

## How Do We Write Responsible Satire in the 21st Century?

Satire as an art form has existed for millennia, and its definition has always been vexed. Recently however, the form has ailed under a new threat, the tendency to entirely ignore irony and literally interpret satirical works, often to dangerous effect. Whether disingenuous reception alters the nature of the text itself is a question for literary theorists, but this article will focus on whether knowledge of this receptive climate makes the creation of ambiguous satire irresponsible. I will also touch on other moments in which ostensibly innocent satire can fail in its purposes, whether intentionally or not. As the president of a student satirical magazine the question of how to write responsible satire, and how to spot potential harm, is a particularly personal one.

An aspect in which much satire fails in its purpose is in ignoring the material reality of its production. The satirization of a medium through ironic replication will often find itself repeating the errors of its subject. A spoof horror film that ironically mimics the tendency of the genre to kill off its black characters will still find itself providing less screen time and less pay to its black actors. An animated series (*South Park*) that critiques racist and homophobic school bullies by coming up with insults that will be consumed and repeated by children viewing has proliferated the issue it sought to combat. The film that places a well-known Hollywood actor (Robert Downey Jr) in black-face as a critique of well-known Hollywood actors using black-face is still working through the same systems of mockery. While irony can change the meaning of a harmful trope, it cannot alter its material realities if it must work through the same channels to challenge it.

The question of material reality is relevant also to the misinterpretation of satire. A risk for works that aim both to ironise a genre *and* to be aesthetically enjoyable is that the ironised form is necessarily that which becomes enjoyable. This aesthetic appeal to the far-right (as is usually the case) opens the door for removal of any sense of irony, particularly possible in a world in which works can be cut down and posted online without their context. The works or particular characters are then championed by those in direct opposition to the

original creator. The most prevalent examples of this tend to be misogynistic, white, male characters who were initially conceived to explore the harms of masculinity but are adopted by adolescent men who see only an unbridled machismo which has otherwise begun to fade from general media. The unthinking misogyny of *Barbie's* Ken or the brooding violence of Walter White, if presented uncritically, would simply not be interesting enough to be produced on as wide a scale as they are in their ironised form. The very fact that their presentations *are* critical is what allows them to spread so quickly, lose their context and become dangerous.

Antony Starr's 'Homelander' in *the Boys* has been a recent example of a satirical figure who has been valorised online; Starr said in an interview, 'There's a weird element out there that actually kind of idolize him [...] and I'm like, 'Wait, What? You are missing the point entirely!'''. The character is unique also in that he is a comment on the very phenomenon that has made him so dangerous, an attempt to show the violent power of right-wing spin that has been far too successful.

That this article has focused on the failings of left-wing media in the fuelling of the right may be seen as a sign of bias based on my own political beliefs (which it partially is), but this is also a genuine pattern that has formed through the specific cultural lens in which we live. As new ideas about what is acceptable to broadcast have risen, works that outright valorise right-wing ideologies have fallen dramatically in quantity. This has left a vacuum in conservative spaces for characters in traditional media to champion, leading to the contextless adoption of those works that have, as mentioned before, endeavoured to ironise right-wing characters while maintaining aesthetic enjoyment. This has also led to an increase in the creation of false satire, work that is *intended* to house hatred that seeks a thin veneer of 'irony' to ensure it is produced.

This leads to a troubling question, has ambiguous satire become profitable to produce? As political divides get wider and deeper, TV executives have struggled to appeal to both sides of the political spectrum, instead choosing to strengthen their viewership amongst their chosen faction. The rise of wilfully misunderstanding satire has changed that;

where 30 years ago executives would aim for a middle ground in order to offend no-one, they have found in ambiguous satire the ability to convince both sides that they are insulting their opponents. The left-wing viewer can watch *Its Always Sunny in Philadelphia* safe in the knowledge that it is satirising its characters' problematic views, while the conservative can watch the same programme, ignore the irony, and take pleasure in the resistance of 'wokeness'; a way to capture an entire market whilst simultaneously insulting it. There is a reason that the (relatively) centrist satire of *The Simpsons*, based on its generally inoffensive middle-American nuclear family, has recently ceded ground in the zeitgeist to its much more extreme cousins.

Where does this leave the aspiring satirist, painfully aware that the negative consequences of misinterpretation of their work may far outstrip any benefits and may even be encouraged by executives? Is satirical writing facing its death because it cannot rely on being recognised as irony? No, what is needed is not the rejection of satire but an increase in responsible practices in its composition. The satirist should not relent, but rather ensure that they consider the material realities of their work, *where* the aesthetic enjoyment springs from in their irony, and what room there is for their work to be reappropriated. Considered and *unambiguous* satire is the way forward.