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1 This much-delayed issue of *Textes et contextes* has its origins in a one-day conference held at the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon in April 2014. This date now seems a world away, not just in terms of publication schedules – for which the editors offer sincere apologies to colleagues, authors and readers alike – but also with regard to the relationship between politics and satire in academic and non-academic spheres. When the conference was first mooted, one aim was to explore the ways in which the so-called "Danish Cartoons" controversy, characterised by Kuipers (2011) as "the first transnational humour scandal", might offer a model for thinking about the relationship between humour, taste, power relations, and the variable interpretation of satire in a public sphere defined but no longer necessarily constrained by national, cultural or linguistic boundaries. But as the January 2015 massacre of journalists at French satirical weekly *Charlie-Hebdo* – and the subsequent polarisation of public and political discourse on the topic, in France and abroad – tragically

went on to show, events have a way of complicating even the most sensitive and meticulously thought-out model. To complement the short but wide-ranging collection of articles contained in this issue, none of which deals directly with the cartoon controversy or its aftermath, this introduction aims, briefly, to touch on the state of satire scholarship and on the problems of interpreting modern political satire.

1. Defining satire

2 Satire has historically been analysed in terms of genre (literary: Horatian, Juvenalian, Menippean, Augustan; by extension non-literary) but also, over time, as a mode of discourse, in line with the common usage of the verb 'satirise' and the adjective 'satirical'.[1] Either way, we tend to associate it with critical, sometimes aggressive, and certainly intentional forms of comic expression, a link which fits naturally enough with our experience of satirical theatre performances, articles, or press cartoons, though rather less well with the image of jovial, sometimes inclusive and usually positive incongruity that audiences and scholars alike often seek to associate with humour.[2] Even casting aside the largely polemical debates on satire, freedom of expression and secularism that have clouded discussion of the topic, we seem further than ever away from a consensus about the nature, effects and limits of satire, and about whether the critical focus should be placed on production or reception, within or outside of a given historical or cultural context. The study of satire is (often) intertwined with that of politics and public life, and by extension with a specific time and place, familiarity with which will depend on the observer. It is also (usually) intertwined with the study of humour, whose epistemological slipperiness, described critically by Kuipers as "a non-serious and fundamentally ambiguous form of communication [...] potentially hurtful, hard to contest, easy to deny" (2011: 70), it often shares. Native speakers of English (unlike many native speakers of French) tend to think about satire as a subset of humour designed to convey some form of serious, critical or corrective intent whose purpose is not merely humorous, although native English-speaking researchers trained in Structuralist or Post-Structuralist literary or cultural theory harbour (or at least ought to harbour), a degree of suspicion

about the possibility of authorial intention.[3] While an intuitive grasp of satire seems simple enough, satire scholars are advised to observe the multiple ironies encapsulated in Swift's preface to his *Battle of the Books* (1704): "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason so few are offended by it."

3 If satire is in the eye of the beholder, then the question of defining and classifying it is a complex one. As Condren concludes his seminal article on the topic, "[t]here is not, and nor should there be any easy answer" (2012: 396). Clearly, essentialist definitions are particularly ill-suited to the type of (at least potentially) non-serious discourse with which we associate humour and satire. The problem, however, is that some degree of essentialisation seems to underpin our assumptions about satiric intentionality, as when asking questions along the lines of "what is a satire's/a satirist's aim?", or "is a given example of satire, or satire in general, inherently radical or conservative?" While the need to interpret source material means that we cannot simply bypass such questions, the slipperiness of the topic and need for critical distance suggest a need to adopt, implicitly or explicitly, what Condren et al. (2008a, 2008b) have termed an ad-hoc "working definition" of satire for the purposes of analysis, at the expense of an (ultimately illusory) overarching definition. The elements to be included would depend, clearly, on the perspective of the definer, determined by factors including scholarly tradition and discipline (art history, law, literature, media studies, rhetoric, sociology, etc.) and the purpose of the analysis (ranging, for example, from a typology of hypertextual relationships [Genette 1982: 46], to the definition of satire for the purposes of copyright exemptions [Condren et al. 2008a, 2008b]).

4 In an instructive case in point, Duval and Saïdah (2008: 11-12) note a divergence between a broadly "Francophone" approach to satire focusing on period and textual studies, and a more recent and more typically "Anglophone" interest in theorising satire as a trans-historical and trans-generic phenomenon with a recognisable "poetics"[4]. Without denying the existence of historically and culturally conditioned (literary, visual or other) satiric traditions, approaches from the latter group tend to approach the problem of intentionality from an oblique direction, as in Knight's description of

satire as “a mental position that needs to adopt a genre in order to express its ideas as representation” (2004: 4), or Phiddian’s as “a rhetorical strategy (in any medium) that seeks wittily to provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction in an audience on a matter of public (or at least inter-subjective) significance” (2013: 44). However general, these definitions illustrate the difficulty of escaping claims about satirical intentionality, and the continuation of Knight’s account (“a predisposition to find an appropriate object of attack that embodies its sense of human evil and folly and to utilize effectively pre-existent form in order to represent that object in such a way as to make its objectionable qualities apparent”, 2004: 4) suggests the difficulty of escaping the notion of corrective laughter stemming from a moral judgment that has underlain definitions of satire since Antiquity.

5 The difficulty of defining and characterising satire should not be taken as an indication of poor research, but rather of a slippery topic situated within a maturing and interdisciplinary field. In the same way as ‘satire’ has come to be placed (by native English speakers, but also by multinational research communities working and publishing in English) under the broad umbrella of ‘humour’, a growing body of work on satire has come to be recognised as an important subfield within humour studies (cf. Attardo 2014). Research dealing exclusively with (for example) the literary or visual dimensions of specific satire genres has often tended to remain under the ambit of fields such as literary studies or art history. [5] However, the movement towards transhistorical and transgeneric models of satire, and a growing awareness of the need to study the reception of satire – especially, though not exclusively, controversies and humour scandals – from a multidisciplinary viewpoint, has led to a growing integration between satire research and humour research (cf. Lewis 2008). Humour studies has already matured sufficiently to see the emergence of viable subfields such as comedy studies, supporting research groups and publications and gaining growing academic and public awareness. [6] A similar tendency can be observed in the recent growth or resurgence of national humour research groups working in languages other than English. [7] In this light, it seems entirely realistic to imagine that a ‘satire studies’, combining research into traditional and non-traditional satirical forms and genres, the transnational

study of satire on the internet and in the media, along with the somewhat vexed question of aggression and humour, will yet emerge. Recent publications such as Meijer Drees and de Leeuw's *The Power of Satire* (2015), Milner Davis's *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice* (2017), offering an Anglo-Australasian perspective, and Knights and Morton's *Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain* (2017), exploring Early Modern satire but also its influence upon contemporary understandings of satire, suggest that such a movement may be underway. As Knights and Morton note, however, many questions remain, not least that of how one might measure the effect (or otherwise) of satire against its traditional claim to right wrongs through laughter:

> Broadening the concept of 'satire' has thus proven salutary in a number of ways. Attending to new materials in new contexts, however, does little to address the tricky problem of what satire and laughter actually achieved. Satirists in every age claim to be high-minded and offer their works as agents of political, social or personal reform; but their savage and attacking tone demonstrates a destructive urge that belies that stated intention, often undermining attempts to unify author and audience against its objects by making its audiences feel uncomfortable. Rather than taking satirists at their own word, then, it is important to consider how their works were received: what they actually did, rather than what they claimed to do. (2017: 16)

2. Satire in/and contemporary politics

6 While the concrete or lasting effects of satire have long been a matter of debate (cf. Knights and Morton 2017, Davies 1998), contemporary examples such as the Pussy Riot movement show how shock tactics designed to disarm, disobey or denounce shocking laws, behaviours, mores or attitudes, either by individuals, a regime or society in general, can ridicule and – at least in the eyes of some viewers – undermine their target.

7 The relationship between satire and politics is hardly new. For every study of *The Thick of It* in Britain or *Charlie-Hebdo* in France, we can

find many more on authors ranging from Aristophanes to Petronius to Swift to Saki. Arguably, the rise of media-driven politics drove public figures to embrace satire as a means of gaining publicity and sympathy, as highlighted by Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister from 1957-63, in reaction to a 1962 satirical television sketch mocking his old-worldly patrician manner: "It's a good thing to be laughed at. It's better than to be ignored". This phenomenon is particularly evident in the ITV satirical programme *Spitting Image*, at its height during the Thatcher government of the 1980s, which lampooned and savagely attacked the leaders of the day, most of whom were reportedly keen to watch each Sunday night's episode in the hope of featuring among the show's puppet victims. In France, its sister programme, *Les guignols de l'info* had the same effect on Canal+, and both programmes boosted their respective channel's viewer ratings considerably while giving free air-time to several national figures of politics or celebrities, albeit not always in the light sought by their advisors.

8 Current-day politics remains a source of inspiration for satirists, perhaps more so in 2018 than at any other time in recent memory. Since mid-2016, the richest vein of satirical material the UK has emerged from the drawn-out and still unresolved negotiations on Brexit. Infighting in the ranks of both the Conservative and Labour Parties has provided political commentators and comedians with ample opportunities to lampoon public figures. Cartoonists including the *Guardian*'s Steve Bell, author of Kipling-themed political cartoon strip *If*, and Martin Rowson have seized the opportunity to develop the visual and iconographic identities of long-running caricatures including Prime Minister Theresa May (drawn by Rowson as a translucent ghost), Opposition Leader Jeremy Corbyn, former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson (with a focus on messy hair and thick red lips) and former UKIP leader Nigel Farage (drawn as a snake striped in UKIP's colours of purple and gold). In today's political context, Rowson's double identity as a press cartoonist and graphic novelist specialising in adaptations of satirical classics such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Rowson 2012) makes him a particularly apposite commentator on human gullibility and folly.

9 American comedian Tom Lehrer reportedly explained his retirement from live performance in the early 1970s on the basis that "[p]olitical

satire became irrelevant when Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize". These words seem oddly prescient of the political phenomenon of Donald Trump, whose election to the American presidency in 2016 was itself prefigured by a satirical depiction of a Trump presidency in a *Simpsons* episode in 2000. To a far greater degree than arguably any other public figure in recent memory, Trump's words and actions, including tweets denigrating the media, choices for high office, reported history of predatory sexual behaviour and contradictory statements seem both to encapsulate and to resist satire, in that his presidential persona already appears to many as a caricature. This has not, however, stopped him providing ample ammunition for critics, political and satirical alike. In a *Saturday Night Live* skit broadcast in May 2018, Trump is portrayed by the actor Steven Baldwin as he lustily tries to elicit a withdrawal of all accusations of sexual misdemeanour during a phone call with porn star Stormy Daniels. In a later skit broadcast in September 2018, Matt Damon plays a beer-soaked Brett Kavanaugh, Trump's controversial nominee for the Supreme Court, as he faces questions from a farcical senatorial committee hearing.

3. Articles in this issue

10 The context in which a work of satire is produced or presented will necessarily condition the reception of that work, a point that is reflected in the five articles presented in this issue. From the emergence of a satirical press in France in the nineteenth century, to the trench newspapers and cinemas of World War I, to the 1980 French presidential campaign, to the polluted cities and censored internet of contemporary China, each article encapsulates a particular time, place and cultural context whose particularities are more likely than any overarching definition to affect how satire is perceived and understood. Trying to understand and analyse satiric intention is one thing; trying to determine the impact of satire on its targets, or its readers or viewers, is another.

11 Charting the evolution of the French satirical press in the second half of the 19th century, Sofiane Taouchichet explores how political cartoons targeting figures of political power came to form part of an emerging mass media culture in which economic and technological

developments came to influence artistic choices and production values. Although these satirical attacks were likely to face the wrath of the censor and even ran the risk of criminal punishment, they continued to spring up despite the threat of closures, fines or imprisonments.

12 The development of a "mainstream" satirical press forms the backdrop to Nicolas Bianchi's critical dissection of the *petite presse*, comprising some five hundred "trench newspapers" written and printed by and for French troops during World War 1 and designed to boost morale, not least by recording and transmitting the mocking spirit of the entrenched *poilus*. While these trench newspapers clearly show a satirical intent, the overtly political dimension of their nineteenth-century predecessors is largely replaced by satire and humour focused on the soldiers and the trenches themselves, with "approved" targets including *les planqués* safely living several kilometres behind the front lines.

13 Focusing on the same period but a different medium, Clémentine Tholas presents a critique of American movie depictions of the German emperor, Wilhelm II, during World War I. She argues that the great imperial and military ambitions of the Kaiser, or more accurately his caricature "Kaiser Bill", were brought down to earth with a bang thanks to satirical ridicule. Kaiser Bill came to be depicted in American propaganda as an effete, proud, even homosexual monster and thereby a source of ridicule. This was carried out as part of an attempt to rally support for the war effort against Germany and her allies among the American public.

14 Focusing on a satirical figure of a very different kind, Marie Duret-Pujol analyses the announcement by French comedian Coluche that he would run in the 1980 French presidential elections in the context of his persona as satirical underdog, aligned with the downtrodden masses he characterises as *cons* [idiots] governed by *cons.* By doing so, she argues, Coluche was not only turning the tables on the political leaders of France and the system at the time, but also on himself as well as his audience and French society in general. Indeed, we are all *cons*, as we allow politicians to rule over us with absurd, arbitrary rules enforced by the incompetent forces of law and order. Moreover, by letting one comedian speak in their name to ridicule

this system without voicing their own discontentment, individual citizens were acting just as ridiculously.

15 Moving from the context of 1970s France to that of online communication in contemporary China, Jocelyn Chey examines the satirical humour of seemingly innocent yet coded and often punning online comments in reaction to the problem of air pollution. In so doing, she highlights how ordinary Chinese citizens are not afraid to express their anger at inaction by public authorities in the form of subtle jibes, but also the link between this internet-based practice and older forms of satirical commentary, as summed up by the proverb "Point to the mulberry tree to curse the locust tree", which owes its origins to Sun-Tzu's ancient work *The Art of War*.

16 With a neat symmetry, then, Chey's article offers the most contemporary subject matter in the current issue but also, by some margin, its most ancient reference. While satire differs widely in its forms, effects, and contexts, it is likely as old as politics itself.

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1 For historical perspectives on satire, see Arnould (1996, in French) and Knight (2004, in English). On the debates surrounding satire as a literary or quasi-literary genre, see Condren (2012) and Phiddian (2013).

2 For critiques of the prevailing tendency to see humour as an overwhelmingly positive phenomenon, see Kuipers (2011) and Billig (2005).

3 Cf. Condren (2012: 382): "even if it were true that all satire set out to be humorous, humor extends so far beyond satire that reference to it can only provide the incomplete beginnings of a definition", contrasting with Emelina (1996: 33): "*La satire est un premier mouvement, de distance railleuse ou indignée. Avec l'humour, il y a, dans un deuxième mouvement, distance par rapport à cette distance, réflexion lucide et indulgente de sympathie vis-à-vis de l'objet du rire.*" Emelina's typology follows the Francophone tradition of Bergson's *Le rire* (1900: 90-91) in situating *humour* as a narrower concept than *satire* within the ambit of the umbrella term *le comique*.

4 Duval and Saïdah's typology of approaches to satire mirrors the broadly accepted contrast between Francophone and Anglophone usage of the term 'humour'. For further discussion, see Noonan (2011).

5 Genre or medium-specific studies do not, of course, preclude a multidisciplinary perspective, as demonstrated by the French research group EIRIS (Interdisciplinary Research Group for Satirical Images, https://www.eiris.eu), publisher of the scholarly periodical *Ridiculosa*.

6 See, for example, the Centre for Comedy Studies Research based at Brunel University (https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Centres/Centre-for-Comedy-Studies-Research#), the *Journal of Comedy Studies* published by Taylor and Francis (https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rcos20/0/0), and the Canadian Observatoire de l'humour, whose foci include Quebec's well-developed comedy industry (https://observatoiredelhumour.org/).

7 See, for example, the Italian research group and journal RISU (Italian Journal for Humour Studies), and the French group RIRH (Interdisciplinary Humour Studies Network), both founded in 2017 in the footsteps of older groups in Israel, Australasia and elsewhere.

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