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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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Abstract

This report contributes to the analysis of the visual language of the political cartoon by comparing the work of the South African cartoonist Zapiro and the American cartoonist Michael Ramirez since September 2001. The central topics investigated are the subjects' contrasting approaches to the task of satirising incumbent domestic and foreign political leaders, their treatment of paradox and ambiguity in subject matter, and the relationships between iconographic and iconoclastic satirical modes in their work. The subjects' technical approaches to caricature are compared, with particular reference to their drawings of Thabo Mbeki and George W. Bush, and their respective approaches to obituary cartoons are contrasted. The main conclusion of the report is that Zapiro's willingness and ability to dramatise and accommodate conflicting historical narratives in his cartoons, and his capacity to comment on the act of cartooned satire itself, are important reasons why he exploits and expands the potential of the form to a greater degree than Ramirez does.