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# **SATIRE, COMEDY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Coping with the Limits  
of Critique

**DIETER DECLERCQ**



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Coping with the Limits  
of Critique

**DIETER DECLERCQ**

*University of Kent, UK*



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Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my parents and Georgia.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Dieter Declercq** is a Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the University of Kent. He is interested in the existential value of popular media (especially satire, comedy and cartoons) and his research is informed by methodologies from analytic aesthetics, media studies, and medical and health humanities. He has organised several international events, including the British Society of Aesthetics Conference: Art, Aesthetics and the Medical and Health Humanities. His work on satire, comedy and irony has been published in journals including *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *ImageText*, *Ethical Perspectives* and *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I remember when I first started thinking about satire in an academic context. It was 2009 and I had no idea what to write about for my MA dissertation in Western Literature. Then, something or someone made me realise that I could pretty much write my dissertation about anything. Really? Anything? Even *The Simpsons*? Although I wrote that first dissertation on Shakespeare adaptations, my real interest was always more existential than literary. *The Simpsons* had been a beacon that shone through as I experienced a spell of alienation in high school (who didn't?). Still, however strong the estrangement, *The Simpsons* was just so funny and, well, so right about things, that it always gave me an entry point for reconnection with the world (albeit with a sense of comic irony). This book is, therefore, grounded in my personal relationship with the solace of satire.

Many people have contributed to the development of my ideas in this book along the way – too many to list them all from the beginning. I do want to foremost acknowledge my parents and my fiancée Georgia, to whom I dedicate this book. Without my parents, I would not have written this book (and I do not mean that in the biological sense of things). I am privileged that they have always supported my studies, including at times when I was unsure that it was really going somewhere. I am also indebted to Georgia, for giving me the space to pursue my academic projects, and for her support during those moments when I am still not sure whether it's going anywhere. She's also been an invaluable soundboard for the ideas in this book. I also want to thank Ben Doyle, for signing me with Emerald, and the great editorial team at Emerald, Paula Kennedy, Joshi Jerome, Sally Martin, Liam Morris, Gabriella Barnard-Edmunds and Carys Morley. Thanks also to S. Rajachitra for help during the production process.

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Some of the ideas in this book are based on previously published work. Chapter 1 revisits key ideas (and sometimes examples) from my 2018 article ‘A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters)’ in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76(3), 319–330. Chapters 3 and 5 elaborate on ideas about moral imperfection and ironic characters developed in my 2020 article ‘Irony, Disruption and Moral Imperfection’ in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 23(3), 545–559.

# ABSTRACT

*Satire, Comedy and Mental Health: Coping with the Limits of Critique* examines how satire helps to sustain good mental health in a troubled socio-political world. Through an interdisciplinary dialogue, which combines approaches from analytic philosophy of art, medical and health humanities, media studies and psychology, Dr Dieter Declercq (University of Kent) frames satire as a resource for coping with a sick world beyond full recovery.

Satire has the purpose to critique and entertain – which explains the genre's infamous ambiguity. Critique is a moral activity which opposes social wrongness, while entertainment involves leisurely enjoying aesthetic pleasures. Satire is, therefore, not the most efficient or impactful means of critique. Yet, instead of curing a sick world, satire helps us cope with it.

Although satire can contribute to social change by motivating activism, satirists also acknowledge that political action is not always successful and that our own resources for critique are not endless. These limits of critique introduce mental health challenges, like depression and neurotic perfectionism, as we must deal with suffering that we cannot alleviate (and to which we may even be complicit).

Satire contributes to coping because its ambiguous combination of critique and entertainment negotiates a balance between care for others and care of self. This book investigates how we can adopt and adapt aesthetic strategies from satire, especially comic irony, to cope with the limits of critique – through philosophical explication and close analysis of satire in various media (including novels, music, TV, film, cartoons, memes, stand-up comedy and protest artefacts).