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Critical Comedy: Satire, Absurdity and Ireland's Economic Crash

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Abstract

Satirical humour increasingly plays a part in the public sphere, particularly in anglophone countries, and quite remarkably so during Ireland's economic crash. While this satire is ostensibly and avowedly critical, irreverently satirising figures of authority and hegemonic discourses, it is argued that the consequences of critical comedy do not necessarily emancipate, but do inculcate critical sensibility and a world-image of politics as irredeemably absurd. Drawing on the works of Bakhtin on carnival and satire, Bergson on laughter and Billig on ridicule, a selection of representative mainstream Irish satire is interpreted as not only discursively positing politicians and public figures as corrupt, stupid and self-serving, but also, more importantly, positing 'the people' as gullible and uncritical. Hence, the overall consequence of satire and critical discourse is the diffusion of generalised cynicism which takes the public sphere as a theatre of absurdity.

Keywords:

absurdity

comedy

critique

politics

satire

Notes

This sketch and all others discussed herein are available on 'YouTube': Late Late Show, Après Match Bailout Sketch, 3 December 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E5eg6cwo4U>; Nineteenth Minute DAA Parody, 15 February 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JPT3feipJ8>; and The Savage Eye - 'Politicians', 6 December 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-23L4NMKjM>

My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point, and later concerning Ross O'Carroll-Kelly and Constantin Gurdgiev.

Although Heath and Potter's work is a good analysis of the self-defeating and consumerist logics of what they term 'counter-cultural critique', they also tend to reduce most of the phenomena they discuss to the working of cultural capital, which verges on a critique of critique, unmasking a plethora of different cultural phenomena as status-seeking strategies.

A genealogy of modern satire would be beyond the bounds of this paper. However, important elements can be seen in the Pulcinella figure (Horvath, [2010](#)) and the Comedia d'ella Arte (Szakolczai, [2012](#)).

David McSavage is the alias of David Andrews, brother of Barry Andrews and son of David Andrews, both former Fianna Fail TDs and ministers. His show, funded and broadcast by RTÉ, also satirises prominent media presenters, such as Pat Kenny in the example later. There is no suggestion of a 'conspiracy theory' here; the comedian probably has complete creative freedom in his work, but clearly neither the political establishment nor the national broadcaster is anxious about the effects of the programme.

Runciman (2008) suggests that hypocrisy is endemic to democracy as a system and that anti-hypocrisy, or the 'hunt for the hypocrite', is not a worthwhile political platform

as it distracts us from real political questions and, besides, it has failed for several centuries.

The social and cultural transformations of the 'Celtic Tiger' era are characterised by both an idealisation of a new cosmopolitan Irish identity and anxiety about immigration and globalisation (Keohane & Kuhling, [2007](#)).

The argument here is that critical discourse can produce critical subjects and by extension satire can produce satirists. It is through the constitution of the critic that others - real and imaginary - become figured as pawns or dupes, and through the constitution of the satirist these others appear as absurd and gullible (see Boland, [2007](#)).

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference of the Sociological Association of Ireland; after screening the parody of the DAA ad, I presented these comments, which produced knowing laughter from the audience. The intended meaning of the comments cannot be ascertained, but their ironic resonances demonstrate my point about satirical subjectivity.

http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=8JPT3feipJ8

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