

Chic Ironic Bitterness

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R. Jay Magill, Jr.



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FOR MY PARENTS,

Ronald and Bonnie Magill,

AND MY GRANDPARENTS,

*Harold and Kathryn Magill &
Edmund and Evelyn Kling, Jr.*

Entire strata of the population have been living
for a considerable period in an *inner somewhere-else*.
They do not feel bound to what are called the
fundamental values of society.

—PETER SLOTERDIJK,
The Critique of Cynical Reason (1983)

Preface

This book began vaguely in 1999. Not that any of it was written but for a small review of Jedediah Purdy's book *For Common Things* on a satire website that two friends and I had started—*The Saucepot Review*—which has since, like all dead websites, become a portal for porn.

Now eight years later, the topic of irony as a social attitude, as a form of social critique, is even more palpable and—as Borat so deftly displayed—has even greater effects on political and national identity. September 11, as it shook everything else in the world, only further widened the cultural fault line between the “serious” pundit and the ironic critic. As political speech and culture over the past half-dozen years have become increasingly grave, bleak, and eerie, seriousness has somehow become the litmus test of true patriotism. Yet as we've had to adjust to the rhetoric and living conditions in the shadow of terrorism, the fanaticism of religious groups, and the publishing of cartoons about religious figures, irony as a method of wry, skeptical detachment has thankfully proven itself to be far from dead, as many predicted and some even hoped for.

When Stephen Colbert spoke at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner in April 2006, it shoved into high relief the tension between the serious and ironic modes of public engagement. Colbert's tone did not register with many in the audience of decorated military folk, high officials, Hill workers, media bigwigs, and Pentagon types. The blows were hard. Laughs were nervous. The president grew noticeably incensed. Tension, sweatingly palpable, scented the room.

The performance glaringly opened up the faults of the present and of politics, making for awkward, weighty silences. Yet scarcely a network mentioned it. Many claimed the performer had bombed.

Colbert's speech, however, far from being insignificant, was a visible emanation from within a culture swimming with knowing assumptions about its nation's power, politics, and pragmatism. Ironic debasing of the Colbert variety is motivated by a sort of entrenched disgust with the state of our national being. It is, as it's long been, a method of critique that gets to the heart of this disgust with economy and stealth. It seems at times an alternative, in our cosmopolitan minds, to actual revolution.

Raising its perky head most alertly when it sees a dreaded state of affairs passing as normal, the ironic, satiric turn seen so frequently of late is a way to distance oneself from threats to integrity. Indeed more than a figure of speech, the ironic worldview, when performing, does something else rarely examined in debates about it in the recent past: it paradoxically and secretly preserves the ideals of sincerity, honesty, and authenticity by momentarily belying its own appearance. It must vigilantly maintain the split between the social role and the inward self to shield what is valuable. For the satirically inclined, trust is now based on the mutual and silent recognition of purposeful artifice. In a culture dense with spin, it's one of the most honest things we have going.

While irony and satire have been used since the Greeks for lambasting those in power—and used in American literary culture since the beginning of this fair Republic—ironic critique has grown into the dominant operative strategy of social criticism in popular culture over the past decade, particularly as seen on shows such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Extras*, *The Office*, *Chappelle's Show*, and, of course, in *The Onion*. Crucially, this book is not a hellishly dry academic analysis that will ruin everything great about these shows. I like TV too much to betray it with too much thinking. Instead, this book is a foray into both

cultural criticism and intellectual history to examine what motivates the larger ironic sensibility being utilized by these shows, a certain cultural bitterness legitimated through trenchant disbelief—an intellectual heritage of irony as a private revolt against the world, particularly one seen as increasingly unstable, ambivalent, open to interpretation, and of dubious moral authority.

In this sense, we're still Romantics. Ever since European romanticism, leaping the chasm from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, this hovering mode, this turn inward, this skeptical remove was recommended—initially by writers, poets, philosophers—as a steady armor against society itself, against the self's impending invasion by technology, scientific understanding, politics, and commercialism. And against the abuse of language, too, that brittle thread of trust.

Romanticism got its jump start by clinging to—however now inconvenient to discuss given religion's divisive role—some rather Protestant values in the face of this onslaught, namely those of inwardness, privacy, sincerity, and a sense of authentic connection to others and to oneself. As a mode of social engagement, irony, based ultimately in Romantic ideology, instead of being fundamentally anti-everything, is, then, at root a Protestant stance: it attempts to critique exteriorities and convey the hidden truth of inwardness. Thus, efforts by some pundits to oppose irony and cynicism with sincerity or earnestness have not understood that sincerity of moral vision can no longer, in a cultural moment that so often seems a frightening yet absolutely predictable joke, be spoken literally to have any effect. Moral vision loses its power—for those deeply aware of its recurrent misuse—when it is cheapened by ready-made, cliché-laden, speech-writer-prepared, pedantic literalism.

I regret that there is much to this topic that could not be included in this book for lack of time and my own effort. Clearly, detachment/cool/irony as forms of social resistance have been around in any number of American cultural productions for ages—African American,

gay, punk, Jewish (which would require several volumes to address), ethnic “others”—as well as in the works of countless artists and writers, all in need of a sort of psychic armor against a dominant political and commercial culture trying to smother existing ways of life with ever-increasing expediency and absorption. Our current ironic mode is comprised of all of these.

What is most interesting now, however, is that such an attitude, such distancing, is no longer hemmed off to cultural enclaves. Now, instead, enormous swathes of Americans feel the need to armor themselves against their very own culture, one that seems to come at, instead of from, them: “Entire strata of the population have been living for a considerable period in an *inner somewhere-else*” wrote the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in 1983. “They do not feel bound to what are called the fundamental values of society.” They respond with a “chic bitterness,” a term coined by Sloterdijk and which I’ve adapted. These two attitudes—chic ironic bitterness and civic trust—have only intensified in opposition, particularly so in the United States. And civic trust, embodying our fundamental social values and discussed so habitually over the last decade, has slowly suffered and retreated, has become a problematic whose reasons must be discovered and analyzed.

But for millions of us who are to some extent ashamed of our culture and national behavior, proud of its ideals yet conscious of the state of politics and knowledge in the early twenty-first century, the answer is clear: trust has been abused and thus withheld from those undeserving of it. It has been replaced by a justified, antagonistic remove. We now have a resolute understanding of how things get done in the world—we’re so often reminded by a thousand reality shows and ominous political statements—and we know it ain’t pretty. *Realpolitik* has unabashedly become life. Significantly, however, we wish it were otherwise.

The public ironists and satirical outlets of today are not simply experiencing a random blessing; no, they are giving voice and functionality to a frustration felt by so many that have enacted this psy-

chological stance as a distance from a culture and politics that embarrasses them. They retain a vague but very real social hope in the ideals that politics needs but has forgotten. But as they suspect that's cheesy, too, they'll never speak it.

This concludes my application for/absolute guarantee for never getting a job at *The Daily Show*.

—RJM

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Hamburg, Germany

April 2007

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serious,
less fun,
but more
substantial*

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*Again
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beginning*