

Zapiro : Tooning The Odds

Jonathan Shapiro, or Zapiro, is the editorial cartoonist for The Sowetan, the Mail & Guardian and the Sunday Times, and his work is a richly inventive daily commentary on the rocky evolution of South African democracy. Zapiro's platforms in the the country's two largest mass-market English-language newspapers, along with one of the most influential weeklies, give him influential access to a large share of the national reading public. He occupies this potent cultural stage with a dual voice: one that combines a persistent satirical assault on the seats of national and global power with an unambiguous commitment to the fundamentally optimistic "nation-building" narrative within South African political culture.

Jeremy Cronin asserts that Zapiro "is developing a national lexicon, a visual, verbal and moral vocabulary that enables us to talk to each other, about each other."² It might also be said that the lexicon he develops allows him to write a persistent dialogue between two intersecting tones within his own journalistic voice; that his cartoons collectively dramatise the tension between national cohesion and tangible progress on the one hand, and on the other hand the recurring danger of damage to the mutable and vulnerable social contract that underpins South African democracy.

This chapter will outline Zapiro's political and creative development, before identifying his major formal devices and discussing his treatment of some persistent themes in cartoons produced over the last two years.

Lines of attack: Zapiro's early work

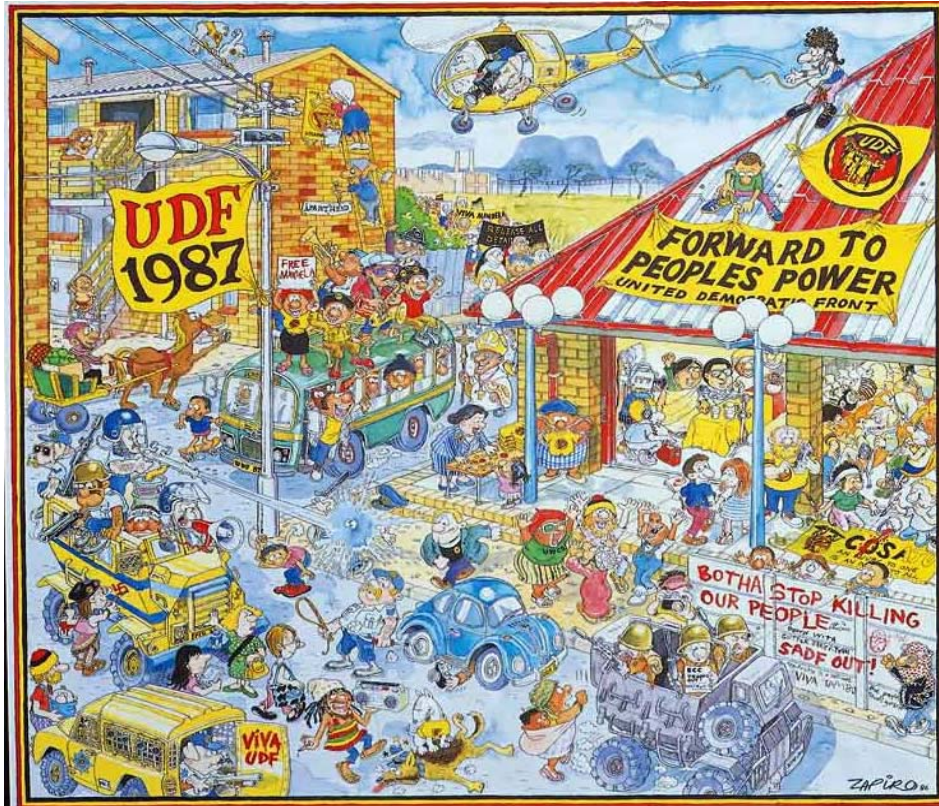
Zapiro's current political outlook germinated during the State of Emergency years in the mid-eighties: he returned from military service with a fervent opposition to the apartheid state, became an organiser for the End Conscription Campaign, and turned his pen to struggle pamphlets. He drew a handful of press cartoons in 1987, but at this point he thought of himself as an activist who could draw cartoons, rather than a cartoonist with a sideline in activism.³

He created a renowned 1987 United Democratic Front calendar ("UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides") which presented a Cape Flats street scene, teeming with gleefully defiant activists, glum pig-policemen & dummy-sucking national servicemen. It was a deceptively powerful image, dramatising underground Cape Town to itself as a community of indomitable cartoon heroes – and offered a welcome counterpoint to the plodding earnestness of most struggle design at the time. I was ten years old when it was distributed, and I remember spending

² Cronin 7

³ Pers. com, Zapiro

hours poring over the poster, captivated by the way Zapiro turned ordinary real-life South



Africans into *characters* with the comic intensity of Goscinny and Uderzo's *Asterix* cast. UDF Calendar, 1986.⁴

People quite literally saw themselves in the scene: certain characters were amalgamations of three or four people Zapiro knew. He recalls that some of these people often told him, "Thanks for putting me in your calendar".⁵ The style and mood of the image drew heavily on the "cute" cartoon aesthetic of Jean-Jacques Loup and Mordillo, who also fabricated teeming comical scenes.⁶ And the impulse to observe and affectionately lampoon the life of a community in a single opulently populated frame recalls the village scenes of Breughel.

⁴ <http://www.africaink.co.za/mamba/pg36.htm> 31 October 2005

⁵ Pers. com, Zapiro

⁶ Mason 22



Pieter Brueghel, Peasant Wedding Feast, 1567⁷

The calendar announced Zapiro's arrival as a partisan cartoonist, and a propagandist blessed with vivid emotive skill. (He offered a vigorous counterattack to the expertly venomous state-funded cartoon pamphlets distributed widely during the period, which depicted fanged, drooling terrorist demons representing the UDF, the ANC, the Angolan army and the communist infiltrator simultaneously.)

On the advice of the lawyers for the calendar's publisher, Zapiro removed a black strip on the bottom of the green and yellow bus in the centre of the scene, to avoid reference to the banned African National Congress, but this turned out to be a futile adjustment. The calendar was banned soon after publication for "furthering the aims of a banned organisation," on the basis of its depiction of graffiti slogans such as "MK is coming" and "Viva Tambo". "The lawyers convinced me to take my signature off," says Zapiro, "but I regretted that afterwards, because it made absolutely no difference – the police were there the next day anyway."⁸

In due course Zapiro was detained for two weeks, when the security police, who were in fact looking for another activist called Jonathan "JoJo" Shapiro, who coincidentally featured in the UDF calendar (the curly-haired hippie on the rooftop, lassoing a passing helicopter). Later JoJo was detained when Zapiro was the wanted Shapiro. During his interrogations, Zapiro was asked why he represented the police as pigs. Zapiro recalls telling them: "I draw what I see."⁹

During this period Zapiro produced editorial cartoons for the The Weekly Mail, South, the New Nation and other subversive publications. His approach to the form at this point was heavily influenced by South Africa's leading practitioner of the time, Derek Bauer, who was the resident cartoonist at the Weekly Mail.

Bauer, who died in a car accident in 2001 at the age of 46, was a supreme stylist and a technically virtuosic draughtsman. He was in turn heavily influenced by the work of Steadman

⁷ <http://www.artofeurope.com/brueghel/bru15.jpg> 31 October 2005

⁸ Pers com, Zapiro

⁹ *Ibid.*

and Scarfe, who revolutionised the political cartoon with their grotesque distortions, masterfully rich cross-hatching and use of feverishly expressive ink-splatters, *a la* Jackson Pollock.

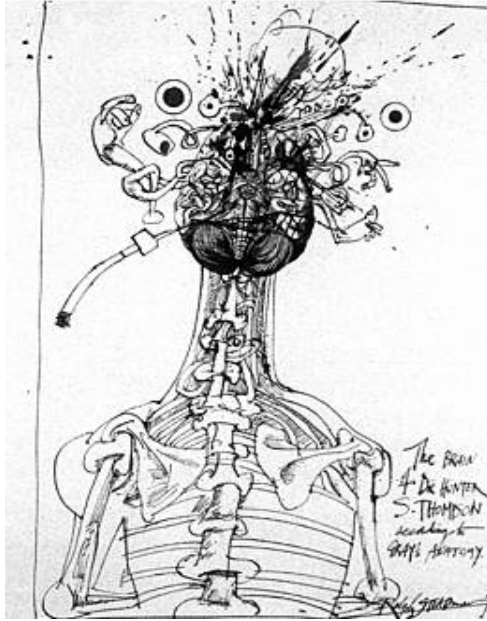
In Bauer's cartoons, as Andy Mason points out, ink became blood.¹⁰ The violent, convulsive decay of the apartheid state was vividly relayed in the exquisitely grotesqueries of Bauer's caricatures. He had an extraordinary capacity to maintain intense likenesses while pursuing and achieving wild extremities of distortion. And, like the Weimar German cartoonist George Grosz whose work he revered, Bauer approached almost all subjects from a committed stance of fascinated, hateful revulsion; his drawings are propelled by an insistent urge to expose the seething vulgarity and decadence of power in all who wield it.



Derek Bauer cartoon from The Michaelis Collection.¹¹

¹⁰ Mason, Andy, pers com

¹¹ <http://www.artthrob.co.za/00mar/images/cartoon01a.gif> October 30 2005



Ralph Steadman, "The Brain of Dr Hunter S Thompson according to Gray's Anatomy"



George Grosz, "The Capitalist"

Bauer's caricatures of PW Botha, Eugene Terreblanche and Mangosuthu Buthelezi were so compellingly ugly that Zapiro found himself "unwillingly and sometimes unwittingly copying [Bauer's] personifications of those figures".¹² His work at the time also echoed Bauer's ink-splattering, his moulding of facial structure through lavishly intricate hatching, and his gestural, distorting approach to figures and postures.

Then, in 1988, Zapiro won a Fulbright scholarship to study at the School of Visual Art in New York. There he studied comics under Will Eisner, creator of The Spirit and a legendary formal innovator who exerted a profound influence on the contemporary comics aesthetic. Zapiro also studied under Harvey Kurtzman, and spent what he describes as a "momentous" semester of independent study under Art Spiegelman, creator of Maus, one of the first commercially and critically successful graphic novels.

Spiegelman's influence can clearly be discerned in a two-page strip Zapiro drew in 1988, "Behind The Barbed Wire Curtain", in which the monsters of his childhood nightmares are correlated with the daylight monsters of the apartheid state. Much of Zapiro's penwork here retains the stamp of Bauer's style, but the narrative's rendition of an intimate personal and political history in the comic book medium places it squarely in the tradition of Spiegelman's Maus. Spiegelman's hugely influential book recounted his parents' passage through Holocaust concentration camps, and the passage of some the resulting trauma to his own life.

¹² Zapiro, pers com

There is a clear echo of Spiegelman's use of animal figures – Jews as mice, Germans as cats – in Zapiro's drawing his policemen interrogators as pigs.

And in its gestural, expressive reactivation of individual memory, it strongly echoes Spiegelman's short graphic memoir, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"¹³, which recounts how he and his father responded to the trauma of his mother's suicide. "Behind The Barbed Wire Curtain" is considerably lighter in subject and tone, but in creating it Zapiro was clearly entering Spiegelman's comix genre of graphic self-history and do-it-yourself psychoanalysis. Spiegelman had brought the literary novelist's concerns to the expressive liberty that Robert Crumb's psychosexual anarchy had opened up in the sixties and seventies, and in doing so paved the way for a range of enthusiastically idiosyncratic avenues in the graphic-novel form taken by the likes of Chris Ware, Joe Sacco and Daniel Clowes.

¹³ Spiegelman 140



"Behind The Barbed Wire Curtain", 1988 ¹⁴

Zapiro's studies in New York exposed him to the work and ideas of a rich range of American comix artists. He recalls absorbing the need to simplify his images and prune unnecessary visual information from his work. The lesson clearly hit home: the uncluttered lucidity of his mature work is the function of a keen urge to clarify the content of each cartoon.

¹⁴ africaink.co.za/mamba

Zapiro also remembers making a revelatory breakthrough in his sense of picture composition in New York ...

I remember having an exhibition of some work that I had been doing during the struggle period and there was one of those 'blinding flash' moments. When one of my drawing teachers, he was teaching me life drawing, came in and looked round at the stuff on the walls, and he said, "I'm not into politics," and this was a guy whose lifeblood was drawing, a brilliant artist in terms of rendering what he saw. And he didn't even go close to the drawings to see what the issues were. Which for me was sacrilege – I mean that was everything. We were focused on the issues! And what he said was: "Too grey. I look around here, and I see grey. " Because there was too much stuff that was too similar. He said, " you want some white there, you want some black there, you want some contrast here. " He said, "You've got to find that." And I looked around and said "God's truth, he's right!"¹⁵

Finding a (double) voice

There were ideological advances during Zapiro's studies in New York, as well as formal and technical ones. While in America, Zapiro's exposure to a range of possible stances for the political cartoonist gave him some critical distance from the reflexive hostility that was the touchstone of Derek Bauer's work. Zapiro had been politically divergent from Bauer ever since he began his career, being a staunch UDF supporter from a staunchly left-wing family. Like Steadman, Bauer was profoundly distrustful of all political actors, and was driven by an anarchic urge to distribute abuse across the full ideological spectrum. He had little appetite for engaging with the slippery nuts and bolts of political morality. Bauer's gift lay in the field of visceral visual slander, not in modulated satirical analysis of national change.

By the time Zapiro returned home in 1990, the *raison d'être* of the South African political cartoon had shifted. The reforming NP government and its reactionary elements still required graphic bludgeoning from an anti-apartheid position – but a new set of imperatives were also germinating. The newly released Mandela needed to be portrayed as the dignified national liberator he promised to be. The impenetrable, tumultuous historical crosscurrents of the transition towards democracy needed visual decoding and encoding. South Africans needed to be advised by journalists on how to think about themselves and their leaders and their futures. And while Bauer lost interest as his hostile monotone began to depress both him and his readers, Zapiro consciously began to construct a popular style and a stance that engaged optimistically and accessibly with the politics of transition.

I was very disillusioned by the work that Derek produced in the beginning of that transitional period. I thought Derek was superbly brilliant in that period from '85 to '89. But I thought his work really fell down in '91, '92. I just felt that he couldn't come to grips with the nuances and complexities of the new South Africa. Of the changing South Africa, the transition. And I said to myself – I actually clearly articulated that

¹⁵ Zapiro, pers com

idea to myself – that I wanted a style that was more accessible for people, that people will respond to, where I can do a sitcom if I want, where I can do something that empathises if I want, where I don't have to do destruction and blood and splatter and sharp and distorted and grotesque. And that was probably one of the most important understandings that I've had, and I think that accessibility is something that I worked at very hard over the next few years.¹⁶

Ever since, Zapiro has sustained this approach, settling into an increasingly uncluttered, economical, relaxed style. He remains capable of dipping into the ruthlessly *ad hominem* satirical palette of the Steadman-Bauer-Steve Bell school to devastating effect, but his stock approach is issue-driven rather than personality-driven.

Among currently active cartoonists, Steve Bell of The Guardian is by contrast an example of someone virtually incapable of a sympathetic or ambivalent representation of power. His unflinching daily assault on the Bush / Blair axis, often to the exclusion of any unrelated subject, is rooted in the axiom that both premiers are morally decayed and mentally deficient. The bewilderingly complex flux of global events merely provides a luxurious supply of opportunities to illustrate his committed enmity towards two major actors; in a sense the journalistic cart precedes the horse.

But this is of course a valid approach to the practice of political cartooning. Zapiro wages a similar campaign against Bush, as do many other cartoonists. It is one of the properties of the political cartoon that it corrals complex, multifactorial political formations, corruptions and misadventures, and compresses them into metonymic figureheads – generally heads of state – before punishing them, often brutally and unfairly, in the kangaroo court of its black rectangular frame.

But there is a canine obsessiveness in Bell's relentless pursuit of his twin *bêtes noires* that deflates his credibility as an observant journalist, irrespective of the quality of the leadership he is attacking. Zapiro has high praise for Bell's invention and satirical force, but concedes that his circular hostility is a weakness.¹⁷

¹⁶Zapiro, pers com.

¹⁷ Zapiro, pers com.



Steve Bell, 25 March 2005 ¹⁸

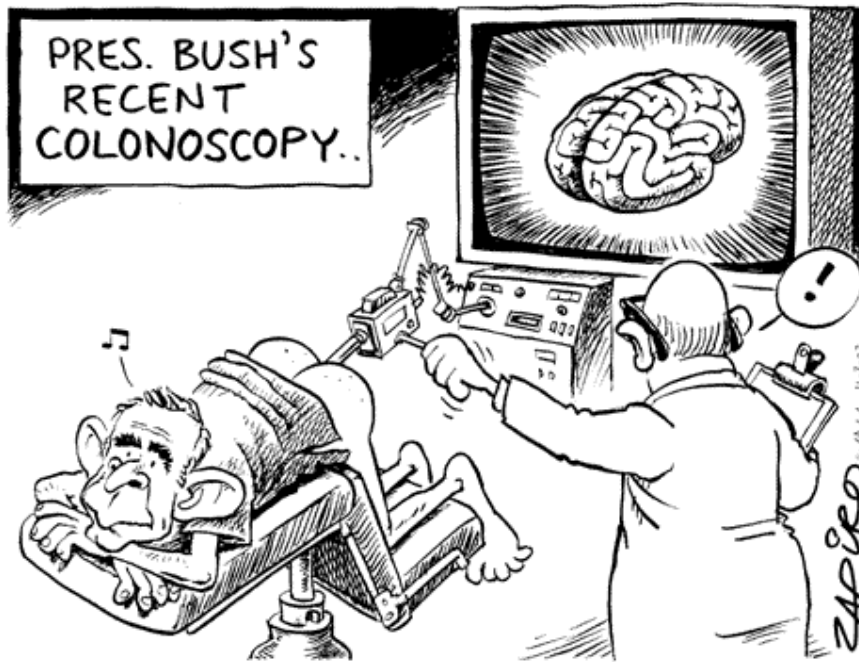
When Zapiro wants to take his gloves off, he resorts only to bluntness of metaphor and not to grotesquely distortive caricature, which he can achieve with ease, but has decommissioned:

I don't miss it so much anymore. In a way I've been through that phase, during the apartheid years, when drawing Botha and others, and now I find the challenge is to get the vitriol coming out of the content, rather than necessarily through a savage drawing. ¹⁹

Two figures are frequently represented in a vitriolically compromising light: Bush and South African health minister Manto Tshabala-Msimang. One of Zapiro's Bush cartoons entered the highest circle of the global e-mail humour network: in it, Bush is on all fours, receiving a colonoscopy exam which reveals, to the shock of his doctor, that his brain is situated up his rectum. It is a juvenile idea, but the expert composition of the drawing raises pure scatology to an inspired pitch. Bush faces us, humming a tune to himself, radiating complacent vacuousness. The doctor faces away from us, and with him we see the glowing brain on the colonoscopy monitor. That Zapiro's caricature is — unlike Bell's, or for that matter Ramirez's — within spitting distance of the Bush's actual physiognomy intensifies the cognitive friction through which the cartoon emits comic energy.

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/cartoons/archive/stevebell>

¹⁹ Zapiro, pers com.



August 11 2002, [Mail & Guardian](#) (All Zapiro cartoons sourced from M&G Online unless otherwise stated.)

I will discuss Zapiro's sustained cartoon campaigns against the government's HIV/AIDS policy and the Bush administration later in this chapter.

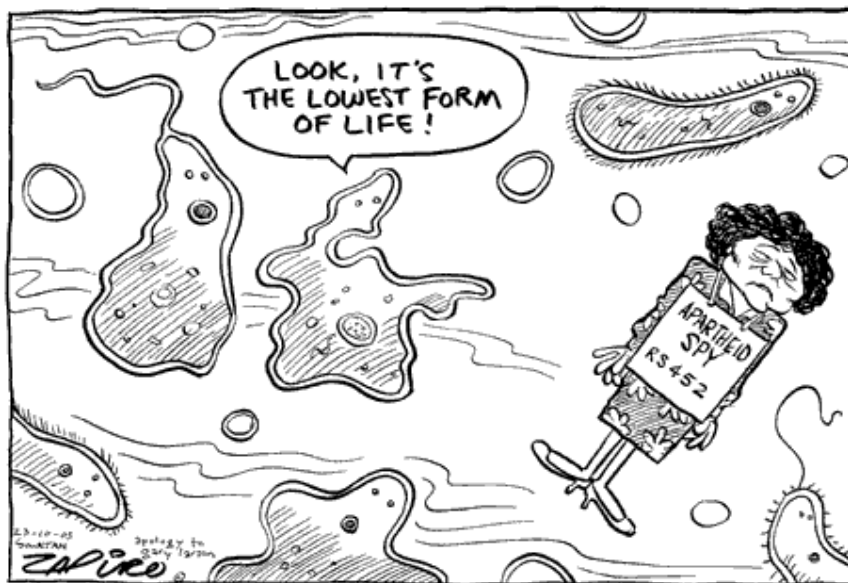
But minor public figures can also attract heavy personal fire. Khulekani Sithole, then director-general of correctional services, proposed in 2001 that prisoners be housed in disused mine shafts as a solution to overcrowding in prisons. The idea was ingeniously lampooned by Zapiro. In his cartoon, Sithole points at a diagram labelled "disused mine shaft", and looks toward the reader: our second observation is a cross-section view of Sithole's skull, showing a shaft leading from the outside world to a large empty hole labelled "disused brain cavity". The visual pun is beautiful in its absurd symmetry, and Zapiro says he is reliably informed that this cartoon brought repercussions in the corridors of power: Sithole's plan was scuppered, at least partially due to Zapiro's blunt assertion of its idiocy.²⁰

²⁰ Zapiro, pers com



6 August 1997, Mail & Guardian

Another prime example of Zapiro's virulently *ad hominem* mode is his cartoon produced at the time of revelations that Eastern Cape human rights lawyer Vanessa Brereton had been the apartheid spy RS452, contrary to rumours that the codename referred to Bulelani Ngcuka.



October 3, 2003, Sowetan

In it, a glum-looking Brereton is shown floating in a microbial soup alongside a pair of amoeba, one of which exclaims, “Look, it’s the lowest form of life!” In the corner of the frame, Zapiro makes an apology to Gary Larson, for the loan of one of the gag cartoonist’s favourite zoological setpieces. The sheer libellous glee of the cartoon springs from a special hatred that Zapiro seems to reserve for apartheid spies – and in particular white spies who were duplicitously involved in resistance politics. (Craig Williamson has received similar treatment; he is arguably a far stronger candidate for the title awarded to Brereton.)

So while he is reluctant to use the cartoonist’s license to draw maliciously, Zapiro is willing and able to conceive his drawings maliciously. The counterpoint to this mode is what he calls a ‘sycophantic’ one, which is largely devoted to cartoons featuring Mandela. These cartoons have been the core of the ‘nation-building’ voice in Zapiro’s journalistic dialogue, and they were central to his work in the early years of democracy. Zapiro’s Mandela cartoons capture and relay his presence into a contemporary icon of regal benevolence, leading the nation towards a celebratory, humane sense of itself. The stock caricature features Mandela’s giant smile, generous fleshy cheeks, heavy eyelids, and his lanky frame caught in jiving motion. In the sheer accuracy of its observation, the Zapiro Mandela presented and continues to present rival and emerging cartoonists with a dilemma: whether to copy it, or to produce a markedly weaker rendition of the man by choosing not to copy it.



May 18 2004, Sowetan

Such an unambiguously admiring mode of political cartoon is rare – partially because the world produces painfully few leaders who merit it, but also because the traditional stance of the cartoonist is oppositional, cynical, and allergic to partisan representations. In those rare

instances when a cartoonist has pitched his ideological tent squarely in a leader's camp, the act of drawing that leader favourably (and well) is difficult. Ramirez, for example, draws Bush rarely, and unconvincingly; his sense of caricature is attritional, and he cannot comfortably adapt it to approving purposes.

The affective power of Zapiro's Mandela is a function both of the extraordinary nature of our politics, which snatched political patriotism from the jaws of bad taste (at least for a while), and the skill of the cartoonist in the delicate field of distortive but affectionate caricature.

Zapiro has dramatised Mandela's stature and charisma to pioneer a particularly South African brand of hope-soaked nation-building cartoons. This is arguably a related genre to the evergreen nation-building TV beer advertisement — though it is not as reliant on a spurious commercial fantasy of soft-focus racial harmony among the brave new youth, since its optimism is propelled simply by the objective truth of basic political progress. Zapiro's nation-building voice never strays into the aesthetic bog of rainbow phoniness — at least partially because he is not selling a product.

The iconographic 'nation-building' voice is at its clearest in Zapiro's Mandela cartoons, but it is present in many others. Similarly, his provocatively iconoclastic voice, loudest in the raucously libellous examples discussed above, can be heard elsewhere in Zapiro's work. They are intersecting, commingling currents of thought, rather than binary alternatives.

Splicing voices: Zapiro in metacartoon mode

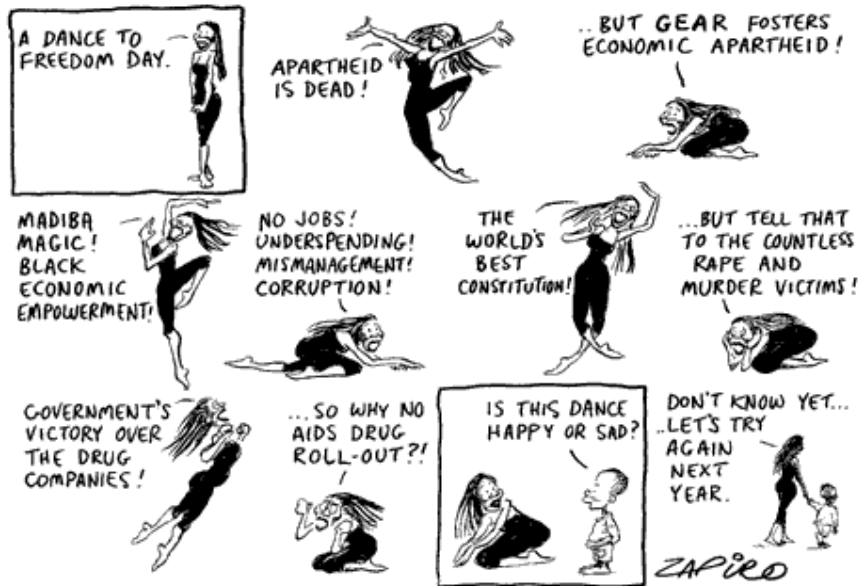
Sometimes the intractable complexities of a topic manage to silence both Zapiro's iconoclastic and iconographic voices: neither can find purchase in and engage convincingly with the subject matter. Often in these situations, a third voice comes into play, in which Zapiro zooms outward to draw himself into the frame, and proceeds to self-reflexively expose to the reader his creative and analytical act.



August 3 2003, Mail & Guardian

In the height of the intrigue surrounding the government's arms deal, Zapiro drew a cartoon (above) which inventively played on the diaphanous relationships between journalism and reality and between words and images. Zapiro celebrates the magical utility of news clichés — and their literalisations in the hands of cartoonists — while at the same time exhaustedly taking leave from the entire project of extracting a cogent narrative from the opaque Machiavellian chaos of backroom politics.

At times the metacartoon, as we will call it, is a way of literally intercutting the iconoclastic and iconographic voices. On Freedom Day 2002, Zapiro drew a dancer performing a “dance to Freedom Day”, in which elated leaps alternate with miserable crouching poses, with each shift of mood triggered by an observation about contemporary South African life.



April 27 2003, [Mail & Guardian](#)

So Zapiro, by using a black female dancer as his proxy, dramatises his moment of historiographic confusion at one remove. Clearly his own thoughts are expressed, but some ventriloquism was necessary to provide a dynamic visual analogue to the text, perhaps especially since he had drawn a previous multi-frame cartoon featuring himself statically vacillating at his drawing board. ([The Sowetan](#), 9 March 2000)

The political equivocations that the cartoon deftly articulates are widespread; they are an inevitable side-effect of a triumphant new democracy that is still plagued by inequities and ineptitudes. It is an extraordinarily refined cartoon which skilfully attunes itself to the frustrations of interpreting an imperfect society.

Zapiro's metacartoons are infrequent. Cartoons with such deft rhetorical management of paradox are rarely drawn anywhere in the world, and they are satisfying and interesting to cartoon researchers and devotees of postmodernist media techniques — but they shirk and reverse the genre's vital and traditional duty to subordinate the flux of events into a univocal narrative. The metacartoons certainly condense history, but they fail to tame it into a statement; they find a scribble where the cartoonist must find a line. Says Zapiro:

I am interested in ambiguities and complexities. But I think if I explored them too much, I would lose the reader. Because in a way I'm trying to break new ground by doing it at all. And I think by articulating for myself — having heard Jeremy Cronin's theory that that's what I was doing — by then saying yes, that's right, that's what has interested me, and then reinforcing that in me, saying I'm interested in those dichotomies and dilemmas, I was taking quite a step. I don't think I could do a lot

more of that, because I think you do need unequivocal statements. You do need advocacy in cartooning, and I really believe in that.²¹

But one of Zapiro's most effective cartoons repurposes his metatextual mode to illuminate unexamined paradoxes in the worldviews of others, rather than his own. In it, the roomy political blindspots of three vocal South African types are woven into an infuriating ideological Moebius strip ...

South African Views....



Bottom line: As South Africans we have our double standards to uphold.

We are presented with the interlocking hypocrisies of a black township woman, a Muslim Capetonian man, and a Jewish Johannesburg man. In its equalising impulse, the cartoon offers an ironic undertone to Zapiro's iconographic voice: as South Africans, it drily asserts, we are united by an array of contrasting but equally meretricious political fictions.

Zapiro might have drawn himself into the loop, providing a fourth frame in which he attacks Israeli abuses with one speech bubble and argues that Arab extremist violence should be ignored in a second bubble. Of course Zapiro is distressed and outraged by Islamist terror – but in his cartoon discourse, he never deals with Palestinian suicide bombs, or with Iraqi murders of foreign contractors. The urgency of his condemnation of the crimes of Sharon and Bush takes primacy in his rhetoric, and therefore honest commentary on the crimes of their victims (or the crimes of people who sympathise with their victims) must be suspended. It is a strategic suppression, a conscious or unconscious silence which he keenly observes in the cartoon's three characters. And of course these omissions lurk behind strident opinions worldwide — and not only behind those of loudmouthed South Africans.

²¹ Zapiro, pers com



September 5 2000, Sowetan

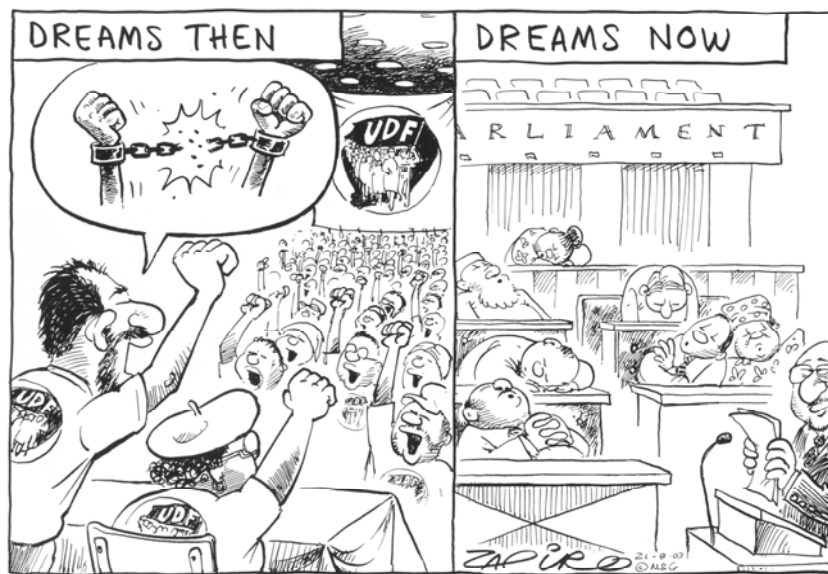
Another superb cartoon illuminates a similar ideological blindspot, but its device is far removed from a metatextual embrace of paradox. Using a single, tyrannical blank frame and a simple caption, Zapiro erases a teeming flood of white South African paradoxes, ambiguities, and dishonest self-narrations.

The cartoon followed heated debate surrounding a petition, drafted by Carl Niehaus and other prominent white figures, that acknowledged the rewards that apartheid gave all white citizens, regardless of their political opinions and activities. The DA MP Douglas Gibson and others indignantly denied this, claiming that their success and comforts were attributable entirely to honest toil and personal merit. Zapiro's cartoon delivers a decisive retort – not an argued one, but an unarguably witty one. (The argument that white people would, on balance, have been better off without apartheid is beside the point, as it can be forcefully argued that the system stunted them in the act of cossetting them.)

Friendly fire: Zapiro on the ANC

As seen in the “Dance to Freedom Day cartoon”, Zapiro's ability to manage paradox is rigorously exercised in his cartoons on the ANC's performance in government. His intimate involvement with anti-apartheid resistance in the eighties has since given him a store of political credibility that most other cartoonists lack, both in South Africa and abroad, and a refined but vigorously self-assured vantage point when appraising post-apartheid politics.

This perspective is sharply dramatised in a cartoon responding to Trevor Manuel's 2004 budget speech; in which the drowsy apathy of parliament's response to his safe, sensible compromises is juxtaposed with a feverish mid-eighties rally in which the current finance minister, then a UDF activist, whips up revolutionary fervour as he addresses a rally with a raised fist and incendiary oratory. By affectionately mocking the trajectory of one man's oratory career, the cartoon articulates a secret nostalgic regret that the compelling confrontational energy of resistance politics has given way to the soporific inertia of stable, democratic public life.



February 22 2004, [Mail & Guardian](#)

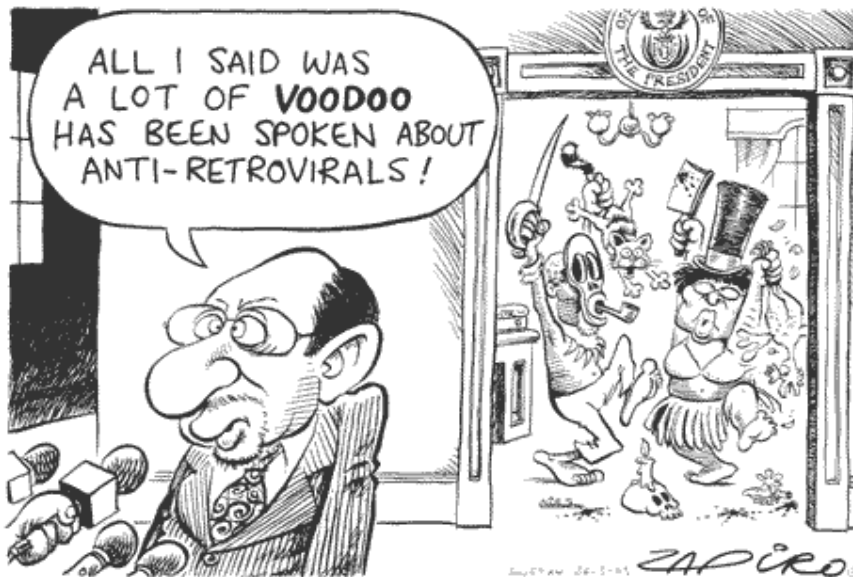
Zapiro has reconciled his consistently centre-left outlook, which coincides largely with the outlook of the ANC, with a willingness to attack the government – often virulently — on a range of sore points: its HIV/AIDS policy, the arms deal, corruption, and the lack of delivery of jobs and services to the poor. There is an exhausting tension between his loyalty to his ideological home and the obligation to regularly attack it.

I find the tension very difficult to deal with. Because maintaining a balance between criticism that is positive and criticism that is quite destructive is difficult. Of course occasionally one wants to go in feet first and really let them have it with both barrels. There's also the other kind of criticism which is a little bit less barbed. There's an excitement that I do have in exploring the dilemmas ... and there's much more empathy in that. Empathy is a word that I would use very strongly here. You're identifying with the person who's faced with a very difficult choice. The transitional time, and the new democratic order, have posed very difficult questions for people who've moved from struggle into power. And I do empathise with them – both

because I think many of them are very good people and because I share some of their struggle background – and I see how difficult it is. So I'm not always trying to destroy what they're doing. Not at all. But I often find it very tough to deal with.²²

Zapiro's empathy for Manto Tshabalala-Msimang seems to have expired. Many of his most forceful cartoons have dealt with the health minister's chronic vacillation on HIV/AIDS treatment programmes, and with Mbeki's equivocation on the nature of the virus.

In one particularly provocative cartoon, Zapiro seizes on a ill-advised remark from Trevor Manuel, and proceeds to cast president and health minister as hysterical voodoo quacks, thus skewering Mbeki with the very racist prejudice he paranoidly observes in his white critics. This *is* voodoo medicine, the cartoon boldly asserts, at the risk of energising an inflammatory vision of irrational African leadership. African solutions to the HIV/AIDS crisis must engage fully with concrete knowledge of the disease exhaustively gathered by Western scientists , or they will amount to a destructive form of African superstition, the cartoon charges.



26 March 2003, Sowetan

The government's failure to deliver nevirapine to mothers during childbirth prompted Zapiro to draw his most stridently hostile cartoon of Mbeki to date. The purchase of an exorbitant presidential jet inspired an ingenious literalisation of the state's immoral budget decisions: the corpses of babies infected with HIV due to the non-delivery of nevirapine are recycled as a staircase serving the jet.

²² Zapiro, pers com



March 1, 2001, Mail & Guardian

The cartoon's caustic hyperbole strips away the inert, technocratic circumlocutions that insulated the government's rationales for spending lavishly on grand luxuries and failing to spend on life-saving necessities. Budgets and bureaucracies are complex organisms, but the moral choices they enact are simple – and a cartoon such as this one decisively unveils and dramatises this simplicity. (Of course, the number of children dying due to the nevirapine delay was greatly exaggerated by the press, which failed to communicate that the drug merely reduces the rate of mother-to-child HIV transmission by around 30%. But lives were still at stake.)

When the peak of the HIV/AIDS controversy coincided with suspicions surrounding the arms deal and growing frustration in the media with government's policy on Zimbabwe, Zapiro fused all three issues into a cartoon which asserted that the ANC had suffered a profound loss of credibility ...



March 21 2002, Mail & Guardian

The six bearers of the moral compass are all clones of Smuts Ngonyama, then ANC secretary-general and spokesman on hot topics. There is an ambiguity surrounding him: is he (mis)leading the compass, or following its misguided urges? Why does Zapiro choose to replicate him six times? Zapiro's metaphor is a forceful one, but it offers a way out: the compass can be repaired, the quagmire escaped, the moral high ground regained. The decay in the standard of ANC leadership is ascribed to a loss of moral direction, and not to a loss of essential moral quality.

Bushwhacking: Zapiro on America and its enemies

Zapiro articulates a fiercely anti-imperialist agenda when confronting global politics, consistently attacking US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. At times, his pursuit of a clear anti-Bush line in his international work has cost him the penetrative complexity that he brings to cartoons about South African issues. On the day of the collapse of the Iraqi regime, Zapiro produced what I read as one of his weakest cartoons. A maimed Iraqi figure sits desolately atop a fallen statue of Saddam; in the sky above him an American warplane flies past, trailing the words "SEE YOU NEXT WAR." The cartoon fails to engage honestly with the momentous fall of a tyrant, and misleadingly implies the immediate departure of the invaders. Evasive cartoons like these are, I suppose, the 'collateral damage' of a firmly held editorial position.

To be fair, Zapiro did acknowledge the value of Saddam's fall in other cartoons. In one, Saddam turns to the viewer with an expression of shocked exasperation as an arcade game

labelled "Iraq" displays a "Game Over" message. The game's joysticks and buttons are labelled "torture", "maim", "exploit" and "kill".



April 14 2003, Sowetan

While the brutal nature of Saddam's regime is cleverly summarised here, the pathos and rhetorical force of the cartoon is anaemic in comparison with the many Zapiro cartoons which portray other tyrants and butchers such as Robert Mugabe, Wouter Basson or Craig Williamson. Perhaps to celebrate Saddam's demise too earnestly or hyperbolise his villainy would subtly fracture the ideological coherence of Zapiro's unqualified opposition to America's unilateral invasion and occupation.

Like most political cartoonists, Zapiro must consciously and/or unconsciously assemble a balanced ideological system, a roughly unified analysis of political events which reconciles conflicting truths and positions by affording them varying degrees of weight. He must articulate a strident opinion on a topic, and be ready to revisit the topic from a different angle if his position is invalidated or complicated by new events.

Another Zapiro cartoon on the Iraqi invasion stirred up widespread controversy. An American soldier is depicted having missionary-position sex with a woman whose head is a TV camera labelled "CNN etc". She is filming the soldier's face avidly; they are in a desert landscape, atop a battle tank converted into a giant military mattress that leaves a trail of crushed Iraqi corpses. The caption reads, "Embedded Journalism".



March 27 2003, [Mail & Guardian](#)

It is a surprisingly *rude* image – a cartoon which somehow seems more graphic than a photograph of the same scene would have been. And its ingenious attack on the journalistic integrity of the American media struck a chord with many.