

*In this wide-ranging consideration of satire as a genre, Pagliari builds on evidence from comedy films, dystopian novels, and contemporary political parodies to make connections between art and politics. Through analysis of its history and conventions, she shows how satire can stay relevant to today's public issues. (Instructor: Michael Tyrell)*

## THE TRAGEDY UNDERNEATH: SATIRE AND REALITY

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**A**t the beginning of the 1933 comedy *Duck Soup*, Rufus T. Firefly (played by Groucho Marx) is appointed leader of the fictional country of Freedonia. When asked, “How do you intend to run the nation?” he starts performing a vaudeville song illustrating “the laws of his administration”: “No one’s allowed to smoke or tell a dirty joke, and whistling is forbidden.” The list goes on for a while, ending with the lines, “The last man nearly ruined this place, he didn’t know what to do with it. If you think this country’s bad off now, just wait ’till I get through with it.” Later in the movie, Firefly’s childish behavior leads to a diplomatic crisis and, subsequently, to a war. *Duck Soup* is widely viewed as one of the greatest political comedies of all time. Produced during the Great Depression, the film is an obvious commentary on political events around the world, “pok[ing] fun at the erratic dictators who were consolidating power in Europe at the time” (Epplin). Critic Tim Dirks emphasizes the multidirectionality of the Marx Brothers’ satire by pointing out how it mocks “the pomposity of small-time governmental leaders,” “the absurdity of government itself,” “governmental diplomacy,” “an arbitrary legal system,” and “war fought over petty matters.” *Duck Soup* may at first appear to be a product of its time, an artwork inseparable from the historical and social conditions that inspired its creation. However, as a comedy based on political satire, it conveys something eerily contemporary and accurate.

One could think of such a movie as pure entertainment directed at a specific, restricted public, its ultimate goal being sheer amusement. However, that thought is debatable, since the Italian dictator

Mussolini took the film as a personal insult and decided to ban it. The fascist dictator clearly saw subversive potential in the apparently innocuous humor of the Marx Brothers, which leads us to consider one question: what power does art, specifically artistic satire, bring to political critique?

The Marx Brothers' commentary on modern politics and Mussolini's reaction to it show us how satire can act as a powerful, indispensable, and inevitable instrument of democracy. As W. J. T. Mitchell explains in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, "representation, even purely 'aesthetic' representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions" (15). Mitchell establishes a necessary relationship between these two seemingly separate realms of art and politics, exploring the supposedly "inevitable" links between artistic representations and the "political" significance inherent within these representations. The concept of "representation" as a 'transversal' medium in which art and politics are crossed is a provocative one. If fictional representations inevitably bear a connection to reality, then art in general could be summed up as an attempt to reproduce and thereby deconstruct, analyze, and interpret reality in different ways. Additionally, if we accept Mitchell's argument, political satire is inextricably linked to democracy, the form of government that is supposed to execute the will of the people through either direct or indirect representation.

Indeed, satire is a direct result of democracy, since it allows people to freely express their opinion about specific public figures and political events. In her article "The Birth of Comedy," Edith Hall reminds us that comedy was first introduced as a genre in ancient Greece after the democratic revolution overthrew the Athenian tyrants in 507 BC. She writes that comedy was "intimately tied to the democracy—the form of sovereign power (*kratos*) held by the free populace—the *demos* of Athens" (12). However, satire is never symptomatic of an *absolute*, fully developed democracy, but rather of an undeveloped democracy that is still unripe and endangered, in which freedom of expression may only be allowed within certain limits. As Brian A. Connery writes in his introduction to Matthew Hodgart's book *Satire: Origins and Principles*:

Satire . . . serves as an alternative form of power when the crimes committed escape the purview of . . . law, religion, and politics . . . this is the reason why so much satire is directed against lawyers and judges, preachers and religions, and rulers and politicians: it is . . . the corruption of the very agencies which are supposed to offer justice, order, and social and moral regulation that makes satire necessary. (2-3)

As George Austin Test points out in the book *Satire: Spirit and Art*, “it is not surprising . . . that satirists have been the most persecuted of artists—exiled, silenced, sued, physically attacked” (1). As long as the tone of the satirical sketch is kept comedic, and the frail game of allusions is steadily maintained, satire will be allowed. Consequently, if democracy were fully developed and if open criticism towards authoritative figures without fear of retribution was possible, satire wouldn’t be necessary at all.

The subversive danger of satire is exemplified not only by Mussolini’s decision to ban *Duck Soup* in fascist Italy, but also by the many modern nations and governments who reject and prohibit satire altogether. Hall points out that the “most recent internationally high-profile case” of censorship of political satire took place in Italy in 2002, when the government of Silvio Berlusconi obstructed a theatrical production of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, whose main protagonist was “all too intelligible to third-millennial Italian audiences” (17). Presently, Silvio Berlusconi owns Mediaset S.p.A., the largest commercial broadcaster in the country. It controls most of the nation’s TV channels and several important newspapers, magazines, and publishers, as well as some other small publishers and film distribution companies. Considering his hegemonic control over the national media, it is quite remarkable that the former Italian prime minister felt threatened by a stage play. At the same time, it is not surprising that his anxiety about *Frogs* was similar to Mussolini’s reaction to *Duck Soup*. Berlusconi’s reaction to the play unveils the actual *power*—and, therefore, the potential *danger*—of satire, for beneath its shallow layer of parody and frivolity, satire always conceals matters of extreme seriousness and importance. Making fun of a public figure like the dictatorial Berlusconi serves a double function: it attacks his uncontested authority as a public figure, and it is cathartic. Satire converts into laughter

something that is, in itself, a bleak reality, such as the fact that a ruthless dictator could be endowed with the power to control a nation. Therefore, satire is invested with the double function of attack and defense, and it is, consequently, not only a democratic art—theoretically open and accessible to all types of people and social classes—but also the artistic subgenre that most serves the ideals of democracy.

This dual nature of satire is also reflected in one of the main stylistic components of satirical language: the grotesque. The concept of the grotesque is particularly important with regard to satire, because it combines seemingly antithetical extremes: laughter and horror, amusement and disgust. Film critic James Naremore writes that, like satire, “the grotesque is structured by a dual implication . . . an ‘unresolved’ tension between laughter and some unpleasant emotion such as disgust and fear” (6). Satire lashes us deeply, but also relieves. In this way, it uses a unique artistic language to convert tension and stridency into balance and harmony.

One drawback of satire, however, is its ‘relatable specificity,’ which erodes its effectiveness. Literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt argues that genres like satire do not survive history. Instead, they age gradually and ultimately move towards a conceptual and thematic death: “Works in these genres often seem immensely important when they first appear, but their power begins quickly to fade when the individuals to whom the works refer begin to fade” (Greenblatt 226). Thus, it would appear as if satire is always and inevitably short-lived. But as Daniel Griffin writes in his review of *Duck Soup*, that “distinction must often be made between a piece of art’s original purpose and how its meanings have shifted and changed when viewed through the filter of a different culture and era.” He states that people cannot help inadvertently placing their own cultural backgrounds and personal observations into the text, “serendipitously giving rise to art’s ability . . . to be interpreted and re-interpreted throughout the centuries.” According to Griffin, art is immortal when it assumes new meanings as time goes by instead of gradually losing its initial veneer. This consideration is particularly important to satire in that its ‘relatable specificity’ might otherwise cause it to fade away with time. Examples like *Duck Soup* demonstrate how satire can prove to be enduring and, with hindsight, even prophetic.

Luke Epplin further emphasizes the links between *Duck Soup*'s satire and contemporary politics, arguing that "Firefly's (and, by extension, Groucho's) ludicrous personality" parallels that of U.S. President Donald Trump. Epplin points out that Firefly and Trump are both "nonpolitician[s]" lacking "solemnity and competence," who "have checkered histories of renegeing on promised payments" and "pathological compulsion[s] to belittle any perceived rivals and then refuse to apologize or back down." A scenario in which an actual political figure is compared to a fictional character who is an exaggerated, grotesque, and unrealistic caricature of modern statesmen is a rather difficult reality to acknowledge. Satire operates by exaggerating and hyperbolizing actual events and public figures; it can thus skirt the need to be 'politically correct' while delivering agitating and often controversial social commentary.

Satire is usually divided into two categories based on the earliest examples of satire in the classical world: Horatian and Juvenalian. Both evolved throughout history and survive today in satirical works that encompass literature, visual art, cinema, music, and television. However, while both modes share the same basic aim, the style and provocativeness of each varies. Horatian satire, based on the writings of the Roman poet Horace, is commonly identified as the milder, less abrasive type. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Horace opts for mild mockery and playful wit as the means most effective for his ends. The satirist's verse . . . should be easy and unpretentious, sharp when necessary, but flexible enough to vary from grave to gay. In short, [Horace's] character . . . moved to laughter rather than rage. (Elliot)

*Duck Soup* could easily be classified as a modern example of Horatian satire in that its humor appears lighthearted and eschews specific attacks, instead utilizing general criticism and parody. This also accounts for *Duck Soup*'s immortality and the fact that its satire remains relevant over seventy years after its release.

In contrast to Horace, the roman poet Juvenal, in his "characteristic posture . . . of the upright man who looks with horror on the corruptions of his time," wrote verses infamous for their harsh criticism,

graphic expressions, and mordant tones. In one of his poems, Juvenal declares that “satire has gone beyond the limits established by his predecessors; it has taken to itself the lofty tone of tragedy” (Elliot). Curiously enough, Juvenalian satire has thrived more in the modern age. Examples of modern Juvenalian satire include George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*. But the most controversial form of Juvenalian satire, at least recently, is probably the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, which published a series of comic strips satirizing Islam’s prophet, Muhammad, in 2006. Although the magazine’s writers describe *Charlie Hebdo* as a secular, leftist, and anti-racist publication, the cartoonists’ blatant and repetitive use of visually-striking images and provocative language often seems to endorse and support, rather than criticize, racism and xenophobia.

A comparable case is a cartoon that depicted Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee who had drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015 while his family was trying to reach Europe. The cartoon suggested that the Syrian boy would eventually have grown up to become a sexual assailant of European women (Heer). In an article for *New Republic*, Jeet Heer interprets the cartoon as “blatantly racist,” though “*Charlie Hebdo* has defenders who argue that it is an ironic commentary on racist attitudes.” Heer argues that *Charlie Hebdo*’s ironic mode of satire has “diminishing returns,” because in “using super-racist images to satirize racism” and “constantly publishing such racist images,” the magazine’s “satire of racism” conflates with actual “[expressions] of racism.”

*Charlie Hebdo* seems like the quintessential incarnation of Juvenalian satire, which is strongly committed to provoking social change. Its advocates believe that the strongest and most violent language in satire yields the most effective results. The retaliatory terrorist attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons prompted social network communities around the globe to adopt the slogan ‘*Je suis Charlie*’ to defend freedom of expression. But, as David Brooks wrote for *The New York Times* in December of 2015, such a slogan is, at the very least, “inaccurate.” Brooks stresses the ambiguity of wanting to “maintain standards of civility and respect while at the same time allowing room for those creative and challenging folks who are uninhibited by

good manners and taste.” Brooks notes not so much the difference between ‘scholars’ and ‘satirists,’ but rather two sorts of satire: the one embodied by *Duck Soup* and the other represented by *Charlie Hebdo*. As Brooks argues, the former possesses an everlasting quality that withstands the corrosive process of time, overcoming its own ‘relatable specificity’ and even possibly foreseeing the future. The latter operates on the opposite principle. Its main aim is to strike and provoke its public rather than inspire critical thought. That is shown by the inconsistency of *Charlie Hebdo* in choosing its targets; for instance, their cartoonists draw satirical caricatures mocking and deriding not Muslim communities, but also Christian and Jewish ones; secondly, and perhaps most importantly, *Charlie Hebdo*’s targets are not always and not necessarily political figures (as in the case of Alan Kurdi). Horatian satire, including *Duck Soup*, is never malicious or prosecutorial. *Charlie Hebdo* is exactly that. In their cartoons, the striking visuals of the drawings surpass the limits of the grotesque, and they become more horrific than comic. This is the danger of satire: the potential misuse or misinterpretation of its language.

According to W. J. T. Mitchell, such danger arises from the nature of representation itself, which “[presents] a barrier that ‘cuts across,’ as it were, our lines of communication with others, presenting the possibility of misunderstanding, error, or downright falsehood” (12). Mitchell claims that in a social situation, “representation begins to play a double role, as a means of communication which is also a potential obstacle to it” (12-13). Assuming this to be true would imply that not only aesthetic and semiotic representations are potentially misleading and ambiguous, but also that specific uses of representation, such as satirical caricatures, always carry within them the potential danger of backlash. Consider, for example, the 2015 terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*.

Political satire experienced a recent ‘revival’ during Donald Trump’s candidacy for the U.S. presidency, as television shows and newspapers mocked the tycoon’s persona. Prior to the actual election, it seemed as if the writers of *Saturday Night Live* had little to invent to portray a satirical caricature of the Republican nominee. Most of Alec Baldwin’s impersonations of Trump consisted of repeating him

verbatim, with only the addition of histrionic gestures and attitudes. Of the satirical political sitcom *Veep*, Ben Terris writes:

For five seasons [*Veep*] has deftly parodied Washington, D.C. . . . But now there's a President Trump. And he and his administration have done a bang-up job of showcasing the peccadilloes of our swampy little town . . . they've made it increasingly difficult to differentiate a *Veep* plot from a real-life one.

Similarly, on the latest season of *House of Cards*—a political drama centered on the Machiavellian congressman Frank Underwood—Underwood's public image is severely damaged not long before an election when a picture of his father dressed as a member of the KKK is released. This alleged connection with the KKK hurts Underwood's campaign, arousing political scandal. It is ironic that in real life, in the face of white nationalist and former KKK leader David Duke's approval of Donald Trump, and the attendance of KKK members at Trump's rallies, Trump was elected President of the United States. Both *Veep* and *House of Cards* have been outstripped by reality.

These spectacles, like satire itself, are paradoxically amusing and darkly tragic. More realistic than pessimistic, these shows seem to be a characteristic product of our time, starting from the dystopian literary tradition of the twentieth century, probably best exemplified by Orwell's *1984*. Thus, while *Duck Soup* only foresaw some of the potential 'great tragedies' of modern politics, Orwell—who participated in the 1936 Spanish Civil War and lived to experience the rise of the Third Reich in Germany and Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union—had deeper and darker insights. This disturbing entanglement of fiction and real life is particularly complex at the moment when reality merges with fantasy.

How can satire still defend certain values and attack illegitimate institutions when no room is left for exaggeration? Perhaps it is not accidental that contemporary satire has gradually shifted toward Juvenalian inspirations: when mild laughter at current events is no longer possible, the lightheartedness of the artist turns into indignation, outrage, and disgust. Consequently, comedic satire adopts what Juvenal terms "the lofty tone of tragedy" (Elliott).



It is up to the satirist's distinctive voice to offer a reflection on our times—a constructive one, it is to be hoped—thus enabling us to gain a clearer insight into our world. Edith Hall concludes that “the Athenians had discovered a timeless secret: not only is comedy a political issue but satire is a democratic duty” (17). Satire is both a duty and a necessity for a democratic society. No matter the modes in which satire operates—the mild, Horatian ones or the more abrasive, controversial Juvenalian ones—the satirist is vested with great responsibility and must be aware of the power of their instrument.

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