



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

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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,

On the 28th of November 2010, the Irish government agreed an 85 Billion Euro bailout with the IMF / ECB, with interest rates running as high as 5.8 per cent, widely held as a loss of sovereignty. Just days later there followed a parodic sketch on the bailout on the *Late Late Show*, Ireland's most popular programme.ⁱ The sketch pits parodies of Minister Brian Lenihan, spouting jargon and excuses and a conniving 'party activist' Michael against a blustering Fintan O'Toole, whose critiques are undermined by this promotion of his new book. There are lewd and carnivalesque aspects to the performance, but what is most noticeable is the openly corrupt self-presentation of all the characters. The multi-billion bailout is treated as though it were a private slush-fund and the party activist appears as the minister's boss, the critic appears as a mere crowd pleaser. This sense of absurdity and corruption even spills into the 'real' world; the party activist reminds the host Ryan Tubridy that he only got his job because of political machinations.

On the one hand this appears a satirical critique of corrupt politicians and self-promoting journalists – the 'commentariat' a satirical term invented by David McWilliams to link Irish critical commentators with the commissariat (2004). Despite the clearly critical satire of corruption, the sketch finishes without any gesture of emancipation;

Michael: We're the people of the party and the party of the people and that's the way it's always going to be. Isn't that right? [waves at the audience, who all wave back] Shower of gobshites. [audience bursts into laughter]

On the one hand this appears to be critically engaged satire, because power is openly mocked and 'the people' appear as part of the spectacle, presented as the gullible fools who elected

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3 corrupt politicians. But who exactly is the butt of this joke? And what are the consequences
4 of such satire? And how did national economic disaster become hilarious?
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7 All the sketches examined in this article were devised and broadcast in a time of
8 economic and political crisis. Somehow, comedy and satire was considered to have a role to
9 play in this crisis, as reflected in the *Kilkenomics* festival and its ilk, which comprised
10 comedians and economic experts on one stage. The following February an election was held,
11 billed as the most important in the history of the state. Coverage of this election was marked
12 by the inclusion of satirical material in the core political programming, Mario Rosenstock on
13 *Tonight with Vincent Browne* and the *Aprés Match* team on RTÉ's *The Eleventh Hour*. What
14 is the significance of these and similar developments? Clearly, part of the response to the
15 events of Ireland's recession was comedic, perhaps because; as the adage has it, better to
16 laugh than to cry. However, in this paper I argue that a curious interpenetration of comedy
17 and politics began during the Celtic Tiger era and became particularly heightened during the
18 recession. This hybrid form of comedy and critique is worth analysis and can help us
19 understand the peculiarity of Ireland, but also the characteristics of modern Anglo-phone
20 comedy and its consequences. Of course, the situation is relatively specific to Ireland, and so
21 is the tone of the humour, but there is much mutual influence and interchange of comedic
22 styles in the contemporary globalised and media saturated world. Furthermore, this concrete
23 episode can help sociologists to explore the relationships between subversion and satire,
24 critique and crisis.
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32 *Analysing Critical Comedy*

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34 Before proceeding it is necessary to deal briefly with two basic objections to analysing
35 comedy, before considering a third objection of greater significance. The first objection is
36 that it is impossible to analyse comedy because laughter is a universal human phenomenon.
37 Obviously, the problem with such an objection is that even if laughter is universal, the way in
38 which it is provoked, its significance and its social settings vary across time and space. Even
39 if laughter is universal, comedy is culturally specific. Even more so than many forms of
40 culture, comedy tends to be very particular by age group and social class. The second
41 objection to analysing comedy is that it is insignificant; politics, economics, demographics,
42 social structure and so on are hardly shaken or transformed by parody, satire or bad taste. To
43 this objection, our reply is that sociological thought has always expanded by analysing
44 phenomena generally neglected, and this analysis of comedy will stand on its own merits.
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50 The third objection to analysing comedy is that comedy itself is critical. There are
51 typically two parts to the claim; firstly, that some, usually new, comedy dispenses with the
52 clichés of prior comedy, i.e. edgy, alternative, idiosyncratic comedy; and secondly, that this
53 particular comedy is critical of society or culture, puncturing pieties, questioning cherished
54 myths, subverting authority. These claims are made by comedians, echoed by journalists, and
55 probably accepted quite generally.
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3 You get that now, mainstream clean-cut kids with their clean-cut comedy, and that's
4 fine it's pop-music stand-up but I like to think there's still room for something else.
5 (Tommy Tiernan in Boyd 2010).
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8 Irish comedy today is not bent and twisted and risky, which is what comedy should
9 be, he says. (David McSavage in Ingle, 2011)
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12 Rather than criticise these claims to critique, I would like to suggest that these claims are in
13 fact true. There is no denying that Anglophone comedy has been transformed as the 1980s
14 gave rise to explicitly critical comedians (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008), and latterly in
15 Ireland during the late 1990s. More importantly, comedy is critical; there is no sense in
16 arguing that comedy is the opiate of the masses or justifies the status quo or legitimates
17 cultural orthodoxy. Interestingly, this popular opinion of comedy is replicated in academic
18 works, Morreal (2005) argues that humour by politicians is always to be suspected of being a
19 power play, and humour about politicians is always critical or subversive. However, the
20 character and consequences of these critiques should be a question for empirical investigation
21 rather than a foreclosed theoretical principle.
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26 My approach to comedy here is based upon the emergent sociology of critique. As
27 opposed to critical sociology, the underlying idea here is not to critique social phenomena but
28 recognise critique as a social phenomenon, for instance, as a mode of subject formation, or as
29 a sort of discourse. Critique is not merely an internal academic affair; rather it proliferates in
30 various guises, alloyed to other aspects of culture. Yet, it is also possible to trace the
31 historicity of critique, principally as diverging from science investigation in the
32 Enlightenment, and crystallising as a mode of subject-formation during Romanticism
33 (Koselleck, 1988, Hansen, 1996). Critique is only one way of describing the world; it does
34 not reflect it neutrally. Indeed, critical tendencies can interfere with the capacity for
35 hermeneutic interpretation, in that they prevent the researcher from being open and receptive
36 to the distinctive meanings of any discrete social phenomenon. Boltanski (2011) argues that
37 critique is a part of pragmatic political action in many different contexts, and is intrinsically
38 linked to the creation of institutions and challenging their justifications. However, he also
39 attends to the problem of disempowering Bourdieusian critical sociology, the nihilistic
40 excesses of 'criticising everything' and the co-opting of critique in contemporary capitalism.ⁱⁱ
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48 Critique is both spurred on by crisis and instigates it, partaking in constantly repeated
49 the modern rupture with the past, by making tradition appear as stultifying constraint, and
50 culture as ideology (Latour, 1993). In particular, the tendency of critique is either to identify
51 something as a myth or ideology to which most or many people are in thrall, and then unmask
52 this as false and arbitrary or to find 'real' causes such as biology or economy which explain
53 human behaviour which is putatively voluntary (Latour, 2004). This is not something that
54 only transpires within intellectual circles, but is part of how critique operates as a general
55 form of discourse, in the public sphere, art and in everyday life. Generally, critique
56 disfigures; that is, it represents individuals as cultural dopes, cultural beliefs as ideological
57 justifications of the status quo and social arrangements as stultifying institutions
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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).ⁱⁱⁱ 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 triathalons 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,

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3 from the old Attic comedians responding to the crisis of democracy in Athens, to the
4 contemporary stand-up comedian commenting upon the capitalist booms and busts. What is
5 particularly interesting is that comedy has now become part of our 'ethic'; Billig analyses the
6 popular and psychological lauding of humour as part of our way of life, our modern ethos
7 (2005). A GSOH was unimportant and unremarkable before the twentieth century, yet now it
8 has become crucial as a means of maintaining mental health in the face of tribulations and
9 suffering. If we are to understand the cultural significance of comedy, it is necessary to
10 understand the world-image of absurdity and the ethos of satire. For this, we shall turn to the
11 insights of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival and satire, Judith Butler on parody and Michael Billig
12 on ridicule.

17 18 *Theorising Satire and Critique*

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

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

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

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

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50 With this qualification in mind, we may then turn to Bakhtin's work on modern satire.
51 For Bakhtin, the decline of the carnival, as documented by Sallybrass (1999) is marked by the

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3 transformation of comedy. Since the suspension of order by seasonal ritual is impossible in
4 modernity, the collective effervescence of the carnival becomes impossible. Thus, the
5 temporary subversion of power and order becomes the permanent preserve of satirists. These
6 are not equivalent to the traditional court jester – a figure who is anachronistically
7 misrecognised as a critic (Carlyon, 2002) – but a proto-enlightenment misanthropist such as
8 Swift or John Wilmot. For Bakhtin, satirical humour is not renewing or life affirming, but
9 caustically laughs at the people, or at power, or at any group, rather than laughing with them.

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14 Bakhtin contrasts this satirical ‘destructive humour’ with the creative humour of the
15 carnival. Whereas the carnival makes the world good but absurd, satire makes the world
16 cruelly absurd:
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20 “Destructive humor” is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all
21 reality, against the finite world as a whole. [...] Through it the entire world is turned into
22 something alien, something terrifying and unjustified. The ground slips from under our feet
23 and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us” (1984: 42).

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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

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3 argues that critique emerges from a particular transformation of the subject in moments of
4 crisis. Persons generally tend to continue with their performances of their identity where
5 possible, because they acquire this identity – or set of performances – in line with socially
6 sanctioned norms. However, in certain circumstances, this identity or subjectivity becomes
7 ‘unliveable’; and Butler offers the example of lesbianism, a sexuality which was once
8 ‘legislated out of existence’ or ‘impossible’. In such a situation, the subject is faced with
9 conforming to gender norms or risking their subjectivity to ‘suspend the epistemological
10 horizon’. For Butler, “Critique is that which exposes a fundamental illegitimacy” (ibid.: 312).
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15 If this exposing and suspending critique is genuinely linked to the experience of
16 ‘unliveable’ subjectivity, one might expect for it to be relatively rare. However, as we see
17 from our comedians’ self-representation, criticism is far from an elite preserve, and it is also
18 widespread in the media and throughout the ‘alternative’ counter-culture (Heath & Potter,
19 2004), amongst enterprising capitalists (Frank, 2001) and even in the ranks of managers
20 (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). It is possible that Butler is wrong, and that critique or parody
21 may be merely one performance amongst others, but surely it is qualitatively different from
22 performances such as standing casually or nodding at acquaintances. I would argue that
23 critique is indeed a performance, but one which involves self-transformation.
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28 Here it is worthwhile to join these theorists together; for Bakhtin carnival laughter
29 was a moment of the loss of self in celebrations that emphasise imitation and the
30 performative dimensions of society. However, after the historical eclipse of the carnival,
31 satire emerges as a mode of hostile contempt for the world, constantly discovering its
32 absurdity and illegitimacy. While Butler never properly historicises her subject, it is
33 recognisably the modern subject described by Foucault (1977) or Elias (2000). Thus it is a
34 subject not renewed by carnival laughter, but one engaging in satire or else, whose
35 subjectivity is threatened by satires.^{iv} Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that being satirised
36 induces critique and participation in parody. The world-image offered by satire threatens
37 onlookers with absurdity, making their subjectivity ridiculous, if not quite ‘unliveable’, and
38 thereby prompting them to participate in the satire, either passively or actively. Without
39 recourse to a carnival re-birth of the world, the subject must expose the world’s illegitimacy
40 and subvert any and all meanings. Because they are satirised, they become satirical.
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47 Michael Billig (2005) theorises humour and particularly ridicule as a form of social
48 disciplining; ridicule controls norms within groups and defines the border with the outside.
49 Far from being a wholly benign force or even a rebellious one, Billig shows how humour can
50 reinforce social structures by force of shame and embarrassment. His work is particularly apt
51 for our purposes, because it suggests that “...there can be a gap between the nature of humour
52 as an act of rebelliousness and the social effects of humour...Rebellious humour need not
53 have uniformly rebellious effects” (ibid.: 212). Rather than chipping away at power, humour
54 may simply provide a convenient safety valve for resistance, a means of maintaining a
55 positive identity despite difficult conditions, from the ‘whispered jokes’ about totalitarian
56 leaders to stand-up comedy about the on-going financial crises.
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3 Most of all, Billig insists on attending to whom is being ridiculed in any joke,
4 partially in consonance with Bergson's formula of humour as an 'anaesthesia of the heart' but
5 mainly as a social theory of humour. It is not what happens within the joking or laughing
6 individual that matters, but the effect of humour as rhetorical social communication. At the
7 individual level it appears that political comedy ridicules the powerful by representing them
8 in absurd ways. However, in terms of the whole social situation, it appears that those who are
9 duped by that absurd power are more significantly ridiculed, after all, who is more ridiculous
10 – the emperor with no clothes or those who persistently fail to recognise his nudity? All of
11 the pieces analysed below bear this out. Furthermore, the consequence of political satire
12 which ridicules power and its pawns is that in turn it teaches subjects how to ridicule –
13 transforming them into satirists.
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19 Now it is possible to resume the question of the world-image of satire: First of all, this
20 world image is divorced from the carnival, it is not a benevolent chaos, but a world starkly
21 devoid of real meaning. Secondly, the performances entailed in this world are implicitly
22 imitative, copies mistaken as original, artifice posing as natural. Thirdly, the satirist is not
23 entirely part of this world, but separated from it ontologically through awareness of its
24 ridiculousness. Even critical perception of injustice are subsumed within the overall image of
25 the world as absurd, a world which has no meaning in itself, and resists any attempt to make
26 it meaningful.^v Thus, the only important ethos within this world-image is to become satirical,
27 thereby establishing a separation from the absurdity and creating personal meaning by overtly
28 or covertly ridiculing those real or imagined others who do not share the world-image.
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36 *Serious Absurdity*

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38 Even before the economic crash, the 'Celtic Tiger' period was a subject of intense satire and
39 critique. For instance, the success of Paul Howard's 'Ross O' Carroll-Kelly is based on its
40 biting satire of the absurdities of boom-time South Dublin life. There is scarcely a stand-up
41 comedian who hasn't used the 'Celtic Tiger' as 'material'. It is in this period that Irish stand-
42 up comedy 'matures' into cosmopolitan, risky, edgy comedy, so that life-style replaces
43 locality, and Ireland ceases to be a backwater, but a 'happening' place in the Anglophone
44 comedy constellation. Irish comedians appear on international stages, for instance, the
45 Montreal festival and Tommy Tiernan appears on the David Letterman show. Dara O' Brían
46 goes from being anchor on RTÉ's *The Panel* to the BBC's *Mock the Week*.
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51 The demise of the Celtic Tiger economy is well-known; exports ceased to grow
52 around 2002, and the boom was carried by a housing bubble until 2007, while bank
53 economists and government spokespersons promised a 'soft-landing'. In September 2008 the
54 government guaranteed banking debt up to 400 billion, unemployment rose to 14%, the
55 national debt ballooned to 95 billion and counting, with at least 70 billion in bailout for failed
56 banks. A general election finally occurred in February 2011, leading to the decimation of
57 Fianna Fail, Ireland's biggest party and long-term government incumbent. This period also
58 saw the transformation of comedy and satire.
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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.

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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.^{vi} *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.^{vii} Most importantly, within the sketch the

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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.

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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.^{viii} 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.

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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 contradiction to the absurd mainstream world.

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

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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.

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3 These statements are deadly serious yet absurd; the first is accompanied by a quick bag-
4 snatch, the second involves the actor colliding with the camera, the third simply because
5 knowing what occurred and allowing it to re-occur is manifestly absurd, and the fourth
6 because the airport is being advertised via national pride but facilitates the national shame of
7 emigration.
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11 In the first statement, the audience is simultaneously interpellated as an Irish person
12 who behaves criminally, and one who is aware of the absurdity of the behaviour of *some* Irish
13 people. The second merely underlines how grave the situation is. The third statement gives a
14 pointed and emotive diagnosis of the ‘gross mismanagement’ of the economy, but then
15 diffuses the emotion and the blaming of the political managers by stating that ‘we’ will ‘let it
16 happen all over again’. Finally, the actor leads by example by jettisoning Ireland entirely.
17 This dramatic leave taking resonates with what occurs symbolically through the satire; the
18 world comes to appear as a carnival of idiotic ‘Irish’ stereotypes, both its foolish people and
19 its bumbling and corrupt politicians, and as one becomes aware of this absurdity, one is
20 separated from it, and the social body of ‘Irishness’ is exposed as not only a fiction but an
21 illegitimate world. The point here is not to argue the direct opposite of the perspective offered
22 by the comedy, rather it is to observe the consequences of satire, that is, the proliferation of
23 the sense of being an isolated observer of absurdity, that is, a *de facto* satirist.^{ix}
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29 *Satirical Culture*

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31 The foregoing trio of sketches exemplify a general trend, not just the satirising of authority,
32 seriousness and sacred values – the politician, the public sphere and national pride, but also
33 make ‘the people’ the butt of their joke. More ridiculous than anyone directly impersonated
34 in the sketches is the sort of person who taken in by the original, genuine versions of these
35 discourses. Imagining the gullibility of others is a means of disciplining the subject to
36 appreciate and partake in satire, following Butler, the subject becomes a subject by being
37 threatened by abjection. Furthermore, by the presentation of the world as absurd and corrupt,
38 it is implied that the deficiencies of the world are significantly due to the stupidity of the
39 majority – that is, society in general disfigured as credulous conformists.
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45 Such an argument may appear as too forceful a reading of the texts at hand, but it is
46 interesting to cite some of the responses that have been posted on *YouTube* versions of the
47 sketches. The majority of these responses merely commend the clip; ‘excellent’ ‘LOL’
48 ‘classic’ and the like. However, a number of them echo the satirical sensibility of the
49 sketches:
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- 52 • the irish-masters at making fun of our own misery. some craic hiiii..!
 - 53 • We're funny coz we're screwed.
 - 54 • The quality of Irish humour increases in direct proportion to the misery of our benighted land.
 - 55 • Great comedy there!!...just like Ireland!....A JOKE!!!
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3 While it cannot be suggested that any single sketch served to constitute its audience as
4 satirists, these responses indicate that something of that sensibility is present within those
5 who watch the sketches on-line and trouble to leave comments. The sense of Ireland,
6 presumably the home society of each respondent, as irredeemably absurd is palpable.
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10 How this satire might critically challenge the identity and beliefs of a non-satirical
11 subjectivity can be imagined by comparing responses to the original DAA advertisement to
12 responses to its parody.
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- 14 • I know it's an airport and he's just saying a few facts.... but this makes me proud to be irish...
- 15 • Amazing monologue! Brings a tear to the eye!

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18 Either of these comments may be intended as sarcastic faux-innocent comments, as the
19 visibility of comments is controlled by the site moderator, who is connected to the DAA.
20 However, if they were genuine, what would be the effect of the parody upon such emotive
21 national pride? Perhaps it might provoke outrage, but equally, it might incite a satirical
22 subjectivity. Furthermore, our tendency to read these comments as sarcastic can be taken as
23 indicative of how satire has become a default position.^x Below is a lengthy response to the
24 parody of the DAA advertisement:
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29 You forgot a drunken immigrant workforce, inferiority complexes, the absence of outrage
30 when the foreign bankers run amok, crap food, the "ah sure" instinct as the surest way out of
31 every problem, legions of corrupt priests, and another guaranteed diaspora of young people
32 fleeing the country for better lives elsewhere. Other than that, go on ya boyos!
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35 The respondent here extends Barry Murphy's litany of 'things that Ireland has given the
36 world' with little humour, but it is no less a redeployment of satirical critique. Presumably the
37 respondent is Irish, and yet, perversely almost, they constitute their identity by heaping abuse
38 on the Irish. Yet, this is no paradox once we recognise how social identities are re-
39 constructed as anti-social individualistic identities through critique.
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43 While political satire is a just one element of the overall constellation of comedy, I
44 would argue that understanding the sort of satirical impulse discernable in the foregoing
45 sketches can aid our interpretation of stand-up comedy generally, which sometimes appears
46 intractable to any analysis. Take for instance the performance of Tommy Tiernan on
47 McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow on the 9th of October 2010. Tiernan begins by saying that
48 times are bad, he arrived in a car too big for him, "...because I drove past my reflection in a
49 shop window, and before I knew who it was I called him an arsehole." The comedy is derived
50 here partially from the effect of incongruity, but it also captures the specifically satirical
51 tendency towards despising and ridiculing oneself as representative of 'the people' as the
52 source of malaise, in this case, by greed and vanity.
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57 Serious topics become absurd in a carnivalesque fashion, the debts of England are
58 estimated as a 'billion, million, willion, trillion', Germany's is a 'billion, trillion, jeeb, jab, ju,
59 willion, billion'; America owes so much it can only be expressed in a scream. Then...
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3 “Every country in the world owes money, but to who? [laugh] Who does everybody in the
4 world owe money to? And why don’t we just kill the bastard and relax? [laugh]”
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7 Such a suggestion translates disaster and suffering into absurdity, particularly because the
8 disaster at hand seems extraordinarily ridiculous because it appears so easily solved by us
9 simply ‘killing the bastard’. Here the comedian partly takes on the role of the trickster who
10 instigates the sacrificial witch-hunt and nominates the victim, but part of the comedy is that
11 ‘we’ don’t kill the bastard. These ‘bad times’ could be so easily averted, and yet they aren’t.
12 This appears paradoxical; yet this is not just comedy but critical comedy – the situation isn’t
13 really funny, but its humour is created by the separation of the satirist from the absurdity. So,
14 the reason ‘we’ don’t kill the bastard is because there are some ‘others’ amidst the ‘we’ who
15 take things too seriously, caught up in paying a ‘million billion willion trillion’. Moreover,
16 the emphasis is on separating the self from the situation rather than solving it. For Tiernan the
17 “...self-flagellating orgy of misery going on is actually entirely irrelevant. Utterly irrelevant”
18 (Boyd, 2010). Perhaps the absence of any serious public mobilisation around these events is
19 less due to ideology than to the spread of a satirical subjectivity.
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25 *Conclusion*

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27 Through a genealogy of modern comedy in the public sphere Szokolczai (2012) suggests
28 “...the real tragedy of the modern world is that it is a comedy” which echoes the opening
29 lines of Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* “Our’s is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse
30 to take it tragically” first published in 1928, but responding to the grimly absurd spectacle of
31 WWI and the destruction of tradition through industrialism. Since then, history has not failed
32 to provide disaster and suffering, all the more absurd because so much of it is technically
33 preventable. This is the century in which humour became elevated as a sign of humanity, and
34 even became the centre of a respected philosophy – Camus insists that life is absurd because
35 the world resists our every attempt to ascribe meaning to it. (1975). This is the real heart of
36 the question; how is it that the world has come to appear absurd?
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42 An absurd vision of the world is only possible once the meanings of social life have
43 become undermined or disfigured. Patterns of behaviour in line with social norm are not
44 automatically graceful and dignified, nor are beliefs and culture necessarily beautiful or
45 profound; according to a critical discourse they are not only arbitrary or artificial, but also an
46 effect of and ideological cover for power. Yet, it is important to remember that this view is
47 only the world image of one discourse, not necessarily a revelation of truth. Satire is based on
48 a critical vision of human behaviour stripped of its meanings, power without any legitimacy
49 and ideas without credibility. Just as comedians are critical the works of a popular critic such
50 as Fintan O’Toole or an academic sociologist like Bauman are peppered with ironic wit and
51 satirical analogies. Despite their emancipatory intent, such critical/satirical works mainly
52 serve to create critics and satirists, inculcating individualised ‘world-rejection’ rather than
53 political participation.
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59 Butler’s use of parody suggests naturalistic performances being challenged by
60 subversive parody which reveals performances as merely an act; how performances can

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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 reassume 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.

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11 ⁱ This sketch and all others discussed herein are available on ‘YouTube’. I recommend watching them there
12 because it is impossible to convey textually all the aspects of the sketches, and of course, because they are
13 genuinely funny.
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15 ⁱⁱ Boltanski’s sociology of critique weaves a nuanced course away from ‘transgressive rituals’ which do little
16 more than defusing critique, nihilistic critiques which demand the end to all institutions, and overarching meta-
17 theoretical critiques which ignore the critical capacities of agents (2011). This is not only an important
18 theoretical refinement, but responds to the tendency of contemporary capitalism to present itself as critical
19 (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).
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21 ⁱⁱⁱ While Heath and Potter’s work is a good analysis of the self-defeating and consumerist logics of what they
22 term ‘counter-cultural critique’, they also tend to reduce most of the phenomena they discuss to the working of
23 cultural capital. To an extent this is apt, but it also leans towards a critique of critique, unmasking a plethora of
24 different cultural phenomena as status-seeking strategies.
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27 ^{iv} A genealogy of modern satire would be beyond the bounds of this paper. However, important elements can be
28 seen in the Pucinnella figure (Horvath, 2010), and the Comedia d’ella Arte (Szokolczai, 2012).
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30 ^v As such, the satirical world-image should be understood as a sort of ‘religious rejection of the world’ (Weber,
31 1991).
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33 ^{vi} David McSavage is the *alias* of David Andrews, brother of Barry Andrews and son of David Andrews, both
34 now former Fianna Fail TD’s and ministers. His show, funded and broadcast by RTÉ also satirises prominent
35 media presenters, such as Pat Kenny in the example below. There is no suggestion of a ‘conspiracy theory’ here,
36 the comedian probably has complete creative freedom in his work, but it is not going too far to suggest that
37 neither the political establishment nor the national broadcaster are anxious about the effects of the programme.
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40 ^{vii} Runciman (2009) suggests that hypocrisy is endemic to democracy as a system and that anti-hypocrisy, or the
41 ‘hunt for the hypocrite’ is not a worthwhile political platform as it distracts us from real political questions and
42 besides it has failed for several centuries.
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44 ^{viii} The social and cultural transformations of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era are characterised by both an idealisation of a
45 new cosmopolitan Irish identity and anxiety about immigration and globalisation (Keohane & Kuhling, 2007).
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47 ^{ix} The argument here is that critical discourse can produce critical subjects and by extension satire can produce
48 satirists. It is through the constitution of the critic that others – real and imaginary – become figured as pawns or
49 dupes, and through the constitution of the satirist these others appear as absurd and gullible.
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51 ^x An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference [xxx] Having screened the parody of the DAA
52 ad, I then presented these comments, which produced knowing laughter from the audience. There is no way of
53 ascertaining the intended meaning of the comments, but their sarcastic resonances demonstrate my point here
54 about satirical subjectivity.
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