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JAAC X AFB

JAAC x AFB: WHAT IS SATIRE?

September 6, 2018 by [aestheticsforbirds](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

"Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds." - Barnett Newman



What follows is a post in our ongoing collaborative series with the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. This is based on a new article by Dieter Declercq, "[A Definition of Satire \(And Why a Definition Matters\)](#)" which you can find in the *current issue* of JAAC.

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Satire is infamously varied. The origins of the label date back to Roman times, as a classification for disgruntled verses by poets like Horace and Juvenal. Yet, although the Roman orator Quintilian tried to claim satire as “wholly ours” (*satura tota nostra est*), satire is clearly not limited to ancient Rome. Just think of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Jimi Hendrix’s “Star-Spangled Banner” ([performed at Woodstock](#)), *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, Pussy Riot, Guerrilla Girls, Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, Jordan Peel’s *Get Out*, Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Daliso Chaponda’s [stand-up comedy](#)...

Satire did not culminate in Roman times. In fact, the Romans can’t even claim to have invented satire. For one, while the ancient Greeks lacked a concept equivalent to the Latin *satura*, they did create art we retrospectively identify as satirical. Take *The Wasps*, a 5th century BCE comic play by [Aristophanes](#), in which he attacks politics and presents himself as “the champion you [the audience] have found to purify your country of all its evil”.

Satire is also not an invention of the Western world. One of the oldest genres of Arabic poetry, *hija*, is commonly considered as equivalent to “[s]tinging satire”. [Scholars](#) have also used the label ‘satire’ to interpret narratives of anti-colonial resistance in [Khoikhoi](#) orature of The Cape region. Consider also “[The Death of Emperor Hundun](#)”, a send-up of a failed Daoist sage in the *Zhuangzi* (China, 5th-3rd century BCE). China remains to have a vibrant (internet) satire culture today, including gems like [Pi San’s controversial cartoon series](#), “[Kuang Kuang’s Diary](#)”.



In the first episode of *Kuang Kuang’s Diary*, “[Blow Up the School](#)” (Pi San 2008), primary schooler Kuang Kuang develops a scheme to get back at his authoritarian teachers, who continually beat

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him up for stepping out of line – a satirical revenge fantasy targeting China’s repressive political regime.

The problem of definition

Satire is historically, culturally and geographically varied. This variety speaks to satire’s artistic richness, but has also created a philosophical problem.

Robert C. Elliot argues that

No 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.

The consensus is that satire cannot be defined because we cannot pinpoint one or more features that all satires share. Not even humour or ridicule? Well, Orwell’s *1984* is a satire which is not (and does not set out to be) funny. Other examples include *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Hendrix’s “Star-Spangled Banner” and Iggy Pop’s adaptation of “**Louie Louie**” (a lament of global capitalism). Perhaps irony is a better candidate? Again, there are counterexamples, right from the beginning. **Juvenal**’s early rants lack irony’s subtle indirectness. **Scholars** and **critics** have also situated some of Eminem’s vitriol in this non-ironic satiric tradition – and there’s certainly no room for misunderstanding in political attacks like “**Mosh**”.



“Rebel with a rebel yell, raise hell we gonna let ‘em know. Stomp, push, shove, mush, fuck Bush, until they bring our troops home. C’mon.” Eminem’s “**Mosh**” (Encore, 2004) may start with ironic

overtone of allegiance to the American flag, but what follows is about as direct as verbal attack gets.

Why we need a definition

Without a clear feature that all satire shares, the consensus is that we don't need a definition. After all, many philosophers consider definitions as cumbersome and artificial constructions. It therefore seems better to settle for a less rigid characterisation of satire based on a cluster of typical (but not necessary) features, such as moral criticism, ridicule, group consolidation, amusement, humour, irony, absurdity, analogy, attack, fantasy, grotesquery, exaggeration, transgression... This cluster of non-essential features should suffice to identify what satire is.

I disagree with this consensus. There are currently media which are commonly identified and marketed as satire, but which really are something else. I'm thinking of examples like the British topical panel show *Mock the Week* or most of *The Onion*'s content. To uphold the difference between these media and real satire, which has artistic and political significance, we need at least one necessary condition for satire – which brings us back on track for a definition.

Most content on *The Onion* is not really satire, despite **common public opinion** and the company's own use of the label as **legal cover against defamation**. My point is that fake articles on *The Onion* like **"Man Takes Sober Moment to Reflect on Fact that Most of Meal Already Gone"** are really something else than Pi San's or Margaret Atwood's attacks of politics. Paul Stokes of *The Daily Mash* (a British version of *The Onion*), explains that the main function of such websites is **"helping people in offices to waste time"**. Satire, by contrast, functions as *critique*, which I understand as a committed moral opposition against a target, sustained by an analysis of that target's perceived social wrongness.

This difference holds artistic significance. Just contrast *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* to *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. When John Oliver **satirised FIFA corruption**, he made a comic but moral argument that despite host country Brazil's considerable investments for the 2014 World Cup, only FIFA and its executives would reap the financial rewards. By contrast, when *Mock the Week* **deals with FIFA**, its panellists mostly indulge in fangless jokes, for instance about FIFA's corrupt chairman at the time, Sepp Blatter, who's name "sounds like set platter" or "like a German guy asking for a step ladder."

Mock the Week is not really satire, because critique is not a central purpose of the show. Indeed, critics often dismiss *Mock the Week* as “a parade of dick jokes”, wondering “isn’t this supposed to be a satirical swipe at the news?” Crucially, marketing *Mock the Week* as satire introduces expectations of a critical purpose which the show does not set out to fulfil. The show therefore seems artistically less accomplished than it really is. *Mock the Week* really seeks to fulfil the purpose of a comic panel show – and as a comic panel show, it’s quite successful. For this reason, *Mock the Week* is not poor satire, but it is not satire at all.



Yes, John Oliver wants to make us laugh, but he also wants to make a point about why we should condemn FIFA corruption. *Mock the Week* just wants to make us laugh.

Apart from artistic significance, the difference between satire like *Last Week Tonight* and other media like *Mock the Week* also holds political significance. Conflating satire with less morally serious media makes the genre appear less politically significant than it really is. Take two contrasting defences of an outrageously offensive poem by German comedian Jan Böhmermann, who provoked Turkey’s authoritarian regime by cheekily calling President Erdogan a goatfucker and child molester. Many identified Böhmermann’s poem as satire and were quick to defend the genre as a democratic value. Yet, while publisher Matthias Döpfner spoke of a crass but morally necessary attack of totalitarianism, MEP Guy Verhofstadt dismissively tolerated Böhmermann as “not my taste in humor, but in a free society such satirical poems must be possible”.

Crucially, there is a politically significant difference between defending the right to political critique or frivolous ridicule. Ambiguous conflation between the two becomes particularly pernicious when the label ‘satire’ is used as a fig leaf to justify malicious shock humour. Think of Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle’s jokes 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”. 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”.

Importantly, if we want to uphold that satire like *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Kuang Kuang's Diary* holds any political significance, we should distinguish it from malicious shock comedy. I do not mean to imply that satire is necessarily a badge of honour. **The Nazis** had satire, but even that had a serious purpose in exposing *alleged* social malice (even if it was deeply mistaken and morally wrong). Satire may at times be immoral, but its purpose is never amoral. We therefore need to identify critique as a necessary condition in order to distinguish satire from less politically significant media, whether they are frivolous or downright gratuitous.

Critique and entertainment

However, we should also not exaggerate satire's moral seriousness. Satire does not just critique, it also *entertains*. I understand entertainment as a classification which applies to media principally designed to deliver fun and divertive aesthetic experiences. This purpose to entertain distinguishes satire from other critical media, like Clio Barnard's social realist film *The Selfish Giant*. Through this tale of destitute youngsters, who drop out of school and start collecting and selling scrap metal, Barnard serves up a grim analysis of post-industrial Northern England. The film is aesthetically stunning, but it's not fun or divertive. When we screened it to our first-year undergraduates, some of them were crying by the end.

Satire's combination of critique and entertainment makes it so distinctive and intriguing, if ambivalent. **Margaret Atwood** highlights this ambivalence in the reception of *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?” Thus Atwood forces us to consider a definitive tension in satire between the moral seriousness of critique and the divertive enjoyment of entertainment.

We should acknowledge this definitive tension in order to deflate **common** but overenthusiastic claims about satire's political forcefulness. **John Stewart** is right when he says that “if [satire]'s purpose was social change, we're not picking a very effective avenue.” Indeed, if relentless critique was the sole purpose of satirists, 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. It's far more accurate, as John Oliver candidly admits, that satirists also simply revel in “**spectacle**” for the sake of it.



Spectacle for the sake of it. An **impressive fireworks display** lights up behind John Oliver's desk, simply to mock and outdo the low-budget video messages of FIFA executive Jack Warner.

Acknowledging that satire is defined by a tension between critique and entertainment means abandoning expectations that satire changes the world. Such expectations have been enduring. During the 2016 Republican Primaries, John Oliver was commonly praised for “**destroy[ing]**” or “**annihilat[ing]**” Donald Trump. Such **endorsements** remained popular even *after* Trump took office. Yet, if satire's value were really determined by political effects like stopping Trump, we could probably shelve it as a failed genre. Instead, we should reframe the significance of what satire is really doing.

Yes, satire critiques, and we can learn from it and even be inspired by it. So satire is not without political value, but it is not our strongest weapon for political change. Instead, we could reframe satire as a medium through which to negotiate harsh political realities, like the fact that Trump is in office and doesn't seem to be going anywhere else anytime soon. We should actively oppose social problems, but also accept our limits in doing so – otherwise we stand to compromise our mental health and wellbeing. Here, the divertive and enjoyable aesthetic qualities of entertainment may serve a therapeutic function in coming to terms with the limits of critique. These considerations require nuance and further investigation, but I think they would prove more fruitful than the stubborn affirmation of satire as politically revolutionary.

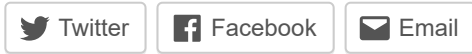
Notes on the Contributor

Dieter Declercq is Associate and Assistant Lecturer in the School of Arts at The University of Kent, where he completed his PhD on satire in November 2017. He teaches undergraduate courses in Aesthetics, Film and Media, alongside Dutch (evening classes) and shorter courses for younger students on topics in

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Edited by Alex King

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