
Intertextuality and Understanding Dave Chappelle's Comedy

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In an American culture where individual achievements and a maverick approach are praised, people tend to forget that “nothing is new under the sun” and that their ideas and thought processes are molded by their everyday experiences in their particular environment. The reality (and beauty) of authorship is that, in the words of James Porter, “the creative mind is the creative borrower” (110).

Intertextuality, however, becomes controversial when it comes to defining *sole authorship*. Any text can be praised as creative (assuming it hasn't been copied from any source word for word), but not because it's something never before seen. Rather, sole authorship is the innovative arrangement of pre-existing ideas recognized by an audience who understands and interprets the work of the author as “original,” based on their own representations. In other words, it's up to the individual to determine whether the text is original or plagiarized. If it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it isn't necessarily a duck. Since each individual interprets a text differently from everyone else, there can really be no universally accepted way of differentiating sole authorship from plagiarism. In this paper I'll discuss how an author uses “creativity through borrowing” through a sketch comedy clip from *Chappelle's Show* and how an audience uses intertextuality to get something out of the text. In doing this, I'll explain why every work, unless blatantly copied word for word, has a sole author.

Measuring the extent to which a comedian's work is original is different from measuring the originality of the work of a scientist or a moviemaker. What a comedian considers original is different from what a novelist considers original because they belong in their own respective discourse communities. According to James Porter, a discourse community is “a group of individuals bound by common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (112-3). Each discourse community looks at a text and decides how original it is based on the values, rules, and regulations of that particular discourse community. Some communities are very strict and discourage their constituents from using other people's work in support of their books, research, or films. Other communities, such as that of comedians, give their constituents more freedom to use the words, stories, and histories of other people in order to give the audience what they want; in the case of comedy, the audience wants to laugh. If the audience laughs, the comedian gets all the credit and rises to fame.

Dave Chappelle is a gifted comedian (who obviously belongs in the comedy discourse community) known for putting a spin on serious issues to make his audience laugh, which is something he does very well in his sketch comedy program, *Chappelle's Show*. He took advantage of

the liberating freedom offered by the comedy discourse community to use intertextuality in his routine. Race, politics, and sex were not taboo for Chappelle. Neither was indecency.

Dave Chappelle also creates his act from borrowing ideas from other comedians, like Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. Richard Pryor's commentary on race in America in his stand-up and movie performances revolutionized the comedy landscape in a time when racial tensions were very high. Eddie Murphy, then, talked about the same issues as Pryor, but created his own style by incorporating crude humor and excessive bodily motion.

Then here comes Dave Chappelle, who added intellectual and political commentary to his style. These comedians were famous for their views on race in America, using extremely strong language and excessive body motion in their acts. So when Chappelle uses strong language and jumps up and down a lot in his act, some people can make the case that Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy supplied some material for his act and should also be given some credit. I'm sure Dave Chappelle would agree with these people, since Pryor and Murphy have been very inspirational for many of his acts. But what many people fail to recognize behind the vulgar language and wacky nature of Chappelle is the motivation for his sketches. He wants his audience to go beyond surface-level thinking and to

understand his political and social messages using comedy. This intellectual element is what distinguishes Chappelle from Pryor and Murphy, and makes him the sole author of his acts. One of Chappelle's notorious acts was a sketch titled "Black Bush," and the motivation for this sketch, I believe, is what proves Chappelle's originality.

"Black Bush" is a perfect example of a spin of an issue. In this seven-minute sketch, Chappelle plays the part of President George W. Bush portrayed as a negatively stereotypical representation of an African-American. Chappelle combined the politics of George W. Bush with the comedic styles of Murphy and Pryor to come up with Black Bush. In other words, Black Bush was based on multiple personalities, but was *created* by Dave Chappelle.

In one scene, while taking questions in a press conference regarding the U.N.'s reluctance to support an American invasion of Iraq, Black Bush responds by poking fun at the lack of military power the U.N. has and tells them to "Shut the (expletive) up!" Chappelle connects geopolitics and crude humor to make his point that the real President Bush went to war with Iraq while ignoring global concern. Knowing that many in his audience believed the U.S. acted arrogantly, and assuming his audience knew colorful language normally characterizes a negatively stereotypical black person, Chappelle hoped his audience would combine those two factors and laugh.

Proving Chappelle's originality here requires that I identify the rhetorical context for this scene. Christina Haas and Linda Flower explain that constructing the rhetorical context of a text enables people to understand it better (150). It's important to see what rhetorical context was in the mind of the viewer that made him or her laugh once they heard Black Bush's F-bomb. Chappelle had a part in constructing the rhetorical context by supplying the eccentric character of Black Bush and outlining the real President Bush's policies. But the viewer also helped create it by being aware of the details of the Iraq War, either by watching the news or reading about the war from some other source. But who's responsible for making the viewer laugh? Chappelle "lit the firework," in a sense, by providing his comedic portrayal of President Bush and hoping the viewer would make the humorous connection between the Black Bush sketch and his or her knowledge of the war. Chappelle may have relied on the rhetorical context in the mind of the viewer to understand Black Bush, but Chappelle can pat himself on the back for doing his job: making people laugh.

In another part of the sketch, a journalist asks Black Bush which countries are supporting America's invasion of Iraq. Black Bush responds, "England. Japan is sending Playstations. Stankonia said they're willing to drop bombs over Baghdad. Africa Bambaataa and the Zulu nation...." Of course, Japan sending Playstations doesn't really constitute a contribution to a war effort. *Stankonia* is a rap album by OutKast and "Bombs over Baghdad (B.O.B)" is a famous song on the album. Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation is a hip-hop group, not a real country. This, again, alludes to the perception that very few countries supported the president in his decision to invade Iraq.

This scene was funny because Black Bush was just giving ridiculous answers to a question he can't answer with facts. This is where the authorship of Chappelle is validated. I assume most people who watch *Chappelle's Show* know very much about hip-hop (like Black Bush does), and are aware of who Outkast and Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation are. It wouldn't surprise the audience that Black Bush would name *Stankonia* or the Zulu Nation as countries that support the war in Iraq. In fact, they find it humorous how Black Bush cleverly used those terms in a different context to make the point that, in reality, not many nations really supported America's decision to invade Iraq. Now, whenever the audience hears the words *Stankonia* or Zulu Nation, they will associate them with Chappelle's sketch and chuckle a little. Thanks to the work of Dave Chappelle, the audience added new ideas and representations to the meaning of *Stankonia* and Zulu Nation so that whenever they think about those terms, they'll laugh.

The rhetorical situation can also support my claim that the sole author of Black Bush is Dave Chappelle. Keith Grant-Davie defines the rhetorical situation as "a situation where a speaker or a writer sees the need to change reality and sees that the change may be effected through rhetorical discourse." The rhetorical situation consists of the exigence (the reason for the discourse), the audience (the people addressed in the discourse), and the constraints (other factors that affect the discourse) (128).

A comedian always finds a way to combine multiple rhetorical situations for material. The goal is to talk about one thing in a different context, and still give the audience a chance to understand the comedian's humor. *Chappelle's Show* is entirely based on two rhetorical situations. They include the political commentary (Bush administration) and social commentary (race in America) of Dave Chappelle. So the Black Bush segment follows the same outline. The exigence of the scene where Black Bush lists countries that support the war is to emphasize the absurdity of President Bush's foreign policy in a humorous manner. Chappelle knows his audience is familiar with Bush's policies and that most of them disagree with these policies. He also understands that a large portion of his audience is either African-American or can relate to Black culture in some way.

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So to emphasize his point even more, he adds a "positive constraint" that works for Chappelle's objective: hip-hop terms (135). Most of Chappelle's audience is aware of the hip-hop culture. Otherwise, his show would not have been so successful. If the audience was not familiar with *Stankonia* or the Zulu nation, Chappelle would not have been able to deliver his anti-Bush message effectively and, thus, make the people laugh. Since he was able to complete this objective, it means he successfully considered the many vital factors of the rhetorical situation to deliver his message in an original manner.

The climactic moment of the sketch is when Black Bush (overwhelmed with tough questions regarding the war) goes on a frantic rant before abruptly ending by accidentally revealing his hidden motive for going to war in the first place: he's "Try'na get that oil!" He immediately clears his throat, coughs, and looks around to see if anyone noticed what he just said. Oil, of course, was one of the many

controversies attached to the Iraq War during Bush's presidency. Many believed he risked the lives of American soldiers to gain control of Iraqi oilfields. The Bush administration denied these allegations by saying their real justification for war was to oust Saddam Hussein and destroy his weapons of mass destruction, though there was no evidence that those weapons really existed.

For the audience to understand Chappelle's motivation for Black Bush's mental lapse, Chappelle ingeniously had to find a way to combine these complex issues (war, oil, Saddam Hussein, dishonesty of government officials, etc.) to make his audience laugh while also expressing his opinion of the real justification for war. The build-up before the "oil" remark gave the audience no reason to expect that Black Bush was actually going to reveal his real motive for going to war. But since he did reveal his secret, it caught the audience off-guard. This was a very effective way to catch the audience's attention and get them to listen to his commentary on the war. So Chappelle's added element of surprise plus his skillful combination of complex social issues all resulted in the funny and climactic ending of the sketch.

The hard labor, the in-depth thinking, and the organization of many ideas that goes into getting people to understand a text may seem like too much for anyone to accomplish. This is why I give Dave Chappelle his due credit for Black Bush, and directors for their films, and artists for their portraits or sculptures. They may not have supplied all of the material for their works, but the impact their works have on people and various landscapes calls for these geniuses to be known as sole authors.

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