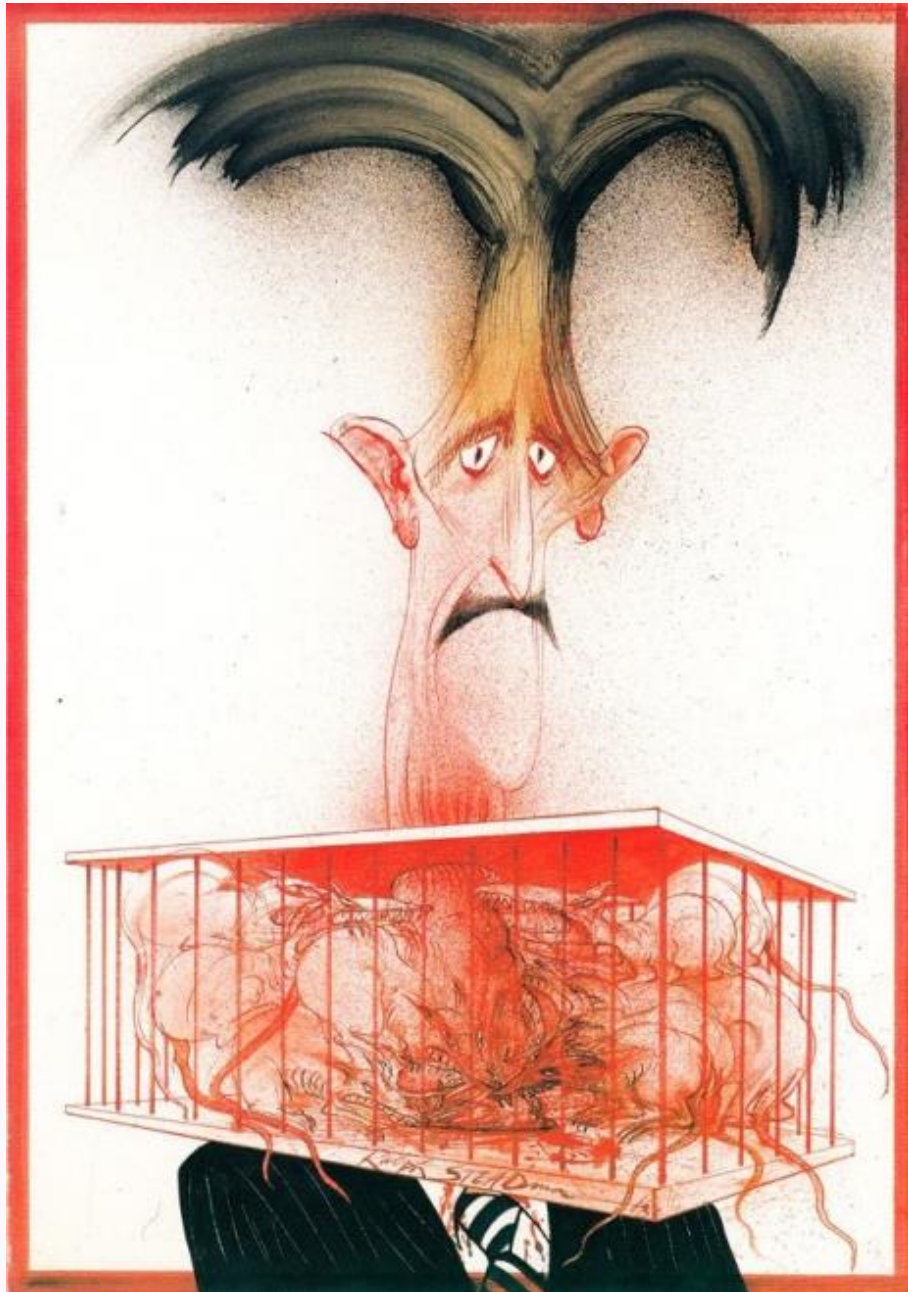


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- SATIRE -

Finding an identity in Satire, and how artists become reflection of their time

"I'm a savage satirist" – Ralph Steadman

The mockery of the political system and to ridicule politicians has been a fruitful topic for contemporary artists for a long time, but not too long, just for a while you might say. To express yourself and expose the elite is a staple of the 1960s and hasn't stopped growing ever since. To an extent, a satire artist has the drive to be savage, to be reckless, to put salt in the mental & emotional wound. Strong opinions form movements and satire carries the opinion through comedic relief and elevates the idea. But can satire truly supply an identity or is it rather the time and environment? In order to answer these questions, the term satire will be explored in the contemporary art scene and furthermore artists like Ralph Steadman and George Condo will be examined to understand their connection with the term. Newer technology and the changing landscape of available mediums have affected the topic of artistic satire.

All types of entertainment, such as films or comics use satire to deride or mock the establishment, to expose human frailty and to call for awareness to certain issues, usually related to the time period it has been created as it wouldn't be useful to solve a problem that doesn't exist or hasn't occurred yet. To ridicule through exaggeration and most commonly in the art form through caricatures, this type of comedy defines free speech and the work of intelligent, open minded and strong artists. Satire & comedy took on a new shape at the end of the 1950s, with the so called "satire boom" that was believed to have been started with "Beyond the Fringe" (see Image 1). The revue performed by four Oxbridge graduates was quote: "deemed acceptable targets for comedy (and acceptable to find funny)"¹. The humor portrayed was revolutionary and meant great change for the comedy of the years to come. Another relevant part of the satire boom was the BBC hosted television show "That Was The Week That Was" or otherwise known as TW3². The show getting cancelled due to the satirical content after just two years was again a further catalyst for the future of satire. In all this tumult the British cartoonist Ralph Steadman emerged.

Born in 1936 in Wallasey, Steadman pursued the creative side of life and after having finished his service in 1954 he moved to London at the age of 18 to pursue work as a cartoonist³. Shifting his focus from simply cartooning for newspapers and magazines to a more serious and provocative style of drawing in 1961. This change was largely due to the mentioned satire boom occurring at the

¹ Early, Chas. "May 10, 1961: Bennett, Cook, Miller And Moore Launch Satire Boom With Beyond The Fringe". *BT.Com*, 2020, <https://home.bt.com/news/on-this-day/may-10-1961-bennett-cook-miller-and-moore-launch-satire-boom-with-beyond-the-fringe-11363980258513>. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

² "BBC - Comedy - That Was The Week That Was". *Bbc.Co.Uk*, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/twtwtw/>. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

³ "Biography – Ralph Steadman Art Collection". *Ralphsteadman.Com*, 2020, <https://www.ralphsteadman.com/biography/>. Accessed 15 Nov 2020.

same time. The contexts and meaning of his works grew with the time and the environment. Ralph Steadman approaches satire not only on a political scale but also in a more neutral & creative sense. This is largely due to his active involvement in the “now” and being very aware of his environment, always knowing about current and relevant topics. For example, his satirical interpretations of the character in Alice in Wonderland, where he often distorts the proportions to an even further extent than in the original to exaggerate on certain personality traits and characteristics of some of the characters. Image 2 shows the White Rabbit as a commuter with an overly large watch. The White rabbit acts as the opposition to Alice, where she represents youth and innocence and he portrays maturity and awareness, especially of time. Steadman also draws him with an overly large stomach referring to his role as herald of the king and queen of Hearts. A very fitting description of the drawing comes from Maria Popova where she describes the illustrations as “blending the irreverent with the sublime”⁴. The Scenery is also reimagined and a very fitting topic for Steadman as he often uses static lines in the background to produce a contrast from the background to the foreground. Scenes like the chessboard (see image 3) fit this description well whilst allowing him to experiment. It is quite impressive to be able to interpret environments through a satirical lens. This taps into details used by the next major artist, George Condo, explored in the quest to reach clarity about the topic at hand, such as using the very basic principles of satire to establish its significance. Further information will follow later.

As an artist growing up in the 60s, Steadman was also embossed with political satire, which can be clearly seen in the series of drawings he produced to show the presidents of the United States of America. Image 4 shows George W. Bush stepping over the city of Baghdad with an earth shaped bomb in his stomach. There are also details of gender and materialism which all add to the significance of the drawing. Steadman stated in an interview with The Economist that he doesn't want to feel “resentful to anybody, not even a politician” and immediately follows it up with “but I'm not really into politicians at the moment, I much prefer extinct birds you know”⁵. These responses describe his role in this game the world calls art. Steadman does what he likes and when he wants. Being satirical in its execution isn't relevant to the time of production.

On that Note it is vital to examine another artist that produces satirical work but isn't fazed by the burden it can come with. George Condo conducts himself quite differently than Steadman in terms of how he engages with satire. As the Guardian so elegantly puts it: “Condo mines instead the archetypal”⁶ which in other words means he uses the very typical and basic features of a subject to express its satire. To use stereotypes is a very valid way of portraying satire, it might just be too good because it is so obvious. The viewer might miss out on Condo's interpretation of that point in time. An example of this is “The Stockbroker” (see image 5) focuses on two major aspects of satire. First of all, it includes George Condo's signature alteration of the characters faces, this time morphing them to be small in comparison to their body and most importantly the placement of the doll. It is supposed to show that the manhood of the stockbroker is of a small doll held by the

⁴ Popova, Maria. "Alice In Wonderland Illustrated By Ralph Steadman: A 1973 Gem". *Brain Pickings*, 2014, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/10/alice-in-wonderland-illustrated-by-ralph-steadman/>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

⁵ The Economist. *The Art of Ralph Steadman: A Savage Satirist*, 3 Sept. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6omL2uk9c&ab_channel=TheEconomist.

⁶ "Turner Prize 2011; George Condo: Mental States". *The Guardian*, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/23/turner-2011-baltic-condo-review>. Accessed 5 Dec 2020.

woman next to him. To an extent he plays with certain stereotypes already familiar to a majority but uses his artistic skills to elevate it to a comedic form. Relatable to the silliness and familiarity of his work is the painting “Simon Bar Sinister” (see image 6), where the villainous figure brings the archetypal elements of the relevant satire into great perspective.

Coming back to the question posed in the introduction to this topic: *“Can satire truly supply an identity or is it rather the time and environment?”* The words time and environment have to lastly be researched and interpreted in the context of satire. Starting at the most familiar commentary, the last 10-20, technology has greatly affected how satire is perceived in time as well as giving it a brand-new environment to live and thrive. Even with comedy & technology it seems that it will suffer the same fate as the pre-historic forms of media once did; they will be pushed back to the extent that you are only able to communicate ideas through allusions, wordplays, smart uses of imagery etc. to give sensible and normal content a satirical undertone. It is interesting to predict what restrictions corporations will place under comedic and satirical content in the coming years, and with the rise in awareness about socio-political issues, the right to freedom of expression on popular platforms like google or YouTube will evidently change.

Following on from that comparison to a point raised earlier on, it is also of core importance to mention the negative consequences of trying to find an identity in satire. One such artist is Zehra Doğan, a Turkish artist, who was imprisoned for nearly three years after having portrayed the Turkish military forces destroying Kurdish cities (see image 7). The artwork that was based on a real photograph, that was, according to the guarding, distributed by the Turkish military⁷, uses elements of exaggeration to transform military vehicles into monsters. Although these consequences are very much different to a little backlash on the internet or having your voice censored, it does show that as satire, and the mockery of certain topics in art develops so does the resulting resistance from corporations and governments trying to retain an image. It is almost as if in order to create an identity as a satire artist, depending on your time and environment, it is a necessity to cause some sort of harm. It is very much an artform that lives and thrives on the reaction of the audience rather than its own existence.

In Conclusion satire captures the more serious parts of life in a very meaningful and distinct light. It can hint at change and be a savage without remorse all in one. Ralph Steadman grew to be a perfect match for the artistic side of satire as he was ascending the ladder of seriousness in his work. Going full circle in the path of knowledge from a child to creating ink drawings that eluded to political misconduct, social issues and many more topics to extinct birds. Satire doesn't have a “set in stone” criteria as many believe, and George Condo and his use of the archetype of satire in his work proves that once and for all. He & Steadman are both excellent examples of their time and place. But even with satire becoming censored, the elite being the ones who decide upon what can be said and what cant, was the freedom of expression more valuable before entertainment was solely based on revenue and maximum profit? Satire was the thorn in the eye for many years, now the only thing that hurts are the red numbers.

⁷ Batycka, Dorian. "Artist And Journalist Zehra Doğan Released From Turkish Jail After Nearly Three

Years". *Hyperallergic*, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/486421/artist-and-journalist-zehra-dogan-released-from-turkish-jail-after-nearly-three-years/>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

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Image 1: Image of Satire play" Beyond the Fringe"

Early, Chas. "May 10, 1961: Bennett, Cook, Miller And Moore Launch Satire Boom With Beyond The Fringe". *BT.Com*, 2020, <https://home.bt.com/news/on-this-day/may-10-1961-bennett-cook-miller-and-moore-launch-satire-boom-with-beyond-the-fringe-11363980258513>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

Image 2: Illustration of the White Rabbit in "Alice in Wonderland" by Ralph Steadman

Early, Chas. "May 10, 1961: Bennett, Cook, Miller And Moore Launch Satire Boom With Beyond The Fringe". *BT.Com*, 2020, <https://home.bt.com/news/on-this-day/may-10-1961-bennett-cook-miller-and-moore-launch-satire-boom-with-beyond-the-fringe-11363980258513>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

Image 3: Illustration of Chess Board in "Alice in Wonderland" by Ralph Steadman

Board, Ralph. "Ralph Steadman Signed Alice And Through The Looking Glass Print Chess Board". *Ralph Steadman Signed Art Prints*, 2020, <https://www.steadmanclassics.com/collections/frontpage/products/ralph-steadman-signed-alice-and-through-the-looking-glass-print-1>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

Image 4: Illustration of George W. Bush by Ralph Steadman

"American Presidents – Ralph Steadman Art Collection". *Ralphsteadman.Com*, 2020, <https://www.ralphsteadman.com/collection/american-presidents/>. Accessed 6 Dec 2020.

Image 5: "The Stockbroker" by George Condo

"David Rimaneli On George Condo". *Artforum.Com*, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201104/george-condo-27832>. Accessed 7 Dec 2020.

Image 6: "Simon Bar Sinister" by George Condo

"Bonhams : George Condo (American, Born 1957) Simon Bar Sinister, 2009". *Bonhams.Com*, 2020, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/25488/lot/32/>. Accessed 7 Dec 2020.

Image 7: Digital painting by Zehra Doğan

Batycka, Dorian. "Artist And Journalist Zehra Doğan Released From Turkish Jail After Nearly Three Years". *Hyperallergic*, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/486421/artist-and-journalist-zehra-dogan-released-from-turkish-jail-after-nearly-three-years/>. Accessed 7 Dec 2020.

Media:

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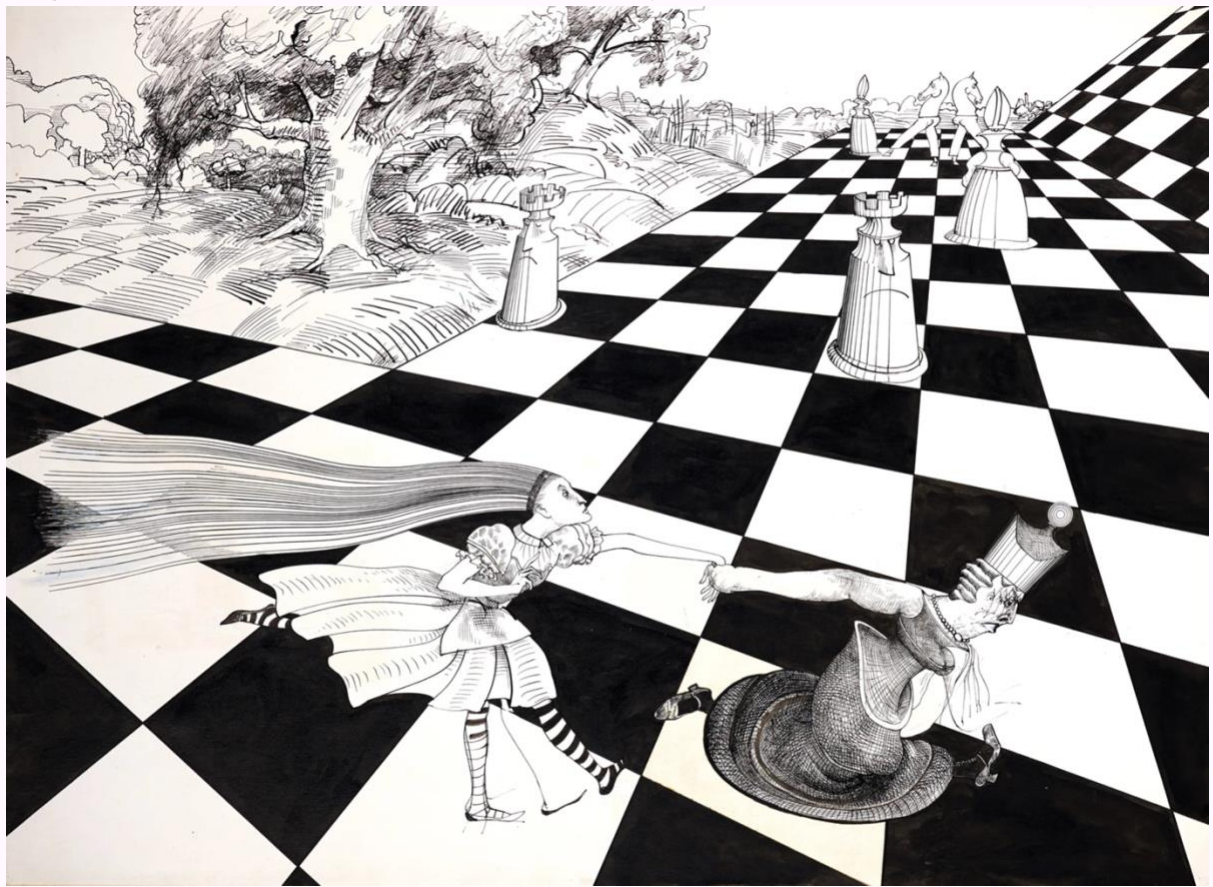


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