A GENERIC ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORIC OF
HUMOROUS INCIVILITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Laura K. Hahn, M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1999

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Sonja K. Foss, Advisor
Dr. Mary Garrett
Dr. Dale Brashers

Approved by

Dr. Sonja K. Foss
Advisor

Department of Journalism and
Communication Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

This research examines the rhetoric of humorous incivility as it is enacted in popular culture, specifically in the television programs, *Seinfeld* and *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and the radio and television program, *The Howard Stern Show*. The purpose is to identify, describe, and understand the features and functions of a rhetoric of humorous incivility. The method of genre criticism is used to identify and explain the rhetorical situation, the substantive and stylistic features, and the organizing principle of each show.

The analysis of the shows suggests humorous incivility may function in two ways for audiences. The shows may be read as both civil and uncivil, depending on the frame from which the audience views them--closed to the perspectives of the other in a self-focus or open to such perspectives in an other focus. When the self-focused topics of sex, family, technology, and bodily functions receive the focus of attention, they may be read within the civil frame--as open, playful, and innovative. When viewed from this perspective, the shows fall into categories at the civil end of the continuum because the characters handle these topics in a manner that appears open or unrestricted. When viewed from the perspective of other-focused topics, however, they appear closed to the possibility of allowing external influences to have an impact.
For being a woman I admire and want to live up to;
For the way she shares herself and her life with her family, friends, and community;
   For the many ways she enjoys her life;
   and for all that she brings to mine
I dedicate this project to my loving grandmother
   Erma Katherine Lewis.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I finish this degree, I am happily back home in California at Humboldt State University. I want to thank the department and my students for making coming to work so pleasurable and for making the Ph. D. process worth it. There are numerous others who fed me, coached me, helped me think, listened to me bitch, and made me feel that this could, indeed, be done. For those of you who were with me in the summer of 1998, the greatest thanks and appreciation must go to you. I needed and appreciate every expression of tenderness and care you lavished on me--whether it was daily phone calls, nightly meals, sleepovers when I needed company, and shoulders to cry--on you were there.

Robin, how do I express my gratitude for your role in my life this year? Our daily calls to talk about the writing process, the day's events, and to "just bitch" were an enormous source of support. Likewise, our workouts always gave me something to look forward to after a solitary day spent at the computer or in the library. Like few others, I knew you could really understand my dilemmas, and I appreciate the way you always listened to, and never judged, my struggles and concerns. My only regret is that this friendship did not bloom sooner and that our careers have taken us to opposite ends of the country. Thanks for entering my life and being a wonderful friend.
I wish to thank my family for their support and encouragement of my academic pursuits. Dad, I remember my first year in college when I wanted to quit. What kept me from doing so was knowing how much that decision would disappoint you. Your approval has always meant so much to me and is partly responsible for this final degree. Thank you for making me want to stick with it! Mom, as a kid, I remember you scolding me with, "If you can't say something nice then don't say anything at all."
I am thankful that Jerry Seinfeld, Mike Judge, and Howard Stern did not follow similar advice. Fish, I appreciate all the times when you instinctively knew not to ask about the writing while at the same time communicated that you were supportive and aware of my process. Your research help toward the end of this process was truly helpful.

Of course, none of this would have been accomplished without the support of the faculty at The Ohio State University. Thanks to my committee members, Dr. Mary Garrett and Dr. Dale Brashers, for your time and valuable assistance. I have had the good fortune and privilege to work with Dr. Sonja K. Foss as my advisor, mentor, and friend. Her work inspired and motivated me to come to The Ohio State University to earn this degree, and her guidance, encouragement, and spirit enabled me to complete it.

The most celebrated aspect of my graduate school experience are the wonderful friendships I made and carry with me. Thanks to Debian Marty and Debra Moddelmog for taking me on long walks with the dogs and reminding me that “life is good.” Pam Tracy, our friendship has blossomed and continues to grow in ways that add humor, support, understanding, and kindness to my life. And, Sharon Varallo, thanks for being the kind of friend who wakes me up on a Saturday morning to say, “Hey, let’s go to China!”
VITA

August 25, 1968 ..................... Born - Orange, California

1991 ............................... B.A. Liberal Studies, San Francisco State University

1994 ............................... M.A. Speech Communication, San Francisco State University

1994-1998 ......................... Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS

Research Publication


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Communication.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Seinfeld</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Beavis and Butt-Head</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Howard Stern Show</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vii
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cultural commentators claim, "We are in a culture war. And one of the first casualties of war is civility" (Himmelfarb in DeMott 15). In this war, no one respects anyone and anything anymore because there are no one and nothing left to be held in high regard. . . . Decency has been dethroned. We have become nothing more than a nation of selfish, whining complainers, and every time we open our mouths, the cavities are there for all to see. We are all conniving to get ahead in the Age of Irrelevance, a time in which respect is breaking down on all levels of society. Vulgarity, malaise, off-color entertainment, lack of civility and decorum, and a penchant for sensationalism are all typical of the modern age. (W. Barrett 11)

Civility has become a popular rallying cry for, among others, national politicians and small-town government officials. President Bill Clinton, for example, encouraged more civility and less partisanship in his 1995 commencement speech to his alma matter, Georgetown University. Clinton explained that the national conversation had suffered at the hands of more and more and more sharply defined organized groups [that] communicate more and more in extreme rhetoric through mass mailings . . . or 30 second ads designed far
more to inflame than to inform. [Thus] Americans' future has been clouded, and their doubts about their leaders and their institutions are profound.

(Elving 2114)

He also attempted to "seize the high moral ground from his critics" and claimed that "we need more conversation and less verbal combat" ("Clinton" 74).

In the spring of 1997, members of Congress met in Hershey, Pennsylvania, for more than the kisses. The retreat in which they participated there came about because of a proposal by David Skaggs (D-Colo) and Ray LaHood (R-Ill), who believed civility could be enhanced if members of Congress and their spouses spent a few days socializing and getting to know one another. Over 200 Congressional members and approximately 100 spouses and children attended the three-day event. Before the retreat, members were given a report, "Civility in the House of Representatives," prepared by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications. The report, which traced the rise of rude language on the House floor, claimed the words "damn, whore, stupid, weirdo, nerd, bozo, idiot, fatso, scum, and nitwit" increasingly have littered the Congressional discourse (McCarthy 8). According to Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenburg School, "It's a sign of the general coarsening of our culture. Things we used to say in private we now say in public. Congress may simply be reflecting a social norm" (McCarthy 8). Although the motivation for the retreat was to restore a deeply divided Congress and a sense of civility, both parties held independent retreats prior to the one in Hershey. While "attendance [at Hershey] was encouraged by the leadership of both parties, . . ., as one Republican Congressman said, it was not clear they really wanted it" (McCarthy 8).
Concern with an apparent increase in uncivil behavior is being manifest in non-political arenas as well. Many communities across the country are spending thousands of dollars bringing in consultants to restore a sense of civility. One town, in particular, Raritan, New Jersey, has gone so far as to pass a law that prohibits the use of rude language in public ("In the Front Line" 22). Corporations and schools "are sending peer groups for training in conflict management" (Lyttle 38). Former Ohio State University president E. Gordon Gee explains, "Civility is a notion whose time has come. There's been a lot of deterioration in the way we conduct ourselves as people over the last 20-25 years. Without civility, we'll never be able to ultimately solve the problems of the social community" (Lyttle 38).

In his 1996 presidential address to the International Communication Association, Berger articulated what he believed to be the potential big questions that communication scholars should be asking and how the communication field can contribute to public policy discussions. Berger's third question is of particular interest and relevance here; he asks, "Why do we believe that we as a people are speaking and treating each other less civilly" (Berger 114)?

The words civil and civility conjure up a diversity of positive images--participatory government, citizens working side by side for a common cause, colleagues problem solving together, peace, an environment of mutual respect--with as many definitions to match. Definitions of civility abound and range from civility means "cultivating personal humility rather than indulging in self-righteousness" (Pappano 44) to civility is inclusiveness "of individuals: an awareness of the commonness of us all" (Benson 361) to "the kinds of behavior persons can rightfully expect from one another"
(Sinopoli 613). These definitions are generic and imprecise and do little to illustrate what a civil or uncivil act may look like. Similarly, the term *incivility* is rarely explicated and is assumed to be the simple opposite of civility. The ambiguity and lack of clarity in the terms *civility* and *incivility*, then, constituted the impetus for this study.

A second impetus for this study is my feminism and the connection I see between feminism and civility. As a feminist scholar, I am committed to disrupting the ideology of oppression that pervades Western culture—an ideology that values and supports the enactment of competition, hierarchy, dichotomy, elitism, and alienation. According to hooks, "to be a 'feminist' in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression (hooks, *Ain't* 195). A liberatory goal, then, "directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (hooks, *Feminist* 31). Thus, feminist movement becomes a struggle "to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression" and a challenge to "an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part" (hooks, *Feminist* 31; hooks, *Talking* 25).

In addition to challenging and disrupting an ideology of oppression and domination, feminism has a creative, proactive component, too: "it can transform relationships so that alienation, competition, dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with feelings of intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie" (hooks, *Feminist* 34). While feminism begins with a struggle to end sexist oppression, it
is a movement for all people because it "challenges each of us to alter our person, our personal engagement (either as victims or perpetrators or both) in a system of domination" (hooks, *Talking* 22).

My feminist purpose is not to "privilege women over men" or to "benefit solely any specific group of women" but to suggest "an understanding of inclusion with interests beyond women" (hooks, *Feminist* 26; Wood 39). To do so, I will discuss three feminist values that aid in the illumination of one's understanding of a feminist inclusion. These are not the only feminist values; indeed, the various feminist philosophies offer unique contributions by shedding particular light on the complex socio-political problem of oppression. I am focusing on the values of equality, self-determination, and immanent value because they are common to a diversity of feminist philosophies and unite much of feminism's differences.

The principle of equality is not unique to feminism but extends through many liberatory movements and seeks to dismantle systems of elitism and domination used in decision making and the allocation of material resources. Privileging equality will eliminate distinctions based on arbitrary characteristics such as class, sex, and race. Creating relationships and institutions based on equality will replace systems of domination, hierarchy, and competition. Instead, the values of cooperation, camaraderie, and mutual respect will guide and characterize human interactions.

The principle of self-determination asserts that individuals are the authorities of their own lives and should be given the ability and freedom to make decisions that will govern their life worlds. The respect for others that arises out of an acknowledgment of one's authority over one's own life has potentially transforming implications for human
communication. As Foss and Griffin explain, “when others are seen as experts who are making competent decisions about their lives, efforts by a rhetor to change those decisions are seen as a violation of their life worlds and the expertise they have developed” (4). Instead of seeking change, rhetors should approach one another with the goals of respect and understanding.

In part, self-determination is possible because of the recognition of immanent value, which holds that, “every being is a unique and necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus has value” (Foss and Griffin 4). Starhawk explains that immanent value stems from the simple notion that “your life is worth something” (115). Thus, individuals’ worth, value, or importance do not have to be earned or granted but is immanent simply because they exist in the world (Starhawk 21). With relationships and communication grounded in immanent value comes the “eschewal of forms of communication that seek to change that individual’s unique perspective . . . .“ (Foss and Griffin 4). These forms of communication are replaced with ones of empowerment and connection.

The use of the principles of equality, self-determination, and immanent value to describe and define feminism suggests that this is not a movement or a philosophy that seeks simply to eradicate men from positions of power and replace them with women. Nor is this philosophy limited to women and other minority groups: it is feminist not because a particular population of rhetors use it but rather because of “the grounding of its assumptions in feminist principles and theories” (Foss and Griffin 5). These values have the potential to transform, not simply reverse the power dynamics in human relationships by suggesting that people approach one another with trust and respect.
Most important for the purposes of this study, the enactment of feminism and its values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination in the world would likely result in a more civil world as well.

Statement of the Problem

My interest in civility and my commitment to feminism both were brought to the fore when I encountered a particular kind of media text. As a media consumer, I could not help noticing the abundance, popularity, and prevalence of television and radio programs that are antithetical to my professed feminist beliefs--texts that create hierarchies, are uncivil and disrespectful, and do not value the perspectives of those who are different from oneself. Yet, I found that I was amused and entertained by some of these texts, an admission that felt uncomfortable given my commitment to feminism. The tension between my feminism and my laughter at these texts, then, drew me to this study. My own tension was an important starting place because critics should begin the search for things worth writing about as critics by reflecting on their own experiences, curiosity, and commitments--with what they care about, and think would be worth understanding. Critics should judge finished criticism, in part, by the extent to which its conclusions are useful or insightful for them, and relevant to their own experiences, curiosity, and commitments.

(Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland 10)

I began this study seeking to discover just what is going on rhetorically in uncivil texts to make sense of the tension I felt in viewing them. Specifically, I examined the notion and expression of uncivil discourse as it is enacted rhetorically in humorous texts. Is this uncivil discourse really a problem? Does it serve a positive function for the
audience and the larger society? Or is American society just going downhill, as Jamieson suggests, with uncivil discourse the norm, to increasingly acceptable to numbers of individuals? Or is something more complex going on here?

My purpose in this study was to define, describe, and understand a rhetoric of humorous incivility as it is enacted by three popular texts—the television shows Beavis and Butt-Head and Seinfeld and the radio and television program, The Howard Stern Show. I used the method of genre criticism to explicate the rhetorical features of these artifacts. The discovery of the rhetorical features or characteristics of uncivil discourse, I hope, will enable scholars and media audiences to recognize its presence in rhetorical texts, understand how it operates, and the purpose it serves for the audience.

Literature Review

Understanding the role of humorous incivility in the three artifacts requires a familiarity with the relevant literature. The literature pertinent to this research was drawn from two primary areas: research in civility and incivility in communication and other disciplines and theories of humor. The civility literature was approached and discussed by answering the following questions: (1) How has civility and incivility been defined?; (2) What are the causes of uncivil rhetoric as cited in the literature?; (3) What is the role of civility in the public sphere?; and (4) What explanations do theories of humor provide for the nature and function of texts of humorous incivility?

Definitions of Civility and Incivility

Civility is an old idea similar in meaning to the ancient Greeks’ term sophrosyne, meaning self-control and moderation. Its opposite was "hubris: excessive pride, insolence and arrogance" (H. Barrett 146). For the ancient Greeks, civility was
characterized by courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom (H. Barrett 146). Speaking for both historical and contemporary contexts, Barrett explains that civility is "at the heart of rhetorical maturity, [it] is a social good--an ethical value--and a rich source of ethos" (147).

Currently, scholars debate the extent to which civility is synonymous with manners and argue that while this may be a popular conception of the term, it is not the most useful. According to Tannen, civility suggests a superficial, pinky-in-the-air veneer of politeness spread thin over human relations like marmalade over toast (3). Peck explains that to think of civility as politeness or good manners is limiting because one can be polite but self-serving and manipulative, which is not what one would call civil (4). One distinction between politeness (which is often not genuine) and civility (which may be quite confrontational) is that with politeness, often nothing is exchanged, nothing happens (Peck 76). Some critics have cautioned that an overemphasis on civility as manners can obscure the importance of civility as community (Carter 21). Too much civility (as manners) may mask deep social conflict. DeMott extends this notion and claims that civility is what those in power use to avoid criticism and turn it back on the critic (21).

Replacing manners as civility’s counterpart, the idea of community has emerged as a seemingly more appropriate descriptor. According to Peck, when the goal is to become more civil, humans must become even more conscious of themselves, of others, and of the organizations that bind them together (16). Civility is how humans relate to one another within community (5), and community building is the ideal mode for the teaching and learning of civility (Peck 292). In a context of community, no one has to
obtain permission to speak from someone of a higher rank. Rank is totally set aside and considered irrelevant. Each person is considered a leader with no more and no less authority than any other person (334).

Carter uses the metaphor of traveling to discuss the role civility plays in an individual's life. For him, civility brings two gifts to individuals: It calls upon people to sacrifice for others as they travel through life, and it makes the ride tolerable. (4). Civility, then, is the sum of the many sacrifices individuals are called to make for the sake of living together (11).

In one of the few communication studies of incivility, Benson attempts to study political discourse as expressed on computer bulletin boards to offer scholars "a provisional rhetorical criticism of the discussions, asking how, if at all, networked political debate meets, fails, or challenges the standards of civility and community implied by rhetoric as a mode of human action" (359). Benson defines civility as welcoming all parties to the debate and foster[ing] the dignity of all participants; for an ongoing sense that all participants share a common humanity and fate; for an acceptance to submit arguments, broadly defined to general consideration, and to accept victory or defeat in debate while protecting minority rights. (361)

The implication is that incivility is the absence of such features. Incivility, then, can be defined as an interaction with others that denies respect and consideration of diverse opinions and perspectives. In such interactions, victory, at whatever cost, is the goal of communication, and domination is the prevailing philosophy.
A theme consistent within the literature on incivility is the notion of the individual as self-absorbed and isolated. Explicitly connecting the uncivil rhetor with qualities of selfishness and isolation, Barrett claims, "a person with no conception of being an integral part of society whose proper operation depends significantly on his behavior or of having responsibilities to others is not a civil being" (147). The uncivil individual engages in such "unsocial or antisocial" behaviors as "coercing, confronting, deceiving, and manipulating," presumably as a means to their own ends (147). He is careful to note the distinction between individuality and individualism: the former is a socially necessary quality to distinguish one person from another and is "even a mark of civility" (152). The latter, a "doctrine or personal aberration enforcing the assumption that the individual and not society is the dominant consideration or end," results in rampant incivility that threatens community interest (152). In daily life, individualism appears as "ordinary incivilities[:] the behaviors of difficult people, inane and deleterious television programming, monopolistic pursuit of attention, inauthenticity, and interpersonal insensitivity" (153). Individualism, then, is the "parent of incivility" (Barrett 154). Benson concurs, suggesting that "the debates [on the Usenet] appear to emphasize the radical individuality of each participant, who achieves connection to a collective through identification with high level ideological affiliations" (368). The rhetor is therefore isolated and separated from others in a perceived community.

Causes of Incivility

To date, there has been little scholarly inquiry into the causes of incivility. One study that addresses this question received national attention when President Clinton invited its author, Robert Putnam, to participate in White House discussions. In
"Bowling Alone," Putnam traces America's declining social capital--those "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit"--through the nation's declining membership and participation in civic organizations (67).

Putnam's cleverly titled article comes from his discovery that while "more Americans are bowling today than ever before, . . . bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. [Specifically], between 1980 and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent" (70). He explains:

Lest this be thought a wholly trivial example, I should note that nearly 80 million Americans went bowling at least once during 1993, nearly a third more than voted in the 1994 congressional elections . . . . The rise of solo bowling threatens the livelihood of bowling-lane proprietors because those who bowl as members of leagues consume three times as much beer and pizza as solo bowlers, and the money in bowling is in the beer and pizza, not the balls and shoes. The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo. (70)

Chronicling a similar decline in associational membership, Putnam concludes, "more Americans than ever before are in social circumstances that foster associational involvement (higher education, middle age, and so on), but nevertheless aggregate associational membership appears to be stagnant or declining" (72).
While Putnam cites four possible explanations for this trend—the movement of women into the labor force, mobility (the re-potting hypothesis), other demographic transformations, and the technological transformation of leisure—the first three factors explain why participation in civil organizations has lessened (74-75). As women have moved from work in the home to paid employment over the past few decades, there has been a seemingly related decline in civic participation. For women, the demands of working leave them with less leisure time to devote to the PTA, the League of Women Voters, the Red Cross, and other similar organizations. Similarly, as their wives or girlfriends spend more time at the office and less time taking care of the house and children, men, in turn, devote more time to these tasks, thus leaving them with less leisure time to spend at the lodge.¹ The re-potting hypothesis suggests that because there is less residential stability among Americans due to the automobile, suburbanization, and the migration to the Sun Belt, they have fewer roots to put down in civic organizations. Similarly, other demographic transformations in contemporary society include fewer marriages and children, more divorces, and lower real wages. All of these changes may affect civic participation "since married, middle-class parents are generally more socially involved than other people" (Putnam 75).

While these three phenomena are all factors in explaining a declining social capital, recent technological advances in leisure also account for a greater lack of civility. Technological advances have privatized and individualized leisure time and, as a result, have disrupted "many opportunities for social capital formation" (Putnam 75). For

¹Time-budget studies indicate, however, that most husbands of working wives have assumed only a minor part of the housework (Putnam 74).
Putnam, the "most obvious and probably the most powerful instrument of this revolution is television" (75). Television has made what Americans experience as communities "wider and shallower" in that they can have access to a wide variety of experiences via the experiences of television characters, but their understanding of such experiences is limited and dictated by the television character itself (75). By watching television as the primary form of leisure, Americans' access to and membership in civic organizations is limited and thus reduced.

Agreeing that incivility is related to isolation, Carter explains that a large part of the incivility problem stems from the fact that individuals do not know one another or even want to try; not knowing one another, individuals seem to think that how they treat one another does not matter (56). The ethic of rugged individualism--independence and autonomy, the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps way of thinking--is an obstacle to building community (Peck 280). When individuals see themselves as separate and isolated, then, they cannot act civilly.

Technological communication advances such as the telephone, television, and Internet exaggerate individuals' isolation from friends and a community. Before the advent of the telephone, for example, to communicate with a friend, one either could write a letter or pay a personal visit--both of which required a commitment of time and perhaps resources. The correspondence not only preserved and maintained the friendship but established a permanent record of its existence. Thus, individuals invest far less in their friendships when they decide to call or e-mail rather than to write or meet in person (Carter 190-91). While civility requires a sense of commonality and community, the
appeal of the cyberspace culture is autonomy. Moreover, an individual’s opinion or false information can be delivered instantaneously with little or no accountability (Carter 193-94).

Role of Civility in the Public Sphere

Like the equivocal nature of the meaning of civility, much ambiguity and complexity surround the question of the role of civility within a democratic state and social order. Although the literature in this area does not deal with humorous forms of expression of civility, it is relevant in that it extends understanding of the nature and function of discourse that contributes to a civil public sphere. Seligman, for example, describes civility as a “philosophical normative concept . . . as an ethical ideal, a vision of the social order that is not only descriptive, but prescriptive, providing us with a vision of the good life” (201). For him, this vision of civil society will nourish democratic possibilities.

Thomas argues that civility plays two significant roles within our society. It “is essential to the functioning of a civil society,” which is “the existence of a private sphere of human interaction that’s separate from and independent of government control” (“In Pursuit” D3). In addition, a civil society "creates mediating institutions that stand between the individual and the power of the state" (“In Pursuit” D3). These two functions of civility, combined with its current societal decline, threaten the maintenance of a civil society, assert Thomas, and if individuals lack common courtesy and respect for one another, it will be difficult for them to forge civic and community groups. The danger is that civility is one of those skills that makes self-government possible; when individuals lack civility, they therefore lack the resources to engage multiple arguments
and make informed decisions for the common good ("In Pursuit" D3). Kumar cautions that civil society is culture specific; thus, when talking about the role of civil society and democracy, the conversation must be grounded in the recognition that civil society as a term and concept must be conceptualized and utilized within a national or ethnic setting.

Schudson takes up the debate that democracy is best brought about through conversation—a type of conversation that embodies principles of civility. He draws largely from Carey to make his case because he "has been especially eloquent in placing conversation at the center of public life and the restoration of a public at the heart of the contemporary task of democratic society" (298). Carey defines the public as "a group of strangers that gather to discuss the news" and as a "society of conversationalists" they are "dependent upon printing for the dissemination of their ideas" (381). Schudson argues that for conversation to be the road to democracy it would have to be egalitarian, but he states "this is not necessarily so" (298). For a person "to participate effectively in a conversation," he or she must possess "cultural capitol" (298). Moreover, when conversation is among true equals, the more the talk "fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all" (298).

To support his argument, Schudson distinguishes between the sociable model of conversation and the problem-solving model. The former is non-utilitarian and involves neither informing nor persuading. This form of conversation "does not compose and argument" and is "an unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (Oakeshott 198). The latter, by contrast, has a goal or end in mind; there is inquiry and a search for solutions. The sociable model conceptualizes conversation as an end in itself, while the problem-solving model "sees conversation as a means to an end of good government" (Schudson 300).
Coming down on the side of problem solving, Schudson states that "democratic talk ... unlike the kinds of conversation often held in the highest esteem for their freedom and their wit, ... is essentially oriented to problem-solving" (298). Reflecting on American’s rhetorical history, Darsey states not a lack of civility but “the absence of meaningful incivility, of radical engagement” is problematic for discourse in the public sphere (x). This problem-solving talk is the kind of conversation to which the notion of civility is most relevant.

In addition to a problem-solving orientation to conversation for democracy, the notions of engaging the other and differences in opinion and ideals also are common to much of the literature concerning civility and the public sphere. Galston notes that there must be both a "willingness to listen seriously to a range of views" and a "willingness to set forth one's own views intelligible and candidly" (227). Salvador and Sias argue that to achieve effective deliberation in a participatory democracy, citizens must have a voice in the discussion while simultaneously considering the voices of others (4). Arguing for a need to "problematize the term public voice, which implicitly assumes a single, unified public voice," Sias explains that "democracy requires the voices of all citizens to be heard; the voices of women and citizens of various ethnic backgrounds are often muted by a dominant voice typically reflecting a white male perspective" (191). Problem solving can come about only when there is "interaction of the participants" to revise each statement "in accord with the prompts and responses of the other" (Schudson 301).

Recognizing the complexities that arise out of an intersection of democratic ideals and conversation in a public forum "among people of different values and different backgrounds," Schudson notes that this sort of civil democratic talk is also "profoundly
uncomfortable (299). Gutmann and Thompson offer guidelines or principles for those situations where there is moral difference arising out of deliberative democracy. Of uttermost value is mutual respect; "like toleration," it is a "form of agreeing to disagree" (79). But unlike toleration, mutual respect demands more from the participants: "it requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees. It consists of an excellence of character that permits a democracy to flourish in the face of fundamental moral disagreement" (79). These persons are "self-reflective," can discern the "difference between respectable and merely tolerable differences of opinion," and are "open to the possibility of changing their minds or modifying their positions at some time in the future if they confront unanswerable objections to their present point of view" (79-80). Gutmann and Thompson are careful to note that this is not synonymous with recognition respect, which one owes to all persons simply because they possess personhood. Instead, mutual respect is a "form of appraisal respect; it expresses a positive evaluation of a person manifesting some excellence of character" (376).

To translate mutual respect into a political reality, Gutmann and Thompson assert, citizens must follow "civic integrity," which has three dimensions. The first, consistency in speech, demands that citizens and political officials "espouse their moral positions independently of the circumstances in which they speak" (81), which means that their actions and beliefs are based in a deep moral commitment rather than used as a tool for political gain. The second form of civic integrity is "consistency between speech and action" (Gutmann and Thompson 81). Citizens and government officials alike should act in ways that mirror their professed belief systems, and in cases where there is legitimate
reason for disagreement between speech and action, there should be a complete and forthright explanation of the discrepancy. Finally, civic integrity requires the "integrity of principle" that includes the "acceptance of the broader implications of principles presupposed by one's moral positions" (Gutmann and Thompson 81). Under this principle, a pro-life advocate, for example, also should endorse policies that ensure care and welfare for all children.

Looking outward toward the judgment of others, Gutmann and Thompson propose three aspects of civic magnanimity that parallel those of civic integrity. Here, the citizen is focused on acknowledging the "moral status of the positions they oppose" (82). To recognize opposing opinions, one first must demonstrate "acknowledgment in speech" that recognizes that an opponent's point of view is "based on moral principles about which people may reasonably disagree" (82). The second feature of civic magnanimity is "open-mindedness," in which people are convinced of the possibility that they may be persuaded to believe in the moral position they now oppose. The third component, "economy of moral disagreement," states that when "justifying policies on moral grounds, citizens should seek the rationale that minimizes rejection of the position they oppose" (84-85). Essentially, this feature advocates avoiding unnecessary conflict.

Deetz enters the discussion on civility in the public sphere by contributing the notion of a particular kind of participation that is implicitly civil. Noting that in a liberal democracy, communication always has been about expression and advocacy, Deetz argues for the introduction of the concept of participation over control. By participation, he means the participation of diverse perspectives so that "more positions are represented in the decisions we eventually make" (129). Unless individuals converse in ways that
enrich their discussions and transform ideas and opinions they are simply reinscribing the same information, "it is by the otherness that the self is productively transformed. The very capacity to escape the fixity of one's own views and homogeneous community is through seeking the other--that which is different and cannot be denied" (130).

The literature on civility and incivility suggests three common themes. One, incivility is believed to be highly correlated to individualism. Two, when incivility is present in a culture, people are less likely to become involved with civic, religious, or associational groups. Moreover, membership in these groups is related to the proper functioning of democracy in the public sphere. Three, conceptualized as more than manners or politeness, civility requires the solicitation, listening, and genuine engagement of diverse opinions, only then can citizens and policy makers make democratic decisions truly reflecting and contributing to the common good.

Theories of Humor

Because my interest is in civility as it relates to humorous texts, an understanding of basic models of humor is necessary to explain the nature and function of humorous incivility. A number of theoretical models exist to explain humor elicitation. Some of them focus on motivational factors, others on cognitive influences, and some blend the two perspectives to explain humor. Theories of women's, feminist, and lesbian humor offer yet other models. In the following section, I will begin by describing briefly these theoretical models and will end by comparing and contrasting mainstream and women's theories of humor.

Motivational Theories. The two most popular motivational theories are arousal/arousal reduction and superiority and disparagement theories. The arousal and
arousal-reduction theories, or what linguists refer to as release theories, argue that "humor responses reflect a release or reduction in arousal" (Wyer and Collins 664).

Much of the basis for these theories derives from the theories of Freud, who argued that individuals respond to humorous stimuli in order to release tension or arousal (aggressive or sex related) that they are prohibited from expressing explicitly. Legman, for example, relies heavily on Freud to provide the theoretical underpinning of his explanation of the psychological function of the "dirty joke." He explains that in the telling of a dirty joke, the speaker forces the listener to invoke the same mental images of sexual acts or body parts as that of the speaker and signals that they picture the same thing. In that the joke teller in these kinds of situations is usually a man and the audience is a woman, this "shows clearly that the telling of jokes in this way is actually intended as a modified form of rape: verbal rape rather than physical" (Legman 12).

Berlyne argues for a more general conception of motivational humor by assuming an inverted-U relationship between psychological arousal and the experience of pleasure so that pleasure increases with arousal to a maximum value and then decreases. In the context of a joke, the setting of the scenario or context is the creation of pleasure or arousal and the punch line relieves the pleasure so that it decreases and returns to a more normal level.

A second set of theories from a motivational perspective derives from superiority and disparagement (largely psychological theories) and hostility (largely linguistic theories). When viewed from a theoretical position of superiority or disparagement, humor is the
contempt of the powerful for the marginalized, or as the revenge of the
marginalized on the powerful, is laughter at the Other from a position of privilege
in relation to the one being laughed at, even if the only privilege that can be
claimed is that afforded by getting the last laugh. As an exercise in domination,
its purpose is precisely to differentiate the one laughing from the one who is
laughed at, indeed to humiliate the one laughed at because of her very difference
from the one laughing. (Miller 4)

Wyer and Collins’ theory is rooted in such a view of humor, suggesting that people
derive pleasure from feelings of mastery or control (665). They explain that “laughter or
amusement at another’s deformities or misfortunes can reflect an attempt to maintain or
reestablish these feelings” (665). This is the perspective Keough takes in his discussion
of the violent nature of American humor: “American humor reveals a complicated
process—the powerful ridiculing the powerless . . . the powerless fighting back with
duplicity and masks . . .” (xvii). Moreover, argues Keough, “American humor not only
has a pecking order but political overtones and is not always good, clean fun” (xvii).

Useful in explaining the appeal of the “sick joke,” superiority theories are often found to
be lacking in their capacity to shed light on the humorous appeal of other types of jokes
such as self-deprecat ing humor.

Miller contends that theories of superiority and disparagement do offer an
explanation of self-deprecat ing humor because “laughing at oneself in a way that
disassociates the one laughing from the one being laughed at is precisely an attempt to
secure such a superior power position for oneself” (4-5). This works because the
“laugher can anticipate and outflank the comedies played at his expense; it also enables
him to gain the upper hand on his incompetencies by laughing at them from the enlightened perspective that his awareness allows him to occupy” (5).

Explanations of ethnic humor often rely on superiority and disparagement. Winik, for example, explains that “a joke reflects social attitudes and provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet” (125). Douglas offers a similar theory of ethnic humor, “emphasizing liberating qualities of humor, allowing sentiments which are represented or blocked in the ‘official culture’ to surface and to be processed, often with positive benefits for social change” (Douglas, qtd. in Mintz 25). One of the properties of ethnic humor “is its ability to create a sense of solidarity, a knowledge of belonging to a certain set” (Boskin 5). Humor and laughter simultaneously reinforce an individual’s or a group’s identity and build a barrier to membership in that group. In this way, laughter creates a “strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders” (Bergson 284).

Cognitive Theories. The most common theories of humor, incongruity resolution theories, suggest that humor is “stimulated by the sudden awareness of an incongruity between two objects or events, or the concepts associated with them” (Wyer and Collins 665). Two branches of this theory exist: in one, incongruity is a necessary and sufficient condition to produce humor, and the greater the incongruity, the greater the humorous response (Suls, Nerhardt). In the other, additional elements besides incongruity must be present to produce humor.

The second brand of incongruity resolution theories has been developed by Suls, who has likened responding to a joke to problem solving in that the punch line is
analogous to the solution of a problem. According to Suls, "humor results when incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke" (42). When people are successful in solving the problem, they feel pleasure that is reported as humor or amusement; when they do not find a solution, they feel frustrated because they do not get the joke. Because not all problem solving is humorous, however, incongruity theories suggest that a number of other factors must be present for humor to occur: (1) rapid resolution of the incongruity; (2) a "playful" context--i.e., with cues signifying that the information is not to be taken seriously; and (3) an appropriate mood for the listener (Suls 46).

Also concerned with the second branch of incongruity resolution theories, Palmer stresses that the humor works by calling upon background expectations of what is plausible and implausible, expectations that "stem from the discourses of the social formation" (139). He explains that "jokes create comic impact . . . by the contradiction of discursively defined expectations" (139). When applied to humor, the "logic of the absurd" says that actions that are implausible reinforce a given discourse, while actions that are plausible constitute "an attack upon the discourse in terms of which the action is seen as absurd" (179). Palmer is careful to note that humor is "neither essentially liberatory or conservative . . . its very basis is ambivalence" (213).

Miller finds incongruity theories useful when talking about how the body performs comedy by "announcing its noises on those occasions when it is supposed to completely efface itself: the body full of sound and fury, and apparently signifying nothing" (2). He looks to contexts, such as a wedding or a funeral, to notice that "we cannot keep a straight face when we chance to see the preposterous body at the very
moment when we are trying to take ourselves most seriously. He explains that what makes these situations funny is the “incongruity between our earnest solemnity and the very body by virtue of which it must be enacted” (2).

Reversal Theories. Wyer and Collins contend that Apter’s reversal theory has a number of advantages over the motivational and incongruity-resolution theories. It considers both motivational and cognitive influences to explain humor elicitation and is applicable to a wide variety of humorous forms and contexts. In addition, this theory is the most explicit about stating the conditions necessary for humor to occur. Apter’s model accounts for the fact that the social context in which a joke is told is made up of more than the people, objects, or events that are immediately present, but it also can include “characteristics of the speaker and aspects of the social situation in which the joke or statement is conveyed” (Wyer and Collins 666). He adds two new factors to the explanation of humor elicitation—nonreplacement and diminishment. He states that if a joke delivers new information to the listener, the new information alters or replaces the original reality; further, this new reality must be diminished in some way so as not to privilege the original reality (Wyer and Collins 666-67).

Holland’s theory of humor also might be considered a reversal theory. He claims two conditions are necessary for laughter and the comic: play and timing. A situation is playful when it lacks seriousness and fear and includes “games, rituals, drama, and perhaps all the formalities that touch on love, law, war, or poetry” (31). Moreover, in play, a person’s emotions are unengaged and isolated so the “logic of the play, game or
joke applies only to that situation and therefore need not be applied realistically” (31).
The timing refers to a suddenness, surprise, and speed--some kind of reversal--at which
the joke is delivered. Laughter, then, is social and contextual.

Women’s Humor. While the above theories do not explicitly refer to male humor,
the growing body of literature on women’s humor suggests that there are some distinct
differences between mainstream (or male) humor and women’s humor. Men are
typically higher in the production and enjoyment of hostile humor, jokes, and slapstick
comedy, while women use and appreciate more anecdotal humor (Crawford 158). One of
the biggest differences Crawford found between men’s and women’s humor was that
women define an outstanding sense of humor as one that “breaks social tension, eases
another’s unhappiness, and cheers rather than wounds--humor as an expression of
compassion rather than hostility” (159). Apte contends that “women’s humor generally
lacks the aggressive and hostile quality of men’s humor. The use of humor to compete
with or belittle others, thereby enhancing a person’s own status, or to humiliate others
either psychologically or physically, seems generally absent among women” (70).

Jenkins argues that the differences in male and female humor parallel the
differences in male and female conversational styles. Women’s humor, she explains,
“supports their goal of greater intimacy in its supportive and healing nature. Men’s
humor reinforces the competitive, hierarchical model of their interactions, and self-
aggrandizement based on performance” (137). These differences also explain the
different forms of humor men and women are likely to employ. Men are more likely to
rely on formulaic jokes that highlight performance and are applicable in a variety of
settings. Women, in contrast, are more likely to rely on contextual humor. The humor is
more spontaneous and "jointly created out of the ongoing talk to satisfy the needs of a particular group of women" (Jenkins 138). Since the goal of the talk in connection, not competition, there is no need to "compete for performance points" (Jenkins 138).

According to Walker, there are three categories of humor that differentiate women's humor from mainstream humor--thematic material, form, and language--"all of them expressing women's sense of isolation from the dominant culture and frustration with their assigned role" (Walker 48). First, women's humor is based on women's lives. The content of the humor often reflects the traditional gender roles for women: the home, family, children, and marriage. Second, women employ a form absent in mainstream humor--the domestic saga or skit--"an account of a female persona in a domestic setting struggling to cope with the many demands of her role as homemaker" (Walker 48). Domestic sagas or skits can function as humor or as rival stories that set up a form of argument between the dominant interpretation of reality and women's marginalized interpretation of reality. Assuming the audience will identify with the struggles of the main characters, the sagas offer no solutions for the problems of the homemaker but serve as a "relatively safe means of protest" about such problems (Walker 52). The final category of women's humor is a particular use of language. While mainstream humor often uses linguistic devices such as put downs and verbal puns to convey violence and to reinscribe power, women's humor uses language to call attention to women's' subjugated position in society (Walker 65). Jenkins explains, "Men's humor affirms their place in society, while women's humor is a way of getting around ours" (137).

**Feminist Humor.** A smaller subset of women's humor is feminist humor. While women's humor describes women's experiences, feminist humor moves beyond a purely
descriptive function to a more evaluative and critical one. Women’s humor may recognize social and political gender inequities, but feminist humor tries to change them. Kaufman describes the difference in terms of hope: “feminist humor tends to be a humor of hope, female humor of hopelessness” (13-14). In essence, feminist humor offers a political comment about the relative worth and value of women’s traditional social roles. Because of the active nature of feminist humor and its attention on social and political change, Clinton argues that feminist humor must not be defined or understood as a string of jokes or antidotes. Instead, feminist humor must be understood as “a deeply radical analysis of the world and our being in the world because it, like the erotic, demands a commitment to joy. Feminist humor is a radical analysis because we are saying that we have the right to be happy, that we will not settle for less” (Clinton 4). The objective of feminist humor, according to Walker, is to laugh “at the very idea of gender inequity in an attempt to render such inequity absurd and powerless (145).

In White’s investigation and analysis of feminist humor, she starts with the following three assumptions common to the literature on feminist humor. First, the research “assumes that humor is culture-specific.” Second, the researchers “imply that humor relies for its effects on shared knowledge of the assumptions, values, and meanings common to a particular community or culture.” Third, the research assumes that feminist humor reaffirms the values of a culture.” Combined, these assumptions helped shape White’s orientation, “which assumes that feminist humor is specific to feminist culture and is an artifact of that culture” (79). Her research aimed at discovering
the values expressed in feminist humor, how feminists differentiate themselves as feminists in and through their humor, and the function of humor as a form of communication in the creation of feminist culture.

White discovered that feminist humor values women, their strengths, and abilities; self-definition and autonomy; and men but not their culture (87). Feminists differentiate themselves through the use of in-group/out-group relationships, but “feminist humor indicates that feminists do not differentiate themselves as feminists by referring to some monolithic definition of feminism” (88). Finally, feminist humor creates feminist culture by creating a sense of community based on common meanings. These common meanings help shape and establish the boundaries of feminist culture. Common meanings along with the in-group/out-group relationships allow for self-identification as a feminist (89).

One of the specific challenges brought by feminist humorists to theories of women’s humor is the notion that women’s humor must be a kinder and gentler form of humor when compared to mainstream humor (Barecca Women 5). For Barecca, the “heart of women’s humor--the ability to say out loud what nobody thought a girl was allowed to think, let alone say”--often violates definitions of kind and gentle (Barreca They Used, 49). Moreover, this characterization can lead to the misreading of feminist humor because if women’s humor is supposed to be nice and gentle and “if these elements are markedly absent, then the work may be judged as non-comedic” (Women 5). Thus, the inclusion of kind and gentle as characteristics of women’s humor is
dangerous for two reasons: it reinforces traditional feminine attributes and ignores the fact that women can be angry and challenging and it can remove women from the comic scene if these elements are not present.

While feminist humor may be conciliatory or confrontational, it tends to have four functions: it creates a separate space; challenges taboos; challenges stereotypes, not people; and is politically subversive. Feminist humor creates a space for nontraditional speakers and the nontraditional speech—a space in which women can challenge the dominant public sphere and maintain a space to which it is safe for them to return (Felski 12). Part of the challenge of feminist humor involves a critical questioning of the taboos and stereotypes that have been used against women:

Humor addressed to women, comedy that recognizes the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives. A strong, rebellious humor empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification.

(Merrill 279)

Jenkins agrees that the use of stereotypes and taboos is an important part of women’s humor and hence their relationships. When women make fun of themselves through the stereotypes, it implies that they “are close enough to share” their “less than ideal selves” and also reinforces the notion that they are not in competition with one another (138).

Opening up a space is crucial to the challenge of taboos and stereotypes. Through a perspective by incongruity that only humor can provide, women can challenge the hold of patriarchal culture upon them:
Having a sense of humor about sex is like having a sense of humor about death—both allow you perspective on an otherwise overwhelming prospect. Humor allows you to elevate and explore rather than denigrate and hide your feelings. Humor doesn’t dismiss a subject but rather often opens that subject up for discussion, especially when the subject is one that is not considered “fit” for public discussion. Humor breaks taboos by allowing us to talk about those issues closest to us. (They Used 200-01).

Sex and jokes that assert women’s sexuality are one of the major taboos at which feminist humor is aimed. This is due to the link between sex and power in the mainstream culture and to the fact that men may feel particularly threatened by women’s sexual freedom. Men may fear that such sexual freedom “may disrupt social order, hence their desire to control women’s sexuality at least in the public domain” (Apte 81). Women’s humor and jokes that celebrate their sexuality break such control.

The debate over whether women’s humor is kind and gentle is revisited with the third function of feminist humor—a challenge of stereotypes, not people. This is due to the claim that feminist humor follows the “humane humor rule” by refusing to rely on the typical scapegoat figures and attacks instead the choices people make (Toth “Female Wits” 783). However, while it may refuse to stereotype people, actions “do become stereotyped in feminist humor (Kaufman 14). Moreover, this is not an amiable or mild form of humor. Its goal is not acceptance but a refusal to follow authority or take it seriously (Barecca They Used 140).

The actions of opening a space to break taboos and challenging authority are inherently subversive and disruptive. Feminist humor often functions by critiquing the
social formations and background expectations particular to sex and gender. Walker notes that this kind of “humorous expression is almost never purely comic or absurd” (xii) but “characteristically criticizes and subverts patriarchal norms” (Toth 212). For the feminist humorist, there is little acceptance of the status quo, and her humor can be characterized instead by the “breaking of cultural and ideological frames. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic, and paradoxically, unconventional” (Barecka Last 8-9).

The goal of radical political and social change is apparent.

_ Lesbian Humor._ Lesbian humor is more political and specific than feminist humor in that its major goal is to “extol women’s virtues rather than presenting them as victims of male-originated stereotypes” (Walker 162). This form of humor is more focused on celebrating women’s strength and power for themselves and rejecting the dominant social structure. In her research, Painter discusses how lesbian humor functions as a normalization device in the construction of lesbian social reality. Specifically, she claims that much of lesbian humor functions to normalize breaches² (by heterosexuals) to lesbian social reality through category devices (136-37). This works by taking an offensive comment from outside the lesbian community, such as “I don’t want any of those queers around me,” back to the lesbian community (Painter 137). There, it can be heard, interpreted (as dumb), placed into the category “dumb things straights say,” and viewed as inferior. Painter explains, “normalizing the breach occurs within the community because the use of the membership category device “dumb things straights say” allows the member to accomplish reflexive interpretation using lesbian social

² She defines breaches as, “disruption in an individual’s reflexive use of a body of knowledge which interrupts the taken-for-granted nature of social reality and makes one’s sense of reality problematic” (135).
knowledge. The membership category device itself can be viewed as lesbian social
togethe
Taken together, women’s humor and more traditional theories of humor share
both similarities and differences. Both forms use incongruity: women’s humor to
highlight the disproportionate socio-political gender roles and mainstream humor as a
means of pure entertainment. The use of stereotypes is both present but different in these
two forms: mainstream humor perpetuates and gives recurring voice to American
culture’s stereotypes about men and women, while women’s humor draws upon these
same stereotypes to highlight gender inequity. The use of stereotypes about women,
feminists, and lesbians also appears to serve an ego function for those telling the jokes or
humorous antidotes. The ego function of rhetoric, according to Gregg, provides rhetors
with “affirmation” and creates “self-hood through expression” (74). By drawing from the
stereotypes that so long have been used against them, women, feminists, and lesbians are
using them instead to show that they are strong enough to laugh at the stereotypes
and hence themselves, with the laughter serving as a means of solidifying themselves as a
political force for social change. Overall, the largest difference between mainstream and
women’s, feminist, and lesbian humor is its objective. Mainstream humor has
entertainment as its primary goal and, as such, it may use hostility or forms of superiority
to achieve its goal. Women’s, feminist, and lesbian humor, on the other hand, has social
and political challenge as its ultimate objective and thus, attempts to disrupt traditional
displays of power or superiority.

The literature review on civility and humor provides no comprehensive
explanation for why texts of humorous incivility function as they do for audiences. The
literature does, however, supply hints or pieces of the puzzle that may contribute to such an explanation. In the theory of humorous incivility developed in the final chapter, I will return to and incorporate constructs that are relevant to the explanation of the texts.

Method

To define and describe a rhetoric of humorous incivility, I used generic criticism. According to Foss, "generic criticism is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations among audiences and thus call for particular kinds of rhetoric" (225). The goal of the rhetorical critic is to discover rhetorical trends that occur throughout similar rhetorical situations. Doing so allows the critic to “understand rhetorical practices in different time periods and in different places by discovering the similarities in rhetorical situations and the rhetoric constructed in response to them” (Foss 225). Generic criticism provides the critic with "an angle of vision, a window, that reveals the . . . dynamic within the rhetorical acts of human beings, . . . responding in similar ways as they attempt to encompass certain rhetorical problems . . . " (Campbell and Jamieson 21).

When a critic is engaged in generic criticism, the artifacts are grouped according to similarities so that a rhetorical genre is a clustering of three different kinds of elements—situational requirements, substantive and stylistic features, and an organizing principle. Situational requirements are those situations that provoke a particular type of rhetoric. The substantive and stylistic features of the rhetoric are the rhetorical choices made by the rhetor concerning how to respond to the requirements of a given situation. The organizing principle is the label for the internal schematic formed by the situational, substantive, and stylistic features of the genre. According to Campbell and Jamieson, "a
genre is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, in isolation, appear in other discourses. What is distinctive about the acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms together in a constellation" (335). Thus, the features of the genre must be interdependent.

The concept of a rhetorical genre first appeared in Aristotle's Rhetoric; Fisher claims that genres "are an Aristotelian construct . . . [because] they are constituted through actual examinations of discourse. They are inductive . . ." (291). Contemporary scholars have made important contributions to the study and practice of what Black first labeled generic criticism in 1965. Black outlined the assumptions of the method:

First, we must assume that there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself . . . Second, we must assume that there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type . . . Third, we must assume that the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide the critic with information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation, and with this information the critic can better understand and evaluate any specific rhetorical discourse in which he may be interested. (Black 133)

Bitzer's development of the concept of the situation in 1968 greatly contributed to the theoretical advancement of the critical model of this genre. He reasserted and reinforced Black's first and second assumptions, described above, when he wrote, "Rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation; the situation that the rhetor perceives amounts to an invitation to create and present discourse" (306). Bitzer offered the following definition of a rhetorical situation: "a complex of persons, events, objects,
and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence that can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (304).

An additional contribution to the study of generic criticism came from Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Their book, *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, was the result of a conference held in Lawrence, Kansas, titled, "Significant Form in Rhetorical Criticism," and it provides both theoretical discussions and sample essays of generic criticism. According to Foss, the book "brought into one volume the best thinking that had been done on generic criticism and served as a catalyst for further work in the area" (228).

Some contemporary communication scholars are cautious of generic criticism and wary of the "difficulties and critical deficiencies genre approaches confront us with" (Conley 47). Conley reminds scholars that in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, genres constitute a way a problem is solved as interpreted by the audience rather than "anything distinctive about the work itself" (48). He warns the generic critic that

1 seeing acts of discourse through the prism of genre theory guarantees a blindness to a good deal of what is going on in them . . . [because] one of the worst aspects of genre criticism is precisely that it detaches us from our experience of the work and (2) the tendency of generic classifications to proliferate into tiresome and useless taxonomies. (52-53)

Although Miller agrees with Conley that "rhetorical criticism has not provided firm guidance on what constitutes a genre," she does not concur that it yields no useful information or should not be used by rhetorical critics (151). By drawing from Campbell
and Jamieson's argument that genre criticism is important because it attempts to place and understand rhetorical discourse through its social and historical connections, Miller asserts that "classification is necessary to language and learning" (151). Methodologically, genre criticism embodies the importance of context, as Campbell and Jamieson claim:

Generic rhetorical criticism aims at understanding rhetorical practice over time by discerning recurrent patterns that reflect the rules practitioners follow. Such rules reflect culturally recognized motives, they define rhetorical situations, and they mark audience expectations. In other words, genres are jointly constructed by rhetors and audiences out of shared cultural knowledge. ("Introduction," 1986, 295)

Despite the above criticisms, generic criticism was a valuable tool for this study. Given that little scholarly inquiry exists into the rhetoric of humorous incivility, genre criticism was appropriate because it provided me with definitions and descriptions of this rhetoric that can be used as starting places for additional research.

There are three types of generic criticism the critic can perform--generic description, generic participation, and generic application--all leading the critic to different kinds of observations and conclusions. Both generic participation and generic application are deductive processes. With the first option, the critic moves from a general rhetorical classification to a specific text or artifact. The goal for the critic is to determine if the specific artifact is a member of a particular genre. Generic application requires the critic to apply a generic model to specific rhetorical artifacts to assess them. Campbell and Jamieson note that most generic studies are deductive and thus carry two
potential limitations. First, "the critic may fail to delineate the essential characteristics of
the model so that the basis for comparison is faulty" (22). Second, "a generic fit" may be
"asserted although certain essential characteristics are absent or significant dissimilarities
exist" (22).

The third type of generic criticism is generic description, an inductive process in
which the critic investigates several artifacts to ascertain if a genre exists. Broadly,
generic description requires the critic to examine various rhetorical artifacts to determine
if a genre exists and to "formulate theoretical constructs about its characteristics" (Foss
229). The risk, according to Campbell and Jamieson, for inductive criticism is that it
must transcend the problems "inherent in any procedure that draws inductive
generalizations" (22).

Given that minimal scholarly inquiry exists on the rhetoric of incivility, a
necessary and logical starting point for me for this initial inquiry into the rhetoric of
humorous incivility was generic description. To conduct such an inquiry, the critic
proceeds through the following four steps, as outlined by Foss:

(1) observation of similarities in rhetorical responses to particular situations;
(2) collection of rhetorical artifacts occurring in similar situations; (3)
analysis of the artifacts to discover if they share characteristics; and (4)
formulation of the organizing principle of the genre. (229)

The first step, observing "similarities in rhetorical responses to particular
situations," was the original impetus for the study. I noticed many striking similarities
between Beavis and Butt-Head and The Howard Stern Show, both of which will be
discussed in greater detail later. Focusing on the similarities, I began to search and

38
inquire as to the specific situations to which these texts were responding. Both programs challenge the form and conventions of the context in which they are situated.

Once I figured out the specific situation that initially seemed to unite these two texts, I began looking for a "collection of rhetorical artifacts occurring in similar situations." For reasons discussed later, I selected the television show Seinfeld to be included in this study, in addition to Beavis and Butt-Head and The Howard Stern Show. The third step, "analysis of the artifacts to discover if they share characteristics," was accomplished through a close textual analysis of these artifacts. In subsequent chapters, I discuss in greater detail the specific radio and television episodes I have selected as texts for this analysis. Ultimately, I organized my analysis to define and describe the organizing principle for the genre.

Data Selection

In selecting rhetorical texts to be included in this research, I applied four criteria. First, I wanted to select artifacts of popular culture. According to Brummett, "popular culture refers to those systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about" (21). He explained, for example, that television is an immensely rich world of popular culture, as nearly everyone watches television and, even if not everyone sees the same shows, they are likely to know in general about the shows that they do not see. In speaking of popular culture, then, we are concerned with things, like television, that are part of the everyday experience of most people. (21)

Because I am interested in our culture at large and the charges of incivility upon it, I wanted to select artifacts that many members of our culture share and have in common,
assuming, as Garvey does, that "our only common culture is made up of law and television" (599). I selected media texts because the entertainment industry often is blamed for the ills of society and often is charged with generating incivility. Barrett, for example, argues that "the entertainment media has become a major contributor to the Age of Irreverence, setting the tone for impressionable audiences, especially American youth" (12). In fact, Senator Ernest Hollings opened hearings before the Senate Commerce Committee on the Television Improvement Act by citing the violence contained in Beavis and Butt-Head3 (Cooper 127). I chose popular culture generally and media texts in particular as my area of focus because they provide me with sites of shared rhetorical meanings in which to ascertain the presence of incivility, define its characteristics, and describe the substantive and stylistic features.

Moreover, I chose humorous forms, as they seem to be particularly vulnerable to attacks of incivility as seen in the charge by Hollings and the numerous fines against Howard Stern. On the surface, one may assume that other television genres, such as westerns or police dramas, may be more likely targets and cites of incivility and violence. This is not the case, however, as allegations of incivility are increasingly made against humorous media forms, with the Comedy Channel’s South Park the most recent example.

A third criterion I applied in the selection of artifacts was variety: I wanted variety among my artifacts in verbal and visual forms. Beavis and Butt-Head is an animated

---

3 Beavis and Butt-Head received much criticism in response to an incidence where a five-year-old boy reportedly emulated an episode that positively portrayed setting items on fire. The boy reportedly ignited his bed on fire, thus killing his younger sister. As a result of the criticism, MTV moved Beavis and Butt-Head to a later prime-time slot and Mike Judge inserted a warning at the beginning of the show telling viewers not to try this at home. What is missing from most discussions of this incident is that the trailer park in which the boy lived did not have cable access. Therefore, for him to tune into the show, which is only broadcast on cable, would have been impossible.
cartoon television show on a cable network, Seinfeld is a live-action situation comedy on a major television network, and The Howard Stern Show is both a syndicated radio program and a cable television program. Such variety among my artifacts enables me to make stronger claims about a rhetoric of humorous incivility, including its manifestation and enactment in a multitude of rhetorical forms. By selecting a variety of forms, I also hoped to avoid mistaking characteristics of this genre with characteristics of specific program types.

Finally, I wanted to select artifacts that are popular and are watched or listened to by a substantial segment of the television and radio audience. If a direct correlation exists between the entertainment industry and the level of incivility in our culture, as some critics suggest, to critique widely viewed shows is necessary. The more popular the program, the greater the impact it may have on the culture at large.

In keeping with the four criteria, I selected Beavis and Butt-Head, The Howard Stern Show, and Seinfeld for inclusion in this study. All meet Brummett's definition of popular culture, are humorous, are different from one another in form and type, and are very popular and earn high ratings in their respective categories. Moreover, all seem to structure their discourse in both form and content in ways that violate basic standards of civility as outlined in my literature review. The major characters within the shows place utmost importance on the self or individual and do not locate themselves in any broad social or political context. Their circle of friends is small, and few, if any, are allowed into the "inner circle"; a seeking out of otherness and diversity are to be avoided at all costs.
Beavis and Butt-Head. Beavis and Butt-Head is the brainchild of creator Mike Judge and appears on the Music Television Network (MTV). The show first premiered on MTV on March 8, 1993, and was an instant success. The on-screen promotional clip read, “Beavis and Butt-Head are dumb, crude, thoughtless, ugly, sexist, self-destructive fools. But for some reason the little weinerheads make us laugh” (McNeil 83). The target audience for the show is 12 to 34 year olds, and the premise of the show is simple:

Beavis and Butt-Head are the cartoon representations of everything that can possibly go wrong with an adolescent boy. The half-hour episode shows the pair at their underdeveloped best: telling very stupid jokes, behaving like idiots in the back of their high school classes and masturbating while they watch rock video[s] on MTV. (Zagano 6)

The audience never sees or hears from Beavis' and Butt-Head’s parents, although Beavis’ mother is sometimes referred to as a slut, and Butt-Head claims to have seen her naked. Minor characters include a few of the kids' teachers--Mr. Buzzcut, the principal, and Mr. Van Dreissen. Beavis and Butt-Head do not have any real friends, but other classmates include Todd, a senior who drives and is cool because he knows how to “pick up chicks and party,” and Stewart. Todd views Beavis and Butt-Head as annoying and stupid kids and likes to torment them. Because Beavis and Butt-Head worship Todd and are themselves a bit slow, they fail to see his torment as dislike and think it is cool to be in his company: negative attention is better than no attention. Stewart is the same age as Beavis and Butt-Head and wants to hang out with them and be like them; however,
Beavis and Butt-Head think Stewart is a baby and only hang out with him when it is in their best interest. For example, they go over to Stewart’s house because Stewart has a satellite dish, which allows them to watch violent movies.

For this study, I reviewed the Beavis and Butt-Head movie, *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America*, released in December, 1996, and 12 episodes that aired on television. Each half-hour episode contains two vignettes, interspersed with the boys sitting on the couch and critiquing music videos on MTV (MTV made its entire video collection available to Mike Judge to create the series).

The Howard Stern Show. Like *Beavis and Butt-Head*, disk jockey Howard Stern has received his fair share of criticism and blame for contributing to an uncivil society. In an article titled, “One More Ounce of Civility,” Budiansky reported that Stern was faced with $2 million in Federal Communications Commission fines as a result of his uncivil tongue (122). The fines have resulted from behaviors such as his discussions of vaginas and sex-related jokes on the air (McConnell and Fleming 24). Stern's sidekick since 1980, Robin Quivers, explains the appeal of the show: "We are the high wire act. We're working without a net so you have to tune in everyday just to see what will happen" (Stark 80). Stern has earned the nickname *shock jock* for his ability to say the unexpected and amaze his listeners.

His shocking style has secured for Stern a large and loyal following. As of March 31, 1997, Stern could claim to his credit a number-one movie; number-one album; the fastest selling book in Simon-Schuster history; cover stories in *Penthouse*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Movieline*, *Time Out New York*, *Los Angeles*, and *TV Guide*;
major features in The New Yorker, Playboy, Vanity Fair, Esquire, Cosmopolitan, Time, Newsweek, and Billboard; and guest spots on Letterman, Dateline, Today, and World News Tonight (Alterman 6).

The Howard Stern Show is broadcast live every morning from New York to syndicated stations across the country. His show runs four hours and is totally unscripted and spontaneous. Sometimes he has celebrity guests, sometimes local eccentric personalities and sometimes no guests at all. On these days, he and his cohorts pick up on a topic and just "go with it," taking calls from the audience. Quivers is responsible for reading the daily news that often provides the impetus for a day's topic and antics. His other two on-air playmates are Jackie and Fred, who back up Stern's jokes and support his humor.

Quivers has received her own share of criticism for her role in The Howard Stern Show. An African-American woman, Quivers has been called a "self-hating black woman" for her part of what some African Americans and women perceive as a "misogynistic and racist show" (Stark 80). Quivers seems unflustered by the critics and rationalizes the criticism by explaining, "we do an entertainment show. People want to make it into some social commentary. I feel sorry for them" (Stark 80). Besides being the news reporter, Quivers' other on-air roles are listening to Stern and articulating "the voice of reason on the show" (Stark 80).

For this research, I analyzed five radio shows, which are four hours each, and four segments of The Howard Stern Show on E! TV. Stern's two books, Private Parts and Miss, America, and the film, Private Parts, also were included as supplementary and supporting material for the broadcast discourse.
Seinfeld. The comedy Seinfeld was the third artifact under study in this research. Seinfeld was a half-hour situation comedy that aired weekly on Thursday nights at 9:00 p.m. and was a crucial program of NBC's "Must See TV" night. "Must See TV" is a programming device used to entice viewers to watch TV from 8:00 to 11:00 p.m. on Thursday evenings. NBC placed three of its top-ratings draws--Friends, Seinfeld, and ER--in this time slot. The phrase, "Must See TV," has become a part of popular culture in the same way that the television programs themselves have. Fans of the shows declare, "it's must see TV night," as they explain their plans for Thursday evenings. This is important because, according to Rybacki and Rybacki, "the time and date a program is aired provide a context for understanding it" (242). Moreover, the placement of Seinfeld at 9:00 p.m. is part of the programming technique called hammocking, where a weaker or new program is placed between two well-established ones. The aim is to "tie programs together in an unbroken flow and produce equivalently unbroken viewing in the audience" (Rybacki and Rybacki 243).

Seinfeld first aired on July 5, 1989, and was co-created and written by Jerry Seinfeld, a stand-up comic, and Larry David. The show ended its ninth season in 1998 and had "evolved into something as close to a religion as pop culture allows" (Flaherty and Schilling 24). The show was a top-five Nielson show during its final four years, thanks to the loyal 30 million who tuned in every Thursday night. Likewise, the millions who faithfully tune into the reruns have made it number five in national syndication (Flaherty and Schilling 24).

On the surface, Seinfeld was about the daily lives of four friends--Jerry Seinfeld, Elaine Benes, George Costanza, and Cosmo Kramer--who lived and worked in New York
City. There were no major or even minor social or political issues dealt with by these four characters; in fact, they were so self-centered that they would fail to see a socio-political issue if it were right in front of them. All of the characters embodied the narcissistic individuality that is captured by Barrett's notion of incivility: Elaine called herself the "Queen of Confrontation," George and Jerry continuously manipulated women, and Kramer was always scheming to make an easy buck. In one of the later episodes, for example, George failed to swerve his car in time and ran over and killed a pigeon. He turned to his date, shrugged, and asked, "So, what do you want to do for dinner?" On the same episode, Jerry dated a woman who had an incredible toy collection but would not let him play with the toys because of their economic value. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to gain access to the toys, Jerry drugged the woman so she would pass out and he would have free access to the collection. When George and Elaine heard about the toys, they, too, came over and drugged the woman in order to play.

For this study, I analyzed 13 episodes of Seinfeld--seven from the most current 1997-1998 season and six from the previous eight seasons. As supporting material, I drew from the book, Sein Language, by Jerry Seinfeld.

Significance

This study into the rhetorical genre of humorous incivility is important for four primary reasons: (1) it constitutes a starting place from which to determine if a rhetorical genre exists and, if so, its rhetorical features and organizing principle; (2) understanding the rhetorical features of this genre may help scholars, entertainers, and public policy makers restore civility in contemporary cultural discourse if this is their goal; (3) it may help explain the current popularity of texts of humorous incivility and the obstacles to
restoring civility; and (4) restoring a sense of civility is important for disrupting the ideology of domination of current American culture.

Given that the talk and concern over America’s lack of civility is increasing and may be serving as a scapegoat for other social problems, this research is important because it offers a definition and description of a rhetoric of one type of incivility that is wildly popular. While generic descriptions of incivility abound--road rage, impoliteness, and rudeness, for example--no research has offered a thorough rhetorical definition or description of the rhetorical characteristics of this discourse. Defining and describing this rhetorical phenomenon is a crucial first step in determining the prevalence and location of such discourse in the culture.

By attempting to discover the rhetorical features of humorous incivility, communication scholars can contribute to public policy discussions and decisions concerning incivility. Not until scholars and public policy makers know exactly what constitutes a rhetoric of incivility can incivility be addressed and/or eradicated from cultural discourse. The alliance with public policy makers is important for two primary reasons. First, communication is directly related to the enactment of incivility: ideas and feelings are communicated though symbols that others read and interpret as uncivil. A rhetorical analysis yields a more comprehensive understanding of the form, content, and power of such symbols. Second, an alliance with public policy makers is beneficial to the communication field. In recent years, an increasing number of communication departments have come under attack because universities and the general public fail to
see how communication as a discipline is related to "real-world" issues. Wider recognition of the discipline's contribution to the social problem of incivility may deter some critics and enhance the discipline's standing.

Texts of humorous incivility appear to be increasing in popularity and numbers. Given that the culture seems captivated by uncivil humorous media texts, this research may offer some insights into the appeal of such texts. Understanding the appeal of the uncivil texts may be useful for highlighting the obstacles to restoring civility and by suggesting strategies for overcoming such obstacles.

Finally, this research is important because of the significant role civility plays in eradicating an ideology of oppression. When alienation, competition, and individualism are the status quo, to achieve the goals of feminist movement is difficult: the feminist goals of eliminating alienation and dehumanization seem antithetical in a climate of incivility. Restoring a sense of civility, then, may contribute to the creation of an environment characterized by respect and the valuing of diverse perspectives, immanent value, self-determination, safety, and mutuality.

Structure of the Study

In this first chapter, I have identified the purpose of the study, the method used, and a survey of the relevant literature on incivility and humor. Chapters two, three, and four are a generic analysis of the discourse of each of the three artifacts of popular culture selected for inclusion in this research: chapter two focuses on the rhetoric of Seinfeld, chapter three on Beavis and Butt-Head, and chapter four on the rhetoric of The Howard Stern Show. In the final chapter, I construct the rhetorical genre of humorous incivility--its rhetorical situation, substantive and stylistic features, and organizing principle--by synthesizing the analyses from the previous three chapters.
Works Cited


Garvey, John. "Alone With Our Rights: America is Getting Harder to Find."


Oakeshott, Michael. "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind."


A man stops dating a beautiful woman so he can do a pretend voice imitating her bellybutton if it could talk. Another installs a garbage disposal in his shower so he can stay in there all day. After being criticized for sleeping with a lot of men and thus having germs, a woman puts an office stapler in her armpit, coughs on a door knob, and wipes a computer keyboard across her butt in defense. A grown man confesses, "Do you know how much mental energy I spend just imagining women naked?" These examples characterize the Emmy Award-winning Seinfeld, which has been referred to as "the defining sitcom of our age" by Entertainment Weekly (www.nbc.com/tvcentral/shows/seinfeld/background.html).

Set in New York City, the plots of Seinfeld revolve around the uneventful daily lives of four co-dependent individuals--Jerry Seinfeld, George Costanza, Elaine Benes, and Cosmo Kramer--all characters based on real-life people. Although the show can be seen to be about friendship, the characters do more than acknowledge and accept one another's faults and imperfections—they exploit them. Because the characters are all ridiculously selfish, self-centered, and egocentric, "their battle cry might be 'All for one and one for me'" (Baldwin et al. 22)! Despite the foursome's continuous plodding through life's trivial details, they never learn a lesson; they exhibit no character growth.
In fact, "that's part of the key to the show. The characters gleefully do not grow," explains Larry Charles, one of the Seinfeld team of writers (Baldwin et al. 24).

Since the beginning of the show, Jerry Seinfeld, a stand-up comic by trade, has been one of the principal writers and producers. Seinfeld, however, would not have reached its current level of popularity without the writing of Larry David, also a stand-up comic. The two comics together created the Seinfeld Chronicles (later shortened to simply Seinfeld) in 1989 to reflect the sort of "obsessive conversations they would have in real life" (Heath 66). The character of George Louis Costanza, played by Jason Alexander, is based on David and reflects his insecurity and neuroses. David, who remained one of the head writers through the seventh season, left because, according to him, "I always want to leave, whatever I am doing, because I think everything's better if I'm not there. . . . Because, I think 'How could anything be good if I'm there'?" (Heath 68)? After a two-year absence, he returned one last time to be responsible for much of the writing of the final episode.

Jerry Seinfeld plays himself, drawing from his work as a stand-up comic in New York. Of the four main characters on Seinfeld, Jerry appears to be the most outwardly normal and at ease with the world. But he also has a negative side: "I hate everybody," he once explained (Baldwin et al. 22). To keep the comedic balance, the three friends must be active so that Jerry can occupy the role of the straight man (Baldwin et al. 22). His role is to comment on and sarcastically critique the other characters' unethical behavior, although his own behavior is certainly not above reproach. As Elaine tells him in one episode, "You know, sometimes when I think you're the shallowest man I've ever met, you somehow manage to drain a little more out of the pool" (Baldwin et al. 25).
The character of George Costanza cannot seem to hold down a job, probably because he hates anything that remotely resembles work. In the show's nine years, George worked for a real estate agency; Pendant Publishing, where he was fired for having sex with the cleaning woman on his office desk; the New York Yankees organization; and a toy company called Play Now. George is short, pudgy, and bald and admits that his whole life is a sham, a condition not helped by his pathological dishonesty. He is selfish and stingy and a "self-proclaimed loser among losers" (Baldwin et al. 24). As he explains in one episode, "I come from a long line of quitters. My father was a quitter. My grandfather was a quitter. I was raised to give up" (Baldwin et al. 30). Despite his bad attitude and lack of conventional good looks, George dates his fair share of beautiful women.

Cosmo Kramer is a "volcano with a bad hairdo, always ready to blow--with petulant anger, with pent up libido . . . or with mad joy over his latest harebrained money making scheme" (Baldwin et al. 23). Despite his wackiness and lack of conventionality, Kramer is a moralist and follows a unique but strict ethical code that guides his actions. He attempts to enact community and neighborliness and displays naive friendliness. For example, he adopted a stretch of highway just so he could keep it clean and took pictures of all the tenants in his building so they could get to know one another and be neighborly. Kramer, played by Michael Richards, is based on Larry David's one-time neighbor, Kenny Kramer. Up until the ninth and final season, Kramer never had held a conventional job. so, in search of money, he always was falling in or out of one scheme or another. In cahoots with George's father, for example, he tried to market a support bra for men, provoking a debate over whether to call it a Manziere or a Bro. The other three
characters regard Kramer as a little "out there," but Kramer sees himself as ahead of his time. Richards explains the heart of Kramer: "The real key came about eight or nine shows in. I had been playing Kramer as if he were slow-witted--always one step behind. . . . Then I learned to play Kramer as if he were blocks ahead of what everyone's saying, and I had him" (Baldwin et al. 23).

Elaine Benes, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, is spunky and exhibits an enthusiastic get-up-and-go attitude. Although she was, at one time, Jerry's girlfriend, she now dates an assorted collection of men and allows herself to have sex for the "sheer guilt-free pleasure of it" (Baldwin et al. 23). Elaine, too, has a hard time settling on a career but more out of boredom than from an aversion to work. Her jobs have included serving as a personal assistant to Mr. Pitt, a writer at Pendant Publishing; a copy writer; and president of the J. Peterman catalog.

Other notable and semi-regular characters include George's parents, Frank and Estelle Costanza. This cranky, conservative, loud-mouthed, critical couple seems to be the root of George's insecurity issues. Jerry's parents--Morty and Helen Seinfeld--live in a retirement community in Florida, think their son is wonderful, and cannot understand how anyone could not like him. Jerry's uncle, Leo, is the stereotypical New York Jewish relative. Jerry and Kramer's neighbor, Newman, works as a mail carrier and is overweight and unappealing. He and Kramer often join together in crazy stunts, while he and Jerry loathe and often engage in one-upping one another. Susan Ross, George's one-time fiancée (she was killed off by licking toxic envelopes for their wedding invitations), comes from a wealthy family and tries to mold George into domestic bliss. Crazy Joe Davola is a mentally ill neighborhood character who once dated Elaine (she stopped
dating him because he built a shrine to her in his apartment) and resents Jerry because he does not invite him to his parties. Elaine's boss in the latter seasons, the verbose and eccentric J. Peterman, is based on the real-life Peterman. Elaine's on-and-off-again boyfriend/lover Puddy is Jerry's auto mechanic and reportedly "the only honest mechanic in New York" (Baldwin et al. 23).

The show is famous for the many twists, turns, and interconnections of each episode as well as the series as a whole. The plot development that characterizes Seinfeld resembles a braid so that, in a typical episode, usually three seemingly unrelated story lines are introduced that are neatly and creatively woven together by the end. In "The Reverse Peephole," for example, Jerry gets talked into pretending to own Puddy's discarded fur coat to hide the fact that Newman, who is having an affair with the building superintendent's wife, gave it to her as a gift. The superintendent is already mad at Kramer and Newman because they have reversed the peepholes on their front doors. Meanwhile, the woman whom Jerry is dating continues to ask him to carry things—such as keys, lipstick, and organizer—for her. Tired of loading down his pockets, Jerry buys what he insists is a European carry-all—his masculine euphemism for purse. All the while, he is being teased mercilessly for being effeminate (and therefore gay) for wearing women's clothing and accessories. At the conclusion, Jerry stands on the street corner wearing the coat and holding his purse when suddenly the purse is stolen. Seeing a police officer across the street, he yells, "Someone stole my European carry-all!" After a series of "Whats?" from the officer, Jerry admits, "Someone stole my purse."

In terms of plot development, Seinfeld is most noted for its focus on the tiny minutiae or trivial aspects of daily life, evoking the description that the show is about
nothing. Elaine expresses this theme best when she says, in exasperation, to Jerry, "I can't spend the rest of my life coming into this stinking apartment every 10 minutes to pour over the excruciating minutiae of every single daily event" (Baldwin 22)! But that is exactly what she does: for nine seasons, Elaine and the other characters spend entire half-hour episodes doing such mundane tasks as looking for Kramer's car in a parking lot, attempting to go to the movies, and trying to get a table at a Chinese restaurant.

While *Seinfeld* has been dubbed "much ado about nothing" by fans and critics alike, something drew millions to their television sets every Thursday evening. The show and the actors had such a loyal following that it became more of a cultural icon than a mere television program. For its final three seasons, the show was the highest rated comedy series on television: it averaged an impressive 20.5 rating and a 32 share in the 1996-1997 season and was watched by an average of 30.4 million viewers (*Seinfeld*). In addition to its Emmy Award as Outstanding Comedy Series, *Seinfeld* won honors such as the Peabody Award (Best Television Entertainment); a Golden Globe Award (Best TV Series; Comedy/Musical); and a Screen Actors Guild Award (Outstanding Ensemble Performance in a Comedy Series).

*Seinfeld* ended its run as one of the most popular television shows in history on May 14, 1998. An estimated 80 million people tuned in for the two-hour event, and advertisers during the show set a record for the most expensive advertising in television history: $1.7 million for 30 seconds. As the series came to a close, the product tie-ins that characterized the show increased. Apple computer produced a special commercial solely for the final episode; *Men's Health* magazine published a guide for the *Seinfeld* men on what kind of suits are best for their body types; and Pond's, the skin-care
company, advertised its Pore Strips with a "Bye Bye Seinfeld" headline (Feran 3). In addition, the cast of Seinfeld was featured on multiple magazine covers during the weeks preceding the final episode.

I will begin my analysis of Seinfeld with a brief description of the situation that serves as the exigence for Seinfeld— the television genre of comedy. In the bulk of the chapter, I will identify, define, and detail the substantive and stylistic features of Seinfeld. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion and summary of what constitutes the rhetorical frame or organizing principle of Seinfeld.

Analysis

Rhetorical Situation

Within the analysis of Seinfeld, I will cover three dimensions: the rhetorical situation, substantive and stylistic features, and the organizing principle. As a situation comedy, or sitcom, the popularity of Seinfeld is understandable because of the success and popularity of the sitcom genre itself. The sitcom is the nexus of prime-time programming and is viewed by network executives as "the bedrock of a successful schedule" (Greenfield 4). Borrowing Newcomb's description of television as "the most popular art," Mintz argues that "surely situation comedy is its most popular genre, and therefore the modern world's most familiar art form" (108). The general format or structure of the sitcom is a half-hour weekly series containing recurring characters within the same premise. Each week, viewers encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. According to Mintz, the episodes are "finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved" by the end of the show. He explains
that the "most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored" (115).

The sitcom genre is not static, however, as each generation requires unique comedic forms. The classic comedies such as The Dick Van Dyke Show have nostalgic value, but they “couldn’t make it today as a first-run show” (Heath). This is due largely to audiences’ preferences and the fact that most television shows are geared toward the 18-to-49-year old audience group. Members of this group, especially the educated ones, have seen all the “clichés and Beaver Cleaver-style cardboard characters in simplistic situations” that tend to characterize sitcoms (Heath). In an attempt to appeal to their desire for more sophisticated plots and characters, producers have begun to offer these audience members comedies that are more relevant to their lives, depicting different kinds of families and values traditionally taboo for television. According to Poltrack, executive vice president of planning and research for CBS, “Comedies of today are more character-focused than situation-focused” (Heath).

Seinfeld is a classic example of this new genre of “smart comedy. . . . People who watch Seinfeld make an average of twice as much as the people who watch the Fox comedies. They’re also more likely to be college educated,” says Stipp of NBC in an interview in American Demographics (Heath N. pag.). Seinfeld is geared to this audience through the creation of characters who have humorous reactions to mundane things and who are people to whom this audience can relate: these characters are “smart and stupid at the same time, just like real people” (Heath N. pag.). Michael Richards’ character, Kramer, adds an element of slapstick humor—a traditionally successful comedic device. This combination of realistic characters and traditional comedic form may be, according
to Stipp, what accounts for Seinfeld's genius: the "ability to poke fun at a whole genre of situation comedy while doing it so well" (Heath N. pag.). Seinfeld, betraying the "Conventional Canons of the Sitcom," thus is created in opposition to the average sitcom (Collins N. pag.). According to Seinfeld, "most sitcoms set up the situation and plug in one liners. We try to make the situation itself funny" (Collins N. pag.).

Seinfeld, therefore, is responding to a market situation where the most sought after television audience is demanding a new form of comedy. The educated baby boomers want characters and a show that reflect their social positions and lifestyles in ways that traditional comedies do not. By breaking the traditional comedic canons and creating laughter out of nothing, Seinfeld responds to this rhetorical situation.

Stylistic and Substantive Characteristics

The analysis of each substantive and stylistic characteristic will proceed through three steps: an identification of each substantive and/or stylistic feature, a description or definition of the feature, and a discussion of how this feature is manifest on the television show Seinfeld. I will focus on the following characteristics in order from most frequent to least frequent occurrence on the show: lack of employment; application of childhood logic, concerns, and communication styles; children's food; the blurring of fantasy and reality; bodily functions; joking about adult concerns and lives; lack of adult relationships; prominence of childhood games; prominence of toys; use of adult technology for play; lack of awareness of the cost of material goods; insider expressions; and the idealized childhood home.

Lack of Employment. Play is the ultimate goal on Seinfeld, so anything that gets in the way of play is either eliminated or transformed into play. Unlike most adults, the
characters on Seinfeld worry little about going to work or holding down steady jobs. Work, or any type of conventional employment, is viewed as part of the real world, and although these four characters recognize that they are supposed to be a part of this world, their lack of social skills and overt rejection of conventional work situates them on the margins of this world and thus on the playground. Rapping, in her critique of Seinfeld, admits that the characters "do indeed diverge radically from the classic professional career/family-based sitcom we have come to know and love/hate" (37). Free "at last from the oppression of corporate work," Seinfeld provides "a vision of daily life in which . . . work [does not] have much meaning or even staying power" (38). This orientation is perhaps a reflection on the writer Seinfeld's own life experience: "When I was a kid my father used to take me around with him in his truck. . . . I'd ride in the van with my sneakers up on the dashboard and it was there that I first learned one of life's great pleasures, watching other people work" (Seinfeld N. pag.). As an adult, he admits that his dream has come true: "I've never really had an actual job. I've worked. But I don't know much about the job thing" (87).

Of all the characters, the absence of work is most prominent for Kramer; he lacks conventional employment all together. His "professional" experience includes serving as the CEO of Kramerica Industries, a future Fortune 500 company that manufactures spill-proof bladders for oil tankers using children's bouncing balls. His company boasts a staff of one. For a brief time, Kramer also was a chicken trainer, training a rooster, Little Jerry, for competition on the underground cock-fighting circuit; an underwear model for Calvin Klein; and author of the national bestseller, The Coffee Table Book About Coffee Tables (a book designed as a table itself). His stage career included being a Tony-
winning producer, playing Santa Claus at a local department store, hosting *The Merv Griffin Show*, and appearing as a stand-in and in one-line cameos on *All My Children* and *Murphy Brown*.

After nine seasons of such careers, Kramer's conventional joblessness is explained: he has been on strike from A and A Bagels for 12 years ("The Strike"). The strike finally ended when the strikers' demands--$5.25 an hour--were granted (this is the current minimum wage). Hearing the news, Kramer returns to the Bagel shop to get his old job back, but he is unprepared to deal with the technological changes in bagel production and, after a series of blunders, is fired. This episode is significant for the belated explanation of Kramer's lack of employment during the show's history as well as the portrayal of Kramer's inability to hold down a job that typically would be filled by a young person as an after-school, part-time job.

Although the other characters tease Kramer for his joblessness, he, of course, believes that he has put in the work of a full-time career. In "The Wizard," he buys himself a gold watch and retires from "the grind." His retirement is made financially possible because, in the show's typical self-reflexive style, he receives an offer from a production company to make a movie of *The Coffee Table Book*. In this episode, Kramer jokes about significant adult concerns and trivializes what is meaningful to most people--productive work, long service, and loyalty. His childlike inability to understand these matters on a serious level reflects a lack of maturity and situates him in the role of a child.

Although being a stand-up comedian is work, the audience never sees Jerry creating and writing his material. He never is seen struggling with writer's block or
worrying about being funny. Although he owns a computer for writing his material, viewers never see him using it. The process of work is hidden entirely so that the audience sees a product that it understands little about. His job is not made to appear like work but as play: telling jokes to an audience much like the class clown tells jokes to classmates on the school playground.

Although Jerry seems to enjoy his work (and why wouldn't he since it is presented as play?), George does anything he can to avoid work. Over the history of the show, he switches jobs to avoid promotion and greater responsibility, moves in with his parents to escape financial responsibility, lies that he is handicapped, selects jobs that require little effort and does only the minimum required, and demonstrates a complete lack of ambition and motivation. In his classic style of avoidance, George has a secret compartment built under his desk at the New York Yankees organization so he can take a nap without being noticed. Confronting his lack of a work ethic, Jerry claims, “You can take just about anything but actual work.” George readily agrees, “bring it on, bring it on” (“The Junk Mail”). For George, work is avoiding work.

For the characters who are employed (Jerry, Elaine, and sometimes George), their work is constructed and presented as play and, as a result, the real-life tensions, challenges, and rewards of a career are trivialized, and serious work matters are turned into games. The world of television make believe frees the characters from needing work or a paycheck to support themselves much like parents free children from the need for these things. As Jerry's admission tells us, being free from work is how children live; their work is play.
Application of Childhood Logic, Concerns, and Communication Styles. The world of play or adolescence also is seen in the application of childhood logic to the characters' adult lives. The maturity level of the characters seems to have peaked at adolescence/puberty, and all their decisions are based on this perspective. Their worldview is based on having fun with little or no effort, hanging out, and being in a position to act out childhood dreams and fantasies.

Applying childhood wishes and logic to current decisions is one way the Seinfeld characters invoke the play world. In exchange for some free advertising for his car dealership, Fragile Frankie, a childhood friend of Jerry’s, agrees to give him a new car. Hoping for a Saab, Jerry is disappointed when Frankie gives him a new van instead. Frankie explains his decision by invoking their childhood concerns and fantasies when he reminds Jerry, "Don't you remember when we were 10, we always wanted a van to ride around in?" ("The Junk Mail").

Invoking childhood logic is another way the Seinfeld characters rationalize their actions. In "The Reverse Peephole," for example, after discovering a tossed-away fur coat in a tree, Newman claims "climbers keepers" as his defense for getting to keep the coat when Kramer also wants to have it. His defense, "climbers keepers," reminds the viewers of the "finders keepers, losers weepers" logic that was applied during their own childhoods.

Like children, the Seinfeld characters place a high value on celebrity status. Children and adolescents, for example, often exhibit idol worship by imitating the dress and/or communication of their favorite stars. In an attempt to gain status, George uses celebrity worship to determine the choice of a new car. Set on buying a Volvo, George
returns from the car dealership with a Chrysler LeBaron because the salesperson told him the LeBaron once was owned by Jon Voight ("The Mom and Pop Store"). (The car later was revealed to belong to John Voight, a dentist, and not the actor). When he tells his friends about his purchase, they make fun of him for buying what they perceive as a lesser car, the motivation behind his decision, and the fact that he is gullible enough to be taken in by the salesperson's trick. In making fun of him, the friends, especially Jerry, show no concern for George's feelings and seem to take pleasure in proving him wrong. The teasing, along with George's association with a less elite car, allows Jerry to place himself in the one-up position, a traditionally male (and adolescent) communication pattern.

To maintain his one-up position, Jerry owns only expensive and elite cars: he drives a BMW and a Saab and buys a Cadillac for his parents. In "The Junk Mail," an old childhood friend of Jerry's gives him a new car. Thinking it would be a new Saab; he is disappointed and a bit disgusted to discover it is a large van. "I hate being the van guy," Jerry complains to Kramer, who suggests that he sell the van. To this, Jerry snobbishly responds, "I don't think I want to meet people in the market for a used van" ("The Junk Mail"). In addition to playing the one-up game, this example shows Jerry making fun of adult concerns and issues—for example, the high cost of raising a family that may make purchasing a used van to transport children necessary and desirable.

In response to pervasive commercialism, the Seinfeld characters use childlike problem-solving strategies to provide an alternative. Invoking a child's world of make believe, George's father, in "The Strike," invents his own holiday in rejection of the commercial and religious aspects of holidays. Festivus, a Christmas alternative, he
explains, "is a festival for the rest of us." In celebration, the Costanza family sets up an aluminum pole (instead of a Christmas tree); holds an airing of grievances where the family members and invited guests share what they do not like about one another; and perform "feats of strength," where George physically fights his father for the holiday to end. Instead of using healthy interpersonal communication strategies to work out family issues, George's father chooses to solve problems through physical violence and verbal insults. Physical violence is also a common strategy that children utilize to solve problems in interpersonal relationships.

The use of exaggeration in *Seinfeld* is a common stylistic communication device that allows the characters to invoke a childlike communication style. For exaggeration, the writers select a common experience and blow it way out of proportion for comedic purposes. In "The Smelly Car," the extent of the body odor is exaggerated to the point that Jerry gives away his BMW and Elaine experiences a drastic sauce treatment to rid her hair of the smell. Jerry explains, "It's destroying the lives of everyone in its path." Kramer's famous entrances (as of the eighth season, there were 252) into Jerry's apartment are funny because of his exaggerated body movements (Baldwin et al. 35). He opens the door as if thrown into it and stumbles and sometimes falls onto Jerry's living room floor.

By applying childlike communication patterns and logic to adult issues, the *Seinfeld* characters again assert their place in the play world. Through these patterns, the characters suggest they lack the resources to problem solve in a sophisticated fashion characteristic of adults. Failing to see beyond the superficial and placing a high value on
impressing others, the characters' behavior appears to be motivated by a sense of peer pressure that often characterizes the actions of children and teenagers.

**Children's Food.** When food is featured on *Seinfeld*, it usually can be characterized as either highly processed and commercialized and/or as stereotypical children's food such as candy, cereal, and soda. Commercially, *Seinfeld* is immodest in its use of brand names to get laughs and a large audience share. In bold consumer fashion, specific products--Junior Mints, Pez, Drake's Coffee Cake, and Snickers--have driven the plot lines, acting almost as guest stars. These products are all primarily children's food items. Jerry and his friends eat cereal for breakfast; drink soda, Cool Aid, or Snapple; and munch on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Wonder Bread.

The most obvious and consistent children's food item for the show is cereal. In Jerry's kitchen, where much of the show's action takes place, the glass cupboard doors allow viewers to see into his world of cereal boxes; in the show's history, 25 cereals made cameo appearances. Poking fun at the show's nine years' worth of cereal, in the last episode, Jerry's parents, Helen and Morty, gather some of his belongings for him while he is in jail awaiting trial ("The Finale":)

*HELEN:* This trial could last for weeks.

*MORTY:* What's all that?

*HELEN:* Cereal.

*MORTY:* You're packing cereal?

*HELEN:* I'm bringing it for Jerry.

*MORTY:* You got enough in there for a life sentence.
HELEN: He likes it. He says he misses it more than anything.

MORTY: So bring a snack pack.

Noteworthy is the fact that, while in prison, the thing Jerry misses most is breakfast cereal—not freedom or relationships, for example. This further situates him as a child, unable to grasp the seriousness of his situation, and reconstructs the prison experience as play.

The nature of the products advertised—the soda, snack food, candy, and cereal—correlates with the narrative structure of the television programs themselves. These empty, superficial food products require a similar forum to be sold; they "demand happy, upbeat environments" (Anderson 8). This relationship contributes to the happy-ending outcomes prevalent in television sitcoms because, according to Anderson, when television "accommodates those products, becoming an appropriate product environment, it too must display the superficial mindless happiness characteristic of promotional culture" (8). Just as the products being sold are literally candy for the body, the programs become a sort of "brain candy." The constant presence of ideal kids' food and the equally constant lack of traditional and nutritious meal-time food suggest the ultimate food fantasy for kids and, once again, remind the viewer that this is a world of play.

Blurring the Lines of Fantasy and Reality in Children's Play. The practice of intertextuality situates one text in context and relationship with other similar texts so the viewer can make connections among them. The connection among texts is suggestive rather than explicit and invites the viewers to supply the missing links or logic. Intertextuality "involves the use of recognizable textual references that allow the viewer to read the text in relationship to other texts. Playful references to media genres, story
formulas, and familiar characters ensure that a range of textual knowledge will be brought to bear upon the present text" (Anderson 33). In *Seinfeld*, intertextuality blurs the lines between fantasy and reality; the two realms are so tightly interwoven and overlapped that viewers have a difficult time telling them apart. This sort of inseparable nature of fantasy and reality is reminiscent of children's play in that children often engage in games of make believe and pretend and can have a difficult time distinguishing between the two.

In advertising, *intertextual* refers to "the means by which products are merged aesthetically with the broader terrain of media culture" (Anderson 33). They work "by assuming a degree of cultural literacy and knowledge among the readers of television" (Anderson 33). By making the appropriate cultural connections and product references, viewers are rewarded with a feeling of being on the inside that enables them to get the clever joke. According to Bush, the “premise behind this [specific brand name product placement on *Seinfeld*] is to make the show more believable” (N.pag.). This sense of believability is a result of blurring the lines between fantasy and reality.

Of the more common forms of intertextuality in advertising is the presence of television characters within commercial segments. Thus, "it is as natural to see Jerry Seinfeld promoting American Express" in commercials during *Seinfeld* “as it is to see him eating Kellogg's cereal on his program. His sidekick, George, the neurotic ego-maniac, is also featured in character, selling snack food" (Anderson 35). The advertising/commercial and program logic becomes circular and reciprocal: the television shows advertise the products, and the commercials advertise the program. By keeping the actors in character on the show and in the commercials, the lines between the reality
of the commercials and the television world of the program become further blurred and, in fact, inseparable.

In recognition of Seinfeld's longtime support for the computer company, Apple designed a commercial specifically for the show's finale. The commercial, part of the "Think Different" campaign, features black-and-white photographs of famous and influential people throughout history. Albert Einstein, Amelia Earhart, and Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, are accompanied by a voice-over of Richard Dreyfus praising these people for their influential ideas and ability to shape and change the world. For this version of the commercial, Apple included a picture of Jerry Seinfeld blowing a kiss to a (presumably) live audience in a stand-up comedy club. While Seinfeld is a stand-up comedian in real life, he is also a television character; thus, the juxtaposition of him both in and out of character with other real-life individuals blurs the line between fantasy and reality for the viewer.

The seemingly reciprocal relationship between Seinfeld and, for example, cereal is neither coincidental nor simply realistic stage setting. This strategy is only one component of what Advertising Age referred to as a "huge integrated arrangement made by NBC with Kellogg to feature the cereal maker as 'co-star.'" The $100-million dollar deal between NBC and Kellogg linked the stars of Seinfeld (and five other NBC shows) with the cereal company in a "marketing program that matches consumers of specific cereal brands with shows they are most likely to watch" (Mandese 1). Since low-fat granola, for example, was the most popular cereal among Seinfeld viewers, the cereal boxes were marketed with paper cut-outs of the four characters. The prolific use of commercial products on Seinfeld and the actors' frequent appearances in commercials
blur, for the viewers, the lines between the television world and reality and reify the importance of the products.

Intertextuality, which, in *Seinfeld*, effectively blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, is reminiscent of a child's sense of imagination and make believe. Just as children incorporate their reality with their fantasy to enhance playtime, so do these characters. By blending the use and appearance of real commercial products with the make-believe world of television, the television world is legitimized and made to seem genuine. In this sense, the commercial products serve to authenticate the television experience by grounding it in a familiar and tangible experience and duplicate an experience—the blurring of fantasy and reality—that characterizes children's play.

**Bodily Functions.** Of the devices that the *Seinfeld* characters use to maintain their cliquish play world, the discursive references to bodily functions are the most prominent. The numerous, explicit, and sometimes vulgar references to bodily functions or "potty talk" enable the group members to maintain their small, closed circle of friends. By developing their own style of communicating and relating with one another on the basis of a private subject, they effectively keep others out. This form of exclusionary communication is also common among children who want to create either a private space away from parents or an in-group on the playground.

Like most teenage boys, the *Seinfeld* men have an intense preoccupation with bodily functions. The majority of the show is shot from Jerry's living room, from which the viewer can see the entrance to the bathroom. George is always going to the bathroom; he grabs some reading material, usually a magazine, and, by closing the door, goes off screen into the bathroom. In response to this repeated behavior, Jerry asks, "Are
you in there again?" In the final episode, George enters the bathroom like he always does but does not shut the door. Jerry quickly notices and warns him against trying to initiate an "open-door policy." In "The Pilot," Kramer has to leave his television audition to use the bathroom. When the men's room at the NBC studios is full, he runs all over town in search of a bathroom. On his search, he is mugged, which has the effect of "scaring him shitless." In the next scene, Kramer enters Jerry's apartment, walking stiffly, and explains, "I was really percolating. Now I have waited so long that I can't get it back. I'm a little backed up." A few days later, he enters the apartment looking very uncomfortable and admits he tried 40-, 50-, and 60-percent bran, but nothing is working. Jerry mockingly suggests, "It might be time for the dreaded apparatus." Recoiling from his words, Kramer says, "I'll do no inserting in that area." A few days later, Kramer enters the apartment singing, to which Jerry, George, and Elaine respond with "congratulations." George asks, "So you went for the big E"? Kramer replies, "Wet and wild."

Elaine, too, participates in this toilet talk. She happily comments to a coworker, "Now we have the bathroom to ourselves," after some people have moved out of their office building ("The Apology"). When she tries to end a romantic relationship with her therapist, he asks Elaine, "Have you been urinating a lot lately" ("The Wallet")?

Allusions to hygiene, sexual diseases, and body image are multiple strategies that enable the Seinfeld characters to make reference to bodily functions. In "The Apology," for example, three of the four story lines make explicit references to bodily functions: Elaine is accused of having germs (by a woman who is referred to as a germaphobe) because she has been with a lot of men. Elaine is insulted when her co-worker insists on
using a seat protector when using the bathroom they share. Viewers learn more than
necessary about Kramer's shower habits; for example, he takes, on average, an hour per
daily shower. When Jerry and Elaine say they spend about 10 minutes in the shower, he
is mystified and insists on learning their technique. Unsatisfied with the "dry run" Jerry
gives him, he takes his notepad to the local YMCA to study men's shower habits. (For
this, he gets punched in the face).

In the third storyline, Jerry is dating a woman who likes to be naked all of the
time. Jerry's response to the woman's nakedness is to distinguish between good naked
and bad naked: "naked hair brushing good, naked crouching bad." The woman,
incidentally, about whom Jerry is complaining, is tall, thin, blond, and has a beautiful
face and body--she is someone most heterosexual men would feel comfortable seeing
naked. Other bodily references include the body odor in Jerry's car in "The Smelly Car"
and the farting sounds when the doorbell is rung in "The Reverse Peephole." Taken
together, the many references to bodily functions by the Seinfeld characters remind
viewers of their lack of maturity and the absence of more important issues in their lives
and distinguish them from other adults.

The multiple references to bodily functions remind viewers that these characters
are children in two ways. First, young children often are preoccupied with bodily
functions and tend to laugh when they occur or are mentioned. Second, the fact that these
characters seem to have the time and energy to worry about such trivial corporeal acts
(such as Kramer's shower obsession) suggest they have little else to worry about. Thus,
the continued focus on and interest in such minute bodily behaviors communicate a lack
of significant adult concerns and lack of maturity.
Joking about Adult Concerns and Lives. Displaying a lack of maturity, the characters joke about the real-life concerns and problems that the majority of Americans face on a daily basis. Any social or political issue is trivialized, sometimes to the point of absurdity, and usually to the point of being inappropriate and socially unacceptable. Many of the characters' remarks would be unacceptable in real-world social situations because they violate conversational manners, minimal ethical standards, and common decency and respect. Moreover, people who do care about such issues are mocked. The characters talk as if they are free to say whatever is on their mind and take little or no responsibility for their actions; for them, their actions have no consequences, just as children are free from major consequences.

Traditional, paid employment is not the only form of work that Kramer avoids; he eschews domestic chores as well. In "The Voice," Kramer complains that he spends so much time doing mundane chores and hanging out with Jerry that he has no time to devote to the development of his good ideas. The duties he complains about--household chores and visiting with friends--are behaviors traditional for women. Kramer unethically enlists an intern from New York University to help him with the running of his corporation, Kramerica. (His behavior is unethical because he pretends to run a large corporation and promises the intern will gain valuable business experience. But, in reality, the intern spends his time doing Kramer's laundry and setting up lunch dates for Kramer with Jerry at the coffee shop.)

In the few episodes when there seems to be a hint of critique of real-life issues, the apparent criticism gets taken to such an absurd level that the criticism is subverted and pointless. In "The Pilot," Elaine has lunch with Russell, the president of NBC (also
the show's network affiliation), who is mildly obsessed with her. Explaining why she is not interested in him, Elaine confides, "I don't like TV. I mean if you were in Greenpeace, then that would be different. But network TV, come on! You're part of the problem." At the end of the show, Russell disappears to a Greenpeace boat in the middle of an ocean, risking his life and saying, "Now she'll respect me." Although the issue is raised that network TV is a problem, the reasons why and the consequences are not discussed; instead, TV just becomes an obstacle to be overcome to "get the girl."

The characters are blatant in their disregard for others. In the series' finale and most dramatic example, the New York Four, as they are labeled, are arrested and tried for violating the Good Samaritan Law, which requires that individuals help people in need. George's question summarizes the characters' joking orientation to serious issues: "Are they crazy? Why would we want to help somebody? That's what nuns and Red Cross workers are for" ("The Clips"). The four characters' crime is joking about and failing to aid an overweight man who is being carjacked:

CARJACKER: All right, fatso! Out of the car!

KRAMER: I'm gonna capture this. (He starts recording with his camcorder.)

CARJACKER: Come on!

FAT MAN: Give me a minute! Don't shoot.

JERRY: (chuckles) Well, there goes the money for the lipo.

ELAINE: See, the great thing about robbing a fat guy is it's an easy getaway.

GEORGE: He's actually doing him a favor. It's less money for him to buy food.

CARJACKER: I want your wallet! Come on. Come on! Come on!

JERRY: Well, that's a shame. All right, I'm gonna call NBC.
By continuously joking about real-life issues, these characters communicate that they are too callous, selfish, and immature to care about others and the larger world. Whatever the cause, the result is an image of four adults behaving like spoiled, selfish children incapable of seeing anything beyond their own immediate interests.

Lack of Adult Relationships. In addition to freeing themselves from work so they can play, the men in Seinfeld also must free themselves from committed romantic and emotional relationships. Relationships and, by association, women (these men are all explicitly heterosexual) are constructed as taking over men's lives. Men, in essence, become less masculine when they are committed to women; such relationships require the giving up of freedom, time, money, and self. This is not to suggest that the male characters on Seinfeld do not date; on the contrary, they date extensively. But the image conveyed by their dating habits is that relationships and women are replaceable; if one does not work out, there is always another to take her place. The women are constructed as a mass of interchangeable body parts rather than as unique individuals.

Avoiding the responsibility of relationships, Jerry, in particular, breaks up with women for trivial reasons. He ends relationships because, for example, a woman does not laugh at all, laughs too strangely, has “man hands,” may have fake breasts, does not taste his pie, is liked by his parents, and eats peas one at a time. In "The Voice," Jerry's girlfriend, Claire, tells Jerry that he must stop "doing the voice" (his imitation of her stomach as if it could talk) if he wants to continue dating her. Jerry decides he would rather break up with Claire so that he can continue to do "the voice" and play with his friends.
George, too, fears that too much intimacy with and commitments to women will interfere with his playtime with his friends. In the series' most dramatic and controversial example, George's fiancée, Susan Ross, is killed from licking the toxic wedding-invitation envelopes. (George was too cheap to purchase high-quality envelopes.) At the hospital, after telling his friends that Susan has died, George asks, relieved, "So, do you want to go to the coffee shop" ("The Invitations")?

Just as children do not exist and live alone in the world, neither do these characters. The literal and symbolic representation of "family" is prevalent. The generous presence of Jerry and George's parents characterizes many of the show's storylines. Compared to other sitcoms, the appearance of a main character's parents is considerably high in Seinfeld. By making the parent-child relationship so explicit, the viewer is repeatedly reminded that these people are children; the juxtaposition makes the characterization obvious.

For these characters, playtime with friends is more important than serious relationships with women because women are replaceable and interchangeable, and play is not. By breaking up with women for trivial reasons, Jerry and George trivialize the real issues that correspond to adult relationships. The inability to be in an adult relationship and participate in relational work in order to be with friends reinforces the existence and primacy of the play world.

Prominence of Childhood Superheroes and Games. References to childhood superheroes and games are also popular rhetorical devices to connect the adult characters to the play world. The characters act out verbal games and use superhero logic to make
sense of their adult world. Rather than admiring social activists, historical, or political figures, the characters in Seinfeld see superheroes as their role models.

Symbolically invoking their childhood, the Seinfeld men make numerous references to comic-book superheroes. George describes Jerry as "a man whose life revolves around Superman and cereal" (Baldwin et al. 24). Specifically, as of the eighth season, there were 32 references to superheroes, including Superman, Batman, the Green Lantern, Elastic Man, Wonder Woman, Aqua Man, and Rubber Man (Baldwin et al. 35). In describing the magnitude of the body odor in "The Smelly Car," for example, Jerry explains to George, "This is a force more powerful than you can imagine. Even Superman would be powerless against this." In "The Voice," Jerry and George debate the question of whether Spiderman wore undergarments or not. Dating a woman whose face changes from pretty to ugly in "The Strike," Jerry explains that she is a two face--"like the Batman villain . . . [and] a 3D baseball card that is always changing." As a tribute to his superhero and a stylistic reminder of his importance, a statue of Superman sits on a bookshelf on the stage set of Jerry's apartment. The real-life Seinfeld offers this explanation, "When men are growing up, reading about Batman, Spiderman, Superman, these aren't fantasies, these are career options. Superman is my role model. . . . Every man thinks of himself as a low-level superhero. And it came true for me. I got to do what I wanted to do in life. To me, that's being Superman" (Smith 37).

Games, too, remind the audience that the television characters are kids, and they behave accordingly. In a mock fight between George and Jerry, they play the "repeat game," in which one person repeats everything the other has said for the purpose of annoying him or her ("The Wallet"). In "The Reverse Peephole," after losing his fur coat
(Elaine throws it out the window to protest to the wearing of fur), Puddy purchases a new coat—one with the number eight on it, a reference to the toy 8 ball game. He says, "I'm the 8 ball—ask me a question"; Elaine's response is a groan at the slap-in-the-face reminder of the child she is dating. She continues, however, to date him, thus legitimizing and accepting the game and his childlike behavior. Explicitly reminding viewers that Jerry is a child, he and his parents often are shown spending time together playing a game, Scrabble.

By playing literal childhood games on Seinfeld, the characters situate themselves as children. The visual representation of the board games themselves, the word games, and the behavior of playing the games take the viewers back to their own childhoods when games were a common form of play.

Prominence of Toys. Any good playground must have toys, and Seinfeld makes explicit references to childhood toys to construct the characters as children. The characters' selfish desire to play with toys distances them from the adult world and situates them on the playground. Access to the toys is crucial for entrance into the play world.

Explicitly showing their passion for toys, Jerry and the other characters in "The Merv Griffin Show" drug his girlfriend so they can have access to her toy collection. Because her father works for a large toy company, the woman has access to toys that are considered collectors' items or antiques, many dating back to the days of Jerry's childhood, including G.I. Joe, Light Bright, and the Easy Bake Oven. Cars are also stereotypically popular toys for males, and they are a favorite of the men on Seinfeld. As of the eighth season, there were 95 scenes of Jerry, Kramer, or George driving a car and a
handful of plot lines that revolve around cars. Oddly enough, for a show set in New York, there are only eight scenes on a subway and one on a bus (Baldwin et al. 35).

The clothing of the characters stylistically suggests playtime. Jerry's feet rarely appear in anything other than sneakers (the real-life Seinfeld is an avowed sneaker buff and receives free shoes from Nike). To go with his sneakers, he usually wears jeans with a button-down dress shirt or T-shirt. George is most often clad in khakis or chinos with a button-down or polo shirt. Consistent with his character, Kramer's fashions are unique: his typical garb is reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s. His vintage clothes visually remind the viewer of another time—a time when the characters were children. Since Kramer's style is unique for contemporary television, he also can be read as playing dress-up, a common form of play for children. The only time the characters wear more formal clothes is when an occasion explicitly calls for it, such as the few cases when they do work or when they attend weddings and funerals (usually the only times when children dress up).

Playing with toys and dressing for playtime fits with the lifestyle of the Seinfeld characters; since they do not work, time is freed up for play. Their toys, dating back to the characters' childhoods, and their casual dress remind viewers that these people are not concerned with common adult issues such as work or raising children.

Use of Adult Technology for Play. The use of technology by the characters on Seinfeld contributes another form of play, with the technological tools serving as the grown-up toys. The technology is rarely used for its original intention but is adapted for the purpose of play. Consistent with the trivial plot lines, the toys/tools are used for trivial purposes as well.
The most notable application of adult technology for play is the use of the cordless phone; as of the end of the eighth season, there were 101 scenes of Jerry on his phone (Baldwin et al. 35). Jerry and Kramer, in particular, make use of telephone technology. They live across the hall from one another (their front doors are five feet apart), but they are constantly talking to one another via the cordless phone; sometimes, they even talk with one another by phone while they are in the same room. Their use of the phone resembles that of kids playing with walkie talkies.

In addition to the consistent presence of the cordless phone, the Seinfeld characters are constantly adapting technology for play. In "The Smelly Car," both Jerry and Elaine receive technical, jargon-filled explanations for getting the body odor out of Jerry's car and out of Elaine's hair. In "The Apology," Kramer has a deluxe garbage disposal installed in his bathtub/shower so he can stay in there all day, and he uses a waterproof cordless phone to gossip with friends and to order chinos from the J. Crew catalog. In another episode, Kramer and Newman decide to reverse the peepholes on their front doors, a stunt that nearly causes their eviction. Technology's prevalence on the show is demonstrated by 103 openings of Jerry's refrigerator; 55 rings of Jerry's buzzer, and 40 shots of Jerry, Kramer, Elaine, or George watching TV (Baldwin et al. 35).

Combining the show's commercial orientation and technology is the presence of an Apple computer in Jerry's apartment. The computer changes with the seasons and reflects Apple's latest; for the 1997-1998 season, for example, Jerry owned the 20th-anniversary Macintosh that is elite in style, design, and form but not in performance or
speed. This particular computer retails for approximately $4000. Yet, despite his expensive taste in computers, viewers never actually see Jerry working on it--it is rarely even on. Visually, the computer is like a child's discarded toy.

**Prices of Goods Have no Meaning.** The products and companies featured on Seinfeld--such as GQ Magazine; Pottery Barn; Federal Express; Apple Computers; and indirect references to Subway, 8 ball, and J Crew--suggest a white-collar, middle-class lifestyle. References to products with a more working-class image, such as the Maytag repairperson or Jerry's critique of George for buying a LeBaron over a Volvo, are used to insult the character, lifestyle, or values attached to such products. References to such products, juxtaposed with the fact that few of these characters hold steady jobs, create a context where the prices of goods have no meaning and the characters do not face any material consequences of their joblessness. Bush concurs, “Viewers see characters on the show [Seinfeld] frivolously spending money without regards to earning any” (N. Pag.).

Of all the characters, Jerry is the most brazen in his disregard for the prices of material goods. In "The Smelly Car," after repeated attempts to rid his BMW of the body odor, Jerry tries to give the car away to a homeless man. After the man sits in the driver's seat, he makes an ugly face in response to the odor and then makes a move to exit the car. The viewer is left wondering if this man also will reject the fancy car. The message is clear: consumer goods are disposable when they no longer help the owner achieve a desired status. Moreover, we never see Jerry self-reflect or process the fact that he is in a privileged position that allows him to give away an expensive car.

Kramer, in particular, likes to take technology to absurd levels, such as installing a deluxe garbage disposal in his shower. All of this occurs despite the fact that, until the
final season, viewers never see or hear about Kramer having a job, so his means of affording these tools is absent. His financial naïveté is reminiscent of a child’s lack of conception of affordability. Kramer’s ability to acquire goods without employment suggests the role of an invisible parent, for, despite his own efforts, he is taken care of and provided for.

The characters on Seinfeld all enjoy various positions of privilege; all are educated, white, middle class, and heterosexual. Elaine, in addition, carries with her the benefits of being thin and beautiful. Jerry also is rewarded by his position as a semi-celebrity. The characters assume—and thus communicate to the television audience—that they are entitled to this privilege. This privilege frees them from having to concern themselves with economic matters. Jerry’s giving away of the foul-odored BMW, for example, reflects his class privilege. His actions appear to be the way of the world, and they are for his world—the world of white, upper middle class, educated men. His giving away of the car is made to appear logical, rational, and ordinary, while, in fact, it is an extraordinary act. The act is plausible on Seinfeld, however, because the prices of material goods are meaningless or absent, and characters are not bound by economic restrictions. Moreover, the implication that the homeless man and community can benefit only by what is given to them by the privileged classes (out of rejection, in this case) reinforces the idea that they must remain powerless and lacking in agency in their own social condition. The absence of such critiques keeps Jerry’s—and the viewers’—world safe and comfortable.

Insider Expressions. The use of insider expressions on Seinfeld is so popular that these expressions have become a sort of recognition device among the fans. Sometimes,
the characters make up words to express their unique experiences and, at other times, the characters take a common experience and give it a euphemistic label.

Kramer is well known for his use of made-up words. For example, he describes Jerry's continued use of the voice from Claire's stomach as "played," meaning that it is overdone and he is tired of hearing it. Kramer uses "kookie talk" to mean blasphemy ("The Junk Mail"), and Jerry says they must "desmellify" the car to get out the body odor. When George and Jerry ask Elaine about the state of her current relationship and she touches her face, they assert that her gesture is "a tell"—when someone touches his or her face when asked about a relationship, the higher up the touch is on the face, the worse the relationship is. If a person touches his or her chin when asked about the state of a relationship, for example, the relationship may be salvageable, but if the hair is touched, the relationship is doomed.

The use of insider expressions creates a private rhetorical space for Seinfeld fans as well as for the characters on the show. For the fans, the expressions serve as a common-recognition device and provide a common language for discussing the show. For the characters, the unique terms allow them to create a rhetorically private space. Privatization is accomplished by focusing on trivial content in which many adults would be uninterested and stylistically by using language that others cannot understand. The use of language that only the main characters know and understand keeps others at a distance and functions to keep them away from playing with the main characters.

The Idealized Childhood Home. Several stylistic devices are utilized to create the feeling of the simple life characteristic of childhood. This life is one that includes a
stable home setting and is free from major disruptions. These forms of simplicity are conveyed on Seinfeld through the reliance on few sets and the camera angles that are used.

The most prominent set of the show is Jerry’s apartment, which is where most of the action takes place. Specifically, the “plot turning” and critical decisions that affected the show’s plot were set in Jerry’s apartment (Bush N. pag.). The second most popular set is Monk’s coffee shop, a “surrogate apartment setting in that important decisions are made and the “mundane” is discussed. All of this goes on as they eat . . .” (Bush N. pag.). Talking, fighting, and making decisions over meals are common behaviors of families. Similarly, since children spend the majority of their time at home, it is typically the place of action for them. The high presence of the home and the surrogate presence of the dining table (at Monk’s) on Seinfeld remind the audience of children playing at home rather than being out in the world of adults.

The camera angles and shots also draw the viewer into the home. As the scenes begin, there is an external establishment shot while the audience hears the characters’ voices coming from within the set. The view of Jerry’s apartment, while hearing the friendly voices emanating from it, invites the viewer inside; the audience is asked to play with Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine. The shots are simple: the majority of them alternate between over-the-shoulder shots and two shots. In the over-the-shoulder shots, viewers look at a character as if they were in the position of looking at him or her from over another’s shoulder. In the two shot, the audience sees both of the characters at the same time. This effect is created with a jumpcut, a different camera that allows a different angle to be shot. Seinfeld is shot with three cameras--typical for the sitcom
genre. The simple style in which Seinfeld is filmed mirrors the simplicity of the characters' lives.

The prominence of the home and the unsophisticated manner in which it is shot work together to convey the simple life of childhood. The consistent setting of Jerry's apartment represents an idealized stable home life. (In the show's history, Jerry never moves from this apartment.) The lack of fancy or sophisticated camera shots also conveys a simple, predictable life, free from major disruptions. This simple, stable life is one that is seen as traditional and ideal for children in our culture. Therefore, not only are these characters cast as children, but they also are characterized as coming from an ideal home setting for children.

Organizing Principle

The organizing principle for this show is children's play. According to Jerry Seinfeld, "It's good to play, and you must keep in practice" (1). The metaphorical setting that the Seinfeld characters occupy is that of a playground--complete with toys and games, freedom from responsibility, and a unique set of playground rules and modes of communicating--with all of the substantive and stylistic features developing and supporting this thematic structure. Specifically, the principle of children's play is constructed through the expression of a variety of characteristics. The characters display a lack of and aversion to employment reminiscent of a child's disdain for doing household chores; their lack of work also echoes children's lack of paid employment. When faced with adult decisions, the characters apply childhood logic, concerns, and communication styles to solve problems. They reject healthy eating, preferring instead the junk food that characterizes children's food. Just as children playing make believe
blur the lines between fantasy and reality, the Seinfeld characters create a world in which separating these two realms is difficult. Bodily functions are referenced in a pubescent fashion. The constant joking about adult concerns and lives communicates that these characters are free from worrying about such matters. As children, they display a lack of adult relationships. These adult relationships are replaced with the prominence of childhood superheroes, games, and toys. The fact that adult technology is adapted for play reinforces its importance in this world. As children, the characters are free from the responsibility of purchasing their necessities and toys; therefore, the prices of goods have no meaning. Wanting to keep this play world free from adult influences, the characters create insider expressions to keep others out. Characterizing the mood of the play world, several stylistic devices remind the audience of the idealized childhood home.

Taken together, the combination of the above substantive and stylistic characteristics creates a world of children’s play for the adult children on Seinfeld. The positioning of the adult characters as children is necessary for the believability and acceptance, on the part of the audience, of the characters’ attitudes and behaviors. This characterization allows two things: it allows the behaviors to make sense and thus to continue, and it subverts critique or critical assessment. When a child misbehaves, the behavior may be punished, corrected, or ignored, but there is a fundamental understanding and tolerance of it because children are, by definition, immature and are not expected to know any better.

In essence, viewers are asked to apply the rationale, "boys will be boys," to the characters' actions on this show. The characters (as children) are liberated from the
responsibility and work of participating in the adult world. This form of acceptance not only allows the behaviors to continue, but it silences any critique the audience may have of their actions.

As a result of the organizing principle of children’s play, the audience witnesses a very limited style of relating to others through the characters on Seinfeld. As the main context in which these characters communicate and interact, play, by definition, suggests an atmosphere that is frivolous, trivial, or idle. People, then, are likely to communicate in ways that are also frivolous, trivial, or idle, and as a result, their actions may have little meaning or significant impact on one another because they are easier to dismiss in this context. While the goal of play is self-gratification and personal amusement, it does not often occur in isolation—people need to play with other people. In essence, individuals use others to play. (For the Seinfeld characters, using others for self-gratification is much the same way they relate to sex.) Thus, the perspective of interpersonal relationships is extremely limited so that people are used for self-gratification purposes only, people are dismissed rather than understood, and personal growth is limited because people do not have significant impact on one another in this context.
Works Cited


"The Merv Griffin Show." Seinfeld. NBC. WCMH, Columbus, OH. 6 Nov. 1997.


"The Wizard." Seinfeld. NBC. WCMH, Columbus, OH. 26 Feb. 1998

CHAPTER 3

BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD

Beavis and Butt-Head are not role models.

They're not even human.

They're cartoons.

Some of the things they do would cause a person
to be hurt, expelled, or possibly deported.

To put it another way:

Don't try this at home.

Depending on one's point of view, these words, which open every Beavis and Butt-Head episode, are either a clever, sarcastic commentary by the show's creator, Mike Judge, on the criticism against him and his infamous duo, or they belittle the seriousness of the potential influence this fictitious pair has upon its audience. As Newsday television critic Marvin Kitman observes about Beavis and Butt-Head, "Either this is the end of civilization or it's a satirical masterpiece, a parody of a certain segment of the American population, the total jerks, the 14 year olds" (Barrett 86).

Beavis and Butt-Head ran from 1993 to 1997 on the Music Television Network (MTV), "an international communications giant" that provides "nonstop pop culture and rock videos to over 249 million homes in 88 countries (57 million in the United States)"
(Zagano 6). Although the social value of Beavis and Butt-Head is debatable, its popularity is not: for the first two years of its existence, it was MTV's highest rated show and maintained a loyal following until Judge ended the show in 1997. Other indicators of its popularity are the cover stories about the show that appeared in magazines such as Newsweek and Rolling Stone and the numerous merchandising tie-ins. These included the 1993 release of the music CD, The Beavis and Butt-Head Experience, which features such rock-and-roll artists as Nirvana, Aerosmith, and Cher; a Sega Genesis home video game; numerous CD-ROM games; and more traditional products such as T-shirts, coffee mugs, and Halloween masks. Taking their popularity to the big screen, Beavis and Butt-Head made their film debut in Beavis and Butt-Head Do America (1996), which grossed $62 million in its first three months of release (Current Biography 256).

Each episode of Beavis and Butt-Head is a half-hour-long cartoon that contains two individual narratives, approximately 12 minutes each in length. Within the narratives are scenes of the two main characters, Beavis and Butt-Head, sitting on their couch watching music videos on MTV. The plots and the cartoon drawings are simple and unsophisticated. Types of story lines, for example, include the boys participating in the "Scared Straight" program that takes teenagers to prison for a day to deter them from a life of crime, going to a radical feminist meeting to try to pick up girls, and getting sent back to kindergarten.

Judge "was certainly nothing like Beavis and Butt-Head as a child," explains the creator's mother. In fact, as an honor student, member of the swim team and the local youth symphony, Judge describes himself as the kind of kid that Beavis and Butt-Head would enjoy tormenting: "I was a skinny kid who got pushed around a lot" (Current
Biography 256). After high school, Judge went on to study the physical sciences at the University of California at San Diego and then worked at what he felt were tedious engineering jobs that required "slow mindless work." Taking up his childhood hobby of drawing cartoons, he entered Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Festival of Animation in 1992 with the debut of Beavis and Butt-Head. The characters were such a hit that within a week, Colossal Pictures signed the cartoon; a year later, the infamous duo appeared on MTV's show, Liquid Television.

The two main characters of the show are Beavis and Butt-Head. Beavis is the "pomadoured blonde pyromaniac with crocodile teeth and a high-pitched voice" who laughs "heh-heh-heh." He is a compilation of a number of people Judge knew while growing up. Butt-Head, the brunette with the "really awful haircut . . . harelip and oversized gums is based on a buck-toothed cretin with an obscene, breathy laugh--Huh-huh, huh-huh-huh" (Current Biography 257). Except for one another, they appear alone in the world: they have no parents or last names to provide heritage, family, or community. Although the show spanned four years, the boys remain about 14 years old and in the ninth grade. Their lack of outward physical growth mirrors the lack of inward character growth. They are virgins and on an eternal quest "to score." They have part-time jobs at Burger World, which they take less than seriously. Lacking any sort of career ambition, the few occupations in which they are interested are either illegal or immoral. In one episode, they want to go to prison because the inmates are "cool"; in another, they want to be moving men who "break stuff."

Viewers, however, see Beavis and Butt-Head's real job to be that of social and music critics. Admittedly, their video reviews sometime come down to one-word
assessments like "cool" or "suck," but often, the two add humor and social commentary to their critiques. For example, responding to a ZZ Top video, the two have this conversation:

BEAVIS: "Check it out, Butt-Head. It's Al Bundy."

BUTT-HEAD: "Is that the dude who killed all those people?"

BEAVIS: No, Peckerwood, that's the dude from All My Children.

BUTT-HEAD: "Wow, the dude from All My Children killed people?"

BEAVIS: "No, that was the dude from Roc.'"

BUTT-HEAD: Oh yeah, he's cool. . . . Better change it, Dude, this video's telling a story."

BEAVIS: Yeah, stories suck."

Since the show began in 1993, it has generated controversy and with good reason: it contains rude and vulgar language, romanticizes violence, objectifies women (and men), and offers no easily identifiable social value. On the surface, the characters seem to be making their way to a life of crime and prison: they have no goals, no ambitions, no skills, and no regard for anyone but themselves. Parents fear children watching the show will copy the boys' behavior and turn them into role models. Much of this fear stems from two incidents involving the death of two children for which the media blamed Beavis and Butt-Head. In one of these incidents, a five-year-old boy set fire to his trailer-park home, and the show was blamed (Beavis is a pyromaniac and likes to chant, "Fire! Fire! Fire!"). When an eight-month-old girl was killed as a bowling ball was thrown off an overpass onto a New Jersey highway and hit the family car, a New York-based media watch-dog organization, Morality in Media, blamed Beavis and Butt-Head. They cited

99
an episode where the boys threw a bowling ball off a rooftop. Newspapers, CNN, and local news stations ran the story and showed clips of the show next to pictures of the baby girl. Not until the 18-year-old youth arrested for the attack admitted he did not get cable and the local prosecutor "announced there was no evidence of a connection between the killing and the program" did the media withdraw its claim of a tie to the show (Katz 45).

In response to the blame and the pressure to take the show off the air all together, Judge and MTV executives pulled the show from its prime-time slot and instead aired it at 11:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. weekdays. In response to the media attacks that Judge's show was responsible for the deaths of the two children, he said, "It saddens and amazes me. . . . To link the program to a tragedy like that with absolutely no evidence--it's just unbelievable. . . . I've gotten so tired that I don't feel like fighting big battles" (Katz 45).

Although a less popular reading of the show, some believe that Beavis and Butt-Head provides viewers--and teenagers in particular--with a forum for talking critically about television and music videos. In this reading, Judge is credited for understanding how teens watch music videos. They do not sit passively, in awe of the images in front of them; rather, they are bored, blasé, and cynical, "like anyone seeing something for the 10,000 time" (Ozersky D4). Beavis and Butt-Head was unique because it showed Beavis and Butt-Head watching videos like real teenagers do: offering critique, using their own lingo and jargon, connecting the videos to their own lives, and comparing them to one another. They express their boredom with the repetitive styling of videos by conferring a judgment of "this sucks" on them while rewarding innovative musicians and video producers with their thumbs-up, "this-is-cool" review. Pleased at seeing something
new, for example, in the Gruntruck video, "Crazy You," Butt-Head comments, "These
guys must be, like, hallucinating." Beavis responds, "Yeah, like back in the Sixties when
you see stuff you don't believe. I must be hallucinating now. I can't believe they're
playing something cool." Similarly, in a video showing a singer under a table playing a
ukulele, the boys decide the video is "cool" because it is different.

The value of Beavis and Butt-Head goes beyond teaching teenagers how to watch
music videos by opening up a critical space for discussing the value of television
"without sounding pompous or culturally alienated." Due to their crude linguistic style
and sophmoristic sensibilities, Beavis and Butt-Head exposed MTV "for the pretentious
dreck it is" and did it "without trying to grab the high ground" (Ozersky D4). Katz
explained, "grow-ups don't get that this program is unique and valuable precisely because
it brilliantly lampoons the qualities it is accused of propagating--stupidity, sexism, the
simple-minded macho rites of adolescence" (45). Ebert suggests that "to study B & B is
to learn about a culture of narcissism, alienation, functional literacy, instant gratification,
and television zombiehood. Those who deplore Beavis and Butt-Head are confusing the
messengers with the message" (F15). Beavis and Butt-Head, according to Ozersky,
"showed up something that had claimed to be subversive and cutting-edge to be so banal
and conventional that even two brainless pubescents couldn't be surprised by it. They
closed the circuit between TV and its audience" (D4).

In this chapter, I begin with a brief description of the rhetorical situation--to make
money (for MTV) and promote music sales. In the majority of the chapter, I will
identify, define, and describe the substantive and stylistic features of Beavis and Butt-Head. I conclude the chapter with a discussion and summary of what constitutes the rhetorical frame or organizing principle of Beavis and Butt-Head.

Analysis

Rhetorical Situation

Although obvious, the rhetorical situation for Beavis and Butt-Head is an economic one: to make money for MTV and, through the extensive integration of music videos within the show, to promote record and compact disc sales. In the early days of MTV and the music video industry, a band’s success was tied directly to its video popularity; no new band could enter the music scene without videos. In the 1990s, however, the music changed: bands like Nirvana and the entire Seattle grunge scene challenged the music to which people listened and the values represented in the music. The lyrical trend was one that reflected a search for meaning rather than the posturing and materialism characteristic of the 1980s’ pop lyrics and videos. Reflecting this new lyrical direction, MTV began to move away from the all-video format and began producing non-musical shows such as The Real World and Singled Out. According to Ozersky, "the pair [Beavis and Butt-Head] ridiculed what had been MTV’s bread and butter, music videos. In their wake, music videos became so drained of their cutting edge mystique that MTV began to run game shows and documentaries more than videos" (D4).

The specific rhetorical situation for Beavis and Butt-Head is this transition of MTV’s format from all music to its current status as everything but music. The format of the show mirrored this transition: part video and part something else. Significant is
the fact that the cartoon characters provided a critique of the videos, a critique that also mirrored the growing resistance to and movement away from music videos.

Substantive and Stylistic Characteristics

To identify and examine the substantive and stylistic features of Beavis and Butt-Head, I will consider them conjointly for, according to Zagano, the show’s “style is part of its substance” (7). The analysis of each characteristic will proceed through three steps: an identification of the substantive and/or stylistic feature, a description or definition of the feature, and a discussion of how this feature is manifest on Beavis and Butt-Head. I will focus on the following characteristics, organized from broadest to narrowest: prominence of television; cultural references; references to violence; dumb, obvious, or wrong statements; images of women as sex objects; bodily functions, references to unlawful behavior; men as caricatures; insider expressions; children’s food; and work as play.

Prominence of Television. The television, in style and content, is the most prominent and consistent feature of the show. The role of the television as content is twofold: it is the main activity of the duo, generating dialogue and story lines, and it is the medium for watching (and hence critiquing) the music videos. The specific stylistic feature created through the television will be discussed under the category of visually crude style.

As a stage prop on the set of the show, the television is featured, of course. The videos appear on the television, and watching videos is the main purpose of the show and, by extension, the main goal of Beavis and Butt-Head. The majority of the show occurs in Butt-Head’s living room with a small couch and television as the only furniture.
The couch and television face each other so Beavis and Butt-Head can sit and watch. The viewer either watches the boys from the perspective of the television—as if the television could watch Beavis and Butt-Head—or watches the television from the perspective of sitting on the couch, viewing as Beavis and Butt-Head do. This dual role of the television as both lens and object reminds viewers that it is “neither a mirror, reflecting ourselves paralyzed in chairs in front of it, nor a window, through which we observe the antics of distant players.” Rather, the television on Beavis and Butt-Head is “designed to flatter us in sinister ways” by rewarding us with laughter for getting the jokes and cultural references and “commit[ting] us to the status quo” through reasserting and reaffirming television’s power and hegemony” (Ozersky 212).

The power of the television to generate content is highlighted in the film, Beavis and Butt-Head Do America, which opens with the boys’ discovery that their television has been stolen. Horrified at their loss, they set out across America in search of it. In the film, the television, or its absence, is the catalyst for action and illustrates its power to generate story lines.

The television is the medium for watching the music videos, thus allowing Beavis and Butt-Head to take on their role of critics. Through their over-simplified video reviews, Beavis and Butt-Head open up a space and a forum for critiquing a media form that many assume teenagers watch, mesmerized and passively. In "Tired," the boys comment on the use of water in videos:

    BUTT-HEAD: I'm sick and tired of all these videos of college dudes in water and stuff.
    BEAVIS: Yeah.
BUTT-HEAD: Maybe we should turn the TV off.

BEAVIS: Yeah.

(Television goes off, the screen goes black, and Beavis and Butt-Head are heard talking.)

BEAVIS: Mmmmm. Ahhh. So, what have you been doing all day?

BUTT-HEAD: Sitting here watching TV.

BEAVIS: Ahhh, yeah. So did you get any?

BUTT-HEAD: Let's see what's on TV.

BEAVIS: (Excited) Good idea. Yeah, Yeah!

(TV goes back on to the same video)

BEAVIS: Oh, look, a video. Yeah, that's so great.

To deconstruct the medium on which they watch and critique music videos, the television invokes a state of hyperconsciousness of postmodern popular culture: "a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as the conditions of its circulation and reception" (Collins 335). The opening lines of the show, which also opened this chapter, are hyperconscious, for example, in that they reflect or parody the criticisms against the show.

Beavis and Butt-Head display hyperconscious recognition of their cartoon identity and their situatedness on MTV. Hyperconsciousness is an act of playing with or tweaking the text to reflect its cultural status, function, or history or its situatedness. While watching a video where a musician whirls around like a small tornado, the boys are reminded of the Tasmanian Devil. The "Tasmanian Devil kicks ass," they say. Implicitly including themselves, they both agree, "Yeah, cartoons are cool" ("Tired").
Demonstrating a hyperawareness of their circulation and sponsorship, the boys poke fun at MTV. In "Buttnicks," Beavis surprises Butt-Head with some music trivia and tells him he learned it from MTV News. (MTV News is MTV's version of a news show that provides information on exclusively music-related stories.) Butt-Head makes fun of the show by mimicking and imitating the show's theme song. Beavis joins in the ridicule and makes fun of one of the announcers, Tabatha Sorenson, by calling her "Tabatha Sore End, get it?"

The television as a substantive device on Beavis and Butt-Head provides the characters with the content material upon which to critique. The prominence of the television in the lives of Beavis and Butt-Head reminds the audience of its influence in theirs.

Visually Crude Style. The cartoon style of the show is important because it establishes crudeness and a lack of sophistication as the general visual tone of the show. The style of the animation and the bleakness of the set of Beavis and Butt-Head create a crude and unsophisticated look for the show. While the goals of Beavis and Butt-Head, through its placement on LTV, were sophisticated, the animation is not. The cartoons are crude, raw, and stylistically unsophisticated and characterized as "the kind of cartoons you might find scrawled on the inside of a high school locker" and depict motion that resembles "the jerky, seasick quality of marionettes" (Current Biography 257). The effect is that the drawings themselves do not draw a lot of attention from the audience but allow the dialogue to be the primary focus.

The characters and the set alike are depicted in a crude and unattractive fashion. Butt-Head's living room, where most of the show takes place, is sparsely decorated; a
couch, lamp, and television are the only furnishings. The couch is torn, and the wall behind it has holes where the brick is exposed. Garbage or empty fast-food packages litter the living room floor. Beavis and Butt-Head look worse than the set. Their heads are drawn unrealistically long so that their size is disproportionate to the rest of their bodies. Their noses and nostrils are exaggerated to appear larger than usual. Butt-Head's big teeth are exposed because of his harelip. The rest of their bodies appear thin and underdeveloped.

The style of Beavis and Butt-Head as crude and unpolished reflects the nature of the characters and their communication. Visually, they appear as rejects and on the margins of society, as misfits not able to fit in. In an era of cinematic special effects, the crude and obviously unrealistic style makes dismissal of Beavis and Butt-Head easy for viewers.

Cultural References. Through the television, Beavis and Butt-Head make explicit cultural references in multiple ways. Their (and hence the audience's) viewing of the music videos visually and stylistically connects audiences to the genre of music videos, the musicians featured in the videos, the clothes of the performers, the cultural messages embedded within the video text, and the criticisms they generate. They create for the audience a world of youth, beauty, strength, power, and material wealth. The technology of the television is the cultural link connecting Beavis and Butt-Head to the "already said" of television's collective history:

There is no other medium in which the force of the "already said" is quite so visible as in television, primarily because the already said is the "still being said." . . . What is postmodern in all of this is the simultaneity of these
competing forms of rearticulation—the "already said" is being constantly recirculated, but from very different perspectives ranging from nostalgic reverence to vehement attack or a mixture of these strategies. (Collins 333-34)

A second way in which Beavis and Butt-Head generate cultural references is through explicit verbal remarks about various cultural figures and institutions. Consistent with Ozersky's logic that Beavis and Butt-Head illustrates the absurdity of television specifically and media in general, many of the boys' cultural references are to media personalities. David Letterman, for example, is referred to as "the letter dude" ("Late Night with Butt-Head"). They make fun of Andy Rooney of 60 Minutes and his style of inquiry. Imitating Rooney's voice, for example, the boys wonder, "Why do they call it 'taking a dump'? You're not taking it anywhere. They should say 'leaving a dump" ("Pool Toys"). In reference to Kato Kaelin, a prominent figure in the O.J. Simpson trial, Butt-Head observes, "He's a great guy. That's why everyone let him live at their house like O.J." ("Spanish Fly"). After successfully looking down the hair stylist's blouse to see her breasts, Butt-Head brags, "Beavis, I have seen the top of the mountain" ("Top O' the Mountain"). This comment invokes reference to Martin Luther King's speech of the same name and the Biblical reference and in this context trivializes these two cultural texts.

In their attack on cultural institutions, references to various aspects of commercial culture and industry are introduced. When Mr. Anderson, their neighbor, goes to Home Labyrinth to buy some tools, he is told to go to aisle K7149B, row 17, shelf W. He becomes hopelessly lost and trapped inside while the store closes for the night. The closing shot shows his car being towed away while he yells for help ("Pool Toys"). The
boys' place of employment, Burger World, is a direct inversion of McDonald's. The uniforms are the same red and yellow colors, and the logo is a bright yellow W—the golden arches turned upside down.

Through these three areas of cultural criticism—music videos, media celebrities, and cultural institutions—**Beavis and Butt-Head** effectively critique the cultural context that has given birth to and supported its growth and popularity. Thus, although the boys appear to critique almost everything that is part of American mainstream culture, they, themselves, are mainstream, and they do not pretend to be anything else. Because they can and do mock MTV, without which they would not exist and they ignore the fact that they, themselves, are products of TV and MTV, them) the duo is seen by some critics as representing postmodern irony. While appearing to make fun of others for embodying the same qualities they, themselves, possess (along with the audience), they effectively cause the audience to laugh at itself. Thus, the cultural references generate a self-reflective laughter for the audience as an invitation for cultural self-reflection.

**References to Violence.** Violence is a pervasive feature of **Beavis and Butt-Head**; the two most common forms are personal physical violence and destruction of property. The boys are shown performing, witnessing, and glorifying violent acts with comments such as "violence is cool" and "break it, break it." Often, the boys are instigators of violence and never suffer the consequences of their actions.

Physical violence is an easy way for Beavis and Butt-Head to solve their problems, and often it is the only way they see for such problem solving. Even though they appear to be best friends (although they never would admit to this), they constantly threaten each other. As they sit on the couch watching MTV videos, for example, Butt-
Head tells Beavis, "I'm gonna kick your ass" ("The Final Judgment of Beavis"). In another episode, while Beavis annoyingly imitates a sound on a music video, Butt-Head repeatedly asks him to "shut up." When he refuses, Butt-Head beats him up. In another similarly stupid dispute that occurs while they are watching videos, Beavis and Butt-Head discuss their "nads." Butt-Head tries to convince Beavis to cut off his nads so he will be able to sing higher; he points out that Beavis does not use his nads for anything and that they simply are in the way. Beavis then kicks Butt-Head in the nads, and his face turns red. "See, that's what nads are for," Beavis mockingly points out to Butt-Head ("Bus Trip").

Not surprisingly, Beavis and Butt-Head love to watch violence on television to learn about new violent behaviors; thus, they always are trying to see programs that contain the warning, "This program may contain violent scenes not suitable for children." After watching a cop show one afternoon, the boys decide to play "cops and robbers." Imitating the cops' heroic stunts, Beavis tries to run through a brick wall. Hitting the brick wall at full force, he is knocked to the ground, unconscious. Butt-Head, mistaking unconsciousness for death, wastes no time in burying Beavis alive ("The Final Judgment of Beavis"). Their penchant for violence on television is summarized in the boys' conversation in one episode. Apparently disappointed with a lack of violence on television, the boys comment on a video showing sex. "This video is complicated," Butt-Head complains. Beavis explains, "Yeah, yeah. I mean I like the boobs and the butts and stuff, but it just seems like it needs some accidents and some blood" (Barrett 88).

The destruction of property, particularly that of other people, is a particular favorite activity for the boys. Watching a video showing construction work, Butt-Head
declares, "Hammers are cool." Beavis agrees, "Yeah, yeah. I like to take hammers and break stuff. Just break stuff. Break it. And when you're done breaking it, you can smash it. Just smash it" (Barrett 87). They are thrilled to watch David Letterman on television and get tips from his "Top 10 ways to break stuff." In fact, they are so inspired that they plan and film their own show about how to break stuff so they will "get chicks" ("Late Night with Butt-Head"). Sitting around bored one day, Beavis suggests to Butt-Head, "Let's get light bulbs and stomp on them." "Good idea, Beavis," he replies ("The Final Judgment of Beavis"). Thinking they have met their role models in "Stewart Moves Away," Beavis and Butt-Head emulate two "moving" men who break the things they do not like and steal the good stuff. In awe, Butt-Head professes, "These are the coolest men I've ever met."

While the numerous references to violence have initiated many of the attacks against the show, they also serve as an invitation to self-critique on the part of the audience in much the same fashion as the cultural references. Because the references to violence are so extreme (such as Beavis trying to run through a brick wall) and are depicted in a style of animation, they are removed from reality and set in a world of make believe. Instead of glorifying violence, Beavis and Butt-Head functions more like a parody of the glorification of violence in the media.

Dumb, Obvious, and Wrong Statements. Part of the show's humor comes from the fact that Beavis and Butt-Head make dumb and obvious statements that suggest their blatant stupidity. These statements revolve around the three themes of the media, political correctness, and general knowledge.
Although trivialized, Beavis and Butt-Head do reflect on larger social issues, and these often have to do with the role of the media or media figures. Wanting to be like David Letterman so he can get money and "chicks," Butthead creates his own show, Late Night with Butt-Head, although he has no plot, script, or any sort of plan ("Late Night with Butt-Head"). By attributing Butt-Head's motive for wanting to be on television to getting money and chicks, media stars' automatic and often undeserved wealth and popularity are exposed. In "The Final Judgment of Beavis," when Beavis tries to run through a brick wall, imitating the cop just seen on television, he exemplifies their blind adoration for and imitation of the media.

A second context in which Beavis and Butt-Head display their ignorance is in the arena of political correctness. In "Spanish Fly," the boys comment on the pressure to be politically correct in the naming of others. The boys are watching television, and the film, One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest, is featured in a video. In talking about the film's characters, Beavis uses the word retarded. Butthead corrects him, saying, "I don't think you're supposed to say retarded anymore. You say mentally superior." After Beavis uses the word Indian, Butthead tells him, "I don't think you're supposed to say Indian." Beavis is confused: "No way! Really?" Butthead explains, "You're not supposed to say Indian, either. You're supposed to call them African Americans."

Although Beavis and Butt-Head are in high school, they have not learned much general knowledge along the way. In one episode, while watching videos, they are reminded of vowels and wonder aloud, "Do letters have vowels?" Butthead believes the numbers 0 and 1 are vowels, and Beavis thinks he is smart as a result. Butthead admits, "Sometimes, when I'm in school, I listen" ("Pool Toys"). Late for class one day, they
enter the room to find that no one is there. On the chalkboard is a message telling them that the class is going on a field trip. The boys fail to read the simple message and mistake the word trip for tit ("Bus Trip"). In the school cafeteria, Butt-Head puts Spanish Fly in a woman's food in an attempt to arouse her sexually. Motivating her to eat the tainted food, he says, "You shouldn't waste good food because there's starving people in Indiana" ("Spanish Fly"). The boys display even less intelligence at work. In "Tainted Meat," Beavis and Butt-Head are grossly unaware of the fact that the contact between Beavis' infected penis, his hands, and the food is causing the customers to become violently ill. When Butt-Head suggests to him that maybe he should wash the penis with water, Beavis replies, "No way! It'll get wet."

Repeatedly, Beavis and Butt-Head demonstrate that they lack even the most basic knowledge, and their ignorance is most visible in the arenas of the media and political correctness. In an exaggerated and foolish manner, they apply the values presented in the media to their real-life goals and interpersonal relationships. Their mutilation of politically correct terminology displays a level of naiveté that appears to trivialize and dismiss the issue.

**Images of Women as Sex Objects.** Women are presented on Beavis and Butt-Head as nothing more than sexual objects. The portrayals are so highly stereotyped that to critique them seems to be stating the obvious. Women and girls are chicks and whores, and the women in California are all sluts. There are only two regular female characters: Daria, whom the boys call Diarrhea (she was popular enough, however, to
earn her own spin-off on MTV), and Stewart's mother. The boys' parents never appear on
the show, but Butt-Head refers to Beavis' mother as a slut and brags that he has seen her
naked.

Most of the women on the show are random classmates, women Beavis and Butt-
Head see in public, and women on the music videos. Often, the women have large
breasts that the boys are trying to see and feel. They use the air hose at a gas station, for
example, to blow up the skirts on women so they can look up them and take the advice on
bathroom walls. In "The Top of the Mountain," for example, the boys get their hair cut
because when the hairdresser bends over to wash their hair, they are able to look down
her blouse and see her breasts.

Judging all women by the slut descriptor, the boys engage in debate while
watching a Debbie Gibson video:

    BUTT-HEAD: Check this out.
    BEAVIS: Yeah, Olivia Newton John sucks.
    BUTT-HEAD: That's not Olivia Neuter John. That's that rich chick from 9-
0-2-uh-uh-61.
    BEAVIS: Oh, yeah, Donna.
    BUTT-HEAD: That's not Donna. Donna's a slut. This is Kelly.
    BEAVIS: No way, Dude. Donna's not a slut; she's a virgin. Kelly's a slut.
    BUTT-HEAD (while looking at Debbie Gibson): Does she look like a slut to
you, Beavis?
    BEAVIS: Yeah, that's why it's Donna.
BUTT-HEAD: But you just said Donna's not a slut.

BEAVIS: Oh, yeah. That must be Kelly. ("Buttnicks")

Although they never can get a date, let alone "score," Beavis and Butt-Head believe they have women all figured out. While watching a video showing a woman in silhouette arching her back, for example, Butt-Head explains to Beavis, "When you see a woman with her back all bent out of shape, that means she's hot." Beavis says, "She looks injured," to which Butt-Head responds, "Well, she gave me a stiffy" ("Cornholio").

The objectification of women and the use of derogatory terms for women by Beavis and Butt-Head create a clear portrayal of women as stereotyped sex objects. Women are depicted as conforming to a stereotyped, sexual ideal of tall, thin, and big breasted. Women, such as Daria, who lack these qualities are ridiculed.

References to Bodily Functions. To say that Beavis and Butt-Head are preoccupied with bodily functions is the grossest of understatements; they talk incessantly about bathroom behavior. They seem particularly interested in the butt and all of its functions. For them, the "Doodaronamy" section of the Bible is where "God invented butt and poop" ("The Great Cornholio").

In "Cornholio," the boys stop at Stewart's house on the way to school because they know he is sick with diarrhea (they think this is funny and make farting noises). As they eat, they discuss whether Stewart's mother is going to "put the thermometer up his butt." And then "she'll put it in his mouth," laughs Beavis. After his sugar overdose, Beavis becomes "The Great Cornholio," demanding, in a Nicaraguan accent, "I need tp [toilet paper] for my bung hole. TP for my bung hole. Olio for my bung-holio."
Much of Beavis and Butt-Head's toilet talk occurs while they watch videos. While watching a video of the Seminifrious Butt Noids, the boys discuss things crawling up one's butt:

BEAVIS: So it's dark in your butt?

BUTT-HEAD: Yeah, when they're saying "stick it where the sun don't shine," they mean your butt.

BEAVIS: I thought they meant under the pillow. If it's dark in your butt, how do the turds find their way out?

BUTT-HEAD: I think they can see in the dark like boats. ("The Great Cornholio")

In another video, a man dressed as Satan is shown riding a little kid's bicycle around a pile of turds. The boys are excited by this and keep watching, with Beavis picking his nose. They theorize that Bobby Feran wrote the song, "Don't Worry Be Happy" by whistling and slapping his butt. As confused as they are about human anatomy, they are even more perplexed about the functions of the body parts of nonhuman animals. While watching a video showing someone milking a cow, they have this discussion:

BEAVIS: They're choking that cow's chicken.

BUTT-HEAD: That's how you get milk.

BEAVIS: You have to spank a cow's monkey to get milk?!

BUTT-HEAD: No, you squeeze its boobs.

BEAVIS: I didn't know they had boobs. I just thought they had the nut sack with all the wiener's hanging off it. ("Bus Trip")
Beavis and Butt-Head's preoccupation with vulgarity also is manifest in the explicit detail in which they discuss bodily functions. Not only do they mention bathroom behaviors, but they go into gross and excessive detail, telling viewers more than they need to know. In "Tainted Meat," for example, Beavis describes the color and texture of his genital infection. In "Bang the Drum Slowly Dumbass," Beavis continues talking about making stools.

The constant referencing of bodily functions or "toilet talk" constructs these characters as unintelligent and immature by suggesting that they do not have anything better to talk about. They give excessive detail and paint verbal pictures of common bodily functions such as going to the bathroom, flatulence, and masturbation.

Unlawful and Unacceptable Behavior. One of the features of the boys' actions is that they do things that are unacceptable or against the law—essentially, they break all the rules. They do the unthinkable and say the unspeakable with self-satisfaction as they proudly chant, "breakin' the law, breakin' the law" ("Stewart Moves Away"). Lacking parental supervision, they appear free to do anything they desire without experiencing the usual consequences. The consequences, which would be painful or destructive in some fashion, are removed from their actions and absent for the viewer—Beavis and Butt-Head get away with everything. Because they are able to do whatever they want, they are able to act out the fantasies and destructive desires of young adolescent boys, acting out of what appears to be total freedom and independence from societal rules and morals.

Often, Beavis and Butt-Head jokingly refer to subjects that are anything but funny. In "Late Night with Butt-Head," their teacher, Mr. Van Driessen, lectures them, trying to motivate them to be creative in their school project. He asks Butt-Head to
"wow" him with imagination and vision. Butt-Head, alluding to teacher-student sexual relations, responds, "I didn't think that was allowed on school property," thus joking about pedophilia and sexual harassment. In "Tainted Meat," Beavis appears to have a medical problem with his genitals because he is continuously scratching them. While working at Burger World one afternoon, a woman drives up to the window to order and hears Butt-Head tell Beavis, "Beavis, put that away. You know you're not supposed to have your penis out when you're cooking." Understandably distressed, she speedily drives off. Later, Beavis puts the spatula down his pants to relieve his itch and then uses the same spatula to flip the hamburgers he is cooking. The customers immediately become violently ill, and the restaurant is closed for health reasons. Beavis and Butt-Head, oblivious to it all, only notice that they are free from having to go to work.

The constant references to unacceptable behaviors again construct the boys as anti-mainstream values. They prefer acts of violence and destruction to ones of playfulness and creativity. Moreover, they appear to take extreme pleasure in doing what others would consider immoral.

**Men as Caricatures.** The images of men and male behavior on Beavis and Butt-Head are more like caricatures than characterizations--grotesque over-simplifications of the obvious, in which parts of a person are magnified to comedic and unrealistic proportions. Different types of men are featured on the show, but all of them are stereotypes, suggesting there are classifiable and predictable categories of men in the world.

If there are male types, Beavis and Butt-Head represent the highly sexed, socially unaware, delinquent, working-class, adolescent male. Much of their identity, self-esteem,
and actions are motivated and guided by one thing: sex. They are obsessed with the size of their penises and try to have plastic surgery to make them longer. While waiting for the surgical bandages to be removed, Butt-Head looks under the sheets and says to Beavis, "Huh-huh-huh, I'm gonna need a bigger hand." Butt-Head insinuates that the size of his nostrils (very large) is related to the size of his penis. He tells Beavis that he will be "swinging my big schlong around" ("Spanish Fly").

The two other semi-regular male characters on the show are Mr. Anderson and Mr. Van Driessen. Mr. Anderson, the boys' neighbor, is a retired military veteran who served in the Korean War. He is cast as a stereotypical Midwesterner and is single. The boys often do odd jobs around his house to earn extra money and always end up making a disaster out of the situation. But because Mr. Anderson is a little slow and cannot see very well, he never remembers that the boys were the culprits and continues to hire them over and over again. Mr. Van Driessen, the boys' teacher, is cast as the stereotypical aging hippie. He wears long blonde hair, a beard, Birkenstock sandals, jeans, and T-shirts with the peace sign on them and drives a Volkswagen bus covered with flowers. He talks about peace and love and tries to motivate the boys to channel their energy in a creative fashion. He, too, is single but occasionally is shown dating women. He shows unrealistic patience and tolerance of Beavis and Butt-Head and gives them much "creative freedom" in the classroom. The boys, of course, never do anything to warrant tolerance or creative license, but Mr. Van Driessen seems to believe that he can make a difference in their lives.

Taken together, all of the male characters are simplistic or one-dimensional and do not demonstrate any potential for character growth. Neither Mr. Van Driessen nor Mr.
Anderson could be a role model for Beavis and Butt-Head because Beavis and Butt-Head shun such notions as personal development and do whatever possible to resist such growth. Instead, they seek only to take advantage of Mr. Anderson and Mr. Van Driessen. Also resisting personal growth are Mr. Van Driessen and Mr. Anderson: Mr. Van Driessen refuses to step out of the Sixties and live in the present, and Mr. Anderson never learns that Beavis and Butt-Head are the kids who continually destroy his property. Thus, all of the male characters remain static in time and experience: Beavis and Butt-Head never grow up, mature, or score; Mr. Anderson remains forever naive; and Mr. Van Driessen refuses to live in the present.

Insider Expressions. Like most teenagers, Beavis and Butt-Head have their own way of talking and slang expressions that reinforce their worldview. The slang functions to keep others on the margins and to provide fans with an insider language with which to discuss the show. Their most infamous and imitated utterance is not a catchy word or vulgar phrase but a laugh. Beavis' high-pitched "Heh-heh-heh" and Butt-Head's similar, yet distinct and lower pitched "Huh-huh-huh" open every episode.

In addition to the laugh, Beavis and Butt-Head’s most popular euphemistic slang revolves around sexual issues. Their constant talk about scoring and masturbation indicates their pubescent preoccupation with sex. While taking a school field trip in the mountains, the boys decide to moon other passenger cars from the school bus. "We'll give them a pressed fruit bowl" (meaning he will press his genitals against the window), says Butt-Head. Trying to connect himself with the mountain scenery, Butt-Head claims, "I've got a rock formation in my pants" ("Bus Trip"). Aside from watching videos, their favorite activity is masturbation. They refer colorfully to it as "choking my chicken,"
"spanking the monkey," and "wrestling with my manhood." Moreover, any time they hear a word that can be linked to sex in any way, they laugh. For example, if someone innocently says, "come," Butt-Head will say, "Huh-huh-huh, she said come." If they are in science class listening to a discussion about the solar system and the teacher says the planet Uranus, Beavis says to Butt-Head, "Heh-heh-heh; he said anus."

In addition to their creative euphemistic sexual references, the boys use more traditional swear words and frequently call one another names. Words such as pussy, ass-hole, diil weed, bung-hole, and butt-plug litter their vocabulary (actually, these words constitute 80% of their vocabulary). The word suck is their most popular descriptor, and they use it as a rating system for music videos.

The use of vulgar language creates a private space for Beavis and Butt-Head and their fans, which is sexual and crude. Sex dominates this space by coloring their euphemisms and other linguistic choices. The use of swear words echoes the unpolished, unsophisticated, and crude nature of the show.

Children's Food. The only food that Beavis and Butt-Head eat is junk food; their favorite is nachos from the local convenience store. They hate anything healthy and exist on a diet of soda, candy bars, hamburgers, french fries, and nachos. Because their parents are never featured on the show, Beavis and Butt-Head, although they are children, are solely responsible for the purchase and preparation of their own food. Viewers, for example, see them hunting under the couch cushions in search of change to buy nachos for dinner.

In "Cornholio," Stewart's mother asked Beavis and Butt-Head, "Have you eaten breakfast?" "Uh, I think so once," replies Beavis. She then makes them a breakfast
burrito. At first, the boys, think is a great treat, but they spit it out on the first bite. Beavis' response is, "Yuck, I have eggs in mine." Butt-Head answers, "No wonder Stewart has diarrhea." Hunggrily and greedily, Beavis rummages through the kitchen cupboards looking for food. He rejects anything healthy and proceeds to overdose on junk food, resulting in hyperactivity and his assumption of a new persona, "The Great Cornholio."

Their passion for junk food and rejection of anything healthy continues to reaffirm the boys' status as (orphan) children and trivializes some of the real concerns related to children's diets. The episode "The Great Cornholio," for example, takes the causal relationship between sugar and hyperactivity to the extreme and downplays the mental, physical, and educational problems this can cause for children. Furthermore, the absence of Beavis and Butt-Head's parents provides an explanation for their diet because the audience makes the assumption that if they had parents, they would be forced to eat more healthy foods.

Work as Play. Although Beavis and Butt-Head do have jobs, their jobs are constructed as paid play more than work; the boys do not appear to take having a job seriously or attach a sense of responsibility to working. Work, for them, is solely a means to "get stuff." They hold jobs typical of many teenagers--working in a fast-food restaurant and doing odd jobs for neighbors--however, they appear free from the consequence of getting fired. Similar to the ways the boys lack discipline in their communication and actions, they receive scant amount of correction or instruction in the work environment.
Beavis and Butt-Head go to Burger World and to their other jobs with no work ethic or sense of responsibility. Beavis, for example, scratches his genitals with his hands and then touches the food he is preparing, puts the hair nets on his "nads," and cooks insects with the french fries. Trying to earn some extra money, the boys get their neighbor, Mr. Anderson, to hire them to do some work around his yard. To their delight, they discover Mr. Anderson's tool shed full of "toys" such as golf clubs, a chain saw, and a tractor. Although they have been hired to pour cement for the pool, they spend most of their time using Mr. Anderson's tools to destroy his yard. After pouring all of the cement into the pool, Butt-Head accidentally drives the tractor into the cement-filled hole. As he sits there, stuck, he declares, "huh-huh-huh, swimming is hard" ("Pool Toys").

For Beavis and Butt-Head, work is to be avoided at all costs because it is hard, and "work sucks." Instead, work and real-life material concerns are trivialized and made into a joke. Completely absent is any sort of work ethic or pride that comes from an honest day's work, and in its place is a ridiculing of such values. A work ethic of creativity, fulfillment, and productivity is replaced with getting away with as much as possible.

Organizing Principle

The organizing principle of Beavis and Butt-Head is the anti-family. Portrayals of the anti-family are a relatively recent phenomenon in television history and are a direct reaction against the seemingly perfect and unrealistic portrayals of families in such shows as Father Knows Best, The Brady Bunch, and Leave It To Beaver. Other anti-family shows include Roseanne, Married . . . with Children, and The Simpsons. These new shows directly respond to and critique the historical genre of family comedies in that
"each program . . . focuses on a family marked by visual styles and characterization as bleak and miserable as those of former TV families had been handsome or cheerful" (Ozersky 206). This new form seems to be a direct inversion of the old. Important to note is that anti-family shows are not against the family as an institution but against the romanticized ideal that characterized the earlier family shows on television.

To look at Beavis and Butt-Head as anti-family, I first must identify some of the defining characteristics of the genre of family comedy. Foremost in this genre is the construction of the family as a nuclear family with two opposite-sex parents and their (usually) biological children. The parents are primarily depicted in the role of parents, and their individual identities as well as their married, romantic, and sexual identities are downplayed or ignored all together. For example, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo in I Love Lucy and Laura and Rob Petry in The Dick Van Dyke Show all slept in separate twin beds even though their characters were legally married as well as parents on the respective programs. Another defining characteristic of the family shows is the portrayal of the children as basically good and having problems that are resolved easily in 30 minutes. When problems do arise, they are usually followed by some form of moral lesson or teaching by the parent and serve as the theme or message of that particular episode.

The substantive and stylistic characteristics of Beavis and Butt-Head work together to construct Beavis and Butt-Head as the anti-family in two primary ways. Oppositional characterization involves the development of Beavis and Butt-Head, in appearance and personality, as a direct contrast with and reference back to the original
and historical characters within the family genre. The creation of symbolic orphans allows the characters to engage in behaviors unthinkable within the context and genre of traditional family sitcoms.

A classic example of oppositional characterization on Beavis and Butt-Head occurs within naming practices. Symbolically marking Beavis and Butt-Head as anti-family and displaying a direct inversion of the family genre, Beavis’ name is a direct reference to Beaver of Leave it to Beaver. Just as Beaver was portrayed as unrealistically well mannered, Beavis behaves proportionately destructively. Through the extreme oppositional characterization and the unrealistic nature of Beavis’ bad deeds, the audience’s attention is directed back to the genre of Leave it to Beaver, and it is invited to critique the past through the present. If Beavis’ character (and, by extension, the show) is criticized for being violent and destructive to the extreme, then the symbolic referencing of Beaver, through the name Beavis, suggests a parallel critique: that Beaver was well behaved and polite to the opposite, but equally unrealistic, extreme.

The characterization of both women and men on Beavis and Butt-Head is a direct inversion of the male and female roles of the traditional family genre. In that context, women typically were portrayed as asexual, domestic, and holding less power than the men—usually their husbands. The men were depicted as powerful, smart, sexual, and career oriented. On Beavis and Butt-Head, however, these roles are challenged and reversed. The women, for example, are solely portrayed as sexual as opposed to asexual. They are linguistically referred to in sexual terms such as slut and whore and are depicted visually as sexual by being drawn with large breasts, long legs, and revealing clothing. Beavis’ mother, for example, is referred to by Butt-Head as a slut, and he claims to have
seen her naked. Viewers come to know her only through references to her sexuality, a characterization absent in the family genre. Moreover, the women derive power from their sexuality as Beavis and Butt-Head will do anything to be with a woman. Except for the occasional appearance of Stewart’s mother, women are not shown in the home fulfilling a domestic role. Significant is the fact that Stewart’s mother appears only occasionally; her rarity reminds the audience that this role for women still exists but is now the exception rather than the norm.

While the women in this anti-family sitcom take on a newfound power through their sexuality, the adult male characters lose their power and sexuality. Mr. Van Driessen is unable to have any sort of control over Beavis and Butt-head within his classroom, and Mr. Anderson fails to prevent the perpetual destruction of his own home. Further, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Van Driessen are rarely shown in or desiring the company of women, while that is the main reason for existence for Beavis and Butt-Head. Thus, all notions and depictions of adult male sexuality within the family genre have been transferred to the children of this anti-family sitcom.

Similar to the oppositional characterization in relation to sexuality, work is a context in which the children take on more adult-like responsibility. Because there are no parents (the traditional male casting, as head of household, is lost) Beavis and Butt-Head assume this role. Granted, Beavis and Butt-Head do not take work seriously, which is consistent with their identity as children, but they appear to have to work to support themselves. The audience, for example, never sees parents preparing meals or even leaving them money for food. Unlike Beaver, who may work to save money for a special toy, Beavis and Butt-Head must work to buy food.
Beavis and Butt-Head functions as an anti-family sitcom in that Beavis and Butt-Head are symbolic orphans. Although they have parents, the audience never sees them; thus, the boys appear as orphans with no adult supervision, guidance, or care. In contrast to the portrayal of children on earlier family sitcoms as dependent on adults for basic physical needs such as food and clothing and for the emotional needs of discipline and guidance, Beavis and Butt-Head appear completely independent and alone in the world. They are latchkey kids to the extreme. Their talent for getting into trouble appears to be directly related to their lack of supervision. If the boys are symbolic orphans, then the television has become the symbolic parent, providing role models and serving as the main focus of the boys’ attention. The fact that the boys watch so much television and look to the media for their role models, such as David Letterman, suggest that they have no real-life role models.

The prevalence of commercial references further suggests the absence of parental figures with the replacement of cultural institutions. The reference to Burger World with the large yellow W, symbolically referencing McDonald’s, reminds viewers that these boys eat their meals at fast-food restaurants. Thus, viewers infer that the boys do not sit down at the traditional family dinner table for a healthy, home-cooked meal and family conversation. This is in direct contrast to the portrayal of mealtimes within the family genre, where the mother cooked dinner and the family gathered around the table for conversation about the day’s events. Through the explicit rejection of healthy eating (for example, Beavis spitting out eggs) and the absence of the ritual of a family mealtime, Beavis and Butt-Head rejects the traditional values and practices shown on earlier family sitcoms.
The numerous references to violence, the unlawful and unacceptable behavior, and the pervasive use of toilet talk on Beavis and Butt-Head are present because the characters lack parental or adult supervision. The strong presence of the nuclear family within the family genre would make such behaviors and language unthinkable. But Beavis and Butt-Head’s status as symbolic orphans provides them with the freedom to enact such behaviors. In contrast to the ease and efficiency with which problems are resolved within the family genre, the violent and unlawful nature of the problems associated with Beavis and Butt-Head makes superficial resolution impossible within the constraints of television programming. More often than not, their antics would result in death or jail (as referenced in the opening lines of the show). At the conclusion of a Beavis and Butt-Head episode, all is not right with the world nor is there a resolution, punishment, or moral message. Juxtaposed with the genre of family comedy, this lack of moral resolution, derived from violent and unlawful behavior, further demonstrates the anti-family as the organizing principle of Beavis and Butt-Head.

This organizing principle suggests a lack of interpersonal relationships for Beavis and Butt-Head because their identity as outside of a family, the most common and basic social structure, implies their distance from others. Thus, there exists minimal exigence for them to relate with other people. Essentially, they do not have to relate with others because they are not in a family—there is no one to whom they can relate. As a result, they are allowed to avoid the sometimes difficult work of interpersonal communication and remain closed to the potential influence of others. Through avoidance, they never learn more sophisticated forms of communicating, and violence remains the predominant channel for relating with others.
Works Cited


Barrett, Wayne M. "Beavis and Butt-Head: Social Critics or the End of Civilization as We Know It?" *USA Today* Sept. 1994: 86.


“Buttnicks.” *Beavis and Butt-Head.* MTV, Columbus, OH. 13 July 1995.


“Late Night with Butt-Head.” *Beavis and Butt-Head.* MTV, Columbus, OH. 14 Apr. 1994.


“Pool Toys.” *Beavis and Butt-Head.* MTV, Columbus, OH. 21 Apr. 1994.


CHAPTER 4

THE HOWARD STERN SHOW

The television comic Jerry Seinfeld can do nothing wrong. He and his cohorts can discuss sexual intercourse, masturbation, bodily functions, male and female sex organs, impotence, homosexuality, birth control methods, and the like. Yet, America and its media love him and millions watch his program.

Radio comic Howard Stern can do nothing right. He and his cohorts discuss sexual intercourse, masturbation, bodily functions, male and female sex organs, impotence, homosexuality, birth control methods, and the like. Yet, America and its media hate him even though millions listen to his program. (Saltzman 77)

Howard Stern, the country's highest paid disc jockey, admits, "I always resented the label of 'shock jock' that the press came up with for me because I never intentionally set out to shock anybody. What I intentionally set out to do was to talk just as I do off the air, to talk the way guys talk sitting around a bar" (Private Parts 141). Intentional or not, he certainly is shocking, so much so that the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) has fined him hundreds of thousands of dollars over the history of his show.

The Howard Stern Show is broadcast weekday mornings out of New York on WXRX-FM and syndicated to most major cities across the country. The show lasts four
hours, during which there can be celebrity interviews, mock game shows, reporting of the news, live on-air pranks, and call-ins from the listening audience. Stern has earned the label shock jock because his brand of humor includes humiliating his guests and on-air callers, brutally teasing his co-workers, ruthlessly inquiring about people's sex lives, making racist and sexist comments, and graphically discussing bodily functions. Since The Howard Stern Show is a live call-in radio show, much of the content is provided by the listeners as well as Stern and his crew.

Originating directly from the radio show is the televised version of The Howard Stern Show that airs on E! TV on most cable networks. The television version is created by paring down the four-hour radio version into a half-hour segment. The show has a rough and crude appearance, evident in the jagged editing, minimal lighting and set design (the set is the radio station), and the industrial type music that introduces the show.

Howard Allan Stern was born January 12, 1954, in New York City to a radio engineer and a homemaker. He describes his childhood as less than ideal, with his father calling him a moron and his mother being overprotective of him: "She raised me like veal. It was like growing up in a box with no lights on" (Private Parts 36). When he was older, the family moved to a predominantly African-American neighborhood on Long Island, where he felt like a misfit: "I remember for the longest time wanting to be black. I hated being white. You want to be with the majority. You want to feel a part of something. Being white you stuck out like a sore thumb. I wanted to have an Afro. I'm sure that did something to my mind" (Current Biography 541). While not an Afro, he
does have a huge black wavy mane of hair atop his six-foot-four-inch frame. His voice sounds like a hyped-up Alan Alda. His dress appears as if he is stuck in the 1970s--black jeans and a black leather "rocker" jacket.

After high school, Stern studied communications and graduated from Boston University with a 3.8 grade-point average in 1976. He then traveled around the county, working for various radio stations; he realized that he would never make it as a straight DJ, so he "started to mess around." As he explains, "It was unheard of to mix talking on the phone with playing music. It was outrageous. It was blasphemy" (Current Biography 541).

Over the years, Stern continued to move from station to station while perfecting his show by incorporating gags, sketches, and publicity stunts into the traditional musical format. He organized a "cadaverathon," for example, in response to the shortage of cadavers for medical research at Yale and Harvard. For these types of stunts and for single handedly raising one station's ratings from 11th to 1st place, he began to get noticed. The attention brought him to his current home at WXRK-FM, where he acquired his crew of Robin Quivers, Fred Norris, Jackie "the joke man" Martling, Gary Dell'Abate, and later "Stuttering " John Melendez. By 1991, his show had moved into the number-one position.

Stern and Robin Ophelia Quivers, his African-American co-host and newscaster, made history in Washington, D.C., when they broke the unwritten radio rule or formula that the disc jockey does not talk with the newscaster. But talk they did, making jokes and presenting themselves as a cooperative and interdependent team. Quivers' role is to report the news, respond to Stern and to the other cast members, and agitate the callers.
Although the only female cast member, her role is not to provide a female or feminist perspective: instead, she is as brutal as the men and is thus constructed as "one of the boys." In her autobiography, she admitted that, as a child, her father abused her. This painful and personal revelation inspired the Stern cast to nickname her father "Ham hands Quivers" and jokingly to discuss the matter on the air. Like Stern, Quivers keeps her income secret, but it is speculated to be in the mid-six-figures range annually (www.animaux.net/stern/bio.html).

Gary Dell'Abate first met Stern while working at WNBC in New York as his coffee boy/producer and soon was elevated to berating status. He first was known as Boy Gary but then later was dubbed Baba Booey after mis-pronouncing the name of a cartoon character, Baba Louie. Dell'Abate was known for his large capped teeth and smelly breath until he stopped smoking and had his caps replaced for the third time. Other than Stern, he has the most freedom on the show to do "guy" things, especially if they include a woman.

Fred Norris, first known as Earthdog and then Frightening Fred, provides most of the voices for Stern's recorded comedy sketches and parodies, including Barney from The Andy Griffith Show and Regis Philbin. When he's not making fun of Jackie Martling, Norris is also responsible for writing and producing the audio skits, orchestrating the commercials, and "painting" with sound effects for the show (www.animaux.net/stern/bio.html).

Also a Stern old-timer, Jackie Martling or The Joke Man began his career with Stern doing "Stump The Joke Man" at WNBC. Like Norris, he is responsible for much of the writing and is a flying gag writer. Constructed as both a "gentle Hippie" and a
"cheap bastard," Martling’s parties on Long Island have become legendary for alcohol, pot, and wild times, along with his unwillingness to feed his guests any food. According to inside estimates, the cheapness is not a reflection of his salary--$100,000 annually (www.animaux.net/sterne/bio.html).

Interns make up an important and sizeable portion of Stern’s radio family. An anomaly in radio, John Melendez (also known as Stuttering John or Hero of the Stupid) was hired as an intern because of his stutter. When Stern heard that Martling was interviewing for interns and that one stuttered, he ordered him hired on the spot. Taking his internship and opportunity seriously, Melendez is famous for his celebrity interviews and ambushes. His ignorance of most topics and people intensifies the interviews, especially if he has no clue that he is asking something very inappropriate. He has said on the air that he makes about $20,000 to 25,000 annually (www.animaux.net/sterne/bio.html).

Steve Grillo, also called Gorilla, is an intern who got his job by writing an odd letter to Dell’Abate, begging him for an internship. His other qualifications include scoring 98 on a recent IQ test, ranking him just under "normal." Although he started as Quivers’ news intern, he now is paid to get Stern his lunch and anything else he requests. One request was to shave his head for over $4000 in cash (www.animaux.net/sterne/bio.html).

Stern’s popularity is undisputed, proof of which can be found in the ratings data of his radio show and his earnings. Reportedly, his gross earnings in 1995 from the radio show totaled about $8 million. In addition, he receives $1.5 million a year from E! Entertainment Television for the cable channel’s nightly videotaped playback of his radio
shows. A contract with Regan Books to write a second book, Miss America, paid him an advance of about $3 million; like his first book, Private Parts, it became a big bestseller. The box-office receipts and video sales from Private Parts, the movie, have made about $85 million for Paramount Studios as of January 28, 1998 (www.animaux.net/ stern/bio.html). All totaled, Stern was expected to earn about $12.5 million in 1995 (Colford 7). Supposedly, no one--except Stern, his wife, Infinity Broadcasting, Mel Karmazin, and Don Buchwald--knows for certain his economic worth. The New York Post and Forbes speculate that it is upwards of $15 million per year (www.animaux.net/ stern/bio.html).

Stern's popularity is setting new records: he has been in the top ratings position in the premier radio market in America, New York City, for more than 10 years. He is the first and only disc jockey in radio history to have the number-one show in New York and Los Angeles simultaneously (www.animaux.net/ stern/ratings.html). For the spring, 1998, ratings period, released on July 16, 1998, Stern had a 7.8 share in the Los Angeles market (97.1 KLSX) of men between the ages of 25 and 54. The overall rating for men, women and transgender ages 25 to 54 was a 5.4 share (www.animaux.net/ stern/la.html). A ratings share is a percentage of listeners; as an example, if Stern has a 10 share, it means that, at any given time during the show, roughly 10% of all the people in that area listening to the radio are listening to Stern (www.animaux.net/ stern/ratings.html).

---

4 In radio, "ratings are taken four times a year by Arbitron, each covering a three-month time period: Winter ratings cover January-March, spring ratings cover April-June, summer ratings cover July-September, and fall ratings cover October-December. The release of the ratings is approximately one month after the period ends, so the winter ratings come out in April, for example. The regular ratings by Arbitron are not the same as the Arbitrend ratings, although Arbitron conducts both. Arbitrend's are monthly ratings, intended to show trends before the official ratings are released.

2 He was followed by Rush Limbaugh with a 4.5 and 3.8 share respectively.
For the same rating period in New York City (K-ROCK), his overall rating was an 8.7 (www.animaux.net/stern/nyc.html).

Stern ran for governor of New York on the Libertarian ticket in 1994. His three-prong platform consisted of legalizing the death penalty, improving toll collection on the highways, and requiring road construction workers to work at night. Moreover, he vowed to resign after the goals had been met. After refusing to disclose his personal finances, however, he withdrew from the race. Money, he says, "is the great divide in our country. I realize it makes people uptight, so I just avoid it" (Current Biography 540).

Analysis

In this chapter, I will begin with a brief description of the situation that serves as the exigence for The Howard Stern Show--the competition within the talk-show genre. Next, I will define and explain the formula of the radio talk show. In the bulk of the chapter, I will identify, define, and detail the substantive and stylistic features of The Howard Stern Show. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion and summary of what constitutes the rhetorical frame of The Howard Stern Show through the identification and description of the organizing principle.

Rhetorical Situation

The starting point for the generic critic is the situation in which the rhetorical act or discourse occurs. A thorough awareness of the context or socio-political environment that calls the discourse into being fosters a greater understanding of the discourse itself. Of specific interest here is the radio talk/news-show formula. The Howard Stern Show is a blend of the traditionally separate news and talk show formats because both functions are present on the show and have a specific cast member responsible for each, Quivers
and Stern respectively. Reporting (and subsequently making fun of) the news is as important on the show as are the conversations with the on-air callers; both provide Stern and his cast with material to which to respond and to use to advance their views. According to Berger, there is a “set of polar opposites that explain or explicate important elements in all program types and genres”: the emotive and the objective (7). The emotive refers to the “affective aspects of consciousness”—personal feelings and emotions (7). The objective refers to “the nature of reality as it is or as we can know it.” It “is the world of things, the world of events that actually happen” (7). Within this framework, Berger places both news and talk shows as weak on the emotive scale and high on the objective scale because both deal with actual or real events and invoke little emotional or personal response from the audience. He does acknowledge, however, that news programs that report rapes, murders, or other violent crimes may be higher on the emotive scale (8).

Important to the talk-show formula is the role and identity construction of the audience; both are carefully and highly regulated. According to Allen, the “live” audience is represented to the home viewer [or listener] as an ideal audience” (123).\textsuperscript{6} On television, the ideal identity is manufactured through “applause” and “laugh” signs and the careful selection of audience members who are singled out to speak or appear on stage. On radio, callers are screened before making it on the air, can be “bleeped” or censored if they respond inappropriately, or hung up on if they refuse to conform to the ideal. For those callers who do make it on the air, the host “wields the microphone,” constantly controlling the content and the duration of the conversation.
Like Seinfeld and Beavis and Butt-Head, the primary exigence for Howard Stern is an economic one: to generate advertising revenues for Affinity Broadcasting. A secondary but equally important goal for Stern is to repopularize network radio and to stand out among the competition. In the 1980s, network radio was on the decline and did not pick up momentum until Rush Limbaugh "made politics approachable and amusing" and drew audiences back to talk radio (La Franco 60). From 1988 to 1994, revenues from network radio went from $565 million to $1.2 billion dollars (La Franco 60). After Limbaugh went national on AM stations, Stern did the same for FM music stations.

With the rising popularity of network radio came competition as other disc jockeys followed Stern's and Limbaugh's example. Wanting to stand out among the competition and claiming a dislike of the traditional disc jockey format, Stern developed his own style, breaking all the rules of the traditional radio format. Stern and Quivers, for example, were considered revolutionary because they talked to one another: never before had the disc jockey and newscaster held a conversation. Stern refused to do characters and instead initiated regular features such as the Lesbian-Dial-A-Date and calling his mother and the wife of the producer and making them semi-regular cast members.

Needing to sell airtime, Stern rebelliously responded to the radio-talk show genre by challenging its canons and pushing its boundaries.

**Substantive and Stylistic Characteristics**

The substantive and stylistic features of The Howard Stern Show will be discussed together because of the interdependent role they play in the programming of

---

6 In discussing the talk-show formula, I will describe it in both a television and radio context to reflect the two media forms utilized by Stern.
the show. The sound effects, for example, are stylistic devices that enhance and accentuate much of the verbal content of the radio show. Likewise, the set design and wardrobes of the cast and guests on the television version function together to create a casual, bar-like atmosphere. The analysis of each characteristic will proceed through three steps: an identification of the substantive and/or stylistic feature, a description or definition of it, and a discussion of how this feature is manifest on the radio and television shows by Stern. I will focus on the following characteristics in order from the most to the least prevalent: violating norms of civility; exerting power and dominance; encouraging illegal acts; humiliating others; images of women as sex objects; the rough, raw appearance; and contradictions.

**Violating Norms of Civility.** Earning him the name shock jock, Stern creates a show where doing the unexpectedly uncivil is expected. Stern and the cast enact the unexpected by violating societal norms and rules of civil discourse and behavior—those appropriate in public contexts such as the academic, institutional, professional, and political realms. Specifically, Stern violates norms of polite and civil society by publicizing individuals' private lives and by making numerous and graphic references to sexual and bodily functions. Although his movie title, *Private Parts*, suggests otherwise, there is no privacy on *The Howard Stern Show*. Guests and callers concede their right of privacy as soon as communication with Stern commences.

A flaming heterosexual, Stern gives his homosexual and bi-sexual guests equal treatment in his exposure of their private lives. In one episode, Stern invites Mark Harris, whom he labels the biggest gigolo, and his friend, David, on the show. Teasing Mark for marrying Martha Rae, a 90-year-old Hollywood actress who recently had passed away,
Stern comments, this is interesting "even though Mark is kind of gay" (The Howard Stern Show 26 Jan. 1998). This is his transition to the subject he really wants to discuss—Mark and David’s private sex life. Stern then introduces David as "the guy he [Mark] has made love to several times":

HS: How many times Mark? Two or three?
M: Yes, something like that. Who knows?
HS: Was it mainly oral sex?
M: Yes, that and a lot of hand work.
HS: Whose hands? David, was Mark good with his hands?
D: Yes, ok.
HS: Mark says he's bi, but he's really gay.
HS: David, did Mark beg you?
D: Not beg, but something like that. I wanted to do this.
HS: When you touched him, did you vomit inside?
M: Howard, if you're so interested, maybe you're next.

Not only is the couple’s sex life made public, but specific behavioral details are revealed. The revelation of such details in a public forum is uncommon and violates one of the communicative rules for civil discourse: details of one’s sex life are not discussed in public with strangers.

Repeat guests on the show often develop strategies for dealing with Stern’s invasion of privacy, one of which is to go along with his jokes and sexual talk. Stern simultaneously seems to enjoy and resent the use of this strategy. He enjoys it in the
sense that he can facilitate a favorite line of discussion, but when his guests demonstrate an ease and comfort level with his sexual inquiry, he concurrently seems to resent the fact that he cannot get a reaction from them.

When a guest goes along with him, Stern seems to lose a bit of his shock value. In his second appearance on the show, David Duchovny, star of the X-Files TV show and movie, for example, appears much more relaxed and prepared for the kinds of questions he is likely to get from Stern; consequently, he plays along with Stern. During the interview, Stern refers to a report that Duchovny has entered a clinic for sexual dependents. Quivers then asks him if he has any bisexual tendencies. Duchovny laughs and replies, "Not only am I dependent, but I have tendencies" (The Howard Stern Show 15 Jun. 1998)? Stern comments repeatedly that he has heard Duchovny "has a big dick" and seeks confirmation. Joining the discussion, Quivers asks Duchovny if he has showed his penis in a film. Duchovny tells her "no, I showed my balls." He continues the phallic talk by describing a picture of him wearing only a teacup dangling from his penis that appears on the Internet. Stern amusingly comments that only a man with a big penis could do this. While the guest may develop this strategy to appear comfortable with the discussion of private matters in public, the discourse continues to violate norms of civility. The graphic sexual talk continues to be the content for conversation and, because the guest is no longer resisting the topic, the details are often more graphic. The very fact that a person does not resist personal questions but, instead, willingly volunteers sexual details also violates norms of civility appropriate for public discourse.

References to bodily functions play a major role on The Howard Stern Show; they often drive the content of the show and are used as a stylistic device as well. They are
used as pre-programmed sound effects: a cast member or producer pushes a button and the audience hears a farting sound, or one of the cast members makes the farting noises him or herself. Substantively, bodily functions provide endless fodder for discussion. The most common bodily functions referenced are farting, urination, and bowel movements. Although common to all human beings, these topics are not considered appropriate for public discussion. By repeatedly discussing them on the radio and television, Stern again violates the conventions for polite society according to the norms of civility appropriate for professional and institutional discourse.

Stern often orchestrates contests and encourages public displays of talent that reference socially unacceptable behavior. Rachael, for example, appears on the show to showcase her ability to clap with her breasts. Her performance goes against common standards of social decency, thus reaffirming Stern’s ability to shock his audience. Claiming to be the first of its kind, Stern sponsors the Crapidation contest in which contestants are judged on their farting abilities. He organizes his three judges--Crackhead Bob, whom the Stern crew members worry will be unable to count to 10 to score the contestants; Croy, who is said to have put the mental in mental illness; and Sal the Stockbroker, who likes to antagonize Stern's producer, Gary. For the contest, the participants are given 1½ minutes to prepare and then 1½ minutes in the ring (to fart), where they are judged on a scale from 1 to 10. As Jeremy, the first contestant, goes into the ring, the audience learns that he has prepared by eating fig newtons and taking "a dump at 6 p.m. the night before" (The Howard Stern Show 19 June 98). Microphones are set up so listeners/viewers experience Jeremy’s “talent” which sounds like a Donald Duck
impersonation. After the performance, Sal the Stockbrocker declares him the "Dizzie Gillespie of flatulence" (*The Howard Stern Show* 19 June 98).

Although traditionally absent from public discussion, masturbation is a favorite topic for Stern. Through numerous references to male arousal and self-gratification, Stern takes this topic from the private sphere to the public. In a radio conversation with comedian Pat Cooper, Stern explicitly asks, "Do you masturbate" (*The Howard Stern Show* 19 June 1998)? Not only does he talk about masturbation, but Stern prides himself on providing material that is sexually arousing for men. He opens his book, *Private Parts*, with a story about a man driving to work becoming so aroused that he has to pull over on the Long Island Expressway. He reports, "It was the first time I had ever done anything like this before. But the show was making me nuts that morning. I was beating off to a radio call-in show! Here I was in my business suit" (1). At the conclusion of the story, Stern takes the credit, "Can you believe this?" he asks. "My producer . . . actually knows this guy. And he knows five other guys who beat off to my show! It's a fucking epidemic. Now, when I think of my radio audience, I envision guys driving to work on the Expressway, guys who need an opportunity . . ." (24).

By devoting much of the show's content to private and voyeuristic sexual and corporeal discussions, Stern reinforces his claim to the title of *shock jock*. Even when guests appear to resist his personal attack by volunteering the sought-after private information, he still succeeds in constructing the content of the discourse on his terms.

**Exerting Power and Dominance.** Constructing the discourse on terms that allow Stern to violate norms of civility for public, institutional discourse would not be possible without his unrelenting exertion of power and dominance over the guests, callers, and
other cast members. He enacts a very traditional style of power-over in which he controls the speech and actions of others by placing himself at the center of attention. He repeatedly reminds the audience that this form of entertainment would not be possible without him.

When a situation is ostensibly about someone else, Stern does not miss the opportunity to exert his power and control to focus attention back on him. To prepare Quivers for her upcoming appearance on television’s celebrity Jeopardy, for example, Stern orchestrates a practice session on one of his shows (The Howard Stern Show 27 Jan. 98). Enlisting the help of tabloid journalist, Geraldo Rivera, and Christopher Darden, a prosecutor in the O.J. Simpson trial, Stern organizes a mock episode of the game show. The questions are legitimate (not obscene) and resemble actual Jeopardy questions in form and content: the categories include sports, definitions, artists, world geography, anatomy, and actors and roles. In constant control of the show, Stern takes the role of Jeopardy host, Alex Trebek, and acts as host and moderator, requiring the contestants to phrase their answers in the form of questions.

Stern uses nonverbal stylistic devices, however, to keep the game centered on him. When the buzzer rings, for example, the audience hears a farting noise instead of a traditional buzzer sound. A Private Parts movie poster hangs in the background, diverting attention away from Quivers and the guests and placing it back on Stern. Although the game is set up for the purpose of giving Quivers an opportunity to practice her trivia knowledge, Stern reasserts himself through the visual display of his movie poster, by constantly controlling the show, and by introducing sounds of flatulence. Stern’s strategic choices allow him to occupy the center stage as if to say “me, me, me.”
Looking for any opportunity to insert himself into the narrative, Stern inserts his voice when none is necessary. He rarely bleeps his callers, for example, and does so only when they utter a word or phrase that is banned by the Federal Communication Commission. He explicitly admits to this "editing" of the show on the air, telling callers, "You can't say that word. I had to bleep you." Voicing the fact that he "bleeped" a caller is not necessary; he could simply do it. Stern, however, takes the time to remind them that he is the central figure in the dialogue and has the power over a caller's communication.

Stern enjoys reminding his guests, listeners, callers, and himself of the benefits of his celebrity status. In a discussion with David Duchovny, Stern talks about the benefits of having a personal assistant and suggests that it is like having a parent to take care of you. Duchovny insinuates that his assistant wipes his butt after he uses the bathroom, and Stern replies that his assistant stands outside his door at night to ensure quiet so he can sleep. This discussion reminds the audience of the extent of Stern's power: he is so important that he can commission others to ensure himself a perfect environment. Moreover, the fact that this is done for him and not others (i.e., his audience members) suggests that he is more important than they are.

In a typical prank, Stern sends Stuttering John, with a cellular phone, camcorder, and camera operator, to Central Park. There they meet a man who had called in and agreed to have his girlfriend flash some guys in the park. (The boyfriend agrees to do this in exchange for Stern's agreement to play his band on the radio.) During the entire prank, Stern remains on the phone with Stuttering John, allowing John to become an extension of Stern so that Stern's powerful reach extends beyond the private studio and
into the public park. Even though Stern is not physically present, his central role is emphasized, and he continues to exert power and control over the situation.

Although Stern probes into the private life of others, he maintains control by monitoring and limiting his own self-disclosure. In the discussion among Stern, Mark, and David concerning sexual behavior, Stern does not want his interest in Mark and David's sex life to be taken as a comment on his own homosexual feelings. Thus, when he feels he is losing control of the conversation (when Mark suggests to Stern that he should be next to participate in homosexual activity, for example), he quickly changes the subject. The rule is clear: Stern can and does expose the private lives of others, but he maintains complete control of his own sexual self-disclosure. When two female guests on the show ask to see his tongue, he replies, "No, that's private" (The Howard Stern Show 28 Jan. 1998). As they leave the show, they thank him for letting them touch his body. He again places himself in the featured role and demonstrates his ability to control and dominate the situation.

Stern's continual and unrelenting questioning of his guests and callers about their sexual lives allows him to reassert his power over others. His power is made apparent not by the questions alone but by the fact that he usually receives a response. Although some guests may attempt to resist the invasion of their private selves, they usually give in to Stern, thus reaffirming his ability and apparent right to control the situation. By performing the classic game of one-upmanship, Stern's message for viewers is that he is all-powerful and always in control. Moreover, his privileged position allows him to violate the communicative norms or expectations that regulate interaction on other talk shows.
Humiliating Others. One strategy that Stern utilizes to maintain his shock jock persona is to humiliate and bully others. Wielding his power as a media figure with access to the industry, he bribes guests or callers to participate in abhorrent acts with the suggestion that he can make them famous.

On the traditional talk show, the host often invites struggling musicians and other artistic performers on their show to help them get discovered by an agent or producer. Usually, such an arrangement is set up in advance, and agents or talent managers agree to come on the show to give constructive feedback to the performers and possibly offer them a contract. In the episode featuring the band Grin Cynic, for example, Stern violates these norms or expectations in two ways. He requires the band to perform an unacceptable act (drink the toilet water in which Stern's underwear has been soaking) to gain an appearance on the show, and the band does not benefit from constructive feedback from the members of the music industry. Instead, after hearing the band, a representative from Epic Records (a major recording label) appears on the air and criticizes the band. He puts down their musical ability, asserting, "they don't know what they want to be" (The Howard Stern Show 29 Jan. 1998). This observation is not followed by constructive suggestions for improvement, as would be the case on a more traditional talk show. Instead, Stern appears to have set the band members up for failure and public ridicule. By the end, the impression is that Stern never intended to give the band members an opportunity but manipulated them into coming on the show simply to give himself the opportunity to humiliate them. Much like the bully on the school playground who uses his size to intimidate the other children, Stern uses his popularity, wealth, and fame to incite others into engaging in humiliating acts.
The examples discussed within the context of violating norms of a civil society, such as Rachael clapping her breasts and the crapidation contest, also represent the category of humiliating others because the guests are brought on the show so the audience can laugh at them for engaging in ridiculous and humiliating acts. Moreover, when Rachael is made famous for clapping her breasts, her contributions as a junior high school drama teacher are trivialized, and she is objectified. Not only do both examples demonstrate Stern's ability to humiliate others, but they also construct an image of people as if they are willing to do anything for a little fame and attention. Stern's constant need for attention and the guests' and callers' willingness to do almost anything for media attention result in humiliation and embarrassment as regular features of Stern's show.

**Encouraging Illegal Acts.** Whether generated by Stern, his cast, or the on-air callers, there are abundant references on *The Howard Stern Show* to unlawful, immoral, and unacceptable behaviors, most of which are sexual in nature. The calls from listeners can be so disturbing and bizarre that one has to wonder if they are staged and why someone would call in and admit to such abhorrent acts.

In one episode of the television show, Stern invites Julia Ashton and Doria from the *Playboy* channel's *Night Calls* to be guests on the show. The two women appear in very revealing clothing; one wears a see-through blouse with a black bra underneath and a tight, short, black skirt with no underwear. The other is in a tight leather vest with no bra and tight black pants. When Stern interviews the two women, he complains that the show is too private; there's not enough "dirty stuff." Detailing his complaints, he says, "there's not enough kissing, too much talking, there's no nipple and no penetration" (*The Howard Stern Show* 28 Jan. 98). The women explain that the privacy is mandated by the
law, and lawyers for the show dictate what can and cannot be; "no pink" and "no spread shots" are allowed. Stern responds, "This is why law is big." He continues to give them advice about how to make the show "hotter": you girls should do "whatever the guys and girls do when they call up." His advice amounts to making the show as sexually public as possible with absolute disregard for legal constraints.

In one particularly disturbing call, the caller, Rob, admits to having sex with his wife's 14-year-old cousin. When Stern and Quivers prompt him for details, he describes what happened: the young girl came downstairs in shorts and a T-shirt while Rob was smoking pot, which he shared with her. He then went to bed and woke up to find her giving him oral sex. At this point, Stern interjects, "She was giving you oral sex when you were asleep in bed with your wife?! You're all right. You were raped! I was going to come down on you, but I am glad I didn't. She just pulled down the covers and went to work on you? Was she good at it" (The Howard Stern Show 15 June 98)? Rob admits that she was very good and proceeds to tell Stern and the radio audience that the young girl then went to work on his wife: "I was kissing my wife while she was doing stuff to her and while we [Rob and the cousin] were having intercourse, my wife was kissing me. My wife seemed to be asleep for most of it and didn't realize what happened until she woke up a few hours later. Then when I woke up, my wife took the girl and left." Stern comforts him by telling him that his wife is probably out filing criminal charges. Rob tries to rationalize the incident by saying, "My wife hasn't given me oral sex in three years." Stern quickly answers, "So divorce her." The call and the dialogue end with Howard saying, "I gotta go, man. Get any butt stuff?" Rob says, "Not that time." Quivers and Stern laugh and conclude that he will be getting plenty of butt stuff in jail.
One stylistic strategy that Stern employs to facilitate illegal acts is the use of technology. The use of the cellular phone and camcorder, for example, allows Stern and his cast a certain freedom and anonymity to encourage illegal acts—such as the woman flashing herself in Central Park—in part because they require minimal effort and preparation. Instead of employing a remote radio crew to accomplish the same purpose but requiring more equipment and labor, the flexibility and ease of the cellular phone and camcorder allow Stern and the cast to go from private to public with ease and minimal preparation and to remain relatively inconspicuous. When encouraging people to perform illegal acts, such as exposing themselves in public, remaining inconspicuous is important for Stern. If he drew a very large crowd or the attention of law enforcement, pranks such as this—on which his reputation as a shock jock exists—would be unable to continue. Moreover, the technology that inserts black dots or fuzzy images over a woman’s breasts, for example, allows the show to pass legally through the network censors and to be shown on the televised version of his radio show.

By encouraging the performance of illegal acts and providing a forum in which to do so, Stern sets himself apart from other talk-show hosts. This difference and separation from the norm account for his status as unpredictable and shocking.

**Images of Women as Sexual Objects.** Stern makes no pretense that the women on his show—and women in general—are anything more than sexual objects. When asked, “Do you respect women?” in an interview, Stern responded, “I think I do. Yes, I see them as sexual objects. I think I like women a lot. But I also see them as tits and ass, too. I’m just honest about it” (qtd. in Marin N. Pag.). He visually and linguistically communicates his attitude toward women through his use of derogatory terms such as
bitch, whore and dyke to refer to women; inviting women from the sex industry to appear on his show; and continuously turning conversations with both women and men to sexual behaviors and sexuality.

Appearances by women from the sex industry such as pornographic film stars and Playboy playmates on The Howard Stern Show are one way that Stern reminds his viewers that women are nothing more than sexual toys. Interviewing the women from Night Calls, Stern asks if their breasts are fake, to which they respond by removing their shirts, bouncing up and down, and explaining how natural their breast implants look. Stern wants them to kiss “with tongue” now that their shirts are off. Next, Stern and the two women remove their pants while Doria sits on his lap and exclaims, "he's up" (The Howard Stern Show 28 Jan. 98). Women from the hard-core pornographic sex industry are also frequent guests on the show. In a particularly vulgar episode, Stern interviews the woman who holds the world record for gang banging the most men on film.

On The Howard Stern Show, women do not have to be explicitly connected to the sex industry to be constructed as sexual objects. Rachael, a junior high school drama teacher, for example, is invited on the show to display her talent of clapping with her breasts. Before she demonstrates the talent, Stern asks about the size of her breasts and how old she was when she got them. She replies, "I had breasts and bleeding all at 10; it's evil" (The Howard Stern Show 19 June 1998). Next, she removes her top so small microphones can be attached to her breasts so the radio audience can hear the clapping sound as her breasts bounce against her chest.

Both of these examples are typical of the portrayal of women on Stern’s radio and television shows. Not only do Stern and his cast treat and talk about women as sexual
objects, but the women appear to enjoy it. The female guests and callers are constantly offering to have sex with Stern and appear as if they enjoy being humiliated. They do little, if anything, to construct themselves as more than sex objects, thus appearing to buy into Stern's portrayal of them.

**Rough and Raw Appearance.** Technology is responsible for creating the rough, raw, and unpretentious look, feel, and sound of *The Howard Stern Show* on television. The set lacks sophisticated props, and the cast does not wear elaborate costumes or appear to have extensive wardrobes; the effect is a rough, unglamorous look. Stern and his cast present themselves as different from most media personalities, and the on-air callers present themselves as the “unrealistically real.” Except for Stern, none of the cast are career media people and have little training in this area; thus, they appear as real people.

Using technology to achieve the raw appearance, the cellular phone and camcorder, for example, are used to broaden the setting of the show. The mobility of the cellular phone and camcorder allows Stern to send one of his cast members out into the street, as when the woman flashed men in Central Park. The use of these forms of technology instead of high-quality microphones and cameras creates a very unpolished look and feel. The shots appear unedited, choppy, and unstable and resemble those of a poor home movie. There is no blocking of the shots so a person’s head can fill the entire screen. The sound, too, is inferior: static or poor connections can make the communication difficult to hear. Given that one of the functions of his show is to provide the news, Stern’s rejection of standard and sophisticated news equipment is noteworthy.
Likewise, the appearance of the set of the television show is equally rough and unappealing. The set is Stern's actual radio booth and lacks the glamour and scripted sophistication often associated with television talk shows. There is no fancy set or comfortable chairs in which the guests can sit. When the guests are awaiting a call from Stern to enter the radio booth, they are often shown in a sparse waiting area or walking down a long hallway leading to the radio booth. The shots of them walking into the set, instead of them magically appearing on the set, look rough and unpolished.

The less sophisticated technology that creates the rough and raw style of his shows enables Stern to appear visually honest. Honesty is important for Stern, and he claims that is what his show is about: "And that's great radio. Because it's someone being honest about their fears and emotions" (qtd in Marin N, pag.). Stern does not want to appear like a celebrity, surrounded by glamour and sophistication; his appeal is as a real person to the real person. The rough, raw appearance of the show allows him to communicate that he is like his audience members.

Contradictions. In many ways, the show and Stern embody contradictory features. What he says on any given day may be disputed the next, and just when audience members think they know where he stands, he changes his mind. Stern, for example, frequently describes himself as a family man and talks of being faithful to his wife, Allison; yet, he asks women to get naked for him, to sit on his lap, and to give him massages. He thus communicates contradictory messages about marriage and sexuality.

---

7 I use the phrase unrealistically real to refer to an audience that is real or realistic in the sense that it does not represent an idealized, perfected or scripted identity common in the media.
Stern admits to this fact, “I’m sure I’m filled with inconsistencies, but fuck that, I’m not the president of the United States” (qtd. in Marin N. Pag.).

To his critics, Stern often tries to explain that he and the show are just an act, but he contradicts this stance when he explains, to the same critics, that the show is simply expressing how guys really think and talk. He seems aware of this dual role:

When I’m on the radio I can be exactly what I am and say exactly what I feel. I really feel I’m role playing in real life. But I can get in the radio and be who I feel I am inside. In real life, I sit and hold back all the time. I hate that. But you can’t function in real life if you go around telling people what you think. (Marin 28)

Stern can be viewed as a "normal guy" on many levels: identity, content of discourse, and personal style. His identity, for example, fulfills the stereotypical, mainstream, dominant role of white, educated, heterosexual married man and father. The majority of his discourse deals with elements of daily life common to all people, such as sexual and bodily functions. His personal style is also mainstream: he does not wear seemingly fancy and expensive clothes, he uses slang, and he participates in popular culture.

Stern as an act, however, also makes sense on multiple levels--personal style and the content of discourse in relation to the setting. The presentation of such personal and uncivil discourse is unthinkable for most; therefore, the fact that he succeeds at it inherently suggests his difference from ordinary individuals. If he were ordinary and regular, such blatant violations of civility would not be tolerated. Although Stern may be a regular guy in many ways, there is one aspect of his personal style that is extraordinary
--his hair. His long, wavy mane is unique for the majority of men. By wearing his hair long, Stern visually signals his distance from his audience and flaunts his power to do so. His hair is contradictory in yet another way--it contradicts his blatant heterosexuality. Stern talks about his hair a great deal, a topic of conversation more often associated with women or gay men. This contradicts his enactment of other typical heterosexual behaviors. The hair, then, visually enables his verbal statement that he is just putting on an act to become believable and acceptable but, at the same time, contradicts his blatant heterosexual identity and homophobia.

The contradictions in Stern’s persona do not seem to detract from his credibility; the audience apparently forgives the discrepancies between his radio persona and the actual individual. He is able to engage in symbolic extramarital affairs on the radio while simultaneously maintaining his faithfulness to his wife. Stern also is able to cast himself as the average guy while exhibiting his celebrity status.

Organizing Principle

The above analysis of the discourse of The Howard Stern Show suggests as an organizing principle of the show men in beer groups. The term beer groups, according to Kramer, is an “effort to capture the spirit of the mainstream world” where “the competitive gathering of men-dominated groups” for the purpose of drinking beer embody “some of its primary values and characteristics” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin, 41). Competitiveness and power-over characterize this environment.

All of the substantive and stylistic features of The Howard Stern Show work together to create the internal organization of men in beer groups. The men in these beer groups are usually drunk, saying things that violate norms of civility and acting in crude
and rough ways. Falling prey to group peer pressure and failing to be self-monitoring or self-reflexive, members of these groups often engage in illegal or near-illegal acts or humiliate others. Women are not typically allowed in these groups and, if they are, they are viewed as sexual objects only. When contradictions are raised within the group, they are resolved by displays of power-over.

In much the same way that the Seinfeld audience is asked to forgive the characters’ behavior by applying the “boys will be boys” rationale, the Stern audience is asked to do the same thing. In this instance, however, the excuse is more like “drunk men will be drunk men.” Through the creation of the “men in beer groups” context, the discourse and the actions of Stern and his cast seem appropriate. Removed from the dominant culture and situated within this separate space, Stern’s actions can be understood.

Within this context, the dominant way of relating to others is from within a closed situation where everyone has the same perspective. Neither new nor nondominant perspectives are present, and the silence serves to reinforce and privilege the dominant ideology of the group. Unlike the overt physical violence used by Beavis and Butt-Head as a way of relating with people, the Stern characters stifle dissent by privileging a manner of relating characterized by emotional and psychological harm such as verbal put-downs, ridicule, and overt humiliation.
Works Cited


The Howard Stern Show. WXRX-FM. WBXZ, Columbus, OH. 15 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. WXRX-FM. WBXZ, Columbus, OH. 19 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. WXRX-FM. WBXZ, Columbus, OH. 26 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 26 Jan. 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 27 Jan. 1998


The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 29 Jan. 1998.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Given the fervent cries for civility from politicians, religious leaders, and social critics and the seemingly increasing popularity of this discourse within popular culture, I became interested in learning more about the nature and function of uncivil discourse, particularly as it occurs in popular humorous texts. I wondered if uncivil discourse provides some sort of benefit to its audience not obvious through casual observation. Therefore, my specific purpose within this study was to discover, describe, and understand a rhetoric of incivility, particularly as it occurs in contexts of humor.

To answer my research question, I used the method of generic criticism because it allows the critic ways of looking at texts to discover rhetorical trends that occur through similar rhetorical situations. Generic criticism allows the critic to understand the "dynamic within the rhetorical acts of human beings" and how rhetors respond "in similar ways as they attempt to encompass certain rhetorical problems . . ." (Campbell and Jamieson Form 21). To practice generic criticism, the critic groups the artifacts according to similarities so that a rhetorical genre is a clustering of three different kinds of elements--the rhetorical situation, substantive and stylistic features, and the organizing principle. Situational requirements are those situations that provoke a particular type of
rhetoric. The substantive and stylistic features of the rhetoric are the rhetorical choices made by the rhetor concerning how to respond to the requirements of a given situation. The organizing principle is the label for the internal schematic formed by the situational, substantive, and stylistic features of the genre.

In selecting rhetorical texts to be included in this research, I applied four criteria. All the texts were situated within the broad category of popular culture, they were humorous, they represented a variety of verbal and visual forms, and they were popular. Based on these criteria, I selected the television shows Seinfeld and Beavis and Butt-Head and the radio and television versions of The Howard Stern Show as the data for this study. Specifically, I analyzed 13 episodes of Seinfeld, 12 of Beavis and Butt-Head, and 5 radio broadcasts of The Howard Stern Show and 4 episodes of the television version. For each text, I examined and analyzed the rhetorical situation or exigence for the discourse, its substantive and stylistic features, and its organizing principle.

In this final chapter, I synthesize and analyze the data discussed in the previous three chapters and use the analysis to develop a theory of the genre of humorous incivility to answer my research question. Before proceeding, however, I briefly will summarize the analysis of the shows, identifying their rhetorical situations, substantive and stylistic features, and organizing principles.

The exigence for Seinfeld was that of smart comedy. The show was trying to appeal to an educated and sophisticated segment of the baby-boom generation. This audience, presumably tired of and too sophisticated for the more predictable comedic formulas of traditional sitcoms, wanted something new to reflect its lifestyle. Given the demand for advertising dollars, its desire was met. Seinfeld responded and situated itself
as a smart comedy through the creation of characters to which the audience could relate and through humor that arose from mundane situations. This was a radical departure from the traditional sitcom that insert one-line jokes into a basic situation that is repeated weekly.

The substantive and stylistic characteristics of this show are lack of employment of the main characters; application of childhood logic, concerns, and communication styles; children's food; the blurring of fantasy and reality; bodily functions; joking about adult concerns and lives; lack of adult relationships; prominence of childhood games; prominence of toys; use of adult technology for play; lack of meaning accorded to prices of goods; insider expressions; and the idealized childhood home. Together, these features suggest that the organizing principle for *Seinfeld* is that of children's play.

The organizing principle of children's play on *Seinfeld* is exemplified in the multiple ways in which the four main characters--Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine--react to the mundane situations in which they find themselves weekly. All of the male characters, for example, demonstrate an aversion to conventional adult employment: Jerry avoids it by being a stand-up comedian, George frequently changes careers and selects jobs requiring minimal effort, and Kramer avoids employment all together. The characters make numerous references to superheroes and often apply childhood experiences and logic to solving adult problems. Technology is rarely used for its original intent but is adapted instead for the purpose of play. By creating this playground complete with toys, games, and children's food, the audience is drawn into a world when life was less work and less complicated.
The exigence for *Beavis and Butt-Head* reflects a transition in both the music video business and the television network built on this industry, MTV. *Beavis and Butt-Head* reflects MTV's transition from an all-video channel to one where few videos are played. Moreover, the main role assumed by Beavis and Butt-Head is to offer a tired and blasé critique of the videos--also a reflection of the public's attitude toward videos and their declining popularity.

The substantive and stylistic features specific to this show are the prominence of television; cultural references; references to violence; dumb, obvious, or wrong statements; images of women as sexual objects; bodily functions; references to unlawful behavior; men as caricatures; insider expressions; children's food; and work as play. All of these characteristics suggest an organizing principle of the anti-family for *Beavis and Butt-Head*.

The anti-family is created through the use of two strategies: oppositional characterization and symbolic orphans. Oppositional characterization allows the construction of these characters as a direct inversion to the characters within the family television genre against which this genre is reacting. For example, the name *Beavis* recalls for viewers a similarly named character, *Beaver*--featured on a show that was the prototype of the family genre. By creating the characters as symbolic orphans, free from parental or adult guidance, a space is created where the characters and, by extension, the audience are freed from control, rules, or limitations.

The final text I studied was *The Howard Stern Show*, both in its radio and television versions. The exigence for Stern's show is the need to stand out among the competition. The plethora of current talk shows and news shows in the present market
makes success difficult to achieve. Therefore, the host or the show needs to be unique in some fashion. Stern's brand of uniqueness is manifest in his name shock jock.

Analyzing Stern's discourse, I discovered the following substantive and stylistic characteristics: violation of norms of civility; exertion of power and dominance; encouraging illegal acts; humiliation of others; images of women as sex objects; contradictions; and a rough, raw appearance. Together, these characteristics create the organizing principle of men in beer groups.

Stern, his crew, the guests on his show, and the callers talk as if they were in the context of a bar. The talk is crude, rough, and unpolished and often violates the norms of civility found in more public, institutional settings. Women are kept outside of the groups and are referenced in sexual or derogatory terms. The men within the groups are privileged, and those outside are ridiculed, teased, or humiliated. The type of power that characterizes this group is that of dominance and power-over. By looking at Stern this way, one can identify the presence of a separate space that has been created: a space away from the rules and norms of mainstream, professional, or institutional discourse. By creating the context as men in beer groups, Stern provides his audience with an alternative space for discourse. I now will explain the genre of humorous incivility and how it can be utilized to explain the appeal of these three shows.

**Genre of Humorous Incivility**

The genre of humorous incivility is composed of three primary elements that together constitute the constellation of the genre. These are a discourse characterized by incivility, classic forms of humor, and the focus on and treatment of a particular set of themes with a self-focus. I will propose a continuum as the basis for explaining the
genre; discuss theories of humor in relation to the continuum; describe how the themes of family, sex, technology, bodily functions, separate spaces, and difference relate to the continuum; and finally, explain how the rhetoric of the three shows can be plotted along the continuum to allow for both a civil and uncivil reading of them.

Uncivil Discourse

My proposed theory of incivility best is explained by conceptualizing civility and incivility as on opposite ends along a continuum of openness to diverse perspectives. Each of the seven points along the continuum represents different rhetorical approaches to the other who is different from the rhetor. The decision to construct the continuum in relation to openness to diverse perspectives came from two sources: the literature review and the analysis of the three shows. My theoretical orientation of feminism coupled with the discussions by Deetz, Darsey, and Guttman and Thomspson of civility, suggested that engagement of the other is central to a definition of civility. Moreover, openness to diverse perspective is central to civility is suggested by the shows themselves. As will be discussed later in greater detail, difference is one of the major themes that unites all three shows. Difference, as opposed to the other five common themes, was chosen as central to civility because it constitutes the backdrop against which the other themes that unite the shows are enacted.

Moving from left to right, from civil to uncivil, the seven markers of the continuum are: appreciation/celebration of difference, acceptance, tolerance, persuasion, active indifference, emotional and psychological violence, and physical violence. Therefore, to communicate in a civil manner means to communicate within certain categories along the continuum: appreciation/celebration of difference, acceptance,
tolerance, and persuasion. Incivility means to engage in active indifference, emotional and psychological violence, or physical violence.

Continuum of Civility (Openness to Diverse Perspectives)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civility</th>
<th>Incivility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rhetorical forms of civility may be found in dialogue, disagreement, persuasive argument, or participation with diverse perspectives. These multiple forms of civil communication imply that harmony and conformity are not synonymous with civility. This is consistent with the arguments by both Carter and Peck, who contend that civility may be quite confrontational and is necessary for community building. Conceptualizing civility as harmony, they suggest, may be ultimately limiting because it may mask deep social conflict. What is necessary in civil communication is that the person be truly open to diverse perspectives, allowing others to have impact on him or her, even when there is disagreement. For this to happen, individuals must grant others inherent value.

In the dimension of participation/celebration of difference—the most civil form of rhetoric—rhetors are not only open to diverse perspectives, but they adopt and integrate those perspectives into their lives. They are willing, then, to let others' perspectives have an impact on their beliefs and behaviors and are willing to change as a result of exposure to these perspectives. In this phase, openmindedness is more than a state of mind; it is a state of action. Thus, the term openactioned best describes this position. Wood suggests
such action is necessary if we are to create and live together in a “common civic culture that celebrates both differences and commonalities” (219). Acts that celebrate difference may include learning a new language, incorporating forms of dress from other cultures into one’s own form of self-expression, or joining in the celebration of other cultural or religious traditions.

At the acceptance point on the continuum, individuals respect and understand diverse perspectives and do not impose judgment on those who are different from them or hold opinions different from theirs. Rhetoric characteristic of this position on the continuum is rooted in the assumption that “no customs, traditions, or behaviors are intrinsically better than any others” because they “are rooted in distinct cultural perspectives” (Wood 218). Accepting others on their own terms allows rhetors simultaneously to be open minded while remaining rooted within the values and practices of their own culture. Hence, there is no change in personal behaviors or beliefs by individuals who engage in acceptance rhetoric. There is, however, likely to be effective communication with others based on a commitment to achieve understanding and treat others with respect. Acts of acceptance may take the form of discussing the tenets of a different religious or political philosophy in an effort to understand it.

At the tolerance dimension of the civility continuum, the rhetoric suggests an acceptance but not an approval of difference. This rhetoric reflects the stance that although an individual may respect the right of others to live in accordance with their own values, there is still a form of judgment that says their beliefs and ways of life are wrong, inappropriate, or offensive. Negative judgment is made about but not usually expressed to the other. While still open minded in “accepting the existence of
differences," this rhetoric "is less open-minded in perceiving the value of alternative lifestyles and values" (Wood 218). Thus, people are allowed to "do their own thing" as long as it does not infringe on the lives of others. A person engaging in tolerance, for example, may cognitively acknowledge a friend’s tattoo but refuse to look at it or inquire about its symbolic meaning.

At the point of persuasion on the continuum, rhetoric is directed at persuading others who are different that they are wrong about their beliefs, values, or customs and should change them. Designed to exert pressure on an individual or group to conform to the rhetor's perspective or engage in a specific action that the rhetor sees as appropriate, the persuasive efforts in this rhetoric are explicit and external. Thus, this is a rhetoric that solidifies and reinforces the rhetor's view of self-superiority in regard to difference rather than openness to that difference. A person trying to persuade a friend to stop eating meat, for example, may cite the health risks associated with a meat-based diet or display graphic images of the conditions under which food animals are raised and slaughtered in the effort to change the other.

At the point on the continuum after persuasion, there is a shift from civil to uncivil communication. The least extreme and offensive uncivil rhetoric is active indifference. Here, the dominant perspective appears normative through conformity and hegemony. There is no enactment of openness because only one perspective is presented that is commonly believed to represent universal truth. The basic orientation of this rhetoric is internally focused—there is no engagement of the other. Put downs and degrading remarks are made within one’s own group about other groups. Active
indifference may take the form, for example, of a group of men telling sexist and misogynistic jokes. As a result of active indifference, those with “minority” opinions are rendered virtually invisible.

**Emotional and psychological violence** is the next point on the continuum, is explicitly uncivil. Such communication may be directed toward an individual or a group who hold non-dominant beliefs. This kind of violence is designed to punish others for being different and to silence and stifle their perspectives. Thus, this position is closed to diverse perspectives. Verbal putdowns, racial slurs, homophobic threats, and other non-physical hate crimes characterize this position.

The next and final position on the continuum is **physical violence**. Here, physical harm and even death may be inflicted upon others to punish them for their difference and to silence their expression of such difference. This position is also closed to diverse perspectives. The physical beating of a gay man because of his sexual orientation exemplifies this position.

The continuum enables various forms of potentially uncivil and humorous discourse to be located and thus conceptualized. “Silly” communication characterized by a lack of seriousness, for example, can occur in the first three phases along the continuum: appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance. Thus, being silly or trivial is not uncivil communication. The use of vulgar communication—that which is obscene, crude, “deficient in taste or delicacy, indecent” ([Riverside Webster’s II Dictionary](#) 759)—can occur in the last four phases: persuasion, resistance, emotional and psychological violence, and physical violence. Thus, vulgarity can be a quality of both civil and uncivil
discourse and, because it characterizes much of the communication and actions of emotional and physical violence, it is a subset or particular type of incivility.

This continuum also allows for the identification of four characteristics of uncivil communication. First, conformity and hegemony are privileged over diversity so that there is a general lack of respect for individuals who are different and for their perspectives. Second, the perspective of the rhetor is not challenged so that he or she remains closed to diverse ideas that might have transformative effects. Third, these uncivil forms of communicating involve a general degradation of humanity. When people are denied respect, understanding, tolerance, and appreciation, more than a silencing of perspectives is the result. Instead, an environment is created in which people are denied inherent value because their beliefs are judged inferior or immoral. Self-determination is almost impossible to maintain when confronted with emotional or physical violence. Equality is nonexistent when some perspectives are allowed to dominate others. Finally, in all of the uncivil categories, rhetors are firmly committed to the given perspective and remain explicitly closed minded and resistant to change.

The continuum provides a means to discuss two other constructs that often are involved in the discussion of civility--ethics and conflict. Ethics, in the context of my theory, means according others the right to hold beliefs and values that are different from the rhetor's and allowing them to live their lives as they choose as long as these beliefs do not harm others. Ethical individuals foster openness and self-determination in themselves and others. Ethics, then, refers to a code of behavior in which the rhetor's actions reflect a civil or a moral system. From this perspective, civility "must be ethical" (Peck 43), with ethics the verb and civility the noun.
Conflict is present in both civil and uncivil positions along the continuum—
persuasion, active indifference, emotional and psychological violence, and physical
violence. Conflict is not inherently uncivil or unethical, as Peck explains: “the essence of
civility is to openly deal with conflict . . . through respectful discussion and clarification”
(305). Admittedly, the conflict or tension over diversity and difference often results in
unethical actions and communication, such as physical threats or degrading remarks.

The continuum provides a means for conceptualizing and categorizing forms of
civil and uncivil discourse. But my focus is on humorous incivility, so the continuum is
as yet incomplete. I now would like to focus attention on the relationship between the
continuum and the theories and forms of humor discussed in chapter one. I will do so by
suggesting where the various theories and forms of humor fit within the categories along
the continuum.

**Classic Forms of Humor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civility</th>
<th>Incivility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appreciation</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
<th>Tolerance</th>
<th>Persuasion</th>
<th>Active Indifference</th>
<th>Emotional Violence</th>
<th>Physical Violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incongruity theories in women’s, feminist &amp; lesbian humor</td>
<td>Incongruity theories in women’s, feminist &amp; lesbian humor</td>
<td>Incongruity theories in women’s, feminist &amp; lesbian humor</td>
<td>Domestic saga</td>
<td>Superiority theories</td>
<td>Superiority theories</td>
<td>Superiority theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sexist &amp; racist jokes</td>
<td>Sexist &amp; racist jokes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slapstick

In the most civil categories—appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance—humor is
likely to assume forms most like incongruity theories in relation to women’s, feminist,
and lesbian humor. In much women’s, feminist, and lesbian humor, incongruity is the
device used to open up a rhetorical space in which one group can appreciate and celebrate themselves and their experiences. Jokes that assert women's sexuality, for example, do so out of appreciation of the erotic and women's power to claim control over their sexual desires and actions. Jokes that recognize and poke fun at one group's subjugated socio-political position but do not offer a challenge or critique of traditional roles and norms can be found in both the acceptance and tolerance phases. Incongruity theories applied to more mainstream humor, such as slapstick—the incongruity between the normal or expected nonverbal behavior and the clumsy or silly nonverbal behaviors—also can be situated in the acceptance and tolerance phases.

Forms of humor most aligned with women's humor such as the domestic saga are likely to characterize the rhetoric of persuasion on the continuum. Either constructed as humor or as rival stories, the humor represented by domestic sagas sets up a form of argument between a dominant interpretation of reality and one group's marginalized interpretation of reality. While such humor does not offer solutions to the problems experienced by the group, it does move beyond acceptance and tolerance and presents a persuasive argument against it.

The next position on the continuum moves the rhetor to the uncivil end of the continuum, one that is closed to diverse perspectives. The superiority theories of humor lend themselves to such placement because humor of this type often functions by exhibiting a hatred "of the powerful for the marginalized" or the "revenge of the marginalized on the powerful" (Miller 227). Comedy of this sort produces "laughter at the other from a position of privilege in relation to the one being laughed at--even if the only privilege that can be claimed is that afforded by getting the last laugh" (Miller 227).
Laughter, then, stems from a perspective that is closed to diverse perspectives because "its purpose is precisely to differentiate the one laughing from the one who is laughed at, indeed to humiliate the one laughed at because of her very difference from the one laughing" (Miller 227).

Types of humor such as sexist and ethnic jokes (rooted in the superiority theories of humor) arguably can be placed within the next two points of the continuum--active indifference and emotional/psychological violence--depending on the audience. When a sexist or ethnic joke is told in the presence of the dominant group or those privileged by the joke, for example, it falls with the category of active indifference. The dominant perspective appears normative and central, while all others are marginal at best. Sexist and ethnic jokes have the "ability to create a sense of solidarity, a knowledge of belonging to a certain set" (Boskin 5) that results in a "strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders" (Bergson 284). In this way, this type of humor creates a situation in which diverse perspectives are not welcomed: superiority humor is the means used to close the door on the impact of diverse perspectives.

When sexist and ethnic jokes are told in the presence of the target groups, they fall into the category of emotional and psychological violence. According to Keough, "ethnic humor feasts upon difference and misunderstanding, stereotypes and the superiority of one's own tribe" (xix). Legman defines the nature of the domination when he likens the telling of sexist jokes in the presence of women as "verbal rape" (12).
In the last category, physical violence, theories of humor are neither appropriate nor applicable. Humor utilizes language or some form of symbolic communication, but physical violence and death are not symbolic--they are real. The laughter that occurs when an individual is committing an act of violence, however, would be the most extreme example of the superiority theories of humor.

Although the incorporation of classic forms of humor is an important element in understanding the function and appeal of these three shows, it is not sufficient to provide a complete explanation of the genre of humorous incivility. Theories of humor fail to explain two important concerns of this project--they do not explain why these shows are funny to some people and not to others, nor do they address the role of civility and incivility in relation to these texts. Theories of humor alone are not adequate to explain the entire constellation of elements that occur within the genre of humorous incivility.

**Self- and Other-Focused Themes**

The continuum is still not complete. Civil-uncivil discourse and humor are two major pieces for explaining the genre of humorous incivility. A third piece requires the incorporation of six themes that emerged from the analysis of the substantive and stylistic features of the individual shows--sex, family, bodily functions, technology, separate spaces, and difference. I will give a brief description of each theme, how it is manifest within the three shows, the placement of each theme along the continuum, and the role these themes play in explaining humorous incivility.

**Family.** The notion of the family--traditional and nontraditional--is present on all of these shows. I refer to a traditional family as one consisting of two opposite-sex
parents who have children. A nontraditional family, in contrast, is a group of people who see themselves as a family but who do not meet the above criteria.

For Seinfeld, a traditional family and a leisure family are present. A leisure family is a group of people who choose to spend their free time together, participating in leisure activities, as opposed to the obligatory getting together over holidays that characterizes many traditional families. The frequent references to and appearances by Jerry's and George's parents remind viewers of their membership in the traditional family at the same time that the strong connection among the four main characters suggests a leisure family. The Seinfeld characters give the impression of seeing one another daily and often sharing meals together—an activity also common to the traditional family. Further, the close proximity in which Jerry and Kramer live, coupled with the way that Kramer enters Jerry's apartment without knocking, symbolically suggests two brothers living in separate bedrooms across the hall from one another.

The presence of the traditional family on Beavis and Butt-Head is absent: there are neither parents nor the corresponding parental guidance and care taking. Meals, discipline, and love are not provided for these characters, and the viewers come to see them as symbolic orphans. The nontraditional family that exists for the boys is the media family. The television acts as parent and offers its version of role models, morals, and goals.

Stern, like Seinfeld, has both a traditional family and a nontraditional family. Although his wife and daughters never appear on the show, he and the cast make frequent references to them, and he talks of traditional family values such as loyalty and faithfulness to his wife. Stern’s second family, or radio/television family, includes his
entire cast. Although there is a lot of teasing among them, they appear to be intensely loyal to one another. Many of them, for example, have been with him for years, and he has found jobs for them as he has moved from one radio station to another.

Sex. Sex, too, is a common thematic for these shows. Sex is privileged, sought after, and primarily heterosexual. While previously absent from most television and public discourse, masturbation is specifically referenced and discussed within all of these texts. Except for Stern, the other two texts rely on metaphors to discuss masturbation—for example, "spanking the monkey" and "shaving." Important to note is that while male masturbation is a popular topic, female masturbation is notably absent. The only time female masturbation was referenced on the episodes analyzed was in Seinfeld's "The Contest." As the three men set up the rules and a wager for seeing who could go the longest without masturbating (or remaining "master of their domain"), Elaine wants to join the contest. They tell her that her participation would be unfair because women do not do it or need it as often as men do. Insisting on being part of the contest, Elaine agrees to wager twice as much as everyone else.

Technology. The use of technology is common throughout all of the shows; however, the forms of technology that are featured and the ways in which they are used vary. On Seinfeld, for example, adult technology, such as the cordless phone and the garbage disposal, is adapted for the purpose of play. The latest model Apple computer that sits in Jerry's apartment is not used at all. For Beavis and Butt-Head, the featured technology is the television. The television serves as the symbolic parent for the characters, while its pervasiveness on the show reminds viewers of their own dependence and reliance on it. For Stern, the technology of the cellular phone and camcorder allows
him to be unpredictable. The ease of mobility provided with these technological forms allows members of his cast to take the radio show outside of the station to encourage, record, and broadcast people engaging in uncivil, humiliating, or illegal acts.

**Bodily Functions.** The fourth thematic of the three shows is the numerous references to bodily functions or toilet talk. How this talk is manifest is comparable across all three shows: the characters talk frequently about specific bathroom behaviors. One difference, however, concerns the graphic nature of the talk: *The Howard Stern Show* and *Beavis and Butt-Head* include much more graphic and descriptive references than are used by the *Seinfeld* characters, and these two shows make numerous references to flatulence that the *Seinfeld* characters do not.

**Separate Spaces.** All of the shows take place within a context in which the characters are somehow isolated and separate from the rest of society. The spaces insulate the characters from engaging in values, ideas, or communicative norms in which they differ. As this space allows the characters to escape, it also may be functioning in a similar fashion for the audience. The *Seinfeld* audience, however, is too sophisticated and aware of television's appeal to escapism to make this outside space obvious, and the mundane situations that characterize this show reflect its awareness. The show, for example, does not insult its audience by trying to cloak its appeal in a novel or glamorous setting, thus making the escapism obvious. Instead, the show's settings are grounded in the everyday, common experience, such as waiting in line for a movie, creating in a subtle way the separate space. The presence of the separate space of the play world is very strong on this show; it is evident in the food choices of the main characters,
references to games and superheroes, the application of childhood logic and communication styles, the lack of adult relationships, and the lack of employment.

The separate space created on Beavis and Butt-Head is that of the anti-family. Characterized as children with no traditional family, Beavis and Butt-Head are situated outside of the mainstream family as portrayed traditionally on television; they reside outside of the mythic family structure. Occupying the margins, Beavis and Butt-Head is therefore liberated from the behavioral and discursive rules of those occupying the center of the culture as portrayed on family television shows.

On The Howard Stern Show, Stern is situated in the separate space of a bar. The nature of the talk and the rough, raw stylistic features work together to give the impression that the cast, guests, and callers are talking as if they were sitting around drinking beer in a bar. In this bar-like context, these rhetors are freed from the rules of civil discourse required in more professional, institutional, or public settings.

Difference. While manifesting in unique ways, the concept and enactment of difference is played out on all three shows. On Seinfeld, difference mainly takes the form of classism. The Seinfeld characters’ aversion to work, choice of material possessions such as expensive cars, and a privileging of the play world reflect attitudes and behaviors of the middle and upper classes. Beavis and Butt-Head, as an anti-family show, reflects the racism and sexism of American culture. The early family shows contained no racial minorities or nondominant perspectives--they simply were absent. Thus, Beavis and Butt-Head are saying what could not be said on those earlier shows.
Stern responds to difference of sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity in ways that ridicule and humiliate the other. Each of the themes can be located on the continuum of civility-incivility:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civility</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Family (Leisure)</th>
<th>Family (Media)</th>
<th>Sex (Homosexual)</th>
<th>Sex (Homosexual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Bodily (Heterosexual)</td>
<td>Separate space</td>
<td>Separated space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(Heterosexual) functions</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Separate</td>
<td>Separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Indifference</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Violence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Violence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Bodily</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The family theme is located in appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance, depending on the type of family (traditional versus nontraditional) and the show. The leisure family on Seinfeld, for example, is celebrated as an alternative to the traditional family and falls into the category of appreciation along the continuum. Stern’s media family belongs in the tolerance category because of his attitude toward them—a mixture of paternal loyalty and frustration—he appears to put up with them because he has to.

The placement of sex along the continuum depends on the sexual orientation and sex of the participants. Masturbation and heterosexual sex are appreciated and accepted. Homosexual sex among men is ridiculed and, if possible, ignored and eliminated; thus, it falls under active indifference and emotional/psychological violence. Lesbian sex is objectified and fetishized by heterosexual men and belongs in the category of active indifference.
The playful and creative adaptation of technology primarily falls under the appreciation category along the continuum. Both Seinfeld and Howard Stern use relatively simple technology, such as the portable phone or the garbage disposal, in novel ways. Neither show seems bound by technology’s conventional uses. Beavis and Butt-Head appreciate and privilege television as it serves as their symbolic parents.

The frequency of references to bodily functions and the use of them as sound effects on both The Howard Stern Show and Beavis and Butt-Head suggest the degree to which these characters celebrate them. Seinfeld’s attitude is one of toleration: the characters acknowledge that everybody has such bodily functions, but they belong in the private sphere.

For Seinfeld, the use of the separate space of the playground belongs in the category of active indifference. By confining themselves to this space, the characters reinforce their own (and the dominant) perspective and encounter as little difference as possible. The space of the bar for Stern is one that contributes to emotional and psychological violence. In this symbolic context, the characters make fun of and treat others different from them with disrespect. The space of the anti-family is what makes the violence of Beavis and Butt-Head possible, for these acts would not be tolerated within the family sitcom genre.

When applied to the continuum, the theme of difference can be located in the three uncivil categories. The characters on Seinfeld act indifferently toward the other, apparently hoping it will go away and that their comfortable, homogenous (play)world will not change. When Stern encounters difference, his reaction is placed in the emotional/ psychological category, and he verbally punishes others for their difference.
When verbal ridicule fails to eliminate difference, Beavis and Butt-Head attempt to physically beat it away, thereby placing it in the last and most uncivil category along the continuum, physical violence.

The topics of family, sex, technology, and bodily functions are self-focused, and the topics of separate space and difference are other focused. When the topic or situation is focused on the self, the rhetor is involved with people who hold the same perspective and is not challenged by diverse perspectives. Family and sex, for example, tend to reinforce one’s own perspective. The rhetor’s focus is on getting his or her needs satisfied and that includes, in part, not having his or her perspective challenged. The rhetor can be characterized as being highly individualistic, isolated, self-centered, and consciously deflecting the input from others. Thus, the rhetor is validated and reinforced for his or her perspective. Those topics that are other focused, in contrast, deal with notions of difference and otherness. This rhetor, in contrast, not only seeks out the perspectives from others but takes them into account and may incorporate them into his or her behavior or decision making.

The continuum, containing degrees of civil discourse, types of humor, and major themes of the shows, now allows a broader view of the shows in terms of humorous incivility. Seinfeld, Beavis and Butt-Head, and The Howard Stern Show are uncivil at their core because they represent closure to new perspectives. Each show essentially operates in one of the uncivil categories along the continuum: Seinfeld displays active resistance to diverse perspectives, The Howard Stern Show responds to diversity with emotional and physical violence, and the boys in Beavis and Butt-Head inflict physical violence on those whose ideas are different from theirs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civility</th>
<th>Incivility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Acceptance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruity theories in women's, feminist &amp; lesbian humor</td>
<td>Incongruity theories in women's, feminist &amp; lesbian humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapstick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (Leisure)</td>
<td>Family (Media)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (Heterosexual)</td>
<td>Sex (Heterosexual) functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily functions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Seinfeld characters display their active indifference to new perspectives by restricting and limiting their actions and communication to the separate space of the play world. The use of the substantive and stylistic characteristics such as the application of childhood logic, concerns, and communication styles; joking from adult concerns and lives; and the lack of adult relationships keep these characters isolated from the difference and diversity they would encounter in the adult world. Their main strategy of active indifference is to play by making jokes at others' expense. The characters' arrest in the final episode for failing to help a man in trouble and making fun of him instead epitomizes their active resistance. Commenting as they watch a man robbed at gunpoint, "Well, there goes the money for the lipo" and "See, the great thing about robbing a fat
guy is it's an easy getaway," suggest that the man's weight--hence, his difference from
them--elicits their uncivil remarks. In the end, the characters are essentially arrested,
tried, convicted, and jailed for their active indifference.

Stern's response to difference is an attempt to resist it through the infliction of
emotional and psychological violence. This is evident in many of the substantive and
stylistic characteristics, such as exerting power and dominance, encouraging illegal acts,
humiliating others, and presenting women as sex objects. Revisiting Legman's analysis
that sexual jokes may be functioning as a form of verbal rape makes explicit the
emotional and psychological harm inflicted by Stern. His use of the terms bitch and
whore to refer to women and his commands to women to undress and perform sexual acts
on the show demonstrate his use of emotional and psychological violence when
confronted with diversity. Through such strategies, he insults others' values, ideas, and
lifestyles while attempting to reaffirm his personal and ideological superiority. His
humor matches his orientation to difference with its classic appeal through superiority
and hostility.

Beavis and Butt-Head occupies the most extreme position along the continuum,
physical violence. As seen in the prominence of such characteristics as references to
violence and references to unlawful behavior, the boys' response to difference is to inflict
physical pain. They appear to perceive difference as a viable threat to their identity, and
they respond as if keeping difference at bay is a matter of self-defense.

Although I have discussed the three shows as occupying distinct places along the
uncivil end of the continuum, each one also can be found in other categories to the left of
the primary placement. So, for example, Stern primarily exhibits emotional and
psychological violence, but he also displays at times active indifference, persuasion, and tolerance. Seinfeld sometimes displays active indifference, persuasion, tolerance, and acceptance. Beavis and Butt-Head often exhibit physical violence, but they also engage in emotional and psychological violence, active indifference, and persuasion. In summary, the positions are not mutually exclusive, although the more extreme the position a show occupies on the right end of the continuum, the less likely it is to also hold a position on the extreme left.

The genre of humorous incivility can be explained as a unique constellation of forms of rhetoric, types of humor, and self-focused themes that allow for a double reading—civil or uncivil—of this kind of rhetoric that accounts for its appeal despite its often appalling incivility. A critical feature of the genre of humorous incivility, then, appears to be its capacity to be read in two major ways, depending on the frame selected for viewing a text in the genre. In the next section, I will describe the two frames that are operating on these three shows: each one offering a unique reading of the show, one civil, the other uncivil. I am using the term frame here in much the way Burke does, referring to the recurring symbolic patterns that individuals and communities utilize to make sense of and organize their experiences (Attitudes 39). As “equipment for living” (Philosophy 293), frames offer a pre-fabricated “notion of the universe or history and shape attitudes in keeping” with the norm (Attitudes 3). According to Crane, the frame is vital because it is the “central idea that is used to make sense of relevant events.” The frame organizes and thus “tells the audience how to think about an issue and encourages it to interpret events in terms of a key idea” (79).
The reading of the shows as civil or uncivil depends on the nature of the topics being discussed and on which the audience is focused. If an audience focuses on how these shows treat issues of difference and otherness, they appear uncivil. Such a focus reveals that the characters deal with such topics in ways that are consistent with the uncivil categories along the continuum. Contributing to this reading is the enactment of a separate space on each show. Common to all three shows, the presence of a separate space allows those within it the freedom to communicate in ways that follow the rules and norms of the specific separate space—the play world, the anti-family, and the bar. In this separate and essentially closed space, the characters' perspectives remain unchallenged as they are sheltered from outside influences. The separateness of the space protects the characters from encountering and engaging in notions of difference. The closed nature of their perspective places them along the uncivil end of the continuum.

A second reading of the shows is also possible. The themes of sex, family, technology, and bodily functions act as strategic diversions by diverting attention away from the close-mindedness and incivility of the characters and the dialogue and toward the novelty factor of each show. They thus create a frame in which to read the shows as open, new, playful, and creative. Such a reading enables them to appear as if they are breaking new ground in form and content even as they are resisting new perspectives and reinscribing traditional ethnocentric, classist, and sexist ideologies. The uses of traditional and familiar forms of humor in the less civil points of the continuum also reinforce the new, fun feel of the shows and produce delight and appeal.

The enactment of the four themes of family, sex, technology, and bodily functions is functioning strategically to give the appearance of creativity or newness to the three
shows. On *Seinfeld*, for example, the discussion of masturbation, a taboo topic, suggests that these characters are opening and pushing the boundaries of sex on television. Likewise, the explicitness of Stern’s program suggests he is performing a similar function for radio. The presence of the anti-family on *Beavis and Butt-Head* presents a new challenge to the conventional nuclear television family. The adaptation of serious technology for play on *Seinfeld* and Stern’s use of it to allow access and flexibility create an environment of non-threatening creativity and fun. The amount of dialogue concerning bodily functions from all of the characters can be interpreted as an indication that they offer a challenge to “old-fashioned” notions of appropriate discourse. Taken together, the ways in which these shows use sex, family, technology and bodily functions offer viewers a reading of the shows as playful and open. The fact that they may appear open and creative with these four topics may explain why some viewers read them as civil—because, in these contexts, they are.

Moreover, all of these shows, in some way, break with previous genres, again giving the appearance of novelty and openness. *Seinfeld*, for example, professes to be a comedy about nothing, *Beavis and Butt-Head* adds cartoon characters and commentary to music videos and MTV, and *The Howard Stern Show* challenges both the traditional radio talk show and news formats. In various ways, the genres—situation comedy, music video, and talk show—contained elements that were closed to new perspectives to which these three shows responded. Situation comedies are notorious for presenting middle-class characters and situations. Their classist nature rarely was identified or discussed but appeared normative in its unquestioned pervasiveness. The *Seinfeld* characters make class visible and explicit by privileging luxury items, insulting a blue-collar lifestyle, and
refusing to date people who are poor ("The Strongbox"). While initially viewed as a radical and subversive response to the dominant culture, especially the music culture, MTV was racist and sexist in the absence of people of color and women or, when they were present, in its exploitation, commodification, and subordination of and violence against women. *Beavis and Butt-Head*, then, are responding (often violently) to a world where racism and sexism were never acknowledged. Similarly, radio talk shows historically have been made up of white, male, polished, professional radio announcers. *The Howard Stern Show* responds by creating a more diverse cast, including an African-American woman who acts as co-host and an inexperienced, uneducated man who stutters. The diversity, however, is surface level only because much of the content of Stern’s radio and television programs ridicules and punishes those who deviate from his normative position.

In conclusion, the shows studied as examples of humorous incivility can be read as both civil and uncivil, depending on the frame from which the audience views them—closed to the perspectives of the other in a self-focus or open to such perspectives in an other focus. When the self-focused topics of sex, family, technology, and bodily functions receive the focus of attention, they may be read within the civil frame—as open, playful, and innovative. When viewed from this perspective, the shows fall into categories at the civil end of the continuum because the characters handle these topics in a manner that appears open or unrestricted. When viewed from the perspective of other-focused topics, however, they appear closed to the possibility of allowing external influences to have an impact.
One frame is not more important than the other is; both are key, just different. When dealing with self-focused topics, the shows are civil; when dealing with other-focused topics, they are uncivil. The fact that these shows can be both humorous and uncivil is a result of the particular constellation of the genre: a combination of features that are clustered at the right end of the continuum—uncivil discourse, verbal put-downs, superior kinds of humor, and the treatment of particular themes with a self-focus. The answer to the question then, of whether the shows Seinfeld, Beavis and Butt-Head, and The Howard Stern Show are civil or uncivil is that they are both civil and uncivil.

Suggestions for Future Research

Because there has been little research on what constitutes civility and incivility, this research is important because it offers a theoretical model of one type of incivility that can be utilized as a starting place to locate the presence of such discourse in the culture. Moreover, this research suggests that determining what constitutes uncivil discourse is a complex process. Humorous texts, as this research suggests, may be read as both civil and uncivil; thus, locating cases of incivility is more intricate than simply identifying, for example, the presence of an inappropriate comment about a bodily function. Much more research needs to be done to understand fully humorous incivility and civility in general.

A starting place for future research would be to discover whether other texts of humorous incivility share the features identified for these three texts. Are any of the themes of family, sex, technology, bodily functions, separate space, or difference shared by other such texts? Or are there other self-focused and other-focused themes that
characterize them? Do the self-focused and other-focused themes in other texts function in ways which are similar or different from their role within Seinfeld, Beavis and Butt-Head, and The Howard Stern Show? The discovery of the extent to which the characteristics discovered about the three shows analyzed for this study describe other texts of humorous incivility will suggest the scope of the genre.

An additional area of future research concerns audiences’ choice of interpretation of these texts. Specifically, research needs to be done to identify why some audiences chose to focus on the self-focused themes and others on the other-focused themes and thus to read the texts as civil or uncivil. Understanding audiences’ process of interpretation and the decision to view these texts as civil or uncivil may suggest strategies for the eradication of uncivil discourse.

Future research also may seek to discover the impact—of any—of rhetoric of humorous incivility on civil discourse in other contexts. In other words, does the presence of the texts of humorous incivility in our entertainment culture have an impact on lack of civility in contexts such as politics and education? Although texts of humorous incivility are popular, does this serve as an indicator that the entire culture is becoming more uncivil?

Finally, additional research should focus on the application of the constellation of openness to diversity, types of humor, and self-or other-focused themes to concerns about civil discourse in general. A possible focus could be to use the constellation to create civil discourse or a greater sensitivity to uncivil discourse. Rhetorical critics, for example, who are concerned about civility might want to see if they can create alternative
texts that share some of the appealing and humorous features of these shows but that promote openness to difference--civility--rather than closed-mindedness.
Works Cited


APPENDIX

DATA

Seinfeld


Beavis and Butt-Head


The Howard Stern Show (Radio)


26 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show (Television)


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Articles


Barrett, Wayne M. "Beavis and Butt-Head: Social Critics or the End of Civilization as We Know It?" USA Today 1 Sept. 1994: 86.


Ebert, Roger. "Beavis and Butt-Head Film So Stupid, It’s Smart.” Orange County Register 20 Dec. 1996, morning ed.: F15.


Television and Radio Programs

Seinfeld


"The Merv Griffin Show."  Seinfeld. NBC. WCMH, Columbus, OH. 6 Nov. 1997.


Beavis and Butt-Head

"Bang the Drumb Slowly Dumbass."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  7 Aug. 1995.

"Bus Trip."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  10 Oct. 1995.

"Buttnicks."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  13 July 1995.

"Late Night with Butt-Head."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  14 Apr. 1994.

"Pool Toys."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  21 Apr. 1994.


"Stewart Moves Away."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  5 Jan. 1995.

"Tainted Meat."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  29 Dec. 1994.


"Tired."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  8 Aug. 1995.

"Top O' the Mountain."  Beavis and Butt-Head.  MTV, Columbus, OH.  19 Jan. 1995.

The Howard Stern Show

The Howard Stern Show.  WXRX-FM.  WBXZ, Columbus, OH.  15 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show.  WXRX-FM.  WBXZ, Columbus, OH.  19 June 1998.
The Howard Stern Show. WXRX-FM. WBXZ, Columbus, OH. 26 June 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 26 Jan. 1998.

The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 27 Jan. 1998


The Howard Stern Show. E! TV, Columbus, OH. 29 Jan. 1998.