

Interrupting the Machine: Cynic Comedy in the “Rally for Sanity and/or Fear”

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Political communication in the United States leaves a great deal to be desired in terms of compromise, rationality, and humility. Rather than lessening the difficulties, the era of 24-hour news makes matters worse by offering punditry in place of commentary while highlighting the issues that divide us rather than those that bring us together. Tensions came to a boiling point during the 2010 mid-term elections, which included overt racist and public violence. In this context, Comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert created a satirical public rally, the “Rally for Sanity and/or Fear,” to draw attention to and provoke a meaningful response to the increasingly troubling political arena. To explain how the Stewart/Colbert rally functions as a form of social critique, we draw on the work of the ancient Cynic philosophers and on rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke’s approach towards comedy.

Keywords: Comedy, Satire, Cynics, Diogenes, Kenneth Burke, Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert, Daily Show

Contemporary U.S. political discourse is rich in anger, deliberate misunderstanding, and extreme partisanship. Insincerity and incivility is packaged and sold to citizens as if it were news or politics. There are, however, powerful voices working to change the landscape of U.S. political communication. In this essay we touch on two such voices—comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. The political and rhetorical work of their television programs on Comedy Central is well documented.¹ Here, we center in on a contemporary political event in its political context, the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear, to

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¹ Recent scholarly approaches to these political satires include: Chad Painter and Louis Hodges, “Mocking the News: How The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Holds Traditional Broadcast News Accountable,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 25 (2010): 257-274; Xiaoxia Cao, “Hearing it From Jon Stewart: The Impact of the Daily Show on Public Attentiveness to Politics,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 22 (2010): 26-46; R. Lance Holbert and Nick Geidner, “The 2008 Election: Highlighting the Need to Explore Additional Communication Subfields to Advance Political Communication,” *Communication Studies* 60 (2009): 344-358; Jonathan S. Morris, “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and Audience Attitude Change During the 2004 Party Conventions,” *Political Behavior* 31 (2009): 79-102; Lauren Feldman and Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, “Late-Night Comedy as a Gateway to Traditional News: An Analysis of Time Trends in News Attention Among Late-Night Comedy Viewers During the 2004 Presidential Primaries,” *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 401-422; Young Mie Kim and John Vishak, “Just Laugh! You Don't Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment,” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008): 338-360.

explain the powerful cultural and political work that comedy may accomplish. We enter into this discussion by explaining rhetorical dimensions of the ancient Cynic philosophers' comic interruptions. Their thought and practices offer a useful explanatory lens for understanding and appreciating the political work enacted by Stewart and Colbert's event. We conclude the essay by reflecting on how Kenneth Burke's approach to comedy, satire, and the comic corrective can combine with an understanding of Cynic philosophy to explain the rhetoric of the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear.

Cynics' Comic Interruptions: Spectacle as Social Protest

We readily recognize the concept of "democracy" as a gift handed down from the ancient Greeks. They proceeded, as have we, with great difficulties through their democratic experiment. The pride and pageantry of political life produced the same sorts of impasses that are all too familiar today. In the Greek context, the Cynic philosophers offered a powerful corrective. The life and public performances of Diogenes of Sinope characterize Cynic philosophy and help us better understand the present.

Diogenes of Sinope remains the most famous Cynic philosopher. Early in his life, Diogenes was forced to leave his hometown of Sinope when he was caught defacing currency. He resettled in bustling Athens where he became influenced by Antisthenes, student of Socrates and founder of the Cynic philosophy. Diogenes adopted increasingly ascetic practices, living a life of naked necessity as a philosopher, beggar, and public scourge.

Cynic philosophy is characterized by witticisms and performances that buck social norms. Throughout his daily affairs, Diogenes was known to have walked the streets in the daytime holding a lamp announcing to anyone within ear shot that he was looking for a wise man. He ate in the marketplace, which, at the time was considered a forbidden practice, and when he was caught masturbating in public he responded that he wished that it "were as easy to banish hunger by rubbing the belly."² Historian Diogenes Laertius tells of a reported meeting between Diogenes and Alexander the Great. Diogenes was sunning himself when "Alexander came and stood over him and said, 'Ask of me any boon you like.' To which he replied, 'Stand out of my light.'"³ Plutarch reports that Alexander "admired so much the haughtiness and grandeur of the man who had nothing but scorn for him, that he said to his followers, who were laughing and jesting about the philosopher as they went away, 'But verily, if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes.'"⁴ In addition to publicly insulting one of the most powerful leaders of his time, Diogenes took aim at the most famous philosopher. In response to Plato offering a definition of man as "a featherless biped," Diogenes reportedly visited Plato's Academy where he plucked a chicken, interrupted Plato, and declared "behold, Plato's man."⁵ Plato reported that such performances led people to consider Diogenes "a Socrates gone mad."⁶

² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 71.

³ Laertius, *Lives*, 38.

⁴ Plutarch and Bernadotte Perrin (trans.), *Plutarch Lives, VII, Demosthenes and Cicero. Alexander and Caesar (Loeb Classical Library)*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 259.

⁵ Luis Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 56.

⁶ Laertius, *Lives*, 55.

Rather than the ravings of a madman or exhibitionist, Diogenes's performances were part of a program of social criticism founded in a rhetorically astute, ethical philosophy. Diogenes's Cynic performances, Philip Bosman explains, "do not simply constitute the arbitrary choice of a comically gifted person. Rather, they are intimately related to Cynic philosophy and its programme of social criticism."⁷ By defying norms of appropriate behavior, Diogenes invited audiences to reflect on the separation of nature and convention while questioning the ethics, or lack thereof, upon which their norms and conventions were founded. Scholar of rhetoric Theodore Windt summarized Diogenes's way of life, "To live by men's conventions is to embrace the death of person: to defy society is to embrace life. . . . One can have no truck with customs regardless of the disguises they wear: laws, civil author, political institutions, social mores."⁸ Windt maintains that this foundation led the Cynics to "devote their whole attention to Ethics" and that in Cynic thought and practice, "every question is an ethical question."⁹ Their "bizarre acts," he continues, "served symbolic purposes" by making their critical beliefs concrete while explicitly rejecting direct political power.¹⁰ Taken this way, their performances allowed them to point out societal problems and suggest solutions without being seen as a threat to either rules or rulers.

That Diogenes and the Cynics were involved in a program of social criticism implies that their performances had purpose. Windt convincingly argues that their main purpose was to shock, which served three connected rhetorical functions. The first function was to create a rhetorical situation. Since their goal was to counteract accepted norms, the shocking spectacle "gathers an audience when orthodox speeches will not."¹¹ Second, the shocking spectacle "functions as the first step towards rearranging perspectives. People seldom become concerned about problems until they are shocked."¹² The real shock of Cynic spectacle would then come as audience members would begin reflecting on the ways in which their lived practices and thoughts diverge from their ideal norms. Third, the Cynic's shocking spectacle "parodied the rhetorical situation."¹³ By advocating stronger commitments to both public ethics and personal freedoms, they were able to demonstrate the comical trappings of both. Bosman explains that the evidence does not suggest that Diogenes was trying to convert his audiences to a radical form of cynicism. Rather than imitating the Cynic's behaviors, their audiences "would typically have responded the way audiences of political satire in repressive societies normally do: they returned to society, albeit with a wider perspective on themselves and a measure of irony towards their world, and feeling more in equilibrium because of it."¹⁴ It is in this way that Diogenes and the Cynics of Greek Antiquity employed their antics as a means of social protest, consequently shifting the argumentative ground on which political deliberation would be founded. That is, their spectacles allowed for deliberation to happen in ways that may not have been available before their comic interventions.

⁷ Philip Bosman, "Selling Cynicism: The Pragmatics of Diogenes' Comic Performances," *Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 93.

⁸ Theodore Windt, "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 4.

⁹ Windt, "Diatribe," 5.

¹⁰ Windt, "Diatribe," 5.

¹¹ Windt, "Diatribe," 5.

¹² Windt, "Diatribe," 8.

¹³ Windt, "Diatribe," 8.

¹⁴ Bosman, "Selling Cynicism," 103.

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Rally for Sanity and/or Fear

During the fall of 2010, the U.S. was in the midst of a particularly vitriolic and, at times, violent mid-term election. This season included elections for 37 U.S. Senators (including three shorter term elections for Delaware, New York, and West Virginia), 36 governors, and all 435 U.S. Representatives. Additional special elections for Utah's Governor and one of Massachusetts Senators were also held. The Republicans became the majority party in the House and assumed the majority of governorships as they picked up 63 seats in the House, six in the Senate, and six governorships.

While political tensions and partisan politics are generally at their most extreme during election time, this particular election stands out as particularly troubling. A highlight reel of the campaign would include a young woman being "curb stomped" at a Rand Paul rally in Kentucky for carrying a satirical sign, racist billboards featuring President Barack Obama on display in Colorado and Iowa, and the launching of a billionaire backed and created astroturf movement known as the "Tea Party."¹⁵ Marked by violence, racism, and special interests, one might expect renewed commitments to democracy, or at least some indignation. Both were had, but not in the ways one might expect. Tim Profitt, the Rand Paul volunteer who stomped on the head of Lauren Valle as she was restrained on the ground, said to a local CBS affiliate that "I would like for her to apologize to me to be honest with you."¹⁶ Relatively little attention was paid to the special interests (David and Charles Koch) who created and funded the "Tea Party," and it took on a life of its own with 138 Congressional candidates receiving "Tea Party" support.¹⁷ Such occurrences took place with media focusing on opposing extreme caricatures like the left-wing arrogant out-of-touch intellectual and the right-wing bigot religious fanatic, with neither depiction helping to create a more productive political discourse.

In response to the troubling times, a notable political commentator called for a rally in Washington D.C. to restore American values. On August 28, 2010, the 47th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, conservative pundit Glen Beck stood before the Lincoln Memorial for his "Rally to Restore Honor" to a crowd of approximately 87,000.¹⁸ Beck declared his rally as a "non-partisan" event that would call on America to turn back to virtue.¹⁹ The event wove religion and nationalism together for a largely white audience, who, despite being asked to leave political signs at home, were adorned with "'Don't Tread on Me' flags—an emblem of the tea party—and wore t-shirts with such messages such as 'I Can See November From My House' and 'RECESSION: When your neighbor loses his job. DEPRESSION: When you lose your job. RECOV-

¹⁵ The source of funding for the "Tea Party" is explained at length in: Jane Mayer, "Covert Operations: The Billionaire Brothers Who are Waging a War Against Obama," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2010.

¹⁶ Lucy Madison, "Rand Paul Supporter Who Stepped On Activist's Head Wants Apology; Victim Says Incident was Premeditated," *CBS News*, October 27, 2010 accessed February 24, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20020888-503544.html.

¹⁷ Kate Zernike, "Tea Party Set to Win Enough Races for Wide Influence," *New York Times*, October 14, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/us/politics/15teaparty.html?_r=2&hp.

¹⁸ Brian Montopoli, "Glenn Beck 'Restoring Honor' Rally Crowd Estimate Explained," *CBS News*, August 31, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20015214-503544.html.

¹⁹ "Restoring Honor Kit," Glenn Beck, accessed February 15, 2010, <http://media.glennbeck.com/828/828kit.pdf>.

ERY: When Obama loses his job.”²⁰ A counter-protest was organized by Al Sharpton and consisted mainly of African-American union members and members of the ACLU, though it did not have the same level of media attention or resonance as Beck’s rally. Early speculation linked Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” as a response to Beck’s rally, though this was denied. Instead, the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear was a response to the media and the caustic political environment.²¹

It was in this environment that the idea for the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear was born and executed. Sensing an opportune moment, comedians and political satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, hosts of the popular faux-news comedy shows the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* announced their comic intervention intent on altering the landscape of U.S. political communication. Similar to the Cynics of Ancient Greece, the time seemed right for a spectacle that would simultaneously set the absurdity of the political climate on display and offer a way to navigate it that would begin with laughter and end with meaningful communication. Their event, entitled the “Rally to Restore Sanity/Keep Fear Alive” would take place on October 30, 2010 at the National Mall in Washington D.C. The rally featured celebrities including Ozzy Osbourne, Cat Stevens, the hosts of *Mythbusters*, and numerous musical and comedy acts. Approximately 215,000 people attended.²² Not too far from the National Mall employees at National Public Radio saw passersby heading to the event. They, however, were prohibited by their employer from attending.²³ The tone experienced by the author was one marked by civility, even when attendees were discussing or debating U.S. foreign and domestic policy.

Stewart and Colbert used jester personae to enact their program of social criticism without undermining the tone of civility struck throughout the rally. Historically and as a rhetorical trope, jesters are allowed to tell the truth, provided that they remain funny. In a courtly system, the jester’s truth revolves around the absurdity of the current political climate, the shortcomings of leadership, or, in situations like the one Stewart and Colbert found themselves in, both. The Rally for Sanity and/or Fear seized this persona to deliver social critique in a palatable and humorous manner that afforded a measure of levity to a series of problems that the rally organizers see as severely damaging the state.

One particular segment from the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear stands out as representative for the way in which the rhetoric of the rally was designed to work. This segment featured a conflict through song between Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens, and Ozzy Osbourne. Yusuf Islam performed his song “Peace Train” for Stewart’s

²⁰ Amy Gardner, “Glenn Beck and Al Sharpton: The Rallies of 8/28,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2010 accessed on February 15, 2011 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/28/AR2010082801106.html?sid=ST2010091201877>.

²¹ Daniel Kreps, “Jon Stewart: Rallies not a response to Glenn Beck,” *CNN*, October 1, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-01/entertainment/jon.stewart.rally.roll_1_rally-million-man-march-jon-stewart?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ.

²² Brian Montopoli, “Glenn Beck ‘Restoring Honor’ Rally Crowd Estimate Explained,” *CBS News*, August 31, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20015214-503544.html.

²³ Dana Davis Rehm, “Why Can’t NPR Staff Go To ‘Rally For Sanity’ or ‘March To Keep Fear Alive,’” *NPR*, October 13, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thisisnpr/2010/10/13/130549777/why-can-t-npr-staff-go-to-stewart-s-rally-to-restore-sanity-or-colbert-s-march-to-keep-fear-alive>.

agenda of “restoring sanity,” but was shortly interrupted by Osbourne performing “Crazy Train” to help Colbert “keep fear alive.”

The two comics went back-and-forth interrupting the other’s music and coaxing their musician back into performance. Eventually, the two songs were being played simultaneously. As “Peace Train” and “Crazy Train” are quite opposite style songs—one is a folk-acoustic ballad while the other is a heavy-metal rock anthem—the fusion of the two was loud and chaotic. The chaos itself was humorous, but the humor did not veil the political and ethical imperative of the skit in particular and the rally in general. The two different trains represented two different mindsets—most easily represented by two extreme viewpoints within American politics. One being a caricatured conservative greeting anything alien to them with fear and skepticism, the other being a caricatured liberal flaunting their intellectualism and looking down upon those with a different ideology than their inferiors. Both of these extremes are stereotypical depictions that are generally not an accurate reflection of the general populace, yet are commonplaces often articulated through mainstream media and its pundits. When these two extremes are trying to talk over one another, playing their songs simultaneously, the result is something that is inaudible. Stewart clarifies this in his ending speech, noting that, “If we amplify everything, then we hear nothing,” and further illustrates that the boundaries we create for ourselves prohibit us from reaching our potential as a nation, and even as a species.²⁴

The choice of these two songs in particular is one worth noting. The theme of “Peace Train” is obvious. The song waxes nostalgic for deliverance to a peaceful and more harmonious world, a world that he feels strongly is coming. Islam croons, “Oh peace train please take this country, take me home again.” The tone of the song matches the utopian goal. In contrast, Osbourne’s “Crazy Train” strikes a dystopian chord. Osbourne shouts, “I’m going off the rails on a crazy train,” which is easily associated with a paranoid, disenfranchised angst towards the establishment as well as one’s fellow man. However, “Crazy Train” also contains an often overlooked lyrical couplet, “maybe it’s not too late, to learn how to love and forget how to hate.” As a nation we want the same thing. We all want to live freely and pursue happiness, and we want to handle our nation’s wealth and utilize it to its fullest potential. As a populace, we have different ideas on the best way to do this, which is why we have political parties and different ideologies. Such distinction can be productive as any nation thrives on new and different ideas; however, too often in our society instead of discussing these issues in good faith and with the ability to compromise, we engage in shouting matches, fear-mongering, and obsessive labeling. Instead of hearing the songs out and judging them on their merits, as a metaphor for deliberating in good faith, we are thrust into a cacophony of indistinguishable noise.

The rally was not only a call to civility and dialogue, but also a denouncement of dichotomized thought and action. To address this visually, Comedy Central produced a t-shirt that announces, “I’m With ~~Stupid~~ Reasonable” depicting a hand pointing to the side. The explanation on the Comedy Central merchandise site explains the significance of this shirt to the overall message of the rally:

²⁴ Jason Linkins, “My Day at the Rally to Restore Sanity,” *Huffington Post*, October 31, 2010 accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/rally-to-restore-sanity-huffington-post-_n_776541.html.

The Rally to Restore Sanity isn't about calling names—it's about making connections. To that end, we've created this new twist on a classic: The Comedy Central Shop exclusive I'm with Stupid Reasonable T-shirt. It's a shirt that says, "I'm willing to bet that the person standing next to me is willing to carry on a completely sane, rational discussion of an issue, without resorting to shouting, bullying or grandstanding."²⁵

The website contains a disclaimer underneath, "And if that turns out not to be the case? Just turn around, and the arrow will be pointing at someone else!"²⁶ The rally and its merchandise sold a hope for continued rhetorical action marked by civilized discussions with and respect for one's neighbors. Further, in true satirical fashion the t-shirt offered a corrective to the type of political signs and advertisements that had been so prominent throughout the election—so much so that Glenn Beck requested his audience to not bring signs as "they may deter from the peaceful message we are bringing to Washington."²⁷

The rally hit on an additional theme of critique relevant to this essay—the profit motive of the mainstream media. The major news networks in the United States are motivated by profit. As a result, news is packaged in an appealing, palatable and entertaining fashion designed to maximize ratings rather than provide information. Media theorist Neil Postman described U.S. television as "an unsleeping money machine... Many decisions about the form and content of news programs are made on the basis of information about the viewer, the purpose of which is to keep viewers watching so that they will be exposed to the commercials."²⁸ This holds as true for for-profit news broadcasting as it does for entertainment.

This aim for profit may help explain the near-daily shouting matches from pundits on both sides of the political spectrum from Fox News' Glenn Beck to HBO's Bill Maher. Punditry is generally more appealing to consumers as it is entertaining and requires less effort to form ideas or opinions and less meaningful of a challenge to already existing ideas and opinions. Postman notes that economic interests invite broadcasters to try "to determine how much programs are worth to the advertiser," and the value of a program is measured, according to ABC, by, "how the demographic breaks down into age groups, with younger viewers favored by advertisers."²⁹ Philosopher Jacques Ellul offers that "the man who keeps himself informed needs a framework in which all this information can be put in order; he needs explanations and comprehensive answers to general problems; he needs coherence."³⁰ The ideology of a political pundit provides this coherence in simple, easily understood terms. This convenience overshadows the fact that, despite being useful for drawing in particular target audiences, punditry provides a highly limited lens for viewing the world and acquiring information.³¹

Profit motive impacts the political realm as well. Instead of having politicians promoting new and innovative ideas, we have people like Sarah Palin promoting reality TV

²⁵ "The Daily Show: Rally to Restore Sanity Tee," Comedy Central, accessed February 15, 2011, <http://shop.comedycentral.com/The-Daily-Show-Rally-to-Restore/M/B00450RHHK.htm>.

²⁶ "Rally to Restore Sanity Tee."

²⁷ "Restoring Honor Kit."

²⁸ Neil Postman, *How to Watch TV News* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 9.

²⁹ Postman, *TV News*, 6, 7.

³⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 146.

³¹ This is similar to the notion of "selection bias," which explains the dangers of people choosing to expose themselves solely to views that they already hold. See Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

shows and books. At the same time, political talking points seem to be driven more by ideological loyalties than by deliberation over the merits of particular policies. For example, in a speech given at the BMO Centre in Calgary, Palin admitted that her family used to cross the border into Canada to receive health care because her family did not have access to affordable quality care in the U.S.³² Rather than recognizing that the plight of her family is similar to millions of others and trying to work towards meaningful health-care reform, she beats an ideological drum by denouncing a similar socialized system in America, even referring to Obama's Health Care overhaul as "downright evil."³³ While the need for solutions and cooperation both at home and abroad is great and increases daily, this cooperation is compromised by profit-motives and partisan agendas both within the mainstream media and political sphere. As a result, cynicism towards the government, especially among younger people is increasing, despite their effort and involvement with the 2008 election.³⁴ In such a system, an alternative is not only desirable, but necessary.

One potential alternative suggested by Neil Postman foreshadows the programs hosted by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. Postman argues that one of the two ways to create media consciousness would be

to create television programs whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conception of news, political debate, religious thought, etc. I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of "Saturday Night Live" and "Monty Python," the idea being to induce a nationwide horse laugh over television's control of public discourse.³⁵

Postman argued, however, that this would be nonsensical because the critics would be co-opted by television and their efforts would ultimately only serve a profit motive.³⁶ Yet Postman's prophetic argument is astute in recognizing the abuses of profit-driven televised parody being used to promote media consciousness. However, we contend that Stewart and Colbert's rally was driven by a Cynic-like ethical commitment to challenging and rearranging perspectives that they perceived to be damaging democracy. Comedy may, in fact, be the most productive, humblest, and most humane way of promoting better political communication in a democratic society.

Kenneth Burke: Comedy as Social Corrective

Kenneth Burke understood comedy as purposeful communication and significant to rhetorical scholarship. In reference to his work *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke states that "in

³² Katherine Q. Seelye, "Sarah Palin Calls Health Care Overhaul 'Downright Evil'" *New York Times*, August 8, 2009 accessed on February 15, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/08/sarah-palin-has-weighed-in-on/>

³³ Seelye, "Sarah Palin."

³⁴ See: Herbert J. Gans, *Democracy and the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Gore Vidal describes a similar phenomenon, while locating the problem in the "United States of Amnesia." See Gore Vidal, *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia* (New York: Nation Books, 2005).

³⁵ Postman refers to this as the "nonsensical" solution. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 161.

³⁶ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 162.

our original plans for this project, we had no notion of writing a ‘Grammar’ at all. We began with a theory of comedy, applied to a treatise on human relations.”³⁷ The basic intention of comedy is to communicate humor and trigger laughter, which is “an involuntary or semi-involuntary response to a stimulus.”³⁸ In noticing a potential in comedy that exceeds such a stimulus-response model, Burke’s focus moved from the entertainment context to its ability to promote and alter worldviews.

Burke’s approach to comedy focuses on its persuasive potential rather than on its function to entertain. He begins with language, since comedy is encompassed within non/verbal language. Burke explains that “the dramatic view of language, in terms of ‘symbolic action,’ is exercised about the necessarily suasive nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures. . . . Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.”³⁹ For language to be interactive in this manner involves participation on the part of the audience, which requires the establishment of a common context. The context of the situation is what moves language into the realm of symbolic action. Language directs the intention or the attention under a common understood context. In the case of the rally, the context is satire within the current political sphere.

Satire provides a special case for understanding Burke’s approach to comedy. Burke considers satire a dramatic approach to language. Language that can be taken at face value in dialogue, cannot be taken so in satire. “Language is taken as ‘the given.’ Man is viewed as the kind of animal that is distinguished by his prowess in symbolic action.”⁴⁰ In satire, as in drama, the language becomes the symbolic action in the manner that it becomes an interactive and interpretive event. Windt offers the analogy that “the diatribe is to rhetoric what satire is to literature. Each attempts to reduce conventional beliefs to the ridiculous, thereby making those who support orthodoxy seem contemptible, hypocritical, or stupid. Each seeks laughter, but not for its own sake.”⁴¹ The laughter is not mere laughter but rather is useful in introducing ideas: “laughter serves as a cleansing force to purge pre-conceptions about ideas, to redeem ignored causes, to deflate pomposity, to challenge conventional assumptions, to confront the human consequences of ideas and policies.”⁴²

Burke confirms Windt’s analogy by exploring the interactive component of satire. Satire is a method of directing and re-directing the audience; it expands understanding by directing the intention. Burke cites the example of Pascal in his Seventh Provincial Letter in which he satirically demonstrated how “one could both take part in a duel and not violate the Church injunctions against it.”⁴³ At the time, dueling was strictly forbidden by the Jesuit Church Pascal belonged to. “I bring up this satirically excessive account of directing the intention, in the hopes that I can thereby settle for less when discussing the ways in which ‘terministic screens’ direct the attention. Here the kind of deflection I have

³⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xvii.

³⁸ John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 4, 18.

³⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

⁴⁰ Burke, *Language*, 295.

⁴¹ Windt, “Diatribes,” 8.

⁴² Windt, “Diatribes,” 8.

⁴³ Burke, *Language*, 45.

in mind concerns simply the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others.”⁴⁴ Satire is a type of deflection that by directing the intention consequently directs the audience’s attention. Satire directs attention simultaneously in two competing directions. First, it invites its audience to reflect on the absurdity of the status quo. By so doing, satire allows the audience to see how norms of appropriate thought or behavior operate culturally, not naturally. Second, by inviting audiences to see how particular norms are produced, it creates the possibility of establishing a new understanding of normative thought and behavior. This new understanding is best viewed through the lens of Burke’s comic corrective.

Burke’s comic corrective offers a different frame for viewing the world, one of humor and incongruity. Burke explains:

If the world around us is at least partially a matter of how it is framed, how the situation is defined, then the reader, the observer, the audience can best understand how the procedure operates by getting outside the box of his own logics. In an example of Pitrin Sorokin’s, the fish is best able to know water when it is outside of it, on land. Seeing the world from its opposite, from incongruity, is not a literary conceit. It is a serious method. Comedy is precisely that—holding the conventional up to its opposite, to irony and satire.⁴⁵

Much as a fish can see the world better when it’s out of the water versus under the water, people can understand a situation better through the transcendence of their situation as opposed to within the confines of their own perspective. In this manner, comedy can overcome the limitations of systems of thought such as labeling and following conventional modes of observation and acceptance because there is a greater understanding of the other. It can also offer a more compassionate manner in viewing disagreements, as humor and laughter relieve tensions caused by conflict. This transcendence and method of thought that Burke has deemed the comic corrective has existed within humanity over the ages, exemplified through the earlier examples of Diogenes and the Rally for Sanity.

Applying Burke’s treatment of satire and the comic corrective to the Rally for Sanity, the satirical performance of Stewart and Colbert was held in an environment historically privy to social protest, the National Mall. But rather than protest, the intention was for a satirical performance based upon the comedy news shows. The intention on the surface was still entertainment. Satire then deflects reality in the sense that it is a recreation of something more sincere, yet is intended for humor. The satirical performance directs the audience’s attention to the problems facing contemporary America and offer a more humanistic way of solving them. Through their performance, Stewart and Colbert invite the audience to walk away with an enhanced perspective. That enhanced perspective is Burke’s comic corrective, exemplified through the linguistic deflection of satire. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert altered perception not through traditional protest but instead through performance.

The rhetorical performance staged by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert operates in an analogous way to the public performances of the Cynics. The rally took place in public upon an elaborate stage at arguably one of the most legendary environments for social

⁴⁴ Burke, *Language*, 45.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.

and political protest at the nation's capital. Stephen Colbert wore an American flag suit while Stewart chose more reserved attire. The spectacle was public for a global audience to see and react to. Similar to the Cynics, the public display contributed to the social impact of the event itself. The public performance enabled Stewart and Colbert to draw attention to the entrenched positions found within everyday political discourse, shift the grounds of the conversation, and ultimately allow a different type of communicative practice to emerge.

Stewart articulated how the comedic rally was designed to function as part of a program of social critique when he concluded the rally by breaking down the fourth-wall by transitioning from comedian to citizen. At this point he was no longer operating as a type of Cynic comedian who serves as a public scourge without making specific persuasive demands on the audience, but rather as a social critic explaining what he hoped for audiences to take from the rally. The intentional effect of Stewart's closing speech is characterized by Wayland Maxfield Parrish as "an utterance meant to be heard and intended to exert an influence of some kind on those who hear it. Typically, also the kind of influence intended may be described as persuasion."⁴⁶ Parrish also acknowledges that "a speech may have a persuasive efficacy even though the speaker denies any intention to persuade."⁴⁷ Therefore, even though Stewart's primary goal, as a comedian, was to entertain, his comedy may also function to persuade. While the event served both entertainment and persuasive functions, Stewart's intentional switch from comedian to social critic marked an overt move towards persuasion. He prefaced the speech as such: "And now I thought we might have a moment, however brief, for some sincerity."⁴⁸ Stewart also immediately acknowledged the boundaries to which he must adhere to as he quipped, "I know there are boundaries for a comedian-pundit-talker-guy and I'm sure I'll find out tomorrow how I have violated them." Rhetorical critic Edwin Black notes that "the technical difficulty of making moral judgments of rhetorical discourses is that we are accustomed to thinking of discourses as objects, and we are not equipped to render moral judgments of objects."⁴⁹ In this case, Stewart is seen as a comedian, the disclaimer at the outset is necessary so that the audience may begin to see Stewart not solely as a comedian, but also as a citizen and thus we are able to make a moral judgment. Stewart began by acknowledging the ambiguity of the event, especially in comparison to traditional rallies held in Washington, D.C., where a common agenda, cause or goal is apparent from the outset. However, immediately after acknowledging the ambiguity of the event, Stewart clarifies his intentions:

I can't control what people think this was, I can only tell you my intentions. This was not a rally to ridicule people of faith, or people of activism, or to look down our noses at the heart-land, or passionate argument, or to suggest that times are not difficult and that we have nothing to fear—they are and we do. But we live now in hard times, not end times. And we can have animus and not be enemies. But unfortunately, one of our main tools in delineating the two broke. The country's 24-hour-politico-pundit-perpetual-panic-conflictonator did not cause our problems, but its existence makes solving them that

⁴⁶ Wayland Maxfield Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt, 34-46 (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2005), 36.

⁴⁷ Parrish, "Speeches," 36.

⁴⁸ Linkins, "Rally."

⁴⁹ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 110.

much harder. The press can hold its magnifying glass up to our problems, bringing them into focus, illuminating issues heretofore unseen, or they can use that magnifying glass to light ants on fire, and then perhaps host a week of shows on the sudden, unexpected, dangerous flaming ant epidemic. If we amplify everything, we hear nothing.⁵⁰

By giving a call to action Stewart avoided a mere diatribe against the profit-driven mainstream media of the United States. Instead, it is up to the populace to understand the discourse of the mainstream media for what it is—a business that is trying to make money while, simultaneously, influencing how political communication happens and what it focuses on. In fact, “most Americans report that they tend to believe what they see through the news window. This belief may not be fanatical, but the legitimacy and maintenance of a political system do not require fanaticism. Passive acceptance will do.”⁵¹ Therefore, the responsibility lies within the person, not the media as a whole. The purpose of the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear was not to create a scapegoat, but instead employ the comic frame Burke speaks about to transcend the occasion and foster a better understanding of both our political selves and our political world.

In this essay, we moved from the historical context of Cynic philosophy to the contemporary U.S. political landscape, the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear, to the theoretical context of Burke on comedy. Diogenes and the Cynic philosophers used wit and spectacle to question and challenge norms and customs and to allow different forms of communication and different possibilities for behavior to emerge. The laughter they provoked was thus neither innocent nor naïve; instead it was a purposefully chosen route by which they navigated a program of social criticism. Similarly, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s spectacle, the Rally for Sanity and/or Fear, was designed to be a comic interruption that would invite reflection and action to alter the type of myopic political communication that characterized the 2010 election season. Like the Cynic philosophers, the rally performed a type of social critique that was not designed to promote a particular political end goal. Instead, the rally invited audiences to broaden their horizons and to expect more from their political representatives. While Glenn Beck was adding to his fame and riches by publishing books entitled *Arguing with Idiots*, Stewart and Colbert invited their audiences to treat those around them as reasonable, especially when there is disagreement or misunderstanding. Burke’s work on comedy reinforces how comedy may be used as a form of purposeful communication that may promote and alter worldviews and reminds us that, when the world is in great need of change, we should begin by reflecting on how we might better communicate with one another. In their “Rally for Sanity and/or Fear,” Stewart and Colbert showed how comedy could pave a path for civic mindedness.

⁵⁰ Linkins, “Rally.”

⁵¹ W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Longman, 1988), xiii.