

On Political Cartoons and Social Studies Textbooks: Visual Analogies, Intertextuality, and Cultural Memory

Walt Werner

University of British Columbia

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Abstract

Political cartoons are animated through visual analogies that imply a likeness between the event portrayed in the image and the issue on which the cartoonist is making comment. Although many kinds of analogies can be used, meanings arise as the viewer is able to recognize and interpret them. This becomes difficult, though, when a cartoon's analogy is drawn from contemporary or historical events, plays on literary allusions, or uses past cultural knowledge not readily available to a viewer. The resultant intertextuality assumes an ideal viewer and a narrow cultural memory that have consequences for who is included in, and excluded from, the ongoing editorial conversation. Issues flowing from this assumed memory are discussed in relation to social studies textbooks used in British Columbia.

My first stop with the morning paper is the political cartoon. I expect to be surprised and delighted, and on a good day, to be provoked or even jolted. On some mornings, though, I puzzle over a cartoon that doesn't make much sense. This experience causes reflection on the viewer-text relationships taken for granted by newspaper readers, editors, and cartoonists. Cartoons "work" as long as these deeply taken for granted are not countered or questioned.

My purpose is to focus on assumptions embedded within cartoons themselves rather than what is assumed by viewers¹ and editors.² Every cartoon assumes an ideal viewer who has the relevant cultural memory. This assumption underlies the analogies used to activate meaning, and has consequences for who is included in, and excluded from, the ongoing editorial conversation. When analogies are drawn from historical events, literary allusions, or past cultural knowledge, and are also Eurocentric, the resultant intertextuality appeals to a narrow cultural memory that positions most viewers as outsiders. Let me explain.

Visual Analogies

Cartoons are meaningful to those who understand something about the larger discourse within which they are constructed and read. Since the mid-eighteenth century when cartoons began

to be used in North American newspapers, this discourse included, among other things, assumptions about ideal viewers, ethical standards, criteria for excellence, and competitive publishing practices that define what counts as a cartoon, and that regulate the work of cartoonists in particular time periods (Hess and Kaplan 1968, Hall 1997, 6, 44, Werner 2003). This discourse also includes a visual language of signs, conventions and rhetorical devices used to convey and interpret meanings. Most rhetorical devices can be grouped under the broad categories of caricature and visual analogy (Hou and Hou 1998).

Visual analogies are the heart of cartoons and what animates thought and emotion (Burack 1994, 19). They consist of simplified situations, characters or objects designed to stand for more complex issues. Rather than making a literal statement about an issue, the artist likens it to something else, and through this comparison invites interpretation. The point of an analogy is not just to present an opinion, but also to stimulate interest and thinking. Meanings arise as each viewer sees a comparison between the portrayed scene and the larger issue. By bringing two things together and implying a likeness between them, though, a metaphor is essentially ambiguous because it both highlights and hides meanings, and allows for multiple entailments and implications.

When constructing analogies, cartoonists use three sources. They can draw from (1) *mundane* situations and everyday objects that most newspaper readers have experienced, (2) *contemporary* popular culture – such as current movies, TV shows, national sports events, etc. – with which many readers have some acquaintance, or (3) *historical* events and personages, and past literary and aesthetic texts, that fewer readers recognize. Let me illustrate. Within the first source, simple cartoons frame a current topic by suggesting its likeness to an event, place or object drawn from the reader's everyday life. For example, visits to the doctor's office or neighbors talking over the fence are immediately recognizable settings. Analogies that rely on shared memory of mundane experiences are relatively easy to grasp if the viewer has background knowledge of the current event.⁴

Other cartoons draw their analogies from contemporary popular culture. Characters, events, or quotations from current movies, popular TV shows, and national sporting events are used as analogies to suggest a message. A startled Osama Bin Laden is shown clutching his suitcases, as he realizes that he is standing on the bull's eye of a large target; the caption states "The LORD of the... RINGS."⁵ Although the cartoon is readable for someone not acquainted with Tolkein's book or the movies (e.g., Bin Laden is "targeted" and will eventually be hit), subtler meanings arising from the ambiguous allusion will be missed. As Gruner (1992, 7) notes, "one can appreciate satire as humor (based upon style and partial knowledge of the material's content) but still not understand the serious, satiric thesis of the author."

Less common, and more difficult to read, are cartoons that draw their analogies from historical events, literary references, and other past cultural texts. "They make it possible to say a great deal, tease the reader with all sorts of implied parallels, without giving away so much information as to become obvious" (Burack 1994, 153). For example, during the Alliance's 2001 leadership convention in Ottawa, a cartoon showed Stephen Harper boating along a jungle river; as he comes upon the river-side convention centre decorated with skulls, guarded by strange creatures holding spears, and draped with an ironic banner that says "Welcome Leadership Candidates", he thinks to himself "THE HORROR! THE HORROR!" Meanwhile the caption says "Apocalypse Now REDUX."⁶ A viewer would have little access to the metaphor's layers without some understanding of the main character in Conrad's novel (*Heart of Darkness*), the plot of Coppola's remade Vietnam war movie (*Apocalypse Now*

Redux), the cultural significance of "jungle" within Western imperial history (e.g., a chaotic, dangerous, exciting place), Harper's *redux* relationship (i.e., a "brought back" or renewed relationship) with the Alliance party, and its squabbles over leadership.

Although there are numerous strategies for constructing analogies from the simple to the complex (Walker and Chaplin 1997, 119-25, Werner 2003), insightful interpretation is only possible as the viewer recognizes the analogy and is able to think with it. This becomes difficult, though, when the naïve eye misses the analogy's intertextuality.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to the cartoonist's borrowing or quoting from prior visual or written texts, and to the viewer's interpreting of the cartoon in the light of (i.e., through, against) those other texts. For example, the touching of God's and Adam's fingers in Michelangelo's "Creation" on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Mona Lisa's gaze in Rembrandt's painting, or Rosenthal's 1945 photo of the flag being raised at Iwo Jima, are playfully paraphrased in many political cartoons, commercial advertisements, and journalistic photos. This echoing of themes, quotations, symbols, storylines, or compositional elements from older images and famous written texts may create visual metaphors that encourage layered meanings in novel or ironic ways (Walker and Chaplin 1997, 142, Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 121-130, Howells 2003). But readers who do not recognize this intertextuality will also miss the ways in which the analogy animates the cartoon.

Because there is an important reader accessibility issue at stake here, I examined Canada's most widely distributed newspaper, *The Globe and Mail* (1992 through 2002), in order to identify the range of historical sources for analogies (only the third category discussed above). During these years Brian Gable was the cartoonist, and at times, Anthony Jenkins. The following ten sources of historical themes and images are listed from greatest to least usage:

1. Jewish and Christian scriptures (e.g., events, characters, quotations).
2. Renaissance art (e.g., famous images such as Michelangelo's Creation).
3. British literature from about 1700 to 1950 (e.g., themes, characters, and quotations from novels, poetry, political treatises).
4. Historical events and characters (e.g., from the Roman Empire through to WW II).
5. Fairytales (e.g., Aesop's and Grimm's fables), and children's stories and rhymes.
6. Proverbs and clichéd sayings.
7. Symbol characters (e.g., Grim Reaper, Cupid, Justice, Liberty, Saint Peter adjudicating the Pearly Gates).
8. Movies (e.g., titles, characters, events, quotations).
9. Famous paintings and photographs from the past two centuries.
10. Television shows (e.g., characters, events, quotations).

These ten sources were used to create analogies whose design and message were often clever. (Rarely were viewers alerted to the embedded intertextuality with self-conscious captions such as "With apologies to Salvador Dali" or "After Goya.") The implied ideal reader is well informed and literate, but in very particular ways. These categories do not just call upon, but also create and celebrate, a selective Eurocentric and sometimes classist cultural memory. And herein lies a problem.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory refers to the store of background knowledge that one calls upon when interpreting the everyday commonsense world. Political cartoons are part of that mundane world as long as viewers share four areas of understanding. Most obvious is the contextual knowledge of *what* the cartoonist is commenting upon, whether an immediate social problem or a specific news item. Second, there is knowledge of *how* the cartoon works, including its visual language of signs (images, symbols, captions, and quotes), conventions (expectations about what a sign is meant to signify), and rhetorical devices (caricature and analogies) used to convey satire, irony, and ridicule. Third, *allusions* to historical events and personages, or to past cultural texts (e.g., poems, novels, famous quotations, art), are only successful as the reader is able to access the allusionary base from which the analogies are drawn. And lastly, there is some understanding of the broader *discourse* itself that distinguishes political cartoons from the comics, political or commercial ads, and photojournalism. Lack of any aspect of this assumed shared memory might render an image opaque. The fact that most adults and students experience difficulties with cartoons raises questions about the status of this shared memory.

Intertextuality only works as readers have access to the assumed memory bank that provides currency for communication. In reality, though, this communal memory is fictive and highly exclusionary within a diverse society. The very assumption creates an elite in-group able to make the connections, and an out-group lacking the requisite cultural capital because of generational, ethnocultural or social class experiences that differ from the cartoonist. The result is a cartoon that "often functions as a sort of inside joke between the cartoonist and the readers" who get the veiled reference (DeSousa and Medhurst 1982, 49). To test this premise I selected 100 cartoons from the previous ten categories, and showed samples to groups of teachers (n=125) working in the ethnocultural and social class diversities of the greater Vancouver metropolitan area. These individuals had at least a baccalaureate degree in history or the social sciences, as well as one or two years of teacher training, and worked with a curriculum that includes political cartoons. For each image they were asked to identify the source of the analogy and to explain the intertextuality. Only a quarter of the respondents had a 50 percent success rate. More importantly, this exercise sparked group discussions about the ideal reader and cultural memory taken for granted by Canada's national paper, and the accessibility implications of these assumptions for students.

These images assume an audience that has considerable memory of selected Western European literature and iconography, as well as important historical events and personages. An ideal reader is thereby created. Excluded from this selective memory base are cultural and historical allusions to Africa, Eastern Europe, South America, and Asia, references to the Islamic and Buddhist traditions, as well as recent North American prize winning literature or art, and sports. Commonly used analogies that reference a jungle as a dangerous but exciting place ("it's a jungle out there") draw on stereotypes about the developing world that harken back to earlier Western imperialism. This reliance on an older Eurocentric (and perhaps patriarchal) canon of a bygone era is surprising, given that *The Globe and Mail's* masthead bills itself as "Canada's National Newspaper" and is published in the continent's most diverse city. This need not be interpreted as a conscious collusion on the part of cartoonists to privilege a particular memory bank as more important than others, or to create a elitist politics of insiders and outsiders. Such cultural and class chauvinism would not play well in the diverse and competitive market where newspapers seek increased readership. Rather, the cartoons speak back to their authors (telling us something about their social locations, and about what these artists take to be a shared literacy) and to the conditions within which they

work (the debates that do or do not take place in editorial offices). This illustrates the process of what Bourdieu (1977, 82) refers to as *habitus*, a deeply taken for granted "system of dispositions – a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in the practices structured according to its principles..."; it consists of the actions, perceptions, and expectations that provide cartoonists with their "feel for the game" within a particular time and institutional place (Roth, Lawless and Tobin 2000, 8). Similar is Apple's notion of hegemony as the unquestioned assumptions about the social world that groups carry in "the bottom of their heads," constituting a common sense that serves to naturalize and perpetuate social inequalities (Apple 1990, 5-7). The particular *habitus* or hegemony operating within this newspaper assumes that there is a storehouse – filled with traditional symbols, stories, images, stereotypes, quotable quotes, and references to famous people, events and places – from which cartoonists can draw their generative allusions. And because this storehouse is assumed to be widely available, and hence legitimate, well-rounded Canadians are able to interpret public texts from newspapers to billboards.

However, the very idea of this imagined memory bank has proved to be controversial during the past two decades. Whose memory should be privileged? Who is left out? On one side of the debate are those literary critics, philosophers, historians, and educators who argue that there is (and needs to be) a widely shared literary, historical, and artistic ground that makes ongoing public conversations possible (e.g., Bloom 1994, Broudy 1988, Hirsch 1987, Osborne 1999, Ravitch 1992, Ravitch and Finn 1987). This allusionary base, they contend, is even more important as society becomes diverse. As one historian warned many years ago,

the problem is that there is little common cultural ground among [college students], and there can be few allusions to writers, to seminal works, or to historical personages that will evoke general recognition.... In literature, students need a common foundation of readings. Unless they have read, as a minimum, the classical myths, the Bible, and some Shakespeare, they will be unable to comprehend the fundamental vocabulary of most Western literature (Ravitch 1985, 314-15).

On the other side are those who view a so-called common memory as representing the ideals and experiences of some groups, and who reject this as arrogant and exclusionary (e.g., Banks 1993, Hilliard 1992, Stotsky 1992). "The notions of canon and master narrative," counter Cornbleth and Waugh (1995, 41), "have outlived whatever usefulness they may have had and should be abandoned in favor of literary choice and multiple historical perspectives or reciprocal history." This debate illustrates a tension for cartoonists, though, because their work centrally depends upon analogies. Within a classed and pluralistic society, what are the best sources of these metaphors? What interests are served, and who is excluded and included, by using Eurocentric literary and historical sources for analogies? Answers to such questions have to be worked out by cartoonists if they hope to remain relevant across cultural diversity.⁷

But it is too easy to blame cartoonists. More important is the onus on schools to help youth negotiate the issue. The social studies classroom is one site dedicated to providing all youth with some shared understandings for critical citizenship. As part of doing so, all social studies curriculum and textbooks purport to teach students to read political cartoons, assuming that this interpretive skill is representative of aspects of a larger civic literacy. I perused fifteen

social studies textbooks used in British Columbia (grades 8-11) to identify the conceptual tools provided for this task.⁸ The range of cartoons included was from one to sixteen, with an average of over five per book. In most instances, authors focus on the content of a cartoon rather than on how it positions the reader and makes assumptions. Usually students are asked to summarize the message, without also focusing on the ways meanings are produced. For example, "After studying this cartoon, explain the issue and the cartoonist's point of view. Do you agree with the statement being made?" (Eaton and Newman 1994, 96; grade eleven); "What do you think the cartoonist is trying to say?" (Francis, Hobson, Smith, Garrod, and Smith 1998; grade eleven). These questions assume that the message is intuitively obvious or that readers already have the tools for interpreting and judging the image. Although three of the books outlined brief steps for reading cartoons, only one explicitly used the term "analogy" (as well as caricature, stereotype, symbol, rhetoric), but without explanation of what visual analogies and intertextuality entail, how they work to encourage and constrain meaning, and some of the accompanying issues of social exclusion (Cranny and Moles 2001, 23; grade eleven). Nor did any text ask students to consider what a cartoon assumes about the audience or about a shared cultural memory: Who is (and is not) the ideal viewer? Whose experience and history are taken to be most relevant and important? Why might this be the case? What might be the consequences of these assumptions? For whom? When four of the books ask students to evaluate a cartoon, the criteria include "effectiveness" and "humor":

- "Political cartoons ... are a very effective means of convincing a reader to see an issue in a specific way.... How effectively does it deliver its message?" (Cranny and Moles 2001, 23; grade eleven).
- "Their purpose is not simply to amuse but also to stimulate thought and discussion.... They are designed to make the reader think about both the event or people being portrayed and the message the cartoonist is trying to communicate.... Is it thought-provoking? funny?" (Francis et al. 1998, 206-7; grade eleven).
- "Did you find the cartoon effective, funny, or both? Think about why" (Cranny, Jarvis, Moles, and Seney 1999, 424).
- "What makes the cartoon funny?.... Bring to class an editorial cartoon that makes you laugh" (Cranny 1998, 257; grade eight).

But humor is not a necessary criterion, and in order to judge "effectiveness," students need tools for understanding how a cartoon works to produce effects. In short, young readers are not richly introduced to the discourse and its issues. This lack is surprising because youth find cartoons hard to interpret.⁹

Learning how to read and critique political cartoons continues to be a part of social education. But this task is too taken for granted. Although visual analogies are commonplace in popular culture, the ways in which they produce meaning and the consequent issues of exclusion can be complex. Students need critical concepts. A place to start is with four sets of questions: (1) What is the analogy in this cartoon? What is its source? (2) What does this analogy assume about the viewer and about cultural memory? Who is excluded? (3) What are the consequences of these assumptions? (4) How could the analogy be changed to make it more inclusive?

Notes

¹Readers expect the image to inform and persuade. But unlike columnists and editorialists

who must argue their positions, cartoonists are allowed to "hit and run." They quickly make a point without having to explain. As a consequence, though, readers do not take the cartoon as seriously as the written word. Rarely is there a published letter taking issue with a cartoon's bias or expressing delight or concern with how it was expressed. And it is easy to be uncritical because, after all, these modest images pursue the "high and mighty" and strike back at unpopular policies. They seem to be on "our" side and allow for each viewer's prejudice or grievance to be read into the image. Even if we don't agree with a perceived message, we can still admire the artist's brash attempt to undress arrogance, privilege and stupidity. This tolerance, though, grants the cartoonist power to position both the object of ridicule and the viewer.

²Newspaper editors also take the cartoon for granted. Day after day these little goads are presented without explanation on the assumption that "the public" recognizes the content and knows how to interpret the embedded editorial. Rarely does a newspaper ask the artist to give written account for a series of harsh cartoons. During the second Iraqi war, *The Guardian* ran a series of in-your-face denunciations of George Bush and Tony Blair by Steve Bell, whose blunt caricatures and crude analogies got his message across, as he said, with "extreme prejudice." In a rather unusual move, the newspaper had him write an explanation for the series published over the prior two months. He irreverently justified himself by hopping on the high road of countering "misinformation" provided by radio and TV! (Cartoonists were, understandably, absented from traveling the low road taken by other media.) In terms of "news" about Iraq, he characterized himself as:

wading up to my metaphorical eyeballs through the swollen torrent of shit pouring out of my radio and TV. One of the real advantages of being able to draw in this awful context is that it affords the chance to manipulate a little of this flood of imagery and turn it back on itself; since I'm certain the vast bulk of these mega pictures constitute a campaign of deliberate obfuscation. This explains the western media's strange combination of squeamishness and prurience. They don't want the gory bits, thank you very much.... for isn't such explicit imagery both tasteless and intrusive? Surely that's the bloody idea. I might be a little more sympathetic to the Bush-Blair axis if they would at least own up to the effects of what they are actually doing out there (Bell 2003).

More interesting, though, was his assurance to readers that although his hard-hitting work attracted the editors' attention, there was little censorship:

Apart from the inevitable risk of seeming flippant and trivial in the face of tragedy and heroism [the Iraqi war], is it any more difficult working as a cartoonist now than under normal conditions? Personally speaking, there is no more "censorship" than usual. The only thing I've been obliged to adapt slightly was the "turd count" in my cartoon on the role of the UN, published on April 4-I agreed to remove three splattered turds from the version that appeared in the printed edition of the *Guardian*. The version on the web went out unaltered (Bell 2003).

This self-justification suggests us that at some point in the series, the editors' assumptions about cartoons and readers could no longer be taken for granted, and so a process of normalization through explanation came into play.

³Signs include the visual images (e.g., caricatures and stereotypes of individuals; symbols such as a flag=country, parliament building=government) and the words (e.g., captions, quotations) used in a cartoon. The particular meaning of a visual symbol is established by arbitrary conventions that change over time; in the past, for example, a short and stout man wearing a pin-stripped suit with top hat, and smoking a cigar, symbolized capitalists or the broader system of capitalism. Similarly, during the past two centuries, conventions for symbolizing Canada shifted from the young and slight Miss Canada to the robust Johnny Canuk, and then to the beaver (see Hou and Hou 1997, 2002).

⁴In addition to mundane analogies, cartoons also draw on caricature that appeals to readers' embodied emotional memories (e.g., of fear, surprise, embarrassment) and vulnerabilities (e.g., potential pain, death). Reference to concrete body experiences makes the cartoon accessible.

⁵Brian Gable, *The Globe and Mail*, December 10, 2001, A18.

⁶Brian Gable, *The Globe and Mail*, August 16, 2001, A12.

⁷Many college students could not recognize the iconography of past symbols, according to a study by DeSousa and Medhurst (1982, 49), because the visual language was in part "rooted in a repertoire of images and allusions that have not kept pace.... Are the root metaphors upon which cartoonists draw the symbols of a bygone era incapable of touching a responsive chord in a modern readership?"

⁸Vivien Bowers and Stan Garrod. 1987. *Our Land: Building the West*. Toronto, ON: Gage (grade 10); Desmond Morton. 1988. *Canada in a Changing World: History*. Toronto, ON: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (grade 11); Diane Eaton and Garfield Newman. 1994. *Canada. A Nation Unfolding*. Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson (grade 11); Carl Smith, Daniel McDevitt, and Angus Scully. 1996. *Canada Today*. Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada (grade 11); Beverly Armento, Jorge Klor de Alva, Gary Nash, Christopher Salter, Louis Wilson, and Karen Wixson. 1997. *Across the Centuries*. Toronto, ON: Houghton Mifflin Co. (grade 8); Bradley Cruyton and Douglas Wilson. 1997. *Challenge of the West. A Canadian Retrospective From 1815-1914*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press (grade 10); Alyn Mitchner and Joanne Tuffs. 1997. *Global Forces of the Twentieth Century*. Edmonton, AB: Reidmore Books (grade 11); Michael Cranny. 1998. *Crossroads. A Meeting of Nations*. Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Ginn Canada (grade 9); Michael Cranny. 1998. *Pathways. Civilizations Through Time*. Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Ginn Canada (grade 8); Daniel Francis, Jennifer Hobson, Gordon Smith, Stan Garrod, and Jeff Smith. 1998. *Canadian Issues: A Contemporary Perspective*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press (grade 11); Michael Cranny, Graham Jarvis, Garvin Moles, and Bruce Seney. 1999. *Horizons. Canada Moves West*. Toronto, ON: Prentice Hall (grade 10); Elspeth Deir and John Fielding. 2000. *Canada. The Story of a Developing Nation*. Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd. (grade 8); Phyllis Arnold, Penney Clark, and Ken Westerland 2000. *Canada Revisited*. Edmonton, AB: Arnold Publishing (grade 8); Angelo Bolotta, Charles Hawkes, Fred Jarman, Marc Keirstead, and Jennifer Watt. 2000. *Canada. Face of a Nation*. Toronto, ON: Gage Educational Publishing; Michael Cranny and Garvin Moles. 2001. *Counterpoints. Exploring*

Canadian Issues. Toronto: Prentice Hall (grade 11).

⁹According to Heitzmann (1998, 7), American research from 1930 through the early 1990s shows that secondary school and college youth, as well as most adults, have difficulty understanding editorial cartoons. Gruner (1992) summarizes some of the reasons why people miss the point of satire; among others, these reasons include ignorance about the issue under discussion, prior political allegiance or prejudice, close-mindedness and dogmatism, and verbal intelligence. Reasons why elementary students might have difficulties are discussed by Steinfirst (1995). See also Bedient and Moore (1985), DeSousa and Medhurst (1982), and Langeveld (1981).

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Walt Werner is an associate professor in the Curriculum Studies Department of the University of British Columbia.

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