

Comedic Nightmare

# Popular Culture

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# Comedic Nightmare

*The Trump Effect on American Comedy*

*By*

Marcel Danesi



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# Preface

Without laughter life on our planet would be intolerable.

STEVE ALLEN (1921–2000)



The controversial 45th American president, Donald J. Trump, has had a considerable impact on American politics and society. His political impact has been examined, hotly debated, and discussed abundantly and exhaustingly across academia and society, but few works have looked in any detail at how Trump affected the comedic mood in America during his presidential tenure—a brief period in American history that nonetheless drastically altered America and many of its traditions. His presidency turned comedy into political weaponry, as comedians on the liberal side of the political spectrum devoted their efforts to ridiculing Trump’s buffoonish persona on a daily basis, while on the conservative side, a Trump-supportive cadre of comedians mocked those who opposed Trump. Unprecedentedly, Trump himself emerged as an ersatz comedian, performing his dark, caustic, Jonathan-Swift-like comical routines with consummate skill at his myriad rallies. If comedy is a pulse for a country, then it is legitimate to ask if that pulse is still beating, despite the fact that Trump lost the reelection in 2020. This book will address this question, by looking at how Trump’s presidency interrupted the historical flow of American comedic traditions, and how it spread a dark mood throughout American society.

The term *black humor* was coined by the French essayist André Breton in his 1940 book, *Anthology of Black Humor*—a term he devised after studying the works of Jonathan Swift. He defined it as a type of humor that arises from a blend of cynicism and skepticism—a characterization that can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s 1928 article “Humor,” wherein he defines *black comedy* as the result of the ego refusing “to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world, and that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” (Freud 1928: 2). Black comedy can be seen to be a genre of a broader category that can be called *dark comedy*—a type of comedy that stifles hearty laughter evoking sinister chuckles instead. Dark comedy became dominant during Trump’s presidency, mirroring America’s mood through humor. It was, in a way, a survival-enhancing comedy designed to counteract the “provocations of reality” that Trump brought about. Freud suggested, in fact, that such comedy arose to allow people to laugh at situations that would otherwise lead them to despair—as captured by the German word *Galgenhumor* (“gallows

humor”). Before Trump, dark humor was never an intrinsic part of American comedy, appearing only sporadically in the stand-up routines of a Lenny Bruce or a Dick Gregory. But it spread broadly as a kind of comedic nervous tic right after his election on late-night television comedy, in cartoon caricatures, in sitcoms, and in social media memes.

A related question that will be addressed in this book is the following one: Was the anti-Trump comedy effective in getting him to lose the reelection in 2020? The problem with using comedy against Trump was that he himself was a consummate entertainer, who used his own style of dark humor to lambaste opponents—in effect, he fought comedy with comedy rather successfully. Trump was, overall, a masterful *Commedia dell’arte* personage—a style of comedy which introduced dark comedy to Europe, with its profane, biting, cynical satire of society. Trump used virtually the exact same kind of outrageous style to great effect, evoking uproarious reactions from his audiences. He was a combination of several *Commedia* characters—Pagliaccio, the clown, Pantalone, the greedy grouch, Brighella the money-grubbing womanizer, and the rascal Pulcinella, who concocted contemptible schemes to satisfy his desires. Additionally, Trump became the impresario of his own P. T. Barnum-style political circus, taking his own “greatest show on earth” from rally to rally, where his myriad fans waited for him with enthusiastic anticipation. All this made him seemingly impervious to the comedic weapons used against him. But in the end maybe these did have an effect, as will be discussed here as well.

This book consists of five parts aiming to deconstruct how Trump affected the American psyche by altering American comedy drastically. I wish to thank Jason Prevost of Brill publishers for encouraging me to write this book. I dedicate it to my late father, who was an amateur comedian, who wanted to make Italian immigrants in the city of Toronto in the 1950s and 1960s laugh at themselves so that they could cope with the reality of post-war immigration. In retrospect, there is little doubt in my mind that his humor was as much therapy as it was entertainment. I came to realize years later that without such laughter our daily lives would be truly unbearable. To cite the great comedian Will Rogers (in Peters 1979: 285): “We are here just for a spell and then pass on. So get a few laughs and do the best you can.”

*Marcel Danesi*

University of Toronto, 2022