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“The Political (Un)Consciousness of Contemporary American Satire”

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In the twenty-first century, humour no longer operates as a simple addendum or ornament to the American political process; rather it has become a central aspect of the operation of American politics proper. From the popular success and wide cultural resonance of satirical media – such as The Daily Show with John Stewart (1999-2015), The Colbert Report (2005-14) and the online empire of The Onion – to the increasing willingness of prominent politicians to engage with and even indulge in comic performances, humour has become an acceptable way to both conduct and discuss politics. There is, of course, precedence for the embrace of such humour, which has long been a lauded aspect of the American political tradition. From Benjamin Franklin through Mark Twain, Walt Kelly, and Lenny Bruce to Gary Trudeau and Lorne Michaels, America has celebrated the use of comedy by essayists, authors, cartoonists and comics to draw attention to the inconsistencies, incongruities and oppressive practices of the state and its representatives. Such a history speaks to an understanding of humour that – especially when invoked in terms of satire – holds out the promise of a properly critical form of popular culture: one that calls out and challenges the inequities and prejudices of the social, political and economic status quo. Indeed, when considered alongside the litany of political anxieties currently afflicting America’s political system, this utopian potential of satire appears as a rare glimmer of hope: a widely-consumed, popular expression of political critique that promises to “encapsulate public sentiment … energize civic culture [and] engag[e] citizen-audiences.”

Yet, despite these optimistic investments, both the source and mechanism of this powerful political potential remain largely unexplored. An account of the cultural politics of contemporary satire requires us to consider both the political relevance actively claimed by its champions and also the murkier ideological undercurrents that circulate in its political unconsciousness.

Deeply enmeshed in the cultural contexts of the USA yet removed from the affective investments and anxieties of its political process, the settler states of South Pacific provide a particularly pertinent perspective from which to analyse the potential politics of

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contemporary American satire. As a consequence of long histories of English-language media flows and cultural imperialism, antipodean audiences are deeply familiar with programs such as *The Daily Show*. Despite their detachment from the underlying political conflicts and lived consequences thereof, they are therefore often eager to join in the laughter despite (or perhaps because of) the unfamiliarity of the Electoral College and the irrelevance of the filibuster. Consequently, *The Daily Show* and affiliated comic texts, such as *The Colbert Report*, *Last Week Tonight* and *Full Frontal* have long been a regular feature of television programming in Australia and New Zealand: interest that is indicative of a shared comic sensibility, even in the absence of a shared political context.\(^2\) The uneven interpellation of this transnational comic flow means that viewers in Australia and New Zealand can be both deeply acquainted with the comic conditions that underpin contemporary America popular culture (and vice versa) while also unambiguously outside of its immediate political context: a potentially productive analytic perspective for those who seek to unpack and account for the political work of popular culture. Freed from the animosity and fear upon which much contemporary political humour is built, but still familiar enough with the wider cultural context to find meaning and resonance in the comedy, the settler states of the Pacific thus provide a vantage from which to assess the cultural politics claimed for American satire from a place both familiar and remote: geographical distance here working as a proxy for the critical distance often thought lost in the postmodern context.\(^3\) Viewed from “down under,” it thus becomes possible to be alert to the cultural and comic nuance of American political satire, while at the same time not being swept up in the immediate political passions that inform such modes of humour. The Pacific perspective thus allows a longer and less immediately invested view of how such comedy might intercede in, but also be caught up with, the narratives that shape American political culture and which can appear alternately unremarkably familiar and inherently alien from the Southern settler states.

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\(^2\) Such an operation also flows the other way as well: *Daily Show* alumnus John Oliver, for example, engaged in sustained long-term mockery of the National-led government of Prime Minister John Key for the amusement of his predominantly American audience. Oliver’s quasi-feud with the Key government reached its apex in 2016 with an elaborate musical number in response to an incident where one of Key’s government minister was struck in the face with a dildo during a political protest. Nicholas Jones. “John Oliver’s sex toy swipe: What did Steven Joyce think?” *NZHerald.co.nz* (February 16, 2016). http://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=11590458

Satire in the American Context

The concept of satire, especially as it is mobilized in the American context, is not so much a stable genre or form of culture as an idea of what humour is and what it can do; and overwhelmingly what satire is thought to do is offer a form of critical judgement through playful means. In this sense, to name a text as satirical is not to offer a reading of its formal elements, but rather to make a claim that it acts in and on the world in particular critical ways. Such descriptions of satire as the critical articulation of humour to wider social and political concerns abound in accounts of historical forms of American satire. For example, writing on the earliest literary manifestations, Linda A. Morris argues that such work “relies upon humour to expose both humour and institutional failures [and] offer sustained critiques of contemporary society.” Luminaires of American letters – such as Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving and Mark Twain – all made use of satire as a “weapon” against the social and political problems of their day. Coterminal with Twain, early and influential editorial cartoonists, such as Thomas Nast, pursued similar ends through visual means and exerted considerable power over electoral politics as a result. Nast’s success in turn presaged the role of editorial cartoons and newspaper comic strips, such as Li’l Abner (1934-77) and Pogo (1948-75), as central sites of satirical analysis and comment in popular American culture for much of the twentieth century.

The success and perceived political importance of satire have – if anything – only increased in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. Stephen E. Kercher charts how

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7 Ibid., 380, 384, 392-5.  
“humour with a social purpose … thrilled in the two decades after World War II.”

This period sees not only the continued success of older iterations like Li’l Abner and Pogo, but also the rise of new institutional and technological frameworks for the production and distribution of satire. This manifested in the expanding subcultures of print media, such as the “social criticism” of MAD magazine (1952–present) and Playboy (1953–present): the latter of which featured interviews with the new satiric stars of the burgeoning post-War stand-up scene where the critical improv comedy of Chicago’s Second City troupe and the scathing and scandalous rants of comedians like Lenny Bruce were indicative of a new socially engaged tone.

This satirical success—carried into living rooms via long-play records—also laid the groundwork for the slow rise of American satirical television in programs such as That Was The Week That Was (1964-65) and Saturday Night Live (1975-present) that “commonly depended upon parody of current events, political figures, movies, and television.” Indeed, from the 1970s onwards even the television situation comedy, often lambasted as an inherently conservative genre, began to incorporate nascent critical commentary regarding the surrounding society in shows such as All in the Family (1971-79), Diff’rent Strokes (1978-86), and eventually The Simpsons (1989–present).

Moreover, at the same time, critical humour also flourished in older media forms, such as the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and Don Delilo and popular newspaper comics like Gary Trudeau’s Doonesbury (1970-present) and Bill Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes (1985-95). Thus even before the 1990s saw the rise of cable Channel Comedy Central as a central hub for the production and distribution of critical, politically-orientated comedy that defines the current state of American satire, there existed a long and celebrated history of humour.

12 Kercher, Revel, 206, 160-65, 397-424.
13 Grey, Jones and Thompson, “State of Satire,” 22; Thompson, Parody and Taste, 5.
18 Thompson, Parody and Taste, 5-6.
as a means of actively engaging, challenging and unsettling social, cultural and political norms.

Contemporary Humour as Critique

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, The Daily Show has been widely hailed as the most prominent inheritor of this American tradition of satire. Not only the central text of American political humour, but also one of the most important reference points in the wider media cultural context, The Daily Show and its most prominent host, Jon Stewart have been the subject of countless editorials, feature articles, blog posts and scholarly essays alternately articulating, attacking and applauding its address of politics through humour. Eschewing the rigid formal and professional conventions that had come to define the rote practice of conventional news sources, The Daily Show has captured national (and international) attention as evidence of an (ostensibly) new way of addressing politics through humour as a means to analyse and unpack the affairs of state and federal governance. Moreover, with its particular focus upon direct political address, The Daily Show operates as a key example of how humour might be apprehended as a form of critique: here expressed primarily in terms of the comic interrogation of directly political matters such policy, parties and elections (however, although the comic critique to the affairs of state is the most often noted aspect of the show, those familiar with it will no doubt be aware that is often equally concerned with politics in the wider sense of the word as it relates to issues such as gender and racial politics, corporate power and especially the politics of media representation). It is the juxtaposition of what is the traditionally regarded as the serious work of government with the irreverent tone of The Daily Show’s comedy that informs the perceived political work of the show in terms of satire: here imaged as a comic mode that expresses a particular critical relationship between humour and politics.

The celebration of The Daily Show is emblematic of a particular way of articulating the cultural work of humour to the political and social world, but it is far from being the only American popular cultural text that enacts this form of directly political humour in the twenty-first century. Such a category could also include examples such as the impersonation-based satire of Saturday Night Live, Daily Show precursor Bill Maher’s recent success with Real Time (2003-present), the animated critique of the successful South Park (1997-present), the Onion web portal and the political wing of other web sites like Funnyordie.com, and a host of political comedy talk-show variants hosted by Daily Show alumni: The Colbert
Report (2005-14), Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (2014-present), The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore (2015-16), and Full Frontal with Samantha Bee (2016-present). Moreover, this wide range of texts is not just indicative of the popular success of satire orientated towards the political sphere, but also maps out the key coordinates of an important cultural constellation that speaks to contemporary anxieties and desires regarding the political work of popular culture. This satirical constellation is held together not simply by a shared orientation towards politics, but also by an understanding of humour as a disruptive, critical force that unsettles convention and threatens politics as usual. At this level, humour emerges as the inheritor of a rebellious tradition of radical liberty and trickster dynamism: a conscious and critical intervention in the practice of politics whereby the humorous text itself emerges as a political act by bringing the “serious” practice of politics into the unregulated zone of the comic.

Such an account of the political power of humour constitutes the “political consciousness” of satirical humour: a seductive and self-congratulatory story that presents the effects of satire in heroic cultural political terms. This narrative has certainly captured the attention, and indeed the affections, of many scholars of both historical and contemporary humour. Such a critical model involves challenging the “reproduction” of politics as a site of eminent seriousness and thereby opens it up for question in a manner that Allon White identified as a “fundamental – perhaps the fundamental – hegemonic manoeuvre.” Satire so imagined thus appears as the direct negotiation of the boundaries of accepted political practice and attitudes. Unfortunately, such an explanation of satire is unfortunately incomplete insofar as it leaves out any engagement with the wider political, economic and cultural contexts which fundamentally shape and determine the production of those texts that constitute satire. Hence, while such an understanding of satirical humour as critique may seem politically desirable, that interpretation is complicated when we considered how the formal construction of satire might be determined by deeper levels of social and cultural structure: what can be thought of as the “political unconscious” of satire.

The concept of the political unconscious arises out of the work of Fredric Jameson where it is developed as means to account for the political and historical specificity of cultural texts under capitalism. Constituted across three levels – the immediate historical circumstances, the class struggles of a historical moment, and the broad inscription of the capitalist mode of production – the political unconsciousness captures “the repressed and buried reality of [the] fundamental [capitalist] history” that informs the ideological complexity of cultural texts. In the case of satire, the political unconsciousness provides a means for rethinking the commonsense political work claimed on the part of satire with particular attention to the role of humour as an aesthetic category. At its heart, this is a question of how the cultural form of satire relates to the political question of what satire can do in the world; and how the relative autonomy of a cultural form, like satire, might be understood in relation to the conditions of its production and legibility in a given historical moment.

At Jameson’s first level of political unconsciousness, that of immediate historical circumstance, contemporary American satire needs to be understood not simply a reflection of context, but rather as a symbolic act that emerges in response to that context. Such contextual details are what necessitate the proliferation of footnotes in contemporary editions of historical (or translated) works; so that the reader might appreciate the subtexts and sly allusions that inform scenes and characters. Indeed, if the future is such that we ever see a “scholarly edition” of The Daily Show, we can be sure that it will necessarily be accompanied by copious background notes explaining the particulars of this moment in American political history. Moreover, this is not simply the relatively straightforward point that understanding the satire of the early twenty-first century requires some knowledge of topics such as the “War on Terror,” the European Union and digital disruption, but also a larger point that the idea of satire as a form of critique is made possible by the political conditions of this moment. In particular, the casual contempt for the political class that informs (but does not over-determine) much of satire can be considered symptomatic of the fantasy of the “post-
political,” which satire alternately indulges in and repudiates. At this first level, then, the political unconsciousness of satire is bound up with the specific historical texture of its moment of production and can be productively compared to Raymond Williams’s concept of a “structure of feeling”: the unlearned social character that forms the implicit background for all cultural texts. The contemporary success of texts that address politics through humour is not therefore a coincidence, but a way of intervening in the formal and cultural terms enabled by a particular historical moment.

The second level of political unconsciousness addresses the way in which the text maps out “the structure of a particular political fantasy.” In shifting from the first to the second level, we might therefore say that we have moved from a structure of feeling to one of fantasy: one which expresses class struggle through an antagonistic dialogue of “two opposing discourses [that] fight it out within the general unity of a shared code.” So conceived, satire can be expected to speak simultaneously to opposing class interests by both expressing and containing challenges to the dominant order within its form. In terms of satire’s challenge the status quo, we can return to the utopian critique noted above as the political consciousness of satire, which can be understood as aligned with oppressed and disenfranchised groups in its disrespectful assault upon the hegemonic norms of politics as usual. Following Jameson, it is this critique that accounts for attractiveness of popular culture in general, and satire in particular. However, this utopian promise does not exhaust the ideological work of contemporary American satire, which not only evokes political anxieties and fantasies, but also manages them. In the case of satire, this ideological containment is carried out by the same aesthetic form by which the form is constituted: humour.

American satire does not offer a “straight” critique: instead, it employs the aesthetic form of humour that functions to both inform and refract – that is, redirects – any critical thrust. This is because the humour of such satire is not simply a statement that things are ‘wrong,’ but rather needs to be understood as a sustained reflection on a gap between the utopian ideals of the American political system and the complex, contingent nature of its concrete practice. To

27 Jameson, Political Unconscious, 48.
28 Ibid., 84.
declare that things are not working as they should is not to be comic; rather the comic only
emerges in the disjuncture between two competing explanations or frames of reference.29
What this means is satire’s critique only operates as humour so far as it locates itself within –
and draws attention to – a gap between ideal and actual forms of politics: if a text were to
focus only on the failure (or the ideal) it would not be humour. Instead, such humour requires
the movement between two different and somehow legitimate frameworks, which in turn
requires implicit retention of a belief in the ideal practice of politics as a viable, although very
distant, option. Such satire therefore only operates as humour insofar as it retains an implicit
belief in the system that it apparently attacks: contemporary American satire only function as
humour so long as it is read against a continued investment in the sanctity of the existing
political system and the failures of the political system are thus funny insofar as they are an
incongruous departure from a persistent belief in a proper form of politics, rather than the
ultimate failure and abandonment of that belief. In this way, satirical humour can be thus
understood as example of the ideological operation by which “real social contradictions …
find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm.”30 The aesthetic of humour requires
rather than a rejects a belief in the ultimate correctness and worthiness of American political
system and thereby resolves and recuperates the politics of any challenge that is mounted.

Taken in terms of the first two levels of political unconsciousness, contemporary American
satire thus appears as a cultural constellation that, first, emerges in response to the particular
demands of our current political moment and, second, which both expresses and represses
anxieties that emerge out of the manifestation of the American political system. This,
however, still leaves Jameson’s third and deepest level of the political unconscious – the
broad inscription of the capitalist mode of production – unaccounted for. This third level asks
us to consider how the form of satire itself might be determined by the context of neoliberal
capitalism: a much larger question that could be accounted for here.31 Such a question does,
however, point towards the importance of the aesthetic as a powerful determining factor

29 Salvatore Attardo, Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis (Berlin: Mouton
de Gruyter, 2001), 25; Simon Critchley, On Humour (London: Routledge, 2002), 2–6; John
Morreall, Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor (Chichester: Wiley-
Blackwell, 2009), 10; Jerry Palmer, The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television
30 Jameson Political Unconscious, 79.
31 I explore the question of humour as an aesthetic expression of neoliberal capitalism at
when accounting for the political work of popular culture. While the contemporary constellation of American satire certainly does provide expression for powerful and potentially politically productive desires, we should be wary to claims to critical efficacy often made (or simply just assumed) on satire’s behalf. What undercuts the political work of satire is not the form’s powerlessness, but rather the manner in which its own comic aesthetic elements work against the reading of any clear meaning. Such a conclusion does not mean that contemporary American satire is not political, but does suggest that when the formal aesthetic of humour is combined with the direct address of immediately political content there is a tendency for those two aspects to counteract one another. The political unconscious of contemporary American humour speaks the necessity of accounting for the ideological potential of aesthetic aspects of text, which can work to undercut or rearticulate the politics of even the most directly engaged interventions and therefore call on us to revisit, though not necessarily abandon, more radical claims towards the political work of American satire.