Zapiro and Ramirez: a comparison

The political vantage points of Ramirez and Zapiro mirror each other. Ramirez articulates a right-wing vision of and from an imperial superpower, while Zapiro articulates a left-wing vision of and from an anti-imperialist peripheral power. Both cartoonists speak pointedly from a minority ethnic platform: Zapiro as a white Jewish South African, Ramirez as a Mexican-Japanese-American. These heterogenous identities enrich their work by complicating their journalistic voices.

But there is a sharp contrast between the two cartoonists' relationships to incumbent political authority. Zapiro's vision of South African history coincides fairly closely with that of the African National Congress, but his is an unambiguously independent journalistic position; while he frequently draws iconographic cartoons which affirm government and its policies, his iconoclastic voice gets considerably more airtime, both in his treatment of the ruling party and of American power.

And, as discussed previously, he occasionally surrenders trenchant rhetorical simplicity in the face of paradox, rendering self-reflexive portraits of his own conflicted understanding of an issue. He allows himself, at times, to coolly record the collisions of opposed and equally compelling political narratives; in doing so he effectively abdicates the role of political cartoonist and adopts that of an historian.

Ramirez, on the other hand, is an increasingly partisan commentator, unambiguously and consistently committing his pen to the cause of America's growing conservative hegemony. This decision has complicated his task; where most political cartoonists aim their satirical hostility at least partially at the political officebearers of their time, Ramirez has almost entirely excluded this staple angle of attack from his repertoire.

Thankfully, his habitual approach is acerbic, and he has little inclination towards sentimental or sycophantic descriptions of power; hence the vast majority of his cartoons are iconoclastic assaults on the Bush administration's adversaries: liberal America, the Democratic party, European opponents of the invasion of Iraq, and, of course, the “axis of evil”. He rarely draws Bush at all, and only one Bush cartoon drawn during the period I have studied could roughly be described as a hostile.
February 5 2004

The cartoon was drawn soon after the scandalous exposure, due to “wardrobe malfunction”, of one of Janet Jackson's breasts during a live Super Bowl football broadcast; Ramirez teases the American public's puritanical horror while castigating the budgetary failings of the Bush administration.

Heads of state: caricaturing Bush and Mbeki

It is possible that Ramirez's apparent reluctance to draw Bush is not only a function of his political allegiance but also of the technical limitations of his approach to caricature. He has a fairly rigid formula for achieving satirical distortion of a subject's face, which sometimes costs his caricatures the instant recognisability we expect from them. For Ramirez, both caricature and the invention of fictional cartoon figures begins with the elongation of the head; he often exaggerates prominent features, but his “default” distortion is to stretch the head to achieve an idiotically pinheaded appearance. This is where his sense of anatomical comedy lies, and in the case of the gauntly ectomorphic John Kerry, it is obvious a fruitful approach ...
But this technique is not as well suited to caricaturing Bush’s average head shape and evenly arranged features, which are those of an Anglo-Saxon everyman. Bush lacks a striking comical feature; his eyes are perhaps fractionally closer together than average, and his nose is mildly hooked and asymmetrical. When drawing faces such as this, the caricaturist is compelled to defy what he observes and extrapolate, from the faintest irregularities, wild distortions that seem to illustrate character: hence, in most caricatures of Bush, the slight downward kink on his upper lip becomes a goofy simian overbite; his slightly pronounced eyebrows become sprouty misplaced mustaches; and his faintly outward-angled ears become mammoth jug-handles.

Zapiro’s caricature of Bush, on the right, is guided by an unshakeable conviction that the subject is a dangerous half-wit, and its distortive decisions are made with the intention of suggesting ape-like idiocy. But despite its gross distortion of very mild anatomical quirks, Zapiro’s caricature works — partially because cartoonists have, by an organic process of mutual mimicry, secured a worldwide agreement from readers that Bush does have giant bat ears and a ridiculously pendulous upper lip, and partially because Zapiro is loyal enough to the subject’s basic head shape and intangible demeanour to trigger recognition. In the flesh, Bush’s eyes communicate (perhaps deceptively) a dullness of intellect, but the precise
signifiers of this dullness are too subtle to reproduce in the style of loose caricature that Zapiro works in.

The eyes have it, goes the cliché, and there is plenty of truth in it: much of the intangible information conveyed by our faces is concentrated in the invariably delicate design of our eye shapes, their spacing from each other, their relationship to the eyebrows and nose, the depth at which they are set in the face, and crucially, in the volatile interactions between light, moisture and colour that occur in the iris and cornea.

These complex effects and their emotional implications can be reproduced in photography and in exceptionally nuanced portrait paintings of the standard achieved by Rembrandt, Holbein the Younger, Sargent and Lucian Freud. And exceptional caricaturists with a finely worked technique can also effectively record and satirise the intricacies of a subject's eyes; but editorial cartoonists generally lack the time, the picture space, the inclination and/or the ability to deliver detailed, intricately attentive caricature. Instead they must invent schematic, reductive analogues for a subject's features; on Zapiro's page, all the dense visual information of Bush's eyes is tautly gestured at with two closely positioned tallish dots. Zapiro has found a simple, remarkably effective sign for the intangible slow-wittedness of the presidential gaze.

By contrast, Ramirez's Bush offers plenty of distortion and reduction, but to little satiric effect. Part of the problem, as discussed, is the narrowness of the head and the extreme width of the jaw — a basic structure that is simply so far removed from the source that it obstructs any recognition that other satirical accuracies might generate.

But another problem, perhaps, is that Ramirez is uncertain as to what he wants his caricature to communicate about Bush. He is sympathetic to the subject, but unlike Zapiro, penetrative sympathy is not part of his satirical palette; and since he does not apply the penetrative hostility here that he does to Kerry or Saddam, his caricature lacks penetrativeness, period. It is a jumble of exaggerations and inventions which amounts to far less than the sum of its parts. The word “caricature” is derived from the Italian caricare, “to load” or “to surcharge” (Feaver 5). Ramirez fails to “load” his representation of Bush; it is merely a weightless exercise in distortion.

But when Ramirez's hostile satirical eye is properly engaged, the results can be explosive. In the cartoon below, his mordant flair for devising grotesque images is allied with his often unused capacity for richly detailed and textured caricature. And, in sharp contrast to his rendition of Bush, his treatment of Saddam is hateful but compelling.
In Ramirez's hand, the decrepit, pathetic abjection of Saddam in the photographs and footage taken of him soon after his capture is transformed into sinister defiance. His watery, bewildered gaze is reoriented to engage aggressively with the reader's, and his eyes are
shrunk dramatically – an easy way to generate the appearance of moral turpitude and/or stupidity. The nose is grotesquely swollen, and the bags under the eyes are intensified with a dense filigree of lines.

It may be argued that Ramirez's approach to caricature veers between the great wartime cartoonist Low's categories of “karicature” (an arbitrary distortion of surface features) and true caricature, which generates a penetratingly distortive image that seems to expose the subject more intimately than the subject’s actual physiognomy. It may be argued that Ramirez’s approach to caricature veers between the great wartime cartoonist Low’s categories of “karicature” (an arbitrary distortion of surface features) and true caricature, which generates a penetratingly distortive image that seems to expose the subject more intimately than the subject’s actual physiognomy. 31 Assessing whether a drawing falls into either category is, of course, a subjective and nebulous project.

Zapiro’s accommodation of political ambiguities sometimes allows or compels him to variegate his caricatures of a given subject – to calibrate the iconographic and iconoclastic elements in a caricature according to the rhetorical objectives of the cartoon. While Zapiro’s Mandela was immutably benign, his caricature of Mbeki shape-shifts between bookish affability and chilly arrogance.

26 May 2004, Sowetan

Following the ANC’s emphatic election victory in 2004, Zapiro responded to Mbeki’s promise of accelerated delivery of growth and infrastructure by parodying the “Mr Delivery” joke he drew four years earlier to describe the beginning of Mbeki’s first term. This time, the presidential scooter has been dramatically powered up. It is an affectionate, drily iconographic affirmation of government’s will and capacity to succeed in their development mission. Mbeki’s habitually staid gravitas is gently mocked by the ramshackle absurdity of the new contraption; his wry half-smile is warmly defined, and his eyes are rendered with two tallish dots. In Zapiro’s Bush caricature, the same reduction connotes mere gormlessness — but

31 Feaver, William, masters of caricature, p 167
here, in the context of the surrounding features, it suggests amiability, echoing the humane, blandly benign presences of Herge’s sympathetic creations and countless characters in children’s books and animated films.

But when Zapiro moves into the attack, Mbeki’s features change. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s remarks about sycophancy in the government hierarchy sparked an angry response from the presidency in December 2004, Zapiro’s comment was elegantly terse:

In contrast with the “Mr Delivery” incarnation of Mbeki, this caricature sports an angular nose, flared nostrils, and an upper lip whose bow-like curve has formed a derisive sneer. The eyes have gained detail and a heavy-lidded, cagey gaze, and the president’s tapering canine tooth has been exaggerated.

The outward zoom of the cartoon’s “camera” in the second frame, as seen here, is often used by Zapiro to deliver the revelation or bathetic surprise that propels his joke. In frame two, we are presented with half of a visual answer to Mbeki’s question – he is surrounded by men (and women) – and the remaining half of the question is, for a fraction of a second, answered literally, until the grinning obsequiousness of his audience sparks an instant of cognitive friction and the cartoon’s deliciously symmetrical ironic punch.
Paying (dis)respects: the obituary cartoon

The obituary cartoon is part of the average editorial cartoonist's job description — and many practitioners resent the obligation to suspend their satirical weaponry and pay earnest tribute to famous figures in the days immediately after their death, according to cartoonist and leading online cartoon archivist Daryl Cagle.32

Unlike a written press obituary, which offers much more discursive space and is generally the work of someone particularly able and inclined to perform the difficult task of condensing and evaluating the life in question, the cartooned obituary is formally compelled towards reductionism and/or sentimentality. Triteness and disingenuousness roam freely in the genre, which frequently resorts to a timeworn setpiece of the subject's reception at the pearly gates by a St Peter figure. Often a death sparks a volley of obituaries employing a single pedestrian joke.

But some cartoonists are particularly well suited to the project of generating elegiac pathos without slipping into crude commodification or hagiography. Zapiro is one – the obituary cartoon fits seamlessly into his broader iconographic mode of valorising and dramatising South Africa's national narrative with an emotional force that, by virtue of his acute aesthetic judgment and the consistency of his political discourse, seems never to ring false.

Following the death of Walter Sisulu in 2003, Zapiro linked his contribution to national liberation, with those of Mandela and Oliver Tambo. The strength of the cartoon lies largely in the restraint of the metaphor it chooses. The struggle triumvirate are not cast as giants, or warriors, or generals or even foundling fathers. Their contribution is measured here not in martial courage or sacrifice or coruscating charisma, but in the decades-long application of quiet, disciplined foresight and design.

Thus, through delicate understatement, Zapiro skirts the idolatrous nationalist kitsch that the death of such a figure can easily trigger. And the loneliness of the last remaining architect is at once improbable — given the adulation and incessant human engagement he enjoys — and palpable. The three drawing boards double as tilted comic-book frames, with the final frame delivering a mournful resolution.

The death of singer Brenda Fassie in May 2004 presented a markedly different challenge. She died distressingly young, and her ill-health was at least partially self-inflicted by many years of drug abuse. Fassie was an adored but traumatised and conflicted star, whose vulnerability and instability emitted a bleak, buzzing undertone to her rhapsodic music.

While the media undoubtedly stimulates and sometimes even fabricates public grief when celebrities die, the trauma generated is nonetheless real when a powerful, emblematic presence such as Fassie fails. The abjectness of her death was hurtful to the national imagination, and Zapiro's obituary cartoon seeks to ease this hurt. In a conventional but expert adoption of the “pearly gates” setpiece, it imagines Fassie in her effervescent prime, arriving rejuvenated and ready to rock the hereafter. With a deft sleight of observation that would be the envy of the finest fairground caricaturists, Zapiro subtly translates Brenda's physiognomy fromcrudeness to prettiness. This is the charismatic, sexy, powerful Brenda, not the rude, ugly and helpless Brenda that prevailed in her final years. Thus Zapiro reaffirms and dramatises the public's fantasy — and Brenda's own fantasy — about her enduring character and meaning.
The cartoon's escapism is helped by the Disney-scented lusciousness of the surrounding cloudscape (a sea of comforting bosoms), by the round-featured amicability of the multiracial committee of angels, and by the kitschy grandeur of heaven's architecture, which is uncannily reminiscent of a luxury gated complex in northern Johannesburg. The anaesthetic impulse of the cartoon hence runs entirely counter to the habitually irritant and cautionary energy of the conventional political cartoon; perhaps it is this potential in the obituary genre that annoys many of Cagle's respondents.

But Zapiro's emollient and sentimental approach to the obituary form is firmly decommissioned in two cartoons commenting on the death of Ronald Reagan, a figure firmly inducted into the cartoonist's historical hall of infamy, both for his own actions and indirectly for the actions of his ideological disciple, President Bush.

In one of these cartoons, Zapiro acerbically satirises the hagiographic media fallout of a famous death. The caricature of Reagan on the cover of the presidential aide's newspaper is mercilessly hostile, grotesquely exaggerating his wrinkled, recessed lips. The cartoon relishes its refusal to comply with the respectful conventions of the obituary cartoon, and elegantly succeeds in insulting two targets with one joke.
Two days before this, Ramirez imagined a similar scenario in the cartoon above, but used its irony to propel an entirely different argument: that the praise being heaped on Reagan would in time be echoed by a similar rehabilitation of Bush in the eyes of his current nearsighted critics. When you die, the public finally understands your value, Ramirez suggests.
While Zapiro’s first obituary chimed with a small chorus of American cartoons which sought to puncture the dishonest idealisation of Reagan’s legacy — a project which was substantially articulated in a much larger chorus of other American cartoons by both liberal and conservative practitioners. Ramirez’s first obituary was a tour de force of nostalgic Americana, neatly drawing on Reagan’s Hollywood career and the “straight-shooting cowboy” persona so adroitly borrowed by Bush. Heaven is a wild Western skyscape flooded with sunset light, and the composition is sumptuously cinematic — the departing rider is framed with asymmetrical elegance by two saluting cacti, and the silhouetted scene is matched by the crystalline movie-credit sharpness of the caption’s white-on-black typography.

But even some American cartoonists who are normally stridently hostile to conservative politics succumbed to the phenomenon that, since the death of Princess Diana, has been classified in media platitudes as a “national outpouring of grief”. Steve Sack, the excellent resident cartoonist with the liberal Minneapolis Star Tribune offered a sophisticated double-coded compromise between tribute and subversion.
Steve Sack, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 9 June 2004\(^{33}\)

Partially due to the acutely nostalgic, fifties-flavoured sympathy and avoidance of distortion which Sack renders his portrait, the cartoon carries a clearly implied acknowledgment of Reagan’s most obvious success in realising the imperatives of his remark – namely his crucial role in the securing a detente with Mikhail Gorbachev, which indirectly helped spark the advent of democracy in Russia and eastern Europe.

But the choice of quotation also obliquely attacks the Bush presidency: soon after considering whether Reagan himself conformed to the ideals he espoused, the reader is invited to apply the same test to his political descendant. The phrases “the quest for peace” and “the preservation of freedom” are both frictive with the history of the current administration, which patently does not prioritise peace and has corroded civil liberties in the US (though its military adventures may prove to generate, at great human cost, greater political freedom in the Middle East).

But there were also several American obituary cartoons which unambiguously refused to celebrate Reagan’s life — among them Kirk’s superbly caustic satire of the sentimental amnesia that was suffusing the media debate.

In his other Reagan obituary, Zapiro, with typical sensitivity to paradox, wittily dramatised the polarised debate over the dead man's legacy: heaven and hell are competing furiously for his tenancy. Zapiro abdicates the sweeping, binary moral judgment of the conventional obituary cartoon, allowing itself only to mock Reagan's reputation for denseness (and perhaps even the confusion he suffered, due to Alzheimer's disease, during his final years). This is not quite a metacartoon, despite its embrace of ambiguity, because it does not comment directly on the task of political cartooning. (Though it does imply a parallel between the task of cartooning and that of sorting the blessed from the damned.)

Kirk Andersen, 11 June 2004

http://www.kirktoons.com/cartoons.html
June 9 2004, Sowetan

Using a similar setpiece, Ramirez offered a mordant anti-obituary on the 9/11 suicide pilots, in which they are bounced from heaven’s escalator by a scimitar-wielding Muslim equivalent of St Peter. Ramirez lampoons the terrorists instead of vilifying them; their bug-eyed dumbfoundedness and comically wide-bottomed physiques suggest slapstick villains rather than religiously inflamed mass murderers.

19 September 2001

In responding to shocking disasters or atrocities, such as the 9/11 attack on New York and the south-east Asian tsunami catastrophe, cartoonists must deliver a distinct and difficult
subgenre of the obituary cartoon. Again, the single-frame cartoon is formally ill-suited to the task assigned to it – in this case, engaging with profound horror.

Its default rhetorical tendency is to reduce, ridicule and schematise, whereas the reader, in the aftermath of a tragic event, demands from it a graphic testimony to its momentousness, confusion and gravity.

( This despite a widespread popular urge to sabotage the often phony sombreness of the mass media’s coverage of such events with irreverently mordant e-mailed or told jokes. Sometimes these subversions are not well received near the scene of the tragedy, though: British TV comedian Ali G was vilified in America for asking an interviewee, many months after the September 11 attacks, about the “terrible events of 7-Eleven”.)

When the conventional satirical tools are inappropriately frivolous, the cartoonist must borrow the emotive tools of painters, sculptors and memorialist architects. On September 12, 2001, Ramirez did this in more than one sense, by conscripting the Statue of Liberty as an animated index of American shock and distress. The mass of dust and smoke rising from the collapsed towers is rendered with great attentiveness – perhaps even with celebratory sensual pleasure in the rich contrasts and textural effects generated – as is the statue’s neoclassical grace and crisply defined draperies. The cartoon dramatises acutely the profundity of the shock experienced by the city and by the American imagination. Its stillness and wordless silence are major sources of its affect, particularly as it was produced and received amid a raging
audiovisual and textual storm of commentary, reportage and endless replaying of thunderous, chaotic, panic-saturated footage. Due to the soberly asymmetrical balance of its composition and its depiction of the scene from a safe, ordering distance, the image in a sense offers palliation as well as paths.

A Zapiro cartoon on the attacks, published two days later, is far less assured. It depicts the desolation of 'ground zero', and imagines an apparition of the fallen towers resurrected as gravestones, each marked "RIP New York". The visual pun seems awkward and forced, suggesting the death of the city and not simply its wounding. And Zapiro's penwork here seems hurried and uncharacteristically careless – perhaps due to distress at the trauma suffered by a city he lived in, or to last-minute deadline pressure following a case of cartoonist's block, or to frustration at the disjuncture between his habitually untroubled, soft use of line and the jaggedly fractured, contorted and apocalyptic scene he is portraying.

Not that Zapiro is incapable of achieving affect through expressive, gestural lines. As noted in the first chapter, his early Bauer-influenced cartoons often forcefully dramatised state violence with violence of line and splatter. And one of his finest mature obituaries employs a loose
expressionist technique to signal the thwarted, painful futility of Yasser Arafat's final years of isolation.

November 12 2004, Mail & Guardian

Zapiro harnesses Arafat's physical ugliness, using it to embody his and the Palestinian people's decades of fruitless bitter conflict. The deep shadows lining his features are crudely defined with ragged, gestural hatching, and the dense black backdrop disintegrates coarsely into the margins. The print on his headscarf, ingeniously, becomes a magical manifestation of national defiance; Arafat's physical and political defeat is redeemed by the unbowed will of his people. One might argue that the cartoon indulges in the propagandist romanticisation of a decayed and destructive militarist aesthetic; but the Middle East is one of the few subjects on which Zapiro brooks no ambiguity ...

Touching raw nerves: cartooning Israel and Palestine

Both Ramirez and Zapiro have been the targets of considerable hostility from Jewish communities in their respective countries after drawing provocative, though very different cartoons on Israel and Palestine. The conflict is driven by two mutually refuting histories which steadily intensify each other – a relationship which presents the political cartoonist with two obvious options: to ratify either history, or to ratify a neutral vision of compromise, hope and conciliation.
Ramirez chose neither course in a cartoon which appeared on October 6, 2000, opting instead to deliver a scornful and pessimistic subversion of both competing histories. In it, a Jewish figure and an Arab figure are portrayed praying side by side before a wall labelled, in massive monolithic letters, “Hate”; the subtitle reads “Worshipping Their God”. The cartoon was misread by many Jewish readers, who saw both figures as Jewish and the wall as representing Jerusalem’s Western Wall. Ramirez was accused of anti-Semitism, and also received complaints from Muslim readers. But this was not an instance of inept miscommunication comparable to Ramirez’s Bush “snuff” cartoon – this is a far more lucid and dynamic cartoon, and his Jewish accusers were not at all mollified by the knowledge that the kneeling figure was a Muslim Palestinian.

October 6, 2000

The *Los Angeles Times* ombudsman, in her report on the outcry, attacked the execution of the cartoon as “careless and insensitive”.35 Which is of course a tautologous description of any successful political cartoon of this kind. Even when correctly read, the cartoon in question punctures the deadlocked — and interlocking — rhetorics of the Palestine crisis. By conflating both Jew and Arab as co-religionists in a cult of hate, it uses a gross and obvious distortion to trigger an underlying observation: that both occupier and occupied have become committed partners in an atavistic rhythm of thought. (“Thinking with the blood” as Martin Amis puts it.)36

The strident daring of Ramirez’s attack was exceeded by a Zapiro cartoon drawn two years later, during the Israeli invasion of the Jenin refugee camp, which drew an explosive visual and historical parallel between Ariel Sharon’s actions against the Palestinian people and those of Nazi Germany against Jews. In the cartoon’s second, revelatory frame, a grotesquely caricatured Sharon is depicted in a black military uniform, sporting an armband and Nazi-style officer’s hat emblazoned with the Star of David, standing triumphantly amid the

35Los Angeles Times, Oct 15 2000
36Amis, Martin, *Experience* p. 252
devastation of Jenin. The response from the South African Jewish establishment was furious: Zapiro had grievously insulted the Jewish state, they claimed, and by extension the Jewish people. Zapiro was upset by the vehemence of the backlash.

I stand by the political sentiments in [the Sharon cartoon], and I’m appalled by the way people refer to it as “The Nazi cartoon”, as if there was a swastika in the drawing, which there was not. I’ve had such personal angst over that, and my family and I have had so much criticism that I find that … I wouldn’t turn the clock back and not have done it, but I haven’t enjoyed it. I haven’t enjoyed it at all. The criticism of Israel, which I will continue doing, and which I am compelled to do, is not enjoyable for me, but it’s something that I will do. (Zapiro)

April 19 2002, Mail & Guardian

Zapiro's protest at the “Nazi cartoon” tag is not altogether convincing, since dressing Sharon with a Star of David clearly in the place of a swastika is perhaps an even more explosive device than dressing him in a swastika: it intercuts fascist imagery with an emotive symbol of Jewish identity, rather than merely with a rogue leader. It is a cartoon which achieves a degree of satirical force and stridency that few mainstream print journalists would dare to attempt. Like the Ramirez cartoon above, it is an illustration of the extraordinary subversive power of the form.

*****

Ramirez and Zapiro are both gifted provocateurs, but Zapiro wields a wider range of satirical skills. In particular, his capacity to dramatise and manage paradox makes him a more compelling commentator than his American counterpart. Zapiro's strength also lies in his
greater ability to move between sympathetic and aggressive modes of caricature, even when dealing with one subject, and to shift between and harmonise his iconographic and iconoclastic voices. Whereas Ramirez achieves great emotive and satirical energy in articulating a conservative and nationalist political narrative which is underrepresented in the form, his work is weakened by a frequent refusal to accommodate other political narratives, or to witness impartially the collision of currents of political truth. He fails to “recognise and name dissonance” , to use Cronin's taut description of Zapiro's critical and satirical strength (8).

Of course Zapiro only occasionally embraces doubt — and frequently draws cartoons which skirt clear ambiguities in a topic — but these tactical retreats from certainty add credibility and conviction to the habitual certainty which he considers to be his professional duty.

The textual compression, distortive energy and tyrannical simplicity of its single daily frame mean that the political cartoon must, to an extent, always fail to meet the standards of balance and depth that we generally demand of written journalism. But perhaps by virtue of its exemption from these standards, the political cartoon is expected to expose or gesture at a seam of lateral, surprising truth — to generate a small comic epiphany that is inaccessible to the conventional journalist. Both of these cartoonists often achieve this, but Zapiro, by virtue of the rhetorical elasticity, formal inventiveness and sheer political acuity of his work, does this more often and more forcefully.