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A definition of satire (and why a definition matters)

There is a consensus that satire cannot be defined, but is best characterised by a cluster account. However, I argue that a cluster account does not acknowledge the artistically and politically significant distinction between real satire and some forms of frivolous topical comedy which are casually labelled ‘satire’ in international media contexts. To uphold this distinction, I introduce a weak proposal that satire is a genre which necessarily sets out to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). I further argue that this proposal also provides necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of satire.

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing scholarly consensus that a definition of satire, which identifies necessary and sufficient conditions, is impossible (see Griffin 1994; Test 1991; Elliot 1984). Instead, scholars commonly settle for a characterisation of satire through a family-resemblance cluster of non-essential features (see Condren 2012). However, others have argued that some forms of frivolous topical comedy, which are casually identified as ‘satire’ in international media contexts, really are something else (Peterson 2008, 23-26). Crucially, although this distinction holds interpretative and political significance, a cluster account fails to adequately support it. Therefore, a definition of satire matters.

My proposal for a definition is that satire is a genre which since Roman times has guided the interpretation and evaluation of works on the ground of their purpose to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). I first formulate this proposal in a weak version, according to which intended critique and entertainment (in their specific interaction) are necessary conditions for satire. I further defend the strong proposal that these conditions are also jointly sufficient for satire.

Although the strong proposal may appear too accommodating, I argue it nonetheless adequately reflects common classificatory practices. Still, should critics remain unconvinced by my strong proposal, the weak proposal already notably improves on a cluster account, because it identifies the central dynamic in satire between its moral function as critique and aesthetic function as entertainment. Thus, my proposal improves our understanding of satire’s artistic and political significance and outlines pathways to clarify its ambiguous reception.

II. THE INTUITIVE APPEAL OF A CLUSTER ACCOUNT

There is a consensus that satire has no essential features because it is infamously “protean,” manifesting itself in so many various forms, in different cultures and across the ages (Test 1991, 256; Hodgart 1969, 13). Therefore, some scholars intuitively dismiss attempts at defining satire in favour of a cluster account (see Condren 2012; Elliot 1962). However, despite its intuitive appeal, I question the validity of a cluster account of satire.

Satire is indeed very varied, from Horace’s *Satires* through Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and contemporary Nigerian poetry (Akingbe 2014). Further, critics sometimes only identify parts of works as satirical, like moments in Jenji Kohan’s *Orange Is The New Black*, a comedy-drama series about day-to-day life in a women’s prison (Bramesco 2015). Specifically,

the series develops satirical moments from season three onwards when Litchfield Penitentiary is corporatized and a managerial culture of greed and negligence is exposed.

The ambit of satire is also regularly expanded to sociohistorical contexts unfamiliar with the label, such as the folk literature of the Khoi, an indigenous people of present-day South Africa (Wittenberg 2014). Moreover, scholars have also argued that non-artistic expressions like political speeches sometimes have satirical qualities (Harrington and Manji 2013).

Because of this variety, Robert C. Elliot argued that “there are no properties common to all the uses” of satire (1962, 22). According to Elliot, “[n]o strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word that signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature (...) and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself in many literary genres but can also enter into almost any kind of human communication” (1984). More recently, Conal Condren also dismissed a possible definition of satire, instead favouring a cluster account (2012).

If a concept can only be characterised by a cluster account, it means “there are no properties that are individually necessary conditions for [an] object to fall under [that] concept,” which entails that “one cannot define that concept, in the sense of fixing individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for it” (Gaut 2005, 274). In this respect, Condren suggests characterising satire “by virtue of a contingent range of characteristics, some of which overlap sufficiently between members of the group for a resemblance to be created” (2012, 386).

Although Condren does not develop a cluster account in detail, he suggests a few non-essential characteristics of satire, including “moral criticism,” “amusement,” “group consolidation,” alongside “ridicule, irony, or some form of humor” (2012, 386). If further developed, this list would likely be extensive, plausibly also including absurdity, analogy, attack, fantasy, grotesquery, exaggeration, transgression, etc. I also assume that for something to qualify as satire, it would have to be characterised by at least some characteristics in this list. Likewise, central cases of satire are likely to exhibit many of these characteristics, while marginal cases only few.

Crucially, because the intuition that satire’s variety precludes necessary conditions is so strong, proposals for a cluster account can be suggestive but nonetheless appealing. However, despite its intuitive appeal, I dispute that a cluster account adequately delimits satire, regardless of its further development in detail. Concretely, because a cluster account does not stipulate any necessary conditions for satire, it cannot distinguish satire from closely related phenomena which really are something else.

III. CHALLENGES TO A CLUSTER ACCOUNT

There are two principal distinctions that a cluster account of satire is unable to accommodate. The first distinction is between non-humorous satire and other non-humorous critical art, like Picasso’s *Guernica*. The second distinction, which holds particular political and interpretative significance, is between satire and certain types of political comedy which are often casually identified as satire, like BBC’s *Mock the Week*. I argue that the former distinction hinges on the necessary condition of entertainment and the latter on the necessary condition of critique.

To start, a cluster account struggles to distinguish satire from other non-humorous critical art. In this respect, Condren rightfully dismisses humour as a necessary condition for satire. For one, he identifies “the notion of ‘comic satire’ to distinguish a less serious kind of satire from works in imitation of Juvenal” (2012, 389). Although Juvenal’s oeuvre is surely not entirely humourless, Condren is right that humour is not central to all his satires, nor does it define his style. Condren also alludes to “the customary designation of Orwell’s *1984* as satire” (2012, 389).

In this regard, Erika Gottlieb explains that “[a]lthough Orwell himself referred to the novel [*1984*] as both satire and parody [concepts he used interchangeably], many of his critics had difficulty reconciling the stark hellscape of Oceania and the irony and humour popularly associated with satire” (1992, 261). In response, Gottlieb claims that some satire cultivates “a sense of the ‘grotesque or absurd’, which is quite distinct from the more popular, comic, or light-hearted examples of ‘wit and humour’” (1992, 262). Another example of non-humorous satire is Jimi Hendrix’s live performance of the American national anthem at Woodstock, which I discuss in more detail below.

However, although humour is not essential for satire, it does not automatically follow that there are no other necessary conditions for satire. Moreover, rather than undermining a definition, non-humorous satire ultimately really problematizes a cluster count. Condren himself signals the issue when he wonders “[i]f [*Orwell’s 1984*] is satirical, so too might be Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*” (2014, 662). Of course, as Condren intuitively acknowledges, *Guernica* is not commonly classified as satire and it is definitely not a clear case. Yet, following the cluster account introduced above, *Guernica* would clearly qualify as satire, for it exhibits many of the listed characteristics, including moral criticism, absurdity, attack, grotesquery, exaggeration and transgression.

Since there are no immediate reasons to exclude any of these characteristics from a cluster account of satire, *Guernica*’s satirical status can only be challenged by identifying at least one necessary condition for satire that Picasso’s painting lacks. I propose that this condition is entertainment. In brief, to argue that Picasso designed *Guernica* for our enjoyment would be a gross misinterpretation of the work. By contrast, although *1984* is serious and emotionally intense, we do not misinterpret Orwell’s novel if we also simply enjoy his clever parallels between the USSR under Stalin and life in the authoritarian Airstrip One, especially through inventive Newspeak neologisms like doublethink, Ingsoc and the Ministry of Love.

In this respect, Gottlieb explains that “*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an undeniably complex and ‘highbrow,’ but also an exceptionally readable and ‘popular’ book” (1992, 60). Similarly, despite his gravity, Niall Rudd and Edward Courtney explain that “in his own dreadful way, Juvenal is an immensely entertaining writer” (1977, 6). In section IV, I discuss the centrality of entertainment to satire in further detail.

For now, I address a more pressing challenge to the adequacy of a cluster account. In contemporary international media contexts, certain types of comedy about politics that lack a moral dimension are often casually identified as satire, but really are something else. In this respect, Russell Peterson has argued that *Saturday Night Live* or Jay Leno’s monologues are really ‘pseudo-satire’ because they generally ridicule politics without taking a moral stand (2008, 23-26). Similarly, when accepting the

Herblock Prize for editorial cartooning, Jen Sorensen inscribed her work in Herblock's satirical tradition by explaining that "he drew from a clear moral perspective" and did not "go for innocuous, crowd-pleasing Jay Leno-style gags" (2014).

However, Condren's cluster account does not acknowledge such a moral dimension as essential to satire and therefore cannot acknowledge the distinction between satire and pseudo-satire. Specifically, Condren grants that "satire can contract into really being only a joke" (2012, 392). Although Condren does not provide specific examples of "purely comic satire", I take it he is alluding exactly to examples like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (2012, 392). Crucially, Condren's cluster account cannot uphold this distinction between satire and pseudo-satire because he considers the pervasiveness of "moral seriousness" or "ethical critique" in satire to be a non-essential feature, not a necessary condition (2012, 391).

Concretely, a cluster account cannot distinguish between the satire of HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and the pseudo-satire of BBC's *Mock the Week*, on which Oliver made his television debut. Although both shows share characteristics like absurdity, attack, grotesquery, exaggeration, humour, irony and transgression, they are nonetheless fundamentally different. In its first season, *Last Week Tonight* received a Peabody Award for "bringing satire and journalism even closer together" (Peabody 2014). By contrast, although *Mock the Week* is also marketed as satire, a producer identifies it as a show with "jokes about politicians being fat and ugly" (Sherwin 2013).

The difference between *Last Week Tonight* and *Mock the Week* is clear from their respective approach to scandals involving the international football organisation, FIFA. For example, in a long segment on the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, Oliver draws on selected footage from news reports to reveal that despite the host country's considerable investments, only FIFA and its executives will reap the financial rewards of the event ("FIFA and the World Cup"). To drive his critique home, Oliver addresses Brazil

in terms [it] might understand. Think of money as pubic hair and FIFA as wax. Oh, they're going to be all over you during the World Cup, but when they go, they're taking all the money with them, including some from places where you didn't even know you had any money, leaving you teary-eyed, going Jesus, what happened here?! Wooh! What? What happened? I'm never doing this again!

Similarly, Oliver mentions the construction of a stadium so deep in the rainforest that it cannot be reached by car and will remain unused after the World Cup, when it will become "the world's most expensive bird toilet". After roughly thirteen minutes, Oliver concludes by stating "I hope I've proven to you that FIFA is just appalling."

Oliver's satire of FIFA contrasts clearly with a segment from *Mock the Week* in which six panellists (professional comedians) are asked to complete the initials of a headline (B.S.I.P) accompanied by a picture of David Beckham handing a present to FIFA president Sepp Blatter ("Mock the Week"). The multiple guesses of the panellists, including "Is it 'Bean Sprouts in Package?'" , "Blatter Steals Idiot's Pizza?" and "Beckham's Spelling is Ph-unny?" , exclusively aim to amuse and ridicule. Although a couple of jokes in the segment are critical of FIFA and its executives, the panellists mostly indulge in

fangless jokes about Sepp Blatter's name "sound[ing] like set platter" or "like a German guy asking for a step ladder."

Crucially, while both shows are often casually identified and even explicitly marketed as 'satire', *Last Week Tonight* serves a critical function which on the whole absent is from *Mock the Week*. In this respect, critics have dismissed *Mock the Week* as "a parade of dick jokes", wondering "isn't this supposed to be a satirical swipe at the news?" (Logan 2015). The point is that marketing *Mock the Week* as satire introduces expectations of a critical purpose which the show does not set out to fulfil and therefore makes it seem artistically worse than it is. Instead, *Mock the Week* seeks to fulfil the purpose of a comic panel show – and as a comic panel show, it is arguably quite good. For this reason, *Mock the Week* is not poor satire, but it is not satire at all.

Apart from interpretative significance, the label 'satire' also holds political significance because it is often invoked to defend transgressive media. In this respect, Kurt Tucholsky (1919) argued that satirists are offended idealists allowed to go to any lengths in exposing malice. However, because of casual connotations with pseudo-satire, the label 'satire' has nowadays also become a fig leaf to justify malicious shock humour. Take the jokes of Scottish stand-up comedian Frankie Boyle about the disability of Harvey Price, son of glamour model Jordan. In *Tramadol Nights*, Boyle joked, "I have a theory that Jordan married a cage fighter, because she needed someone strong enough to stop Harvey from fucking her" (2010). Defending Boyle, a spokesperson for broadcaster Channel 4 argued that his jokes were a "satirical comment on high profile individuals whose lives have been played out in the media" (Sanchez 2010).

Such conflation with malicious shock humour contributes to confusion about the political significance of satire. To use another example, to spite Turkey's authoritarian regime, German comedian Jan Böhmermann delivered an outrageously offensive poem in his show *Neo Magazin Royale*, ironically calling President Erdogan a goatfucker and child molester (2016). In defence, publisher Matthias Döpfner praised Böhmermann's satire as a moral act of necessary crassness against undemocratic malice (2016). By contrast, liberal MEP Guy Verhofstadt tolerated Böhmermann's poem as "not my taste in humor, but in a free society such satirical poems must be possible" (Spiegel Staff 2016). Crucially, there is a politically significant difference between defending the right to speak truth to power and defending the tolerance of ridicule.

In conclusion, the distinction between satire and pseudo-satire holds both interpretative and political significance. Importantly, this distinction cannot be upheld by a cluster account. As explained, although both *Mock the Week* and *Last Week Tonight* serve a function as entertainment, the former lacks the latter's additional function as critique. Since a cluster account does not identify critique as a necessary condition for satire, it cannot acknowledge this distinction between the two. Further, a cluster account also inappropriately identifies non-humorous critical art like *Guernica* as satirical because it does not identify entertainment as a necessary condition for satire. Therefore, despite its intuitive appeal, a cluster account does not adequately delimit satire.

IV. DEFINING SATIRE: THE WEAK PROPOSAL

Since a cluster account of satire is inadequate, I attempt a definition. For now, I introduce a weak proposal, which identifies critique and entertainment as necessary conditions for satire (with the

qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). In its weak version, my proposal leaves it open if there are further necessary conditions for satire. Nevertheless, the weak proposal is more normatively adequate than a cluster account because it distinguishes satire from pseudo-satire, but also clarifies the common confusion between the two (see Gaut 2005, 281). Moreover, this proposal has heuristic utility because it identifies a central dynamic in satire which has been acknowledged in discussions since antiquity (see Gaut 2005, 283).

In this respect, scholars have said that “[t]he satirist holds a place half-way between the preacher and the wit” (Wolfe 1929, 7) and “though he [sic] may enjoy his talent and may hope that we will enjoy it too, the satirist normally avows a more serious intent” (Pollard 1970, 1). Further, satire has been called “a weapon and a toy” (Nokes 1987, 17), which “aims to entertain and amuse as well as to inform and reform” (Brown 1993, 3). Similarly, satire has been said to stimulate “jest and earnest” (Highet 1962, 233) and “combines aggressive denunciation with some aesthetic features which can cause pure pleasure in the spectator” (Hodgart 1969, 10). My proposal is that this central doubleness of satire is most appropriately defined as an essential combination of critique and entertainment.

I understand critique as a committed moral opposition against a target, sustained by an analysis of that target’s perceived social wrongness. Some examples of critique include campaigning against modern slavery, publishing a pamphlet to end gender inequality or advocating to ban single-use plastic.

To specify, when we critique, we target issues about which we cannot agree to disagree: instead, we are morally compelled to oppose them. Further, the moral motivations underlying critique have a social dimension which exceeds private or personal concerns (as opposed to, say, suing for defamation). Critique’s moral opposition also exceeds merely expressing disapproval, but involves a committed effort towards resolving or alleviating the target’s perceived social wrongness, if only by raising awareness about it. To that purpose, critique always involves an analysis of the perceived wrongness of the target.

Importantly, although critique is driven by moral motivations, it is not necessarily morally right. Take the recent political campaigns of *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, a party which opposes targets that allegedly undermine German identity, including immigration, feminism and gay marriage. Although they are deeply morally flawed, *AfD*’s racist, sexist and homophobic campaigns are true instances of critique.

The emotional dimension of critique as a committed act of moral opposition has been frequently acknowledged in scholarship on satire. In this respect, James Sutherland has claimed it is “the mark of the satirist that he [sic] cannot accept and refuses to tolerate” and is “driven to protest” (1958, 4). Similarly, Catherine Keane has explained that Juvenal identified anger as “a kind of communal emotional pulse”, which “has led many readers to believe that this is the true nature of satire” (2015, 11).

Crucially, while this moral and emotional drive to critique is central to satire, it is absent from pseudo-satire. Concretely, whereas John Oliver is visibly angry and protests the practices of FIFA executives with an eye to their termination, the panel members on *Mock the Week* cultivate the FIFA scandals as an opportunity for frivolous mockery. Regardless, although satire is necessarily morally motivated, it

is not necessarily morally good. Perhaps the most striking example of morally flawed satire is the Nazi's anti-Semitic satire magazine, *Die Brennessel*.

At the same time, satire does not only set out to critique, but also to entertain. On my proposal, something is entertaining when it provides aesthetic experiences which are fun and divertive. Along these lines, I understand entertainment as a classification which applies to artefacts and performances principally designed to deliver such fun and divertive aesthetic experiences. Some examples of entertainment include thrillers by Alfred Hitchcock, professional cycle races and quiz shows.

Entertainment is an aesthetic classification, because we appeal to aesthetic concepts to clarify why we find something entertaining. We say that Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* is entertaining because it is suspenseful. Similarly, a quiz shows cultivates suspense with every new question, as we wonder whether the candidate will know the answer or falter. Professional road cycling, too, cultivates suspense, as audiences tensely anticipate where the favourites will attempt a breakaway or speculate whether the leaders will stay up front.

In this respect, most flat stages in the latest editions of *Le Tour de France* are boring because there is no doubt that the peloton will retrieve the breakaway group before the finish. In other words, these stages fail to entertain because they fail to deliver suspense. *Mutatis mutandis*, the success of entertainment depends on the success of the aesthetic experiences it is principally designed to deliver.

Specifically, I propose that the aesthetic experiences which constitute entertainment are characterised by a functional dimension of diversion and an emotional dimension of fun. This proposal develops a distinction introduced by Plato in *Phaedrus* "between the farmer's serious business and what he might do in a different spirit," more specifically as a "pastime" that gives "pleasure" (276c; see Shusterman 2003, 294).

Entertainment has a divertive function. When we are entertained, we are absorbed in certain aesthetic experiences that divert our attention from the seriousness of everyday life. Such aesthetic diversion is not a strenuous activity and claims no greater significance than providing leisure. In other words, we pursue entertainment for fun. As a fun pursuit, entertainment is also inherently enjoyable and emotionally joyous.

In this respect, Geoffrey Grigson explains that "[w]hatever satirical poets may have said about their moral or reforming or punitive intentions (...) [t]hey have enjoyed it; and we enjoy what they have written, without apology" (1980, v). Similarly, James Sutherland explains that as far as satirists preach to amend the world, "[i]t is fun for the preacher, and fun for the congregation" (1958, 25).

As discussed above, while John Oliver's satire has a moral function as a critique, it also functions as easeful enjoyment in a leisurely context. Similarly, Jimi Hendrix's "satirically intended" version of "The Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock critiques the Vietnam War by combining the sounds of the American national anthem with tunes of "Taps," the bugle call played at American military funerals (Hutcheon 1985, 87). At the same time, Hendrix's performance also explicitly cues aesthetic admiration for his virtuosic skill as a rock guitarist. Hendrix is showing off and the audience is supposed to enjoy it.

Similarly, even more 'serious' satirists like Juvenal and Swift pursue divertive and fun aesthetic experiences. In this respect, John Dryden argued that Juvenal "gives me as much Pleasure as I can bear" (1900 [1693], 81-84). Likewise, John Bullitt explains that Swift's "delight in puns and verbal wit of all kinds, which so amused and attracted his many friends (...) frequently find their gratuitous place in even the most serious of his satires" (Bullitt 1966, 6). Paul Turner likewise explains that *Gulliver's Travels* "was a bestseller when it first came out in 1726, and people have been reading it for pleasure, not merely for profit, ever since" (1986, ix).

This dynamic between critique and entertainment has been central to satire since its inception in antiquity. In this regard, the Roman satirists of the first century BCE, including Horace, modelled their understanding of satire on their predecessor Lucilius. In particular, Horace argued that Lucilius's satire had a moral function as critique by comparing him to the writers of Old Comedy, who "if anyone deserved to be noted down for being a villain and a thief (...) would show great freedom of speech in branding him" (*Satires* 1.4, 2-6). At the same time, Horace acknowledged satire's aesthetic function, arguing that Lucilius "was witty, with an acute nose, but rough in composing his verses" (1.4, 9-10).

Crucially, like Lucilius himself, Horace explicitly distinguished satire's aesthetic function from more elevated poetic equivalents like epic and tragedy by stating "I play about with these trifles" (1.10, 38). In this regard, the Romans originally situated satire in a context of aristocratic play, in contrast to (or as a preparation for) the seriousness of real life (Habinek 2006). As entertainment, satire has remained popular and lowbrow in various socio-historical contexts, even if some satires are now canonical (Nokes 1987, 8; Hodgart 1969, 10; Highet 1962 3). In this respect, Anne Kelly clarifies that even "Swift devoted most of his energies to publishing popular literature for a general audience" and therefore some "contemporaries condemned his publications as 'low'" (2002, 2).

So far, I have argued that, since its inception in antiquity, satire necessarily sets out to critique and entertain. I now further propose that critique and entertainment in satire must also interact. Take Hendrix's satirical "The Star-Spangled Banner", in which he skilfully distorts the chords of the American national anthem to mimic the carnage of bombs falling on Vietnamese villages. While Hendrix's skilful distortions are indispensable to the critical success of his satire, they also contribute to its aesthetic success as entertainment. In this regard, when performing at the Atlanta International Pop Festival in 1970, Hendrix playfully opened "Purple Haze" with distorted chords from "The Star-Spangled Banner" – just for fun.

Similarly, the use of analogy in John Oliver's satire of FIFA serves both a critical and entertaining function. When Oliver compares a stadium that will remain unused after the World Cup to "the world's most expensive bird toilet", he both entertains and attacks the unsustainability of FIFA's organisational practices. Moreover, had the analogy not been insightful, it would also fail to be funny. Likewise, if Oliver's satire failed to successfully entertain, its critique would also follow suit.

To sum up, I propose that satire not only necessarily sets out to critique and entertain, but that these two purposes must interact. An interesting counterexample is the British magazine *Private Eye*. On the one hand, *Private Eye* incorporates investigative journalism in a style which is casual but stops short of entertainment. On the other hand, the magazine publishes cartoons and gags which seek to

entertain, but lack clear critical intent. For this reason, although *Private Eye* is commonly classified as a satire magazine, it contains little actual satire.

At the same time, although critique and entertainment necessarily interact in satire, neither purpose is instrumental to the other. In particular, it is important to stress that satire is not critique *through* entertainment – even if satirists like Horace sometimes present it as such to legitimise their practice. Despite Horace’s self-professed didacticism, modern commentators agree that he also designed his *Satires* to be entertainment in its own right (Brown 1993, 11-12; Rudd 1979, 21). Similarly, a modern satirist like John Oliver stresses that he simply revels in “spectacle” for the sake of it (Marchese 2016). As an example, Oliver once had an impressive fireworks display lighting up behind his desk simply to mock and outdo the low-budget video messages of FIFA executive Jack Warner (“John Oliver Strikes Back”).

This pursuit of entertainment for its own sake distinguishes satire from other critical art and media. Take Ken Loach’s *I, Daniel Blake*, a bitter critique of the British welfare system. Interestingly, lead actor Dave Johns is a stand-up comedian and the film does have entertaining moments of darkly absurd humour. However, whatever entertaining moments Loach’s film may have, they are not pursued for their own sake but strictly function in a solemn and didactic aesthetic project that cultivates bemusement and desperation. Likewise, although Picasso’s horrific representation of war in *Guernica* serves a similar critical function as Hendrix’s skilful evocation of bombs falling on Vietnam, it is not also designed as a spectacle for our easeful enjoyment. Instead, *Guernica* disturbs and invites a more solemn aesthetic appreciation that defies the leisureliness of entertainment.

This distinction between satire and critical media like *Guernica* and *I, Daniel Blake* is significant because they lack satire’s central ambiguity between its moral function as critique and aesthetic function as entertainment. As explained, critique is deeply morally serious and introduces the requisite of hard work to amend a perceived social wrongness. By contrast, entertainment is leisurely and pleasant. Crucially, entertainment’s fun and divertive aesthetic experiences may appear morally suspicious in a situation which demands a committed response to a perceived social wrongness. This definitive tension between the moral function of critique and the aesthetic function of entertainment has been central to the reception of satire.

Margaret Atwood highlights this tension in the reception of her satirical novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* by explaining that “[r]evellers dress up as Handmaids on Hallowe’en and also for protest marches – these two uses of its costumes mirroring its doubleness. Is it entertainment or dire political prophecy? Can it be both?” (2012). In other words, Atwood highlights the issue that if her novel exposes the contemporaneous dangers of neo-conservatism to women’s rights, is it really appropriate to also sit back and enjoy the read? Similarly, Peter Steele identifies “the confluence of apparently contradicting impulses” (1978, 2) in satire like Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* and explains that Swift’s “entire career can be described as a partnership of ‘a clown and preacher’” (1978, v).

This fundamental ambiguity between critique and entertainment explains for satire’s mixed reception: hailed for its political interventions, celebrated as aesthetic enjoyment and dismissed as frivolous pastime that cultivates cynicism. As a case in point, during the Republican Party primary elections of 2016, online critics commonly praised John Oliver or Samantha Bee for “destroy[ing]” Donald Trump

(Barrell 2016) and such hyperbolic praise of satire's political impact remained common even after Trump took office (Juntwait 2017). In response, satirists like Oliver often downplay "any larger sense of mission. It's just — we're making a comedy show" (Marchese 2016). Similarly, scholars and artists sometimes argue that the best satire is "nonmoral" (Wyndham Lewis cited in Griffin 1994, 185). More sceptically, detractors like Julie Webber dismiss satire as cynical aestheticism (2013, 133).

My proposal that satire necessarily sets out to critique and entertain not only elucidates the tension at the heart of this mixed reception, but also suggests a clear pathway towards resolving the continuing uncertainty about the nature, function and significance of satire.

On the one hand, my proposal challenges claims that satire can be non-moral, which is not to say that it is necessarily morally right or virtuous. In this respect, after the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, *Nature* published an editorial which stressed "the part that both science and satire played in promoting the contrasting values of the Enlightenment" (Campbell 2015). The editorial was right to identify the infamous cartoons as satire, because they intended to defend secular individualism by attacking sacred cows of political and religious authority.

However, for various reasons, *Charlie Hebdo's* satire was morally flawed, not in the least because the magazine's blunt style ambiguously perpetuated stereotypes of xenophobia and racism. Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons were not simply offensive for the sake of it. Satire, even if it is flawed, is rightfully distinguished from gratuitous shock humour or frivolous mockery, otherwise its moral function appears less serious than it is.

On the other hand, my proposal highlights that hyperbolic praise of satire's moral function as critique is also out of place. Indeed, if all satirists cared to do was to critique unabatedly, they would probably follow the example of civil rights activist Dick Gregory, who gave up his career as a stand-up comedian in favour of more directly activist strategies, like hunger strikes (Nachman 2003, 494-508). Since satire also entertains for the sake of it, satirists seem right not to exaggerate their moral zeal and political impact.

This centrality of entertainment in satire also clarifies the common conflation with pseudo-satire in international media contexts. Although satire's critical function distinguishes it from pseudo-satire, both do set out to entertain for the sake of it. Moreover, due to the centrality of entertainment for its own sake in satire, the satirical status of some media sometimes remains ambiguous beyond resolve. Take Jan Böhmermann's ironic poem about President Erdogan, in which he so cultivates the easy pleasures of ironic transgression that any critical dimension is almost wholly obscured. Although such highly ambiguous cases are exceptional, they do highlight the fundamental tension between critique and entertainment in satire.

Yet, granted that satire's aesthetic function to entertain abates its moral function as critique, it does not follow that satire is wholly amoral or, worse, cynical. In this respect, the demands of unabated critique seem particularly steep, if not unhealthy. Forsaking hunger strikes, perhaps the complex dynamic between critique and entertainment in satire negotiates a healthier middle ground. In any case, I argue that further study of this complex dynamic between critique and entertainment in satire is required to clarify its nature, function and significance.

Summing up, my weak proposal identifies a dynamic between a moral and aesthetic function which has been central to satire from antiquity to modern times. As discussed, while Horace praised Lucilius “because he scoured the city with the abundant salt of his wit”, he also considered his style too harsh for “beautiful poetry” (l.10, 4-7). Similarly, a modern satirist like Lenny Bruce was famously praised as a “social critic and secular moralist” (Kofsky 1974).

However, towards the end of his career, Bruce often ranted about injustices he suffered during his obscenity trials. While these rants were critical (and even successfully so, for Bruce was arguably in the right), they were not entertaining, which is why his later performances do not rate as highly as his earlier ones (Nachman 2003, 412/418). Importantly, if Bruce had simply been a social critic or secular moralist, and not a satirist, this lack of entertainment would not have been problematic. Yet, in line with Horace’s criticism of Lucillus, modern satirists are praised only if they succeed both to critique and entertain.

Thus guiding understanding and appreciation of works and performances, the classification ‘satire’ behaves like a genre. In analytic aesthetics, genres have become understood as classifications which guide interpretation and evaluation of artworks, along the lines of Walton’s categories of art (1970). According to Catharine Abell, classifying a work in a certain genre guides interpretation and evaluation because “every genre has a characteristic purpose” (2015, 31), which depends on “common knowledge” between audiences and artists (2015, 32). Accordingly, my proposal is that satire is a genre which since Roman times has guided interpretation and evaluation of works on the grounds of their purpose to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other).

My proposal does not only challenge the consensus that there are no necessary conditions for satire, but also that satire is not a genre (Brown 1993, 4; Test 1991, 10; Rudd 1979, 9; Sutherland 1958, 1). Again, this consensus is informed by satire’s infamous variety. According to Condren and colleagues, satire is not primarily a classification of artworks, but an “impulse” or “spirit” with manifestations “almost as various as cultural activity itself” (2008, 443). Moreover, when satire does function as a classification of artworks, Condren, alongside others, considers it a mode, not a genre (2012, 394; also Griffin 1994, 4; Muecke 1993, 2).

On this understanding, genres are associated with “the presence of certain general, formal, even required properties, such as those of plot, motif and structure” (Condren 2012, 393). Since satire manifests itself in various media and sometimes only in parts of works, it cannot be a genre in this specific sense. Instead, scholars like Alistair Fowler consider it a mode, or a selection of non-structural and non-formal characteristics which typically modifies genres (1985, 107).

However, genres are not accurately understood as a collection of textual features (like form and structure) on the basis of which works are classified. Rather, they are frameworks that help us to understand what a work sets out to do and evaluate how well it does it. For example, Hendrix’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” is a satire not because it shares formal and structural characteristics with the poems of Lucilius, but because it serves the same purpose to critique and entertain. Crucially, someone who does not classify Hendrix’s performance as satire, and also knows nothing about rock

music, will completely misunderstand the work and most likely only discern noise. Similarly, someone who only classifies the performance as rock music is likely to be oblivious of its critical dimension and therefore only has a limited appreciation of the work.

Importantly, this revised understanding of genre can easily accommodate satire's infamous variety (see Abell 2015, 30). For one, satire has many typical features but no essential ones, because many features can fulfil the generic purpose of critique and entertainment, but none are strictly necessary. In this respect, humour and irony are important typical features of satire because they are particularly suited, but not strictly necessary, to fulfil its generic purpose of critique and entertainment. Further, generic purposes can concur. Especially since the purpose to entertain can be fulfilled broadly, the generic purpose of satire often concurs with other genres, including comedy, science fiction or rock music. Likewise, if genres are singularised by purposes, not form or structure, a genre classification like satire can apply across media and to parts as well as entire works.

Moreover, genre classifications can be expanded to non-artistic practices. For example, an accident can be 'tragic' or a situation 'farical'. Satire need therefore not be identified as an impulse or spirit because conversational remarks or speeches can have satirical qualities. Concretely, although non-artistic expansions of satire are inevitably looser, they are justified when they incorporate the essential purposes of critique and entertainment (in their specific interaction). For example, in identifying Sir Edward Clay's speeches as satirical, John Harrington and Ambreena Manji highlight that these not only attacked corruption in Kenya but are also "notable for their rhetorical self-awareness" (2012, 9).

To conclude, in its weak version, my proposal is that something can only be satire if it is justified to interpret and evaluate it as setting out to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). Importantly, as opposed to most other genres, classification of a work as satire often depends less on "the category in which the artist intended the work to be appreciated, or in which the artist's contemporaries would have placed it" (Walton 1970, 357). My proposal is exactly that certain works commonly marketed and received as 'satire', like *Mock the Week*, are not satire because they do not set out to critique and entertain. In this sense, my proposal is revisionary, although in line with a common scholarly distinction between satire and pseudo-satire.

At the same time, my proposal also allows for the reinterpretation of works originally not classified as satire, because it can be justified that they should be interpreted and appreciated, at least in part, as setting out to critique and entertain. One crucial example is the Old Comedy of Aristophanes, which is commonly said to have satirical qualities, even if the Greek had no concept or word that equalled the Latin *satira*. In this sense, my proposal is descriptive, because it accommodates common classificatory practices. This adequacy of my weak proposal to common classificatory practices is also the crux of my strong proposal for a definition of satire.

V. DEFINING SATIRE: THE STRONG PROPOSAL

As it stands, my weak proposal already improves on a cluster account, but falls short of an actual definition, because it does not specify if satire has further necessary conditions. My strong proposal is bolder and dismisses that further conditions are required. In other words, the strong proposal defines

satire as a genre with the purpose to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). Although some critics may find this strong proposal too counterintuitive, I argue that it is adequate to contemporary classificatory practices.

Critics of my strong proposal are likely to retort that my strong proposal is too encompassing because it identifies counterintuitive works as satire. They might be thinking of naturalistic novels like Zola's *La Bête Humaine*, some of Shakespeare's political plays or some socially critical rap music. Crucially, these examples set out to critique and entertain, at least in part, and when they do, these two purposes interact, without one being instrumental to the other. According to my strong proposal, they would therefore be satire or at least in part satirical, which some critics are likely to find counterintuitive. Such critics would demand that the weak proposal is supplemented with additional conditions for a definition of satire in order to exclude such counterintuitive cases.

However, my strong proposal purposely identifies these cases as satire or at least in part satirical, in order to be adequate to contemporary classificatory practices. In this respect, Brian Nelson talks of "Zola's moralizing satire" in *La Bête Humaine* (1983, 20) and "his satire of bourgeois mismanagement" in *Pot-Bouille* (1983, 5). Similarly, Karen Aubrey mentions that "critics speak acceptingly of Hamlet's satiric impulse" and further argues that also in *Coriolanus* "Shakespeare masks a brilliant satire with Coriolanus as the figure of the satirist supreme in a politically chaotic world" (1995, 300). Likewise, Mohamed Mifdal has discussed satirical tendencies in contemporary Moroccan and Tunisian rap music videos, specifically mentioning examples like the "acerbic satire" of El Haked, which is "is visceral and breath-taking" while "his indignation stifles any laughter" (2015, 47).

These scholars apply the classification 'satire' in a more expansive fashion than critics of my strong proposal are likely to find intuitively correct. Yet, I see no immediate reason to dismiss these classificatory practices as illegitimate.

For one, sceptics who find it counterintuitive to classify *La Bête Humaine*, *Coriolanus* or El Haked's angry rap as satire, or at least partly satirical, need a stronger reason to refute these contemporary classificatory practices than just their own intuitions. Those classificatory practices testify exactly that some critics and scholars do intuitively identify these examples as satire – and why would their collective intuitions necessarily be any less valid than those of the sceptics?

By contrast, I did challenge the classification of frivolous topical comedy like *Mock the Week* as satire, because such illegitimate conflation obscures satire's moral dimension and ignore interpretative distinctions that matter to artistic appreciation. Crucially, there are no similarly undesirable political and interpretative consequences when classifying *La Bête Humaine*, *Coriolanus* or El Haked's angry rap as satire or at least partly satirical. On the contrary, classification of such works as satire often reframes our interpretation and evaluation in an interesting way.

As a case in point, Aubrey argues that *Coriolanus* should not be interpreted as an inadequate tragedy and reclassifies the work as a satire in order to revalue it artistically (1995, 299). Similarly, Ralph Rosen and Victoria Baines highlight that the provocative rap music of Eminem has a politically more significant function than juvenile provocation by identifying it as stylised moral anger in the satirical

tradition of Juvenal (2002, 114). Eminem's "Mosh", for instance, is a direct attack on George W. Bush's administration.

These examples testify to the political and interpretative value of reclassifying certain counterintuitive cases as satire or at least in part satirical. That said, I do not disagree that works like *La Bête Humaine* or "Mosh" are primarily and rightfully classified in other categories, respectively the naturalistic novel and rap music. Yet, granted that these works most aptly meet the criteria of these other categories, they can still also be satire, at least in part.

Ultimately, the crux of possible disagreement is really whether an adequate delimitation of satire should or should not include cases like *La Bête Humaine* or "Mosh". In support of my strong proposal, I have argued that there are no real reasons why it should not. I appreciate that critics may still find my strong proposal too counterintuitive, but the challenge for them is to provide reasons beyond their own intuitions to explain why examples like *La Bête Humaine* or "Mosh" are not (in part) satire. To succeed, they face the further challenge to supplement the weak proposal with additional necessary conditions – which I think will be difficult to find. Here, the cluster theorists do have a point. For these reasons, my strong proposal has at least some plausibility.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although favoured by many, a cluster account of satire is inadequate because it cannot distinguish satire from media casually identified as 'satire' which really are something else (like the frivolous mockery of *Mock the Week*). Instead, I introduced a weak proposal that satire is a genre which necessarily sets out to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other). In its strong version, I argued that this proposal provides necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of satire.

This strong proposal withstands initial concerns about its adequacy to intuition. Nevertheless, should critics remain unconvinced by the strong proposal, the weak proposal is already more adequate than a cluster account, especially because it can distinguish satire from so-called pseudo-satire. Further, the weak proposal also has greater heuristic utility than a cluster account because it both clarifies satire's extremely mixed reception and suggests a pathway to overcome it by further investigating the central dynamic between satire's moral function as critique and its aesthetic function as entertainment.

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