# SATIRE, COMEDY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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# SATIRE, COMEDY AND MENTAL HEALTH

## Coping with the Limits of Critique

DIETER DECLERCQ
*University of Kent, UK*

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Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my parents and Georgia.*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Dieter Declercq** is a Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the University of Kent. He is interested in the existential value of popular media (especially satire, comedy and cartoons) and his research is informed by methodologies from analytic aesthetics, media studies, and medical and health humanities. He has organised several international events, including the British Society of Aesthetics Conference: Art, Aesthetics and the Medical and Health Humanities. His work on satire, comedy and irony has been published in journals including *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *ImageText, Ethical Perspectives* and *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I remember when I first started thinking about satire in an academic context. It was 2009 and I had no idea what to write about for my MA dissertation in Western Literature. Then, something or someone made me realise that I could pretty much write my dissertation about anything. Really? Anything? Even *The Simpsons*? Although I wrote that first dissertation on Shakespeare adaptations, my real interest was always more existential than literary. *The Simpsons* had been a beacon that shone through as I experienced a spell of alienation in high school (who didn't?). Still, however strong the estrangement, *The Simpsons* was just so funny and, well, so right about things, that it always gave me an entry point for reconnection with the world (albeit with a sense of comic irony). This book is, therefore, grounded in my personal relationship with the solace of satire.

Many people have contributed to the development of my ideas in this book along the way – too many to list them all from the beginning. I do want to foremost acknowledge my parents and my fiancée Georgia, to whom I dedicate this book. Without my parents, I would not have written this book (and I do not mean that in the biological sense of things). I am privileged that they have always supported my studies, including at times when I was unsure that it was really going somewhere. I am also indebted to Georgia, for giving me the space to pursue my academic projects, and for her support during those moments when I am still not sure whether it's going anywhere. She's also been an invaluable soundboard for the ideas in this book. I also want to thank Ben Doyle, for signing me with Emerald, and the great editorial team at Emerald, Paula Kennedy, Joshi Jerome, Sally Martin, Liam Morris, Gabriella Barnard-Edmunds and Carys Morley. Thanks also to S. Rajachitra for help during the production process.

This book is a substantially revised and updated version of a PhD thesis which I completed at the University of Kent in 2017, where I still teach and work. I'm very grateful for the School of Arts' support of that project with a 50th Anniversary GTA Scholarship. I'm also indebted to my supervisor, Aylish Wood, for her invaluable (and continued) guidance and support in my academic career. I also want to thank my co-supervisor (and compatriot), Hans

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Some of the ideas in this book are based on previously published work. Chapter 1 revisits key ideas (and sometimes examples) from my 2018 article 'A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters)' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 76*(3), 319–330. Chapters 3 and 5 elaborate on ideas about moral imperfection and ironic characters developed in my 2020 article 'Irony, Disruption and Moral Imperfection' in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice,* 23(3), 545–559.

# ABSTRACT

*Satire, Comedy and Mental Health: Coping with the Limits of Critique* examines how satire helps to sustain good mental health in a troubled socio-political world. Through an interdisciplinary dialogue, which combines approaches from analytic philosophy of art, medical and health humanities, media studies and psychology, Dr Dieter Declercq (University of Kent) frames satire as a resource for coping with a sick world beyond full recovery.

Satire has the purpose to critique and entertain – which explains the genre's infamous ambiguity. Critique is a moral activity which opposes social wrongness, while entertainment involves leisurely enjoying aesthetic pleasures. Satire is, therefore, not the most efficient or impactful means of critique. Yet, instead of curing a sick world, satire helps us cope with it.

Although satire can contribute to social change by motivating activism, satirists also acknowledge that political action is not always successful and that our own resources for critique are not endless. These limits of critique introduce mental health challenges, like depression and neurotic perfectionism, as we must deal with suffering that we cannot alleviate (and to which we may even be complicit).

Satire contributes to coping because its ambiguous combination of critique and entertainment negotiates a balance between care for others and care of self. This book investigates how we can adopt and adapt aesthetic strategies from satire, especially comic irony, to cope with the limits of critique – through philosophical explication and close analysis of satire in various media (including novels, music, TV, film, cartoons, memes, stand-up comedy and protest artefacts).

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# INTRODUCTION

## AIMS

What is satire, what can it do or not do and why should we care about it? Since the Romans coined 'satire' as a classification of art, these questions have been continually addressed by satirists themselves, their fans, detractors, political and moral authorities, art critics and, last but not least, scholars from a variety of disciplines. The result is a myriad of longstanding discussions about satire which have often been fruitful and enlightening. Still, the fundamental questions about satire's nature, function and significance remain a matter of debate.

The reception of satire has been ambiguous. Scholars and critics have hailed satire for its moral and political interventions (Jones, 2010) as well as its amoral aesthetic pleasures (Grigson, 1980) – while sceptics have condemned the genre as immoral cynicism (Hart, 2013). There is no consensus whether satire is a punitive but curative practice (Tucholsky, 1919) that is deadly for political opponents (Jones, 2014); whether its political impact is only more moderately incremental (Day, 2011) or even ethereal (Quirk, 2015); or whether satire is really like a safety valve (Gini, 2017) that facilitates political acquiescence (Nokes, 1987) by venting anger and frustration (Njoya 2017).

What has often remained unacknowledged in these debates is that satire's ambiguous reception itself signals a central ambiguity in the genre. Satire has both the moral purpose to critique social wrongness and the aesthetic purpose to entertain. Most approaches to satire have typically subordinated one of the genre's central purposes to the other. Some scholars have argued that entertainment in satire really supports its political aims (McClennen, 2011), while others have downplayed the genre's moral purpose to promote its aesthetic pleasures (Griffin, 1994), decry its cynicism (Webber, 2013) or frame satire as an emotional catharsis (Freedman, 2008).

I argue that satire's moral and aesthetic purposes are equally important and that we should frame the genre's purposeful ambiguity in relation to mental health. This position differs significantly from the idea that satire

is a safety valve that provides an emotional catharsis by venting negative emotions like anger and frustration, which could otherwise be put to political action. For one, such a hydraulic understanding of the emotions is outdated (Evans, 2003), while the safety valve metaphor is opaque and does not actually clarify how satire works. Moreover, the catharsis model cannot accommodate that satire is also genuinely committed to critique and can have (modest) political impact. Yet, satire is significant because it also alleviates the limits of critique and political action – which is why the solace of entertainment matters.

Satire's ambiguous interaction between critique and entertainment resonates with an existential conflict between the care for others and care of self. We have a moral duty to care for others and alleviate their suffering, which is the domain of critique. However, if we tried to devote ourselves unabatedly to critique, we would compromise our own wellbeing. For one, our resources to sustain critique and political action are limited – and if we tried to devote ourselves unabatedly to critique, we would set ourselves unattainable goals and fall prey to the mental suffering of neurotic perfectionism (Geranmayepoura & Besharata, 2010). Moreover, the political impact of critique is also limited; sometimes, all the political action in the world is not enough to resolve a conflict and alleviate suffering.

The painful upshot of this situation is what I call 'the limits of critique', which means we must live in a world where suffering exists that we cannot alleviate and to which we may even be complicit. We may experience such a world as patently absurd, and become disconnected from it, which introduces the risk of depression (Godderis, 2000). Just consider mental health conditions like political depression (Cvetkovich, 2012) or eco-anxiety (Stoknes, 2015), which occur when people face problems which seem too overwhelming to resolve. The main argument of this book is that good satire helps us cope with the limits of critique by avoiding the Scylla of political apathy and the Charybdis of mental health problems. Therefore, satire is a resource to negotiate the existential conflict between care for others and care of self.

The main aim of *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* is to investigate how we can use satire as a resource in our own lives to deal with the limits of critique. The book develops three key arguments. First, satire does not really cure a morally sick world, but helps us to cope with it. This does not mean that satire cannot contribute to political change, but it only has a modest impact in the service of motivating more direct political action. Second, satire helps us deal with the limits of critique through the solace of pleasurable autotelic engrossment in entertainment, which reconnects us to an otherwise depressingly absurd world – without ignoring that we should alleviate suffering

where we can. Third, satire develops comic and ironic coping strategies that we can fruitfully adopt and adapt in the stories we tell about ourselves in a world that is sick beyond full recovery.

## METHOD

In this study, I approach satires as intentionally designed artefacts with specific affordances (or useful aspects) – which is a common methodology in analytic philosophy of art (see Currie, 2010; Maynard, 2012). Satires are artefacts that are designed for a certain purpose, namely to critique and entertain. Due to this intentionally designed purpose, satires have specific affordances, including motivating or sustaining political action and, most importantly, coping with the limits of critique. We can establish these affordances through analysis of satire's intentional design.

This methodology approaches satire as a tool, like a hammer. One of the key affordances of hammers is to drive nails into walls, which we know by analysing their intentional design. Hammers typically have long handles (in wood or plastic) and a weighted metal head. They are intentionally designed so that the long handle affords a good grip to swing the head onto the surface of a nail with appropriate force to drive it into a wall. By contrast, you cannot eat soup with a hammer (you really need a spoon) – which, again, we know through artefactual analysis. Yet, although most hammers are also not designed to open beer bottles, they do afford this use – but still only by virtue of their artefactual design.

Similarly, I approach satires as narrative artefacts that are designed to tell stories that critique and entertain. Satires are often professionally produced narratives like cartoons, novels or films; but we can equally tell a satirical joke or make a satirical remark. These jokes and remarks are typically (part of) a story – often just a 'mini-narrative' – about what someone did or should have done (Williams, 2002, p. 233). We need not publicly express or share these satirical narratives with others; we can also simply think through sequences of thought, feeling and imagination with a narrative structure (Goldie, 2012, pp. 4–5). As narrative artefacts, satires are resources that help us make sense of ourselves and the challenges to our mental health in a world that is sick beyond full recovery (see also Guerrero, 2019).

Narratives are artefacts that are intentionally designed to communicate meaning through stories (Currie, 2010, p. 6). Hence, narrative interpretation is guided by communicative principles (Currie, 2004, p, 112). According to the relevance theory, we decode the meaning of a communicative utterance

by inferring the most optimally relevant interpretation of a thought which it resembles in content (Sperber & Wilson, 2012, p. 127). If I tell my dinner companions, 'Can you pass me the salt?', the most relevant interpretation is to interpret that utterance as evidence that I wish to put salt on my food (not pepper) – unless I am making a snarky ironic comment about the sodium levels in the fast food we ordered. Similarly, according to Gregory Currie's (2004) theory of narrative interpretation, 'we use the text, together with various other things, to come up with the best ideas we can about what the author intended to convey' (p. 109).

Crucially, Currie (2004) does not advocate that we seek to establish authorial intentions irrespective of textual evidence (p. 125). For example, suppose that we unearth a long-lost diary of Jonathan Swift in which he asserts that *A Modest Proposal* was really intended to outline a new and revolutionary model for calculus. This discovery does not mean that we should change our interpretation of Swift's famous satire. As Currie (2004) explains, it is what Swift has written in his text that constrains narrative interpretation 'in ways that no other source of evidence does' (p. 126). In other words, Swift's assertions about the meaning of *A Modest Proposal* are irrelevant if they cannot be reasonably inferred from the text.

Nonetheless, satirists are skilled and reflexive artists who know what they are doing – often better than anybody else. Hence, throughout this book, I engage with various comments that satirists themselves have made about their satire – including Samantha Bee, Matt Bors, Stephen Colbert, Aaron McGruder, John Oliver, Dan Perkins (aka Tom Tomorrow), Jen Sorensen, Jon Stewart and Ted Rall. In various ways, these satirists have argued that satire is a resource to sustain good mental health in a troubled socio-political world.

Yet, I only draw on these comments to substantiate arguments about satire's coping affordances as long as they can be inferred from close analysis of a wide range of works in diverse media – including novels (Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), music (Jimi Hendrix's 'Star-Spangled Banner'), stand-up comedy (Stewart Lee), TV (*South Park*'s 'The Hobbit'), film (Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*), cartoons (Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks*), memes (Trump piñatas) and protest artefacts (Tump Baby blimp).

These close analyses, supported by relevant comments of satirists, will ground my argument about the coping affordances of satire. I argue that satires are artefacts designed to critique and entertain, with purposeful affordances to cope with the limits of critique. Satire's artefactual design reveals that instead of devoting all available resources to critique, satirists also entertain – which (only) makes sense if we know that critique has its limits and entertainment involves autotelic engrossment in aesthetic pleasures which allows us to

cope with those limits. These entertaining strategies, especially comic irony, not only distance us from the limits of critique, but also reframe the meaning of these limits from a less threatening perspective.

Many comments by satirists reveal that creating satire is perhaps foremost a therapy for themselves (although, of course, it also helps to pay the bills). Still, satirists typically also create satire in the hope that it has coping affordances for their audiences (even if that is far less under their control). Satire is obviously designed for media consumption and I will draw on research in psychology – especially the Revised Transactional Model of Coping (Folkman, 2008) and the Mood Management Theory (Robinson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2016) – to substantiate the hypothesis that consuming entertainment in the right measure has valuable affordances to sustain good mental health.

Yet, my investigation also moves beyond media consumption to outline the coping affordances of satire to ordinary media users, especially satirical strategies of comic irony. I will establish the coping affordances of comic irony in dialogue with scholarship from the psychology of humour (Kuiper, 2012; Martin, 2006) and I will argue that we can adopt and adapt satirical strategies, like comic irony, in the stories we tell about ourselves in a troubled world, drawing on narrative frameworks from philosophy (Goldie, 2010; Lindemann, 2001) and the medical and health humanities (Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995). Although I doubt that satirists design their satire with such narrative appropriation in mind, it is still an affordance of satire by virtue of the genre's artefactual design – just like hammers are designed to drive nails into walls but also afford to open beer bottles.

My arguments about the artefactual design of satire are subject to empirical verification and falsification. Through narrative interpretation, I will make claims about the meaning and affordances of satire which are accurate or not (so, hopefully, I will not be making claims similar to the assertion that *A Modest Proposal* outlines a model for calculus). Put metaphorically, suppose I was to embark on a study about hammers, I would be making claims that we can verify by looking at them and investigating their design; and refute by claiming that I have mistaken what hammers actually look like or that my selected sample is too narrow or otherwise not representative of hammers in general.

Nevertheless, in my hypothetical hammer study, I would make claims about their afforded uses without empirically establishing what people really do with hammers or measuring how effective they are at driving nails into the wall. In other words, my actual study of satire will introduce arguments about the coping affordances of the genre without providing evidence of what

people do with satire or how effective it is as a coping strategy. Although I will develop my arguments in dialogue with relevant empirical evidence from the natural and social sciences (especially psychology), my own methodology is humanistic, which introduces unavoidable, but purposeful, limitations to my study.

Currently, a meaningful empirical study of how satire contributes to coping with the limits of critique feels somewhat like a pipe dream – exactly because a book like *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* needs to be written first to establish if and how satire is artefactually designed for coping. Without such a foundational study, meaningful empirical research is currently hard to conceive. In this respect, there is a large body of sound research in communication studies about satire's political impact on audiences which has been largely inconclusive (see Holbert, 2013; Young, 2018). The problem with this kind of empirical research about satire is not the soundness of the methodologies, but the lack of clarity about what exactly they should set out to measure.

The ambiguous reception in scholarship and criticism indicates that it is unclear what satire is *designed* to achieve – let alone what individual satires *actually* achieve. Without greater certainty about the artefactual design of satire, empirical studies may well investigate unhelpful directions. Imagine that hammers were more complex artefacts (a bit like satires); as long as we have not investigated what they are designed for, we risk wasting our time with studies that try to establish how people use hammers for eating soup. Presently, there are two common misconceptions about satire which risk causing confusion about future directions for empirical research. The first misconception is that the significance of the genre should be narrowly framed in terms of political impact. The second is that, conversely, satire offers an emotional catharsis that helps us cope with a troubled socio-political world – but at the expense of dissipating all motivation for political action.

*Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* aims to redress this situation by developing a theoretical model for understanding satire's coping affordances, which does not deny the genre's modest political affordances, and is also informed by scholarship about coping and mental health. At this stage, I consider a philosophical study of satire's artefactual design more appropriate than trying to document how audiences use satire for coping (through interviews or focus groups). Although people may be able to explain *what* they do with satire or *how* it makes them feel, they do not necessarily know *why* it has those affordances. Similarly, although I could tell you that my word processor afforded me to write this book, I could not explain the underlying process behind this affordance.

Moreover, I imagine that there will always be significant challenges for empirical research into the coping effects of satire. Satire is not some tonic or medicine. We should not think of satire as something to consume twice a day (once in the morning and once in the evening), if we feel mild to moderate existential despair about suffering that we cannot alleviate (and to which we may even be complicit). Moreover, we should equally not think of satire as the only coping strategy in this situation – at the expense other strategies like physical activity or psychotherapy. Therefore, it may prove difficult to set up an experiment to measure the coping effects of satire that controls for all the variables.

Instead, we should think of satire as a tool we can use if we experience feelings of existential despair about the limits of critique. In general, the efficiency of tools depends on multiple variables, including the aptitude and skill of the user, alongside their state of mind or even level of intoxication. Put differently, some people are more naturally skilled with hammers, although they do become harder to handle for almost anybody after having opened too many beer bottles and drinking their contents. Yet, what we can say with certainty is that, for everyone in all circumstances, it is much more difficult to try and drive a nail into a wall without a hammer.

Similarly, *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* aims to unpack why we would lose an invaluable tool for coping with the limits of critique if we ignored satire in our existential toolbox. I do hope that a future and more ambitious project than mine can establish satire's contributions to coping with more empirical certainty – which I think would have to be a project that combines expertise from across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. I also hope that my book can help to pave the way for such a future study.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

The rest of this book has five more chapters. The first chapter argues that satire is a genre with the moral purpose to critique and the aesthetic purpose to entertain. Although these moral and aesthetic purposes of satire fruitfully interact, they also pull in different directions, which makes satire at once distinct, ambiguous and relevant to the study of mental health.

The second chapter challenges the heroic conception of satire as a therapy for the socio-political ills of the world. I do not deny that satire has political affordances, but these should be primarily conceptualised as harnessing emotional resources to stimulate or sustain other forms of political action, which have greater political impact. As (what I call) a 'magic' representation, satire

can serve as an emotional booster to stimulate or sustain political action. However, such political action does not always entail political success. The idea of satire as a heroic therapy that cures socio-political sickness, therefore, introduces expectations that the genre cannot meet. Moreover, since the political impact of satire is only modest, especially compared to direct forms of political action, narrowly framing the genre's significance in terms of its political impact may ultimately make satire seem less significant than it really is.

The third chapter instead frames satire as a therapy for a world which is sick beyond full recovery. I argue that reflexive satirists are aware of the 'limits of critique' which confront us with suffering that we cannot alleviate, and to which we may even be complicit. The limits of critique highlight an existential tension between the care for others and care of self, which introduces mental health challenges like neurotic perfectionism and depression. Satire seeks to alleviate these mental health challenges, but to understand why and how, we need to move beyond the catharsis model.

The fourth chapter argues that satire contributes to emotion-focussed coping with the limits of critique by providing pleasurable aesthetic engrossment that lifts our mood and helps to sustain meaning in an absurd world. Satire's significance is that its central tension between critique and entertainment serves as a coping resource to negotiate the existential conflict between care for others and care of self.

The fifth chapter turns to comic irony as a satirical strategy for meaning-focussed coping which actively reframes how we think about the limits of critique. I argue that satire introduces comic and ironic strategies – like analogy, reversal and (what I call) 'ironic characters' – which we can integrate in the stories we develop about our moral imperfection in a morally imperfect world.