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Pop Culture or Political Riff:

Presidential Images and Narrative on Saturday Night Live

A frightening moment this week for First Lady Hillary Clinton.

Her plane, en route to the former Soviet Union, was forced to make an emergency landing when it was discovered that a frayed wire in the engine was causing serious malfunctions.

The president was said to be furious and demanded an immediate investigation of what went wrong with...

OPERATION FRAYED WIRE.¹

For nearly a decade, details of the personal relationship that defines the marriage of Hillary Rodham and Bill Clinton have been the subject of private conversation, speculation by the national press, and fodder for a seemingly endless parade of jokes, skits and narrative on cable and late-night television. What is it about their relationship that captures the public interest? Is the fascination really about their marriage? Or is it a veiled vehicle for a curious public to poke, probe and ponder the psyche of a person with whom they feel a unique and personal kinship: a man they elected president?

Presidential satire was part of late-night television before Chevy Chase began taking pratfalls as Gerald Ford in the early days of Saturday Night Live. However, during

¹ Michael Shoemaker and Scott Weinstein, ed. SNL Presents: The Clinton Years. Written by the writers and cast of Saturday Night Live. (New York: TV Books, 1999) 68-9.

the last quarter century, no other late-night television show has consistently satirized and parodied the American presidency with the consistency and to the extent of that show.² It's featured a southern-fried Jimmy Carter, who baffles a talk show host with his knowledge of pop-culture trivia; a bipolar Ronald Reagan, who plays a grandfatherly old man for the public but turns into a scheming micro-manager and runs his staff to exhaustion behind closed doors; and a neurotic George Herbert Walker Bush, whose whining phrases "not gonna do it" and "wouldn't be prudent" reinforce his perceived lack of touch with the American people. In short, Saturday Night Live offers a rich text for examining the way Americans see their presidents without the filters applied by mainstream news media.

This paper examines the construction of presidential satire on Saturday Night Live. It considers how presidential characters created for the show parody characteristics – real and perceived - of actual presidents. It gathers episodic evidence from a highlight videotape of presidential skits sold by Saturday Night Live Studios. For academic context, it locates its discussion within a contextual framework of communication theory offered by Walter Lippmann and Jeffrey Scheuer. Lippmann claims that people respond as powerfully to fiction as they do to reality, and in many cases, they help create the fiction to which they respond. In short, he argues that the real environment we inhabit is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for us to directly engage, and that even though we have to act in that environment we have to

² Saturday Night Live has presented nearly 300 skits featuring presidential characters since its inception 28 years ago.

reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.³ Scheuer claims two great trends have shaped American politics during the past generation: the emergence of television and the nearly complete collapse of American liberalism in the face of a resurgent New Right. In short, he argues that television has created an audio-visual vocabulary of images, slogans and sound bites that dominates political conversation, and this television language privileges certain political ideas and disfavors others.⁴

Are Saturday Night Live characters fair and accurate portrayals of the presidents they spoof? What impact do the parodies have on public perceptions of the presidents and the institution of the presidency? While relevant, those questions are better suited for a political science study based on a more quantitative research model using survey and focus group data. This is a communication study. As such, it is designed to examine how images and narrative of the presidency are communicated through political satire. It focuses on two central questions. How are these characters crafted? And what makes them successful parody? While images and narrative of American presidents are widespread on late-night television, a narrow look at the characters offered on Saturday Night Live provides insight into political communication. Examined within longstanding theories from Lippmann and more recent ones from Scheuer, this paper helps answer the question: How do parodies of American presidents on Saturday Night Live provide images and narrative of the American presidency to people who get political information outside mainstream news media?

³ Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Simon Schuster, 1922) 11.

⁴ Jeffrey Scheuer, The Sound Bite Society: How Television Helps the Right and Hurts the Left (New York: Routledge, 2001) 9.

Methodology

Lippmann and Scheuer provide the theoretical framework for this qualitative study in their respective books, Public Opinion and The Sound Bite Society. Lippmann's work was published in 1922, a time when the psychology of politics was only just beginning to be explored.⁵ While the book offers a myriad of insight into the way people view their world, Chapter 1, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," is most germane to this analysis. Scheuer's more recent work, published in 2001, provides a solid vehicle to extend Lippmann's theories directly to television. The introduction, "The Politics of Electronic Information," best summarizes his arguments.

The text that is analyzed in this paper comes from SNL Transcripts, a Web site that lists by year every episode of the show since it began in 1975.⁶ The listings include host, musical guest and a manifest that describes each skit in each episode. A spreadsheet was created to identify and sort presidential characters that have appeared on the program since it began in 1975. Every skit from 532 episodes during twenty-eight seasons was reviewed.⁷ Seventeen presidential characters were identified. For this paper, a presidential character is a person who actually was elected president or was the nominee of a major political party in a general election.⁸ Actual presidential skits

⁵ Lippmann xi.

⁶ Patrick Lonergan, Saturday Night Live Transcripts. < <http://snltranscripts.it.org>>

⁷ The 2002-3 season is underway. Six episodes have been shown. The most recent original episode included in the data was 11/16.

⁸ Nominees of major parties (Michael Dukakis, Walter Mondale, Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot and Al Gore) were included, because many skits were set during a presidential campaign. In some cases, nominees went on to be elected president (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W Bush). While skits involving sitting vice presidents (Dan Quayle and Dick Cheney) clearly were commentary on a presidential administration, they were not considered. Neither were skits about presidential family members (Amy Carter, Nancy Reagan and Hillary Rodham Clinton).

contained on an anthology videotape Presidential Bash 2000 also were reviewed.⁹ The 116-minute tape contains twenty-six skits. In addition, this paper draws on interviews of Saturday Night Live cast members for insight into why specific characters were successful. The interviews were conducted by Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller for their book Live From New York.

The following section summarizes theories by Lippmann and Scheuer. The section after that gives a brief history of Saturday Night Live designed to show the unique role it has played in presenting presidential satire on late-night television. That section also identifies three distinct ways presidents are parodied and gives a textual example of each. The final section deconstructs the skits, places them within the theories offered by Lippmann and Scheuer, and offers conclusions.

Theory: Pseudo-reality and How Television Shapes Narrative

Prior to Lippmann, most political science texts were concerned with how decisions were made: by political parties, voting blocs, the three branches of government, etc... In Public Opinion, Lippmann moves beyond that relationship and creates a nexus between political theory and human psychology. He challenges the assumption that humans are in fact omni-competent citizens who can make reasoned judgments on public issues if they are given a complete set of facts.¹⁰ His experience in World War I led him to believe that distortion of information was inescapable, largely because humans are more than creatures of reason: Their decisions are influenced by emotions, habits and prejudices. In the book's introduction, Ronald Steel argues that

⁹ Presidential Bash 2000. Edie Baskin, Mary Elle Matthews and Norman Ng. SNL Studios, 2000.

¹⁰ Lippmann xii.

Lippmann came to believe no one can see everything, sort it out and respond appropriately, so we choose and categorize things we observe.¹¹

This reality is key to the way we define our world. Lippmann argues that we define according to “stereotypes” presented by our culture. These stereotypes are useful tools that provide a sense of context to an unfamiliar world. This is important, he argues, because we do not experience most aspects of reality directly. Instead, we inhabit a world that is part reality and part pseudo-reality, which we fabricate with the help of images we get from others. Those sources may include gossip, movies, newspaper stories and now, the World Wide Web.

To emphasize the concept of “pseudo-environment” Lippmann draws on Plato’s cave allegory. In The Republic, Plato describes a place where people are chained with their backs to the light. All they can see are shadows and images on a wall of a cave. Eventually, they come to believe these shadows are real images, even though their reality is merely a reflection (or pseudo-reality). Lippmann argues that this is true of the average citizen. He or she has no firsthand knowledge of national or world events. Instead, they experience them second-hand, through a prism of images created and projected by others.

Lippmann extends this explanation of the way people experience world events directly to the concept of world leaders. He writes: “Great men, even during their lifetime, are usually known to the public only through a fictitious personality.”¹² He cites for example writings by Lytton Strachey about Queen Victoria. Says Strachey:

¹¹ Lippmann xii.

¹² Lippmann 5.

When Victoria came to the throne among the outside public there was a great wave of enthusiasm. Sentiment and romance were coming into fashion; and the spectacle of the little girl-queen, innocent, modest, with fair hair and pink cheeks driving through her capital, filled the hearts of the beholders with raptures of affectionate loyalty.¹³

For Lippmann, "...the most interesting kind of portraiture is that which arises spontaneously in people's minds."¹⁴

Lippmann's arguments were made before the advent of television. I will argue later how they remain relevant today. For now, let us turn to Scheuer, who writes eighty years later and two generations after television reached virtual saturation among American households. He opens with the statement that television doesn't just affect society; to a great extent it *is* society. Borrowing from the phrase made famous by former House Speaker Tip O'Neill, he writes: "All politics is no longer simply local; most politics – and most popular culture – is televisual."¹⁵

Scheuer defines a sound-bite society as "one that is flooded with images and slogans, bits of information, and abbreviated or symbolic messages, a culture of instant but shallow communication."¹⁶ He argues that the electronic culture fragments information into isolated, dramatic particles and that it resists longer and more complex

¹³ Lippmann 6 (Queen Victoria, p. 72.).

¹⁴ Lippmann 6.

¹⁵ Scheuer 2.

¹⁶ Scheuer 8.

messages. He writes:

These characteristics militate against a vision that emphasizes:
1) change, including gradual or evolutionary change; 2) abstraction, an important tool for envisioning and framing change; 3) ambiguity and non-binary thinking; 4) reasoning that appeals to causal, contextual or environmental considerations; 5) divergence between appearance and reality; and 6) stronger bonds between individual, community and nation.¹⁷

In short, Scheuer states that the sound-bite society enforces a contrary vision that “focuses on the immediate and the obvious; the near-term, and the particular; on identity between appearance and reality; and on the self rather than larger communities.”¹⁸ He concludes that it is a society that “feeds on simplicity and disdains complexity.” And simplicity, he suggests, is “epitomically (sic) conservative,” whereas complexity is “quintessentially progressive.”¹⁹

Text: Images and Narrative of the Presidency on Saturday Night Live

Saturday Night Live began offering presidential satire on Nov. 8, 1975, four episodes into its first season. Chase opened the show as a clumsy Ford who could barely make it through a speech without a physical mishap. A month later, he had polished the character into a mainstay of the show. (In a skit called “Ford Fireside Chat,” Chase takes slapstick to an extreme as Ford literally crashes into the Christmas tree

¹⁷ Scheuer 10.

¹⁸ Scheuer 10.

¹⁹ Scheuer 10.

while trimming it.)

Appendix 1 shows the number of times seventeen presidential characters have appeared during twenty-eight seasons from 1975 to present. In all, presidential characters have appeared 293 times in Saturday Night Live skits. Clinton has been in more skits than any president, having appeared seventy times between the 1991-2 and 2001-2 seasons. That is roughly twice the number of the next two popular characters, the elder Bush and Reagan, who have appeared in thirty-eight and thirty-seven skits respectively. Other presidential characters that have appeared ten times or more include: George W. Bush and Carter (twenty-eight appearances), Bob Dole (twenty-five appearances), Ford (seventeen appearances), Al Gore (fifteen appearances), Ross Perot (eleven appearances) and Richard Nixon (ten appearances).

Although presidential characters were an early mainstay of the show - appearing ten and fifteen times during the first two seasons respectively - the frequency with which they appeared dropped during the late 1970s and most of the 1980s. During the eleven seasons from 1977-8 to 1987-8, the average number of appearances dropped to roughly five characters per season. That changed beginning with the 1988 presidential election, the first election in twenty years between two non-incumbents. During the fourteen seasons from 1988-9 to 2001-2, the average number of appearances tripled to roughly fifteen characters per season. Presidential election years are the peak years for presidential characters. Thirty-nine presidential characters appeared in each of the seasons during the last two presidential elections. That is more than twice the number of any other year.

While humor is largely a subjective judgment, three noticeable trends appeared during a viewing of the twenty-six skits contained on Presidential Bash 2000. 1.) Presidents were parodied in a fictional skit by exaggerating characteristics commonly attributed to them. 2.) Presidents were parodied in a fictional skit by giving them characteristics generally opposite to those commonly attributed to them. 3.) Presidents were parodied by re-creating an actual event and exaggerating their behavior there.

The following texts provide examples of each trend. Skit I, "Clinton Visits McDonalds," plays against Clinton's reputation of being able to connect with the American people and his love of fast food. Skit II, "Split-Personality Reagan," plays Reagan's image as a good-natured grandfather figure against the idea that he secretly is a domineering scheming micro-manager. Skit III, "Bush-Gore 2000 Debate," plays the image of Bush as short of substance against the image of Gore as a roaring bore. (Each skit is discussed in terms of communication theory by Lippmann and Scheuer in the next section.)

Skit I. Clinton Visits McDonald's

CLINTON. Al right boys. Let's stop in here for a second. I'm a little parched from the jog.

AGENT. Sir. We've only been jogging three blocks, and you asked us not to let you stop at any more fast food places.

CLINTON. Well, I just want to mingle with the American people, talk with some real folks and maybe get a Diet Coke or something.

AGENT. All right, fine. As long as we don't tell Mrs. Clinton.

CLINTON. Jim, let me tell you something. There's going to be a whole

bunch of things we don't tell Mrs. Clinton. Fast food is the least of our worries.

CROWD (VOICES). Oh my God. It's Bill Clinton.

CLINTON. (Making his way across the room.) Hey...How you doing?...Nice to meet you...How are you?...Oh that's and adorable baby. What's your name sweetheart?

WOMAN. Her name is Shakira.

CLINTON. Shakira. That means African princess, doesn't it?

WOMAN. Oh, why yes.

CLINTON. Well she certainly is beautiful enough to be a princess. Say, you going to finish these fries?

WOMAN. Uh, no. You want some?

CLINTON. Well, if you're not going to eat em...Yum. Those are good. Well, Shakira, take good care of your mom, now.

CLINTON. (Making his way from table to table) Hi how are you?...Hello...Good to meet you...How you doing? Hi...How we doing over here?

MAN. Not to shabby. Les Hombrin. Hombrin Hardware. We voted for you, sir.

CLINTON. Why thank you Les. You own your own hardware store do you?

MAN. Yes, sir, since 1972.

CLINTON. Well, good for you. You know we want to create a network of

community development banks to lend money to small businesses like yourself...I see your boy doesn't like pickles.

MAN. No, he hates them.

CLINTON. You mind? (Takes pickles off boy's tray). Thanks a lot. Well, good luck to you. I'm going to wake up every morning thinking about you.

MAN. Thank you, sir

CLINTON. Oops, forgot one! (reaches back for pickle)...

Skit II. Split-Personality Reagan

REPORTER. ...and finally Mr. President about the Iran-Nicaraguan connection. Some may wonder which was worse, your knowing or your not knowing.

REAGAN. (In soft, grandfatherly voice) Well, all I can say is I didn't know. Why, we're trying to find out what happened because none of us knows.

REPORTER. Well, thank you Mr. President.

REAGAN. Well, I hope I've answered your questions as best I could given the very little I know. Good-bye, and God bless you.

REPORTER. Thank you Mr. President.

REAGAN. (Voice changes to loud authoritarian tone as cabinet members aides scramble in from side door.) OK, get back in here. Let's get down to business. I'm only going to go through those once, so it's essential you pay attention. Casey. You'll spear-head our new

operation to fund the Contras. The C5As with the TOW missiles and grenade launchers will leave for South Africa at 08:00 hours. I want you to supervise the loading. Regan...

REGAN. Yes, sir...

REGAN. Well, I'm afraid you're going to have to resign. But first you'll make a public statement supporting me, which I wrote myself. It's over there on the word processor. Just key in and press file. The code name is...

REGAN. (Looks puzzled and lifts his hands)

REGAN. Oh, all right. I'll do it for you. Now, any questions? Caspar...

WEINBERGER. Mr. President, you're going so fast there's still a lot about the Iran-Nicaraguan operation I don't understand.

REGAN. (Yelling) And you don't need to understand! I'm the president, and only I need to understand. Is that clear?

WEINBERGER. Yes, sir!

REGAN. Carlucci. You're new. Here's how we do things. (Presses button that lowers painting to reveal secret world map.) The red countries are the countries we sell arms to. The green countries are the countries where we wash our money. The blue countries are...

AIDE. Excuse me, Mr. President, sir. It's your 11:30 photo opportunity with the little girl who sold the most Girl Scout cookies.

REGAN. Damn! OK. Let's get it over with. (Cabinet members rush out

side door) Everybody out. Move. Move. This is the part of the job I hate.

REAGAN. (Returns to soft, grandfatherly voice as Girl Scout enters.) Well, hello little girl. What's your name?

GIRL. Lisa Meyers.

Reagan. Well, Lisa, if you're that good a sales lady, maybe I could use you on Capitol Hill. (Poses for pictures then the Girl Scout leaves.)

REAGAN. (Returns to loud, authoritarian voice as aides rush in from side room.) Back to work. Come on...(Cabinet members rush back into room.)

Skit III. Bush-Gore 2000 First Debate

LEHRER. Mr. Vice President, during this campaign you have repeatedly called the Bush tax plan a risky scheme. Why?

GORE. (Slow monotone) Gov. Bush and I have two very different plans to offer tax relief to American families. (Pause) In his plan, the wealthiest one percent of Americans would receive nearly fifty percent of the benefits. (Pause) My plan, Jim, is different. Rather than squander the surplus on a risky tax cut for the wealthy, I would put it in what I call (Long pause) a lock box.

BUSH. I don't know what that was all about. (Pause) But I will tell you this: Don't mess with Texas.

LEHRER. Gov. Bush...

GORE. (Continued monotone) Jim, could I just add that in my plan the

lock box would only be used for Social Security and Medicare.

(Pause) It would have two different locks...

LEHRER. Gov. Bush...

GORE. (Continued monotone) Now, one of the keys to the lock box would be kept by the president. The other would be sealed in a small magnetic container and placed under the bumper of the Senate majority leader's car.

LEHRER. Gov. Bush, two weeks ago at a meeting of the economic club of Detroit, you said the following: "More seldom than not, the movies gives us exquisite sex and wholesome violence that underscores our values. Every two child did. I will." What did you mean by that?

BUSH. (Appears to be pondering answer) Pass.

LEHRER. Perhaps if you could see it on a monitor. (Quote shown on screen)

BUSH. Pass.

LEHRER. Really, you have no idea what that could be?

BUSH. Education?

GORE. (Continued monotone) Jim, I believe what my opponent intended to say is that all too often the explicit sex and violence we see on TV undermines our values...

BUSH. Bingo! That's it...

Discussion and Conclusions

What is Saturday Night Live? Is it an incubator for cutting-edge social satire or a commercial endeavor whose content ebbs and flows with decisions of censors who believe they are in tune with America's cultural values? Does the show's approach fall within a specific comedic tradition, or is it in some ways pioneering? These questions are a starting point for identifying how the show's content has evolved and how presidential parody fits into its paradigm. Data and theory presented earlier extend the discussion to how the show's satire plays with stereotypes as described by Lippmann. The data also raise new questions. Why does presidential parody spike during certain years, and why are some presidential characters parodied more often than others? Finally, it gives some perspective on whether Scheuer's arguments may apply to comedic satire and parody as well as straight narrative in mainstream news and public affairs programming.

Saturday Night Live is more than just a television program. It is a cultural scrapbook of the American experience. During the last quarter century, its montage of comedic wit, ironic parody and biting satire have given Americans a look at their culture, their heroes and themselves without the filters and constraints of mainstream news. Its format – the variety show with music and comedy sketches intermixed – wasn't new, but its content was in attitude, approach and collective mindset. As Shales and Miller write: "Tea had been around for centuries, after all, but the notion of throwing mass quantities of it into Boston Harbor, that was new. That was revolutionary. And so was Saturday Night Live."²⁰

²⁰ Shales and Miller 3.

Yet, Saturday Night Live wasn't created because NBC executives yearned to introduce something new and bold into the television bloodstream or the American mainstream.²¹ Johnny Carson wanted the network to stop showing reruns of the Tonight Show on weekends. In 1974, he finally told the network to stop the practice altogether. NBC had the choice of returning the weekend time to local stations – and losing a substantial chunk of advertising revenue - or filling the slot with network programming. Executives chose the latter, and Saturday Night Live was born. As Shales and Miller remind us:

The people who own and run commercial television networks don't put a show on the air because they imagine it will break bravely with tradition or set grand new aesthetic standards or stretch the boundaries of the medium – or for any reason whatsoever other than to make money.²²

So how did presidential parody become such a central part of the show? What determines who gets parodied and to what extent? And what makes these parodies successful?

As noted earlier, presidential parody began on Saturday Night Live with Chase impersonating Ford on the fourth episode (1975-76 season). The following year, Dan Aykroyd crafted a highly successful parody of Carter that played well with Chase's Ford as the 1976 election approached. Parodies of Carter and Ford quickly became mainstays of the show during the first two years, appearing a combined number of

²¹ Shales and Miller 3.

fifteen times in various skits. Aykroyd made three additional appearances as Nixon during the second season (1976-77). An indication of just how precise the show's commitment to political satire was, skits featuring Reagan also appeared during the first season (1975-76), months before he mounted his attempt to wrestle the GOP nomination from Ford and a full four years before he unseated Carter in 1980. Reagan characters also appeared during the third season (1977-78) and fifth season (1979-80).

With a well-established Reagan character and a litany of successful presidential skits to its credit, writers and cast members were ready to expand the tradition of presidential satire as the country entered the Reagan years. But something happened. Instead, the show turned in the opposite direction. From the fifth season (1979-80) to the twelfth (1986-87) the number of skits with a presidential character dropped dramatically. (See Appendix A)

Barry W. Blaustein, a head writer and supervising producer during the early 1980s, claims the show was directly affected by social mores and perceived cultural swings of the country.²³ The Reagan Era was a time, Blaustein says, when the show's producers and NBC executives were still finding a place for political satire.

Consequently, they may have been overly sensitive to what they perceived would be accepted by the public. He told Shales and Miller:

Reagan's election set the tone. There was a kind of impending doom hanging over the country, and there was palpably a move toward conservatism at the network.

²² Shales and Miller 3.

²³ Blaustein began a 20-year collaborative relationship with David Sheffield with a three-year stint on Saturday Night Live. In all, they wrote more than 150 sketches for the show.

We tried ideas for sketches that the network would shoot down. The censors would say, "You can't do that." We'd point out they did something similar with Aykroyd (who played Carter for the show) three years earlier, and the censor would say, "Yeah, but that was then. This is now. Things are different."²⁴

Brad Hall, a writer and cast member from 1980-83, says the show clearly lost an opportunity for some historic comedic material. He told Shales and Miller:

There was a lot of news going on, Reagan era. There was stuff we could've been parodying. I don't think (Dick) Ebersol wanted that. And I don't think NBC did...And so the very thing that originally made the show popular was really resisted...You look back, it's kind of bizarre, the election in 1984 and there's almost no political humor during an entire political election. Nothing.²⁵

Harry Shearer, a writer during the 1979-80 and 1984-85 seasons, recalls the frustration of the time and how it played into his decision eventually to leave the show.

He told Shales and Miller:

I had been writing this series of Reagan sketches called "Hellcats in the White House," none of which got on the air. And the last one, they had me in Reagan makeup

²⁴ Shales and Miller 223.

²⁵ Shales and Miller 274.

from dress straight though air. So I spent eight straight hours in Reagan makeup, and I think Bob Tischler finally told me at twelve fifty-three the sketch was cut, and I said to him, "I kind of figured that out." So for three straight weeks, I wasn't on the air, and I just at that point decided I had better things to do with my time.²⁶

A trend is clear. Presidential parody on Saturday Night Live appears to ebb and flow during the show's early years with the perceived popularity of a presidential character. The show's writers, cast and producers seem more willing to poke fun at Ford and Carter toward the end of their terms, when their job-approval ratings were down. They were less willing to satirize Reagan toward the beginning of his presidency or during his re-election effort, when his job-approval rating was high. That changed as the Iran-Contra scandal unfolded and Reagan's job-approval began to drop.

The Roper Center Web site contains poll results by news organizations and independent firms dating to the Eisenhower Administration.²⁷ According to Gallup Poll data:

- Ford was initially popular, but his approval rating dropped to the 30-percent range in early 1975 and bounced in the 30- and 40-percent range for the remainder of his presidency.

²⁶ Shales and Miller 287.

²⁷ <<http://roperweb.ropercenter.uconn.edu>>

- Carter also was popular during the first year of his presidency, but that faded by 1978, when his numbers dropped around the 50-percent range and remained there or below for the remainder of his term.
- Reagan was initially popular, though his numbers briefly dropped below 50 percent with the 1982 recession. He quickly rebounded as the 1984 election approached and his landslide victory seemed inevitable. His job approval remained solidly in the 60-percent range from 1983 to 1986. It dropped into the low 40-percent range in 1987 following the loss of the Senate and as the Iran-Contra scandal came to light. It hovered below 50 percent for much of the remainder of his presidency.

This paper doesn't take the position that the decision to parody a president or the success of a presidential character on Saturday Night Live depends directly on survey data. I would argue only that the survey data shown by Gallup gives a snap shot of a popular sentiment, and anecdotal evidence shows those in charge of creative decisions at the show appear to have been affected by that perception. Other factors, such as a well-publicized change in the job of executive producer – and the specific comedic tastes of those in charge - also may have played a role in the decision to offer less presidential parody during the early Reagan years. During the 1980-5 seasons, Dick Ebersol replaced Lorne Michaels, who helped create the show. Shales and Miller write:

During the Ebersol years, SNL dabbled only lightly and mildly in political humor, but once Michaels returned the show began to build a stronger and flintier political profile. In time, it became an integral if impudent part of the

process.²⁸

Beginning with the 1988 election, the show's producers seem to appreciate the value of presidential humor as an end to itself. From that point, the number of parodies seems to coincide directly with political content of mainstream news media, which is more prolific during election years. Shales and Miller write: "Even if all other attempts at livening up the show failed, (since 1988) it was almost guaranteed a new burst of energy every four years when election time came around."²⁹

Now that the idea of presidential parody has been established as a core element of the show – many Americans expect shows that open with "a message from the president" or a "debate" parody during election years - the question of what makes the show's presidential parody popular should be addressed.

Clearly, presidential parody presented by Saturday Night Live has been successful partly because it simply is funny. However, it has become such a mainstay of the show – especially at election time – that something else seems to be at work. I would argue with the help of Lippmann that presidential parody presented by Saturday Night Live has been successful, because it allows Americans to learn more about a person they believe they already know. (It is a natural impulse to be curious about a friend or person with whom one has some relationship.) For most Americans, the president is such a person. The question then becomes what is the nature of that relationship. Is it real, perceived or somewhere in between?

²⁸ Shales and Miller 346.

²⁹ Shales and Miller 346.

Lippmann argues the average citizen has no firsthand knowledge of national or world events but experiences them second hand, through a prism of images created and projected by others. I extend his argument to the relationship Americans have with the president. Relatively few Americans actually know a president. Yet, most Americans feel they know with some degree of certainty the person who is the president. The Clinton shown in Skit I and the Reagan shown in Skit II demonstrate that premise.

Lippmann's theory of "images in our heads" gives a concise framework for examining those characters. It may be applied aptly to both fictional skits that parody presidents by exaggerating characteristics commonly attributed to them and fictional skits that parody presidents by giving them characteristics generally opposite to those commonly attributed to them. I will argue that Skit I shows Clinton as the former and Skit II shows Reagan as the latter.

Clinton was known for having an uncanny ability to connect with working-class Americans. He also was known for his affinity for junk food. So, what do we learn about Clinton from Skit I? We already know these two drives to be part of Clinton's personality. Perhaps we wonder which is stronger. Skit I tells us. Clinton's love of junk food is at least as powerful – if not more – than his desire to connect with working-class Americans. To people who like the Clinton they believe they know, that is ridiculous. To those who don't like the Clinton they believe they know, it may not be.

Reagan was known as – or at least to many had the image of – an affable, Rockwellian grandfather. Yet, members of his administration engaged in covert operations many Americans believe undermined constitutional principles basic to our

democracy. So, what do we learn about Reagan from Skit II? We already know these two conditions existed simultaneously in the White House during his presidency. Perhaps we wonder if the public Reagan was a façade. Skit II tells us. Reagan actually was a scheming micro-manager bent on running a shadow government that used Cabinet members as pawns to further his covert agenda. To people who like the Reagan they believe they know, that is ridiculous. To those who don't like the Reagan they believe they know, it may not be.

Here I draw an important conclusion. Placed within the theory offered by Lippmann, the presidential parody offered by Saturday Night Live may be considered relatively free of a partisan agenda. In that way, it resembles the phenomena scholars noticed with the CBS television show *All in the Family*. In that case, people who shared Archie Bunker's beliefs saw him as the winner in his clashes with his son-in-law, Michael Stivic. Those who shared Stivic's beliefs saw him as the winner in his clashes with Bunker. In short, how we categorize according to the images we have in our heads, determines not only how but what we see. Consider Steel's paraphrase of Lippmann: "Each person creates for himself a reality that feels comfortable; where one person sees a primeval forest, another sees a potential load of lumber ready to be stacked and shipped."³⁰

Scheuer's theory that a sound-bite society feeds on simplicity and disdains complexity - and that simplicity is "epitomically (sic) conservative" and complexity is "quintessentially progressive" – offers a framework for examining Skit III. It may be applied specifically to skits that recreate an event such as a presidential debate and

³⁰ Lippmann xii.

exaggerate the behavior presidential characters exhibited during it. I will argue that Skit III shows the younger Bush and Gore in that context.

Scheuer argues that the electronic society fragments information and resists longer, more complex messages. I believe his theory enhances perspectives offered by Lippmann, who wrote nearly eighty years earlier and before the advent of television. Scheuer's twin claim that television simplifies and that simplicity abets conservatism is not a partisan one for he admits arguments of the left and the right may be equally sophisticated or flawed. He writes: "It is not the arguments or strategies but the underlying values and visions that are simpler and more complex respectively. And those core values of simplicity and complexity cannot be peremptorily disqualified."³¹ The Bush and Gore shown in Skit III demonstrate this premise.

Bush is shown as a man of few words. His first three responses are: "Don't mess with Texas," "Pass," and "Pass." In contrast, Gore is shown as someone who rambles endlessly. He drones on and on about his "lock box" and either doesn't notice or doesn't care that he is inappropriately dominating the dialogue. Bush, the conservative, delivers his message with simplicity that Scheuer claims is "epitomically conservative." Gore, the liberal, delivers his with the complexity Scheuer claims is "quintessentially progressive."

Skit I succeeds by exaggerating characteristics widely associated with Clinton. Skit II succeeds by offering an image contrary to the one generally associated with Reagan. And Skit III succeeds by recreating an event widely seen by Americans and playing on a pop-cultural interpretation of the event.

³¹ Scheuer 11.

All three skits are examples of satire playing on stereotypes. So, what conclusions can be drawn from them? Lippmann argues that "...we do not first see, and then define; we define first and then see."³² This seems to be the case with the presidential characters of Saturday Night Live. Examples cited earlier include: a Clinton, who is a glutton for both food and human interaction; a Reagan, who either is simultaneously grandfatherly and maniacal; a Bush, who is simple minded; and a Gore, who is tediously boring. Clearly, these are simplifications meant to capitalize on easy recognition. These are not random creations. The writers and cast members of Saturday Night Live are using images that already have been defined for their audience by other means, largely mainstream media. Would a tediously boring Clinton, a gluttonous Reagan or a grandfatherly Gore be funny or even interesting? Not likely. In fact, those images likely would create dissonance that would confuse or lose the audience. It would in a sense be acting out of character.

This is important to my earlier hypothesis: the narrative about these presidents is successful, because it is a way for people to poke, prod and ponder the characters of persons with whom they have a pseudo-relationship. If Americans are used to getting messages about political issues through sound bites (short slogans designed to appeal to preconceived notions), have they also become used to getting impressions about political leaders – people they think they know – through this type of venue? In a sense, does this entertainment act as a personalized sound bite? I would argue that again Lippmann offers a reasonable explanation. He writes:

The analyst of public opinion (the show's writers and

³² Lippmann xii

cast) must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action (the skit), the human picture of that scene (stereotypes imbedded in the audience's mind by mainstream media), and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of the action (audience reaction).³³

Finally, the data collected for this paper and some earlier discussion raise the question: How do Scheuer's theories account for SNL strategies? If Scheuer is correct in his hypothesis that television is conducive to a narrative that favors conservative ideology, we should consider whether the satire offered by Saturday Night Live fits this schema. And if not, why?

I would argue that Saturday Night Live does not offer presidential parody that favors conservative ideology. I reached that conclusion in two steps. First, I considered the presidential characters the show uses: Are conservatives or liberals disproportionately the subject of the parody? Then, I examined Scheuer's arguments to see if they fit a schema where narrative is defined in negative terms by using irony and satire. In short, I considered whether parody of a liberal character is always the same as conservative ideology.

While the intensity and subject matter of the parody is a strong indicator of whether an ideology is being privileged, counting the subjects used in the skits does shed some light on whether an institutional bias exists at the show. If Democrats are

³³ Lippmann 11.

chosen disproportionately more than Republicans, a stage is set for conservative ideology to be dominant, because liberals would be the source of the parody.

The data give a quantitative summary of which presidential characters appear most during the show's twenty-eight seasons. (See Appendix A) There have been 160 (54.6 percent) Republicans, 122 Democrats (41.6 percent) and 11 Independents (3.7 percent).³⁴ The number of Republican characters is significantly higher than the number of Democrats. However, during the show's twenty-eight seasons, a Republican was president 16 years (57 percent of the time), and a Democrat was president 12 years (43 percent of the time). While not conclusive, this data does offer a foundation to argue that the show's writers and producers choose presidential characters at least in part for who was in the public consciousness – who the public may have its pseudo-relationship with – not by partisan ideology.

Finally, Scheuer's arguments appear to apply largely if not exclusively to narrative that exists in news and public affairs programming. His text is rife with examples of narrative taken from mainstream news media: defeat of the Bork nomination, upholding of Roe vs. Wade, passage of the Clean Air Act, acceptance of the Contract with America.³⁵ There is scant mention of entertainment narrative beyond the effect of tabloid television, such as Inside Edition, American Journal and Current Affair. He doesn't apply his theory to parody or satire, which often depends on saying the opposite of what is meant. I would argue that if anything, parody and satire are a

³⁴ For this analysis Ross Perot was considered the only Independent. Pat Buchanan was considered a Republican.

³⁵ Scheuer 26.

complex – not simplistic – form of narrative, and by nature they would favor a liberal ideology rather than a conservative one.

Further, his twin claim that television simplifies and that simplicity abets conservatism is not directly partisan. In fact, he admits arguments of the left and the right may be equally sophisticated or flawed. As noted earlier, he writes: “It is not the arguments or strategies but the underlying values and visions that are simpler and more complex respectively. And those core values of simplicity and complexity cannot be peremptorily disqualified.”³⁶

In sum, Saturday Night Live provides a rich text for examining the way Americans see their presidents. During the last quarter century it has carved a niche in popular culture as a leader in presidential satire and parody. Communication theories offered by Lippmann and Scheuler help explain why the show has been so successful: It gives Americans a forum to learn more about a person with whom they believe they have a personal relationship: their president.

While presidential satire has been a mainstay of the show since the first season, it has ebbed and flowed with the cultural climate in the country. A content analysis for this paper shows that presidential satire was not relatively prominent on the show during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, it re-emerged since during the late 1980s and has grown to an even greater level in recent years. More important, it tends to hit its highest levels during election years, when Americans may be paying most attention to the media for information about presidential characters.

³⁶ Scheuer 11.

These highs and lows are documented by Shales and Miller, who claim that in 1996 and again to an even greater degree in 2000, “Saturday Night live returned to its richest vein of humor, American politics, and in the process the show rejuvenated itself for the umpty-umph time.”³⁷ They give an optimistic scenario for the role the program may occupy in the future of American popular culture. They describe recent casts and new members as “prodigious,” the writing team as “witty and self-confident,” the satire as “biting.” Of the 2000 season, they write:

Saturday Night Live seemed to have come full circle, back to its roots. Those predicting the show’s demise skulked back into the shadows – poised of course to return at any given moment. Ratings rose, the show surged again in popularity, and the real Al Gore and his aides studied SNL’s parody of a presidential debate to help understand where Gore had gone wrong with his own debate performance.

Saturday Night Live – prominent again in the national consciousness, closely watched and widely quoted – was primed for its next quarter century of being the satirical epicenter of the United States. It had changed a great deal over the decades, but to its noble mandate it remained true: Find apple carts and upset them, for the nation’s amusement and just because, like Mount Everest, they were there.³⁸

³⁷ Shales and Miller 443.

Appendix 1

Number of Times a Presidential Character Appeared on SNL by Season

	G. W. BUSH	G O R E	C L I N T O N	P E R O T	D O L E	B U C H A N A N	G. H. W. BUSH	D U K A K I S	R E A G A N	M O N D A L E	C A R T E R	F O R D	N I X O N	M c G O V E R N	K E N N E D Y	L I N C O L N	J A C K S O N	T O T A L
02	2																	2
01	8	2	1				1		1		1	1						15
00	14	11	8				3		1		1	1						39
99	4		4				1											9
98			15														1	16
97			7	1	1													9
96		2	14	3	12		2		2		2	2						39
95			4		10	2												16
94			2	1			2						1					6
93			4	1														5
92			9	4	1		3											17
91			2	1		1	4											8
90						1	6		1							1		9
89							7		2		2	1						12
88							4	3	1		1							9
87					1		4		2									7
86									3			1						4
86									4			1						5
84									2	3								5
83									4				1	1				6
82									2		1							3
81									5				1					6
80									4		3							7
79							1		1		1							3
78											3		2					5
77									1		3	1	1					6
76											9	3	3					15
75									1		1	6	1		1			10
Ttl	28	15	70	11	25	4	38	3	37	3	28	17	10	1	1	1	1	293

Source: Content analysis by Joe Cutbirth from Saturday Night Live Transcripts.

<<http://snltranscripts.jt.org>>

- a) The year listed for each season is the year in which the season began. Seasons begin in September and typically run through the spring of the following year.

³⁸ Shales and Miller 443-4.

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