Critical Comedy: Satire, Absurdity and Ireland's economic crash

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Critical Comedy: Satire, absurdity and Ireland’s economic crash

Abstract: Satire and critique became intertwined during Ireland’s Celtic Tiger, as comedians became more important sources of discourse on contemporary society and politics, especially since the beginning of the recession. The public profile and self-presentation of comedians is clearly critical; comedy is taken widely as an important subversive discourse. Through the theories of Bakhtin on carnival and satire, Billig on ridicule and Butler on parody and subjective formation, I suggest that Irish political satire is a form of critical discourse, and more importantly a ‘world-image’ of absurdity. As an empirical illustration, I analyse the combination of comedy and political commentary in popular television sketches and stand-up routines. The wider influence of these elements on political discourse can then be considered.

Keywords: Absurdity, Comedy, Critique, Politics, Satire,
corrupt politicians. But who exactly is the butt of this joke? And what are the consequences of such satire? And how did national economic disaster become hilarious?

All the sketches examined in this article were devised and broadcast in a time of economic and political crisis. Somehow, comedy and satire was considered to have a role to play in this crisis, as reflected in the Kilkenomics festival and its ilk, which comprised comedians and economic experts on one stage. The following February an election was held, billed as the most important in the history of the state. Coverage of this election was marked by the inclusion of satirical material in the core political programming, Mario Rosenstock on Tonight with Vincent Browne and theAprés Match team on RTÉ’s The Eleventh Hour. What is the significance of these and similar developments? Clearly, part of the response to the events of Ireland’s recession was comedic, perhaps because; as the adage has it, better to laugh than to cry. However, in this paper I argue that a curious interpenetration of comedy and politics began during the Celtic Tiger era and became particularly heightened during the recession. This hybrid form of comedy and critique is worth analysis and can help us understand the peculiarity of Ireland, but also the characteristics of modern Anglo-phone comedy and its consequences. Of course, the situation is relatively specific to Ireland, and so is the tone of the humour, but there is much mutual influence and interchange of comedic styles in the contemporary globalised and media saturated world. Furthermore, this concrete episode can help sociologists to explore the relationships between subversion and satire, critique and crisis.

Analyzing Critical Comedy

Before proceeding it is necessary to deal briefly with two basic objections to analysing comedy, before considering a third objection of greater significance. The first objection is that it is impossible to analyse comedy because laughter is a universal human phenomenon. Obviously, the problem with such an objection is that even if laughter is universal, the way in which it is provoked, its significance and its social settings vary across time and space. Even if laughter is universal, comedy is culturally specific. Even more so than many forms of culture, comedy tends to be very particular by age group and social class. The second objection to analysing comedy is that it is insignificant; politics, economics, demographics, social structure and so on are hardly shaken or transformed by parody, satire or bad taste. To this objection, our reply is that sociological thought has always expanded by analysing phenomena generally neglected, and this analysis of comedy will stand on its own merits.

The third objection to analysing comedy is that comedy itself is critical. There are typically two parts to the claim; firstly, that some, usually new, comedy dispenses with the clichés of prior comedy, i.e. edgy, alternative, idiosyncratic comedy; and secondly, that this particular comedy is critical of society or culture, puncturing pieties, questioning cherished myths, subverting authority. These claims are made by comedians, echoed by journalists, and probably accepted quite generally.
You get that now, mainstream clean-cut kids with their clean-cut comedy, and that’s fine it’s pop-music stand-up but I like to think there’s still room for something else. (Tommy Tiernan in Boyd 2010).

Irish comedy today is not bent and twisted and risky, which is what comedy should be, he says. (David McSavage in Ingle, 2011)

Rather than criticise these claims to critique, I would like to suggest that these claims are in fact true. There is no denying that Anglophone comedy has been transformed as the 1980s gave rise to explicitly critical comedians (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008), and latterly in Ireland during the late 1990s. More importantly, comedy is critical; there is no sense in arguing that comedy is the opiate of the masses or justifies the status quo or legitimates cultural orthodoxy. Interestingly, this popular opinion of comedy is replicated in academic works, Morreal (2005) argues that humour by politicians is always to be suspected of being a power play, and humour about politicians is always critical or subversive. However, the character and consequences of these critiques should be a question for empirical investigation rather than a foreclosed theoretical principle.

My approach to comedy here is based upon the emergent sociology of critique. As opposed to critical sociology, the underlying idea here is not to critique social phenomena but recognise critique as a social phenomenon, for instance, as a mode of subject formation, or as a sort of discourse. Critique is not merely an internal academic affair; rather it proliferates in various guises, alloyed to other aspects of culture. Yet, it is also possible to trace the historicity of critique, principally as diverging from science investigation in the Enlightenment, and crystallising as a mode of subject-formation during Romanticism (Koselleck, 1988, Hansen, 1996). Critique is only one way of describing the world; it does not reflect it neutrally. Indeed, critical tendencies can interfere with the capacity for hermeneutic interpretation, in that they prevent the researcher from being open and receptive to the distinctive meanings of any discrete social phenomenon. Boltanski (2011) argues that critique is a part of pragmatic political action in many different contexts, and is intrinsically linked to the creation of institutions and challenging their justifications. However, he also attends to the problem of disempowering Bourdieusian critical sociology, the nihilistic excesses of ‘criticising everything’ and the co-opting of critique in contemporary capitalism.ii

Critique is both spurred on by crisis and instigates it, partaking in constantly repeated the modern rupture with the past, by making tradition appear as stultifying constraint, and culture as ideology (Latour, 1993). In particular, the tendency of critique is either to identify something as a myth or ideology to which most or many people are in thrall, and then unmask this as false and arbitrary or to find ‘real’ causes such as biology or economy which explain human behaviour which is putatively voluntary (Latour, 2004). This is not something that only transpires within intellectual circles, but is part of how critique operates as a general form of discourse, in the public sphere, art and in everyday life. Generally, critique disfigures; that is, it represents individuals as cultural dopes, cultural beliefs as ideological justifications of the status quo and social arrangements as stultifying institutions
However, contemporary Irish comedy adds something more to this; as we shall see from close analysis of actual examples of satire, the critical discourse of emancipation by debunking is transformed into a vision of society itself as absurd. Politicians and the polity are ridiculed in the same gesture. By and large all authority figures appear simultaneously as transparent buffoons and as conniving hypocrites, simultaneously idiots and tricksters. Occasionally, the public themselves figure, both as passive victims of the politicians, or as outraged. Yet, despite the enormity of the hypocrisy and the ensuing disasters, nothing ever changes. Even if the politicians are the butt of joke, they return again the same without learning anything. Politics, and life itself, appears insuperably absurd.

How can such comedy be analysed? Comedy is of course part of popular culture and its uses and appreciation could be understood as a sort of ‘cultural capital’ in Bourdieu’s sense. This would also indicate that comedy is amongst the cultural repertoire for constructing group boundaries, which is typically achieved by flattering the in-group and ridiculing the out-group (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008). However, the particular tendency of political satire we will analyse is that it appeals very generally to an Irish audience, and also ridicules Irish people in general. Everyone is simultaneously ‘in’ on the joke and the ‘butt’ of the joke. Such humour could be described as ‘counter-cultural’ or employing the ‘critique of mass-society’ following the analysis of the ‘counter-culture’ by Heath & Potter (2004).

If you don’t find new risky, edgy, alternative comedians funny, then you probably are not ‘cool’; having a taste for satirical comedy is just another ‘positional good’ whereby the individual can differentiate themselves from the supposedly conformist masses. “Dutiful consumption encourages us to mock apparent authority, enabling us to enjoy the feeling of constant rebelliousness in economic conditions that demand constant dissatisfaction with yesterday’s products.” (Billig, 2005: 209).

The strongest element of such an analysis is that comedy is seen in terms of what it does socially rather than solely in the terms of the claims it makes for itself. However, such an analysis leads to much the same results for comedy as for organic food as for triathlons as for exotic holidays. Such a Bourdieuan reading of comedy would reduce the cultural phenomenon to its social predicates, without sufficient analysis of the meaning of the art (Inglis, 2005). In effect, culture itself becomes so much froth, rather than the underlying meanings which give shape to society, which is worse than no engagement with culture because it critically cancels its existence.

Instead of this I suggest that it is necessary to undertake a ‘thick description’ of comedy (Geertz, 1973), taking note of the winks and burlesqued winks of comedy. Such a cultural anthropology has its roots in the works of Max Weber. In particular, Weber concentrates on ‘world-images’, responses to the problem of meaninglessness within the world, that attempt to show that “The world order in its totality is, could and should somehow be a meaningful ‘cosmos’” (Weber, 1991: 281). In this context Weber was discussing charismatic prophecy and its transformation of the economic ethic of entire civilisations, which appears at first as vastly different from the situation of comedy. Nonetheless, the historical record shows that comedy responds to crises, transitions and deficits of meaning,
from the old Attic comedians responding to the crisis of democracy in Athens, to the
temporary stand-up comedian commenting upon the capitalist booms and busts. What is
particularly interesting is that comedy has now become part of our ‘ethnic’; Billig analyses the
popular and psychological lauding of humour as part of our way of life, our modern ethos
(2005). A GSOH was unimportant and unremarkable before the twentieth century, yet now it
has become crucial as a means of maintaining mental health in the face of tribulations and
suffering. If we are to understand the cultural significance of comedy, it is necessary to
understand the world-image of absurdity and the ethos of satire. For this, we shall turn to the
insights of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival and satire, Judith Butler on parody and Michael Billig
on ridicule.

Theorising Satire and Critique

Mikhail Bakhtin’s work suggests that comedy has a particular association with seasonal
rituals, specifically in medieval Europe, and potentially worldwide. During these occasions,
the entire social body is brought together in one place for a short time, for a feast and period
of inverted order; the carnival. While ordinary life is governed by order, hierarchy and
differentiation, the carnival is a special time of renewal in which all these are suspended; the
community becomes one social body without individuality, so that all take part in the
begetting and birthing and living and dying processes of humanity. The body is emphasised
during the carnival, appetites, crudity, sexuality and all forms of human contact are
celebrated. In this context, all are performers – there are no separate spectators.

For Bakhtin, the heart of the carnival itself is laughter, comedy pervades the dancing,
drinking and feasting; witty word play and slapstick humour abound. Laughter, communal
and unstoppable contorts the entire body and thereby the whole social body, and this laughter
is directed at order, at individuality and at death, because neither one can cancel out the
vitality of the community, from which all life stems:

“To consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different
elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world,
from conventions and established truths, from clichés from all that is humdrum and
universally accepted.” (1984: 34)

Bakhtin’s account of the carnival is derived chiefly from the work of Rabelais, and suggests
that no one now has access to the carnival spirit of medieval times. Such a decline in the
vitality of popular culture is supported by Huizinga’s work (1990), however, it should be
noted that subsequent developments in anthropology and folklore give us more direct
accounts of periods of festive periods. For instance, Turner’s (1969) work on liminality
would indicate that seasonal rituals are important times for symbolic inversions and the
discharge of libidinous energies, but these principally serve to renew and adjust order rather
than to oppose it.

With this qualification in mind, we may then turn to Bakhtin’s work on modern satire.
For Bakhtin, the decline of the carnival, as documented by Sallybrass (1999) is marked by the
transformation of comedy. Since the suspension of order by seasonal ritual is impossible in modernity, the collective effervescence of the carnival becomes impossible. Thus, the temporary subversion of power and order becomes the permanent preserve of satirists. These are not equivalent to the traditional court jester – a figure who is anachronistically misrecognised as a critic (Carlyon, 2002) – but a proto-enlightenment misanthropist such as Swift or John Wilmot. For Bakhtin, satirical humour is not renewing or life affirming, but caustically laughs at the people, or at power, or at any group, rather than laughing with them.

Bakhtin contrasts this satirical ‘destructive humour’ with the creative humour of the carnival. Whereas the carnival makes the world good but absurd, satire makes the world cruelly absurd:

“Destructive humor” is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all reality, against the finite world as a whole. [...] Through it the entire world is turned into something alien, something terrifying and unjustified. The ground slips from under our feet and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us” (1984: 42).

Critical elements are noticeably exaggerated in Bakhtin’s account of the carnival, but they are certainly present within satire, which is distinctly oriented to debunking shared belief in the meaning of the social world. More importantly, the world-view of satire is that the world is absurd and unjustifiable. Thus, there is no sense to the world, and any action within it and any attempt to give it a meaning can only be ridiculous. Within such a worldview, laughter is the only possible response, and is inseparable from the continued act of satire. Ridicule becomes central to maintaining the personal identity of the satirist.

Butler’s early work is associated with parody, although she latterly clarifies that parody is only one amongst a number of potential modes of subversion (1999). For Butler, the central aspect of all social life is that it is a repetitive performance with variation over time, even in the case of supposedly essential, immutable characteristics such as gender or race. Such performances are also ‘performative speech acts’ making something true about social life. This repetition gives a sense of continuity, so that performances appear not as copies of copies of copies, but echoes of original genuine phenomena beyond the social.

Within this framework, it is possible to challenge dominant discourses by repeating them in subversive ways, by ‘reiterating discourse to another purpose’ as Butler has it. Such subversions can have two elements; the first is to diverge from the norm, expanding the range of possible performances, the second is to parody what is ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ or ‘original’ and thereby insinuate that it is none of those things, but instead a convenient fiction, an act. Ordinarily, parody might be understood as a deliberately and obviously exaggerated representation, which is funny by virtue of how far it falls short of the ideal, but it may subtly re-direct laughter and disbelief to the ‘original’ which it presents.

For parody to have the sort of subversive effect which Butler claims, it must go beyond mere comic exaggeration. It must expose the ‘dominant’ in some way. Interestingly, this is a phenomenon that Butler later describes under the aegis of ‘critique’ (2004). Butler
argues that critique emerges from a particular transformation of the subject in moments of crisis. Persons generally tend to continue with their performances of their identity where possible, because they acquire this identity – or set of performances – in line with socially sanctioned norms. However, in certain circumstances, this identity or subjectivity becomes ‘unliveable’; and Butler offers the example of lesbianism, a sexuality which was once ‘legislated out of existence’ or ‘impossible’. In such a situation, the subject is faced with conforming to gender norms or risking their subjectivity to ‘suspend the epistemological horizon’. For Butler, “Critique is that which exposes a fundamental illegitimacy’ (ibid.: 312).

If this exposing and suspending critique is genuinely linked to the experience of ‘unliveable’ subjectivity, one might expect for it to be relatively rare. However, as we see from our comedians’ self-representation, criticism is far from an elite preserve, and it is also widespread in the media and throughout the ‘alternative’ counter-culture (Heath & Potter, 2004), amongst enterprising capitalists (Frank, 2001) and even in the ranks of managers (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). It is possible that Butler is wrong, and that critique or parody may be merely one performance amongst others, but surely it is qualitatively different from performances such as standing casually or nodding at acquaintances. I would argue that critique is indeed a performance, but one which involves self-transformation.

Here it is worthwhile to join these theorists together; for Bakhtin carnival laughter was a moment of the loss of self in celebrations that emphasise imitation and the performative dimensions of society. However, after the historical eclipse of the carnival, satire emerges as a mode of hostile contempt for the world, constantly discovering its absurdity and illegitimacy. While Butler never properly historicises her subject, it is recognisably the modern subject described by Foucault (1977) or Elias (2000). Thus it is a subject not renewed by carnival laughter, but one engaging in satire or else, whose subjectivity is threatened by satires. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that being satirised induces critique and participation in parody. The world-image offered by satire threatens onlookers with absurdity, making their subjectivity ridiculous, if not quite ‘unliveable’, and thereby prompting them to participate in the satire, either passively or actively. Without recourse to a carnival re-birth of the world, the subject must expose the world’s illegitimacy and subvert any and all meanings. Because they are satirised, they become satirical.

Michael Billig (2005) theorises humour and particularly ridicule as a form of social disciplining; ridicule controls norms within groups and defines the border with the outside. Far from being a wholly benign force or even a rebellious one, Billig shows how humour can reinforce social structures by force of shame and embarrassment. His work is particularly apt for our purposes, because it suggests that “…there can be a gap between the nature of humour as an act of rebelliousness and the social effects of humour…Rebellious humour need not have uniformly rebellious effects” (ibid.: 212). Rather than chipping away at power, humour may simply provide a convenient safety valve for resistance, a means of maintaining a positive identity despite difficult conditions, from the ‘whispered jokes’ about totalitarian leaders to stand-up comedy about the on-going financial crises.
Most of all, Billig insists on attending to whom is being ridiculed in any joke, partially in consonance with Bergson’s formula of humour as an ‘anaesthesia of the heart’ but mainly as a social theory of humour. It is not what happens within the joking or laughing individual that matters, but the effect of humour as rhetorical social communication. At the individual level it appears that political comedy ridicules the powerful by representing them in absurd ways. However, in terms of the whole social situation, it appears that those who are duped by that absurd power are more significantly ridiculed, after all, who is more ridiculous – the emperor with no clothes or those who persistently fail to recognise his nudity? All of the pieces analysed below bear this out. Furthermore, the consequence of political satire which ridicules power and its pawns is that in turn it teaches subjects how to ridicule – transforming them into satirists.

Now it is possible to resume the question of the world-image of satire: First of all, this world image is divorced from the carnival, it is not a benevolent chaos, but a world starkly devoid of real meaning. Secondly, the performances entailed in this world are implicitly imitative, copies mistaken as original, artifice posing as natural. Thirdly, the satirist is not entirely part of this world, but separated from it ontologically through awareness of its ridiculousness. Even critical perception of injustice are subsumed within the overall image of the world as absurd, a world which has no meaning in itself, and resists any attempt to make it meaningful. Thus, the only important ethos within this world-image is to become satirical, thereby establishing a separation from the absurdity and creating personal meaning by overtly or covertly ridiculing those real or imagined others who do not share the world-image.

**Serious Absurdity**

Even before the economic crash, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period was a subject of intense satire and critique. For instance, the success of Paul Howard’s ‘Ross O’Carroll-Kelly is based on its biting satire of the absurdities of boom-time South Dublin life. There is scarcely a stand-up comedian who hasn’t used the ‘Celtic Tiger’ as ‘material’. It is in this period that Irish stand-up comedy ‘matures’ into cosmopolitan, risky, edgy comedy, so that lifestyle replaces locality, and Ireland ceases to be a backwater, but a ‘happening’ place in the Anglophone comedy constellation. Irish comedians appear on international stages, for instance, the Montreal festival and Tommy Tiernan appears on the David Letterman show. Dara O’Brian goes from being anchor on RTÉ’s *The Panel* to the BBC’s *Mock the Week*.

The demise of the Celtic Tiger economy is well-known; exports ceased to grow around 2002, and the boom was carried by a housing bubble until 2007, while bank economists and government spokespersons promised a ‘soft-landing’. In September 2008 the government guaranteed banking debt up to 400 billion, unemployment rose to 14%, the national debt ballooned to 95 billion and counting, with at least 70 billion in bailout for failed banks. A general election finally occurred in February 2011, leading to the decimation of Fianna Fail, Ireland’s biggest party and long-term government incumbent. This period also saw the transformation of comedy and satire.
This transformation is most easily seen in the changes in *The Panel* which ran from the height of the boom to the present. At first, the programme was devoted to a mad-cap whistle-stop tour of the eccentric news stories of the week, used as cues to prepared but mainly spontaneous sketches coupled with interviews with artists and other celebrities. After the bank guarantee in September 2008, the show took on more and more economic stories, principally because such stories were unavoidable in the media; pundits and politicians began to dominate the guest-list. The following year, economist David McWilliams took over as anchor for the programme. His performances are interesting, because he laughs more easily and cannot react so quickly to the quick-fire wit of the professional comedians. However, with McWilliams in the chair, interviews with guests such as Eamon Gilmore the Labour Party leader become credible journalism. The combination of strident economic critique and comedic satire becomes less of an oddity and more of a natural alliance.

Whilst the whole cultural position of comedy is provided by the caveat, ‘only a joke’ (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008) these years saw the established of satire as significant. The best single illustration of this is the insertion of a bailout sketch on *The Late, Late Show* as described in our introduction, which we shall return to now. Is Punch and Judy show parody of political debate a carnivalesque renewal of the social body? It certainly appears that everyone is mocked; the politician, the critic, the presenter and the ‘plain people’ are all subjected to ridicule, which seems like a participative carnival. Yet, this is a television broadcast, viewed from a distance, and the comedy is derived precisely from that satirical distance. For instance, when the *Late Late Show* audience waves on cue, they do not represent themselves, as each of them is ‘in’ on the joke, rather, they temporarily are marshalled as a parody of whomsoever is still duped and manipulated by corrupt politicians and their rather obvious lies. Their laughter implies not only superiority towards those who are genuinely gullible, but also a satirical sensibility, a critical awareness of the cupidity of politicians and the posturing of professional critics.

This sort of satire resonates strongly with the nature of ‘whispered jokes’ in communist societies analysed by Speier; “By occasionally telling or laughing at a subversive jest one can live more easily with nagging, half-conscious insights about accommodation or one’s failure to revolt” (1998: 1395). For Speier, such cynical political humour does not succeed in undermining power or mobilising any political values, but merely in providing an outlet for dissatisfaction. To this account I would add that satirical criticism of politics also has the effect of ‘disfiguring’ – that is, making everything portrayed appear worse than it really is, and diminishing the meaning of whatever is portrayed. For instance, the meaning of O’Toole’s book is diminished from being a political argument to being a mere commodity, and the meaning of being Irish is reduced from a genuine feeling of home to being a mere fetishism of nostalgia filled objects, the GAA, barmbrack or a ‘kick up the hole’ in the winter, as listed by Michael. Not only this, but the satire also gives an impression of the utterly hopeless absurdity of politics as the unabashed pursuit of power. Yet there is no rally for emancipation, but a resigned sense that voters will continue to return idiotic politicians, power is corrupted by local cronyism and critics are mere self-promoting celebrities.
The second series of David McSavage’s *The Savage Eye* was broadcast in the early months of 2011, coinciding with the announcement of the general election. The *Savage Eye* is a satirical sketch show in which parodies serious journalistic investigation of such questions as ‘Why are the Irish so racist?’ complete with voice over, talking heads, vox pop and stock footage. All the episodes attribute the causes of social phenomena to a list of usual suspects; Politicians, The Church, Imperialism and so forth. It is both sociology by satire and a satire of sociology, mixed with slapstick, farce and ironic stereotypes.

Of particular interest here is a sketch screened during the run up to the election, parodying RTÉ’s flagship political programme *The Frontline*. The presenter elicits a question from a ‘man with furrowed brow’ in the audience.

Questioner: It’s not mad we are, we’re fucking livid, we’ve no jobs, no income, no assets…
Voiceover: To be incompetent and stay in power the Irish politician must constantly endure public outrage. After the tirade the politician gives out facts and figures, because he knows the Irish mind can only understand stories and will lose track after the first sentence.
Questioner: …what are you going to do? [applause]
Politician: First of all let me say I totally accept your condemnation of the situation, and I understand your outrage at the situation that you find yourself in. But let me say that moving forward there’s a six per cent increase on last year’s figures, which is progress and we are moving forward. [video cuts and rewinds]
Voiceover: But under no circumstances must the politician ever say what he’s really thinking.
Questioner: …what are you going to do?
Politician: Come here to me you working class scumbag, always whinging and fucking moaning, you probably don’t even vote so why don’t you just fuck off.

The parody carried out in this sketch undermines the presumption that programmes such as *The Frontline* succeed in their ostensible purpose of fostering serious political debate. The question from the audience appears as a mere formality, a simulacrum of democracy of no consequence, mainly because of the politician’s empty jargon, but also because of the incoherence of the speaker from the audience and even the formality of the questioner being applauded after his tirade by the audience. This ‘average citizen’ in the forum of *The Frontline* putatively represents the voice of the people, but once satirised as the ‘man with furrowed brow’ an inarticulate voice unable to understand anything bar stories, who can identify with him? As an absurdity, he comes to represent the outraged ‘majority’ who allow the incompetent politician stay in power. The trick of the politician is as obvious as it is arrogant, and the revelation of what ‘he really thinks’ comes as no surprise.

Our purpose here is not to suggest the exact opposite, that politicians do not placate with platitudes or manipulate statistics to obfuscate issues. Rather, our interest is how this tendency is transformed into a wholesale political circus wherein the public sphere, the politician and the polity appear as corrupt or hoodwinked. Satire here plays into the longstanding democratic pursuit of exposing hypocrisy (Runciman, 2008). However, the hypocrite exposed is not a powerful and intelligent manipulator, but represented as identically coarse and idiotic as the polity he manipulates. Most importantly, within the sketch the
comedic emphasis is on the capacity to see through the politician’s ruse, as the voiceover does. Yet this comic voiceover expresses nothing political beyond a satirical critique of the absurd world presented. Critical emancipation from routine obfuscation takes the place of political mobilisation of any sort, and a satirical perspective on the flawed ‘public sphere’ of talk-TV is substituted for actual participation.

In the midst of RTÉ’s dedicated election coverage *The Eleventh Hour* – with the 2011 election widely billed as the most important in the history of the state – the *Nineteenth Minute* presented satirical sketches on politics; it was non-partisan, taking swipes at every party and even foreign media. Comedy and satire has become an increasingly prominent aspect of elections, adding to the sense of politics as a circus (Shifman, Coleman & Ward, 2007). One of the most memorable of these is a skit on the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) advertisement for the opening of Terminal 2 at Dublin airport; the official opening for which coincided with the negotiation of the bailout deal. The original advertisement celebrates Irish identity and cosmopolitan travel, the importance of the Irish to the globe and the international reputation of Ireland. It features a confident cosmopolitan Irishman who suggests that Ireland has given the world a lot, Yeats, Friel, Godot and Gulliver and, ironically the ‘gene for skin that goes from nought to sunburnt in 2.4 seconds’. Such an advert appears ripe for parody, but perhaps that is less because of the advertisement and more because of the general diffusion of satirical sensibilities.

Comedian Barry Murphy appears in a wig to parody the original advertisement, firstly by garbling the Irishness of living, flying and being ‘on a small island’, then by citing tawdry things Ireland has given the world, the gene for alcoholism or the scrofulous skin mite. This performance of national pride clearly exaggerates and lampoons, but also indicates the falsity of national stereotypes by an exaggerated contrivance of them; the actor picks up money from the floor thereby ducking a projectile – the luck of the Irish – then straightens to punch someone – the fighting Irish. Much more effective than a direct deconstruction of nationalism, these elements combine to make the performance of national pride at the very least ambivalent and self-conscious, if not quite what Butler meant by ‘unliveable identity’. Moreover, they clear the way to the generation of a satirical subjectivity lived in contra-distinction to the absurd mainstream world.

He then proceeds to a more connected monologue, on what has been the ‘burning issue of the day’ for many years:

We engage in unnecessary, often criminal behaviour and justify it by calling it the craic.

Our national debt stands at over 95 billion euro, and is increasing at over 40,000 a minute.

We once had a booming economy, grossly mismanaged by an alliance of the inept and the incompetent; now we’re going to let it happen all over again.

And that’s why, without putting too fine a point on it, I’m getting the fuck out of here.
These statements are deadly serious yet absurd; the first is accompanied by a quick bag-snatch, the second involves the actor colliding with the camera, the third simply because knowing what occurred and allowing it to re-occur is manifestly absurd, and the forth because the airport is being advertised via national pride but facilitates the national shame of emigration.

In the first statement, the audience is simultaneously interpellated as an Irish person who behaves criminally, and one who is aware of the absurdity of the behaviour of some Irish people. The second merely underlines how grave the situation is. The third statement gives a pointed and emotive diagnosis of the ‘gross mismanagement’ of the economy, but then diffuses the emotion and the blaming of the political managers by stating that ‘we’ will ‘let it happen all over again’. Finally, the actor leads by example by jettisoning Ireland entirely. This dramatic leave taking resonates with what occurs symbolically through the satire; the world comes to appear as a carnival of idiotic ‘Irish’ stereotypes, both its foolish people and its bumbling and corrupt politicians, and as one becomes aware of this absurdity, one is separated from it, and the social body of ‘Irishness’ is exposed as not only a fiction but an illegitimate world. The point here is not to argue the direct opposite of the perspective offered by the comedy, rather it is to observe the consequences of satire, that is, the proliferation of the sense of being an isolated observer of absurdity, that is, a de facto satirist.

**Satirical Culture**

The foregoing trio of sketches exemplify a general trend, not just the satirising of authority, seriousness and sacred values – the politician, the public sphere and national pride, but also make ‘the people’ the butt of their joke. More ridiculous than anyone directly impersonated in the sketches is the sort of person who taken in by the original, genuine versions of these discourses. Imagining the gullibility of others is a means of disciplining the subject to appreciate and partake in satire, following Butler, the subject becomes a subject by being threatened by abjection. Furthermore, by the presentation of the world as absurd and corrupt, it is implied that the deficiencies of the world are significantly due to the stupidity of the majority – that is, society in general disfigured as credulous conformists.

Such an argument may appear as too forceful a reading of the texts at hand, but it is interesting to cite some of the responses that have been posted on YouTube versions of the sketches. The majority of these responses merely commend the clip; ‘excellent’ ‘LOL’ ‘classic’ and the like. However, a number of them echo the satirical sensibility of the sketches:

- the irish-masters at making fun of our own misery. some craic haiii..!
- We're funny coz we're screwed.
- The quality of Irish humour increases in direct proportion to the misery of our benighted land.
- Great comedy there!!...just like Ireland!!....A JOKE!!!
While it cannot be suggested that any single sketch served to constitute its audience as satirists, these responses indicate that something of that sensibility is present within those who watch the sketches on-line and trouble to leave comments. The sense of Ireland, presumably the home society of each respondent, as irredeemably absurd is palpable.

How this satire might critically challenge the identity and beliefs of a non-satirical subjectivity can be imagined by comparing responses to the original DAA advertisement to responses to its parody.

- I know it’s an airport and he’s just saying a few facts.... but this makes me proud to be irish...
- Amazing monologue! Brings a tear to the eye!

Either of these comments may be intended as sarcastic faux-innocent comments, as the visibility of comments is controlled by the site moderator, who is connected to the DAA. However, if they were genuine, what would be the effect of the parody upon such emotive national pride? Perhaps it might provoke outrage, but equally, it might incite a satirical subjectivity. Furthermore, our tendency to read these comments as sarcastic can be taken as indicative of how satire has become a default position. Below is a lengthy response to the parody of the DAA advertisement:

You forgot a drunken immigrant workforce, inferiority complexes, the absence of outrage when the foreign bankers run amok, crap food, the "ah sure" instinct as the surest way out of every problem, legions of corrupt priests, and another guaranteed diaspora of young people fleeing the country for better lives elsewhere. Other than that, go on ya boyos!

The respondent here extends Barry Murphy’s litany of 'things that Ireland has given the world' with little humour, but it is no less a redeployment of satirical critique. Presumably the respondent is Irish, and yet, perversely almost, they constitute their identity by heaping abuse on the Irish. Yet, this is no paradox once we recognise how social identities are re-constructed as anti-social individualistic identities through critique.

While political satire is a just one element of the overall constellation of comedy, I would argue that understanding the sort of satirical impulse discernable in the foregoing sketches can aid our interpretation of stand-up comedy generally, which sometimes appears intractable to any analysis. Take for instance the performance of Tommy Tiernan on McIntyre’s Comedy Roadshow on the 9th of October 2010. Tiernan begins by saying that times are bad, he arrived in a car too big for him, “…because I drove past my reflection in a shop window, and before I knew who it was I called him an arsehole.” The comedy is derived here partially from the effect of incongruity, but it also captures the specifically satirical tendency towards despising and ridiculing oneself as representative of ‘the people’ as the source of malaise, in this case, by greed and vanity.

Serious topics become absurd in a carnivalesque fashion, the debts of England are estimated as a ‘billion, million, willion, trillion’, Germany’s is a ‘billion, trillion, jeeb, jab, ju, willion, billion’; America owes so much it can only be expressed in a scream. Then…
“Every country in the world owes money, but to who? [laugh] Who does everybody in the world owe money to? And why don’t we just kill the bastard and relax? [laugh]”

Such a suggestion translates disaster and suffering into absurdity, particularly because the disaster at hand seems extraordinarily ridiculous because it appears so easily solved by us simply ‘killing the bastard’. Here the comedian partly takes on the role of the trickster who instigates the sacrificial witch-hunt and nominates the victim, but part of the comedy is that ‘we’ don’t kill the bastard. These ‘bad times’ could be so easily averted, and yet they aren’t. This appears paradoxical; yet this is not just comedy but critical comedy – the situation isn’t really funny, but its humour is created by the separation of the satirist from the absurdity. So, the reason ‘we’ don’t kill the bastard is because there are some ‘others’ amidst the ‘we’ who take things too seriously, caught up in paying a ‘million billion willion trillion’. Moreover, the emphasis is on separating the self from the situation rather than solving it. For Tiernan the “…self-flagellating orgy of misery going on is actually entirely irrelevant. Utterly irrelevant” (Boyd, 2010). Perhaps the absence of any serious public mobilisation around these events is less due to ideology than to the spread of a satirical subjectivity.

Conclusion

Through a genealogy of modern comedy in the public sphere Szakolczai (2012) suggests “…the real tragedy of the modern world is that it is a comedy” which echoes the opening lines of Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover “Our’s is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically” first published in 1928, but responding to the grimly absurd spectacle of WWI and the destruction of tradition through industrialism. Since then, history has not failed to provide disaster and suffering, all the more absurd because so much of it is technically preventable. This is the century in which humour became elevated as a sign of humanity, and even became the centre of a respected philosophy – Camus insists that life is absurd because the world resists our every attempt to ascribe meaning to it. (1975). This is the real heart of the question; how is it that the world has come to appear absurd?

An absurd vision of the world is only possible once the meanings of social life have become undermined or disfigured. Patterns of behaviour in line with social norm are not automatically graceful and dignified, nor are beliefs and culture necessarily beautiful or profound; according to a critical discourse they are not only arbitrary or artificial, but also an effect of and ideological cover for power. Yet, it is important to remember that this view is only the world image of one discourse, not necessarily a revelation of truth. Satire is based on a critical vision of human behaviour stripped of its meanings, power without any legitimacy and ideas without credibility. Just as comedians are critical the works of a popular critic such as Fintan O’Toole or an academic sociologist like Bauman are peppered with ironic wit and satirical analogies. Despite their emancipatory intent, such critical/satirical works mainly serve to create critics and satirists, inculcating individualised ‘world-rejection’ rather than political participation.

Butler’s use of parody suggests naturalistic performances being challenged by subversive parody which reveals performances as merely an act; how performances can
reassume this naturalism is rarely her concern, but since she suggests that power regulates performances, presumably it also naturalises them. But what if performances could not so easily reassert their natural grace after parody? Bakhtin’s account of carnival suggests a temporary eruption of laughter which renews the world, historically supplanted by implacable order and bourgeois satire. Here we have suggested that satire proliferates and becomes ubiquitous, but another reading would be to suggest that the carnival becomes permanent. This resonates with Billig’s analysis of how humour, once treated with caution, has in modern times become mandatory, and its function of ridicule celebrated unreservedly. Szakolczai (2012) analyses the modern public sphere as a never-ending ‘diabolical circus’, in which comedy and politics are indistinguishable.

To these accounts, this paper adds the suggestion that satire, as a form of critique, is disfiguring, and hence a political weapon which drains the social world of meaning. The circulation of such satires inculcates satirical individuality, both by threatening the subject and by indiscriminately parodying any social meanings. Thus, however slowly, the absurd vision of individual isolation, constant power play and meaninglessness becomes more and more of a reality, and satire and critique a bizarrely self-fulfilling prophecy.

Bibliography:


Boyd, B. (2010) ‘It was just unreal. All I could do was keep gigging. And take my beating’ [Interview with Tommy Tiernan] *Irish Times*, November 27th.


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i This sketch and all others discussed herein are available on ‘YouTube’. I recommend watching them there because it is impossible to convey textually all the aspects of the sketches, and of course, because they are genuinely funny.

ii Boltanski’s sociology of critique weaves a nuanced course away from ‘transgressive rituals’ which do little more than defusing critique, nihilistic critiques which demand the end to all institutions, and overarching meta-theoretical critiques which ignore the critical capacities of agents (2011). This is not only an important theoretical refinement, but responds to the tendency of contemporary capitalism to present itself as critical (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

iii While 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. To an extent this is apt, but it also leans towards a critique of critique, unmasking a plethora of different cultural phenomena as status-seeking strategies.

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

v As such, the satirical world-image should be understood as a sort of ‘religious rejection of the world’ (Weber, 1991).

vi David McSavage is the alias of David Andrews, brother of Barry Andrews and son of David Andrews, both now former Fianna Fail TD’s and ministers. His show, funded and broadcast by RTÉ also satirises prominent media presenters, such as Pat Kenny in the example below. There is no suggestion of a ‘conspiracy theory’ here, the comedian probably has complete creative freedom in his work, but it is not going too far to suggest that neither the political establishment nor the national broadcaster are anxious about the effects of the programme.

vii Runciman (2009) 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.

viii 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).

ix 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.

x An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference [xxx] Having screened the parody of the DAA ad, I then presented these comments, which produced knowing laughter from the audience. There is no way of ascertaining the intended meaning of the comments, but their sarcastic resonances demonstrate my point here about satirical subjectivity.