

The art of cartooning

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Recently, a parking attendant recognised me when I wrote my name in his register. ‘You’re Zapiro? I thought you’d have bigger muscles!’ I asked him why and he said, ‘Because you’re so cheeky, you need big muscles when the big politicians get mad at you!’

Readers value the licence we have as editorial cartoonists to confront the most powerful people in society and knock them off their pedestals. It’s a bit like the licence the court jester once had to say things about the king that nobody else would dare to say.

How much freedom cartoonists have to criticise in any given country has been called a litmus test for democracy. Oppressive regimes don’t readily tolerate satire, and censorship or worse is the order of the day. Cartoonists under oppression have tried bravely to get their message across but the risks have been great. Cartoonists have been assassinated, assaulted, jailed, deported. Apartheid-era South Africa was extremely intolerant of dissent. Promotion of banned organisations was prohibited, censorship was everywhere and some newspapers were banned (Figure i). Cartoonists in mainstream newspapers



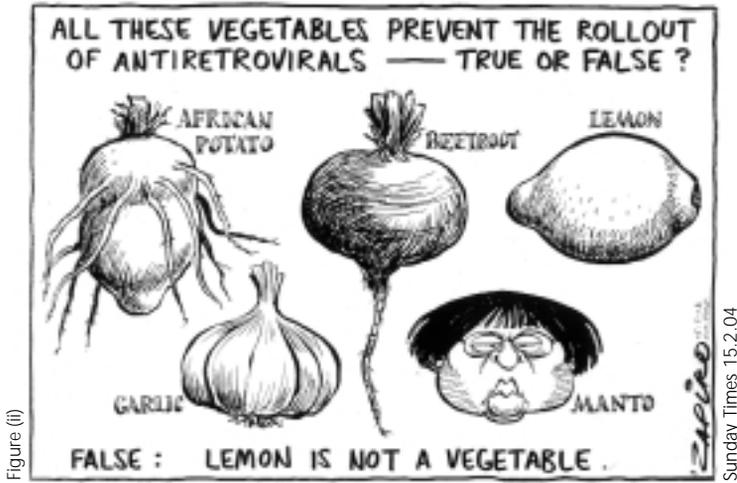
Figure (i)

Save the Press 1.6.88

were able to criticise government to an extent, but while some were excellent at their craft, few dared to be really subversive. In the alternative press things were even more difficult. Cartoons and the publications themselves were often banned. A student publication once carried a cartoon depicting a little boy looking down a toilet and saying, 'Excuse me, are you the Prime Minister?' The artist, Franco Frescura, an Italian citizen, was promptly deported.

In my own experience, a cartoon poster I did in late '86 for the United Democratic Front was regarded by the authorities as subversive and the security police came looking for me. I had to go into hiding and emerged a couple of weeks later in disguise, which I kept up for about three months. The poster was banned. In mid-1988 the security police finally did get me in their clutches, arriving at my home at 3am and detaining me without trial. My detention appeared to be due to other activism I was involved in but the security police hadn't forgotten the UDF poster and the first thing they asked me in my interrogation was, 'Why do you draw us as pigs?' to which I replied with some bravado, 'I draw what I see.'

Democracies are generally more tolerant of satire and in post-apartheid South Africa, press freedom flourishes (Figure ii). But, as in other democracies, there are still restrictions to freedom of the press, though they are usually more subtle. Corporate interests can influence what newspapers are prepared to publish. As the big media groups swallow up more and more newspapers, media ownership becomes a constraint to a cartoonist. When I tried in the mid-90s to do a cartoon lampooning a public figure implicated in financial skulduggery,



I was blocked by the editor because the public figure happened to be a director of the company that owned the newspaper. I fought hard to publish the cartoon but I lost and it never saw the light of day.

Editors are wary too of cartoons using corporate brands, even when the company name or logo is used merely as a device to satirise something entirely separate. This is because companies may sue for loss of brand integrity if they see their product being used in any way they don't like. The T-shirt company Laugh-It-Off has been hit with lawsuits for exactly this reason. Even under our progressive constitution, religious and sexual taboos continue to constrain what editors are prepared to publish, though the newspapers for which I've worked over the past decade have allowed me the freedom to publish cartoons some readers consider religiously or sexually offensive (Figure iii).



A good cartoonist is motivated by moral outrage, is prepared to attack powerful people and knock them off their pedestals, and thinks nothing of taking on the establishment, taking risks and espousing unpopular views. A cartoonist should have a passion for politics, hold strong opinions, have an ability to read between the lines and to think laterally, a sense of the absurd, some talent for drawing and especially for caricature, and be able to work under the extreme pressure of daily deadlines.



Figure (iv)

Mail & Guardian 11.7.02

Cartoonists tend to criticise and ridicule their subjects. It's easier to do a vicious satirical cartoon than one that offers a considered, balanced view (Figure iv). It's easier to be negative than positive. Some internationally famous cartoonists go as far as to belittle the notion of doing positive cartoons that are in favour of something. I don't entirely agree with this attitude. In post-apartheid South Africa, with icons like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, there's a lot to be positive about, even as a cartoonist. In fact I've found it a challenge to explore the dilemmas and dichotomies of the new order, resulting in cartoons that empathise with the protagonist as he or she grapples with difficult choices (Figures v and vi). While I would never see myself as a praise-singer, I don't believe every cartoon needs to be a political assassination. While



Figure (v)

Sowetan 27.5.97



Figure (vi)

Sowetan 24.5.00

maintaining a healthy scepticism, I would never want to become an all-out cynic and if ever I do become cynical about everything, that's when I'll change jobs.

A major challenge for me, working as I do in three very different newspapers, has been to find metaphors and scenarios that speak to readers

Figure (vii)



across the board, across cultural and racial divides (Figure vii). South Africa is still unpicking the threads of apartheid and frames of reference in different sectors of the population differ widely.

A cartoon works effectively when the reader understands the metaphors and scenarios used, whether they're drawn from literature, the Bible, myths and legends or popular culture.

A cartoon takes just a few seconds to read and absorb but it can have enormous impact and be highly memorable (Figure viii).

Figure (viii)



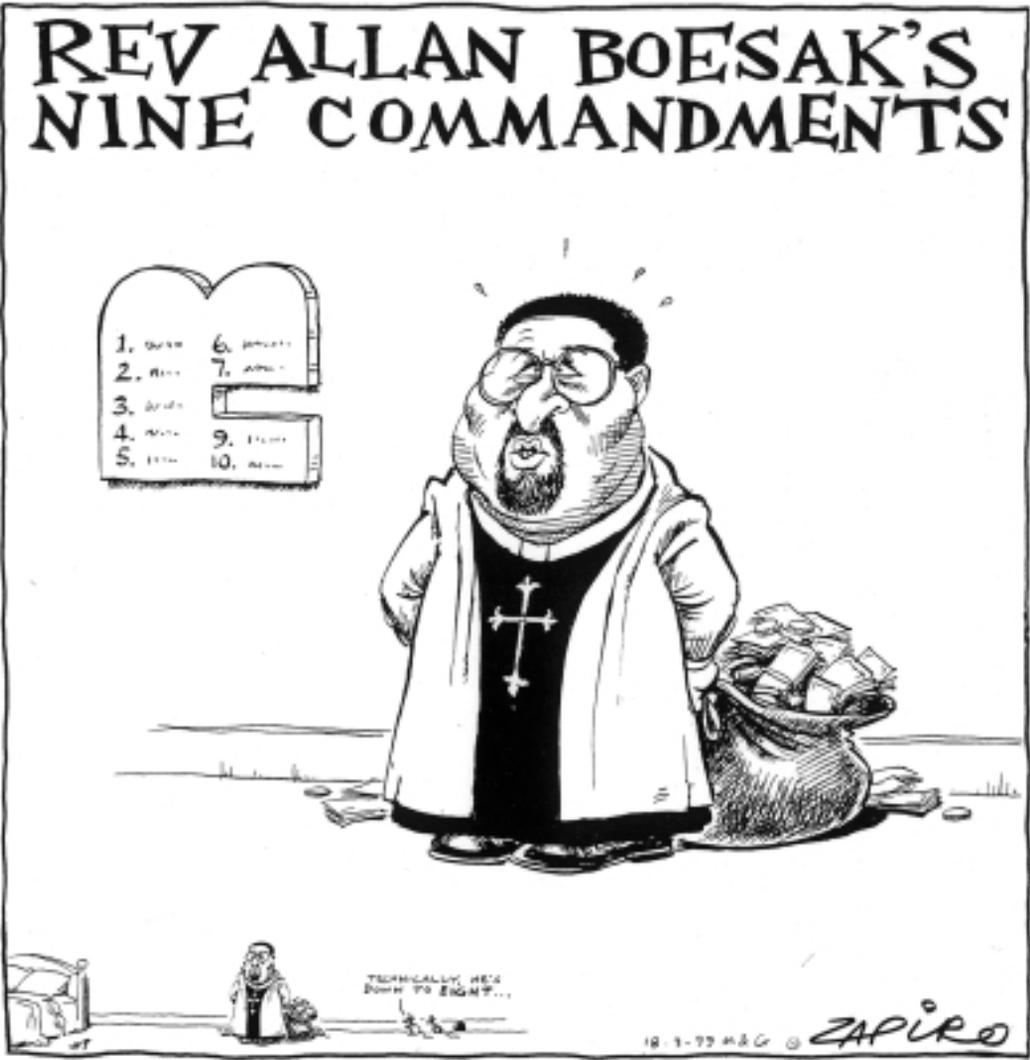
Cartoons expose people's faults and foibles, exaggerating them for effect and pinpointing contradictions between what people say and what they actually do. Almost every reader of a newspaper reads the cartoon, not just for a laugh but to see a strong, well-communicated idea. A cartoonist's job is to make people think, often by making them laugh, though not all cartoons are meant to be funny. Some evoke anger, some sadness. The main thing is to make an incisive comment using whatever devices will help. I feel I'm 80 per cent journalist and 20 per cent artist, that the head is more important than the hand. A good idea can survive being drawn badly but a great drawing can't carry a weak idea.



Figure (ix)

Sowetan 5.9.00

A good tip for a budding cartoonist: don't try to do too much in one drawing. A single well-communicated idea is invariably better than a set of complicated ideas (Figure ix). Most beginner cartoonists try to put everything they'd like to say about a particular issue into a single cartoon. The result is a confusing, diluted cartoon that doesn't hold the reader's attention. I learnt this to my cost when I did my first cartoon for the *Mail & Guardian* in 1994. I wasn't a complete novice but, overawed by the occasion, I did a cartoon that tried to cover all bases and ended up with the whole being far less than the sum of its parts. I realised then that conceptual clarity without over-elaboration is best.



Having said that, occasionally I do add 'asides' in the form of comments or in-jokes, drawn small-scale (Figure x). What's important when you use this device, however, is to make sure that these 'asides' do not detract from the main message of the cartoon. They should be adding something to the main message, a detail which adds a subtle but mordant little twist of the knife.

When thinking about how I'm going to make a point in a cartoon, I've found it useful to differentiate between cartoons that are 'conceptual' and 'sitcom' cartoons. For me, a conceptual cartoon usually makes its point using a visual metaphor where an issue or a person is shown as something else (Figure xi). A powerful visual metaphor is capable of carrying multiple meanings very succinctly.



Figure (xi)

Mail & Guardian 4.2.00



Figure (xii)

Weekly Mail published 1986

In the 1980s when PW Botha was in the habit of wagging his finger belligerently at the liberation movement and at the world, I did a number of conceptual cartoons where his finger became the symbol for the repressive authority of the state (Figure xii). The finger became a smoking gun or a giant statue or I switched the index finger with the middle finger to show his contempt for the world.

A 'sitcom' cartoon portrays an interaction between characters in what appears to be a relatively naturalistic scenario (Figure xiii). I call it 'sitcom' because people are familiar with situation comedies on television. The characters and their surroundings are shown in realistic scale and the joke or comment is made through dialogue or a relatively restrained visual twist.



Figure (xiii)

Mail & Guardian 11.7.96

Categorising cartoons into 'conceptual' and 'sitcom' is just a way to help one think clearly. These two broad categories are not always completely distinct from each other and some cartoons combine aspects of both.

Editorial cartoons are most often drawn in a single frame or panel, encapsulating an issue in one 'take', but cartoons can also be drawn in more than one panel. Multiple panels are used either to enumerate a series of ideas (Figure xiv) or to produce an editorial cartoon in classic comic-strip form, where the break between panels represents the passing of time. It's important for an aspirant cartoonist to understand how comic strips work as this method can be the best way to nail a specific point (Figure xv). As in other forms of joke telling, timing becomes important here. An understanding of comics can also help a cartoonist make the reader absorb the message in a coherent way (Figure xvi). Comics are read from left to right and from top to bottom, and so to a great extent are editorial cartoons, which informs the way dialogue balloons should be placed in a single panel. Beginner cartoonists often subvert a good idea by placing dialogue balloons in positions where the reader will read them in the wrong order.

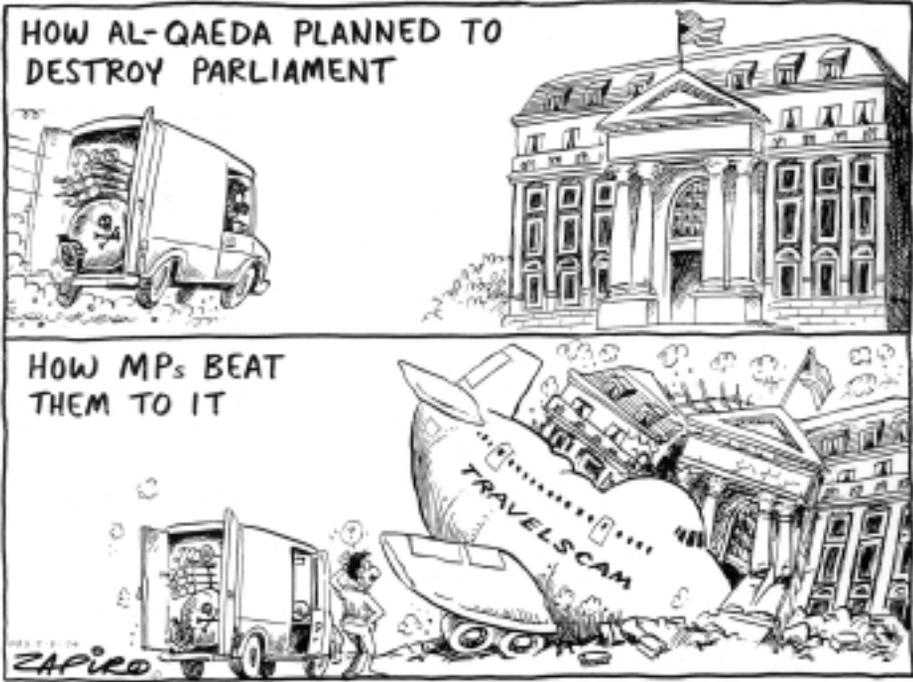


Figure (xiv)

Mail & Guardian 5.8.04



Figure (xv)

Sowetan 19.2.96



Figure (xvi)

Sowetan 16.5.01

Caricature is a potent weapon in a cartoonist's armoury. Identifying and exaggerating facial features is used to identify personalities, even to the extent of reducing them to a few simple elements. A diagonal black fringe and small square moustache is still enough to represent Hitler, half a century after his death. But not everyone has a face that's easy to caricature and it can take more than one shot at an individual before you feel you've got it right.



Figure (xvii)

Sunday Times 26.1.03

Prominent public figures seem to ‘grow into’ their caricatures as a number of cartoonists keep drawing them and keep on refining their features. Take George W Bush: he doesn’t have extremely prominent features, he’s not bald and he’s clean-shaven. Some early versions of him were fairly nondescript but then cartoonists began emphasising his ears (which are not particularly large), his flared nostrils and the shape of his upper lip. He’s been transformed from an ordinary-looking guy to the bat-eared, wing-lipped, button-eyed persona we know so well (Figure xvii).

Public figures who wear signature clothing are a gift to cartoonists: Archbishop Tutu in his robe, Frene Ginwala in her sari, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in her hats, Eugene Terre Blanche in his neo-Nazi outfit. However cartoonists can also develop the caricature of a person around clothing that doesn’t exist in reality and is a representation of someone’s personality. When Marthinus van Schalkwyk took over the New National Party, someone said he was inexperienced and still wearing short pants (kortbroek). Since then he’s become known as ‘Kortbroek’, which inevitably led to his cartoon persona almost always wearing short pants (Figure xviii).



Figure (xviii)

Mail & Guardian 28.5.98

In many newspapers, cartoonists used to be part of the editorial staff, advantages being that the cartoonist could sit in on editorial conferences and also receive the financial benefits and security offered by fixed employment. These days the trend is for cartoonists to work as freelancers or on retainer, where the advantages are a greater degree of independence and the possibility of working for more than one publication. The downside is that being out of the newsroom can lead to a degree of isolation, so an extra effort is required to keep in touch with events and to have a network of sharp minds with whom you can consult (Figure xix). Being freelance also means that financially you're on your own, so you have to work towards earning enough to provide things like your own medical aid and retirement package.



Figure (xix)

Sowetan 9.7.99

If you're aspiring to be an editorial cartoonist, it's best to develop a wide range of cartooning skills, as positions at newspapers are hard to come by. Even a large city has no more than a handful of newspapers and once a cartoonist has become established, he or she is likely to stay in the position for a long time. There are many other avenues to explore, including doing cartoons, caricatures, illustrations and comic strips for student publications, small local newspapers and magazines. Learning to write won't hurt either. Getting the text or dialogue just right in a cartoon takes a lot of fine-tuning.

The good news is that a number of new newspapers have recently been published and dynamic young cartoonists have been given a golden opportunity.