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Weapons of mass provocation: The visual language of the political cartoon in the work of Zapiro and Ramirez, 2001-2005

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2006-11-16T09:46:34Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/1786

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Literature Review

The most comprehensive general history of political cartoons I found is Charles Press's The Political Cartoon. Press provides a basic introductory analysis of the political cartoon and the way it relates to political power in democracies and authoritarian regimes. He contrasts the rhetorical approaches adopted by "pro-establishment" cartoonists (like John Tenniel and the Soviet cartoonists) with those of "anti-establishment" cartoonists like Daumier, Gillray, George Grosz and Ralph Steadman. Press' basic typology of cartoons is based on the ideological undercurrent guiding the artist rather than on any graphic characteristics; he is a political commentator rather than an art critic.

In his essay "Poison Pen or Good-Tempered Pencil? Humour and Hatred in 20th Century Political Cartoons", Mark Bryant examines the tension between cartoonists' obligation simply to amuse and their potential importance as forceful subversive and didactic voices. Bryant identifies a long tradition of "ugly" cartoons whose humour, if any, is secondary to an incendiary political anger. He cites John Berger's parallel between Gerald Scarfe and Gillray, Goya and Daumier:

> What is essential to them is that they draw faithfully – and with pain – the ghosts that crowd in on them. (Edwards et al, 62)

And the Dutch cartoonist Fritz Behrendt:

> The political cartoonist is a close relative of schoolmasters, missionaries, prophets and moralists: and his primary aim is not belly laughter, but the thoughtful smile which shows that the graphic signals have been understood. (63)

Bryant argues that the most aggressive political cartoonists have been a genuinely potent corrective to the abuse of power. And power has retaliated: Honore Daumier was imprisoned for six months for a single cartoon attacking Louis Philippe; Heine was jailed by Kaiser Wilhelm for his drawings; and in 1987, the Lebanese cartoonist Naji al-Ali was shot dead in London by agents of a political faction in his homeland. (And of course Zapiro himself was detained by the apartheid security police in the mid-eighties.)

Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms informs the analysis of political cartoons as a satirical and parodic form. Hutcheon investigates parody as a richly fertile and productive artistic mode, in which the author invents a new text in the act of reworking and critiquing an old text. She draws on a vast range of parodic works in literature, art, film, theatre and music, discussing creations as diverse as Tom Stoppard's Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stockhausen's Hymnen, James Joyce's Ulysses, and Magritte's Ceci n'est pas un pipe.

Hutcheon's theory applies to Zapiro and Ramirez's parodies of widely recognisable narratives and images, and how these generate satirical commentary on the public figures "implanted" into the parody – through effects of ironic disjuncture, bathos, shock or comical resonance.

Scott McCloud's brilliant cartooned study of comic-book narrative, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, resonates tangentially with my topic. While it is primarily concerned with the aesthetics of sequential art and does not deal directly with political cartoons, it offers a rich analysis of the graphic language of cartoon art.

In his second book, Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionising an Art Form, McCloud explores how the language, culture and business of comics are changing in the digital era: particularly relevant to my topic is his assessment of the impact of the Internet on the production, distribution and reception of drawn and digital cartoons. The sudden emergence of a global electronic audience has extended the cultural influence of leading political cartoonists such as Zapiro and Ramirez.

The most wide-ranging study of South African political cartoons is Ken Vernon's Penpricks: The Drawing of South Africa's Political Battlelines. It is a comprehensive history of South African political cartoons between 1880 and 1999, which intersperses historical narrative with commentaries on individual cartoons.

Vernon provides a richly illustrated account of the evolution of the form in this country, covering in some detail the work of major mid-century cartoonists like Boonzaier, David Marais and John Jackson. He also deals with the changing nature of cartoons during the late apartheid years, but his analysis is fairly cursory on the formal and political agitations of Derek Bauer and Zapiro. As a non-academic study his book offers little formal analysis or theoretical background; it is an anthology of brief personal responses to many individual cartoons. But it situates Zapiro in the century-long tradition of South African cartoons, and helps identify the continuities and innovations that he and other contemporary cartoonists represent.

While several publications have referred to Zapiro, the only academic study of his work I have found is Jessica van Onselen's long essay, Understanding The Success of Zapiro's Cartooning in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Van Onselen provides a broad overview of Zapiro's creative development and convincingly argues that his power as a commentator on South African democracy lies in his capacity to fuse an anti-authoritarian drive with a range of firmly-held ideological positions: to marry the traditional cynicism of the caricaturist with the lively didacticism she calls "leadership through laughter".

Van Onselen identifies two major creative paradigms in Zapiro's work: the conceptual cartoon, which re-presents a situation in an invented metaphor, and the "sitcom" cartoon, which presents an amusing everyday scene. Van Onselen also identifies a range of strategies

that Zapiro employs to comic and satiric ends. She points out that Zapiro frequently employs what Kristeva defines as *intertextuality* - multiple visual and narrative texts are marshalled to the cause of communicating an ironic or polemic message.

Many Zapiro cartoons take the form of a *homage* to and/or parody of "canonic" cartoon artists such as Herge, Disney, Schultz and Steadman. Van Onselen places homage as a subcategory of intertextuality, and presumably we could also describe it as a respectful species of parody.

Zapiro's regular employment of a *metatextual* mode is also noted by Van Onselen. In certain cartoons, represents himself in the act of devising a cartoon – thus dissolving the boundary between Shapiro the person and Zapiro the *nom de plume*. Often he resorts to this when a conventional cartoon would over-schematise a complex issue: instead, we are presented with a sequential narrative on Zapiro's nuanced thoughts on the topic. Van Onselen points out that his own subjectivity and the pressure of his production routine are exposed to the reader in a complex package of meanings. The metatextual cartoon at once demystifies the cartoon genre and elevates it to an intimate address: we are asked to respond to the cartoonist as a thinker and not merely a signature.

Van Onselen's essay is a strong source for my chapter on Zapiro with regard to intertextuality, parody and metatextuality, as well as their manifestations in the cartoons of Ramirez.

Jeremy Cronin's review in the The Sunday Independent of Zapiro's 1997 collection, The Whole Truth, is particularly relevant to my argument on Zapiro's capacity to respond creatively to doubt, and paradox. He argues convincingly that Zapiro articulates a double vision of South African society, finding and wrestling with the disjunctures "between pragmatism and principle, fiscal discipline and social development, reconciliation and truth". His cartoons frequently "generate the laughter of 'oops!', of dissonance recognised and named". (7)