Spitting Image and Pre-Televisual Political Satire: Graphics and Puppets to Screens[1]

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Abstract: In this article, I read the satire TV show "Spitting Image" as a virtual archive of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century graphic satire (John Gillray, George Cruikshank) and nineteenth-century street puppet-theatre (Punch and Judy). Though innovative as satire TV, "Spitting Image" remediated the style of Georgian visual satire as well as the conventions of nineteenth-cenutry puppet theatre. This reading thus counters non-historical analyses of the show that have approached "Spitting Image" as being disconnected from pre-televisual satires.

Résumé: Cet article propose une lecture du feuilleton télévisé satirique "Spitting Image" comme une archive virtuelle de deux sources historiques: les dessins satiriques des 18e et 19e siècles (John Gillray, George Cruikshank) et le théâtre de marionnettes de rue du 19e siècle (Punch et Judy). "Spitting Image" passe à juste titre comme une émission très novatrice, mais son format mérite d'être analysé comme la "re-médiation" de formes plus anciennes. La présente lecture se propose donc de donner la réplique aux critiques historiquement non fondées qui insistent sur la solution de continuité entre "Spitting Image" et les formes satiriques antérieures à l'ère télévisée.

Keywords: satire, puppetry, television, remediation, intermediality

Introduction

"God help Thatcher no. 1 Bitch." *Margaret Thatcher* is a recent street art-poster by Paul le Chien.[2] It portrays an aged Margaret Thatcher with a deeply lined face, her hair in a light blue color with streaks of white, her neck blood red just where it is at its most saggy and wrinkled.

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[2] Visit http://www.flickr.com/photos/alcattell/3456493480/in/faves-paullechien/ to view Le Chien's work.

"True blue," the poster quotes: staunchly conservative. The portrait is tattooesque, from the ink colors to the thick lining in the reproduction of a public face. This rough materiality – one could say that the portrait screams – carries the force of the poster. For this is no ordinary poster. It is a curse. *DIE DIE DIE*, it says twice over, in the margins of Thatcher's face. As public art, there for the taking and for everyone to see on the street, the poster is intended to do harm. It is a satire in its most archaic form.

Satire has its roots in the field of tribal warfare and in doing bodily harm to corrupt kings and rulers. It has always been a means of attack that left its visible mark on its intended victim in the form of blisters, burns, spots, and other deformations that seemed ineradicable, irreversible, and even deadly (Randolph, Eliot, Test). As satire moved from ritual to art in the post-medieval world, defacement and ridicule became a means to a higher end. Humor couched, and enabled at the same time, the dimension of aggression in satire. Thus in his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson defined satire as the censuring of wickedness, yet it was a censuring with the purpose of bringing about social change or political reform. Television satirists Jon Stewart's and Stephen Colbert's mobilization of public opinion in the US in 2010 is a case in point: they organized a Rally to Restore Sanity (And/Or Fear) in Washington to instigate a turnaround in American media and news coverage, mocking Fox News' analyst Glenn Beck's rally Restoring Honour along the way.

TV satire, or satire TV as Gray, Jones, and Thompson have suggested, is among the more under-researched domains of satire in comparison to the scholarly work done in literature and the visual arts (Gray et al). Yet as one of the dominant cultural media of the later twentieth century, TV has been an important vehicle for satire in its capacity as a public censurer of vice and folly. Thus TV has grown into a rich repository of contemporary takes on social norms, expectations, and power structures. This was evinced only very recently, when Clarence House – the private office of the Prince of Wales – restricted satirical usage of footage of Prince Williams' wedding on TV. Consequently, ABC's satirical coverage of the wedding by the Chasers was canceled, as the BBC, providing the footage, threatened to "pull the feed": a ban on ridicule (ABC).

In the 1980s, during the reign of Margaret Thatcher, the BBC (and ITV) had been equally self-censoring – with regard to coverage of the Falklands, South-African Apartheid, the IRA, and other controversial issues (Moloney). Indeed, more than a dozen television programmes were canceled or suppressed between 1979 and 1981 (Curtis 287-289). Yet it was in 1984, in Orwell's ominous year, that ITV started a satirical show lashing out at Margaret Thatcher with a

maliciously creative vigour: *Spitting Image* (1984-1996). *Spitting Image* satirized politicians, TV personalities, and the royal family in sketches using latex puppets. These puppets were a handy means to say everything without being held liable for it. It was, after all, the puppets that spoke (Ramsey & Bradley 5). Thus, masking and ventriloquism, hiding oneself and speaking with the voice of another, like a ghost, marked out the terrain of satire in a medium still struggling with its government ties.

Spitting Image evolved out of the 3D caricatures that Roger Law and Peter Fluck had made in the 1970s for the *Sunday Times Magazine*, *New York Times*, and other international magazines, such as the Dutch *Panorama*. Co-produced by Law, Fluck, John Lloyd, Jon Blair and, initially, Tony Hendra, *Spitting Image* was first criticized for its offensive caricatures, especially those of the royal family, but then became a huge success (Godfrey).[3] Ever since, the show has been copied worldwide, from the US to Iran.

Spitting Image was innovative as satire TV, using caricature puppets to combine topical satire (as in *That Was the Week that Was*) with comedy sketches (*Monty Python*): criticism within one-liner narrative sketches. Apart from *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, also produced by John Lloyd, this combination had not been attempted before on British TV. Moreover, a satirical puppet show for adults on TV was a novelty at the time, and many of the production companies were, in Lloyd's words, "stuck on the idea that puppets must be children's stuff" (Charles Denton

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[3]According to the Cartoons Biography website of the British Cartoon Archive of the University of Kent, "the audience for Spitting Image rose from an initial five million to a peak of over twelve million in 1985. By 1986 Spitting Image Productions - Fluck and Law's production company - had an annual turnover of £2 million, and built itself a new workshop in London's Canary Wharf at a cost of almost £500,000. Law remained in charge of the workshop, which he described as "the first hi-tech caricature sweatshop in history." The political element in Spitting Image was still important. "At first we were stupid enough to think we were going to make a difference with our humour", Law recalled, "but I don't think, in retrospect, that it did make a difference. It was hugely successful, but probably more as a safety valve than anything else" ." See for this:
http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/artists/rogerlaw/biography.

For contemporary reviews of the show see for instance: CSCC Archive, cutting from Sunday Times Magazine, "Making Faces" (n.d.); Brian Appleyard, "Spectrum: the Infamous Puppeteers are Brought to Book", *The Times* September 30, 1985; Lewis Chester, "Spit and Polish", Sunday Times Magazine, 14 September 1986, pp.55-6; Edward Wech "Thatcher Goes into the Bin", Sunday Times, 14 April 1991.

at Central accepted the show) (Godfrey 2).[4] Finally, *Spitting Image*'s harsh humour – remember poor David Steel or brainless Ronald Reagan – was felt to be unprecedented in the history of British satire TV (Ramsey & Bradley 4).[5]

However, I argue here, while challenging as satire TV, *Spitting Image* harked back to graphic satires of the past, when prints and drawings were legally considered ambiguous enough to perform the rudest satires (Gatrell 485).[6] More specifically, the show reworked the golden age of British graphic satire during the reign of King George III, with champions like John Gillray and George Cruikshank. Indeed, James Gillray appeared as a latex puppet on *Spitting Image*, paying homage to the great master of satire in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, the puppets on *Spitting Image* recalled the Punch and Judy street-shows and the satirical puppet theatres of Henry Fielding and George Alexander Stevens whose *Lecture on Heads* (1788) anticipates *Spitting Image* in some ways. I therefore propose to analyze *Spitting Image* as a virtual archive of British Georgian satire: a productive archive that (re-)stored and reinvented satire as an offensive practice.

Satire TV in Great Britain 1960-1984

Some say that Great Britain witnessed a golden age of satire TV between the 1960s and 1990s. This may not be entirely correct – apart from *Monty Python*'s satirical surrealism or surrealist satire between 1969 and 1974, satire was but a marginal presence on British TV in the 1970s – but the 1960s and the 1980s respectively saw two landmarks in the history of British political and social satire TV: *That Was the Week that Was* and *Spitting Image*. *That Was the Week that Was* used television as a vehicle to ridicule politicians, religion, and royalty. First broadcasted on

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[4] Of course, Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* preceded *Spitting Image* by three years as a (quasi-)satirical puppet show, but that show was neither about caricatures of public figures nor about political satire, as *Spitting Image* partly was. Henson, by the way, thought life-like puppets would never work as vehicles of satire.

[5] David Steel would be one of the few real victims of *Spitting Image*, as I will show in a little more detail below. Curiously, or perhaps typically, all those puppets who caricatured their original as sadistic, dictatorial, or possessing any other streak of nasty power play never made bad publicity for these originals. Indeed, it even reasserted their image as strong leaders (like Thatcher, Hesseltine, Tebbitt, and others).

[6] That said, the laws limiting free expression between the 1790s and 1820s were deeply intidimating, but especially effected writers, bookshops, and some print shops. Gatrell emphasizes that most of the print shops were part of the establishment and therefore less vulnerable (493).

November 24 1962, and featuring David Frost, TW3 changed television's relation to politics. In the first decades of the post-war era, television had been a docile and even reverential medium with regard to the elite. As Keith Suter has put it, a "sample deferential television interview question from [the 1940s/50s] was: Prime Minister: May I ask you to remind us of your achievements over the past year?" (4) Directed by Ned Sherrin, and written by Peter Cook, John Cleese, Roald Dahl, and many others, TW3 turned this round with live satire on Saturday evenings. No one was spared.

And this was too much. If the decline of Britain as a world power, the Suez crisis, the long Tory rule, and the scandal involving John Profumo and call girl Christine Keeler had made Britain once again rife for political satire, the BBC was too much involved with the establishment to give the show free way much longer. Already in 1964, the year of the election that was to bring Harold Wilson to power, TW3 was discontinued. There had been too many complaints from the government, and as Suter suggests the show created too many bureaucratic problems for the BBC (5). TV had been reaching beyond the elite few frequenting Peter Cook's Entertainment Club or reading magazines like *Private Eye*: political satire for "the masses" may have been one step too far in the early 1960s (4-5).

Later in the 1960s, 1966-67 to be exact, there followed *The Frost Report* with BBC, which contained some political satire, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and in 1979-1982 *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, which targeted politics, police, and royals alike. It was partly the newly elected Tory government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher that had sparkled satire TV and political comedy anew. Roger Law, in any case, felt very strongly about Thatcher, her political agenda, and the things she had in store for Great Britain (like breaking the power of the unions, the massive sell-out of national companies, and deregulation of financial markets). In an interview I conducted with him on November 22 2010, Law explained that for him *Spitting Image* was specifically directed against Thatcher, with the purpose of marring her and perhaps even bringing her down (though that would have surpassed satire's power for Law) (Wurth). Again, in an interview for *Rude Britannia*, Law recalls how passionate people in Great Britain were about Thatcher in the early 1980s, when conservatism grew into an international movement. "What I find ironic about Thatcher", he then observes, "is she created the world that we live in

now, pretty much single-handedly I think, and now she can't remember a bloody thing about it" (Tate). Her mind lost, vacuous, Thatcher now almost appears to us as a rigid, puppet-like figure.[7]

Spitting Image started during Thatcher's second term of government in 1984, the year of the miner's strike that was called off on March 3, 1985.[8] As Law suggests, there was a real divide in the country and real issues to be fought over – a fight that Thatcher won in creating Britain anew (or destroying it, depending how one looks upon it) as a neo-liberal capitalist economy. *Spitting Image* intervened in this process. It targeted the government – and basically anyone that made a frequent appearance on TV – through caricature and the modes of symbolic aggression that have long been part of satire as a mode of attack: mimicry, defacement, belittlement, exaggeration, and deformation.

At the heart of *Spitting Image* was a puppet factory in the London Docklands. There, Peter Fluck recalls in a retrospect on *Spitting Image*, Central Television employed around fifty people overseen by him and Law – caricaturists, "modelers, mould makers, costume makers, face painters, just to supply the programme with rubber puppets" (Ramsey). All in all, the factory produced ca 800 puppets, often with two or three versions of the major characters to capture different postures, or even different selves. Then, there were scriptwriters, voice actors (including Steve Nallon, who brilliantly did Margaret Thatcher as well as the Queen mum, Louise Gold, aka the Queen, and Nigel Plaskitt), and puppeteers. Each puppet was typically manned by three people: one operating the head and left hand, the other the right hand, and a third working eye movements with a cable.

Law and Fluck were horrified at the look of the puppets in the first show. Yet their appearance as well as operation increased so markedly over the years that, by the early 1990s, *Spitting Image* could offer the kind of low-key but intense scenes such as the grey John Major puppet quietly eating peas with his wife Norma in a universe of boredom. Such scenes contrasted

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[7]Thatcher tragically suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

[8] In the 1970s the trade unions helped to bring down the government of Edward Heath in the 1970s. Thatcher had had to renounce reforms – cuts – in the coal mining industry in 1981, but her government came well prepared when they tried again in 1984. Followed a confrontation between the American Ian MacGregor, who executed the reform process by announcing closure of uneconomic pits, and Arthur Scargill, of the Miner's Union, according to whom there were no uneconomic pits, but only pits that were exhausted. Nigel Lawson was then Energy Secretary. See for this, Seldon and Collings, 33.

with the brash humour of the earlier years that involved, say, Norman Tebbitt chopping off Nigel Lawson's hand in a food mixer overseen by Thatcher (March 18, 1984). Yet, *Spitting Image* always retained a violence implicit in caricaturing and stereotyping: a violence of negation that I will briefly elaborate on in the next section.

Spitting Image **and the Humorous Violence of Satire**

Thatcher was the star of *Spitting Image* between 1984 and her resignation in 1990.[9] Ironically, the show did much to boost and sustain her public image as the iron lady. Consistently, Thatcher was portrayed as a bully hitting, torturing, and killing her cabinet ministers, and affiliated with shady types. Early on in the series, Hitler, posing as Thatcher's neighbour Herr von Wilcox (recalling Wilcox the capitalist from *Howards End*), was established as Thatcher's secret advisor of government affairs, putting dangerous ideas in her head (March 18, 1984). As he is scorching his garden to kill off all "insects", Hitler keeps giving answers from the past to Thatcher's issues of the present: he tells her to invade the union of the miners ("but not in winter"), to enlist the unemployed in the army, build up the army ("especially that SS", to which Thatcher replies "I think you mean SAS"), and fight the French ("that's right, give them a taste of the medicine"). Meanwhile, husband Dennis is hanging up laundry, mostly towels with the imprint of the British Pound. If he is, so to speak, washing his and her dirty linen outside, this suggests that Thatcher's capitalism (and monetarism) is in fact emerging as a new, concealed form of fascism.[10]

Thatcher's association with fascism in *Spitting Image* was so consistent that we may compare it to a metaphor: the way in which we understand one thing (Thatcher) in terms of another (Hitler), the latter taking the place of the former. This taking place, or mere suggestion of resemblance, which is a colonization of some sort, signals the particular violence that satire is prone to – and that TV, as a mass medium productive of public personae, greatly facilitated in the 1980s and 1990s. If *Spitting Image* aimed to reveal appearances for what they were through caricature, TV provided the means to do so through its power to frame our perceptions of public figures and events (Lippmann, McCombs). The show took advantage of the means available in

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[9] For an excellent recent study on Margart Thatcher and her cultural legacy, see Louise Hadley's and Elizabeth Ho's *Thatcher and After. Margaret Thatcher and her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[10] See for this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2DnW5uC1_A.

mass media to shape and regulate cultural or shared images by turning these images round or inflating them.

Politicians from the other side were targeted with equal vigour: Neil Kinnock, Labour leader, as Pinocchio, Roy Hattersley, deputy Labour leader, with a thickly exaggerated lower lip and a terribly wet speaking habit,[11] or David Steel whose puppet was a midget ingratiating himself with the co-leader of the Liberal-SDP alliance, David Owen, and who typically appeared in the pocket of the latter. As *Spitting Image* returned every week, the satirical "impressions" started to interfere with public perceptions of these politicians – to the detriment of Steel, whose leadership was undermined (Godfrey 3).[12] This is how we might see such impressions as modern-day versions of the old curses of the Arabs and Celts: they cast a virtual "spell" on the object of satire by creating a public persona (the puppet) that attached itself to this object, exposing its weaknesses, vices, and inadequacies. The former provided the fatal frame for a shared view of the latter.

In this way *Spitting Image* made visible the "law", as Blanchot has said, that words and images obliterate the very beings they make present in speaking, writing, and visualizing. In a peculiar rendition of Hegel, Blanchot claims that to speak, to write, to name, is to negate. To name a being in language is to annihilate that being, to render that being absent in the flesh (so as to render it repeatable in language): "the word is the absence of that being" (Blanchot 44).[13] The word signals a certain death of that being – at least, a presence that is forever lost in language. Satire, satire as ritual, may well be seen as a reflection on this deadly, negative aspect of language: it is *all about* the potential of language to kill.[14] Naming, calling, here openly crystallizes as an act of physical mutilation.

Spitting Image capitalized on this potential of naming – naming in a verbal and a visual sense: to designate and to render an image – and the right, as Blanchot called it, "to say everything": not the poetic "saying nothing", the refusal of naming as killing, but its blunt

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[11] As John Lloyd observes in an online column for *The Telegraph* of April 14, 2011: "To this day, people still think (quite wrongly, as it happens) that Roy Hattersley's blubbery lips fleck spittle at everyone he meets, a calumny that is almost a quarter of a century old now."

[12] In section 3 of the *Best Ever Spitting Image* documentary, there are fragments from the show which painfully exemplify this undermining (at 4 min. 32, through to the end): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4agXi15LfS0

[13] Maurice Blanchot, "Littérature et la droit a la mort" in Bruns 44.

[14] For Blanchot, this potential is a necessary, foundational potential of language, its condition of possibility.

realization (43-45). Satire, like stereotyping, *is* naming for the sake of reinforcing the name at the expense of beings. It is the eclipse of nuance. The look-alike puppets of *Spitting Image* brilliantly performed the dynamic of naming in Blanchot's rendering of the term, as their exaggerated human qualities literally obscured the objects they mimicked.

Such violence was typically thematized in the show. There is the scene in series 8 (1990) where Thatcher, toward the end of her career, looks into the mirror and talks to her image in a soft, almost erotic tone of voice, complaining about her age.[15] Then, in a Dorian Gray-like manner, her image talks back in that other, low and evil voice: "How *dare* you call me old and ugly?" Her image escapes, enters the room, attacks Margaret, and says: "There's two sides to your personality, Margaret, a nasty, evil side", (switching to the soft voice) "and then me," (switching to the evil voice) "an even more nasty, evil side". This is a doubly mediated exchange: one between two puppets, a puppet and its image puppet, through a reflection that is then broken, as the image crosses the threshold of the visible. The humour is that there really is no duplicity here, but this absence of difference also suggests that Margaret cannot escape the image that comes from the other side.

What is this other side? Is it only a private mirror space or does it also signify that other screen, the TV screen on which her public persona was created? If mirrors signal a space of identification – of selves recognizing and shaping themselves *as* selves in a Lacanian sense[16] – the TV screen likewise produces images of selves reflexively, rather than referentially. As Jean-Luc Marion has said of the TV screen: "this antiworld in the world, produces images without ever referring them to some original: form without matter, the image only maintains a ghostly reality" (Marion 50). Thatcher's TV image, on *Spitting Image*, in this scene, is not an image *of* her, but of *the eclipse* of her: it is an image constituted out of the public perception of Thatcher, her face on the TV screen (and faces is what TV has always been all about). She is watching that face and she is helpless – not even Hitler can help her now: her evil other is no other than her self-effacement.

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[15] See for this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txBZ8cH1eVc&feature=related.

[16] I am here referring to Jacques Lacan's theory of mirror stage as the defining moment in the shaping of identity: the introjection of an image in the mirror that has the semblance of wholeness.

As this example shows, TV was not only the means or channel for *Spitting Image* as a satire show, but also constituted a prominent presence within that show. This is, indeed, what Ulrike Meinhof and Jonathan Smith have been at pains to point out: that *Spitting Image* was primarily *about* TV – that its generic format was TV pastiche rather than political satire in the first place (Meinhof and Smith). And even *as* political satire, *Spitting Image*'s main strategy was to make glaringly obvious the reduction of politics and politicians to TV personalities in the 1980s. This was the great age of commodification in Great Britain, from museums and musicals to shop merchandise, and Meinhof and Smith argue that *Spitting Image* capitalized not so much on the content of "old" political satire as on the format of contemporary commercials and TV shows. It was not "events…in the world" that were satirized on the show, but the mode in which such events would have been presented on TV and in ads: the medium, the reflection, not the real (54, 57).

And yet. As I show in the next section, Meinhof's and Smith's analysis of *Spitting Image* misses an important historical dimension of the show. While they find it deeply problematic to attach the show to a "pre-televisual tradition of political satire" (50), I think this creates a problem of its own to our understanding of the particular *kind* of satire that *Spitting Image* practiced, and the intertextual layers apparent in it that went well beyond contemporary TV formats. Instead, I argue, these layers pointed back to a distant past: to a past of cartoons and London printshops during the golden age of British satire.

Spitting Image and Georgian Satires

In Roger Law's *A Nasty Piece of Work* there is a – till then unpublished – 3D caricature by Fluck and Law of the feet of prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson in a *certain* position: his feet between hers (Law 201). Made on the occasion of the prince and Sarah's wedding, the caricature is a salute to another satire of two hundred years before, and another Duke and Duchess of York (Fred and Fred) in the same position: James Gillray's *Fashionable Contrasts; – or – The Duchess's Little Shoe yielding to the Magnitude of the Duke's Foot* (1792). Gillray's print was directed at the press, which had been a little too indulgent in their flattery of the Duchess of York, Frederica Charlotte Ulrica, and her reportedly dainty feet. Drawn in copulating position, the shoes of the Duke had been enlarged to ridiculous proportions, while the Duchess's feet had been

rendered excessively small and fragile. Thus, the print suggested a heavy weight for the Duchess to bear, as if she were a child.

Spitting Image, I suggest, cannot be seen apart from the styles, tastes, and forms of satire offered by Gillray and his contemporaries in the late eighteenth century. For Law, caricaturists like Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson, and George Cruikshank were a style-frame for the show and, what is more, for the public's understanding of its visual satire. According to him, "grossness has always been part of satire. Look at Gillray. It's a tradition in British satire and we've recycled everything in that tradition" (Wurth). This is an important point, as the commonsense view of Spitting Image is that its grossness and offensive humour was somehow unprecedented in the 1980s – an outgrowth of the 60s and 70s and a matter of bad taste, especially in its ridicule of defenseless royals. Yet it was not Spitting Image but the print makers of the Georgian era and the Regency that had created this precedence. Their satire had been so nasty and personal that George IV, the son of the mad king who had had to endure ridicule for so long from Cruikshank in particular, desperately bought up most of the hostile plates against him in 1820. If Spitting Image was seen as the first satire TV to display such nastiness, it did so as a resuscitated memory of the golden age of satire between 1780 and 1820 in a new mass medium. As such, the show effectively rehearsed an already established visuality – that is to say, an already established language of visual forms, conventions, and viewing habits.

In his magnificent City of Laughter, Vic Gatrell notes that, with the war in America and then with France, graphic satire in the last decades of the eighteenth century achieved "an unprecedented, undidactic and often self-indulgent freedom" (259). Producers and consumers of satire could not care less about previously established rules of the game and politeness in the Augustan age. "Most of those who bought satirical sheets after the 1770s were sufficiently loose in principle, secure in status and eclectic in taste to accept the prints' vulgarities without anxiety, and yet still, as public beings, to deem themselves 'polite' " (257). Graphic satire now became "much more personalized" and it typically lacked any intention to improve society (257). This was satire without the semblance of good taste. It had none of the didacticism and generality that had defined satire in Johnson's Dictionary. It went for the kill, like the old, ritual satires had done. It went for king George, and his badly behaving son, for Edmund Burke, for the aristocracy on the one hand and the revolution in France on the other, for prime minister Pitt, or Lady Fleybum. Only after the Regency, after George IV's bribe of the satirists, did British satire lose

its edge and colourful vulgarity: the crass, single sheet satire vanished in the 1830s, to resurface in a modern form only in the 1960s – in magazines like *Playboy* (235).[17]

Spitting Image's salute to that era before the age of progress and reform, before Queen Victoria and the civilized monochrome cartoons in magazines like *Punch*, is hard to ignore. I have already mentioned the Gillray puppet as an extra, and the explicit re-doing of Gillray prints like *Fashionable Contrasts*, but the parallel runs deeper. *Fashionable Contrasts* is part of a libertine tradition in Georgian satire that culminated in Rowlandson's erotic engravings and Cruikshank's attacks on the Prince of Wales' frivolous sex life, explicit and exuberant in style. *Spitting Image* revived that libertine tradition in sketches like Paul Daniels ("The man and his wig") noozling the breasts of Debbie McGee, or Andrew and Sarah trying to get pregnant, but also in offshoots like *The Appallingly Disrespectful Spitting Image Book*, featuring media mogul Rupert Murdoch as a page-seven hunk with Andrew Neil for a penis, or a naked Prince Andrew, hard and shiny, with a red telephone by his side and some seven Cumberland sausages between his legs. Such caricatures not merely mocked celebrities, royalties, but the *very idea of good taste* and the standards set for good taste (Thompson 218). They were built on a "foundation of unrelenting decency", to borrow from Thompson's analysis of *South Park*, that signals an aesthetics of the carnivalesque with its tendency towards bodily excess, inversion, insult, and cursing, and its liberating, transformative laughter (218, 221). Building on Fiske and others, Thompson has already shown how TV constitutes a space for the carnivalesque, an alternative marketplace where authorities and members of the aristocracy were scoffed (219, Fiske). In *Spitting Image* the grand reversal of the social order was achieved through the use of the puppets

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[17] Allowing for many exceptions to this generalization, Catrell argues that the aggressive and lavatorial humour of the Georgian age was wiped out in the nineteenth century with George IV's bribe of the satirists in the 1820s, his death in 1830 and the Great Reform Act of 1832. The hostile and obscene carnivalesque of the Georgian satires fitted badly with the emerging tendency toward class consensus and the popular emphasis on righteousness that this Act promoted. Humour was now directed at safer targets: children, servants, the *nouveaux riches*, not the vices or "lower body parts" of princes, kings, queens, or ministers (427). As Catrell claims, excepting some French and German examples, "the extreme forms of the comic grotesque and the ancient bodily symbols were all but completely erased" – not only in satire but also in commentaries and academic scholarship on satire (427). Only after the 1960s did England recover from the sanitizing process. This explains why many commentators – including producer John Lloyd – of *Spitting Image* claimed that the show's ridiculing of high politicians and royalty was unprecedented. It was not: the memory to such ridicule was merely lost.

that, in the 1980s, were primarily seen as "children's stuff". If Bahktin's carnivalesque is about seeing things anew, in a different perspective, the mere sight of Thatcher, the Queen, or the Prince of Wales as a puppet on TV may have been conducive to such a break in the usual perception of things in the first place.

To thus render the respected disrespectful is at once a sign of the mock-heroic: the parody of high-brow genres, like history painting, with lowly styles and subjects. Gillray was a master in this field and transformed the visuality of graphic satire with it. As Donald has shown, the "complex and often superimposed allusions which Gillray… introduced into caricature, provided a new kind of reading structure which obviated the need for overt emblems" (68). These allusions to high art, in other words, opened up a specifically stylistic dimension in graphic satire: a parody of the classics and the traditions of high art (a special concern for Gillray, who was educated as a serious artist) that would, in the end, replace the kind of allegorical prints William Hogarth had made earlier on the eighteenth century, and that involved a merging of the sublime and the ridiculous.

Gillray's *A New Way to Pay the National Debt* (1786) is a fine example, evoking the greed of the royal family in a caricature framed stylistically by epic Renaissance painting (68-69). Fluck and Law's 3D caricature *The Last Supper* (1992) honours this mock-heroic style in a remake of Leonardo's da Vinci's painting.[18] The caricature has Thatcher in the chair of Jesus, since she had been betrayed by her own party members, and features her cabinet ministers as the disciples. The whole work is geared toward ironic contrast: between Thatcher's angry and Jesus' benevolent face, the dictator in the lover's seat, between violence and forgiveness (not for nothing, the story of Salome is woven through the caricature, with Neil Kinnock's face being offered to Thatcher), between loyalty and treachery as Thatcher had not one but several "traitors" to deal with. Thatcher and Jesus, in other words, could not be further apart: the scene commemorating his last meal only serves as a biting contrast to the eve of her political defeat in the fall of 1990.

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[18] "The Last Supper" has been reproduced in Roger Law's *A Nasty Piece of Work*, pp. 194-195. It is important to note that In 1735, in the third plate of *The Rake's Progress* (recounting the downfall of a social climber), William Hogarth had also parodied *The Last Supper* to satirize the elite by rendering apparent the morally depraved nature of contemporary banquets. There are numerous other parodies of Leonardo's work, Andy Warhol's repetitive remake among them, and it seems that Fluck and Law thus purposively step into a well-worn tradition.

Spitting Image likewise recycled the mock-heroic style, adjusting it to modern times and modern media. Thus, the 1987 election special of June 11th culminated in a parody of the uneasy song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" from Bob Foss's 1972 film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Cabaret*.[19] The film is set in Germany in 1931, two years before the Nazi's assumed power, and the song imparts the ominous presence of that future. *Spitting Image* appropriated *Cabaret*'s "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" to turn it into a weapon against the Tories. Written in the style of a hymn, and often mistaken for a genuine Nazi song, "Tomorrow belongs to me" had been sung by a blond Hitler youth in the film, raising the crowds to the Nazi ideology: as they stood up and sang with him, they declared themselves to fascism. In *Spitting Image*, the youth was just as blond, and articulated just as aggressively, but his Hitler youth uniform was replaced by a bowler hat, and a black umbrella used to make the Hitler salute: the attire of bankers in the city.

In *Cabaret* "Tomorrow belongs to me" is a song heralding an imminent future, and unlike the singers mesmerized by the appeal of a strong, young voice, the viewer knows the fatality of that future: a future of mass murder, degradation, and Germany's downfall. *Spitting Image* taps into that fatality by replacing the crowds of German peasants and villagers with puppets of the Tory cabinet ministers drinking beer with Nazi-armbands on. As the bowler-hatted boy sings, and the Tories join in, Great-Britain's demise is imagined in a montage of disasters, just after the polls had closed: environmental ruin, nuclear meltdown, prospering bankers and business men, bobbies as KKK members, and the evil Thatcher having free reign. The parodic style is not mere silliness here but in fact presents one of the more genuine and daringly reflective moments in *Spitting Image*. As Lloyd recalls, the song-scene was "uncompromisingly rude", but it was a rudeness to reclaim the country, so to speak, from its looming corporate take-over (Godfrey 4). Here, *Spitting Image* intervened as the humorous voice of a subversive alternative.

Spitting Image reflected on the present but it did so by way of the satire modes and tastes of the past. Its recycling of Gillray's prints and his mock-heroic style, as well as its adoption of a Georgian, libertine humour, suggests a very strong attachment – *pace* Meinhof and Smith – to a pre-televisual tradition of political satire. (Even if half of the show was dedicated to TV personalities, just as half of the Georgian satire was composed of social satire as well) (Gatrell). This attachment tells us something about a certain exuberant style and subversive tendency in

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[19] See for this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReIAna459sg.

British satire that, as Gatrell has argued, was marginalized between the 1830s and 1960s but in itself constitutes no marginal presence in the history of satire: a tendency away from satire as polite, didactic humour, towards personalized attack, with the purpose of doing harm through ridicule and rudeness. Some may call this invective, lampoon, but it simply is the oldest business of the satirist.

Windows, Palimpsest, and Puppetry

In this last section I would like to trace this close connection between *Spitting Image* and pre-televisual political satire further by focusing on the show's open reworking of pre-televisual satire media. We have already seen the presence of Georgian prints in Law and Fluck's 3D caricatures and the TV show, but the residue of that era extends still further. It extends to the show's recycling of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century puppet theatre, and other means of instant public reach that increased satire's subversive potential.

Let me start with these other means, still closely related to the print tradition. In Georgian Britain, graphic satires were distributed through print shops. Donald and Gatrell respectively have mapped the locations and movements of these shops in London's Fleet Street, the East Strand, and later in the more fashionable quarters of Picadilly, Oxford, and St James Street (Donald 2-9, Gatrell 241-245). Displaying their latest prints on their windows, typically plastered from top to bottom, the caricature shops were always "besieged by the public", as one contemporary observer put it (Donald 4). Another witness recalls: "I well remember when the loungers of the eastern sides of Bond street and St James's Street, upon approaching Mrs. Humphrey's shop [the famous publisher of Gillray's work] in the latter, had to quit the pavement for the carriage-way, so great was the crowd which obstructed the footpath to look at Gillray's caricatures" (quoted in Jackson 151). Many prints have been made of the scenes outside these shops, with people from varied social classes flocking in to see caricatures of politicians, royalty, and social celebrities (Donald 4-7). As public screens, the shop windows facilitated a space of social interaction. Here, public personae crystallized in the popular imagination.

It is tempting to see in these shop windows a glimpse of the TV screen, as it was to evolve out of radio, telephony, the theatre and the visual arts (Uricchio, Zielinski). We could then even see the gawpers at the Georgian print windows as looking forward to TV audiences in the mid twentieth century, when sets were not yet available to all and still on display in shop windows

and public establishments (Spigel). Like the satire prints in the shop windows, TV in its early phases drew audiences out of their homes, into the streets, watching together as families and friends now still watch programmes together on screen. Was *Spitting Image*, as a TV show, (unknowingly) "remembering" the print shop windows? There is, after all, an intimate connection linking windows to high-tech screens (Friedberg).

This is mere speculation, but it is speculation to draw attention to the special, palimpsest nature of *Spitting Image* as satire TV: it offered a layeredness of styles and tastes, as we have seen, yet also of satire's mediating matter from the past. How precisely do the puppets figure in this palimpsest? They composed the most immediate, visible deposit from the (Georgian) past. How precisely should we assess this deposit in the show? Law and Fluck had used the puppets for shock-value in their 3-D caricatures: the shock of the unexpected and close resemblance (Wurth). What kind of shared values and expectations did the puppets carry to the TV show, as remnants from another era?

Caricature in the Georgian era had been just as much an affair of puppet theatre as of print. There is, Donald has claimed, a "demonstrable connection" between fashionable puppet theatres of eighteenth-century London and the "development of graphic satire" (11). Like the prints, the puppets held up a mirror of ridicule to their viewers – and their masters. As George Speaight has recorded in his classic history of puppetry in England, already in the early eighteenth century the London Fairs featured satirical puppet plays, some with large wax puppets that were very life-like and entertaining (Speaight 157). Martin Powell operated a successful marionette puppet theatre in St Martin's Lane in London in 1710, and in Convent Garden from 1711 to 1713 (93-94). His marionettes did remakes of legendary tales, and "operatical burlesques" based on classical stories, but also ridiculed famous people, contemporary society, and religious fanatics (95, 101).

Perhaps the most immediate link between graphic satire and puppetry as equally significant modes of caricature in the eighteenth century was the then hugely successful *Lecture on Heads* by George Alexander Stevens. This was a show in which Stevens used heads carved out from wooden blocks, sculpted from papier maâché, or painted on paper, to "lecture" humorously on certain types in contemporary society. Though initially a show about physiognomy, many of these heads were caricatures. Donald has already emphasized the significance of Stevens's show as a blend of puppetry and "improvised mimicry", and of

caricature and theatre, on the London stages and in country alehouses. First staged in 1764 at the Little Haymarket Theatre, the show was still called the "most popular exhibition of the age" in 1785 (11). In 1784, Charles Lee Lewes – who had bought Stevens' property in 1780 (Kahan 107) – recalled Stevens as one who "possessed a keenness of satire that made Folly hide her head in the highest places, and Vice tremble in the bosoms of the great" (Lewes 2). As satirical shapes, likewise performed with vocal impressions, Stevens' three-dimensional caricatures look forward to Law and Fluck.

Stevens' work, however, was very much framed within a polite culture. It safely targeted its victims among prostitutes, rakes, fashion victims and other types abhorred by its well-mannered audiences (Donald 11). *Spitting Image*, by contrast, tapped into the kind of bluntness and raw, carnivalesque humour that belonged to the Punch and Judy shows, and that likewise informed the cartoons of Gillray and Rowlandson. *Spitting Image* sided, precisely, with the other side – even though polite society was also duly flattered by the puppets in the 1980s and 1990s: any attention was good attention in the TV age.[20]

Punch descended from the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, from Pulcinella, and spread across Britain under the reign of Charles II. The English Punch was a hunchback with a crooked nose and curved chin, a fat belly, and a jester's jacket who beat his wife (first known as Joan, then as Judy) though she may have hit him first when he asked her for a kiss. Until the later eighteenth century, the Punch shows had been staged with marionette puppets in the London theatres. Typically, these shows offered adaptations of old morality plays, Biblical tales, or creation tales drawn from the chapbooks of the people. As the jester, Punch would intrude on serious scenes, Edward Popham wrote in 1774, "turning everything into disorder with his chattering and his jokes…His double-meanings, hinting at gross indecencies, bring a blush to every modest cheek" (quoted in Speaight 169).

By the 1770s, disorder would define the Punch Puppet Show in every respect. George Speaight records how the incidents patched together in these shows represent "the leavings of a hundred years of puppet dramas; all idea of continuity had been lost; all that remains are certain characters and situations" (168). This relative lawlessness of form continued into the nineteenth century, when the theatres were replaced by mobile puppet booths, the marionettes by glove-puppets, Joan became Judy, Punch threw their baby out of the window because it would not stop

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[20] Michael Hesseltine was not the only one who repeatedly tried to buy his puppet.

crying, and then outwitted the Hangman. Punch, Roger Law has observed, is "anarchism": an anarchism of form, and an anarchism of manners (Wurth). Drawing on the hand-gloved Punch Shows, *Spitting Image* mimicked their absence of a governing structure, both in a formal and moral sense.

The nineteenth-century Punch shows proceeded in hap-snap, slapstick-style fashion from one violent encounter to another. Punch spanked, hit, and killed his fellow puppets without scruples. *Spitting Image* likewise moved from one brief sketch to another, without any overarching plot, with Thatcher as the cruel Punch spanking her cabinet ministers or butchering the unemployed with a knife. As in the Punch shows, such scenes were not embedded in any moral scheme but rather haphazardly (or seemingly so) inserted in *Spitting Image*'s revue-like structure. The violence often served to effectively end one sketch and move on to the next – as when the Thatcher puppet blew up 10 Downing Street with a cruise missile after Michael Hasseltine had questioned its use. This is typical Punch-style procedure in the absence of a compelling narrative form.

Thus, *Spitting Image* rematerialized the conventions, events, and material means of the Punch and Judy shows. By material means I do not only mean the puppets, recalling Punch with his deformed face, but also the space of the puppet theatre itself. Like Jim Henson had done with the *Muppet Show* (1976-1981), *Spitting Image* transformed the set of the puppet booth into a TV set: the frame of the booth had, so to speak, been repurposed by the frame of the TV set, the puppets freely moving in screen-space. Significantly, though, the show kept the memory to that booth alive in its title sequence. In the later series, *Spitting Image* consistently interposed the original puppet theatre frame of the Punch and Judy booths, with its hand-gloved puppets and rapid succession of events, in that title sequence.[21] Thus, the show announced its ancestry from the start.

Why did it do so? For one, I suggest, the hand-gloved puppets of the title sequence reinforced the status of the show's targeted objects *as* puppets – however striking the likeness of the star puppets in the show might be. It was as if these puppets affirmed from the outset, wittingly and jestingly, *Spitting Image*'s freedom to say anything: their very materiality, we have

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[21] When the show started, the opening sequence was compiled out of footage of the targeted politicians and celebrities, the latter manipulated as marionettes: the world's a stage and even those in power are mere puppets on a string. For an instance of the later series, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErLcr1AkFfU&feature=related.

already seen, warranted that freedom, as it was "just puppets" speaking. Secondly, the theatrical set-up provided a context of reception: it brought home to viewers the set of viewing conventions attached to the Punch and Judy shows that had evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the show became predominantly street and seaside entertainment. Viewers would have known what to expect: excessive but harmless violence, unrestrained but undamaging cruelty, slapdash transitions, and so forth. With the puppets and their limited theatrical space, *Spitting Image* opened up yet another space of freedom, where all kinds of dangerous and forbidden impulses were satisfied and enacted without anyone getting hurt.

Thirdly, the frame of the puppet booth inserted viewing conventions of the theatre within the bounds of TV: it created the semblance of a live audience, *of the TV viewers being the live audience associated with the theatre*. Now, liveness was one of the defining dimensions of television in the twentieth century. Philip Auslander has indeed gone so far as to claim that TV has always recycled the theatre in its appropriation, or replication, of a sense of immediacy and liveness. From television's earliest phases, he says, "the televisual" has been understood "as an ontology of liveness more akin to the ontology of theatre than to that of film": a broadcasting, not a recording medium like film (12). I am not sure if we can put it as strongly as this, and forget about other predecessors of TV like telephony in this respect, but until well into the 1990s and 2000s – even after VCR and the digital had changed TV into a storage medium as well – liveness has been of shaping significance to our experience of TV. In its opening sequences, *Spitting Image* showed us how this notion or semblance of liveness was built into TV. In this way, it also showed us the historical layeredness of the medium of TV. *Spitting Image* was not just about contemporary television formats and viewing habits, as we have seen, nor was it even only about pre-televisual modes and means of satire: it was also a show that makes us aware of the "memory" of television itself, of the media (like theatre) it contained in its fold. This leads us to the question how much of TV was already potentially present in the satire media of the past on which *Spitting Image* always drew so openly and profusely – and thus also to the significance of satire studies to the history of the very medium of TV.

Coda

Spitting Image, Roger Law has noted in an interview, built on ideas, shapes, and forms of Georgian satire that – according to him – are "present within the collective psyche": "you have

this tradition that actually means something to a readership or a viewership". He thought this was a very special and "brilliant" thing (Tate). As I have been at pains to point out, the show was deeply historical, deeply mnemonic, rather than just an expression of the contemporary and a parody of contemporary televisual formats. In the final analysis, we can regard *Spitting Image* as a productive archive, opening, restoring, and re-imagining Georgian graphic satirical practices as well as the anarchic humour of the nineteenth-century Punch and Judy puppet shows in the age of visual mass media. Or, as Law puts it, the "business of recycling bits of the past in order to create an impact on the present has always been one of *Spitting Image*'s central strategies" (Law 189). The historical dimension of *Spitting Image*, we have seen, even reaches further down, to Arabic curses and Celtic incantations and the deadly violence these modes presented. In *Spitting Image*, this violence had become symbolic, but it is the latent power of all language to negate and erase that the show rendered explicit with its latex impressions.

Recycling old media in (then) new media, *Spitting Image* may readily appear as an illustration of the concept of remediation as it was coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in 1999: the process whereby new and old media actively shape and inform each other (Bolter & Grusin). As a TV show, we have seen, *Spitting Image* enfolded satire media from the past on different levels – from satire prints and, speculatively, the print shop windows that "broadcasted" them, to theatre and mobile puppet booths. Directly or indirectly, these older satire media were made present, through allusion or parody, but also through a literal incorporation of the frame of puppet theatre shows on screen. However, these older satire media carried with them an entire history of styles, tastes, and conventions, so that their recycling exceeded a mere formal repurposing. Rather, I would like to suggest, *Spitting Image* manifested itself as an *art of memory*: a memory of a shared past, and the caricatural forms, means, and matters from that past that continued to inform the present. This mnemonic process signaled less the oppressive contact that remediation implies – with the new medium aggressively refashioning the old (McLuhan 158) – than an ongoing interaction between multiple media: a more erratic and versatile dynamic based on the work of memory (Schacter). We could call this *media mnemonics*: the "memories" of media, or their "work" of memory, in the present. *Spitting Image*, I would like to conclude, can be seen as a performance of this work of memory.

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