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Guided by the Fool at the Desk

Generic Practices In Late-Night Comedy Talk Shows

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Proxies, Stand-ins, and Warm-ups, a virtual symposium (April 27, 2022)

Guided by the Fool at the Desk: Generic Practices In Late-Night Comedy Talk Shows

Across the world, late-night comedy talk shows bear a striking resemblance originating from *The Tonight Show* (NBC, 1954–). Despite this, one of its main visual cues, the desk, gains less attention than the more serious news desk (cf. Selby & Cowdery, 1995). While desks often symbolize modern era seriousness, these desks are the center of a ritual late-night jest with that seriousness.

Considering studio sets as meaningful communicative spaces (Bolin 2009), this presentation explores late-night desks as proxies (Mulvin 2021). Related to production and reproduction of American-style late-night – a highly formatted cultural form (Mittell 2004); discourse on the relationship between set design and comedy work is in focus. The ways hosts, producers, writers, and journalists construct the desk's importance is part of a circular generic discourse.

Two “desk events” function as cases: Seth Meyers adding desk-time in 2015 (*Late Night*, NBC, 1982-); and Conan O'Brien removing it and the desk entirely (*Conan*, TBS, 2010-2021). Discursive constructions of desks' practical and symbolic meaning reveal how they are used, enjoyed, and valued. Alongside these events, “desk pieces” are highlighted. Here, hosts' joke from behind the desk. *Conan*-writer Levin describes them as simple yet “deceivingly hard to crack. [They] must be generic enough to accommodate all kinds of jokes, familiar enough to require very little setup, and fresh enough that [they haven't] already been attempted in more than a half century” (Sacks, 2014:64f). This exemplifies a strong theme: comedy production hardships, related to production demands. Another theme is tradition: reverence to predecessors. Tradition then becomes related back to business-motivated risk-avoidance.

In a sense, late-night desks like news desks, are collecting places: nodes in an information network (Latour 1987). Desk piece practices signify the desk as the base of operations. From here, hosts address off-camera producers and cameramen; communicating that they are in command.

According to Fox, comedians embody “folly itself as a uniquely and universally human way of adapting to the social world” (2011:47), which lets us get “in touch with our own knowledge and experience of folly” in the world (ibid.). This emphasizes the amalgam of desk-host as cultural and affective node, relating to mass entertainment, where a “we” is perpetually created through ritual. This node seems to provide everyone involved – producers, performers, management and engaged audiences – a sense of security, stability and sometimes, stifling conservatism. Yet the authority bestowed to this amalgamation is increasingly questioned in an age when power and especially male authority is an important theme in and around comedy.

Bio

Joanna Doona is associate senior lecturer and PhD in media and communication studies at Lund University, Sweden. Her research mainly concerns the intersection of the serious and the silly, through studies of popular and political culture and engagement. Her recent projects investigate young adult audiences of public service election satire, as well as the role of humor and comedy in civic interaction online, specifically in relation to issues of trust, crisis and social resilience. Doona has published several book chapters and journal articles in publications such as *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Her forthcoming book *Political Laughter* (“Politiska skratt”, 2022, Studentlitteratur) concerns news satire engagement among young Swedish adults.