

DEFINING SATIRE

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The purpose of this paper is to define satire in such a way that allows for the work of art to be interpreted as, in part or whole, satirical. To orient the philosophical project, I want to invoke Northrop Frye's understanding of satire from his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye identifies what I will take to be the two fundamental components of satire, which are wit "founded on fantasy . . . or the absurd," and an attack against an object outside the text.¹ My project, then, will be to draw out a philosophical account of these two components, and create a definition that unifies them. This paper is formed of three sections. The first section will sketch an account of how satirical criticism functions. The second section will engage humour, and set out the place of humour within satire. The third section will give a definition of satire in accordance with the previous two sections, and then test that definition through applying it to a case study.

1 Interpretation, and how satire attacks its target

Figuring out the relationship between a satirical artwork and the object that artwork is attacking might be a good starting point for working out a definition of satire—because it forces the question not only of how the target is being attacked, but also how the 'figuring out' happens. To this end, I will introduce Gregory Currie's theory of interpretation as laid out in *Image and Mind*. Specifically, Currie holds that to

¹Frye 1957, p. 222-3.

interpret is “to hypothesize about the intentional causes of whatever it is being interpreted.”² Finding the intentions behind a work, however, is not a straightforward matter. Quizzing the author herself is unhelpful on two counts. The first is that there is space between what the author believes and what the author does, so that it is possible that a belief can be expressed by a work without it either being believed by the author or the author meaning to express it. The second is that some works may have many authors, possibly with conflicting intentions. It is difficult to ask about the intentions underlying a filmic scene when it displays the authority of dozens of people.³ There have, for instance, been documented cases where an actor and director on the same film have had conflicting intentions.⁴

Currie’s solution to the problems surrounding the obscurity of intentions begins with considering an artwork as the end result of intentional behaviour.⁵ The process of interpretation, on his view, is the reverse-engineering of the intentions that underlie an artwork by looking at it in its final state. Through this interpretive strategy, a new idealized hypothetical author is thought to be ‘implied.’ In Currie’s own words, implied author intentionalism is:

That the implied author intends P to be fictional means just that the text can reasonably be thought of as produced by someone intending the reader to recognize that P is fictional.⁶

The upshot of this strategy, with regard to the interpretation of a satirical work, is that we can figure out what, if anything, is being attacked by identifying evidence in the artwork itself.

The next task is to identify how the implied author, as constructed from textual evidence, manages to attack something external to the

²Currie 1995, p. 226.

³Any given scene can, for example, show the work of the screenwriters, directors, actors, set designers, and many others.

⁴One case being Harrison Ford and Ridley Scott disagreeing over the nature of Ford’s character in *Blade Runner* (Greenwald 2007).

⁵Currie 1995, p. 239.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 245.

work. Since the thing outside of the work is being attacked in the work, it must be represented in the work in some way. In identifying how this representation functions, it helps to take up some ideas of Gaut's, specifically relating to what he calls 'double objects'.⁷ A double object is the target of satirical criticism, and ties the external object of criticism to the text. There are two halves to a double object. Within the work there is the 'intentional object', which is the target of attack purely within the work.⁸ External to the work there is the 'model', which is both the ultimate target of attack and the basis of the intentional object.⁹ Anything may be used as a model: individual persons, political systems, or just clusters of ideas. The intentional object is similarly open-ended in possibility, but must bring together those elements of the model that are to be criticized. Accordingly, intentional objects are often individual persons, since turning abstract intellectual issues into character traits is a common literary device used to make such abstract issues more concrete.¹⁰ What is needed, then, is to explicate the relationship between the two—between the intentional object and the model.

The intentional object cannot simply be the model accurately and completely inserted into fiction, as that would reduce the work to mere invective. As an example, the characters in *An American Carol* (2008) taking turns to hit Michael Moore is not, as such, satirical. It is, rather, just a depiction of abuse. For the work to be properly satirical there has to be some sort of abstraction or misrepresentation in moving from the model to the intentional object. For an example of a satirical misrepresentation of Michael Moore, consider his appearance in *Team America: World Police* (2004). Here he is exaggerated as an America-hating terrorist, to the point where he suicide bombs the heroes' headquarters. Since there is a misrepresentation occurring, there is more being displayed than a simple antipathy towards Moore in this depiction. It is important to note that the misrepresentation

⁷Gaut 2007, p. 248.

⁸Ibid., p. 248.

⁹Ibid., p. 248.

¹⁰One good contemporary example of abstract ideas being represented in a single person is the character of Judge Dredd, who is a collation of technocratic and militaristic American ideals about policing.

is related to what is being criticized, and that it is not satirical to simply present a cruel misrepresentation of the model. For an example of a simply cruel misrepresentation, Michael Crichton, as an act of revenge against Michael Crowley,¹¹ wrote a character into his novel *Next* named Mick Crowley who was solely presented as a paedophile.¹²

Since, in accordance with Currie's theory of interpretation, the relationship between the intentional object and model must be identifiable in the work and, in cases of satire, the intentional object must misrepresent the model in some relevant way, the attack against the model must be conducted through the way in which it is misrepresented. This means that it is not enough for the model to be misrepresented, but that the misrepresentation must also be central to the criticism. For the misrepresentation to be central to the criticism, it can be the case that either the misrepresentation constitutes the criticism, or the criticism follows from the misrepresentation. An example of the former would be political or economic leadership being represented as a fat pig wearing a crown, showing leaders as gluttonous and ruling without concern for the broader population.¹³ Examples of the latter are often found in dystopian fiction, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where Los Angeles' consumerist hedonism is represented as a sterile society that has stifled virtue and human excellence. This explains why the Crowley case is not satire while the *Team America* case is. With Crowley, none of his attitudes or attributes are being misrepresented; he is simply cast as a paedophile. No judgment is manifested towards him beyond the evocation of a vague antipathy. With *Team America's* Moore, on the other hand, Moore's criticism of the United States is exaggerated into a deranged hatred, to the point that Moore takes on the characteristics of what the authors take to be the absolute enemies of America: Islamic terrorists. The model Moore is then not just being attacked, but being attacked for attitudes that he holds and has really expressed, and in a way that makes use of an

¹¹Crowley, as editor of *The New Republic*, had written an editorial critical of Crichton's writing on global warming.

¹²Lee 2006.

¹³For a straightforward example of this, see the music video for Billy Talent's 'Surprise Surprise'.

exaggerated representation of those views. It is this kind of attack, incorporating a misrepresentation of actual features of the target, that is the mark of the satirical.

2 Wit and humour in satire

If misrepresentation is the conduit between the model and the intentional object, wit is how the conduit operates. To elaborate on the function of wit, I want to use Gaut's distinction between prescribed and merited response.¹⁴ A prescribed response is one that an artwork invites an audience to take. A merited response, on the other hand, is the response that the audience *ought* to take. This distinction comes to the fore in genres like horror or comedy, where a film may prescribe terror or laughter in a situation that is not frightening or funny, respectively. With respect to comedies, Gaut applies the distinction to humour to emphasize that for something to be properly amusing what matters is not whether or not someone finds it funny, but whether or not it *merits* amusement.¹⁵ Requiring satirical misrepresentation to be amusing serves as a guarantor of the connection between the intentional object and the model: for the misrepresentation to be amusing it must not just accurately connect the intentional object and model, but it must do so in a way that accurately conveys a criticism of some sort. Recalling *Team America's* Moore, what is amusing is not just that the character of Moore is a terrorist, but specifically that it is *Moore who is being presented as a terrorist*. The amusement relevant to the satire derives in part from properties of the half of the double object external to the work.

That the connection through the double object has to be amusing does not mean that the work has to prescribe humour. It may be that the misrepresentation occurs at such a point or in such a way that another response, such as insight, awe, or admiration, crowds out any humour—but this does not undermine the role of the double object. Were someone to somehow fail to experience insight, awe, or admi-

¹⁴Gaut 2007, p. 231.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 246.

ration and still experience humour their amusement would still be merited. It could also be the case that the misrepresentation does not become apparent without extended reflection. In this case it would be possible to identify an element after the event as amusing without ever actually experiencing amusement. For example, with Huxley's *Brave New World*, the representation of early-century Los Angeles as a futuristic dystopia may never prescribe amusement but still be amusing after reflecting on the way that Los Angeles is misrepresented in the book. Despite this, humour still plays two very important roles in satire. The first is that it can serve a palliative role in making fundamentally unpleasant insights or topics more bearable. Its second, and arguably more important, role is to underscore to the audience that the artwork is in fact satirical. Satirists always run the risk of their satire being lost on the audience, so humour clarifies that not everything should be taken at face value. However, despite these two important roles of humour, neither plays to the question of whether or not a work is satirical to begin with.

3 A definition of satire, stated and applied

Combining the roles of misrepresentation (as facilitated by Currie's theory of interpretation) and wit (as facilitated by Gaut's notion of amusement), the following definition of satire might be plausible:

An artwork is satirical, in part or in whole, if it makes a criticism through the use of a double object where the double object operates through an amusing misrepresentation.

In interpreting a particular satirical work, we need to ask two questions. First, what are the intentional object and model of the double object? And second, how is the model misrepresented and what criticism does this misrepresentation convey? For example, consider the character Stephen Colbert, anchor of the satirical news show *The Colbert Report*.¹⁶ Here, the character is the intentional object, where the

¹⁶*The Colbert Report* is a particularly relevant piece of satire because of the way that audiences interact with it. A 2009 study showed that viewers, regardless of their own political ideology, would project their

model is Bill O'Reilly of Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*. The misrepresentation is one of exaggeration: Colbert seizes upon and amplifies O'Reilly's self-aggrandizement, nationalism, and aggressiveness. The criticism of O'Reilly, and those similar to him, is conveyed through the way that Colbert renders these characteristics ridiculous: for example, before an interview, instead of having the interviewee walk out to applause, Colbert will run out to the audience to pose and preen.

A trickier case is that of another comedy-news program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Here, rather than a character playing the intentional object to a particular model, different segments will constitute intentional objects that are modeled on trends or styles of reporting by 'serious' news networks. The misrepresentations usually vary by segment, but they frequently serve the same purpose, which is to draw attention to a particular foible of standard news reporting. As an example, a piece of ridiculous trivia that is treated with the utmost seriousness works to criticize the way self-serious news networks create stories out of irrelevancies. It is important to note that not everything about the show is satirical. Stewart, the host, will sometimes go on polemical rants that are not satirical, and where there is no double object—he is simply offering criticism. Similarly, the show will often give the news with jokes. Since there is again no double object or misrepresentation, news-with-jokes is not satirical.¹⁷

When interpreting works of art, it is important to distinguish between bad satire and failed satire. 'Bad satire' may refer to any piece of satirical artwork where one or more of its constitutive elements are particularly poor. 'Failed satire,' meanwhile, concerns the real creator of an artwork and their failure as an artist in producing a work of satire. Critically, bad satire is still satire, while failed satire is not. This distinction comes to the fore with cases of bad satire where an element is so bad that the instinctive reaction might be to consider the artwork to be a case of failed satire. Two examples of bad and failed satire re-

personal ideology on to the show as the show's underlying critical motivation (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009).

¹⁷It is arguable as to whether or not the show as a whole is satirical. Given that Stewart frequently insists that the show is not political, it is reasonable to infer that he himself conceives of the show as generally conforming to the news-with-jokes format.

spectively might be as follows: first, a misrepresentation is so spurious that the putative intentional object appears to bear no similarity to the model. Second, the criticism attempted by the misrepresentation is so ill formed and off-target that it appears to be no criticism at all.

Both cases may be solved, I propose, by appealing to the interpretive processes proposed by hypothetical intentionalism. So, for cases of the first kind, if an artwork may be reasonably interpreted such that its creator intended the intentional object to be a misrepresentation of the model, then the work may be considered a proper satire, albeit a bad one. Cases of this type crop up most frequently in political cartoons. Consider a cartoon of David Cameron, in a rabbit suit, holding a surfboard. What the rabbit suit or surfboard represent is utterly unclear but, owing to the context of this being a political cartoon it is fair to infer that they do represent something to do with current affairs involving the Prime Minister. While the meaning of the rabbit suit and surfboard may be obscure, it is still clear that Cameron is being misrepresented: the intentional object of the rabbit-suit-wearing Cameron allows for the identification of the model object, which is the real Cameron. It is important to emphasize that this cartoon only works as a satire of David Cameron. Were the artist attempting to create a satire of something else, and as such intended the rabbit suit and surfboard to constitute the intentional object, then the work would fail as satire because there is no way of identifying what would be the model objects.

There is another way that misrepresentation can come apart, which we saw above with the two Michael Moore examples. In *An American Carol*, Moore is simply inserted into the story as a victim of abuse. Here, instead of there being a spurious misrepresentation, there is simply no misrepresentation. If the makers of the film were intending this part of the film to satirize Moore, they failed. The misrepresentation of Moore in *Team America*, as a terrorist, may be trite and simplistic but it is still a misrepresentation with identifiable intentional and model objects. It may be bad, but it is not a failure.

Cases of the second kind, that is, ill-formed or off-target criticism, are solved in much the same as cases of the first kind, of spurious and

dissimilar misrepresentation. Often, failures in cases of the second kind will reduce to failures of the first kind: if an artist did such a poor job of articulating their would-be satirical criticism that the criticism is not identifiable in the final artwork, then it is likely that the would-be model object will not be identifiable in the work. However, there are times when double objects are identifiable but no real criticism is evident. The best examples of this might be Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer's series of parody films. One example, just one among many, would be when a character in *Disaster Movie*, modeled on Indiana Jones, is played by a black midget who proclaims "I am your father," a line famously belonging to the character Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. By dress and by name the character is clearly identifiable as the intentional object of Indiana Jones, but there is no criticism of which we can make sense. The Mick Crowley case is similar: Misrepresenting Michael Crowley as a paedophile, while creating an unflattering intentional object, does not convey any actual criticism of the real person Michael Crowley.

4 Concluding remarks

The definition of satire that I offer here is friendly to both the critic and audience-member, as it is primarily interested in the interpretation of works of art. It is a largely intuitive definition, I believe, as it concerns itself with connecting two important aspects of satire: humour and criticism. While a working definition of satire will open up avenues for future research, the test of such a definition will ultimately be in how easily and confidently it can be applied when interpreting works of art. To that end, I hope I have provided a useful tool for art interpretation and appreciation.

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