

Book review

Milner Davis, Jessica (ed.) (2017). *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice is introduced by Australian comedian and founding member of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) Rodney Marks, who draws from his experience as comedian, hoax speaker, and corporate impostor to explore whether satire can have a critical edge even when it is in close relationship with its targets, a question that is addressed by several chapters of *Satire and Politics*. Marks's foreword is followed by Jessica Milner Davis's editor's preface, in which she explains that the collection originated in a panel organised by the AHSN in 2015. Although the project started with a specifically Australasian perspective, the book in its final form comprises works on the Anglosphere in general, with an international frame of reference (p. xv). The nine chapters present research in both the humanities and social sciences, with three chapters on literature and cultural history, three on visual and media studies, a literature review, a discussion of quantitative research, and a final overview of the topic and of the book's multifaceted research.

In Chapter 1, "The satirist, the larrikin and the politician: An Australian perspective on satire and politics", Jessica Milner Davis & Lindsay Foyle retrace the trajectory of the image of the larrikin, a popular Australian figure generally depicted as challenging social conventions. Milner Davis & Foyle's chapter is well-documented and makes for a compelling read. The authors focus principally on the larrikin's representation in cartoons but are also attentive to the historical development of the figure in literature, television, and films, as well as to its use in the contemporary political sphere. The first five sections of the chapter (pp. 2-10) can be read not only as an introduction to this chapter, but also as an introduction to the book itself. Milner Davis & Foyle introduce the main themes and questions addressed by *Satire and Politics*. They then trace a brief history of political cartoons in Australia and of the figure of the larrikin. Starting from the 1880s, they show how the image of the larrikin has transitioned from the one of a boy, such as with the cartoon characters The Little Boy from Manly and Ginger Meggs, to one of a young man or soldier, such as Cecil Haart's Aussie Digger or Alex Gurney's Bluey and Curley. The authors point out that the long-lived Ginger Meggs (now almost a hundred years old) was originally a secondary character in a cartoon featuring a young girl as the protagonist (p. 16). Given this shift from female to male character and the connection between the larrikin and masculinity, I would have been interested to read the authors elaborate more on the lack of female larrikin images and on the gendered aspect of the image in general, although I am aware that this could be the subject of an entire article. Moving to the current use of the larrikin image by Australian politicians, the authors conclude by showing the ambivalence of a figure that is "both celebratory and ridiculing" (p. 22) and propose that the decrease in the presence of larrikin images nowadays might be due to a lesser desire to celebrate rebellion in the public sphere.

Chapter 2, "The populist elements of Australian political satire and the debt to the Americans and the Augustans," offers a rhetorical and historical study of the tradition of anti-politics rhetoric that has been dominant in the Anglosphere for three centuries. Mark Rolfe

locates the origins of this rhetorical tradition in the works of Augustan writers (particularly Swift, Pope, Gay) who criticised Horace Walpole's Whig Government, before tracing their influence in the United States, in Australia, and in contemporary UK. Looking at films, cartoons, television satires and the public image of politicians, Rolfe identifies the thematic recurrences at play across media and centuries: the image of lying politicians, the depiction of political rhetoric as vacuous spin, the antithetical images of party leaders as strong leaders or weathervanes, and the perceived arrogance of politicians. The author's main point is that these thematic recurrences all spring from the aggressive incongruity that is at the core of satire, and in the cases studied, from the incongruities and tensions between the ideal and the real that are "at the heart of representative democracy" (p. 63) and that necessarily flatten the complexities of politics. The analysis concludes with a critique of the popular belief that satirists speak truth to power, and of Foucault's work on truth-telling or "parrhesia" (Foucault 2001), which, according to Rolfe, does not take the rhetorical context enough into account (p. 62). Although the chapter moves through examples a bit quickly, it offers an insightful historical overview of the tradition of political satire in the Anglosphere.

In Chapter 3, "Under the guise of humour and critique: The political co-option of popular contemporary satire," Rebecca Higgie criticises the dominant contemporary discourse which presents satirists as truth tellers and satire as a vehicle for authenticity (p. 75). As she explains in her conclusion, her contribution aims at championing satire while moving away from uncritically positive or negative appraisals of it (p. 92). To arrive at her nuanced outcome, Higgie first reflects on satire's current cultural capital and on the lack of research on political co-option of satire. Working with a wide array of theoretical works on co-option, incorporation, and commodification, Higgie goes beyond the simplistic but pervasive idea that co-option entirely neutralises subversion, noting how "subversion actually becomes part of the politician's own image" when taking part in satire (p. 82). She indicates that, when using the vehicle of satire, politicians do not co-opt authenticity, but the *image* of authenticity, and play with our perception of satire as being critical, whether the critical edge is present or not (p. 84). She then considers two cases of politicians who have appeared on television satire, Nick Clegg on *The Last Leg* (2015) and Barack Obama on *The Colbert Report* (2014), analysing the discourse of the politicians in the satire and the media and public responses to the two cases. While Clegg's interaction with the satirist can be read as a good mediatic performance embedding quite frank political admissions, Obama's performance without Colbert can be read as a much gentler case of self-satire. Higgie's two case studies illustrate her claims on the complexity of the connection between co-option and satire, but the real strength of her chapter lies in the theoretical reflections of the first half of the chapter and on her strong and balanced conclusion.

Nicholas Holm's chapter, "The politics of deadpan in Australasian satire," looks at the apparent contradiction between satire, considered an active genre, and deadpan, perceived as a passive mode, and at their nevertheless frequent interplay in the Australasian context. Looking at deadpan as an aesthetic category, Holm traces a brief history of the word, of the performance style, and of the (lack of) criticism on the notion. Providing his own definition of deadpan (p. 105), he proposes to extend the understanding of the term from a performance style limited to the body of the performer, to an aesthetic mode pertaining to the whole comic work. The features of deadpan in television satire would then range from an absence of laugh track or soundtrack to the use of a single-camera comedy format. These, and other features aimed at removing conventional markers of the comic, are evidenced in Holm's three case studies, the series *Clarke and Dawe*, an episode of *Jon Safran's Race Relations*, and an episode of *Flight of the Conchords* ("Drive by", which showcases a New Zealand perspective). The pertinence and originality of Holm's discussion emerge in his reconceptualisation of deadpan as an active mode and his reading of the political aesthetics of deadpan satire as

conventional within the Australasian context. Engaging with Lauren Berlant's work on flat affect (Berlant 2015), which she reads not as a passive retreat but as a rejection of familiar categories and particularly of melodrama, Holm reads deadpan, or "flat humour", as an active intervention that can prevent interpretative closure and enable the retention of polysemy (p.108). As he shows in his analyses, the openness and indirectness of deadpan, when used in the context of satire, often mean that "this satire leaves us with the impression of a purpose but not of a direction" (p.119). Reconceptualising deadpan as open and active does not mean that this "flat humour" can be read as an act of resistance. Replacing deadpan satire in the Australasian context, Holm notes that, unlike in the USA, the politics of indirectness fall in the mainstream and deadpan satire should be read as a conventional rather than resisting genre, albeit a genre that can still leave room for polysemy and uncertainty.

In Chapter 5, "Towards a discipline of political cartoon studies: Mapping the field", Khin Wee Chen, Robert Phiddian & Ronald Stewart provide a critical literature review of research on political cartoons across a wide range of subfields. As they specify in their conclusion, there are very few comprehensive studies like this one, and the existing ones often fail to distinguish between academic work and journalism (p. 148). This chapter maps the current state of political cartoon studies by looking at ninety-two academic studies in English grouped in six major subfields of research: meta-studies; properties of political cartoons; political cartoons as cultural mirrors; political cartoons' impact as politics; audience reception studies; and the cartoon ecosystem. In light of their synthesis, the authors identify areas of research that are not developed enough, such as humour-focused or comparative studies. They also note that the two most substantial areas of research are those dealing with audience response, and with conceptual metaphor studies. Yet, while the former's scope is currently limited, often concentrating mostly on youth response, the latter often fails to build on previous research. More importantly, the major weaknesses of the current state of research are that cartoons are never at the centre of any field of study, and that there is no sustained attention or long-term engagement from scholars (p. 145). The authors advocate for the development of research on political cartoons and thus encourage fellow researchers to come together to find a name for their discipline and to develop a set of definitions for the basic terms used in the field (p. 129). They also point out the need for more forums, conferences, and publications specific to their field. In light of these more general goals for the development of their field, Chen, Phiddian & Stewart's chapter does a good job at laying a common ground for future research.

While Chapter 5 dealt with the state of research on political cartooning, Chapter 6, "The evolution of political cartooning in the new media age: Cases from Australia, the USA and the UK", shifts to the current state of the practice of political cartooning in the Anglosphere. The author of the chapter, Lucien Leon, who is both a researcher and a practitioner of political animations, starts by highlighting a few major changes in the situation of political cartoonists, and most prominently the drastic decline in numbers of editorial cartoonists and the switch to syndicated cartoonists, especially in the USA. The core of the chapter is then dedicated to general observations on the strategies currently employed by political cartoonists active in new media, both in the production and in the dissemination of their work. In terms of production, Leon points out that animation and video mash-ups constitute the most radical shift (p. 168). These practices, which necessitate the cartoonist to develop a new set of skills, and which are extremely time-consuming and expensive, lead us to rethink the temporality of the relationship between the news and cartoons. With regards to dissemination, the main paradigm shift would come from a subversion of the cartoonist-editor-print-reader model. Although it remains quite general, Leon's chapter is a fair overview of the state of the field which points out that one of the main challenges for cartoonists might be to reconsider the spontaneous nature of the work when newspapers are no longer its main vehicle.

In Chapter 7, “The effects of satire: Exploring its impact on political candidate evaluation,” Alison O’Connor presents research she conducted on the impact of written satire on the self-reported evaluation of political candidates, thus providing empirical data that can complement and nuance claims on the power of satire made in literary and political studies. O’Connor’s chapter thoroughly presents the place, goals, findings, and limitations of her research. Her study seeks to address two main limitations of previous research: the failure to account for the audiences’ choice to be exposed to satire, and the failure to take into account the informational aspect of satire. Participants in her study were proposed four treatments. They were either assigned a piece of news, humour or satire, or given a free choice between the three types of reading, thus mimicking the audience’s choice to opt in real-life satire. It would have been pertinent to provide us with the reading material given to the participants of the study; although this might not have been possible within the limits of the printed volume, online access to the material might have been a good option. The post-test evaluation of political candidates allowed the researcher to see whether satire had a specific impact and under which conditions. In both the allocated group and in the choice group, satire turns out to have had no distinct effect when compared to the reading of a news piece. In the allocated group, both satire and news lead to a more positive evaluation of political candidates than humour, but in the choice group, on the contrary, satire and news both lead to a more negative evaluation of candidates. The impact of satire would therefore be much more crucially influenced by the circumstances of viewing than current theory proposes (p. 215). When mandatory, the exposure to satire would confirm the saying that “all publicity is good publicity” (p. 214), but the critical edge of satire would have a much more pronounced impact when satire is chosen. O’Connor’s chapter is thorough and well-structured. While the quantitative nature of her work differs from the other chapters and can make for a more difficult reading for readers who do not have a background in quantitative research, it is written in a clear and compelling way which makes it an enlightening read.

Chapter 8, “*Yes, Minister, Yes, Prime Minister*: The theoretical dimension,” looks at two 1980s British situation comedies that might not have been intended by their writers to be satirical, but that were certainly perceived as such by viewers and politicians. In his discussion of the shows’ main motifs, structure and reception, Conal Condren stresses how the lack of development and of direction of this type of television satire accentuates the idea that political activity and bureaucracy aim at perpetuating the organisation itself and at leaving everything unchanged (p. 241). Condren’s discussion of the use of language in the two shows and reflection on political language in general is the most compelling section of the chapter. To analyse the constant play with language at the core of the two shows, Condren goes back to George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Politics and the English language” (Orwell 1981), which advocates for the use of clear, simple language. Condren nuances Orwell’s positive appraisal of simplicity, observing how simple language can also mislead (p. 248). In the context of the two satires analysed, Condren focuses his discussion on the use of mixed metaphors and euphemisms, highlighting the multifaceted effect both can have. While mixed metaphors can be signs of an empty discourse but also be used as a means of clarification or to reassure an audience, euphemisms can be markers of avoidance, but also signal a more constitutive clash of perspectives.

The final chapter, “Have they no shame? Observations on the effects of satire,” is both a nuanced reflection on the powers attributed to satire, and a conclusion that brings together the work presented in the eight other chapters of *Satire and Politics*. Robert Phiddian offers a balanced take on the connection between satire and politics, pointing out that the former is inseparable from the latter, and is indeed “part of the noise of politics” (p. 254). Framing satire not as a genre but as a mode, Phiddian stresses that it should not be studied within a single discipline but through an interdisciplinary approach that can truly render justice to its form, its

intention, and its impact. In his critical overview of the previous chapters, Phiddian notes that satire can be both a form of populist anti-politics and a vehicle for co-option by politicians, two modes that are not in opposition, but in dynamic tension. Identifying the revealing powers of satire (which can expose corruption) and its cathartic and conservative functions (satire's channelling of negative emotions can help to maintain status quo), Phiddian critiques the perception of satire as an unequivocally positive secret weapon. Picturing satire as "a sort of rhetorical garbage removal service" (p. 261) and play space for the exercise of freedom of speech, the author concludes that it constitutes a channel that should be appreciated and protected.

Satire and Politics takes up the challenge of making us appreciate the play space provided by satire, and of taking its impact seriously. Its combination of subjects and approaches makes it a well-rounded collection that I strongly recommend. At once timely and rooted in history, the volume provides a critical perspective on the current overwhelming presence of satire in multiple media (particularly television satire and political cartoons), while grounding its exploration in historical research, ensuring that it does not fall into the trap of picturing our contemporary moment as unique. It also actively advocates for an increased connection between the theory and practice of satire in its all its guises, with some of its contributors also practitioners of satire (Marks, Leon, and Foyle). Depending on the reader's field of research, *Satire and Politics* will be of interest for its exploration of broad issues related to the nature and impact of satire (Chapters 3, 4, 7, 9), as well as for more media-specific and more historically grounded discussions (Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 8), although most chapters achieve a successful balance between general and specific insights.

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