

Ian Kinane's
*Isn't It Ironic? Irony in
Contemporary Popular Culture*
(2021)
Review

AIMEE HINDS SCOTT

This edited volume opens—of course—with an analysis of Alanis Morissette's 1995 single 'Ironic'. Kinane's introduction notes the variety in Morissette's infamously perplexing lyrics, and the contributions within *Isn't It Ironic?: Irony in Contemporary Popular Culture* duly follow Morissette's example, albeit minus the confusion. The essays widely explore the multivalency of irony in popular culture from ephemera to the cinema, and through satire, humour, and political discourse. Many of the texts analysed here are well-trodden ground for scholars of popular culture, but the essays recontextualise familiar topics such as James Bond, black metal music and the Marvel Cinematic Universe through the lens of their (sometimes unexpected) engagements with irony.

Kinane's introduction ably familiarises the reader with the various ambiguities and difficulties presented by the idea of irony, a concept notoriously difficult to define. Although Kinane assures us that the collection is concerned with culture as a priority over debates about definitions (8), working definitions of irony

are provided by several of the contributors within their own essays, aiding the reader in following authors' specific lines of enquiry. All of the essays are convincing in their arguments, adding to the conversations around their subjects as cultural texts and where appropriate, the political discourses into which they play. Published as part of Routledge's *The Cultural Politics of Media and Popular Culture* series, the contributors appropriately avoid simply identifying the presence of irony or satire in the texts that they review, instead exploring the social, cultural and/or political ramifications of the turn to irony. The critical analyses are carefully provided with solid foundations in relevant theoretical frameworks.

The first chapter, Matthew Leporati and Rob Jacklosky's 'Peeling *The Onion*: Pop culture satire in the writing classroom' opens the collection through a discussion of the pedagogical advantages of teaching satire through writing assignments. Opening with anecdotal evidence from the classroom, Leporati and Jacklosky note the resistance to satirical modes among students and illustrate the effects of contemporary political discourse on students' understandings of, and openness to, rhetorical satire. Providing a pedagogical answer to the problem of students' fear of 'post-truth' politics and their lack of comprehension around nuance, Leporati and Jacklosky helpfully produce a blueprint for teachers of satire and ironical texts to facilitate their students' comprehension and enjoyment.

Kinane's own chapter, 'For your eyes only?: Brexit, Bond and British meme culture', sets the tone for the rest of the volume. Deftly demonstrating the importance of treating seemingly ephemeral forms of cultural expression such as memes as capable of holding and disseminating political meaning, Kinane considers a specific set of memes featuring James Bond and the Queen derived from a television segment performed during the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games. Kinane establishes the existence of layers of ironic political discourse around Brexit across the political spectrum, with particular emphasis on the identification of Boris Johnson with James Bond, and the ambiguous memes which call upon fictional structures of power to intervene in a real political event.

The next three chapters form a group considering irony in music. In 'About 136': Bob Dylan's democratising irony', Simon Stow explores the music of Bob Dylan and its utility in revealing the democratic possibilities of irony. Via a survey of irony in Plato, Socrates and Attic comedy, Stow neatly argues for readings of Dylan that demonstrate irony's positive political power. Mary W. Campbell's 'New irony and old sincerity: How the metamodern and the post-secular meet in indie rock' analyses the lyrics of Sufjan Stevens and Craig Finn of The Hold

Steady, both of whom she contends employ irony in order to reject it in favour of religious and mystical devotion and authenticity. Concerns with authenticity continue into the final chapter in this cluster, ‘Sarcastic Turbelence’: Irony, seriousness and ambiguity in black metal music culture’, in which Owen Coggins examines claims of authenticity and the production of ambiguity through ironic inversion in black metal and its fandom. Reading the black metal music scene through a broad lens encompassing its history and adopted aesthetics, Coggins demonstrates the instability of black metal’s claims to seriousness and truth.

The following two chapters are focussed on cinema: Brian Brems’ ‘Funny people: Comedic performance and irony in *Knocked Up* and *This is 40*’, and Camilo Peralta’s ‘Irony and Iron Man: The Marvel Cinematic Universe and the post-modern rejection of values’. Brems astutely questions the efficacy of Judd Apatow’s directorial decisions to prioritise ironic and distancing improvised comedy over emotional narrative in his films. Brems asserts that where Apatow leans on the actors’ ability to improvise to lend authenticity and emotion within his films, this ironically leads to a lack of identification between the audience and his characters where he seeks it most. Scrutinising the modern hero narrative, Peralta argues that irony in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, following a blueprint set by the *Iron Man* series of films, is symptomatic of modern avoidance of formerly heroic values around serious issues such as love and death.

The final two chapters concentrate on television. Elizabeth Currin and Chad E. Harris investigate the various methods by which irony is expressed through contrasting power differentials between royals and ‘commoners’ and children and parents in *The Crown* (‘We could all do with some school’: The miseducation of Elizabeth and Charles in Netflix’s *The Crown*). Finally, in ‘Human after all: The irony of *Black Mirror*’, Thomas Britt appraises several episodes of Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, noting the irony inherent in its stark warnings to viewers about the possibilities of the (near) future whilst relying on their participation in the very behaviour that is being satirised. Through close readings of episodes across multiple series of the programme, Britt examines the consistent presence of irony in the series’ relationship with technological tools, with them often causing deep dissatisfaction or disaster for characters where they are designed to make life easier.

Kinane brings together a lively set of papers in this volume that all are highly readable and informative. A handful of the essays would benefit from a more thorough explication of their choice of case study, and it would have been fruitful for some of the contributions to have engaged more tightly with specific as-

pects of the audiences of their chosen texts to give political and social depth to their analyses. Nonetheless, this is—without irony—an accomplished set of papers that should prove widely useful to students and scholars of popular culture.

WORK CITED

Kinane, Ian, editor. *Isn't It Ironic? Irony in Contemporary Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2021.