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A cartoon says more than a thousand words

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Get the picture!

There is no human society that does not have its images, and no human society without its humour. When put together, these constitute a powerful force for both cultural cohesion and identity, and for individual fulfilment.

Art and humour are bosom companions. Call it whatever you will, wit or whimsy, fun or fantasy, humour is the spark that touches off an explosion of joy in the imagination. In creative design, ideas fashioned of line and mass flash with cheerful impact upon the eye, the mind and the heart. The 'picture stuck in my head' phenomenon also seems to reinforce the idea that images work on both our short- and long-term memory.

It is said that humour is the sudden marriage of ideas or images which before their union were not perceived to have any relationship to each other. Cartoons are to be called for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnastic struggle; that the reader has to do something for himself.

Great draughtsmen express themselves in a timeless and universal language. Although their drawings are now museum pieces, the rollicking humour of William Hogarth in England and the biting satire of Honoré Daumier in France still cause people all over the world to smile.

Historical examples

Cartoons are for the most part composed of two elements: caricature, which parodies the individual, and allusion, which creates the situation or context into which the individual is placed.

While caricature originated around the Mediterranean, cartoons of a more editorial nature developed in a cooler climate. The Protestant Reformation began in Germany, and made use of visual propaganda. An excellent example of Luther's use of visual protest is found in two woodcuts from the pamphlet 'Christ and Antichrist', originally drawn by Lucas Cranach the Elder. These two images contrast the actions of Jesus with those of the Church hierarchy. The two pictures are clearly intended to raise public consciousness by illustrating the premise that changes must be made within the Church for life to ever become more Christ-like. Cranach used the second element of a political cartoon - the context of a widely recognised story or setting - to get his point across.
The cartoon became an important medium of communication and commentary. Artists took serious issues and presented them in a manner that was not only funny, and therefore more socially acceptable, but also designed to affect the viewer's opinion. As Western culture diversified from its original religious foundation, new subjects became available for discussion and subsequent ridicule.

Caricature as a Western discipline goes back to Leonardo da Vinci's artistic explorations of 'the ideal type of deformity' (the grotesque) which he used in order to better understand the concept of ideal beauty. In the Low Countries we find artists such as

Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Bruegel the Elder using caricatures to give more expression to their main themes. Intended to be light-hearted satires, their caricatures were, in essence, counter-art. A new style was born, a quick, impressionistic drawing that exaggerates prominent physical characteristics to humorous effect.

In the nineteenth century, Thomas Nast, a German immigrant, created some of the earliest political cartoons. Thomas Nast was famous for the first appearance of Santa Claus as we know him today. He also published a series of cartoons directed against corruption in government, and as a result the public outcry became intolerable for politicians. He made accusations against William Marcy Tweed, who said 'Let's stop those damned pictures. I don't care so much what the papers write about me - my constituents can't read, but damn it, they can see pictures.' As a result of Nast's campaign the 'popular' politician was arrested for corruption. Nast later exerted a strong influence on politics through his cartoons and engravings, which included the creation of the concept of the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey. Since Thomas Nast challenged the New York political engine of Tammany Hall, cartoon art has been perceived as an oxymoron or a contradiction.

Today cartoon art is dismissed by academics, corporate leadership and politicians, who claim cartoons cannot possibly be art, since they are not much more than mere entertainment for children. Cartoons are more often seen as a popular medium of ridicule and slander. Nowadays every newspaper and magazine has a contract with a freelance cartoonist. In the recent past there were problems getting an up-to-the-minute headline cartoon.

Cartoon art acts as a bridge between those who want 'just the facts' and those who believe in their intuitions. Using cartoons one is able to get whole teams into a creative mindset, creating solutions in ways no one would have expected.

The identity and citizenship of … a cartoonist!

The cartoonist is the professional joker in a castle with kings and queens, ministers and spies. These jokers developed campaigns against indifference and tactics to raise debate and maintain it at its peak. Their battlefield is paper, their ammunition words and pictures; their howitzers are printing presses, newspapers and magazines, sometimes a textbook for children. Trade signs, displayed on shops, became an extension of craft symbols, and were first used to identify the location of the tradesman. A free press sustains the light of truth throughout the land.

Each country or nation stands for a concept of life, shaped by people who have built a nation dedicated to enduring principles. Cartoons suggest aspects of national life that are bad. Naturally when the cartoonist transcribes scenes to paper he represents neither their shapes nor the colours as they actually look, but swirls his brush into agitated rhythms and colour-contrasts to make clear his moods and feelings. The work of a cartoonist seems to reveal clearly that it is life itself that really inspires. Cartoonists have created an entity, combining their message with ancient symbols, modern abstract designs and politically inspired art treasures.

Cartoons are a guide for youth and an entertainment for adults. They support us in our solitude and keep us from becoming a burden to ourselves. They also help us not to forget

the anger of Man. A cartoon is a forcible language. However the relationship between the artist and society is not a harmonious one.

Using symbols in cartoons

A cartoonist speaks of his experience using images and a short storyline, and has developed a special mythological language to express it. He feels a need to confess, judge and evaluate his experience. This confession corresponds to a deeply felt human need. His experience is expressed originally and spontaneously. When we examine a cartoon we must follow 'the way from mythos to logos', from spontaneous expression to a reflected concept.

It is important to consider all the visual (symbolic) elements. We will now consider this symbolic content in two ways. On the one hand, symbolic language makes it possible for us to understand the basic experience of the cartoonist. The basic experience is for most of the time a contrasting experience. On the other hand, seen in the light of the experience, this symbolic language is the language in which this experience can be expressed originally and spontaneously.

The universal language of cartoons contains a number of characteristic images that recur again and again. There is, for example, the image of the spot or stain. Other images are those of losing one's way, or the crooked path, of trespassing and wandering around and of enduring a heavy burden or pressure. Even a rudimentary semantic analysis of these images reveals different meanings and enables us to reduce these images to a number of categories.

Working with cartoons does not end with an analysis of the meaning of symbolic expression and a classification of those images in various categories. The various symbols have to be seen as elements related to the point of view of the cartoonist, just as the different levels of man's experience of guilt, sin and external stain can only be regarded as various levels of this one experience.

A cartoon is sometimes accompanied by a kind of iconoclasm, in which one image destroys the other. The ethical and actual symbol of guilt destroys the religious and traditional symbol of sin (Böckle), or the ancient symbol of peace and hope is transformed into a symbol of suffering and anxiety. In many cartoons guilt is depicted as sleepwalking, indifference or simply guilt by association.

Cartoons: expressions of different experiences

At first sight, experience would seem to be such an obvious category of western thought that no further explanation is necessary. In everyday language, experience is an indicator of social and technical competence, or the ability and openness to acquire it. It is based on perception, but not identical with it. It is always 'an experience of connections … Experience is a way of knowing that is mediated. As direct experience, it is based on sensory perception'.

The process of experience that leads to morally relevant insights takes place at many different levels. In it at least three fundamental types of experience can be distinguished - experience of contrast, experience of meaning and experience of motivation or intensity. Cartoons are connected with these experiences.

Perhaps the most important aspect of experience is that of negative experience, in other words experience as a disappointment or negative event. Experience in this sense has to be understood as an experience with someone or something. It occurs whenever an experience of truth or value that has touched our existence has to be corrected. This negative experience is not, however, the end of a process of experience. On the contrary, it is able to operate as a dialectical process of development and to produce further insights and reveal new possibilities. In this sense, it is hermeneutical. It produces not only disappointment and a correction of what was previously known, but also a wider knowledge and therefore an existential enrichment and a deeper understanding of themselves on the part of those who experience.

We are rationally capable of describing, in vivid detail, all the dangers that threaten the world: the deepening gulf between the rich and the poor parts of the world, the population explosion, the potential for dramatic confrontations between different racial and cultural groups, the plundering of natural resources and the destruction of the natural variety of species.

For a cartoonist the individual is sometimes not alert to the reality of the situation. He or she is incapable of acting critically, cannot come to any judgement about relationships and makes platitudinous pronouncements. Their only wish is to survive, to get through, and so pass untouched, like a sleepwalker, through immorality. They are fundamentally indifferent toward their fellow man. This draws our attention to another aspect of experience, since it is obvious that negative experience is in no sense the whole of experience. This experience of contrast presupposes a certain experience of values before it can itself be called into question. Within human praxis certain models of action have to prove their value or at least have to point to new possibilities within the framework of an experience of contrast. In that case, these data of experience provide an insight which is experienced as a relationship of meaning. In this sense, the reality that has to be faced at any time acquires what Peter Berger has called a ‘plausibility structure’, which is at the same time the basis for a moral experience of meaning and is concentrated in the experience of value as a ‘profile of norms’ or a ‘profile of significance’. ‘It is becoming clear to me ... it dawns on me … and that has convinced me …’ are all exact expressions of an experience of meaning. Justice, mercy and reconciliation are made present in the light of their own testimony and call on us to imitate them as human possibilities.

We should, however, recognise that not every experience of meaning is as such a morally relevant insight. Moral experience comes about when an experience of meaning becomes - often through a contrast - so dense for man that it affects him deeply and lets him experience in the centre of his being the existential importance of the free realisation of himself. It is only when this experience of motivation has a sufficiently high level of intensity that experience of meaning forms an inescapable part of the structural development of the moral person. In this way, a store of morally relevant experience is formed in the ethos - either of a person or of a particular sphere in life - and this store forms the basis of all moral judgement. This is only possible, however, if the experience is accompanied by a process of interpretation in which an attempt is made to understand it within the sphere of experience prevailing at any given time, and the experience itself is also reflected in the consciousness as a morally relevant insight or as a value judgement.

Cartoons can therefore reach a certain knowledge that will undoubtedly make it possible for us to understand the experience of the meaning and content of human life at a deeper level. It may in this way be possible for us to aim at an inter-subjective agreement with regard to morally relevant cases of experience, an agreement supported by the need to bridge the gap between the responsible subject who is always anticipated and the object - subject who is really found in history. If that agreement can be reached, there will at the same time be a continuity in the value insights which we will not be able to abandon if our intention is to give a rational human shape to our lives. This, then, is the basis on which the ethics and values that are embodied in the constitutional laws of many states, and are regarded as essential for human society, should be elaborated.

It is clear from our brief consideration of man's reflected experience of evil in contemporary literature that man is directly and deeply affected by the experience of guilt. He speaks of this experience in images and metaphors. He has developed a special mythological language to express it. He feels a need to confess, judge and evaluate the experience. This confession corresponds to a deeply felt human need. Man speaks spontaneously about evil in his confession of it. His experience of sin is expressed originally and spontaneously in the mythological narratives of primitive people. This way it leads from mythos to logos, from spontaneous expression to reflected concept.

Cartoons as teachers of the little taught

In relation to learning, the use of cartoons offers two major advantages:

- Cartoons are highly memorable. This is either because they create a state of relaxed receptivity, or because their messages touch deep-seated emotional or aesthetic needs. Like songs, cartoons also stick in the head.
- They are highly motivating, especially for children, adolescents, and young adult learners. Cartoons and comics in their many forms constitute a powerful subculture with its own priesthood.

It would be unwise to ignore this flexible and attractive resource. Indeed, history, civic education and religion have always made good use of it. My conviction is that 'anything you can do with a text you can do with a cartoon'.

We have also found that using cartoons gets everyone on the same wavelength, creates common goals or targets and terminology and makes formal modelling much easier, faster and more accurate. Concepts like identity and a sense of public responsibility can be visualised in this way. Using cartoons we are able to create various environments and instruments to facilitate global discussion and dialogue.

Being natural and being schoolish

Looking at what we normally do with cartoons outside the classroom, and then looking at what we may do with them in class, may provide us with many more ways of exploiting them (see checklist). However, we have to be careful not to kill the material by doing too much serious work with it. Students will recognise that some cartoons are there just for fun, while others are shockingly meaningful.

Working with cartoons we learn about our students and from our students, letting them choose and explain their preferred cartoons. They must also integrate cartoons into their

project work. They can prepare exercises for their classmates, which gives them more active control over and responsibility for their own learning. Students may be content to be passive watchers but we, as teachers, need to encourage student interaction with cartoons, and invite the students initially to predict, describe, comment on and share their perceptions.

Objectives for students

Students will become familiar with social and political commentary as portrayed in editorial cartoons. We can ask our students what objects they see in the editorial cartoons. Certain objects are common to editorial cartooning - they are like a vocabulary list. Students must propose reasons why some objects appear so frequently. They will then be able to recognise and comprehend symbols and what they represent.
It might be interesting to choose a symbol found in one of the cartoons and ask three different people what it represents to them. The students must try to choose people of different ages, gender and background. The students will be able to better understand the importance of current events and to explore significant events from news through an investigation of editorial cartoons.

People in general tend to enjoy cartoons. Seen as fun, helpful when used to explain difficult ideas and easy to relate to, cartoon art turns out to be a powerful way to talk about difficult and scary issues. But sometimes cartoons are only illustrations that do nothing more than help make up for the lack of education in some of their readers, holding fast to the idea that pictures are for children.

People often fail to recognise the validity of visual learning, believing that it is for a lower quality of thinking or something that less intelligent people may resort to - a prejudice that does not hold up under the weight of available evidence.

Fortunately this viewpoint is changing, particularly as the television generation reaches maturity and begins to re-define the cultural norms. Either use a cartoon as an introduction to the theme before starting a project, or use it to illustrate and reinforce what has already been discussed. Drawing parallels between the themes in older cartoons and the themes in some articles makes the current cartoon more relevant for many students. Students should be aware that a cartoon is just a ‘snapshot’ and that in discussing it we have to place it in context, and fill in what happened before and at the moment in time of the cartoon.

In the classroom ask small groups or pairs of students to read the cartoon and make up discussion questions based upon the cartoon or arising from its main themes. Then ask each group to write their best questions up on the board. As they do so, note the similarities and differences in the questions from different groups.

Finally, ask the students to form new groups to discuss the questions they find most interesting. You can use ‘engaged’ cartoons about political, social and ecological issues, and other more personal and affective cartoons. Either type can spark off different types of discussion.

A lively discussion followed the completion of the questionnaire and the teacher was amazed at how well children voluntarily expressed themselves about the cartoons offered. I also hope it will show teachers how stimulating it is to tune in to the wealth of information, reactions, and feelings in our children and students. The advantage of graphic materials is that they are so readily available to the teacher, and so immediately motivational to most students. We should never disparage our children because they like simple-minded cartoons. We should rather try to help them find modern orientations, discuss with them what they are really searching for and develop together with them realistic models of behaviour that are fit for our world and which help them to find their own way.

In a world of global civilisation, only those who are looking for a technical trick to save that civilisation need feel despair. But those who believe, in all modesty, in the mysterious power of their own human 'being', which mediates between them and the mysterious power of the 'World Being', have no reason to despair at all (Havel).
Without the heritage of cartoonists there would be considerably less humour in the world than there is today.

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Appendix:

Checklist : observation and interpretation of cartoons

Who are the main figures in this cartoon?
Which figures have a subordinate function?
What is each wearing?
Where are the figures? Can you guess?
What is the background?
What expression is on the person's face?
Is the person moving, standing, sitting?
Which figures have an active or an executive function?
Which figures could one easily identity with?
Who takes the important decisions?
Are there any real people in the cartoon? Who is portrayed in the cartoon?
Which problem is expressed in the cartoon?
Who solves the problem? How is the problem solved?
Are there any positive or negative associations with the topic? What are the colours?
What is actually said? Are the words insulting? Are they shocking?
Do the words add anything to the picture?
What information do we get with regard to the issue?
Can you derive the cartoonist's point of view from the cartoon?
What is the cartoonist's opinion about the topic portrayed in the cartoon?
Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's opinion? Why?
Are there symbols in the cartoon? What are they and what do they represent?

Walking in the gallery of the Belgian Cartoonists

The Belgian artist GAL (Gerard Alsteen) is one of the strongest imagemakers of caricature-reportage, achieving an intense visual impact with a complex pictorial technique. His allegories reflect his fundamental socialist and democratic viewpoint, and often evoke the human issues and graphic strengths of masters such as Daumier. At the Venice Biennale of 1980 his work appeared in the Belgian Pavilion in an exhibition representing the contemporary art scene in Belgium, the first time caricature has been featured at the Biennale.

His cartoons demonstrate the very qualities of simplicity, vitality, honesty, and craftsmanship that are inherent in this kind of art. Pictured with this article are visual records of the Flemish designer's seeking new directions in expression through an exploration of the painter's work, an art which traditionally affords greater freedom of expression. This painterly exploration was made with the intention of fusing together word and image as a work of art without sacrificing the graphic designer's visual concern both for readability and for printability. He has demonstrated a talent for using the newest ideas with traditional illustrative material.

Whatever drawing of GAL you come to face to face with, you will always recognise a deep concern: that of feeling. Just as if he were immune to the cynicism, indifference, tiredness and disappointment that live among his contemporaries, he began to observe

social life with curiosity and to care for the whole world, to feel pity for and laugh about it. He has worn this attitude as an overcoat and has never taken it off, in order to experience the warmth of goodness and not to be affected by the chilliness of egoism. Sometimes his commitment to a subject is so great that it grows into indignation and is wrapped up like a Message. It is this that makes his work so unique and is also the difference between him and his fellow cartoonists. They describe political reality and laugh at it. They put it into a certain perspective. GAL interprets political reality and caricatures it to poignant humour or bloody seriousness.

As he interprets, he wishes to draw his viewers' attention to an unforgettable picture. He gives a lasting meaning to a passing coincidence, raising his issues from a purely anecdotal level to a significant level and from a mere expression to an artistic picture, so sharp, mocking, unmasking, desecrating and biased because undoubtedly choosing for the poor, the weak, the oppressed and the exploited.

He gave to the Flemish people a visual memory. We believe that in every country there are men and women like GAL. They offer a wealth of portraits of an era that can be passed on to our children. Their very reason for existence as cartoonists involves raising their voices when conventional journalists grow silent. Political cartoonists ask their 'readers' to follow current news. One has to know the relationships and has to know who is doing what to whom. According to GAL his work is an emanation of a mental process and not of a spontaneous explosion.

O-SEKOER (Luc Descheemaeker) and other cartoonists like KNUT (Kerse) draw modern-day man in all his trivial and more soul-searching depths. The humour thus effected does not necessarily elicit massive roars of laughter among audiences, for most of these artists continue to aspire to the more sensitive side of life. They tend to turn everyday events topsy-turvy, in order to lead readers up the garden path, so to speak, in the mild-mannered way that is their own. No doubt the reader who is trying to enter into the spirit of the cartoon will find himself reflected in the countless 'petty' topics the cartoonists dabble with. The reader observes, snickers, reflects, and comprehends. *(cartoon 5-6)*

O-SEKOER toys around with socially critical themes. His cartoons refer to what are most frequently emotional contradictions: poor man-rich man, the old versus the young, tall versus small, guilt versus innocence.

The cartoons of KNUT challenge our local politicians to become people again, those who trust not only a scientific representation and analysis of the world, but also the world itself. A politician must believe not only in sociological statistics, but also in real people; he must trust not only an objective interpretation of reality, but also its soul.

KNUT uses humour so that people come to a new understanding of themselves, their limitations, and their place in the world. People should grasp their responsibilities in a new way, and re-establish a relationship with the things that transcend them. He shows us that we must rehabilitate our human subjectivity, and liberate ourselves from the captivity of a purely rational perception of the world. Through this subjectivity and the individual conscience that goes with it, readers must discover a new relationship to their neighbour, and to the universe and its metaphysical order, which is the source of the moral order.

Readily discernible and therefore very human feelings on topics such as death, loss, parting, suffering and distress, anxiety and apprehension, friendship and disaffection are the foundations that underpin his wit.

O-SEKOER is in the business of creating conflict and joining together antipodes, in search of those points where sparks ignite. Through the process of mutation and switching sections and sequences, the humour suddenly comes about, with the cartoonist distancing himself from reality as far as possible. The sketch does not become a cartoon until it finds itself face to face with the actual knowledge the reader has of reality.

Through his cartoons, O- SEKOER attempts to poke fun at the world in a tone of irony and satire.

The cartoonist's amusing convolutions of the brain have stood the test of time. They are double entendres, that never fail to strike the right chord. What they are not is cheap mockery or easy slapstick. It is not the sketch in itself that sparks off the wit, but the confrontation with the reader. Behind the pictorial humour lies a message.

The selected cartoons of KNUT, GAL and O-SEKOER shy away from verbal discourse and text balloons. Above all, they attempt to underpin this precept with a highly delicate drawing technique. These cartoons are thoughtfully composed with great attention to detail. The cartoons can be used as enhancers, reinforcers or as centrepieces for communicating in lessons such as civic education or world- orientation. When we work with cartoons maybe we can remember the wisdom of John Donne: 'No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent …'