Johan Nilsson

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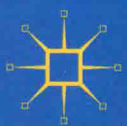
Hollywood Subversion



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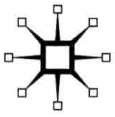

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For my grandfather

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Preface

The book you are about to read began its life in 2006 and was finished (or so I believed) in the fall of 2011. It was my doctoral dissertation. However, the appeal (and, I hope, the relevance) of film satire seems to be such that its life will be further extended. Satire has a very long history, and while the written forms of satire have been thoroughly treated by scholars in comparative literature and language studies, research about audiovisual satire is only at the beginning of what will hopefully be a long journey into a lasting field.

Today satire is heavily used in different media. You only have to look at political comedy shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* both of which have enjoyed tremendous success over the last few years, and not only as shows on television. They are on Twitter and on Facebook and they are both heavily featured on Comedy Central's YouTube channel. Now, this book is not about Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert, but I would argue that they are two very relevant examples that show how satire is and can be used today.

The subject for this book is American film satire during one decade in particular, the 1990s, and I argue (with other scholars) that this was the time when satire really began to emerge in the mainstream of American media culture. The reasons behind this occurrence are discussed in the book, but the primary interest lies in how satire works on stylistic and formal levels. That being said, however, satire cannot be fully understood without looking at contextual factors as well.

The book you now hold in your hands is a slightly revised version of the original dissertation. First of all, for reasons of clarity and categorization, the title has been slightly changed, from *Hollywood Subversion: American Film Satire in the 1990s* to *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion.* Also, the structure of the introductory chapter has been changed to offer the reader a more fluid and continuous text and some clarifications have been made when it comes to certain theoretical concepts and methodological choices.

Whereas the chapter on the 1990s context stands relatively unchanged, the introductory sections (where the particular thematic contexts are explicated) to the three analytical chapters have been expanded upon. They now offer a fuller view of the backgrounds against which the films are understood. As for the analyses themselves, very little has been revised except in the case of *Forrest Gump*. That particular analysis, after having been particularly (but fairly) criticized, has been made clearer in terms of the position I have taken in relation to the film. I have tried to add some nuance to the argumentation, filled out some descriptions, and added a short section dealing with the film's musical score, which stands in relative contrast to what the film offers viewers on the visual level.

Lastly, the concluding chapter has been looked over, but very little has been changed except for incorporating a discussion of the connections between the examined period and the 1960s and early 1970s. This connection is quite obvious in the material at hand and it is actively used for the actual satire, but it did not come out clearly enough in the former text.

Örebro, Sweden
October 31, 2012

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Introduction

[A] new subject matter demands new form, and as good a way as any toward understanding what a film is trying to say to us is to know how it is saying it.

—André Bazin[1]

This book is about satire—that seemingly elusive mode of representation that has been used to mock and ridicule society and culture for thousands of years. From its earliest incarnation, satire was associated not only with the written word, but also with public performance.[2] Over time satire has come in many forms and genres as well as in different types of media (verse, drama, rhetorical performance, prose, cartoons, journalism, film, TV, Internet), making it quite difficult to encapsulate.[3] Indeed, the stylistic and formal variety that is possible within the "framework" of satire precludes defining it as a clearly delimitated unit. As early as 1960 Robert C. Elliott wrote that "[w]e shy from using the category 'a satire' today, at least when we are trying to speak precisely, because the term has lost for us any sense of formal specification."[4] If this was the case in 1960, imagine what has happened to satire since then, as the media landscape has grown ever larger and more varied.

Satire has traditionally been defined as a moral and rhetorical art that attacks vice and folly through wit and ridicule.[5] Like all cultural forms, it has had both its detractors and its defenders. Much of the controversy around satire stems from its relationship to morality: Does the satirist have the right to attack society? Is his or her critique justified and does it conform to a moral standard? Who is the satirist and who is satirized? These are not questions that this study attempts to answer in any explicit sense, but they do actualize issues concerning the satirist's social, political, and cultural role at any given time. This, in turn, implies that some type of connection to historical reality is emphasized when it comes to satire. The notion of satire as a moral

form and as a rhetorical art, Dustin Griffin tells us, was in fact put forth as long ago as 1693 by the English satirist John Dryden. Griffin moves away from the general works on satire produced during the 1960s (where the moral center of satire was continually emphasized) and points to more specialized fare from individual satirists, in whose works the complexities and ambiguities of the form are considered.[6]

Because of what I, and others, perceive as an uncritical consensus in definitions of satire and the prevailing masterwork tradition (at least in literature research), I decided to keep this study strategically open-ended, problem-based, and empirical. It is exploratory in the questions posed and the aim is thus to test an approach that can result in a method for analyzing satire—in this case, film satire. Following from this notion of being open-ended, the study is inspired by David Bordwell's film poetics, which he describes as following the tradition of rational and empirical inquiry when analyzing film in general.[7]

My contribution to the field is in closing the gap in research on film satire (there exists research on satire in the field of literature, and television satire is an emerging research field, but film satire is significantly under-researched) while describing and positioning American film satire within the context of the 1990s. More precisely the focus lies on how style and form cue viewers toward constructing satirical meaning—that is, *how do films cue viewers to perceive satire?* The interest in how viewers infer satirical cues does not mean that the interpretations made by actual viewers are of interest, however. Rather, the focus is on the films themselves, their style and form, with emphasis on how they work to construct said cues.[8] A qualification with regard to this aim is that it should not be interpreted as intrinsically formalist (in the text-centrist sense). It is neither feasible nor desirable to exclude the historical context from a discussion of satire, whose target exists in that context. However, the context and target of satire are considered secondary in that they are made visible primarily through the films (and through secondary material).

In accordance with the aim, a case study approach is adopted. Five satirical films, all produced and released during the 1990s, structure the book. They were all made by US directors, even though financing in some cases was partly foreign, and they are *Bob Roberts* (Tim Robbins, 1992), *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998), *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992), *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997), and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). The selection of the period in question should be understood as derivative from the output of satirical films in general. The cases analyzed are particular films that were produced in the varyingly commercial environment of American

cinema and within its specific system of aesthetic norms, thus emphasizing particular contextual conditions. The selection also actualizes a larger cultural setting, where popular culture came to be used for political purposes, where the public had become increasingly literate in terms of media, where history was being revisited, and where irony, the dominant technique in satire (see section titled "Making Sense of Satire"), became a generational and ideological battleground, as it was associated with either fresh new thinking or apathy and nihilism.[9] Here I touch upon the central themes running through this study. It is within the general realms of politics, media, and history that I have chosen to discuss the aesthetics of American film satire.

A basic assumption grounds the aim of this study: satire had particular significance as a category of American film during the 1990s.[10] However, the book should be regarded neither as an attempt to prove this fact nor as an analysis of historical change in American film. Rather, it uses this particular period, when certain historical factors—shifts in company ownership and conflation of film practices that opened up opportunities for formal heterogeneity and unconventional subject matter to emerge in "mainstream" film—created new spaces for satire. As such, the period can be distinguished from the 1980s, when, according to Andrew Horton, American comedy lost the "'democratic' or populist flavor that characterized it in the past in favor of a 'Reaganite' cynical neoconservatism that ignores many contemporary issues [. . .] Such comedy ultimately endorses the status quo rather than offering any true critique of it."[11] Likewise, Chris Jordan argues that President Reagan implemented policies that made access to the film industry more difficult and restricted the ideological diversity of Hollywood's films. These policies sprang from Reagan's work, via tax cuts and deregulation, to decrease government influence over the marketplace. As early as 1981 Congress passed the "Economic Recovery Tax Act," which "promoted greater short-term banking investment in the entertainment industry by lowering corporate tax rates."[12] Under this free-market economy Hollywood managed to reintegrate what had been lost through the Paramount decision of 1948; once again the major studios, which now became parts of diversified entertainment conglomerates that reaped record profits, became vertically and horizontally integrated.[13]

This study argues that this was not entirely the case during the 1990s, when satire (re)emerged as part of a more challenging kind of film. Thus, the quintessential 1980s movie was presold, had crossover potential, and belonged to a genre that appealed to diverse audiences.[14] Of course, the 1990s retained some of these characteristic

traits; however, the rise of the independent sector in the late 1980s resulted in new strategies after studios realized the crossover potential of the more challenging films (see Chapter 2).

There exists no previous study that deals explicitly with 1990s American film satire (in fact, studies of film satire in general are exceedingly rare), but via a brief detour into a television context, some general conclusions can be made about the relevance of satire at the time. In a recent anthology on television satire, Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson trace the evolution of satire TV all the way back to TV's inception, but note that for a long time it existed only in the periphery.[15] It was not until the late 1980s that satire truly emerged, thanks in part to a convergence of audience tastes and shifting programming strategies. While satire certainly achieved resonance with audiences during the 1950s and 1960s, it was not spearheaded by television but by print culture (*MAD Magazine, Playboy*) and vinyl records, on which one could listen to comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Mike Nichols, and Elaine May. The problem was that explicit satire did not (yet) qualify as mass entertainment, but during the 1970s and 1980s it started to become more accepted, although mainly in the sitcom format (e.g., *All in the Family*).[16]

Networks also began to realize the opportunities associated with appealing to smaller audiences, as demonstrated by *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) in the 1970s. However, as *SNL* increased in popularity it began to soften its satire so as not to upset the tastes of mass audiences. Then, in the late 1980s, *The Simpsons* (1989–) was introduced by the FOX Broadcasting Company. This show went further in its satire and in its parody of television genres (the news, ads, and the family sitcom) than *SNL* did with its "Weekend Update" segment. The FOX network's strategy was based on a targeting of niche audiences and specific demographics, and through the success of *The Simpsons* it gradually became the fourth big network, alongside ABC (American Broadcasting Company), CBS Broadcasting, and NBC (National Broadcasting Company).[17]

These strategies were fruitful for new networks, of which one of the most important for the popularization of satire was Comedy Central.[18] This channel emerged in 1991 from the merger of Time Warner's The Comedy Channel (1989) and Viacom's rival channel Ha! The TV Comedy Network (1990), and it premiered important satirical shows such as *Politically Incorrect* (1994–2002), *The Daily Show* (1996–), *South Park* (1997–), and *The Colbert Report* (2005–).

The argument that the rise of television satire was due to shifts in industry and audience tastes is a likely explanation for the rise of film

satire as well. The partial merging of Hollywood and the independent sector during the 1990s, which could be seen as part of the general media conglomeration occurring at the time, is important in this respect (see Chapter 2). Also significant is the fact that several of the filmmakers whose films are analyzed had experience with other satire formats: In 1988 Robert Altman made the satirical miniseries *Tanner '88* for the HBO (Home Box Office) cable network and in 1986 Tim Robbins first played the populist right-wing character Bob Roberts on *SNL*;[19] Barry Levinson began his career writing comedy for variety shows, such as *The Carol Burnett Show,* which ran on CBS between 1967 and 1978, and Mike Nichols started in improvisational comedy together with Elaine May, appearing in comedy clubs, on radio, and, as previously mentioned, on vinyl records.

In summation, film satire and the 1990s fit nicely together, and the fact that satire broke through in other media as well during the time is further confirmation of the relevance of this study. Again, however, I enter a research field that is relatively unexplored.

Filling a Gap

Research on satire, like the mode itself, is eclectic in both approach and scope, and until recently it was done mainly in the domain of literature and language studies. During recent years, seemingly as a symptomatic response to the rise to prominence of the political comedy shows *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report,* there has emerged a wave of media and communication research that deals with satire in more or less explicit ways. Under headings such as civic engagement,[20] political journalism/news,[21] information processing and media psychology,[22] as well as rhetoric,[23] this research follows in the tradition of variety but is at the same time somewhat unified by its interest in contemporary American entertainment culture.

The 2009 anthology *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* is a prime example of this interest. The value of this research for the present study is of course limited by its object of study (TV) and by its focus on contemporary satire (after the 1990s), but as a window into satire's role and TV manifestations in contemporary American culture and the ways audiences may perceive it, the book does provide knowledge about contextual factors and the function of satire in 1990s America.[24] For instance, as already argued, the contention that the rise of satire TV was due to shifts in industry and audience tastes is valuable as a likely explanation for the rise of film satire as well. A likely explanation is that as satire became more

popular, through, for instance, *The Simpsons* and the rise of Comedy Central, film studios realized its commercial potential.

Before the twentieth century, accounts of the workings of satire tended to come from satirists themselves, often in the form of prefaces to their works.[25] Since then, however, a diverse body of research has emerged, not least within literary criticism. Oscillating between text- or author-centered treatments and more theoretical and contextual explications, this research, while useful for my theoretical conception of satire, repeatedly exposes the same works and satirists (although sometimes alongside others) to analysis. Especially prominent are the Anglo-Irish satirists—such as Jonathan Swift, John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, and Alexander Pope—of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but also classical Greeks and Romans such as Aristophanes, Horace, and Juvenal.[26]

A limitation of the research of the 1960s was that it defined satire and its function but tended to disregard all matters of context. The definition of satire in the earlier research is known as "the old theoretical consensus," a consensus that endures despite its inadequacy and despite much practical criticism from individual satirists who moved away from any certainties. The persistency of the consensus prompts Griffin to embrace New Historicism's urging to rethink how satire is embedded in history and culture.[27] The importance of contextual considerations when dealing with satire is something most contemporary researchers agree on, no matter which discipline they are working in.[28] I would argue that the consensus definition functions as an introduction to how satire can be understood, but its conventions and strategies have (as they tend to do) shifted and developed over time.

A similar focus on history is also manifest in later treatments of postmodern satire, where contextual and intertextual perspectives are used to determine satire's historical references. The real-world referential aspect, regarding postmodern satire, is complemented by issues of representation and reflexivity.[29] With regard to postmodernism, there are certain aspects of satire that could be explained as such, for instance, its penchant for mixing forms and its self-consciousness. However, the fact that these aspects have been associated with satire for much longer than postmodernist discourse has existed limits its relevance as a way to understand satire.

The loose formal restraints of satire are hardly something new. In fact, etymologically satire stems from the word *satura* in *lanx satura*, which signified a dish filled with a variety of fruit. Further, the *Menippean satire*, supposedly invented by the Greek cynic Menippus

(all his works are lost), was originally a form of verse satire that incorporated prose interludes, but it was later identified with a prose form that included incidental uses of verse.[30]

One finds mention of film satire in studies of humor, comedy, irony, and parody (where satire is secondary), or in scattered articles concerning specific films, the effect being quite the conceptual mire.[31] There are, however, some exceptions. Derived from a symposium with American and Russian scholars and practitioners, an anthology collecting essays on film satire in the Soviet Union was published in 1993. *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash* contains aesthetic and thematic analyses as well as historical expositions.[32] The relevance of this study as far as this book is concerned is limited by the fact that the essays are very context-bound, but in terms of a theoretical understanding of satire the collection has certain value.

In a 1996 article titled "The Forms of Film Humour: Three Examples of Satire," Danish film scholar Lennard Højbjerg makes some conclusions about film satire based on analyses of three films. Starting off from a conceptualization of the narrational techniques of irony, parody, and satire, he concludes that film satire, unlike most satirical literature, "accentuates the values of the common man." A film, he argues, is only satirical if the audience perceives it as such, and that requires that it is funny. "[W]hen people laugh at satirical films it is because it [sic] agrees with the film's values."[33] Højbjerg puts the plot action at the center of his analyses. With very few exceptions the actual construction of satirical cues by way of stylistic devices is ignored, which gives the arguments an interpretive character. This means that the article's practical value for this study is limited, although as part of the existing canon of satire research it does have relevance—especially, I would argue, in the theoretical department.

There is a gap to fill in the research on film satire. Rather than accepting theories on literary satire that do not account for functions and effects of audiovisual material, research on film satire needs to consider the devices that are at the medium's disposal.[34] This is not to say that I entirely avoid selected research concerning literary satire. After all, it is there that we find the most comprehensive work on the form. The moving image is perceived differently than the written page, not least because of its actualization of many different devices, such as narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. Film offers a greater variety of combinations of devices for satire than, say, the novel, poem, cartoon, or still image. This study's contribution to the field of satire research lies in dealing with these aspects.

MAKING SENSE OF SATIRE

Satire is used to attack different targets, is dependent on some kind of comic expression, and is actualized by a wide variety of artworks. Immediately, therefore, satire appears to be a complex form that is difficult to define. Much of this difficulty derives from its formal and thematic variety.[35] This study shows that aspects such as fiction, nonfiction, classical narration, parody, crime, action, war, politics, and so on, can all be contained within a satirical framework.

A conclusion one can draw from this is that regarding satire as a genre is problematic, and, indeed, it is often described as a mode instead.[36] An exception is Leon Guilhamet, who views satire as a "borrower of forms" in that it de-forms host structures,[37] meaning that it is essentially understood by its form rather than its subject matter. Charles A. Knight also recognizes satire's tendency to adopt other forms, but unlike Guilhamet's excluding characterization of satire, he regards the openness of its boundaries as a sign that it is pregeneric. It is a frame of mind.[38] Here we also come close to how Hayden White has defined satire, as a mode of emplotment that identifies the work as a story of a particular kind. The story is one of diremption, "a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitely the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy."[39]

Griffin goes further than either Guilhamet or Knight, arguing that the "difficulty of comprehending satire within a single theoretical frame" stems from the fact that, like a body snatcher, satire does not just borrow another form, but subverts or alters its potential.[40] It seems to me that it is not so much a lack of generic conventions on the part of satire but rather a tendency to blend conventions from different genres that helps define satire.

Satire, we can intuit, confronts form in some manner. It is very loose and eclectic, and subverts forms for its own playful and critical purposes. It is no wonder, then, that it is often confused with parody. Indeed, satire and parody are often used together.[41] The most recurring distinction between satire and parody is based on the nature of the target and views satire as targeting real-world particulars or social norms, while parody targets aesthetic objects or conventions.[42] However, there are problems with such a definition, because real-world particulars and aesthetic objects cannot be sufficiently distinguished from each other, especially during a time when media is increasingly