

# CHRIS ROCK: EPIDEICTIC RHETOR

David Elder  
Northwestern College

Jeans and a t-shirt. That is what we used to see Chris Rock wearing during his performances. But now, after a few years of hype and his own show on HBO, Rock comes exploding onto the stage wearing a flashy, expensive, leather suit. His physical presence is the same, small and unassuming with a goofy grin, still yellin' at the world with a high-pitched nasally voice, but his mouth has grown larger, utilizing the freedom that comes with fame. Rock was never one to back down from racially and socially sensitive issues, but after making millions, he now says what's really on his mind.

The crowd responds appropriately as it should when a man of Rock's reputation and biting comedic genius steps up to the mic: with rowdy, uproarious, deserved applause. During one of his most recent comedy tours, *Bigger & Blacker*, Rock launched into what he's best known for: racially charged satire. He isn't more than one second into his routine when he says, "White people sittin' up top tonight," followed by loud applause and laughter from the floor section of the auditorium. What Rock's audience might not know is that they are taking part in epideictic rhetorical discourse. However, recognizing Chris Rock as an epideictic rhetor establishes epideictic's rhetorical value in everyday discourse. Rock uses his comedy to challenge and reaffirm social values, just as an epideictic rhetor should.

## Rethinking Epideictic Rhetoric as Everyday Discourse

Of the three "species" of Aristotelian rhetoric—judicial, deliberative, and epideictic—the first two are generally thought to be more valuable and pervasive in society. Aristotle's third rhetorical category, epideictic, lurks in the background, a hidden brother. Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard writes, "Aristotle himself cannot be faulted for this, for he could not have envisioned the uses of discourse that would develop over the last 2400 years" (790). However, in spite of the growth of this specimen of rhetoric into an expansive category, many modern rhetoricians still want to push it into its original place: an unwarranted box of formal occasions. In *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, James Herrick defines epideictic as "the kind of speaking characteristic of public ceremonies such as funeral or events commemorating war heroes" (277). That definition works when describing the type of epideictic Aristotle may have experienced, but thinking of epideictic in that way restricts how we see its function today. To the trained eye, epideictic is the most pervasive kind of rhetoric in American society.

In epideictic rhetoric, the speaker speaks; the audience listens and then goes home. But the audience goes home *with* something; they leave with their collective values reinforced: "The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement" (Perelman 51). The speaker gets an opportunity to uphold communal values without being particularly challenged.

While this rhetoric does have the unique ability to reinforce collective values, a more recent view of epideictic holds that it can go beyond advocacy and move people to action. Sheard argues that epideictic is misunderstood if it is thought of as merely upholding collective values. She argues that historically, “epideictic has been seen as a rhetoric of identification and conformity whose function is to confirm and promote adherence to the commonly held values of a community” (767). Sheard wants to “recast epideictic as, in sum, a rhetorical gesture that moves its audience toward a process of critical reflection that goes beyond evaluation toward envisioning and *actualizing* alternative realities, possible worlds” (787, emphasis in original).

To “move an audience toward actualizing possible worlds” requires a relationship between the speaker and the audience. Epideictic has no definite dialectic or argumentation with which to build that relationship: “Dialectic is the art of logical argument on general issues of a political or ethical nature; practiced as an exercise for students of philosophy in the form of question-and-answer dialogue” (Kennedy 314). Aristotle calls rhetoric “the counterpart of Dialectic” (151), so how can we justify epideictic as rhetoric if no explicit discussion between speaker and audience takes place? Aristotle answers this question for us through his use of enthymeme. Epideictic could not function as a form of rhetoric without the enthymeme because without the audience making connections with the speaker in that way, there would be no dialectic in an epideictic speech.

Although it is also difficult to define (Aristotle attempted to in at least twenty pages of *On Rhetoric*), an enthymeme is a “rhetorical syllogism” (40). In an enthymeme, “a premise may be omitted if it will be easily assumed by the audience” (Kennedy 315). In other words, an enthymeme is a premise to the speaker’s argument supplied by the audience. An enthymeme is easier to create when most people in the audience share the same background as the speaker. Much of the audience at a Rock show consists of African American people. Because Rock is also African American, he is able to automatically establish his ethos with the audience and in turn makes it easy to craft enthymemes.

### **Modern Thoughts on Training the Rhetor**

It may be difficult to accept someone such as Chris Rock as a master rhetor. Looking at him as a rhetor goes against everything our learned culture has taught us a rhetor should be. David Fleming illustrates the type of training needed to become a rhetor: “In the past, this is what rhetoric was: three to four years of intense study and practice, sometime between the ages of (about) fifteen to twenty, organized to develop the discursive competencies and sensibilities needed for effective and responsible participation in public life” (173). Fleming goes on to say that he thinks such an education should be brought back to train rhetors in the modern setting. Fleming believes that knowing the “theoretical vocabulary” is one of the essential keys to becoming a true rhetor, for it allows the rhetor “to isolate, analyze, and manage communication situations, goals, resources, acts, and norms” (183). The rhetor would also need training in the actual practice of speaking. Along with being formally trained, for Fleming, a rhetor is someone “who is conceived first and foremost as a free and equal member of a self-governing community” (184). The training would continue on for a lifetime, since learning how to be a functioning member of society never truly ends.

Rock, contrarily, dropped out of high school. He had no formal education in rhetoric, and yet he uses it just as well as anyone with rhetorical training. He may not know any of the specialized, aca-

demic terms used in this essay, he did not spend three to four years specifically training in rhetoric, and his teachers did not have Ph.D.s in rhetorical studies. Yet, Rock's use of epideictic is masterful.

### **Unifying the Audience through Epideictic Humor**

Comedy is nothing more than delivering a short speech that persuades someone to a response—laughter. Rock's use of humor fits both the traditional definition and Sheard's definition of epideictic rhetoric. According to John Meyer, humor "has the capacity both to unify and divide social groups. For humor that differentiates, the violation is the primary focus of the narrative. Humor that unifies, conversely, stresses the normal aspect of the situation and views the violation as a nonthreatening exception to the norm" ("Humor in Member Narratives" 190). This explanation of two uses of humor helps us identify just how Rock's comedy fits into epideictic. When Rock is unifying his audience, he is participating in the traditional epideictic of affirming the values of a group.

For humor to unify a group, the speaker needs to connect to the entire audience. In "The Persuasive Force of Humor: Cicero's Defense of Caelius," Michael Volpe describes how Cicero used humor to win over a jury and a courtroom audience: "Cicero molded his strategy to fit exactly the unique circumstances of the trial setting" (313). According to Volpe, Cicero used humor as a rhetorical device in the trial. The humor didn't have much to do with the actual trial, but it did help him get the jurors on his side. The trial took place during a Roman holiday, and Cicero "wanted to entertain the jurors who were foregoing their holiday in order to hear the case" and to "undermine [the prosecutor's] case by minimizing their role in the trial" (313). Cicero knew that in order to win the trial, the audience had to like and trust him. He succeeded in getting the jury on his side by unifying them through the medium of humor.

Rock also understands the importance of connecting to an audience. He establishes rapport with audiences very quickly in every stand-up act he performs. In the *Bigger & Blacker* routine, he starts with a simple, "Wassup New York! Is Brooklyn in the house? Well I'm from Brooklyn!" On his *Roll With the New* comedy tour, he opens by saying, "Wassup, Washington D.C. Chocolate City. That's right, home of the Million Man March. With all the positive black leaders there." Even in his first stand-up special, *Born Suspect*, he begins with an audience warmer: "Wassup! This is the best part of the South. It's the only part the South you can go where no one says 'Man, I wish you could take me back to New York with ya.'"

In each of these acts, Rock's opening gets the local audience to feel at ease with him, to connect to him. He finds what almost everyone in the audience has in common—location. The opening lines are usually brief, but they make the audience feel special. Rock, a huge celebrity, singled their city out for attention and even changed the act a little, tiny, miniscule bit, just for them. In those first few seconds he eases and connects with the crowd, preparing them for the uproarious laughter yet to come.

### **Humor as Epideictic**

Using the model of Aristotle's "praise and blame" as a definition for epideictic, it is easy to see how Rock and his stand-up embody everything that is epideictic. Aristotle calls the "honorable and shameful" the "reference points of praise and blame" (*On Rhetoric* 79.) Finding things that are honorable or shameful are the foundation for discovering topics for epideictic speeches. This is no prob-

lem for comedy, for, through the tool of amplification, even the least honorable or shameful things can be praised or blamed to produce a comedic effect. Rock's comedy is edgy, political, and an instrument for change, thus fitting comfortably in Aristotle's model of praise and blame and Sheard's model of epideictic as a means to challenge the values of a group.

Rock's stand-up comedy uses epideictic humor as a way to challenge societal and cultural values using either praise or blame. Occasionally, he uses praise to effect change. For example, by paying tribute to good fathers for providing for the family, Rock hopes that more fathers will take care of their kids (*Bigger & Blacker*).

Although Rock often skimps on the praise part, he knows how to blame like it's nobody's business. Rock is able to accomplish much more than just laughter because he is able to get an audience to scrutinize what they value. Rock takes the role of comedian very seriously, tackling issues that have bearing on many peoples' lives—race, gender, sex, and politics. With Rock, the blame is often racial, but he is an interesting case because he blames his race as often as others', even calling "old black men" the most racist people (*Bigger & Blacker*). He blames parents for school shootings, hoping that parents will change and spend more time with their kids (*Bigger and Blacker*); he blames current rap artists for making it hard to defend rap music on an intellectual level, hoping that rap artists will rap more intellectually (*Never Scared*).

Divisive humor is the best example of humor as epideictic. Meyer says that humor "can divide through the enforcement and differentiation functions with derision and put-downs of others pointing to incongruities in what they say or do" ("Humor as a Double-Edged Sword" 326). Again, Rock does an excellent job of this. His humor often works as a divisive agent when discussing issues of race or class by dividing existing social groups into even smaller ones. This is evident throughout his *Roll With the New* routine. When joking about death row inmates, Rock distinguishes between Caucasians and African Americans. When joking about African Americans, he distinguishes between "black people and niggers." When joking about the verdict in the O.J. Simpson case, he distinguishes between Caucasian and African American responses by saying, "Black people too happy, white people too mad." During that sketch, he also distinguishes between celebrities and the general public: "That shit wasn't about race, that shit was about fame. Because if O.J. wasn't famous, he'd be in jail right now. If O.J. drove a bus, he wouldn't even be O.J.; he'd be Orenthal the bus driving murderer." He often distinguishes between rich and poor, and his argument is embodied in his sketch about prison, saying, "compared to an old project, a new prison ain't bad!" And that argument even has the undertones of distinguishing between blacks and whites.

Rock even divides the audience itself. He breaks the group into women and men when he talks about commitment: "Women always ready to settle down. Woman go on four good dates, she go like, 'Why are we bullshittin? What are you waitin for?' Men, never ready to settle down. Men don't settle down, we surrender" (*Roll with the New*). This example of divisive humor also shows how Rock doesn't always differentiate between races. He is connecting with men and women of all races when talking about men and women. This is a perfect example of Rock breaking down racial barriers by connecting with every member of the audience, regardless of race. The audience is divided into unified groups, which shows that some beliefs can be reinforced and some challenged by different groups in the audience.

Using humor as a tool to make distinctions between groups, Rock reinforces or challenges values, which can differ from audience member to audience member. Rock knows that a group of middle class whites won't be able to connect with him if he talks about the projects; they won't be able to fully understand or appreciate the difference between "black people and niggers." He knows that his mostly black audience will connect with his jokes, so he throws in more that will connect with the black community. And yet, he manages to keep a strong white audience, too. Even though some of his jokes will fail with white audience members, many of his jokes are universally appealing. An audience member may not associate with a certain joke, but that only challenges the audience member to learn more about a different set of cultural values to the point where that audience member will understand the joke more fully.

Through epideictic humor, Rock envisions a society where race, class, and gender are less divisive, even though that would put him out of a job. Sheard sees epideictic as "a rhetorical gesture that moves its audience toward a process of critical reflection that goes beyond evaluation toward envisioning and actualizing alternative realities" (787). Rock uses his epideictic comedy in the same way. He engages his audience by blaming the world as it is—outlining problems of race and politics and speaking out against other social injustices of our society. This is illustrated perfectly by a section of his newest stand-up routine, *Never Scared*. He says, "There are no wealthy black, or brown, people in this country. We got some rich ones, but we got no fuckin' wealth. People go, 'what's the difference?' Here's the difference: Shaq is rich. The white man that signs his check, is wealthy" (Rock, *Never Scared*). He got a big laugh out of the audience with those few sentences, but the section is one of divisiveness and change. Rock sees a problem in America regarding race and money. He uses his comedy to try and raise awareness and instigate change, saying later in that segment, "wealth can uplift communities from poverty."

### **Encompassing Epideictic**

In the United States, we can easily see how epideictic humor has infiltrated every aspect of our society. The president delivers jokes along with his speeches, commercials are funny, even pastors in our churches use humor to start sermons. Everyone knows that humor can be used to help bring together a group. But many people don't realize that when they tell a joke, they reinforce or challenge the collective values of our society. Through the medium of comedy, epideictic infiltrates speeches that extend far beyond its historic definition and far beyond stand-up comedy. It is our job as rhetoricians to seek out epideictic and rescue it from the realm of formal occasions into which it has been banished.

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