

# Comedy as dissonant rhetoric

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## Abstract

This article considers the normative and critical value of popular comedy. I begin by assembling and evaluating a range of political theory literature on comedy. I argue that popular comedy can be conducive to both critical and transformative democratic effects, but that these effects are contingent on the way comedic performances are received by audiences. I illustrate this by means of a case study of a comedic climate change ‘debate’ from the television show, *Last Week Tonight*. Drawing from recent scholarship on deliberation, judgment and rhetoric, I highlight both critical and transformative dimensions of the performance. I attribute these to the vignette’s likely reception, which I describe as ‘dissonant’ – unresolved, affectively turbulent and aesthetically attuned. I argue that comedy is uniquely positioned to spur such ‘dissonant’ modes of engagement and, in so doing, to promote acknowledgement and reflective judgment.

## Keywords

Comedy, dissonance, reception, deliberation, judgment, rhetoric, climate change

In a 2014 episode of his weekly television program, *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver hosted what he called ‘a statistically representative climate change debate’. The ‘debate’ featured 96 scientists (plus Bill Nye the Science Guy) talking over three climate change deniers.<sup>1</sup> Different opinions were rendered inaudible over the cacophony of 100 participants speaking at once. The debate clearly lacked deliberative quality, a relatively fair exchange of ideas or even an opportunity for agonistic contest. None of the debate’s participants were heard; none were able to present reasons.

This article considers how political theory might treat performances like these, where comedy or comedic rhetoric is employed in ways that do not conform to the normative expectations of democratic theories. I argue that these kinds of popular comedic

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performances can prompt deliberation, reflective judgment and democratic will formation by facilitating what I call a ‘dissonant’ reception. I begin by assembling and evaluating a range of political theory literature on comedy. I argue that popular comedy can be conducive to both critical and transformative democratic effects, but that these effects are contingent on the way comedic performances are received by audiences. In the second half of the article, I examine *Last Week Tonight*’s climate change ‘debate’. Drawing from recent scholarship on deliberation, judgment and rhetoric, I highlight both critical and transformative dimensions of the performance. In particular, I focus on the perhaps paradoxical ways the performance violates deliberative norms in order to facilitate greater system-wide deliberation and foster judgment and acknowledgement in audiences. I attribute these qualities to comedy’s capacity to shape its own reception by spurring ‘dissonant’ modes of engagement.

## Comedy and political theory

Many works of political theory focus on tragedy. Indeed, tragic texts, like Sophocles’ *Antigone*, are frequently the very first to which students of political theory are introduced in courses on the history of political thought. Even if one is sceptical of treating tragic plays themselves as works of political theory, whole genres of scholarship exist that take these plays as springboards for considering either Athenian political thought specifically or questions in political theory, including contemporary ones, generally. Works by Larissa Atkinson, J. Peter Euben, Bonnie Honig, Martha Nussbaum and David Scott stand out as important contributions to this tradition, but so too do more canonical works in the history of political thought, including Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>2</sup>

Curiously, comparatively less has been written in the discipline of political theory on comedy.<sup>3</sup> This is odd not just because attending comedic plays (like attending tragic ones) was an important feature of Athenian civic life, but also because comic genres are very popular today – particularly as a foray into the political. Many of the most watched television programs and movies are comedies, and comedic late-night shows are frequently cited as a primary source of news, especially among younger audiences.<sup>4</sup> There is reason to assume that comedy’s political influence may be high, and, indeed, an empirical literature exists exploring precisely this question.<sup>5</sup>

When political theory does engage comedy, it is often to suggest that comedy is worthy of analysis insofar as it is popular.<sup>6</sup> That is, comedy is significant in so far as people consume it. Alternatively, comedy is sometimes addressed as a conservative force – one which perpetuates the status quo or promotes the interests of the elite. Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticisms of the ‘culture industry’ stand out,<sup>7</sup> but so too do more contemporary critiques. In a chapter comparing ‘old’ (Attic) and ‘new’ (television) comedy, J. Peter Euben, for example, highlights the disdain with which many scholars regard television comedy. Euben summarizes eleven reasons why television programs – particularly situation comedies – are regarded as a deeply conservative, anti-political, anti-democratic and anti-emancipatory force by critics.<sup>8</sup> The case goes: television often acts only to get us to buy more stuff, tune out of politics or make us feel good about the status quo – even if it

is deeply flawed. In situation comedies, potentially troubling news is put right at the end of 22-minutes of action, resolving any ‘dissonance’ or discomfort the shows might have caused. This neat resolution means the emancipatory or critical potential of much of popular comedy is muted at best.<sup>9</sup> This criticism is echoed by professional comedians, such as Hannah Gadsby, who questions whether she should give up comedy altogether because of its conservative ramifications and structure. For Gadsby, comedy can facilitate the cathartic release of tension, thereby enabling audiences to avoid acknowledging difficult subjects.<sup>10</sup> Further, comedy can function to entrench oppression by preying on the already oppressed (e.g. racist or antifeminist jokes), and there is a philosophical literature exploring how and in what ways these types of humour may contribute to racism, sexism, etc.<sup>11</sup> In these accounts, comedy can contribute to oppressive beliefs and practices by tapping into or furthering destructive prejudices.

However, comedy can also be theorized as critical, emancipatory or democratically beneficial. In what follows, I assemble and scrutinize some of the literature on this topic, contributing a perspective focused on the receptive effects of comedic performances. I argue that comedy can produce critical and positive transformative effects, but caution that these effects are contingent on how the comedy is received. I then illustrate the importance of reception via an analysis of the *Last Week Tonight* climate change ‘debate’. I argue that a comedic delivery increases the likelihood that the vignette will be received by audiences as ‘dissonant’ – as unresolved, affectively turbulent and aesthetically attuned – thereby promoting acknowledgement and reflective judgment.

## Comedy as critical and transformative

Arguments have been made for comedy possessing both episodic and enduring transformative benefits. One of the more common claims made by those arguing for comedy’s episodic impact is that laughter can prompt people to confront their own and each other’s biases and prejudices, combating what Clarissa Hayward calls our ‘motivated ignorance’ about subjects we choose not to acknowledge due to the psychological costs.<sup>12</sup> To this end, laughter among citizens may facilitate a type of democratic exchange that does not require the erasure of difference, and which might prompt reciprocal practices of reflection.

There are both interpersonal and societal variants of this claim. John Lombardini, for example, takes interpersonal exchanges as paradigmatic, arguing that Aristotle’s conception of ‘wittiness’ can inform ‘a contemporary ethos of democratic laughter’.<sup>13</sup> This is the case because laughing with ‘friends, enemies, and strangers with whom we disagree’ may prompt agonistic practices of reflection.<sup>14</sup> While helpful for pointing towards cognitive and dispositional benefits, analyses that foreground the interpersonal tell us little about relatively one-sided comedic exchanges, such as those we find with television comedies, where there is considerable asymmetry between the joke-teller and the audience. For Lombardini, for example, trust and reciprocity are required for comedy not to devolve into antagonism, and wittiness works best within what Lombardini calls ‘virtue friendships’ – a level of very close friendship beyond what we could ask for with most people with whom we engage in discursive exchange, let alone what we could hope for

with comedians who we watch on television.<sup>15</sup> With popular media, like *Last Week Tonight*, viewers cannot engage in reciprocal dialogue with what they are witnessing on their televisions.

A different approach is therefore needed for asymmetric comedic performances. One avenue is to evaluate humour from a 'systemic approach',<sup>16</sup> where humour is considered based on its ability to advance various functions within broad democratic systems. While he does not explicitly use the language of deliberative systems, Sammy Basu argues that humour has cognitive, dispositional and political democratic functions, which are traceable to humour's ability to interrupt or 'suspend' ordinary arrangements, enabling new and different ways of seeing and associating.<sup>17</sup> Cognitively, 'humour dilates the mind', permitting us to play with ideas or view them in new lights.<sup>18</sup> Dispositionally, humour prompts 'ease, modesty and tolerance', democratic virtues that Basu sees as conducive to democratic deliberation.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, politically, humour 'lubricates', provides 'friction' and also acts as a 'glue'.<sup>20</sup> That is, comedy provides avenues for new issues to be put on the table (it lubricates), it can allow for dissent and criticism to be both raised and heard (it creates friction), and it can do all of this while reducing societal tensions and creating citizen bonds (it acts as a social glue). In other words, humour provides normative rupturing in order to facilitate new ways of thinking and acting regardless of whether the humour emerges from symmetrical or asymmetrical exchanges. Indeed, Euben makes a similar claim, noting that comedy, at its best, can break taboos and allow an audience to '[laugh] at its own prejudices'.<sup>21</sup>

In these accounts, humour provides epistemic democratic benefits, including potentially emancipatory ones. Echoing Iris Marion Young, Basu, for example, argues that too narrow a conception of political communication marginalizes oppressed groups who may communicate differently than do those with power. Additionally, treating comedic rhetoric as non-serious forecloses affectively attuned forms of communication. Driving home this point, Charles Mills frequently began his lectures on philosophy and race by making his audience laugh. He explains: 'I use humour not just because discussing oppression can be disheartening but because—especially for the largely white audiences of philosophy events—it disarms people, and gets the message across more effectively than through accusation and straight polemic'.<sup>22</sup> Marrying the serious and the comedic enables audiences to delve into uncomfortable ground with greater ease.

Moving beyond comedy's episodic functions, comedy has also been said to possess more lasting attributes. Lars Tønder, for example, argues that 'comic acts' make 'enduring positive contribution[s] to democratic politics', due to their 'affirmative power' [emphasis added].<sup>23</sup> In other words, comedy is noteworthy not simply because of the immediate cognitive and deliberative effects it might produce but also because of the way its effects can carry forward in time. For Tønder, comedy has a 'dual' function – deconstructing/negating *and* affirming/adding.<sup>24</sup> Taking a skit which lampoons racism from the short-lived *Chappelle's Show*<sup>25</sup> as a case study, Tønder argues that the comedy of the skit enables both its negating contribution (it shows the absurdity of racism) and its additive contribution (through comedic inverting, the show provides new ways to articulate criticism and address racism). In Tønder's words, comedy can '[augment] the desire for

new encounters and experimentation with other ways of being a citizen'.<sup>26</sup> Comedy provides new ways of seeing and understanding.<sup>27</sup>

A similar claim is made by communication studies theorist Robert Hariman, who argues that comedy serves both critical and constitutive functions, which conventionally eloquent deliberation, civility, etc., cannot serve. Indeed, Hariman goes further than Tønder, arguing that without parodic contributions to the public sphere, the very ground upon which we make and sustain claims might dissipate.<sup>28</sup> Parody is essential because it takes an object of understanding and turns it into an 'image of itself', enabling epistemic play which is facilitated by the critical distancing made possible by parodic mimesis.<sup>29</sup> This epistemic play, in turn, enables forms of knowing that conventionally eloquent speech precludes and it adds to societal pluralism by broadcasting new and different perspectives. Hariman writes, 'When the weight of authority is converted into an image, resistance and other kinds of response become more available to more people'.<sup>30</sup> Once this happens, we are able to laugh at the image humour produces, subverting its power, allowing us to see with new eyes and restructure our ideas and actions accordingly. Hence, Hariman posits, 'Were every speaker a Pericles and every discussion a model of rational-critical debate, we would be in deep trouble'.<sup>31</sup>

I agree with Lombardini, Basu, Euben, Mills, Tønder and Hariman that comedic exchanges and comedic rhetoric more generally can have profound critical and transformative effects, which are significant for democratic politics. I argue, however, that these effects are conditional on how the comedy is received by audiences. Are comic acts received in a way that induces reflection or in a way that confirms existing biases? What prevents comedic rhetoric from being received as merely a cathartic release or as simply an assertion of superiority by those 'in' on the joke? Most importantly, might there be attributes specific or intrinsic to comedy itself that facilitate critically engaged forms of reception rather than more complacent ones?

In what follows, I argue that the reception of comedic rhetoric informs the political effects it will go on to produce. However, I see comedy as especially suited to shaping its own reception compared to other kinds of rhetoric, and to do so in ways that foster critical reflection. I attribute this to comedy's ability to facilitate what I call dissonant modes of reception. Not all comedy facilitates dissonance and not all audiences will receive a given piece of rhetoric in the same way, but comedic rhetoric, I argue, is especially likely to produce dissonant receptions and thereby facilitate reflective judgment. To illustrate the importance of reception as well as dissonance, I turn now to John Oliver's 'climate change debate', which I unpack from the perspective of a critical/democratic rhetorical theory. I show how this comedic performance may play both critical and transformative functions, depending on how it is received by audiences. I argue that the comedic form of the sketch increases the likelihood that the 'debate' will be received by audiences as 'dissonant', thereby promoting acknowledgement and reflective judgment.

## **Last Week Tonight and the politics of democratic debate**

John Oliver's weekly television program, *Last Week Tonight*, fits into a popular sub-genre of comedic late-night talk shows – what one might call 'parody news' or 'satire news'.

These shows take as their primary subject matter the daily (or weekly) news and they address that subject matter in a way that mimics traditional television news-media. In the United States, popular iterations include *The Daily Show* and, formerly, *The Colbert Report*. Canada has its own versions, such as *This Hour has 22 Minutes* and *The Beaverton*. These programs have mass appeal and frequently devote significant airtime to serious issues, such as systemic racism, economic inequality and political corruption. *Last Week Tonight*, however, is unusual in at least two respects. First, while a few minutes may be devoted to quickly summarizing some of the major news items of the previous week, most of the show's half-hour timeslot is spent covering a single topic. The weekly topic may be one of the most discussed items in the news (COVID-19, Donald Trump, Brexit, etc.), but it is also often an item that, while important, is neglected by more traditional news-media. For example, Oliver has dedicated full episodes to the for-profit dialysis industry, problems with flood insurance, and issues with 9-1-1 emergency telephone services – topics rarely addressed in depth in conventional news programs. Second, Oliver's show is singular in that it covers its central topic in far greater depth than do other shows in the sub-genre, or in the genre that it parodies, the traditional news-media. It would not be surprising to watch a brief segment on dialysis machines on the news, but it would be very unusual for that feature to last for over 24-minutes, as it did on Oliver's show. In a world where attention spans can be measured in 140 (now 280) character tweets,<sup>32</sup> the depth offered by *Last Week Tonight* stands out.

Oliver's ability to maintain viewership even given these unusual program features is testament to a point that is addressed by many of the theorists covered thus far in this article: if a topic is made aesthetically pleasing, amusing, enjoyable or funny, audiences are likely to listen (and continue to listen) even if the topic is not immediately interesting to them or is uncomfortable and difficult. The items covered on *Last Week Tonight* are frequently depressing, highly technical, complex, insidious, frustrating or seemingly hopeless. This is what Basu means when he discusses comedy acting as a 'lubricant'.<sup>33</sup> It is also what Tønder discusses when he speaks of comedy prompting discussion and engagement with what people 'otherwise would find abstract and reserved for experts'.<sup>34</sup> By comically engaging with subject matter that most audiences avoid, Oliver may succeed in putting items on political agendas.

Unlike the politics of dialysis, climate change does not lack public awareness (although many still do not deem it to be a particularly serious issue).<sup>35</sup> While some politicians have made addressing climate change central to their platforms, actions taken so far have been insufficient to address the many threats posed. Because media representation is linked to public will formation, it is not uncommon to hear calls for greater and more informed media attention.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that climate change is never discussed in the news-media; it clearly is.<sup>37</sup> However, it is precisely the issue of *how* it is discussed to which Oliver is responding in the *Last Week Tonight* episode with which this article began.

News programs frequently discuss climate change (and other significant issues) by way of a debate or other forms of ostensibly serious competitive or argumentative discursive exchange. Typically, these debates have a similar number of participants on various sides of issues, although there are exceptions – particularly with explicitly partisan

media, where one side might be overrepresented or where the host might choose a side rather than act as facilitator. Climate change coverage often proceeds in this manner, with participants brought in to advocate a position on questions like: is climate change occurring? is it caused primarily by human actions? and, most importantly, what should be done about it? Sometimes these debates are consensus-oriented; other times the debates are agonistic. Either way, normatively, the aim is that audiences who witness these debates are offered a range of perspectives, allowing for more ‘objective’ or less partial or one-sided ways of viewing. If this occurs, audiences will be provided with the resources to make more informed judgments and decisions.

This practice of airing debates or discussions seems to correspond to the normative expectations of both deliberative and agonistic variants of democratic theory. Participants present perspectives, they exchange in reason-giving, and they are provided an opportunity to question each other, thereby scrutinizing each other’s reasons and presuppositions. Audiences watching at home are given a chance to witness a range of perspectives, which are vetted and contested by dialogue and exchange. If the debate is fair and conducted in a way that seeks to amplify propositional rather than strategic content (to the extent these are distinguishable), audiences are provided an opportunity to use their own capacity for reason to decide on the most persuasive position and are given resources to defend that position. Generally, the hope, to speak with Habermas, is that these performances will provide a platform for ‘the forceless force of the better argument’<sup>38</sup> to be distillable for audiences.

A number of potential criticisms emerge when we consider televised debates on issues like climate change. One might ask if television debates can ever do a reasonable job separating propositional and strategic content. These debates are often more about scoring points, hitting soundbites, and appeasing a base of support than they are about ideational exchange or contest. Further, in an age of conspiracy theory, alternative facts and wilful (or motivated) ignorance, how much faith should we put in the idea that, all things being equal, good reasons will prevail over weaker ones? While we might be uncomfortable with deferring to expert knowledge (something that motivates many of the authors discussed above), in a world where, for example, ‘flat earthers’ are growing in number despite overwhelming evidence that the earth is round, downplaying the privileged opinions of experts may be dangerous.

These are not, however, Oliver’s principal criticisms of climate change debates specifically and television debates generally. They are also not the criticisms I seek to make in this article. I see two main criticisms at work in *Last Week Tonight’s* ‘statistically representative’ climate change ‘debate’, which features 96 climate change scientists (and Bill Nye, the Science Guy) speaking simultaneously with three climate change deniers. The first critique Oliver’s sketch makes concerns climate change denial and how it is reported. Oliver suggests: the scientific consensus is in – climate change is real. The effects of climate change are serious, and time is running out in our ability to do something meaningful about it. The question is not up for debate, as it is a matter of fact, not opinion. Oliver tells his viewers that asking people if climate change is real is like asking, ‘which number is bigger, 15 or 5? Or, do owls exist? Or, are there hats?’<sup>39</sup> These are fundamentally different questions, than, say, how should we teach math? Or, what species of

owl is the most interesting? Or, is wearing hats indoors appropriate? The former questions are matters of fact, and the latter are matters of opinion – whether serious or trivial. Reporting on a survey that asks participants if they believe climate change exists should reflect that the survey is asking for people’s belief on a matter of fact. Thus, Oliver claims, ‘The only accurate way to report that 1 out of 4 Americans are sceptical of global warming is to say a poll finds that 1 out of 4 Americans are wrong about something’.<sup>40</sup>

The second critique Oliver’s sketch offers concerns sober and ‘rational’ discourse and debate itself. To this end, *Last Week Tonight* criticizes, first, by exposing the *limitations* of discourse and debate, and, second, by pointing to the potentially negative and *transformative* effects of this kind of discourse – how, in the case of climate change, debate can add to the problem, not just fail to address it. In other words, far from enabling the better argument to win out, might climate change debate actually allow the worse argument to grow and become legitimized?

These forms of debate are *limited* in that they presume a relative degree of equality between the various perspectives, regardless of how ill-informed or dangerous the position taken by one of the debate participants. That is, the debates proceed by supposing potential validity on each side. If this were not the case, there would be no need to hold a debate in the first place. As such, for viewers, the outcome of these debates is likely to go in one of two directions. Either, at the conclusion of the debate, both positions (assuming a two-side debate) will be assumed to have legitimacy, or, the stronger side will have ‘won’, presumably negating the need for future debate. In the former scenario, the debate is perhaps unlikely to foster a critical examination of climate change, as climate change denial will be seen as just as plausible as any other perspective. Indeed, rather than provide opportunities for reflective judgment, the debate might reduce the requirement for judgment as all sides are seen as equally legitimate, negating the need for someone to come to a decision. Further, given that these debates are rarely one-off occurrences, but are repeated continuously across networks, audiences may well be led to believe that these issues are forever contestable as the debates seemingly never end. In the latter case, the question is: does an audience member who does not already agree with the position of one of the participants have the opportunity to be persuaded? This seems unlikely since audiences are usually not provided the resources or motivation to adequately weigh competing perspectives. These debates rarely go into sufficient depth and nuance to adequately allow for informed judgment, and, as I explore later, they also are rarely affectively attuned in a way that could motivate reflective judgment.

More concerning, however, are the *transformative* and reifying effects of these kinds of debates, which normalize the idea that these questions are both up for debate, and ones for which there are valid positions on all sides. That is, it is not simply that these debates fail to sufficiently criticize wilful ignorance or provide a trigger for reflection, but that they provide a platform for that wilful ignorance to become further entrenched. The prime mechanism for this is what I call receptive *resonance*. According to what Charles Taylor calls a ‘constitutive’ theory of language,<sup>41</sup> the language that we receive has a profound influence on our discursive horizons as we move forward in time. If the opinions, perspectives, or linguistic formulations that we receive ‘resonate’ with our expectations, those opinions, perspectives and linguistic formulations may, over time, become



increasingly constitutive of our world. When climate change denial is repeatedly presented with the same legitimacy as the scientific consensus, the perspective is seen as increasingly acceptable and plausible. The more the position is uttered, the more climate change denial seeps into the discursive horizons of viewers, transforming their expectations of appropriate and reasonable speech.

Thus, even if the rhetoric of deniers is not immediately successful in convincing audiences, it may have the slow-forming, iterative effect of transforming worldviews, by way of transforming the linguistic worlds in which people are situated. Because linguistic worlds and horizons, to borrow Gadamer's term,<sup>42</sup> are not rigid with clearly demarcated borders, but are blurry and always changing, the language that we receive has profound effects on us moving forward in time. If, as we grow used to them, these debates and the positions being espoused in them are increasingly unsurprising, what once might have seemed like a fringe view can become increasingly normalized and then acceptable. Thus, the more we witness these debates, the more the perspectives on offer entrench themselves.<sup>43</sup>

In the skit, Oliver points to a feature of many television climate change debates that makes this problem particularly acute. The issue: the speaker defending the scientific consensus is very frequently the same person across various networks and debates – Bill Nye, The Science Guy. A possible effect of repeatedly having the same person represent one side of the debate is that viewers might come to see the perspective as associated with only that one person, and not the vast majority of the scientific community. This is especially problematic given that Bill Nye is someone who is perhaps most famous for having a television show designed for children, making him more dismissible as an expert for some audiences.

Thus, a typical way climate change is addressed on television news-media – debate and discourse – may not only do a poor job of prompting reflective judgment, it may contribute to the entrenchment of climate change denial due to resonant receptive effects. Oliver, however, provides an alternative, which is born from comedy and is productively captured as 'dissonant rhetoric'.

## **Dissonant comedy and democratic non-debate**

What makes Oliver's sketch particularly interesting is not simply that it is critical of common forms of mediation. Rather, what is most significant is that the show provides a transformative alternative for climate change coverage. The show's comic, cacophonous and parodic 'statistically representative climate change debate' not only proposes an alternative form of climate change mediation, it performs it.

Oliver claims that if these debates must occur, they should do so in a way that is representative of the scientific consensus. Oliver, therefore, assembles 100 debate participants and crowds them onto his stage. Three 'debaters' represent the 3% of scientists who are sceptical of climate change, 97 'debaters' represent the 97% of scientists who agree, at least minimally, that climate change is real, caused predominantly by human actions and is of serious concern. The debate begins with Oliver briefly inviting one of the three climate change deniers to speak. He then asks for a response from the 96 scientists

(and Bill Nye, The Science Guy), who all talk at once, rendering any specific claim indiscernible. Before long all 100 participants join in on the cacophony, rendering it impossible for viewers to distinguish any single view expressed by any one participant. Viewers are left with no choice but to take the performance itself (the non-debate) as the object of understanding, rather than any specific claim made by any of the debate participants. The only speaker whose voice the audience is able to make out clearly is Oliver himself, who says against a background of undecipherable noise, 'this whole debate should not have happened'.<sup>39</sup>

Oliver does, however, arrange for the debate to 'happen', albeit not in a way that corresponds to how we might view debates normally unfolding. There is no reasoning, no arguments are made and no positions can be heard. The debate both occurs and it does not occur. It is a debate in form, but not a debate in substance.

This comedic non-debate, I argue, has the potential to make an important contribution to the public sphere, acting as a kind of rupture. More than simply providing the 'friction' that Basu argues comedy can provide, the non-debate disrupts the regular flow of typical media occurrences. The experience of watching the debate is likely to stand out as it is both contrary to our normative expectations of debates and is laughter-inducing. Because of its absurdity, the debate creates, not just an 'image' of climate change media in the sense that Hariman uses the term, but one that is discomforting, unexpected and jarring. Stated differently, the performance is disruptive not simply because it presents an image of a debate that is substantially different from typical debates but because the comedic cacophony of the performance itself is discordant and noteworthy. *Last Week Tonight's* sketch is the literal staging of a communication breakdown. It is a performance of uncomfortable noise, where ordinary communicative exchange can no longer proceed. Oliver utilizes common comedic tropes like hyperbole, extreme reversals and absurdity, to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. This makes the resonant receptive effects characteristic of traditional debates far less likely, as the debate clashes with our expectations rather than resonating with them. The non-debate is eventful; it is disruptive both in form and in practice.

Disruption itself, however, need not be normatively or critically productive. Rather, disruption (comedically induced or not), can be a vehicle for manipulation. We may be warned that a crisis is occurring (e.g. by being told that a group of people are out to get us), which may well be experienced as disruptive. The fear created by this disruption can then be manipulated into support for policies that many may not have supported otherwise. Disruption can also function to release social tension, which can relieve people from dwelling on those matters which are uncomfortable. Indeed, as comedian Hannah Gadsby remarks, unproductive comedy can do this, allowing people to laugh their way out of difficult situations or uncomfortable truths.<sup>44</sup>

The non-debate, however, has two features, which are facilitated by its comedy, that increase the likelihood that it will be received not merely as disruptive, but potentially as *dissonant* – that is, as unresolved, affectively turbulent and aesthetically attuned – a distinction that is missing from the political theory literature on comedy, which tends to address reception only obliquely.<sup>45</sup> First, because Oliver's skit is amusing, audiences are more likely to continue to watch rather than change the channel, receding from the

uncomfortable truth of climate change.<sup>46</sup> Because it is being made enjoyable, audiences may not immediately desire to escape the experience of dwelling on impending climate disaster – a feature that, on my account, often distinguishes dissonant from merely disruptive rhetoric. The non-debate marries discordance (climate change) with aesthetic attunement (comedy), facilitating affective turbulence and uncomfortable enjoyment. Second, Oliver does not navigate his audience to a simple and easy resolution of climate change, but, rather, challenges his audience to reflect on the issue at hand. Indeed, because no specific claims can be heard in the debate, the debate never resolves any tension it might cause. We are left to dwell on the frustrating, uncomfortable and ‘inconvenient’ (to use Al Gore’s term)<sup>47</sup> truth of climate change. The dissonance is open-ended. The show ends in cacophony. Audiences are left to bring themselves back to consonance.

These two features, which are facilitated by the show’s comedy, greatly increase the likelihood that the vignette will be received as dissonant. The performance is conducive to reflection or evaluative judgment because the comedic form brings audiences in and the comedic (lack of) resolution pushes audiences to do work themselves to make sense of what they have witnessed. *Last Week Tonight’s* non-debate, therefore, not only presents an alternative to typical debate and discourse, it performs that alternative. Rather than merely serving a critical role, the comedy of *Last Week Tonight* actively combats the rhetoric of climate denial and the forms of media that sustain denialism. At best, because of the dissonance it creates, the non-debate may have both episodic and enduring transformative effects in audiences, brought about by facilitating critical reflection and evaluative judgment.

While this may be the best-case reception, this reception is made possible by the vignette’s comedy. It is the comedy of Oliver’s vignette that make it unlikely that it will be received in stride; that it will be received as resonant. If Oliver’s mediation was not comedic, if it were a typical debate, for example, it would not have the same receptive effects. Comedy is, thus, key to the positive episodic and transformative effects of the vignette, but these effects are conditional on the comedy facilitating dissonance. This is the case, because, first, if audiences do not find the sketch funny, they may not tune in or continue to listen when the uncomfortable fact of climate change is raised. Second, if audiences are not compelled to laugh, the sketch may not be jarring; laughter facilitates reception that is not resonant. Finally, laughter provides a different outcome than a rhetor navigating an audience to a clear and simple solution. Laughter enables dissonance to persist. It is in this sense that comedy may be especially conducive to a dissonant reception and the reflective judgment associated with it.

## Deliberation and judgment

These claims contribute new insights to both deliberative theory and judgment theory. Within the ‘systemic approach’ to deliberative democracy, we can see the performance as serving both epistemic and democratic functions. Epistemically, while the non-debate may not immediately ‘produce preferences, opinions, and decisions that are appropriately informed by facts and logic and are the outcome of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons’,<sup>48</sup> over time, I argue, the non-debate can further these

epistemic ends. Comedic dissonance can check discursive power and provide for more sustained reflection on matters of systemic concern. Comedic performances, like the one on *Last Week Tonight*, thus, can challenge hegemonic practices and ways of viewing via the dissonance induced by ridicule, inversion, sarcasm and absurdity.

Additionally, the non-debate (and comedic performances like it) provide a democratic function. *Last Week Tonight* brings citizens into important political conversations and spurs political action and acknowledgement. For some audiences, the show makes accessible important political concerns and solicits ordinary citizens to critically engage with them. This furthers democratic ends by facilitating important conversations in the public sphere and potentially more concrete forms of political action and acknowledgement.

Finally, comedy can also serve a third, ethical, function by criticizing practices of oppression and by broadcasting and amplifying the perspectives and opinions of the oppressed. The comedic sketch from *Chappelle's Show*, which Tønder focuses on, is an example. While it does not in any way undo the requirement for other forms of action, the vignette can serve as a force to combat systemic racism.<sup>49</sup> The inversions that it facilitates via its comedy expose ordinary insidious practices that sustain racism, demonstrating both their power and their absurdity. Thus, even though comedic media may not have a robust internal deliberative quality, comedy can improve the deliberative quality of the broader system.

The positive effects I claim for comedy also fit with judgment theory. Linda Zerilli argues that acts of evaluative judgment are acts of world-building in that they contribute to and help to sustain a common world, which is predicated on a pluralism of shared ways to view common objects of understanding. When we judge, we represent and consider various viewpoints and, ultimately, contribute our own point of view, broadcasting it for others to represent in their thought. In this way, judging both relies upon and produces a 'common world'.<sup>50</sup>

I see Oliver's non-debate as helpful for this world-building process. This may seem paradoxical in that Oliver is in some respects criticizing perspectival pluralism as it relates to climate change. Moreover, he is silencing (also paradoxically through the noise of a hundred people speaking at once) the perspectives of debate participants. However, all of this is done in order to facilitate the activity of judgment in audiences. While judgment is 'ordinary', we do not always do the best job of facilitating it. This is where comedy and dissonant rhetoric more generally can be helpful. Because it has the potential to instil dissonance, the climate change non-debate may propel citizens to judge not merely the positions of sceptics versus scientists but, more importantly, the very practices of mediation that are at work in our democracies. The objective is not for citizens to simply parrot the views of partisans who participate in television debates, which could be ineffectual in fostering genuine evaluative judgment. Instead, the 'non-debate' may aid in 'enlarging our sense of worldly reality',<sup>51</sup> providing us with new material which we can represent in our thought. In this way, the non-debate facilitates world building through reflective judgment and acknowledgement brought about by instigating a dissonant reception.

This is particularly significant in that comedy can motivate us to acknowledge and evaluate topics on which we might otherwise avoid dwelling. As Rob Goodman argues, judgment can be painful and carry with it ‘subjective costs’.<sup>52</sup> Because climate change, systemic racism, tax policy, etc., may be difficult or uncomfortable topics to either dwell upon ourselves or discuss with others, we may avoid engaging in evaluative judgment concerning them. Comedy can spur us to do so.

## Comedy as dissonant rhetoric

It is my position in this article that comedy is especially suited to fostering receptive dissonance. This is not to say that all comedy guarantees a dissonant reception, nor is it to say that all comedy is productive in the way that Oliver’s sketch might be. Comedic performances can be of the type that Lombardini (and Aristotle) caution against, where would-be comics use ‘humour’ to assert superiority or belittle others. Indeed, comedy can sometimes entrench oppression by preying on the oppressed. More generally, comedic performances can be manipulative or pandering and work to foreclose evaluative or reflective judgment as in some of the eleven criticisms of ‘sitcoms’ to which Euben is responding.<sup>53</sup> Critical theorists should also keep in mind Gadsby’s concerns that comedy too frequently allows us to laugh our way out of seriously acknowledging or acting on societal oppression. For example, Alex Shephard argues that a 2010 comedic rally by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert failed to instigate actual change or progressive momentum because it functioned as a mechanism for audiences to feel good about themselves without doing any real political work.<sup>54</sup>

These important critiques notwithstanding, in this article I have attempted to show that comedy also has the potential to prompt important moments of affective turbulence – instances where discordant messages are married with aesthetic attunement and remain unresolved, soliciting audiences to do the work of judgment and acknowledgement. Other types of rhetoric (such as sober debate) are less likely to prompt this kind of reception because they lack the features (aesthetic attunement and unresolved discordance) that make dissonant receptions likely.

And while not all comedy will solicit dissonance, John Oliver’s comedy is not alone in doing so. I see a similar process at play in the Marx Brothers’ lampooning of nationalism and the glorification of war in *Duck Soup*.<sup>55</sup> The film is unquestionably silly, but it is a haunting rebuke of fascist politics. While the film was powerful in the 1930s (deemed sufficiently dangerous that Mussolini banned it in Italy), it may be worth re-watching today as it shows the absurdity of fascism and prompts reflection on how war and nationalism are mediated. The film draws in audiences and, through its silliness, prompts viewers to dwell on uncomfortable or difficult topics like nationalism, militarism and the forms of reverence bestowed on political leaders. I see similar effects in some comedy which criticizes racial oppression, such as the comedy of *Key & Peele*, which exposes everyday practices of racial domination. The show can be dizzying in its poignancy, but also enjoyable to watch, making it a potentially powerful critical force. The show’s comedy prompts audiences to reflect on the practices that sustain systemic racism and

tends not to provide easy resolutions, encouraging viewers to reflect on issues they might otherwise avoid.

Even Gadsby, who is highly critical of comedy because of its conservative potential, uses comedy herself to facilitate audience acknowledgement and judgment. Indeed, she delivers her criticism of comedy as a stand-up comedy routine, telling her audience, who frequently laugh at her jokes, that she wants them – especially the straight White male audience members – to experience the uncomfortable tension that arises from taking seriously the experiences of the oppressed.<sup>56</sup> Gadsby's '*Nanette*' comedy special tackles patriarchy, heteronormativity and White supremacy, and her comedic form both draws in audiences who might otherwise avoid those topics and facilitates the navigation of her audience to unresolved tension. While she suggests that comedy can enable the cathartic release of tension and the avoidance of action (it can be merely disruptive), she demonstrates how comedy can do the opposite. Towards the end of her routine, she states that 'stories' rather than jokes are the medicine needed for addressing destructive bias, but also that 'comedy is the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine'. Comedy, she claims, enables her story to be 'heard' and 'understood'; comedy enables enjoyable tension which facilitates sustained acknowledgement. Comedy, that is, enables a dissonant reception.

Indeed, other comedians sometimes defend their comedy by highlighting the dissonance it might cause. In a famous debate concerning the uproar following the release of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, John Cleese claims that the silliness of the film does not undermine its more important goals, but, rather, is conducive to them. Cleese argues that the comedy is designed to get people to 'make up their own minds', and to 'take a critical view'. Cleese tells his audience: 'don't just believe because someone tells you to'.<sup>57</sup> Monty Python's objective is not to get audiences to parrot their rhetoric, but to think and judge for themselves.

This is difficult, and it is difficult in a way that is perhaps best encapsulated in a notorious scene from the film. Brian is a mistaken prophet who, contrary to his own wishes, has legions of followers who desire to emulate his every act and follow every piece of advice. But this non-prophet does not want the attention and yells out to his masses of unwanted followers, 'You've got to think for yourself! You are all individuals'. The crowd's response is telling. In unison they respond: 'Yes, we are all individuals!' Not to let the joke end there, Brian again implores the crowd: 'You're all different'. Once again, in unison they respond: 'Yes, we're all different'. One crowd member then proclaims: 'I'm not'. The irony of the remark and the laughter it produces both highlights the difficulty of soliciting reflective judgment in audiences and provides an opportunity for such reflection to occur.

This is not to say that the comedy of Oliver, Gadsby or Monty Python (or other popular comedians) is necessarily helpful for addressing highly divided populations, which is a role Lambardini, Basu and Hariman each see comedy as potentially filling. A comedic delivery does not guarantee global appeal. Not everyone will find the same things funny,<sup>58</sup> nor will they do so for the same reasons. Comedy does not spring from nowhere, and those people who have self-selected into viewing *Last Week Tonight* or *Nanette* are already likely to be sympathetic to the propositional content of those programs.

Nevertheless, rhetoric generally and comedic rhetoric specifically need not convert someone from across the political aisle in order to be critically productive. Rather, dissonant rhetoric generally, and dissonant comedy specifically, can achieve transformative effects simply by shifting how ideas fit together. It may also spur acknowledgement or action where passive compliance was formerly acceptable. While many know climate change is real, how many of us have truly acknowledged this fact and live our lives in accordance with it?<sup>59</sup> Further, how many of us have spent time contemplating the political consequences of talking-heads debates as a form of news mediation? By prompting dissonance, comedy invites reflective judgment and political acknowledgement.

## Conclusion

While no given reception is inevitable, there are features intrinsic to popular comedic performances like *Last Week Tonight*'s 'statistically representative climate change debate' that make a dissonant reception likely. This is because the comedy of such performances prompts receptions that are affectively turbulent and aesthetically attuned, and which remain unresolved. When comedy instils dissonance in audiences, it enables critical reflection, acknowledgement and reflective judgment.

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## Notes

1. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, season 1, episode 3, 'Climate Change Denial,' directed by Joe Perota, aired May 11, 2014 on HBO.
2. Larissa Atkinson, 'Antigone's Reminders: Choral Ruminations and Political Judgment', *Political Theory*, 44, no. 2 (2016), 219-239; J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*:

- The Road Not Taken*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans and ed. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music', in Walter Kaufman (ed. and trans.) *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* (Toronto: Random House, 1976).
3. This is not to suggest that there is no writing in political theory on comedy. Indeed, interest in comedy, both contemporary and Attic, seems to have increased in recent years. See, for example, this recent critical exchange in *Contemporary Political Theory*: Julie Webber et al., 'The Political Force of the Comedic', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20, 2 (2020). There is also substantial interest in comedy in cognate disciplines, such as humour studies, media studies and (with regard to Attic comedy) classics.
  4. Feldman and Young argue that increased news-media attention is correlated with watching late-night comedies. 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, no. 4 (2008), 401-422.
  5. There is a debate concerning the extent of comedy's influence on political psychology. While there is no consensus, most scholars agree that specifically comedic media does have an impact on audiences moving forward in time, albeit a somewhat limited one. See Young Min Baek and Magdalena Wojcieszak, 'Don't Expect Too Much! Learning From Late-Night Comedy and Knowledge Item Difficulty', *Communication Research*, 36, no. 6 (2009), 783-809.
  6. This article, concerning the popularity and appeal of *The Simpsons*, is representative: Paul Cantor, 'The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family', *Political Theory*, 27, no. 6 (1999), 734-749.
  7. Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso, 2010).
  8. J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 74-76. While Euben acknowledges that television comedy can be conservative, he argues that this need not be the case and that the opposite can be true. In fact, Euben argues that television comedy, at its best, can break taboos and 'make the assumptions of the culture visible' thereby turning them into objects of politics rather than merely unquestioned presuppositions upon which opinion rests (83). Specifically, Euben argues *The Honeyymooners* and, most especially, *The Simpsons* have positive critical and democratic value.
  9. Young argues humorous stimuli decrease critical scrutiny of arguments. See Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, 'The Privileged Role of the Late-Night Joke: Exploring Humor's Role in Disrupting Argument Scrutiny', *Media Psychology*, 11 (2008), 119-142.
  10. *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, directed by Jon Olb, and Madeleine Parry (2018; <https://www.netflix.com/title/80233611>).
  11. For a summary, see Luvell Anderson, 'Racist Humor', *Philosophical Compass*, 10, no. 8 (2015), 501-509.



12. Clarissa Hayward, 'Disruption: What is it Good For?', *Journal of Politics* 82, no.2 (2020), 448-459. Hayward does not discuss comedy but rather disruptive events which combat motivated ignorance.
13. John Lombardini, 'Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor', *Political Theory*, 41, no. 2 (2013), 203-230, 219.
14. Ibid, 216.
15. Ibid, 217.
16. Jane Mansbridge et al., 'A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy', in John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds.) *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
17. Sammy Basu, 'Dialogic Ethics and the Virtue of Humor', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 7, no. 4 (1999), p378-403, 387-394. Basu also makes a case for interpersonal benefits, advocating for what he calls, the 'Ironic Speech Situation'.
18. Ibid, 387.
19. Ibid, 389.
20. Ibid, 391.
21. Euben, *Platonic Noise*, 79.
22. Alumnus Charles Mills on pedagogy, white supremacy, and the future of philosophy', *University of Toronto: Department of Philosophy Website*, May 16, 2018, <http://philosophy.utoronto.ca/news/charles-mills-alumnus-interview/>.
23. Lars Tønder, 'Comic Power: Another Road Not Taken?', *Theory and Event*, 17, no. 4 (2014), 1.
24. Ibid, 6.
25. *Chappelle's Show*, season 2, episode 2, 'Negrodamus & the Niggar Family,' directed by Rusty Cundieff, Neal Brennan, and Scott Vincent, written by Neal Brennan, Dave Chappelle and Paul Mooney, aired January 28, 2004 on Comedy Central.
26. Tønder, 'Comic Power', 2.
27. A somewhat similar claim is made by Patrick Giamario concerning laughter specifically. Giamario provides a Rancierian reading of Kant's meditations on laughter, suggesting that laughter is 'dissensus'. However, laughter need not be critical productive for Giamario. Laughter, he argues, reshapes 'sensus communis' in both emancipatory and reactionary directions. See Patrick T Giamario, 'Laughter as Dissensus: Kant and the Limits of Normative Theorizing Around Laughter', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20 (4) (2020), 795-814.
28. Robert Hariman, 'Political Parody and Public Culture', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 94, no. 3 (2008), p247-272, 248.
29. Ibid, 255.
30. Ibid, 254.
31. Ibid, 248.
32. The 140- and 280-character count is the maximum allowable length of a tweet, not the average length, which is much shorter. For what it is worth, this endnote is 182 characters long.
33. Basu, 'Dialogic Ethics'.
34. Tønder, 'Comic Power', 9.
35. According to a Yale study, only 70% of Americans believe global warming is happening, only 57% believe it is 'caused mostly by human activities' and only 49% are of the opinion that 'Most scientists think global warming is happening'. See Jennifer Marlon et al., 'Yale Climate

Opinion Maps 2018', *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, Aug. 7, 2018, <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us-2018/?est=happening&type=value&geo=county>.

36. For a graphic depicting climate change coverage across US Newspapers, see Max Boykoff et al., 'United States Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming, 2000-2020', *Center for Science and Technology Policy Research*. Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado, Media and Climate Change Observatory Data Sets, 2019, doi.org/10.25810/jck1-hf50. [https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/icecaps/research/media\\_coverage/usa/index.html](https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/icecaps/research/media_coverage/usa/index.html).
37. According to the Yale study, only 22% of Americans reported encountering climate change media 'at least weekly'. See Marlon et al., 'Yale Climate Opinion'.
38. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Beacon Press, 1975), 108.
39. Last Week Tonight.
40. Ibid.
41. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).
42. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
43. There has been some momentum on ending television debates on climate change for fear of legitimizing denial. This has been criticized by right-wing media. A *Fox News* op-ed, critical of this move: Michael Guillen, 'Physicist: Don't fall for the argument about 'settled science'', *Fox News*, posted: January 21, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/physicist-dont-fall-for-the-argument-about-settled-science>.
44. *Hannah Gadsby*.
45. Dissonance, as I understand it, is not 'dissensus' in the Rancièrian sense. While moments of dissonance are exceptional and can result in significant interpretive shifts in linguistic horizons, dissonance does not result in a total rupture of the sensible or in a transcendence from the interpretations of 'explicators'. See Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', in Jacques Rancière and Steven Corcoran (ed. and trans.) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). For more on dissonance, see Simon Lambek, 'Nietzsche's Rhetoric: Dissonance and Reception', *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25, no. 1 (2020) p57-80.
46. Media coverage may be limited because some perceive climate change as a 'ratings killer'. See Kyle Pope and Mark Hertsgaard, 'Why are the US news media so bad at covering climate change?', *The Guardian*, Posted: April 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/22/why-is-the-us-news-media-so-bad-at-covering-climate-change>.
47. *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim (2006).
48. Mansbridge et al., 'A Systemic Approach', 11.
49. Chappelle's recent transphobic rhetoric clearly complicates his legacy.
50. Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
51. Ibid, 267.

52. Rob Goodman, 'The Deliberative Sublime: Edmund Burke on Disruptive Speech and Imaginative Judgment', *American Political Science Review*, 112, no.2 (2018), p 267-279.
53. Euben, *Platonic Noise*, 74-76.
54. Alex Shephard, 'The *Daily Show*'s Rally to Restore Sanity Predicted a Decade of Liberal Futility', *The New Republic*. Posted: December 27, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155928/daily-shows-rally-restore-sanity-predicted-decade-liberal-futility>. Though a full analysis of Stewart and Colbert's rally is outside of the scope of this article, I suggest that their rally, in-part, failed to produce action because it released tension rather than inducing it; it was a poor spur of receptive dissonance. But this is likely to have been true even if the organizers aimed for the rally to be 'serious' rather than funny. The comedy of the rally may have only increased the likelihood of a dissonant reception, and the organizers simply squandered this potential by being overly smug and insufficiently discordant in their rhetoric.
55. See *Duck Soup*, directed by Leo McCarey (1993).
56. *Hannah Gadsby*.
57. *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, season 1, episode 7, directed by John Burrowes, aired November 9, 1979 on BBC2.
58. Ted Cohen explores this topic concerning jokes specifically, arguing that jokes are 'hermetic', requiring some fore-knowledge or shared sense for them to land. See Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts On Joking Matters* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). Elsewhere, Cohen highlighting three reasons why a joke may not land. See Ted Cohen, 'And What If They Don't Laugh?' in *Serious Larks: The Philosophy of Ted Cohen*, ed. Daniel Herwitz (University of Chicago Press, 2018).
59. That there are far more Canadians who are concerned about climate change than there are Canadians who are prepared to make sacrifices to combat climate change speaks to this issue. See Éric Grenier, 'Canadians are worried about climate change, but many do not want to pay taxes to fight it: Poll', *CBC News*. Posted: June 18, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/election-poll-climate-change-1.5178514>.

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