[Question: Does satire perform a valuable social function by holding politicians to account, or does it merely undermine politics?]

**The political effectiveness of late 20th and early 21st century satire**

“I am grieved to see the genius of Hogarth, which should take in all ages and countries, sunk to a level with the miserable tribe of party etchers, and now, in his rapid decline, entering into the poor politics of the faction of the day, and descending to low personal abuse, instead of instructing the world as he could once, by manly moral satire.” – John Wilkes

Satire can mean different things to different people at different times. As such, the power of satire to hold politicians to account can be almost impossible to plan or predict. The above quote by John Wilkes, well-known political radical of William Hogarth’s time, captures a sense of the lofty moral function towards which satire can aspire to, but also its divisive quality – on political, class, personal levels and more. This paper will look into some of these polarising qualities and inherent tensions in political satire that make it such a tricky medium to evaluate.

Satire is commonly differentiated from other forms of comedy in its critical approach. It encourages the audience to take part in a critical stance that tends towards questioning, and in doing so, poking fun at certain commonly held norms. This critical approach of satire is why it is often credited with having a truth-telling quality lying behind its comedy. The creators of *Private Eye* saw it that way and felt that their brand of political satire sat very easily together with features of investigative journalism, which can share many of the same critical qualities. As current editor of the magazine, Ian Hislop, states, “They are both basically doing the same job, which is questioning the official version. Either doing it with jokes or doing it with facts.”

*Private Eye* is one of a crop of British satirical outlets to emerge out of what Simon Wagg refers to as the ‘satire boom’ of the 1950s and 60s. The common theme of this new brand of satire was an anti-establishment challenge to existing views of political authority. Sharing a collective belief that ‘the Pomposity-of-Politicians-

---

Must-be-Pricked’s new brand of comedians helped to establish a sense of daring to challenge the received institutions of power and prestige, particularly politicians, the media, and celebrity. Speaking of *That Was The Week That Was*, Tony Benn MP gives a sense of just how powerful this radical shift in contemporary attitudes was for politicians of the time: “I felt like a wet blanket and I sensed an enormously powerful anti-political feeling. It wasn’t anti-political in the way that CND or the real left is anti-political. It was anti-political in a scornful and contemptuous way.” For many the defining moment was Peter Cook daring to mercilessly mock Prime Minister Harold Macmillan during a *Beyond the Fringe* event, knowing full well that Macmillan was in the audience on the night. This strand of brazenly irreverential satire can be said to have recently culminated with Stephen Colbert’s scathing comedic invective delivered to President George W. Bush’s face at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association dinner.

To watch the likes of Colbert and Cook it becomes clear that one way in which political satire can be effective is in its very audacity to take on and confront subjects that others in the mainstream don’t dare to. While not usually as daunting as the work that some investigative journalists carry out in braving the wrath of ruthless governments or large corporations, mixing comedy and politics can still be a very thorny and sometimes even risky venture for those who choose to undertake it. Raising the gambit that all comedians undergo when taking to the stage one step further, the particularly sensitive subject of politics can mean an even harder task for winning over one’s audience. Perhaps this is partly what Wilkes means when using the seemingly unusual adjective of ‘manly’ to describe what he sees as being the best type of satire. Political satire is not always simply an amusing sideswipe at the political world. In its willingness to challenge perceived notions of authority and the status quo, it can embolden audiences where politics and politicians sometimes fail to do so.

These are lofty goals for what many, including those who practice satire, see as a much more jocular affair. Wilkes wants satire to instruct. But he is aware that much of satire can be seen as “entering into the poor politics of the faction of the day”, and more often than not, “descending to low personal abuse”. This is a

---


common criticism levelled against political satire: that in its constantly critical attacks against the powers that be it can have the end result of a depoliticizing effect on attitudes towards politics. By portraying all of its political subjects as “an almost inexhaustible supply of distinguished idiots,” as *Spitting Image* did to very popular effect in the 1980s, satire is often accused of inducing no more than a sense of political cynicism in its audience. When everything is held up to ridicule and no positive alternatives are posed, it cannot come as a surprise that some might be turned off by politics of all kinds in response to this common mode of political satire.

Wagg describes this brand of satire as having a “fundamentally hedonistic attitude to politics, in which public life is seen as absurd and citizenship as no more than an option,” and equates it with its pioneering modern day practitioner, Peter Cook. By reinforcing the commonly held notion that all politicians are laughable figures worthy of contempt, this type of satire can be seen as doing no more than mirroring such attitudes and, in doing so, nullifying any belief that engaging in politics can make a difference. The pages of *Private Eye* can similarly read like a private members club at times. This may have a welcoming effect of mutual understanding for those who share a knowledge of the references made, but can also be very alienating for others who may feel left out of the discussion altogether. Thus there is the potential knock-on effect in such satire of reinforcing another commonly held and negative notion – that politics is a closed circle, not interested in facing outward to the world at large.

On the other hand, satire can also be a powerfully inclusive practice in the way that it tries to engage the audience with political issues in an informal and humorous way. Comedy itself has often worked as a linking factor between different social spheres. Wagg points to the example of the 1950s hipster and beat cultures, where comedians were able to form a link between white beat poetry and black jazz. “As the writer Albert Goldman observes: ‘Jazz could have no truck with white, middle-class poetry, however rebellious or avant-garde. Jazz was one world. Poetry another. Comedy was something in between.’” Peter Cook’s contemporary, David Frost, became an icon for the bridging ability of political satire and the way it can help

---

6 Wagg, *Satire Boom*, (p.320).
politicians and their wary public meet on a common and more informal ground.

“‘Satirical’, reproving, reverential by turns, Frost has essentially performed the same task throughout – mediating public figures to a mass audience: he represents the populist imperatives and possibilities of the age.”

For many though there is a danger in any attempts by satire to use comedy to popularise the political world. By constantly poking fun at all manner of politicians and political issues satirists run the risk of trivialising all of politics in the process. In its use of comedy, satire can unintentionally become a kind of cotton wool in which political figures worthy of satirical attacks are protected. Most comedy tends towards the flippant and casual approach, rather than the sharper and edgier side of the spectrum. Despite injecting plenty of venom into their pantomime villain Margaret Thatcher, there is a sense in which the creators of *Spitting Image* produced an unintended knock-on effect of making her ruthless nature such an amusing and even likeable trait.

A similar claim could be made of the millions of spoofs made of President Bush today. No modern politician has been as widely ridiculed as Bush and yet he secured a second term in office. Popular American comedian Will Ferrell became famous for his Bush impressions and in 2004 was sponsored by the liberal political action group, America Coming Together (ACT) to do a spoof election campaign video playing on Bush’s perceived dim-wittedness. While clearly portraying the president in a poor light, the video nevertheless can be said to soften Bush’s shortcomings by portraying them in just such an amusing light. The video encourages us to laugh at the president’s stupidity but has little political bite beyond this. While meant to portray Bush in a bad light, its enduring effect in one important sense is the way in which it captures the folksy and down-home appeal that made him electable at the time.

This is another example of the unintended effect that satire can have of reflecting and reinforcing social norms, even when it is attempting to offer a unique critique of them. Wagg suggests the following surprising example of such an instance:

> [M]any view ‘satire’ with in a paradigm of British ethnicity. John Connor, for instance, wrote of *Monty Python* in 1989: ‘The real secret of Python wasn’t their surrealism – it’s the fact that they were the first to articulate the madness of the British, and in particular the English. Margaret Thatcher could have been created by

7 IBID, (p. 332).

8 One YouTube link to the video has received over 4 million hits to date: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkqrI3IibY1
Python’ (Guardian, 6 October 1989).’ This is almost certainly intended to mean that Thatcher represented the narrow-minded, petit bourgeois English bigot that Python had been trying to subvert, but it seems to me that Python, and the other ‘satirists’, also helped to invent what became known as Thatcherism.9 It may seem preposterous to accuse the creators of Monty Python of laying the grounds for Thatcherism, but it doesn’t hurt to think more critically about the different and sometimes ‘deeper’ ways in which satire can be absorbed and transmitted in unintended ways into the fabric of the society it is attempting to address.

Satire can also feed on the understandable need within culture for a generally palatable message about the state we are in. A staple of news bulletins over the decades has been the amusing final item that can be seen as attempting to put a happy gloss on everything that has proceeded. Political shows on television commonly resort to a similar tactic. A typical format: “David Frost (knighted in 1993) converses on first-name terms with cabinet ministers and world statesmen and is followed by Bremner delivering a series of lampoons.”10 Many major online news or political resources now include a selection of links on their front pages to comical articles and video clips. It seems that no longer is it enough that we the public are sent to bed happy, we now require a rolling supply of readily available comedy outlets with which we can easily escape from the barrage of harder news stories.

While satire can be seen as being one of the few voices ready to critique the social and media norms of the time, its saturation into so many political and media outlets is worth questioning. In the way that Python captured the surrealism of modern life it would seem that its creators had a hand in more than just Thatcherism. In today’s post-modern online world, their slapdash and free approach to comedy has been embraced by our YouTube generation. Even politicians seem to be jumping on board the comedy express. From the madness of President George to Comical Ali’s Minister of Information, it would seem that we can turn John Cleese’s quote on its head. Satire can now be both “the defence of the rational individual against the irrational public” and also the defender of the irrational politician against the rational public.

9 Wagg, Come On Down, (p.279).
10 Wagg, Contemporary Politics, (p.325).
It seems little wonder then that a show like *The Daily Show with John Stewart* has become so popular in the US. As John Stewart himself likes to say, “We're a fake news organisation covering a fake news event.” In a world of politics saturated by the constant stream of breaking news coverage and analysis, today’s news can seem both very real and yet completely unreal. The show has become a kind of distilling filter in the way that it uses clips from a variety of major and minor news sources to distil its own comical wisdom.

TV comedy has become one of the few clarifying elements of a political discourse obfuscated by hours of punditry, spin and anti-spin. As Americans tune out from serious political coverage and analysis, they are getting more of their election news from late-night talk. A recent survey found that 47% of people aged between 18 and 29 often gleaned information from these programmes, along with a quarter of all adults.11

This can be seen as an effective truth-telling function of satirical political comedy, but how much does it achieve beyond mere mockery of the media and politicians? How many parts of the equation are wisdom and how many wise-ass?

Returning once more to the Wilkes quote, there is still a lingering idea for some that political satire should be more than just comedy. You can point back to English satire’s radical roots in the pamphleteering business and forward to the work of comedians like Mark Thomas who, unlike many others from the ‘new comedic orthodoxy’ of today, “does not work through an *a priori* condemnation of public life.”12 Some might call this an activist approach, as compared to the neutral or negative/hedonistic approach of the Pythons and Cook, whereby all political organisations are ‘as bad as each other’. For Thomas and others of the activist bent it is possible for political satire to take a moral standpoint and still be funny.

The issue of how much one should invest one’s personal politics into satire has indeed been a regular subject for debate amongst satirists. *Private Eye*’s politics are famously summed up as having jokes from the right and stories on the left. Some of the team involved in *That Was The Week That Was* didn’t feel that the respectful and serious homage to JFK after his assassination had a place on the show. Others such as *The Daily Show*, while clearly left leaning, still invite bastions of the political right to have their say on issues. A small aside: if we are to treat satire as participating in a

---

‘satire industry’ that competes for viewers attention, this leaves the slightly tricky point from a market driven perspective that by taking an overtly left or right wing approach you are potentially turning off a large segment of your market. On the other hand, in trying to appeal to as broad a political spectrum as possible a satirist could leave themselves open to the contrary accusation of watering down any political point they intend to make – not to mention ‘selling out’.

In conclusion, it seems clear in all of this that satire has, for the moment anyway, established itself as a distinct part of the political landscape today. It has brought down politicians from the lofty perches from which they were often permitted to preach. In doing so it has helped to encourage a more critical approach towards politicians by the public, while simultaneously running the danger of rubbishing the art of politics all together. Much satire has managed to popularise the subject of politics for many who would otherwise not pay it much attention, while at other times it can be an alienating experience for anyone unfamiliar with the topics being sent up or unappreciative of the often negative portrayal of all those involved. At the same time it has in many cases chosen not to take overt sides in the political argument or present positive alternatives to the social and political models it attacks. This is quite rightly something that satirists do not need to be judged on or asked to do, but it nevertheless begs the question of why many of satire’s practitioners don’t view it as being a vehicle capable of achieving political change. The satire ‘boom’ in 1960s Britain has now been matched by a similar one in the early years of 21st century American politics, and also in the more global online explosion of user-generated satirical websites and videos. The first big battle of wills in this new era, ‘the world vs. George Dubya Bush’ during the run-up to his second term election, was a defeat for most of those of a satirical bent. It will however remain interesting to follow both the effectiveness and consequences of further attempts by those who believe in the power of satire to function as a tool for social and political improvement in the years to come.
Reading:


