

Rethorizing Comedic and Political Discourse, or What Do Jon Stewart and Charlie Chaplin Have in Common?

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On November 1, 2010, the progressive newsblog Huffington Post ran an opinion piece responding to the previous weekend's "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," held on the National Mall by comedic news pundits Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.¹ Asking in its title "Can Comedians Really Lead Us to Sanity and Civility?", the article expressed both gratitude and surprise that it had taken the Comedy Central comedians to "remind us that life can be lived devoid of the nasty rhetoric that has become all too commonplace in what passes for [political] discourse these days." "Perhaps," the writer even suggested, "the two comedians could lead the effort to bring politics into an atmosphere of disagreement without having to be disagreeable in the process."² This was hardly a lone voice: the rally's staged series of comedic showdowns between Stewart (as advocate of reasonableness in politics) and Colbert (in his persona as blowhard advocate of a politics of fear) had seemingly conveyed lessons for many seeking a transformation in politics. Although Stewart himself went on record to claim that the rally was not political "in any way," most interested observers and media pundits sensed a loftier agenda: "This event, while originally intended for jest, could possibly become a 'turning point' . . . for having

immense impact on how political discourse is conducted in the future,” commented one fan on the rally’s Facebook page, adding that “You have created a political movement, intended or not.”³ A sign held up by a rally attendee captured a similar sense of paradox: “It’s a sad day when our politicians are comical and I have to take our comedians politically.”⁴

The exact content of the rally—including Stewart’s well-reported closing monologue in which he lambasted news media partisanship and hyperbole—will be addressed later in this essay. For the purposes of introduction, I want only to note how commonplace these conflation of comedy and politics have become in recent years and how they might prompt us to rethink comedy’s potential as a mode of political expression. There can be little question that the last decade or so has marked something of a golden age in political humor. Whether in the spate of news satire programs (*The Daily Show* [1996–present]; *The Colbert Report* [2005–present]), politically themed talk shows (*Real Time with Bill Maher* [2003–present]), or satirical documentaries (notably Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004]), our contemporary media landscape has increasingly drawn color from the impulse to blend humor and political nonfiction as a way of critiquing the inadequacies of political and media discourse. One immediate set of questions to ask, then, would be: What are the sources of this impulse, and what are its effects? Within existing scholarship, answers usually begin with the heavily stage-managed, manufactured quality of contemporary political spectacle and the attendant desire, through comedy, to pierce the veil of talking points and media spin. This in turn opens onto discussions about whether news satire programs constitute meaningful political interventions or simply reinforce the cynical apathy of young adults who, as is often said, “get their news from *The Daily Show*.”⁵ Yet for all the recent academic discussion of these comedic encroachments on political debate, there remains little attempt to explore the implications of these developments for a broader theory of comedy, particularly as this intersects with a theory of politics.

What I hope to do in this essay is to pursue these implications by shifting the frame of discussion from the question of media sources and effects (potential or real) to that of comedic and political discourse, and I want to do so by taking quite seriously the query posed by the Huffington Post: Can comedy indeed contribute to a space for political discourse? By what processes and under what conditions might comedy be expected to establish such a space? I take my lead here from the recent work of philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose definition of politics points to a parallel

with comedy that this essay aims to develop. It is Rancière's contention, for instance, that political activity is "a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions" of an existing social order by demonstrating the assumption of "the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being."⁶ But if this is so, then it is tempting to use this definition to reassess the critical bugbear of the supposed politics of comedy, for comedy has often been defined in an equivalent way, as a mode of expression that "destroys hierarchy and order" (Mary Douglas), that suspends "hierarchical rank" such that "all [may be] considered equal" (Mikhail Bakhtin).⁷ In pursuing this parallel, my focus will fall upon an eclectic range of case studies involving comedians whose acts, routines, and films have included seriously intended political declarations—in the main, through a comparison of Stewart's "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" with the final scene of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) but also through a concluding detour into the stand-up comedy of Bill Hicks. The principle of selection, in other words, is one of theoretical illustrativeness rather than historical comprehensiveness, with an emphasis on instances when comedy has served as a platform for explicitly political expression. There is an analytic question to be asked here: What kinds of expression do we find in comedy; that is, what configurations of sense and nonsense, of propositions and puns, etc.? But there is also a prescriptive question: How do these relate to the kinds of utterance necessary for making a political intervention? Within this constellation, furthermore, it is Chaplin who must provide our starting point, for it was in the passage from cinematic silence to cinematic sound that the question of the comedian's utterance—and its possible relation to political speech—was first posed most notably as both a formal and a historical event.

Silence versus Speech: Charlie Chaplin

In his provocative history of film sound, *Film, a Sound Art* (2003), Michel Chion categorizes the "Three Steps into Speech" through which Charlie Chaplin made his transition into talking pictures, each step represented by a single feature film.⁸ The first is *City Lights*—commenced at the transitional moment between the silent and talking periods but completed only in 1931—a film that Chion describes as a "manifesto in defense of the art of silent film" that uses the soundtrack to provide musical accompaniment and sound effects but with no audible dialogue. Next is *Modern Times*—released five years later (1936)—a film that while "still essentially a silent

film” now includes more noticeable incursions of diegetic sound, including sporadic moments of dialogue.⁹ Two types of voice make their presence felt here. On the one hand, Chion notes, there are a number of voices that pass through some media apparatus: the protovideophone that the factory director uses to communicate to the workers and the gramophone that accompanies the worker-feeding machines. Yet there is also the unmediated voice of the tramp himself, when after much suspense he finally sings his nonsense song, “Je cherche après Titine,” consisting only of incomprehensible, if vaguely suggestive, syllables and fragments of words (e.g., “Tu la tu la tu la wa” and “Si rakish spaghetto”)—an appropriately contrary gesture for Chaplin’s reluctant abandonment of the tramp’s silence.

The third and concluding step comes with *The Great Dictator*, a “full-fledged talkie” that completes the transition, bringing Chaplin’s speech from nonsense to meaning and from comedy to seriousness.¹⁰ A series of doubles serves here to resolve the dilemmas that Chaplin had faced since the advent of sound film, the most notable being the comedian’s decision to play two characters, the paranoid dictator Adenoid Hynkel and the nameless Jewish barber. (As Chaplin explained in his autobiography, the former permitted him to indulge in nonsense dialogue, and the other enabled him to exercise his pantomimic talents. “As Hitler I could harangue the crowds in jargon and talk all I wanted to. And as the tramp I could remain more or less silent.”¹¹) Also relevant, however, is a doubling in the very structure of the film. Hynkel’s speech at a rally near the beginning of the film—a speech whose parodic “German” seemingly picks up the baton of the nonsense song that ends *Modern Times*—is ultimately answered by another public speech at the close when, in an infamous scene, the Jewish barber takes Hynkel’s place to deliver the pacifist message with which the film ends (figure 1). A brief excerpt from this nearly four-minute speech captures the tone:

Let us fight for a new world, a decent world that will give men a chance to work, that will give you the future and old age and security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power, but they lie. They do not fulfill their promise. They never will. Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people. Now let us fight to fulfill that promise. Let us fight to free the world, to do away with national barriers, do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men’s happiness. Soldiers—in the name of democracy, let us all unite!



Figure 1. "Let us fight for a new world." The Jewish barber delivers a pacifist message. Screen capture from *The Great Dictator* (1940, directed by Charles Chaplin).

Comic incomprehensibility thus yields to sincerity and meaning in a culminating speech that finally treats the sound cinema as, in Chion's words, "the depository of a text, a bottle in the ocean"—the vehicle, that is, of a message in which the technologies of sound cinema are no longer a laughing matter.¹²

But we miss an essential aspect of Chaplin's transition if we fail to notice that it marks, simultaneously, the explicit transfiguration of his comedy into politics. Or, to put it more precisely, what we have here is a transition that leaves comedy behind—there is nothing funny about the final speech—the better to exploit sound's capacities as a vehicle for making a kind of stump speech. It is as though, in a recursive move, the initial reduction of Hynkel's political discourse into comic nonsense clears the way by the film's end for a new and entirely serious kind of speech, which is also a new kind of politics. I would thus like to supplement Chion's analysis by emphasizing two basic observations. First, as I am suggesting, Chaplin's ascent to speech enables the open declaration of a political message; yet insofar as the tramp thus becomes an explicitly political subject, he thereby ceases to be a subject of comedy. Second, we can thus distinguish two kinds of utterance made

by the tramp—nonsense and comprehensible speech—and only the first of these is funny. Communicative speech, for Chaplin, is simply not a vehicle of humor. In this respect, *The Great Dictator* may be seen as the first of Chaplin's features to reveal what would become a formidable schism in the filmmaker's work: a rigid separation dividing speech from slapstick. Purged of comedy, Chaplin's speech would prove unable to transcend seriousness (resulting in the oft-remarked speechifying of subsequent films such as *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947]), while his comedy, purged of speech, found itself increasingly limited to the wordless realm of pantomime (as evident in Calvero's stage routines, both dreamed and real, in *Lime-light* [1952]).

Phôné vs. Logos

Jacques Rancière

There is perhaps no easy segue from the films of Chaplin to the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière, in which comedy and laughter play no role. Still, it is a segue worth making insofar as the latter's recent work provides at least a framework for understanding these relations linking speech and nonsense to politics. What Rancière argues, following Aristotle, is that the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their shared possession of *logos*, which we might translate as "communicative speech" or, better, "speech as discourse." "Whoever is in the presence of an animal that possesses the ability to articulate language and its power of demonstration," Rancière writes, "knows that he is dealing with a human—and therefore political—animal."¹³ But he also draws a distinction between *logos* and what he calls *phôné*, which might be translated as "babble." *Phôné*, for Rancière as for Aristotle before him, is the kind of utterance that simply expresses pleasure or pain ("mmm" or "yuk"). Nonhuman animals have *phôné*—a cat can meow when it wants something and purr when it gets what it wants—but they don't have *logos*. In other words, your cat has the means to indicate that somebody is standing on its tail but can't communicate what it thinks about raising the national debt ceiling, and that's why a cat can never be a political subject.

The foregoing example is nonetheless too facile, since there is a real practical difficulty in knowing exactly where the boundary line between discursive speech and babble is to be placed in any given instance. As Rancière continues, "If there is someone whom you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politics, by not understanding



Figure 2. A placard from an early Tea Party rally. "Scenes from the New American Tea Party," *The Washington Independent*, February 27, 2009, <http://washingtonindependent.com/31868/scenes-from-the-new-american-tea-party>.

what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse."¹⁴ We can find great examples of this dynamic in much online coverage of the wave of Tea Party-style populism during President Barack Obama's first term, whether in Huffington Post-style reportage on the innumerable gaffes of people such as Sarah Palin and Rick Perry, or in websites devoted to misspelled Tea Party signs, the collection of which was briefly a kind of internet sport. Very early in the Tea Party movement, the label "tea bagger" emerged as a term of liberal derision, prompted by one protestor's display of a placard using "tea bag" as a verb, perhaps in ignorance of its sexual connotations ("TEA BAG the LIBERAL DEMS BEFORE THEY TEABAG YOU!!") (figure 2).¹⁵ Other signs that have gone viral include "no pubic option!" (in reference to the contentious *public* option in Obama's health care reform), "Respect are country, speak English" (intending *our* instead of *are*), and, along similar lines, "Make English America's offical language" (misspelling *official*).

If, as intended by the respective online editors, we find humor in these errors, should we not also acknowledge that our laughter, in such instances, might constitute an implicit refusal to take such

populism seriously as a form of political discourse? It as though the Tea Party platform is to be considered simply as *phôné*—illiterate babble, the only meaning of which is “Obama, boo!”—and hence not true *logos*. The point here is not to defend Tea Party politics but instead to note how its characterization as *phôné* risks discounting populism as a viable political mode, as though it were merely a rightist phenomenon symptomatizing ignorance and stupidity. Not only does such a dismissal drastically impoverish the resources for democratic agency across the political spectrum, but for the purposes of the present argument, it also obstructs an understanding of comedy’s political functioning.¹⁶ As the following aims to make clear, there can be no fully realized politics of comedy—no comedy that does not propose to break with an existing order of things to imagine a new one—that does not entail one of populism’s fundamental characteristics: namely, the assertion of the right to speak and be heard by voices ordinarily disparaged or dismissed.

The Three Stooges

There is, further, a paradoxical way in which the finale to *The Great Dictator* suggests a provisional—if necessarily partial—definition of comedy, for the devastating lack of humor in the barber’s final speech suggests that the movement proper to comedy might be found in the exact opposite direction, that is, in the trajectory that reduces speech to nonsense or that exposes meaning as babble. Here we find, translated into the language of speech and signification, all those theories that have understood comedy as an agonistic structure in which a normative pattern is challenged and (temporarily) overcome by a nonnormative one: conscious perception by repressed desire (Sigmund Freud), *élan vital* by mechanical behavior (Henri Bergson), and social hierarchy by carnival (Bakhtin), a series of family resemblances to which, moreover, the Aristotelian couplet of *logos* overcome by *phôné*, speech overtaken by babble, also evidently belongs.

Some confirmation of the general approach here can perhaps be found by turning from the art of Chaplin to the crudity of the Three Stooges, a trio whose violent slapstick has come to define our cultural image of early sound-era slapstick. The Stooges are, of course, often considered quintessential products of the advent of sound, comedians whose style depended profoundly on the possibilities that sound afforded—not, of course, because of any witty repartee but instead because of their dependence on noise. Under the stewardship of Columbia Pictures’ sound effects man Joe Henrie, the Stooges developed an elaborate grammar of knockabout

clamor that translated the stylization of silent-era comic action into a unique sonic expressivity: face slaps accentuated by the crack of a whip, eye-poking by two plunks of a ukulele, ear twisting by the turning of a ratchet, head bonking by a wooden tempo block, blows to the stomach by the sound of a kettledrum, and so forth.¹⁷ Equally important to the Stooges' noisy style, however, was the kind of guttural idiolect developed by Curly, with his characteristic "woo woo woos" and "nyuk nyuk nyuks." Even when they speak, words exist for the Stooges more as raw sounds than as signifiers; characteristic here is the joke, again usually in Curly's mouth, that treats quasi homonyms as synonyms—as in "Are you casting asparagus on my cooking?" from the short *Busy Buddies* (1944). As Moe Howard later put it, glossing the Stooges' characteristic emphasis on noise over signification and speech, "You don't have to have words, to speak funny words, to make things funny. Even to the point where many times, if we did something and then the thing wouldn't get a laugh, we found a way to . . . hit Curly in the stomach and have a barrel noise."¹⁸ "We're 'sound' comics," he elsewhere observed.¹⁹

But it is not only their general reliance on noise that counts here, for the essential dynamic of the Stooges' comedy, within each short, is itself typically premised on the repudiation and deconstruction of spoken discourse. One short out of dozens, *Three Sappy People* (1939), the Stooges' forty-third for Columbia, will serve as a case study. The plot offers a basic variation of their trademark formula: somebody—usually a figure of class authority—seeks some professionals for a job but by a series of coincidences ends up hiring the Stooges instead.²⁰ Here, though, the formula takes on a psychoanalytic spin: the wealthy Mr. Rumsford needs a therapist to cure his insane wife but ends up contacting three phone repairmen by mistake—Larry, Moe, and Curly—who decide to take the job for themselves. Characteristic, moreover, is the way that sound here reinforces the plot's basic dichotomies: upper versus lower class, order versus chaos, and even sanity versus insanity are all given a precise sonic dimension in terms of the difference between communicative speech and meaningless noise.

The Stooges' status as agents of verbal misrule is immediately identified in an opening scene in which they try to repair a switchboard, a communications technology that, thanks to their incompetence, now fails to communicate at all. The pattern thus set, the film proceeds through a series of set pieces in which the Stooges repeatedly explode formal discourse into nonsense. Upon arriving outside their patient's home, for instance, they mistakenly begin a medical investigation of Mr. Rumsford—instead of his wife—that swiftly segues into an a cappella chorus of "aahs," in turn provoking

Mrs. Rumsford to burst into uncontrollable hysterics and run off toward the house, shouting—for no really discernible reason—“Last one in is a Republican!” What next ensues is some fairly typical Stooge-ing: Moe, Larry, and Curly have arrived on their new patient’s birthday and turn the formal party thrown in her honor into a chaotic food fight. Notable, though, is the way in which the climactic food fight fully inverts the path taken by Chaplin in his sound films. Whereas Chaplin’s trajectory was to ascend from nonsense to speech, the Stooges’ comedy moves in the precisely opposite direction, progressively breaking down the formal discourse of the well-heeled partygoers and reducing them to babbling incoherence, to shrieks, grunts, and hysterics. All hierarchies, all social differences, are erased as each character is brought to the level of the Stooges’ guttural idiolect. Put another way, communicative meaning becomes impossible when every open mouth has a cake flung into it.

It goes without saying that the outcome of these shenanigans is that Mrs. Rumford is cured. Parenthetically, I would add that this cure—such as it is—provides a neat mirror of American discourses on comedy during the period of the film’s making. The 1930s was a period characterized by a prevalent insistence on the therapeutic value of humor. (This was, after all, the decade that saw the heights of the discourse of laughter as a “tonic,” as good for what ails you.²¹) And yet, to the extent that this film articulates such a therapeutics, it precisely avoids a stable or unambiguous politics insofar as the Stooges’ comedy here entails a rejection of that which, for Rancière as for Aristotle before him, defines the political subject: namely, *logos*. If laughter is a “cure” in this film, then it is so not as a Freudian “talking” cure, but instead as a kind of indeterminate “babbling” cure, an escape into nonsense, noise, and cream pies.

Comedy versus Sincerity: Jon Stewart

It appears, then, that we confront a seeming paradox in the very notion of a politics of comedy: the dichotomy between the trajectory of a Chaplin, who by ascending from nonsense to speech became unambiguously political but at the cost of laughter, and the more straightforwardly comic trajectory of the Three Stooges, who by descending from speech to noise produced comedy at the apparent cost of any articulated political meaning. Yet the very neatness of this dichotomy clearly implies the need for some kind of conceptual mediation, some pathway whereby (comic) nonsense

can be seen to short-circuit into (political) sense. Put simply, if the movement proper to political utterance points toward *logos* while comedy inversely finds its trajectory in the direction of *phôné*, how can we begin to think of the two processes in terms of their interaction, as a trajectory in which both can be made to overlap, complement, or lead into one another? Such problems bring me to a recent comic—but also political—event and finally to ask the question that gives this essay its title: What do Charlie Chaplin and Jon Stewart have in common?

The event I have in mind here is the aforementioned Jon Stewart/Stephen Colbert “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” which took place in Washington, D.C., on October 31, 2010 (figure 3). Planned as (explicit) comic riposte and (implicit) liberal response to libertarian gadfly Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor Rally” the previous August, the event consisted in the main of a series of satirical stand-offs between Stewart, as personification of “Sanity,” and Colbert, as advocate of “Fear.” Thus, Stewart introduced Yusuf Islam singing “Peace Train,” and Colbert introduced Ozzy Osbourne singing “Crazy Train.” Stewart gave out “medals of reasonableness” to a number of media figures, and Colbert gave out “medals of unreasonableness.” Toward the end, a giant papier-mâché puppet of Colbert was brought on stage to demonstrate the superiority of fear. Peter Pan (played by *Daily Show* correspondent John Oliver) then led the crowd in a chant that caused the puppet to melt into the stage, thereby handing ultimate victory to reason. What drew the most media attention, however, was what transpired next, when Stewart took the stage for a closing monologue in which he quite seriously explained his intentions. The following gives some flavor of those comments, in which Stewart attacked news media partisanship and hyperbole:

And now I thought we might have a moment, however brief, for some sincerity—if that’s ok. 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. . . .

So, what exactly was this? 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 heartland, 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 [*pause*] broke.

The country’s twenty-four-hour politico-pundit-perpetual-panic conflictinator did not cause our problems. But its existence makes solving



Figure 3. “A moment, however brief, for some sincerity.” Jon Stewart’s closing monologue at the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” October 31, 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/meta/search/imageDetail?format=plain&source=http://abcnews.go.com/images/GMA/abc_pol_rally_speech_101030.

them that 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. . . .

We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is, on the brink of catastrophe, torn by polarizing hate, and how it’s a shame how we can’t work together to get things done. But the truth is, we do. We work together to get things done every damn day. The only place we don’t is here [*points to the Capitol building*] and on cable TV. Where *we* live our values and principles form the foundation that sustains us while we get things done, not the barriers that prevent us from getting things done.

The key passage comes right at the start: “And now I thought we might have a moment, however brief, for some sincerity. I know that there are boundaries for a comedian-pundit-talker guy, and I’m sure I’ll find out tomorrow how I have violated them.” This is the moment when Stewart seems to be restaging—unintentionally, no doubt—the dilemma that Chaplin had himself confronted at the end of *The Great Dictator*. There is the same careful position-taking (with Stewart’s concern for “boundaries” seeming to echo the start of Chaplin’s speech: “I don’t want to be an emperor; that’s not my business”). But above all, there is the shared question: How does a comedian become the bearer of political speech? And

Stewart's answer here is the same as Chaplin's: to call, that is, for a "brief moment of sincerity." Or, in other words, to say "stop the comedy!"—as though one cannot be the bearer of political speech and a comedian at the same time. Not, of course, that the monologue was entirely humorless—as is evident, for example, in Stewart's reference to exploding ants—but that there was a clear shift in the *genre* of verbal expression, an explicitly demarcated transformation of satirical into serious intent.

In the run-up to the rally, in fact, much of the online and print discussion addressed precisely this seeming boundary separating comic from political discourse. "Jon Stewart's Rally Raises Questions about Comedian's Role," ran one headline, while others similarly struggled with categorization: "Stewart-Colbert Rally: Entertainment or Pure Politics?" (*Washington Post*), "Jon Stewart . . . May Shun Politics, but Attendees Are Embracing It" (*New York Times*), and "Stewart's 'Rally' Not Just Politics" (*USA Today*), among others.²² Indeed, to the degree to which there was a small backlash following the event, the critique seems to have been that the rally failed as politics precisely to the degree to which it succeeded as comedy. David Carr of the *New York Times* criticized Stewart for failing to tackle genuine political issues such as unemployment, and comedian/pundit Bill Maher complained that the event's attitude of comic reasonableness ultimately neutered its political potential.²³ Such knee-jerk critiques seem, in retrospect, unfounded, for in the wake of the January 8, 2011 assassination attempt on Democratic congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, Stewart's advocacy of civil discourse gained resurgent traction among U.S. politicians and the media. Indeed, one consequence of the shooting was the immediate founding of a new National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona, where in a memorial service for the victims of the shooting, President Obama called for the nation to "listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy"—language that seemingly echoed Stewart's plea two months earlier.²⁴

Taken as a sequence, these events reveal a surprising logic, a trajectory extending from political satire to a presidential declaration of unity, from comedic to civil discourse, as though political civility—a willingness to acknowledge a shared public sphere held in common or, to paraphrase President Obama, to listen to the speech of others as speech (*logos*) and not as *phônê*—were if not quite the secret flip side of comedy then at least one of its possible destinations. Here, it would seem, comedy and politics *do* intersect, and they do so because comedy has taken explicit aim at divisive speech (that is, speech as fear-mongering, as satirically embodied

by Colbert), thereby seeding the ground for the imagining of a more inclusive public sphere.

What is further significant in this respect is the way this trajectory finds a formal correspondence with the very definition of politics proposed by Rancière.²⁵ It is the French philosopher's contention, for example, that politics concerns itself with particular "distributions of the sensible," by which he means the cluster of commonsense perceptions that structure and divide our world, allowing certain things to appear self-evident while consigning others to obscurity: what can be said within a given society versus what goes unheard, who can be seen versus who remains unseen, what counts as speech and what counts as babble—this is the terrain of politics. The essence of a political intervention, on this model, is to create what Rancière terms "dissensus," a reconfiguring of the divisions that structure our perception of things: dissensus marks the process whereby those unseen and unheard—those whose voices are heard only as babble—challenge our frames of reference in order to establish an inclusive perspective from which they *can* be seen and heard, in which they emerge as bearers of *logos*, as political subjects. "Political demonstration," Rancière writes, "makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another—for instance, the world where the factory is a public space in that where it is considered private, the world where workers speak, and speak about the community, in that where their voices are mere cries expressing pain. . . . Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue . . . [to an addressee who] 'normally' has no reason either to see or to hear."²⁶

There is an analogy in all of this with comedy, for comedy too, at its most basic level, operates as dissensus: it too reconfigures the frames of reference governing our everyday understanding of things (whether this is a matter of twisting the rules of logical inference, in the case of a told joke, or of upsetting codes of social etiquette, in the case of a slapstick film such as *Three Sappy People*). Everything, however, hangs on whether matters proceed beyond this basic move. There are, of course, plenty of examples of comedies that are simply deconstructive, that begin with order and end with disorder, from sense to nonsense (virtually any Stooges film would fit that bill). Yet there is always an alternative possibility, such that in certain circumstances comic nonsense reveals itself as anything but merely nonsensical, and comedic deconstruction as possessed of a constructive kernel. There is, in other words, always the possibility of a process whereby the clown or comedian, as agent

of *phôné*, thereby establishes a new frame of reference to emerge as the bearer of a new *logos*, as a subject qualified to speak. That possibility, as semiotician Paulo Virno has suggested in a recent study of jokes, exists when comedy operates according to a “logic of crisis”: “At the exact point when a form of life cracks and self combusts”—when, for instance, comedy upsets our normative frames of reference—then “the question of *giving shape to life as such* is back on the agenda.”²⁷

What is intended here are those moments when the comedian, in the very process of destabilizing the discursive and ideological partitions and identities that structure our perception of the world, thereby opens up a space for the imagining of a new order; Virno’s interest is in “what takes place during the transition from one form of life to the next, in the gray zone where the first form of life barely persists and the second still resembles an eccentric experiment.”²⁸ Recall, in this connection, the movement of *The Great Dictator*, in which Chaplin begins by reducing Hynkel’s hateful political utterance to comic nonsense in order, in the film’s subsequent action, to delineate a shared space of Jewish suffering from which the tramp finally claims his right to speak and be heard. Or recall the movement of the Stewart/Colbert rally, which parodically dismantles the alternatives proposed by news media spin (Left vs. Right, liberal vs. conservative) to reach toward the ideal of “sanity,” toward the shared right of civic discourse—a movement further evidenced every weeknight in the very structure of the *Daily Show*, which invariably begins with two sections satirizing contemporary journalism before modeling, in the concluding interview, the type of serious journalism that the show asks for: civil, honest, deliberative.²⁹ Comic reasoning, on this model, follows in the footsteps of politics when it destabilizes a hegemonic understanding of the world in order to demonstrate to its audience an alternative in which the clown’s utterance finally counts—and can finally be heard—as speech. The paradox, however, is that comedy here ceases to be identical with itself, or rather evacuates into seriousness, such that the comedian becomes one who no longer provokes our mirth; still, it is in these brief moments of sincerity, and not in laughter, that comedy approaches its clearest articulation as politics.

Consensus versus Dissensus: Bill Hicks

An addendum is necessary at this stage, however, since my last point raises a seeming contradiction in terms, that comedy becomes “fully” political only at the point that it stops being funny. The

obvious criticism is that this point establishes too rigid a separation between comedy's political potential and its laugh-provoking capacities. Surely, it may be asked, comedy is itself already *intrinsically* political, such that it does not need the "brief moments of sincerity" of a Stewart or a Chaplin? Surely, for instance, there is *already* a class politics immanent in the Stooges' carnivalesque inversion of the rituals of the wealthy? Certainly, these two questions can be answered in the affirmative; there is indeed a kind of intrinsic political quality to comedy, at least insofar as comedy's disordering propensities—its "victorious tilting of uncontrol against control," in Mary Douglas's definition—may itself be deemed a kind of zero-degree political form.³⁰ Yet what is fundamentally at issue here is a real ambiguity regarding what "politics" actually means in these various examples. Is the term being used in, say, its Rancièrian sense (politics as an intervention within an existing political distribution, as a matter of rights and recognition) or more loosely (politics as a matter of cultural practice and style, of those forms of expressive resistance ordinarily associated with the study of subcultures)? Surely only in something approaching the latter sense can politics be said to apply to, say, the Three Stooges.

As a contribution to resolving these ambiguities, it is worth following cultural theorist Michael Denning in insisting on a distinction between a number of discrete levels through which any cultural politics may be defined. The first level, according to Denning, is indeed the moment of resistance—that is, violations of decorum or hegemonic norms—as variously expressed in forms of subcultural style, uses of language, reading practices, and so forth. Yet Denning insists that this "first moment" risks ineffectiveness and resignation unless it also at some point opens onto a second, namely, an articulated struggle for cultural justice. This second level "is closely related to the so-called identity politics of the liberation movements; and it is named by contemporary political philosophy as the politics of recognition."³¹ Again, there are several distinct forms of expression that can be identified. Denning lists issues such as affirmative action and battles for cultural diversity, self-organization and unionization of cultural workers, and contestations of the selective traditions that determine cultural canons. Indeed, Denning insists, it is only from these more organized forms of struggle that the third, and final, moment of cultural politics can emerge: cultural revolution itself and the consequent formation of a new cultural paradigm.

Something structurally very similar is at stake in the foregoing analysis of comedy's political valences, for the two faces of comic utterance here discussed—deconstructive *phôné* and politically

productive *logos*—map directly onto and indeed provide a framework for modeling the transition between the first and second levels of Denning's analysis, from ludic resistance to recognition. This is why it becomes important to think beyond Bakhtin's famous discussion of the carnivalesque in framing the politics of comedy. In no small number are those who, following Bakhtin, have equated comedy to a kind of Mardi Gras hiatus when it is finally legitimate to transgress and mock the order that is in place during the normal workweek. Yet it is clear that such a perspective seizes only on the first level at which comedy might be described as "political"—the level at which order is upset and hierarchies are equalized—without acknowledging the politics that can be achieved in the passage *through and beyond* carnivalesque inversion. There always remains that further dimension at which comedy may operate as a prop upon which new social imaginings and distributions can be given utterance. It is only at this register that we find comedians articulating such ideals as sanity and civility (Stewart) or pacifism and universal enfranchisement (Chaplin)—the register, that is, at which a comedic politics of transgression shades toward a comedic "politics of recognition," of the shared rights of all to participate in a life in common.

But if this is so, then it becomes important to think of comedy not merely as some carnivalesque space/time apart—a peculiarly static model—but instead as a particular type of discursive movement, a sequence or trajectory that may open onto new political configurations. Virno is again useful here. What he contends is that the logic of jokes—or rather, in his terms, their "paralogic"³²—provides microcosmic case studies of how normative modes of thinking can be transformed to permit fresh possibilities to emerge. Two paths are proposed. The first is what Virno terms "entrepreneurship," a form of innovative praxis that, rather than introducing entirely new elements to a situation, instead sees potential in the rearrangement of existing terms. In jokes, entrepreneurship is in play whenever a punch line involves modifying an existing set of verbal elements to unleash unforeseen meanings. (Virno cites a classic example from Freud's study to illustrate this comedic *ars combinatoria*: "Some people think that the husband has earned a lot and so has been able to lay by a bit; others again think that the wife has lain back a bit and so has been able to earn a lot."³³) The other model—more directly pertinent to the comedic processes I have been tracing—is what Virno calls "exodus," a form of joke logic that deviates from an existing framework of choices or alternatives according to the principle of the *tertium datur*, that is, by introducing a "third path" not previously

considered. (Another example from Freud's *Jokes*: "The marriage broker had assured the suitor that the woman's father was no longer living. After the betrothal it emerged that the father was still alive and was serving a prison sentence. The suitor protested to the marriage broker, who replied: 'Well, what did I tell you? You surely don't call that living.'" The binary of dead versus alive here is disrupted by a third possibility: alive but not living.³⁴) Such comedic structures, Virno argues, rehearse in Lilliputian form the structure of exodus as a response to a political situation: "Instead of submitting to the pharaoh or openly rebelling against his rule (A or not A), the Israelites identify another possibility, one which evades the number of alternatives that could be counted at the beginning: that of fleeing Egypt. Neither A, nor not-A, . . . but an eccentric B."³⁵ Jokes, when they obey this paradigm, thus provide a microcosm of the creative resources necessary to think beyond a given status quo (linguistic, cultural, political, etc.); they introduce a comic deviation or displacement in the axis of a dominant discourse and, from that basis, establish a space out of which new pathways open up.

This model of comedy as a kind of discursive movement or trajectory also opens onto the question of destination, of where and how far politically such a trajectory can go. For an obvious weakness in the case studies I have discussed is that neither Chaplin nor Stewart go remotely far enough to achieve a genuine political intervention—at least not in Rancière's terms—insofar as each remains hidebound to certain well-worn concepts from the realm of political philosophy. While the processes of their comedy may mirror the *formal* terms of Rancière's analysis, their political contents remain firmly rooted within existing frameworks of what can be thought and said and as such fail to break beyond an existing "distribution of the sensible": Chaplin's politics in *The Great Dictator* thus precipitate upon his infamously empty gestures toward universal democracy, while Stewart's in recent years have similarly gelled around the demand for civil discourse. Yet for comedy to become politics in the true sense of dissensus, it cannot rest upon a simple affirmation of a recognizable idea; it cannot keep within the circle of existing political ideals and take up residence there.³⁶ Rather, it must instead create a kind of split within what can be thought in order to allow for new and constantly renewed forms for political agency and subjectivation to begin dimly to emerge; it must unleash what Rancière has elsewhere discussed as a kind of nomadic process that refuses to come to rest under the terms of any master signifier.³⁷ But this in turn means that a political comedy—again in the fullest possible sense—must set itself to the task of

pushing thought beyond thought's own limits, not to plant its flag within the grab bag of existing political ideals and philosophies but instead to reach that most difficult of articulations, a precarious form of *logos* that opens onto positions that escape signification, always on the verge of sinking into what cannot be declared. For purposes of a closer, then, let me offer a brief final example of one moment when comedy has seemed to achieve this, to consider a comedian outside of the televisual and cinematic genres thus far examined: the Texas comic Bill Hicks, perhaps the most notable stand-up artist of the last quarter century to have worked within the tradition of angry cultural critique pioneered by comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and George Carlin.

A self-styled outlaw comedian who would occasionally perform in rifleman's coat and Stetson, Hicks's style of blanket cultural condemnation guaranteed that he never enjoyed mainstream success or exposure in the United States, even as, paradoxically, he became something of a cult star in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s before his untimely death from cancer in 1994 at age thirty-three. "America does not take comedy seriously, social criticism seriously," he once explained. "If you look at even the careers of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, you'll notice that one was basically run out of the business and the other one killed himself due to lack of work. This is how America supports social criticism."³⁸ Indeed, so unremitting, so totalizing, was Hicks's comedic assault that his routines constitute a useful limit case for my analysis here, for it often seems as though his act is nothing but pure white-heat rage with no margin for alternatives, a hectoring scorched-earth satire of cultural alienation, an unremittingly savage takedown of late 1980s/early 1990s-era American complacency, from the triteness of Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy Breaky Heart" to Fox's *Cops*, from the hypocrisy of politicians to the self-satisfied apathy of Hicks's own audiences. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of Hicks's comicality is the degree to which he circumscribes entirely the conventional tropes of spoken comedy. In place of jokes and punch lines, which are few and far between, the comedic aspect of his stand-up depends almost exclusively on a range of shock tactics—the profanity, the abusive harangues (both to imagined interlocutors and his actual audience), and the quasi-surrealist scatological imagery that constantly underpin his cultural diatribes. As he himself acknowledged in one routine, "I have this weirdest style, don't I? 'Bill, you do a little joke that's kinda funny, and then you start telling us you hate us, and you dig a fucking hole. Where's Bill going? He's going to comedy death.'"³⁹ Take, for example, the following routine, "Deficit," from the posthumous album *Rant in E-Minor*:

You want a better world, ladies and gentlemen? Legalize pot, right now. You want to end the deficit? Legalize pot, right now. [*audience cheers*] I am so sick of hearing about the goddam deficit that I could fucking puke blood. There ain't no fucking deficit. It's a fucking lie and it's a fucking illusion in the first place. But you want to end it? Legalize pot. Biggest cash crop in America. Deficit's gone. But I am so sick of hearing "Well, your leaders misspent your hard-earned tax dollars, so you, the people, now have to tighten your belts. And we gotta start paying this back." . . . You know what would make tightening my belt a little easier? If I could tighten it around Jesse Helms' scrawny little chicken neck. [*audience cheers*] I feel better about the sacrifice right now! You fucking tobacco-pushing motherfucker. You are the worst fucking drug dealer in the fucking world. You scrawny, right-wing, fearmongering sucker of Satan's cock! YOU SUCK SATAN'S COCK, YOU FUCKING CHICKEN NECK LITTLE FUCKING CRACKER! . . . Boy, Jesse Helms is another great one, isn't he? Just another fevered ego tainting our collective unconscious. 'Cause you know, any one that far to the right is hiding a very deep and dark secret. You do know that, right? . . . You know when Jesse Helms finally fucking dies, he's gonna commit suicide first of all in a washtub out back underneath a pecan tree. He's gonna slash his wrists and write in blood, "I've been a bad boy." But you know they're gonna find the skins of young children drying in his attic. Swarms of horseflies going in and out of the eaves. And on CNN, over and over, his wife going: "I always wondered about Jesse's collection of little shoes."⁴⁰

Needless to say, none of this obeys the logic of punch line humor, nor, moreover, does it achieve anything like a political declaration in the fashion of our earlier examples. To the extent that there is a political claim here (legalizing marijuana), it is less a conclusion reached through Hicks's comedic discourse than a point of departure for that discourse, a springboard from which he launches his speculations about Helms's horrifying "dark secret." Moreover, as a form of dissensus—as a grotesque negation of the "dignity" of political office—Hicks's baroque evocation of Helms's bathtub suicide threatens nihilistically to eclipse the apparent substance of his critique; almost lost in the mix is Hicks's commentary on the hypocrisy of those who, like Helms, oppose the legalization of drugs yet support the tobacco industry.

Yet far from constituting a weakness or flaw, it is possible to see here the very source of Hicks's radicalness. It is hardly on banal issues such as legalizing marijuana or the hypocrisy of politicians that Hicks stakes his claim to *logos*. Rather, the endeavor of his comedy is to refuse a position within the discursive frameworks in which so-called political speech typically consists in order

to secure a point of articulation beyond them. It is as though any statement of a political proposition or interest (e.g., legalizing pot, pro-choice abortion rights, gays in the military—all themes of his late stand-up) must necessarily be provisional, a fragile gambit to be relinquished in order to remain faithful to the possibility of an elsewhere of political thought. For nihilism is not all there is, and if one listens closely, one finds also an occasionally voiced belief in spiritual interconnectedness, the belief, as he put it in some of his last shows, that “we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively”—and it is this belief, far beyond the realm of politics as ordinarily practiced, that constitutes the integrative *logos* for which his stand-up strives.⁴¹ Nowhere is the interplay between these two registers—cultural critique and spiritual assertion—clearer than in Hicks’s routines on drugs, which fall into two broad categories: scatology-laden denunciations of the hypocrisy of the U.S. war on drugs and a reverent insistence on the capacity of those same substances to bring enlightenment. Consider, for instance, the following bit as a necessary corollary to the mordant satire that typically constituted his act, and note in particular the way his initially comic evocation of the quasi-sacred properties of magic mushrooms begins to shade into something seriously meant:

Well, once again I recommend a healthy dose of psilocybin mushrooms. [audience laughs] Three weeks ago two of my friends and I went to a ranch in Fredericksburg, Texas, and took what Terence McKenna calls “a heroic dose.” Five dried grams. Let me tell you, our third eye was squeegeed quite cleanly. [makes squeaking sound] Wow! [makes squeaking sound] And I’m glad they’re against the law. [audience laughs] Cos’ you know what happened when I took ’em? I laid in a field of green grass for four hours, going, “My God . . . I love everything.” [audience laughs] The heavens parted, God looked down and rained gifts of forgiveness on to my being, healing me on every level, psychically, physically, emotionally. And I realized our true nature is spirit, not body, that we are eternal beings, and God’s love is unconditional. And there’s nothing we can ever do to change that. It is only our *illusion* that we are separate from God, or that we are alone. In fact the reality is we are one with God and he loves us. [scattered applause and cheers] Now, if that isn’t a hazard to this country. Do you see my point? How are we gonna keep building nuclear weapons, you know what I mean? What’s gonna happen to the arms industry when we realize we’re all one? Ha ha ha ha ha! It’s gonna fuck up the economy! [audience laughs] The economy that’s fake anyway!⁴²

There is, here, a theistic dimension to Hicks’s act that makes the political stakes of his comedy far more totalizing than, say, Jon



Figure 4. “Is there a point to my act?” Bill Hicks at the Dominion Theatre, London, November 29, 1992. Screen capture from *American: The Bill Hicks Story* (2011, directed by Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas).

Stewart’s. Although Hicks renounced his strict Southern Baptist upbringing as a child in 1970s-era Houston, the legacy of that upbringing inflected the very structure of his stand-up, which in consequence translated comedic discourse into a form of religious eschatology: dissensus becomes tantamount to a satirical analysis of the fall, exodus to the possibility of salvation, *logos* to an assertion of God’s love. It is as though for Hicks, in an entirely venal world, comedic exodus becomes quite literally otherworldly, something to be achieved only through an act of religious projection. The challenge for Hicks, then, is to find some way to bridge that impasse, to find a way to move plausibly from satiric denunciation to assert the utopian possibilities of nonalienated life—or, in other words, to include within his act the imperative of imagining a way completely outside of the cultural system that he analyzes. Perhaps the most famous routine from Hicks’s career is the moment when he attempted to do just that, not by relying on another of his drug stories but instead in the very serious discussion of the “point” of his act from the concluding moments of his Dominion Theatre show in London in 1992 (figure 4). Here then, one final time, is another instance of a comedian’s discourse suddenly resolving itself into serious speech.

Is there a point to all this? Let’s find a point. Is there a point to my act?
I would say there is. I have to. The world is like a ride in an amusement

park. And when you choose to go on it you think it's real because that's how powerful our minds are. And the ride goes up and down and round and round. It has thrills and chills and it's very brightly colored and it's very loud and it's fun, for a while. Some people have been on the ride for a long time and they begin to question: "Is this real? Or is this just a ride?" And other people have remembered, and they come back to us, they say, "Hey, don't worry, don't be afraid, ever, because, this is just a ride." And we . . . *kill* those people. Ha ha ha. "Shut him up! We have a lot invested in this ride. SHUT HIM UP! Look at my furrows of worry. Look at my big bank account and my family. This just has to be real." It's just a ride. But we always kill those good guys who try and tell us that, you ever notice that? And let the demons run amok. But it doesn't matter *because*: it's just a ride. And we can change it any time we want. It's only a choice. No effort, no work, no job, no savings and money. A choice, right now, between fear and love.

The eyes of fear want you to put bigger locks on your door, buy guns, close yourself off. The eyes of love, instead, see all of us as one. Here's what we can do to change the world, right now, to a better ride. Take all that money we spend on weapons and defense each year, and instead spend it feeding, clothing, and educating the poor of the world, which it would many times over, not one human being excluded, and we could explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace.⁴³

The difficulties here are apparent but only because comedy is here operating at the very limits of what can be imagined *as* comedy: what begins with the seeming imperative of getting off the ride—with the challenge to his audience to make an immanent break with the terms of an already existing reality—hesitates midway through and changes tack, retreating to a different choice about how to stay within that reality, to stay on the ride but somehow to make it better, here envisioned through a redistribution of wealth. This, to be sure, is *logos*, but it is a *logos* that wavers beneath the burden of what Hicks wants it to accomplish. And this, to be sure, is politics, but it is a politics for which the imagining of nonalienated life can only be approached asymptotically, always at the horizon of its disappearance. What we find at the summation of Hicks's comic discourse is less a plausible program for action and more a testament to the imperative of somehow finding new modes of thought and action in the world. Here, then, at the edge of comedy, utopian reflection can only assume a form symbolizing the fantasy of situating oneself somehow "outside," not the expression of a stable system of articulated interests or ideas but rather, as Rancière claims in a different context, the "operator of a particular *dispositif*" of critique that vouchsafes no stable position for its subjects nor

any fixity to its objects.⁴⁴ Put differently, an exodus that finds a kind of strength in becoming exile.

Notes

¹ A portion of this paper derives from an earlier essay of mine on 1930s comedy, “‘Sound Came along and Out Went the Pies’: The American Slapstick Short and the Coming of Sound,” in *A Companion to Film Comedy*, edited by Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2013), 61–84. Some of the ideas presented here were hatched in conversations about comedy with Nic Sammond during late-night rides on the College streetcar. He didn’t realize what he was prodding me to think about, but I am profoundly grateful for his prodding. My thanks also to the anonymous reviewers and especially to James Cahill, who is a stalwart editor and friend.

² Russell Bishop, “Can Comedians Really Lead Us to Sanity and Civility?,” *The Huffington Post*, November 1, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/russell-bishop/comedians-sanity-civility_b_776603.html.

³ Quoted in “The Political Movement of Jon Stewart,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, October 27, 2010, www.startribune.com/politics/105925273.html.

⁴ Reported in “At the Rally to Restore Sanity, A Reaction to Overreaction,” *The Nation*, October 31, 2010, www.thenation.com/article/155696/rally-restore-sanity-reaction-overreaction.

⁵ See, for example, the essays on Jon Stewart published in the “Critical Forum” section of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 262–83; Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2010); and Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30.

⁷ Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception,” *Man* 3, no. 3 (1968): 369; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 10.

⁸ Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, translated by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 21–28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (1964; reprint, London: Penguin, 1992), 387. The passage is also quoted in Chion’s analysis.

¹² Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, 26.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38. The *logos/phôné* distinction is thus, for Rancière, constituted as a

principle of political classification and is to be rigorously distinguished from Jacques Derrida's more well-known handling of the same couplet. For Derrida, *phoné* refers specifically to the idea of the human voice, while *logos* refers to the idea of an ultimate "word"—an unquestionable truth or ideal—that serves as the foundation of all meaning. See Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; reprint, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ "Scenes from the New American Tea Party," *Washington Independent*, February 27, 2009 <http://washingtonindependent.com/31868/scenes-from-the-new-american-tea-party>.

¹⁶ Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (Verso: London, 2005) offers a vigorous theoretical defense of populism as not just a form of democratic agency but instead as "the democratic element in contemporary representative systems" (176, my emphasis). Laclau's defense of populism runs very close to Rancière's definition of politics (see *ibid.*, 244–49).

¹⁷ On the use of sound effects in Columbia Pictures' short comedies, see Ted Okuda and Ed Watz, *The Columbia Comedy Shorts: Two-Reel Hollywood Film Comedies, 1933–1958* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1986), 42–43.

¹⁸ Howard, quoted in Steve Cox and Jim Terry, *One Fine Stooge: Larry Fine's Frizzy Life in Pictures* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2006), 32. It is worth noting in this connection that Moe Howard's own Hitler impersonations—in the trio of war-themed comedies *You Nasty Spy* (1940), *I'll Never Heil Again* (1941), and *They Stooge to Conga* (1943), the first appearing nine months before *The Great Dictator*—remain limited to nonsensical verbiage and never resolve into meaningful speech in the manner of Chaplin's film.

¹⁹ Untitled article, *TV Guide*, March 21, 1959, n.p., Three Stooges clipping file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

²⁰ Moe Howard himself described the formula: "We subtly, the three of us, always went into an area of life which we were not supposed to understand. If we were going to go into society, the picture would open with us as garbage collectors." Howard, quoted in Jeff Lenburg, Joan Howard Maurer, and Greg Lenburg, *The Three Stooges Scrapbook* (1982; reprint, New Jersey: Citadel, 1999), 70.

²¹ Donald Crafton has recently explored laughter's therapeutic function in 1930s cartoon shorts in his essay "Infectious Laughter: Cartoons' Cure for the Depression," in *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, edited by Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 69–92.

²² Michael Calderone, "Jon Stewart's Rally Raises Questions about Comedian's Role," Yahoo! News, October 29, 2010, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/upshot/jon-stewart-rally-raises-questions-comedian-role.html>; Marc Fisher, "Stewart-Colbert Rally: Entertainment or Pure Politics?", *Washington Post*, October 27, 2010, http://blog.washingtonpost.com/story-lab/2010/10/stewart-colbert_rally_entertai.html; Bill Carter and Brian Stelter, "Jon Stewart and His Rally May Shun Politics, but Attendees Are Embracing It," *New York Times*, October 28, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/10/29/us/politics/29rally.html; Marisol Bello, "Jon Stewart's 'Restore' Rally Not Just Politics," *USA Today*, November 1, 2010, www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-11-01-rally01_ST_N.htm.

²³ David Carr, "Rally to Shift the Blame," *New York Times*, October 31, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/11/01/business/media/01carr.html.

²⁴ “Obama Arizona Memorial Speech: Full Text and Video,” *The Huffington Post*, January 13, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/12/obama-arizona-memorial-sp_n_808335.html.

²⁵ The qualifier “formal” is important here. See my later discussion of the limitations of Stewart’s and Chaplin’s politics on p. 280.

²⁶ Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” 38–39.

²⁷ Paulo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, translated by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 159.

²⁸ Ibid., 152–53.

²⁹ The point here is Amber Day’s, from her *Satire and Dissent*, 92.

³⁰ Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition,” 366.

³¹ Michael Denning, “What’s Wrong with Cultural Studies?” in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 164.

³² The distinction between paralogical versus illogical is an important one. In refusing to categorize jokes as illogical, Virno seeks to avoid any implication that they involve flawed or fallacious reasoning. Joke logic cannot be described as fallacious, Virno suggests, since jokes do not imply any propositions or conclusions regarding the actual state of things in the world (and so cannot be judged true or false). Rather, jokes operate in the mode of counterfactual reasoning: they implicitly present hypotheses about what might happen—the decisions people would make, the processes of their reasoning—were the principles of the known world somehow to have become altered. Virno, *Multitude*, 139–49.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by James Strachey (1905; reprint, New York: Norton, 1963), 35, quoted in Virno, *Multitude*, 147–48.

³⁴ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 62–63, quoted in Virno, *Multitude*, 134.

³⁵ Virno, *Multitude*, 148.

³⁶ For this reason, both Chaplin’s and Stewart’s politics fall within the realm of what Rancière calls “consensus,” a mode of symbolic structuration of a community that circumscribes what counts as political activity to what does not challenge it. I am indebted to James Schamus for this point.

³⁷ I have in mind here Rancière’s discussion of “literarity” as the nomadic power of a writing that creates imbalance within the legitimating orders of a society’s discourses. See his *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 94–112.

³⁸ From a 1993 radio interview, quoted in Bill Hicks, *Love All the People: The Essential Bill Hicks* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull, 2004), 260.

³⁹ Bill Hicks, *Rant in E Minor* (Rykodisc, 1997).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hicks, *Love All the People*, 146.

⁴² Adapted from *ibid.*, 215. The routine quoted is also included on *Rant in E Minor*.

⁴³. Quoted in Hicks, *Love All the People*, 146.

⁴⁴. Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 39.

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