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The Journal of Politics, Vol. 51, No. 1. (Feb., 1989), pp. 165-173.

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Richard Nixon as Pinocchio, Richard II, and Santa Claus: The Use of Allusion in Political Satire

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Our approach to the uses of metaphor and allusion in political satire is rooted in the interaction view of metaphor offered by the philosopher Max Black. We focus on one central illustration, the assertion that "Richard Nixon is Pinocchio"—contained in a 1970s monologue by the political satirist David Frye. We argue that the meaning attached to this assertion requires us to know about both Richard Nixon and Pinocchio. The more we know of each, the more sophisticated will be our understanding of what makes this allusion both satirical and apt. Also, for an allusion to work, it must not contain elements that appear to contradict the satirist's central thrust, and that central thrust must be comprehensible to the audience even if some of the fine points may be missed. Moreover, some allusions are "richer" and more successful than others, such as that of Nixon as Pinocchio. To demonstrate these points, we contrast two other allusions involving Nixon, one portraying him as Richard II, the other as Santa Claus.

Our concern in this research note will be to demonstrate how figures of speech such as allusion, metaphor, and analogy work in the context of political satire. First, we shall explicate the interaction view of metaphor made famous by Max Black (1962; 1977; 1978), extend it to other tropes and show its applicability to political satire.¹ Next, we shall discuss in detail a simple allusion

I wish to express a particular debt of gratitude to Max Black, whose ideas I have freely borrowed for this paper. The manuscript was typed from my handwritten scribbles by the staff of the Word Processing Center of the School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine. The encouragement to write it came from two individuals: George Gordon, Department of Communications, Hofstra University, and my UCI colleague, Lewis (Creel) Froman. I am also indebted to helpful comments from an anonymous referee.

¹ Political satire is a much-neglected topic. Although there is a sizable literature in communications on cartooning, I found only a handful of references to political satire in political science journals (see, however, Coupe, 1969; Zashin and Chapman, 1974) and virtually none that dealt with contemporary satire or satirists. Aristophanes is a more likely candidate for scholarly study in political science than is Art Buchwald or Bill Mauldin. While satire is studied in the humanities more than in the social sciences, most humanists who have looked at satire are simply not very interested in political satire, and, with rare exceptions, even when they do deal with political satire (e.g., Orwell's *Animal Farm*) they look at it primarily in literary terms. Moreover, humanists, too, seem to have a bias against investigating contemporary satire. One of the most important areas, and one of the most neglected, is visual satire. An important exception to this neglect, how-

that permits us to illustrate our major points, the assertion that "Richard Nixon is Pinocchio." For contrast, we then consider two other allusions to Richard Nixon: as Richard II and as Santa Claus. We shall seek to demonstrate the claims that (1) satirical allusions are implicit arguments that must be "decoded" by the listener or reader; (2) often, allusions can be understood at more than one level, depending upon the sophistication of the audience; (3) for an allusion to be fully successful it may not contain elements that appear to contradict the satirist's central thrust; (4) for an allusion to be at all successful its surface meaning must be comprehended by the audience, even if details of interpretation are missed; and (5) some allusions are "richer" and more apt than others, even though we may simultaneously hold several allusions in our mind with respect to the same object.

THE INTERACTION VIEW OF METAPHOR AND ITS APPLICATION TO METAPHOR AND OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH

There are three commonly held views of metaphor. The first, the *substitution view*, treats a metaphoric expression as a substitute for a meaning that might have been expressed literally. "The author substitutes M for L, it is the reader's task to invert the substitution by using the literal meaning of M as a clue to the intended literal meaning of L. Understanding a metaphor is like deciphering a code or unraveling a riddle" (Black, 1962, p. 32). The second, the *comparison view*, holds that a metaphor is "a condensed or elliptical simile" (Black, 1962, p. 35).² The third approach, the *interaction view* (Black, 1977), will be the basis for the approach taken in this paper.

Let us consider the ever popular example, "Richard is a lion." The substitution view would require us to find a literal predicate that is to be substituted for the metaphorical one, for example, "Richard is a lion" means "Richard is brave." The comparison view would translate "Richard is a lion" as "Richard is like a lion [in being brave]," with the "added words in brackets being understood but not explicitly stated" (Black, 1962, p. 36).

Black (1962; 1977) notes that there are a number of difficulties with both the comparison and substitution views. First, both views treat the decoding process as involving matching up M (lion) with L (brave) without regard to what may be known about characteristics of the primary subject (Richard) and without apparent regard to the context in which the metaphoric statement is

ever, is the December 1975 issue of *20th Century Studies*, which is devoted to "politics in cartoon and caricature." (I am indebted to Professor Seymour Colin-Ure, University of Kent, for calling this issue to my attention.) Another important exception is Press (1981).

² As Black points out, the comparison view of metaphor can be regarded as a special case of the substitution view, "for it holds that the metaphorical statement might be replaced by an equivalent literal comparison" (1962, p. 35).

uttered.³ Second, both views treat metaphor as what we shall call a “close-ended expression,” that is for a given M there exists some specifiable set of L_1, L_2, \dots, L_N by which it is to be appropriately translated (the substitution view) or to which the subject of the metaphor is to be likened (the comparison view).

Black has suggested that even the simplest and seemingly most straightforward metaphors cannot be readily decoded in the fashion suggested by either the substitution or comparison view. Consider, for example, the assertion that “man is a wolf.” While there may be standard beliefs about the characteristics of wolves (e.g., wolves are fierce, carnivorous, and treacherous) that the metaphor is expected to call to mind, other equally well-known attributes of wolves are somehow being neglected (e.g., wolves are four footed and have a fur pelt). Which characteristics of the secondary subject of the metaphor, “wolves,” are regarded as relevant and which are regarded as irrelevant will depend upon the perceived attributes of the principal subject of the metaphor, “man.”

The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man a “wolf” is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on. Each of these implied assertions has now to be made to fit the principal subject (man) either in normal or in abnormal senses. If the metaphor is at all appropriate, this can be done—up to a point at least. A suitable hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject. But these implications will *not* be those comprised in the commonplaces *normally* implied by literal uses of “man.” The new implications must be determined by the pattern of implications associated with literal uses of the word “wolf.” Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in “wolf-language” will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, *organizes* our view of man (Black, 1962, p. 41).⁴

³ “There are . . . many contexts (including nearly all the interesting ones) where the meaning of a metaphorical expression has to be reconstructed from the speaker’s intention (and other clues) because the broad rules of standard usage are too general to supply the information needed. When Churchill, in a famous phrase, called Mussolini ‘that *utensil*,’ the tone of voice, the verbal setting, the historical background, helped to make clear *what* metaphor was being used” (Black, 1962, p. 29).

⁴ However, a zoologist who knew a great deal about wolves would be unlikely to interpret the metaphor “man is a wolf” in exactly the same way as one whose knowledge of wolves was less reliable and less detailed. Similarly, “men who take wolves to be reincarnations of dead humans will give the statement ‘man is a wolf’ an interpretation different from the one [we] have been assuming” (Black, 1962, p. 40), as will contemporary feminists. For example, the metaphor “marriage is a zero-sum game” (discussed in Black, 1977, pp. 443–44) will be more meaningful the more one knows about game theory.

To remedy the limitations of the substitution and comparison views of metaphor, Black (1962; 1977; 1978), building on the work of Richards (1936), has proposed a third approach, an interaction view of metaphor, which we may paraphrase (Black, 1977, pp. 441–43).

A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, identified as the primary subject and the secondary one. The metaphorical utterance works by applying to the primary subject a set of implications that is predictable of the secondary subject. An interpretation of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, and suppresses features of both the primary and the secondary subject so as to construct an isomorphism between the two. In the context of a particular metaphoric statement, the two subjects interact in that the presence of the primary subject incites the reader to select some of the secondary subject's properties that "fit" the primary subject and the presence of the secondary subject incites the reader to select for properties of the primary subject that can be "matched" to characteristics of the secondary subject.

In Black's view (and ours), a metaphorical statement demands selection, organization, and projection, in short, "a creative response from a competent reader" (Black, 1977, p. 442). Moreover, any attempt to translate a metaphor into some set of literal statements will be misguided. Not only will the set vary with individual readers but, even if this variation is treated as insignificant, "the set of literal statements . . . will not have the same power to inform and enlighten as the original. For one thing, the implications previously left for a suitable reader to deduce for himself, with a nice feeling for their relative priorities and degrees of importance, are now presented explicitly as though having equal weight" (Black, 1962; p. 46).

Black has informally characterized the interaction view of metaphor in terms of "a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. . . . Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be organized by the screen's structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen. . . . We can say that the principal subject is 'seen through' the metaphorical expression—or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is 'projected upon' the field of the subsidiary subject" (Black, 1962, p. 41).

My own preferred metaphor to characterize the interaction view is that a metaphor is a wardrobe. We try out the clothes in the wardrobe on the principal subject to see which fit. Having tried the garments one at a time, even if many don't fit, we see if we can come up with a combination that comprises a matching (and fitting) outfit—one that covers the principal subject (or at least doesn't leave too many ragged edges).⁵

⁵ Of course, if most of the wardrobe doesn't fit (or at least doesn't appear to), then the metaphor is apt to be a failure. "It may seem justified to speak of the metaphor as creating connections, but nothing intelligible can be created *ex nihilo*. . . . When the author presents the metaphor to his audience, its effectiveness depends upon whether the imagery evoked can send the au-

While metaphor is sometimes used as a generic term that encompasses virtually all other figures of speech, by defining it as characterizing an object in a way not meant to be taken literally, one needn't take such an extreme position to recognize that certain tropes (in particular, allusion) can often be treated as special cases of metaphor. In particular, like metaphor, allusion can have a power to enlighten by creating a coherent pattern that is imposed upon a series of otherwise rather disjointed observations. The allusion described in the next section, Richard Nixon as Pinocchio, can serve just such a role.

RICHARD NIXON AS PINOCCHIO

The straightforward application of Black's interaction view of metaphor to a case of use of allusion for political satire can be demonstrated with an excerpt drawn from a comic monologue by David Frye—from his early-1970s routine called "Richard Nixon Superstar"—which portrays Nixon's childhood and adolescence.

"Hello, Betty? This is Dick Nixon. Uh, Dick Nixon from school. I've been sitting behind you for five years. That's right. Pinocchio."

How are we to interpret the allusion "Richard Nixon as Pinocchio"? To say "Richard Nixon is like Pinocchio" doesn't help us much unless we know what characteristics of Pinocchio are to be attributed to Nixon. When I asked students in my class in political satire to adumbrate the characteristics of Pinocchio, they drew up a reasonably long list. For example, Pinocchio is a wooden puppet who had a very long nose, and told lies, and telling lies made his nose grow longer. But Pinocchio also wanted to be human and eventually succeeds in becoming human after he learns to stop lying. Furthermore, he goes for a ride in the belly of a whale, is created by a puppet maker named Geppetto, and has a friend called Jiminy Cricket.⁶ Which of these characteristics are relevant to deciphering the allusion?

In the context of the Frye routine, one might think that it is sufficient to realize that Richard Nixon is usually caricatured by emphasizing his long nose, presumably the feature by which Betty remembers him. Thus, we might decode the metaphor as "Richard Nixon has a long nose" or "Richard Nixon, like Pinocchio, has a long nose." But note that to interpret the allusion we look not just to the characteristics of Pinocchio but also to the characteristics of Richard Nixon—to see what match-ups between the two sets of characteristics seem to make sense in the given context. Finding a suitable match yields an

dience down various paths that ultimately will reveal those relationships" (Zashin and Chapman 1974, pp. 301–302). We reject the view of some philosophers (e.g., Davidson, 1979, p. 30) that "there are no unsuccessful metaphors." (See also Balbus, 1975; Booth, 1979; Ortony, 1979; Perkins, 1975; Richards, 1936; Sacks, 1979; Streicher, 1967.)

⁶ Most American students are familiar with the story of Pinocchio via the Walt Disney cartoon, which contains a number of elements not in the original fairy tale written by Collodi.

“aha” sensation that is crucial to our enjoyment of the satire. However, the notion that the only “relevant” attribute of Pinocchio is his wooden nose is far too simplistic.

The allusion to Nixon as Pinocchio works on more than one level. Nixon was perceived by many as physically stiff (wooden) in his gestures, a cold personality who very much wanted to be thought of as just one of the guys (human). Enemies of Nixon (the routine is pre-Watergate) certainly regarded him as a liar. Moreover, close students of Nixon’s career were aware of the role of Murray Chotiner as the mastermind (puppet maker) of Nixon’s early political career. However, only the most highly sophisticated members of the audience would be able to recognize the last similarity between Nixon and Pinocchio.

Thus, while not all the characteristics of Pinocchio fit Nixon, enough do so as to be able to render intelligible a metaphor that can work simultaneously at several different levels. However, different listeners will read into the allusion different meanings, depending both upon what is recalled about Pinocchio and upon what they know or believe about Richard Nixon. Hence, there is no single translation of the allusion (cf. Zashin and Chapman, 1974, pp. 297–98). Nonetheless, this is a rich allusion with a variety of aspects that fit the subjects. Thus, most of us, I suspect, would find Frye’s use of Pinocchio to characterize Nixon as a successful use of allusion.

In addition to metaphor, analogy, and allusion, the satirist’s lexicon contains a repertoire of devices, such as hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche, and pun. Cartoons, in particular, abound in visual analogues to these figures of speech (see, e.g., Black, 1977; Conrad, 1974; Editor, 1978; Feiffer, 1968; Freeman, 1975; Hess and Kaplan, 1974; Westin, 1979). In this brief note, however, we focus on the use of allusion. (For a detailed inventory of literary devices see Lanham, 1969.)⁷

⁷ Black (1962) regards metaphorical statements as having two components: the *focus*—the term or phrase that is being used metaphorically; and the *frame*—the remainder of the sentence. If we substitute “in a nonliteral fashion” for “metaphorically” in the above definition of the focus of a metaphor, we can define the focus and the frame of any figure of speech that involves a nonliteral use of terms (e.g., synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole). Analysis of many figures of speech used in a satirical context is often facilitated by regarding the meaning of the trope to derive from an interaction between its focus (nonliteral component) and its frame (its direct or indirect subjects and the context in which they are embedded). Contrast, for example, the metaphor “He was shielded behind a cloak of anonymity” with the metonymy “The CIA shielded him behind its cloak of anonymity.” In addition to the contrast between the active and the passive verb forms used in the two expressions, the latter differs from the former in that the link between “cloak” and “cloak and dagger” (i.e., spying) is far more pronounced because of the interaction between “cloak of anonymity” (the nonliteral expression) and “CIA.” Similarly, if we compare “the CIA shielded him behind a cloak of anonymity” with “the IRS shielded him behind a cloak of anonymity,” I would argue “cloak of anonymity” is apt to connote “a spy in from the cold” in the one case and “faceless bureaucrats” in the other. What has changed is not the metaphor but the context in which it is to be interpreted.

It is critical for the audience to “get the joke,” to be able to decide the satirical allusion. Contemporary American satirists are more likely to take their references from current movies (e.g., *Jaws*, *Superman*, *Star Wars*) than from such traditional sources as the Bible, Greek mythology, and Shakespeare. Such topical references lend spice to political satire, but only at the cost of making such satire as skits and political cartoons appear dated in a short time. However, the more recondite the allusion the less likely it is to be understood, and, even for college-trained readers, mythological and classic literary references may be incomprehensible. To compensate for this, satirists who use literary and historical allusions often try to provide enough clues to the reader so that the central thrust is clear even to those unfamiliar with the allusion.

However, those unfamiliar with an allusion may still miss some elements of the cartoon’s implicit message. For example, a 1974 Conrad cartoon (Conrad, 1974) depicting Richard Nixon as Richard II, even though a caption from Shakespeare is included, is not an allusion that most people could grasp. While the “politics of failure” might seem the core message, heightened by the similarity in names, even the sophisticated reader may wonder exactly what else, if anything, Conrad has in mind. In a 1950s cartoon from the *Chicago Tribune* (Hess and Kaplan, 1974) depicting the United Nations as a Trojan horse that would bring “alien spies and agents” into the United States, the horse is not labeled. The Trojan horse was presumably a reference with which the cartoonist expected *Tribune* readers to be familiar.

In 1974 a cartoon appeared in the *National Review* (a die-hard Nixon defender), which was a takeoff on a series of English prints featuring dogs in human roles. The satirical thrust of this cartoon falls flat for two reasons: first, because the identity between the senators on the Judiciary Committee and the breeds of dogs by which they are represented is not well established; second, because the political point of the cartoon is not clear. Few others than dog fanciers have clear-cut images of the characteristics of various breeds. While Sam Ervin as a bulldog seems apt, should I regard the portrait of Nixon-defender Gurney as a collie as a compliment? Given the conservative proclivities of the *National Review* (and in the light of my own fondness for Lassie and for stories by Albert Payson Terhune), I take the answer in this case to be yes. Are the breeds identified as Republicans (or as Nixon supporters) generally superior to those identified with the Democrats (or Nixon haters) on the committee? I can’t tell! Moreover, what is the cartoon all about? Are we to take this to be a portrait of the impeachment investigation as a pack of hunting hounds in full scent after the quarry or as a pack of low curs, or are we simply to be amused by the transmogrifications? The chief defect of the cartoon is its failure to communicate a clear message.

Satirical allusion fails when the most obvious elements of the match-up between the primary and the secondary subject are incongruent with the satiric thrust. A good illustration of such a failed allusion is an early-1970s cartoon

in a university student newspaper portraying Nixon dressed in a Santa Claus suit driving a sleigh of reindeer labeled Exxon, Shell, Mobil, and so on, laden with bundles of goodies labeled “excess profits,” “oil depletion allowance.” Here the allusion fails because the primary attributes of Santa Claus (a kindly old man who rewards good children with presents—“He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake”) are at odds with the cartoonist’s aim of suggesting Nixon as unjustly rewarding big oil. Also, portraying Nixon in the driver’s seat is at odds with the cartoonist’s almost certain intent to portray Nixon as a servant of big business.

The examples that we have considered illustrate our five central points. Richard Nixon as Pinocchio illustrates the point that allusion can work on more than one level; the richness of the interpretation will depend upon the knowledge (and political views) of the observer. Richard Nixon as Richard II illustrates the limits of classical allusion for an audience unfamiliar with the necessary background to translate it. Richard Nixon as Santa Claus demonstrates the need for the key elements of the match-up between primary and secondary subject to operate in a mutually reinforcing fashion so as to sustain the thrust of the satire. Portraying Nixon as Santa Claus driving a sleigh with labeled reindeer and labeled gifts formally satisfied the requirements for allusion but failed to provide a coherent substantive interpretation of the allusion’s meaning.⁸ Finally, comparing Pinocchio to the other two uses of allusion suggests the difference between a successful allusion, potentially rich in detail and relatively easy to decipher at least at a surface level, and less successful allusions—ones that fail either the decipherability test or the substantive test of conveying a credible message to most members of the intended audience.

Manuscript submitted 12 February 1988

Final manuscript received 15 May 1988

⁸ However, figures of speech work best if they are not hackneyed. Consider two cartoons: one shows Uncle Sam trying to balance his checkbook—which is shown as overdrawn; the second shows President Carter steering a ship (labeled “Ship of State” and depicted as a paddle-wheel steamer) down a reef-strewn river on a dark and stormy night (with reefs labeled inflation, unemployment, energy crisis, etc.)—with other figures (labeled Congress, the bureaucracy, etc.) fighting for control of the wheel. Implicit in these cartoons are political arguments: “Uncle Sam has to balance his budget the same as any other citizen” and “the Ship of State requires a firm hand at the helm; she cannot have more than one pilot lest she go aground.” Both are arguments that rest on analogy and metaphor—and this remains true whether we express them in verbal or in visual form. However, both are clichéd and thus lack impact.

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