efforts are also often bound up in power relations that can displace articulations of identity anchored in particular production and socio-historical contexts, a dynamic Stuart Hall characterizes as the "tyranny of the New."[10] One of my goals, then, is to use sketch comedy to contextualize these discourses of innovation and differentiation and to interrogate how they function hegemonically.

The malleability, cost-efficiency, and mobility of sketch comedy has made it amenable to a broad range of industrial outputs, and my analyses of the format work to provide a clearer picture of contemporary practices of transmedial production, distribution, and consumption. Each case study in this dissertation, accordingly, examines sketch comedy across varying combinations of television, film, and the Internet. At the same time, this project keeps the influence of medium-specific, long-form comedy in mind, particularly as it serves to define industry conventions and provide a point of departure for sketch comedy. On television, cable netlets have utilized sketch comedies as a way to distinguish themselves from broadcast networks where long-form situation comedies have traditionally thrived. Film stars with backgrounds in improvisation have integrated sketch comedy into their performances as a way of pushing the boundaries of conventional, long-form storytelling techniques. Advertisers, start-ups, and web communities have struggled to define the aesthetic and distribution practices of online video against those of "offline" media by flooding the Internet with short-form

sketch comedy content. In many cases, a sketch comedy text or production practice might begin in one medium only to be quickly appropriated by another. A number of recurring characters and sketches from NBC's *Saturday Night Live* have been stretched into feature films, for instance, while Internet-original sketch comedy videos have become a new source material for television outlets looking to eschew costly pilot development processes and court hip young viewers. In addition to serving as a site through which the industry articulates discourses of innovation and differentiation, then, sketch comedy also provides examples of the day-to-day production decisions that structure those discourses.

Before undertaking analyses of sketch comedy's specific role in the discursive and material construction of media industry innovation and differentiation, we must understand the broader context out of which this role has emerged. The three primary case studies in this dissertation cover events and texts from the last 30 years, a period I characterize as moving from a "multi-channel" to "digital convergence" era. Although these terms come from an approach to media industries grounded in television studies, they also reflect many of the relevant technological and economic infrastructures of film and web industries I will cover in the same period. As Amanda Lotz[11] and Megan Mullen[12] use the terms, the multi-channel era describes a period spanning the 1980s and 1990s that saw a drastic increase in viewing options and technologies that allowed viewers control over their expanded options. Cable and satellite channels eroded the long-held dominance of television's three-network oligopoly, home video devices and remote controls provided time-shifting capabilities for viewers outside of movie theaters and broadcast schedules, and niche content increasingly supplemented mass-market fare.

The digitization of media content and integration of computing into entertainment technologies have accelerated many multi-channel trends into the digital convergence era of the 2000s.[13] In the present day, a broad range of interpretation, flexible exchanges, and sites of meaning-creation inform media production, distribution, and consumption practices, a dynamic that global media conglomerates have attempted to systematize profitably while maintaining the illusion of consumer choice.

The next section of this introduction offers an overview of the key events and critical frameworks for considering media industry structures from the multi-channel to digital convergence eras. While I do not intend to for it to be comprehensive, I do wish to highlight key shifts that have accommodated the increased importance of sketch comedy in meeting media firms' goals of flexibly and efficiently creating and distributing content. With this in place, I indicate how these industrial contexts have informed the relationship between sketch comedy and discourses of innovation and differentiation in previewing the subsequent case studies of the project.

Mapping the Multi-Channel and Digital Convergence Eras

Two major trends have driven changes in the American commercial media industries since the 1980s: the increased fragmentation of and active consumption behaviors by audiences, and the conglomeration of media firms into vertically and horizontally-integrated multinational corporations with a focus on leveraging their intellectual property across de-centered channels of distribution. Both trends have become more pronounced in the multi-channel and digital convergence eras as digital technologies

have accelerated the pace of media production, distribution, and consumption as well as expanded their reach. In 1987 Bernard Miege diagnosed the logics of these "new cultural industries" as they took advantage of widespread deregulatory measures and grappled with a surge in choice for consumers and competition among media creators.[14] Among the potential conflicts he saw was the tension between television broadcasting's long-held "flow" model—the predominant industrial paradigm since the 1970s—of disseminating content without the intent of further re-use, and the ascendant cable industry's voracious appetite for material. Cable operators eager to fill their schedules sought to re-purpose that content, often opting for cheap syndicated programming from major sources rather than expensive, internally produced material. When cable outlets did produce their own material, as I explore later in the project, they often opted to supplement low-cost broadcast reruns with equally economical sketch comedy. The format afforded cable networks a way to create unique content that, across the multi-channel era, had little track record of success on broadcast television but fit into the logic of recyclability and repurposing driving cable scheduling. Miege also presciently problematized the role of live entertainment, once thought to be in working harmony with recorded versions of media according to the idea that consumers, for example, buy a record then see the band's live show. In an argument pre-dating the mid- to late-90s rise of sports and entertainment venues designed to maximize consumption points, he urged for a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between live events (e.g. the Super Bowl and others that come to constitute the broadcast medium at specific moments) and the way they bleed out into the cultural-economic milieu beyond their moment and place of occurrence. Miege's prognosis, while having obvious implications

for how the music industry would adjust to declining record sales in the early 21st century, speaks to contemporary revaluations of live comedy acts as well. Sketch comedy allows performers to quickly and cheaply work out material in new media formats online or in podcasts—nearly always at no cost to consumers—while driving them to more lucrative live performances.

Curtin and Streeter pick up on Miege's notions of increased content mobility and the multiplication of consumer touch points in describing the (seemingly contradictory) nature of neo-networks, fragmented and globalized multinational media conglomerates focused less on single-holding firms that pass content from the top down and more on integrated, corporate activity that shares properties flexibly.[15] They identify two tactics at work in neo-networks that further elucidate the broader strategies mentioned above. The first is a shift in focus from "hardware to software" in the form of intellectual property management. Neo-networks treat content not simply as stories and texts, but as properties to be protected and leveraged across their various holdings.[16] The second characteristic is a flexible regime of accumulation fostered by a media property's multifaceted exposure through the conglomerate's myriad channels of vertically integrated companies. Such flexibility allows the component companies that comprise media conglomerates to hold onto some impulses of the mass-audience courting while others pursuing smaller niche ones as well. Firms like Time Warner, for example, still create movies and sitcoms with mass appeal aimed for the global market, while at the same time making edgy products aimed at niche audiences and designed to foster intense loyalty.

Sketch comedies have most often been deployed to serve the latter need, from NewsCorp's courting of African-American audiences with FOX's *In Living Color* in the early 1990s to NBC-Universal's targeting of young professionals with the now-defunct DotComedy website in 2008. In both cases, neo-networks targeted niche audiences with content that did not align with broadly appealing, mainstream tastes. Yet this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of niche audiences or content joining the mainstream, Curtin notes. The flexible corporate structures of neo-networks allow the quick movement of oppositional groups (like African-Americans) from niche to mainstream if conglomerates sense a zeitgeist, as was the case with *In Living Color*'s role in the broader mainstreaming of hip-hop culture to white audiences.[17] From the late 1980s on, the predominant culture industry logics would guide co-owned, interdependent media companies to work in conjunction with one another, but always heterogeneously, maintaining their own specific goals and protocols.

Amidst an atmosphere of widespread deregulation of the media and communications industries across the 1980s and 1990s, personnel within media industries and trade discourses at the time characterized the new industry logics as being driven by "synergy," the idea that the sum of parts working together is greater than their total collective output would be working as individual units. In terms of scholarly analysis, the concept is less useful as an analytic framework for understanding what and how media firms could integrate vertically and horizontally. Nonetheless, synergy captured the spirit of the in-the-moment fervor of the late 80s with the rise of Murdoch's News Corp empire, Time Inc.'s merger with Warner Communications, MCA with Matsushita, and Sony with Columbia. This first wave of mergers had implications for how the film

industry would come to ally itself with television, essentially returning to a more broadly conceived iteration of the vertically integrated ownership structures of Hollywood's classical era. In its merger with Time, for instance, Warner bolstered the its cable holdings and provided itself with a built-in distribution outlet for its movies that would reduce the costs associated with bidding. According to Douglas Gomery, Warner chairman Steven J. Ross broadened the film industry's focus from a product's linear movement (production-distribution-exhibition in theater) to its role in a conglomerate's leisure experiences, ones that included toys, theme parks, books, home video, and television.[18] Tino Balio suggests that this logic extended to movie studios' attitude toward the global market, solidifying their partnerships in the home video market, (as seen in Viacom and Paramount's partnership with Blockbuster video in 1995) and in international partnerships intended to allay up-front production costs.[19] Film producers increasingly sought more money upfront from an array of international investors who, given their stakes in newly-proliferating worldwide distribution channels, were willing to take on risk assuming the possibility that they could make their money back in the film's long life after theatrical exhibition.

Balio notes that the rise of the home video market created voracious demand for product, with mini-majors like Orion and Lionsgate popping up to serve this market. Efforts from these studios, many of which would come under the control of media conglomerates like Time Warner and Disney in subsequent years, often ran counter to prevailing practices of high-concept filmmaking in the 80s and 90s. Justin Wyatt suggests that big-budget blockbusters and star-driven comedies of the era like *Batman* and *Kindergarten Cop* were geared as much for marketing as much as they were for

theatrical exhibition. That is, the films' focus on modular sequences and flights of visual excess translated easily to marketing campaigns and saturation release, strategies facilitated by conglomerates' cross-media ownership patterns.[20] Conversely, mini-majors fostered the growth of smaller-scale foreign and independent features, ones that could see extended life on home video and attempt to recoup costs there.

Comedies thrived under this model too, offering stories and assemblages of content suited for small-screen consumption. The National Lampoon, which had previously seen some measure of success with theatrical releases like *Animal House* in 1978 and *Vacation* in 1983, licensed its name to a number of direct-to-video releases across the 80s and 90s.[21] NBC's long-running sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* also began repackaging already-aired material as "Best Of" collections often centered on a star or recurring character, supplementing the program's revenues while providing viewers with an opportunity to engage the show outside of its original broadcast. While the National Lampoon and *SNL* remain active in home video, both properties in the 2000s have refocused their ancillary income efforts on branded web content. As I explore later in this dissertation, online sketch comedy has become the favored genre of media conglomerates looking both to extract additional revenues from "offline" properties like *SNL* and to breathe new life into moribund ones.

A second wave of media mergers in the mid 90s followed that of the film studios the decade before, this time taking advantage of the cross-ownership affordances of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, as well as the expiration of "fin/syn" regulations that had limited the extent to which television networks could take ownership in and syndicate their programming. Broadcasters no longer had to rely on independent

companies to produce their shows, freeing them to partner with studios and negotiate mutually beneficial licensing fees. The distribution resources possessed by networks made them appealing targets of takeover by media conglomerates, and each broadcast network changed ownership in this period (after already having done so in the face of cable competition in the mid-80s). ABC partnered with Disney, CBS with Westinghouse, and NBC with Universal in 2003. The period also saw the launch of two entirely new broadcast networks altogether, Warner's WB and Viacom/Paramount's UPN.

With their return to the vertically integrated structures of television's classic network era (this time under the aegis of conglomerate infrastructures), broadcast became more closely tied to cable. Across the development of television's multi-channel era in the 90s and 2000s, co-owned broadcast and cable outlets shared programming and distribution resources in order to serve their corporate parents flexibly and with cost efficiency. At the level of the respective broadcast and cable networks, however, discourses of differentiation continued to construct for each the guise of their own branded identity. Cable programming was often positioned as the innovative upstart to broadcast's staid fare, even though revenues from both ultimately served the same bottom line. In this industrial climate, television sketch comedy—such as sketch shows— served a crucial role in articulating distinctive brand identities for cable networks.

The seemingly fragmentary, edgy nature of sketch comedy—and its ties to cable programming—has already been taken up by scholars in useful ways. In her study of black comedians in the multi-channel and post-network eras, Bambi Haggins draws a distinction between the "containment" impulse of network sitcoms and the

"transgressive" impulse of sketch comedies more frequently found on cable.[22] The

comedic persona of Dave Chappelle, for instance, was too fragmented and polysemic to

work within the narrative strictures and broader audience expectations required of

situation comedy. He succeeded (and subsequently "failed") on Comedy Central

precisely because the sketch format accommodated a multiplicity of comedic discourses.

While I am loath to characterize either sitcom or sketch as being inherently constrictive

or transgressive, Haggins's framework can be instructive when applied more broadly to

industrial discourses. Indeed, the sitcoms of television's classic network era—*The

Beverly Hillbillies*, *Bewitched*, *Gilligan's Island*—have long been the poster child of that

period's mass audience-courting strategies. Part of cable television's "transgression" was

to undermine this pursuit of an undifferentiated mass audience, and cable programmers

looked to sketch comedy—with its fragmented, disparate parts—as being a useful tool for

networks to reach out to their respective niches.

In their use by cable networks, sketch comedies became more than the sum of

their disparate parts, distinct from the "something-for-everybody" acts of television

variety and even late night in previous years. Instead, cable outlets such as MTV,

Comedy Central, and HBO utilized sketch comedy as a way to articulate their respective

brand identities and create a sense of edge both at the textual and industrial levels.

Haggins's observation might be elaborated in this way, then: network sitcoms contained

comedic personae in ways safe enough to draw a mass audience, while sketch comedies

of the multi-channel era accommodated discursive multiplicity in ways supportive of

their networks' brand-building and audience targeting strategies. The atomistic,

component parts of sketch comedies often remained distinct from one another at the

textual level, but at the industrial level, they worked cohesively in the service of a network's branding and niche targeting efforts.

Cable programmers were among the most aggressive in using sketch comedy as a way to differentiate their content and brand identity from that of primetime sitcoms and broadcast television. As Megan Mullen argues in her comprehensive overview of the cable industry, though, programming on early cable outlets "maintained, above all, a strong resemblance to and dependence on broadcast television—featuring a large number of broadcast reruns, old movies, and other inexpensive fare."[23] Indeed, cable networks saw the production of original programming as cost prohibitive early on, devoting much of their financial resources to distribution expenses. Early cable, despite the optimistic "Blue Sky" discourse hailing it as an interactive, alternative exhibition space to staid network fare, lived in the shadow of broadcast until it could become more financially stable in the multi-channel era. Before it was anything resembling an alternative to network television, cable existed as a retransmission technology to remote parts of the country via community antennae. Thomas Streeter notes that by the early 1970s, a strange alliance of CATV operators, professional groups, and liberal policy-makers passed along the most utopian elements of their "ever-expanding chorus of expert opinion" into broader public debates about the social and industrial possibilities of cable.[24] The wild optimism of this "Blue Sky" rhetoric masked the often conflicting motivations of those leading the charge of cable's development, and by the time cable became a mature television technology, Streeter argues, it had simply ingratiated itself into the television landscape in accordance with the economic imperatives of the existing media industries:

On the level of the media industries, however, the pattern was not a roller coaster of high hopes and disappointments, but a process of gradual, if occasionally halting, growth and integration of cable into the American corporate system of electronic media and communications technologies. The back-and-forth motion between high hopes and disappointments served the industry well; it loosened the regulatory framework at strategic moments, allowing cable to be gradually ratcheted into its place between the usually calcified, tightly joined elements of the corporate industrial system.[25]

The cozy relationship between cable MSOs, cable networks, and their corporate parents is outlined by Michele Hilmes in her study of how satellite-delivered cable and pay stations such as HBO helped break the broadcast bottleneck.[26] HBO was among the earliest practitioner of a variety of now-entrenched cable and television industry practices, not least of which were the simultaneous delivery of content via satellite, feature film co-financing in exchange for first-run privileges, and (as part of Time Inc.) early synergistic strategies that presaged the merger mania of the late 1980s.

Perhaps most importantly, though, was HBO's *behavior* as a television presence distinct from those of broadcast networks. Because it required cable subscribers to pay a fee in addition to their monthly subscription charges, HBO launched extensive branding efforts aimed at convincing both cable MSOs and subscribers of its unique programming capabilities. Much of its early content was comprised of movies and cheaply-produced events such as boxing, but the network's risky promotional maneuvers proved to be a drain on the finances of parent company Time Inc. that did not yield immediate financial benefits. But as Megan Mullen notes, the long-term cross-media relationships forged between HBO and Time provided a blueprint for the "synergy-driven frenzy of mergers

and acquisitions" in the 1980s.[27] HBO's branding efforts, and their role in the vertical integration of Time Inc., echo the contemporaneous rise of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation empire. While cable was not a prominent part of Murdoch's earliest plans, his efforts to brand FOX as a broadcast network—and not just its programs—distinct from those of The Big Three was a large part of its success. "The Fox formula" focused on targeting audience segments perceived to be underserved by ABC, NBC, and CBS, such as African-American, working-class, and youth audiences. These targeting efforts were clearly on display on some of FOX's earliest sketch comedies, including *The Edge, The Ben Stiller Show*, and *In Living Color*.

The change in mentality away from courting mass audiences to aggregations of niche ones echoes Joseph Turow's conception of "society-making" and "segment-making" media.[28] Turow traces how network-era mentalities of programming for an undifferentiated mass audiences and their attendant consumption practices evolved into the multi-channel era, where advertisers took advantage of audience fragmentation with increasingly directed segment-making ads. Turow suggests that this move away from the undifferentiated mass audience—one facilitated by cable and embraced by FOX—coincided with new ways of understanding demographics by American advertising agencies in the 80s and 90s. That cable provided new outlets for directing demographic-specific content and advertising at particular segments of the population at this time seemed fairly clear. Advertisers promised their clients to create efficient separation of their desired audience without making them pay for "down-market" viewers and to foster in that desired audience feelings of intense loyalty toward the program, network, and products of any given viewing experience.[29]

One way in which advertisers sought efficient separation in audiences was through generational appeals seen particularly is the pursuit by corporate America of Generation X in the 1990s. As advertisers saw baby boomers slip out of the prized 18-49 demographic, Turow notes, they came to embrace the taste-making capabilities and spending power of the so-called "forgotten generation."[30] Generation Xers, for their part, defined themselves in ways directly opposed to their attempted co-option by advertisers and programmers seeking their disposable income. More broadly, the construction of Generation X came increasingly to be aligned with the pursuit of young, white, male audiences, marginalizing female and non-white racial identities in the process. These tensions would play out in particularly intense ways in the Generation X-courting sketch comedy programs of networks like MTV, a dynamic I explore more fully in chapter two. Despite Generation Xers' vociferous distaste for being a target market and their many cultural responses to it, sketch comedy in shows like *The State* articulated ambivalence about the Xer cultural identity, one that aligned more closely with industrial discourses of differentiation than it did with a truly oppositional voice.

Ron Becker's conception of the "slumpy" audience provides a useful look at the response of broadcast networks to cable differentiation efforts in this period. Becker highlights the shifts in the advertising industry away from mass audiences to niche ones facilitated in television by Nielsen's people meter in 1987.[31] The industry moved emphasis from measuring TV households to demographics (especially the lucrative 18-34-year-old-male), a move that also uncovered a long-suspected overall decline in network viewership. As a result, networks refocused their energies on pursuing particularly profitable viewerships with edgy content. A flailing NBC began "granny-

dumping" (i.e. removing programs aimed at unprofitable older demographics, a sect Turow suggests is notoriously underserved) and developed programming with the socially liberal, urban-minded professionals in mind. Markers of gayness (in *Will and Grace*, for example) became one way to distinguish programs for this audience, since it was assumed among executives and advertisers that gays (presumed to form a particularly desirable segment of the slumpy audience) had little familial obligations and much expendable income. Another was the construction of distinctive generational identities, ones that valued young Generation Xers over the more mature baby boomers. In this context, short-from sketch comedy served as an important tool to court young viewers with edgy content distinct from family-oriented sitcoms with a presumed boomer audience.

Beyond the issues of cultural identity surrounding the increasingly fragmented media environment of the 80s and 90s, Turow's framework points to additional ways of understanding the industrial and cultural utility of sketch comedy in cable's mature years. He notes that the rush to identify and program for profitable niche audiences led to a growth of cheaply-produced lifestyle programming in cable's mature era. Accordingly, Mullen argues that lifestyle and reality programming as seen on outlets such as Home and Garden Television (HGTV), ESPN, and Food Network work as efficient platforms for product and service tie-ins, as well as any other cross-media opportunity the network's parent company might be pursuing.[32] Networks increasingly complemented these strategies with their own mass audience courting fare but, toward the end of the 90s and into the 2000s, began to do so in a much more flexible way. Curtin's conception of this moment as "matrix media" provides a useful way for considering how cross-media

mobility and disparate parts of sketch comedy make it an especially ideal format for the contemporary industrial moment. In light of increased audience fragmentation, user-controlled and digital distribution technologies, and the fizzling logics of corporate synergy, Curtin argues that media industries in the matrix era are characterized by "interactive exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use."[33]

Key to matrix media is the use of programming by conglomerates to build a brand and make it accessible to viewers at their convenience and on their terms. The accumulated media platforms and times at which audiences might engage with a program represent for advertisers a way to target consumers in an increasingly fragmented mediascape, while at the same time facilitating the sense of separation and loyalty Turow posits. These trends are particularly acute in sketch comedy online, where web-original comedy supplements the repurposing of long-form comedy for established media firms like Sony, Viacom, and Time Warner. The major media conglomerates have launched their own digital production and distribution platforms as well. While sites such as NBC's DotComedy and ABC-Disney Television's Stage 9 Digital failed to gain traction in the mid-2000s, new partnerships between established industry powers and online comedy sites have cropped up on a weekly basis since then. Elsewhere, conglomerates are continually experimenting with ways to bring sketch comedy made outside their purview into their financial fold, and they have created infrastructures for sifting through amateur comedy on sites like YouTube and other content aggregators. Sketch web comedians who distinguish themselves earn the chance to write for offline comedy properties like network sitcoms or feature films, while conglomerate-created sketch

comedy extends the storyworlds of myriad texts online. Media conglomerates have also found it advantageous to take low-cost ownership stakes in online sketch comedy productions, particularly in the present day as executives increasingly see the Internet as a complement, rather than a rival, to their offline properties. This logic can be seen working in both directions. Time Warner's HBO took an ownership stake in the comedy website FunnyorDie.com, for instance, while comedy podcasts from the likes of Ricky Gervais and former *Mr. Show* writer Scott Aukerman have spun off into television programs. Sketch comedy at all levels of production serves as a key site for understanding the state of contemporary digital institutions and will continue to do so as these companies increasingly re-negotiate the terms of financial viability assumed by established media firms.

At each point of transition in the survey I have provided above, sketch comedy on television, in film, and online have been in the vanguard of moving industrial practices or textual aesthetics from (perceptions of) old to new. Many of the reasons for this are apparent enough. Sketch comedy—even when assembled to fit long-form comedy templates—is comparatively cheap to produce, often requiring fewer resources and less time than long-form comedies. This makes the format an attractive option for media executives, programmers, and performers unsure of how a new distribution technique or audience demographic might disrupt established industry routines. Sketch comedy is malleable and mobile, able to fit into a variety of exhibition contexts—as interstitial material between programs, as promotional material for feature film, or as a media "snack" while a viewer has a short viewing window. This aligns the format with industrial logics of the multi-channel and digital convergence eras requiring content to be

shared across co-owned media outlets quickly, efficiently, and profitably. However, these readily apparent properties of sketch comedy do not speak to their broader history and cultural functions. Why, for instance, did sketch comedy not thrive in previous industrial contexts the way it has recently? What are the ideological implications of mediated comedy expressed in short bursts as opposed to comedy crafted around long-form narratives? What kinds of performances, representations, and viewers do these ideologies privilege, and which do they marginalize? How do media industries elide these power relations, particularly as web-based sketch comedy increasingly mimics the participatory practices of user-created and controlled content?

Project Overview

This dissertation considers these questions as they relate to media industries' efforts to tie sketch comedy to production, publicity, and performance discourses of innovation and differentiation. In the first chapter, I offer an overview of historical precedents for sketch comedy preceding the multi-channel and digital convergence eras. Performers coming from live vaudeville contexts, I suggest, brought many of their characters and comedic sensibilities to early mass media like radio, film, and television in ways that greatly inform sketch comedy during the recent period that is my primary focus. These early iterations of sketch comedy also provide an important way for understanding how the nascent television industry came to privilege certain kinds of humor and performances over others. In a case study of NBC's *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, I detail how a direct transposition of vaudevillian, sketch performance aesthetics and production routines

initially provided ready-made material for television's live broadcasts, but proved unsustainable over a longer period of time. Moreover, television's transition to recyclable, filmed content increasingly marginalized sketch "vaudeo" shows in this era in favor of situation comedies. It would not be until the premiere of *Saturday Night Live* toward the end of television's classic network era that sketch comedy found a sustained voice in the same manner it exists today. Part of *SNL*'s success with the format, I suggest, was to disavow previous sketch comedies through implicit generational appeals to the emerging baby boomer audience.

The link between generational identities and sketch comedy would take on more importance as media industries in the multi-channel era increasingly looked for ways to target their fragmented audiences. Where *SNL* constructed the identities of its boomer audience as aggressively opposed to those before it, sketch comedies of the multi-channel era articulated generational identity with ambivalence. As I explore in the case of *The State* in chapter two, industry discourses constructed Generation X as an identity aligned with consumer culture, containing its oppositional impulses and directing them to market-based expressions. This is not to say that truly oppositional cultural identities did not exist within constructions of Generation X. However, Generation X's specific iterations in *The State* suggest that media industries saw sketch comedy as a powerful marker of differentiation. As I explore in original archival material from the show, cast members and producers negotiated these imposed notions of differentiation with particular performative strategies. The relative success of these strategies on cable, and their subsequent failure on broadcast television for *The State*, point to the boundaries of how adequately sketch comedy can express distinction among cultural products and identities.

The end of *The State*'s contentious run on MTV and its subsequent failure to transition to broadcast television also speak to the cast's reluctance to participate in the developing industrial atmosphere of cross-media production and performance. When directed by MTV to develop recurring characters that could be spun-off into a movie, for instance, The State responded by creating a character whose catchphrase was too crude and simplistic to function in a feature-length narrative. At the same time, producers and performers on *Saturday Night Live* were regularly generating iterations of its short-from comedic characters and sketches in feature films and home video collections, a practice that continues into the present day. Where *The State* viewed sketch comedy as a venue to voice resistance to the commercial influences in media creation, *SNL* thrived in the multichannel environment of cross-platform promotion and performance.

As it evolved into across the 90s and 2000s, the program fostered the rise of stars whose performances would not be limited to television, but could live on in transmedial contexts as well. In chapter three, I explore the implications of these transmedial discourses and how they have shaped contemporaneous conceptions of comedic performance and narrative in feature films. Intervening into popular and scholarly analyses positing incompatibilities between sketch comedy performance and viewer comprehension of them, I suggest that the industrial and cultural contexts in which the films of former *SNL* stars circulate accommodates the creation of multiple meanings by performers and reading strategies by audiences. In this chapter, then, I present a case in which industrial constructions of innovation and differentiation through sketch comedy frame the format in a negative light. That is, current models for understanding narrative and performance in film comedy do not fully account for how sketch and long-form

comedy complement one another. Where a critic's review might argue that the short-form comedic moments in the long-form narrative of a Tina Fey movie as disruptive, for instance, I contextualize these moments by explicating their origin in improvisation techniques and the production conditions of *SNL*. Comedic performances that transcend media-specific boundaries are becoming the norm as media outlets proliferate, and audiences decode the comedic personae of former *SNL* stars in this transmedial context accordingly.

Chapter four examines the transmedial context of sketch comedy more fully, suggesting that the format is and will continue to serve as the primary basis for extensions of "offline" film and television products online. In a case study of the comedy website FunnyorDie.com, I highlight the power that established industry studios and personalities possess in online comedy. While the future of the medium of Internet-original content is in flux, stars like Will Ferrell and companies like Viacom are expending financial and cultural capital online in an effort to fold websites into already existing industrial infrastructures. Such efforts often appropriate bottom-up, user-generated web communities and re-articulate them as part of a seemingly inclusive comedic identity group where all have the opportunity to be funny.

As instructive as successes like FunnyorDie are in demonstrating the industrial utility of sketch comedy online, failures of the format can be useful as well. In a case study of the *Onion Radio News*, I consider how media producers operating outside the Hollywood mainstream inform sketch comedy articulations of innovation and differentiation as well. The program served as short interstitial material on syndicated radio programs across the country before moving its operations completely into

podcasting. In interviews with *ORN* writers and performers, I explore the financial constraints of moving offline to online, particularly the program's inability to distinguish itself for advertisers in a crowded field of podcasts. The program's cancellation indicates a high degree of volatility for sketch comedy online and suggests that producers operating outside of conventional financial models must work to distinguish themselves even more than those working within the mainstream.

These case studies proceed in a roughly chronological order, beginning with an overview of sketch comedy precedents in early television in the first chapter before focusing specifically on the industrial climate of the last 30 years in the next three chapters. They also examine a cross-section of media formats, including radio, television, film, live performance, web video, and audio podcasts. As such, I do not intend for this dissertation to be a definitive examination of any one medium or historical period. Indeed, the many referents I invoke throughout under the umbrella term of "sketch" comedy—including sketches, skits, bits, improvisations, and web shorts— indicate a high degree of variation among producers, performers, and economic infrastructures in preferred uses and interpretations of the format. Instead, each case study highlights specific moments of tension between established industry conventions for producing, distributing, and consuming comedy content and the impulses of innovation and differentiation that figure so prominently in industrial growth.

Sketch comedy is routinely and systematically constructed as new, different, or problematic in these industrial discourses. The format is attractive because of the new performative modes or viewing segments it can provide, yet risky and volatile because of the unpredictability inherent in deviating from past successes. As I elaborate throughout

this work, sketch comedy negotiates these competing conceptions as few other cultural products do. Examining sketch comedy from the present perspective of the digital convergence era, with a careful eye on the historical contexts from which it has emerged, provides a greater understanding of how popular media products serve specific economic goals, but are also open to uses and interpretations that constantly revise the practices through which those goals are achieved.

Notes to Introduction

[1] The New School for Social Research,
http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/courses.aspx?id=53074 (accessed March 1 2012).

[2] Bill Carter, "In the Tastes of Young Men, Humor Is Most Prized, a Survey Finds," *The New York Times*, February 19 2012,
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/business/media/comedy-central-survey-says-young-men-see-humor-as-essential.html (accessed March 1 2012).

[3] Sketch comedy also shares many aesthetic qualities with other forms of mediated short-form humor, variously described in generic terms as "variety" and "vaudeo" and in their component parts as "bits" or "gags." I address these terms as they have been used by scholars in discussing early broadcast and film comedy in the following chapters.

[4] Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5.

[5] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[6] Jonathan Gray, *Watching With* The Simpsons (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[7] Michele Hilmes, "Pay Television: Breaking the Broadcast Bottleneck." *Hollywood in the Age of Television* ed. Tino Balio (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 297-310 and Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[8] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

[9] Julie D'Acci, "Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities" in *Television after TV*: Essays on a Medium in Transition, eds. Michael Curtin, Lynn Spigel, and Jan Olsson (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 418-446.

[10] Stuart Hall in Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, June 1986, 10, 45-60, 47.

[11] Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 12-15.

[12] Megan Mullen, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

[13] Lotz and others use "post-network," but I borrow this term from Jason Mittell, who is speaking to the continued primacy of established network infrastructures into the present day. See Jason Mittell, "A Post against 'post-'," *Antenna*, February 7 2010, http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2010/02/07/post-post/ (accessed March 1 2010).

[14] Bernard Miege, "The logics at work in the new cultural industries," *Media, Culture & Society*, July 1987 vol. 9 no. 3, 273-289.

[15] Michael Curtin and Thomas Streeter, "Media," in *Culture Works: Essays on the Political Economy of Culture*, ed. Rick Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[16] Ibid., 233-235.

[17] Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era," in *Making and Selling Culture*, eds. Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway, and Elizabeth Traube (Hanover, NH: Weslyan University Press, 1996).

[18] Douglas Gomery, "Hollywood corporate business practice and periodizing contemporary film history" in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998).

[19] Tino Balio, "'A major presence in all of the world's important markets': the globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998).

[20] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 1-22.

[21] Andrew Adam Newman, "National Lampoon Stakes Revival on Making Own Films," *The New York Times*, June 25 2007 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/25/business/media/25lampoon.html?_r=2&ex=1185768000&en=6aa1fc052e6e2748&ei=5070, (accessed March 1 2012). The article details the National Lampoon's loss of quality control in licensing its brand and subsequent attempts to resuscitate its reputation online.

[22] Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

[23] Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 1.

[24] Thomas Streeter, "Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows: the Discourse of Cable Television," in *The Revolution wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 222-224.

[25] Ibid., 240.

[26] Michele Hilmes, "Pay Television: Breaking the Broadcast Bottleneck." *Hollywood in the Age of Television* ed. Tino Balio (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 297-310.

[27] Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*, 122.

[28] Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1-17.

[29] Ibid., 55.

[30] Ibid., 76.

[31] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 97-107.

[32] Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*, 189.

[33] Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media," in *Television after "TV": Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

CHAPTER ONE

Controlling Comedy: Sketch Comedy Before the Multi-Channel Era

This chapter establishes the key historical precedents for sketch comedy before the multi-channel and digital convergence eras by examining how the format has evolved out of contingent performative, industrial, and cultural contexts. It begins with a consideration of how media and cultural scholars have analyzed mediated comedy through the discursive domains of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Comedy, in these analyses, has often been positioned as a forum of "low" culture, one that challenges dominant conceptions of taste and identity. As industrial formations worked to incorporate the genre into popular mass media, long-form comedy became the preferred norm. The vestiges of low culture and potentially transgressive identities often operated at a secondary level via sketch comedy in the coded language of short dialogue bits and disruptive performance techniques.

This dynamic would continue into early television vaudeo programs, where the unstable sketch comedy traditions of vaudeville conflicted with the weekly production demands of live television initially, then with the consolidated control of filmed production routines in television's classic network era. Here the industry sought to stabilize sketch comedy as much as possible, subsuming any appeals to oppositional interests under the commercially driven impulse of programming for as broad an audience as possible. By the dawn of the multi-channel era in the late 1970s, generational shifts and increased viewer options made possible a clearer articulation of

sketch comedy outside previous industrial constrictions. In the sketches of *Saturday Night Live*, performers and producers aggressively asserted a sense of innovation and differentiation from previous comedy traditions.

In surveying how sketch comedy was variously constrained and articulated in popular media before the multi-channel and digital convergence eras, then, this chapter highlights the industrial and cultural traditions against which sketch comedy would later work. In doing so, this chapter establishes many of the key concepts—performative modes, identity, and industrial pressures—upon which my subsequent case studies will build. The influences of vaudeo television programs and atomistic comedy within long-form structures figure prominently in how later sketch comedy modes on cable television, the Internet, and in feature films would negotiate their own efforts to be seen as fresh and different. By describing how sketch comedy impulses were expressed in variety and sitcom formats during television's classical network era, this chapter also highlights the aesthetic evolutions of sketch that would allow the format to become a useful programming device for targeting niche audiences in the multi-channel and digital convergence eras. Indeed, this chapter's goal is to demonstrate how sketch comedy is not unique to a particular time period, but is part of a long tradition of mediated comedy that offers a way to see industrial changes over time. Examining how the format has historically worked against and within discourses of normalization further highlights the constructed nature of how and why media industries have sought differentiation among their products through sketch comedy in the multi-channel and digital convergence eras.

In examining relations among the many early precedents for sketch comedy, this chapter follows in a tradition of cultural studies historiography that has striven to amend

the top-down, media-product-as-reflection-of-institution work that long dominated

media histories from other disciplines. Although cultural studies has always had an

uneasy relationship with some of its more established disciplinary brethren in the

humanities, its incorporation of numerous domains of study can foster more nuanced

analyses in fields holding on to comparatively traditional conceptions of, for example,

performance or textual analysis. Such an approach foregrounds the dynamic interaction

among domains rather than isolating one at the expense of others. By examining media

history through the intersections of its various actants, paying just as much attention to its

texts, performers, and consumption patterns as we do to its institutions, media history

thus becomes a process of describing "contingent historical formations."[1] This chapter

describes interactions among the contingent formations of comedic performance, media

industry infrastructures, and socio-cultural conditions before the multi-channel era. It

does so in order to provide a basis for understanding how and why sketch comedy would

come to be tied to discourses of innovation and differentiation.

Writing Comedy Historiography

Robert Allen's study of taste and the commodification of burlesque in the late 19th

century provides a useful starting point for examining how comedy culture has negotiated

dominant cultural and industrial norms.[2] In his history of burlesque, Allen describes the

ways in which it went from a form of broadly enjoyed folk culture to low culture. In

doing so, low culture forms like burlesque, Allen suggests, trouble high culture forms like

legitimate theater, simultaneously abhorrent to dominant taste cultures (reassuring them

of their status) and an object of fascination for them. As such, low and high need not

be framed in strictly oppositional terms, but as mutually constitutive, providing a fluid

framework through which cultural tensions are negotiated, privileged, and subordinated.

Henry Jenkins positions his study of early sound comedy in similar terms, noting

how comedy, as one of the most prevalent forms of popular culture at the turn of the 20th

century, also exacerbated tensions between low and high culture.[3] The Progressive

middle-class of the era spurned the simple pleasures of the so-called New Comedy and

espoused a more sophisticated form of humor that led not to reactive laughter, but to

thought and social change. This new humor became ubiquitous at the vaudeville theaters

populated by a lower class seeking a quick release from the drudgeries of their work.

Invoking Bordieu's framework for the social stratification of taste, Jenkins details the

role of middle-class leisure time and how this led to an institutionalization of morality-

and story-centric forms of culture, while the bawdy humor of vaudeville was increasingly

pushed to the margins of society.

In those margins early cinematic peep shows providing quick-hit spectacles

thrived in ramshackle nickelodeons. But with the rise of the studio system and vertical

integration of its production regime, cinema also moved into respectable downtown

theaters and began to privilege longer narrative formats. However, Jenkins argues,

narrative norms were thrown into flux in the early 1930s transition to sound technology.

A subset of comedy films moved away from linear causality and goal-driven characters

in favor of self-contained units of comedic spectacle.[4] Jenkins calls these films

"anarchistic" not only because of the aesthetic boundaries they broke, but also what the

breaking of those boundaries meant in their socio-cultural milieu. By conceiving of

comedy as atomistic bits in dialogue with their historical and industrial moments, Jenkins argues, anarchistic comedies negotiated both narrative tensions of the text and socio-cultural tensions of their time.

Jenkins elaborates this notion via a case study of the early sound films of Eddie Cantor.[5] Cantor, a wildly popular Jewish vaudevillian, found himself negotiating the conflicting demands of two movie-going audiences in the early sound era—coastal audiences in sound-equipped theaters for whom vaudeville was a familiar aesthetic, and "hinterland" audiences catching up to the unfamiliar sound-technologies and anarchistic-sensibilities they delivered. Jenkins describes the gradual "de-Semitization" of Cantor's persona, one manifest in his later films' privileging of conventional romantic plots over song-and-gag spectacles. Cantor reluctantly adjusted his humor in order to play to what was becoming a national audience, but not without some tensions at the local level, ones negotiated in everything from newspaper advertising to radio interviews. Hilmes describes a similar negotiation of comedic persona in her study of the radio-comedienne Fanny Brice's "Snooks strategy."[6] In the same way that Cantor's subtle use of Yiddish slang allowed him to be understood by one audience while playing to all audiences, Brice's baby Snooks feigned infantilized innocence as a way slip in double-entendre and sexual puns. But Snooks wasn't a mere gag—it served as a site for negotiating feminine deference to, and often undermining of, patriarchal authority, while at the same time serving as a useful framework through which to keep a running format on air.

Frank Wertheim's history of radio comedy similarly describes vaudevillians struggling to adapt their visual, gag-based humor into stable and continuing genres appropriate for the medium.[7] He identifies a new generation of vaudeville-trained

comedians like Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen who, learning from the struggles of Ed Wynn and Cantor, developed comedic personae that not only diverged from vaudeville, but also accommodated radio's advertising demands. Benny in particular would become notorious as a "fall guy," building short-form comedic bits and exchanges with his musicians and a growing cast of characters based on his supposed cheapness. The role of radio comedy is one most often dealt with as an interlude to television comedy (especially the sitcom), leaving a major gap in comedy historiography. One effect of this has been the further marginalization of female comedians, a dynamic Hilmes addresses in describing the increased presence of women in prime-time radio in the early 1940s. Outlining the confluence of factors (the program-package system granting more power to talent; war-time labor shortages) that created a context for women in primetime, Hilmes takes issue with the unreflecting industry discourses of the time that paint their ascent as sudden.[8] But as Spigel and others have noted, women and femininity were the primary sites through which broadcast institutions enacted a domestication of comedy (first on radio, then on television), one fraught with the ideological negotiations of ethnicity, suburbanization, and consumerism.[9]

Spigel's study outlines how the move from work-for-subsistence into late capitalism shifted consumer relationships to leisure, resulting in a popular culture marketplace that became increasingly ideological. Television's place in the living room, as indicated by everything from magazines to editorial cartoons, created a seamless overlap between the roles of wife, mother, leisure and domestic labor for women, with consumption as its nexus point.[10] In examining the role of television comedy in this dynamic, Spigel notes the ideological implications of the move from vaudeo to sitcom.

As in film and radio before it, early television comedy scooped up vaudeville talent and showcased them in variety formats that played-up the uniqueness of television's liveness and intimacy. As I explore below, programs like *The Colgate Comedy Hour* originating from New York were wildly popular in the early 50s, but their workload proved unsustainable to aging stars like Cantor. Burns and Allen, already having shifted the former into "straight man" and the latter resurrecting the "dumb dame," began incorporating sketch, domestically based scenarios replete with meta-commentary from Burns. Jackie Gleason, too, regularly featured his Honeymooners sketch on his variety program. With stars taking increased financial stakes in their programming (facilitated by the same capital-gains tax that led to the package system described by Hilmes), tiring of the demands of live television, and seeking to regularize production to align more with the daily routine of television consumption in the mid-1950s, stars like Lucille Ball led the charge for the television sitcom to become the medium's dominant comedic form.

But outlining the evolution of early comedy from sketch vaudeville to long-form sitcom as strictly an industrial evolution only paints part of the picture. Spigel notes that this move also aligned with the government-sponsored construction of huge tracts of suburban housing, enabling a post-WWII mass exodus from America's urban centers. As a result, Americans increasingly left behind their ethnic roots in favor of the cultural logic of consumption on display in situation comedies.[11] Susan Murray notes how Ball in *I Love Lucy*, for example, retained just enough of the bawdiness reminiscent of vaudeville humor, but acted out in a way ultimately deferential to patriarchal authority.[12] Those who didn't adapt to the rigors of filmed sitcoms largely fell by the wayside, an historical

process privileging long-form comedy traditions that subtly wrote out sketch ones in early television.

In addition to the crucial role carried out by women in expressing the sitcom's ideology of consumption, David Marc argues that the form was crucial in creating a perception of a homogenized mass culture represented as white and middle class.[13] Sitcoms assuaged the fears of families moving out of the cities to suburbs by providing de facto familial interaction on television, one that always repressed any markers of difference. Marc's case study of the Carl Reiner-produced *Dick van Dyke Show* provides a fascinating example of the ways in which sitcoms (and the larger industrial structure of which they were a part) raised and resolved issues of ethnic identity and suburban flight.[14] Reiner had initially written the lead as a Jewish showbusinessman, but, after a failed pilot, cast van Dyke as a white, middle-class family man who lived in the suburbs but worked in the city. The overt moralizing and paternalism of 50s sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*, Marc argues, gave way to the "magicoms" of the 60s, such as *Mr. Ed*, *Gilligan's Island*, and *Bewitched*. These programs suppressed rising social tensions of the time through pure escapism, while at the same time reinforcing the sitcom's conservative ideologies, according to Marc.[15] But these tensions were also present outside of long-form sitcoms of the classic network era, as Aniko Bodroghkozy's study of the sketch/variety show *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* notes. With characters like Goldie O'Keefe, a hippie Martha Stewart of sorts who dispensed advice on how to get rid of "unsightly roaches," the program subversively addressed the burgeoning American counterculture in a way sanitary enough for primetime television.[16]

Many of these studies provide useful templates for understanding the historical contingencies that produced or were produced by comedic texts, the industrial conditions of their production, and the cultural contexts of their reception. Yet in many of them, the particulars of sketch comedy are often given short shrift, positioned primarily as constituent parts of long-form comedies or of broader historical process. The remainder of this chapter highlights key cases in this dynamic in order to better understand specifically how sketch comedy served as a site of negotiating industrial and aesthetic tensions as the American commercial media industries moved from consolidated control to diffuse sites of interpretation and use in television's multi-channel era. In the former era, I argue, sketch comedy impulses were contained via the normalizing routines of serial and sitcom production and performance, processes that also often marginalized volatile elements of performers' transgressive tendencies. This opened the way for new approaches outside of long-form comedy and primetime television, beginning with NBC's *Saturday Night Live* in 1975. The program would prove influential not only in revitalizing sketch comedy sensibilities, but also how they fit into shifting industrial infrastructures across the 80s, 90s, and 2000s.

Killing the Vaudeo Star: NBC's *The Colgate Comedy Hour* and Sketch Comedy on Early Television

The textual fluidity of sketch comedy formats described as "sketch" and/or "variety" in scholarly analyses makes a solid entry point to their study difficult. But for the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms interchangeably with the understanding that, to an extent,

both incorporate elements of the other. In their description of the genres, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik characterize variety as "sequentially presented acts and forms whose unity lies solely in a time span, a distinctive structure, or in the recurrence of a particular performer or performers across otherwise separate acts and items."[17] One manner of defining a sketch, then, is as an "act," one of many contained within the variety program. In his study of the sketch comedy troupe Monty Python, Greg M. Smith echoes the sketch's distinctive structure, defining it as an "independent unit which can be placed in any of several different places in a vaudeville-style program."[18] Both the sketch and variety genres have roots in the theatrical traditions of vaudeville and the minstrel show, which, as Donald Bogle has described, relied heavily on elements of Blackface performance and dialect humor.[19] As radio established itself as the dominant cultural medium in the early 20th century, many of its performers held on to their roots in vaudeville and continued using racialized humor in the sketches on their programs.

Comedian Fred Allen, who grew up on the vaudeville circuit, combined this tendency with his passion to address news of the day on his radio programs via overt satiric commentary. From the beginning of his radio career, Allen drew comedy directly from current events, often through parodic news stories that asked eccentric characters for "man on the street"-type opinions. By 1942 on the *Texaco Star Theater* and after 1944 on *The Fred Allen Show*, he modified the format in order to create "Allen's Alley," a setting similarly populated by colorful characters. Up to half of the show's 30 minute running time would be dedicated to Allen dropping by the fictional anytown and working through issues of the day via idiosyncratic, anecdotal humor. Among the four Alley mainstays were Pansy Nussbaum, a malaprop-prone Jewish housewife, and Ajax

Cassidy, a blustery Irish drunkard. While these broad ethnic stereotypes provoked

scattered listener protest, Alan Havig argues that their presence was an integral element

of Allen's comedy and can only partly be attributed to radio's roots in the vaudeville

tradition.[20] Allen recognized the necessity of a purely aural comedy tailored to radio's

hearing audience, Havig notes, and distinguishing accents or malapropisms functioned as

narrative shorthand both in the absence of visual markers and in the compressed

timeframe of the sketch/variety tradition:

> Once Allen had fixed a few stereotyped personality, regional, or ethnic
> traits in listeners' minds, the Alley characters failed to grow. In the short
> term, that they stopped short of full individuality was compatible with
> radio's aesthetics…In the Alley, Allen could not develop the fullness of
> character necessary to sustain the interest of many listeners.[21]

While recurring characters such as Nussbaum or Cassidy helped frame stories of national

import in a familiar tone (in contrast to Allen's overt political commentary), they

provided little in the way of social commentary.[22] One does not readily decode, for

example, the views of the Jewish housewife on Gestapo tactics from Mrs. Nussbaum.[23]

Instead, these characters served the primarily aesthetic purpose of easing the listener into

Allen's narrative world of the Alley. The repetition of aural markers like the ethnic

accent, drawn as much from vaudeville traditions as from the sensory limitations of radio,

allowed audience members to recognize more quickly the sense of place so crucial to the

humor of Allen's Alley.

By contrast, a contemporary (and "enemy") of Allen's, Jack Benny, utilized an

ethnic stereotype as a recurring character in a manner both subversive of its vaudevillian

roots and unbound by narrative convention. Like Allen, Benny honed his craft on the

local vaudeville circuits, first as a musician and later as the pretentious gadabout that

would be the basis of his radio persona. The young comedian caught the attention of

NBC executives, and by 1936 *The Jack Benny Show* was the highest ranked show of the

rapidly proliferating sketch comedy/variety format.[24] Unlike other comedians who came

to network radio from the stage, Benny largely left behind his vaudeville baggage and

explored the indigenous qualities of the medium to a greater degree than did Fred Allen.

As David Marc argues, Benny realized that the shift in performance space from the

public stage to private living rooms created conditions for comedy in which the

individual performer was the center.[25] Key to this realization was Benny's creation of a

radio family, one that allowed him to expand his program concept beyond the boundaries

of the studio and into the "private lives" of his performers.[26]

One such performer was African-American Eddie Anderson, voice of Jack's

domestic servant Rochester Van Jones. In the same way that Mrs. Nussbaum was

instantly recognizable by her Jewish dialect, Rochester spoke in caricatured black speech

and was often humorously portrayed as unreliable and lazy. On one level, Rochester is,

in Bogle's conception, an insulting iteration of the Coon stereotype from the minstrel

tradition.[27] But on another level, Rochester subverted these stereotypes due in part to the

narrative universe created by Benny. Portrayed as inept and dependent, Benny needed

Rochester's services to keep his life in order. Additionally, Rochester was frequently

"doubled" with the white bandleader Phil Harris, a character that sometimes surpassed

Rochester in displaying ignorance and uncouthness.[28] As Margaret T. McFadden

describes him, "Rochester is a fundamentally ambiguous character. He could be heard as

a stereotypical black man or as a hilarious resister of authority, as a subservient domestic or as the indispensable organizer in charge of Jack's life."[29] Recurring characters like Rochester, though similarly grounded in the vaudeville tradition, functioned as more than mere support for its host's didactic comedy (as Nussbaum did for Allen). Instead, Benny created an expansive comic universe populated by dynamic supporting players and characterized by running storylines and narrative continuity. This granted the listener a closer identification point with Benny and his cast and allowed him/her to identify with Benny's comedy at an individualized level.

This space for identification with the recurring character is key as the sketch comedy/variety format made the jump to television, a medium that allowed for both audio and visual characterizations. It aligned the genre with one of early television's important markers of differentiation from film—intimacy. In contrast to the "larger-than-life" conceptions of film stardom that drove audiences to movie theaters, television brought stars right into viewers' homes. By opening up their performances of recurring characters beyond one-note jokes, early sketch/variety stars humanized themselves for home viewers. Moreover, this performative mode would align with television's growing industrial imperative of routinizing production practices, one that would increasingly favor sitcom stability over the live, weekly grind of variety.

While the added visual dimension of television opened up new performative possibilities, the sketch comedy/variety format held on to its spectacular vaudeville roots in the early going. Beginning in 1948, "Uncle Miltie" delighted with slapstick and musical numbers on his hit, *The Milton Berle Show*, while Ed Sullivan trotted out an array of musical, dance, and acrobatic performances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But

vaudeville's articulation as a broadcast and mass-consumed *visual* mode of comedy

presented performers with a new host of problems. When vaudevillians experienced a

revival in the late 1940s in the early television variety programs known as "vaudeo," their

presentational performance modes initially meshed well with television's live, intimate

aesthetic. As Murray notes about some of early television's most popular programs,

comedians such as Jack Benny and Milton Berle continued to perform iterations of their

vaudeville personae, emphasizing the relationship between performer and audience often

through the same gags (such as asides directly addressing both the studio audience and

home audience through the camera) as their live theater performances.[30] These vaudeo

programs made little effort at establishing a fictional diegesis due to the nascent

medium's advertising model, one in which performers served as trusted spokespeople for

myriad consumer goods in America's booming post-war economy. As a result, Murray

maintains:

> The variety format is not as coherent in its structure as the classical
> Hollywood film…Vaudeo's presentational, comedian-centered, gag- and
> slapstick-style figure the vaudeo comic's persona as one fluid in its
> relation both to narrative and to constructions of authenticity and
> performance.[31]

Murray argues that the fluidity of a broadcast comic's persona manifested not only in

program content, but also in the institutional and economic practices surrounding it.

Whereas the film comic mobilized the unified aims of a single studio, the early television

comic represented the (sometimes conflicting) textual and industrial strategies of both a

network and commercial sponsor. The comic's star persona, then, became a key site of

negotiation as television defined its economic and programming norms. As television

comedy moved away from vaudeo out to the fictionalized suburbs of sitcoms in the mid-

1950s, many performers shifted their comedic personae away from atomistic, bit-driven

humor in service of the medium's broader commercial imperatives. The suburban home

setting required a different kind of intimacy between comedians and audiences, one that

drove the purchase of domestic goods (and that didn't agree with the bawdy aesthetic of

vaudeville). The family-centered "domesticom" would provide limited transgressive

potential for vaudeo comedians in the ensuing years.

Filmed television situation comedy afforded television in the classic network era

many of the same economic benefits as product standardization did for film's studio

system. Production shifted from the chaotic proscenia of New York to the soundstages of

Los Angeles, which were sometimes (as Christopher Anderson notes in his study of

Warner Bros. television)[32] the same facilities left underutilized by the collapse of the

Hollywood studio system. Vaudevillians, whose citified material could not be recycled

after a live broadcast, found their comedic stylings supplanted by the sensibility that

advertisers and networks were in the process of creating and selling to presumed

American audiences comprised of suburban families. Networks developed renewable,

episodic narrative formulae to satisfy television's voracious appetite for content. They

exploited not only the sitcom's reliability in regularly delivering viewers, but also the

newfound sense of intimacy fostered by idealized TV families sharing audiences' living

rooms each evening.

The shift away from atomistic, sketch vaudeo comedy to routinized, long-form

situation comedy—and the ideological tensions therein—instructively plays out in the

case of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, a vaudeo program that ran on NBC from 1950-55. The program competed in the 8:00-9:00 pm timeslot on Sunday nights with another popular variety program on CBS, Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* (*The Ed Sullivan Show* after 1955). While Sullivan lorded over each episode of his program, *The Colgate Comedy Hour* relied on a rotating cast of star comedians as hosts. In the show's peak years, they included Eddie Cantor, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Donald O'Connor, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, and Jimmy Durante. The content of any given episode varied according to the comedic persona of its host, who often brought with him as supporting players many the top names of the day in vaudeville, theater, radio, and film. As its name and choice of hosts suggests, *The Colgate Comedy Hour* was heavy on vaudevillian routines and sketches, but it also included original musical numbers, nightclub comedy revues, and monologues.

With Jackie Gleason hosting its second season premiere, *The Colgate Comedy Hour* was the highest budgeted, single-sponsor program on television. At that point, sponsor Colgate-Palmolive-Peet was funding it at $3 million per year; by the following season, that figure ballooned to more than $6 million.[33] However, performers and creative personnel on the show perceived in reviews and audience letters that many of the performers they had come to know over three seasons had become too repetitive. By *The Colgate Comedy Hour*'s fourth and fifth seasons, Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* was rating increasingly higher. *Colgate*'s once reliable star hosts succumbed to the demands of live television production and began dropping out for, among other things, less demanding and more lucrative film opportunities. Program content came to be less and less focused on original comedy sketches, and more on musical revues, gimmicky spectaculars (such

as a broadcast from Mexico), and promotional segments for contemporaneously popular films, books, and theater. By the summer of 1955, after *The Colgate Comedy Hour* had taken several different names and identities, NBC's once-popular comedy variety series left the air.

Factors like rising production budgets and star fatigue expedited the demise of *The Colgate Comedy Hour* and its vaudeo brethren. By the mid-50s, the story-centered situation comedy offered more stable and renewable generic devices to comedians weary of the weekly grind of vaudeo, and ample popular and scholarly analysis exists regarding comedians with continued success on sitcoms like *Burns and Allen*, *The Honeymooners*, and *I Love Lucy*. What has been somewhat overlooked, however, are the various ways in which early sketch comedy vaudeo programs, such as *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, struggled to define themselves according to/against the conventions of other long-form narrative comedy. How did they respond to the rise of the sitcom? What specific program strategies did they attempt to implement? What relation did they have to early discourses of innovation and differentiation establishing television as a unique aesthetic medium early on?

This case study offers an entry point for consideration of these topics, as well as the early role of sketch comedy, by taking a closer look at the final seasons of NBC's *Colgate Comedy Hour*. While Sullivan continued, and even grew, his audience share through the 50s, the aesthetically similar *Colgate* program attempted a variety of programming shifts—including the incorporation of more "story"-based sketches and film narrative techniques—in order both to distinguish itself from Sullivan's successful variety acts and to respond to the growing popularity of the sitcom. Crucial to this period

of transition is the shifting role of the personas of star comedians that populated vaudeo programs. One central concern for producers and executives of *Colgate* was the clash between their star comedians' atomistic, short-form comedic performance styles and the desire to incorporate this vaudevillian tradition into stories with continuity across sketches and episodes.

Initially, producers attempted to rein in this textual and economic fluidity of broadcast star persona by imposing upon him/her pre-existing narrative contexts. As Murray notes, the narrative expansion of sketches helped disperse audience attention. This de-emphasized the vaudeo star as the primary point of audience identification and returned authority of program content back to producers and advertisers: "Recurring characters and settings helped standardize production practices and enable the program to rely on plot and character to attract an audience, rather than being completely dependent on the personality of a sole vaudeo comic." [34] Producers of *Colgate* began focusing less and less on acquiring high-priced Hollywood talent and allowing them great degrees of creative control. Instead, producers focused more and more on how they could use that talent most profitably within the context of their variety format. Somewhat paradoxically, this meant acquiring existing entertainment properties for the show that catered to the comedian's star persona, without granting him or her ultimate creative control (as original material often did). At the same time, *Colgate* producers began exploiting their comedians' career beyond the confines of the show by increasingly incorporating film clips, recreations of musical numbers, and one-off spectaculars.

This dynamic played out in struggles among the program's creative personnel as they debated how best to utilize the comic stars' increasingly marginalized status for the

program's overall economic aim. The late winter months of 1954 proved to be a

turning point in *Colgate*'s evolution as it finished up its fourth season and made plans to

re-capture audiences in its fifth season. In January of 1954, NBC and *Colgate* producer

Fred Wile brought in an independent consultant to offer her appraisal of the show's

situation at the time and the direction it might take. She noted:

> The Comedy Hour is basically a variety type revue, sans any story line.
> Occasionally a thin thread continues on for a sketch or two, but more often
> it is a series of specialties with an opening production number, a sketch or
> two, and another production number…Novelty acts should be employed to
> great advantage…The argument (stars) become stale the next day, etc.,
> shouldn't stand up, otherwise we couldn't have legitimate shows where
> performers are given nightly.[35]

NBC executive director of programming Thomas McAvity followed up the consultant's

diagnosis with similar sentiments. He informed the program's creative personnel to lean

away from the "star" system and place emphasis on novelty acts more akin to what

Sullivan was doing, rather than on crafting expensive and time-consuming original

content for the program's star comedians: "It is believed that comedy can be achieved

through using comedians and comedy acts with already prepared and tested material,

minimizing the need for new and high priced sketches to be written each week."[36]

Colgate's various writers, directors, and producers set to the task of brainstorming

exactly how they could continue the comedic tradition of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*

without aping Sullivan's variety stylings too much. Director Pete Barnum was one of the

program's only creative personnel that concurred with McAvity. Barnum sought to

"keep change constant," each week importing some spectacle (such as the Barnum &

Bailey circus and rodeo) in lieu of original comedy sketches crafted around the host's

comedic persona.[37]

Crucially, though, Barnum raised the notion that would guide *The Colgate*

Comedy Hour through its final season—base an episode's "original" content on its star

comedians' work outside of television, thereby providing quick content while at the same

time affording any given host a marketing platform. In the following weeks, Barnum

would set to the task seeking out the rights to, for example, Fred Astaire properties like

Top Hat for host Donald O'Connor. The strategy provides a brief instance of how the

show's material conditions of producing sketch comedy misaligned with the guiding

industrial imperatives of the era. A live, weekly broadcast of new material with little

continuity from one comedic piece to the next proved unsustainable in meeting demands

for textual consistency and reliability in meeting advertiser and audience expectations. It

also highlights an early iteration of content sharing across media at a time not commonly

associated with the practice. Certainly, industry practices before the multi-channel and

digital convergence eras routinely reached outside any given medium for ideas and

promotional opportunities, but it is important to note the specific role of sketch comedy

in the case of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*. Namely, sketch comedy was something to be

normalized and made more predictable under medium-specific infrastructures (in this

case, those of television), not a unique aesthetic form capable of differentiating its

performers or programming from competitors.

Following the directive to ease *The Colgate Comedy Hour*'s production routine in

anticipation of the 1954-55 season, executive producer Fred Wile Jr. took Barnum's cue

and instructed the program personnel to create a list of vehicles—adaptations of motion

pictures, Broadway musicals, or farces— that the program could "musicalize" as well as use as the basis for ideas for original sketches."[38] The following week of February 1954, Wile, Barnum, New York executive producer Sam Fuller, and several newly hired writers and directors (among them, Frank Tashlin) convened to discuss exactly how this new creative directive would manifest. Tashlin warned that the current lineup of comics was "dangerously repetitive" and that creating each episode as an "idea show, more even in the direction of doing a movie, would be better."[39] Others were keen to adapt more Broadway musicals, such as those of Cole Porter.[40] All were in favor of increased characterization of any given host, slotting them into fictionalized sketch scenarios that minimized presentationalism, while at the same time using the host's star persona to exploit marketing opportunities for his film and theater vehicles. In summarizing his own appraisal of the proceedings, Wile saw drastic change as necessary and inevitable:

> None of these alternatives seems to offer the hope and opportunity of
> staying with the hour and keeping the star dominated rotating pattern but
> doing it much better, with more imagination, scope, resourcefulness and
> guts than we have in the past…By refusing to hew closely to the revue line
> and encouraging the producing directing writing folk to cut loose, not only
> in ideas themes stories books etc, original as well as adaptive, but also
> with respect to backgrounds and locales, real and functional, we have a
> chance to be real funny and certainly different, and at the very minimum
> to be talked about.[41]

The premiere of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*'s fifth season on September 19, 1954, began with a very tangible departure from shows past, but not necessarily in content—it was the first ever television program to be broadcast from the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, California. Subsequent episodes would continue to exploit this newly fortified bond with

Hollywood in explicit ways. Promotional film clips, including Mamie Van Doren's

Ain't Misbehavin (1955) and Ray Millard's *A Man Alone* (1955) constituted regular

blocks of content week-by-week. In a May 15 episode originating from March Air Force

Base in Riverside, California in honor of Armed Forces Day, Bud Abbott and Lou

Costello were asked to recreate a scene from their early motion picture hit, *Buck Privates*

(1941).[42] In fact, *The Colgate Comedy Hour*'s explicit aping of film and theater material

increasingly became a part of promotion for the program, too. According to memos,

producers asked that a tune-in ad for the week's episode with Jimmy Durante be rewritten

in order to highlight elements of the show beyond the star's name. Instead, the ad

repeatedly mentions Durante as performing a number from "his hit opera *Inka Dinka*

Doo," suggesting that even promotional material move away from publicizing potentially

unique elements of sketch comedy on the show in order to emphasize the existing

projects of imported singers and film stars.[43]

When *The Colgate Comedy Hour* faded away after its fifth season, the vaudeville

aesthetic did not disappear from television entirely. Indeed, it lived (if in somewhat

transmogrified form) in the performances of actors like Lucille Ball on *I Love Lucy* and

Jackie Gleason on *The Honeymooners*. What was clear, though, in the demise of *Colgate*

and its vaudeo ilk was that the sketch-like, short-form comedic performances

characteristic of the vaudeville tradition, while providing early television comedy with

quick, easily translatable material for its live broadcasts, were ill-suited to fit the

medium's sustainable, long-term economic aims. As the television industry transitioned

away from liveness as its primary production mode over the course of the late 1950s,

short-form comedic formats would be increasingly pushed to dayparts outside of

primetime and give way to story-based television genres like the sitcom. In television's classic network era—during which the three-network oligopoly of NBC, ABC, and CBS controlled production, distribution, and exhibition of programming—the driving industrial logic was to capture as broad an audience as possible (a need the sitcom served well), not aggregations of audience segments with differentiated programming. Sketch comedy, with its textual volatility and demanding production routines, fell out of favor.

Of course, sketch comedy formats existed outside of primetime vaudeo and variety, too, in ways that experimented with television's unique aesthetic capabilities and provided precedent for many of the televisually-obsessed sketch comedies of the multi-channel and digital convergence eras. One instructive example for understanding how sketch comedy would move away from vaudeo to embrace the unique aesthetic possibilities of television more fully is Ernie Kovacs. Across a number of different programs and timeslots, Kovacs displayed a completely unorthodox style that explored the possibilities of the young medium. "While his contemporaries were treating TV as an extension of vaudeville stages," notes Frank J. Chorba, "Kovacs was expanding the visible confines of the studio. His skits incorporated areas previously considered taboo, including dialogue with the camera crew, the audience, and forays into the studio corridor."[44] Perhaps Kovacs' most audacious experiment was the January 19, 1957 half-hour "Silent Show" in which he starred as the mute, Chaplinesque Eugene and performed entirely in pantomime, accompanied only by sound effects and music. Kovacs reveled in brazenly breaking with television conventions in general, particularly those of his vaudeo and variety contemporaries.[45] Instead of pandering to celebrity guest stars, for example,

Kovacs often roamed the aisles of his television studios for impromptu interviews with audience members or for demonstrations on the innards of a television set. As a critic of the time noted of Kovacs, "[he] enjoyed a remarkable rapport with his audience, who by some strange chemistry seem to feel they are a part of what is going on."[46]

In the recurring character of Percy Dovetonsils, an effete poet in a smoking jacket, Kovacs frequently broke from the script for asides to the audience or crew. In one segment from a 1954 episode of *The Ernie Kovacs Show*, Percy stops the recitation of a poem and comments on his cameraman's muscular legs with an affected lisp. Studio audience members and crew alike break out in laughter. In the same way that *The Jack Benny Show* offered a dual reading of the stereotyped black character Rochester, Kovacs' performance as Percy Dovetonsils can be decoded as both an offensive iteration of a gay male stereotype and as a subversion of that same stereotype, one facilitated by Kovacs' carefully-crafted rapport with his audience who are made to feel "in" on the joke. Kovacs at times utilized exaggerated parodies of ethnic or sexual stereotypes as recurring characters, but not in the service of overt political commentary like Fred Allen did. Instead, Kovacs' recurring characters were part of a comedic project more akin to that of Benny—to demystify the nascent medium for its audience and to offer the audience a point of engagement with the performer as the medium continued to grow.

Kovacs' mode of sketch humor was rooted in the specific aesthetic qualities of television, and it would greatly inform later iterations of late-night comedy shows such as *Late Night with David Letterman* and sketch shows like *Mr. Show*. Despite critical adulation and a small but loyal fan base, however, Kovacs' short-lived time on television was over by the early 60s. His unique brand of experimentation was too far afield from

contemporaneous vaudeo and variety programs to be incorporated into them, and it

was too avant-garde to find a sustainable sponsor and timeslot on network television.

Moreover, the turbulent socio-political climate of the 60s, along with FCC chairman

Newton Minow's infamous indictment of network television as a "vast wasteland,"

mandated a more socially responsive and responsible brand of programming that

precluded many of the first wave of sketch comedy/variety shows from television's early

days.[47] Networks, with a vertically-integrated stranglehold on the industry after

regulatory changes made in the wake of the quiz show scandals, sought to create mass-

appeal programming that would maintain their robust profitability and, at the same time,

speak to the burgeoning baby-boomer generation.[48]

NBC was among the first to attempt this with its creation of the satirical *The Bob

Newhart Show* in 1961. In his study of NBC and satire, Jeffery S. Miller details the

unique relationship to the Kennedy administration (and Kennedy appointee Minow) that

expedited the network's risky plunge into primetime satire.[49] But the show ended after

one season, Miller notes, due to the "identity crisis" brought about by NBC's desire to

explicitly market it as satire and Newhart's reluctance to "go for the idea that comics

should be social critics."[50] While Newhart incorporated topical satire into the show's

sketches, he utilized it as a gag line and not as source material that structured the

program's overarching themes. Newhart's case is of particular interest because it marks a

rare occasion wherein the network, seeking to distinguish itself from competitors and to

placate regulators, attempted to push potentially subversive content on to resistant talent.

Many subsequent sketch and variety programs structuring their sketch comedy around

explicitly satiric content found themselves in the opposite scenario, wishing to appease

networks and regulators with youth-courting fare, yet not wanting it to be too risqué for fear that it would not be appropriate to air.

No show of the 60s better embodied this battle than CBS' *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a sketch comedy/variety program that, at least initially, delicately combined Tom and Dick Smothers' left-wing sensibilities with their conservative-friendly, wholesome personas. Aniko Bodroghkozy identifies the recurring character of Goldie O'Keefe as particularly exemplary of this balancing act.[51] Parodying afternoon TV advice shows for housewives, spacey hippy-chick O'Keefe dispensed anecdotal advice in sketches laced with druggy slang, instructing viewers in one episode on how to get rid of "unsightly roaches." Amazingly, Bodroghkozy notes, much of the material was cleared for broadcast thanks to the writers' savvy use of double-entendres that likely went over censors' heads. However, as the brothers sought to respond more explicitly to the increasingly tumultuous social climate of the late 60s, their battles with network censors over controversial musical guests and inflammatory sketches reached a boiling point, and CBS cancelled the show over a contract technicality in April 1969.

Despite its short run, though, the show's use of Goldie O'Keefe represents another crucial step in understanding how industrial and socio-historical factors structured the evolution of sketch comedy through normalizing devices like the recurring character. O'Keefe offered many of the same decoded meanings as that of Jack Benny's Rochester, but ones situated in a drastically different socio-cultural and industrial milieu. Whereas Benny created a highly personalized, idiosyncratic persona that accommodated layered readings of his show's characters, the Smothers Brothers' progressively confrontational propagandizing skewed viewers' (and censors') interpretations of

O'Keefe to align with their agenda. Moreover, Rochester existed in a pre-civil rights era that, combined with Benny's parallel characters, rendered innocuous what we might today deem an offensive racial stereotype. O'Keefe, conversely, was a product of a polarizing and contentious social and network climate that, combined with the brothers' proselytizing, we might today dismiss as banal and quaint drug humor.

At the same time on NBC, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* incorporated the Smothers brothers' topical satire (which the network had tried in vain to procure from Newhart six years earlier) not as its focal point, but as a minor element of the show's scattershot, "anything goes" aesthetic. "If *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* captured the political earnestness and moral conscience of the 1960s counterculture," says Henry Jenkins, "*Laugh-in* snared its flamboyance, its anarchic energy, and its pop aesthetic, combining the black-out comedy of the vaudeville tradition with a 1960s-style 'happening.'"[52] Hosts Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, who cut their teeth in the boozy nightclubs of Las Vegas, saw satire not as source material for their comedy, but as a punchline option on par with physical comedy or sexual puns. But what differentiated the show's sketch aesthetics from others was *Laugh-In*'s use of rapid-fire one-liners and quick-cuts in place of "laboriously overwritten sketches and overproduced musical numbers."[53]

The ensemble cast of recurring characters was especially important to the show's success, but not in the same unified and personalized way as the recurring characters of Jack Benny or Ernie Kovacs. Instead, *Laugh-In*'s rotating cast of characters functioned in a manner similar to the recurring characters of Fred Allen in that they "gave an element of familiarity and predictability to a program which otherwise depended upon its

sense of the unexpected."[54] Like Allen's Alley, the comedic milieu created by Rowan

and Martin didn't allow for the individual growth of any character. Unlike the recurring

characters of Allen's Alley, however, supporting players on *Laugh-In* did not contribute

to any overarching satiric project, only intermittently injecting a sense of topicality into

any given sketch via vaudevillian one-liners and sight gags. The overall effect of the

Laugh-In aesthetic was an attempted deconstruction of the sketch comedy/variety genre,

one muddled by the show's ham-fisted and awkward attempts at social commentary.

A sketch from show #15 (16 September 1968) illuminates how Rowan and Martin

approached sketch comedy from a greater critical distance than the Smothers Brothers

did, utilizing it more to pander to youth culture as part of a something-for-everyone

approach than for any salient cultural critique.[55] The sketch begins with the camera

tracking in to a swinging party scene decorated by psychedelic art, with all of *Laugh-In*'s

recurring characters chatting and dancing to the music. Every several seconds, the music

and commotion stop, the camera frames one or two characters, and a short bit ensues. A

young Goldie Hawn, characterized as a sweetly naïve ditz, opens the sketch by saying,

"I'm so glad the new TV season has started. It gives us a chance to see next year's re-

runs early."

Several bits follow in a similar manner, punning and musing on everything from

fall fashion to segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace. Toward the end of the

sketch, the camera stops on host Dan Rowan and cast member Arte Johnson, who plays a

Soviet expatriate named Mr. Rosemenko. Rowan asks him how he likes America, to

which Mr. Rosemenko awkwardly replies, "Well it's, uh, very excitational for to be

immigrationated. But it's one thing with all the criticalizations from the people, if they

don't like it here, why don't they go fly a boat?" Rosemenko invokes many of the same vaudevillian, malaprop-prone performative qualities as Pansy Nussbaum from Allen's Alley. But while Allen utilized Nussbaum as a stepping-stone onto his soapbox of political commentary, the political commentary contained in Rosemenko's character is largely undermined by *Laugh-In*'s quick cuts to silly sight gags. All the viewer is left with, then, is an ethnic character speaking in a funny dialect. In subsuming potentially transgressive readings of its recurring characters, *Laugh-In* brought sketch comedy to align more closely with industrial imperatives structuring content for mass appeal.

Considered more broadly, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In* pointed just as much to network era programming practices as it did to shifting audience demographics. Many older viewers of the same generation as vaudeville stars like Eddie Cantor and Jimmy Durante comprised the mass audience prized by networks less and less. Boomer comedians who grew up watching the elder vaudeo stars used sketch comedy to define the format their own way, mixing socio-cultural commentary with innovate comedic performances that explored the unique aesthetic qualities of television. We see this generational negotiation at work in the contrast between *Smothers* and *Laugh-In*. The former hailed emergent baby boomer audiences with its oppositionally-oriented references to drugs and counterculture, while the latter attempted to incorporate boomers into a vaudevillian, bit-driven approach to sketch comedy that was becoming increasingly unfashionable. But while the social satire of *Laugh-In* may have seemed toothless in comparison to that of the Smothers Brothers, *Laugh-In* did provide some precedent for how sketch comedy would transcend media-specific boundaries in the multi-channel era. As Jenkins notes:

> The comic regulars—Gary Owens' over-modulated announcer, Ruth
> Buzzi's perpetually-frustrated spinster, Arte Johnson's lecherous old man,
> Goldie Hawn's dizzy blonde, Jo Anne Worley's anti-Chicken Joke
> militant, Henry Gibson's soft-spokenly banal poet, Lily Tomlin's snorting
> telephone operator, Pigmeat Markham's all-powerful Judge, and countless
> others—dominated the program. Many of these comics moved almost
> overnight from total unknowns to household names and many became
> important stars for the subsequent decades. Not until Saturday Night Live
> would another television variety show ensemble leave such a firm imprint
> on the evolution of American comedy.[56]

Many performers on *Saturday Night Live* viewed sketch comedy as a way to distinguish

their own comedic personae from cast mates en route to bigger and better things beyond

television. The variability of sketches on the show granted performers ample screen time

to demonstrate their versatility in a number of different performative contexts. At the

same time, however, performers who found the most success beyond the show were often

ones that aggressively inscribed their own personalities across their various characters, a

dynamic I explore fully in chapter three. These processes of individuation among sketch

performers were closely tied to the broader, baby boomer generational identity. Original

cast member Chevy Chase's catchphrase ("I'm Chevy Chase and you're not.") not only

served his own egotistical drive for stardom, but also highlighted how *Saturday Night

Live* self-consciously positioned itself generationally against its sketch comedy

predecessors. The program's contribution to the format, then, came not just in its many

memorable characters and catchphrases, but also in constructing a vocabulary of

differentiation taken up by a number of subsequent industrial formations creating sketch

comedy in television, film, and the Internet.

What's Happening on Saturday Night: *Saturday Night Live* and Bridging Sketch Comedy into the Multi-Channel Era

Popular histories commonly suggest that longtime *SNL* executive producer Lorne Michaels envisioned, and actively positioned, his program as one of television's great success stories from its inception. Early on, however, it wasn't entirely clear how his rag-tag group of Not Ready For Prime-Time Players would build the foundation of a comedy empire, particularly from their positions as relative unknowns toiling in the late night timeslot. Nonetheless, as Frank Krutnik notes, the " the cult NBC sketch show *Saturday Night Live*…has proved the single most influential showcase for filtering comedians into the mainstream."[57] This characterization of *SNL* as a "cult" show provides a good entry point for understanding how it tried to distinguish itself from other television comedies early on. While it may be difficult, in the present day, to assign cult status to a show as financially successful and culturally ubiquitous as *SNL*, the term aptly captures both the unique comedic aesthetic and cultural cachet to which program aspired. Michaels, at least in *SNL*'s mythologized nascent years, consciously sought to set his enterprise apart from the variety tradition of shows like *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* before it. In doing so, the program would not only provide a steady option in a timeslot that ABC and CBS would gradually relinquish over the years, but also a finishing school for comedic talent before they moved on to higher profile projects in prime-time and feature film. Over the course of five decades

(and counting), *SNL* would move from initially challenging the comedy "mainstream"
to redefining it altogether.

In the summer of 1974, NBC's Monday-through-Friday king of late night, Johnny
Carson, informed the network that he no longer wished to have *The Tonight Show* rerun
on weekends. NBC president Herb Schlosser gave the task of filling the timeslot to
newly appointed head of late night weekend programming Dick Ebersol, who in turn
tabbed former *Laugh-In* writer Lorne Michaels to produce what would become *Saturday
Night Live*.[58] The young Michaels sought to set his show apart from the tradition of
comedy in network variety programs before *SNL*, specifically citing his desire to emulate
the newly-imported BBC sketch comedy program *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.[59] Steve
Neale describes *Python* as distinctive from other television comedies because it
"encompassed a much wider range of 'thought' than had hitherto been the norm…while
persistently playing with the formats and forms of traditional variety and its sketches, of
popular culture and popular film, and most notably, of TV itself."[60] The program found
success in both the UK and U.S. by appealing to the young, often college-educated "TV
generation," one receptive to *Python*'s surreal comic attacks on institutional authority and
television tropes. Indeed, many variety shows (such as *The Smothers Brothers*) had made
appeals to the same viewing audience, but were ultimately forced to temper their risqué
content in response to primetime censorship standards and sponsor demands. The
American broadcast of *Python* eschewed these problems on the commercial-free PBS,
and *SNL* used its late-night timeslot similarly to push the formal and aesthetic boundaries
of the genre.

No sketch better encapsulates *SNL*'s aggressive, edgy aesthetic better than its very first ("Wolverines"), one provided as a "cold open" without any contextual credits or introduction. In it, writer Michael O'Donoghue plays the role of a teacher instructing a vaguely-Eastern European immigrant (played by John Belushi) in the finer points of the English language. Belushi haltingly repeats each of O'Donoghue's increasingly bizarre sentences, such as "I would like to feed your fingertips to the wolverines." He mimics the teacher's final lesson—collapsing of a heart attack—and punctuates the bizarre moment announcing the arrival of a new American comedic sensibility. At the same time that it departs from contemporaneous television comedy, however, the sketch's epilogue features Chevy Chase calling out the first iteration of *SNL*'s pre-title sequence segue way—"Live, from New York! It's Saturday Night!"—immediately marking the program's live, late night industrial identity, a constant for nearly forty years.

As Jeffrey S. Miller notes, *SNL* was not an instant success, but it did align with television's industrial imperatives to court demographically-desirable youth audiences: "Overall ratings for the first few shows were nothing more than what *Best of Carson* had provided, and for a lot more money; the demographic breakdown, however, showed that *Saturday Night* was attracting a higher percentage of viewers in the all-important eighteen-to-forty-nine age group—the "television generation"—than any other program on the air."[61] While the show treaded water in the ratings and struggled to return on NBC's investment, it did capture the emergent comedic voice of baby boomers and won six Emmies in its first five years. Cast members like Chase, John Belushi, Bill Murray, and Gilda Radner became household names both for their onscreen charisma and for their offscreen antics. But it quickly became clear that *SNL* was not a permanent position for

those who had helped create its original identity. Chase left *SNL* for Hollywood after

his first and only season, soon to be followed by Aykroyd and Belushi. Fatigued by

battles with NBC brass and the network's own instability by the end of *SNL*'s fifth

season, Lorne Michaels departed as well.

The respective reigns of executive producers Jean Doumanian (1980-1981) and

Dick Ebersol (1981-1985) are often seen as a blight on the proud legacy of *SNL* in many

popular histories. "*Saturday Night Live* was competing against the memory of itself.

And losing," Tom Shales and James Andre Miller muse in their oral history of the

program.[62] Internal strife and further tumbles in the ratings created real doubt about the

program's viability in the minds of viewers and NBC executives alike. A number of

overhauls of the cast moved the program's sensibilities away from the adventurousness of

its original members, many of whom had worked together at the Second City or National

Lampoon. The new casts drew heavily from the 1980s stand-up comedy boom,

incorporating the likes of Gilbert Gottfried and Joe Piscopo with underwhelming results.

But the era is best remembered for introducing America to Eddie Murphy, whose brief

tenure catapulted him to a level of stardom previously unattained by other *SNL* alumni.

After Murphy's departure in 1984, the cast included Billy Crystal, Martin Short, and

Christopher Guest. Here the influence of the Canadian sketch comedy show *Second City*

Television is prominent in *SNL*'s incorporation of more sketch, filmed segments, ones

that tended to take a more *Python*-esque approach to lampooning television conventions

and institutional authority than anything else. Ebersol attempted to make recorded

material an increasingly integral part of the show, but NBC refused to allow him to shut

down live production for a period in order to tape segments. The 1984-85 season drew

critical raves, but change was on the horizon once again.

Michaels returned as executive producer in 1985 and installed a curious collection

of film stars and young actors such as Randy Quaid, Robert Downey, Jr., and the

teenaged Anthony Michael Hall. He was also coming off the critical and financial failure

of another NBC sketch comedy, *The New Show*, the previous year. Under television's

"fin-syn" regulations, networks were not allowed to take full ownership in their shows, so

Michaels had sunk much of his own money in producing the costly failure for NBC. The

experience speaks less to a direct cause for his return to *SNL*—though it certainly

contributed—than it does to an indication how *SNL* would fit in television's shifting

industrial landscape. Michaels created his own production and distribution company,

Broadway Video, in 1979 originally to assist in post-production duties for *SNL*. By the

late 1980s, though, the company was deeply invested in the creation and circulation of all

things *SNL* beyond the moment of its original broadcast on NBC.

In addition to releasing now-ubiquitous, home-video "Best of" collections for cast

members such as Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Dan Aykroyd, the Blues

Brothers, and Chris Farley, Broadway retained most of the lucrative distribution rights for

the *SNL* as it was syndicated across cable outlets and internationally. This "regime of

repetition" of reruns form the structuring backbone of American commercial television,

as Derek Kompare notes, more so than the initial live broadcasts of programs do.[63] In the

case of *SNL*, reruns served to reinforce the program's already-robust mythology of

envelope-pushing comedy, further solidifying its legacy in the minds of viewers and

driving their interest back to the live broadcasts. Michaels expanded what could begin to

be called *SNL*'s "brand" beyond the program itself, too, producing myriad movies

based on characters from the show (*Blues Brothers*, *Coneheads*, *A Night at the Roxbury*,

among others) as well as television projects for former cast members like Tina Fey (*30

Rock*) and Maya Rudolph (*Up All Night*).

Indeed, the germ of this multimedia mindset can be seen in many of the episodes

as early as *SNL*'s late 1980s – early 1990s seasons. Cast members such as Phil Hartman,

Mike Myers, and Dana Carvey effortlessly impersonated pop culture and political figures

with the same deftness as they developed recurring characters that prompted viewers to

return every Saturday. *SNL* conditioned audiences in this era to think of the program not

only as a once-weekly diversion, but also as a repository for catch phrases and cultural

commentary they could use and re-interpret in their day-to-day lives, too. As cast

member David Spade notes, "…it's never been the case, in any sketch that's worked in

history, to leave it at one. It's usually 'leave it at thirty.'"[64] Shales and Miller suggest

that Michaels was under direct pressure from NBC to develop recurring characters that

could be spun off into sitcoms for the network, and the program responded in kind with

Julia Sweeney's Pat and Al Franken's Stuart Smalley, among others. Television projects

for various *SNL* characters fizzled, however, and movies of both Pat and Stuart Smalley

were tremendous flops. Michaels's greatest financial success came in the 1992 spin-off

of Mike Myers and Dana Carvey's popular "Wayne's World" sketches, as the film would

go on to earn over $180 million worldwide.[65]

The mentality of expanding the sketch sensibilities of the *SNL* universe beyond

the program would continue well into the multi-channel and digital convergence eras,

too. Cast members like Adam Sandler and Chris Farley released successful movies and

albums outside of *SNL*'s production cycle, and they were often foregrounded as stars

on the show in support of their side projects. The rise of these male-dominated casts,

however, was met with contempt by other cast members and critics alike, who saw the

show in this era as representing a particularly sophomoric brand of humor. Janeane

Garofalo, for instance, described her only season on *SNL* as "the year of fag-bashing and

using the words 'bitch' and 'whore' in a sketch."[66] A widely discussed 1995 *New York*

magazine piece entitled "Comedy Isn't Funny: *Saturday Night Live* at twenty—how the

show that transformed TV became a grim joke" chronicles the *SNL* workplace as

"obsessed with maintaining its internal pecking order" and compares the viewing

experience of that season to "watching late-period Elvis—embarrassing and poignant."[67]

To be sure, the article—like many others at the time invoking the now-familiar

"Saturday Night Dead" trope—wistfully yearns for the generation-defining humor of the

original Not Ready For Prime-Time Players at the same time that it glosses over many of

the same problems created by that cast's chaotic, misogynistic, and drug-addled working

habits. But it also foreshadows another round of changes. Many of the performers of the

troubled early- to mid-90s era departed, quit, or were dismissed by the 1995-1996 season,

as *SNL* welcomed Will Ferrell that year, Tina Fey the next (as a writer), and Amy Poehler

in 2001. The cast saw frequent turnover across the 2000s as well, with performers like

Jimmy Fallon, Tracy Morgan, and Horatio Sanz variously attempting to compensate for

Ferrell's 2002 departure. One constant across the 2000s, though, was the increasingly

prominent place of politics on the program, shaped by major world events like the 2000

Presidential election, 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rise of Sarah Palin.

Cold open sketches nearly always engaged some political event from the preceding week,

affording ample impersonation opportunities to players like Darrell Hammond, Fred Armisen, and Tina Fey. *SNL* was one of many comedic commentators in television's broader milieu of political satire, but its long-time late night position on broadcast made it an attractive option for politicians seeking to tap into the program's established cultural cachet.

The enduring influence of *Saturday Night Live* comes in no small part from its tenure as the longest-running short-from comedy on television spanning five decades. Its live, weekly production has allowed it to address current events in sketches, while its incorporation of many commonly-used sketch comedy practices—celebrity hosts, recurring characters—have placed it in dialogue both with early vaudeo programs and the many contemporaneous late-night talk shows and pop culture forums that would come and go over its run. The program is in many ways the culmination of sketch comedy practices predating the multi-channel and digital convergence eras. But in equally important ways, it provides a framework for considering how sketch comedy would fit into the shifting industrial landscape as media firms sought to move media content across their holdings. *SNL* sketches like "Wayne's World" and "The Ladies Man," for instance, provided the ideal raw material for long-form feature film comedies in the 1990s, while later digital shorts like "Lazy Sunday" circulated virally on the Internet beyond their original broadcast context in the 2000s. Both transmedial iterations of these sketch comedy texts provided viewers with points of engaging the show outside of television with the implicit financial goal of returning some of them to the late-night broadcast as well. As *SNL* evolved over the multi-channel era into its own branded media enterprise, it would serve as the example par excellence for how other sketch comedies could and

should exploit their most popular content in as many outlets as possible. I explore in subsequent chapters how various sketch comedy texts like *The State*, the comedy website FunnyorDie.com, and the satirical newspaper/website *The Onion* have negotiated the influence of *SNL* in their respective efforts to create content that succeeds in its original televisual or online iterations as much as it does in other media.

Conclusion

In surveying historical precedents for sketch comedy, I have established the industrial and cultural discourses against which sketch comedy texts of the multi-channel and digital convergence eras would seek to differentiate themselves. Indeed, for the sketch comedies I discuss in subsequent chapters, this dynamic is not simply a matter of distinguishing one text from another contemporaneous one in pursuit of immediate financial gain. Differentiation in the multi-channel and digital convergence eras is also about expanding upon previous comedic traditions. The generation of sketch performers who came of age across the 80s, 90s, and 2000s grew up under the influence of many of the texts and performers analyzed in this chapter. They sought cultural cachet just as much by breaking from previous traditions as they did from demonstrating an understanding of how those previous traditions worked.

Saturday Night Live represents the most long-running and influential program that bridged the gap between the vaudeo programs before and the many sketch comedies after it. It did so by creating a forum that gave voice to the comedic sensibilities of the emerging baby boomer generation, one that defined itself aesthetically and culturally in

opposition to the comedic traditions of vaudeo and variety before it. In this chapter, I

have primarily provided an overview of historical constructions of sketch comedy, noting

how they have aligned or not aligned with dominant industrial and socio-historical

discourses along the way. But implicit in my analyses are the ways in which these

discourses assumed certain viewer positions. In early versions of mediated sketch

comedy, while television was still centered in urban areas, vaudeo reflected the presumed

sensibilities of a generation that had matured under live vaudeville and presentational

performances as the dominant comedic aesthetic. When the industry refocused on filmed

long-form sitcoms in the classic network era, sketch comedy conflicted more explicitly

with network attempts to hail broad audiences. But by the early moments of the multi-

channel era, the youth audience previously addressed in coded, layered terms by

programs like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and the "socially-relevant" MTM

sitcoms found themselves directly hailed as new and different by *Saturday Night Live*.

The program's aggressive aesthetic both spoke to and helped to create in its baby boomer

audience a sense of separation from the comedy of previous generations. *SNL* would go

on to become such a dominant presence in sketch comedy across the multi-channel era

for so long that, inevitably, its original boomer audience no longer found itself clearly

defined as the courted youth audience. In its stead was a generation equally eager to

distinguish itself from the previous one by embracing an ironic distance from (in contrast

to boomers' aggressive confrontation of) earlier sketch comedy aesthetics.

Programs like *The State* on MTV in the early 90s, then, represented a deep

ambivalence regarding the next generation's cultural identity, wishing to differentiate

itself through sketch comedy the same way boomers had with *SNL*, yet fearful that such

self-identification would make them easy targets for media industries increasingly

adept at exploiting any markers of difference for financial gain. The next chapter takes

up the issue of cultural identity-formation through generation more closely, considering

how it informed the production, publicity, and performative discourses of sketch comedy

at a crucial point of transition for media industry conceptions of differentiation and the

cultural contexts in which they circulate.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] Christopher Anderson and Michael Curtin, "Writing Cultural History: The Challenge of Radio and Television," in *Media History: Theories, Methods and Analysis*, eds., Niels Brügger and Søren Kolstrup (Aarhus: Aarus University Press, 2001), 15.

[2] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991)

[3] Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, 26-58.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 153-184.

[6] Michele Hilmes, "Fanny Brice and the Schnooks Strategy," *Spectator*, Fall 2005, 25:2, 11-25.

[7] Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Radio Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[8] Michele Hilmes, "Fanny Brice and the Schnooks Strategy," 2005.

[9] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1992).

[10] Ibid., 73-98.

[11] Ibid., 99-135.

[12] Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 170-178.

[13] David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

[14] Ibid., 96-118.

[15] Ibid., 129-138.

[16] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and the Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[17] Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 179.

[18] Greg M. Smith, "'To Waste More Time, Please Click Here Again:' Monty Python and the Quest for Film/CD-ROM Adaptation," in *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, ed. Greg M. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 63.

[19] See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York and London: Continuum Press, 1973), particularly 46-78.

[20] Alan Havig, *Fred Allen's Radio Comedy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 194.

[21] Ibid., 187-188.

[22] Of course, I do not wish to ignore Allen's skill as a social satirist. But my focus here is specifically the limited function the recurring characters played, and how it pressed up against industrial imperatives to establish something longer, in articulating satire in "Allen's Alley."

[23] A typical bit might be structured around a malapropism such as Nussbaum growing "rutabagels" in her garden, as Havig notes (195).

[24] Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), 99.

[25] David Marc, "Lending Character to American Comedy," *Television Quarterly* (New York), Winter 1992.

[26] Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 100.

[27] Bogle *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 46-78.

[28] Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 102.

[29] Margaret T McFadden, "America's Boy Friend Who Can't Get a Date: Gender, Race, and the Cultural Work of the Jack Benny Program, 1932-1946." *Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Indiana, June 1993), 132.

[30] Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, 1-40.

[31] Ibid., 73.

[32] Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994).

[33] Joel Sternberg, "The *Colgate Comedy Hour*," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/colgatecomed/colgatecomed.htm (accessed October 1, 2009).

[34] Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, 115.

[35] Abby Greshler, "Memo to Fred Wile Jr., January 19, 1954," Sam Fuller files, Box 380, folder 28, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[36] Thomas McAvity, "Memo to *Colgate Comedy Hour* staff, January 25, 1954," Sam Fuller files, Box 380, folder 29, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[37] Pete Barnum, "Interdepartment Correspondence to Sam Fuller: *Colgate Comedy Hour*, February 2, 1954," Sam Fuller files, Box 380, folder 31, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[38] Fred Wile Jr., "Memo: *Colgate Comedy Hour*, February 2, 1954," Sam Fuller files, Box 380, folder 28, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[39] Fred Wile Jr., "Memo: *Colgate Comedy Hour* Proposal, February 11, 1954," Sam Fuller files, Box 380, folder 31, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Promotional materials, Box 133, Folder 61, Broadcast publicity files, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[43] James C. Douglass, "Letter to Sam Fuller, March 2, 1955," Box 380, Folder 28, Sam Fuller files, NBC Archives, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[44] Frank J, Chorba, "Ernie Kovacs," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/K/htmlK/KovacsErnie/kovacsErnie.htm (accessed December 8, 2010).

[45] David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: Dumont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 175-208.

[46] *New York Daily News* critic Sid Shalit quoted in Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: Dumont and the Birth of American Television* 180.

[47] Hilmes is careful to note that "the set of social phenomena we think of as the sixties didn't really get started until after 1965" (Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 218). I include Minow's 1960 speech as part of this time period because of its relevance to Miller's later discussion of NBC and satire.

[48] In the introduction to their anthology on the period, *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin note that "the networks presented social movements of the 1960s less as a break with television's general entertainment logic than as part of the flow of its 'something for everyone' programming philosophy" (2).

[49] Jeffrey S. Miller, "What Closes on Saturday Night: NBC and Satire" in *NBC: America's Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 192-208.

[50] Ibid., 194.

[51] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and the Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 205.

[52] Henry Jenkins, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in," The Museum of Broadcast Communications *Encyclopedia of Television*, http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/R/htmlR/rowanandmar/rowanandmar.htm (accessed December 8, 2010).

[53] Miller, "What Closes on Saturday Night: NBC and Satire," 200.

[54] Jenkins, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in."

[55] *The Best of Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, vol. 2, released by Rhino Home Video's Retro Vision, 2004.

[56] Jenkins, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In."

[57] Frank Krutnik, "Introduction Part Five: Post-Classical Comedian Comedy," in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, ed. Frank Krutnik (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 169.

[58] *NBC's Saturday Night* would not take on the now-familiar *Live* part of its name until the January 1976 cancellation of ABC's primetime variety show *Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell*.

[59] Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of* Saturday Night Live (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 33-40.

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[62] Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of* Saturday Night Live (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 192.

[63] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xi-xv.

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[65] "Wayne's World," *boxofficemojo.com*, http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=waynesworld.htm (accessed February 1, 2012).

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[67] Chris Smith, "Comedy Isn't Funny: *Saturday Night Live* at twenty—how the show that transformed TV became a grim joke," *New York Magazine*, March 13, 1995, http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/47548/ (accessed February 1, 2012).

CHAPTER TWO

Brand(ing) X: Negotiating Cultural Identity through Sketch Comedy in MTV's *The*

State

As *Saturday Night Live* increasingly led American sketch comedy away from the vaudeo

and variety tradition in the 1980s, a number of new outlets provided ample opportunity

for even more innovative takes on the format. FOX's *In Living Color*, MTV's *The Ben*

Stiller Show, and HBO's *Mr. Show* all explored the unique aesthetic properties of

television while hailing underserved viewers, experimentation made possible by

industrial imperatives that accommodated edgy content for niche audiences. As *SNL*

continued its success into the multi-channel era, it became the predominant tastemaker in

American sketch comedy, one whose style—while highly influential—replaced variety as

the new standard from which the later cable sketch shows sought to distinguish

themselves.

   But the basis for this urge for differentiation transcended mere comedic tastes, a

dynamic that I trace across this chapter as being tied to the television industry's pursuit of

young, white, male niche audiences with edgy humor. Importantly, though, this "edge"

was itself an industrial construction whose racial and gendered bias were concealed by

broader generational appeals to the emergent Generation X. As such, the humor in sketch

comedy shows of the multi-channel era was less a reflection of the heterogeneity of Xers

and more an attack on the regime of baby boomer nostalgia, one the programs viewed

SNL—and its many "Best of" collections, retrospectives, and feature film spinoffs—to be an integral part of. Just like their boomer predecessors on *SNL* before them, then, the Generation X performers on programs like *The State* used sketch comedy to distance themselves from previous comedic traditions. Where the original casts of *SNL* expressed an aggressive confrontation of pandering variety acts, however, *The State* confronted boomer dominance with decidedly more ambivalence. As I explore throughout this chapter, *The State*'s articulation of an ambivalent Generation X cultural identity was driven by equally contradictory industrial forces guiding cast members to create edgy, niche-oriented comedy that could transcend television to reach broader audiences in film, audio recording, and beyond. This chapter thus moves my analysis of sketch comedy away from moments of either alignment with or rupture of dominant industrial and socio-cultural discourses. Instead, it considers sketch comedy as a site of negotiation for these discourses, particularly as notions of innovation and differentiation became more complex and competed with one another in an increasingly crowded field across the multi-channel era.

Generation and American Television Culture

While boomer nostalgia thrived in the 1990s, the cultural products of that decade have, fittingly enough, also seen their own recent resurgence. Over the course of the late 2000s and early 2010s, various pockets of the American commercial media industries resurrected and repackaged television programs, music, and movies of the 1990s for re-consumption by a post-baby boomer populace presumed to be nostalgic for its childhood.

TeenNick, a part of Nickelodeon's stable of cable channels, re-aired episodes of comedies such as *Clarissa Explains It All*, *Doug*, and *Kenan & Kel*. The programming block was called "The '90s Are All That," after the long-running sketch comedy originally shown on Nickelodeon from 1994-2005, *All That*.[1] Bands like My Bloody Valentine, Pavement, and Hole all reunited in the late 2000s in an effort to re-capture their 1990s appeal. And the 2012 Sundance Film Festival offered 1994's *Reality Bites* as part of its "From the Collection" series, either oblivious to the film's mordant critique of corporate media's co-option of "indie" sensibilities, or eager to indulge in that very practice.[2] The nostalgic ploys were, on one level, a way for these outlets to extract additional revenue from recycling their archived content. But on another level, the 90s nostalgia cycle played into what George Lipsitz describes as evoking "the experiences of the past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideology of the present."[3] Rather than reinforce narratives of national unity and social cohesion, however, this dominant ideology has sought to balkanize media consumers. The commodification of 90s nostalgia serves as a way to assure millennial and Generation X audiences—as they age their way through the prized 18-49 year old demographic—that they, too, have their own cultural heritage distinct from, and just as important as, that of baby boomers.

Perhaps the most notorious purveyor of 1990s nostalgia has been, fittingly, MTV, the cable network that became its own self-perpetuating zeitgeist across the decade by appropriating Generation X's "barely formed narratives" and selling them back at young viewers.[4] Its stock of music videos and original programming from the era provided an ample source of material to feed the nostalgia wave and exploit its own televisual legacy. In the late 2000s, MTV and its subchannels re-launched 90s staples like *Headbangers*

Ball, borrowed *Ren & Stimpy* reruns from Nickelodeon (also owned by Viacom), and ordered new episodes of *Beavis and Butt-Head*. The rebooted *Beavis and Butt-Head*, in which the eponymous characters crack more jokes about MTV's pandering reality fare than they do about Ween and Blind Melon videos, suggested that the network was trying to have it both ways, inviting millennials to laugh at *Teen Mom* and *The Hills* yet doing so through a satiric framework that was decidedly not of their time. Indeed, MTV's 2010 rebranding as simply "MTV" (and no longer "Music Television") was accompanied by a bizarre proclamation from MTV Networks vice president Van Toffler that it was "pushing Generation X out. We're slaves to our different audiences, for MTV that's millennials, who are vastly different than Generation X; they're definitely less cynical— they're more civic minded."[5] MTV told the viewers that first defined the aesthetic and comedic sensibilities of its original programming not only that they were no longer welcome there, but also that those sensibilities were being warped to fit a more attractive commodity audience.

Popular press and television industry trade papers are awash with talk of age groups, since they are ostensibly the currency used by networks and advertisers to buy and sell commercials, programming, and carriage on cable providers. Age is one of the primary demographic categories that are "presumed to correlate with behavioral patterns pertaining to product-purchasing and media consumption habits."[6] Young viewers are thought to possess spending and taste-making power, while advertisers view older viewers as savers and thus less desirable targets. While age groupings provide shorthand for many in the industry, they often belie much more complexity within any given demographic and require further description. When trade analyses extend to the cultural

identities and tastes of age groups, then, these discourses are often framed in many of the generational terms mentioned above: baby boomers (born, roughly, between 1946-1960), Generation X (1961-1980), and millennials (children of boomers born between 1981 through the 2000s).

Media and cultural studies scholarship, however, has a spotty history of using generation as a category for analyzing broader processes of identity formation, and the reasons for this are readily apparent. The very notion of investigating diverse groups of people according to whether or not they fall within the same two decades of birth seems, at first glance, short-sighted. It elides much more salient categories like race and ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class, lumping them together without a concrete framework for suggesting how they might interact. For instance, though it is coterminous with many of the temporal and aesthetic developments of punk and grunge music, hip-hop culture is often bracketed off from popular histories of Generation X, implicitly privileging whiteness in that generation's popular conception.[7] Television trade discourses similarly tend to flatten the many identities comprising a generation. To be sure, a number of racial and gender categories matter to television executives and advertisers, if only as ways to organize their various commodity audiences. Yet these identities inevitably intersect with age and generation, requiring critical work dissecting how the television industry powerfully and systematically uses those guiding concepts to describe its audiences, as well as the ways audiences can defy, negotiate, or comply with industry discourses. Like other cultural categories of analysis, then, generation must be understood as a construction, one in which myriad social and industrial discourses intersect but are nonetheless structured in specific ways.

This remainder of this chapter considers in detail the construction of Generation X in MTV's original programming of the 1990s, most notably in the sketch comedy *The State*. More broadly, it considers how sketch comedy has participated in the construction of discourses of innovation and differentiation by the cable television industry as it attempted to develop an identity distinct from that of broadcast television. I explore throughout this chapter the ways in which cable networks like MTV tied these discourses of distinction directly to the cultural identities of its viewers. The result, I argue, was an ambivalent articulation of oppositionality on the part of cultural producers positioned as Generation X at the time. While performers on *The State* attempted to resist the commercial impulses of their working conditions by satirically attacking them, MTV strove to incorporate these attacks into the production and publicity of the show. This dynamic bled out into broader portrayals of the MTV audience as well, one that the network framed as edgy, dynamic, and culturally savvy. Ultimately, though, MTV's efforts at both the programming and publicity levels only served to reinforce the importance of already-dominant commodity audience categories—namely, young white males.

The State aired on MTV from 1992-1995 before attempting a move to CBS in the fall of 1995, but the program's run on MTV served as a key site of tension in negotiating competing notions of differentiation between youth audiences and the cable industry. By incorporating more regularly scheduled original programming apart from its music videos in the early 90s, MTV sought to create and target more precisely a youth demographic distinct from baby boomers. It saw programs like *The State* as especially appealing to that demographic, even though the network and the cast tussled over exactly what that

appeal was. By the end of *The State*'s tenure on MTV, broadcast networks like CBS were making similar attempts to appeal to a youth audience (though one more broadly defined). In the end, *The State* turned out to be a much worse fit at CBS, falling victim to the network's ill-conceived rebranding efforts. Through analyses of its episodes, promotional content, reviews, trade reports, and original archival materials from one of the program's creators, MTV provides a key example for understanding how original programming like sketch comedy and audience targeting strategies have developed on television. While in the contemporary digital convergence era it has become increasingly attractive to turn critical attention toward thematically rich programming from the likes of HBO, FX, and AMC, the transitional multi-channel era of the 1990s— in which original shows often developed on cable simply to fill time in a cost-effective, brand-building, and audience-targeting way—offers insight into industry strategies still in use today.

A parallel concern to this history is an examination of how discursive constructions of generation in *The State* served as sites for negotiating cultural identity. As I demonstrate by the chapter's end, though, sketch comedy in *The State* was not a democratic space for dialogue among disparate racial, gender, and age groups, but a tool for MTV to pursue its desired audience of young, white men under the aegis of "edginess." While MTV's move to develop original programming meant an increasingly narrow focus on an already-powerful social group, those within that group—the presumed young white men of Generation X—attempted to reject the cultural characteristics ascribed to them by the network. In many ways, commercial interests like MTV hailed Generation X into being, eager to quantify the group in order to program for and sell to it. Yet members of Generation X also used these same strategies in defiance

of hegemonic cultural structures, implicitly buying into them if only to expose and

reject them explicitly. The resultant relationship between young people positioned as

Gen Xers and the cultural discourses positioning them, then, is much more ambiguous

than it is directly oppositional. As such, the specific nature of these discourses—that is,

the way Xers and the television industry "talked to" and challenged one another—

warrants closer scrutiny. A primary discourse through which this dynamic played out

was in the vocabulary of sketch comedy, long a tool used by various identity groups to

roll back hegemonic power. When MTV tried to position *The State* as representative of

an entire generational voice, cast members satirically inverted these efforts to suggest that

Xers' only grand, generation-defining statement was that it did not have one. Comedy

can thus serve as a powerful marker of difference, as Andy Medhurst notes:

> Comedy, after all, is a cultural and social practice that is both shaped by
> and contributes to historical conjunctures; it pivots on contested and
> ambivalent relationships of power; it constitutes a repository of symbols
> that can be drawn on to indicate how, where and why people place
> themselves; it is a prime testing ground for ideas about belonging and
> exclusion.[8]

The State often embodied these "ambivalent relationships of power," acceding to

television's industrial imperatives of audience targeting at the same time it attacked them.

The extent to which these practices constituted a Generation X cultural identity, then, was

equally equivocal, yet careful consideration of their cultural and industrial contexts can

reveal more about how and why television functions as a source of cultural hegemony.

"The Purple-Haired People, I Call Them:" Cultural Identity and Generation X

In a widely-discussed address to the Magazine Publishers Association late in 1992, Karen Ritchie, a senior vice president at the advertising agency McCann-Erickson Worldwide, notoriously referred to Generation X with thinly-veiled derision as "the purple-haired people."[9] In the speech, Ritchie spoke in broad strokes about the emergence of a generation of young people whose political, cultural, and economic sensibilities did not align with hers or with members of the baby boomer generation. These young people were crude, disengaged, and, unreceptive to the advertising and marketing ploys that had long formed the backbone of the American commercial media industries. More importantly, the image provided a powerful signifier for a collective of millions of young Americans that was picked up and reiterated across countless popular and trade publications. Generation X was different, these pieces often pondered, but what was the best way to turn this difference into financial gain? Of course, Ritchie's commentary was also meant to be tongue-in-cheek, expressing a wonderment of Gen X's cultural savvy at the same time that it sought to exploit that savvy. The ambivalence in her characterization of Generation X seeped into the cultural products created by and for young people across the 1990s as well. As myriad industrial and cultural forces tussled over the meaning of the term, it began to lose any clear meaning altogether. As an analytic tool, however, the polysemy contained in the "Generation X" label provides a powerful way to organize the various discourses that sought to construct, constrain, and circulate the media production and consumption patterns of young people in specific

ways. Generation X as a cultural identity, then, is shot through with contradiction, indicating powerfully oppositional sensibilities on the one hand, but also cultural practices structured according to the hegemonic pull of commercial media. To better understand the term, its utility in understanding cultural identity formation, and the way in which that identity was articulated in specific ways in sketch comedy, however, we must examine how it aligns with existing models of subjectivity, power, and ideology.

Identity has long been a central concern for media scholars seeking to understand how cultural products like television structure identity formation by its viewers. Much of this work draws on the ideas of Karl Marx, who grappled with the relationship between power and subjectivity. Writing in contrast to Hegelian dialectics, which posited history as evolving through a clash between ideas and their antitheses, Marx's historical materialism argued that man's primary existence is in the material realm.[10] In Marx's conception of the base and superstructure, the material and social conditions of production ultimately determined the nature of life in capitalist economies. The superstructure contained repressive state apparatuses, institutions borne of the base's need to keep workers working. In tracing a critical theory of capitalism, Marx sought to understand the processes by which the bourgeois merchant class kept the working proletariat productive in order to continually regenerate capital and serve its regime of accumulation. It did so, he argued, by reproducing the material and social conditions of production primarily through repression, but also ideologically via false consciousness, one that led the worker to misidentify his goals in life with those of the bourgeois class— that of accumulating more capital. Ideology for Marx, then, was the ideas of the ruling class, "nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material

relationships…grasped as ideas."[11] These ideas were borne of the system whose only goal was to extract as much labor from workers for as long as they could produce in pursuit of ever more capital. Crucially, though, ideology did not occupy a domain distinct from the repressive state apparatuses of the superstructure—ideology was produced by it and facilitated its repressive mechanisms.

Subsequent theorists such as Louis Althusser working in the critical-Marxist tradition reconsidered the place of ideology and granted it primacy in the production of the conditions of reproduction, placing it at a level atop the superstructure.[12] For Althusser, ideology (not the economic) was the primary social determinant, with the economic determining only in the last instance: "the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order."[13] Such submission was produced in ideological state apparatuses, in contrast to the coercion of Marx's repressive state apparatuses, which peddled soft power, interpellating their subjects as productive workers. Schools endorsed meritocracy, churches endorsed subservience to the higher power of God; both produced the mental conditions necessary for the continued reproduction of production. Althusser's conception of ideology suggested that subjects are not made but born into ideology and are always-already subjects. In this formulation, we enter into a system with rules of language and socialization in place to guide our development, a dynamic that arguably still applies to the role of popular media in the contemporary moment of late capitalism.

Though the top-down structure of these models have undergone extensive revision, they nonetheless provide an important basis for understanding how the critical-

Marxist tradition came to be applied to mass media as it developed over the course of

the 20th century. Most notably, the Frankfurt School's conception of industrialized

cultural production drew parallels between its functions and those of ideological state

apparatuses. Horkheimer and Adorno, among others, saw the burgeoning broadcast and

film industries as embodying the same assembly-line uniformity in cultural products as

they did in automobile factories of the time, a dynamic that provided a soothing escapism

(i.e. false consciousness) that distracted workers from the misery of their own

conditions.[14] Cultural products provided just enough release for workers to return to

work sated and passive. Like Marx, these thinkers saw no room for oppositionality or

even negotiation (discounting, of course, Marx's eventual hope that critical theory would

expose the workings of capitalism and the proletariat would recognize it and revolt), but

other cultural theorists have sought to maintain elements of Marx while adjusting it to

account for the many contexts of media production and consumption. Raymond

Williams' revisions to Marx's base/superstructure model, for example, characterize the

levels as mutually determining, arguing that in late capitalism the base cannot strictly

define superstructure due to mediation and time lags.[15] That is, man does not live a

merely material existence, so the translation to repressive and ideological state

apparatuses designed to perpetuate this existence is not so one-way. Williams sought to

understand the ways in which superstructural elements incorporate the everyday, lived

and cultural experiences of man. With these revisions to Marx's model, we might better

understand how, for example, initially oppositional subcultures like hip-hop develop and

are eventually incorporated into the same ideological apparatus intended to keep us

working. With more broadly defined Generation X culture, however, clear delineations

of oppositionality become much harder to pinpoint, requiring further nuance in how its myriad meanings were negotiated.

With the provocation that "culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind,"[16] Williams argued for an examination of its localized, emergent cultural moments of departure and/or eventual alignment with the ideological imperatives of capitalism. In doing so, Williams borrowed from Antonio Gramsci's model for understanding the politics of ideological consolidation. In tracing the processes through which disparate ruling factions united Italy in the 19th century, Gramsci saw dominant powers utilizing a complex combination of consent (gained by exercising moral and intellectual leadership) and coercion (repressive forces) he called hegemony, a flexible system of rule that adjusted to social, cultural and political shifts.[17] As this bourgeois ruling class maintained control into the 20th century, it continued to act in ways responsive to the socio-economic milieu via common sense appeals, so as to elicit a "spontaneous consent" from the subaltern classes who believed that this ruling class truly had their interests in mind.[18] Such consent would not have been possible, however, had the bourgeois not first carefully exercised leadership and repression in a way contingent on the ever-changing social and political conditions wrought by capitalism.

The flexible and contingent nature of power in processes of identity formation is perhaps most compellingly put forth across the work of Michel Foucault, who further characterizes ideological power as insidious and pervasive, seeping into every domain of our everyday lives and even into/onto our bodies. Subjects are not merely repressed and interpellated in direct, monolithic ways, he argues. Rather, they are constructed discursively, as products of how they talk about themselves and as products of how

institutions talk about, restrict, regulate, delineate, and provide boundaries for their subjectivities.[19] Language (i.e. discourse) is the key element of power for Foucault, but not in the pursuit of master structuralist codes that can be applied uniformly. Foucault bemoaned this will to truth as bound up in power relations of which it was not aware. Instead of asking "what is truth?" Foucault asked "under what conditions is truth produced?", an approach that requires study of the specific contexts bearing on the production and circulation of subjectivities.[20]

Moreover, Foucault suggests, that which is officially banished from discourse in the form of law or institutionally-sanctioned knowledge can actually provide an incitement to discourse. In his work on the history of sexuality, for instance, Foucault argues that the institutional forces bearing on sexual discourses did not remove ways of talking about it, but actually incited more discourse about it—it simultaneously made subjects more horrified and curious about it and, conversely, inspired a network of power to control these impulses.[21] This power did not seek to render silence, but to control discourse in a way that rendered it morally and socially useful and acceptable, thereby reinforcing dominant power structures. Such power flows in a networked, capillary manner and is pervasive, not housed only in state-endorsed apparatuses but present in even the most mundanely quotidian interactions. As discursively-constructed subjects, then, we are both the objects of and complicit in localized exercises of power that align with the forms of individuality espoused by institutions in power.[22]

Foucault's work has provided an important foundation for a number of cultural studies questioning the unified nature of subjectivity and exposing the complexity of discursive power. His work is especially useful for considering how subjectivity can be

shot through with contradiction, redressing the implied simultaneity of subject-

formation in critical-Marxist models. While we might always-already be subjects,

Foucault accounts for the processual elements of the subject-in-formation and how it

relies on multiple, intersecting racial, national, and gender identities. But while Foucault

is right to point out how a subject is produced through and within discourse, Stuart Hall

argues, his work provides no account for continuities among subject positions or how and

why certain individuals come to occupy certain subject positions under certain

circumstances.[23] Because Foucault posits power as pervasive, he provides no space for

resistance, only suggesting self-care and self-policing as models of preservation and

survival. Thus, as Hall notes, "Foucault steps too easily from describing disciplinary

power as a tendency within modern forms of social control, to positing disciplinary

power as a fully installed monolithic force which saturates all social relations,"[24] but he

concedes that Foucault's work crucially provides

> a recognition that, since the decentering of the subject is not the
> destruction of the subject, and since the "centering" of discursive practice
> cannot work without the constitution of subject, the theoretical work
> cannot be fully accomplished without complementing the account of
> discursive and disciplinary regulation with an account of the practices of
> subjective self-constitution.[25]

Hall's goal is to reconcile these two forces of identity formation, accounting for how

individuals as subjects identify with the positions to which they are interpellated and how

they produce and perform these positions. It is the interplay between them that

constitutes identity, one that is never completed but always in the process of

formation. Identity for Hall, then, is

> the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices
> which attempt to "interpellate", speak to us or hail us into place as the
> social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the
> processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects
> which can be "spoken"…Identities are thus points of temporary
> attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for
> us.[26]

In this process of "articulation," an individual's identity is not created entirely out of the

structuring ideologies of late capitalism, nor is an individual incapable of occupying

certain subject positions that allow him/her to resist these powers.[27] By acknowledging

the simultaneously dominant and contingent nature of social power, Hall argues for an

understanding of identity that accounts for the ways in which it is both imposed upon and

produced by individual subjects. To be sure, no subject operates beyond the capillary

reach of social power, but Hall's framework allows for instances wherein power

condenses into centers of meaningful everyday experiences.

Cultural studies scholars have already incorporated Hall's model to analyze

constructions of racial identities in mediated short form comedy. Herman Gray's study

of the FOX sketch comedy program *In Living Color*, for instance, parses the industrial

and cultural discourses that construct deeply ambivalent representations of black identity,

ones aligned more with performances of race suited to the quick-hit nature of sketch than

they are with more authentic articulations of blackness.[28] Humor on the program is

neither unambiguously conservative nor oppositional in its racial politics, but always

potentially both, a negotiation it foregrounds in order to mask prized notions of black normativity relied upon by the television industry. In sketches like "Men On...", in which performers Damon Wayans and David Allen Grier crudely affect the personae of black homosexuals, performative flair and recurring sketch catch-phrases only serve to anchor articulations of potentially transgressive cultural identities (black male homosexuality) in the relative normativity of black male heterosexuality prized by FOX at the time. In a similar vein, the "Homeboy Shopping Network" sketches, which feature the same performers as destitute vagrants pitching garbage for sale to home viewers, confront the economic plight of the black lower class only to affirm a middle-class blackness able to revel in joys of lower-class antics. Both sketches, for Gray, are really about reassuring black, heteronormative, middle-class viewers that they are the prized commodity audience of the program, even while it articulates oppositionally-oriented black identities.

Bambi Haggins's study of black comedians working in sketch comedy suggests a similar negotiation of black identities, though not one that necessarily endorses one or another dominant construction. Instead, she sees the ambivalence of performers like Dave Chappelle as emblematic of complex and contradictory "post-soul" black identities both within the television industry and in American culture, providing "partially translated enunciations of blackness that speak to various audiences on variable registers."[29] For Haggins, the sketch format ideally captures the processual elements of identity formation, ones increasingly bound up in an industrial infrastructure amenable to multiple and contradictory representations of blackness. Whereas *In Living Color* tacitly posited blackness as an industrial construction that served FOX's strategic targeting of

that audience, Haggins sees cable networks like Comedy Central as affording performers more room for risk and authentic portrayals unfiltered by a demographic bottom line.

Chappelle's Show, for instance, complicates simple insider/outsider notions of any one audience group "getting it" by presenting constructions of blackness alongside myriad other racial identities. In sketches like "Racial Draft," "The Niggar Family," and "Clayton Bigby" (a blind white supremacist who is black), the fluid sketch format allows Chappelle to move among a number of topics and racial tropes, place them in dialogue with one another, and deconstruct blackness with the same satiric bite as other racial categories. The dynamic proved unsustainable for Chappelle, though, as he grew increasingly uncomfortable with the extent to which audiences rearticulated elements of the show unmoored from their dialogic context, latching on to incendiary catch-phrases and character bits instead. Chappelle was alleged to have been upset about a white crew member laughing at a racial epithet during taping, and he abandoned the show shortly after signing a lucrative long-term contract with Comedy Central. In Haggins view, the program is notable less for bringing previously peripheral black identities into the mainstream—and the "success" or "failure" of these efforts—than it is for shifting the center for identity politics, "making the marginal mainstream" in the process.[30]

One tension in examining the cultural identities expressed in short form comedy, then, is the extent to which industrial discourses constrain them. Gray sees the possibly-transgressive black identities of *In Living Color* as being circumscribed by their place on advertiser-driven outlets like FOX, while Haggins suggests that cable networks like Comedy Central are free to explore riskier and more complex constructions of black

cultural identity. Yet even the "freedom" afforded cable networks must be viewed as a construction as well, one designed to differentiate them from seemingly-staid network fare. On the one hand, then, entertainment industries strategically create and circulate cultural identities that serve their respective financial goals. In the above examples, broadcast networks are ultimately prone to less risky representations in order to appease advertisers, and even cable networks—seeking to be edgy and distinctive, but also operating under the same broader industrial infrastructure as broadcast—can only go so far. Yet on the other hand, this does not preclude popular media like sketch comedy from articulating cultural identities that can momentarily deconstruct, destabilize, or transgress dominant ideological norms. As Haggins notes, small victory might be seen in inserting transgressive identities into conservative ideological domains and placing them in dialogue with one another. Sketch comedy, with its textual volatility and polysemy of representations, is particularly suited to accomplish this.

Robert Stam, in re-interpreting the work of Bakhtin, posits similar possibilities for counter-hegemony in popular cultural forms like comedy. In Stam's conception, carnivalesque comedy need not be conceived of as entirely beyond the domain of ideology, but can actually provide subjects with tools for demystifying it, rendering it visible and, by extension, susceptible to opposition.[31] Jonathan Gray has similarly suggested the oppositional possibilities of popular comedy in the form of parody. Programs like *The Simpsons*, for instance, might not immediately compel viewers to immediate action against institutional powers, yet the show works at the micro level to foster critical awareness. Comedic parodies can thus destabilize the invisibility of a

genre's grammar and, by extension, undermine the ideologically dominant position it espouses.[32]

Popular media—and, as I argue, sketch comedy—are especially open to the destabilizing forces of dialogism originally envisioned by Bakhtin. But at the same time, these forces are situated by the hegemonic discourses of commercial media industries. My goal in the remainder of this chapter is to identify moments of tension between these competing discourses in order to better understand how cultural identities are formed through sketch comedy. The dialogic nature of comedy, as noted by Haggins, Jonathan Gray and Stam, allows one not only to understand the complex social and industrial forces that go into its making, but also uncover the muffled voices within it. In cultural identities formed around Generation X and through sketch comedy, oppositional sentiments clashed explicitly with dominant commercial imperatives. As I demonstrate in the case of *The State* on MTV, the readily apparent negotiation between oppositionality and mainstream forces helped to foster critical awareness of institutional media powers, but in ways that were ultimately beholden to the mainstream.

The notion of resistance was represented in a number of complex and conflicting ways in the media produced by and targeted at members of Generation X. Throughout the 1990s, artists, consumers, and media executives alike debated the extent to which Generation X constituted a true cultural identity. While many qualities of the media—the sneering resentment of Nirvana; the ruminative demurral of *Slacker*— associated with Xers expressed angst about their social status throughout the 1990s, it remains difficult to identify a coherent center of resistance expressed through these cultural products.[33] What was common in these and other media, though, was a vaguely defined sense of

oppositionality, a flexible mode of expression that allowed Xers both to stand defiant

in the face of dominant social forces and to recuse themselves of taking a stance. Yet for

Hall, resistive practices of identity formation need not be coherent in order to be

meaningful:

> in spite of the fact that the popular masses have never been able to become
> in any complete sense the subject-authors of the cultural practices in the
> twentieth century, their continuing presence, as a kind of passive
> historical-cultural force, has constantly interrupted, limited and disrupted
> everything else.[34]

In exploring the incomplete nature of Generation X as a cultural identity, then, this case

study acknowledges both its disruptive power and the dominant forces that constructed it.

In examining MTV's move to original programming with Xer-targeting programs like

The State, I elucidate the discourses that attempted to bring Generation X identities into

being, and the ways in which "temporary attachment to the[se] subject positions"

occurred.[35]

Across many generations of Americans, cultural practices resistant to dominant

power have often been centered in and around youth.[36] But unlike the world wars,

economic depression, and social upheavals of generations of youth before it, Xers were

"free of any defining event or experience," with no "powerful touchstone for group

identity."[37] Critics lamented "the age of increasing despair" of the 1990s, and

demographic studies abounded with details of the difficult socio-economic conditions for

Xers.[38] There were fewer of them, with the national birth rate declining in 1965 for the

first time since the start of the baby boom in the mid-1940s.[39] They grew up with less

parental guidance in the 1970s, as the number of "latchkey" children left alone after school doubled.[40] When Xers did enter the workforce by the early 1990s, they earned less: with "the median income of families headed by someone under 30…13% lower than such families earned in 1973."[41] As one report put it succinctly at the time, they "read less, know less, care less, vote less and are less critical of almost all institutions than any previous generation."[42]

One of the more widely discussed conceptions of Generation X came from historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, who in a 1992 article outlined what they viewed as fundamental differences between Xers and baby boomers, ones resulting from the cyclical nature of birth patterns that every century brought two generations into conflict.[43] In the authors' view, Xers were defined by the fact that they were not boomers, with no cultural identity of their own except that which positioned them in opposition to the elder generation. "Since Xers grew up in the leviathan shadow of the boomers, a sense of apartness played a role in forming our identity from the start" Jeff Gordinier, editor-at-large for the Xer-oriented *Details* magazine, would later concede.[44] But other responses broadened Strauss and Howe's account, arguing that discursive formations of Generation X were created, circulated, and reinforced by a boomer-controlled "propaganda campaign intended to…[slow] the next generation's succession to power."[45] Some accounts suggested more insidious mechanisms at work in the boomer-controlled media industries, ones that fabricated a Generation X identity as a way to prevent anything more authentic from emerging:

Today a generic youth culture has been assembled from above precisely because it doesn't exist down below…The twentysomething generation is indeed a myth—an imaginary resolution of real contradictions...But these characteristics don't cohere into a shared identity...[Generation X's] true cultural legacy is to have been disunited by the very experiences it has had in common.[46]

The term and concept "Generation X" was originally popularized by the title of Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel about sardonic, shiftless youths living in southern California, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Generation*.[47] One often-quoted line from the book ("I am not a target market") underlined the common thread among the above-mentioned popular commentaries and from young people elsewhere to the pejorative label—it was not theirs. Not only was it not theirs, but it was also a label crafted according to the logic and language of consumer culture. This, more than anything, seemed to be the implicit object of Xers' resistance. They recognized that "Generation X" was little more than a category constructed by the converging efforts of advertisers and media industries seeking to organize increasingly fragmented consumption practices around a shared identity. Indeed, young people voiced objection to these efforts throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, and much of the scholarship about Generation X and youth culture insightfully examines the aesthetics and identity politics in music of the time.[48] But as television shifted from the three-network oligopoly structure of previous decades to a multi-channel landscape thanks to cable, the medium negotiated cultural identity in ways reflexive of its unique, industrial instabilities.

The proliferation of new channels recontextualized familiar fears about the deleterious effect of television, ones that saw a heightened sense of disillusionment and

disunity among youth. A report about young people's voting patterns in the 1992

presidential election, for instance, stated that "This generation, after all, has been raised

on the distancing and isolating medium of television, in an age when many of the

traditional mediating institutions that once brought the young into social action have

weakened or collapsed."[49] Blaming television as a tool of modern alienation was not

necessarily a new idea, but the sheer abundance of texts generated by the expanding

industry complicated attempts to characterize its effects monolithically. One program

that embodied this ambiguity was MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head*, the crudely animated

meta-comedy in which two teenagers crack (not-so-)wise about music videos and popular

culture. When a five-year-old boy, after having viewed the eponymous characters

playing with fire, burned down his family's mobile home in 1993, critics, media

watchdogs, and parent groups vociferously attacked *Beavis and Butt-Head*. Even

accounts that recognized the program's parodies of authority figures conceded that, in the

end, its "social defiance is extremely limited and highly problematical."[50]

But conflating the show's satiric strategies with how they did or did not effect

social change overlooks the ways in which they also created meaning in subtler and

sometimes polysemic ways. Beavis and Butt-Head's imbecilic chuckling and inane

observations, for instance, were also vehicles for a subversive and "smart" mode of

televisual humor, part of "a growing crowd of characters who have found a magic

formula: nothing cuts through the clutter like a slap of bracing crudity…Stupidity, served

with a knowing intelligence, has become the next best thing to smarts."[51] Concerned

parents and interest groups may have been inclined to decode the program in a

straightforward way, seeing only its overtly brainless aesthetic. But young viewers

additionally saw it as reflexive of their own thoughts and experiences and as a satire

of the conventional readings.

Jason Mittell[52] and Aniko Bodroghkozy[53] have described a similar dual address to

older mass audiences and young viewers in the late 1960s' *Dragnet* and *The Smothers*

Brothers Comedy Hour, respectively. In the case of *Dragnet*, the black and white

worldview espoused by the series' moralizing creator was increasingly out of touch with

the burgeoning youth counterculture; for *The Smothers Brothers*, countercultural topics

and guests proved too incendiary for CBS. Both shows cracked under the weight of a

"polysemic burden too heavy"[54] to handle the shifting cultural milieu and industrial

exigencies that, over the course of the following decade, would see the young baby

boomers become television's new mass audience. Xer comedies like *Beavis and Butt-*

Head and other MTV original programming like *The State*, by contrast, did not need to

please mass audiences and advertisers. Instead, their appeal was partly built by—indeed,

thrived on—ambiguous, multivalent modes of addressing its small, targeted youth

audience, often laying bare the seemingly straightforward, dominantly encoded

ideologies of mass audience-courting fare. As I explore below, this tension—between

risqué cable sensibilities and mainstream broadcast safeness—is what ultimately brought

The State from modest success on MTV to collapse on CBS.

Industrial Identities on MTV and in the Multi-Channel Era

Youth audiences have served as one of the primary testing grounds for cable television's

experimentation with original programming in the last 30 years. Beginning with the

introduction of Nielsen's people meter in 1987 and through the rise of database-driven marketing in the 1990s and 2000s, media industries have gained more and more information about exactly who is watching and consuming what products and when. As I discussed in the Introduction, the ensuing shift away from practices that courted an undifferentiated, mass television audience coincided with new ways of understanding demographics by American advertising agencies.[55] The abundance of new outlets on cable—in well over half of American homes by 1990—provided ideal venues for demographic-specific content and advertising directed at particular segments of the population.[56] Advertisers promised their clients campaigns that could foster in desired audiences feelings of intense loyalty toward the program, network, and products of any given viewing experience.[57] As advertisers saw baby boomers slip out of the prized 18-49 demographic, they came to embrace the taste-making capabilities and spending power of the so-called "forgotten generation" of youth that followed—Generation X.[58]

This is not to say, however, that targeting niche and youth audiences became the predominant industrial logic of the era. The "Big Three" broadcast networks of ABC, NBC, and CBS still brought in exponentially more advertising revenue than their relatively new competitors on cable did, and as a result they were reluctant to risk alienating long-held and still-robust boomer audiences to pursue Generation X fully. Moreover, because cable outlets increasingly became part of the same media conglomerates as broadcast networks, we can instead view mass and niche audience targeting practices as complementary, allowing the shared corporate parents of broadcast and cable outlets to pursue consumers with flexibility. In the merger mania of the 80s and 90s, Michael Curtin notes, firms like Viacom and Time Warner created both

apolitical content aimed at national/global markets that required low audience involvement, as well as niche products designed to inspire intense loyalty in consumers from smaller market segments.[59] One goal of media industries at the time, then, was to accommodate the quick movement of niche content into the mainstream, making "the oppositional…more commercially viable and, in some measure, more closely tied to the mainstream."[60]

The FOX network infamously used this strategy as a way to counterprogram against its competitors, bringing black and Generation X subcultural elements into the mainstream with sketch comedies like *In Living Color* and *The Ben Stiller Show* in the early 1990s. Though the network's programming was comparatively oppositional to that of much broadcast television, it would eventually trade up to the even bigger mass audiences of NFL football and fold its niche elements into the more conservative News Corporation conglomerate.

Grunge music followed a similar path from regional subculture to international, multi-million dollar phenomenon, as bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam topped record charts across the early 1990s. The genre became the most ubiquitous signifier of Generation X culture, and the more it filtered into the mainstream, the riper it became for parody. One of the more memorable sketches from *The Ben Stiller Show*, which had an initial run on MTV before moving to FOX, lampooned a fictional band called "The Grungies" by using the wacky tone and stylistics of *The Monkees*. The sketch's theme song ("We're not trying to be friendly/ We just want money and fame/ We're the X generation/ We just like to complain") explicated the conflicted feelings grunge musicians had about their authenticity versus their commercial viability. Certainly, such

a dilemma was not unique to grunge music, or even musicians in general. Yet the cultural and industrial context of grunge's appropriation by commercial media institutions seemed to amplify the uniqueness of this particular artistic dilemma. Coming on the heels of the boomer-dominated rock generation, and with exposure across ever-proliferating media outlets, grunge became a crucible for the new youth culture of the 1990s.

On television, MTV seized upon the grunge music zeitgeist as a steady resource for content and for its attendant appeal to youth audiences. Yet in doing so, MTV was continuing its decade-old strategy of building a brand around product differentiation and niche targeting.[61] Since the network's launch in 1981, MTV (with record labels bearing much of the financial burden for production) offered music videos found nowhere else on television and delivered a highly desirable demographic to advertisers with them. In doing so, it also created a unique visual identity for its own interstitial content based on the now-familiar pastiche of music videos' quick cutting and hyper-stylized aesthetics, differentiating the network further from cable competitors that relied on familiar syndication packages and cheap knockoffs of broadcast fare. As important as music videos were for MTV early on, though, it gradually began filling out its schedule with original programming in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, just as oppositionally-oriented grunge and hip-hop music were ascending to mainstream awareness. Here, the discourses of Generation X identity formation and MTV's pursuit of profitable growth would meet in the form of original programs like *The State*, but not without some contention in how to find a comfortable meeting point between the two impulses.

As Lauren Rabinovitz has noted, MTV was not yet profitable by 1984—three years after launching—due to considerable start-up costs.[62] In the face of financial pressures and brief competition from Ted Turner's Cable Music Channel, MTV increased efforts to consolidate its power over cable's music video market. The network negotiated with cable companies for long-term carriage and with record labels for exclusive rights to previously free videos, streamlining "its on-air formula for success" accordingly.[63] After being sold to Viacom International in 1986, MTV again revamped its program flow, further narrowing its focus on heavy metal artists that would hail the desired audience of young white males. The move kept in line with MTV's spotty history of airing videos by black artists, further reifying the same commodity audience—middle class white viewers aged 18-49—that broadcast television prized, but concentrated on a younger segment. The strategy also corresponded with other measures by the network to please advertisers, many of which involved moving further away from an undifferentiated flow of music videos and closer toward the half-hour and hour-long scheduling conventions of broadcast television. But in order to hold on to some vestige of the edgy aesthetic that defined its early identity based on music videos, MTV introduced short, animated, identification segments and logos in between them:

> The logos could provide a structural link that would address a presumed audience desire for the flow of images signifying Postmodernism while identifying MTV as the purveyor of that desire. Since MTV had made a name for itself with both viewers and advertisers as a Postmodern-styled channel, it still needed to maintain its own identity/product differentiation in order to keep its audience and advertisers.[64]

This characterization of MTV suggests its embodiment of the "superficiality, stylistic jumbling"[65] and "neutral practice"[66] of postmodern pastiche. Indeed, MTV provided a number of scholars at the time with evidence of a new and uniquely ever-contemporary postmodern condition unmoored from the power relations of the past.[67] Yet Rabinovitz's analysis argues for an understanding of MTV and the logos as products of a particular industrial and historical context. MTV's style could not simply be read in unqualified opposition to dominant aesthetic norms and ideologies, enabling either escape from domains of political engagement altogether or radical new modes of occupying them. Instead, the network served as a site for the ongoing negotiation for these discourses, one informed by the material conditions of its production, distribution, and consumption contexts.

Any perceived break with these contexts had just as much to do with postmodernism's abandonment of grand narratives as it did with buying into the smaller ones that would replace them. As Andrew Goodwin notes, "It isn't just that MTV must be seen as hip and irreverent, but that it must seem always to be hip and irreverent in *new* ways."[68] Newness and innovation, then, became industrial strategies, performances of differentiation based on their prospective appeal to desired demographics.[69] As MTV's first format evolution took shape, the stylized look of the promotional logos increasingly pervaded across the network as it diversified beyond music videos. *Remote Control* (1987-1990), for example, departed from the staid game show genre with a set cluttered by pop culture artifacts in tune with trivia questions that plumbed the depths of contestants' music, television, and movie knowledge. Another one of its original programs, a short-lived sketch comedy show called *The Idiot Box* (1990-91), frenetically

mixed short comedic bits in between music video segments. As seen in the promotional logos and in these programs, MTV's stylization at both the program and network level was less an attempt to hold onto a purely postmodern past and more an adaptation of its defining characteristic—the music video—to the normalizing schedule demands of audiences, advertisers, and network executives.

John Caldwell has described the relationship between this self-conscious performance of style and the industrial discourses that informed it "televisuality."[70] Over the course of the 1980s, programs across television's range of expanding outlets embraced exhibitionism, privileging style as their subject instead of as a vessel for transmitting narrative and informational content. This move was motivated by a number of converging factors, including networks' need to self-identify and differentiate from one another amidst growing competition, advances in video technology, and increased media literacy on the part of viewers. Though televisuality would manifest in a number of ways, MTV fare like *Remote Control* and *Beavis and Butt-Head* represented a "trash" aesthetic that played into worries about its effect on vulnerable young viewers. But, as Caldwell notes, "the spatial and temporal excesses that define trash television, also inevitably flood the viewer with knowing references. The accumulation of junk and gestural marks swirling around the performers in these shows is matched only by the thickened flood of smart cultural codes given off by the very same objects."[71] The televisuality of MTV's original programming thus bore the effects of contemporaneous industrial and cultural discourses just as much as its (supposedly-purely) postmodern music videos and promotional segments had.

On the one hand, then, MTV foregrounded televisual style in order to self-identify as "edgy" in a cluttered cable marketplace. On the other hand, this style was increasingly on display within established programming practices and genres elsewhere on cable that also sought out the young, white, male audience desired by MTV. Megan Mullen notes that MTV's early negotiations of music video and half-hour formats catalyzed the spread of "video bites" on cable networks such as CNN and Comedy Central. The attention-grabbing aesthetic and affordability of minutes-long programming "buttressed the notion that audiovisual meaning can be conveyed in much shorter spans of time than the traditional half-hour or hour scheduling slots…increasing recyclability while creating new meanings."[72] The "flow" of MTV's early days may have been aesthetically innovative compared to broadcast fare, but the network was also motivated to find equally innovative ways to subsume this style to growing financial imperatives. As its cultural codes proliferated beyond its own programming and into advertising and press, MTV invariably attempted to claim ownership of them and structure their polysemy around the perceived tastes of Generation X audiences.

MTV Executive Vice President Sara Levinson, for instance, said in 1993 "We're definitely seeing an increase in the number of programs targeted to the younger demographic, but I think MTV is the only place that really has as its mission to serve this audience all day, every day…We have a long-term commitment to this audience."[73] That same year Taco Bell hired Bill Plympton, the animator responsible for many of MTV's promotional shorts in the late 80s, for an X-targeting ad campaign. A Taco Bell marketing representative called the ads "very edgy stuff with multiple messages…It's constant visual change and challenge. The boomers are just not going to get this one."[74]

Efforts to brand a particular cultural commodity as Gen X often came with a corresponding implication of how baby boomers did or did not figure into the equation, a dynamic that played out as MTV positioned itself among a crowded field of cable outlets. When the music channel VH1 launched in 1985, it and MTV both courted a broadly-conceived youth audience for much of the remainder of the decade. VH1 often made more direct appeals to boomers with nostalgic retrospectives like *Woodstock Minutes*, in which "bite-sized chunks of history cascade[d] along with the rest of the network's 'flow.'"[75] The network aggressively embraced the "growing 'cult' of the past in popular music" and exploited the "generational narcissism" of baby boomers, though both MTV and VH1 would make use of the past with direct generational appeals as their respective forays into original programming evolved.[76] But while VH1 packaged the past in a flattering light, MTV came increasingly to use it ironically, appealing to the emerging youth demographics of Generation X. MTV, before coming to focus eventually on Xers, packaged boomer-friendly fare (such as cheap syndication packages of *Speed Racer* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*) alongside the likes of *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Liquid Television*. The strategy had the purpose of solidifying its core youth audience—12-25 year old Gen Xers—while also hailing aging boomers toward the 25-34 year-old end of the youth demographic. But if both VH1 and MTV sought youth audiences through the late 1980s,

> The strategy behind this targeting seems to have changed somewhat in 1994. Whereas VH-1 defined itself as "The difference between you and your parents," by late 1994 the network was targeting "graduates" of MTV. The aim is still to flatter the viewer into feeling young, but now with music video itself (MTV) as an explicit frame of reference.[77]

Here again the language of MTV as a referent occurs, not as a postmodern signifier, but as a branded commodity using another (VH1) to self-identify. The industrial logic of this reflexivity becomes even more apparent considering that both MTV and VH1 were owned by the same parent company, Viacom. Segmenting its audience in this way allowed the conglomerate to create the illusion of differentiated taste cultures so crucial to pitching the networks to advertisers and cable carriers. At the same time, revenues from both stayed within the same corporate structure.[78]

In a more recent setting, as older Xers have gradually slipped out of television's 18-49 year old demographic, cable outlets have once again looked to the relationship between generations and the American "television heritage" as a way to frame their programming practices. While Nick at Nite and TV Land, for instance, programmed for boomer nostalgia in much the same way VH1 did, they shifted focus in the 2000s to reruns of 1980s hits like *Cheers* and *The Cosby Show*—"the TV neverland of Generation X parents."[79] As the industry has treated generations with such disposability, it would be tempting to see the idea as little more than a sound-bite friendly manner of expressing the same information contained in dry demographic numbers. Yet that does not mean that cultural identities based on generations cannot be articulated and/or resisted in real and meaningful ways. Even if it was and would continue to be primarily, as Coupland worried, "a target market," Generation X expressed opposition to cultural hegemonic forces not as the boomers before them did, but in ambiguous ways that made their critique seem less salient.

"I don't have a problem, that's my problem!": *The State* **on MTV**

By early 1993, 85% of MTV's programming was music videos, but the channel began relying on original comedy programming as a cost-efficient way to fill time and develop talent.[80] Among its efforts at the time were the above-mentioned *Remote Control*, *The Idiot Box*, *Liquid Television*, *The Ben Stiller Show* (1990-91) and *You Wrote It, You Watch It* (1992-93). Hosted by a then-unknown Jon Stewart, *You Wrote It* solicited humorous anecdotes from viewers, which were then re-enacted in exaggeratedly parodic ways by comedy troupe The State. Though crude in its execution, the program highlighted many of the absurdist tendencies for which *The State* would later be known. Moreover, the program functioned as a pilot of sorts for the troupe, and it also aligned with MTV's broader shift toward original reality and comedy programming. Seeking to further develop and retain in-house comedy and reality talent, Viacom launched the production unit MTV Prods. in May of 1993, headed by future Viacom wunderkind Doug Herzog.[81] While initially focused on shepherding MTV television properties such as *Joe's Apartment* (1992) and *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997) through to film production, MTV Prods. sought to develop original ideas that would distinguish it in an increasingly crowded cable marketplace.[82]

Before arriving at MTV, though, The State had already had a successful run as a sketch and improvisation troupe as undergraduates at New York University in the late 1980s. The 11 members of the comedy troupe then known as The State: Full Frontal Comedy performed in an off-Broadway show co-produced by Steven Starr (and fellow

State co-creator Jonathan Bendis) in October 1992; soon thereafter, the group

dropped "Full Fontal Comedy" from its name and starred in *You Wrote It, You Watch It*.

In April 1993 troupe members Kevin Allison, Michael Ian Black, Robert Ben Garant,

Todd Holoubek, Michael Jann, Kerri Kenney, Thomas Lennon, Joe Lo Truglio, Ken

Marino, Michael Showalter, and David Wain and producers Bendis and Starr signed a

development deal with MTV's Remote Productions Inc. The initial agreement was for a

six-episode cycle and included a list of "pre-existing characters" that would come under

MTV's control.[83] While a standard development practice at the time, the explication of

pre-existing characters in the case of *The State* would prove to be a site of tension

between the cast and the network. MTV continuously pressured The State to showcase

recurring characters and catchphrases in order to familiarize viewers with the unwieldy

11-member cast. Given cable's appetite for new content and the thriving home video

markets, moreover, MTV likely envisioned *The State* as a bountiful source for spinning-

off recurring characters onto new merchandising, television, and film platforms.[84]

    The State defiantly responded to these pressures in the form of the recurring

sketch character Louie, an obnoxious, catchphrase-spewing boor who simultaneously

appeased and flew in the face of MTV's demands. Before the character is even seen

onscreen for the first time, a title card with spotlights and bombastic voiceover announces

his forthcoming appearance: "And now…Louie! The guy who comes in and says his

catchphrase over and over again!" Inside an apartment party, the entire cast mills around

looking bored. Louie (played by Ken Marino) enters and the partygoers perk up.

"Who's got something to drink?" he asks. After accepting an orange juice, Louie

exclaims "I wanna dip my balls in it!" and gestures suggestively towards his crotch.

Though it is not readily apparent until a couple of repetitions of the gag, Louie is holding two white golf balls in his hand, a bit of business likely required of Marino by MTV standards and practices personnel. From the network's perspective, the move allowed Marino to skate by with a bit of edgy, envelope-pushing comedy. The State was seemingly able to capitulate to MTV's demands for catchphrase-friendly characters, while also undermining the ultimate purpose for them. Clearly, MTV would not be able to develop further such an offensive and crude character for spin-offs and films; but at the same time, the gag proved immensely popular and resonated with Generation X audiences' distrust of authority, and the character would go on to appear in two more sketches over the series' run.

While Louie embodied both resentment toward MTV and fodder for *State* fans hungry for dumbed-down humor, another recurring character would express the Generation X cultural identity with much more ambivalence. In his first appearance on the series, the teenaged slacker Doug confronts his boomer father while his friends stand slack-jawed in the background. Exchanges parodying after-school-special-type problems ensue—Doug's father wants to know why his son has condoms and cigarettes, accusing him of being on drugs as well. Doug grows increasingly agitated with each new charge, storming out (with the catchphrase "I'm outta here!) only to return and indignantly justify his life choices. The central joke of the sketch hinges on Doug's father not actually being angry with him, but indulging his transgressive behavior. Instead of worrying about Doug's promiscuity and smoking habit, he asks Doug for a cigarette and invites him and his girlfriend to have sex at their house. After shouting down his dad's attempts at

offering an "easy solution that's gonna bridge the generation gap between you and me," the following occurs:

> Dad: "Doug, your mother and I think you're on drugs."
>
> Doug: "Drugs?! Hey, I'm Doug, man, not Bob Dylan."
>
> Dad: "Doug, do you even know who Bob Dylan is?"
>
> Doug: "No, but I know he died of drugs."
>
> Dad: "Doug, Bob Dylan is alive and well. I produced his last three albums."
>
> Doug: "Oh, you mean uncle Robert?"

The exchange fittingly centers on music in portraying a generational clash, with Dad enlightening his Xer son about the boomer icon Dylan. But the clash turns out to be manufactured, one resolved within the context of a commercial media industry. The oral history of the 60s (and its attendant lessons about speaking truth to power) Dad might have given his son is omitted. For Doug—and, by extension, Generation X—Dylan and recreational drug use are little more than evidence that boomer counterculture has been co-opted by commodity culture. Doug is made to look silly for not realizing this and for not embracing the prospect of this assimilation happening to his generation's iconoclasts, too. The sketch climaxes with Doug's Dad growing impossible to hate no matter the provocation, further underlining the extent to which Xers resented the simultaneous marginalization and misdirection of their oppositional impulses toward their elders. "Doug, what is your problem?" his father asks. "I don't have a problem, that's my

problem!" Doug responds, parodically inverting Johnny Strabler's flippant retort of

teenaged insouciance ("Whadda you got?") from *The Wild One*. By the sketch's end,

Doug has angrily rebelled and Dad has calmly riposted, and neither has conceded any

power as Doug barges out past his friends for the last time. In the sketch's final beat,

Doug's friends decide to stay behind with his Dad to have some drinks, punctuating one

more time Generation X's various fluctuations among oppositional anger, ambivalence,

and eventual complicity with the cultural hegemony of boomers and the media industries

they controlled.

The muddled nature of this push back against paternalistic forces carried over to

State cast members' relationship with MTV as well. On the one hand, sketches like

"Louie" and "Doug & Dad" articulate their explicit oppositionality through satiric attacks

on dominant cultural discourses. On the other hand, this oppositionality can often be

aimless, directed just as much at the troupe itself as it is at external forces. Commentary

tracks from *The State*'s 2009 complete series DVDs suggest as much, with the tone of

cast member anecdotes vacillating between lingering resentment toward MTV and

embarrassment for their own immaturity and insubordination.[85] Yet at the time of the

series' initial run, The State voiced their dissatisfaction in a number of venues, a move

that, at least early on, MTV attempted to contextualize as flippant irony for its Generation

X demographic. In a promotional spot for *The State*'s second season alongside *The Jon

Stewart Show* and *Dead at 21*, for instance, the cast appears onstage in a mostly empty

auditorium pitching the show to a bored-looking producer.[86] Cast member Thomas

Lennon rattles off a quick tagline: "*The State*: we're twenty-something postmodern

sketch comedy whores." Backing cast members echo Lennon's sentiments: "Yeah, we're

whores, definitely whores." In another promo, graphics display several excerpts of particularly vitriolic reviews of their first season—"So terrible it deserves to be studied;" "Every MTV executive who gave thumbs up to *The State* should be given a urine test." The latter review may have been a subtle jab at Eileen Katz, MTV's vice president for series development who, according to a contentious *New York Times* profile, early in the show's run handed the troupe a list of suggested pop culture ephemera to parody.[87] Katz and MTV vetoed content they deemed to be too intelligent and esoteric, such as references to *Catcher in the Rye*. When The State complied with a parody of *Beverly Hills 90210* only to have a gag about Bob Dylan removed for fear that viewers wouldn't know who Dylan was, the joke would resurface in the "Doug & Dad" sketch.

MTV's strategic attempts to control *The State*'s humor according to demographically-driven market dictates and The State's tactical evasions of them highlight the highly contingent and constructed nature of generational identities. The dumbed-down humor of *Beavis and Butt-Head* had worked well for MTV, yet trying to map that same sensibility onto *The State* overlooked how it could function polysemically—a vacuous Bob Dylan joke suppressed in one sketch appeared in another with arguably more resonance. From Katz's perspective, though, structuring the content of MTV programming according to perceived audience tastes was straightforward:

> The State is doing what MTV does when it does things well, which is bringing our audience their experience in their own language and their own terms….The State was the first generation weaned on MTV. They are savvy. They know the music and the lingo and television, and so does their audience. It's a direct connection.[88]

The State, for its part, bristled not only at the network notes, but also at the notion

that it and its generational cohort could be so easily targeted. "It's interesting MTV has a

very low opinion of their audience," cast member Showalter remarked in the same *Times*

piece.[89] The article ran on the eve of *The State*'s third season premiere in January 1995,

where it would compete in the Saturday late-night slot just before NBC's *Saturday Night*

Live and go on to hold its own at a respectable 1.4 rating/3 share.[90] Yet tensions between

MTV and the troupe appeared to be boiling over. The day after the *Times* article ran,

MTV senior vice president Doug Herzog sent *State* co-creators Starr and Bendis a memo

admonishing the cast for their insolent remarks.[91] The incident may have been the final

straw for *The State* at MTV, one exacerbated by MTV's "problem holding on to talent.

They'd discover Ben Stiller and Jon Stewart, but couldn't do talent-holding deals,

because the budgets were so small, and talent would eventually leave."[92] Starr and

Bendis were already anticipating a more lucrative move to CBS, which had a recent run

of success importing the Canadian sketch comedy program *The Kids in the Hall* and

sought to compete with NBC on Saturday nights. In March, Starr informed Herzog that

The State would not return after its contract expired in August (with thanks to "Eileen

Katz in particular for her commitment on our behalf.")[93] Throughout the summer of

1995, the troupe planned a Halloween special for CBS that, if successful, might have

meant a regular, Saturday late-night series. However, things did not go as planned.

"I'm Outta Here": *The State* on CBS

While Doug's catch-phrase may have indicated their excitement at the prospect of leaving MTV for CBS, The State faced a dilemma: how did a program coming from basic cable retain the edge that made it popular among a narrowly-targeted audience and, at the same time, create a comedic sensibility appropriate for a broader broadcast audience? In June 1995—a full month before production for their final cycle of MTV episodes had wrapped—Starr broached the subject with head of CBS late-night programming John Pike, noting that "Our MTV show, as good as it looks, needs to look better if we are going to attract and impress a network audience."[94] In its MTV iteration, *The State* mixed in-studio live-to-tape segments with video shorts shot on location. In addition to wanting to shoot the remote segments on 16mm film, Starr laid out other requests to enhance the look of the show and bring it up to perceived network standards:

> Sets, props, materials must be upgraded. [Production designer] Ruth Amon is a miracle worker, but her crew has been ill-equipped and we need to give them the means to make us all look fabulous in the network circumstance…For the first time, we are inviting non-State talent to guest on our shows. This costs money…Also, let's not overlook all the free music that MTV was able to make available to us.[95]

One key point of difference in the working conditions between MTV and CBS, Starr noted, was *The State*'s ability to appeal to youth viewers with music of the moment, done at no cost to the troupe and producers. Music from grunge groups like The Smashing Pumpkins regularly provided the soundtrack to *State* sketches, and without easy access to the music, CBS would be taking on additional cost to license it. Additionally, using music from groups with young fan bases might have been antithetical to CBS's goal of

delivering a broader age range of young viewers, fearing that such music would alienate older viewers.

In addition to wanting to create a successful Halloween special, Starr stated his intentions to build the long-term viability of *The State* as "a franchise that will serve all parties for years."[96] The sentiment echoed the struggle over recurring characters and catchphrases between MTV executives and the troupe years earlier. Starr's emphasis in memos on budgeting concerns may have indicated a desire to hold to The State's edgy, ironic humor in the content of sketches, but upgrade the *look* of those sketches in order to broaden their appeal beyond youth viewers. By August, production for the special was already well underway, yet Starr and Bendis felt neglected and underserved by the considerable financial and promotional resources at CBS's disposal. In August Starr contacted the troupe's management at the William Morris Agency, James Dixon, asking him to lobby CBS on The State's behalf, noting that the special had yet to receive the promised financial and promotional support from the network. Starr complained, "We are the only MTV show to move to a network, and critically considered the best sketch show on television. I've heard nothing. No interest generated anywhere."[97] Clearly, The State sought to build upon and carry over the momentum generated from their MTV run, yet Pike and CBS were reluctant to commit to anything beyond the special.

The documents in Starr's collection do not detail the exact nature of these exchanges with CBS executives, but we might infer more about the network's thinking by examining broadcast television's broader industrial climate at the time. As Ron Becker notes, the 1995-1996 season represented an important shift in programming practice by CBS that sought to replicate NBC's success in winning broadcast's key 18-49

year old demographic.[98] These socially-liberal, urban-minded professionals—or

"slumpies" as Becker calls them—gravitated toward edgy content that was not the stock-

in-trade of CBS hits at the time like *Murder, She Wrote*. After leading the networks in

overall viewers in the 1993-1994 season, CBS tumbled in the ratings the following year

and initiated a high-profile effort to court the slumpy audience for the 1995-1996 season.

Its efforts were primarily focused on primetime with the likes of *Cybill* and *New York

News*, but one can see how the cutting-edge humor of a late-night program such as *The

State* could be molded into this demographically-driven model for CBS's fall 1995

schedule.

　　While these issues played out on one level, the troupe members set to the onerous

task of producing a one-time special that would ostensibly decide their collective future

on broadcast television. In a 1996 post-mortem article for *Details*, journalist David

Lipsky describes the uncomfortable feelings shared among members of The State and

how the lack of a vote of confidence from CBS began to wear on their democratic

decision-making processes. In one infamous anecdote, Pike expressed concern about the

lack of a cast member of color in The State, stressing the importance of black audiences

for late-night because, among other reasons, they had "no place to go in the morning—no

jobs—so they can stay up as late as they like."[99] The members voted themselves a pay

cut and put the savings toward production expenses. Comments in production memos

pair the cockiness of their MTV success with the uneasiness of knowing the support they

had there was no more. In a production memo entitled "Some Things to Ponder Whilst

Formulating a Network Special," the troupe formulated a list of questions for Pike,

including, "What is considered pushing it on CBS? Can we have fun at the network's

expense?"[100] The oppositional aesthetic The State expressed while at and toward

MTV—and MTV's co-option of that oppositionality for sale back to its young

audiences—had taken on higher stakes at CBS. But if the first sketch of its Halloween

special were any indication, The State would critique CBS no matter what the network

thought.

The State only occasionally built parodies of MTV shows and branding into its

flow of sketches, but the troupe built the entire premise of its Halloween special on the

disillusionment it felt at CBS. "The State's 43rd Annual All-Star Halloween Special"

(itself a joke about the lack of longevity The State assumed it would have) begins with a

musical number that expresses this discomfort explicitly. Opening on a close-up of

CBS's "eye" logo prominently displayed on the studio set, effigies of all eleven cast-

members drop from the rafters in a mock hanging. The cast appears on stage dressed in

tuxedos and holding shovels that they then use to begin digging their own graves.[101] The

number continues with ominous and discomfiting imagery and lyrics like "They

promised us a series if this last one goes well/ We've got a better chance of making

snowmen in hell." At the number's conclusion, The State lay down in the mass grave

they have just dug.

Later in the special, cast members Michael Ian Black and David Wain appear on

the same set and address the camera to mockingly pay "tribute" to Desi Arnaz of *I Love*

Lucy, one of CBS's earliest hits. The gag revolves around their straight-faced reading of

misinformation and fuzzy recollections about Arnaz, and it comes across with the same

sort of cringe-inducing feeling as the opening musical number. Throughout the special,

The State relentlessly mocks CBS's sense of television heritage, hoping their edgy aesthetic plays well with the Xer audiences CBS thinks it wants.

Even the presence of musical guest Sonic Youth speaks to The State's Gen X sensibilities and how they seemed simultaneously to bolster and undermine CBS's attempts to reach out to a youth audience. The network initially suggested pop group Hootie and the Blowfish for the special and eventually booked Blues Traveler, only to have the latter cancel suddenly that week to play the season premiere of *Saturday Night Live*. Starr hurriedly nabbed Sonic Youth to fill in, a band that hip Xers (who formed part of the broader slumpy audience courted by broadcast networks) likely embraced, but one that Pike misunderstood as being too obscure. Upon discovering the switch at the show's taping, Pike attempted to call his daughter, according to Lipsky, "Not to see if she *likes* them. To see if she's *heard* of them."[102] The special aired on Friday, October 27, 1995 with virtually no promotion from CBS and earned a six share.[103] In fact, few of CBS's new, slumpy-courting programs succeeded, and Pike ended the network's relationship with The State that week. CBS's audience share plummeted, and in September 1996, it initiated a "Welcome Home" campaign to win back conservative and rural audiences.

After its deal with CBS ended, The State found itself without the regular television exposure necessary to support cast members' various side projects. Throughout the winter of 1995-1996, the troupe embarked on a college tour and collected material for a book, *State by State With the State: An Uninformed, Poorly Researched Guide to the United States*. In January they adjourned to the Bahamas to record a comedy album for Warner Bros., *Comedy for Gracious Living,* which was released over a

decade later. Various attempts at extending the life of The State brand fizzled or lingered in development throughout the late 1990s, including an Internet series not unlike *You Wrote It, You Watch It*, and several film projects (many of which, proposed by David Wain, resemble the tone of the troupe's 2001 cult hit, *Wet Hot American Summer*). Most importantly, the CBS debacle exposed weaknesses in the troupe's egalitarian working methods, and various members began pursuing their own projects. Garant, Lennon, Kenney, and Black spun-off a *State* sketch into *Viva Variety* on Comedy Central in early 1997, and similar clusters of *State* alumni would continue on the network into the 2000s with *Stella*, *Reno 911!*, and *Michael and Michael Have Issues* and on film with *Night at the Museum*, *The Ten*, and *Role Models*.

The State's troubled tenure at CBS again points to problematic assumptions about using generation as a basis for cultural identity, as well as how those assumptions are taken up by cultural hegemonic forces in the television industry. Caught up in shifting industrial imperatives that prized a particular segment of its idealized commodity audience, CBS may have focused too narrowly in trying to incorporate The State into its more broadly appealing fare. Yet the strategy took CBS too far from what had been, up until before that season, working for the network. While in the present day, such a strategy might be seen as considerably less risky given broadcast television's waning audience share, the multi-channel context of the 1990s—before cable television and other entertainment outlets had cut as significantly into American consumers' entertainment resources as today—indicated that merging traditional conceptions of television as a mass medium and newer views of it as a niche product would prove difficult.

Even MTV, working exclusively (and with some success) in smaller-scale audience targeting met with resistance to the notion that it could tell viewers with more and more precision what they wanted. Indeed, the commercial impulses driving both MTV and CBS's respective treatments of The State are not as dissimilar as they might seem. MTV and CBS adjusted their production and distribution routines—MTV to look and act more like a broadcast network; CBS to look and act more like a cable outlet, arguably—but both underestimated the volatility of pulling *The State* too far in either direction.

Conclusion

The difficulty of correlating *The State* with either MTV or CBS's industrial self-positioning at the time suggests broader problems with attempting to decode Generation X—their desired audience—monolithically as well. On the one hand, as I have argued, Generation X was a construction of consumer culture, one built from the top-down and whose members rejected any association with it. In this view, Generation X was always-already a part of hegemonic cultural forces in the media industries, particularly those aligning the generational identity with profit-driven practices of niche audience targeting. In this conception, any resistant elements were suppressed or elided in popular figurations of the concept. The more oppositional discourses of black and feminist culture contemporaneous to Generation X, such as those articulated by hip-hop or riot grrl movements, were largely absent from Xer forums like MTV at the time in favor of those constructing the primary voices of Generation X as young, white, and male. It is

something of a perverse irony that the CBS executive Pike urged The State to add a

black cast member in some feeble attempt to incorporate that audience into its turn to

slumpies. The troupe would also often deflect questions about the extent to which its

racial and gender composition (ten white males and one white female) reflected many of

the entrenched social powers it so ruthlessly mocked.[104]

One the other hand, I have also argued that the manufacture of Generation X by

commercial interests provided the young people targeted in these efforts with, as

Medhurst calls it, "a repository of symbols"[105] for the tactics of identity formation that

cultural commodities like MTV work so hard to obscure and appropriate. The myriad

cultural contexts of young people across two decades is surely too vast and

heterogeneous to account for in one signifier, yet such complexity does not align with

media industrial interests that need to cut through this complexity in order to program and

maintain profitability. Here too, *The State* served as a site of negotiation, comedically

inverting the meaning of musical iconography in order to position itself and its viewers as

decidedly *not* that which had already been and could be so easily identified. The power

of humor in processes of identity formation is precisely its ability "to leave out, to render

'outside', abject those perceived as occupying contrasting or challenging identities."[106]

At the very least, *The State* offered Generation X not a definitive example of what young

people were at the time, but a powerful tool for articulating what they were not.

The State further underlines how sketch comedy texts are both ideal and

problematic for media industry constructions of innovation and differentiation. The fluid

nature of the format as sketch comedy, for example, allows it to address a wide array of

topics and audiences without necessarily having a cohesive, structuring narrative.

Producers and performers on the program are freer to experiment with content than in long-form comedy formats, knowing that if one sketch "misses" another might "hit" just minutes later. At the same time, though, publicity and advertising interests must channel this textual volatility to productive ends, offering viewers a clearly defined reason to watch. In the case of *The State*, it was one built around appeals to youth culture and the contested notion of a Generation X identity that would position the show as fresh and innovative. The State certainly endeavored to distinguish itself from sketch predecessors and contemporaries, but its downfall was in not recognizing how these efforts were implicated in broader industrial infrastructures. Resistance defined the show's aesthetic and initially helped brand it as edgy, but The State never found a successful way to negotiate its oppositional aesthetic with commercial impulses driving it toward the mainstream.

For media industries across the multi-channel era and into one of digital convergence, the long-term viability of a particular piece of media content has depended on not just exposure to broader audiences and increased profitability with, for example, a move from cable to broadcast. It has also meant developing that product (or elements of it) into texts for distribution and consumption across the various outlets housed within a conglomerate infrastructure. While this milieu has been especially conducive to media properties with expansive, long-form narrative universes, here again, sketch comedy would seem to be an ideal fit. Comedic Internet shorts that have gone viral make for appealing television development projects, while successful television shows can repurpose humorous outtakes for the web. Popular recurring sketch characters can serve as the basis for feature-length film comedies or appear as supporting players across a film

franchise. But even when it is not explicitly resisting these transmedial movements (as *The State* did), sketch comedy is problematic for industry discourses seeking unique and innovative content. As I explore in the next chapter, short-form, sketch-like comedic modes of performance in contemporary feature films distinguish their stars and narratives from conventionally plot-driven comedies, yet the critical and industrial discourses surrounding these films often seek to underplay—and even devalue—markers of distinction built around sketch comedy. The analyses argue that sketch comedy units in film, like sketch comedy on television in the multi-channel era, do not necessarily align with one critical function or another—as either integrated or disruptive; motivated or nonsensical; good or bad—but serve as sites for negotiating the terms of those functions.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Brian Stelter, "The Good Ol' Days of 20 Years Ago," *The New York Times*, July 18 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/19/arts/television/teennicks-90s-nostalgia-fest.html?ref=magazine (accessed January 15, 2012).

[2] Gustavo Turner, "*Reality Bites*: The Ultimate Sellout?" *LA Weekly*, January 5 2012, http://www.laweekly.com/2012-01-05/film-tv/reality-bites-sundance-ben-stiller/ (accessed January 15, 2012).

[3] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 42.

[4] Carl Wilson, "'My So-Called Adulthood,'" *The New York Times*, August 4 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/magazine/the-gen-x-nostalgia-boom.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1 (accessed January 15, 2012).

[5] James Hibberd, "MTV pushing out 'cynical' Generation X," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 23 2010, http://www.thrfeed.com/2010/02/mtv-pushing-out-cynical-generation-x-.html (accessed January 15, 2012).

[6] Philip Napoli, *Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 104.

[7] Undoubtedly, a driving factor for this was MTV's reluctance to program music videos by black artists in its early years. Though the channel would eventually come to embrace hip-hop music with videos and original programming like *Yo! MTV Raps*, these practices were largely folded into broader audience-targeting strategies that courted young white male viewers.

[8] Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 39.

[9] Karen Ritchie, "Get ready for 'Generation X'; Soon the primary market, and very unlike aging Boomers," *Advertising Age*, November 9, 1992, 21.

[10] Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* ed. David McLellan (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159-191.

[11] Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 176.

[12] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 127-186.

[13] Althusser, 132.

[14] Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 85-92.

[15] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 152-165.

[16] Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), 91.

[17] Antonio Gramsci in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers Co, 1971).

[18] Gramsci, 12.

[19] Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, Pantheon Books: 1972), 215-238.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books 1990), 15-35.

[22] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208-226.

[23] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 11-12.

[24] Ibid., 12.

[25] Ibid., 13.

[26] Ibid., 5-6.

[27] Stuart Hall in Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, June 1986, 10, 45-60.

[28] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 130-146.

[29] Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 11.

[30] Ibid., 187.

[31] Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1-25.

[32] Jonathan Gray, *Watching With* The Simpsons (New York: Routledge, 2005), 46.

[33] This is not to say, of course, that resistive practices—at least in Hall's conception—did not exist among young people at this time. Rather, such practices were often located outside of, sometimes *in opposition to*, the discourses constituting and constituted by Generation X. As I explore below, dominant media and cultural institutions increasingly appropriated the term in order to exercise a hegemonic control over resistive youth practices.

[34] Stuart Hall in Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," 52.

[35] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?", 6.

[36] Jonathon S. Epstein, "Introduction: Generation X, Youth Culture, and Identity" in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998).

[37] Geoffrey T. Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind "Generation X,"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 3.

[38] Henry A. Giroux, "Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics, and the Pedagogy of Display" in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 25.

[39] William Dunn, "Hanging out with American Youth," *American Demographics*, Feb 1992, vol. 12, no. 2, pg. 24. The initiation of the so-called "baby bust"—another pejorative nickname for Generation X often seen in literature of the time—was undoubtedly spurred on by the introduction of commercially produced birth control in the early 1960s and the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Roe v. Wade.

[40] William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 325.

[41] Aaron Bernstein with David Woodruff, Barbara Buell, Nancy Peacock, and Karen Thurston, "What Happened to the American Dream?" *Business Week*, August 19, 1991,

http://www.businessweek.com/archives/1991/b322758.arc.htm (accessed January 15, 2012).

[42] John Leo, "The unplugged generation," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 20 1992, 22.

[43] William Strauss and Neil Howe, "The New Generation Gap," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1992, http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/92dec/9212genx.htm (accessed January 15, 2012).

[44] Jeff Gordinier, *X Saves the World: How Generation X Got the Shaft but Can Still Keep Everything from Sucking* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008), xxi.

[45] Bob Guccione quoted in Karen Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X* (New York: Lexington Books, 1995), ix.

[46] Alexander Star, "The Twentysomething Myth," *The New Republic*, January 4 1993, 208, 1-2, pg. 25.

[47] Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

[48] See, among others: Donna Gaines, *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Mary Celeste Kearney, "'Don't Need You:' Rethinking Identity Politics and Separatism from a Grrrl Perspective" in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998); and T. C. Shevory, "Bleached Resistance: The Politics of Grunge," *Popular Music and Society* 19.2, 1995: 23–48.

[49] Leo, "The unplugged generation," 22.

[50] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 78.

[51] John Leland, et al., "Battle for Your Brain." *Newsweek*, 11 October 1993, 48.

[52] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 116-146.

[53] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and the Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[54] Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 204.

[55] Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[56] Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 129.

[57] Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*, 55.

[58] Ibid., 76.

[59] Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era," in *Making and Selling Culture*, eds. Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway, and Elizabeth Traube (Hanover, NH: Weslyan University Press, 1996).

[60] Ibid., 197.

[61] Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011). Johnson's book examines in detail (with MTV as a brief case study) the balancing act for branded television content between emulating what has worked for others but providing just enough differentiation to matter.

[62] Lauren Rabinovitz, "Animation, Postmodernism, and MTV," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 24 (Fall 1989), 99-112.

[63] Ibid., 101.

[64] Ibid., 103.

[65] David Tetzlaff, "MTV and the politics of postmodern pop," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1986.

[66] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 25.

[67] See Andrew Goodwin, "Fatal Distractions: MTV Meets Postmodern Theory," in *Sound & Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds. Simon Firth, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[68] Ibid., 49.

[69] Caldwell (1995) notes that postmodern narrative strategies (as seen in programs like *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and *Beavis and Butt-Head*) of having characters watch and comment on the same thing as the audience does are in line with similarly reflexive televisual techniques stretching back to *Texaco Star Theater* in the 1940s.

[70] John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3-31.

[71] Ibid., 197.

[72] Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*, 172.

[73] Sara Levinson quoted in Scott Donaton, et al., "The Media Wakes up to Generation X," *Advertising Age*, February 1 1993, 16.

[74] John P. Cortez and Alice Z. Cuneo, "Taco Bell logs odd hours to lure Xers in new ads," *Advertising Age*, May 10, 1993, 3.

[75] John Burns, "Popular Music, Television, and Generational Identity," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1996, Vol. 30, Issue 3, 130-131.

[76] Ibid., 129.

[77] Ibid., 131.

[78] This logic would include the targeting of children's audiences as well. The Viacom-owned Nickelodeon also branded itself with "an 'Us versus Them' attitude, where the television programs aired on Nickelodeon are expressly not for adults but *only* for kids." (Banet-Weiser 2007, 59). Viacom's goal, then, was to keep viewers within its family of networks from early childhood to adulthood, moving them along a sequence of seemingly distinct steps of cultural consumption whose profits ultimately flowed back to the same source. See Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

[79] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 182.

[80] Jennifer Pendleton, "TV Plays it Safe—Just for Laughs," *Daily Variety*, February 16, 1993.

[81] Herzog would go on to serve in a number of capacities for the Viacom empire, including head of programming for Comedy Central.

[82] John Brodie, "MTV Expands Horizon: In-house unit to delve into films, network TV," *Daily Variety*, May 4, 1993, 3.

[83] The State, Steven Starr, and Jon Bendis "Pre-Existing Characters," Steven Starr collection, M98-128 Box 3, Folder 35, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[84] The 1992 film *Wayne's World*, for instance, which was based on a popular *Saturday Night Live* sketch, went on to gross $183 million worldwide. The influence of *SNL* would figure prominently in *The State*'s efforts to differentiate itself in terms of generation and extend those efforts beyond television.

[85] Jonathan Gray suggests that DVD commentary tracks most often serve as sites of reclamation on the part of artists looking to rectify studio or network meddling in their work. The State's admissions in them go against these preferred uses of commentary tracks, but they highlight the difficulty of characterizing the *The State* and Generation X as unequivocally battling against some unified ideology. See Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 81-116.

[86] Videos, Starr collection, M95-204, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[87] Trip Gabriel, "Television; Beyond Beavis and Butt-Head, MTV's Sketch Comedy Group." *The New York Times*, January 8 1995, http://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/08/arts/television-beyond-beavis-and-butt-head-mtv-s-sketch-comedy-group.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm (accessed January 15, 2012).

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] MTV Networks, "Ratings Report," Starr collection, M95-204, Box 2 Folder 4, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[91] Doug Herzog, "MTV Networks, Herzog Memo to Starr and Bendis," Starr collection, M98-128 Box 3 Folder 35, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[92] Beth McCarthy quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 513.

[93] Steven Starr, "Starr Pictures Memo RE: THE STATE," Starr collection, M98-128 Box 3 Folder 35, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[94] Steven Starr, "RE: 'THE STATE' – NETWORK FORMAT," Starr collection, M95-204 Box 3 Folder 37, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 97-107.

[99] John Pike quoted in David Lipsky, "They Died Laughing," *Details*, January-February 1996, http://www.the-state.com/details.htm (accessed January 15, 2012).

[100] The State, "Some Things to Ponder Whilst Formulating a Network Special," Starr collection, Box 2 Folder 4, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[101] Videos, Starr collection, M95-204, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, The Wisconsin Historical Society.

[102] John Pike quoted in Lipsky, 1996.

[103] Lipsky, 1996.

[104] When asked about the reason behind Kerri Kenney being the only female member of The State, one cast member stated that previous women simply didn't work out, and another jokingly remarked, "These are lies… The real reason is, Kerri ate them." (Gabriel 1995)

[105] Medhurst, 39.

[106] Medhust, 19.

CHAPTER THREE

"Skits Strung Together:" Performance, Narrative, and Sketch Comedy in *SNL*

Films

This chapter examines the incorporation of sketch comedy into the long-form feature

films of former cast members of *Saturday Night Live*. Like the case of *The State* in the

previous chapter, I posit sketch comedy in film not as working directly in opposition to or

compliance with industrial discourses of innovation and differentiation, but as sites for

negotiating how and under what circumstances those discourses are articulated. Critics'

reviews and popular press repeatedly frame the distinctive sketch comedy devices in the

films of former *SNL* stars pejoratively. Yet such evaluations overlook the extent to which

short- and long-form comedic formats and narrative modes (e.g. improvised scenes and

the central storyline) can complement one another to create performative meanings and

pleasures unavailable to each when analyzed on its own.

I begin by considering how scholarly approaches to atomistic comedy in Classical

Hollywood films provide a template for understanding similar relationships in the

contemporary setting. By contextualizing the production and performance traditions of

former *SNL* stars, I place their work in dialogue with similar sketch comedy modes in the

broader transmedial environment. This opens up the apparent clash between short- and

long-form comedy in feature films to a range of interpretive possibilities, ones that I

suggest viewers are likelier to embrace over prescriptive, medium-specific ones. In

describing how sketch comedy can invoke multiple, simultaneous meanings in the films

of former *SNL* stars, I further elucidate the format's textual fluidity and provide a basis for understanding its many transmedial articulations in chapter four.

Reading Sketch Comedy in the *Saturday Night Live* Graduate School

Popular press coverage of *Saturday Night Live* commonly refers to the program as the "graduate school" of comedy.[1] Performers such as Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Eddie Murphy, Mike Myers, David Spade, Adam Sandler, Chris Farley, Tina Fey, Will Ferrell, Amy Poehler, and Kristen Wiig have all honed their skills for comedic performance and developed their respective star personae on *SNL* before moving on to the higher profile platform of feature film. But although the show has produced some of the top box office draws of the last 30 years, film critics nonetheless tend to see the influence of *SNL* as a nuisance on the big screen. Some critics lament the tendency of *SNL* alumni to play "the same character[s] seen on *SNL*"[2] or question whether or not this performative mode can "carry a whole movie."[3] Others see an ill fit between *SNL*'s sketch comedy sensibility and the structural demands of feature-length film narratives. Reviewers noted of Ferrell's *Anchorman* (2004), for example, that it felt "like an extended skit stretched and stretched"[4] or "loosely strung-together SNL skits;"[5] of Fey and Poehler's *Baby Mama* (2008) that it "plays out like a very long and very mediocre sketch on 'SNL;'"[6] and of Sandler's *Jack & Jill* (2011) that the actor appears "caught in an abysmal *Saturday Night Live* sketch."[7]

Saturday Night Live, according to critics, has no business being in the movie business, a sentiment further bolstered by universally panned flops like *It's Pat!* (1994),

Stuart Saves His Family (1995), *Blues Brothers 2000* (1998), *Superstar* (1999), and

MacGruber (2010). Though these movies were spun-off directly from *SNL* sketches in a

relatively transparent effort to capitalize on their fleeting popularity, they also highlight

the same critique levied at the films mentioned above: former *SNL* stars are too closely

tied to their sketch comedy personae, ones that disrupt conventionally representational

film performances and long-form, goal-driven film narratives. Chase's smug gadabout in

Fletch (1985) is therefore too much like the anchor he "played" on *SNL*'s "Weekend

Update" segments. Myers buries his own personality among characters in *So I Married

an Axe Murderer* (1993), the *Austin Powers* franchise (1997, 1999, 2002), and *The Love

Guru* (2008) the same way he did in portraying Deiter, Linda Richman, and Simon on

SNL.

These extra-fictional comedic personae, based in the sketch sensibilities of *SNL*

and other media platforms, become the focus often at the expense of the film's narrative.

This is illustrated when *Anchorman*, for example, pauses for a silly street fight in which

Ron (Ferrell) can spout his characteristically absurdist non-sequiturs, and when *Tommy

Boy* (1994) provides Tommy (Farley) time to perform a song-and-dance in which he

ruins a tiny sport coat with his famously fat frame. Although this relationship between

SNL stardom and film performance is certainly not unique in the history of popular

comedy,[8] it has been repeatedly encoded in reviews, publicity materials, and fan activity

surrounding performers as they move from small to big screen. However, popular and

critical commentary rarely account for how the sketch aesthetics of *SNL* and those of

feature film comedy can interact to provide pleasures unavailable in each medium by

itself.

My analyses of the comedic personae and films of former *SNL* stars like Tina Fey and Will Ferrell argue that their film performances operate intertextually and across media, driven by specific skillsets in sketch comedy and reflective of an industrial milieu increasingly receptive of those skillsets. It specifically considers how performers working in sketch comedy use the format to differentiate themselves from one another, as well as the complex, sometimes contradictory ways this differentiation is interpreted by critics, scholars, and fans. In doing so, this chapter reads against the critical trope of short-form sketch comedy performances as disruptive and suggests that they might actually be complementary to and integrated with film narrative. The analyses below are based on Philip Drake's argument that contemporary comedic performance invokes "multiple semantic frames—of fictional character, of star persona, and of generic codes and conventions."[9] This chapter thus explores the textual possibilities of contemporary comedic performance and suggests probable interpretations of its many frames by viewers. Performances based in the short-form sensibilities of sketch can certainly be read as disruptive to conventional film narrative, yet they are one of many possible layers of intertextual meaning for many viewers. I argue that we may also enter into moments of more or less recognition of any one layer of meaning without detracting from our overall ability to comprehend their totality.

Drake's conception of comedic performance is a useful revision of Steve Seidman's "comedian comedy," a film genre in which comedians from Charlie Chaplin to Jerry Lewis systematically undermined the representational strategies of classical Hollywood narrative with a presentational style—not unlike that of many *SNL* alumni— that "parades the specialty performer *as* a performer rather than subjugating his or her

presentation to the demands of character construction."[10] For Seidman, this tension

also plays out uniformly at the thematic level of comedian comedy films, ones whose

stories often develop around the eccentric comedian's rejection of and/or acquiescence to

some normative environment. Indeed, one can easily map this generic convention onto

any number of films starring *SNL* alumni. John "Bluto" Blutarsky (Belushi) and his

cohort overrun the institutional powers-that-be in *Animal House* (1978), for example,

while Billy Madison (Sandler) must abandon much of his immature behavior and accept

some responsibility in order to graduate in *Billy Madison* (1995). Yet the tensions

between presentational vs. representational performance and classical vs. interruptive

narrative are not always clear-cut in constructing this theme, as each film speaks to a

different socio-historical and industrial context. Jim Whalley has demonstrated this

variability in the films of Belushi and Sandler, among others, noting that generational

conflicts inform their narratives in ways that problematize conventional generic

readings.[11]

Henry Jenkins similarly characterizes comedian comedy as assigning static

meaning to comedic performance modes that vary greatly across decades, and he

suggests more proximate causes—such as the influence of vaudeville and Hollywood's

shift to sound—as guiding aesthetic forces in classical comedies.[12] While theories about

comedian comedy provide a good starting point for considering the films of *SNL* alumni

historically, I take Jenkins' cue and place these films' patterns of textual similarities into

dialogue with the contemporary material conditions of their production and reception. In

doing so, I hope to illustrate more clearly how performances grounded in sketch comedy

instruct audiences to read intertextually and across media.

For much of its history, *SNL* has privileged the presentational performance modes that foreground individual cast members as stars, and much of the above-mentioned critical discourse about their films bears this out. Chase, Belushi, and Sandler, among others, distinguished themselves from the *SNL* ensemble by aggressively inscribing their own personalities onto the characters they played across sketches, a dynamic largely borne of Lorne Michaels' efforts to distinguish the program itself from contemporaneous television comedies. As I elaborate below, Michaels' strategy catalyzed the varyingly successful film careers of a number of male cast members across the 1970s-1990s at the same time that it marginalized female performers. But as *SNL* has adapted to the contemporary transmedial environment, so too has its preferred method of star-making shifted.

Today, the overwhelming majority of *SNL* cast members hail from training grounds like The Groundlings, Second City, and the Upright Citizens Brigade, which emphasize group writing and performing skills. These impulses for communal performance often conflict with established notions of individual expression on *SNL*, a dilemma further exacerbated by the show's tradition of privileging solo stardom as *the* way to break free from television and make it in film. Contemporary cast members, as a result, have not entirely shied away from presentational star-making performances, but have increasingly used them as complements to more dialogic, group-based modes. This dynamic is driven by *SNL* stars' increasing exposure across ever-proliferating media outlets, an environment more amenable to flexible articulations of comedic stardom than to the fixed identities of performers who merely "play themselves" all the time. The comedic personae of former cast members like Tina Fey and Will Ferrell, for example,

equally accommodate the dialogic aesthetics of group performance *and* individual identities that develop from collaboration. This shift in *SNL* stars' formation requires a re-framing in critical discourse about their films away from a medium-specific notion of performance toward one that acknowledges the many frames through which former *SNL* players encode meaning and audiences decode it. The "graduate school" metaphor today no longer speaks to a singular performance mode placing individual *SNL* stars on a linear trajectory from television to film. It might be better used to describe the flexibility required of those stars to accommodate the myriad cultural and industrial contexts of many media simultaneously.

Comedian Comedy and Living with Narrative Demands

Examining the films of *SNL* alumni provides the opportunity to revisit some key ideas on the historical contexts of film comedy. Just as sketch comedy on television revised and re-articulated many of the same performative and cultural tensions first expressed in vaudeo, contemporary sketch performance in film maintains a dialogue of differentiation with many of the bit-driven, presentational comedic performances that disrupted conventions of Classical Hollywood productions. While the scholars discussed below posit, to varying degrees, atomistic comedy as conflicting with classical conventions, they provide a basis for understanding how contemporary performers operate in an industrial climate more amenable to the short-form comedic modes of sketch.

Steve Seidman's 1981 book *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* remains a crucial jumping-off point for any discussion of comedy on film.[13] The

dominant discourses of film comedy scholarship at the time Seidman was writing

lionized silent-screen comedians and implicitly denigrated the sound cinema's effect on

comedic performance.[14] Seidman's intervention into the field sought to avoid such

tendencies by mapping the work of film comedians across a broader generic terrain of

cohesive thematic and stylistic devices. Films of the comedian comedy genre, Seidman

argues, are showcase vehicles for star performers that systematically negotiate the

representational strategies of the classical Hollywood narrative aesthetic with a

presentational style. A basic tension exists, then, in each comedian film between its

hermetic diegesis and the whimsical performative strategies of its star that rupture this

diegesis. Further exacerbating this tension, Seidman notes, are the ways in which the

comedian's extra-fictional personality are brought to bear on the narrative. Thus the

comedian film is best characterized by

> two seemingly contradictory impulses: (1) the maintenance of the
> comedian's position as an already recognizable performer with a clearly
> defined extrafictional personality (and in the case of comedians from 1930
> on, a *highly visible* extrafictional personality); and (2) the depiction of the
> comedian as a comic figure who inhabits a fictional universe where certain
> problems must be confronted and resolved.[15]

Seidman's lucid definition of the genre points to two central dialectics in the study of

film comedy, the first of which is the relationship between gag/joke and filmic narrative.

This conversation is most instructively played out in exchanges between Donald Crafton

and Tom Gunning.[16] Crafton views the slapstick gag as a purely disruptive element to

the "hegemony of narrative in the classical cinema."[17] Gunning, in contrast, frames the

relationship between gags and narrative as a "dialectical interrelation" in which gags may subvert, not disrupt, narrative. Gags, in their proximity to and assimilation of narrative forms, are ultimately subject to narrative's "process of integration in which smaller units are absorbed into a larger overarching pattern and process of containment."[18] While Crafton and Gunning are specifically referring to the physical slapstick comedy of silent-screen comedians like Keaton and Chaplin, their debate is evocative of much of the critical discourse still used today in evaluating the films and comedic personae of *SNL* alumni. Instead of Chaplin's sight gags, though, the contemporary unit of disruption/subversion is the sketch narrative sequence that commingles uneasily with its larger narrative framework. Such sequences, variously described in the popular press as "inexplicable detours,"[19] "sprightly set pieces,"[20] and even "comic moments,"[21] are the factors most cited for these films' failing attain to attain such similarly-vague cinematic ideals such as "coherence" or "logic."

Addressing a second dialectic central to the study of film comedy, Seidman's model complicates the stable and hermetic narrative world implicit in the Crafton/Gunning dialogue by recognizing the role of the comedian's extrafictional personality within a fictional universe. Though he characterizes comedian films as exemplary of one kind of alternative narrative practice, Seidman sees this relationship not as systematically subversive to classical Hollywood narrative norms, but as combining various "interruptive devices with recurring fictional procedures."[22] Groucho Marx's direct address to the camera, for example, represents only a momentary disruption in the narrative flow so that the performer might flaunt features of his comedic persona not contained within the strictures of his fictional character. As he does in many of

Hollywood's generic traditions, moreover, Seidman sees in comedian comedy the thematic struggle between individual eccentricity and normative cultural identity. He maps consistencies across the many narrative arcs in which comedians such as the Marx brothers, Danny Kaye, and Jerry Lewis must choose between relinquishing their idiosyncrasies and conforming to their community's standards or remaining an outsider. Seidman's model, Krutnik summarizes, "concerns itself not simply with the formal negotiation between performance and fiction but also with the thematic arbitration between the conflictual demands of social conformism and counter-cultural impulses."[23]

It is essential to acknowledge the historical moment out of which Seidman's analysis arises, one in which film journals like *Screen* were challenging the dominant discourses of *auteur* theory and staking out new theoretical territory grounded in semiotics, structuralism, and feminism. As important as this paradigm shift was for film studies, however, the *Screen* model tended to deal in theoretical abstractions that gave short shrift to the production and reception practices that so greatly inform the Classical Hollywood tradition. Seidman's conception of comedian comedy, in its overtures to themes of assimilation and oppression, must be seen partly as a response to its academic milieu. To be sure, Seidman's work is a watershed moment for our understanding of comedic performance, but a turn to historically-based analyses (occasioned by work such as Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*[24]) provides a more nuanced framework with which to understand the migratory patterns of comedy.

Henry Jenkins' *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*[25] expands the scope of Seidman's work, which he characterizes as assigning static meaning to the generic mechanisms of comedian comedy. Groucho

Marx's direct-address to the camera carries a different valence than does that of Jerry Lewis, Jenkins notes, one informed by shifting industrial and reception practices. Jenkins' chief concern is to delineate the historical continuities between comedian comedy and other performance traditions (especially those of vaudeville), while also "exploring those traditions, their relationship to the classical aesthetic, [and] the institutional factors shaping their adoption by Hollywood."[26] Like Seidman, he rejects the elitist cordoning-off of silent-film stars as the height of comedic performance. Jenkins argues that Hollywood's transition to sound momentarily created a space to (sometimes awkwardly) accommodate the full spectrum of contemporaneous popular entertainment forms. Hollywood studios raided the vaudeville stages for talent not only to meet the burgeoning new material demands of the medium, but also "as a means of broadening their entertainment empire and bringing Broadway and vaudeville under their corporate control."[27] Filmmakers of the era catered to the talents of their newly imported stars and crafted vehicles around the skills they honed outside of the cinema.

In analyses of the Marx brothers' films produced by Paramount, Jenkins highlights the curious juxtaposition of conventional narrative elements (such as romantic pursuit) with short, self-contained set-pieces exhibiting the brothers' comic virtuosity. The uneasy incorporation of this vaudeville aesthetic into conventional narrative modes, what Jenkins calls "anarchistic comedy," is not a problem to be rectified by the thematic binary of assimilation versus exclusion that Seidman puts forth. Rather, Jenkins implores that "we need to think about comedy atomistically, as a loosely linked succession of comic 'bits.' That the parts are more satisfying than the whole may only be a criticism if we do not like the parts."[28]

Jenkins' framework, then, is a largely formal one that asks the viewer to trace the historical and cultural lineage of any given comedian before attempting to map larger thematics across his body of work. At the same time, that the Marx brothers frequently played underclass misfits can hardly be ignored. Both of the approaches to comedian films put forth by Seidman and Jenkins carry much critical weight in attempting to map the theoretical terrain for the contemporary iterations of these films. But Jenkins' key intervention is to place comedic performances within their broader historical, industrial, and cultural contexts. Doing so opens them up to interpretive possibilities that go beyond the immediate moment of viewing.

In the present era of digital convergence, where media products live on in myriad contexts beyond their initial moment of consumption, a similarly contextualized reading of sketch comedy performance accounts for its many functions beyond a single filmic iteration. It also aligns more closely with how audiences use and interpret comedic content in the present day. Sketch comedy moments in Andy Samberg's *Hot Rod* (2007), for instance, might subvert viewer and critic expectations on film, but take on additional meaning when circulated on television or online. Former *SNL* stars provide particularly useful examples for examining how sketch performances operate in the transmedial environment because, as I discussed in chapter one, initial seasons of the program cultivated a sense of differentiation from previous comedic traditions. As I explore below, this mentality permeated *SNL*'s day-to-day production conditions and on-screen representations so much so that, early on, performers aggressively strove to distinguish themselves from one another. But as opportunities other than feature film multiplied across the multi-channel and digital convergence eras, former *SNL* stars have embraced

short-form sketch comedy modes that, while they still prove "problematic" within the confines of film narrative, provide a number of ways to maintain their presence across media platforms.

Saturday Night Live and Sketch Aesthetics: Looking Beyond Studio 8H

> We wanted to redefine comedy the way the Beatles redefined what being a pop star was. That required not pandering, and it also required removing neediness, the need to please. It was like, we're only going to please those people who are like us. The presumption was there were a lot of people like us. And that turned out to be so.[29]

From the moment it premiered in the fall of 1975, Lorne Michaels sought to distinguish *SNL* (then *NBC's Saturday Night*) from the vaudevillian-influenced formats that had dominated many variety shows before it. His desire to "redefine comedy" indicated a rejection of the faux-sincerity and pandering characteristic of the Borscht Belt comedians that populated those programs. His Not Ready for Primetime Players would eschew Henny Youngman's "Take my wife, please,"-style of sketch comedy for a bolder sensibility that played to the baby boomer generation's desire for self-definition and distinction from its elders. The new comedy aesthetic advanced by early cast members of *SNL* was an overtly egotistical, often aggressively presentational style, one embodied most explicitly in *SNL*'s first season by Chevy Chase. Tall and good-looking with an arrogant swagger that alienated his cast mates, Chase quickly became the face of the show by consciously positioning himself as its star. "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not," was Chase's greeting in the fake-news "Weekend Update" segments, one that functioned

as a tacit acknowledgement of Michaels' mission to set the show apart from its generic brethren. As a wheelchair-bound character in the opening sketch of October 25, 1975, Chase drew riotous laughter after taking a hard fall. In the opening sketch the next week, Chase took an identical tumble in his bumbling impression of President Gerald Ford. Without makeup that would allow him to better approximate Ford physically, the resultant impersonation accommodated a dual reading of both presidential parody and star performance—it lampooned Ford's clumsiness at the same time that it presentationally foregrounded Chase's comedic persona. Soon thereafter, a *New York Magazine* cover story called Chase "the funniest man in America,"[30] and Chase would continue to play an exaggerated version of himself in subsequent sketches that year, his only on the show.

Chase was not lacking for offers from Hollywood after his departure from *SNL*. Producers of the frat-house comedy *Animal House* crafted the lead role of Otter for Chase, a move director John Landis adamantly opposed. Landis convinced Chase to opt instead for the lead in the romantic comedy *Foul Play*, explaining to him: "'Chevy, if you take *Foul Play*, you're then like Cary Grant; you're opposite Goldie Hawn, a major sex star, you're like Cary Grant. But if you take *Animal House*, you're a top banana in an ensemble, like *SNL*.'"[31] The expectation was for Chase to continue playing himself in much the same way he had on *SNL*, but the move would get Chase's film career off to a sputtering start. To be sure, Chase's presence starring "as himself" would not necessarily guarantee the film's success, but it fit with industrial discourses that embraced his *SNL* star persona at the same time that they attempted to distance him from it. Aggressive individuation distinguished Chase from the *SNL* ensemble on television and, at the very

least, provided him with enough familiarity among audiences to attempt the next step

in film. For a similar shot at film stardom, it quickly became clear to fellow cast

members that Chase's model of self-figuration was the most direct route to notoriety and

subsequent capitalization on the cultural cachet the show was building.

The success of *Animal House* in 1978, thanks in part to the carnivalesque

performance of *SNL* alumnus John Belushi, gave rise to a larger trend in film comedy that

William Paul calls "animal comedy." Paul characterizes the cycle of films, further

embodied by *Bachelor Party* and *Porky's* in the early 1980s, as having an "insistent

emphasis on animality," "physicality," and the notion that "physical comedy generally

receives pride of place over verbal comedy."[32] Paul further distinguishes the cycle by

describing it as "New Old Comedy," underlining the extent to which animal comedy

manifests the romantic thematics of New Comedy via the physical and often crass

sexuality of Old Comedy. With this theoretical framework, we can see how the comedic

persona Chevy Chase honed on *SNL* might fit uneasily within the context of animal

comedy. "A lot of the comedy in Chase's performances," Paul claims, "comes from his

own conception of himself as suave and debonair while events around him conspire to

puncture holes in that image. Ultimately, though, the image proves real."[33] Paul's

suggestion is that Chase's comedic persona did not align closely enough with the

confrontational aesthetic of animal comedy, and his presentational persona was

ultimately ill-suited for the type of sustained success in film comedy as other *SNL*

alumni. Chase was ultimately consumed with the maintenance of his own laid-back

image, and his shtick—from "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not," to the quick rebound

from his pratfalls, to his cool detachment from the news on "Weekend Update—

articulated a generalized indifference that insufficiently addressed the industrial imperatives driving animal comedy's success at the box office.

Whereas "Chase is a schlemiel Cary Grant," Paul describes another *SNL* player-turned-film-star, Bill Murray, as "a schlemiel who has sufficient shrewdness and aggression to turn his weaknesses into strengths."[34] The difference between the two is most explicitly played out in the animal comedy *Caddyshack* in a scene in which Murray, playing the slovenly lout that would become his stock-in-trade, comically wills his conspicuous shortcomings into a position of power over the nonchalant Chase. Paul draws some qualified parallels between the anarchic comic personae of Murray and Groucho Marx, noting (much as Seidman does) that Marx often wielded his comic authority to undermine the power structures of which his characters were a part. Whereas Marx inevitably survives such power struggles with the integrity of his character intact, Murray's characters approach such conflict with ironic reserve because the actor often "depends on the outside world for a sense of inner self. If the outside world were to fall apart, so would he."[35] We can see in this characterization a slightly more nuanced portrayal of Murray's comedy. Though he does so without ever acknowledging Seidman's model of comedian comedy, Paul situates Murray's performances within the outer-aggression-versus-inner-emptiness dialectics of animal comedy. However, like Jenkins, Paul suggests that the complex manner in which Murray arrives at an articulation of his comic persona indicates that such dialectic tensions can never be fully resolved and must be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation within specific industrial and cultural contexts.

In recent years, elements of Murray's comedic persona have come into sharper focus outside of the animal comedy cycle in projects such as *Rushmore, Lost in Translation*, and *Broken Flowers*. In some ways, traces of the juvenile, sexual aggression-masquerading-as-mockery remain in characters like *Rushmore*'s Herman Blume, who competes for a woman with a high-school boy. Elsewhere, characters like *Lost in Translation*'s Bob Harris mourn this impulse in wistful lamentations of a love just out of reach. Whatever the project, Murray's performative tendencies of distinction have evolved in a way that keeps them in dialogue with prevailing comedic trends. While I do not wish to imply that the cases of Chase and Murray are unqualified failures or successes based how their comedic personae have evolved over the years, I do wish to emphasize how the manner in which a comedian's mode of differentiating him/herself, one grounded in the sketch sensibilities of *SNL*, can be viewed as part of a larger historical process by which comedic styles are developed, discarded, and disseminated across media platforms.

Many subsequent *SNL* cast members emulated Murray and Chase's presentational mode of performance en route to a film career, but the strategy warrants additional consideration in the context of the program's early climate of institutionalized sexism. Caryn Murphy notes that although *SNL* was borne of countercultural impulses, ones that manifested in a comedic voice distinct from others on television, "advancing gender equality was not a shared goal."[36] Female writers, performers, and producers early in the show's run were subjected to a range of maltreatment at the hands of male personnel. The generally hostile environment toward women meant less meaningful screen time for them and that their comedic personae factored into the program less than those of their

male counterparts, creating "pressure on the few women involved in the creative process to disprove a generally accepted notion about gender and comedy, as compared with the men on the staff who were presumably attempting to prove their own individual talent."[37] While popular histories of the show highlight the more egregious instances of sexism (such as Belushi's infamous proclamation that "women aren't funny"[38]), the environment clearly influenced softer forms of power wielded by above-the-line personnel like Michaels, too. According to original cast member Laraine Newman:

> Lorne urged me to repeat characters. I refused to do it because I wanted to, you know, dazzle everybody with my versatility. And that kept me anonymous. That was the same pitfall for Danny [Aykroyd]. He was much more comfortable doing characters, and I think that it made him less recognizable than John, who was always John even when he was the Samurai. And Billy [Murray] was Billy. He did Todd in the Nerds but basically he was Billy. So even though I loved the kind of work that I did, and still do—I love the character work—I think it keeps you more anonymous than people who play themselves.[39]

Newman's comments speak directly to the central contradiction of performance modes on *SNL* in its early seasons. Effacement of one's personality via recurring character work meant more screen time, but without the individuation that could lead to opportunities beyond *SNL*. Performers who only "played themselves," conversely, minimized their chances to appear often in varied roles on the show in the hope that their comedic personae would "click" with writers, cast mates, and audiences. Clearly, the divide between the two is not absolute, but Newman's comments suggest a gendered bias toward men in the latter mode.

The original female cast member that most approximated Chase's presentational style was Gilda Radner, yet even her case highlights how sketch comedy performance modes on *SNL* could articulate gendered biases that marginalized women and propelled male cast members into film stardom. Radner thrived in the representational performance modes of recurring character work in her five year tenure on the show, creating such memorable roles as Roseanne Roseannadanna, the crotchety "Weekend Update" commentator Emily Litella, and the Barbara Walters parody Baba Wawa. She often appeared in presentational monologues and backstage segments as herself, too, a tendency that Whalley notes was a major component of the original cast's efforts to form rapport with its boomer audience and invite them in on the joke of television's constructed-ness and artificiality.[40]

But while Chase imbued these segments with an aloofness that maintained distance between himself and audiences (and thus implicitly positioned himself as star), Radner formed an intimate bond with viewers in ways that reinforced the program's gendered hierarchy. In a bit from *SNL*'s fourth episode, Radner chats onstage with host Candice Bergen about everything from the stresses of dating to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. In a monologue entitled "What Gilda Ate" from the program's third episode, Radner playfully rattles off a lengthy list of her day's diet before host Rob Reiner cuts her off. While they light-heartedly lampoon some of problems faced by millions of American women, the sketches take on additional significance in light of Radner's struggles with her self-image and bulimia at the time. Her vulnerability in them humanized her and offered a point of identification for viewers, particularly female ones. Yet the fact that her femininity provided the basis for this identification and figured so

prominently into her presentational comedic persona closed the gap between Gilda and "Gilda." The blueprint laid out by Chase for TV-to-film stardom required this gap, allowing audiences to get close to him, yet keeping them far enough away so that he could position himself as star.

Over the course of *SNL*'s first 20 years, the cast members following this blueprint from *SNL* into movies—Chase, Belushi, Murray, Murphy, Sandler, Farley—were overwhelmingly male performers who more or less played themselves. Evidence of the *SNL* "boys club" persists well into the 1990s, as comediennes like Janeane Garofalo found cast mates Sandler, Spade, and Farley to be guilty of many of the same abuses suffered by Newman, Radner, and Jane Curtain in the original cast. And while the hiring of Fey, Poehler, Wiig, and other female cast members in the late 1990s and early 2000s did not suddenly usher in gender equality on *SNL*, as Murphy notes, their presence did provide a substantive change in the popular perception—if not the actual power relations—of how *SNL* women could or could not self-position as stars in moving from the program into film.[41]

Significantly, the recently increased presence of female performers under head writer Tina Fey has coincided with a number of shifts in the entertainment media industries accommodating polysemic forms of comedic performance in film. As I described them in the introduction to this dissertation, these changes across the 1990s and 2000s have largely moved primary control over the production, distribution, and exhibition of television out of the hands of a few broadcast networks like NBC and into a more flexible matrix of relationships among content producers, providers, and consumers. The path to stardom today, then, is not the same seemingly linear

trajectory—from *SNL* on the small screen to big screen feature film—that it was for many early performers. While sketch comedy formats on *SNL* might still be the primary incubator for any given cast member to test and develop his/her comedic persona, that persona is increasingly articulated across media platforms and informed by voices from a range of discursive domains—popular culture, politics, sports, advertising, fashion— interacting at a much more accelerated rate than in the past.

Fey, Ferrell, and Contemporary Sketch Comedy Aesthetics on Film and Beyond

Will Ferrell and Tina Fey have been arguably the two biggest stars to use sketch comedy to "graduate" from *SNL* in the last decade and move on to multi-media careers beyond the show. They have not followed precisely the same path, but the respective comedic personae they developed along the way are emblematic of the same contemporary industrial context in which comedic stardom operates intertextually and across media. Their myriad appearances—in public forums and Internet comedy shorts as themselves; on television and Broadway as prominent political figures like Sarah Palin and George W. Bush; and in any number of film roles—have utilized both presentational and representational performative modes, variously "playing themselves" and subsuming these bit-driven elements of their personalities to character construction. Given their shared background in improvisational troupes and overlapping time together at *SNL*, the major factors shaping their performances have accordingly been collaborative, dialogic, and therefore amenable to the contemporary transmedial climate. Critiques insisting their films too often invoke the aesthetics of other media, then, risk overlooking the extent to

which they can and often do interact in complex and complementary ways. By offering analyses of films like *Date Night*, *Anchorman*, and *Step Brothers* (2008) below, I offer strategies for reading Fey and Ferrell's films with the same flexibility that already frames their performances everywhere else.

Fey joined the *SNL* writing staff in 1997, headed at the time by frequent Ferrell-collaborator Adam McKay. Whereas Ferrell was one of the program's most popular onscreen presences for much of his tenure, Fey only occasionally appeared in sketches as a supporting player, focusing much of her creative output on writing. As a result, Fey cannot be said to have the same fully-formed comedic persona as full-time cast members did, at least not until she joined Jimmy Fallon as co-anchor of "Weekend Update" in 2000. She thrived there for six seasons, contrasting her witty, matriarchal charm with Fallon's impish antics and, after Fallon's departure, Poehler's volatile energy. It was during this mid- to late-2000s period alongside Poehler on "Update," writing for female cast members like Maya Rudolph, Rachel Dratch, and Kristen Wiig, and making guest appearances as vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin that publicity discourses made Fey the focal point of a newly ascendant female voice on *SNL*, despite it not being entirely clear what Fey's own voice was as a performer.[42]

Though she has returned often to portray Palin and serve as host, Fey left *SNL* in 2006 to create NBC's mock-*SNL* sitcom, *30 Rock*. Her character Liz, a thinly-veiled version of herself, is the hardscrabble showrunner for *The Girlie Show*, a fictional late-night sketch comedy/variety program on NBC. In the 2007 episode "Jack Gets in the Game," vain and neurotic cast-member Jenna, seeing her popularity on the show decline, begins a new season of *The Girlie Show* grossly overweight. Audiences react favorably

to her new "character," and offers pour in to Jenna for movie and merchandising deals. Instead of leaving the show for greener pastures, Jenna loses weight and stays not out of loyalty to *The Girlie Show*, but because she doesn't want to be typecast as "the fat girl." Through the character of Jenna, Fey expresses ambivalence in explicitly articulating a star persona as many of the (mostly male) *SNL* alumni before her had. Positioning *SNL*—by way of *The Girlie Show*—as a punchline in *30 Rock* has allowed Fey both to acknowledge the importance of *SNL* in defining her comedic persona, as well as ensure it isn't *the* defining characteristic.

Fey would often express this tension through the character of Jenna. In the 2012 episode "The Ballad of Kenneth Parcell," Liz attempts to bring Jenna back down to earth by reminding her of a pact they made while struggling improv actors together in Chicago. "Liz, if I become famous, will you tell me if I start acting weird?" Jenna asks, to which Liz replies, "Definitely, and will you do the same for me?" Jenna bursts into laughter at the thought of Liz/Fey becoming famous. *SNL*-made fame, for Fey, is absurd, particularly when it is based on the type of antiquated, aggressively selfish mode of individuation represented by Jenna. Yet *SNL* persists as a star-making forum nonetheless, and Fey's critique of *SNL* suggests that this contradiction is a key aspect to the comedic personae of the show's alumni. Her performances on *30 Rock* vary among directly presentational moments that acknowledge the television audience with fourth-wall-breaking comments and vaguely representational scenes as the character of Liz. Indeed, Fey is quite often simply playing herself on the show, but her performance is embedded in a deeper critique of and dialogic relationship with *SNL*, one most often satirically voiced through Jenna. By exposing the trappings of *SNL* stardom, as well as

the comedically seedy underbelly of corporate-controlled network television comedy, Fey/Liz and *30 Rock* offer multiple points for considering how performance need not be circumscribed by any given text or medium.

Fey's film performances contain obvious overlaps with her television work, particularly in their tendency to de-emphasize her individual comedic star persona. Instead of Fey as a conventional, solo film "star," her persona is more often integrated among coterminous layers of performance, narrative, and the variable amounts of extra-fictional knowledge brought by audiences to the moment of viewing. This layered interaction has been inflected not only broadly by practices of transmedial production, distribution, and consumption (as I discuss below), but also specifically by performance modes increasingly amenable to those practices. The skills for sketch improvisation and character work that many *SNL* cast members bring with them to the show, then take into feature films, are ideally suited for a contemporary mediascape that requires performers to wear many hats across many media. These skills also manifest in film narratives that, in Drake's terminology, enact "multiple semantic frames," allowing viewers both to see the extra-fictional sketch parts of comedic performance and how they function within the film's reality.[43]

In a scene from *Date Night* (2010) with Fey and fellow Second City alumnus Steve Carell, for instance, the actors play out a scene that simultaneously invokes their theatre training, their respective star personae, and the generic tropes that seek to integrate both into the film's narrative. Portraying a bored married couple out to dinner, their characters scan the restaurant and see a young couple on a date. In an effort to entertain one another, Phil Foster (Carell) prompts his wife Claire (Fey) to make up the

couple's backstory. They decide the couple is having an unsuccessful third date and proceed to improvise their conversation from afar. Phil affects a groggy monotone for the man, and Claire adopts the personality of vapid ditz, responding that she's going to go home and "fart into a shoebox." After they chuckle to one another, Claire mutters to herself "That's not…that doesn't make sense." The scene mimics any number of improv games—in which actors on one side of the stage provide commentary for the pantomimes of actors on the other—Carell and Fey might have practiced in their time at Second City. It also invokes the dialogic rapport Fey developed with her "Update" co-anchors at *SNL*, punctuated by her "breaking" or acknowledging the presentational performance to herself in the scene's final beat. Importantly, though, neither frame necessarily distracts from the scene's place in the narrative. Drake suggests that such self-contained moments function as motivated "narrative enclosures,"[44] accommodating bit-driven, presentational performance without disrupting the verisimilitude of the film's diegetic world. Indeed, Phil and Claire—bored married couple—are performing for one another just as much as Carell and Fey—comedy stars—are performing for the film's audience.

Reviews for the film frame these layers of performative signification as complementary, too, suggesting that audiences look out for—and take pleasure in—such scenes of seeming distraction based in sketch comedy. The above-mentioned scene and others like it "create hilarious but accurate verbal portraits of contemporary types, while saying a great deal about the unsatisfactory lives that the Fosters themselves are living."[45] Another review advises audiences to "Stay for the outtakes — they're improv delights,"[46] and "funnier than screenwriter Josh Klausner's lines."[47] In addition to suggesting that improvisations invoking Fey and Carell's comedic star personae "work" within the

narrative, the reviews also point viewers beyond that narrative to material providing additional pleasures. The practice of tacking outtakes onto film end credits is not an uncommon one, particularly for contemporary comedies. Yet their inclusion and emphasis across a number of reviews highlights the multiple sites of meaning creation both within the film and in its ancillary material. Jonathan Gray has identified such paratextual material—reviews, film trailers, DVD extras, and merchandise—not simply as extensions of a primary text, but as "filters through which we must pass on our way to the film or program, our first and formative encounters with the text."[48] Audiences likely arrive at comedies like *Date Night* with some sense of how a potentially disruptive performance mode like improvisation will affect their viewing experience, as well as how that mode has been used in paratexts to characterize the film's stars. Audience activity among and with paratextual material, then, additionally informs layered constructions of comedic star performance and catalyzes their movement across platforms. And few *SNL*-alumni-turned-film stars have thrived in this transmedial environment as Will Ferrell has.

Ferrell has undoubtedly been the most notable Hollywood personality to embrace—and become identified with—transmedial comedy practices. After leaving *SNL* in 2002 for starring film roles in *Elf* (2003), *Kicking and Screaming* (2005), and *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), he co-founded with McKay the massively popular comedy website FunnyorDie.com in 2007. With the instantly viral success of the site's first short, "The Landlord," Ferrell established a middle-ground between the aesthetics of user-generated content and Hollywood prestige that the industry has been attempting to replicate since then.[49] His film career has continued to be financially successful, yet he has often veered from conventional paths of publicity that would clearly position him as a

star. Ferrell often shows up in friends' projects and co-productions like *Eastbound and Down* (2009-2012), *The Goods: Live Hard, Sell Hard* (2009), and *Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie* (2012) buried deep in the persona of some bizarre character. Over the course of 2011-12, he and McKay made several television advertisements for Old Milwaukee beer that aired only in local markets in the upper Midwest (one of which ran during the 2012 Super Bowl), but would later be shared across social networking sites the following weeks. The ads' lo-fi aesthetic and Ferrell's bumbling, faux-sincere demeanor work just as much to position him outside the Hollywood "mainstream" as they do to expand the boundaries of what's included in that mainstream. Because Ferrell's bit-driven comedic persona is so spread across roles and media, identifying a singular articulation of it within and among his films detracts from the many intertextual pleasures such variability offers.

In his seven-year tenure at *SNL*, Ferrell's comedic star persona was similarly scattered, anchored on the one hand in versions of himself—Will Ferrell, versatile everyman who could play any number of "straight" roles—and erratic, volatile characters with a tendency for the absurd on the other. No sketch better encapsulates this variability than his very first on *SNL* in the fall of 1995. Gazing over the heads of the audience while he unassumingly flips burgers on a grill, Ferrell as a plainly-dressed suburban dad serenely and familiarly makes small-talk with neighbors. He intermittently interrupts the polite banter to gently implore his off-screen children to stop their horseplay atop the family's shed. He returns to his conversation with the neighbor. Suddenly, his tiny eyes narrow, and his gaze shifts back to the children: "Hey! There's gonna be a meeting between your ass and the palm of my hand, if you don't get off the shed! Now, get off

the shed!" Without a beat, he continues his conversation with the neighbors, who are aghast at his treatment of the children.

Ferrell honed this delicate balance between the familiar everyman and violent, impulsive surrealist in many characters and impersonations over the years. As Neil Diamond, he gently cooed to his audience before inserting non sequiturs like "I'll smack you in the mouth, I'm Neil Diamond!", and as a drunken businessman telling tall-tales of a recently deceased co-worker like "He once scissor-kicked Angela Lansbury!" The abrupt and tangential aggression in Ferrell's comedic persona hewed closely to that of Chase and Murray before him, but with Ferrell, this aggression was purely performative and rarely part of some broader process of individual distinction. Instead, it more often functioned as the initial step in a dialogic give-and-take with a fellow performer, turning what might appear initially as a tangent into another performative layer. Ferrell would translate this aesthetic—like Fey did after him—into many of his film roles, ones accused of being disruptive and meandering by critics but ultimately built around this very disruptiveness.

Early in 2004's *Anchorman*, Ferrell, as the eponymous news anchor Ron Burgundy, warms up for the evening newscast by spouting comedic non sequiturs masquerading as preparatory vocal exercises such as "The arsonist has oddly shaped feet." When the newscast begins, he looks into the camera and directly addresses the filmic audience, but only via the mediation of the fictional television audience to which he broadcasts, suggesting the same sort of dual registers of reality necessary for a narrative enclosure. This winking knowingness doubly frames both the Burgundy

character performing for his studio/television audience and Ferrell's comedic performance of him, one invoking his *SNL* persona.

A similar dynamic plays out in several subsequent scenes. The day after sleeping with love interest Veronica Corningstone (played by Christina Applegate), Ron recounts his conquest to his news team. After each poses his idealized version of love to Ron only to have it questioned, they collectively pause to ponder what an idealized version of love would look like. Suddenly, they break out into a minute-long rendition of Starland Vocal Band's "Afternoon Delight," replete with harmonizing and mimicry of the instruments. The sequence might be dismissed as yet another extended skit stretched too far were it not for the many cues indicating it as one of many semantic frames through which we might process the scene. Ron sings the first line of the song alone, then is joined by his compatriots. Upon finishing, sports-anchor Champ Kind (David Koechner) claims that the model of love they have collectively expressed "sounds kinda dumb." This explicit acknowledgement of the performance serves to maintain it as integrated within the film's diegesis—non-diegetic scoring does not cue its beginning, a character's lead-in does; characters do not simply cordon off the musical number from their respective narrative roles, they acknowledge its relevance to them, performing simultaneously for one another and for the presumed audience of the film.

The improvisation-heavy 2008 film *Step Brothers* also provides a number of narrative enclosures that accommodate layered comedic performance by Ferrell. After several failed job interviews, forty-something halfwits Brennan (Ferrell) and Dale (John C. Reilly) solicit investments from family and friends for their entertainment company, Prestige Worldwide. Their pitch includes upbeat techno music, an amateurish slideshow,

and Brennan frantically dancing and ad-libbing over Dale's composed recitation of talking points. The assembled audience is initially amused by the duo's promises of music, event planning, and management. Yet as the presentation drags on into its fifth minute, Brennan and Dale begin showing pictures that don't appear to have anything to do with the company, including one of Dale sitting on a toilet that Brennan "put in at the last second to mess with the flow a little bit, break it up a little bit." Here Ferrell presentationally acknowledges a scene that trails off into irrelevance for the film's narrative, yet remains true to its established diegetic world. Brennan and Dale perform for their potential investors just as Ferrell and Reilly are performing for the film's audience. The layered frames for the scene take on extra significance in the context of the film's publicity campaign, which included Ferrell, Reilly, and director Adam McKay producing similarly scatological shorts like "Green Team" for FunnyorDie.com. Critics, predictably, characterized the toilet humor as "pointless"[50] and "a bad *SNL* skit,"[51] yet both evaluations ignore how texts beyond the film reveal intertextual pleasures associated with it.

Conclusion

The *Step Brothers* scene, as well as seemingly disruptive scenes in the films of a number of recent *SNL* alumni, indicates the need for a mode of evaluation "where terms conventionally associated with realist performance—such as 'authenticity' and 'sincerity'—have very little explanatory force."[52] That is to say, the complaint that *SNL* films' meandering, sketch-like narratives and ostentatious, presentational performances

violate some prescribed "norm" misses the point. Given the abundance of extra-textual information about *SNL* stars, their respective performance backgrounds in sketch and improvisational comedy, and their work across media, audiences likely enter the moment of viewing their films with that norm as one of many available frames for decoding layered performative meanings. Many of the most salient comedic moments—the ones so often bemoaned by critics as "sketch-like" or *SNL*-esque in their characterization—provide ample justification for their place both within the world of the film and in the many media platforms beyond it. Indeed, one need only peruse YouTube for a sampling of scenes lifted from the films of *SNL* alumni that work just as well on their own as they do in the context of the movie. Not coincidentally, these scenes often exist in the same web-based flow as sketches pulled from recent broadcasts of *SNL*. We can better understand these newly-formed flows of sketch comedy by acknowledging their interconnectedness from the start.

This chapter has attempted to illuminate that interconnectedness by tracing the sketch comedy performance styles of *SNL* stars from their time on the show to projects beyond it. I have traced a roughly historical arc of the preferred performance mode for *SNL* alumni as shifting from individualized, presentational modes to representational ones, yet this shift is not uniform in all cases. The versatile Mike Myers, for instance, had a highly successful *SNL* and film career embracing representational character work in the same era that *SNL* compatriots like Sandler and Farley aggressively distinguished themselves from the ensemble. Nor does Drake's reading of layered comedic performance apply only in the contemporary moment. Indeed, one can view someone like Bill Murray performing as sardonic Peter Venkman in *Ghostbusters* (1984); as

former *SNL* star Bill Murray, whose similarly-acerbic portrayal of characters like

Nick the lounge singer frame our readings of him elsewhere; and as an ostensible film

protagonist, whose actions can propel the narrative at the same time that they evoke

associations with other supernatural comedies like *Teen Wolf* (1986) and *Beetlejuice*

(1988).

     SNL cast members have always utilized some mixture of both presentational and

representational sketch performance modes on the show and in film, and they continue to

do so today. This ongoing negotiation might be most usefully seen in comparing the

sensibilities of Radner and Fey. Both performers share similarly idiosyncratic and brazen

takes on femininity, but Radner's were circumscribed by the internal politics of *SNL* at

the time. Fey, by contrast, works in a moment with myriad outlets for her humor,

inspiring a range of performances that are at the same time anchored in the comedic

personae she developed on *SNL*. The contemporary transmedial moment, which makes

performers available to viewers on their terms much more than in the past, has allowed

for multiple and simultaneous articulations of the comedic personae of Fey, Ferrell, and

other *SNL* alumni beyond the boundaries of any one text or medium. Despite the

newfound freedom afforded to a range of sketch comedy performers and audiences in the

digital convergence era, though, many dominant conceptions of what "works" and what

does not still persist. These conceptions continue to be structured around the pursuit of

niche viewerships that the industry presumes to be the most lucrative. While Fey has

found her own niche in sketch comedy performance modes beyond *SNL*, for instance, her

success is still commonly framed around the liberating idea of a woman "making it" in

the male dominated comedy world. While such discourses can indeed be empowering,

they obfuscate the underlying, assumed norm—that sketch comedy is and should be predominantly male and that success by a female is inherently transgressive. In considering the transmedial environment of contemporary sketch comedy, then, gender continues to inform the industrial and cultural discourses surrounding successful performers and texts in much the same way it has on cable and in film.

Often, these broader issues surrounding power and gender are secondary thoughts for performers simply seeking to work regularly and stay relevant. Sketch comedy for them can and does serve as means to an end, a way to forge their comedic personae around a personal brand and unify their identity in the public eye. But sketch comedy and improv comedians, with their natural inclinations for atomistic jokes and malleable, in-the-moment performances, must flexibly complement their personal brands if for no other reason than to keep working. Up-and-coming comedians regularly need to generate new content for online video sites and podcasts, hoping to catch the eye of producers that can lead them to bigger and better opportunities. Established comedians turn to new media outlets to satiate audience demand for content, work around television and film production lead times, and latch on to the hip sensibilities of emergent comedy practices. *SNL*, after being little more than the "launching pad…which leads to making bad movies" as Buck Henry called it, [53] is positioned as a nexus between both talent pools for years to come.

While this chapter has focused on the textual and performative aspects of sketch comedy that make it amenable to transmedial movements, the next chapter examines the specific industrial and technological discourses through which the format continues to serve as a basis for innovation and differentiation. If film conventions have

circumscribed the extent to which sketch comedy can be seen as innovative, the opposite is true of sketch comedy on the Internet. Over the course of online video's rapid development in the mid- to late-2000s, everyone from multinational media conglomerates to amateur producers created sketch comedy online in an attempt to distinguish themselves or their brand identity from others on the nascent medium. As it has on television and film, sketch comedy has served as a key site for negotiating the aesthetic and economic properties of web video, particularly as preferred practices for the medium remain in flux. As I suggest, though, established industry powers are increasingly incorporating sketch comedy into their menu of offerings in ways that resemble existing models of profitability rather than forging entirely new ones.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] See, among others, Sherryl Connelly, "'Comedy at the Edge' looks at '70s standup explosion," *New York Daily News*, January 13, 2008, http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/comedy-edge-70s-standup-explosion-article-1.345455 (accessed February 1, 2012) and James Poniewozik, "All-Time 100 TV Shows," *Time*, September 6, 2007, http://entertainment.time.com/2007/09/06/the-100-best-tv-shows-of-all-time/slide/saturday-night-live/#saturday-night-live (accessed February 1, 2012).

[2] Dan Silver, "YouTube HOF: Great Moments in Selling Out," *Grantland*, February 1, 2012, http://www.grantland.com/blog/hollywood-prospectus/post/_/id/42559/youtube-hof-great-moments-in-selling-out (accessed February 1, 2012).

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[4] Mick LaSalle, "Flip the channel on 'Anchorman,' a comedy sketch stretched too far," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 9, 2004, http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/07/09/DDGSL7I07A1.DTL (accessed February 1, 2012).

[5] Peter Travers, "Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy." Rolling Stone, July 14 2004, http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/anchorman-the-legend-of-ron-burgundy-20040709 (accessed February 1, 2012).

[6] Times-Dispatch Staff, "'Baby Mama seems like a long, bad 'SNL' sketch," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 26, 2008, http://www2.timesdispatch.com/entertainment/2008/apr/26/-rtd_2008_04_26_0068-ar-135182/ (accessed February 1, 2012).

[7] Ramin Setoodeh, "Movie Review: Adam Sandler's 'Jack and Jill Is the Worst Movie Ever Made," *The Daily Beast*, November 11, 2011, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/11/movie-review-adam-sandler-s-jack-and-jill-is-the-worst-movie-ever-made.html (accessed February 1, 2012).

[8] See Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom* for a rich analysis of comedians negotiating the opposite trajectory—from feature films into the intimate, live aesthetic of early television.

[9] Philip Drake, "Low Blows?: Theorizing performance in post-classical comedian comedy" in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, ed. Frank Krutnik (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 188.

[10] Frank Krutnik, "General Introduction" in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, ed. Frank Krutnik (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

[11] Jim Whalley, *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

[12] Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1-25.

[13] See Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981).

[14] See James Agee's oft-cited piece from *Life* magazine, "Comedy's Greatest Era" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 438-57.

[15] Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film*, 3.

[16] See Donald Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy" and Tom Gunning, "Response to Pie and Chase" in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106-22.

[17] Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," 117.

[18] Gunning, "Response to Pie and Chase," 121-2.

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[22] Krutnik, "General Introduction," 7-8.

[23] Ibid., 8.

[24] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[25] Henry Jenkins' *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

[26] Ibid., 11.

[27] Ibid., 159.

[28] Ibid., 5.

[29] Lorne Michaels quoted in Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of* Saturday Night Live (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 69.

[30] Ibid., 59.

[31] John Landis quoted in Shales and Miller, 90.

[32] William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 86.

[33] Ibid., 156.

[34] Ibid., 156.

[35] Ibid., 161.

[36] Caryn Murphy, "'Is this the Era of the Woman?': *SNL*'s Gender Politics in the New Millennium" in Saturday Night Live *and American Television Culture*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, in press).

[37] Ibid.

[38] Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of* Saturday Night Live (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 233.

[39] Laraine Newman quoted in Shales and Miller, 124.

[40] Whalley, 35-39.

[41] Caryn Murphy, "'Is this the Era of the Woman?': *SNL*'s Gender Politics in the New Millennium."

[42] Murphy calls this "the Tina Fey Era." See Caryn Murphy, "'Is this the Era of the Woman?': *SNL*'s Gender Politics in the New Millennium."

[43] Drake, "Low Blows," 188.

[44] Drake, "Low Blows," 190-192.

[45] Charles Bogle, "*Date Night* and *City Island:* One comedy that knows where it's going, another that can't seem to decide," *World Socialist Web Site*, June 10, 2010, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/jun2010/date-j10.shtml (accessed February 1, 2012).

[46] Peter Travers, "*Date Night,*" *Rolling Stone*, April 8, 2010, http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/date-night-20100408 (accessed February 1, 2012).

[47] Michael Phillips, "Steve Carell, Tina Fey deserve a better 'Date Night,'" *Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 2010, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-04-08/entertainment/chi-100406-date-night-review_1_carell-and-fey-date-night-tina-fey (accessed February 1, 2012).

[48] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 3.

[49] See Nick Marx, " 'The Missing Link Moment": Web Comedy in New Media Industries," *The Velvet Light Trap* 68, Fall 2011, 14-23.

[50] "Movie Review: 'Step Brothers' is men behaving badly," *Mac News*, http://www.macnews.com/content/movie-review-step-brothers-men-behaving-badly (accessed February 1, 2012).

[51] James Berardinelli, "Step Brothers," *ReelViews*, http://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=1258 (accessed February 1, 2012).

[52] Drake, "Low Blows," 192.

[53] Buck Henry quoted in Shales and Miller, 168.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Missing Link Moment:" Sketch Comedy in New Media Industries

> I don't want to overstate the importance of this deal, but this is the missing
> link moment where TV and Internet finally merge. It will change the way
> we as human beings perceive and interact with reality.[1]

Comedian Will Ferrell delivered the above proclamation, tongue planted firmly-in-cheek,

when HBO bought its ten per cent minority stake in his comedy website,

FunnyorDie.com. The program that resulted from that partnership, *Funny Or Die*

Presents, debuted on the premium cable outlet in February 2010. Its first episode begins

with an HBO logo and previews of the sketches, webisodes, and short films (some of

which had already run on the website) that follow, all while a large progress bar counts

down the remaining time until the program actually begins. Then, primitive graphics of a

computer and television appear, move toward the center of the screen, and merge to form

the logo for the "Funny or Die Network." A presenter dressed in outdated garb intones

with faux-gravitas: "Tonight marks a departure from our usual business model as we join

the ever declining world of broadcast television. Think of what you're about to see as

kind of a network unto itself, a half-hour network complete with its own lineup of

wonderful shows. Basically, the same kinda horseshit we throw up on our website."

The episode's introduction alone invokes a number of competing aesthetic and industrial discourses in quick succession. Markers of "quality" television (HBO) overlap with Internet iconography (the progress bar), before giving way to joking nods to 1970s design and fashion (the graphics and presenter). While the first two bits of visual information align with FunnyorDie.com's embrace of distinctive, forward-looking comedy, the latter two stand out as parodically-framed references to an era when the oligopolistic power of broadcast television networks was at its peak. The 70s tropes are, by now, well worn, notably expressed in Ferrell's 2004 film *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* and in the BBC's *Look Around You* from FunnyorDie.com regular Peter Serafinowicz. But it is not without significance that the program deliberately chooses imagery from that period in framing its launch. In *Funny or Die Presents*, the movement of FunnyorDie.com content from Internet to premium cable clashes with broadcast television's traditionally top-down distribution methods to affiliate and owned-and-operated local stations. That the episode characterizes Funny or Die as a "network" expresses both contentment about the supposed end of centralized industrial infrastructures and anxiety about the uncertainty of what will replace them.

This first part of this chapter explores the complex and often conflicting ways in which the major media conglomerates and their affiliated talent have managed this tension in the production of sketch comedy content online. While many established television producers found profitable ways to supplement and repurpose their broadcast and cable programming online in the 2000s, they often struggled to develop entirely new, web-based properties. Web production studios from Disney, Time Warner, and GE's NBC-Universal launched with this goal in mind to great fanfare throughout the decade,

but faced stiff competition from the likes of YouTube and a barren advertising market brought on by the worldwide recession in 2007-08. As a result, major media conglomerates and their web production studios have since scaled back their efforts, re-shifted focus, or sought to foster comedy talent with an already-formidable following online. Today their goal is not only to find sustainable profitability with web-original video, but also to use it to complement their growing television holdings online and myriad offline media outlets as well.

While FunnyorDie.com continues to see success in innovating sketch web comedy, the second case study of this chapter examines *The Onion*, a comedy property unaffiliated with any of the major media conglomerates and whose track record in new media has been a bit more mixed. Begun as a weekly satirical newspaper in Madison, WI, in 1988, the company has since expanded into a robust web presence with an array of video content, publishing, and two short-lived television series on the cable networks IFC and Comedy Central. Not all of its efforts beyond the original print publication have thrived, though. *The Onion Radio News*, which began as broadcast radio segments and podcasts long before any of *The Onion*'s more recent web efforts, straddled an undefined divide between being purely promotional and profitable until its end in 2009. In exploring its rise and fall, I outline the distinct set of issues facing new media producers working in sketch comedy outside of contemporary Hollywood infrastructures. Certainly, these problems are not uniform across all independent producers (especially ones lacking the already-formidable brand recognition of *The Onion*), nor is *The Onion*'s independence from major media firms the sole—or even primary—reason for *ORN*'s cancellation. However, *ORN* speaks to the volatility and uncertainty surrounding the

emergent production, distribution, and consumption practices of sketch comedy content in the digital convergence era.

This chapter provides a final look at how media industries construct notions of innovation and differentiation in and through sketch comedy by examining current articulations of distinction and anticipating how the format will continue to serve as a site of negotiating differences. Sketch comedy online serves as a particularly useful analytic site because of web media's lack of any clear aesthetic and economic norms. The negotiations of difference on television and in film discussed in previous chapters challenged preferred conceptions of identity and performance at the same time that they worked within them. On the Internet, one can sense that executives, performers, and producers are making up the rules as they go along, and this is not entirely inaccurate. Digital technologies and short formats afford producers from across the professional spectrum the opportunity to tinker and constantly re-define what works and what does not. The success of any given piece of content might not be viewed according to how profitably it can be leveraged across a firm's outlets, but by the cultural cachet it garners in Twitter followers, Facebook "likes," or page views.

Of course, even these measures are tied back to monetary remuneration in some way. But the instability that characterizes media industries' contemporary efforts to profit from sketch comedy highlights the importance of identifying key players and practices when they do emerge. Doing so adds to our understanding of how particular texts, creative practices, and consumption patterns construct preferred tastes and audiences while marginalizing others. Thus, this chapter examines the model of "success" for one sketch comedy producer online (FunnyorDie.com) alongside one that

has "failed" (*Onion Radio News*). Differences between the two highlight some of the basic tensions often lost in the shuffle in the shift from "old" to "new" media paradigms.

Sketch Comedy from "Old" to "New" Media

Comedy has long been the dominant genre in negotiating web video's aesthetic traits and industrial circulation beyond the Internet. As producers (and their parent companies) of original web video have increasingly sought cross-platform mobility, comedy—short, cheap, and accessible across media—has become their preferred genre, providing a cost-effective format for experimentation and immediacy. Hit television shows from many genres presently provide abundant ancillary content such as webisodes, character blogs, and interactive games at their network websites. But the flow of content in the opposite direction—from the Internet to established, "old" media like television—has been decidedly less prominent. FunnyorDie.com and *Funny or Die Presents*, for example, represent one of the most significant attempts thus far at translating the aesthetic and industrial practices of web video to television,[2] and their success hints at new possibilities for media conglomerates in the digital convergence era. Instead of viewing the Internet as a distinct medium, producers are increasingly incorporating web video into existing cross-platform strategies in much the same way they are already milking extra revenue from streaming television online. Ultimately, the case of FunnyorDie.com indicates that the web video production units of major media conglomerates are less invested in success online than in developing branded web content able to seek out more lucrative earnings from traditional offline media.

To be clear, neither these production units, nor their parent companies, conceived of the Internet as a completely final destination for their web-original properties. Beginning with the repeal of the Fin-Syn rules in the 1990s and through the ensuing "merger mania" that re-established television networks as part of vertically-integrated media empires, conglomerates have long had their collective eye on developing web-original content to leverage across their holdings. But analyses of recent trade discourse reveals a gradual reframing of this goal, one characterized initially by optimistic attempts to establish regular programming and advertising protocols online first, with their eventual transposition to television and other media a long-term strategy. Trade outlets in 2007, for instance, described the "millions-strong audience still up for grabs"[3] migrating from broadcast television to the Internet, where "[t]he medium also will create its own stars, just as the cable business did."[4] Original sketch web comedy has played an integral role in attempts to monetize this audience and create new stars, both independently online and in ways complementary to existing media industry practices.

In this chapter's first case study of FunnyorDie.com, I outline the industrial landscape of original web video and describe the ways in which the major media conglomerates have utilized sketch comedy content as a cost-effective and immediate way to build a presence online alongside their existing television streaming services. Key to understanding these media flows is the way that sketch comedy content has been discursively framed as distinct and disruptive, ushering in innovations at a time when existing media industry practices are undergoing change and instability. As I demonstrate, though, web comedy properties like FunnyorDie.com are increasingly

produced and consumed in ways complementary to existing industry practices, not

directly oppositional to them. Certainly, a number web video producers—from

pornographers to personal video diarists—operate outside the purview of the major media

conglomerates, creating content that challenges dominant conceptions of popular

entertainment. But at the moment, web sketch comedy is uniquely positioned as a bridge

between the competing impulses of transgressive and conservative, offering formal

innovations in the largely-unregulated online domain on the one hand, while serving as

cost-efficient talent development for major studios on the other. It is therefore important

to revisit the ways in which sketch comedy has served as a site of negotiation in past

instances of media industry transformation and understand how these discourses frame

present debates.

Press discourses typically draw an uncomplicated trajectory from "old" to "new"

media though some form of progress narrative:

> When motion pictures were invented at the end of the 19th century, most
> films were shorter than a minute, because of the limitations of technology.
> A little more than a hundred years later when Web videos were
> introduced, they were also cut short, but for social as well as technical
> reasons. Video creators, by and large, thought their audiences were
> impatient.[5]

The above bit of journalistic commentary provides a pat characterization of how new

media formats evolve: artists are limited by the tools at their disposal and by the

perceived desires of their intended audience. But such an approach overlooks the

complex and contingent ways that industrial practices, performance traditions, and

cultural discourses also guide emergent media. Early film audiences were no less capable of grasping feature-length films than contemporary audiences are of enjoying web comedy longer than two minutes on their laptops. From the Lumière brothers' 1895 *L'arroseur arrosé* to *Saturday Night Live*'s 2005 short "Lazy Sunday," comedic content has served as a primary site of tension in negotiating these discourses. In each instance established media practices have attempted to assimilate comedic experimentation with varying degrees of success. In the case of web sketch comedy, the result thus far has not been outright domination on the part of commercial media institutions, but an ongoing redefinition of the practices by which they seek it.

Film scholars, as I have discussed in chapter three, have already taken up the assimilation of early comedy practices into established visual storytelling strategies,[6] characterizing slapstick gags, for example, as either purely disruptive to film narrative or entering into "dialectical interrelation"[7] with it. Henry Jenkins elaborates this issue of containment—integrating extrafictional comedic bits into Classical Hollywood narrative—by additionally considering the shifting industrial practices and performance traditions that inform early sound comedies. He argues that Hollywood's transition to sound momentarily created a space for experimentation, one that accommodated the full spectrum of contemporaneous popular entertainment forms. Hollywood studios, accordingly, raided the vaudeville stages for talent not only to meet the burgeoning new material demands of the medium, but also "as a means of broadening their entertainment empire and bringing Broadway and vaudeville under their corporate control."[8]

While the notion of Hollywood aggressively seeking out new comedy talent is certainly not new, we might consider how this practice takes on a different significance in

the present day. The cable network Comedy Central, for example, regularly uses

Atom.com (both owned by media conglomerate Viacom) as a farm league of sorts for

growing new programming. It developed the Atom.com web series *Ugly Americans* into

a half-hour television program in 2010, and it has regularly run half-hour compilations of

Atom.com short videos (under the tile *Atom TV*) during hours normally reserved for

reruns and paid programming. Viacom sees the strategy as a cost-saving measure,

allowing content to find a following gradually online rather than subjecting the untested

material to the competitive rigors of television scheduling and promotion.[9] Conversely,

Comedy Central has also begun utilizing Atom.com as a testing ground for television

material in which it is not fully confident. In December 2009, the network segmented the

half-hour pilot for *The Fuzz* into several minutes-long chunks and released it online.

That the network and its parent company do not view their content as medium-

specific speaks not only to web sketch comedy's formal malleability, but also to the

nature of comedy itself. Jenkins suggests the "need to think about comedy atomistically,

as a loosely linked succession of comic 'bits.'"[10] Such a conception of comedy can allow

for an ongoing negotiation among the competing aesthetic logics of film, television, and

Internet. In the case of Viacom's web comedy strategy, this negotiation ultimately serves

the purpose of distribution flexibility. The loosely linked "bits" can be assembled or

disassembled according to their distribution outlet without losing their aesthetic appeal.

While this certainly does not automatically translate into a hit television program, it

points to the need for producers and distributors alike to create comedy in purposefully

multivalent ways rather than ones beholden to a single medium's aesthetic norms.

The move to produce sketch comedy web content conducive to transmedial movement aligns with Max Dawson's characterization of "unbundling," the process of dismantling television texts and distributing them in self-contained segments for consumption on mobile devices.[11] Television programs like *Lost* and *24*, for example, offered additional content online that extended their respective diegeses and kept their loyal viewers engaged beyond the moment of television exhibition. Pushing beyond technologically-defined notions of mobility, Dawson additionally provides a useful reminder of the aesthetic implications of textual fragmentation. That is, while unbundled television segments circulated across platforms serve the repurposing needs of integrated media conglomerates,[12] we need not read these segments simply as dependent, extracted parts of a larger textual whole. Instead, we might view original web sketch comedy and programs like *Funny or Die Presents* as emblematic of the ways the industry has found aesthetic value in these segments and profitable ways to *re*-bundle them for television.

Michael Curtin echoes Dawson in characterizing contemporary media conglomerates as being driven by "interactive exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use."[13] Key to what he calls "matrix media" is the use of television programming by conglomerates to build a brand and make it accessible to viewers at their convenience and on their terms. The accumulated media platforms and times at which audiences consume a program represent for advertisers a way to engage consumers in an increasingly fragmented mediascape. Accordingly, media firms like NBC have taken to packaging advertising opportunities across their holdings and developing inter-media strategies for them instead of viewing programs singularly.[14] While the movement of programming in this conception often begins in

mainstream television, producers are experimenting with ways to develop web-original content that can eventually contribute in more established (and financially lucrative) arenas.

A key issue, Curtin notes, is the genre and length of such content and how it compels viewers both to return to the website and to explore similar programming offline. Even as broadband capabilities grow and studios increasingly offer their long-form television programming online, most successful original web videos are short: between two and seven minutes long.[15] As a result, the format has attracted a wide range of comedians working in performance traditions like short-form improvisation, stand-up, and sketch comedy. For example, in one of its earliest attempts at fostering growth beyond the Internet, YouTube launched a sketch comedy contest in 2007 judged by users of the site. The winners would shoot an original comedic short for the soft drink Sierra Mist and earn a meeting with talent agents.[16]

In addition to aspiring amateurs, established sketch and improv theaters such as The Groundlings, Second City, and the Upright Citizens Brigade regularly post original web sketch comedy and recorded live shows to their homepages and to a number of aggregators of comedy content. FunnyorDie.com co-founders Will Ferrell and Adam McKay (alumni of The Groundlings and Second City, respectively) turned to web comedy as an outlet for their improvisation skills beyond the narrative strictures of feature film and broadcast television. After working together at *Saturday Night Live*, the duo embarked on successful film collaborations like *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* and *Step Brothers*, demonstrating many of the improvisatory and bit-driven sensibilities from their sketch backgrounds. As a result, their film comedies often tended

to play like a collection of comic set-pieces rather than a conventionally goal- and conflict-driven narrative, as I discussed in chapter three.

Ferrell itched for a venue "to exercise that same muscle" he did on *Saturday Night Live* outside of film and television.[17] In 2006 Mark Kvamme, chairman of the Silicon Valley venture firm Sequoia Capital (who had previously invested in YouTube, Google, and Yahoo) approached Ferrell and McKay via their representation at Creative Artists Agency about starting an online comedy forum. With just $17,000 in seed money, FunnyorDie.com launched in March 2007. By April, the site had its first hit: "The Landlord," a two-and-a-half minute short featuring a toddler (played by McKay's daughter Pearl) being fed lines off-camera in order to give the appearance that she is verbally abusing her tenant (Ferrell) for rent money. It begins in a living room with Ferrell and McKay exchanging breezy, improvised banter. Ferrell answers a knock at the door and finds his "landlord," Pearl. As their exchange escalates, Ferrell ostensibly plays straight man to Pearl as she berates him with a string of obscenities and epithets. When Pearl finishes her tirade, a defeated Ferrell turns back into his house sobbing. The bit cannily plays up the homemade feel—shaky camerawork, real-life setting, and awkward pacing—of the still-nascent amateur web video aesthetic. It also provides an ideal format for Ferrell to exercise the sketch, sketch sensibilities that seemed to disagree with much of his film comedy work.

With its brief run time and meme-friendly moments, "The Landlord" quickly became a viral success, acquiring 30 million views in a little over six weeks and garnering coverage in numerous popular press outlets.[18] YouTube's attempts in 2007 to create new comedy stars, combined with FunnyorDie's reliance on established

Hollywood talent like Ferrell, seemed to point web comedy in a new direction toward professionalized content with the potential for life beyond the Internet. Web comedians began generating a broad range of sketch material, experimenting with recurring characters, small-scale story arcs, and regular release schedules. But by 2009 (as I detail below) the medium had generated few of its own stars, and its advertising revenues still paled in comparison to those of film and television.[19]

Surely, much of FunnyorDie.com's early success could be attributed to the fact that its talent already had resources and a robust following beyond the Internet. Ferrell's presence on the site garnered much mainstream press coverage and provided a mark of differentiation from the increasingly-crowded field of web comedians. But the site's appeal beyond the web spoke to a broader need to bring the competing aesthetics of web sketch comedy and mainstream film and television into closer harmony. If, initially, the major media conglomerates sought to create content in which talent could exercise the comedic "muscle" that conflicted with traditional comedy formats, they quickly came to see the utility in pushing this content beyond the boundaries of the Internet.

Industrial Differentiation in Web Sketch Comedy

In an effort to capitalize on YouTube's success in the mid- to late-2000s, the major media conglomerates launched production units for web content with dizzying speed. Trade press hyped the exponential growth of online viewership as well. In 2007, over half of Americans were watching web videos, with 19% saying they did so every day.[20] In contrast to YouTube's largely amateur aesthetic, web efforts from the majors positioned

themselves as "User-Gen Plus."[21] Audiences sought more professional-looking

content,[22] and Hollywood studios had the financial resources to make it. Advertisers

sought to capitalize on professionalized web video too, shifting their focus from banner

ads to video spots that played before or were integrated into a given piece. One report

optimistically predicted that, contrary to stagnant ad rates in virtually every other sector,

web video ad spending would rise 45 percent in 2009 to reach $850 million.[23]

But by late 2009, a different picture emerged as many the majors' web units shut

down, drastically scaled back, or re-formulated their strategies. Online viewership

continued to grow, but advertising revenue did not keep up with production costs.

Advertisers for original web video paid around ten dollars for every one thousand

viewers a video delivered. With production costs for three- to five-minute long pieces

averaging between $5,000 and $25,000, even "hits" that garnered audiences in the

millions would not be guaranteed to make back their money.[24] At first glance, this

disparity between production costs and perceived earning potential sunk many major web

video ventures. SuperDeluxe, a Turner/Time Warner property, pursued established

Hollywood talent like David Foley and Bob Odenkirk. Both comedians were alumni of

cult television sketch comedy programs (Foley from *The Kids in the Hall*; Odenkirk from

Mr. Show), but SuperDeluxe was unable to turn a profit on their expensive series from

online revenues. Similarly, United Talent Agency's online content company, 60Frames,

launched in 2007 with $3.5 million in seed money.[25] But after failing to provide any

sustainably profitable hits, the studio was unable to secure a second round of financing

and shuttered in 2009.

Thin profit margins and gun-shy investors provided a convenient excuse for some of these web video failures, but they do not tell the whole story. While the ventures seemed like good bets for big media initially, they often failed to take advantage of—or even duplicated—the co-owned resources of their parent companies. SuperDeluxe, for example, courted the same young male viewer as another Time Warner unit, the Adult Swim television program block on Cartoon Network. Adult Swim already had an online presence by re-purposing its television sketch comedies and cartoons for its own website. Bringing SuperDeluxe's online original sketch comedies under the established Adult Swim brand made perfect sense. Similarly, web comedy distribution platforms like NBC's DotComedy and ABC-Disney Television's Stage 9 Digital had been operating independently of the home websites of their respective television networks. Folding each into their parent brands not only bailed the websites out financially, but also allowed for their original web content to be showcased alongside programming that already had a loyal (and more lucrative) television audience in tow.

Among the major media conglomerates that successfully integrated their original web video and offline media holdings were, appropriately enough, two of the biggest suppliers of television programming to the broadcast networks. Warner Bros. Studio 2.0 (operating under Warner Bros. Television) saw its comparatively costly, though infrequent, productions as "first and foremost an effort to attract and maintain talent at its television division."[26] The studio's biggest hit so far has been *Childrens Hospital*, a medical-drama satire starring a "who's who" of Los Angeles based sketch comedians. In 2010 the minutes-long webisodes on TheWB.com were re-purposed and pieced together into 15-minute television episodes on Adult Swim. It and other original comedies were

hosted at TheWB.com alongside Warners' extensive back catalog of television shows. Sony has taken a similar tack, developing high-profile original web comedies that both encouraged repeat visits to its website, Crackle.com, and promoted the online-streaming availability of films like *Spider-Man 2* and *Groundhog Day*.

However, promoting online streams of film and television is not the only goal behind web sketch comedy productions, nor is advertiser-driven television their only option after online release. Executives have realized that web video previously-available online might dilute its value for potential television advertisers. As a result, high-profile web videos can also be promoted in the service of DVD sales and paid downloads from iTunes. Joss Whedon's web musical *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, for example, doubled its production budget by "windowing" its release schedule to iTunes and DVD after streaming online for free.[27] Sony struck similar deals for the $1 million-budgeted *Angel of Death* and hoped to do the same with the horror-comedy *Woke Up Dead*. Portending bigger things, *Woke Up Dead*'s star John Heder described the production as "like shooting a film…that's cool because you're like, 'OK, this is legit.' I thought it would be, like, five guys with a boom mike."[28] For major media conglomerates, a sheen of respectability can be worth the sunken production costs if it allows content to be profitably moved across media at a later date.

Before HBO bought its stake in FunnyorDie.com in 2008, the site cannily exploited this discourse of "amateur vs. professional" aesthetics, too. Ferrell's cohort of Hollywood comedian friends would create web comedy shorts for everything from immediate image rehabilitation to circumvention of the slow-moving production lead-times of film and television. At the same time, the site welcomes user-generated

submissions that "live" or "die" based on the (dis)approval of viewers, all of whom

have one-click voting capabilities. This dual embrace—of amateur, participatory culture

on the one hand and professional-grade comedy on the other—allowed FunnyorDie.com

to aggregate a loyal audience of users with the hopes of eventually trading up to the

premium cable arena. The result thus far has been a comedic sensibility rooted in a

community-building impulse, yet capable of moving beyond the web into more profitable

revenue sources such as merchandising, live performances, television, and film.

 While FunnyorDie.com's traffic fluctuated in the months following the release of

"The Landlord," the short had helped it establish a comedy brand-name, one built around

the prestige presence of Ferrell and the cadre of comedians represented by CAA (such as

Zach Galifianakis, Nick Swardson, and Demetri Martin) that have come to

FunnyorDie.com for everything from exposure to experimentation. Up-and-coming

comedians increasingly turned to places like FunnyorDie.com instead of amateur sites.

As comedian Nick Thune remarked, aspiring comics saw the site as a way to attach

themselves to a particular sensibility, because "If Will Ferrell is there, it must be good."[29]

But as buzz about the "The Landlord" increased the site's profile over the summer of

2007, while like-minded web comedy efforts from the major media conglomerates

floundered, Ferrell and McKay faced a dilemma: what kind of content would impel

viewers to return while keeping the material fresh? Would the star presences of Ferrell

and other mainstream comedians alone be enough?

 Investigating a similar problem faced by early television comedy stars, Susan

Murray notes that audiences grew weary from overexposure to their gag-centric styles.[30]

At the same time, the aging vaudevillian comedians found the demands of live television

(including the inability to recycle material) physically taxing. The ensuing shift to

the sitcom as television's dominant comedic form entailed a move away from the fluid

comedic personas of vaudeo. In the contemporary setting, though, the Internet has

afforded comedians the space to maintain comparatively more fluidity in their

performances. This flexibility has resulted in fewer medium-specific comic performance

styles and more movements of comedian/comedy-as-brand across film, television, and

the web. In the months following the viral success of "The Landlord," Ferrell and

company would build the site beyond one-off viral videos to include celebrity

testimonials, political satire, and experimental shorts, all under the aegis of the

FunnyorDie brand.

Ferrell's presence throughout FunnyorDie.com, moreover, indicated an effort by

contemporary web comedians to circumvent the aesthetic and economic strictures of

narrative storytelling in film and television. FunnyorDie.com attracted viewers to the site

not through story hooks, but by building a brand name around star-controlled comedy

content that could deliver quick-hit satisfaction to viewers at their leisure. That anyone

could potentially become a star was built into the site's economic model, one based

largely on the artist's creative control and aimed across multiple media.

The success of "The Landlord" simultaneously gave FunnyorDie.com mainstream

credibility and a point of identification for viewers to break through the clutter of web

comedy. But with Ferrell's endorsement, the site also became a place for comedians

(aspiring and professional), producers, and investors to posit a model for web sketch

comedy that, being backed by Hollywood talent, could grow beyond the confines of the

Internet. Because it offered up-and-coming artists a stake in ownership and established

actors low-cost, high-profile exposure unfettered by studios and above-the-line power

struggles, amateurs and professionals alike had the option to eschew the expensive and

competitive audition processes for film and television. For aspiring comedians,

> there's an aspirational quality that comes from associating with Ferrell and
> McKay, who critique clips and pick their favorites. Pitch your gags on
> YouTube, and it's as if you're one of a million comic wannabes on some
> public-access channel; at Funny or Die, you feel like you're auditioning
> for *Saturday Night Live*.[31]

While submitting a short to the site may not quite be on the same level as a tryout for a

network television program, FunnyorDie has come to attract a particular style of content

that amateur users hope aligns with the FunnyorDie brand. Part of the attraction for an

amateur to submit content to the site over, say, YouTube, is a merit system that allows

voters to banish unfunny videos.[32] Anyone can submit, but few break through for the

kind of viewing numbers on par with the pieces produced by FunnyorDie staff.

Moreover, the architecture of the site clearly delineates its original content from user-

submitted bits with large, red "FOD Exclusive" logos, and it provides a separate section

for one-off submissions from "Celebrity VIPs" (such as Ron Howard, Natalie Portman,

and Paris Hilton) not employed by FunnyorDie.com. The site's national profile and

quick production turnaround made it a destination for everything from celebrities seeking

public relations damage control to canny commentaries on politics and pop culture.[33]

At the end of 2007, Sequoia Capital injected another $100 million into

FunnyorDie.com, but to that point, none of the site's talent had seen a dime from either

revenue sharing or advertising sales.[34] This was part of Kvamme's long-term plan of

leveraging the "or Die" name across a number of websites, media, and merchandising opportunities. To that end, he launched shredordie.com (an extreme sports site) as well as eatdrinkordie.com (a food and pop culture site), among others. Much as NBC moved to packaging advertising opportunities across its media holdings instead of specific programs,[35] Kvamme sought not only to reap advertising profits from FunnyorDie.com, but also to sell ad packages across all "or Die" properties for the total number of viewers all the sites delivered.[36] Eventually, talent would be paid based on the amount of traffic their video pulled in, with different pay scales for "exclusive" and "VIP" content than for videos submitted by site users.[37]

This system may seem unfair to many aspiring comedians, especially in light of recent amateur success stories coming out of YouTube's partner program. But, as one artist in that program noted, "For new users, it's a lot of work. Everybody's fighting to be seen online; you have to strategize and market yourself."[38] What amateurs submitting their material to FunnyorDie.com received in exchange for a prospectively smaller cut of ad dollars was the site's brand name. Whereas YouTube artists competed for potential viewers with millions of other videos, FunnyorDie.com targeted a specific viewer interested in its brand of comedy. The meaning of that brand continued to grow as FunnyorDie.com diversified its profile across media platforms. What remained constant, though, was its focus on professional-grade comedy and connections to the Hollywood establishment. After it attracted 3.6 million unique visitors in September 2007, producer Judd Apatow bought a minority stake in the site in October. Shortly thereafter, FunnyorDie.com began playing outtakes and shorts based on Apatow projects such as *Knocked Up* and *Superbad*.[39] In February 2008, Will Ferrell toured in support of his new

movie with several other CAA-represented comedians on the "Will Ferrell's Funny or Die Comedy Tour Presented by *Semi-Pro*." The tour played to several sold-out venues, with behind-the-scenes footage posted each week on the website, further strengthening the site's bond with established film comedians beyond the Internet.[40]

Then in June, HBO bought its ten percent stake in FunnyorDie.com. The deal called for partners Ferrell, McKay, and Henchy to develop 10 half-hours of original comedy programming for the pay station.[41] After Ferrell and McKay's company (Gary Sanchez Productions) produced the HBO series *Eastbound and Down*, it began work in March 2009 on the 10 half-hours commissioned by HBO, which debuted in the spring of 2010 as *Funny or Die Presents*. The site also opened a London production headquarters in September 2008 and began running selections from *Little Britain USA*, an American spinoff of the massively popular British comedy program that HBO had recently acquired.[42] In early December 2008, FunnyorDie.com posted the first episode of season two of *Flight of the Conchords* weeks ahead of its premiere on HBO. The cable outlet undoubtedly saw the move as a way to build buzz for the show before its return. But by placing the episode alongside FunnyorDie.com content, it also served to align the site more closely with HBO's carefully crafted brand of premium programming before the launch of *Funny or Die Presents* two years later.

The site also spread its brand of comedy into other new media platforms, licensing exclusive videos to the mobile content platform Babelgum in July 2009.[43] But original web sketch comedy with transmedial potential was not all the site saw in its future, however. Early in 2010 global corporations like Hyatt and Starbucks hired FunnyorDie staff to create viral advertisements for them. The Hyatt spots, for instance,

play up a self-deprecating sensibility about the effects of the recession on the hotel

industry and were produced at a fraction of the cost charged by traditional ad firms.[44] As

an added value for clients, FunnyorDie.com CEO Dick Glover notes, the site can deliver

a largely young, male, and upscale audience that wouldn't otherwise be exposed to mass-

market brands like Hyatt.[45]

From live events to television partnerships to advertising, FunnyorDie and its

parent interests see the website as a jumping off point to bigger and better things. Each

new venture begins online but is designed to have the potential to generate revenue in

more established and lucrative media outlets. According to a profile of Glover,

> [He] wants to create and distribute successful comedy on the Web, spin
> the talent off into their own successful brands, then exploit those assets
> offline where the real money still lies…Mr. Glover said FunnyorDie will
> take "the voice, sensibility, attitude [and] talent and direct that toward TV"
> with new, yet-to-be-determined programming.[46]

Clearly, Glover's intention is to get viewers to engage in branded content at their own

convenience online, on their phones, on HBO, and in live acts. The fact that he frames

his vision in vague business-speak—not in terms of genre and programming strategy, but

of "brands," "assets," and "sensibility"—is a good indication of just how much

FunnyorDie is attempting to mimic the transmedial movement characteristic of

conglomerated media companies. These companies, in turn, are increasingly looking to

the rising stars of the web for new properties capable of contributing to multiple revenue

streams.

While I've enumerated above the aesthetic and industrial forces driving web comedy offline, the format has also come to perform a very basic and desirable function long-prized by the television industry: organizing the audience.[47] Star power, production value, and savvy marketing can certainly distinguish a web sketch comedy property from its online peers, but creating a loyal community around that property (as FunnyorDie has) promises the possibility that audiences will follow it wherever it goes. In the highly-competitive battle for fragmenting audience shares, it might be as close to appointment television as one can get.

The case of FunnyorDie.com indicates that web comedy is an increasingly relevant part of the discussion about how sketch comedy in new media are incorporated into existing formats and practices. At a very basic level, FunnyorDie might be viewed as stretching the boundaries of what a "prestige" television network like HBO considers as part of its brand identity. On another level, it would be difficult to posit this as challenging the dominant hegemonic meanings generated by commercial media institutions in any meaningful way. Perhaps the best indication that web sketch comedy will continue to serve as an important forum for the negotiation of aesthetic and industrial practices comes in the precedent set forth by YouTube. The site, still the dominant player in web video,[48] has striven for profitability[49] yet sought to uphold its image as a freely-accessible platform for everything from grassroots political movements to online video archiving. Scholars have noted the conflicting ideologies in YouTube's vacillation between "community and commerce,"[50] arguing that an understanding of the site as only either "a player in the commercial new media landscape" or as "a site of vernacular creativity and lawless disruption"[51] precludes discussion of how tension between the two

discourses might actually be productive. Comedy websites like FunnyorDie.com are borne of this tension, the product of comedians' community-building impulse and media industries' adaptive strategies.

Clearly, web sketch comedy can be articulated in a number of ways. With its fluid aesthetic qualities able to permeate across a number of evolving industrial infrastructures, the format might be seen as part of what Geoffrey Baym calls "discursively integrated" media.[52] Baym sees programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, for example, as integrating the previously-distinct discourses of news and comedy, offering new and potentially empowering journalistic practices in the process. Similarly, FunnyorDie has hosted the gay-rights short "Prop 8 – The Musical" alongside tongue-in-cheek commentaries from Paris Hilton to John McCain. *Funny or Die Presents* places aspiring amateurs in the same televisual flow as established Hollywood stars. Discourses of comedy, politics, performance, and celebrity integrate among and across the FunnyorDie brand, providing one of many links between tradition and innovation; amateur and professional; and funny and unfunny in the evolving new mediascape.

Most importantly, the case of FunnyorDie.com suggests that in order to have staying power, web sketch comedy must carefully negotiate the community-building impulse of amateur web video with the commercial infrastructures that are increasingly coming to dictate the circumstances of online video consumption. In many cases, this requires some financial relationship with offline television and film industries. As entertainment media on the Internet continue to become constitutive elements of established media powers, short-from web comedy can point to fissures in how the

industry has traditionally valued particular audiences and cultural formations. For

the foreseeable future, however, web sketch comedy on sites like *FunnyorDie.com*

indicate that media firms view the Internet not as a site of pure innovation, but as another

extension of the production and distribution routines already in place in the digital

convergence era.

While brands like *FunnyorDie.com* make for appealing sites of analysis because

of their growing cultural ubiquity in more mainstream channels, web sketch comedy

thrives in myriad other contexts as well. Weblogs, fan remixes, and music videos all

incorporate sketch bits and elements of humor that might not explicitly brand the content

or even the site as "comedy." Those that do identify as comedic face a particularly

difficult challenge in distinguishing themselves from a field of competition where

comedy has become the preferred discourse of differentiation. As the many failed

comedy video sites from the major media conglomerates indicate, even

"professionalized" production aesthetics and distribution resources are not enough to

ensure success. But while the financial stakes in web sketch comedy are decidedly lower

than they are in film or television, their failures provide another perspective on the

transmedial movements of digital convergence that is often left untold by the successes.

The second case study of this chapter examines one such failure in an otherwise

successful sketch comedy property, *The Onion*. I elucidate how its syndicated-radio-

short-turned-podcast, *The Onion Radio News*, fits into scholarly and trade discourses that

contrast podcasts' democratizing creative possibilities with radio's established systems of

production and distribution. Then in a profile of *The Onion*, interviews with its creative

personnel, and my own observations from recording sessions of *The Onion Radio News*, I

examine one of the many performance and production contexts of web sketch comedy beyond the purview of the major media conglomerates. While not a strictly amateur production (indeed, the podcast is one of many extension's of *The Onion*'s presence on television, online, and in print), *ORN* points to the difficulties new media producers face in utilizing sketch comedy as a method of innovation and differentiation in the present transmedial environment.

Turn on the Radio Online: Sketch Comedy in the *Onion Radio News* and the Failures of Digital Convergence

As a low cost and efficient complement to many existing "old" and "new" media forms— particularly radio—podcasts predate their web video analogues by several years. British journalist Ben Hammersley, widely considered to have coined the term "podcasting" in a 2004 article for *The Guardian*, mused as to whether or not the new medium portended "a new boom in amateur radio."[53] A *San Jose Mercury News* profile, still fascinated by the new medium a year later, described podcasts as "a new online outlet for amateur broadcasters to run their own pirate radio stations."[54] At the same time, bookshelves overflowed with titles like *Podcasting: The Do-it-yourself Guide* and *Podcasting Now! Audio Your Way*. In its emphasis on both individualized innovation and wide-ranging (even transgressive) content, popular discourse surrounding the emergence of podcasting recalls the maverick aesthetic ascribed to early radio. Indeed, the development of both media were driven by amateurs experimenting with available communication technologies in order to make personalized programming available for their peers. But to

characterize podcasting as merely "radio for the iPod generation"[55] risks relegating it to a middle-ground of analysis. Tying podcasting too closely to radio, on the one hand, undermines any interrogation of its potentially unique production and consumption patterns. On the other hand, it obfuscates podcasting's role as both a catalyst and product of digital convergence. As the medium developed to include sketch comedy formats, podcasting would come to incorporate elements from radio while tailoring them to its own unique technological capabilities.

Podcasting quickly proliferated across the web thanks in large part to the open source software originally created by engineer Dave Winer and former MTV on-air personality Adam Curry. Curry was the new medium's most outspoken proponent, using his podcast *Daily Source Code* as an alternative voice in a media landscape that he claimed had become "so diluted, so packaged, so predictable."[56] Curry's program riffed on everything from his personal taste in contemporary music to the minutiae of his personal life, content emblematic of what is typically found on a personal weblog. Indeed, the same popular discourses that define podcasting as next-generation radio often additionally characterize it as an aural form of blogging. This has structured preferred uses and interpretations of the medium in important ways, the most salient of which is an emphasis on the individual media producer. Because the financial barrier to producing a podcast is low, the medium invites a broader swath of producers than do traditional commercial broadcast media like radio or television. The weblog PodcastAcademy.com, for example, provides a listing of different podcast setups with costs ranging from $225 for an entry-level rig to $2,500 for a professional rig, with additional software (ranging from open source to commercial) required for post-production.[57] Given its low cost and

conduciveness to content diversity, podcast production has grown in nearly

innumerable ways.

Comprehensive attempts to quantify the demographic of burgeoning podcast

producers, though, are few and far between. A study from the Pew Internet & American

Life Project notes that the number of podcasts indexed on the directory site

Podcastalley.com grew from 1,000 in November 2004 to over 26,000 two years later.[58]

Instead, the most readily available information on podcast production often champions

any given producer's use of the medium, and the academy has been among the most

prolific agent of this literature. The University of Missouri enlisted its IT department to

draft a white paper outlining podcasting's pedagogical potential, while Duke University

distributed iPods for podcasting to all first-year students in 2004 as part of its Duke

Digital Initiative.[59] Some scholars further venture into theorizing the additive power of

using personalized audio to teach the individual listener. A 2006 study highlights the

new modality of learning offered by podcasts, one brought about because it combines

"the benefits of the broadcast nature of radio with the flexibility, learner control and

personalisation afforded by recorded audio."[60] Elsewhere, everyone from diet pitchmen

to religious proselytizers have utilized this unique ability of the medium to aurally target

niche audiences, and podcasters' forays into myriad programming formats concurrently

begat an impulse to quantify their audience. A 2005 memo from the Pew Internet &

American Life Project noted that more than 6 million adults had downloaded a podcast,

and a subsequent study stretched that figure to 12% of Internet users.[61] Other data

suggest slower adoption rates but predict exponential growth. Bridge Research and

Ratings concluded that 4.8 million people had downloaded a podcast during 2005 (up

from 820,000 in 2004) and projected that those figures would rise to between 45 and 75 million users by 2010.[62] However, the implications of early demographic data of podcast listeners, like that of podcast producers, has proven somewhat unclear: of regular internet users to have downloaded a podcast, men figured more prominently than women, but there were no significant differences at the level of education and income.[63]

The difficulty in painting a clear picture of the typical podcast listener serves only to refocus critical analysis of the medium on a case-by-case basis. Demographic inscrutability, however, would not suffice as a number of podcasts began attracting audiences too large for advertisers to ignore. One method saw advertisers simply targeting high-traffic podcasts whose content closely aligned with their products. Among the first podcasts of note to gain sponsorship was the parental advice program *Mommycast* in 2005. Domestic products giant Dixie developed ads to lead in and out of each installment of the program, as well as four 20-25 minute programs "developed around content suggested by Dixie, such as how Dixie can help with quick meal preparation and clean up."[64] Alternative advertising methods picked up on existing sponsorship models in other media, such as underwriting (having a program "presented" by a commercial sponsor without an explicit advertisement) or simply producing ad-like content in-house and making it available for download. Projections for the growth of advertising on podcasts in all its forms tend to see big things for medium's future. Recent studies claim "spending on podcasting advertising will quintuple over the next five years, from a paltry $80 million base in 2006 to a $400 million market in 2011."[65] An analysis of the top 100 podcasts indexed by iTunes found that advertising was present in under a third of them, with the existing ads occurring infrequently (2.4 per podcast)

and briefly (16.3 seconds per podcast).[66] But, the study cautions against advertising

over-penetration or uneasy commingling with content: "consumers have such a range of

media choices that advertisers should be careful not to allow advertising to dominate the

content, thereby stifling podcasting's potential and turning off consumers during the vital

early stages of growth."[67] Clearly, advertising in podcasting has yet to strike the right

balance between profitability and co-existence with medium's uniquely delivered

content.

The story of commercial imperatives usurping individualized and progressive

media innovations is familiar from radio but misleading when applied directly to

podcasting. While broadcast radio has several regulatory mechanisms in place, no such

agency exists to oversee podcasting practices. Low-flying instructional podcasts from

amateurs exist on the same web-based sphere as those of media titans BBC or ESPN.

Even Adam Curry, the so-called "Podfather" who bemoaned the homogeneity of

broadcast media, is reaping profits from his menu of sponsored podcasts on the Mevio

network. What's more, the rudimentary materials of podcast production—a microphone

and a voice—preclude any instructive analysis of what might distinguish a commercial

podcast producer (or listener) from an amateur one—indeed, there is much overlap

between the two. Thus, any theoretical consideration of podcasting must see the two

media as intimately connected and as having overlapping, not conflicting, commercial

and aesthetic aims.

The most cogent attempt at detailing this relationship is Matthew Berry's 2006

article "Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio."[68] Berry

provides a nuanced snapshot of the past and present of podcasting, while pitting its future

against that of commercial radio. He characterizes podcasting as a "disruptive

technology" that is forcing the radio business to "reconsider some established practices

and preconceptions about audiences, consumption, production, and distribution."[69] He

echoes many of the same discursive elements used to characterize podcasting I have

summarized above, especially the focus on individualized production and consumption,

but with more emphasis on the latter. Berry particularly stresses the departure

podcasting offers from traditional "gate-kept" models of media, that it "offers a classic

horizontal media form in which producers and consumers are the same."[70] By granting

the consumer so much agency in podcasting's production/consumption patterns,

however, he implicitly positions the podcast consumer in opposition to the radio

consumer. Berry's vision of podcasting recalls that of Adam Curry, one in which

individual media producer/consumers undermine commercial broadcast models:

> Whilst large corporate broadcasters have found podcasting to be a new
> way to access listeners and in new ways, often with new experiences, it is
> at the grassroots level that podcasting offers the most significant challenge
> to the mainstream and exhibits the characteristics of a disruptive
> technology.[71]

Podcasting has already begun the inexorable march to commercial co-option. While this

does not necessarily disavow the potentially disruptive power of podcast

producer/consumers at the grassroots level, it does demand that the medium be

understood within a larger context where media, cultural, and commercial interests

converge.

Indeed, FunnyorDie.com provides one powerful example of sketch comedy content flexibly serving these interests for a financial shelf life somewhere between here-today-gone-tomorrow viral videos and years-long television syndication. To clarify, Berry's study is very much set within the same context. He acknowledges the podcast as an ideal example of converged content functioning within a transmedial context—part Internet radio, part broadcast radio, part weblog. But podcasting, Berry argues, is a particularly illustrative medium through which one can see consumers shaking up media institutions, a claim that the case of *The Onion Radio News* problematizes. Through its various manifestations as company calling-card, new media production, and satiric performance, *ORN* illustrates the difficulties faced by relatively bottom-up new media producers striving to break through established gate keeping mechanisms.

The Onion as New Media Enterprise

The Onion was founded in 1988 as a weekly satirical newspaper by University of Wisconsin-Madison undergraduates Tim Keck and Christopher Johnson, who later sold controlling interest of the paper to current editor-in-chief Scott Dikkers and advertising director Peter Haise. The two worked on a shoestring budget for much of the paper's early existence, content to amuse their peers in the Madison area and upper-midwest with tongue-in-cheek news items such as "Scissors Defeats Rock" and "Man With Heart Disease Eagerly Awaits Young Boy's Death." The paper's circulation expanded with the addition of the A.V. Club, which offered film and music reviews and a local entertainment calendar. A turning point came after the founding of its website,

theonion.com, in 1996 placed the young media franchise on the national map. Soon

thereafter, *The Onion* began reaping profits from anthologies of its news writing, the first

of which, *Our Dumb Century: 100 Years of Headlines from America's Finest News

Source*, won the 1999 Thurber Prize for American Humor. The paper moved its editorial

operations to New York in 2000, where national circulation reached 300,000 and revenue

climbed to $5 million.[72] Today *The Onion* empire includes merchandise, audio and video

web content, and a failed movie deal with Miramax. *The Onion* is not a publicly traded

company and tends to keep its finances confidential, but this excerpt from a 2002 profile

of the company offers an interesting snapshot of where the company was and where it

intended to go:

> [Peter] Haise, 35, won't divulge profit numbers, but he says that about 70
> percent of revenue comes from advertising sales, two-thirds of that from
> the print edition. Subscriptions provide another 10 percent, and the rest
> comes from the books, movie options (they also have a development deal
> with Miramax), merchandise and so forth. The Onion Radio News, 60-
> second fake reports that air daily on more than 80 stations nationwide,
> doesn't make much money but gets the name out there.[73]

The line of interest to this study, of course, is the last one. *The Onion Radio News* (*ORN*)

began in 1989 just after the establishment of the paper. Dikkers assembled several local

radio personalities (including P.S. Mueller, voice of *ORN* news anchor Doyle Redland),

and the group, The Onion's Radio Pirates, performed short sketch comedy bits for free on

Madison radio stations. Name recognition for *The Onion* grew through the 90s, and by

1997 the troupe was sending sketches out on speculation to syndicated drive-time

deejays. The bits were minute-long readings by Mueller of faux-news items based on

stories from the print edition, the titles of which, in true *Onion* fashion, succinctly

pointed to the punch-line without the need for much elaboration ("Former Presidents

Convene for Liver-Spot Summit" is one early example). Radio producers would

typically use the bits as segues between programming and commercials. In one

breakthrough use of *ORN*, Chicago shock-jock Mancow Mueller clipped the

identification tags that bookend each segment ("This is *The Onion Radio News*…"),

ostensibly passing it off as his own. A spat ensued between Mancow and *ORN*, and the

fallout raised the program's profile nationally. In 1999 *ORN* signed with radio syndicate

Westwood One to produce and distribute two of the segments a day for five days a week,

and a similar deal shortly thereafter with the American Comedy Network.

In 2005 *The Onion* struck a deal with iTunes to make daily *ORN* segments

available as podcasts, at which point *ORN* began developing content separately from the

print and web editions of *The Onion* in both sanitized versions for broadcast and explicit

ones for podcast download. At the same time, *theonion.com* featured *ORN* as part of its

ever-expanding web content. *The Onion*'s original ancillary product was finding a home

in a number of forms and places in the transmedial landscape. At first glance, *ORN*

might be seen as one stop in the intricate exercise of cross-platform storytelling—the

listener can follow his favorite bits from print to web to podcast, with each medium

explicating the bit further or highlighting some aspect the other medium did not. *ORN*,

however, does not create an explicitly defined narrative diegesis that would necessitate

such transmedial literacy. A more appropriate model for understanding *ORN* might be a

news outfit such as ESPN or NPR, which regularly makes their television and radio

commentary programs, as well as unique content, available for download as podcasts

both with and without advertising. Such podcasts function both as ways to extend their respective corporate brands and as ancillary revenue streams. Yet *ORN* does not manifest these characteristics in quite the same way, either. Because the program is produced mostly independently of the content generated by its parent, it "gets the name out there" on different terms than media corporations that simply reproduce their content as podcasts. In addition, because *The Onion* budgets the majority of its resources and manpower on its print and web editions, *ORN* was not used initially as a revenue stream from which advertisers would expect, in turn, to see significant downloads. Instead, *ORN* functioned early on as a low-risk, high-return commercial both for its parent media company and the advertisers drawn to this uniquely positioned corporate brand.

With a yearly operating budget of $40,000 (less personnel costs), *ORN* was not initially expected by *The Onion* to turn a significant monetary profit in order to be considered a profitable venture. Rather, Dikkers indicated that he very much saw it as a quick, predictable, and cheap way for *The Onion* to keep its name fresh on the eyes, ears, and lips of its listeners—essentially as a mini advertisement though which the consumer intensifies his bond with *The Onion* as a brand.[74] Seventy-eight per-cent of *ORN* listeners and unique visitors to *theonion.com* fall within the coveted 18-40 age demographic, and 70% of both groups make $50,000 or more in yearly income.[75] Clearly, *The Onion* as a brand attracts a potentially lucrative audience for advertisers on *ORN*. Moreover, data from the podcast research firm Podtrac suggest that "podcast advertising is three to seven times as effective as traditional media when it comes to impacting brand awareness."[76] The study does not specify for which "brand" podcast advertising creates awareness, but one might draw the conclusion that both podcast

producer and advertiser can see a mutually beneficial relationship in the medium. On

the one hand, *ORN* ostensibly provided *The Onion* with a low-cost commercial for itself

that could also be used as a unique venue for the exploration of sketch comedy aesthetics

(as I explore below). On the other hand, advertisers on *ORN* such as BMW reached

consumers explicitly with ads bookending each segment *and* reaped the added benefit of

having their brand associated with the firmly established and attractive *Onion* brand

name.

Why, then, did *ORN* fail to find sustainable profitability within *The Onion*'s

portfolio of products, and what implications does this have for sketch comedy producers

in the digital convergence era? My own observations of a production week in 2008 for

ORN supports the notion of podcasting as an independent media enterprise, but one

increasingly structured by commercial media infrastructures whose expectations of

financial sustainability do not necessarily align with the products themselves. Indeed, I

have described above how *ORN* as a podcast had a decade-long gestation period as

broadcast radio, and much of this infrastructure relied on radio's established practices of

production and distribution. But while the medium-specific qualities of podcasting (time-

shifting, automatic download, freedom in content) open potentially medium-specific

readings of podcast style and aesthetics, the case of *ORN* indicates that podcasting might

be better viewed within the same matrix of media movement of which other broadcast

media are already part. Podcasts like *ORN* may momentarily rupture these movements,

but they may also clear a new path in transmedial practices or redirect existing ones.

ORN's failure was in getting caught in between.

Sketch Comedy Production, Distribution, and Performance in *Onion Radio News*

As *ORN* moved into its podcast phase in 2005, its production staff kept many of its

practices intact while adjusting for the demands of the new medium. At *The Onion*'s

weekly editorial meeting, a cohort of writers develops headlines and content for the print

and web editions of the newspaper, as well as for the website's sketch video content.

After their ideas are locked in, senior writer and *ORN* producer Chris Karwowski works

with the staff further to either translate stories that did not make the cut into audio pieces

or develop new stories altogether for *ORN*. Karwowski and his staff then develop and

write scripts over the course of a couple of days. While the content of the minute-long

segments is primarily comprised of Doyle Redland, *ORN*'s fictional news anchor, reading

satirical news stories, they are sometimes supplemented by "man on the street"

interviews, sound effects, or other b-roll audio. Karwowski oversees the production of

this content from *The Onion*'s editorial offices in New York, often utilizing little more

than a digital recorder and reliably hammy office-mates. After this material has been

arranged and recorded, the week's scripts and supplementary audio are emailed to *ORN*'s

primary performer in Madison, WI, P.S. Mueller. In Madison, Mueller and *ORN* director

Steve Gotcher meet weekly to record the primary audio for segments to air the following

week. In contrast to Karwowski's seat-of-the-pants production style in New York,

Gotcher and Mueller work in a professional recording studio. Their easy-going, near-

lackadaisical rapport is tempered with improvisation and direction from Gotcher to

Mueller to hit this or that intonation in order to best drive home a given bit of aural

imagery. After acquiring a take they are mutually satisfied with for each segment, Gotcher mixes in the supplementary audio provided by Karwowski. Gotcher then prepares two mp3 packages, the first of which is not edited for explicit content and directly uploaded to *The Onion*'s internal FTP server where it will later be parsed out to *theonion.com* and to iTunes. The second mp3 package, featuring segments with explicit content censored or revised, is then sent along to the syndicating service American Comedy Network for broadcast on one of the 100 affiliates carrying *ORN*.

ORN works with its broadcast affiliates in much the same brand-promotion way that the podcasts do. The difference between the two comes in the function of advertising. Major market broadcast affiliates such as San Francisco and Denver sign contracts with the American Comedy Network to license *ORN* between one and three years in amounts ranging from $50 to $150 per month.[77] Much of this money sees its way back in to the hands of the American Comedy Network and not those of *The Onion*. By way of contrast, smaller, lower-rated markets such as Tomah, WI, that cannot afford these licensing deals grant advertising space to the American Comedy Network in exchange for the *ORN* service. The American Comedy Network uses small markets' brand familiarity with *ORN* as a way to introduce other programming from their stock of clients, in much the same way that a network television show might advertise for a new sitcom during the commercial breaks of one with an established and loyal viewership. In its iteration as a radio product, then, expectations are not that it delivers financial return, but that it serves as a promotional vehicle.

While one might expect *ORN*'s availability for free at *theonion.com* and on iTunes to detract from its attractiveness to broadcast radio programmers, the two are not

necessarily in conflict with one another. Account executive Steve Knoll of the American Comedy Network indicates that his client list grew after taking on the program, and anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some cases, *ORN*'s availability as a podcast has driven some listeners to seek out *ORN* on broadcast radio stations in their area.[78] In its relationship to its radio iteration, then, *The Onion* views *ORN* podcasts as complementary and evaluates their success in the aggregate, combining measurements of success accordingly. Since its 2005 inception on iTunes, Apple's online music browser, *ORN* has remained firmly entrenched in the top 20 most downloaded podcasts.

To be sure, this can be attributed at least in part to *ORN*'s daily regimen of output. As the podcast continued to grow in popularity on iTunes, though, Dikkers had his advertising team pitch a series of banner ads promoting *ORN* on iTunes. This in turn drove consumers to the comedy section of the iTunes browser, whose podcasts saw an immediate (though fluctuating) spike in download traffic.[79] At the same time, *theonion.com* provided advertising space on its site to iTunes for the browser to promote not only *ORN*, but also popular comedy podcasts from the likes of *Happy Tree Friends* and Comedy Central. iTunes, much like the syndicating service American Comedy Network, continued to take advantage of the cultural cachet attached to *The Onion* brand name. *The Onion*, meanwhile, used ostensibly the same product across multiple media platforms to firmly entrench itself as a unique and sought-after sketch comedy product that, in the end, drives readership and advertising revenue to the website and paper in different ways.

The quick and efficient production routines of *ORN* facilitate the podcast's various media outputs, a dynamic aided by sketch comedy aesthetics grounded in rapid

turnover and quick-hit humor. *ORN*'s primary performative bits are fake news leads

read by cartoonist and actor P.S. Mueller. Mueller was an original member of Scott

Dikkers' Onion Radio Pirates troupe, where his faux-newsman and voice of *ORN* Doyle

Redland began. The voice of Redland originated as walla from a television set playing in

the background of one early sketch. When Dikkers sought to formally produce material

for the troupe in 1997 in the form of *ORN*, he asked Mueller to resurrect the Redland

character and make him the primary voice of the segments.[80] From that point forward,

the basic formal and aesthetic principals of each *ORN* segment remained untouched. A

booming, news-ticker score swells as Redland reads the headline, followed by his and the

network's identification: "'$46,000 Vacuumed out of Oval Office Couch,' this is *Onion*

Radio News, I'm Doyle Redland reporting." Redland reads the body of the story, most of

which clocks in at under one minute, breaking off for b-roll audio and interviews per the

demands of the script. Finally, each segment is finished off by a four to five second

advertisement recorded by an *Onion* staff member in New York.

To understand how the textual and aural aspects, too, of *ORN* might be situated

within the context of transmedial production and distribution, we can look to the

aesthetics of satire set forth by *The Onion* and implicitly carried over into *ORN*. The

attacks of 9/11 first pushed *The Onion* into America's collective cultural consciousness

on a widespread basis, and the publication characteristically offered a wounded nation

satire as emotional salve. *The Onion*'s first edition after the attacks, with a headline

reading "Holy Fucking Shit: Attack On America," dug for humor on both sides of the

conflict by lampooning, on the one hand, Islamic extremism ("Hijackers Surprised To

Find Selves In Hell") and on the other hand, American jingoism-cum-patriotism ("Not

Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake"). The issue

received polarized criticism from the popular press and academy alike. O'Rourke and

Rodrigues, in analyzing the symbolic power of *The Onion*'s ironic stance, characterized

its treatment of 9/11 in binary terms, arguing that "satire and humor in *The Onion* reveals

that irony does not conceal reality, but can, in fact, reframe it as a source of healing."[81]

Rather than viewing *The Onion*'s satiric impulse as an "either/or" proposition—either

you find something funny, or you don't "get it"—we can more productively view news

satire through Baym's conception of discursive integration.[82] Instead of positioning

satire in terms of a binary, Baym's model offers multiple points of engagement with

satire by framing it as a network of meanings in dialogue with one another and thus

constantly subject to revision or reinterpretation.

Humor, then, is one instance of a nexus point on these networks of discourse.

One need not keep his or her understanding of the headline "Woman Bakes American-

Flag Cake" strictly within the confines of 9/11 discourse. Readers bring their own

experiences to this joke—maybe one knows such a woman, or a flag-cake has particular

resonance with him/her in ways unrelated to patriotism. Similarly, *The Onion* as

transmedial media producer invites several points of discursive engagement. The paper

has a history—its "Area Man" stories—of mocking bombastic national news items that

elevate commonplace and local acts of do-gooding to levels of heroism. The cake story

thus might be seen as merely another iteration of *The Onion*'s established aesthetic

practices. At the industrial level, *The Onion* has shared writing staff and personnel (like

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* executive producer Ben Karlin) with other like-

minded satiric outfits. These programs do not exist in isolation from one another, but as

part of the same discursive network, potentially arming the viewer/reader with added critical tools whenever s/he might engage with any given program. *The Onion* itself is fundamentally a discursively integrated media product as well because, as satire, it requires readers to seek out meaning and interpretation beyond the immediate level of the text. This does not mean that satire necessarily enters into an oppositional or disruptive relationship with its given target texts; instead, reader understandings of both the satiric text and its target of attack are additionally enriched through the added meaning they give one another.

For *ORN* this target of satire is first and foremost the high-minded news anchor, a dynamic immediately signaled by Mueller's vocal performance of the Redland character. Jason Loviglio has investigated the ways in which the vocal qualities of on-air personalities contribute to the "cultural work" being performed by a given media outlet.[83] Vocal performance, for Loviglio, provides a set of cultural signifiers historically constructed according to shifts in technology and performance traditions. Similarly, vocal performance in *ORN* contributes to the cultural work of *The Onion*—news satire— by immediately identifying the program's aim as satiric. Though Loviglio notes we lack the critical vocabulary to articulate exactly how vocal performance translates into cultural work, *ORN* sheds light on this dynamic because it comes built-in with a target text. That is, listeners understand why it sounds the way it does because of *The Onion*'s cultural position as producer of satiric media.

For his part, Mueller exaggerates the performance of Redland to make the satiric cultural work of *The Onion* that much more apparent. Already blessed with a deep, rich voice, Mueller drops it down another octave into a gravelly and bellowing baritone for

the voice of Redland. While Mueller does not shape his performance to any specific

satiric target, it is clear that his inflection of faux-gravitas is meant to contrast with the

ludicrous statements he reads. Thus a news item such as:

> President Bush implemented the creation of an American caste system
> today which will provide a rigidly stratified social system intended to
> greatly simplify the lives of citizens. Initially, the President will split the
> American people into two groups: those who kick ass, and those who do
> not.

provides two fronts for satire—the feeble-mindedness of President Bush, as well as that

of a blithely clueless news media that would take such a story seriously. Furthermore,

the *ORN* consciously coaxes the listener into making mental connections to satiric targets

by avoiding excessive aural cueing. Karwowski and his staff specifically focus on using

language that allows the listener to create his/her own picture of the story, rather than

relying on sound effects and scoring to hammer home a given punch-line. Thus, in a

story such as "Couple Upstairs Going At It Again," no sound effect of heavy breathing or

a squeaky bed-frame ever enters into Redland's monologue. Instead, he breezes through

descriptions of the couple's "insatiable animal appetites and tremendous capacity for

vigorous sex" in the same brusque monotone as he would an account of a tsunami death

toll.

These *ORN* bits of sketch comedy follow in the same tradition of language

manipulation as headlines such as "Area Homosexual Saves Four From Fire: Heroic

Neighbor Praised, Gay." The aural aesthetic of *ORN* provides another iteration of *The

Onion*'s larger satiric project, an aesthetic that builds upon its foundation of language

play by adding to it the dynamic aural calling card of satiric vocal performance. At the same time, though, *ORN*'s close relationship with the aesthetic and production routines of other areas of *The Onion* means there can be much overlap among print, video, and podcast content. *ORN* bits come from the same writing sessions as these products, with a small group of dedicated producers and performers seeing through the final products to podcast. Initial brainstorming sessions for the *Onion* content thus tend to prioritize areas of the brand that attract more page views, more easily integrated advertising opportunities, and more accessibility across screens and consumption devices. In many cases, *ORN* has thrived on this dynamic, developing unique aural humor out of bits that do not translate well to print or live-action video. In the same number of instances, though, *ORN* gets short shrift by occupying such a small niche in the broader *Onion* brand, subsisting on leftovers that did not make the cut for more profitable areas of distribution. Its potential for generating revenue is exponentially smaller than its print and video analogues, a quality exacerbated by production and distribution routines that frame *ORN* as little more than a promotional vehicle for more important *Onion* content.

With the inexorable decline in profitability of print media over the course of the digital convergence era and worldwide recession in the late 2000s, *The Onion* initiated a series of cost-saving measures that would drastically cut long-standing markers of distinction for the brand and re-focus resources on what it perceived to be growth areas. Over the course of 2009-2010, *The Onion* shuttered or sold off the majority of its local print operations, including its flagship newspaper in Madison, WI. Unable to sell advertising for the podcast through 2009, Mueller and company ceased production of *ORN* by the end of the year.[84] At around the same time, *The Onion* announced deals to

develop many of its popular web video segments into half-hour television series,

Onion News Network on IFC and *Onion SportsDome* for Comedy Central. Each

premiered to tepid reviews and underwhelming ratings in 2011, and both were canceled

by early 2012.

The reasons for any given media product's termination or financial failure are

complex and contingent upon a number of intersecting cultural and economic contexts,

but they are often publicized through the filter of familiar narratives. A television show

might be canceled for delivering viewership numbers below expectations, or a movie

might open poorly because its marketing campaign failed to target the right audience.

The same mentality applies even in the digital media context for *ORN*. With *The Onion*

needing to make cuts in the face of economic troubles, it re-focused advertising sales

efforts on areas with greater profit potential on the web and in video. Even with its low

production cost and use of distribution manpower, *ORN* could not earn its way to

sustainability, viewed by advertisers as too small to return a significant return on

investment and by *The Onion* as too low on its list of future priorities. Yet mapping

"old" media models of failure or success—ones nearly always tied to either the product's

immediate payoff or the possibility of its long-term revenue generation—onto *ORN* does

not entirely explain of how sketch comedy on the web circulates in meaningful ways for

producers, performers, and fans outside of a financial context.

Conclusion

In the broader view of sketch comedy online, *ORN* seems to have been a victim of poor timing, too. Over the course of the early 2010s, comedy podcasts grew in ways that were not necessarily tied to their long-term financial viability. On September 29, 2011, *The Hollywood Reporter* christened podcasts "comedy's second coming," noting, "Podcasts have been compared to television in the 1940s, and for good reason: The medium is entering uncharted territory but has the potential to rival terrestrial radio."[85] The next day, comedy podcast production and distribution company Earwolf Media announced that its flagship program, *Comedy Bang Bang*, surpassed ten million downloads, and by the summer of 2012 IFC would launch a variety program based on the podcast. Comedy podcasts grew so quickly, attracting comedy talent from across such a broad spectrum of experience that commentators wondered if the medium's meteoric growth was leading to overload and overwhelming listeners with too much content.[86]

The case of *ORN* indicates that the same qualities that make sketch comedy attractive as a mode of innovation and differentiation online—cost-efficiency, quick turnaround, and quick-hit humor—also make it expendable as a durable media product upon which to expand into more profitable areas. But the glut of comedy podcasts currently proliferating online also speak to how the format serves as a labor of love for many comedians. Few return any significant revenue back to the podcast performers. Even comedy podcasts with robust downloads—like *Comedy Bang Bang*—regularly implore listeners for donations or to visit sponsors who re-route small portions of purchases back to podcast producers. Lack of profitability in comedy podcasts can thus be seen as a badge of honor, as articulating an authenticity that the artists create podcasts out of love for the craft of comedy rather than the pursuit of profit.

Of course, comedy podcast producers, as well as those working in sketch comedy videos on sites like FunnyorDie.com, are just as interested in proving their mettle among their peers as they are in using web sketch comedy as a sort of ongoing audition process. Maintaining an online presence allows performers to circumvent traditionally gate-kept processes of selection for more lucrative opportunities in film and television. It also gives them the sheen of coolness and edge, signifying that they are in touch with emerging production and distribution models likely to be embraced by desirable young consumers. Ultimately, then, the role of sketch comedy online is multivalent, and willful constructions of it by industrial forces seeking to guide the format toward old channels of profitability overlook this multiplicity of meanings. At the same time, however, these old channels of profitability in film and television implicitly remain the desired end goal of sketch comedy producers and performers. As sketch comedy continues to evolve online, the tension between these two forces—creative and financial freedom online versus the appeal of bigger payoffs offline—will continue to be the primary influence in determining what performers are seen where and by what audiences.

Notes to Chapter Four

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[15] Ibid., 17.

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[32] Registered users can vote a video "funny" or "die," which determines its ranking and prominence on the site. The most popular videos are specially archived, while the least popular (those receiving many "die" votes) are banished to "the crypt."

[33] See, for example, Lindsay Lohan's self-parodic e-dating profile (http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/0d646e2edb/lindsay-lohan-s-eharmony-profile) or the FOD-produced "Prop 8—The Musical" (http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/c0cf508ff8/prop-8-the-musical-starring-jack-black-john-c-reilly-and-many-more-from-fod-team-jack-black-craig-robinson-john-c-reilly-and-rashida-jones).

[34] Lidz 2008.

[35] Curtin, "Matrix Media," 4.

[36] Unlike the YouTube partner program that splits ad revenue between the site and content creators, Funnyordie.com does not yet feature advertising in or during content, focusing instead on banner ads across the portal itself.

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[38] Brian Stelter, "YouTube Videos Pull in Real Money," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/11/business/media/11youtube.html (accessed December 14, 2008).

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[46] Sergio Ibarra, "Mining Comedy From the Internet," *TVWeek*, June 15, 2008, http://www.tvweek.com/news/2008/06/mining_comedy_from_the_interne.php (accessed June 18, 2008).

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(accessed 19 February 2011). Showtime commissioned short films for its website from a handful of filmmakers who'd already built followings online, hoping not only to benefit from their artistic reputation, but also their social networking and marketing abilities. The premium outlet hoped "to reach an audience for which television is not the primary viewing option."

[48] Internet marketing research firm comScore estimated in June 2009 that YouTube attracted 60% of the U.S. audience watching video online (Fritz and Chmielewski 2009).

[49] See Miguel Helft, "TNT and CNN Clips to Appear on YouTube," *The New York Times*, 19 August 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/20/technology/20youtube.html?partner=rss&emc=rss (accessed 22 August 2009). YouTube's pact with HBO to host short segments of professionally-produced content drew bemused reactions from many in the industry, given the increasing audience share of online video viewers by Hulu.com's full episode services.

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[51] Jean Burgess, and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 37.

[52] Geoffrey Baym, "*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," *Political Communication*, 22:259-276.

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CONCLUSION

"The Comedy Zeitgeist"

In April 2012, Vulture, the online pop culture section of *New York Magazine*, published a "Map of the Comedy Zeitgeist."[1] The map is a diagram that draws connections among the most prominent players in Hollywood film and television comedy of the last several years. Aside from playing to my interest in schematic visualizations of popular culture, the map is notable for this dissertation on a couple of fronts. Two of the major nodes— Will Ferrell and *Saturday Night Live*—form the basis for two of the case studies in this project. From them emanate myriad secondary performers and texts like Tina Fey, Judd Apatow, and *The Daily Show*. The many connections cover not only comedy writ large, but also domains like politics, celebrity, and above-the-line influences from producers and other industry powers. That the map is labeled as capturing a "zeitgeist" is significant, too. Part of what drove me to establish mediated sketch comedy as the basis of this project was the general sense that comedy has recently been and will continue to be of growing importance as media industrial forces, performers, and consumers continue to experiment with what content works and what does not according to their respective needs.

Most notable, though, is the disconnect between the label of the map as a "zeitgeist" and the labyrinthine jumble of people, texts, and production outfits it contains. There is little in the diagram to suggest that comedy in the contemporary moment speaks to or cohesively serves any one cultural function or another, but this might be precisely

the point. The map suggests that the defining spirit of American comedy, currently,

is not coherent, but diffuse. Even with its focus on only film and television comedy, the

map highlights the extent to which comedy in the mainstream is highly heterogeneous

and without any clearly defined structure.

A map of the comedy zeitgeist that included the many iterations of recent sketch

comedy might look even more disarrayed. Web videos, podcasts, and live performances

inform the comedic sensibilities of many of the major players in the diagram just as much

as film and television do. Yet the exclusion of much of this content is instructive as well.

At a very basic level, little of it has broken through to the mass viewership levels

common to popular film and television comedy, making it difficult to characterize it as

being part of a broadly conceived zeitgeist. But on another level, the exclusion of sketch

comedy indicates that industrial and cultural voices situated within the mainstream—

diverse as they may seem—are still troubled by how best to organize and incorporate the

format.

As I have explored throughout this dissertation, the varied manifestations of

recent sketch comedy media mirror the fragmented production, distribution, and

consumption practices of media industrial infrastructures in the multi-channel and digital

convergence eras. This has led to sketch comedy across an array of mainstream media

platforms in the form of television sketch comedy, comedian comedy films, and websites

operated by major media conglomerates. But while media industries have increasingly

sought to incorporate sketch comedy into their menu of offerings, producers and

performers of the format have used it to articulate their own identities and performative

personae distinct from efforts tied to the pursuit of profit.

In chapter one, I examined sketch comedy before the multi-channel and digital convergence eras, noting how oligopolistic control of the television industry constrained and channeled sketch comedy impulses into a limited selection of textual articulations. I cited vaudeo television programs as being particularly exemplary of the tensions that arose in attempts to align the sketch performance traditions of vaudevillian comedians with an industrial and cultural climate that increasingly valued long-form comedic tendencies. Certainly, my sketch of the era does not tell the whole story of how and why sketch comedy came to be marginalized, as the format thrived elsewhere in variety programming into the multi-channel era. But while a closer study of the variety genre from the 1940s to the 1970s might reveal a better fit between sketch comedy and the contemporaneous push for mass-audience-courting programs, I sought in this chapter to describe the ways in which sketch comedy could and did undermine industrial conventions of the era. More importantly, the demise of vaudeo also provided the basis for innovation and differentiation for sketch comedians that would follow in programs like *Saturday Night Live*.

In chapter two, I explored more fully how sketch comedians in the multi-channel era not only distinguished themselves from previous comedy traditions, but also laid bare the contradictions in doing so. Without a clearly defined economic function for sketch comedy in the era, programs like *The State* attempted to forge their own path to long-term viability with comedic sensibilities that alternately aligned with and defied network efforts to contain them profitably. Sketch comedy on *The State* comprised part of a broader contemporaneous dialogue with popular culture products positioned as "Generation X," an identity built just as much on articulations of defiance as it was on

commercial interests that sought to capitalize on that defiance. The 1990s were

something of a golden age for sketch comedy on television, with programs like *The Ben*

Stiller Show, *Mr. Show*, and the Canadian sketch comedy *Kids in the Hall* embodying

much of the same ambivalence I identified in *The State*. To be sure, a more

comprehensive examination of sketch comedy in this era needs to be done in order to

fully grasp the extent to which a true articulation of a Generation X cultural identity

might be seen in them. But what I sought in isolating *The State* as a case study was to

demonstrate how sketch comedy at the time could express the same uncertainty seen in

press and trade discourses about the then- and future shape of targeted television

programming. The case of *The State* made clear that the industry continued to prize

many of the same viewers it always had, but in smaller segments and with appeals

appropriated from oppositionally-oriented identity groups.

　　The State also highlighted the tensions involved in emerging practices of

transmedial content movement. In manifesting its sketch sensibilities specifically in

characters and sketches that could not live on beyond television, *The State* provided a

contrast to the type of sketch comedy that media firms would see as more valuable and

able to be moved among platforms. Yet even these transmedial movements are not

seamless, as they point to continued instability in aesthetic and economic functions of

sketch comedy in the digital convergence era. In chapter three, I considered the apparent

incompatibilities between sketch comedy performance modes and feature-length film

comedies, while in chapter four I examined the over-compatibility of sketch comedy in

the world of original content online. In the former, critical and popular press discourses

have framed sketch comedy as problematic and disruptive to long-established

assumptions about how humor interacts with more contained notions of narrative. In the latter, such disruption is prized and sought after by media institutions looking for new ways to expand their offerings and differentiate them from competitors. In both cases, I argued for the need to view sketch comedy in the digital convergence era as fundamentally interconnected with other media texts and performance traditions, not as necessarily distinct from them. Doing so sheds additional light on how industries, performers, and consumers interact through sketch comedy in ways that defy established industrial practices at the same time that they become constitutive parts of them.

A key analytic site that might help further illuminate these relationships is the theatrical training of comedic performers. Little scholarly work exists on how and why screen actors make the onscreen choices that they do, particularly in comedic contexts where performative emphasis might shift drastically from joke to another. Scholars are often left to intuit how a particular performance came to be based on its end result in a television program or movie. Yet tracing the various decision-making processes of comedians can further point to complexities and contradictions within media creation. Many of the actors discussed in this dissertation, for instance, came through comedy training grounds like Chicago's Second City or New York and Los Angeles's Upright Citizens Brigade. There, too, performers negotiate the competing impulses of short- and long-form comedy, experimenting with what works in a given performance space or what might translate to media. In developing this project further, I plan to carry out additional research on comedic performance as it has been shaped by theatrical and live contexts.

I began this project with a note about the highly personal role that comedy has played in my life and the suspicion that it serves a similar function for many others. My

analyses of comedians and the institutional contexts in which they work bear this suspicion out, even if only implicitly, again and again. More than any other genre or performative mode, comedy seems to take on extra special importance to those involved in its creation and consumption. It can articulate a specific kind of worldview or assert a sense of self-identity where other cultural discourses fall short. Indeed, part of what attracts many producers and performers to sketch comedy is the sense that commonplace long-form modes are inadequate to capture their voice. As those voices multiply, and as they do so through sketch comedy, continued consideration of the myriad forces bearing on their creation is required.

Notes to Conclusion

[1] Jen Cotton, Andrei Kallaur, Margaret Lyons, and Josh Wolk, "See Vulture's Map of the Comedy Zeitgeist." http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/comedy-zeitgeist-map-apatow-stiller.html (accessed April 30, 2012). See also Appendix A.

APPENDIX A: "Map to the Comedy Zeitgeist"
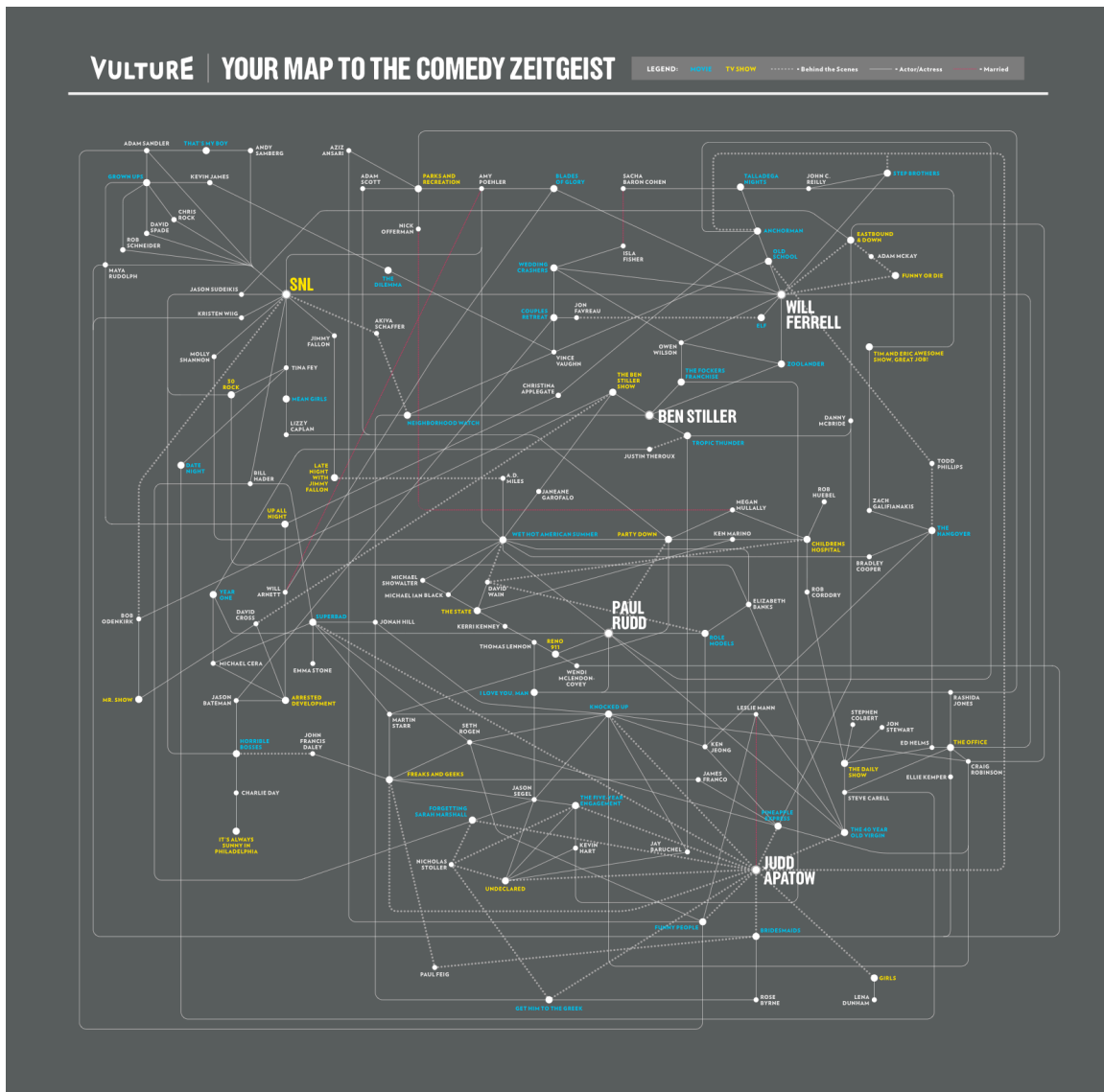
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