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“AN ARMY OF COMEDY”

Political jokes and tropic ambiguity in the Trump era

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Introduction

On the eve of the American presidential inauguration on January 19, 2017, the film-maker Michael Moore arranged a rally against the President-elect at the foot of Trump International Hotel and Tower near Central Park in the heart of Midtown Manhattan, New York. Standing on a raised platform, Moore spoke to the thousands of New Yorkers, who had braved the ruthless cold to manifest their anger and frustration with a political reality that was feared by many and foreseen by few. Pointing a stiff index finger at the imposing Trump Tower, whose upper floors were now completely enveloped in darkness, the chronically indignant Moore revealed his surprising strategy for overturning the President-elect:

Some reporter was just asking me: ‘well, what’s the point of all this because no matter how much bad news he creates or that there is about him, it doesn’t seem to affect him’. I said ‘right, yeah, he is not affected by the bad news when he talks about sexually assaulting women, he is not affected by the bad news that comes out of him calling Mexicans rapists and murderers. That’s right. He is not affected by that. What’s he affected by? He is affected by comedy!’ He has the thinnest skin of any bully I’ve ever met. I remember the night after the election on the 9th of November? A bunch of us just randomly got into the street and marched to Trump Tower. And he is up there in his tower, in his penthouse tweeting: ‘demonstrators outside my, my home. Unfair, unfair ... uuuu. Why are they protesting? Wrong! Wrong!’ I am telling you, my friends: This is how he’ll implode. If you make fun of him, if you ridicule him or if you just show that he is not popular... It’s his Achilles’ Heel. And we don’t need to just depend on the comedians to do this for us. Everybody here has a sense of humor. Use it! Use it! Participate in the ridicule

and the satire of the emperor who has no clothes. Do this for me! Let's form an *army of comedy*! And we will bring him down!

In this chapter, I explore political comedy in the contemporary 'post-liberal' world. Focusing in particular on jokes about Donald Trump performed by stand-up comedians in comedy clubs in New York and by late night talk show hosts during their opening monologues, I want to examine the 'operational structures' (Turner 1991) of political comedy in an era of deep-seated ideological dissent that has wide-ranging and potentially immensely damaging repercussions. As I will argue, political comedy operates on the basis of a fundamental 'tropic ambiguity' by which the joke becomes a catalyst for exploring broader social and political issues. Similar to other joke forms and comedic anecdotes, in political comedy a social phenomenon or character is set up as reflecting features or qualities that are usually introduced in a hyper-exaggerated form. While this set-up is what leads the story in one direction, the punchline creates a payoff to the joke or anecdote by going in a completely new direction, which collapses the joke's initial framing as well as its implicit target assumption. What distinguishes political comedy, however, is a particular kind of tropic ambiguity: the paradoxical juxtaposition that is established between set-up and punchline is ambiguous and the meaning of the joke or comedic anecdote is therefore inherently unclear, which gives to the audience the responsibility of making the final interpretation about what the implications of the political joke might be. It is this tropic ambiguity, I will argue, that gives to the political joke its acute critical potency.

It seems to me, however, that jokes and comedic anecdotes about Donald Trump are becoming increasingly unequivocal in their framing of the comedic object. Not only is the meaning of the joke immediately decipherable; the juxtapositions and metaphoric comparisons through which the comedic effect is achieved progressively operate by way of clear-cut analogies, such as when Trump is compared to Darth Vader. Through the comparison, the President-elect is figured as unambiguously vile because Darth Vader is the epitome of evil. By so doing, it could be argued, political jokes essentially shed themselves of interpretation.

Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's work on myths (1974; 1995), I will therefore argue that the internal structure of political jokes may lose its critical potency when it starts to pivot around the comedic object (e.g. Donald Trump). Analogue to Amerindian myths, which, according to Lévi-Strauss, exhaust their transformative force when turning into legends, political jokes lose their critical potency when they turn into mockery. Still, as I will show in the final section of the chapter, by shedding themselves of interpretation, political jokes do not *ipso facto* lose their differential and therefore transformative potentials. Instead, they reach out to their 'outside' in a way that is no longer based on metonymic identification (Trump: Darth Vader) but on metaphorical distantiating.

The appropriate incongruity of stand-up routines

According to Joe DeVito, New York-based stand-up comedian and comedy teacher, stand-up comedy can be defined as a performance medium that is designed to elicit laughter from an audience. Typically, this is done in the form of a spoken performance by one individual in front of an audience in a specialized space with a clear demarcation between performer and audience (Bodie 2014). The comedian may have spent months working on his or her jokes at ‘open mic’ venues before presenting them to a paying audience in a formal comedy club but the routine is delivered causally so as to imitate an informal conversation between peers who have overlapping or similar worldviews. In order to achieve this intimate relationship with the audience, the comedian will often present his or her jokes as if based on autobiographical or observed material. In so doing, the audience is introduced to a comedic persona that is constructed as a composite hyper-exaggerated version of some of the comedian’s most pronounced character traits.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to establish a comprehensive analysis of how and why jokes work, it might be argued that jokes in many if not most stand-up routines are based on what Oring defines as ‘appropriate incongruity’ (Oring 1992; 2016), that is, a juxtaposition of elements from domains that are generally regarded as incongruous. In order for a joke to work, then, it needs to establish a conflation of incongruous words, behaviours, visual forms, or ideas that nevertheless seem appropriately related when presented to an audience by the comedian. And it is traditionally by way of the punchline that an incongruous relationship to the assumptions introduced with the set-up is created (Morreall 2009).

Significantly, while stand-up comedians do more than simply tell jokes, their main objective is to make people laugh. Unlike other narrative performance formats, such as monologues, dramatic plays and comedies, which do not require continuous laughs from the audience in order to work, stand-up routines are therefore structured almost exclusively around the punchline, which is what gives to the joke or comedic anecdote the humoristic and often surprising twist. However, as Carroll tells us (2001: 323), a punch line is ‘not simply a matter of neatly answering the question posed by a riddle nor of drawing all the story lines of a narrative to a summation. Rather, the punch line concludes the joke with an unexpected puzzle whose solution is left to the listener to resolve’. The punch line should therefore ideally come as a surprise to the listener to whom it befalls to interpret the joke by filling in the vacuous conceptual space between set-up and punch line that is created by the puzzling incongruity.

Traditional one-liner jokes generate interpretations that are relatively determinate. When the American comedian and actress Rita Rudner in the mid-1980s claimed that ‘single men don’t live like people; they live like bears with furniture’, you pretty much knew what the juxtaposition of men and bears was supposed to indicate. Today, however, stand-up comedians increasingly focus on telling stories and jokes with a much wider interpretational range. Shortly after it was announced

that the notorious cult leader Charles Manson had died, the comedian Norm MacDonald tweeted: 'My prayers go out to Charles Manson and his family in this time of pain'. A perfectly reasonable statement when pertaining to the death of a loved one. But when the statement refers to one of the most appalling and morally depraved criminals of the last century, the interpretation of the tweet becomes slightly more ambiguous.

Tropic ambiguity

From early January to late June 2017 I did ethnographic fieldwork in New York City about stand-up comedy and the crafting of jokes and comedic anecdotes. I was particularly interested in the paradoxical juxtapositions and metaphorical analogies by which jokes and comedic anecdotes work. In fact, my working hypothesis was – and is – to consider stand-up routines as a contemporary and very potent form of popular myth-making. From the outset, political comedy was not on my radar as an area to be given particular attention. I was more interested in what is known as 'confessional comedy', that is, comedians' self-deprecating and often brutally honest jokes about their own emotional and social shortcomings. But since the comedians were explicitly reacting to the changed political climate in the US brought about by the presidency of Donald Trump through their jokes, I obviously had to recalibrate my analytical gaze accordingly. Taking the date for the American presidential election on November 8, 2016 as my starting point, I have tracked political jokes about Donald Trump made by stand-up comedians on social media (predominantly Twitter and Facebook), online news sites and in the comedians' stand-up routines as well as registered and analysed monologues by late night talk show hosts. Written by a staff of writers, many of whom are performing stand-up comedians themselves, talk show monologues have become a hugely popular platform for articulating scathing criticism of current national political leadership.

One of the first jokes about Donald Trump that I registered was made by Adrienne Iapalucci, a New York-based comedienne known for her cynicism and very dark comedy. On December 31, 2016, she posted a somewhat despondent tweet: 'People keep saying that Trumps presidency will be the end of the world. Promise?' Iapalucci's apocalyptic premonition of the presidency notwithstanding, it seems to me that the joke is not really about Donald Trump. The set-up to the joke is clearly a commentary to the expected catastrophic consequences of Trump's presidency. But the question ('promise?') opens towards an entirely different conceptual and emotional terrain, which can best be described as a kind of 'introspective anthropology'. Those who have seen Adrienne Iapalucci perform will know that her comedy is structured as a series of self-deprecating and cynical analyses of contemporary social life. Jokes such as 'One time on the train I saw a suspicious package but didn't say anything because I hoped it was a bomb' or this recent tweet: 'I consider taking up smoking so I have something to do while I hide in this staircase'. Not unlike the reaction to Norm MacDonald's tweet about the death of Charles Manson, it is not entirely clear how to appropriately interpret

Iapalucci's troubling statements. And that interpretational ambiguity is undoubtedly part of her comedy.

During the first couple of months following the election on November 8, 2016 and especially in the immediate aftermath to the presidential inauguration ceremony on January 19, 2017, Trump jokes were characterized by a similar kind of conceptual openness and interpretational ambiguity where a deep concern about the current political climate served as catalyst for engaging with broader social and moral issues or, as in Iapalucci's case, as empirical basis for an ongoing introspective dialogue. By contracting the political climate into widely known catchphrases, such as 'Trump's America', comedians reflected on the social and racial underpinnings of a dysfunctional political system. On January 20, Dwight Travis, an Afro-American stand-up comedian and former writer for the Daily Show, performed at The Stand Comedy Club in New York. After a few initial jokes about the inauguration ceremony, he launched into an extended critical rant about white supremacy in the US.

What happened, white people? This one is on you. Statistically one of you motherfuckers did vote for him ... In the end, it was white supremacy. Not the KKK. Those are the comic book nerds of racism running around in janky-ass Jedi robes. They can't make a light saber so they light a stick on fire. I'm talking about white supremacy that this country was founded on because this country was built by white people in England who felt persecuted by other white people in England. You know how white that is? White people were saying: 'Hey, white people! These white people are telling us how to be white people. Fuck that! Let's go somewhere where white people can really be white people'. Historians will try to say that it's religious persecution. No! It was about white people trying to out other white people. And congrats! White supremacy is not racism. Racism takes work. White supremacy is lazy as shit. White supremacy is childish. It's like if you were a little kid and your parents told you that you're about to have a little sister and you freak out in the living room: 'I'm going to have to share my room and my toys? Let's build a wall around mom's pussy and get the pussy to pay for it'.

A few days later on the same stage, Martin O'Donnell, another stand-up comedian and actor, expanded on the reasons for Trump's electoral success.

People voted for Trump the same way that men cheat on their marriage: Because it felt dangerous and exciting and they gave no thought to what comes after. None of you fuckers who voted for Trump were thinking about 2018 or 2019. You were thinking about November 8th: 'I'm gonna fuckin' send a message! I'm gonna burn it all down'. It's that same blind passion like 'I'm gonna fuck the waitress at Buffalo Wild Wings. That'll make me feel alive again'. And then a year later: 'What the fuck did I do? I ruined everything!'

While Travis and O'Donnell did use the presidential election and Trump's erratic political agenda as a set up for their jokes and comedic anecdotes, the objective was clearly to address racial injustices and social divides in the American society. Hence, for Travis and O'Donnell and many other comedians, Trump's surprising victory was but a first step towards addressing social and political issues, which the presidential election could offer new perspectives on.

Comedic contractions

During the weeks following the inauguration, the political climate in the US grew increasingly intense as the president stumbled ahead from one disastrous and poorly thought out decision to the next accompanied by a legion of advisors whose competencies for counselling the world's most powerful man was disputable at best. Not unlike the situation that most commentators and political analysts increasingly found themselves in, comedians in New York and elsewhere struggled to figure out how to compute and address the political chaos that was rapidly seeping into ordinary everyday experiences. On January 27, Trump signed an executive order halting all refugee admissions and temporarily barring citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. The response from the comedic community was immediate. During his 15 minute set on January 27, Peter Matthews told a supportive audience that 'Trump going full Hitler in the first week is surprising because I'm always surprised when anyone works'. In his opening monologue on January 30, the popular talk show host Jimmy Kimmel commented on the many protests that were already happening at national airports:

There were demonstrations in just about every major city yesterday. People went to the airport to protest. That's when you know people are mad: It's Sunday, they have no travel plans and they go to the airport

Again we see in both examples a certain kind of interpretational and conceptual openness where the political situation in general and Donald Trump in particular are used as relay stations for making jokes about something else: Matthews's expectations of general idleness and Kimmel's surprise at people wanting to stay at the dysfunctional airports without travel plans. But as the political chaos and the injustices committed by the incumbent president only seemed to increase, the nature of the comedic analyses, as it were, changed accordingly. On March 15, a heavy storm paralysed all flight activities at JFK Airport in New York. During his opening monologue on the same night, talkshow host Seth Meyers told his audience that 'thousands of flights were cancelled today due to a powerful winter storm. Either that or Trump's new travel ban is for all of us'. Here Meyers reverses the directionality of Kimmel's joke from January 30: instead of using Trump as catalyst for commenting on the untenable situation at many national airports, the latter becomes a set-up for making a joke about Trump's inhumane travel ban.

Seth Meyer's joke is, I suggest, an apt example of a general transformation of the dynamics of stand-up routines and talkshow monologues that occurred during the first months of Trump's presidency. While Trump jokes initially served as relay stations for making open-ended reflections about broader social and political issues, they gradually came to pivot around the president and a motley cast of supporting characters, such as his wife Melania, his two sons Eric and Donald Jr., the former White House strategist Steve Bannon, the equally former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer and, of course, Trump's unfortunate political arch-enemy Hillary Clinton. Crucially, as the jokes came to focus almost exclusively on the president's peculiar personality, the roles that were made available for the supporting cast to play out were gradually being reduced into one-dimensional exaggerations of particular stereotypical features: Melania as the Eastern European migrant worker, who really didn't want to stay with her husband, Eric Trump as the White House hunchback lurking in the dark corridors, Steve Bannon as the political gremlin, Sean Spicer as Trump's increasingly desperate lapdog and Hillary Clinton as an eremite hiding in the woods from where she plans her imminent escape.

Through the ongoing production of political jokes about Trump's presidency, the chaotic political landscape was gradually being contracted into a relatively stable comedic universe that was peopled by a number of one-dimensional characters who acted out their roles in predictable ways. As the jokes thus began to fold in on themselves, the 'play of tropes' (Turner 1991) was equally reduced. While comedic effects continued to be achieved through appropriate incongruities, the tropic connections that were established between different semantic domains were simply less ambiguous and the interpretational range therefore smaller or, in many instances, almost absent. During late February and early March, Trump made several public announcements, tweets and press conferences where his peculiar behaviour made comedians wonder about his mental health. March 4, Patton Oswalt tweeted 'We're three days away from Donald claiming he can control the weather. This is 'admitted to bellvue' level crazy'. And on 16 March, Barry Crimmins, comedian and respected political activist, expanded on Oswalt's diagnosis: 'The plain fact is we have a criminally insane president. And that's the 'real' in @realDonaldTrump.'

While traditionally a platform for non-political one-liner comedy intended for the widest possible audience, talk show hosts began to use their opening monologues to explicitly critique the incumbent president. On March 13, Seth Meyers claimed that 'one thing that has become clear is that lying is such a central feature of the Trump administration that many in DC just take it for granted' and two days later, when commenting on the president's extended stays at the Mar-a-Lago, a Palm Beach Resort owned by Trump, Meyers claimed that the president 'has spent 15% of his time since his inauguration at a property that he owns and which is named by him: the Fat Old Racist Spa and Resort'.

How jokes die

In 'How Myths Die' (Lévi-Strauss 1974), an obscure article written in 1974, Lévi-Strauss suggests that myths reach a point of exhaustion when they cease to engender transformations. Myths die, we are told, when their internal system of variations is no longer capable of producing differences in other structures. Beyond this threshold, myths turn into legends, which are historical and political narratives rather than cosmological ones (ibid.: 278; see also Schrempp 2014).

The question is, then, whether we might make a similar argument regarding political jokes about the incumbent American president. For does it not appear as if political jokes reach a similar kind of threshold when they cease to operate as relay stations for comedic arguments about social and political issues that lie 'outside' the jokes themselves? To be sure, when Trump jokes began to pivot around the president himself, the interpretational range was drastically reduced if not entirely eliminated. While the structure of the joke continued to be built around an appropriate incongruity, it no longer had the element of surprise that might open the comedic universe to a broader political domain. Rather than using Trump as an apt vehicle for extended reflections about racial injustices and social divides in the American society as we heard Travis and O'Donnell do shortly after the inauguration ceremony, jokes and comedic anecdotes increasingly turned towards overt ridicule of the president, e.g. by making fun of his peculiar physical looks and questionable moral ethics: His haircut looked like endangered marchland, his head looked like an orange bowl of gas, his ass looked like it was stuffed with ham, Steve Bannon acted like a gremlin, Eric Trump was the White House hunch-bag and Melania was mistaken for Caitlyn Jenner.

It might be argued, then, that whereas myth die when they turn into legends, political jokes die when they turn into mockery. In both instances, differences cease to proliferate and the narrative structure folds in on itself. Similar to the legend that is no longer capable of generating transformations in other systems of signification, the political joke ends up confirming its own premise by establishing appropriate ambiguities that leave little or nothing for the audience to interpret. What presents itself as a figurative incongruity based on metaphorical distantiation is, in fact, a relationship of literal identity based on metonymical integration (cf. Turner 1991). Indeed, both Darth Vader and Trump participate in, or form part of, the substantial continuum of despotic evil.

Still, I am not convinced that this analysis is fully satisfactory. For is mockery really the end-point at which political jokes cease to have a dynamic relationship with their 'outside'? While I do believe that political jokes reach a certain threshold when they begin to pivot around their main comedic object, I am less certain whether that necessarily implies that their differential capacity is definitively exhausted. Could it not be, for instance, that it is not the capacity for generating transformations that is affected when political jokes turn into mockery but, rather, it is the quality – or nature even – *of the transformation itself* that changes? If so, we have to turn Lévi-Strauss's insight on its head and consider what kind of transformation a dead political joke might constitute.

The shedding of interpretation

So far we have considered the narrowing in of the political joke's interpretational range as a reduction of its transformative capacity. But this is only the case if the joke is analysed as if somehow operating on the same level as its elements. We have established that a joke folds in on itself when the elements that supposedly constitute its internal incongruity form part of the same tropic continuum, such as, say, 'immoral maliciousness'. This tropic change, however, occurs at the level of the internal incongruity and not at the level of the joke whose differential principles may have an impact on broader social or moral domains. Hence, while it could be argued that the resolution of contradictory elements within the joke does suspend the play of differences at the level of the internal incongruity, that is not the same as arguing that the differential capacity of the joke is altogether eliminated. In fact, I will argue that as we ascend from the level of the internal incongruity to the level of the political joke, the latter acquires a singular differential status by itself. Put somewhat differently, we could say that the resolved joke sheds itself of its interpretation and realigns with its outside as a monadic singularity. No longer held in place by a fixed interpretational range, it can be actualized as a series of continuous variations that emerge and disappear without unfolding a determinate identity (cf. Deleuze 2004). Let me give an example:

In late March, I made an interview with Neil Abrams, a New York-based comedian. I had asked Neil about the impact that Trump has on the writing of jokes among stand-up comedians in general and he responded by reflecting on his own writing process.

After the inauguration I was talking about Trump all fucking day. I would walk around thinking like: 'I can't fuckin believe it'. But when I sat down to write (Trump jokes), I couldn't do it. I just wanted to write the story that I was developing for a tv show ... Maybe because it was distracting me from what was going on; maybe it's because the story (I wanted to write) is about a thing that happened to me as a young man that ... I'm not going to go as far as to say that I saved a girl from being date-raped, but I am going as far as to say that I definitely prevented someone from taking advantage from her. That's what the story is about. And maybe I wanted to write it because it matched up with Trump hating women. Maybe that's why subconsciously my brain went there...

There is clearly no immediate connection or appropriate incongruity between the comedic anecdote that Neil is working on for the TV show and the Trump jokes that he was initially planning on writing. Neil's decision to work on the story about his involvement in the prevention of a sexual assault is not a direct outcome of *not* writing Trump jokes. But it seems to me that the anecdote and the Trump jokes interact through a form of tropic play that figures the former as the appropriate story to work on for the TV show. Comedian Justin Herman recently

suggested to me that the relationship might be described as a form of 'politics adjacency'. The two discrete elements are adjacent rather than connected and that is what creates the effect. They both reverberate with dissimilar intensities that only make comedic sense by *not* being connected in the form of an appropriate incongruity.

Conclusion

It was Michael Moore's social indignation that I remember most vividly from the rally at the foot of the Trump Tower on the night of the presidential election. As he was speaking to the thousands of New Yorkers who had defied the blistering cold to manifest their frustration and anger with the new president, Moore really did seem to believe that Donald Trump could be brought down by 'an army of comedy'. Maybe he was right. Maybe not. While comedy does feed on an anti-hegemonic energy that threatens the stability of any entrenched social and political system, the question remains whether an oppositional aesthetics is actually equivalent to concrete political resistance. To paraphrase Max Gluckman (1963), we may rightfully ponder whether political jokes lead to revolution or whether they are merely a 'ritual of rebellion'.

During the last period of my fieldwork in New York, it was apparent that Trump jokes were getting fewer and fewer. In order for the comedians to keep up with the insanities emanating from the White House, they would have to dedicate all their time to writing Trump jokes and that was clearly not feasible. It seemed to me that the frustration and anxiety with the incumbent president that initially functioned as an emotional engine for doing political jokes had rapidly become an overall premise for stand-up routines as such. Rather than doing bits about Donald Trump as integral parts of their stand-up routines, some comedians would briefly mention the bizarre situation that most Americans found themselves in when realizing that their president was clearly off the rails before launching into bits about issues that were not immediately related to the political situation. And many comedians simply stopped doing Trump jokes altogether.

A few weeks ago I sent an email to a New York-based comedian telling him that I was working on an article about Trump jokes. He responded that 'both at the open mic scene and in stand-up clubs it's almost considered hack to do Trump jokes now'. I think that this comment only confirms the shift that was already happening during the late spring away from doing Trump jokes. But as I have suggested above, maybe some forms of political jokes need to ascend to a different level of comedic complexity in order to regain their differential (critical) capacity. As Trump jokes shed themselves of their interpretations, they realign with the 'outside' as a singular differential force. Rather than an appropriate incongruity whose elements form part of the same metonymical continuum (e.g. Trump as Darth Vader), the differential capacity of political jokes is lodged in a dissimilar intensity that is based on metaphorical distantiation (e.g. *not* making Trump jokes leading to an anecdote about preventing a sexual assault).

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