



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Crines, Andrew

“All Things Indefensible, Our Leader Made Them All” The Logic, Emotion, and Credibility of British Political Satire in the 1980s

Original Citation

Crines, Andrew (2012) “All Things Indefensible, Our Leader Made Them All” The Logic, Emotion, and Credibility of British Political Satire in the 1980s. In: Rhetoric in British Politics and Society Workshop, 4th May 2012, Manchester, UK. (Unpublished)

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/14428/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

“All Things Indefensible, Our Leader Made Them All”

The Logic, Emotion, and Credibility of British Political Satire in the 1980s.

**Andrew S Crines
University of Huddersfield**

Draft Paper

Do not cite this paper without prior permission from the author

a.crines@hud.ac.uk

Rhetoric in British Politics and Society Workshop, Friday 4 May 2012

Venue: School of Social Sciences, Arthur Lewis Building, University of Manchester

Abstract

Satire draws upon irony, derision and wit in order to illuminate vice and ineptitude in public figures. For political elites, this makes satire a dangerous tool of civil society, given its capacity to challenge and undermine political efforts. This is a healthy characteristic in any liberal democracy.

This paper provides an indicative example by showing how a single Spitting Image sketch draws from a range of rhetorical tools to convey a broad critique over the perceived social failures of the Thatcherite period. The sketch exposed real-world manifestations of deprivation, placed them into comedic setting, before presenting them to the viewer. This raises the questions: what effect in the viewer did they hope to generate, and how did they garner appropriate credibility?

The ethos of the sketch derives from the neutral character of the messenger, from the visual illustrations, and by tapping into a broader sense of discontent with the political leaders at the time. The pathos was discontent with social ills, seemingly attributable to deliberate government policy, whilst the logos aims to inform and educate the audience of such issues.

As such, this paper will argue that satire can be utilised to communicate a specific message using ethos, pathos, and logos, as illustrated by this sketch.

Introduction

British Politics in the 1980s was a smorgasbord of rhetorical intrigue. Under Thatcher, the Conservative Party was occupied with restructuring the economy around an ideological theory of *free market monetarism*. Under Kinnock, the Labour Party was modernising following very close flirtations with the radical left. Meanwhile, the often forgotten but nevertheless satirically engrossing Liberal Party under Steel was being congealed into a marriage of inconvenience with the remnants of the Social Democratic defectors. It was, evidently, a period of political change across each of the parties, with old certainties now being washed away, and the new uncertainties emerging. Such conditions laid the foundations for a political satire renaissance, building on earlier foundations laid by such greats as *That Was The Week That Was*, amongst others. The satirical renaissance of the 1980s was led, to some extent, by media commentators such as *Spitting Image* and *Private Eye*. The first of these is the focus of this short paper.

Political satire aims to entertain and to inform, often but not exclusively through humour. It is a form of rhetorical performance art, tied to politics by its mimicry of leading political elites, drawing from political facts, to frame an emotion, garnering credibility. Satire subscribes to a left-field world view, adding absurdities to the serious, bringing mockery to the pretentious, in order to communicate a certain critical analysis. It is, in effect, a means of reinterpreting the world in order to scrutinise and critique.

For politicians, satire cuts deep into their treasured achievements and abilities, often pricking egos or even, as in the case of Norman Tebbit, perpetuating one. As alluded to, effective satire must advance a message across the rhetorical themes under review, *vis-a-*

vis Ethos, Pathos, Logos. The logos of satire tends to be drawn from real-world issues and events, the pathos is the intended emotional capital required to generate amusement or, indeed, another emotion, and the credibility derives from the neutral character and reputation of the satirist needed in order for the audience comfortably pay attention. Combined, these enable the communication of an effective critique, as to lack any one of these renders the communicative process less effective. These represent the analytical basis upon which this paper and subsequent chapter will utilise towards better understanding how and why satire functions.

Analysis

Chosen for their clear relevance and impact, both Spitting Image and Private Eye garnered credibility amongst political actors given their high impact profiles. Such is the ethos of Spitting Image that Michael Foot partly blames it for Labour's failings in being able to communicate its modernisation narrative to the electorate. Although other factors inevitably played a role, the fact Foot makes such a claim demonstrates the potential for major satirical impact upon the electorate, which can be translated into political action or inaction. With regards to Private Eye, Hattersley argues that its 'caricaturisation' of political elites undermines their attempts to convey a message, suggesting mockery distracts the electorate from serious issues. Hattersley has also argued the satire can, in part, be regarded as a contributory factor in the decline of deference towards political elites. Consequently, it can be seen that some elites lay the charge of real world political impact upon these satirical houses, but the question remains – how?

To examine the hypothesis suggested by Foot and Hattersley, this paper will investigate the

process of rhetorical communication through Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. Each sketch requires these in order to be effective. The logic of a sketch is the premise, the emotion of the sketch is the intended consequence, credibility of the sketch emerges from the character of the satirist and their ability to leave an impression – to communicate *their* message.

To demonstrate their suitability, it is now necessary to consider how and why each are useful when examining political satire. As an indicative example for this paper, each are applied to an extract of satire to demonstrate effective use of the rhetorical devices. For the chapter, however, a broader approach shall be adopted, drawing from both satirical houses around two key periods of political significance *vis-a-vis* 1987 and 1992. However, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the satirical analysis can be advanced. As such, a Spitting Image sketch will be briefly analysed.

The sketch in question is a hymn entitled 'All Thing Bright and Beautiful', which aims to attribute mono-causal responsibility for social consequences brought about by the free market revolution at the door of Margaret Thatcher. The sketch has been selected because it illustrates aspects of the three main criteria for the rhetorical analysis. It presents researched and logical findings, which draws out a strong emotion that is compounded by the visual imagery, and showcases the character of the messenger, that of a critic, building upon its established credibility. Before going forward, it will now be necessary to watch the sketch.

Watch the sketch. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2OhZ-sggLo&feature=related>

The logos of this sketch aims to remind the viewer of the consequences of an imbalanced social order tied to free market liberalism by focusing upon memorable real-world manifestations. By doing so, the sketch aims to clearly connect the viewer with memorable examples of controversy during the Thatcher period. The logic they are seeking to advance, is *these* are the consequences of Thatcherism and they are indefensible. Importantly, this aspect of the sketch also demonstrates author credibility given its capacity to draw from such clear visual illustrations to support the rhetoric; the idea being that the satirical message must be based in reality, expressed here by indicative examples. In brief, some of the real-world examples given include the "rich man in his roller, the poor man on his bike" - this aims to clearly illustrate the social divide resulting from economic reforms. Those who benefit garner material wealth, whilst those who do not are told to get on their bike. Harking back to a controversial suggestion of the former employment minister, the logic of this statement seeks to portray Britain as a more divided country following Thatcher's period in government.

Other illustrations include removing the right to strike, greenbelt motorway expansion, private sector involvement in the health service, the graveyards in the Falklands, armed police officers, the rise of desolate and homeless people, radioactive food, overcrowded slums and the rise of the market enterprises. These things the sketch lays at the altar of neoliberalism whilst throughout repeating the message that *our leader made them all*, using memorable oratory to reinforce the point. The logic of this approach conveys the clear message that the issues covered should be attributed personally to Thatcher. *She*, as the leader of the country, *she* is responsible for these achievements, if you will, and so this

becomes the premise of the sketch, ensuring the viewer takes away a clear analysis of the first eight years of Conservative rule.

The pathos of the sketch comes partly from the setting. The religious approach aims to demonstrate the absolutism of neoliberal economic theory, the older way of thinking, tied to almost a decaying Britain. The broken pillars, the lightening, the old Church... each perpetuate this point. This sketch does not aim to create amusement despite the absurdity of seeing their political leaders singing a hymn celebrating the divisions in Britain, but rather one of disaffection. The viewer is expected to feel uneasy by the sketch, to feel that there is something wrong with the divisions in British society. The deification of Thatcher is there to further illustrate the disconnect between them, the rulers, and us, the mere electorate. This emotion, connected to the clear inequalities demonstrated by the examples shown, is designed to create a sense of fear, even depression, on the part of the viewer. Even so the key emotion intended by this sketch is anger. Anger at the deliberate segregation of Britain, the purposeful favouring of economic elites at the expense of those left out of the Thatcherite miracle. Although ordinarily satire aims to amuse, it is not always a requirement, as illustrated by this sketch. Rather, satire aims to stir clear emotion, and in this case the setting and message provides the central emotion of dismay.

How does this sketch garner a degree of credibility? The ethos of the sketch derives from the research conducted to construct such an assessment of Thatcherism, and the long term impact upon the viewer. In order to create this impression, the sketch demands research combined with wit in order to demonstrate ethos. The presentation of the research garners its credibility from the expansive scope of the messengers prior satirical endeavours. It is a

messenger with a credible record for critique spanning the political panorama, one who has built a reputation for equal mockery, as such the viewer is left without a sense of anti-Conservative bias, but rather an assessment of how Thatcherism has impacted upon the country. The message, therefore, garners greater impact, knowing the messenger is providing a critique based not in order to advance a political ideology, but rather to present to the audience its view of British society in 1987.

It is now appropriate to consider how I will use this approach for this project. It will use ethos, pathos, and logos as windows into the impact of Spitting Image and Private Eye. The planned chapter will examine satirical impact at two key points, these being the general elections of 1987 and 1992. These have been selected because of the impact both Foot and Hattersley assert that satire had upon the electoral potential of the Labour Party. Although other factors are clearly relevant, their suggestion of satirical impact upon the Labour Party's ability to secure power requires investigation. Should their hypothesis be demonstrable, it surely can only be through measuring the logic and emotional impact of each, if either are to benefit from such credibility they are attested to possess.

As a result, the election specials of each shall be the focus of the analysis, although clearly this will be contextualised against key satirical instances in the years preceding this. The approach will, therefore examine the logical premises, the emotional intent, and also how each are able to generate credibility.

To conclude, it is clear that the rhetoric of political satire has the potential to generate emotion by utilising a logical premise, both contextualised by the messengers credibility. As

seen by the indicative illustration, by drawing from examples of neoliberal policies a message was able to generate strong emotions in the viewer. Through the rhetorical devices, the extent to whether this can be found in satire around major political events will provide an insightful and interesting analysis of the impact of satire more broadly.

Select references

Spitting Image sketch, Christmas special, 1987.

Olmsted, (2006), *Rhetoric*.

Griffin, (1994), *Satire*.

Finlayson & Martin.

Atkinson, (1984) *Our Masters' Voices*.