

American Critic: Satire and Political Discourse in Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*

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Abstract: This article focuses on how critical reviews of *Bulworth* can be said to draw attention to political discourse when discussing the film's satirical aspirations. This entails a consideration of contemporary American reviews, which are discussed in relation to a conceptualization of satire in terms of a discursive practice. It is concluded that satire is understood, in quite unproblematic terms, both as a determinant for and as attributing a tone to the political discourse.

Keywords: Satire—*Bulworth*—discursive practice—reviews—political discourse—American politics

During the winter and spring of 1998 the scandal concerning President Clinton's sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinski made big headlines in the press. Around the same time several films that explicitly or implicitly touched on this issue caused further reactions. For instance, Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog*, released in late December of 1997, anticipated the scandal by founding its premise on a president who has a sexual affair with a young woman but tries to conceal it from the public. In March of 1998 Mike Nichols' *Primary Colors* represented Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign by having a southern governor (John Travolta), made up to resemble Clinton, dodging accusations from women he has had affairs with. Enter Warren Beatty, who screened his film *Bulworth* for Washington insiders in April of 1998, some weeks before its wider release on May

15: "All this time that's wasted talking about this issue of sex is time that would be better spent talking about the disparity of wealth, race, class and the tyranny of big money in politics."¹ Here Beatty, a long-time liberal political activist, shows his hand, and the film confirms these sentiments. In *Bulworth*, a California senator (Warren Beatty) suffers a personal crisis and hires an assassin to kill him during the campaign; he is disillusioned and has nothing to lose, and so he begins to spew hard political truths to his voters and financial backers. However, the actual film will receive no particular attention here, at least not directly.

This article focuses on how critical reviews of *Bulworth* can be said to draw attention to political discourse when discussing the film's satirical aspirations. The hypothesis is that *Bulworth* communicates intentionally about politics through the discursive practice of satire in order to engage and interact with the world of politics.

Conceptual Framework

In his book *On the Discourse of Satire* Paul Simpson argues for a theoretical model of satire that not only emphasizes the satirical text's nature as utterance, but also its relation to context, participants, and frameworks of knowledge. The model Simpson proposes is based on the idea of satire as *discursive practice*, and as such it is made up of "three discursive subject positions which are subject to constant shift and (re)negotiation." These are the satirist, the satiree, and the satirized, the first two of which are ratified within the discursive event. The satirized is usually not invited into the discourse.² In practice the three positions are of course inseparable as they really constitute an interactive event, not something that is textually inherent. However, as far as this article is concerned, focus lies on theoretically distinguishing the subject position of the satiree and empirically explicating the actual understanding of a satirical text. Of interest is how a number of film critics interact, based on context and frameworks of knowledge, with a

1 Quoted in Maureen Dowd, "The Bulworth Doctrine," *New York Times* (Late Edition (East Coast)), April 29, 1998, p. A25.

2 Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003, p. 8. A case where this might not be true is *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992), in which the satire of Hollywood at times is quite affectionate. The film is packed with movie stars playing, and making fun of, themselves.

specific satirical film, an interaction that re-contextualizes a discourse into new texts (reviews). I am interested, here, mainly in the understanding and appropriation of satire, what Simpson calls satirical *uptake*, a linguistic-pragmatic notion borrowed from speech act theory:

[S]atire has no ontological existence [...] the status of 'satire' is something that is conferred upon a text and this conferral is as much a consequence of the way the text is processed and interpreted as it is of the way it is produced and disseminated. The concept of perlocution in satirical discourse [...] relies heavily on structured patterns of inferencing by the satirist; patterns of inferencing which require *ab initio* the resolution of the certain elements in textual organisation which then push the satirist towards a phase of text processing where a satirical interpretation may (or may not) be accepted.³

This means that an uptake of satire is dependent not only on the text (or the film) but also on the act of reading (or watching) as well. I would further contend that central to this argument is an emphasis on situation, or historical context. The interaction is initialized by the viewer in a specific and historically determined situation, and it is based on frameworks of knowledge and experience.

The present text operates under the assumptions that the film and the viewer are both important for the creation of meaning, that the historical context is central for the interaction between viewer and film, and that meaning and significance are determined inside this contextual point of intersection.⁴ This means that historical circumstances and frameworks of knowledge are essential for understanding a particular film.⁵ Thus, what this article aims to do is to analyze an interactive event, not elucidate a particular film. However, it should be recognized that such an aim will also clarify the first and third subject positions to some extent, if only through the eyes of the satirists.

In her analysis of the historical reception of *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983), Janet Staiger discusses the interpretive problem of parody, and several of

3 Simpson (2003), pp. 153-154.

4 See Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films—Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 45-48.

5 This view is anchored in a neoformalist conception of how films work and how viewers infer meanings based on pre-constituted mental schemata. Each viewing of a film exists in a specific situation, and the viewer cannot assimilate the film without using his or her observational skills, which have evolved through the meeting with other works of art and through everyday experiences. Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 6.

her arguments are relevant in terms of satire as well. Parody (and satire) requires extra-textual referencing because “internal evidence in a text could never be sufficient to settle critical disagreements about the meaning of the text or to what it refers.” Parody, she argues, implies intent and a referent, and the explication of the form is a question of determining voice and tone.⁶ Thus, there is more to consider than the fact that satire communicates intentionally about a referent. The relationship between a satirical film and the referent is characterized by a particular tone, and only by recognizing all these aspects can a film be interpreted as satire.

In *Bulworth* the referents, or the targets, are quite clearly defined—they are mainly found in the American political sphere—but concerning satire in general the nature of the target can be quite elusive. This means that satirical targets must be determined for each specific case, not predetermined based on general ‘common sense’ conceptions. As satire, *Bulworth* is intrinsically linked to its contemporary political context. This restriction has repercussions on the shelf life of its satire, because it derives meaning from the historical context and yet references to contexts are transitory.⁷ Thus, there emerges a problem of immediacy, which has been acknowledged by Duncan Stuart Beard who, like Staiger, argues that satire is not inherent in the text:

Satire operates within specific cultural, political, and historical contexts and depends on an understanding of these contexts in order to operate effectively. No text can be considered ‘essentially satirical.’ Because once the particular extra-textual elements that imbue a text with its particular meaning are removed, little potential for satire remains.⁸

In order to be understood, a satirical film requires that viewers are sufficiently informed about the relevant context. The referential function actualizes the theoretical question if it is possible to identify a historical world to which satire refers, which is something that can be seen to have positivist implications.⁹ However, in an empirical sense it is clearly possible to determine an object of attack, both in terms of the film’s satiric cues, and as here by studying how the film was discussed at the time of its release.

6 Staiger (1992), p. 197.

7 See Charles A. Knight, *Literature of Satire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 45. Knight holds this as a general restriction for satire.

8 Duncan Stuart Beard, “Local Satire with a Global Reach: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*,” in John Alberti (ed.), *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004, p. 289.

9 Knight (2004), pp. 45, 47.

Another potential constraint for satire has grown out of the abiding legal interest it provokes. Robert C. Elliott has identified attempts at banning satire all the way back to its beginnings as magical utterances. Libel claims, censorship, prohibition, and legal retribution have accompanied satire throughout its history, although with questionable effect. The relationship between satire and law is an important energizer for the development of new forms of satire and the methods it uses. Inspired by Freud, Elliott argues that social pressures have subjected impulses of hostility to restrictions and repressions. While the hostility remains, the physical violence that once may have resulted from it was forbidden by law and replaced by verbal invectives, and finally, as civilization set in, even that weapon became inappropriate. These kinds of restrictions led to the development of wit, an indirect weapon of hostility:

Once wit has been brought into the service of the satiric spirit, then all the rhetorical maneuvers by which the [...] satirist achieves his end become available: irony, innuendo, burlesque, parody, allegory—all the devices of indirection which helps make palatable an originally unacceptable impulse. It is a nice complication, however, that the devices which make satire acceptable to polite society at the same time sharpen its point.¹⁰

In other words, satire, in an effort to protect itself, has been developed towards being a more indirect mode, which affects how and if a viewer perceives a film as satire. For satire to work, the viewer needs a certain understanding of the relevant context as well as a savviness regarding its formal and stylistic workings. This means that an explication of a satirical film benefits from taking into account the relevant historical context and how it was discussed at that particular time and place. What it also means is that thanks to devices of indirection satire can be made more palatable for larger audiences. This is especially significant for satire in film, where financial prerequisites are particularly strong determinants for the production.

The main strategy of satire is irony, which Simpson categorizes in three phases. He argues that satire “functions through the instantiation of a discursive *prime*,” which activates an anterior discourse event. The prime is an ‘echoic’ utterance in the sense that it is dependent on a previously existing discourse, but “through the repositioning of the ostensible speaking source of the text,” ironic distance is affected. Furthermore, the prime is

10 Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, pp. 261-264.

complemented by a text-internal *dialectic*, which functions antithetically and gives rise to an oppositional, and thus ironic, relationship between the two.¹¹ However, it is the third ironic phase of satire that is most relevant in terms of this article's aspirations. That phase has to do with a viewer's comprehension of satire and of the inferencing strategies that are employed. The viewer (or satiree) "works through the ironic phases embodied in both the prime and dialectic components of satirical discourse, resulting in the injection into the discursive event of a third ironic phase, an 'irony of conferral'."¹² Satire requires that the irony is recognized and assigned to the text by the viewer, which also leaves room for a viewer to assign irony to a film without it having been intended as ironic. However, such cases lie beyond the scope of this article.

***Bulworth* and American Political Discourse**

If one considers the reviewers not only as viewers or satirees, but also (or rather) as writers in interaction with *Bulworth*, certain aspects of individuality and commonality emerge. On the one hand they distinguish themselves in terms of judgment, focus, and political views, but on the other hand there are also clear similarities. Staiger writes:

For each review-as-utterance, the reviewer posits [the film] as one object of reference; a second object, the imaged speech of an Other to which [the film] refers; a tone to the relation (such as parodic); and, as a fourth variable, the intertexts of the reviewer's own listeners.¹³

In other words, the reviews refer to *Bulworth* itself (as film), to its objects of attack, to its tone (satiric), and they implicitly refer to their own readers. The reviews are thus not only responses to the film, but also bearers of re-contextualized discourse.

Concerning the film as film, the similarities and differences between the reviews are mostly tied up with judgments about Warren Beatty as filmmaker, going back to previous works such as *Reds* (1981) and *Dick Tracy* (1990). Beatty is no "stylist when it comes to directing" as one critic posits,¹⁴

11 Simpson (2003), pp. 8-9.

12 Simpson (2003), p. 153.

13 Staiger (1992), p. 205.

14 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Rocking the Vote," *Chicago Reader*, May, 1998. Review retrieved from <http://>

nor is the messy film in any sense perfect.¹⁵ However, there are reviews that are more positive as well, where the direction is seen as energetic, the camera style as lively, and the editing as pacey.¹⁶ These sentiments are of course very much in line with the formal conventions of the review genre, as are judgments of the work of the various actors, but they do not constitute the focus of this article, that is, the discourse about American politics through satire, and how it is taken up by the critics.

American politics is basically the framing discourse that *Bulworth* is placed within by all the critics, even if what can constitute politics is quite broadly defined. Some focus on aspects of race, on stereotypical representations of blacks and Jews and the divide between race and wealth in America, some on Beatty as both political activist and Hollywood big shot.¹⁷ Others take hold of the film's critique of the actual political system, which by far is the most common point of intersection among the reviews. Therefore, it deserves particular attention.

Influential critic Roger Ebert holds that the film "seems to reflect a rising tide of discontent with the current American political discourse," thus comparing it to *Wag the Dog* and *Primary Colors*, and that it is "about an archetypal character who increasingly seems to stand for our national mood."¹⁸ Public trust in government has been in decline since the 1960s,¹⁹ so while it is likely that this tide of discontent has been in effect for quite some time, it is nonetheless significant that Ebert explicitly recognizes aspects of political life in America as determinants for the film's interaction with the contemporary context. In particular he references a line of dialog in the film where Senator Bulworth is accused of being "old liberal wine trying to pour himself into a new conservative bottle," which, Ebert contends, symbolizes the loss of meaning for labels such as liberal and conservative, Democrat and Repub-

www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/1998/0598/05228.html.

15 Roger Ebert, "Bulworth," *Chicago Sun Times*, May 22, 1998. Review retrieved from: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19980522/REVIEWS/805220301/1023>.

16 Todd McCarthy, "Bulworth," *Variety*, May 11, 1998. Review retrieved from: <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117477466.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=0>.

17 See N'gai Croal, "Same Ol' White Negro," in *Newsweek*, Vol. 131, Issue 20, May 18, 1998, p. 72; David Ansen, "Shock to the System," in *Newsweek*, Vol. 131, Issue 20, May 18, 1998, p. 70; Peter Travers, "Movies: Rappin' with Warren B.," in *Rolling Stone*, Issue 787, May 28, 1998, pp. 197-198; Stanley Kauffmann, "Color Lines," in *New Republic*, Vol. 218, Issue 23, June 8, 1998, pp. 24-26.

18 Ebert (1998).

19 Joseph Nye Jr., "Introduction," in Joseph Nye Jr., et al. (eds.), *Why People Don't Trust Government*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 1-18.

lican.²⁰ Similarly, in the radical leftist film magazine *Cineaste*, Pat Dowell regards the film as an odd and melancholy political satire that deals with the crimes of politicians in general and “the shame of the Democrats in particular,” and for Dan Georgakas it “slashes at the two-party system in America, corporate domination of economic life, corrupted mass media, and racial injustice.” The hard-core politics of *Bulworth* appealed to the critics writing in *Cineaste*, which is to be expected given the character of the magazine, and they discussed the film in relation to how it, thanks to the controversies surrounding it, suffered at the box office given the new Hollywood economics.²¹

Bulworth is placed within a discourse of discontent with American party politics, and this increase in skepticism and suspicion of political authorities is clearly visible in the output of 1990s American cinema. The overtly political films of the 1990s can be summed up as reflecting “a deep cynicism about the political system and its institutions.”²² This, then, offers one potential reason for the many satirical political films of the period, since these often attack elected authorities and political institutions. W. Lance Bennett sees the rising costs of campaigning required to assemble publics and maintain their support as a reason for the growing cynicism among citizens. Rising political costs strengthen the influence of business interests on parties and elected officials:

An irony of this vicious political cycle is that citizens often grow cynical about the corruption and insincerity of politics due to the staggering costs and formulaic results of polling, marketing and communication—even though those costs are driven in part by the challenges of reaching ever more isolated and skeptical individuals.²³

A critical view of the role of money in the political processes is an aspect that several reviews attribute to *Bulworth*. For instance, in a review for *Salon.com*, an online magazine focusing on American liberal politics, health

20 Ebert (1998).

21 Pat Dowell, “The Politics of Self-Absorption” and Dan Georgakas “Reviving the Sixties,” both in “Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth*: Will the Real *Bulworth* Please Stand Up?,” *Cineaste*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, December 15, 1998, pp. 6-11.

22 Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005, p. 201.

23 W. Lance Bennett, “Lifestyle Politics and Citizen-Consumers: Identity, Communication and Political Action in Late Modern Society,” in John Corner and Dick Pels (eds.), *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2003, pp. 147-148.

insurance companies are referenced in particular and the film is held to be critical of how both political parties are dependent on these companies' donations.²⁴ In the context of the 1990s it is easy to draw parallels to the failure of Bill Clinton's health reform, which would have provided universal health coverage to all Americans if the opposition had not been able to discredit it through a successful public relations campaign, and if the issue itself had not been so polarized. There are, however, no explicit references to that context in the review material.

Bulworth is held to be quite diverse in terms of its critique. Jonathan Rosenbaum, writing for the alternative newsweekly *Chicago Reader*, holds that

Beatty sounds off on issues of the 80s and 90s—public financing of elections, the inflating cost of health-care insurance, the corporate ownership of networks, the absence of black leaders, the erosion of inner-city school and job programs, the decimation of welfare, the hypocrisies of the gulf war—combining them with reflections on the venality of politics and the media, which are again seen as virtually interchangeable.²⁵

However, to go along with the terms of this critique, Rosenbaum argues that it is necessary to “agree [with the film] that Beatty and Bulworth have more common cause with inner-city victims than with Rupert Murdoch.”²⁶ Thus, while the critical dimension of the film is understood, acceptance of the premises of the critique is not easily given.

In some reviews there are also visible references to a general agenda of the film and to what can be interpreted as Beatty's (the satirist) intent or aspirations. Janet Maslin, writing for *The New York Times*, regards *Bulworth* as a political satire with a liberal agenda and a cynical view of political puppeteering,²⁷ thus loosely relating satire to cynicism, which is in line with the skepticism and suspicion of elected authorities and the political system that was manifest in the American culture of the 1990s. Dowell argues that the film's political aspirations are eclipsed by the spotlight that illuminates Beatty himself, as star actor and director.²⁸ The recognition of

24 Charles Taylor, “Bulworth's Righteous Wrath,” *Salon*, May 15, 1998. Review retrieved from http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/reviews/1998/05/cov_15review.html; Ebert (1998); Dowell (1998), Georgakas (1998), pp. 6-11.

25 Rosenbaum (1998); See also Taylor (1998).

26 Rosenbaum (1998).

27 Janet Maslin, “White-Bread Senator Turns Homeboy” in *New York Times* (Late Edition, East Coast), May 15, 1998, p. E.1:19.

28 Dowell (1998), p. 6.

Beatty's star status as affecting the film is also visible in the review by Rosenbaum: "Beatty uses his character's alternating absurdity and lucidity to play daffy riffs on his own persona" and combines "bits of Beatty with the ruined ideals of the democratic party."²⁹ Indeed, *Bulworth* owes much to the fact that it was supported by a big name (Beatty) who had significant influence within the industry.³⁰ Edward Guthman acknowledges the fact that Beatty starred in, directed, produced, and co-wrote the film, and he argues that it is unlikely that "any other Hollywood power" could or would have put the story on screen.³¹ The film was a star-vehicle, but whether or not this helped its reception is difficult to confirm or disprove. In general its reviews were positive, but because of its limited box office success in the opening weeks it basically disappeared from American cinemas in less than a month: "Its peculiar blend of outlandish style and hard-core politics generated considerable controversy, but that attention needed time to translate into bigger audiences."³² Also, the fact that Beatty, "the rare American director with an overt political agenda,"³³ is known for his liberal ideas and political activism likely affected how the film was received. Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post*, usually regarded as having a liberal bias, understands *Bulworth's* message as founded on Beatty's persona as preacher and proselyte:

Hailing from the most radical sheik around, it's really a jeremiad from the left to the center of the Democratic Party, calling the flock home, hoping to rekindle vanished idealism and compassion, hoping to reignite the fire of activism and, by massive applications of shock, to stir up the juice of energy.³⁴

As is hinted at by the title of the review, Hunter sees the film as a call to the left founded on an argument that the ideals of the Democratic Party have been forgotten or ignored. The quote shows that Hunter moves beyond purely critical aspects of satire and explicates a deeper purpose, which is a

29 Rosenbaum (1998).

30 Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 95.

31 Edward Guthman, "Beatty's Rap: Hilarious 'Bulworth'—the Truth Sets a Senator Free," in *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 22, 1998, p. C1.

32 Dowell, Georgakas, and Boyd (1998), p. 6.

33 David Ansen (1998).

34 Stephen Hunter, "Beatty's 'Bulworth': A Call to the Left," in *Washington Post*, May 22, 1998; Collected from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bulworthhunter.htm>.

call for mobilization, and that could perhaps hint at a possibility of a greater potential for satire. It is not simply an attack through comic devices, but an attack with an implicit aim to rectify an undesirable situation. The understanding of the satirical communication is taken a step further by Hunter, which is demonstrated by his recognition, not only of a target but also of intent. Interestingly he also posits a source of that intent. Hunter, to some degree together with a few other critics, seems to represent an exemption from the generally held rule that regards satire as mainly presenting incisively critical attacks of real-world particulars.

A very explicit way of relating *Bulworth* to real-world particulars is exemplified by an editorial that uses the film to argue its point about 'real' events. The film is seen as a satire that pinpoints the "real-life truth of campaign finance," to criticize the bipartisan efforts by Congress to "preserve a system of campaign finance that amounts to legalized bribery." The points of departure for the editorial seem to be the efforts of House Speaker Newt Gingrich to block a campaign-reform bill that aimed to outlaw abuses of 'soft money' and the report that the 1996 Clinton campaign received a \$100,000 contribution from the Chinese army, and it argues that neither a film like *Bulworth* nor journalistic exposure seemed to deter Washington politicians from accepting these kinds of financial contributions.³⁵ The editorial actualizes the close proximity between the film and its contemporary political context, in part by the recognition of the thematic correlation, but mainly by the fact that it was used to help strengthen a political argument. This shows how *Bulworth* actually made an impact, however small, on American political discourse.

Conclusions

Generally, the critics seem to use the term satire as a way of attributing a tone or establishing the particular slant of the film's critique, and most often it is accompanied by the designation 'political,' which of course is a way to describe the film to potential viewers. It is clear that in terms of reviews of *Bulworth* the designation as satire is quite loosely linked to the conceptions of the contemporary political discourse.

In Hollywood the norm may be to dilute the incisiveness of satire or

35 Unsigned, "The Bulworth Critique," in *New York Times* (Late Edition, East Coast), May 24, 1998, p. 4-10.

to make it target established social norms, and when this is not the case the cause is usually the intervention of particular contextual circumstances. In the case of *Bulworth*, the essential components that enabled the critical power of the film were the achieved industrial influence and the commitment of the filmmaker.³⁶ The recognition of Beatty as central to the film's inception and to the attention it received is, as has been seen, confirmed by some critics, but the sentiment that Beatty's star status and performance overshadowed the film's satirical aims has also been demonstrated. Whatever the case, it is, however, clear that Beatty's position as star director and star actor, and as political activist, affected the ways in which the critics discussed the film's way of politicking through satire.

Another important consideration is the transfer that is made between the satiric communication and the historical context. The critics tend to base the actualization of satire on the existence and explication of a target, which fits with Staiger's argument that "considering context is a normal referential act by a reader who believes parody to be occurring."³⁷ Parody, it has been argued, functions in a similar way to satire in terms of always implying intent and an extra-textual referent. The reviews have shown that *Bulworth* exists within a liberal discourse, as do many of the reviews, which can be confirmed by taking Beatty's own political views into account, that it springs from discontent and recognition of ruined political ideals, and that it argues around political issues and criticizes certain societal ills. It is clear that the reviews generally actualize a very close proximity between *Bulworth* and the political context. It is impossible to draw conclusions from the material at hand in terms of how, and if, the film affected real people or policies. Nor is that an aim of this article, and it is indeed rare that a single film can be said to have that kind of effect. Instead it is possible to reach conclusions about how and in what terms the film was understood in a specific situation.

This article began by situating *Bulworth* in relation to the blatantly discernible scandal concerning Clinton's extra-marital indiscretions, which according to Beatty took up too much space both in the media and in the political discourse of the time. It is fitting, then, that the film's opening title announces that "the populace is unaroused," which is ironic considering that the very opposite was obviously true for Clinton. However, aside from Dowd, who directly quotes Beatty's own arguments for *Bulworth* being a

36 King (2002), p. 107.

37 Staiger (1992), p. 197.

reaction to the American preoccupation with sex, the critics that reviewed the film do not register this connection. Instead the common thread seems to be recognition of the film's satirical communication about aspects of the contemporary political discourse. The film 'attacks,' 'sounds off on,' 'engages with,' 'strikes at,' 'deals with,' 'slashes,' 'preaches on,' and 'criticizes' certain political issues. In other words, it communicates intentionally about American politics.

Implicitly one can recognize a correlation between how the critics understand *Bulworth* as political satire and the concept of political communication. For instance, Brian McNair has stressed intentionality as a founding characteristic for political communication, which has led him to define the concept as *purposeful communication about politics*.³⁸ This fits together with how the satire of *Bulworth* is understood, even if it leaves out the nature, or the form, of the communication. As argued, satire is a discursive practice that communicates in indirect ways by using irony and wit, but interestingly the examined reviews and articles make no mention of these strategies. Instead satire is understood as more direct and unproblematic, as a straightforward form of attack and critique. Valid reasons for this could perhaps be found in the actual film or in the restrictions that satire must operate under in the Hollywood economy.

38 Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (1995), London and New York: Routledge, 2007 (Fourth Edition), p. 4.

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