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The paradox of political satire: navigating critique in culture industry and neoliberal media

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dual role of satire as both a vehicle for political critique and a product of neoliberalism and culture industry, focusing on Arjen Lubach's *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*. Analyzing episodes from seasons four and five, the study explores Lubach's use of satire to address populism, nationalism, and far-right politics in the Netherlands. While Lubach's satire effectively exposes aberrations and digressions in established power dynamics, it ultimately fails to envision an alternative political reality. This limitation stems largely from its operation within the constraints of neoliberalism and culture industry, which curtail its transformative potential. The analysis reveals that while satire can expose political contradictions and stimulate discourse, it also risk reinforcing existing biases and the status quo. The culture industry's role in commodifying satire may dilute its impact as a tool for change, as critiques often uphold the neoliberal ideology by focusing on deviations from its idealized form. Drawing on the analysis of Lubach's work, the paper proposes two context-sensitive strategies to reclaim the political edge of satire: decoupling satire from the ideologies it critiques and fostering self-reflexivity to critically engage with the satirists' and the outlet's own positionalities, interests, and biases. This study underscores the complexity of satire as a means of political transformation amid rising populism and far-right extremism. By examining Lubach's approach, the article contributes to our understanding of the paradox of the political consequences of satire, highlighting the contexts in which it unfolds and the strategies that could be employed for its reclamation.

KEYWORDS

Satire; populism; nationalism; far-right extremism; *De Avondshow Met Arjen Lubach*

Introduction

The relationship between satire and politics has long been uneasy, with no clear consensus among scholars regarding its political efficacy. One significant factor contributing to this uncertainty is the impact of context. The 2023 elections in the Netherlands offered a unique opportunity to examine satirical responses to the rise of far-right movements and to develop theories based on these observations. Once hailed as an island of stability, the Netherlands has experienced a political shift; where figures like Geert Wilders, once considered fringe, are now part of the mainstream

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conservative landscape. In response to these developments, Arjen Lubach, a prominent Dutch satirist, addressed these issues on his show, *De Avondshow Met Arjen Lubach*. The program is known for its sharp wit and incisive commentary, with Lubach using satire as tools to entertain, critique, and engage with contemporary political issues.

This paper argues that the failure of satire to achieve emancipatory potential stems from two factors: its enmeshment in the culture industry and use of neoliberal discourse to critique neoliberalism at a time when trust in mainstream media and political establishments seem to be in decline. Neoliberalism is understood 'as a politico-economic doctrine that embraces robust liberal capitalism, constitutional democracy, and a modest welfare state' (Vallier 2022). Although Lubach gestures toward nonconformity in his work, it is inevitably framed by the constraints of the culture industry and neoliberal thought. By exploring the unique characteristics and contradictions of *De Avondshow Met Arjen Lubach*, I intend to explain some of the reasons why satirical critique might fall short of galvanizing genuine political action in the Western hemisphere.

Lubach attempts to harness the liberating potential of satire, primarily by exposing the slide toward populism and far-right extremism in Dutch neoliberal democracy, while failing to envision an alternative to the status quo. This is largely because his critique unfolds within the confines of the culture industry and neoliberalism, posing the risk of reinforcing rather than transforming the political narrative. The paper proposes ideological decoupling and self-reflexivity as two ways to address this tension in Western democracies. By doing so, satire can move toward a more radical reimagining of the political sphere.

This research therefore contributes to the understanding of the role of satire in contemporary Western neoliberal representative democracies at a moment when far-right extremism and populism are on the rise, offering insights that could extend beyond the Dutch context. It challenges the binary and exclusionary understanding of the political functions of satire that might either idealize it as a purely subversive force or deny its political consequences altogether, instead presenting a more nuanced analysis of its function within the constraints of neoliberal media and the culture industry and implying how its political affordances could be reclaimed in Western representative democracies.

A historical perspective toward the political efficacy of humor

The political efficacy of satire has long been a subject of debate, with no clear consensus among scholars. Historical evidence suggests that satire has played a politically significant role in certain milieus, as demonstrated by its impact and the attempts to regulate its production and distribution. In the early days, public figures were sometimes driven to extreme actions, such as suicide, due to the public shaming that satire could bring upon them (Elliott 1960; Quintero 2007). Legislative efforts to regulate political expression have often shown particular interest in satire, highlighting its potential influence.

Stephen Greenblatt, through his New Historicist approach, has analyzed the political role of masques during the Renaissance. These elaborate courtly performances, which combined music, dance, and dramatic spectacle, were designed to flatter monarchs while simultaneously critiquing political authority. Greenblatt

suggests that such performances allowed writers to embed subversive political messages within their grand allegories, effectively disguising satire as celebration. He examines how plays and masques both reinforced and challenged state power by presenting dual-layered narratives – one of deference and another of dissent (Greenblatt 1988). Similarly, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Greenblatt 1980), Greenblatt discusses how figures like Ben Jonson used masques to offer coded criticism of the Stuart monarchy.

The Licensing Act of 1737 had a significant impact on political satire, particularly within the realm of theatrical performances. Introduced by Prime Minister Robert Walpole, the act aimed to suppress critical political commentary by subjecting all new plays to government censorship. This legislation profoundly influenced how satirists approached their subjects, prompting them to adopt more indirect forms of critique. As a result, satire often shifted to prose, underground performances, and the use of coded messages.

The Act forced satirists to move away from overt political attacks, leading to the development of more nuanced or symbolic forms of satire. Many playwrights, like Henry Fielding, abandoned the stage in favor of prose. Fielding's play *Pasquin* (1736), a biting satire on political corruption, was a significant factor in the Act's introduction. The effects of the Licensing Act extended well beyond the eighteenth century, influencing theatrical and satirical traditions for over a century (Bricker 2022; Burch 2008; Kinservik 2002; O'Shaughnessy 2023; Snead 2010; Zacchi 2014).

Attempts to regulate satire have persisted throughout history and continued in various parts of the world. In the early twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin celebrated the carnivalesque, emphasizing its potential to temporarily disrupt power structures. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is particularly relevant to discussions of political satire. In his work *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin examines how the carnival serves as a period during which social hierarchies are temporarily inverted. He posits that the carnival creates a space for subversive critique of authority, all under the guise of festivity and celebration.

The regulation and suppression of satire have continued into modern times, with satirists, directors, and cartoonists often facing severe consequences or even imprisonment for their work. The socio-political developments at the turn of the century sparked renewed debates about the political relevance of satire and its potential consequences. Some argue that satire is politically inconsequential, merely serving as entertainment without substantial socio-political impact. Conversely, others maintain that it can be a powerful tool to advance progressive causes and challenge existing power structures and promote socio-political change.

Christie Davies was a prominent advocate for the notion of apolitical humor, suggesting that humor remains politically inconsequential even amid the political turmoil it can incite, as demonstrated by the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the Danish cartoon controversies (Davies et al. 2008). In contrast, other scholars have increasingly recognized satire as a significant political force (Basu and Zekavat 2021; Condren 2023; Davis 2017; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp 2022; Phiddian 2019; Zekavat 2017, 2019; *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Special Issue: The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour). These discussions underscore the dual nature of satire as both a potential agent of change and a seemingly benign form of entertainment, contingent on its context and

application. When satire is deemed politically consequential, its vital role in protecting and furthering democratic values is often emphasized, particularly with American satirists like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver. Numerous books, papers, and special issues were published in the twenty-first century on this subject, highlighting its importance in the discourse on satire and politics.

Recently, the political consequences of satire for conservative causes have also been noted. Researchers have acknowledged that satire has political consequences, with a recent focus on fringe and conservative satire and its role in political discourse to exclude certain communities. This focus on the negative impact that satire can have within the public sphere is partly a response to the previously positive and somewhat idealistic view of satire as the watchdog of democratic society – a perspective that had driven research on news satire for many years. Today, both the negative and positive impacts of satire are being explored, particularly in the current political climate where far-right extremism is on the rise in many Western democracies. Concerns have been expressed by scholars regarding the political impacts of satire, but now for different reasons: it is employed by the far right to advance its agenda. Conservative satire is described as ‘a considerable cultural force in the service of not only achieving political outcomes, but also protecting the wealth and class privileges of America’s right-wing elite’ (Marx 2022, 22).

Pérez (2023), for instance, has expressed concerns about the political implications of humor in promoting racism. In his book *Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy*, Pérez examines how humor can perpetuate racial stereotypes and reinforce white supremacy. He argues that racist humor is not merely an expression of individual prejudice but a systemic tool that maintains and legitimizes racial hierarchies. According to Pérez, such humor serves to normalize racist attitudes and behaviors, making them more socially acceptable and harder to challenge. By framing racist jokes as mere comedy, society often dismisses their harmful impact, allowing white supremacy to persist under the guise of humor. This highlights the insidious nature of racist humor and its role in sustaining systemic inequalities.

A recent pertinent example is Tony Hinchcliffe’s jokes at a Trump rally in Madison Square Garden, New York, on October 27, 2024, which offended vulnerable groups and sparked widespread debate leading up to the 2024 US Presidential Election (Pérez and Finley 2024). Scholars studying the use of satire within right-wing circles in the US are increasingly worried about its implications. This perspective highlights the strategic employment of satire to reinforce existing power structures and socio-economic hierarchies. Likewise, Sienkiewicz and Marx (2021) are rightly concerned that satire can be instrumental in ‘ceding key ideological terrain to right-wing authorities... Through the implementation of displaced abjection, powerful reactionary forces are in fact combining ironic form and hegemonic positionalities’ (108). In other words, satire is not merely a harmless form of entertainment but a potent tool that can shape and influence ideological landscapes, sometimes to the benefit of dominant groups (see also Horisk 2024).

Thus, more scholars appear to acknowledge the political consequences of satire. It is increasingly recognized that it is not a tool employed exclusively by progressive forces; rather, its influence in political discourse spans the entire spectrum, serving both conservative and liberal purposes. Far from being politically neutral, this form

of expression can act as a powerful mechanism for both resisting and reinforcing power structures. This realization calls for a nuanced understanding of satire's impact, necessitating an examination of how it shapes public discourse and influences social dynamics. As a result, satire emerges as a significant political and ideological force, transcending its role as mere entertainment.

This paper offers a nuanced exploration of the dual role of satire as both a tool for political critique and a product of the culture industry by focusing on the Dutch political landscape during the 2023 elections and the subsequent rise of far-right parties as a timely and understudied context for analysis. Specifically, it analyzes selected episodes from seasons four and five of *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*, which aired immediately before and after the general election, as well as during the formation of the new coalition government in the Netherlands. Through critically analyzing how satire, while serving as a vehicle for exposing political contradictions and stimulating discourse, is constrained by its existence within the neoliberal culture industry, it will highlight the tension between satire's potential to challenge power structures and its risk of reinforcing the status quo due to commodification in Western democracies. The paper will further explore ways through which satire can potentially transcend existing power structures and the discourse it critiques through decoupling itself from the ideologies it critiques and acknowledging the interests it serves in Western democracies.

The primary political function of satire in the *Show* appears to be confined to exposing populist and extremist tendencies while falling short of envisioning radically different alternatives to the political discourse. Arjen Lubach pursues his agenda on state-funded national television, which raises questions about the limitations of the political affordances of satire. I argue that these affordances are constrained, as they may not fully resonate or achieve their intended impact due to being co-opted by the culture industry and neoliberalism. In other words, culture industry has the capacity to absorb even potentially resistant and subversive forces for its benefit. A partial solution to this challenge in Western democracies is self-reflexivity, wherein the satirist and the program critically reflect on their role within the neoliberal landscape of culture industry. This approach may help maintain the subversive potential of satire, ensuring it remains an effective tool for political critique.

This focus is particularly significant and timely as Europe and the world at large are experiencing a surge in far-right extremism and populism. This trend is highlighted by what is being referred to as an 'election year', with at least 64 countries, along with the European Union – representing approximately 49% of the global population – participating in elections. The analysis of Lubach's satire will enhance our understanding of how satire can reinforce, challenge, or potentially transform political ideologies that are gaining momentum. By examining how satire fails or functions as a form of resistance, this paper aims to illuminate the broader implications of using satire as a tool for political critique and social change.

Discussion

This study analyzes selected episodes from seasons four and five of *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*, which aired on the State-funded NPO between September 2023 and March 2024. These seasons are significant as they coincided with critical political

moments in the Netherlands – namely, the period leading up to and following the general election, as well as the formation of the new coalition government. To ensure a comprehensive examination, a native Dutch student assisted me in identifying segments of the show that were particularly relevant to the election. Subsequently, I reviewed these segments to discern the major themes that emerged. This process revealed three predominant themes: populism, nationalism, and far-right politics. Additionally, the analysis highlighted the prominence of the political parties that garnered significant votes and ultimately formed the coalition government. To ensure consistency and accuracy, the themes and party representations were cross-verified with the student assistant.

Arjen Henrik Lubach is a prominent Dutch satirist, television presenter, and writer, known for his incisive and witty commentary on political and social issues. Born in 1979 in Groningen, the Netherlands, Lubach gained widespread recognition through his work on the satirical news show *Zondag met Lubach* that aired from 2014 to 2021, where he skillfully blends satire with critical analysis to engage audiences in complex topics. His ability to distill intricate political narratives into accessible and entertaining segments has established him as a significant figure in Dutch media. He launched *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach* in 2022, continuing his satirical take on current affairs. It is a popular Dutch television program that aired between 2022 and 2024 on NPO 1, a government-funded channel. Known for its incisive analysis and engaging style, *De Avondshow* offers viewers a unique blend of entertainment and insight, regularly featuring guest interviews that provide diverse perspectives on pressing topics. By leveraging Lubach's distinctive wit and keen observational skills, the program not only entertains but also stimulates critical thought and discussion, solidifying its place as an influential platform in the Dutch media landscape.

This research examines political satire in selected episodes from seasons four and five of Lubach's show, which aired during critical political junctures, leading up to the general elections and during the formation of a coalition government in the wake of the election. This calls for a succinct introduction to the Dutch political landscape. The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy that operates within a parliamentary democracy framework, characterized by its bicameral parliament structure, which consists of De Tweede Kamer and De Eerste Kamer. This political system is defined by its multi-party nature, necessitating coalition governments, as no single party typically secures an outright majority. The multiplicity of political parties spans across the ideological spectrum. Key political debates in the Netherlands often center on critical issues such as social welfare, immigration, and climate policy, addressing both domestic and global challenges. The coalition-based governance model requires negotiation and compromise, making Dutch politics a complex but relatively cooperative arena where diverse voices contribute to shaping policy and decision-making (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.; Parlement.com, n.d.).

The country held its last general election on November 22, 2023, in the wake of the collapse of Mark Rutte's government, precipitated by disputes over immigration policy. The election campaign was intensely focused on pivotal issues such as immigration, economic challenges, and climate policy, reflecting the pressing concerns of the electorate. In a significant political shift, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV),

led by Geert Wilders, emerged as the largest party, highlighting growing voter apprehensions over immigration and national sovereignty. Following the election, a new coalition government was officially sworn in on July 2, 2024. This coalition comprises the Freedom Party (PVV), the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), New Social Contract (NSC), and the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB), marking a notable realignment in Dutch politics and an alarming rift to the extreme right.

First, I will try to illustrate how Arjen Lubach leverages satire for political purposes. Specifically, Lubach seeks to harness satire to expose emerging propensities toward populism and far-right extremism in the country. However, it is important to analyze how and why these attempts may fall short, remaining susceptible to reinforcing and perpetuating existing structures rather than effecting meaningful change. There are two primary reasons for this susceptibility: First, Lubach's satire functions within the framework of neoliberalism, which inherently limits the extent to which political discourse can be reimagined. This framework can impose constraints that make it challenging to completely overhaul established political ideologies or systems. Second, the reimagining of political discourse occurs within the confines of the culture industry, which poses the risk of reinforcing rather than transforming the political narrative. The culture industry has the capacity to absorb and neutralize subversive elements, thereby diminishing their potential to drive significant political or social change.

I will examine Lubach's response to three major themes and concerns that emerged leading up to and following the 2023 general election. Previous studies have explored the political function of Lubach's satire in the Netherlands, highlighting its impact and significance (Boukes 2019; Boukes et al. 2024; Boukes and Hameleers 2020; Möller and Boukes 2022; Möller and Boukes 2023; Nicolăi, Maesele, and Boukes 2022). For instance, Ödmark and Nicolăi (2024) conclude that Western news satire consistently performs journalistic roles, particularly excelling in the advocate, watchdog, and civic educator functions. They argue that satire and entertainment are effectively combined with factual, civically engaged, and critical journalistic reporting to fulfill these roles. I aim to elucidate how Lubach intertwines the rigor of investigative journalism with entertainment to advocate for rationality in the established political discourse and to highlight the dangers of mainstreaming fringe extremism, as well as the pitfalls of his approach.

Populism

Rise of populism seems to have been a major concern for the *Show*, as it discusses its emergence across different countries including Slovakia (season 4, episode 17 henceforth 4.17), Poland (4.22), US (4.23), and Argentina (4.33). Populism, like nationalism, is a highly complex and controversial concept that merits extensive attention but given the focus of the paper, I have to stick with working definitions. Populism is a 'thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). A thin-centered ideology is one that is often attached to or even assimilated into other ideologies for promoting its political agenda and appealing to a broader public. Populism, for example, is often attached to nationalism and far-right politics.

Populism has three distinct modes. The first mode highlights the reliance on superficial and poorly substantiated policy solutions for addressing complex social and economic issues. The second mode concentrates on a particular set of political strategies that employ a unique rhetorical style and discursive framework to intentionally create societal polarization. The third mode underscores the autocratic institutional orientation that ensues. These modes frequently coexist and collectively constitute the political strategies employed by populists (Karlson 2024).

Lubach uses humor to expose and chastise populist moves by politicians. He exposes uninformed and unsubstantiated policies and vitriolic rhetoric that are geared merely toward political gain and manipulation. Through satire, Lubach critiques these strategies, highlighting their lack of substance and the potential harm they pose to informed public discourse.

In episode 4.11 aired in September 2023, the show focuses on populism, using the recent debate over excise tax on gasoline as a case in point. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Dutch government had lowered excise taxes on gasoline as an emergency measure, with the intention of eventually returning them to their original levels. However, the emergence of a new majority in the Tweede Kamer, opposing the tax increase, indicated a shift in political stance. Lubach humorously yet incisively identifies the center-right governing party, VVD, as the party responsible for this change, dubbing it 'pump populism'. This opportunistic move, he argues, is designed to appeal to voters, as everyone, including the wealthy, dislikes higher fuel costs right before the general election. In other words, Lubach is highlighting how the ruling party is abandoning its principles and resorting to political strategies often associated with its right-wing competitor and challenger to secure power in the upcoming elections. By exposing VVD's compromise and opportunism, the show reveals that populism, once considered fringe, is now becoming mainstream.

Lubach highlights the troubling resonance of this populist strategy with the electorate, referencing a poll conducted by *De Telegraaf*. In this poll, 96% of respondents agree with the sentiment that 'benzenerijders de klos' ('gasoline drivers are getting the short end of the stick'), and alarmingly, 68% oppose the electrification of mobility. Lubach criticizes these polls for presenting the issue in isolation, devoid of context. He follows this critique with a joke, poking fun at the dynamics of the pollster and participants whose indifference to adjacent issues is troubling. "Er is een ijsbeer gewond, mag je een pleister?" 'Nee!' ("A polar bear is injured; may I have a band-aid?" 'No!'). His satire underscores the absurdity of ignoring broader environmental concerns at the cost of subsidizing fossil fuels (see Zekavat and Scheel 2023; Zekavat 2019b; Zekavat 2025).

In doing so, Lubach highlights the intersections of social, political, economic, and environmental issues, maintaining that populism, overlapping with right-wing politics, relies on superficial and poorly substantiated policy solutions to address complex socio-political challenges. Lubach exposes the contradiction where individuals oppose environmental measures that could potentially reduce energy costs – while simultaneously being frustrated with rising energy prices – within political discourse. He acknowledges the broader implications of policy decisions and recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability and economic well-being. Lubach's satire reveals how short-term populism sabotages long-term and sustainable solutions, urging a more holistic and informed approach to contemporary political issues.

The VVD, Lubach argues, seeks to subsidize gasoline costs primarily benefiting wealthier individuals, though they publicly frame their actions as concern for those who rely on cars for work. Lubach debunks this rationale by pointing to improvements in public transport infrastructure and reduced costs for commuters, indicating that the real beneficiaries are not those the VVD claims to prioritize. He further critiques Sophie Hermans of the VVD for emotionally manipulating discourse by suggesting that rising fuel prices will impact people visiting their sick parents on weekends, which Lubach counters by asking about those reliant on buses for such visits, labeling them the most 'zieligst' or 'pitiful'.

Lubach therefore calls for stronger public infrastructure and exposes the condescending attitude of politicians toward the very people they are supposed to represent, as highlighted by the term 'zieligst'. Above all, he reveals how populism often manipulates emotions to advance specific agendas and serve certain interests. Sophie Hermans invokes pity for the elderly and sick to frame the populist move as an attempt to support the downtrodden. This emotional manipulation is a tactic used to divert attention from the underlying motives and benefits aimed at wealthier constituents, using sympathy as a tool to garner public support for policies that may not truly align with the needs of the broader population. Lubach's critique calls for a more transparent and equitable approach to policymaking that genuinely addresses the concerns and serves the interests of all citizens.

The financial implications of VVD's plans are significant, with maintaining low fuel prices costing 1.2 billion Euros annually, a figure exceeding the budget of the national marine forces. Lubach quips, 'Dus met dat geld hadden we ook Denemarken kunnen vervoeren' ('So with that money, we could convey Denmark'), to highlight the misallocation of resources. He reveals that the wealthiest 30% disproportionately benefit from 60% of this subsidy, while only 11-12% reaches the poorest 30% of the population. For every Euro aiding the poor, five Euros benefit the rich. Lubach concludes that if the VVD managed food banks, they would send 'one bottle of champagne to millionaires for each can of soup given to the less privileged'.

The *Show* continues to present evidence debunking the VVD's claim that their plan is designed to promote socio-economic justice and support less privileged communities. It references an analysis by ING Bank, showing the VVD's scheme would benefit wealthier individuals by 300 euros annually, while aiding the poor by only 100 euros – and only for those with cars. Lubach draws on statistics to demonstrate the plan's lack of sense, but he does not rely solely on numbers. Instead, he engages the audience's imagination by making concrete comparisons, such as with the marine budget and the Denmark joke, to make the issue more tangible.

Through this approach, Lubach exposes the dishonesty of the government, exposing its attempts to serve the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the poor to garner support. He highlights how the government misrepresents its actions, framing them as championing the poor, creating an illusion of socio-economic justice. This critique exposes underlying power structures and implicitly questions whether it should be acceptable for the government to perpetuate inequality by misleading the public, rather than genuinely serving the most vulnerable communities in need of assistance.

These disparities highlight that the VVD's priorities are more aligned with political gain than with genuine social welfare. Not only does the VVD seek to allocate financial

resources to wealthier classes and subsidize fossil fuels, but it also plans to fund these subsidies using the national fund for innovative projects, potentially jeopardizing investments in forward-looking initiatives. Lubach, therefore, insists that this is a classic case of populism and proposes an alternative populist idea: distributing 1,000 euros to each of the one million Dutch people living in poverty, including babies. He suggests that while this approach is also populist, it represents a more decent alternative.

Lubach argues that rather than ensuring the distribution of wealth in a manner that provides everyone with access to their basic needs and secures the public good, the VVD is misappropriating funds meant to benefit all and directing them to where they serve the wealthier population. Through satire and sharp critique, Lubach exposes the underlying motives and consequences of political decisions framed as populist policies. His satire aspires to function as a watchdog, informing the audience, reprimanding unsubstantiated policy solutions, and advocating for socio-economic justice.

However, Lubach employs similar strategies to those he criticizes. He jokes about the VVD's plan to fund subsidies using the national fund for innovative projects, quipping, 'De VVD wilde dat eigenlijk weghalen bij het Emma Kinderziekenhuis maar dat kon niet want daar mochten ze niet naar binnen komen met brandende sigaren' ('The VVD actually wanted to take it from the Emma Children's Hospital but couldn't because they weren't allowed in with their lit cigars'). This satiric critique manipulates emotions by invoking imagery of a children's hospital to illustrate the unequal distribution of wealth and resources.

Lubach's approach is symptomatic of a broader tendency to blame a party or the government rather than the system itself. As Nieuwenhuis (2022, 406) has noted, 'the show mainly defended the existing liberal status quo'. The underlying assumption is that the political and economic system – neoliberalism – is ideally designed to secure equitable distribution of resources, but one party or the government fails to implement it effectively due to the temptations of populism and emotional manipulation of citizens. However, Lubach's own use of emotional manipulation mirrors the very tactics he chastises. Instead of transcending the flaws of neoliberal democracy, he plays into its playbook by suggesting that it would be acceptable if the government simply delivered on its promises. This critique indicates that while Lubach's satire seeks to challenge political practices, it may still operate within the constraints of the same system it aims to critique.

Nationalism and far-right politics

Nationalism and far right extremism are two more ideologies that are associated with populism and recur in the *Show*. The relationship between nationalist ideologies and far-right movements is intricate and multifaceted, often characterized by a shared emphasis on identity, heritage, and perceived cultural homogeneity. Nationalist ideologies typically prioritize the interests and identity of a specific nation or ethnic group, advocating for sovereignty and self-determination. Nationalism is 'a malleable and narrow ideology, which values membership in a nation greater than other groups ... seeks distinction from other nations, and strives to preserve the nation and give preference to political representation by the nation for the nation' (Bieber 2018; see also Garner, 2022).

Far-right movements, while diverse, frequently adopt these nationalist narratives, intensifying them to promote exclusionary and xenophobic policies. This relationship is often marked by an emphasis on the protection of cultural traditions and a resistance to perceived external threats, whether they be political, economic, or social. Far-right groups may exploit nationalist sentiments to galvanize support, framing their agendas as necessary defenses of national identity against globalization, immigration, or multiculturalism. Consequently, the intersection of nationalist ideologies and far-right politics can lead to heightened social tensions and the marginalization of minority groups, posing significant challenges to pluralistic and democratic societies. Lubach undertakes to critique both ideologies particularly in the form of right-right political parties and figures in the Netherlands.

The far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders has received a fair share of this critique. In episode 4.28 (aired in October 2023), Lubach turns his attention to Geert Wilders and his campaign in Venlo, dissecting the intersection of nationalism and rhetorical strategies. The show begins with footage of Wilders engaging with a crowd, initiating small talk by asking, 'How are you doing?' to which the crowd responds enthusiastically with 'Goeeed' ('well'). The segment cuts to Lubach, who mimics the interaction by asking, 'What do we think about Moroccans?' and responding with 'Goeeed', before impersonating Wilders objecting, 'No, this is not what I have been preaching over 20 years!' Wilders made reprehensible comments about Moroccans, referring to them as 'scums' in interviews leading up to the 2017 elections. He criticized Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands, associating them with crime and social problems. His remarks drew significant criticism both domestically and internationally, with opponents accusing him of inciting hatred and discrimination. His comments were seen as part of his broader anti-immigration platform and his efforts to appeal to nationalist and populist sentiments within the Dutch electorate (The Guardian 2017; BBC News 2010; BBC News 2017; McKie 2017).

Lubach's satire has two primary targets. Firstly, it censures Geert Wilders for his reprehensible rhetoric and the promotion of nationalist ideologies to advance his far-right agenda. Through mockery, Lubach exposes the underlying prejudices and divisive tactics employed by Wilders, seeking to hold him accountable for the societal impact of his words. Secondly, Lubach critiques the audiences who mindlessly echo Wilders' rhetoric, emphasizing the routine nature of their responses and the absence of critical engagement with his nationalist discourse. By doing so, Lubach not only challenges the superficial acceptance of such rhetoric but also encourages viewers to reflect on their own complicity in perpetuating these ideologies. This dual focus underscores the importance of critical thinking and active engagement in political discourse, urging audiences to move beyond mere acceptance and consider the broader implications of nationalist narratives.

One might argue that Lubach is a deliberative democrat, using satire to foster a more informed and reflective public dialogue. However, a counterargument could be that Lubach's audience likely does not include supporters – or potential supporters – of Geert Wilders and other right-wing politicians. Instead of urging audiences to move beyond superficial appearances, Lubach may be attracting an audience already negatively disposed toward this brand of politics. For these viewers, laughter becomes a

mode of pleasure, reinforcing their sense of difference from, and even superiority over, nationalists and populists. Therefore, part of the audience might be more influenced by confirmation bias, and the show may not succeed in reaching across the political divide. While viewership data, particularly regarding the political persuasion of viewers, could offer insights into this dynamic, I was unable to find reliable data on this topic despite my attempts.

Nonetheless, this limitation highlights a broader issue with political satire: its impact is inevitably moderated by the political stance of both the outlet and the satirist, as well as the biases of their audience. Rather than encouraging right-wing zealots to reimagine political discourse, the show may simply reaffirm liberal biases in its liberal audience. Consequently, the potential for satire to serve as a tool for political transformation is curtailed, as it risks becoming an echo chamber that fortifies existing beliefs rather than challenging them.

Lubach's use of satire in countering the rise of pernicious ideologies largely seems to aim to challenge digressions from entrenched power dynamics rather than envisioning alternative forms of social organization. By leveraging satire to expose the mechanics of hate speech and manipulation of discourse, Lubach poses as a guardian of established neoliberalism against deviations into what used to be fringe ideological stances. This approach risks inadvertently reinforcing the polarized status quo by preaching to the choir rather than reaching those who hold opposing views. Satire can become an echo chamber that comforts those who already agree with its message, without effecting real change among those it seeks to challenge.

As Giamario asserts, 'laughter serves oppressive, reactionary ends only by making possible an escape from social power, and it serves subversive, emancipatory ends only when it bears traces of that power within itself' (Giamario 2022, 67). For satire to be truly subversive, it must transcend the ideologies and power structures it critiques, rather than simply provide an outlet for those fretting over their perpetuation. Yet, Lubach is more focused on exposing Wilders rather than fostering a more nuanced dialogue about the political system on which Wilders falls back; in other words, his satire seems to replicate the dynamics it seeks to oppose. Instead of questioning the political field, Lubach shifts focus to Wilders' recent strategy of softening his tone, an apparent attempt to increase his political viability and become part of the next government. This rhetorical adjustment seems to resonate with voters, as evidenced by an interview with a woman from Limburg who expresses approval of Wilders' more measured language, noting that it could enhance his chances of joining the next cabinet. This vignette underscores a pivotal shift in Wilders' approach, as he attempts to broaden his appeal without fundamentally altering his nationalist agenda.

Throughout his political career, Wilders has been a prominent purveyor of Islamophobia, known for inflammatory claims such as calling the Koran a 'fascist book,' labeling the hijab as a 'woman-humiliating Islamic symbol,' and describing Islam as a 'retarded ideology'. He has previously characterized Islam as a 'totalitarian ideology,' aligning with his broader nationalist rhetoric (BBC News 2010).

Ample evidence of Wilders' rebranding efforts emerged after his party gained the most seats in the Tweede Kamer in the 2023 general election. This development marked a significant moment in Dutch politics, as Wilders sought to position himself

and his party as credible partners in government, while still adhering to the core principles of his nationalist and far-right ideology. Lubach's analysis exposes Wilders' strategic shifts, questioning whether his softened rhetoric truly signals a substantive change or merely a tactical maneuver to gain political leverage. Through satirical critique, Lubach's episode offers a nuanced exploration of Wilders's shapeshifting, inviting audiences to consider the implications of rhetoric in shaping political landscapes and the potential threats it poses to democratic values. In other words, Lubach frames Wilders' shapeshifting as a threat to the stability of the neoliberal political system, rather than admonishing neoliberalism as the enabler of such dishonest political maneuvers. In Giamario's words (2022, 167), 'the deliberate, tactical deployment of laughter can undermine neofascist political assemblages, [though] the unrestrained enjoyment of laughter risks empowering them even further'.

This ambivalent function of satire is particularly evident in the workings of the culture industry (cf. Zekavat 2023). Critiqued by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), the culture industry refers to the mass production of cultural goods under capitalism, where entertainment becomes a tool of social control rather than a means of genuine artistic expression. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that standardized, commodified culture – through film, music, and media – manipulates mass consciousness, promoting passive consumption and reinforcing the status quo. Instead of fostering critical thought or individuality, the culture industry pacifies the public, turning them into compliant consumers who uncritically accept dominant ideologies.

As part and parcel of the culture industry, the *Show's* critique remains subject to these dynamics. While it aims to foster critical thought, it risks becoming a media spectacle that prioritizes entertainment and inevitably advocates for the ideologies it sets out to critique. The show extensively draws on elements of the culture industry and its populist appeal, such as entertainment, spectacle, and football, to make its points. In doing so, it employs the same strategies it satirizes and criticizes, highlighting the complexities of using satire as a tool for critique.

This is particularly evident in episode 5.28 (aired in March 2024), which features Jan Böhmermann, a German satirist and late-night host, and critiques the lurch toward the far-right in Western politics. In defining far-right politics, Kopeček's (2007) framework provides a useful starting point, identifying 'the four-element combination of nationalism, xenophobia, law and order, and welfare chauvinism' as central to the ideology. Despite the heterogeneity of far-right parties, this concept allows for a basic ideological classification within a unified party family, encompassing a range of movements across Europe and beyond.

The episode showcases how satire can simultaneously entertain and critique, yet it also underscores the challenge of detaching itself from the very cultural mechanisms it seeks to critique. By using the modalities of the culture industry, the show walks a fine line between challenging and perpetuating the status quo, demonstrating the intricate relationship between satire, entertainment, and ideology.

In the Netherlands, PVV, led by Geert Wilders, exemplifies the far-right's entrenchment within national politics. Notably, the PVV is structured as a party with no formal members, a feature that is illegal in Germany, where party membership is a requirement by law. This peculiarity has drawn criticism and warnings about the dangers of

such a system, including from Böhmermann, who cautions against the rise of fascism in political structures that circumvent traditional democratic norms.

Böhmermann's critique is part of a broader conversation comparing the trajectories of far-right movements in the Netherlands and Germany, particularly in the context of their respective political landscapes during and after the first Trump Administration in the US. Böhmermann goes as far as accusing the Netherlands of allowing neo-Nazis into government, ironically implying parallels to the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The AfD's evolution from a regional party in Eastern Germany to a significant force nationwide underscores the pervasive influence of right-wing extremism.

Jan and Arjen's argument about the political status of their countries continues in a music video. Drawing on nationalist symbols, such as the Dutch and German flags, Lubach observes that the combination of red, white, and blue results in the color rose, while the German equivalent yields brown – an allusion to the Nazi past as Nazi SA or *Sturmabteilung* uniforms were brown in color. This symbolic interplay is woven into a larger narrative in which both countries accuse each other of sliding further to the right. When Böhmermann raises his hands in a gesture, Arjen, his counterpart, pushes them down, evoking the Nazi salute and its historical connotations.

The basic argument presented in the segment is that rise of the far right is deeply concerning. However, there are two notable flaws in their approach. Firstly, the discussion is framed as a competition between the Netherlands and Germany over which country is more profoundly affected by far-right extremism. This competitive angle may appeal to television audiences but detracts from the gravity of the issue at hand. Secondly, the arguments employed, such as the symbolic use of colors, lack substantive reasoning and risk trivializing the seriousness of the discussion.

This competitive framing may inadvertently provide viewers with a false sense of security by suggesting that their national political climate is not as extreme as that of their neighbor, thereby minimizing the perceived immediacy of the threat. The culture industry's requirement to entertain and appease the audience can overshadow the necessity of addressing the cross-border dangers of far-right extremism. By focusing on superficial comparisons, the segment risks creating a false sense of distance and safety, rather than emphasizing the pressing need to confront the shared and pervasive threat of rising extremism and nationalism across Europe.

The satire sharpens when Jan remarks that 30% of Dutch voters supported an 'extremist clown,' with an image of Wilders appearing on the screen. Arjen counters by questioning why there is a direct rail route from Germany to Hungary via Prague, subtly jabbing at the right-wing alliance between Germany and Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Jan's mention of the autobahn – a contentious issue in German politics, particularly regarding the right's opposition to speed limits and its idolization as a symbol of individual freedom – further highlights the cultural issues intertwined with far-right ideologies, where the absence of speed limits is equated with freedom.

However, each host's focus on the other's national shortcomings, while downplaying the threat within their own country, can be interpreted as an attempt to deflect from the rise of far-right sentiments at home. By accusing the other of being worse, they avoid fully acknowledging and addressing the challenges within their own borders. This approach suggests an inclination to entertain the audience rather than provoke discomfort or critical reflection. The primary objective appears to be engaging and

entertaining viewers, potentially at the expense of fostering a deeper understanding of the pervasive and shared threat of far-right extremism.

The satirists continue to critique aspects of Dutch culture, with Jan's playful use of language in 'Wenn es um Rechts sein geht, spielt Ihr plötzlich Champions League/ Und Ihr fresst Fascho-Snacks wie nazischijf, patatje Krieg und so'. These lines cleverly incorporate puns on fascist/Fascho-Snacks and nazi/nasischijf, as well as patatje oorlog (war=Krieg). Despite their mutual accusations, both figures eventually find reassurance by comparing their domestic situations to the more extreme cases of far-right success in countries like Italy, the US, Austria, and Portugal. Their satirical exchange concludes with a reference to football, a popular sport in both countries. Jan quips, 'twee mensen met een mic en uiteindelijk wint Duitsland' (Two voices armed with microphones, yet in the end, it's Germany that prevails). This echoes a famous quote by Gary Lineker: 'Football is a game of 22 people running around, playing with the ball, and a referee who makes a series of dumb mistakes. And in the end, Germany always wins'. The ambiguity of this 'win' could refer to Jan prevailing in the argument or Germany leading the race in veering further to the political right.

By drawing on populist elements like football, the satirists tap into nationalist pride and cultural touchstones to make their point. They employ the very strategies they satirize and criticize. Satire primarily functions as a guardian of the status quo, warning against developments in the political field while emphasizing entertainment. It allows Böhmermann and Lubach to raise alarm against the normalization of far-right ideologies. Holm (2018, 40) supports this view, noting that 'the assault of laughter repeats the moves of Latour's critique by puncturing the veil of lies and unthought habits that settle over conventional thinking'. Satire thus becomes capable of exposing the underlying violence of far-right ideologies.

The segment however projects the impending danger onto the Other, creating a sense of distance and safety at home, and resorts to the very strategies it critiques to formulate its criticism. Most importantly, the critique stops short of transcending nationalism and largely defends the neoliberal status quo (albeit with minor tweaks) rather than using the challenge of far-right nationalism as an opportunity to seriously imagine new modes of socio-political organization. In this way, the potentially effective tool of resistance is co-opted by the system through the dynamics of the culture industry under neoliberalism. This dynamic highlights the limitations of satire when it remains bound by the structures it seeks to challenge, ultimately reinforcing rather than disrupting the status quo.

Conclusion

Satire thus can act as a vehicle for political critique and social commentary, especially at critical historical junctures. However, when crafted and communicated within the culture industry and operating under the constraints of neoliberalism, it risks losing its impact. By analyzing selected segments from seasons four and five of Arjen Lubach's *De Avondshow met Arjen Lubach*, it becomes evident that Lubach employs satire not only to entertain but also to expose aberrations. He uses satire to expose and critique the underlying motives and consequences of political moves. But his critique does not go beyond pointing out the aberrations and digressions from the values of

neoliberalism into envisioning alternative political realities. Lubach often utilizes the same strategies he criticizes, thus reaffirming the neoliberal status quo. This highlights the complexities and potential contradictions inherent in using satire as a tool for political and social change.

One of the key insights from Lubach's work is the manner in which he dissects the rhetoric of political figures like Geert Wilders and parties such as the PVV. Through satire, Lubach highlights the superficiality and potential dangers of nationalist rhetoric. His satirical portrayal of Wilders' shifting rhetoric, for instance, underscores the importance of scrutinizing political strategies that may appear moderate but are rooted in long-standing prejudices. This approach might empower audiences to see beyond the facade of political rhetoric and recognize the enduring impact of nationalist ideologies on democratic values.

Lubach's satire also serves as a reminder of the importance of vigilance in political discourse. By exposing the routine and often mindless responses of the public to populist rhetoric, he underscores the need for critical engagement and awareness in navigating the polarized public sphere. His critique of the VVD's 'pump populism' and the party's opportunistic strategies in fuel taxation further illustrates how populist tactics can manipulate public sentiment to serve specific agendas, often at the expense of broader societal interests.

These insights are consistent with previous research. Analyzing *Zondag met Lubach*, Ivo Nieuwenhuis (2022) examines the Dutch satirical TV show using political aesthetics. His analysis reveals that the show was less critical and progressive than perceived, primarily supporting the liberal status quo. It tends to depoliticize its views as reasonable and frames opposing ideas as irrational. Further, the solutions it proposes focuses on individual responsibility rather than structural change, reinforcing existing socio-political norms.

In their study of reflexivity in racism, van Roessel and Dumitrica (2025) aver that Lubach's song has the potential to expose racial prejudice in Dutch society. Similarly, Mirjam Vossen (2020) discusses Dutch nuclear energy controversies, highlighting a media hype in which Arjen Lubach's talk show plea for nuclear energy and VVD leader Klaas Dijkhoff's support sparked significant media attention which demonstrated its power to sway public debate with limited media exposure. And Nicolaï, Maesele, and Boukes (2022, 2057) contend that '*investigative comedy* elicits reflection on the epistemic authority of novel incantations of journalistic storytelling, and ... contributes to the expansion of conventional assumptions among satirists and media professionals about what journalism can or should be' (See Rogers and Niederer (2020) for another instance of Lubach's political interventions).

I attempted to elucidate two reasons why Lubach's satire might fall flat. Firstly, it operates within the framework of neoliberalism, inherently limiting the extent to which political discourse can be reimagined. Secondly, this reimagining occurs within the confines of the culture industry, which risks reinforcing rather than transforming the political narrative. The culture industry has the capacity to absorb and neutralize subversive elements, thereby diminishing their potential to drive significant political or social change.

This situation is further complicated by the relationship between Lubach's embedded political critique and the fact that his show airs on a government-funded channel. While public funding can potentially empower Lubach to target entities such as

corporations that might otherwise be off-limits, it could also limit the content and scale of his critique. After all, the culture industry often seems geared toward glorifying the status quo. Consequently, Lubach's program helps consolidate a center-left political constituency that vigorously and sometimes successfully opposes far-right politics and politicians. However, it remains limited in its ability to imagine and construct a form of social organization capable of defeating populist nationalism.

Lubach's satire appears to support not only progressive causes but also more conservative (or at least 'moderate') dimensions through its position within the culture industry, thus, inadvertently reinforces neoliberal norms. This is particularly significant given that contemporary post-network television is primarily 'an industry increasingly driven by financialization, corporate consolidation, and the tendency to treat intellectual property – i.e. television shows themselves – as commodities to be leveraged for short-term, maximum monetary gain rather than as cultural texts' (Marx 2022, 23). This context highlights the complex dynamics at play in Lubach's work, where satire serves as both a critique and a product of the systems it seeks to challenge.

Lubach engages in a compelling negative critique of far-right political figures and movements, offering incisive commentary on their shortcomings. However, there is a noticeable lack of sustained creative imagination for new modes of social organization beyond neoliberalism. While satire can effectively expose the pitfalls of conventional thinking and existing social structures, it can also, as manufactured by the culture industry, reinforce the social order and its power structures.

There have been many attempts to navigate the complexities surrounding the role of satire in political discourse. While some scholars have dismissed the political efficacy of these forms of expression, others have romanticized their potential impact. Others like Giamario and Holm have provided a nuanced perspective by acknowledging the intricate dynamics at play. Building on my analysis of Lubach's show, I propose two context-sensitive strategies for revitalizing and sharpening the political impact of satire. First, positioning the discourse of satire outside the systems it critiques. One promising avenue for this repositioning is the utilization of decentralized social media platforms. Second, self-reflexivity.

Decoupling the discourse of satire from the ideologies it critiques can enhance its socio-political impact. This does not suggest that the discursive strategies employed in satire are immune to appropriation or co-optation for various, sometimes opposite, purposes; rather, such effects are largely contingent upon the specific context in which satire operates. For instance, when examining examples outside of Western neoliberal representative democracies, one can find instances of impactful political satire. Bassem Yousef, for example, left a lasting impression on the Egyptian revolution, despite facing severe crackdowns from authorities. Similarly, numerous cartoonists in countries like Iran have been imprisoned or forced into exile for their work. Unlike the more reformist discourse often found in Western contexts that largely seek to uphold the status quo, these satirists envision radically alternative systems that challenge and subvert the existing order. Their satire transcends the limitations of what the system can contain, breaking free from subversion-containment dialect and embodying a maverick recalcitrance that calls for revolutionary change.

One key reason these satirists can afford to challenge prevailing systems is that they do not rely on the existing structures for their livelihood; instead, they emerge from the populace rather than the elite class. Their willingness to risk their careers,

freedoms, and even their lives enables them to adopt more radical stances. Recently, decentralized social media has played a crucial role in facilitating this dynamic by providing a third space where individuals can promote counter narratives without depending on State resources. These platforms allow for the emergence of radically different approaches to discourse and activism. For instance, we have witnessed powerful examples of how decentralized media has been utilized for organizing in recent political movements, such as the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement in Iran. The aggressive shutdowns and crackdowns on social media by authoritarian regimes serve as a testament to its transformative impact. In these contexts, satire flourishes, becoming a vital tool for resistance and expression against oppressive systems.

While decentralized social media opens new avenues for political activism, it also presents significant risks. One such risk is ‘slacktivism’, a term that refers to minimal, low-effort engagement in causes, such as liking or sharing posts, which can create an illusion of activism without fostering meaningful action or real-world change. This superficial involvement can dilute the urgency of social movements and undermine genuine efforts for reform. Moreover, despite the perception that decentralization might liberate users from the constraints of the culture industry, the reality is that users often remain beholden to tech giants, algorithms, and what Yanis Varoufakis (2023) refers to as ‘techno-feudal lords’. In his critique of techno-feudalism, Varoufakis argues that while digital platforms offer the promise of decentralized participation, they simultaneously concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few technology companies. This concentration allows these entities to control the flow of information and shape public discourse, ultimately reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them. As a result, while satire on decentralized social media can empower activists, it can also entrap them in a system that prioritizes profit and control over genuine democratic engagement.

Besides decoupling satire from the ideologies it critiques, another effective strategy for reclaiming its political edge is self-reflexivity, allowing satirists to critically examine their own positionalities and assumptions within the very frameworks they critique (Zekavat 2019a). By engaging in reflexive satire, artists can partly mitigate the impact of operating under ideologies they do not endorse and can explore the contradictions inherent in the discourses they seek to challenge. This strategy may be particularly relevant in the current context, where we are witnessing the alarming rise of populism and far-right extremism within the political sphere in the West. Creators can strive to foster a more nuanced dialogue that not only critiques external forces but also reflects on their own complicity and the broader societal dynamics at play.

One could argue that a significant factor contributing to the appeal of far-right populism is the populace’s struggle with anxieties, uncertainties, and insecurities that have long been ignored and unaddressed by the elite. Elitist perspectives often regard ‘the people’ as dangerous, dishonest, and vulgar, while perceiving ‘the elite’ as superior in moral, cultural, and intellectual terms. This belief leads elitists to favor a political environment that is predominantly or exclusively managed by the elite, sidelining the voices of the general public, which can manifest in outright rejection of democracy or in support for a limited model of democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

In this context, far-right and populist leaders swiftly capitalize on the discontent of the populace, often attributing their grievances to easily identifiable scapegoats

such as immigrants or a nostalgic return to past glories. 'Authoritarian powers in the present depend on the intensification of passions, stoking fear and redirecting it as hatred, moralizing sadism, and figuring their own forms of destruction as promises of redemption. ... The authoritarian who commands an electoral majority through stoking fears of cultural 'invasion' or 'terrorism' can be elected precisely because he stands for brutal power and unyielding nationalism' (Butler 2004). By making bold promises and presenting themselves as champions of the 'forgotten' people, these leaders create a sense of validation for individuals who feel unheard and marginalized. More radically, some right-wing populists openly acknowledge the corruption of the existing system and promise to dismantle it, appealing to those who believe the current structures do not serve their interests. This dynamic allows far-right populism to gain traction, as the elite become both the effigy and the nemesis in the eyes of the disillusioned populace. In this climate, media figures and comedians labeled as 'woke' are often perceived as part of this elite class, further fueling animosity and resentment towards the established order.

Acknowledging the vested interests of the satirist, the subjects of their satire, and the outlet could serve as a counter to the tendency for satire to be appropriated by the culture industry. Self-reflexivity could provide a potential solution for the conundrum of critical political satire being caught within the culture industry. By embracing self-reflexivity, satirists can critically examine their own positionality, political stances, and the conflicting interests that inform their work.

In doing so, satirists can create a more nuanced and authentic dialogue that challenges not only external power structures but also their own complicity within those systems. By openly addressing their vested interests and the potential contradictions in their satire, they can foster greater transparency and accountability, which can enhance the credibility of their critiques. This self-aware approach can help reclaim satire from the clutches of the culture industry, ensuring it remains a tool for genuine political engagement rather than a mere commodity that reinforces prevailing ideologies. Ultimately, this commitment to self-reflexivity can empower satirists to produce work that resonates more deeply with audiences, encouraging critical reflection and dialogue in an increasingly polarized political landscape.

Rather than merely assuming a virtuous stance, therefore, creators should recognize how their backgrounds, biases, and affiliations shape their perspectives and the narratives they promote through a process of introspection. They should acknowledge their role within the culture industry, where capturing attention is paramount for capitalizing and monetizing content. As Giamario remarks in his reading of Adorno, 'laughter that is an 'image of humanness' (i.e. reconciled laughter) maintains a dialectical tension between its light-hearted and serious qualities. Such laughter is light-hearted in that it pokes fun at existing social reality, but it is serious in how it acknowledges its own embeddedness in and takes aim at that reality' (Giamario 2022, 82). This perspective underscores the dual nature of satire as both a tool for critique and a product of the systems it critiques.

Several examples from Western media illustrate how comics have integrated self-reflexivity in their work. For instance, John Oliver frequently acknowledges that his audience is predominantly progressive and left-leaning. Similarly, Stephen Colbert also exemplifies this self-reflexive strategy; he often checks whether the brands he

mocks are sponsors of his show, demonstrating an awareness of the complex relationship between media, advertising, and content creation. Likewise, in his recent direct address to Trump supporters, Jimmy Kimmel employed a self-reflexive tone in his 'A Special Monologue for the Republican in Your Life', (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oy0zq8YzY9w>) where he sought to engage with those holding opposing views in a respectful manner, aiming to bridge divides rather than deepen them. This approach underscores the importance of acknowledging one's positionality and the potential impact of satire within a polarized political landscape. By recognizing their own biases and the interests that shape their work, these satirists can create more meaningful and impactful commentary that resonates with a broader audience.

Lubach seems to occasionally achieve this in his work by turning the lens back on himself and his program, highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in using satire as a tool for social and political critique. Episode 5.14 features an instance of such self-reflexivity. Despite his shifting rhetoric, leaders of different political parties were keen to distance themselves from the PVV and Wilders, as they negotiated the formation of a coalition government since they perceived PVV as too far to the right. Wilders, recognizing the precariousness of his position, doubled down on his attempts to rebrand himself and his party as more mainstream, going so far as to assure his peers that he no longer wishes to do anything 'raar' or weird.

Lubach sheds light on a recent rhetorical shift where Wilders now refers to Islam merely as a 'religion'. This apparent moderation prompted Lubach to quip, 'Well, probably it is not his favorite religion. And I don't think he will grow a beard in the near future.' (It is *mustahabb* or recommended in Islam that men should grow a beard). Lubach's commentary emphasizes the superficial nature of Wilders' change in tone, suggesting that the underlying prejudices remain intact despite the altered rhetoric.

The satire targets the absurdity of Wilders asking the public to disregard two decades of inflammatory rhetoric and to believe that his values have fundamentally changed. At a deeper level, Lubach's critique is not solely directed at Wilders but also at the political establishment. He suggests that other parties and political figures have failed to effectively counteract the PVV's extremist rhetoric when it mattered most. The recent pressure applied by the NSC during coalition negotiations demonstrates that such strategies can indeed work, forcing figures like Wilders to adjust their positions, albeit superficially.

Lubach observes that the pressure exerted by other political parties, particularly the NSC, has made Wilders adopt a more tolerant and moderate stance, at least publicly. This shift is underscored in a satirical advertisement for the PVV, which claims that the party has been 'working for tolerance, spirituality, and diversity over the last 20 years' and that the party aims to work together with 'voluntary organizations, churches, mosques, social partners, and with you'. The advertisement portrays Wilders as an advocate of 'cooperative thinking', with Muslim symbols conspicuously featured, in stark contrast to his earlier rhetoric.

The satiric advertisement includes a fleeting moment of self-reflection. As the voiceover introduces 'constructive collaboration' as one of the three principles of the PVV, the screen shows two hands matching puzzle pieces together – one bearing the PVV logo and the other that of NPO, the network that broadcasts *De Avondshow met Lubach*. This visual nod suggests the complicity of the culture industry in the

country's shift toward the far right. Another passing reference is found in episode 4.11 where Lubach implies his awareness of this complicity by using 'we' instead of 'they' when discussing the wealthier classes that stand to benefit most from pump populist policies.

These moments highlight the potential for satire to make meaningful political interventions if their critique includes self-reflexivity and self-criticism. However, these examples of self-reflection are only fleeting, occupying only a few seconds of visual symbolism or subtle verbal clues compared to the program's overall airtime. The insufficiency of self-reflection can blunt the political edge of satire, entrenching it within the culture industry and perpetuating the neoliberal status quo. While laughter can reveal the malleability of common sense, it does not inherently advocate for equality or democracy. Instead, as Giamario (2021, 810) notes, 'laughter constitutes a[n] uncertain, fraught, yet for those reasons, privileged site wherein the polis can be reimagined and reconstructed in more democratic directions'. This underscores the importance of self-reflexivity in satire to ensure it remains a potent force for challenging and reshaping political and social realities.

This study underscores the complex role of satire in the contemporary Western world, highlighting its dual potential to challenge extremist movements while acknowledging the limitations imposed by its position within the culture industry. Focusing on Arjen Lubach's satire in the Dutch context, which has emerged alongside the rise of right-wing and populist politicians and parties, the analysis bears several implications. Satire functions as a medium for critiquing the rhetoric and policies of right-wing figures, with the potential to expose contradictions and challenge authoritarian tendencies. However, this critique unfolds within the constraints of neoliberalism and the culture industry, which can significantly limit its effectiveness. Often, satire is co-opted by the very systems it seeks to critique, undermining its critical potential.

The study suggests two potential solutions: decoupling satire from the ideologies it critiques and fostering self-reflexivity among satirists. These strategies can help reclaim satire's political edge and enhance its capacity for meaningful critique. The implications of these dynamics extend beyond the Netherlands, providing valuable insights into the role of satire in Western representative democracies. As many countries experience a surge in far-right extremism and populism, the exploration of satire as a tool for political critique – and its inherent pitfalls – becomes increasingly relevant in understanding contemporary socio-political dynamics.

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