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The Interplay Between Art, Aesthetics and Politics in The Xyz Show

Gladys Mbithe John^{1*}, Dr. Larry Ndivo, PhD¹ & Dr. Charles Kebaya, PhD¹

¹Machakos University, P. O. Box 36 – 90100, Machakos, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence Email: gladysjohn79@gmail.com

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Artivism, a neologism of art and activism, has attracted the interest of scholars who have studied artivism in various popular art productions. The XYZ Show, the first animated Kenyan puppet comedy, has received fair attention; however, the nature of artivism in the show has not been consistently addressed. This study therefore interrogated The XYZ Show to determine how as a popular art production it engages art to ridicule various omissions and commissions of political leaders in Kenya. The interpretation is guided by Grace Musila's model of reading popular art: Politics/Power/Agency, to corroborate the artistic aesthetics that make the show politically textured. The study is qualitative and it engages in textual analysis of purposively sampled episodes to explain the nature of artivism as depicted in the show. Videos of sampled episodes were watched and data was collected using structured observation checklists and analyzed using thematic content analysis. From the analysis of the data collected the study determined that The XYZ Show employs artistic strategies to speak truth to power. It uses allusion, allegory and imagery among other techniques to present events that are intelligible to the Kenyan audience with a view to satirizing government officials and the Kenyan political landscape. This article expects to add knowledge on the subject of popular art and artivism in Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

Artivism as defined by various scholars is a neologism derived from art and activism and it refers to the utilization of popular artistic modes for the expression of activism. According to , artists embody the fusion of the political and the artistic and the mixing of forms of discourse or combination of techniques that has resulted in hybridity in activist art. Further, it has also been established that artivism draws from the practice of art that gives it its aesthetics; and political action .

The XYZ Show was read as a popular art guided by Grace Musila's model of Politics/ Power/ Agencies. Musila posits that despite the anxieties about the forms of agency made possible by popular forms in Africa, their engagement with political questions is beyond question . This informed this study that sought to interrogate nature of artivism in *The XYZ Show* and answer the question of whether *The XYZ Show* is politically textured.

Musila adds that popular cultural forms convene communities of dialogue around issues with which they grapple and that this sense of community is livelier on social media and online texts. Further, because the terrain of popular culture is less policed, it enjoys a scope for constant innovation, experimentation, boundary-pushing and contestation of taken-for-granted protocols and social values . Thus, the choice of art in activism by many especially those living in repressive regimes, is solely because art makes activism less confrontational; therefore, more often than not did not lead to retaliation from the party being criticized or opposed. Consequently, in most parts of Africa, artivism is the choice to evade consequences of direct activism like police brutality, arrests and killings of people living under repressive governments.

Mohammed Hachimi for example discusses how the youth changed tact to counter the government's harsh reaction to the 20 February Movement demonstrations (20FM demonstrations) against what they deemed despotism, corruption and social inequality. The

youth resorted to using short films, plays and podcasts on social media to evade police brutality and killings as witnessed during the 20th February 2011 demonstrations. Most notably was the famous podcast '*Tsoulime*' that broadcast various videos on YouTube whose success lay in the ability to mix sarcasm and politics.

Closer home in East Africa, artivism is not a new phenomenon and has been used on various occasions in the 21st century. For instance, practical humor was witnessed when citizens in Uganda let loose on the streets of Kampala piglets painted in the colours of Uganda's ruling political party and with some wearing hats to mimic president Museveni. This was to raise issue on the massive unemployment of the youth in Uganda .

Similarly, practical humour was witnessed in Nairobi when citizens took pigs smeared with blood to the parliament buildings. The pigs had the inscriptions MPIGS on their bodies. When writing about the MPIGS incident, Kebaya points out that through 'vulgar aesthetics', the greed of the Members of parliament who insisted on raising their salaries was ridiculed and contested . Further, Charles Kebaya examines how Kenyan artists have in their various popular art forms that include music, comedy, jokes, comics and cartoons have in rather "unconventional but innovative and creative ways re-configured police atrocities in Kenya." One early artist production is *The Redykyulass Show*, a political satire that foregrounds the excesses of the state during the 14-year reign of president Moi . This comedy show aired on local television used impersonation and mimicry to joke about the then President Moi and his government. This proves that in Kenya, artivism is at the core of popular art through which artists communicate their social, political, economic and moral concerns. *The XYZ Show* is one of this type of art that portrays activist sensibilities. It is a political puppet comedy that heavily relies on humour to castigate the political class in Kenya, therefore has a close-knit relationship to politics.

Kebaya postulates: 'art forms have a close-knit relationship to politics but do not expressly have

political aims in their representations but still, creative artists use popular spaces for artistic expression and institutional critique of various issues such as poor governance.’. This study therefore interrogated the artistic aesthetics utilized in *The XYZ Show* with the aim of exposing, how they are utilized for political motives. Additionally, the paper discusses how the show exhibits what refers to as politically provocative and activist sensibilities defined by the ability to merge political and aesthetic elements of satire.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach to interpret, describe and explain activism in *The XYZ Show* text. This was guided by , who opine that qualitative research is the best approach in studies involving text and image analysis and those handling audio-visual data such as is the case with this study. posit that qualitative research should have relatively small samples (30 or below) because it requires intensive study and description of the samples. Through purposive sampling therefore, eight episodes that had characteristics considered representative of the population were selected. Data was gathered by physically viewing, on YouTube, the *XYZ Show* videos. This data was then recorded in structured observation checklists, transcribed then reviewed to identify recurrent themes. These themes were categorised and coded for easy identification. Further, relationships were sought between the coded episodes and secondary data obtained by reviewing relevant literature.

ART AND AESTHETICS IN *THE XYZ SHOW*

Stephen Davies argues that something is art if it shows excellence of skill in realizing significant aesthetic goals; if it falls under an art genre or art form established within an art tradition; or if it’s intended by its maker to be art and its maker does what is necessary to realizing that intention. He adds that significant aesthetic goals in this case cover more than formal beauty or unity in variety and include expressions of powerful emotions, compelling narrations, realistic and evocative depictions and vivid enactments of historical or

imagined scenes all executed with exceptional expertise . This paper discusses how the creators of *The XYZ Show* have utilized puppetry and humour to satirize the Kenyan government and its leaders. Further, this paper gives an in-depth discussion of the ethos of laughter and key artistic strategies that create humour like irony, derision, incongruences and hyperbole to determine how they are used to speak truth to power.

In a discussion on the art puppets’ immense potential as vehicles of artistic expression Enrico Bay posits that modernism created a fertile ground for the discovery of puppet theatre by artists and its recognition as a visual art in its own right . Indeed, as a work of art, the puppet was seen to draw a lot from popular culture. Kordjak discusses the puppet as an element of a comprehensively designed stage reality consisting of space, materials, form, movement, light, colours and sound . Furthermore, Kordjak points out that due to the wit, irony, and mockery in puppet theatre, it was considered to be a potentially perfect and relatively safe medium of socio-political critique. Similar to a children’s game, puppet theatre was also seen to provide a convenient space for rejecting certain social tenets, order and established norms of behaviour . This paper is interested in the Latex puppets category featured in *The XYZ Show*. The show has been interrogated to determine how the elements of puppet art like caricature, irony, wit and mockery combine to present its political purpose.

Paula Callus in a discussion of the rise of Kenyan animation observes that *The XYZ Show* draws upon devices that historically appear within cartooning such as caricature, parody allegory and humour. From the sampled episodes, the show was found to be a complete narrative with plot, setting, characters, themes and dramatic style. The characters are caricatures of senior political and government leaders. These caricatured characters have exaggerated body features like thick lips, big eyes and mouth that are a point of amusement. Despite this exaggeration, they are still recognizable by the Kenyan audience because the puppet creators have used latex which according to (Bartnikowski 74), is ‘skin imitating thus

conjures up a successful illusion of life on stage giving puppets realistic gestures and a hint of bodily shape.’

For instance, it was easy to identify personalities represented by regular puppets in the show like former presidents Daniel Arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta; former deputy president and now president William Ruto; former prime minister and official opposition leader Raila Odinga among others. By design, these puppets are referred to using names that exist in the public domain. For example, President Uhuru is referred to as Uhuru or Uhunye, William Ruto is referred to as Ruto/ Rutode/ William/ Hustler; Former Prime Minister Raila Odinga is referred to as Rao/Baba/Tinga/ Raila/ Captain. It can therefore be argued that the creators of this show deliberately use these names to make the Kenyan audience identify these leaders and see their misdeeds - something the leaders would ideally hide from the public domain. Reducing these leaders to puppets does not just give the show an added layer of humour, but has the political purpose of lowering the leaders from their pedestals and presenting them as objects for ridicule. This coupled with the allusion to identifiable political events makes the show a politically textured text.

In discussing the political dimension and significance of puppets, Dariusz Kosinski argues that the puppet’s ability to act as a substitute for the unavailable body of a public personality through its material representation is one of the fundamental properties of a puppet. Thus, through puppetry, an image is transformed and used in such a way that it exposes and makes manifest precisely that which the satirist believes the public figure is trying to hide from public view . This leads us to the functionality of puppets since by being reduced to puppets, the criticized person is stripped of power, degraded and belittled .

According to one of the writers of *The XYZ Show*, Loi Awat, the intention of the show is to promote good governance and social justice in Kenya. Therefore, the producers address serious issues in a comical way without using real people; but

using puppets. Their decision to use puppet characters is intentional as it shields the people behind the puppets from attack by the leaders imitated. This is because it would seem trivial to get riled up about a caricature . By reducing these leaders to puppets and displaying them on national television therefore exposes their misdeeds and shortcomings to the public who watch this show.

Grace Musila opines that the political dimension of popular genres demands contextualized reading for them to be legible . In the reading of *the XYZ Show*, the centrality of context in interpreting the data was key. A good example is episode 12 of season 3 produced in 2010 which alludes to the Artur brothers’ saga of 2006. The TV host Jonah, interviews the puppet of one of the Artur brothers, Artur Margaryan; and Winnie, who was purported to be then president Kibaki’s daughter. The two are referred to using their real names and the host alludes to the theatrics the Artur brothers displayed in the country from ‘gun trotting displays at the airport to their raiding KTN Media House.

During the interview in the episode under discussion, Artur contradicts himself when he denies their being mercenaries but at the same time admits that they were paid by government to carry out tasks that needed to be done without it dirtying its hands. Artur says, “... when government needs eh- something done, I mean... without getting its hands dirty, it ‘invests’ in us.” Artur also admitted that he and his brother raided KTN. He agrees that the government ‘invested’ in them to raid KTN and it “got good returns for its ‘investments.” Ideally, it would be expected that the government invests in activities or projects that are valuable to the country. ‘Investing’ in this context therefore introduces an incongruity. In this episode, humour is achieved through the ironies and paradoxes presented; all that reveal the controversy that surrounded the presence of the Artur brothers in the country. Further, through these contradictions, the writers humourously expose the government’s involvement with the Armenian mercenaries.

In the above episode, therefore, the government is satirized for issues of abuse of power and injustice raised through the caricatures of Artur and Winnie. This gives the episode a political inclination. This episode humourously explores the political motivation behind the Arturs' presence in Kenya in 2006. According to a report by Jicho Pevu's KTNs investigative journalists Mohammed Ali and Dennis Onsarigo, the Artur brothers were reported to be Armenians brought into the country by rogue government officials in response to a seizure of 1.1 metric tons of cocaine. The two brothers were exposed after their 2nd March 2006 raid on The Standard Group offices, a raid that the then security minister John Michuki termed a government operation.

Similarly, context informs *The XYZ Show* Episode 13 of season 10 produced in 2014. In a segment titled '*Christmas Story*,' the puppet of president Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto; the Coalition of Reforms and Democracy (CORD) leader Raila Odinga and other CORD principals (Kalonzo Musyoka, Musalia Mudavadi and Moses Wetangula) are juxtaposed in different scenes. Besides their recognizable facial features, the characters refer to each other using their real names or known nicknames. Ruto for instance refers to Uhuru as Uhunye, a corruption of Uhuru and a popular street name for the president then. The CORD leader is referred to as captain a title that was used to indicate his position as leader of the CORD coalition. The dress/ costume of these puppet characters also has political undertones. The president and his deputy adorn their characteristic similar black suits and red ties that they first appeared in during their joint inauguration speech in 2013 and continued to adorn during their joint public appearances as a public display of their unity. The CORD leader on the other hand is in an orange shirt. The orange colour was Orange Democratic Movement (ODMs) signature colour and was common among the party leaders and their supporters.

In the episode, the two political factions are interested in a newborn child whom they refer to as 'Jesus.' They separately visit their mother each with a view to woo her to support them. The

CORD party arrive first and Raila is allowed to knock and introduce the team. He introduces them as the three CORDED men thus alluding to their identity as CORD principals. Further, allusion to the CORD principals' decision to support Raila as their flag bearer in the 2013 elections is made when the three refer to him as captain and allow him to knock at the woman's door. The juxtaposition of the two political camps (Jubilee and CORD) re-creates the political rivalry that existed at the time of production of this episode. This rivalry is further heightened when Ruto and Uhuru sarcastically refer to the CORD leaders as '*watu wa vitendawili*,' and 'noisy party.' '*Watu wa vitendawili*' here reminds us of Raila's inclination to using Swahili riddles (*vitendawili*) during political rallies a habit that earned him the title '*mtu wa vitendawili*.' By referring to him as such in this context Uhuru not only portrays his condescending attitude towards his key political rival but also exemplifies political propaganda.

In the same episode, Ruto is afraid that the CORD coalition will visit the baby and blames Itumbi for failing to stop them. Itumbi here refers to Dennis Itumbi, the then Director of Digital, New Media and Diaspora in the executive office of the President. The newborn baby metaphorically refers to the politicians the two coalitions were competing to win over to their side in order to have tyranny of numbers. The president in this episode is ready to use government agencies to win support when he suggests deploying KDF (Kenya Defence Forces) to guard the baby. This points to intent to abuse power for political gains. The two scenes in this episode make use of both visual and auditory imagery drawn from the local political scene to communicate the battle for supremacy witnessed between the two coalitions. Further, we are provoked to not only laugh but also ridicule their greed for supremacy which makes them idolize the 'baby.'

In episode 10 of season 1 of *The XYZ Show*, in a segment titled '*Interview with Dr. Goldstein*,' the producers employ satire to highlight vices displayed by leaders in the Grand Coalition government formed in 2009. In this segment, imagery has been extensively used by the puppet

of Dr. Goldstein. He refers to corruption metaphorically as ‘jiggers infesting the politicians’ brains leading to a disease he refers to as ‘Jigger Nasomiasis corruptiophilia.’ Jiggers as we know them affect the low-income groups living in unsanitary conditions. Thus, it is unexpected for them to infest top government officials and this incongruity is what offers the text comic quality. Dr. Goldstein’s reveals corruption as a disease, a ‘very fatal disease’ that should not be left untreated. He affirms that an anti-jigger campaign was ongoing suggesting anti-corruption campaigns aimed at bringing to book culprits of corruption. Dr. Goldstein in a demonstration, crudely extracts the jiggers from the politician’s head by drilling it. This expresses the contempt with which corruption should be treated. This segment of *The XYZ Show* displays activist ideals as it uses metaphor and humour to raise awareness about and condemn a social vice-corruption.

As evident in the episodes discussed in this section, *The XYZ Show* which is produced locally, heavily relies on allusion, symbolism and imagery drawn from the local political scene to point out political issues like corruption and misuse of power. Further, the ironies and paradoxes presented point to the serious failures and omissions of top government leaders. As opposed to holding street protests, art as discussed here is used to inform and at the same time question the state of politics in the country and the lack of integrity in senior government leaders. Therefore, the show that is rich in satire serves to artistically ridicule the structures of power in the country.

ETHOS OF LAUGHTER IN THE XYZ SHOW

This section focused on the ridiculous portrayal of senior government officials that incites laughter about them thus reducing them to objects of public mockery. Phil Emmerson argues that for laughter to happen, first, there must be a joke; and secondly, the laughter emanates from the ridiculing of the scruffiness of people who are in higher positions of power than the laughers. As discussed earlier in this paper, *The XYZ Show*

employs humour as its main strategy of communicating its political messages. In the show, prominent leaders are exposed to public ridicule when their caricatured forms appear as puppets on national television and go through motions that mock their positions. This grants space for the ordinary citizens to laugh at them.

The XYZ Show episode 5 of season 10, produced in 2014, four years after the promulgation of Kenya’s 2010 constitution, takes the viewer through the journey of devolution in a segment titled, ‘*Devolution Report.*’ In this segment, devolution is metaphorically referred to as a ‘baby’, and as the XYZ puppet reporter puts it, it’s ‘a baby born after many years of waiting and trying.’ The reporter adds that in the search for the baby, ‘we sweet-talked men. In the first scene, the puppet of Kenya’s second president, Daniel Arap Moi, appears seated with the puppet of a lady who introduces herself as Kenya. The woman tries to seduce the president to impregnate her. Ironically, instead of the president ‘aiding the conception’, he casually tells the woman that she will be made pregnant and get a child whose name will be devolution. observes that humour can be expressed in a range of techniques including irony, exaggeration, parody and impersonation. In the above scene, humour is expressed first through the impersonation of the then-president and the presentation of Kenya as a woman seeking a child. Secondly, it is expressed through the president’s ambiguous response, ‘*Wewe utapachikwa mimba.*’ This is what William Connolly would term as ironic self-distancing .

In the case above, President Moi distances himself from the responsibility of delivering the long-awaited new constitution to the people and this is mocked by joking about his virility, a serious subject that ordinarily would elicit empathy as opposed to laughter.’ These can thus be viewed as jokes that are political statements. To understand the joke, it is worth mentioning that at this particular time, President Moi had ruled for over twenty years and was in his old age, probably a reason the writers joke about his inability to sire a child to imply his unproductivity as a leader. In this case, laughter will be a response to the

writers' witty mockery of the president's inability to meet his people's expectations to deliver a new constitution as opposed to his inability to sire a child. This joke about the president, therefore, allows the viewer to momentarily bring him down from his pedestal, and as Terry Eagleton asserts, if we rejoice in seeing the high brought low, we relax a certain psychological tension partly because we condescend those whom we were previously intimidated.

The above episode further jokes about the country's desperation for devolution when they make the woman (Kenya), visit a traditional healer in search of a baby. The joke is presented from the onset: the inscriptions on the signboard detailing the doctor's specialization are ridiculous. The board reads: 'Hutibu katiba, kutibu Kanu, Kuepuka ugali wa Moi, Jeraha za sabasaba.' The translation is: 'We bring a new constitution, treat Kanu, escape Moi's staple food, and the injuries of sabasaba.' Ideally, these issues cannot be categorized as illnesses therefore the fact that Kenyans are seeking supernatural intervention serves to show their desperation for a new constitution and new leadership. In a voice-over, the reporter offers a witty commentary on how difficult the journey in search of devolution had been. He says that it took many years of 'agitation and street protests by men of cloth and men without clothes; men with stones and men with hearts of stone for this baby to be born...' This comical wordplay causes laughter through the juxtaposition of men of cloth (religious leaders) and men without clothes (a pun in its own right.) Further laughter is caused by the traditional doctor's allusion to the bible when prophesying the woman's conception. He borrows the angel's proclamation to Mary in the bible and this allusion in the given context is misplaced. Practically, delivering a new constitution required committed leaders ready for the change Kenyans needed but not spiritual intervention. Seeking spiritual intervention in this context emphasizes the failure of the president and his government.

In a different scene in the same segment, there is an outcry from county governors who complain that the fund allocation to the counties was

insufficient to support the devolved functions. The puppets in this scene are governors led by the then chair of governors Isaac Ruto who, like the characters in the previous scenes, refers to devolution as a baby. The governors complain that the national government had become reluctant to fund devolved functions when they claim: '*Hamuezi kutupatia mtoto na hata hamtumi maziwa ya yeye*' (You cannot give us a baby yet you do not send its milk.) Demand for milk could be well understood but wastage of funds in the counties is suggested through ridiculous demands for the baby at its initial stages of development, such as schooling and vacationing. The puppets claim: '*Huyu mtoto anahitaji Kwenda shule next week, Transport hamjatuma... Hata mtoto anasema anatakiwa Kwenda outing.*' (The baby needs to go to school next week yet you have not sent transport. He also says he should be going out.) Here we laugh at the intention of the governors to waste public resources in the pretext of implementing devolution. In the episode discussed here, the subject of childbearing has been cleverly navigated to present the situation of devolution in the country. Different leaders have been mocked for their failure at different stages of the devolution process. This gives the viewer privilege to laugh at these leaders and thus concurs with Aristotle's assertion that laughter should seek to give pleasure to the person of good judgment and not refrain from paining the one being mocked.

Episode 11 season 1, unlike the episode discussed above, is a clear example of buffoonery. In a segment titled, '*XYZ Project Fame*,' there is an imitation of a popular TV show known as *Tusker Project Fame* which provided a platform for upcoming music artists from Kenya and neighbouring East Africa countries to showcase their artistic talents. The episode produced in 2009 the time at which the coalition government in Kenya was birthed features the puppets of Raila Odinga, Kalonzo Musyoka and Mwai Kibaki – key leaders in the coalition government. Mwai Kibaki was the president, Kalonzo Musyoka the deputy president and Raila Odinga the prime minister. These three are contestants in *The XYZ*

Project Fame. Each performs a different song expressing their prowess and interest in the presidency in 2012 but none says anything positive about themselves. Instead, their utterances are ridiculous in an amusing way. This aligns with Aristotle's postulation that, buffoons are excessive with respect to laughter, are desirous of raising laughter on all occasions as they care more about laughter than saying something decent

The first contestant, Raila who introduces himself as man Agwash- short form of Agwambo a popular nickname for this leader at the time sings a parody of a popular song 'Salary' by Kenyan artist Nameless. Man Agwash discloses that he agreed to work with Kibaki for monetary benefits only. He sings: *'Ukiniona na Kibaki, usidhani ni mabeshte, Najua plan yangu ni kutafuta salarie'* (When you see me with Kibaki, don't think we are friends, I know my plan, I'm looking for salary.) Apparently, he is already strategizing how to clinch the presidency in 2012 while he is still in the coalition government. Kalonzo Musyoka on his part, sings a parody of Jemimah Thiong'o's gospel song *"Akisema atakubariki."* In it, he speaks against rigging at the previous elections something that the third contestant Mwai Kibaki confirms in his song *'Mi ni Mjanja'*.

Kibaki engages in self-mockery when he admits that his win in the 2007 presidential elections was actually rigged; but he was able to get away with it because he was sly. He goes ahead to boast about his infamous swearing-in at night something that sparked violence in the country leading to death of over 1200 people and displacement of over 30,000. He sings: *'Kumbuka KICC usiku stima zikalosti. Halafu wakasema mimi ni prezzi. Raira akasema amesanyiwa mavoti...'* (Remember that blackout at KICC at night. Then they said I was president. Raila said his votes were stolen...) Instead of defending his innocence in the accusations levelled against him after the 2007 elections, the puppet of Kibaki brags that he rigged the elections then beefed-up security to quell any revolution against his presidency.

Humour in the above episode is created when the three leaders are presented as caricatures and reduced to music performers exposing their misdemeanors on public television. Notably, laughter in this section can be interpreted in relation to Mula Kundera's idea about the angelic and demonic views of human existence. While the angelic sees the world to be orderly, the demonic deflates the angelic, puncturing its pretentiousness. In the two episodes discussed in this section, senior government leaders are presented as jesters joking about themselves. Their admission to engaging in serious vices is not only laughable but highlights them as objects to be ridiculed. Humour of this kind, as Kundera points out is the amusement that springs from things being out of order. As Hegel argues in 'Philosophy of Fine Art,' laughter springs from the self-satisfaction involved in observing human aberrations.

According to Simon Critchley, humour functions subversively by revealing the incongruities in everyday structures of power in order to render the familiar unfamiliar and thereby produce opportunities for critique. Thus, humour is produced by the disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke. Such incongruous situations can be glimpsed in episode 10 season 1 produced in 2009. The episode features the puppets of the then President Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga. When a segment titled "What if?" begins, the narrator introduces an incongruous situation in his rhetorical question 'What if? *KWEKWE SQUAD WORK FOR HAGUE, OCAMPO AND ANNAN NI CHAMA, and What if KENYA WAS PERFECT?*'

The wording of this question has deliberate discrepancies. In this case, the subject hints at the ridiculous manner in which the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague was handling the Kenya case regarding the 2007/2008 Post Election Violence (PEV). Writing in *The Standard*, Hudson Gumbihi reveals that the Kwekwe squad an infamous police unit notorious with extrajudicial killings had been set up to exterminate Mungiki, a criminal sect. The squad saw the killing of a number of members of the

Mungiki Sect. Many aggrieved Kenyans hoped ICC would deal ruthlessly with the six Kenyan personalities indicted for committing crimes against humanity. Hence, suggesting that Kwekwe squad could work for The Hague, an institution meant to safeguard human rights and justice, is outrageous. There is also mockery of Kofi Annan's brokerage of peace during the PEV. By claiming that the then ICC prosecutor Ocampo and Annan could be "a Chama," that is, associates, the show suggests the international UN peace mediation and the international criminal justice were conspirators against Kenya. In this case, humour is produced by the disjunction between the expected functions of the ICC and the way it is represented in the joke as a chama.

In the show, hyperbole is used for the sake of humour and serves to sarcastically emphasize certain ideas. According to classical rhetoric, hyperbole is "a figure or trope of bold exaggeration". Episode 11 season 8 produced in 2013 in a segment titled, 'Nyumba kumi,' hyperbole has been used to expose the incompetence, inefficiency and excesses of legislators. The episode features the period after the launch of the Nyumba Kumi Initiative by the Kenyan President in a bid to enhance security in the country. This was a civilian vigilance initiative where any stranger in a neighbourhood would be scrutinized as well the activities of every neighbour monitored.

In the segment, the puppet of an MP that takes the form of a pig is used to satirize the misdemeanors of the legislators. When the segment starts, the puppet of a resident is moving from door to door getting information about his neighbours in line with the Nyumba Kumi Initiative. After leaving the first house, this puppet knocks on door number 7 and it opens to reveal the puppet of a character with a pig's face, mouth and hooves reading a paper. This puppet talks like a human but keeps snorting like a pig giving it a comical representation. The imagery of the pig reminds us of the common reference to our MPs as Mpigs emphasizing their greed for wealth. It also alludes to the Mpigs display of 14th May, 2014 outside

parliament that sent a strong message against the MPs who were pushing for salary increment.

Barasa posits that humour offers an opportunity to reflect on important issues as it involves an interaction between the performer and the consumer; that use of latex characters in *The XYZ Show* is a humorous device that involves manipulation of language by a cast of extraordinary creations therefore the viewer is placed to accept amusement and enjoy it. The hyperbolic representation of the legislators in this episode therefore is not only for laughter's sake but also speaks truth to power. The inefficiency and materialism of the legislators are exposed when the Mpig declares that they sleep in parliament but keep enjoying their salaries and allowances. Hyperbole has been used in this statement to emphasize the irony in that the legislators are paid for their inefficiency. Thus, the use of animal symbolism, the pig in this case, causes amusement as well as exaggerates the greed and materialistic nature of these legislators with a view to exposing them to ridicule.

Episode 9 season 8 and Episode 11 season 10 demonstrate how derision has been utilized as a strategy for telling the truth to power. Both episodes produced in 2013 and 2014 respectively in segments titled 'Security Concerns' and 'Veterans' Café' address the subject of insecurity in the country and mock the government's failure to ensure the safety of its people. It is worth noting that these episodes were produced two and three years after Kenya deployed its troops to Somalia in October 2011. According to a report by Andrews Asamoah, during Kenya's military operation in Somalia, Al-Shabaab established an active presence in the country and carried out numerous attacks in the country.

By December 2014, Alshabaab was directly blamed for about 211 incidents, 192 of which occurred after October 2011. These involved 609 deaths with 290 occurring in 2014 alone. This made insecurity an important factor in all considerations of the country's economic and political progress as well as diplomatic engagements.

Going by the above background information, we can relate to President Kenyatta's desperate and combative mood in episode 9 season 8 while dealing with the then Defence Cabinet Secretary Rachael Omamo, Minister Joseph Ole Lenku and the Director of National Security Intelligence Service Major General Michael Gichangi. In this episode, the puppet of President Uhuru Kenyatta is chairing a security meeting in which he reprimands the puppets of the three senior Security bosses (identifiable from their screen names) for their display of incompetence and inefficiency and threatens to sack them. While doing this, he is emotional and shouts at them. It is ironical that he uses an informal and condescending tone and Kikuyu language to address a formal security meeting.

The president's uncontrolled outburst is mocked as it inhibits communication and intimidates the three security officials. When Rachael Omamo fails to verbally respond to the president's questions she is crudely thrown out of the meeting. Before then, Gichangi makes fun of her by saying, "She said she has a body ache." This utterance by Gichangi propagates gender stereotypes of women that are meant to prove them weak. The producers are aware of how national security matters are considered masculinist, thus their demonstration of Omamo being thrown out of the security meeting. This agrees with Rashelle Peck's claim that masculinities feature in the political decisions of leaders and this affects the country .

Ole Lenku and Gichangi's responses to the president's questions on why they should not be sacked are not only ridiculous but also expose their incompetence. Ole Lenku dismisses claims of his poor performance as rumours claiming that that was just what was being said out there. Gichangi, on his part, asks the president to await forensic reports before sacking him and all this makes the president more agitated. In this scene, the president humiliates the three officers by exposing their incompetence but at the same time he exposes his failure as the appointing authority. He asks Rachael Omamo, 'You are in charge of Defense! Do you know what Defense entails? Do

you?' This question is ironical because the question on competence needs to be asked before appointment to a position but not after one is assigned duties.

As Eagleton posits, to be laughed at means having your case undercut rather than seriously contested, discounted rather than refuted and is thus a particular painful kind of humiliation . In the above episode, President Uhuru and the three security bosses are the butt of the joke. The four are ridiculed for their incompetence and ineffectiveness in handling security matters. The president is highlighted as having failed in his mandate by appointing incompetent persons to handle the security ministry. His emotional outburst therefore strips him of his power and portrays him as not being in control of serious state affairs. Similarly, the writers strip the three leaders of their power when they allow the viewer to witness them being reprimanded in a very condescending manner.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the nature of activism in The XYZ Show by interrogating the artistic strategies utilized for political intent. From the interrogation of the show, it was evident that the show employed allusion. It drew its content, characters and images from the country's historical, political and social context. The puppets went ahead to represent events that were intelligible to the Kenyan audience and in every day terms and this makes the show stand out as a popular art. The paper engaged with how the show employed laughter and various artistic strategies to satirize senior government officials and the political landscape in Kenya. Various strategies like: derision, incongruencies and hyperbole were used to mock government officials and institutions. In all these strategies, a deep tone of mockery was used to engage with various political aspects like incompetence of leaders, corruption, political scandals and ridiculous state decisions. For instance, among the scandals that assailed the Mwai Kibaki regime is the Armenian mercenaries who were involved in attacks against some media houses that were featuring stories regarding the

first family. Even appointment of senior public servants is questionable as it is seen not to be based on competence. There's also political rivalry among various political factions. The rivalries eventually lead to electoral malpractices resulting to serious atrocities. In the show's portrayals, political and governance ineptitude is laughed at and condemned. The ironic mockery of masculinities in politics that influence political decisions were also espoused.

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