

C.C. Hendricks, “Mobilizing Affect: The Rhetoric and Circulation of Popular Political Satire News Shows”

ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers an analysis of how popular political satire news shows use humor, emotion, and circulation to critically respond to emergent exigencies and power dynamics. Drawing from classical rhetorical theory, feminist and queer affect studies, and rhetorical circulation studies, I analyze how three shows—*Saturday Night Live*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*—engage with evolving questions surrounding personality politics, bias, and equal representation in the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

This project constellates around the primary research question: how do these shows, through the affective processes of production and circulation, impart critical literacies uniquely suited for our current moment? More specifically, I analyze a *YouTube* clip and viewer comments for each show. Together, the *YouTube* clips and viewer responses offer insight into how the shows’ rhetorical ecologies shift and are repurposed in the service of different arguments and political ends.

From this analysis, I argue that these shows operate as forms *affective rhetorical intervention*. Kairotic and malleable, affective rhetorical interventions employ emotion as a rhetorical strategy to dismantle and effect change within dominant arguments and narratives. For example, in the *Last Week Tonight* clip, this intervention works to dismantle misguided expectations of impartiality in the news. In *Full Frontal*, the show channels this intervention towards feminist consciousness raising and confrontation of institutionalized racism.

This study contributes to the field a rhetorical and affective inquiry into how and why viewers increasingly turn to political satire as a legitimate news source. By focusing on the rhetorical processes of these shows, this dissertation interjects nuance into dichotomous perceptions of political satire news shows as either democratizing forces or affective feedback loops of cynicism that exacerbate partisan polarization.