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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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Introduction

The cartoonist's freedom of expression is far greater than that of an editorial journalist: a cartoon can legitimately be libellous, inflammatory, ad hominem, unresearched, coarse, near-sighted, bigoted or surreally illogical. When applied to the representation of warfare and global crisis as it has been over the last three years, this freedom is even more strange and powerful.

Of course it is not unlimited; cartoonists have been successfully sued for libel in liberal democracies as well as repressive states. And the intangible, informal censorships exerted by editors, media owners and political climates often apply as much to cartoonists as they do to conventional journalists.

But the editorial cartoonist's licence to distort is potent, and when allied to the emotive properties of caricature and visual satire, it becomes a formidable subversive weapon. While the subjects of this study have markedly different relationships to incumbent political authority in their respective countries, they share an extraordinary capacity to provoke, influence and irritate public and government opinion – a capacity rooted in their graphic and rhetorical skills, and their willingness to use these fearlessly.

The advent of the internet age in the last fifteen years has delivered an energising new global stage for cartoons and comics of all genres, as Scott McCleod demonstrates in Reinventing Comics, and this has intensified the transcultural currency of the political cartoon in particular. Amid the growing surfeit of mainstream written journalism, and the rapid rise of a new parallel industry of independent "alternative" news websites and blogs, the political cartoon can cut through the gathering fog of text.

The effective political cartoon delivers its message faster and more dramatically than an opinion column — and can, in the digital era, cheaply reach a multilingual global online audience with little if any translation required. And the formal online publication of cartoons on websites or in digital newsletters is often merely the preamble to an organic "viral" publication via e-mail, the breadth of which is determined by the cartoon's quality and its consonance with a zeitgeist.

This new stage gives the political cartoon a globally subversive potential. And cartoonists in the developing world, among them South Africa's Zapiro, are seizing the opportunity to address an international audience by satirising northern centres of power, particularly the US and Europe. The form offers a virile and charismatically lucid (if innately reductive) alternative to the often turgid and pedestrian written arguments against global political and economic injustice produced by academics, journalists and nongovernmental organisations.

(The subversive potency of visual satire can be observed in the recent exhaustive legal steps pursued by South African Breweries against T-shirt company Laugh It Off; the beer company is fully aware that the spontaneous communicative energy of ridicule leaves expensive public relations efforts coughing in the dust.)

The digital globalisation of the audience is also globalising the form; cartoonists and aspirant cartoonists worldwide are being exposed to a range of stylistic traditions and innovations.

The traditional American school of editorial cartooning, of which Michael Ramirez's work is a leading example, is being boldly challenged. Web-savvy practitioners such as Ted Rall and Tom Tomorrow eschew the rich monochrome hatching, time-honoured symbols, moderate political stances and staple setpieces used by the average newspaper cartoonist in favour of luridly coloured, crudely-drawn multipanel cartoons which are tailored for online consumption and mount an unambiguously militant assault on mainstream American opinion.

This emerging American radicalism is a move toward the compulsively caustic and aggressive British style pioneered by Gerald Scarfe and Ralph Steadman and currently pursued by Martin Rowson and Steve Bell, who both use virulent colour and baroque excesses of visual obscenity to wage incessant satirical warfare on the Bush-Blair alliance.

But Ramirez's technical traditionalism is certainly not matched by rhetorical inhibition. Several of his cartoons have provoked public outrage, and one in particular, as will be discussed later, sparked his interrogation by US Secret Service agents. The strength of his conservative political convictions, and their consistent alignment with those of his country's current government, make him a rarity among political cartoonists and an intriguing subject of study, both alone and as a counterpoint with Zapiro.

Ramirez's position as a partisan satirical voice consistently aligned with imperialist power contrasts sharply with that of Zapiro, who leads a growing field of developing-world cartoonists satirising the rich world and its leadership, as well as domestic authorities.

These cartoonists occupy a wide stylistic spectrum, spanning the delicate, moody illustrative sophistication of Angel Boligan, resident at El Universal in Mexico City, the sumptuously conventional penwork used by the Kenyan-based Tanzanian Gado, who works in and expands on the mainstream American tradition, and the distinctly Indian cartoon aesthetic employed by Manjul of the Economic Times of New Delhi[1].

[1] http://cagle.slate.msn.com/politicalcartoons/PCcartoons/boligan.asp
http://cagle.slate.msn.com/politicalcartoons/PCcartoons/manjul.asp
http://cagle.slate.msn.com/politicalcartoons/PCcartoons/gado.asp

I have chosen to discuss cartoons drawn since September 2001, simply because the al-Qaeda attacks on America that month introduced a new degree of tension between the United States, the Arab world and the developing world in general, and both Ramirez and Zapiro have narrated this change in interesting and contrasting ways in the years since. In the Zapiro chapter, I have discussed earlier work when tracing his creative development. Unfortunately, Michael Ramirez was unwilling to discuss his work with me, and I have not found literature on his early work or influences. So there is an imbalance of biographical detail between the first two chapters.