

British satire, everyday politics: Chris Morris, Armando Iannucci and Charlie Brooker

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Abstract

This article develops a critical engagement with the politics of British satire. After first engaging the mainstream critique of satire—that it promotes cynicism and apathy by portraying politicians in stereotypically corrupt terms—we develop a performative approach to comedy as an everyday vernacular of political life. Beyond a focus on ‘impact’, we suggest that satire can be read as an everyday form of political reflection that performs within a social context. This argument yields an image of Morris, Iannucci and Brooker as important critics of contemporary British politics, a point which we explore through their interventions on media form, political tragedy and political agency.

Keywords

British politics, British satire, comedy, critique, everyday politics, resistance

... the world has changed and so has political comedy and satire. The rise of the 24/7 media machine with ever more pressure on ratings combined with the rich pickings offered by mass market DVDs and large-scale arena tours has fuelled a transition best captured in David Denby’s notion of the change ‘from satire to snark’. The latter being snide, aggressive, personalized: ‘it seizes on any vulnerability or weakness it can find—a slip of the tongue, a sentence not quite up-to-date, a bit of flab, a flash of boob, a blotch, a wrinkle, an open fly, an open mouth, a closed mouth’, but all designed to reinforce the general view that politics is failing and politicians are bastards. (Flinders, 2013)

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing scepticism towards the role of satire in British political life. This view, which has been expressed across policy circles, the media and academia, suggests that making fun of politicians and political parties can foster cynicism and apathy among citizens that diminishes healthy political engagement (Fielding, 2012, 2014a,

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2014b). In more sweeping variants, a norm of subversion, especially snark, within the public sphere is taken as (at least) permissive of a 'hollowing out' of political life (Denby, 2010; Flinders, 2013). A kind of 'post-truth' malaise emerges whereby politicians themselves—most notably Boris Johnson—are able to profit from an increasingly symbiotic relationship with satire (Coe, 2013; Iannucci, 2015, 2016). The once cutting edge of British satire is not only blunted but also actively turned to the ends of a de-politicised, spectacular form of politics where gesture, form, personality and humour trump engagement, deliberation, transparency and accountability.

While sympathetic to this view, not least for underlining the political significance of comedy, we develop a critical engagement that extends in a more performative direction (Butler, 2010). Although satire has certainly grown in significance and circulation within British politics, we argue that the political analysis of comedy should not be reduced to an instrumental logic of 'impact' but can also entertain the plural possibilities and limits that might be in a process of construction and change. As Julie Webber (2013: 7) observes, 'few political science scholars examine political comedy, and when they do, they ask an outdated disciplinary question: does it promote civic engagement? Or does it make citizens cynical toward government?' Straightforwardly, there is more to critical politics than parliament, parties, politicians and elections. Part of the argument against contemporary satire seems to imply that the resolution of public engagement via the state form of politics is straightforwardly the best option. On this view, satire either supports the process of resolution or not. But rather than begin with this fixed understanding of what politics 'is', to which comedy is then 'added', we think it is more productive to ask: how does satire conceive of politics? What possibilities and limits are performed? Rejecting the idea that satire should work as an instrumental force that influences the world of politics (for good or ill), we develop a performative approach that engages political satire on its own terms as a far more contested and insurrectional domain.

Broadly speaking, we question the objective separation between a domain of culture on one hand and a domain of politics on the other, in order to develop a conception of satire as an everyday vernacular of political life (Brassett, 2016). Comedy is not 'good' or 'bad' for politics. Comedy *is* politics. Anthropologists have long understood that small things like laughing at, subverting or otherwise ridiculing elements of political life suggest an important everyday agency for reflection and critique (Scott, 1987). But what this agency does or does not do, or what it is used for, and by whom, are entirely open questions. The interesting point for us is that British satire exists as a vernacular record of political thought in its own right: it raises questions about the state form of politics, suggests radical limits in the mediatisation of political life and can, in certain circumstances, anticipate novel ways in which political agency might be changing. This view has implications for the study of political comedy, which go beyond the objective orthodoxy of audience studies, to anticipate how satire works as an everyday language of politics.

Satire is fundamentally situated in the social relations that it seeks to criticise and, as such, the performance can both critique and embody the problems and contradictions of that society. This is not necessarily 'direct' in the sense that the satirist intends, because these contradictions manifest—in part—through the performance itself. Thus, the significance of the satirical performance is not predetermined and should not be treated as a 'closed' event. Rather, the manifestation of these contradictions through the performance is open ended, and the satire can develop its form of critique in unintended directions. We therefore recognise an important ambiguity in the politics of comedy that others have identified, which is that it can as easily uphold, as well as critique, established forms of

hierarchy and exclusion (Critchley, 2002). While certain jokes can reveal the instability and violence of nation or gender, say, others can serve to entrench such exclusionary tropes through stereotype or humiliation. A turn to comedy is not an ‘escape’ from the hard questions of politics (Brassett, 2009). Good satire can serve to tranquilise critique, distract from moral dilemmas, or else, empower a certain (masculine) worldly cynicism. But such ambiguities in the performative politics of satire are, for us, an acute question of ethics and agency that should be foregrounded and engaged.

This argument is developed over three sections. The first section engages the dominant critique of British satire. While we draw inspiration from the argument that comedy has an important role to play in politics, we question the idea that satire should work ‘as a corrective’ or ‘an ameliorative’ for politics; that is, holding politicians to account. Instead, we make the case for a performative approach which foregrounds the ambiguity and instability of comedy. The second section therefore asks, ‘What does satire do?’ ‘What narratives of politics and political does it instantiate?’ Here, we trace a critical line through the work of Chris Morris, Armando Iannucci and Charlie Brooker. These satirists mark an interesting case selection because they each share elements of the mainstream critique of a ‘hollowing out’ of politics, yet they each take the critique in different directions. This move yields variously an attempt to subvert the narration and visual representation of politics in news media (Morris), a meditation on the tragic figure of the state form of politics (Iannucci), and a more radical questioning of the site of politics and political agency (Brooker). In the final section, we draw these points together to argue that satire can provide an important everyday commentary on the site and nature of politics, raising questions over the state form of global capitalism, the language of political engagement and the nature of political agency. This disaggregation of the substantive content of satire suggests (for us) some productive lines of extension that include—*inter alia*—a generalisation of satirical literacy, the rise of the ‘self-satirising’ politician and the radical potential of ‘citizen satire’. Neither a resolution nor an escape: the proliferation of satire as an everyday vernacular can be understood as an incitement to politics, not its denouement.

The politics of satire

As the Introduction suggested, an influential view associates British satire with the potential for an excessive personal critique of politicians and a negative view of political possibility.¹ While a popular line of thought, this critique emerges from a venerable set of critical arguments that seek a ‘renewal’ of politics to encourage trust and participation in the British political process, following a general observation that politics ‘is not all that it was once cracked up to be’ (Hay, 2007: 1). On this view, satire can be read as encouraging apathy, or worse, legitimating a more general turn away from representative politics, most eloquently expressed in the work of Fielding (2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b). ‘Comedy’, Fielding (2011) argues:

has always relied on stereotypes. There was a time when the Irish were thick; the Scots were careful with money; mothers-in-law fierce and ugly; and the Welsh stole and shagged sheep. The corrupt politician is one such stereotype, one that is neither racist nor sexist and seemingly acceptable to all.

However, the effect of this stereotype is to diminish the work that the audience has to do: it diminishes the deliberative potential of satire. As he surmises:

... the impression that comedy gives us about our representatives as a class—that they are morally inferior to the rest of us—is just wrong. It is however a convenient view, for it means we, the audience, the voters, are not to blame for anything: we are not responsible because we are the victims of a politics gone wrong. (Fielding, 2011)

While sympathetic to this argument, not least for drawing attention to the political importance of satire and its capacity to lapse into stereotypes that tranquilise rather than agitate, we seek to develop a performative conception of satire as an everyday language of politics. This conception emerges from a critique of the idea that comedy ‘should’ be seen as an instrumental force, something which is ‘added onto’ politics to correct its failings. Instead, comedy can be understood as an inherent element in the cultural–political discourse of society. We therefore seek to license an approach to satire that treats it as a productive area of political thought in its own right.

The critique of satire

In a widely circulated blog, Matt Flinders (2013) remarked, ‘there has been a groundswell of opinion against political comedy and satire as evidence grows of its social impact and generally negative social influence (especially over the young)’. This lament for younger people was primarily targeted at the rise of Russell Brand; however, Flinders considered that there was more going on: ‘in recent years the nature of political comedy and satire has derived great pleasure and huge profits from promoting corrosive cynicism rather than healthy scepticism’. He draws from authors like Denby (2010) to argue that satire has become two dimensional in recent years, hitting the easy targets and generating a bit of controversy along the way, for example; Sandi Toksvig’s reference to Michael Gove as having a face like a pickled embryo. For Flinders, any ‘nostalgic’ attempts to license such offence by invoking the tradition of Swift should begin to face up to the fact that as numerous comedians themselves now admit, it is part and parcel of the ‘destructive nature of modern humour’. The impression given is that political satire has become a largely conservative force: as he surmises, ‘my question is really whether satire continues to play a positive social role that helps explain just why politics matters?’

On this view, even the apparently worthy and committed critique of comedians like Brand and also Jon Stewart in the United States may actually contribute to a broader retreat from politics by associating too closely with a tradition of comedy that assures voters that politics is all about self-interest, back stabbing and negativity.² Interestingly, this is a view of satire that is widely shared in policy and media circles. For example, Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s former Director of Communications and Strategy, is a strident critic of Armando Iannucci for providing a ‘cartoon caricature’ of ‘venal’, ‘self-serving politicians’ in a way that distracts from how ‘politics has delivered most of the great things that have happened in the world in its history’.³ In a more nuanced line, authors like Jonathan Coe (2013) and Will Davies (2016) have lamented the way satire has become a weakened force in British politics due to its regular interaction with politicians like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. By allowing them to partake in the audience friendly mocking that satire has become, the critical foil has been blunted, and we are left with little more than a media relay that privileges entertainment over accountability. Far from the Swiftian ideal, they argue, we must remember the darker warning of Peter Cook that ‘*Britain is in danger of sinking giggling into the sea*’.

While a popular and broadly shared critique of satire, this argument also chimes with a deeper analysis of political disenchantment in politics, whether with the liberal democratic form of government (Pharr and Putnam, 2000) or society itself (Putnam, 2000), but most notably observed in British politics by Colin Hay (2007). Hay (2007: 161) argues that we should consider ‘the cumulative consequences of the assumptions we project on to politics and political actors before we plump for them’, and that ‘we should politicise such assumptions and seek to make them the subject of political deliberation’. Here, the fillip of engagement is left on the table as a strategic option.

For Hay, political disaffection can lead to a norm of disengagement and the longer term nurturing of apathy. The solution proposed is a form of renewal, whereby political processes must be more visibly deliberative, where internal discussions and decision-making processes are more transparently available. If this were to occur, we might dispel the ‘myth’ that politicians are in it for themselves, and that people would come to see that parliamentary/representative politics could be a vehicle for social and political progress *once more*. In a world of sound bites and gesture politics, where people have been asked to focus on the personality of the politician, a negative judgement of that person can all too easily blend into a negative view and, indeed, a distrust of politics more generally.

British satire would appear to be directly susceptible to this critique. Rather than politicising globalisation discourses or the rise of personality politics, satire can all too easily mock politicians for their uncritical reproduction of such logics. In a sophisticated critique of the *The Thick Of It*, Steven Fielding (2014b: 344) argues that the programme merely reflects audience prejudice about politicians, thus providing an ‘intensification of the fictional association of politics with corruption’. In other words, far from providing a new insight into politics, this form of satire is simply another manifestation of a growing disengagement. Rather than invigorating and re-engaging with political and social life, it:

... has done little more than pander to our prejudices about politicians. For, as survey after survey reveals, most of us don’t like MPs much, feel they lie and suspect they are corrupt—although other research shows we don’t know much about how politics works. The series takes the brave stand of confirming what we already think we know. (Fielding, 2012)

On this view, Fielding (2014a: 261) argues, *The Thick Of It* provides a disarming negativity: ‘A more depressing example of the failure of political action and communication it is hard to find, and one in which all parties are at fault, trapped in their conflicting logics ...’. It would seem that Iannucci, who is an outspoken critic of the decline of principles like truth and fairness in politics, has unwittingly produced a monster that confirms that very problem: ‘Politicians are still obsessed with the media; policy does not matter compared to its presentation; spin (and spin doctors) rule’ (Fielding, 2012). Indeed, Fielding (2012) castigates the series for its comic success:

The picture painted is, then, hopeless: articulating popular prejudices about politics, which it exaggerates for comic effect, the series leaves viewers with no consolation other than their own laughter. Unlike satire as it should be, the series mocks with no purpose other than mockery.

By engaging in a satirical critique of soundbite culture, personality and gesture politics, there is a risk that satire will confirm what ‘we already know’. This appears to be a political dilemma of comedy: a tranquilising effect can emerge, whereby things may be terrible, but ‘hey at least we can laugh’. It is especially interesting to note that Armando

Iannucci (2016) recently responded to requests to bring back *The Thick of It* for the post-Brexit malaise with a swift ‘no’: ‘Rather than joke about it, I’d sooner urge people to change it’. The general implication appears to be that satire is failing. Whatever high ideals we might once have associated with it, something about its take on politics is either disarming or worse, capable of shoring up the very structures of power it/we would seek to critique.

Satire as critique

The mainstream critique of satire is clearly effective. It connects with a popular view of comedy in the public sphere and licenses some important methodological implications. Understanding how comedy conforms to a particular set of political prejudices or allows for their contest is an important and growing field in the politics of comedy. Audience reception studies that capture insights on how politicians are viewed, how issues are debated (or not) through satirical interventions and whether politicians are actively courting satirists through appearances on *Have I Got News For You* and the *Daily Show* represent an important extension of the mainstream approach (Higgie, 2017; See also Morris, 2009).⁴ However, while sympathetic to such trends, we will explore a more performative approach to satire that is, nevertheless, critical of the potential for instrumentalism in the mainstream view.

First, we would argue that the mainstream critique of comedy produces a limited idea of what political satire is or could be. It harkens back to a Swiftian myth of satire as a corrective to the abuse of power, a mechanism for holding the excesses of the state to account. A quite traditional lament then follows, that things are ‘getting worse’, that comedy is ‘destructive’ or that ‘unlike satire as it should be’ we are left with a form of entertainment that ‘mocks with no purpose other than mockery’. At one level, this is an important recognition that British satirists are closely judged for their role in politics. Similar laments were heard after the satire boom of the 1960s faded, and when big names like John Cleese were accused of ‘selling out’ the promise of their comedy to popular entertainment and advertising (Wagg, 2002). At another level though, for all the stated desire for a ‘renewal’ of politics, there is a curious conservatism in the idea that the restoration and cohesion of the liberal state form should be the ‘main aim’ of satire. If we accept the critique, it leads down a path of using satire to involve more people in an ‘engaged’ and ‘healthy skepticism’ in order to restore public faith in ‘good politicians’. But we would strongly question the attractiveness of this view. Renewing the state form of liberal politics may be one potential outcome of satirical intervention, but it is problematic to regard it as *the primary* aim. Why would we celebrate it ahead of other concerns like ethical critique, political reflexivity or the promotion of more radical forms of democracy, for instance?

Thus, second, building from this point, the ontology of politics at work in the mainstream critique of satire is both limited and limiting. Politics is (apparently) something that happens in parliaments, political parties and elections. All that a public sphere need be concerned with is filling this politics out with engaged, participatory deliberation by enthusiastic trusting citizens. On this view, comedy is set up quite instrumentally as *either complementary* to the mainstream view of the political horizon, *or not*. It neither takes a full account of the content and arguments of the satire in question—many of which overlap with the concerns of political scientists, for example, on soundbite culture, personality politics, and so on—nor does it conceive of the audience as anything other than a

(more-or-less) passive receiver. This separation between cultural producers and audience consumers belies a further set of assumptions about how satire circulates that must surely be questioned. At a time when ordinary people are increasingly *producing* social media content themselves, building networks of engagement outside of traditional institutions, often in the language of satire—for example, satirical critiques of UK Independence Party (UKIP) or Momentum on Twitter (Higgie, 2015)—it is not clear why such an instrumental view of input and output should be privileged.

Drawing these points together, there is a performative limit, or a sense of closure, at the heart of the mainstream critique of satire, which is that it reads comedy according to a state-centric vision of politics that may not be shared. What is taken as cynicism by some, because it fails to support the workings of parliamentary democracy, might otherwise be seen as merely a different form of critique. Thus, we detect a quiet-ism about alternative visions of politics: everyday, non-state-centric and/or radical. Even on its own terms of fostering political engagement, it downplays the political relevance of the capacity for audiences (i.e. ordinary people) to tell their own jokes. Instead, we seek to develop a non-instrumental view of satire, which de-links from the requirement to correct state-level politics, in order to entertain a more everyday notion of satire ‘as’ politics. Less an input–output view of satire and more a performative approach, where different audiences are intimately involved and where the effects are unstable (Butler, 2010). Culture, on this view, is more than the summation of producers and audiences; it becomes a conversation that is ongoing and (at its best) imaginative, poetic (Rorty, 1989). As Simon Critchley remarks:

the genius of jokes is that they light up the common features of our world, not by offering theoretical considerations or by writing two admirably fat volumes of Habermas’s *The Theory of Communicative Action*, but in a more practical way. They are forms of practical abstraction, socially embedded philosophizing. (Critchley, 2002: 87)

Comedy and satire are therefore understood as political practices in their own right, a move that might lead us to ask different questions: what does satire do? What meanings are encapsulated in its critiques? How should we conceive of the possibilities and limits entailed? In this way, satire is rendered as an everyday vernacular of politics that can animate elements of our collective political contingency: an open record of political life (Brassett, 2016).

Satire as politics

While there is much to be gained from a view of satire as a critical foil for the problems of parliamentary democracy, we think that such a view can downplay the role of comedy as a space of critical reflection in its own right. As Louiza Odysseos (2001: 730–731) notes, comedy need not be seen as *just political*—it can be much more profound than that—supplementing rational deliberation through its mere absurdity: ‘making use of the full spectrum of the human register in political and moral considerations’. Rather than enlist contemporary satire to a pre-established model of political interaction, then, we would rather license it as a form of political reflection and critique per se. Less of an identifiable force that ‘does something’ ‘to’ ‘politics’, and more as a language; an everyday vernacular of political life. On these terms, this section will engage the work of three contemporary satirists: Chris Morris, Armando Iannucci and Charlie Brooker.

If political satire is commonly judged in terms of an ability to hold politics and politicians to account, then Morris, Iannucci and Brooker are complex to discern. In different ways, they each carry harder edges and seem less concerned with consequences. Their comedy engages in a form of meta-critique where the very notion of 'holding to account' is itself placed in question. Here, we find emblematic Chris Morris's *Day Today*, which famously saw its newscaster engineer a declaration of war from a successful trade negotiation, triumphantly declaring: 'Its WAR!!' as a panoply of hyperbolic military reporting poured across the studio. For such satirists the locus of democracy is somehow obscured by the rise of 24-hour media: soundbite culture, the cult of personality and gesture politics. Comic high points such as the *Brass Eye* special on 'Paedogeddon', or the monstrosity of characters like Malcolm Tucker, speak to a general disquiet over how we come to 'know' politics. Indeed, as heir apparent to this tradition, Charlie Brooker has taken to filling out his various 'wipes' at '*what the bloody hell's going on?*' with documentary reflections by Adam Curtis on the engineered confusion of global events.

While it would be easy to draw a line through the work of these comedians, not least since they have all collaborated, and all engage in a sophisticated critique of the mediation of politics, we will argue that it is important to disaggregate. In the work of Chris Morris, we discern an important point about form: how language, sound, tone, and often violence push political discourse in highly limited directions (e.g. celebrity endorsement, moral panic, etc.). These trends are picked up and modified in the work of Armando Iannucci to present a tragedy of the modern politician. Quite apart from the cynical take, we suggest that a close reading of *The Thick of It* reveals a mood of tragedy brought out by trying, feeling, ridiculous, failing comic figures (up to and including Malcolm Tucker). In this way, Iannucci is arguably the satirist who shares most with the mainstream critique of satire: lamenting the death of a particular form of politics where truth and rational argument mattered. Finally, we draw on elements of the work of Charlie Brooker to suggest that the mood of satire may be shifting from a focus on parliamentary politics to the politics of representation in media relay. Quite apart from any disarming view this shift might suggest, we argue that Brooker can encourage reflection on the subject of media politics and the different modes of inclusion and exclusion this permits.

Chris Morris

Chris Morris is commonly understood as one of the true artists of modern satire. His uncompromising style, refusal to take part in the celebrity spectacle and the tendency of other comedians to use and/or defer to his work mean he has an important place in comedy history. Often seen as prescient in his satire, a common refrain is to refer to any element of current politics or 24-hour news media as an unknowing reference to Chris Morris. His satire developed by targeting the media form of politics. In early radio shows, this targeting involved taking sound bites out of context or using sounds to identify the meaning of sections, for example, whale sounds for the 'green news desk'. But it gradually developed via the *Day Today*, to point to an important political limit in the news cycle: a need for sensation that diminishes the significance of policy and may actually set the agenda. In one sequence, coverage of the IRA's latest theoretical strategy of turning dogs into bombs leads police to cordon off areas of London and conduct controlled explosions on (what the headline refers to as) 'Bomb-Dogs' (later changed to 'Terrier-ists'). The menace of exploding dogs is then juxtaposed with an interview with the head of Sinn Fein who is legally required to inhale helium when being interviewed 'to subtract credibility from his statements'. This

combination of moral panic with (ridiculous) personality politics underpinned Morris' practice of interacting satirically with the world that came to prominence in *Brass Eye*. *Brass Eye* was a thematically organised news parody show that took a particular issue each episode and explored the problems and anxieties associated with the media's handling of that issue. In particular, 'Drugs' and 'Paedogeddon' provide a fascinating critique of contemporary political life, as well as an innovative consideration of how important political concepts are socially digested.

In performative terms, the interesting point about Chris Morris is the way that his satire interacts with society, and then subsequently how mainstream politics attempts to take account and reconcile itself. Picking up where 'Bomb Dogs' left off, *Brass Eye* followed a method of ridiculing celebrated figures from the media, politics, sport, culture and other well-known personalities not only to show the vacuity of celebrity but also to juxtapose it with the weight and significance of these issues. The episode 'Drugs' features a number of celebrities, including Noel Edmonds, Bernard Manning, Rolf Harris and the MP David Amess, who were asked to condemn and campaign against a drug called 'Cake', a new legal high from Czechoslovakia.⁵ Cake is represented by a large luminous tablet, and the celebrities are told the tablet is 'actual size', and are then asked to read out some fictitious scientific data about the drug. Most famously, the campaign is organised by the 'Free the UK from Drugs' and 'British Opposition to Metabolically Bisturbile Drugs', or 'F.U.K.D' and 'B.O.M.B.D' for short. In each interview, the celebrities are told of the ludicrous effects of 'cake'—including 'Czech neck' which inflates the neck so far that it engulfs the face causing asphyxiation, or Bernard Manning's lament that 'one young kiddy on cake cried all the water out of his body'—as well as being asked to repeat regularly: 'Cake is a made up drug'. However, nobody notices the joke and all are keen to stop the spread of drug use in the United Kingdom. MP David Amess' appearance on the show even led him to raise the existence of 'cake' in the House of Commons:

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government propose in respect of the import of (a) khat, (b) gammahydroxybutyrate and (c) 'cake' to the United Kingdom.

Mr. Sackville: Neither the khat plant nor the substances gammahydroxybutyrate—GHB—or 'cake', which we understand refers to 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-benzylamphetamine, are controlled under the international United Nations drug conventions or under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. (HC Deb 23 July 1996, col 167)

By interacting satirically with the world, the programme highlights how easily the norm of celebrity campaigns oriented around moral panic can become empty. The interaction with politics is the very basis through which it proves its value as a form of political engagement and contestation. Not only does the episode 'Drugs' directly engage with parliamentary democracy but it also shows how limited this form of politics can be. Ironically, the same point was made in reverse as a result of the *Brass Eye* special 'Paedogeddon', which focused on public and media attitudes to paedophilia. The controversy surrounding this episode led to a number of politicians openly condemning the show in the strongest possible terms. Beverley Hughes, Minister for Child Protection, and David Blunkett, Home Secretary, both went on record to decry the episode, although both admitted that they had not actually watched it.

Although a special episode, Paedogeddon followed a similar format to 'Drugs'. Numerous celebrities were drafted in to make a series of absurd, yet emotionally charged,

claims about paedophilia. The episode featured a number of celebrities making ridiculous statements with absolute sincerity, from Phil Collins declaring that he was ‘talking nonce sense’ (nonsense) to MP Barbara Follet talking about ‘Pantou the Dog’, a child’s game on the internet, where ‘an online paedophile has converted [the dogs eye] to be a webcam to look at the children playing’. Such games are part of a Hidden Online Entrapment Control System, which is reduced to the acronym HOECS, said phonetically ‘hoax’. Richard Blackwood states that such ‘HOECS games make your children smell like hammers’, and that ‘online paedophiles can actually make your keyboard release toxic vapours that actually make you more suggestible’. After sniffing his keyboard he says, ‘Now I actually feel more suggestible. And that was just from one sniff’.

Again, we might be tempted to channel the mainstream view of satire here: Lockyer and Attwood (2009: 57) make the point that *Brass Eye* does not offer any solutions, thus limiting how ‘informative or critical its satirical attack can be’. However, we would argue that the absurdity of *Brass Eye* not only satirises the limited nature of British political discourse but also *deliberately performs it*. In doing so, Chris Morris clearly enters into an area of uncertainty (Meikle, 2012: 25). As he has previously noted, ‘You have to be at best only half aware of what you’re trying ... if you know what you’re looking for there’s no attempt to do some real work’ (Hanks, 2013). On the issue of paedophilia, the *Brass Eye* episode (including the media reaction to the performance) *embodied* the difficulty that British society has with paedophilia, not in spite of, but because of media and political interest in the matter.

Armando Iannucci

If Chris Morris asks a set of interesting performative questions about the satirical status of politics, challenging us to think through the entwinement and mutually subversive behaviour of satirist and politician, then Iannucci develops an altogether more traditional satirical method in order to ask, ‘What happens when we make this absurd situation a background to politics and policy?’ While Morris is more comfortable to let politicians make fools of themselves, Iannucci has repeatedly emphasised the tragic consequences of how the media relay and political process are becoming entwined. In a long career of production, script writing and acting, he has been behind some the most important and successful series in TV comedy. His acute sensitivity to the comic value of flawed characters who respond to difficult circumstances, an eye for the absurdity of mediated society and a love of mundane life (e.g. Alan Partridge’s frequent trips to the 24-hour garage, Malcolm Tucker’s penchant for ‘old style’ Curlywurlys or Peter Mannion’s love of a relaxing Twix) mark him out as a satirist who takes the everyday as a productive resource. In *The Thick of It*, Hugh Abbott struggles to keep up on a very human level:

I work, I eat, I shower. That’s it. Occasionally, I take a dump, just as a sort of treat. I mean, that really is my treat. That’s what it’s come to. I sit there and I think, ‘No, I’m not going to read *The New Statesman*. This time is just for me. This is quality time just for me’. Is that normal?⁶

The politicians sit, nominally, at the top of a cast of unelected special advisors and civil servants. It becomes clear they live and work in constant fear of the media cycle as it is embodied in such ‘fixers’ and ‘spin artists’. Far from being greedy or ‘bastards’, the few politicians presented in the show are portrayed as amateurish, vain, inexperienced and, ultimately, foolish. As Amoore and Hall (2013: 99) note, the significance of the fool derives from its historical association with chaos and misrule, thus creating ‘an inverted

and upturned world'. The presentation of the politician as a fool in the *Thick of It* turns the traditional understanding—and the ideological basis—of British liberal democracy on its head: that our politicians have meaningful agency and control. In *The Thick of It*, none of these things are true. For example, Peter Mannion struggles to understand the very concept of an app when trying and failing to sell his coalition partner's vision of a 'silicon playground'.⁷ It is a policy he does not understand, does not want to promote and one he even destroys *against his will*.

Beyond this diminution of political agency by the structure of mediatised politics, the idea of the fool goes further. Another key aspect of the fool, in traditional terms, is the character's ability to see beyond the immediate surface of what occurs in society (Amoore and Hall, 2013: 99). In essence, they offer a critical insight into the world but, as fools, they are dismissed as frivolous and so occupy a peripheral role in the story (Critchley, 2002: 82). *The Thick of It* inverts this formula: rather than playing a peripheral character, the fool is now the central figure of the story, or rather the tragedy is the gradual realisation that we are 'all fools'. For example, Glenn Cullen, the principled peripheral character, whose arc portrays the death of meaningful politics: the only character capable of genuine empathy for colleagues and even Mr Tickel,⁸ whose (foolish) nervous breakdown illustrates much that is wrong in the party:

Fucking hell! Fuck! Jesus, I'm not a joke, okay, all right, hello? I am a man. I am a man, you know, you know?! This, THIS!!!! **THIS IS MY LIFE!!!! I'M A HUMAN BEING, AND ALL THIS IS MY LIFE!!** And, it's collapsing in front of me. [...] I'm irrelevant, I'm irrelevant, I'm irrelevant! (Glenn)

Gradually, however, the fools become aware of their tragic predicament and rage turns to a form of pathetic acceptance. In policy terms, government is constrained, not principally by action or deed but by public perception, and how public perception itself is constituted. But this recognition can bring no comfort, even for the apparent spin masters like Malcolm Tucker. From pre-emptive leaking that turns out to not be required to managing the perception of equality by placing Nicola Murray's child in a state school where she goes off the rails and becomes a potential nightmare headline for the government, his intensity often backfires. The focus on spinners, then, is not necessarily a form of cynicism but rather an observation about how political thought and practise are conditioned by context; and how the politics of that context has become a self-perpetuating edifice. Even Malcolm Tucker - that most Machiavellian and demonstrably powerful figure - succumbs to a tragic realisation of this context. At one point, unable to text Terri, Malcolm shouts at her and, in front of the office, she tells him he is losing it and he should apologise.⁹ He leads her into a private room for what many expect to be a typically apocalyptic sacking, but instead, his breakdown continues and he actually opens up about the pressure he is feeling. When Terri comforts him and apologises, he assures her:

No, I'm over it, okay? Don't you apologise. Don't you fucking apologise. You don't need to apologise. I love this place. I do. I mean, fucking, compared to Number 10, this place is fucking tranquil, yeah? Over there, 300 yards down the road, I mean, it's like a fucking cancer ward. I mean, there are people in there, they're fucking screaming at each other. They are screaming, 'You gave me this fucking disease'. 'You gave me this fucking disease'. And every corner that I turn there's another threat, Terri. Hacks, hacks, fucking vampire hacks. And they're slaughtering us, Terri. They are fucking slaughtering us and they want my face for a flannel! And you know what? I used to be the fucking pharaoh, Terri. I used to be the fucking pharaoh. Now I'm fucking floundering in a fucking Nile of shit. But I am going to fashion a paddle out of that shit. Yeah?

While tempting to dismiss the fatalistic and cynical dimensions of *The Thick of It* (Fielding, 2014a: 262), we prefer to emphasise this theme of tragedy as a critical device. For example, Fielding (2014a: 260) describes the programme as ‘denigrating popular agency’ through its depiction of the public as disinterested and comically aggressive towards politicians. But this separation between the general public and politicians is, in part, a product of a limited model of politics that should be placed in question. Where Fielding (2014a: 263) sees proof of hopelessness that ‘awful politics goes on, and on, and on’, we read a sharp critique of politics *as usual*—where separations between politicians and public are entrenched as part of the operating mechanism of politics via media strategies to ‘better communicate’ (that is, with ‘quiet bat people’). Considered in this light, British politics as a whole—and the society of which it is essentially a part—is revealed as deeply problematic. By representing contemporary British politics as an ongoing tragedy, *The Thick of It* provides an alternative framework through which to think about politics: a critical lens through which the distinction between politics and everyday life is revealed as fantastical.

Charlie Brooker

Where Chris Morris highlights the mediatised limits of political life in the United Kingdom, Iannucci’s satire presents a more human-centred tragedy about the everyday life of people at the centre of politics. Rather than standing outside and poking fun at politicians (and celebrities) as they stumble from one moral panic to the next, the satire rather inhabits the logics of this emergent context, seeking to think through and understand how they work to perform political possibility. For Morris, the emptiness is absurd when compared to the societal weight of the issues involved, and for Iannucci this backdrop must be seen as an unfolding tragedy on a human scale.

Such themes are seemingly rehearsed in altogether lighter, more playful, tones in the satire of Charlie Brooker. Working across a similar time period, although arguably peeking just after *The Thick of It*, Brooker has developed a style of satire that blends tightly edited sequences, spliced and narrated with his own sardonic and fatal voice. His style might be typified as high snark, or educated-lad humour, since, despite his eye for a sophisticated argument, he is nevertheless happy to play around with smutty puns and puerile humour. While echoing elements of Morris and Iannucci, Brooker must be seen as an important departure for his decision to give up on a fictional backdrop altogether. For Brooker, the media already functions as an absurd comically theatrical form, per se:

Politicians and newsmakers know this, which is why everything is geared more and more towards soundbites and razzle-dazzle. The soap opera analogy is a fitting one because that’s what the news has become [...] Sometimes it’s happy, sometimes it’s sad, but somehow it isn’t real.

Interestingly, much of Brooker’s output is addressed to the audience of media: the individual subject, who watches the news and seeks to comprehend global events. So, in addition to the presenter and the first person narrator, Brooker also appears as a television viewer, who is sat in his living room on a comfortable sofa. This attempt to define and personalise the audience suggests a degree of identification—breaking down the illusory barrier between performer and audience—and a provocation, asking us: do you see it this way? Do you challenge or question what you are told? Such a reflexive conception of the audience subject suggests an unstable performance: there is a possibility for disagreement, ignorance, denial or even involvement.

More recently, Brooker has developed two additional viewer characters—Barry Shitpeas and Philomena Cunk—who comment upon and engage in the various politico-media narratives that are emerging. The irony in these talking head vignettes is often multi-layered and difficult to define, a fact that brings a rich, polyphonic experience to the satire. In one discussion of *Benefits Street*, a Channel 4 documentary about poor people on state benefits who all happen to live in the same street, the performativity we identified in Chris Morris' work, specifically in relation to the reception of *Brass Eye*, is actively courted:

There was this sort of anger making a programme called *Benefits Street*. It gave you a fascinating insight into the lives of these people who've got next to nothing, so you can judge 'em. [...]. (Barry Shitpeas)

When I was watching it I felt sort of pity for the people in it, but when I went on Twitter everyone was angry with them so I thought, oh I've got it wrong I'd better join in with that, so then I wrote these little tweet things, about how they were scum and bastards and about how I hope the government fucking shoots them, and then stands over their bodies pumping bullet after bullet into their benefit scum bastard bodies. And I got like 20 new followers for that so it was a pretty good programme ... People say there's no community anymore but watching that interesting show and joining in with everyone on the internet hating them together, sort of outdoing each other to express how much hate you felt, was amazing. I don't think I've ever felt so much part of a huge group with all this fun anger surging through us. It really made me feel alive.¹⁰ (Philomena Cunk)

By placing the viewer at the centre of the satire, there is a challenge to think through how politics works, where opinions come from and how they are disciplined. Contra Fielding (2014b: 262), who takes the view that Brooker, notably in his dystopian comedy series *Black Mirror*, characterises the audience as 'facile' and showing a 'flippant disregard for *serious politics*' (emphasis added), our account instead offers a view of Brooker urging viewers to deconstruct that illusory division between audience and media, as well as that between politics and everything else. On this view, it can be argued that the person who watches Charlie Brooker is performatively inscribed as both the recipient and the instigator of the satire. Beyond questions of getting the joke or not, liking it or not, a performative instability is presented at the centre: how do we come to know politics?

His 2014 *Wipe* of the year included the work of documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis in order to problematise the confusion that currently surrounds politics. A provocation in line with Brooker's focus on the recipient subject, Curtis picked up and elaborated Brooker's traditional themes of confusion and bewilderment at the 'chaos that seems to be engulfing everything':¹¹ Across a combination of disjointed edit sequences and a typically dystopian lo-fi soundtrack, Curtis describes an 'odd non-linear world that plays into the hands of those in power' where everything the media tells us seems to be confusing and contradictory. We have the biggest financial crisis in decades, yet not a single banker goes to jail. Instead, they get bailed out and given millions in quantitative easing:

But it gets even more confusing because the Bank of England has admitted that those millions of pounds have not gone where they are supposed to. A vast amount of the money has actually found its way into the hands of the wealthiest five per cent in Britain. It has been described as the biggest transfer of wealth to the rich in recent documented history. It could be a huge scandal comparable to the greedy oligarchs in Russia. A ruthless elite siphoning off billions of pounds in public money. But nobody seems to know. It sums up the strange mood of our time where nothing really makes any coherent sense. We live with a constant vaudeville of contradictory stories which makes it impossible for any real opposition to emerge because they can't counter it with a coherent narrative of their own. And it means that we as individuals become ever more

powerless—unable to challenge anything because we live in a state of confusion and uncertainty. **To which the response is ‘oh dear’. But that’s what they want you to say.**

The rise of satirical literacy

In summary, there are lines to be drawn between the work of the three satirists considered in the previous section and the mainstream critique. They each portray politicians in terms which undermine them, question the agency of parliamentary politics and question how the media relay is diminishing the quality of discourse within the public sphere. However, against those who would see this form of satire as merely a cynical turn, laughing at politicians without encouraging debate and discussion, we have elaborated a more performative reading. The success of British satire has created a burgeoning industry, ‘yes’, but it has also invested the vernacular of political life with a ready set of critical devices. Satirical performances are not closed events, they are received and reiterated, modified and subverted. As such, we have cautioned against an exclusive focus on the ‘political impact’ of satire, in order to explore the proliferation of satire as an everyday language of political life. In this way, we very much echo the argument of Stephen Wagg (2002: 324) that far from dying, ‘satire has become deeply woven into public discourse and has helped to define a new paradigm for the mediation of the public sphere’. We identify four strands of thought that could be productively developed in future work.

First, satire develops and structures a form of political critique that bears reflection on its own terms. The work of Morris, Iannucci and Brooker reveals an acute critique of mediated politics that targets the weakness of deliberation about social issues in the United Kingdom, the tragic potentials of this backdrop for political practice and a provocative move to consider the viewer as a site of political agency. But this critique interacts with its context, and it exceeds its initial performance, so to speak. While elements of Morris’ work make the politician look ridiculous, it should be foregrounded that the performative interaction is open and unstable. We might, for instance, hate a show like ‘Paedogeddon’ because it hoodwinks MPs, but we might also learn something from the media reaction—which placed strident critiques of the show opposite a spread of adolescent girls in bikinis (Lockyer and Attwood, 2009)—and how MP hubris allowed them to critique Morris without having seen the programme (The Guardian, 2001a, 2001b). On this view, there is a certain zombie-like quality to the performative politics of satire. A joke that might once look offensive can, through its unstable interactions with society, be reiterated in different circumstances; thus, the meaning of satire is in a process of negotiation, over time, with different audiences and new performers.

Second, there are a range of political possibilities on offer across the work of these three satirists. Morris seems to license a kind of ‘never ending satire’—whereby once the joke is rolling we are beholden to let the consequences be what they will. While uncertain and unstable, this can nevertheless be seen as an important political technique in its own right. Contemporary satirists like Lee Nelson and Al Murray have continued to interact satirically with the world, whether by dropping cash on Sepp Blatter or standing for election against Nigel Farage as the Pub landlord. The performativity of everyday satire can inspire forms of political intervention which do different things, critique and deliberate in alternative registers. While elements of this style might appear glib or spectacular, it does not restrict from more politically engaged work such as that pursued by, say, *Revolt*, which itself echoes a number of anti-globalisation themes pioneered by grass roots activist groups like the *Space Hijackers* and the *Clown Army* (Rossdale, 2016).

Beyond the ability of comedians to learn from each other, we would suggest that a more pervasive set of effects emerge when a show like *The Thick of It* becomes so embedded in

public discourse. In providing such a robust critique of politics, Iannucci has created an alternative critical register for thinking about British political life. Through its popularity, *The Thick of It* fosters a kind of satirical literacy about spin doctors and spads, and about gesture politics and public relations. The now popular refrain that one or other political event is 'just like an episode of *The Thick Of It*' suggests, for us, a reflexive language of engagement. For example, Jeremy Corbyn's reference to 'ordinary people doing extraordinary things' in his speech to the Annual Labour Party Conference (Corbyn, 2015), which was word for word what Nicola Murray says about 'Fourth Sector Pathfinders', was noted by Iannucci himself (Evening Standard, 2015). Equally, the rise of social media parody accounts has regularly and commonly referenced the programme, for example, the Twitter account MP Peter Mannion parodied the early Brexit brainstorming sessions as a version of the 'ideas retreat' in Series 3, with Mannion asking 'Am I Norway-Plus'? Again these are not issues of political impact but do suggest a productive dimension to satirical performance where the terms of engagement are updated, generalised and—through use—modified.

Third, and developing from this point, the *Brass Eye*-like responses to *Brass Eye* can fathom a deeper problematic of what happens once satire is let loose in the world. One prominent example of the 'zombie-like' nature of satire is the appointment of MP David Amess as Chair of the Committee to discuss the Psychoactive Substances Bill and the satirical reactions this drew (Stone, 2015). In other words, David Amess who once asked about the status of Cake in the UK Parliament will now play a major role in determining the future of British drugs policy. While a small circle of initiates may take this choice as a very pure form of comedy, whereby politics itself becomes a form of satire, it is clear that we are in unstable territory. For instance, beyond the positive image of satirical literacy, we may also need to consider the role of politics and media in the recuperation of critique. What happens, for instance, when politicians appear in a satirical light? Remarking upon the use of his jokes by David Cameron, Iannucci (2016) suggested that one reason not to turn the joke back against him is that:

politicians no longer act like real versions of themselves. Instead, they come over as replicants of an idealised, fictional version of what they think a politician should be. They perform politics, rather than practise policy. [...] We're left watching an entertainment rather than participating in affairs of state.

On these terms, Stewart Lee (2014) and Will Self (2015) have pursued the idea that the invented character of Boris Johnson should rather be understood as the 'world's first self-satirising politician'.¹² This issue is one that mainstream critiques of satire would clearly place as a failure. But to underline, we would rather open up such dilemmas to ongoing questioning. There are multiple iterations of satire (some of it by politicians) with different critical potentials interacting and manifesting in an open and dynamic society. It may be an unfashionable point, but references to the failure of satire in regard to Boris Johnson could equally be understood as a successful move by the politician, playing upon the political potential that satirical literacy affords.¹³

Finally, this everyday merging between satire and politics does not seem to turn people off from politics; indeed, we might argue that one reason for the massive public engagement in the European Union (EU) referendum was precisely the irreverent style of 'self-satirising' politicians like Boris and Nigel Farage. But it does challenge us to find new modes of intervention. In this vein, Charlie Brooker offers the most direct reflection on the question of *what* and *where* politics is? His deconstruction of media narrative, decentring of the viewer subject and his use of an open-ended performance arguably leave the work of politics to the audience. Unlike the ritual of parliamentary politics, satirical engagement

can be both unpredictable and uncoordinated as David Cameron found with the ‘PigGate’ allegation, which became a social media meme reflexive to the eerie parallels with Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* episode ‘The National Anthem’.¹⁴ Can the rise of satirical literacy form the backdrop for such engagement? Rebecca Higgie (2015) describes a form of ‘citizen satire’, how ordinary people engage critically with politics via social media memes, as a significant proliferation of agency. While far from romantic about the potentials of a bottom-up form of public sphere populated by citizen satirists, it is clear that new moral economies of satire are emerging on social media that are quickly circulated and highly inclusive. They may be rough around the edges, encourage a form of attack-level politics, or even feed a conspiratorial tone. But as an everyday form of politics, the growth of citizen satire does not so much diminish, *as change* the terms of political engagement.

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Notes

1. In a qualitative study of political television fiction that included comedy and satire, Van Zoonen and Wring (2012) found that while US fiction and satire tended to be optimistic or inspiring in tone, British political comedies tended to portray politicians as dim witted or selfish, with a general gloomy outlook that suggests ‘there is no use trying’.
2. In mentioning US satire, we would note that the US literature on satire asks a similar set of questions to the mainstream critique, that is, how does it affect politics? It sometimes offers a more positive set of answers, embracing the potential of satire to educate. This general divergence can be read into elements of the US literature on satire which has celebrated the capacity of major titles like the Daily Show and the Colbert Report proactively to occupy a tranche of the news media industry (Baym, 2010: 111; Baym and Jones, 2012: 13). But as Julie Webber (2013: 8) argues:

While communications scholars have a close affinity to political theory because of their interest in the way changing media have transformed information gathering and sharing in democratic republics, they offer little in the way of explaining how certain narrative forms of political comedy organize or disorganize political affiliation, and often fail to connect it to historical trends in thinking about the economy, culture wars, modern political parties and social movements.

Anecdotally, at least, we would note that there is now an analogous turn ‘against’ US satire following the election of Donald Trump in a way that further resonates with the mainstream view in the United Kingdom (Coleman, 2016).

3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcFaizGw860>
4. For an interesting critical discussion of ‘the audience’ and the politics of audience reception studies, see Reinelt (2014). We share many of Reinelt’s observations on the limitations of an instrumental view of the worth of performance, and while we would not seek to rehearse common debates on intrinsic value, we do agree that sociality, engagement and ongoing discussion would be an important methodological adaptation for audience studies to contemplate.
5. Broadcast on 5 February 1997, this claim was made over 4 years after the division of Czechoslovakia.
6. Hugh Abbott is the first Minister for Social Affairs in *The Thick of It*, eventually replaced by Nicola Murray. He explains his ‘treat’ to Glenn Cullen, who acts as his dogsbody throughout the first two series. Glenn, in response to Hugh’s rhetorical question, answers, ‘It’s sad’.
7. Peter Mannion, the Tory Minister for Social Affairs and Citizenship in a Coalition Government, launches a policy to get students to design apps in classrooms, for which they would not be paid. Mannion, completely out of touch with both technology and social change in Britain, embarrasses himself and the Government at the launch of the policy. This fictional policy reflected—and in fact, preceded—a policy implemented by the actual Coalition Government in 2012.
8. Douglass Tickel is a nurse, camped outside Parliament in opposition to Government policy. He is regularly derided by the members of the Coalition Government and the Opposition. Mr Tickel’s story is the driving force and instigation for all the events of the final series of *The Thick of It*, even leading to the final downfall of Malcolm Tucker, who leaked his medical records. Glenn Cullen is the only character in the show who shows genuine remorse at Mr Tickel’s death.

9. Terri Coverley's role in the Department for Social Affairs and Citizenship is to manage media relations. She is the former Head of Press for Waitrose and, ostensibly, the least competent at her job. She is not respected at all by her colleagues in the Department. For this reason, it is particularly unusual that Malcolm Tucker, of all people, should confide in and sincerely apologise to her.
10. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUYEk5nRIFw>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcy8uLjRHPM>
12. Charlie Brooker also considers Nigel Farage such a politician: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/05/06/charlie-brooker-election-wipe-bbc_n_7221262.html
13. Again the mainstream approach would posit a set of instrumental rationalities to explain this performance. For example, Wood et al. (2016) re-phrase it as part of a new form of statecraft, a move to celebrity status that provides legitimacy for continued political action. While an interesting argument, we would suggest that there are important developments beyond self-interested statecraft, not the least of which, would be the way Boris Johnson has used satire to defend the human rights of Turkish artists. This move was a political one that became widely derided in media and policy circles, even as it explored fundamental issues of human rights and political agency.
14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sf3QkQk7xEE>

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