BOOK REVIEW

Randall P. Harrison
The Cartoon: Communication to the Quick

Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher
The Hecklers: A History of
Canadian Political Cartooning and a
Cartoonists History of Canada
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).

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A substantive error in undergraduate essay writing almost as common as the use of "media" as a singular noun, is the notion that these media come in two distinct and forever separated phyla: "Print" and "Visual." Television and the cinema, with their parades of eyeball icons and background miasmas of aural associations, constitute the "visual" media in the popular imagination.

Print, on the other hand, tends to be popularly perceived as something else, (though precisely what is never entirely clear). Exposure over time to the ideas of the semiotics theorists, perhaps to McLuhan, or to the powerful imagery of James Joyce, eventually creates at least an intellectual awareness of the powerfully visual abstract symbolism that is always potentially present in the printed language. Even this belated recognition rarely is extended with any enthusiasm to the associated devices of design, typography, and graphics, however, and at some subconscious level, the entire inapprop-
riate undergraduate distinction between print and visual remains in tact. It even has a way of unconsciously lingering on into the agendas of mature communication scholarship.

Simply put, newspapers and magazines are not culturally perceived as being visual. Research in these media, therefore, remains predominantly, with some rare and honourable exceptions, the business of investigating the informational content of words, sentences, and other grammatical paraphernalia. Purely visual characteristics, especially those relating to the humble cartoon, have not received the research attention they deserve.

Of course, there is a modest but useful body of literature ranging over time from Brodbeck and White in 1957 on Li'l Abner, through McLuhan's *The Comics* in 1972, to Salmon's work of recent vintage. But the fact remains that most of the limited available material either falls into the how-to-do-it genre, or is historical or biographical in theme.

From the social scientist's point of view, the Catch 22 becomes fairly obvious. If sufficient research is not done and reported, courses are not likely to be mounted. And without the scholarly interest generated by teaching, the necessary writing and research will remain in a state of back burner neglect. Randall P. Harrison's *The Cartoon: Communication to the Quick* helps to break this unfortunate cycle, and its arrival on the Sage list is therefore most welcome.

Harrison's primary interest is with the cartoon in its print form, but he provides sufficient detailed peripheral discussion of the non-print variations to create a meaningful context. The book is short, 151 pages including appendices, but each of its five chapters is well focused to a theme, and Harrison's writing is generally well-ordered; his style refreshingly crisp and lucid. The clarity of
Harrison's style is at its best in his amply illustrated fourth chapter, a detailed and reasonably documented accounting of the history of American cartooning from Ben Franklin's famous segmented colonial snake, to current developments in computer graphics.

Unfortunately, more than occasionally Harrison's painstaking effort to produce readability, with the needs of the undergradate so obviously and sympathetically in mind, leads him into verbal vacuums where the obvious becomes painfully overstated. For instance: "The cartoonist starts with a blank sheet of paper and creates something which has never existed before, a unique message for human beings" (p. 31). By way of further example, the simplistic "cartoon communication model" graphically presented in figure 2.1 will be rather less revelatory even to students in the early weeks of a most elementary course.

On the other hand, the detailed graphic classification of cartoon types (p. 18), is very useful, as is the cartoon context code (fig. 1.1), both offered as aspects of a pleasingly thorough survey process in the introductory chapter.

Chapter two, "The Cartoon as Communication", places the cartooning genre in a context of the broader evolving body of communication theory, while the third chapter, "The Cartoon Code: A Closer Look", borrowing from a number of sources, but primarily from the literature of semiotica, develops a useful, though certainly not original, theoretical description of the dynamics of audience response to the print cartoon.

"Like a statistic", Harrison writes, "the cartoon can summarize a vast body of data in a succinct symbol" (p. 69). It can do this by utilizing a rather standardized code which the individual cartoonist personalizes with the mark of his or her own style. Coding, Harrison sug-
gests, involves the application of "iconic" details of figure, a concept Harrison develops with reference to cartoon renderings of the human face, in a context of a figure-ground relationship.

The cartoonist typically makes a succinct and coded point, Harrison proposes by: (a) leveling, which is to say reducing detail, moving to the two-dimensional, simplifying colour relationships; (b) sharpening, by which Harrison means emphasizing for message purposes the details retained; and (c) assimilating, by which he means the exaggeration of certain of these remaining iconic details, such as the low brow and drooping lower lip to signal comic stupidity, or the slight exaggeration of a jutting jaw to emphasize the superhero's manly determination and virtue.

Students examining this chapter in association with Harrison's first appendix, "A Brief Introduction to Pictic Analysis," will appreciate the potential research model which emerges. Harrison extracts the concept from his own 1964 doctoral research, but unfortunately in the present context, he does little more than provide the barest sketch, without documentation, of a method analogous to forms of linguistic analysis. The difficulty is relieved somewhat by the fact that this appendix follows immediately upon the text of the fifth and final chapter, "Cartoon Concerns: The Research Frontier", in which Harrison quite usefully outlines an agenda of research possibilities.

There is little in this, or in any other part of the book, that is not offered in a more sophisticated manner elsewhere, but Harrison makes a significant organizational contribution, and, more importantly, in so doing he provides a useful undergraduate course text. Harrison does not pretend to do more, but what he does is enough. It is important as a final note to mention that his second appendix provides what
may be the most thorough bibliography now available on the subject of cartooning.

Even though it may not be reflected in the research being done in this country, the print cartoon, especially the editorial page variety, has become an object of considerable public interest in Canada. For whatever reasons, the country in recent decades has produced the genius of Duncan Macpherson of the Toronto Star, Terry (Aislin) Mosher of Montreal Gazette fame, Sid Barron with his depictions of suburban futility, and perhaps a dozen others who literally have set a new global standard for political and social comment via the cartoon device.

Harrison's *The Cartoon: Communication To the Quick* is an American publication, and unfortunately touches upon none of this, but we do have a recent and useful collection of Canadiana in *The Hecklers* by Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher. Its costly "coffee table" format, as well as its narrowness of theme, its content is restricted to newspaper editorial cartooning, place it beyond consideration for course adoption. But any Canadian teacher selecting Harrison for course adoption will find *The Hecklers* a most useful companion source book.

Despite glossy outward appearances, Desbarats and Mosher have done their homework, and have produced something much more important than just another random collection of cartoons designed more to amuse than to inform. This is a carefully selected and presented anthology of Canadian political cartooning, dating from the pre-Confederation era. The evolution of the art is described informally, but with a scholar's care for accuracy of detail, in the extensive accompanying text. The book is thus not only a useful anthology, but a serious historical comment.