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Kynical dogs and cynical masters: Contemporary satire, politics and truth-telling

Abstract: This article proposes that the philosophical techniques found in contemporary satires can be understood using a spectrum that ranges between the cynical and the kynical. Cynicism is the belief that there is no hope for change, that truth is dead, while kynicism – a non-nihilistic form of cynicism – maintains that truth does exist, and is worth saving from political and media manipulations. By exploring the evolution of kynicism, from its origins in ancient Greek philosophy to its presence in contemporary satire, I analyze how *The Chaser* and *The Thick of It* are complex examples of kynicism and cynicism respectively. I argue that by conceptualizing contemporary political satire using a dynamic spectrum, we may better understand how satire envisages politics in a postmodern society and, in turn, how certain satires may be more resistant to co-option by politicians or the “modern cynic.”

Keywords: *The Chaser*, cynicism, Diogenes, kynicism, Sloterdijk, *The Thick of It*

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1 Introduction

Satire is often accused of breeding cynicism and apathy. Contemporary political satire has not escaped this accusation but, as with its various incarnations throughout history, it has also been heralded as invaluable in speaking truth to power. I propose that it is worthwhile to consider these two claims in conjunction with the understanding that satire articulates an image of politics that can be cynical, subversive or both. In an age when politicians have increased their presence on satirical programs, even occasionally engaging in satirical performance, the cultural capital of satirists and the political world they present becomes increasingly important in the study of both humor and politics. In a focused study of Australia's *The Chaser* and the U.K.'s *The Thick of It*, this paper argues that by

conceptualizing political satire using a dynamic spectrum between the kynical and the cynical, we may better understand how satire envisages contemporary politics and how certain satires may be more resistant to co-option.

In their article on the American satirical television program, *The Daily Show*, Baumgartner and Morris found that college students felt more negativity towards both 2004 U.S. presidential candidates after watching this satire than any other hard or soft news program. They propose that this negativity produces cynicism, which “dampen[s] [political] participation among an already cynical audience (young adults) by contributing to a sense of alienation from the political process” (2006: 362–363). They also argue that while *The Daily Show*’s audiences are generally better educated and more confident in their ability to understand politics than those of other news programs, this confidence is largely the result of host Jon Stewart “simplif[y]ing” politics” by only “highlighting the absurdities of the political world” and because youth audiences are more “impressionable” (2006: 344). This impressionability means that the cynicism bred by *The Daily Show* has an adverse effect on its audience’s engagement with, and trust in politics.

Contemporary Australian satire has faced similar allegations. Louise Staley has suggested that *The Hollowmen* – the 2008 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) satire about public relations in Australian federal politics – is cynical, arguing that this series and all “Australian political satire is an extension of a national distrust of politicians” (2008: 17). Michael Hogan, exploring cynicism produced by political cartoons in New South Wales from 1901 to 1999, even proposes that negativity and cynicism are a “consequence of the genre” (2001: 41). Baumgartner, Morris and Hogan all argue that criticism is vital for a healthy democracy, but they warn that consistently negative criticism produces cynicism, which in turn erodes public trust in the political system. They propose that this erosion results in apathy and disillusionment, potentially affecting the levels of absenteeism at the ballot box. Hogan notes that even in Australia with its compulsory voting, political cynicism jeopardizes public support for major parties, making voters turn to minor fringe parties.

Interestingly, in their conclusions about the effects of *The Daily Show*, Baumgartner and Morris do not explicitly define cynicism. Jeffrey Jones responds that even if *The Daily Show* is understood as cynical, its cynicism has a place in contemporary politics. This type of cynicism – now referred to as “kynicism¹” –

¹ The different spellings of kynicism and cynicism have been used in various ways in other texts on cynicism, as we understand it in modern day usage, and kynicism or ancient Greek Cynicism. Kynicism has often been used to denote ancient Cynicism, but some texts differentiate between modern definitions of cynicism and ancient Cynicism through capitalization. Throughout this paper, I have opted to use “kynicism” to refer to the philosophy that derived from the

originated with Diogenes and the ancient Greek philosophical movement of Cynicism. Jones finds Stewart's rhetorical style "kynical" because within his arguments there is "a firm insistence that politics and the conduct of public life need not be this way" (2010: 249). Kynicism is cynicism without the latter's nihilistic nature. While cynicism questions and doubts that which it finds hypocritical or untrustworthy, it does so in a defeatist manner. It is "the condition of lost belief" (Chaloupka 1999: xiv) and sees no hope for change. Kynicism also questions and doubts, but maintains that there is a better way of doing things. It is a "cheeky, subversive practice" (Chaloupka 1999: 171) that uses joking, profanity, humiliation and mocking for a "morally regulative" purpose (Sloterdijk 1988: 304). In his work on *The Simpsons*, Gray also discusses the difference between cynicism and kynicism, noting that kynicism has the potential for positive results:

Where cynics have lost faith in the existence of truth, and where their cynicism serves as a reaction to this loss of faith, kynics hold on to the notion of truth, but since they see it being perverted all around them, their cynicism and laughing ridicule serves as a defence and an offence to this state of affairs. (2005: 154)

Sloterdijk argues that while both cynicism and kynicism question the sincerity of everything, cynicism is a "shameless, 'dirty' realism that . . . declares itself to be for how 'things really are'" (1988: 193). It asserts its position that "all claims to truth are distorted" as the only truth. He refers to it as "enlightened false consciousness," one that believes it knows everything and "holds anything positive to be fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life" (1988: 546). Kynicism, on the other hand, is "self-preservation in crisis-ridden times," a "critical, ironical philosophy of so-called needs, in the elucidation of their fundamental excess and absurdity" (1988: 193).

2 Diogenes and the dogs of kynical philosophy

Kynicism is best personified by Diogenes of Sinope, the ancient philosopher Plato is said to have called "Socrates gone mad" (Sloterdijk 1988: 104). While his works, if indeed there were any, have been lost, anecdotes about his philosophy and existence have survived through texts such as Diogenes Laërtius's *The lives and*

ancient Cynics, "cynicism" to refer to modern day usage or "negative" cynicism, and "Cynicism" or "Cynics" (capitalization) to refer to the Ancient Greek movement itself. The use of the word "kynics" shall refer to one who echoes the practices and philosophies of the ancient Cynics, but is not necessarily a philosopher of the ancient movement.

opinions of eminent philosophers. Though there has been debate about the source of these stories, it has not diminished their ability to communicate the philosophy of Diogenes and the ancient Cynics: famously, Diogenes is said to have walked through the busy streets of Athens, swinging a lantern about in broad daylight. When asked what he was doing, he said he was “looking for people” (Sloterdijk 1988: 162) or “an honest man” (Chaloupka 1999: 3).

This anecdote illustrates that Diogenes was the first of what Sloterdijk calls the “kynics”, a term derived from the ancient Greek “*kynismos*,” encompassing a philosophy that seeks truth through subversive challenge rather than reasoned argument. Diogenes was labeled a “*kyon*,” or dog, because he chose to live impoverished and homeless, regularly defecating and masturbating in public, thereby resembling a stray canine (Chaloupka 1999: 5). He embraced this title, responding to banqueters who threw him bones by putting his leg up and urinating on them (Laërtius 6.6). As a kynic, he engaged in “satirical resistance” to bring about “uncivil enlightenment” (Sloterdijk 1988: 102), which countered the era’s more civilized philosophies. Here, the low, the dirty, the playful and the rude were utilized by those disillusioned with the all-encompassing but unrealized idealism of philosophers such as Plato. This philosophy was built around the ancient Cynic credo “deface the currency.” Anecdotal and historical evidence suggests that Diogenes literally defaced the coinage of Sinope (Branham and Goulet-Cazé 1996: 8; Cutler 2005: 28), thereby earning him exile from his native city. However, “defacing the currency” also acted as a metaphor for kynical practice, which encouraged one to test and challenge “all usages and laws to see whether or not they had any genuine validity. If they did not, it was the Cynics’ roles to deface them until they were abandoned” (Cutler 2005: 28).

Despite defacing the currency and rejecting idealism, kynicism still has its own set of “ideals.” Its ancient form was not simply a subversion of idealism, but a call-back to ethical naturalism. Social conventions, hierarchy and etiquette were seen as human creations: Diogenes’s lantern-wielding search found only performances of people, abstractions of the “real” nature of human beings. He maintained that human beings’ “animal sides” – the innately instinctual or biological – were innocent rather than shameful. To contain or restrict one’s desires and bodily impulses according to convention was to “behave irrationally and inhumanely” (Sloterdijk 1988: 162). His animal-like behaviour, therefore, was not inspired by some “random grossness” (Flynn 1988: 110), but by an “active pursuit of the ‘true life’” where one sought to harmonize “one’s ‘doctrine’ with one’s ‘life’” (Mazella 2007: 29). Kynicism was a *lived* philosophy.

However, Diogenes was not content with just living his “true life.” The many anecdotes about him betray a man and a philosophy driven by a missionary zeal. He is thought to have said, “other dogs bite their enemies, but I my friends, so as

to save them” (Stobaeus quoted in Diogenes 2012: 24). Audience participation was crucial to his philosophical conduct, hence his choice to live his “true life” in the busiest public spaces of Athens. In one story, Diogenes is ignored when orating gravely, and so he resorts to whistling to elicit attention. Once a crowd gathers, he scolds them for “coming earnestly to nonsense, but slowly and contemptuously to serious things” (Bosman 2006: 97). These examples clearly illustrate the performative nature of kynicism, where a spectacle is used to gather and then “confront its attracted audience with their own distorted values” (Bosman 2006: 97). Therefore, despite the anti-theoretical nature of kynicism, embodied by Diogenes’s commitment to living his philosophy, it still functioned as a critique. Diogenes was not just a dog who lived a natural, true life: his public barking and biting served a corrective purpose.

These anecdotes about Diogenes show that in defacing the currency, “humor [was] the chisel stamp of Cynic discourse” (Branham, 1996: 93). Bosman describes Diogenes and the Cynics as the “humorists of antiquity” (2006: 99) and Sloterdijk argues that Diogenes’s weapon against idealism was “not so much analysis as laughter” (1988: 160). Humor and satire were key to his performances, allowing him to subvert social conventions without “sinking into pure animalism and cultural pessimism” (Bosman 2006: 95). It also offered him a way of engaging in outrageous, socially unacceptable behaviour without alienating his audience entirely. In other words, “the dog had to fawn in order to bite” (Bosman 2006: 104).

3 *Parrhesia*: Kynicism and truth-telling

In savagely defacing the currency, kynicism opposes the use of abstract conventions in fixed ways, especially in ways that dictate the parameters of people’s behaviour. Ironically, it still comes from an essentialist position based upon what it believes to be true. As Sloterdijk notes, “despite all apparent lack of respect, the kynic assumes a basically serious and upright attitude towards truth and maintains a thoroughly solemn relation, satirically disguised, to it” (1988: 296). Indeed, Diogenes was said to have prized above all “the most excellent thing among men: Freedom of speech” (Laërtius 6.6). This free speech was known as *parrhesia*, which translates broadly as “saying everything” and “telling the truth as one sees it” (Monoson 2000: 52–53). Monoson identifies two elements that are consistently associated with *parrhesia*: “criticism and truth-telling” (2000: 53). To speak with *parrhesia* is “to confront, oppose, or find fault with another individual or a popular view in a spirit of concern for illuminating what is right and best” (Monoson

2000: 53). It involves a strong relationship between belief and truth: a parrhesiast² does not speak what he or she does not believe, unlike a rhetorician, who can disguise both opinion and truth. Parrhesia is blunt and risky truth-telling: no amount of harm or insult to the parrhesiast or the parrhesiast's interlocutors can serve as an excuse to refrain from telling the truth. Furthermore, the parrhesiast is always less powerful than the one to whom they speak: parrhesia "comes from 'below,' as it were, and is directed towards 'above'" (Foucault 2001 [1983]: 18).

Simply telling the truth does not make one a parrhesiast. To clarify this, Foucault defines three other types of classical truth-tellers. The first is "the prophet," who tells the truth "not in his own name, as does the parrhesiast, but as a mediator between the principle speaker and his auditors" (Flynn 1988: 104), such as God and the people. The prophet is more ambiguous than the parrhesiast, potentially hiding or "veiling" as much as or more than is revealed. The second truth-teller, "the sage," feels no obligation to share wisdom. Their truth is spoken in general terms. The parrhesiast, on the other hand, has a duty to speak. The third is the "teacher-technician," whose truth-telling is a technical skill learned through training. The teacher-technician aims for clarity and, like the parrhesiast, has a duty to speak the truth. However, this group faces no danger in their truth-telling: teacher-technicians are always superior, their knowledge coming from "above" and being directed "below".

The ancient Athenians saw the acceptance and tolerance of parrhesia as a sign that political life was free from tyranny. More than an ideal about speaking frankly, it was a democratic practice extended to all Greek citizens. Assembly debate granted citizens two rights: *isegoria* or equality, the right of every citizen to contribute to public life on an equal footing, and parrhesia. While *isegoria* granted every citizen the right to speak, it did not guarantee the quality or integrity of the speaker. Athenians were said to be particularly suspicious of self-interest disguised by flattery and expert oratory, fearing that such speech could "corrupt the deliberations, leading to the neglect of the public interest and, perhaps, to disastrous decisions and actions" (Monoson 2000: 59). Parrhesia was seen as a counter-measure to this. The very "invocation of parrhesia asserted the personal integrity of the speaker" because the risk involved in speaking frankly was seen to affirm one's commitment to truth (Monoson 2000: 60).

Louisa Shea argues that parrhesia was a notion transformed by the Cynics from this state-sanctioned right of a few to speak on matters of governance to "the

² The spelling of *parrhesiast* varies between sources. In the English translation of Foucault's *Fearless Speech*, it is spelled "*parrhesiastes*" and is rarely, if ever, used in the plural. In Flynn's chapter on Foucault's discussion of *parrhesia* in *The Last Foucault*, the spelling "*parrhesiast*" (singular) and "*parrhesiasts*" (plural) is used. I have chosen to use Flynn's spelling.

prerogative, indeed duty, of all human beings . . . to speak one's mind in any and all circumstances, on public as well as private matters, whether formally invited to do so or not" (2010: 11). To the Cynics, parrhesia was paramount, above even personal or social preservation. When Alexander the Great inquired why Diogenes was searching through a pile of bones, Diogenes responded that he was looking for the bones of Alexander's father but could not distinguish them from those of a slave (Wilson 2009: 73). He risked death at the hand of the powerful sovereign because the parrhesiast "prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself" (Foucault 2001 [1983]: 17).

While Sloterdijk and Chaloupka both identify the kynic's "moral streak" (Chaloupka 1999: 208), they also stress that it differs dramatically from the Platonic, Socratic and more contemporary notions of morality. Kynical or parrhesiastic morality is not about what is right or wrong, but rather what is true, and frequently the moral struggle towards the truth involves challenging another morality. Furthermore, kynicism's commitment to "the truth" should not be mistaken as a sense of idealistic hope or indeed a solution that brings about more truthful or honourable conduct. While maintaining that there are better ways of doing things, kynics do not provide advice about how this might be achieved. Diogenes's impoverished life may have illustrated his commitment to live according to his doctrine but his public performance of this commitment was a subversive act that exposed social hierarchies rather than replaced them. As Bosman observes,

Whether [Diogenes] intended his ideal audience to turn to the radical Cynic lifestyle is debatable; his real audiences certainly did not. Rather, they would typically have responded the way audiences of political satire in repressive societies normally do: they returned to society, albeit with a wider perspective on themselves and a measure of irony towards their world, and feeling more in equilibrium because of it. . . . The Cynic position induces "laughter of excessive nature" to those able to recognize the artificiality of societal conventions, at the same time excluding those who remain merely shocked at the lack of propriety. (2006: 103)

Diogenes is said to have satirically subverted Plato's claim that "man is a two-footed, featureless animal" by plucking the feathers from a chicken and bringing it to Plato's school, proclaiming, "This is Plato's man" (Laërtius 6.6). Diogenes provided challenge, not theory. Instead of providing solutions to the injustices or untruths that kynicism aims to subvert, it "shows that there are other ways to live – other bases for moral claims, other ways to frame expectations, other ways to imagine politics" (Chaloupka 1999: 209). Instead of providing hope, solutions to political and social injustice or a moral code, kynicism seeks only truth.

4 The evolution of kynicism and modern cynicism

Dogs that humorously bark the truth: One can see how many contemporary satirists could be considered modern-day kynics. Jones defines Jon Stewart as a kynic and Gray argues that there is a “*Simpsons*-related kynicism . . . [that] leads to discussion and *fosters* community” (Gray 2005: 155). Cutler identifies *Dilbert*, *South Park* and Ali G as contemporary kynical³ texts. Aside from these examples, it is rare to see kynicism or ancient Cynicism applied to contemporary satire outside of the study of classical philosophy and modern-day cynicism. Before proceeding, it must be noted that kynicism should not be plucked from its ancient origins and directly applied to contemporary contexts. Many scholars have observed that since Diogenes’s day, the philosophy has been adapted for different ages and discourses in various ways.

For example, Shea has observed that philosophers such as d’Alembert, Prémontval and Diderot sought to “tame” Diogenes for the Enlightenment project. They recognized that Cynicism had a socially disruptive and revolutionary potential, but were also aware that this nature could endanger the peaceful and emancipatory aims of the Enlightenment. D’Alembert believed that “every age, and ours above all, would need a Diogenes; but the difficulty is in finding men courageous enough to be one, and men courageous enough to suffer one” (quoted in Shea 2010: 23). This Diogenes, however, was refashioned as a man of letters, one who stood for “independence (from patronage and from collaboration with tyrannical governments in particular) and the free courageous expression of truth,” without the “misanthropy and indecency” of his ancient counterpart (Shea 2010: 30). Mazella and Roberts, respectively, note a similar taming in early modern England and the French Renaissance, to the extent that Fougerolles, the first French translator of Diogenes Laërtius, euphemizes Diogenes’s public masturbation while other scholars, such as Erasmus, ignore it completely on the grounds of “Ciceronian ‘decorum’” (Roberts 2006: 237).

Mazella also demonstrates that cynicism, often embodied by literary or dramatic representations of Diogenes and the ancient Cynics, has undergone a number of semiotic shifts in its progress from ancient to modern. Over time, the Cynics became increasingly associated with misanthropy but their parrhesiastic displays were more or less valued as a type of “snarling” philosophy (Johnson quoted in Mazella 2007: 15). In the early nineteenth-century, cynicism lost its connection to the ancient philosophy that bore its name, and there was a “shift from snarling to

³ Please note that Cutler uses the word cynical and cynic without capitalisation in his text in the same way that this article uses kynical and kynic.

sneering cynics, or from cynical railing to cynical disbelieving” (Mazella 2007: 182). The distinctive difference is that kynical dogs snarl a warning, while cynical dogs sneer and give up.

Both scholarship and public debate commonly describe our age as symptomatic of this sneering cynicism. Sloterdijk even defines modern-day human experience as being imbued with a particularly corrosive form of cynicism that he calls “modern cynicism.” Since Sloterdijk was writing before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this term certainly reflects the tensions of a world gripped by the Cold War, but his meaning remains relevant to cynicism today. Modern cynicism knows we exist in a world of empty constructions, but instead of subverting and exposing them (kynicism), or simply giving up (cynicism), modern cynicism *benefits* from playing within these constructs. Sloterdijk believed that modern cynicism was a trait of those in positions of power, “a cheekiness that has changed sides” (1988: 111). Instead of trying to tackle broad cultural mistrust of politics through change, “the cynical master lifts the mask, smiles at his weak adversary, and suppresses him” (1988: 111). Political modern cynicism in particular “plays along” through media management and policy based on focus groups.

More recently, Bewes uses Sloterdijk’s definition of kynicism and modern cynicism to describe the postmodern condition, but, like other scholars, his application fails to acknowledge kynicism’s potential subversiveness or the possibility that a kynicism resembling that of the ancient Cynics could exist in postmodernity. Instead, he criticizes the contemporary age, especially its politics, as deeply cynical. He distinguishes kynicism, an “anti-theoretical, gestural critique” (1997: 28), from contemporary cynicism but, unlike Sloterdijk, does not see kynicism as a potential remedy for modern cynicism. Instead, he believes that it “seems to be nothing more radical or challenging than yet another flank in the pervasive rearguard action against postmodern ‘inauthenticity’” (1997: 31).

5 Contemporary kynicism: *The Chaser*

In seeking to overcome postmodern cynicism, Bewes proposes a number of solutions, one of which is that “if willingness to rubbish ‘the world as it is’ is taken to be an underlying principle of political action . . . then society will be one in which politics is credible, effective and exciting, embodying the extremes of both energy and depth” (1997: 217). Kynicism could be considered a “willingness to rubbish ‘the world as it is.’” Though representations of Diogenes and kynical philosophy have undergone a semiotic transformation into the more nihilistic cynicism we understand today, this does not mean kynicism has transformed *into* cynicism.

Rather, cynicism continues to exist in a distinct, evolved form alongside its cynical counterpart.

This distinct form encompasses a dialogue between the postmodern and modern. Firstly, cynicism shares postmodernism's disdain for all-encompassing grand narratives and reason. Just as postmodernism seeks to dismantle modernity rather than further a particular philosophy, project or cause, cynicism is a philosophy that stands against, rather than for, something (Cutler 2005: 93). The contradiction of postmodernism also appears in cynicism. While postmodernism claims the grand narrative is dead and expresses distaste for totalizing theories, it also provides grand narratives and theories about the contemporary spectacle-laden world. Similarly, while also railing against idealism, cynicism maintains that there is essential truth. Where once cynicism accessed truth through naturalism, contemporary cynicism upholds more ambiguous notions frequently linked not to living naturally, but to living justly. While naturalism represents the opposite of the Enlightenment's campaign for truth through reason, cynicism's uncompromising assertion that truth and equity are definable is itself decidedly modern.

As such, cynicism can both have its cake and eat it too. It protests idealistic constructions that dictate human behaviour and lay claim to truth, yet claims that a truth – only alluded to; rarely, if ever, stated – exists outside media and political spectacle. I propose that this is an example of the dialectic nature of contemporary cynicism: postmodern in its irony, self-awareness and suspicion of grand narratives, yet simultaneously exhibiting an ethical impulse that is ultimately modern. This ethical impulse ensures that the irony and parody of contemporary cynicism is not the “blank parody” proposed by Jameson, where postmodern texts only engage in nostalgic homage or self-aware irony without any meaningful reflection. Bewes claims “the concept ‘postmodern’ has reified to such an extent that any attachment to useful notions such as identity or subjective agency is dismissed as essentialist by a banal sensibility for which ‘irony’ and ‘parody’ enjoy the status of perverse creeds” (1997: 47). This may be true of cynicism in postmodernity which, even as it desires authenticity as Bewes suggests, does not believe it exists. However, applying this to *cynicism* ignores the way cynical irony and parody, as they roll their eyes at idealist essentialism, still seek truth, a trait more aligned with modernity. Bewes disregards the ethical impulse of cynicism, an impulse cynicism does not share.

Cynical philosophy, with its performative and parrhesiastic practice of defacing the currency, is evident in some contemporary political satires. In 2007, the Australian satirical team known as *The Chaser* staged a fake Canadian motorcade that breached Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum security in Sydney. Three four-wheel drives with tinted windows, clearly displaying Canadian flags, two motorcycles and four fake secret service runners were waved through security

checkpoints, one of which was the “ring of steel” cordoning off the “red zone.” The secret service runners carried fake security passes, which were clearly marked with an identification photo, the APEC logo watermarked with the words “JOKE” and “Insecurity,” and “It’s pretty obvious this isn’t a real pass” (S2 E15, 2007a). These were never checked. The team got within a block of U.S. President Bush’s hotel. When *Chaser* member Julian Morrow realized how far they had gone, he ordered them to turn back. The real security response was accommodating: “You can do what you want, matey.” “The road is yours.” *Chaser* member Chas Licciardello, dressed as Osama bin Laden, emerged from one of the four-wheel drives, exposing the joke. Eleven *Chaser* members were arrested on location.

APEC’s estimated \$170 million security effort, the largest Australia had ever seen, included the deployment of more than 5000 New South Wales police officers, 1500 military troops, 450 federal police and the construction of a five kilometre long, three metre high fence, cordoning off sections of the Sydney Central Business District as an exclusionary zone for APEC leaders and dignitaries (Bryant 2007: n.pag; Hynes et al. 2008: 34). APEC laws allowed police to hold people without bail. Using these new powers, police arrested, strip-searched and jailed a 52-year-old man overnight for crossing the road incorrectly ahead of an APEC motorcade (Bryant 2007: n.pag; Hynes et al. 2008: 35). The arrested man later labeled it “a fool’s comedy,” yet it was *The Chaser* that “exposed the clowns and asked us to join in on the laughter” (Hynes et al. 2008: 35). APEC’s extravagant security measures that hampered basic civil rights under the guise of protection were exposed as incredibly fallible, designating certain signifiers (a motorcade with a country’s flag, apparent secret service runners, etc.) as entirely arbitrary.

Images of Licciardello’s fake bin Laden and Morrow’s fake secret service runner were broadcast on news networks worldwide, including Fox and CNN in the United States, and the BBC in the United Kingdom, internationally shaming APEC’s security effort (2007c, 2007f, Moos, 2007, 2007g, Vause, 2007). *The Chaser* team, known to Australian audiences for satirizing current affairs and politics, became the subject of the news themselves. The stunt’s associated risks were reported widely. Andrew Scipione, the New South Wales Police Commissioner, said, “we had snipers deployed around the city. They weren’t there for show,” and Neil Fergus, former intelligence chief for the Sydney Olympics, said, “somebody might have been shot” (2007d). While media commentators debated whether *The Chaser* had “gone too far,” 87% of 28 451 people polled by the *Sydney Morning Herald* found the stunt funny (2007b).

The Chaser team was already infamous (and still is) for their often grotesque and always convention-breaking public displays, which include ambushing politicians and other public figures at press conferences and on the campaign trail. *The Chaser*’s antics regularly embody the kynical practice of defacing the currency

in a parrhesiastic spirit. For example, *Chaser* Craig Reucassel waylaid Sydney Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen and, after thanking him for returning the Church to the Bible, interrogated his belief in some parts of scripture, such as Leviticus 18:22 – that a man should not lie with another man, which Jensen used to justify church discrimination of LGBT people – but not others, such as Exodus 35:2, that people who work on the Sabbath should be put to death (2007e). In response, Jensen nervously complimented Reucassel’s knowledge of scripture as he tried to leave.

The APEC stunt represents *The Chaser*’s greatest risk. Though the extent of the stunt’s success was unexpected, and officials’ claims that members could have been shot were perhaps hyperbolic, it was still known that even attempting such a stunt would be viewed harshly under APEC laws. Indeed, the satirists were detained, charged with entering a restricted area without justification and faced a prison sentence of 6 months. While the charges were eventually dismissed, *The Chaser*’s public performances are often risky, with consequences ranging from public ridicule to detainment. These acts, both literal and via broadcast, are a form of satirical resistance that tests and challenges today’s political and social currency. If found to be fraught, the currency’s artificiality is exposed and then defaced through their satire. That said, as with Diogenes, *The Chaser* provides challenge, not theory. Like most satire, it is reactive and rarely suggests what could replace the currency it defaces.

As with the ancient Cynics, interactions with public figures and the audience are crucial to *The Chaser*’s satire. The APEC stunt relied on the security officers’ response. The scathing exposure of APEC’s security failings peaks when passes are ignored and Morrow is told, “You can do what you want, matey.” Similarly, Bishop Jensen’s inability to justify his selective validation of specific sections of scripture during Reucassel’s ambush clearly exposes the hypocrisy of characterizing one group or act as deviant while simultaneously engaging in practices, such as working on the Sabbath that are considered abhorrent within the very same rhetoric. These interactions, and how *The Chaser* frames them, add an element of authenticity to the cynic’s claim; in a way, the security officers and Jensen make *The Chaser*’s point for them. Furthermore, the parrhesia of kynical satire not only relies on speaking frankly to politicians and other public figures, but on its wider audience (in this case, the viewers at home) recognizing the “truth” behind the performance and coming away experiencing Bosman’s “wider perspective on themselves and a measure of irony towards their world” (2006: 103).

Just as with Diogenes, humor is a tool that simultaneously allows *The Chaser* to be subversive yet palatable to its audience. Viewers who observe their public displays firsthand may not always understand or appreciate the wit – the APEC security officials certainly did not – but a decade-strong career means they are

such infamous satirists that most publicly ambushed politicians respond with good humor (a technique, perhaps, of the modern cynic who recognizes the satirist's cultural capital). Figures who respond poorly to *The Chaser* only add to the comedy for the home audience. Of course, humor does not necessarily guarantee protection. *The Chaser* was pulled off the air for two weeks and their third season of *The War* was both cut short and canceled after widespread public outrage at a parody skit featuring charity advertising, which was perceived as an attack on children.

Alongside these affinities with the kynicism of Diogenes, there are also many differences. The naturalism so stressed by Diogenes is not as strong in contemporary examples. While *The Chaser* reveals the commonality of human beings' physical, bodily nature, regardless of social status, their truth does not focus upon pursuing and living a "natural life;" rather, it revolves around more ambiguous notions of truth and social justice. They satirize perceived political abuses to these ideals, but never explicitly define what truth or justice might be, allowing for fluidity and ambiguity. Furthermore, contemporary satirists do not "live" the philosophy as Diogenes and the ancient Cynics did. While many of them, especially *The Chaser* team, enact their philosophy through public performances and ambushes, this lasts only as long as the cameras are turned on. Only their televised performances emulate Diogenes's enacted philosophy of preaching through lived example. Contemporary satires may be considered the playground of "dogs," but the satirists are not dogs outside their performances. Arguably, the failure to commit to kynicism's lived philosophy denies *The Chaser*, and indeed all mass media political satirists, the status of kynic. However, *The Chaser* remains a satire that defaces the currency, not cynically to tear apart conventions but in a kynical parrhesiastic spirit to reveal truth, even at the risk of personal embarrassment, public outrage and more.

6 The kynical/cynical spectrum: *The Thick of It*

Sharon Stanley makes a valuable point that, even in postmodernity, we do not need to accept a "bleak account of universal cynical triumph": even those displaying a propensity towards cynicism are not cynical about everything (2007: 401). She stresses that cynicism is always likely to be partial, and that "the possibility of re-enchantment always lurks on the horizon" (2007: 406). Just as it is useful to disregard universalizing narratives about cynicism and postmodernity, it is also useful to do away with strict categories of the kynical or cynical with regard to satire and politics. Few satires can be categorized as purely kynical or, indeed, purely cynical. Rather, it is more constructive to consider how different contemporary

satires may range on a dynamic spectrum encompassing the kynical, the cynical, and everything in between.

The Chaser series and, as argued by Jones, *The Daily Show* have already been identified as kynical satires. They do include cynical, nihilistic skits, yet much of their satire leans towards kynicism. While cynical satires may also engage in truth-telling and satiric resistance against idealism and power, and may even exhibit a strong ethical impulse, such an impulse is not based upon the position that truth and justice are essential and should not be denied. The only truth in cynicism is that there is no truth left, and that nothing can be done to restore social justice to politics, if it ever existed. Kynical texts maintain that politics should not, and more importantly, need not be this way.

There is probably no satire that is strictly kynical or cynical. A satire may present politics as abusing essential ideas of truth and justice (kynical), and argue that it should change (kynical), while inevitably saying no truth remains (cynical). A fine example of this kind of satire is the British series *The Thick of It* and its feature-length offshoot *In The Loop*. It follows the British government's Director of Communications, Malcolm Tucker, an aggressive bully apparently based on Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's infamous Director of Communications and Strategy (Dee 2009: n.pag). As the "Prime Minister's enforcer" (S1 E1, 2012b), Tucker ensures ministers stay "on message" and that the media produces favourable reports about the government. He is the epitome of Sloterdijk's modern cynic. Many *The Thick of It* characters act in a similar way, but none outranks Tucker, who identifies every broken part of the political system and works to manipulate it for the utmost political advantage.

The Thick of It focuses on Tucker's dealings with the Minister and staffers of the Department of Social Affairs (later the Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship or DoSAC). In season four, a change of government brings Tucker to the office of the Leader of the Opposition. The staff, politicians and journalists he deals with are just as morally dubious as he is, but are a lot less competent. Every policy decision is based upon what will read well in the media and accrue the government more favour. For example, when the DoSAC acquires a new minister, Tucker bullies her into sending her daughter to a government school, because doing otherwise will lead the media and the public to believe that she thinks "all the schools that this government has drastically improved are knife-addled rape sheds" (S3 E1, 2012b). When he is accused of bullying, Tucker responds, "How dare you! Don't you ever, ever, call me a bully. I'm so much worse than that" ("Special 1", 2012b).

Tucker is, oddly enough, the hero of *The Thick of It*, or rather, its anti-hero. His explosive, manipulative behaviour and excessive profanities are directed at his party, the opposition, the media, the ignorant public, everyone he deems to be

stupid or not playing their part. In many ways, audiences disillusioned by current political discourse can identify with his rage, and perhaps relish in watching him ruthlessly punish political and journalistic figures. However, as the master of *The Thick of It's* modern cynics, Tucker truly does smile at his weak adversaries and then suppress them. While his fury towards the political system makes him highly relatable, he is also the embodiment of the corruption in politics that *The Thick of It* presents.

In fact, no good or moral characters can be found in the government, the opposition or the media staff rooms of the series. This in itself does not make the satire cynical. Politics and the media are presented as grossly corrupt and self-serving, but the implication is that this is wrong – a rather kynical position. In one instance, a female character who represents the public good campaigns to change building regulations after her husband dies in a building site collapse. Nicknamed the “people’s champion,” she is offered the chance to speak at a government party conference and becomes a prized object, fought over by Tucker and the Minister’s staffers. She tweets about her experience, including a moment where she sees Tucker hitting a staffer, and later yells at them for mistreating her. Tucker then issues orders to “put her on a train to Shit Town or wherever the fuck she came from” (S3 E3, 2012b). This is one of the closest examples of public empowerment against the onslaught of political corruption. Inevitably, however, the government experiences little, if any, fallout from the tweets of the “people’s champion,” instead leaking to the press that she has been dropped from the party conference for unspecified and invented “extremist views.”

The most dynamic moments between the kynical and cynical occur when Tucker is sacked, first in the third season, and then definitively in the fourth. First, Tucker is fired after being “out-spun” by a more manipulative staffer and is re-employed in the following episode through even shiffter means (S3 E7, 2012b). Then, in the fourth season, Tucker orchestrates circumstances where his party leader, who he feels cannot win the next election, must shamefully resign. In doing so, however, he becomes caught up in an inquiry, and it is discovered that he leaked the private health records of a mentally ill member of the public who committed suicide. Tucker admits nothing, even as he faces photographic evidence that he possessed the man’s National Health Service number. Instead, in his last testimony to the inquiry, he delivers a scathing speech from one modern cynic to another:

Please don't insult my intelligence by acting as if you're all so naïve that you don't know how this all works. Everybody in this room has bent the rules to get in here because you don't get in this room without bending the rules. . . . But you decide that you can sit there, you can judge, and you can ogle me like a page three girl. You don't like it – well, you don't like

yourself, you don't like your species and you know what, neither do I. But how dare you come and lay this at my door? How dare you blame me for this, which is the result of a political class which has given up on morality and simply pursues popularity at all costs. *I am you and you are me.* (S4 E6, 2012b)

Tucker truly falls from grace and finally is arrested for perjury. While trying to turn himself in to the police without media attention, he asks Ollie Reader, a staffer he mercilessly bullied and then trained in the ways of spin-doctoring, for assistance, begging him to “give me my fucking dignity” (S4 E7, 2012b). Reader abandons his mentor and is given Tucker's old job. Though Tucker does finally fall on his sword, the system carries on, suggesting that despite rare moments when corrupt individuals receive their comeuppance, people and processes that are still more corrupt will fill the void. There is no hope for a return to truth or justice, if they existed in the first place. Master modern cynics, the likes of Tucker and his staffers, define the truth.

7 Snarling at master modern cynics

While *The Chaser* leans closer to the cynical end of the spectrum and *The Thick of It* to the cynical, both also display elements of the other. Contemplating mass media satire on this spectrum is valuable for a number of reasons. First, it reflects the hybridity of mass media satire, and acknowledges that satirical representations of politics are neither strictly bleak, nor strictly subversive. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it provides a way of examining the dialogue between satire and power, asking whether satire engages in parrhesia. Politicians have appeared in non-journalistic media, like talk shows, for decades. In the last decade, this has extended to interviews on comedy or satire programs and, more recently still, to actually partaking in satirical performance. Extensive scholarship has already established that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are trusted as both authentic and humorous political commentary. *The Chaser* and *The Thick of It* are also regarded as particularly astute. Perhaps it is for this reason that politicians are not just appearing on satire programs but also performing alongside the satirists. In *The Chaser's* 2010 election special *Yes We Canberra*, several prominent politicians made appearances, including Labor's Maxine McKew. She was connected to a fake lie detector that supposedly flashed green when she told the truth and red when she lied, deemed the “pollie-graph” (S1 E3, 2010). U.S. presidential nominee John McCain appeared on *Saturday Night Live* alongside Tina Fey's satirical double of Sarah Palin, and Vice-President Joe Biden, dressed as

a cliché hotdog vender, dispensed hotdogs to military officers – or “returning warriors,” as he called them – in Colbert’s audience. While politicians cannot appear on *The Thick of It*, the word “omnishambles,” coined by Tucker to describe the new minister in the program’s third season, was co-opted by Labour ministers to describe the government on numerous occasions during parliamentary debate (2012a). Given these examples, one must ask if politicians, in playing along, can co-opt the reverence given to some satirists. Can the modern cynic gain the perceived endorsement or even the appearance of a parrhesiast by playing along? In considering this, I turn to another anecdote about Diogenes, involving Alexander the Great.

In the story, Alexander sought to display his generosity to Diogenes by granting the poverty-stricken philosopher a wish. Diogenes, who was said to have been lying lazily in the sun, was approached by Alexander. When asked what he desires, Diogenes retorts “stop blocking my sun!” (Sloterdijk 1988: 160). Here, we see the kynic’s commitment to defacing the currency of power and to parrhesia. For Sloterdijk, this anecdote illustrates an “emancipation of the philosopher from the politician” (1988: 161). The kynic refuses to show the politician any form of respect as dictated by social etiquette. He also dismisses the reverence given to power, opting for the bodily enjoyment of sunlight over the socially determined status or comforts that power can provide. Simultaneously, he demonstrates his commitment to speaking frankly, even at great risk to himself.

What, perhaps, makes *The Chaser* more kynical than cynical is that the team rarely allows the politician to “step into their sun.” When hooked up to the “pollie-graph,” McKew tries to be playful in her responses, but is often labeled a liar by the machine. *The Chaser* continues to challenge and ridicule, exposing the politician’s attempt to play along as opportunistic. While the best cynics can be just as ruthless, their show of disrespect is not driven by the kynical “missionary zeal.” Even the cynic that defaces currency still does so from a nihilistic position, where everything remains fraught and hopeless. A dangerous kind of cynic allows the politician to play along, bleakly giving in to the idea that politicians will never be held to account in any meaningful way. Worse still is any kind of cynical practice employing modern cynicism itself. The kynic, however, tears convention apart with a parrhesiastic goal: to reveal truth and show that currency found to be fraught – often the politician’s – should be abandoned for something better. Contemporary satirists, especially when faced directly with the smiling politician, should therefore “snarl” instead of “sneer.” For theorists of contemporary satire, using the cynical/kynical spectrum may assist in identifying whether or not such satire allows the modern cynic to escape without having their currency torn down, and whether such an act of defacement demands more from politics or furthers a resignation to apathy and futility.

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Bionote

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