

# Cultural View; Inside The Political Mimic's Fun-House Mirror

**BYLINE:** ANNA DEEVERE SMITH, The New York Times

**SECTION:** Section 2; Page 20; Column 1; Arts & Leisure Desk

**DATE:** August 16, 1992

To the artist, what is more dangerous: the possibility of giving offense or the refusal to look and to see? When the rest of us have turned our attention to other matters, the impressionists, the parodists, the comics, are still watching. Historically, their vigilance is what has kept them on the outskirts of society.

In our own time, Dana Carvey's impressions of President Bush on "Saturday Night Live" won him an invitation to the White House. On another occasion the President's speechwriters asked Mr. Carvey to talk to them about the President's mannerisms.

A videotape of the comedian Jim Morris performing Bush impersonations at the Ford Theater in Washington is intercut with shots of the President and his wife in the audience obviously enjoying the joke.

Authority likes to see itself imitated, followed. But impersonation is not the same as a mirror image or a videotape. For the health of a society, it should not be; it should, in fact, be authority turned upside down. Mimics study authority while standing on their hands. They wear respectable clothing -- designer jeans in their real lives and business suits while portraying politicians. But underneath is the spirit of Harlequin and his multicolors and a view of the world that is inverted. The public takes this reflection and uses it as a key. The mimic has opened up a new way of seeing.

In Shakespeare's "King Lear," the Fool is referred to by Goneril, the King's daughter, as his "all licensed Fool." The character can say things that would send others to prison or their graves. The Fool also serves as a mirror of Lear. Will the King recognize himself, the play asks. Every fool's mirror throws back a fun-house reflection that in some ways is truer than the more flattering real mirror image would be.

"I'm not concerned about politics for the good reasons," said the "Saturday Night Live" writer and performer Al Franken in a recent conversation. "I'm interested for the bad reasons. I'm interested for the horse race. It's fun to watch these people savage each other and lie."

In this society, comedians don't get executed for their political commentary, but a comic can't go where the audience is not willing to follow. Joy Behar remembers that when she performed Reagan jokes in the 80's, nobody laughed. "Even in

New York, the Reagan material was not working. People were still making money and they didn't like seeing him trashed. Then it became clear unemployment was rising and it opened up."

"You couldn't get a joke off of Bush when he was Vice President because he had been the head of the C.I.A.," Ms. Behar said. "Today, Quayle has been a boon to comedy."

Which Presidential candidate is more lampoonable? "Clinton is younger," she said. "You can take more shots at a younger person."

When Comedy Central, the cable network, covered the Democratic National Convention last month in New York, what fascinated was the degree to which real politicians were cajoled into participating in their "foolishness." As Ms. Behar, Mr. Franken and other comics worked the convention floor, interviewing candidates and delegates on "Indecision '92," one wondered what encourages politicians to speak with fools. Might it be that some of these office-holders see the limit of the real glass mirror; see it and seek the notion of a human mirror, even if deflation comes with the bargain. When jesters sat at the side of kings, a relationship of interdependence developed with the two often meeting in the hallway of distorted mirrors. The mingling of politicians with select fools today may be a sign that a more fluid relationship between the two is being sought.

But it may also mean that this is a time for outsiders, said Mary Salter, vice president of current programs and production for the Comedy Central network. "With the rise of Perot, you saw that the country was open for something from the outside. People are looking for alternatives."

About the Republican National Convention, which opens tomorrow in Houston, Ms. Salter said her team is optimistic, convinced that the delegates want to be perceived as having senses of humor.

Although some comics are licensed fools, particularly those who have the sanction of celebrity, other social commentators, the rap artists, have clearly not been "all licensed." Perhaps they never set out to be. And it's doubtful that any of them are eager to cavort with the king. But they are eager to challenge the king. Their words are listened to. No physical shtick, no MTV cinematography keeps the word from coming through loud and clear. And, as has been seen this summer in the cases of Sister Souljah and Ice-T, the words have been taken seriously. To some they are cutting and on the money, to others, fearsome and divisive.

"Race is a tricky one," Ms. Salter said. "The whole point is it should be talked about. And we should talk about it, because when you can laugh about something together, you can talk about it."

So what is more dangerous: the possibility of giving offense or the refusal to look and to see? Eddie Murphy has done an impression of Jesse Jackson in which the mimicry is technically brilliant. As Mr. Jackson, he stops speaking and continues his thought in a soul tune with a three-man backup group. Would a white comic get away with combining these two motifs -- a powerful black political figure and Motown? Or would this be considered racial stereotyping? Would some consider Mr. Murphy himself to have crossed over the line of what is acceptable? Or is it rather that parts of our society are considered sacred until the fool shows us the upside-down view?

What if the President had an impressionist on staff who held him accountable? The political figure performs himself or herself every day, and that performance grows and changes like actors' performances grow and change the more they learn about the text, the circumstances and the audience.

If there were a house mimic -- an all-licensed Fool for 1992 -- would the individual necessarily be of the same race, gender and political sensibility as the President? Could that even be, if the person were meant, as the Roman satirists were, to keep the emperor in check?

Who would be the perfect Fool for our time? A time in which we are divided, challenged, in some quarters hushed, in others licensed. Who could speak to all our fragments, for all our fragments, while revealing to those in power their own denials, without the risk of metaphoric execution? Before we even answer that question we must ask: Does our society breed the kinds of fools who take the risks to show us more than we can see?