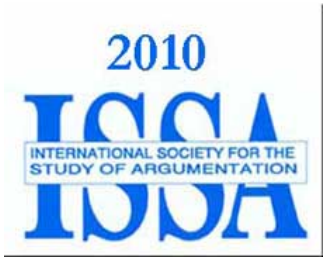
ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Interpretation And Evaluation Of Satirical Arguments



Satire and argument are a dangerous mix. What makes satire pleasurable is often how it differs from more rational argument. Satirical texts exaggerate and distort for comic effect resulting in sometimes little more than an ad hominem attack. Satire asks us to laugh first and think second. Further, some critics warn, satire can backfire if presented to audiences who are unable to recognize the author's "real" message. These concerns about satirical arguments arise, in part, due to the prevalence of satire in U.S. political discourse. Programs such as the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the *Colbert Report* employ irony, sarcasm, parody, and satire while serving as a major source of information for many people in the U.S (Baym, 2005; Boler, 2006; Hariman, 2007; Reinsheld, 2006). Some programs best categorized as entertainment offer political arguments in the form of satire, such as Comedy Central's persistently popular and controversial *South Park*.

These concerns about satire come largely from studies of satirical texts rather than audiences who view satirical texts (Gring-Pemble and Watson, 2003; Kaufer, 1977; Olson and Olson, 2004; Tindale and Gough, 1987; Wilder, 2005; Wright, 2001). Yet we know that the construction of meaning comes not from a text alone, but from an interaction between an audience and a text (Hall 1980, 1993; Jensen, 1990; Lewis, 1991). Our research approaches the matter of satirical arguments by starting with audiences interpretations instead of textual features. We wish to build a model of satirical arguments unrestrained by the vocabulary and focus of textual research. In this essay, we present preliminary findings from a study of audience interpretations of arguments and an example from a recent study (Johnson, del Rio, and Kemmitt 2010) of audience evaluations of arguments. Our findings suggest that 1) audiences can interpret serious arguments as satire if the arguments are bad enough, 2) under certain conditions, satire can be missed by audience members, 3) a failed satire does not necessarily "backfire," and 4) satirical arguments may be polysemic, but like other polysemic texts, they produce a fixed number of interpretations and evaluations.

1. What is a satirical argument?

The traditional approach defines satire as those texts with multiple, contradictory meanings. This approaches to satire sometimes incorporate the author's intentions into the definition, but some (particularly in literary studies) consider any example of polysemy as a type of satire. A satirical text be polysemic, resulting in what Ceccarelli (1998) identified as resistive reading, a type of polysemy in which different audiences focus on different aspect of the text, resulting in different, perhaps contradictory interpretations and evaluations. Satire has the potential for this type of polysemy because it offers at least two potential readings (serious and satirical).

Paying attention to author's intentions is not popular among critics these days, but author's intentions are still important to audiences. If a speaker or author makes a purposefully bad argument meant to illustrate the folly of someone or something, but that argument is interpreted by audiences in a serious way, then is the argument satirical or serious? What about an argument that just happens to be so bad that audiences believe it must be a joke? To the audience, they are experiencing a satirical text regardless of the author's intentions. Our approach was to employ a variety of texts that we felt *might be taken* as satire by audiences. Some of the texts we chose were identified by authors and critics as satire (such as the Half-Hour News Hour on Fox television or the film Starship Troopers), but others were ambiguous (such as the music video Gonzaga Love) or were not intended by the author as satire (such as the religious video "Banana").

2. Interpretations of satirical arguments

The first study, conducted in 2007, employed 11 videos taken from film, television, and the internet. Each video was less than 2 minutes long and participants viewed the videos with few clues as to its origin. While this may seem an artificial way to encounter a text, it actually replicates aspects of the modern viewing environment characterized by fragmentation and decontextualization. Further, we wanted to explore what types of readings would be produced when audiences missed the satire, so we created conditions to facilitate that. Thus, we make no claims about the likelihood of a particular satirical text being misread. We only note that under the conditions we used, it happened frequently.

We recruited 26 participants from 3 different colleges to view and respond to the videos. We did not want to draw attention to any particular aspect of the text, such as its genre, medium, or message, so we simply asked respondents to

“describe what they just saw as though describing it to a friend who hadn’t seen it.” This allowed us to see what the participants considered to be the relevant elements of the texts.

Our analysis of the interviews employed a bottom-up, qualitative method to identify the various interpretations of each individual text. Both authors interpreted the interviews separately, grouping together similar audience interpretations of each text into our basic categories. We then merged our analysis, resolving any discrepancies through discussion and modification of categories.

Participants’ responses did not fit neatly into discrete categories. Some answered by identifying what they considered to be the source of the video (i.e. “it was from YouTube”), some described the action of the video (“it showed people talking”), and others talked about what they felt the producers were trying to convey (“it was selling something”). Some participants gave multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations of a single text. Thus, our categories of interpretation were not discrete or mutually exclusive.

All of the texts we used resulted in multiple readings that were either *shared readings* (expressed by at least two people) or *idiosyncratic readings* (expressed by only one person). Our most “open” text was a video featuring the song “California Love” with different lyrics performed by white college students. This text produced nine shared readings and five idiosyncratic readings. However, most of the texts resulted in three or four shared readings and one or two idiosyncratic readings.

For this essay, we will focus on one example from the study. Participants’ reaction to the video we titled “Banana” illustrates how one argument can produce a range of interpretations, some predictable and some not. The video opens with two men seated on stools in front of a nature backdrop. One of the men holds a banana and, in an Australian accent, states:
Behold the atheist’s nightmare. Now if you study a well made banana, you’ll find on the far side there are three ridges, on the close side, two ridges. If you get your hand ready to grip a banana, you’ll find on the far side there are three grooves, on the close side, two grooves.

The speaker then makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger and inserts the

banana into that circle. He continues:
The banana and the hand are perfectly made one for the other. You'll find the maker of the banana, all mighty God, has made it with a non-slip surface. It has outward indicators of inward contents: green too early, yellow just right, black too late. Now if you go to the top of the banana, you'll find wrapper, which is biodegradable, has perforations. Notice how gracefully it sits over the human hand. As the soda can makers have placed a tab at the top, so God has placed a tab at the top. When you pull the tab, the contents don't squirt in your face.

By this time, the speaker has peeled the banana and he holds it up next to his face. The man next to him smiles as the man continues his argument:
Notice it has a point at the top for ease of entry. It's just the right shape for the human mouth. It's chewy, easy to digest. And it's even curved toward the face to make the whole process so much easier. Seriously, Kirk, the whole of creation testifies to the genius of God's creative beauty.

As he states "ease of entry" and "curved toward the face" he makes a circle with his mouth to show how the banana would fit perfectly inside.

From the 26 participants who viewed this clip, we identified three shared readings, three idiosyncratic readings, and three "non-readings" in which the participant stated they couldn't understand the text enough to say anything about it.

The first and most common reading was that the video was religious in nature. 15 participants described the video as "a religious video," "religious program," or "infomercial promoting the existence of God." In fact, this is correct. We found the video on YouTube, where it had been excerpted from a DVD series titled *The Way of the Master* featuring Australian preacher Ray Comfort and 1980s sitcom star and outspoken Christian activist Kirk Cameron.

The second most common reading, appearing four times, was that the video was a "joke" or "parody" from a comedy show, such as *Saturday Night Live* or *MadTV*. Here is an example:
Well, the guy next to him was laughing, so it obviously would not be a Christian channel because it was kind of mocking how people believe everything was created by God. I am really not sure. Maybe something like MadTV or some kind of program that likes to make parodies about issues and politics.

These four participants found evidence for this reading in a number of places. One thought it was a joke because no one would seriously speak about a banana in that much detail. The mismatch of topic and tone was evidence to another participant: “It was a satirical clip because the guy had a serious topic then kind of satirizing it and made it laughable with the banana.” Finally, two participants mentioned that the speaker’s accent was evidence of humorous intent, because, as one participant stated, “I think people our age kind of accept the Australian accent as some kind of comedy tone.”

The final shared reading, expressed by three participants, was that the video was a commercial, infomercial, or documentary promoting bananas. This participant found the style of the program matched that of an infomercial:
At first I thought it was pay programming when you watch it and they are trying to sell you something. Well, he is trying to sell us to something and that is just, I guess, bananas are great and you should have them.

None of the participants expressing this interpretation appeared confident in their answer. While the style and tone seemed commercial, the product, a banana, is not typically advertised or promoted in any way. Despite this disconnect, three participants felt this was the most plausible interpretation, with one stating “I don’t think it could be anything else.”

We also found three idiosyncratic readings. One participant interpreted the video as part of a game show where contestants are asked to improvise humorous comments around objects they are given, in this case, the banana. Another participant labeled it “women’s programming.” Finally, one participant thought that it was the first part of a debate and that the second man in the video was about to offer a rebuttal.

Finally, we found some “non-readings” that shed light on the process of argument reception. One participant had limited English language comprehension and couldn’t understand enough of the text to offer a coherent interpretation beyond “it was about a banana.” One participant asked that the clip be stopped midway through, stating that the video was “ridiculous” and that he had nothing else to say about it. But our most intriguing non-reading came from a participant who had the most knowledge about the text. Here is her interpretation:
Participant: A really weird video. I like the guy’s accent, because that’s always pleasant to listen to. But then I believe he started with a banana saying that this is

an atheist's nightmare, he starts to describe a banana. Kirk Cameron was in it, and even though he didn't say anything, we all know he was a Christian. So, um, it was Kirk Cameron, I don't know what they were doing because it was this totally sexual thing with the banana and you know, the way your hand gripped it. Were they going for a sex scene? But then Kirk Cameron was in it, and I was like "where did that come from?" I don't know where they were going with it or what they were talking about. It gripped in your hand perfectly!
Interviewer: So could you take a guess what kind of video or whatever you think that is?
Participant: No.
Interviewer: No guess at all?
Participant: No, because it talks about atheists and Kirk Cameron is a Christian, and talking about a banana and gripping. I don't know.

This participant recognized Kirk Cameron and knew that he was an outspoken Christian. She also interpreted parts of the video as sexual in nature. Because she recognized Kirk Cameron, and knew that he was a Christian, her interpretation could have been that it was a religious program of some kind. But when she also found sexual content in the text, this contradicted the religious interpretation, resulting in confusion and an inability to speak about the meaning of the text. The contrast between the religious message and humorous/sexual means of conveying the message led four viewers to conclude that it was a joke and not a serious religious argument. But for this participant, the result was confusion.

The "Banana" video produced a high number of readings, but every video argument used in this study produced multiple interpretations. Separating the shared readings from idiosyncratic readings is an important step towards sorting out the mess that polysemy makes of understanding arguments. Idiosyncratic interpretations are evidence that it is often audiences, not arguments or their authors, who control the process of making meaning. But beyond that observation, these readings cannot tell us much. Shared readings point to a more stable and potentially predictable process of meaning making. Researchers should be able to identify, either through audience research or thoughtful textual analysis, the potential interpretations of an argument.

3. Evaluations of satirical arguments
In the first study discussed here, we examined only how audiences interpreted arguments. In a second study (Johnson, del Rio, and Kemmitt, 2010), we examined

how audiences evaluated satirical arguments. We located short, satirical arguments from films (*Safe*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Bob Roberts*) and a television program (Fox's short-lived comedy show *Half-Hour News Hour*). These arguments were chosen because they were labeled by writers, producers, and reviewers as satirical. Also, we selected examples that we believed conveyed a clear argument that an audience member could potentially take away. Our purpose was to examine the extent to which audiences might interpret the arguments in non-satirical ways. Thus, we removed the arguments from their context and gave the audience few clues for decoding the text. We then were able to examine how audiences evaluated arguments when they took them at face value.

Our method resulted in many instances of missed satire. Some participants saw images from the science fiction film *Starship Troopers* as real recruitment ads for the U.S. military. Participants saw the fictional debate between Senatorial candidates in *Bob Roberts* as the words of real politicians. However, just as in the previous study, these texts produced a limited range of readings.

The main finding of this second study is that missing the satire does not necessarily mean missing the message intended by the author. This can be illustrated by audience evaluations of the *Half-Hour News Hour*. We showed participants a segment of the program designed to resemble a commercial for the American Civil Liberties Union. In the clip, a white man in a suit walks down a sidewalk towards the camera while delivering these lines:
There was a time in America when white supremacists and other hate groups had to operate in the shadows, afraid to walk the streets in the daylight, afraid to show their faces. But in 1977, a group of neo-Nazis sued for their right to march through Skokie, Illinois, a town where thousands of Holocaust survivors lived. People like me helped those neo-Nazis take their case all the way to the United States Supreme court. And guess what? They won. We won. I'm the ACLU.

After viewing the video, each participant answered the same question used in the first study, "Please describe what you just saw as though describing it to a friend who hadn't seen in." Participants then answered questions about their evaluation of the message, such as "What do you think the producers were trying to say?" and "What do you think about what the producers were trying to say?"

Of the nine participants who viewed this clip, eight thought it was produced by the ACLU to promote their organization. None of the eight, however, found the

argument compelling, as illustrated in these responses:
I think they could have done something better. I didn't really like it. . . I think they need more evidence to support them.

I think it was largely based on feelings in that video because they were showing pictures of stuff that a lot of people may be offended by or even proud of depending on where you side.

I don't think it should be allowed because if every person is made equal, I just definitely don't agree with that the producers are trying to put out there.

I don't believe in the thing the producers are trying to support.

While these participants may not have recognized the satire, they still engaged critically with the text. They were not impressed by the fact that the ACLU defended neo-Nazis and spoke out against what they perceived to be the author's message. The producers' intended message – the ACLU defends extremists – is still conveyed even to audiences who "missed the joke." In fact, a non-satirical reading includes a second argument that a satirical interpretation would not, that the ACLU is foolish enough to think their defense of neo-Nazis would impress people.

4. Implications for the study of argument
Our work suggests that theories of reception have much to offer the study of argument. Toulmin, Perelman, and others urged scholars of argument to look at real-world, ordinary arguments rather than theorize about the properties of imagined arguments or abstract arguments. Similarly, scholars of argument can learn much from real-world, ordinary interpretations of arguments. Before an audience member can evaluate or accept an argument, he or she must interpret the argument.

We believe that dealing with the implications of polysemic arguments is not a particularly daunting task. While our research, along with the research of many others, demonstrates that texts hold multiple meanings for audiences, this research also suggests that some texts produce only a few, fairly predictable readings. As our understanding of audiences develops, researchers can better predict potential readings from textual features, thus bringing the real and the imagined audiences closer together.

Previous studies of textual openness have identified features that supposedly "open" a text to multiple meanings. Chief among these is satire. The logic is that satire operates by presenting two contradictory meanings at the same time (serious and satirical), thus revealing the possibility of multiple interpretations to audiences and empowering them to create their own interpretations (Fiske, 1986, 1987). Our research, in contrast, suggests that an ironic or parody text may have more than one possible reading, but that shared readings are few and often predictable. This suggests that such texts do not necessarily differ from other polysemic texts where multiple meanings are possible but limited (Ceccarelli, 1998).

In contrast, we found non-ironic texts which produced greater numbers shared and idiosyncratic readings. The "Banana" video, which produced six distinct readings, was not intended by the producers as satire, irony, or parody. Audiences could potentially have a similar reaction to other arguments. When audiences perceive an argument to be ridiculous (by whatever standard they employ), they could potentially classify that argument as part of a satire, parody, or other ironic text. The second study discussed here suggests that when audiences classify an argument as part of a satire, they may then refrain from evaluation of the argument. Participants described what they perceived to be satirical arguments as "just for fun" or "just entertainment" and offered little commentary on the substance of the argument.

When audiences encounter arguments in the real world, the circumstances do not always favor the arguer. The audience can be distracted or bored. The audience may not encounter the arguments as part of a larger case being made, experiencing only fragments as they flip through the channels, view online videos and advertisements, or selectively remember ideas days later. Complex and nuanced arguments fair poorly in such an environment. But despite the distraction and fragmentation, audiences still assemble good reasons for their beliefs and actions and researchers can begin to understand that process.

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