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When Satire Isn't Funny: The Exodus of Chappelle's Show

Abstract

As a program engineered to showcase a blunt depiction of racial politics and satire in America, *Chappelle's Show* has generated great controversy. An examination of Dave Chappelle's success and his decision to halt his provocative series reveal complications that are inherent to satire (and the satirist), including both its power and its capacity for damage. By analyzing *Chappelle's Show's* sketches, particularly "The Pixies," "The Blind Supremacist," and "The Nigger Family," I will flesh out the problems with satire, specifically, Chappelle's satire. Chappelle's use of incongruous and clashing discursive frames gives his satire great bite but also creates audience discord. For this reason, it is imperative that the satirist not only understands his audience when creating satire but also understands the repercussions that could arise from a production that goes rogue.

Satire has been employed as a comedic tool since the Greek theater -- as early as 500 B.C. And in many respects, it is an art form created for public consumption, in the spirit of entertainment. However, although presented through the vehicle of comedy, satire is serious business, as its purpose is not to provoke laughter, necessarily, but rather to "cause the behavior of the audience to twist round," (Raskin 117). In this respect, satire is a unique art form, as the audience plays a significant role in ascribing meaning to it, and its success or failure as a satire is greatly subject to the audience's perspective. Consequently, as satire is not an "exact" art, if applied injudiciously (or received unfavorably), it can affect a result that is in direct conflict to the author's intended purpose. For this reason, it is imperative that the satirist not only understands his audience when creating satire but also understands the repercussions that could arise from a production that goes rogue.

Perhaps one of the best contemporary examples of satire going rogue is *Chappelle's Show*, which was broadcast on Comedy Central from 2003 -2005. The show boasted overwhelming popularity, and a 2004 *TV Guide* article proclaimed Dave Chappelle the "funniest

man on TV,” (Fretts, 2004, 26). As a program engineered to showcase a blunt depiction of racial politics and satire in America, the show generated great controversy during its run and continued to do so even after the series ended. But it was not a residual impact from the show’s provocative content that left the viewers unsettled after its termination; it was the comedian’s unexpected and permanent departure. Surprisingly, after two years of creative controversy, Chappelle left his show because he felt his sketches were “socially irresponsible,” (Oprah Winfrey Interview, Feb. 3, 2006). An examination of Dave Chappelle’s success and his decision to halt his provocative series reveal complications that are inherent to satire (and the satirist), including both its power and its capacity for damage. In Chappelle’s case, although his sketches were extremely popular, satire is subject to members of its audience, and his racial “humor” proved to be no laughing matter to some of his viewers, especially as it applied to the use of the infamous “N” word. Further, Chappelle’s critical decision to end his show (as well as his successful career) is a direct result of his not fully understanding the diversity of his audience and, for that matter, not recognizing the uncontrollable impact his work might have on it. To this point, three of *Chappelle’s Show’s* sketches that generated adverse responses from his audience – “The Pixies,” “The Blind Supremacist,” and “The Nigger Family” provide insight into the delicate nature of satire, specifically racial satire, and the complications that can arise when the artist essentially loses control of his work to the audience, because their views were not congruent with what he presented as “humor.”

Chappelle’s Show was a sketch comedy program that tackled weighty issues of stereotypes and race relations present in the 21st century; and his irreverent, controversial, outrageous, and occasionally raunchy sketches made the comedian an instant hit. The show, in fact, became the highest rated show on *Comedy Central*, and its DVD sales yielded the highest

sales in TV history (Winfrey 2006). Additionally, *Chappelle's Show* earned three Emmy nominations and received considerable acclaim from critics. With the completion of the second season, Chappelle's contract was due to be renewed for two more years – this time at a 50 million dollar premium. However, despite the abundantly lucrative compensation offered to Dave Chappelle for his contract, the comedian walked away, stating that the true cost of the money was too great, (Winfrey 2006). In his interview following his return from Africa, Chappelle told the talk show host, as well as the millions of viewers and fans that tuned in that day to watch the show, that he left the show because he was “doing sketches that were funny but were socially irresponsible” and could not, in good conscience, continue to do so (Winfrey 2006). He also stated in a *Time* magazine interview that he was concerned about *Chappelle's Show's* effects on viewers, wondering if “the new season of his show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them,” (Farley & Robinson, 2005, 72). Interestingly, however, rather than altering his show or introducing a new complexion to his sketches, the artist stopped everything, like an operator halting a wrecking ball.

Chappelle told Winfrey, “What I didn't consider is how many people watch the show and how the way people use television is subjective.” In hindsight, perhaps what Chappelle needed to consider when developing his material was not necessarily “how many people” were watching the show but rather how many conflicting cultures were watching the show and how the subjectivity of the viewers, in part, was rooted in racial disharmony. To this point, John Fiske writes, “We must [...] understand the contribution of the audience members in the construction of social reality. Messages are not uniformly understood and interpreted by different audience members, (Fiske 28-29). Chappelle may not have considered that a homogeneous response from the audience was unlikely, despite his earnest practice of incorporating racial diversity into his

sketches. In theory, spraying a diversity of targets with humorously disguised insults can be a potentially productive strategy for uniting ethnicities, (Perks 277). However, as the old adage goes, equitable does not mean equal. And Chappelle's broad based humor did not necessarily affect his audience equally. Chappelle broaches this subject with his audience during one of his opening dialogues in season two:

I'm not advocating in any way shape or form any kind of racial hatred. I'm just making fun of each other's cultures. It's fun. The problem is when you do stereotypical kind of jokes, there's no room for subtlety," (Cited in Perks, 276).

When complications arose, however, from an unfavorable audience (racists) deriving pleasure from racial "humor" that was intended to be satirical but was perceived literally, Chappelle's opus fell apart -- people were laughing at things that were not meant to be funny but rather were intended to be satirical. Racial differences proved too powerful for reason.

Chappelle's first inkling that his work might be indulging undesirable viewers (racists) presented while he was performing a skit that involved African American, Asian, Latino, and White "pixies" all played by Chappelle dressed in character) who urged their owners to fulfill stereotyped behavior, (Winfrey 2006). In one respect, the sketch touched upon a rather serious side of race relations in that Chappelle's pixies gave the viewers a window into the inner conflict experienced by various ethnicities (in this case, Black Americans), as they struggle to appear indifferent to their cultural roots, and possibly to their authentic self, in order to defy stereotypes. In the African American pixie segment, the pixie encouraged it's owner, a passenger on an airplane, to eat fried chicken when asked by a flight attendant if he would prefer fish or chicken. This is where Chappelle infused his controversial comedic artistry: "Oooooo-Weee! I just herd the magic word! Chicken! Go on! Order you a big bucket, nigga, and take a bite. Black mothafucka." (Pixie starts chucking and jiving). As the flight attendant tells the Black passenger

they are out of fish, the pixie continues, “You caint beat fate, nigga. Eat the chicken!” When the chicken is prepared fried, the Pixie exclaims, “hallelujah! hallelujah! hallelujah! hallelujah! Big lipped bitch!” (Chappelle, Lost Episodes). Although adorned with Chappelle’s funny gesticulations as a pixie, the dialogue in this sketch is very incongruous with what Black Americans have steadfastly tried to abolish in society, particularly its degrading reference to Black features (“Big lipped bitch”). Further, since the pixie represented the black mans’ subconscious and psyche, his reference to big lips and status (black mothafucka) stigmatized the Black man, which may be interpreted by some as self-deprecating. Undoubtedly, this is a message that could be menacing to Black men in a racially divided America.

Referring to the repercussion from the sketch, Chappelle made the following statement:

I’m on the set and we’re finally taping the sketch, somebody on set that was white laughed in such a way ... I know the difference between people laughing with me and people laughing at me. It was the first time I had gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person? (Winfrey 2006).

Chappelle’s uneasiness with being laughed “at” rather than laughed “with” is a feeling familiar to almost everyone. However, the uncomfortable experience served as a wake-up call to Chappelle’s; he was presented with the reality that *he*, the Black man, was being laughed at at that moment -- it was not his satire that was amusing to the viewer. Painfully, Chappelle, realized his art was, in effect, being turned on him -- his satire and possibly satire as a whole) was fallible; it was flawed, and the spirit of the laughter felt ugly to him. In his book titled The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy John Y.T Greig’s describes laughter as a trigger for the observer that elicits either positive feelings (love) or negative feelings (hate), depending on how the laughter is interpreted. In any event, however, “the immediate effect of being laughed at is essentially the same into whatever context we fit the laugh: we feel belittled,” (Greig 187-188).

Interestingly, Chappelle's feeling of belittlement occurred when he was transformed from artist to Black man at the sound of the laughter -- he was a victim of his own satire.

However, in spite of his trepidation, Chappelle continued to create provocative sketches, and his audience continued to grow at an exponential rate. Jonathan Gray maintains that it was the sociopolitical significance of the series that attracted its diverse audience, from "frat boys and backpackers" to the "occasional scholar" (Gray, Jones, 235). Chappelle was doing things that interested *everyone*, and with the show's exploding popularity, more and more people were tuning in to hear and see what Dave Chappelle was offering up -- People tuned in to laugh. To Chappelle's own astonishment, he was not only popular, he was compelling: "What I didn't consider is how many people watch the show and how the way people use television is subjective," (Chappelle to Winfrey, 2006). When he finally did consider the show's viewership, he realized that what he said mattered and that the skits were powerful.

To his disappointment, however, people were interpreting *his* sketches *their* way, and not necessarily as he had intended. As it pertains to television comedy, Perks suggests that, meanings are derived from several contributing factors: incongruous and clashing discursive frames, the segmented nature of the text, and perhaps most importantly for the purpose of this argument, the "ambiguous layering of comedian and comedic personae," (Perks 273). As it pertains to Dave Chappelle (the man), his audience loved him, and his audience listened -- for the good or for the bad, *he* was the center of the contentious discourse. Unfortunately, the viewers were not necessarily embracing the skits as he had intended.

As part of the show's allure (as well as Dave Chappelle's, for that matter) Chappelle addressed his audience in a direct, and rather personal, manner before beginning his skits. In his opening statement from Season Two's second episode, Dave Chappelle made the following

profound statement to his audience regarding one of his sketches, *Blind Supremacy*, which aired during the previous episode:

“Last season, we started the series off with a sketch about a black/white supremacist – very controversial. Yes, very. It sparked this whole controversy about the appropriateness of the “N” word, the dreaded “N” word. You know, and then when I would travel, people would come up to me, like white people would come up to me, like, ‘Man, that sketch you did about them Niggers was hilar...’ Take it easy! You know, I was joking around! You start to realize that these sketches in the wrong hands are dangerous! You know, and that “N” word is a doozy! Especially for us black folks.”

As the context of Dave Chappelle’s sketches was born from *his* reality, *his* perception of the world, the message behind his comedy was inherently exclusive – it aimed at the heartstrings of people who shared his experiences and perspective. Unfortunately, Chappelle may not have considered the disposition and perception of the racists who were also watching his show.

As Perks points out in her article, “Comedy relies on the collision between discourses, and neither the text, nor the dominant ideology, can ever control all the potential meanings that this collision produces,” (Perks 402). For Dave Chappelle, the “collision” resulting from “Blind Supremacy” suggested that his entire audience may not yet be ready or evolved enough for his racial humor, as white fans laughed and black fans took exception to the sketch’s popularity with them. Katharine P. Zakos explains that by juxtaposing contradictory images like a black, white supremacist yelling racial slurs about his own race, the incongruity of the situation is not only obvious, it is ridiculous; however, “if the audience sees the stereotypical images as congruous rather than incongruous, *Chappelle's Show* will have effectively endorsed that which it was trying to challenge” (Zakos 5). In the case of “Blind Supremacy,” a portion of the audience (likely, white viewers) “missed” the satire behind Chappelle’s skit (including the message inherent in its title) and instead embraced the skit as validation of their racist views. To that end, Clayton Bigsby (a.k.a. the blind supremacist), unfortunately may have served to endorse their

hatred of Black people. As an example, Clayton Bigsby (cloaked in a white hood, a symbol that by nature evokes hatred) enthusiastically and repeatedly encourages the KKK in his speech to fight for White power: “White power! Everybody, I have a lot of things to discuss, mainly nigras. America’s at war with al Qaeda, but we’re still losing the war against Al Sharpton [...] White Power!” (Chappelle, Season One). At a time when America stands on guard to its reprehensible enemy, al Qaeda, Chappelle’s decision to include Black Americans in this hateful mix, is risky, and to many Black Americans, insulting. Chappelle admitted in one of his monologues that after showing the sketch to a black friend of his, “he looked at me like I had set black people back [...]” (Chappelle, Season One). He then apologized to his friend.

Paradoxically, satire evokes laughter because the meaning behind its content is *not* funny, but the context in which it is presented is. Perhaps one of the most startling examples of this phenomenon, to Zako’s point, was the backlash that ensued *The Nigger Family*, a skit intended to showcase a “humorous” side to the “N” word but ended up, in Chappelle’s view (as well as in the view of many black Americans), possibly reinforcing the negative stereotypes imputed to black people. In his season premier, Chappelle introduced the skit with a seemingly tongue-in-cheek sentiment:

You know, a lot of different feelings come up when they hear that word. But I’m thinking, is it because black people actually identify themselves as the “N” words? No. I don’t know. Maybe. But what if we just used the word for other people, would it be so bad? I don’t know? So I made a sketch. It’s about a white family, whose last name happens to be Nigger, that’s all. Lets see how offensive the word sounds now.

Within this skit, Chappelle takes on possibly the most controversial and vexing word in the English (American) language – “nigger,” and attempts to turn it into a comedy sketch.

By assigning the “N” word to a white suburban family (their last name is Niggar), Chappelle’s sketch was intended to bridge two opposing races by connecting them via this notorious word, thus diluting its hurtful impact, a technique Randall Kennedy refers to as “strategy of subversion through overuse,” (Kennedy, 38). The sketch was fully charged with unflattering black stereotypes and epithets that were appropriated to an equally unflattering stereotyped white family. The skit gushed with provocative dialogue that included comments like, “She’s got those nigger lips;” “He sure is one lazy nigger;” “We’re rich, their nigger rich;” and “Mr. ‘N’ word,” (Chappelle, Season Two). The harsh stereotypes exhibited in the skit were intended to be *so* bad they would be laughable – satire epitomized. Nikolay Chernyshevsky explains, “The unpleasant in the comical strikes us as ugly; what is pleasant is that we are so perceptive that we understand that the ugly is ugly. Laughing at it we put ourselves above it,” (Cited in Raskin 10). Unfortunately, however, the “ugly” in this skit (the “N” word) was not construed by a fraction of the audience as unquestionably “ugly” and was maliciously savored by some, while painfully rejected by others.

One interesting layer to “The Niggar Family” skit is that the white family, the Niggars, was perfectly comfortable with its surname and was unaware of its inherent offensiveness. The milkman, however, played by Dave Chappelle, was “in” on the joke. He would enter the scene and yell, “Its my favorite family to deliver milk to, the niggas!” The unfiltered brazenness of the Milkman, and his use of contradictory terms used in conjunction with each other (milk-white family with the last name, Nigga), facilitated the spectacle. To many who viewed the skit and appreciated the satire, the taboo associated with the “N” word changed – it was “neutralized.” However, a positive reaction from his black audience did not weigh-in, as “no other word comes close to provoking the animosity and hurt provoked by this slur” (Himma 512). All in all, the

“N” word is still the “N” word, and a comedy sketch in 2006 cannot usurp the painful history the word carries for black Americans.

Despite the comedian’s decision to end *Chappelle’s Show*, Chappelle’s standup performance in 2010 at the famous Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, CA, exhibited that he still has great faith in satire, regardless of its controversial complexion. In November, 2006 Michael Richards, a.k.a. “Kramer,” broke out into a racist tirade during his stand-up routine on stage. Repeatedly using the highly charged “N” word, despite the audiences’ expressed objection, Richards continued his stand up shouting, “Shut up! Fifty years ago we'd have had you upside down with a [f – ing] fork up your ass,” and then pointing to a black audience member and yelling, “Throw his ass out! He's a nigger [...] he's a nigger,” (TMZ video). The show was brought to a halt when the audience collectively left the club in protest. Without a doubt, Richards was either unhinged, did not “know” his audience, or presented a combination of the two conditions. As laughter is a product of some persons or group of persons sharing something that they all know and recognize as laughable, “unless you happen also to know a good deal about this person or group of persons you cannot by any means guarantee the laugh beforehand. It is only people with the same social heritage who laugh easily at the same kind of jokes,” (Y.T. Creig as cited in Raskin, 17). To this point, Michael Richards traveled into territory that was not his and compounded it with satire that was vulgar, aggressive, and wildly out of control. Curiously, Chappelle seemed to empathize with “Kramer’s” satire gone awry:

“I tell you the truth. When I seen Kramer’s tape, I learned about myself. You know what I learned? I think I’m only like 20% black and 80% comedian! You know what I mean, and black dudes can relate, you know what I mean bro, like when you saw that shit you was furious right? The black dude in me was like, ‘Kramer, you motha fucker!’ like, I was hurt. And the comedian in me was just like ‘Phew! Nigga’s having a bad set, hang in there Kramer, don’t let them break you Kramer.’ Ahh, I wish I was there so bad. Cause you know in the back of his mind he was thinkin, ‘ I’ll get him the next show -- there wont be a next show Kramer, Phew!’”

However, as the demise of Michael Richard's career clearly reveals, the "N" word is a "doozy," and it is not a word that may be utilized without regard to authorial ownership – it's not funny when a white guy says it. In sum, the satire and language employed by Dave Chappelle in *Chappelle's Show* does not work when spoken by Kramer. To quote Chappelle, "These sketches in the wrong hands are dangerous!" (Season Two, Opening Act). Interestingly, as Chappelle openly acknowledges, they sometimes don't even work for him.

Whether or not satire serves as an effective device for causing "the behavior of the audience to twist round," (Raskin 117) is certainly debatable. However, what is not debatable is the power that is inherent to popular satire. If ideally delivered, the intended message will extend beyond the stage and will have an impact on the audience that serves the artist's purpose. However, as the demise of *Chappelle's Show* and, arguably the comedian's career, exhibit, satire is no laughing matter, especially as it applies to racial humor. Without an absolute understanding of his audience and the consequences that could arise from satire that misses its mark, the ramifications of misguided satire can not only be harmful to the artist and its viewers; it can be lethal.

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