

Letters to the Editor

When satire isn't worth its salt

Any number of past wrongs don't make might right in the Balkans

WHEN Spitting Image is presented as a model for effective satire, we know we are in trouble. David Thomas's article on The Cutting Edge exhibition at the Barbican (Review Guardian, August 20) is not only shallow and ill-informed, but also dangerously reactionary in its implications.

The prerequisite of satire is not "a love of mischief and anarchy", but the determination to hold up for ridicule or denunciation what seems to the artist to be folly or vice. In other words, it has something to say. Spitting Image specialise in the far easier and (for the audience) less challenging art of the lampoon, which merely ridicules the physical or other personal characteristics of specific individuals. Mr Thomas's description of a Tory voter and his wife being temporarily convulsed by their Conservative Party "Last Supper", and then wandering on otherwise unaffected, is actually an illustration of the puppet-masters profound failure as satirical artists, rather than their success.

Whilst dismissing what he calls fifth form agit-prop, Mr Thomas is asking us to embrace instead schoolboys who cartoon their teachers with their trousers down as the inheritors of the mantle of Pope and Swift. When he goes on to suggest that artists are incapable of the "rationalism required for accurate political analysis", backing his argument by citing Jane Fonda's move from moral to

physical aerobics, one begins to wonder whether his own desperately limited analysis explains why Punch is no longer on our newsagent's shelves. Robert Clare, 36 Norreys Avenue, Oxford.

YOUR REVIEWERS of the John Heartfield exhibition, David Thomas and Tim Hilton, have made assumptions which have led them to the wrong conclusions. Even as a young man before the outbreak of the first world war (which he bitterly opposed), John Heartfield was already deeply disturbed by the lack of justice and humanism in Germany. This is precisely why he was motivated to channel his considerable artistic talents into the new technique of photomontage, which offered him a mass audience, rather than devote himself to the "fine arts" confined to art galleries.

He was first and foremost an artist and an innovator, not a photo-journalist. He was no "propagandist" either: propaganda was Goebbels technique, by which he sold the Nazi credo to the German people. Heartfield did his best to undo propaganda, on a shoestring and at tremendous personal risk. Publications like *Simplicissimus* (a sort of German Punch) would not have given him a hushouse, they did not have the guts.

Heartfield was neither deaf nor blind in post-war Germany, his nose remained unimpaired. His frequent and loud vocal criticisms, which I have personal

ally heard him deliver in the highest places, were dismissed as idiosyncratic by a new generation of functionaries. He turned to theatre design. Satire, and humour generally, was never a strong point of the GDR. They respected his contribution in the past, they even put his portrait on a postage stamp, but they didn't want or heed his opinions, nor for that matter, the recriminations of many other "oldtimers." Is it fair to expect him to have joined an opposition, which also contained a great many supporters of questionable affiliation (including neo-Nazis?)

Heartfield was not a "man of steel" but a creative and innovative artist with something to say, whose powerful visual images both shocked and opened many people's eyes — and isn't that one of art's major and vital functions? Barbara Cartledge, London NW3.

OH DAMN! According to David Thomas I "backed all the wrong horses" making photomontages supporting the GLC and CND, and against Rupert Murdoch and the Gulf War. If only Mr Thomas had advised me on which were likely to be "lost causes," I needn't have wasted my time. I could have been up there working for the Conservative Party, the Sun and the armaments industry. I could have been a winner. Peter Kennard, London N16.

DAVID THOMAS thinks CND's attitudes "naive to the point of madness." Not till I learnt that he was the last editor of Punch did I get the joke.

Of course it is better to have lovely Trident submarines and clapped out public transport, health, education and housing provision. We all feel so much safer don't we? What a sensible way to spend out billions. You can see the pensioners dancing in the streets. I would much sooner be mad with CND than sane with the last editor of Punch. Bruce Kent, Vice President CND, London N4.

MR THOMAS'S concern that any artist who embraces a political viewpoint will dull his satirical instinct is most illuminating. If only he'd been around 250 years ago, his insights no doubt would have been most influential on the careers of Pope and Swift, perhaps garnering us that satirical masterpiece, *The Chicken Song*, by his beloved Spitting Image, a quarter of a millennium earlier.

I take the invitation of a former Punch editor to write on the sorry state of British satire to be the inauguration of new feature policy in the Guardian. I fully expect to see Mike Tyson on That Important First Date, Noel Edmonds on *The Decline of British Television* and Norman Lamont on *Managing the Economy*, (whoops — a little bit of politics there!)

Tony Murray, Kidderminster, Worcs.

AS A long-standing pro-Yugoslav anti-fascist, I firmly believe — or perhaps wanted to believe — that the UN and EC should keep out of the civil war, that the Serbs had at least as good a case for their policy as the other warring parties, and that many of the alleged atrocities had to be mitigated in the light of history. However, since reading Ed Vulliamy's report (Guardian, August 21) I have humbly arrived at the conclusion that I was wrong all along.

No amount of wrongs committed to them in the past, no amount of justified fear about the future of their community can excuse what the Serbs are doing at present. The excuse that the worst excesses "are the work of irregulars and do not represent official Serb policy" will not wash. I cannot believe that if the "official" Serb authorities had the will, they would by now have moved to take drastic action in order to curb such excesses.

Martin Woollacott is right in order to avoid further suffering, the UN must co-operate in the process of assisting as many Bosnian Muslims to safety, however, painful such a decision may be. Then, however, Serbia should be subjected to South African-style boycotts as the deportees can be resettled in their natural homeland. Walter Cairns, Manchester.

MARTIN Woollacott rightly points out the dilemma the UN finds itself in over the issue

since the expulsions "are going to happen anyway". Whilst the appalling treatment of these refugees understandably leads to calls for action to stop their suffering, it is not clear that we should readily accept the premise that these expulsions, and the eventual completion of the "ethnic cleansing" process are an inevitability.

In accepting this outcome the international community will not only find itself faced with the seemingly insoluble problem of how to then negotiate the right of return for the displaced Muslims, but will also be faced with the high probability of war spreading into Kosovo and Macedonia, which inevitably will implicate the surrounding countries in the region. It is essential that we do not accept the division of Bosnia as a foregone conclusion if we are to avoid the further spread of this horrific war.

Lucy Howard, Joanne Hurley, London N10.

I SUGGEST that an unseen immense danger faces our political world; a split into the factions that caused the Crusades centuries ago and which if re-generated could bring into play an Islamic world which stretches across every continent on earth.

Muslims are being driven out from Bosnia. The Islamic world is responding. For the first time in history it has called for, and will get, a Special Assembly of the United Nations to consider the crisis. Make no mistake: