



Humour across registers: The politics of expression in Donald Trump, Mo Yan and David Sedaris

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a sustained examination of the dynamics and aesthetics of different rhetorical registers and the corresponding functions of humour that emerge from them. It focuses on three distinct figures-- US President Donald Trump, the Chinese novelist Mo Yan and the American non-fiction writer David Sedaris-- whose works and public expressions exemplify divergent modes of humour across political, literary and autobiographical contexts. By situating these figures within established theories of humour, the paper compares how humour operates within different registers and the boundaries between satire and excess.

Keywords: Humour, theories of humour, Donald Trump, function, obnoxious humour

Introduction

The ancient Greek playwright, Aristophanes, in the 5th century BC used comic satire in his plays, like, to mock politicians, philosophers and war policies, The Clouds influencing public opinion during Athens' Peloponnesian War. Shakespeare's comedies in the 16th century blended wordplay, romance and mistaken identities to mock social conventions. Moliere, in the 17th century, satirized the hypocrisy of the French society while Oscar Wilde perfected the "comedy of manners", poking fun at upper-class pretensions through wit and irony. In the 19th and 20th century America, Mark Twain lampooned slavery and Will Rogers, the vaudeville actor, critiqued politicians while cartoons by Herb Block targeted scandals like Watergate. Jon Stewart's The Daily Show blended humour with critique, bonding audiences through relief and palatable aggression against elites, boosting civic engagement. The Onion, through its absurd headlines, highlighted injustices while the provocative cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo* challenged political taboos.

Historically then, humour has been employed as a socio-political corrective. It acts as a superior form of satire that aids social movements and amplifies marginalised voices. However, in the 21st century, in the now and here, it has become important to question whether there is a discernible boundary between lampooning one's adversaries and crossing a line? This paper examines how comic sarcasm or humour is wielded by different people within different registers but achieve different results. It will comment on the use of humour in Trump's rhetoric as the US President, Yan's aesthetics as a novelist and Sedaris' avowals as a non-fiction writer.

US President, Donald Trump recently faced a heavy backlash (notably, from his supporters this time) for posting an AI-generated image on Truth Social which presented him as Jesus Christ giving thaumaturgic touch to an ailing man. The image was reinforced with icons of America in the background (the flag, the eagle, the Lincoln Memorial, the Statue of Liberty) and among others, American soldiers, charging forward masterfully. Trump might have posted the image as a humorous reinforcement of his all-encompassing

power within the Iran-US war rhetoric but a line had been crossed. As the online backlash grew, the post was deleted, only for Trump to repost an AI image of Jesus hugging him with the caption "God might be playing his Trump card" barely two days after the earlier controversial image, underlining the obnoxiousness of his humour. Trump's "obnoxious humour" then, was of a sort that neither provided a socio-political (may one add, theological too) corrective nor amplified marginalised voices but was just aimed at furthering the motives of the Self.

Humour seems to function variably as satire, irony, parody and absurdity making it necessary to engage with theories of humour. According to standard analysis, humour theories can be classified into three identifiable groups: Incongruity, Superiority and Relief theories, among other prevailing types of psychological and empirical theories. Freud's relief theory examines humour as a release of repressed tensions, especially in the context of taboos, de-escalating aggression in political critique without direct conflict or engagement. This fits comedy that defuses social anxieties, such as wartime satire easing public fears. Kant's incongruity theory juxtaposes political ideals with reality, highlighting the absurdity of a situation through humour. This is the most versatile of humours, covering puns and irony and aligns with Bergson's idea of humour correcting rigid social behaviours. Hobbes' superiority theory, on the other hand, posits that humour arises from feeling superior to others' flaws, making it ideal for ridiculing deviant social behaviours or corrupt leaders. Hobbes described laughter as a "sudden glory" from perceiving one's superiority over others' flaws or misfortunes, making it key to satire that mocks vices for social correction. It explains ridicule in political humour, like lampooning corrupt leaders, but struggles with self-deprecating jokes. While these registers overlap, this is where Trump's rhetoric is brought into question. His intended humour category might have been superiority (his subsequent post of Jesus hugging him while ironically calling out Iran as the "child sacrificing monsters being exposed" underlines this aspect) but it ends up becoming simply, obnoxious humour, missing the political or social transformative aspect. If at all humour is generated,

it is incongruous in nature, and only serves to underline Kant's example of a man expecting a clever insight from an ignorant speaker, only to hear nonsense; the dashed hope "transforms into nothing", prompting laughter at the void.

Mo Yan is not new to controversy either. The Chinese novelist's 2012 Nobel Prize win was purported to be a political one largely because of his supposed good relationship with the ruling Chinese Communist Party and his lack of solidarity with other Chinese writers who spoke up against the ruling regime. Perry Link, the American sinologist, who asserted that he had no issues with Yan's political leanings, critiqued Yan's writing by saying that it "invoke(d) a kind of daft hilarity when treating 'sensitive' events" such as the Great Chinese Famine and the Cultural Revolution. It is interesting to note that Mo Yan is criticised and praised for the same thing-- his use of humour.

For Mo Yan, humour becomes a tool to interrogate a political situation that otherwise "silences" dissent. The Bakhtinian metaphor of debasement and mockery are fully employed by Yan to highlight the absurdities of life within a totalitarian regime. Yan's "The Republic of Wine" is a comic satire around gastronomy and alcohol, which uses cannibalism as a metaphor for Chinese self-destruction. He uses the carnivalesque through his grotesque bodies overturning the "high" authoritarian discourse. The laughter generated is chaotic, uncomfortable and thought-provoking as it satirises bureaucracy. It highlights the benign violation theory as when he explores the taboo topic of baby eating in the novel. The Republic of Wine centres on the investigator, Ding Gou'er exploring rumours of a culinary school serving infant boys to elite officials, serving as an allegory for political excesses and societal consumption. Yan's narrative both underscores the violation of such an act while presenting it to the readers as a benign remote possibility. Thus, Yan generates humour through the horrifying premise to satirize corruption and the dehumanization of Chinese society. Similarly, "Life and Death are Wearing Me Out" is seemingly the story of a landlord who is reincarnated in the form of various animals during the Chinese land reform movement. But in reality, the novel parodies the official narratives about the history of the People's Republic of China from 1950 to 2000 through the metaphorical framework of the Buddhist idea of the six paths of reincarnation. Yan takes a tongue-in-cheek dig at Mao Zedong, when the protagonist, Ximen Nao (in his pig avatar) proclaims: "On the ninth day of September, an event occurred that was as cataclysmic as a mountain collapsing or the earth opening up. Despite all attempts to save him, your Chairman Mao passed away. I could, of course, have said our Chairman Mao, but I was a pig at the time, and that would have sounded disrespectful." The same is true for Yan's *Frog* which is a dark, satirical commentary on the subject of one-child policy of China. The villagers of Gaomi in the novel handle brutal situations with a surreal, resignation-filled humour. This comic fatalism serves to highlight the political cruelty of the policy and the social fallout of it. Yan's concept of humour then is closely aligned to that of Bakhtin's as he unpacks the issues with communist China. He uses humour to highlight the most grotesque and unpalatable aspects of China's history and for the readers located outside of China, it exemplifies Freud's relief theory of humour.

David Sedaris' non-fiction, "Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim" blends a performative style of narrative with often candid self-exposure. The autobiographic collection of essays chronicle Sedaris' upbringing in Raleigh, North Carolina, his relationship with his family members, his personal and professional experiences in New York City and France. The humour emerges from a carefully crafted persona-- socially awkward, petty and observant to the point of discomfort. This aligns with the incongruity theory of humour: we expect dignity in autobiographical narration, but instead encounter embarrassing minutiae (speech impediments, family tensions, failed interactions) in this collection of essays. This self-directed humour is evident, among others, in the essay titled, "Us and Them" when Sedaris jokes about the capitalistic excesses of Halloween candy that American kids binge on: "He's a human being, but also he's a pig, surrounded by trash and gorging himself so that others may be denied." The gap between expected self-presentation and actual confession produces laughter. Sedaris' essays are structured like comic stand-up routines, where delivery is inseparable from meaning. And though Sedaris often skirts the line between satire and excess by humorously exposing private family moments of social awkwardness, he avoids outright violation through his tone. The essays rarely claim moral authority; instead, they present flawed perception. The humour arises from comic timing and reflexivity.

Trump, Yan and Sedaris certainly belong to three very different registers. Trump's discourse is primarily rhetorical and performative, in alignment with his political and media persona. Mo Yan's discourse is literacy and aesthetic. Sedaris' discourse arises from self-reflexivity. Within the rhetoric of humour, the three invoke different theories of humour in their texts- while Yan's humour fulfils the relief and incongruity functions, Sedaris' humour fulfils the incongruity humour, Trump's humour proceeds from the superiority function and culminates in the obnoxious. Trump's humour then is purely amplified rhetoric; while Yan and Sedaris' humour is systemic (they do not even spare themselves with their metafictionality and reflexivity). While Yan and Sedaris' narratives unsettle, Trump's diatribe polarizes. With Yan humour becomes a mode of political and historical interrogation, with Sedaris humour takes on a very personal yet objective note, while with Trump, humour functions as a tool of power. Humour seems to assume very distinct functions in the three-- ranging from performative provocation and ideological negotiation to subtle critique and intimate self-reflection. Each case illustrates that humour operates not merely as a stylistic embellishment but as a strategic mode of communication shaped by context, audience and intent and while it is absolutely critical to underscore that the deployment of humour is context-based, it is very easy to venture from strategic satire and transgress into obnoxious excess.

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