

“Approaching the Visual Rhetoric of Political Parody Online”

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Handout

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*Argument:* The visual rhetoric of parody is, for perhaps the first time, under scrutiny as public figures scramble to define what may – or more specifically, what may not – constitute parody on the World Wide Web. A number of political sites define themselves (frequently by written disclaimer) as parodic in nature; however, methods by which we can analyze such claims are sorely lacking, and indeed necessary. To understand parody in the digital age, we must be able to apprehend its presence in textual, auditory, and visual elements, individual and convergent.

*Primary Source for Analysis:* The ambient visual elements (background images, buttons, banners, etc) and the photographic elements of the Whitehouse.org website.

*Individual visual source URLs:* Thanks to John Wooden at Chickenhead Productions for permission to use these images.

1. Banner of whitehouse.org, “Officious Website of President George W. Bush”  
< <http://www.whitehouse.org/images/whtxt.gif>>
2. Presidential seal: Vulture replaces eagle. < <http://www.whitehouse.org/images/hseal.gif>>
3. Vice President Cheney – foreground of flag-draped coffins –  
< <http://www.whitehouse.org/news/2005/images/dickdick.jpg>>
4. President Bush at Arlington – domestic context  
< <http://www.whitehouse.org/news/2005/images/2kdead.jpg>>
5. President Bush in Mongolia – foreign context  
< <http://www.whitehouse.org/news/2005/images/mongolia.jpg>>

*Points to consider when analyzing visuals.*

- Standard notions of web design dictate that ambient graphics (banners, logos, colors) be consistent across the site; therefore, the color choice, logo placement (and content choice), and layout must be addressed.
- In order to be parodic, to contribute to the effect of the site as parody, the photographs must provide recurring depictions of culturally perceived features of the participants within the photographs
- The actor’s position within the photograph, relative to both viewer and locative circumstance, is a strong social indicator of the actor’s relationship to the viewer.

- Remember: digital images are under the complete control of the rhetor, who dictates color, shading, intensity, and content down to the pixel: photographs, once indexical and iconic, are no longer so.

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