

Laughter with Horror: Sarah Cooper's Absurdist Deconstructions of Donald Trump

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Abstract

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” is often used to refer derogatorily to political rhetoric. However, rhetorical theorists, using Erving Goffman’s sociological observations of human communication as a performance, have found fruitful ways to discuss and analyze political rhetoric as theatre. This essay looks at the 2020 TikTok and YouTube videos of Sarah Cooper’s lip-sync performances of Donald Trump as a form of Absurdist theatre, examining the ways that Cooper chooses to embody Trump’s performances in order to highlight the meaninglessness and absurdity of Trump’s words. By delivering Trump’s precise words on a stage devoid of any front-stage trappings of authority, supporting cast, or indeed the physical form of Donald Trump himself, Cooper effectively creates an Absurdist theatre text that parodies the original.

Keywords

Sarah Cooper, Donald Trump, Theater of the Absurd, Erving Goffman, Dramaturgical analysis

In April 2020, Sarah Cooper was frustrated. The comedian was stuck inside on a COVID-19 lockdown, unable to do standup, and watching her career stall out. After watching in fascinated horror as President Donald Trump asked the doctors of the coronavirus task force to look into whether injecting people with bleach or irradiating them with ultraviolet light would help against the virus, Cooper had an idea for a funny video to post on the video-sharing app Tik Tok. Cooper, who had already written two humorous books about the politics of office communication, *100 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings* and *How to Be Successful Without Hurting Men’s Feelings*, recognized in Trump exactly the kind of posturing, condescending boss that she was used to mocking. “I thought it would be interesting to see what it was like to be this person who has absolutely no substance, but still gets respect and is seen as credible,” she remembers (McCluskey, 2020).

The first video in what would become a famous series was called “How to medical.” In it, Cooper lip syncs her way through fifty seconds of that press conference, playing both Trump and, in cutaway reaction shots, the confused and horrified doctors. She’s wearing a navy-blue suit, but nothing about the setting attempts in any way to mimic the press conference: we can see prints hanging on her walls, a pet bed perched on a couch behind her. “Supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or uh... in some other way,” she mugs to Trump’s distinctive voice, miming sticking light bulbs in her mouth, her ears, and finally her rear end.

“How to medical” went massively viral, racking up millions of likes within weeks. It became the first of a series of about thirty videos, each of them a surreal or jarring Trump moment turned into a brief lip-sync act by Cooper. To a nation and even a world largely cooped up in their houses and apartments, trapped and listening to Donald Trump in morbid fascination, Cooper’s videos captured some of the zeitgeist of the moment: absurd, sardonic, and a bit panicky. By October, she had scored her own Netflix special, *Everything’s Fine*, and become something of a household name.

This paper is a look at Cooper’s “How to President” videos through the lens of dramaturgical theory, with a specific eye to Cooper’s own deconstruction of the spectacle of Donald Trump and her transformation of his rhetoric into a form of the theatre of the absurd.

Erving Goffman and Dramaturgical Theory

In sociologist Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in the United States in 1959, Goffman used the theatre as the organizing principle to understand human interaction. Using “theatre” as not merely a metaphor, Goffman argued that public behavior in a society is best understood as, indeed,

performance. In his book, he discussed the theatre of everyday life: in living rooms, hospitals, offices and department stores, as people perform roles in order to save each other face, gain societal power, and/or keep social life running smoothly. His analyses of the behaviors of con men, Shetland islanders, servants and waitresses were concise and penetrating looks at the way society gives people roles to play, the lengths to which people will go to play them correctly, and the intense discomfort people feel when the performative nature of these roles is revealed through errors or slips of the curtain between “front” and “backstage” behavior. People caught on live mics or on accidentally-left-on cameras behaving inappropriately for their roles, for example, cause intense social anxiety not just in the guilty party, but in the observers of the breach. Laughter is one way of dealing with that anxiety.

Goffman only rarely touched on applying dramaturgical theory to politics, as his focus was much more on the types of social theatre that people deal with on an everyday basis. However, there is naturally a long history of treating politics as theatre. Most superficially, “politics as theatre” is often used as a dismissive phrase, implying that it is an inferior way of talking about politics. This is a criticism that re-emerges every four years like clockwork in American media coverage to disparage lazy writing, as Derek Thompson did in 2015, at the beginning of the campaign that would lead to the Trump presidency: “A great deal of political writing these days is indistinguishable from theatre criticism: Its chief concerns are storyline, costumes, and the quality of public performances” (Thompson, 2015). However, a more serious use of the idea of “politics as theatre,” one which embraces Goffman’s assumption that all public behavior is performance, “offers simple strategies to decode the range of meanings found behind the everyday symbols, rituals, gestures and performances that make up all human interaction, including political interaction” (Chou & Ondaatje, 2017).

Many scholarly works have been published on the dramaturgical aspects of politics (cf. Merelman, 1969; Borreca, 1993; Bealing et al., 1996; Manning, 1996; Brown, 2005; Hendricks et al., 2016). Sarah Cooper’s “How to President” videos amount to a casual dramaturgical analysis of President Trump’s rhetoric, specifically by re-casting the pomp and ceremony of presidential rhetoric into a new genre, that of the theatre of the absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd

The term “Theatre of the Absurd” refers to a style of post-World War II theatre which focuses on the meaninglessness and chaos of existence, and the alienation of human beings within it. Martin Esslin, in the essay that introduced the term, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” refers to the genre as “confront[ing] their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention” (1960, 3). The specific word “absurd” is taken from the English translation of Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), and means not so much the common English meaning of “ridiculous” as the feeling that the world is irrational and devoid of significance. Strikingly, Camus himself describes the sense of the absurd in dramaturgical terms:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, **the actor and his setting**, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (6, emphasis mine).

The works of Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Tom Stoppard, and Samuel Beckett are some of the most well-known plays of the genre, with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* perhaps the most famous example.

There is no monolithic definition of Absurdist theatre. Some of the common aspects include bare, minimalistic sets, circular narratives with little to no plot, and language that is by turns naturalistic and nonsensical as communication fails the characters, for example this exchange in Harold Pinter’s *The Caretakers* (1961), where characters stumble through sentences, never quite able to complete them—a style that will be agonizingly familiar to anyone who has tried to transcribe or even listen to Donald Trump speak:

ASTON. More or less exactly what you...

DAVIES. That's it ... that's what I'm getting at is ... I mean, what sort of jobs ... (*Pause*.)

ASTON. Well, there's things like the stairs ... and the ... the bells ...

DAVIES. But it'd be a matter ... wouldn't it ... it'd be a matter of a broom ... isn't it?

Other times, Absurdist characters unleash a torrent of speech peppered with nonsense or repetition, like Lucky’s single-sentence monologue in *Waiting for Godot* (1956), of which a small part is

in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same
and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the
earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something
the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold and sea on land
and in the air I resume for reasons unknown

It goes on and on, never reaching a conclusion, an endless confused complaint against the universe that literally breaks off on the word “unfinished.”

The overarching theme of Absurdist theatre is generally an exploration of the failure to achieve meaning, community, and connection in a senseless world. As Martin Esslin put it in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1969), “the means by which the dramatists of the Absurd express their critique--largely instinctive and unintended--of our disintegrating society are based on suddenly confronting their audiences with a grotesquely heightened and distorted picture of a world gone mad” (1969, 300).

Sarah Cooper's tiny vignettes of the most absurd--in both the simple sense of “ridiculous” as well as the more existential sense of the word--moments from Donald Trump's speeches provide exactly that same confrontation, that same image of a world gone mad, to the point where there's nothing to do but laugh.

“How to President”

Cooper's technique in making her videos was a simple one. First, she found some jarring moment from a Trump speech, one that she felt gave her an opportunity to “pull aside the curtain” to some extent and reveal what Goffman would call the backstage behavior hidden by the pomp and circumstance of the political theatre. According to Cooper, “I always go with ones where I feel like I can use my expressions to expose the subtext, as well as those with opportunities to add visual props or other characters to tell a mini story” (Cristobal, 2020). She listened to the clip as much as necessary and as little as possible:

To get the lip-synching just right, I have to listen to Trump's voice over and over again, which is pretty painful. . . . my husband, Jeff, is ready to gouge his ears out [at the sound of Trump's voice]. So once I know what clip I want to use, I try to get it done quickly, which actually helps me not overthink it too much. (Cristobal, 2020)

TikTok limits videos to less than a minute, so the clip chosen had to be short and succinct. After adding a few props and shooting some shots where she played bystanders, Cooper would piece them together and upload them to Tik Tok (and then, later, to Twitter and YouTube). The resulting short videos (which can be seen most easily on YouTube at the username SarahCooper) are trenchant critiques of Trump's theatre that use the happenstance of lockdown life in 2020 to deconstruct Trump to absurd and hilarious effect. The next section of this work will look at three different aspects of theatre that Cooper uses in this dismantling: the setting, the supporting cast, and the main character.

Setting

The first (if not the most dramatic) aspect of Cooper's vignettes that we can see is the setting. In the context of the theatre of everyday life, Goffman describes the setting as “involving furniture, decor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it” (1959, 13). Setting, is, of course, essential in the theatre of American presidential politics: the podium, somber navy-blue curtains, White House seal and inevitable United States flag of the White House press room; the lush gardens and white columns of the Rose Garden; the rushing wind and noise of the presidential helicopter on the front lawn. All these props and symbols of authority work together to set the stage for important and solemn rhetoric.

Cooper strips the ceremonial setting away entirely, creating something similar to the famously bare and minimalistic stages of an Absurdist play like *Waiting for Godot*. She makes no effort to replicate the settings of the speeches that she is enacting; instead, Trump's words are abruptly set into the same mundane settings that millions of people were locked down in during 2020. The walls behind her are standard beige, dotted with art prints. The viewer can spot, now and then, wall-mounted televisions, family photos on refrigerators, computer monitors with their tangle of cords, remote controls, desk lamps: all the domestic backstage detritus of everyday life. The effect is to deny Trump's words the glossy trappings of authority, to strip them down to a nearly blank stage with only the most unremarkable “stage props.”

Now and then Cooper will go a step further and add a prop that incisively punctures the self-importance of the traditional stages for presidential words. In her first video, “How to medical,” as Trump talks about injecting light into the skin, Cooper touches the beige lampshade of a floor lamp while pulling a ludicrously solemn face. “How to lobster” features Trump playing with a cute stuffed lobster as he tries to sound like he understands maritime fishing laws. In “How to bunker,” Cooper plays Trump hiding fearfully in the bathroom from demonstrators, cowering in the bathtub and pulling a clear plastic shower curtain in front of her face. Cooper moves Trump out of the prestigious, powerful settings that he so loves into the same world of Sharpies and whiteboards, throw pillows and picture frames that we all inhabit. The words that may sound authoritative when backed up by presidential seals and velvet curtains sound substantially more absurd when delivered in front of cute robot prints and white blinds.

Supporting characters

A large part of Trump’s theatrical performances is the supporting characters listening to him, whether it’s ecstatic rally-goers, bemused heads of state, or a burgeoning mob. It’s important to note that although “audience” is perhaps the simplest word to describe these people, they are *not* outside of the political drama being staged. Instead, they are *playing the role* of “people listening to the President.” The press conferences that Cooper re-enacts were limited mostly to doctors, staffers, and reporters, usually doing their best to keep a neutral expression as the President spoke. Cooper plays all of them in her vignettes, cutting from herself-as-Trump saying something ridiculous to herself-as-reporter or herself-as-doctor reacting to it.

A fascinating thing about Trump’s presidential theatre when viewed through the lens of Goffman is the way it illuminates how trapped many of the people involved were by the constraints of the traditional role and setting they found themselves in. The reporters, doctors, and heads of state in the scenes staged by the Trump administration were also playing roles: for example, the role of “reporter” at a press conference requires the actor to look serious, to ask penetrating but neutral questions, and to accept the answers given. To stand up and shout that Trump is speaking nonsense and lies--or even to roll one’s eyes--is to break that role and expose one’s backstage persona. As Goffman puts it (1959), members of a team

must be willing to accept minor parts with good grace and perform enthusiastically whenever, wherever, and for whomsoever the team as a whole chooses. And they must be taken in by their own performance to the degree that is necessary to prevent them from sounding hollow and false to the audience (135).

For the purposes of the public performance called “press conference,” Donald Trump and his observers are indeed all members of the same performance team, acting out roles in a piece of theatre that has become a staple of American political life: the leader of the free world giving information to the free press, who in turn listen, question, clarify and hold him responsible. To visibly call into question the legitimacy of the entire performance is a betrayal of the role.

Cooper has no such loyalty to the conventions of the performance, and as such when she takes on the roles of the doctors, reporters, and other supporting actors, she breaks the rules of the theatre of politics with abandon. When Trump abruptly announces to a doctor in “How to medical” that he expects them to check on the benefits of ultraviolet light on coronavirus, Cooper cuts to herself as the doctor, pointing to herself in bafflement and mouthing “who, me?” In “How to hydroxychloroquine,” when Trump announces that “a lot of doctors” are taking hydroxychloroquine as a way to prevent coronavirus, she cuts to herself as a doctor solemnly shaking her head, directly contradicting Trump. The reporter in “How to person woman man camera tv” shows open contempt and confusion as Trump haltingly explains how difficult it was to remember five words in order. By showing the supporting cast reacting to Trump in ways that violate their roles in the drama but feel true to the backstage reactions we assume the actors are having, Cooper deflates the entire spectacle, revealing its absurdity.

The personal front

But of course the heart of Cooper’s performance is in what she does as the main character in this performance, Donald Trump, and the personal front of his role in the performance. “Personal front,” according to Goffman (1959), are all the intimate physical aspects of a performer’s role:

If we take the term “setting” to refer to the scenic parts of expressive equipment, we may take the term “personal front” to refer to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes. (15)

Cooper has been called a Trump impersonator, but the word is inaccurate, as Cooper has no interest in *impersonating* Trump. The only part of his personal front that she actually uses faithfully is the sound of his voice. As the New York Times notes:

Trump impersonators usually try to capture his goofiness (Alec Baldwin), his air-headed frivolity (Stephen Colbert) or his smarmy lasciviousness (Anthony Atamanuik). They fall into the trap of having to imitate the very qualities that make the president appealing to some people, exaggerating them until his base sees only the mockery, not what's being mocked. But Cooper doesn't seem interested in embodying or mimicking Trump. She's all about exposing him, in the most literal sense — and exposing, along with him, all the props, bluster and stagecraft he has cultivated for years. What would it be like, her videos ask, if you could take away everything else — all the trappings of authority, the partisan resentments, the sorcery of the performance — and leave only what Trump is literally saying? (Packer, 2020)

The only person Cooper is im-personating (in the sense of inhabiting or embodying) is herself, a version of herself filled with unshakable confidence and complacency, unfettered by any fear of mediocrity or shame. She explains:

I love how much people are drawn to my 'impersonations' of Trump because they aren't really impersonations at all. I'm not trying to be Trump so much as I'm trying to make Trump me. In doing them, I simply ask myself, 'How would I, Sarah Cooper, say these words?' (Cristobal, 2020)

Her performance of Trump doesn't particularly try to capture any of his actual mannerisms or nonverbals. Instead, she focuses on projecting all the bullying bluster of Trump--which allows her to crack the facade and show the insecurity, cruelty and fear beneath that surface. She cowers in a bathtub in "How to bunker," or twists her face while talking about Abraham Lincoln in "How to Lincoln"--"I'm gonna take a pass on 'Honest Abe,'" Trump's voice says, and Cooper's rolling eyes perform the contempt in his voice (Cooper, 2020). When Trump talked about testing negative for COVID-19, he stumbled constantly over his confusion about negative test results being good and positive test results being bad, as well as his own reluctance to apply the word "negative" to himself in any way. "I tested very...positively...in another sense," he stammers, and in "How to very positively," Cooper's frantically darting eyes make explicit his panicked lack of comprehension. "I tested positively toward negative, right? So... No, I tested perfectly this morning. Meaning...meaning I tested...negative." She ends the vignette putting a hand to her mouth, mentally reviewing the sentence in confusion, blustering uncertainty radiating from her.

Goffman describes some of the aspects of personal front as "insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures, and the like" (1959, 15). Beyond the speech patterns, Sarah Cooper alters each and every one of these aspects of personal front, because the final perfect touch to Cooper's parodies of Trump is one that is obvious from the moment one sees her perform and yet has not been mentioned here yet: Cooper is Jamaican American, a Black woman playing the White president. Seeing a Black woman embodying the words of Donald Trump is a jarring, startling, and ultimately liberating experience. By taking Trump's literal words and embodying them in a personal front that is radically different from the original, stripped of the age, race, and sex that confer some level of automatic authority in the United States, Cooper gives her audience a chance to hear Trump's words as they really are: absurd and empty. The New York Times describes that discontinuity:

When Trump's words come from a different mouth, we approach a sort of reckoning. A black woman — no matter her obvious intelligence, her hip affect or cool apartment — could never get away with talking like this. She channels the entitlement of someone accustomed to bluffing their way out of speeding tickets, blustering through corporate presentations, excuse-mongering a way out of kids' birthdays and partners' anniversaries — the guy at the end of the bar whose expert opinion always begins with ignoring the experts. (Packer)

Cooper herself is keenly aware of the transgressive nature of what she's doing:

It was exhilarating to play the most powerful man in the world and expose him as the clueless snake-oil salesman he is. I had taken away the suit and the podium and the people behind him smiling and nodding and calling him "sir," and all that was left were his empty words, which, in reality, were not the best. (Cristobel, 2020).

In that uncomfortable gap--the realization that the words being spoken are meaningless and absurd, and that there is no way the Black woman we see lip-syncing them could ever speak like this and be listened to respectfully--is the frisson that makes the audience laugh.

The absurdity of Trump

Sarah Cooper's videos transform Donald Trump's rhetoric from patriotic pageantry to a theatre of the absurd by stripping bare the set, by stripping the front-stage politeness from the supporting characters, and above all by stripping from Trump the personal front of an elderly rich white man to reveal the naked nonsense of his words. The effectiveness of this deconstruction becomes clearer when compared to the more polished, professional, and traditionally theatrical version of her lip syncing that Cooper does on her special, *Everything's Fine* (2020). In it, Cooper and Helen Mirren lip sync a re-enactment of Donald Trump and Billy Bush's raunchy "grab them by the pussy" conversation on the set of Access Hollywood. It's funny, and both Cooper and Mirren are brilliant in their embodying of the two grossly entitled, over-confident men, as Sophie Heawood (2020) in the Guardian notes:

There is something quite extraordinary about seeing the two of them, who are dressed in smart trouser suits, but not dressed as men, carrying themselves and their thoughts with such utter, unqualified boastfulness. It makes you realise how unlikely it is to hear women talk with such confidence, or use their bodies to carry a conversation in that way.

Despite their performances, the skit falls oddly flat, and a great deal of that is because it's too theatrical. The skit is staged on an actual bus placed in an actual parking lot. The supporting roles--the chuckling men on the bus, the women in the distance being ogled--are played by a full cast of other actors. But the wealth of sophisticated details and skilled support--*Helen Mirren!*--ends up defusing the absurdist minimalism that gave the original bits their punchy, hysteria-edged hilarity. It's funny. But it's not *absurd* anymore.

Absurdist theatre in the 1950s and 1960s was a way for playwrights to express their despair and confusion in "a world gone mad," in which language had no meaning, life had no goal, and human connection seemed impossible. Similarly, Sarah Cooper's lip-syncing deconstructions of Donald Trump's words through 2020 struck a chord with viewers because they "present[ed] the audience with a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose--an absurd universe" (Esslin, 1969, 301). They lift up Donald Trump, stripped of anything but his words, to be a figure of mockery and disdain.

Esslin (1969) explains that the Theatre of the Absurd refuses to give the audience any characters that they can identify with, in order to critique the chaos of the universe with clear eyes:

The audience is confronted with characters whose motives and actions remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify; the more mysterious their action and their nature, the less human the characters become, the more difficult it is to be carried away into seeing the world from their point of view. Characters with whom the audience fails to identify are inevitably comedic. (300-301).

There is almost no sense that Donald Trump has any interior life at all in Cooper's skits. It's impossible to empathize with him--or it should be, although Cooper has noted with some alarm that people who claim to be Trump fans say that they love her work, which she finds baffling: "when people are like, 'I love Trump, but this is great,' it's very confusing to me" (McCluskey, 2020).

In fact, increasingly Cooper seems to have found it difficult to "play" Trump. Her videos tapered off as she worked on her special, and reading interviews with her one gets the impression that voicing Trump took a toll on her. One reporter writes of her, "'I hate him so much,' she says, smiling calmly as she talks to me over video from New York, where she lives, 'but he has provided my greatest material.'" (Heawood). Another notes:

Whether or not Trump is reelected, Cooper says she has no intention of leaving politics out of her comedy going forward. "Part of me is like, 'I wish politics were boring again.' I'm glued to the news and Twitter to see the latest thing that's happening, and it's just sucking the life energy out of me. It's sucking the life energy out of so many people. (McCluskey, 2020)

After Trump's hour-long phone call with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger--a rambling diatribe in which Trump demanded Raffensberger somehow "find" enough ballots to give Trump the win, and threatened him with political retaliation if he didn't--emerged on Jan. 3 2021, Cooper was inundated with requests on social media to embody Trump's words. Surely the impresario of Trump couldn't resist such a treasure trove of potential ridicule? A day later, however, Cooper tweeted: "Sorry everyone, my New Years resolution was to try to not make criminals hilarious."

The Theatre of the Absurd as a genre is a constant collision of hilarity and anguish, as Esslin notes: "such theatre is a comic theatre in spite of the fact that its subject matter is somber, violent, and bitter. That is why

the Theatre of the Absurd transcends the categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror" (1969, 301). That Sarah Cooper found it impossible to maintain that knife-edged balance of absurdity as Trump's rhetorical trajectory veered horrifically and inevitably into actual bloodshed and chaos can be no surprise.

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