1-1-2012

More than Words: Rhetorical Devices in American Political Cartoons

Lawrence Ray Bush
University of South Florida, lbush2@mail.usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons, History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, Political Science Commons, and the Rhetoric Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3924

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
More than Words:
Rhetorical Devices in American Political Cartoons

by

Lawrence R. Bush

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of American Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Robert Snyder, Ph.D.
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.
Adriana Novoa, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
March 26, 2012

Keywords: Art, Communications, History, Humor, Literary Theory, Symbolism

Copyright ©2012, Lawrence R. Bush
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Alice Bush, my wife, who has supported me through my graduate studies and has proofread my papers, correcting many of my errors before they were seen by my instructors.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. ii

Abstract ................................................................................................................................ iv

Introduction: Rhetorical Constructs .................................................................................. 1

Pictorial Representations ....................................................................................................... 6
  Structuralism .................................................................................................................. 6
  Cartoon Theory ........................................................................................................... 8
  Female Representations .............................................................................................. 14

The Single-panel Tradition: Satirical Prints .......................................................................... 17
  Text Condensation ....................................................................................................... 18
  Bakhtinian Analysis ..................................................................................................... 22
  Embedded Panels ......................................................................................................... 23
  Political Cartoon Strips .............................................................................................. 26
  Split Panels .................................................................................................................. 28
  Long Format Cartoon ................................................................................................. 30

Introductions may be in Order: Rhetorical Identification .................................................... 35
  Caricature Aids: Labeling ........................................................................................... 36
  Fact-based Humor ....................................................................................................... 40

Conveying Text: The Jigsaw Puzzle Approach .................................................................... 49
  Yellow Journalism ....................................................................................................... 53
  Use of Titles ................................................................................................................. 55
  Three Examples .......................................................................................................... 57
  Balloons ....................................................................................................................... 62
  Captions ....................................................................................................................... 68
  Calligraphy .................................................................................................................. 70

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 77

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 80
List of Figures

Figure 1: “The Next Rung by Blanche Ames .............................................. 11
Figure 2: “Col. Fremont’s Last Grand Exploring Expedition in 1856” ............... 13
Figure 3: “One Look at the Jobbers’ Pets was Enough” by Charles Nelan ........ 21
Figure 4: “…And So the Senate…” by Pat Oliphant ...................................... 26
Figure 5: “I Used to be a Big Shot” by Steve Sack ........................................ 29
Figure 6: “G. O. P. Policy Guide” by Matt Davies .......................................... 29
Figure 7: “Beneath the Surface” by Nick Anderson ......................................... 31
Figure 8: “Who Stole the People’s Money?” by Thomas Nast ......................... 33
Figure 9: “The Feast of the Aldermanic Vultures” by Walt MacDougall .......... 37
Figure 10: “Will the Governor Come to the Rescue?” by Charles Nelan ........... 39
Figure 11: Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau .......................................................... 43
Figure 12: “News Irem” by Geoff Olson ............................................................ 45
Figure 13: “Plants, Animals Seeking Higher, Cooler Climes” by Tony Auth ...... 46
Figure 14: “When I’m President by Mike Thompson ....................................... 48
Figure 15: “Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine” by Walt MacDougall ................ 52
Figure 16: “No Wonder We’re Getting Soft” by Vaughn Shoemaker ................. 56
Figure 17: “Say, Whatever happened to Freedom from Fear” by Herbert Block 60
Figure 18: “I Feel Like a Fugitive from the Law of Averages” by Bill Mauldin .... 61
Figure 19: “I can be at Abbotsbury and Enfield” by William Hogarth .............. 63
Figure 20: “The Foot Race” by David Claypool Johnson ................................. 65
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td><em>Hogan’s Alley</em> by Richard Outcault</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Stay Tuned for the President’s Plan” by Dick Locher</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td><em>Pogo</em> by Walt Kelly</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>“Immigration Policy by Clay Bennett”</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>“It is Deemed most Fortunate” by Roy Peterson</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This thesis argues that literary theory applied to political cartoons shows that cartoons are reasoned arguments. The rhetorical devices used in the cartoons mimic verbal devices used by essayists. These devices, in turn, make cartoons influential in that they have the power to persuade readers while making them laugh or smile. It also gives examples of literary theorists whose works can be applied to political cartooning, including Frederick Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Wolfgang Iser. Not only do those theorists’ arguments apply to text, they also apply to pictorial representations.

This thesis also discusses changes in the cartoon art form over the 250 years that American political cartoons have existed. Changes have occurred in both the way text and pictorial depictions have been presented by artists. This thesis makes some attempt to explain why the changes occurred and whether they have been for the better.
Introduction: Rhetorical Constructs

The rhetoric of political cartoons consists of more than words. It is a complex system of symbols, pictures, and words put together in a way that newspaper readers who understand the intended message of the cartoonist, will better understand the issue that the cartoonist addresses. However, research has shown that not everyone appreciates the cryptic drawings that appear every day on the opinion pages of the newspaper. Affectively engaging with cartoons is a matter of looking at pictures, reading the words, understanding pictorial representations, and keeping up with current events. This thesis identifies the rhetorical constructs in editorial cartoons, and tracks their usage over the course of more than 250 years that American cartoons have existed.

Some of the terminology used in this thesis is specialized and deserving of definition. For instance, readers of cartoons are called “skimmers.” This term was coined by Raymond Morris in *Behind the Jester’s Mask*. He states, “We expect to skim or glance at [the cartoon], grasp its message, laugh or groan, and move on.”¹ It is an appropriate term in that someone who peruses cartoons does not merely look at the picture, nor does s/he just read the text. Most cartoons are a combination of illustration and text and are best understood by the person who skims the entire piece in order to grasp its meaning. For lack of a better term,

“skimmer” refers to those who read cartoons, while “reader” refers to the literate public.

Positioning is also important in this thesis. Text may be placed in three places in a cartoon. That which is above the frame of the cartoon is in the title position (it may be descriptive or dialogue). Text is often written within the frame. And that which is below the frame is a caption. The text that is written is largely either a descriptor or dialogue. Either one can be object language, the voices of characters that do not reflect the artist’s opinion, or authorial voice, which is text that reflects the artist’s opinion. It is incumbent on the cartoonist to make the intent of the text obvious enough for the skimmer to determine which it is.

There is, moreover, a difference between types of political cartoons. In this thesis, the term “political cartoon” refers to all cartoons that have a greater political than social bent. And, although there are many who feel that all social issues are political, in the cartoon arena, the two are separated. An “editorial cartoon” is a political cartoon that is drawn contemporary to the issue that it examines. The turnaround time between the artist having finished his product and its publication in a newspaper is often less than one day. It is usually, but not always a rectangular single panel that appears nearly square. A “political cartoon strip” is a political cartoon that is drawn as an elongated rectangle and may have more than one panel in it. It usually has recurring characters, and is a regular feature of a newspaper, contrary to the syndicated editorial cartoon which may be in a newspaper one day, but on subsequent days, the editors choose other artists’ works. Popular political cartoon strips include Boondocks,
Candorville, Doonesbury, La Cucaracha, and Mallard Fillmore. The political cartoon strip is drawn at least one week prior to its publication, so it is not as contemporary as the editorial cartoon. While the editorial cartoon appears nearly exclusively on the opinion pages of a newspaper, the political cartoon strip appears either in the comics section or on the opinion pages.

This thesis tracks rhetorical constructs used by American cartoonists over more than 250 years. It also examines different types of symbols and how they have changed. Thirdly, it examines how the use of titles has changed and changes in how a topic is presented to the skimmer over time. Finally, it reviews the way dialogue is attributed to characters in a cartoon, and how that has evolved.

Truthfulness is important to cartoonists and skimmers, and while most cartoon content is hyperbole, and is treated as opinion, the hyperbole must have some factual basis in order to work. Laying that groundwork of truth is a rhetorical construct in political cartoons. Sometimes the factual basis is stated in the cartoon, and sometimes the facts are assumed by the cartoonist. Either way, if the skimmer does not recognize either the stated fact or does not recognize what the cartoonist assumes, the point of the cartoon fails. Cartoonists have been sued for taking liberties with the truth, so they have some sensitivity about making it clear that their opinions are based on some recognized truth or something that is reported as the truth. Once the cartoonist has established credibility, then the cartoonist is at liberty to exaggerate at will. This thesis
examines how the various cartoonists present factual information in their cartoons.

Finally, this paper looks at the format of the political cartoon, and how it has changed. There is evidence that most people do not understand the intended message that cartoonists convey in their cartoons.\(^2\) However, for the minority who do understand them, political cartoons provide more than just entertainment at the expense of politicians who may have committed a *faux pas*, they are critical analyses of current events. Like their counterparts on the opinion pages of newspapers, editorial cartoonists provide insight into issues that skimmers may have overlooked in their own analysis.

In *Behind the Jester’s Mask*, Raymond Morris analyzes the effect of political cartoons on skimmers. He argues:

> By alloying a picture with a text they activate more of the reader's senses. They thus invite greater involvement, offering a suggestive pattern to be grasped in its totality rather than an informative discourse which must be followed one step at a time. Their latent message may slip more successfully than an editorial through the filters with which readers protect themselves from ideas which may run contrary to their interests.\(^3\)

On a personal level, Wendy Wick Reeves noticed this phenomenon within herself as she was reading editorial cartoons. She observes:

> Comic forms are easily and quickly dismissed, but humor is too pervasive and influential an element of our visual culture to ignore. Some years ago,  

\(^2\) Leroy M. Carl, “Editorial Cartoons Fail to Reach Many Readers,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 45 (1968), 533-535. In this article, Carl uses scientific methods to poll Americans and argues that only 15% of Americans fully understand the artist's intent of individual editorial cartoons, and 15% partially understand the artist's intent in an editorial cartoon. Therefore, 70% of Americans do not understand editorial cartoons.  

\(^3\) Raymond N. Morris, *Behind the Jester’s Mask*, 80.
while preparing an exhibition on the Pulitzer Prize winning artist Pat Oliphant, I first became aware of the extraordinarily persuasive power an editorial cartoonist can wield over our subconscious….We absorb lasting impressions that, without our awareness, mold our opinions.4

The editorial cartoons are so attractive to newspaper readers that the New York Times does not run them on a daily basis anymore. According to Gail Collins, Times’ opinion page editor, it detracts from the essays of its pundits. She states, “It takes an enormous amount of the power of the page and funnels it in one direction.”5 To Collins, the competition of an editorial cartoon overwhelms the essayists, and, by not running editorial cartoons, she chooses not to put the editorial writers in that situation.

At the risk of absorbing lasting impressions that may mold their opinions, skimmers willingly read political cartoons in order to better understand issues, and, the more powerful the cartoon, the better skimmers seem to enjoy them. The political cartoon is a hybrid of text, pictorial representations, symbols, shadings, and humor that become a puzzle, a sophisticated rebus that is affectively engaging to skimmers. It is a challenge that newspapers publish for news junkies in a manner similar to what the crossword is to lexicophiles.

5 Patrick T. Reardon, “Drawing Blood: A Newspaper’s Editorial Cartoons are Meant to Sting, even Offend. It’s a Grand Old Tradition,” Chicago Tribune, 18 July 2003,
Pictorial Representations

The art of cartooning uses many different types of symbolism. This symbolism creates a vocabulary that does not simply consist of words, but are pictorial representations that cartoonists use repeatedly and skimmers are expected to understand. Skimmers understand some of the symbols, such as largeness versus smallness, inherently, but others, like the symbol of the elephant for the Republican Party, are learned. While the inherent symbols never change, learned symbols are flexible. They are used until something better comes along, and as cartoonists change their symbolic vocabulary, it is incumbent on skimmers to change their perceptions. This chapter delves into the cartoon vocabulary of symbols, icons, and other pictorial representations that challenge the perceptions of skimmers.

Structuralism

Ferdinand Saussure presented a linguistic theory of semiotics that is now called structuralism. In it a word is a “signifier;” and what the word represents is a “signified;” together, the two of them are a “sign.” According to John Storey in Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction:

He then goes on to argue that the relationship between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary. The word ‘dog’ has no dog-like qualities, there is no reason why the signifier ‘dog’ should produce the signified ‘dog’: four-legged canine creature (other languages have different
signifiers to produce the same signified). The relationship between the two is simply the result of convention—of cultural agreement.\textsuperscript{6}

Similarly, cartoonists use pictographs, symbols that represent an arbitrarily designated entity, to represent concepts. For example, as a result of a convention that began in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, cartoonists and skimmers have agreed that the elephant represents the Republican Party of the United States. There is nothing particularly elephantine about Republicans, but artists and skimmers have agreed on this convention.

As with structuralism in words, the use of symbols is not always neat and tidy. Consider the signifier “present.” When a reader sees that word, how does s/he know what meaning the signifier carries? As a noun it can mean a gift; as an adjective it can indicate that one is in attendance, and as a verb it can denote the action of giving. In fact, the signifier is pronounced differently when used as a verb than it is as a noun. The reader knows which meaning of the signifier applies through context. Likewise, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, sometimes an elephant is just an elephant.\textsuperscript{7} How does a skimmer know that a depiction of an elephant in a cartoon represents the Republican Party rather than it representing a pachyderm? S/he must put the signifier into the context of whatever else is in the tableau and determine the correct signification of the elephant.


\textsuperscript{7} Ralph Keyes, \textit{Nice Guys Finish Seventh: False Phrases, Spurious Sayings, and Familiar Quotations}, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 173. The saying, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” is attributed to Sigmund Freud. However, the quote is not in any of Freud’s writings, nor any of the biographies written about him. The context of the quote may be from a question posed to him about his habit of smoking cigars and whether it was an oral fixation or phallic symbol. He is reported to have answered, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” At another time he is reported to have answered that question with, “A cigar was merely a good smoke.” Either way, the cigar reference has been attributed to Freud. The analogy reinforces the concept that symbols must be regarded in context.
Saussure’s theory goes on to give an example of the knight in chess: “A knight, for example, could be represented in any way a designer thought desirable, provided that how it was represented marked it as different from the other chess pieces.” That principle, when applied to political cartoons, allows for artistic difference between cartoonists and political situations. Artists must take care not to depict the elephant similarly to any other animal (say, a vulture or snake) unless the artist means to imply that the Republican Party has the nature of the other animal. That said, artists are free to depict the elephant in infinite ways, and the skimmer will still recognize it as a signifier for the Republican Party.

**Cartoon Theory**

E. H. Gombrich and Raymond N. Morris also have theories of symbolism in cartoon art. The similarity in their theories is that symbols used by cartoonists are binary in the way cartoonists represent a thing, person, or concept as wholly positive or negative. They differ in what those symbols are and how they are used. Gombrich’s theory concerns the drawing and coloring of elements of the cartoon, while Morris’s theory concerns the representation of characteristics in the drawing. These theories are complementary in that a cartoonist may use elements from both theorists to enhance the effectiveness of a cartoon.

Raymond Morris applies the symbolic action theory of Kenneth Burke to political cartoons. Burke espouses a theory of social processes as they apply to

---

8 Storey, *Cultural Theory*, 89.
politics of good versus bad, victory versus defeat, and heroism versus villainy. Politics is full of symbolic action, “A leader who ignores symbolic action is apt to be caricatured as dull and colourless; one who ignores necessitous action is seen as playing to the gallery while doing nothing; one who does not correlate the two is seen as incoherent.” These symbolic battles take place at all levels of government all of the time. Cartoonists, in turn, take the symbolic action that is played out in city halls and in capitals and re-present the symbols pictorially so that readers can better interpret the machinations of government.

Gombrich describes two types of symbols, the natural metaphor and the ad hoc symbol. Natural metaphors are symbols that humans automatically understand. The difference between lightness and darkness is such a case. As a result, these relationships can be exploited for creative communication or for destructive propaganda. Gombrich states, “Racial propaganda has at all times exploited this unthinking fusion.” However, in this study the use of the binary of light and dark will be used for its affect as a symbol in non-racial issues. Other natural metaphors include beauty versus ugliness and big versus small. These are especially useful for cartoonists in that they simplify the communication process. Skimmers inherently perceive who the heroes and villains are if some characters are drawn attractively, while others are drawn with unattractive features. Likewise, a hegemonic entity is depicted as substantially larger than its counterpart in a comparison. Often those comparisons are made into a David

---

and Goliath metaphor. Cartoonists exaggerate the binaries as necessary in order to create an even greater opposition.

An example of two of the principles of Gombrich’s theory is an undated cartoon by Blanche Ames during the women’s suffrage movement prior to 1920 (figure 1).11 In the cartoon, two ugly, devil-like characters are attacking an attractive woman who is climbing a ladder from darkness to light. In order to reinforce the symbolism of dark versus light, the artist labels the darkness “greed” and “ignorance.” The woman must ascend a ladder with rungs labeled “education,” “property,” “professions,” “business,” “votes of women,” and “true democracy” in order to reach the light of “progress.” She is hindered by forces in the dark. The artist labels the devils in the dark that are attacking her, “injustice” and “prejudice.” This suggests injustice and prejudice are bad, and they are the forces hindering the woman’s attempt to progress in society and government. Gombrich argues that skimmers recognize those symbols instinctively and would understand the intent of Ames’s cartoon even without the labels. However, the labels are used by the artist to reinforce the natural metaphors, and push the suffragist agenda that exists in the drawing.

---

Figure 1: This Blanche Ames cartoon was published in the *Women’s Journal* in 1915. It illustrates the use of natural metaphors of light versus dark and beauty versus ugliness.

Heroism versus villainy is also prevalent in the Ames cartoon. The ugly devils are attacking the defenseless woman ascending the ladder of life toward progress. According to Morris’s theory, skimmers instinctively recognize the attractive woman as the hero—persevering up the ladder toward progress as the ugly devils attempt to deter her. Satirists opposed to women’s suffrage would depict light versus dark and beauty versus ugliness in a manner opposite of Ames’s cartoon. They would depict those who are opposing the woman ascending the ladder as heroes and the woman as the villain intruding into the
man’s world. The artist used these natural metaphors knowing that the skimmers would understand her intended meaning.

Ad hoc symbols are those symbols created by artists and used extensively enough that readers understand their meaning when they see them. Ad hoc means “improvised,” so there is an assumption that they were manufactured arbitrarily (as Saussure argues that the word “dog” was coined), but something about the symbol resonates with readers, so the symbol endures. Gombrich uses, for example, the elephant as the symbol of the Republican Party and the donkey as the symbol of the Democratic Party. He claims that repeated use of the symbol changes it from an ad hoc symbol requiring explanation (a label on the character is usually sufficient) to a symbol as familiar to readers as a common word, needing no explanation. Rhetorically, ad hoc symbols eventually become signifiers for skimmers in a similar manner that words become signifiers for readers of text according to Saussure’s theory of structuralism.

Not all ad hoc symbols endure as the elephant and donkey have for almost 150 years. In *Abraham Lincoln: His path to the Presidency, a Cartoon History*, Albert Shaw explains an ad hoc symbol that rose and fell during the 19th century. In an unsigned cartoon of 1856, John C. Fremont is depicted on an exploration mission (figure 2). Colonel Fremont, the Republican nominee for President in 1856, was a well-known explorer and surveyor of western lands from 1842 to 1854. However, in this cartoon he is riding a horse labeled “Abolition Nag,” and the “crazy old hack” is leading the candidate straight to the “Salt River.” At the time, “Salt River” was an ad hoc symbol for “defeat.” According to Shaw, “Salt
River, found in many cartoons in subsequent chapters [of *Abraham Lincoln: His Path to the Presidency*], conveys the idea that the Fremont expedition of 1856 is headed toward defeat. Another ad hoc symbol that has fallen out of favor is Columbia. Used nearly exclusively during the 19th century as the female representation of the United States, she was replaced by Lady Liberty during the 20th century. Thus, Columbia is nearly unseen in modern political cartoons.

Figure 2: This unsigned cartoon from 1856 depicts John C. Fremont (on horseback) heading toward the Salt River which is identified to the left of Senator William H. Seward, the man leading the horse.

---

Female Representations

Despite the strong acceptance of symbolism, by agreement, between cartoonists and skimmers, not all aspects of society accept the symbols, and the way they are represented. Political cartoons were used to help women achieve suffrage during the enfranchisement movement of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. However, women cartoonists found that ad hoc symbols used by male cartoonists did not represent the needs of women. In *Cartooning for Suffrage*, Alice Sheppard theorizes that there was a point in the campaign for women’s suffrage that women had to attach recognizable symbols to the women’s rights rhetoric in order to win over the men who would ultimately decide whether they should be able to vote or not. In her essay, “The New Woman as Androgyne,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg addresses the co-opting of established male rhetoric around the turn of the twentieth century in America, “These women’s deliberate adaptation of male symbols in order to engage in political debate raises many philosophical and political questions.” Among the questions she raises is, “Can male symbols accurately represent female experiences?” Sheppard answers Smith-Rosenberg’s question. She states, “Women experimented by incorporating symbols from men’s cartoons and appropriating them for their own use, but often discovered that concepts inherited from mythology and tradition reflected male perceptions.” She argues that women presented existing symbols differently in order to better reflect the female experience:


Women could reinterpret an existing symbol such as Justice, using additional or altered meanings to transmit the new political appeal made by women. Or, as a cultural symbol, Liberty representing the complete absence of political bonds, could be shown to be defective or nonexistent.\textsuperscript{15}

As Smith-Rosenberg suggests by her leading question, Sheppard found that male symbols of women had to be rejected in their established form. Sheppard argues, “This was the case with Columbia, a customary American icon, who rarely offered a political statement for women.”\textsuperscript{16} The complete rejection and reconstruction of established symbols is a two-edged sword. On the one hand it may make a strong political point, but on the other hand, Sheppard states, “These risked alienating men whose support was crucial to the campaign.”\textsuperscript{17}

Established ad hoc male symbols could not accurately represent female experiences because they were fabricated by men, but female suffragist artists were stuck with the symbols that were established at the time. They, in turn, reinterpreted the symbols so that they better reflected the needs of women and did so in such a way that men, who controlled the enfranchisement of women, eventually understood the arguments, and voted for their suffrage. This type of reinterpretation of symbols drives changes in rhetoric. Not only have women reinterpreted symbols, but blacks and Hispanics have gone through a similar process of questioning accepted symbols and adjusting their usage for their own needs.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Boondocks cartoonist Aaron McGruder reinterprets suburbia in his cartoon strip. It represents suburbia in the eyes of a transplant from the city rather than the suburbia of Chic Young’s
The history of cartoons has been one of artistic innovation and evolution. Trends in rhetoric come and go as cartoonists become more adept at their craft. When a cartoonist originates more effective communication artifices, outmoded devices become obsolete. The research into changes in the cartoon medium is a study of rhetorical principles, and it gives researchers a look at how the ability to persuade through the linguistic and artistic skills of the artists adapts to the ability of skimmers to perceive satire. This dance between the artists’ abilities to convey ideas, and the skimmers’ abilities to perceive them, has been in constant flux for over 200 years.

*Blondie*. In addition, Lalo Alcaraz reinterprets politics from the point of view of a Hispanic male in both his editorial cartoons and his cartoon strip, *La Cucaracha*. Although they both lean to the liberal side, Alcaraz’s view of U. S. politics is substantially different from that of Garry Trudeau in *Doonesbury*.
The Single-panel Tradition: Satirical Prints

The format for the American editorial cartoon stems from the European political cartoon. Europe had a tradition of political satire before any known American cartoons existed. It is probable that political satire derived its form from the vast majority of artwork that was produced in Europe during the 17th century and before. A single panel was intended to convey the artist’s thoughts on a subject, often a story from the Bible or mythology, but not always. Satirical artists are likely to have used that format to produce art that was familiar to Europeans but which had a humorous bent. In Britain, William Hogarth was producing satirical prints of single-panel satire that were reproduced in print shops and sold to the public. They were displayed by patrons as artworks. Anonymous “bubble prints”\(^{19}\) began circulating in Britain during the 1720s, but they came later than other European satirists, such as Honore Daumier and Charles Philipon. According to Michael Wynn Jones in *The Cartoon History of Britain*, “While their fellow artists might be composing their massive and impressive allegories or conjuring up their idealistic or romantic vision, cartoonists took the world and its inhabitants as they were, warts and all (the

\(^{19}\) Bubble prints were lithographs that used an innovative technique that drew public attention to their content. Production and distribution of the prints induced wealthy British citizens to speculate on property in the South Seas. Those investments caused an economic bubble that eventually collapsed and left many investors poorer. By calling the pictures “bubble prints,” they have been labeled as the cause of the economic crisis. Ironically, the artists and printers that produced the bubble prints turned around and produced cartoons satirizing the victims of the South Seas economic bubble.
bigger the warts, come to think of it, the better).\textsuperscript{20} However, like their more impressive counterparts, these drawings were single-panel works of art meant to convey an idea, perhaps less romantic than their idealistic peers, to their art patrons. Satirical prints became a major commercial enterprise in Britain around 1720, and continued until 1841 when \textit{Punch} consolidated the production of satirical art and published it in an illustrated periodical.\textsuperscript{21}

The American colonies were influenced by their British imperialists. When the first known American political cartoon was published on May 9, 1754, it was drawn by Benjamin Franklin, and was a single panel feature. “Join or Die,” however, did not go to a print shop for individual distribution as a work of art. It went into Franklin’s \textit{Philadelphia Gazette} newspaper. Hence, though America adopted the British format for political cartoons, it chose a different course for distribution. And, perhaps, partly because of that difference in distribution, as a part of the press more than as a separate art form, American political cartoons have flourished as an integral part of its First Amendment right of free speech and free press.

\textbf{Text Condensation}

One reason for the single-panel format before the 20\textsuperscript{th} century is that an artist had to work hard to draw a single panel suitable for lithography. Carving the lines of a cartoon into a lithography plate is time consuming and labor intensive. The artist, therefore, conveys all of his/her message in the single panel. That is


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 9.
also true of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century political cartoonist. Until print reproduction evolved to photoengraving during the late-19\textsuperscript{th} century, the foremost reason for the single-panel format was that reproduction of pictures on a mass scale was so difficult that multiple panels were seen as a waste of effort and, therefore, inefficient. In order to accommodate the single-panel format, artists sometimes wrote entire conversations under a single picture. The caption contained the text of the conversation indicating the various speakers and the text. A cartoon by Charles Nelan in the \textit{Philadelphia North American} from March 30, 1903 is a conspicuous example of that convention (figure 3). This cartoon pertains to a Philadelphia utilities bill and a city administrator (recently returned from a voyage to England) who wants nothing to do with it.\textsuperscript{22} Even though photoengraving had advanced printing past the need to print entire conversations in the captions, convention held stacked dialogue as the rhetorical device of the time.

John Culhane, in the \textit{New York Times}, argues that editorial cartoons were influenced by social satire in journals. He states, "It began with the one-line joke in the social cartoons of the \textit{New Yorker}, which eventually cleared away the five-decker dialogue and proliferation of labels."\textsuperscript{23} These economic cartoons, which became the standard of wit in magazines, began as a concerted effort by \textit{New Yorker} editors Harold Ross and Rea Irvin. The two sought writers to compose

\textsuperscript{22} Charles Nelan, "One Look at the Jobbers' Pets was Enough," \textit{The Philadelphia North American}, 30 March 1903, 1. This is as extreme of a case of multi-decker dialogue as exists. If anything like this were published today, it would take on the look of a Sunday cartoon strip or a long format editorial cartoon.

condensed lines for their cartoons.\textsuperscript{24} Between 1925 and 1930, \textit{New Yorker} cartoons were the hallmark of brevity, and, according to Culhane, brevity became the standard for editorial cartoons as well. By World War II, five-decker, or even double-decker cartoon captions had gone the way of the horse and buggy. Like most magazine cartoons, editorial cartoons largely maintained the single-panel protocol with few exceptions and modifications until the 1960s. Tradition is hard to fight. For some, even if a political idea could best be conveyed in multiple panels, if there is more than one panel, to some people, it is not an editorial cartoon.

Figure 3: This Charles Nelan cartoon of March 30, 1903 illustrates how unwieldy stacked dialogue could get.

Daniel Fitzpatrick, the former editorial cartoonist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, calls the single-panel tradition a “distilling process.” He continues, “By its nature... a political cartoon is ‘not a medium easily adapted to a balanced disclosure of a subject’s every side.’” This is recognition of the nature of the single panel being the reason why political cartoons carry such blatant bias. It also reinforces the theories of the binary nature of editorial cartoons proffered by Culhane, *New York Times*, SM10.
Gombrich and Morris. Characters are depicted as ugly or beautiful, heroes or villains. In the world of cartoons, the single-panel tradition ensures that there is no middle ground.

**Bakhtinian Analysis**

Russian philosopher and literary analyst, Mikhail Bakhtin, wrote essays on parody. In “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” Bakhtin proffers strategies for divining the artist’s voice from literary works. Among the literary works that he assesses is the poem, a work that is comparable to cartoons in that poets incorporate symbolism and economy of words in order to make the piece concise. Although Bakhtin does not examine the editorial cartoon in his essay, he addresses humor writing in general:

> This world is very rich, considerably richer than we are accustomed to believe. The nature and methods available for ridiculing something are highly varied, and not exhausted by parodying and travestying in a strict sense. These methods for making fun of the straightforward work have as yet received little scholarly attention.  

Bakhtin goes on to scrutinize different devices used by writers to ridicule. Among the rhetorical devices that poetry and cartoons share is dialogism, literally, “double-voicedness.” According to Sue Vice in *Introducing Bakhtin*, “Dialogism refers to the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance.” It is the responsibility of the skimmer to detect the dialogism, and to figure out who the voices represent. Those skimmers who are not skilled in detecting dialogism are

---


likely to find that they are able to only partially appreciate the content of the cartoon. Often, the voice of a character is also the voice of the artist. In other cartoons the voice of a character is also the voice of the parodied subject of a cartoon. It is incumbent on the cartoonist to give clues to the skimmer as to who the parodied subject is. It is the responsibility of the skimmer to find the clues and figure it out. Within the construct of political cartoons is the expectation of wordplay that will make the cartoon more humorous. That expectation aids the skimmer in finding dialogism.

**Embedded Panels**

When Pat Oliphant began his career as an editorial cartoonist in Adelaide, South Australia, he worked for a conservative newspaper, and was instructed to draw conservative cartoons, even though he was not a conservative. At some point during the early-1960s, Oliphant drew a penguin in his cartoon in order to add a comment to the content of the panel. That comment changed the bias of the cartoon to something more in line with the philosophy of the artist. Oliphant describes the invention of “Punk the Penguin” in *Oliphant’s Anthem*:

> [Drawing conservative cartoons] was a great frustration, so I invented the character—a penguin—about that time as a way of getting my own point of view into my work. I don’t know whether they ever realized that what I was doing was trying to subvert their system and say something in my own words. But the bird became very popular and became a regular element of my cartoons.  

---

Rhetorically, what Oliphant did was embed a second panel into the main panel of the editorial cartoon. Punk and his comment are inserted into white space, usually at the bottom of the tableau. The main tableau is the object language of the cartoon. The embedded panel contains Punk and a dialogic comment that, in addition to the voice of the character, also consists of the artist’s parodic voice. The editorial cartoon with the embedded panel looks like traditional editorial cartoons, but the rhetorical element in the embedded panel makes it read like a two-panel cartoon with the embedded portion as the second panel.

Wendy Wick Reeves describes the discourse of Punk the Penguin as “an added throw-away joke.” Punk is much more than that to the skimmer. He is the dialogical voice of the cartoonist. Punk is the difference between understanding the artist’s intended meaning and confusion. Most editorial cartoons contain object language that is presented in such a ridiculous manner that the skimmer is expected to understand that it is ridiculous and that the situation in which it is presented is parodic. In those cases, the dialogic utterance parodies the subject of the cartoon. This is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls making fun of straightforward work. With a character such as Punk in the cartoon, the object language does not have to be exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness; Punk provides the turn of phrase that satirizes an unexaggerated situation. For example, in Oliphant’s cartoon of July 19, 1991, Senator Robert Byrd is pictured arguing the case for senators receiving a pay raise of $23,200.00.

---

29 Wendy Wick Reeves, e-mail to the author, 18 February 2010.
per year (figure 4).\(^{30}\) The rhetoric that Oliphant attributes to Senator Byrd is largely the argument that the Senator made for the raise. In addition, Oliphant planted other senators in the bottom right corner of the tableau to depict general agreement among senators with Byrd’s argument. According to a story in the *New York Times*, “Senators voted 53 to 45 on July 17, 1991 to grant themselves a $23,000 pay raise and ban the acceptance of speaking fees, bringing their pay in line with that of members of the House.” The article quotes Senator Byrd, “Now’s not the time to run from a tough decision.” Among the arguments, the senators agreed to no longer accept the honoraria of $23,068.00 in speaking fees that they were previously allowed to receive.\(^{15}\) The object language that Oliphant attributes to the senators is not words that he made up, it is the actual argument of the congressman. Punk is pictured among the senators watching the proceeding. His comment that “some cartoons write themselves” reflects that he is simply transcribing the words of the senators. It is dialogic in that the cartoonist is saying the senator’s words are so laughable, he merely has to transcribe them in order to make the senator look ridiculous. Making fun of straightforward work and adding a line that guides the skimmer to the artist’s point of view are two ways the embedded panel aids the rhetorical structure of cartoons.

Figure 4: In this Pat Oliphant cartoon of July 19, 1991, Senator Byrd argues for a raise for U. S. Senators. In the bottom right corner, various senators second Byrd’s arguments while Punk the Penguin is the bird in the far right that provides the artist’s argument.

Political Cartoon Strips

Garry Trudeau’s Doonesbury began as Bull Tales in the Yale Daily News while Trudeau was a student at the university. Trudeau was offered syndication in his junior year, and beginning on October 26, 1970, Doonesbury ran in 28 newspapers as well as the student newspaper at Yale. Doonesbury began as an edgy cartoon strip about student life, but the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal was so much a part of student life that it could not help but become a part of Doonesbury as well. Two incidents vaulted the social satire strip into the realm of political cartoon. First, according to Trudeau in Flashbacks: Twenty-five years of Doonesbury, because of its controversial content, on September 17,
1973, “The *Lincoln Journal* becomes the first newspaper to move *Doonesbury* from the comic page to the editorial page. In the years that follow many other papers follow suit.”31 A year and a half later, Trudeau’s reputation as a political cartoonist solidified when, on May 5, 1975, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning. As an example of the disconnect between the editorial cartoon and the political cartoon strip, following the announcement of Trudeau winning the Pulitzer, the Editorial Cartoonists Society passed a resolution protesting the Pulitzer Prize Committee’s decision.32 This protest indicates that, to the Editorial Cartoonists Society, if it does not look like an editorial cartoon, and does not read like an editorial cartoon, it must not be one. However, the rhetorical needs of cartoonists and skimmers had changed, and, indeed, *Doonesbury* had crossed the line and became enough of a political cartoon to win a Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning.

Trudeau brings a four-step approach to reading a cartoon as opposed to the one or two step approach that is traditionally used. Instead of confronting skimmers with a single tableau and expecting them to understand the symbols and nuances of the content, Trudeau lays out his argument over the course of four panels of content. Though the content contains symbols, there is room for Trudeau to give a greater explanation of any given issue. Additionally, *Doonesbury* is a serial strip in which Trudeau writes a story that can be followed

---

32 Charles Solomon, “Strip that Splits the Cartoonists,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 November 1987, n. p. This article is about the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning to Berke Breathed of *Bloom County*. However, it retrospectively mentions the protest of Garry Trudeau, the only other cartoon strip artist to have received the prize.
from one day to the next over the course of six days. This is in contrast to the
typical editorial cartoon which satirizes one subject one day and the next day the
cartoonist satirizes a completely different subject. Despite its lack of timeliness,
the political cartoon strip is a device that affectively engages skimmers for a more
prolonged period and is able to address issues more thoroughly than the single
editorial cartoon

**Split Panels**

Another rhetorical device that allows the cartoonist to engage the skimmer to
a greater extent is the split panel. Split panel editorial cartoons maintain the
rectangular format that is typical of editorial cartoons, but the panel is split in two.
This technique allows the cartoonist to show time passing and make side-by-side
comparisons. As a means of showing the passing of time, the cartoonist may
show the beginning of a conversation and then the punch line or a before and
after sequence. In a cartoon of January 13, 2012 by Steve Sack of the
*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Sack splits the panel horizontally and depicts the
loneliness that Iowa feels after candidates have left the state following its
caucuses (figure 5).³³ An indefinite time passes before New Hampshire joins
Iowa after its primaries. The elapsed time could not be depicted in a single
panel, so this is the most efficient way to depict it. In addition, on January 11,
2012, Matt Davies of the Tribune Media Services published a vertically split panel
that compared G. O. P. policy positions (figure 6).³⁴ On the left side is a large

---

corporation that is considered a person for certain legal reasons. On the right side is a gay man who has fewer rights than a straight person for certain legal reasons. In this case, the cartoon is a side-by-side comparison of two political entities made ridiculous by their juxtaposition with one another. Although comparisons can be made in a single panel, this method provides an alternative that is also efficient.

![Cartoon](image1)

Figure 5: This Steve Sack cartoon illustrates the passing of time between the top panel and bottom panel.

![Cartoon](image2)

Figure 6: Matt Davies illustrates a side-by-side comparison of political entities.
The split panel construct uses two panels, but it is different from the embedded panel in that the embedded panel is a comment on the main panel; therefore, the second panel is dependent on the first. With split panels, the two panels are equally dependent on each other. As a rhetorical tool, the split panel allows the artist to present issues in a way that a single panel cannot. Although side-by-side comparisons can be made in single panels, the split panel shows the comparisons more starkly. As well, single panels are poor vehicles for showing the passage of time.

Long Format Cartoon

Nick Anderson, the editorial cartoonist for the Houston Chronicle, has created a hybrid of the traditional editorial cartoon and the political cartoon strip. Anderson usually draws a single-panel editorial cartoon that is published in the Chronicle and syndicated nationally. However, on occasion, he draws a longer, more involved editorial cartoon. His first “long format” cartoons have been on the subject of energy (figure 7).  

---

Figure 7: This long format cartoon by Nick Anderson is a rhetorical hybrid of the traditional editorial cartoon and the political cartoon strip.
The long format cartoon of July 10, 2011, concerns the topic of oil. Anderson begins the cartoon with a title that is a *double entendre*. “Beneath the Surface,” is a heteroglossic introduction to the cartoon in that it describes both the literal extraction of oil from beneath the surface of the ocean and is a metaphor for the conflicts between political and ecological interests that push for and against regulation of the oil industry. The cartoon alternates narration and dialogue as object language. Among the villains in the cartoon are the large-mouthed complainers against President Obama, complaining that he is not stopping the flow of oil from reserves into the Gulf of Mexico and complaining that he has stopped the flow of drilling permits to the oil companies. This describes the no-win situation that government officials find themselves in crisis situations. As well, a gas pump with “higher prices” is contrasted with a gluttonous vehicle careening down a road demanding “gas.” The complainers and gluttonous vehicle are unattractive caricatures, natural metaphors that reinforce their villainy. In contrast, the tableau that contains a comment on the government regulating the oil industry and protecting the environment is drawn as a peaceful natural scene with a glowing sun, trees and mountains. The artist finishes the cartoon by writing a dialogical, “Meanwhile, the players involved in Macondo are busy pointing fingers…” That tableau is reminiscent of a classic Thomas Nast cartoon, “Who Stole the People’s Money?” in which the principals of New York City Government are standing in a circle pointing to the official to his right (figure 8).36

The final tableau finishes the sentence in the previous panel, “…Reminding us of

---

our most plentiful natural resource...blame." Since the word “blame” is written in the oil that is spewing from the top of an oil derrick, the cartoon is dialogic. The skimmer must decide whether the artist is telling us that oil or blame is our most abundant natural resource. This creates a more subtle difference between the opposing forces than what most cartoonists show in a single panel. In this case, Anderson finds middle ground. A single-panel cartoon would have simply ridiculed the industry, but this one brings in other forces. This cartoon is similar to other editorial cartoons in that it has a unique title that helps explain the content and it does not contain recurring characters. It is similar to the political cartoon strip in that it is drawn using a step-by-step argument to help the skimmer better understand the artist’s intended meaning.

Figure 8: This cartoon by Thomas Nast depicts official entities blaming one another in order to obfuscate any investigations of culpability, similar to the tableau in Anderson’s cartoon in which “the players involved in Macondo are busy pointing fingers.”
The format of American political cartoons has evolved little over the last 250 years. Most of the cartoons are still single-panel drawings with captions. Among the changes that have occurred, the verbiage has been reduced to the minimum necessary to make a point. However, if the cartoons of Oliphant, Trudeau, and Anderson are indicators, in order to more thoroughly address an issue, a retreat from minimalistic verbiage is the trend. Another change is that although the single panel is the norm, it is not a mandatory construct as it has been in the past. Four-panel strips are now accepted as valid political cartoon constructs as well as split panels and long format cartoons which allow the cartoonist to formulate more reasoned arguments for the skimmer.
Introductions may be in Order: Rhetorical Identification

Cartoonists use several devices to introduce the issue they will be addressing. These introductions act as topic sentences in a paragraph of text. Sometimes they describe the issue or label a subject. Despite many speakers being introduced with the words “The person who needs no introduction,” there are few people satirized by cartoonists who fit that description. World leaders are generally exempt from having to be introduced to skimmers in cartoons. A caricature is sufficient for skimmers to recognize a world leader in a cartoon. They are literally the folks who need no introduction.

Name-dropping is the process of putting the name of a prominent, but not necessarily recognizable celebrity, in the text of the cartoon. The name is usually dropped in the caption. Therefore, when the skimmer questions who the person is that s/he is looking at, the skimmer gets the answer at the end of the entire piece. Another name-dropping technique is to put the name in the dialogue of characters. It identifies not only the subject of the cartoon, but it also identifies which caricature is of the subject. The least subtle, but most effective way of introducing the subject, is to label the person either with a full or partial name. In most cases, a surname is sufficient, but in the case of former president George W. Bush, he was simply identified as “W” even before he was elected.
Caricature Aids

The label is a widely used approach to introduce a subject or subjects to skimmers. In the 19th century, cartoonists put labels in various places on the subjects of cartoons. In one cartoon satirizing New York City aldermen, published on September 7, 1884 in the New York World, artist Walt MacDougall drew the aldermen as vultures in a cartoon called, “The Feast of the Aldermanic Vultures” (figure 9). In order to identify each alderman, MacDougall drew a facial caricature on the body of a vulture and wrote the last name of each alderman on its forehead.37 The convention of literally defacing the caricatures was short-lived. The practice of marring a caricature was not aesthetically pleasing, so new innovations developed.

---

Figure 9: This Walt MacDougall cartoon depicts the New York City Alderman of 1884. It took up most of a front page of the newspaper, so the names on the foreheads were readable to skimmers. That method of labeling quickly became obsolete.

Cartoonists have used many methods to label subjects. But the most popular form is “tagging” them. The tag takes on many forms including depicting something similar to a price tag that hangs from clothes in a store with a name on it, or depicting a name tag similar to that used by a person attending a conference. A Charles Nelans cartoon of April 20, 1903, depicting Pennsylvania officials desecrating the United States flag and part of the First Amendment of the Constitution is a case in point (figure 10). Nelans depicts the ship of state with several officials dressed as pirates firing on the flag. Two jesters who depict
an asphalt scandal of the time are holding the flag. One is tagged with a sign on a lanyard (a cord looped around the character’s neck) and the other with a “price tag.” The officials are tagged with signs on lanyards or names on feathers. In addition, Frederick Pusey is caricatured as a cat and intentionally misidentified as “Pussey” in response to a bill he introduced in the Pennsylvania legislature that banned caricaturing public officials as animals. Recently, labeling has become more sophisticated as the cartoonists put the last name on a sash on the subject or use a name tag. For better known celebrities, cartoonists often use only initials (Ronald Reagan was often identified as “RR,” using the logo of Rolls Royce). The protocol is to identify subjects by using the most concise method that skimmers will comprehend.

---

38 Charles Nelan, “Will the Governor Come to the Rescue?” The Philadelphia North American, 20 April 1903, 1A.
Garry Trudeau, in *Doonesbury*, takes the identification process one step further. Because United States presidents and vice presidents are so well recognized, he uses pictorial representations to represent these politicos. For example, Dan Quayle is a feather. Bill Clinton is a waffle—complete with syrup. George W. Bush was an asterisk until the Iraq War began. Then he became an asterisk in a war helmet. After his reelection in 2004, he transitioned to just a war
helmet. By using the icons, Trudeau introduces the subject without a caricature, a tag, or an introductory statement.

**Fact-based Humor**

German literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser, addresses the need for literary works, and by extension, cartoons to have a basis in reality. In his essay, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” Iser addresses the phenomenon of the reader connecting correlative in sentences, “He has to accept certain given perspectives, but in doing so he inevitably causes them to interact.” As is the case of the reader of text, if the skimmer does not accept the given perspectives, the skimmer will not accept the artist's satire on the perspective, and the cartoon will fail. Assuming political cartoons are like sentences, Iser continues, “Statements made, or information contained in the sentence are already in a certain sense qualified: the sentence does not consist solely of a statement—which after all, would be absurd, as one can only make statements about things that exist—but aims at something beyond what it actually says.” Likewise, a cartoon that satirizes a situation that does not exist is absurd. Therefore, the cartoonist must lay the groundwork of credibility somewhere in the cartoon so that the skimmer will appreciate the ridicule.

Introductory phrases, such as direct quotations and headlines, offer cartoons an essential element besides making the skimmer aware of the subject matter. If a political cartoon does not contain perspectives that are recognizable, the

---

40 Ibid.
skimmer will not be affectively engaged in the cartoon because s/he will be unable to connect the correlative. Historian Allan Nevins, in A Century of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900, makes the case for “factual” statements to be correct in political cartoons. When listing three characteristics of a good cartoon he states:

The second requirement of a good cartoon is truth, or at least one side of the truth…. The situation presented must possess at least a rough fidelity to fact. To depict Lincoln as an awkward railsplitter was fair enough; to show him as a gorilla was a falsification from which men recoiled. 41

In one of his Doonesbury cartoons, Garry Trudeau states, “Jokes don’t work if the audience can’t perceive the truth behind them.” 42 In addition, Chris Lamb, professor of communications at the College of Charleston, and author of Drawn to Extremes: The Use and Abuse of Editorial Cartoons, commits an entire chapter to the importance of truth in cartooning. He states, “Fair comment protects only opinions not false statements of fact.” 43 He mentions that there were at least nineteen lawsuits filed against U. S. cartoonists between 1981 and 1987. Although most lawsuits against cartoonists are dismissed, it is best for cartoonists to have some documented research behind their ridicule and exaggeration.

As an example of the media being its own watchdog, Garry Trudeau stated a fact in the Doonesbury strip of February 13, 2011 having to do with gun violence.

41 Allan Nevins and Frank Weitenkampf, A Century of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 10.
42 Garry Trudeau, In Search of Cigarette Holder Man, (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1994), n. p. The statement is made in the context of a cartoon, but he clearly intended it to pertain to his art.
Referring to the intervening time since the Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, he said, “During those same nine years, 270,000 Americans were killed by gunfire at home.” He went on to satirize the gun violence. Politifact.com, a subsidiary of Tampa Bay Times, checked the accuracy of Trudeau’s assertion. They gave the statement a “mostly true” assessment. That Trudeau included Americans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the 270,000 kept it from being wholly true. The point is that there is an expectation, even among journalists, that the opinions expressed in editorial cartoons are based on some element of truth. Once that element of truth is introduced into the cartoon, the cartoonist can take broad measures to embellish it. In addition to helping the skimmer understand the artist’s meaning, introductory phrases, such as headlines and quotations, are the rhetorical elements of truth that are necessary for successful cartoons.

---

Figure 11: The fact stated in this *Doonesbury* cartoon by Garry Trudeau was investigated by Politifact.com for its accuracy.

The use of the “News Item” approach was popular until the mid-20th century as a method of lending credence to a particular cartoon, but it fell out of favor with cartoonists, probably because it is overt. When “News Item” was used, it
usually referenced little-known news stories in which the cartoonist took an interest. “News item” was followed by a colon. Then the artist wrote a short explanation of the issue. The cartoon then satirized that topic. Although it is rarely used anymore, there is still a place for it. There are two criteria for using the “News Item” introduction. If the explanation that the artist gives is too involved for a concise “headline,” or if the picture does not lend itself to placing a newspaper with a headline within it, the artist may choose to use this approach.

Geoff Olson of the Vancouver Courier uses the “News Item” approach in a cartoon about Canada’s abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol in 2005 (figure 12). In the upper left corner is a rectangular box with the words, “News Item: With Canada abandoning Kyoto, Tories say they are still willing to commit to environmental ‘future targets.’”45 The tableau features a target with the Earth at its center. A gun is in the lower right corner and there are bullet holes around the target but not in the center. This cartoon meets both of the criteria for using the News Item approach. The target does not lend itself to placing a newspaper within the tableau, and the artist’s explanation is too involved to be summed up in a few words. Therefore, skimmers are introduced to the topic using the “News Item” approach.

---

Figure 12: In this cartoon, Geoff Olson writes a “News Item” in the upper left corner that introduces the subject matter to skimmers.

Out of necessity, Tony Auth takes the “News Item” approach one step further toward credibility in a cartoon of August 21, 2011. As cliché as the term “ripped from the headlines” is to many news watchers, that is exactly what Auth did for his editorial cartoon (figure 13). In the upper left corner, ripped from a newspaper and superimposed on the upper left corner of the tableau, is the headline, “Plants, animals seeking higher, cooler climes as globe grows warmer.” The cartoon depicts wild animals and trees running uphill. Texas governor, and presidential candidate, Rick Perry says, “You’ve all fallen for the hoax!”\footnote{Tony Auth, “You’ve all Fallen for the Hoax!,” \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, 21 August 2011, n.p.} In this case, the cartoonist was careful to give evidence of climate change in order to provide the nugget of truth that is so essential to a successful cartoon. Because of the controversy of the climate warming issue, Auth chose to use part of an
actual news story instead of improvising the high points himself. Had the cartoonist drawn the cartoon without the headline, skeptics would have claimed that he is a left-wing eco-nut and the cartoon would have elicited complaints of bias toward those who believe that global warming exists. Wolfgang Iser's theory of qualification applies to this cartoon in that the depiction of the trees running up the hill would seem absurd without the qualifying statement in the headline. Showing the actual headline ripped from the newspaper (rather than rewriting it as a “News Item” or placing a newspaper somewhere in the tableau) gives this cartoon the extra credibility that it requires against those who may claim that global warming does not exist.

Figure 13: Taking the credibility factor to a higher level than the previous artist, Tony Auth literally rips a headline from a newspaper in order to introduce the subject matter.

Cartoonists prefer to use headlines to introduce a topic. Since conciseness and subtlety are important characteristics of a good cartoon, cartoonists strategically place a newspaper somewhere within the tableau to introduce the
topic of the cartoon to the skimmer. Once the skimmer and cartoonist are on the same page, the skimmer is able to peruse the panel and better understand the cartoonist’s intended meaning.

Quotations from politicians are also used by cartoonists to introduce the subject. The quotations are sometimes put in talk balloons or captions as they are attributable to that person. They can also be put in white space at the top of the cartoon. This method is used when someone makes a particularly noteworthy gaffe. For example, during a debate in Florida, Newt Gingrich mentioned that during his presidency he would start a colony on the moon. Many cartoonists satirized the statement. Most cartoonists assumed skimmers knew of Gingrich’s statement. In his cartoon of January 29, 2012, Mike Thompson of the Detroit Free Press took the precaution of placing the quote within the frame, reinforcing skimmers’ memories (figure 14).47 Often, the satirized quote is one that is well-known to newspaper readers. It is possible that the artist felt that those who were unaware of the statement might think that he was exaggerating too much. In this case, the quote lends context and credibility to the cartoonist so that whatever opinion the artist expresses, is more believable.

Introductions are nearly always in order in editorial cartoons. The best cartoons introduce the subjects and subject matter with the greatest efficiency. Once that recognizable nugget of truth is placed in the skimmer's mind, the cartoonist is free to satirize at will.
Conveying Text: The Jigsaw Puzzle Approach

The cartoonist works with a multiplicity of images and texts. Any individual cartoon may have several of those units. It is the artist’s responsibility to organize those units to convey his/her message with the greatest effectiveness in order that the skimmer may best understand the concept that the cartoonist is imparting. Each misplaced piece causes confusion among skimmers and decreases the effectiveness of the cartoon. Perfectly assembled political cartoon puzzles, such as Thomas Nast’s “Who Stole the People’s Money? (figure 8),” are those that are remembered for years and lauded as masterpieces. There is a flow to reading a cartoon, and if that flow is compromised, the skimmer’s interest in the artist’s treatment of the issue could be impaired. Again, comparing a cartoon to a statement, Wolfgang Iser explains the way elements of a text are presented, “They set in motion a process out of which emerges the actual content of the text itself.”48 If those elements of text are presented in the wrong order, the reader will lose interest in the text. Likewise, skimmers from western cultures generally peruse a cartoon from left to right and from top to bottom; therefore, it is best if the cartoonist puts the voice of the artist toward the bottom of the cartoon. That should be the last thing the skimmer sees. However, sometimes there is a need to put some text at the top of a cartoon panel. The nomenclature is the artist’s responsibility.

The process of including titles at the top of political cartoons began, informally, during the antebellum period in the United States. It became formalized during the early-20th century, then faded from popularity during the 1960s. If the popularity of using titles were graphed, it would look like a bell curve with its height in the 1930s.

During antebellum times in the United States, the use of titles at the top of cartoons was sporadic. Often, Harper's Weekly, one of the first U. S. publications to publish political cartoons on a regular basis, used a title as an umbrella to describe the content of multiple cartoons on a single subject. However, a title was not usually given to individual cartoons. When titles were used, they were generally typeset at the top of the page of panels and did nothing to further the content of any individual drawing. They merely introduced the reader to the topic of the cartoon. If there was a caption, it was usually dialogue, and it was typeset below the panel. Any hand-lettering was within the panel, and it was sparse—usually labels.49

The affective power of political cartoons is exhibited in both the election of Grover Cleveland in 1884 and in the rise of yellow journalism in the late 19th century. In 1883, Joseph Pulitzer purchased The World New York, a newspaper of mediocre standing in New York. He built the circulation of the paper by publishing a daily that appealed to the working class and recent immigrants to New York. One of his most effective sales ploys was that he published editorial

49 Harper's Weekly, 3 January 1857 through 29 December 1861. A survey of the cartoons during this period found a sporadic use of titles. They usually headed multiple cartoons on a similar subject.
cartoons on page 1 above the fold to attract the attention of newspaper buyers at newsstands, thereby increasing circulation of The World. On December 15, 1884, a little more than a year after it was bought by Pulitzer, The World published circulation figures and stated, “Every Sunday a larger number of papers was taken than the week previous. Three months ago The World outstripped all the other papers, and has since steadily headed the list.” A survey of copies of The World from September 1, 1884 to December 31, 1884 shows that Pulitzer made every effort to run a cartoon on page 1 on Sundays to attract readers and bolster circulation in order to make some claim of superiority. The second most popular day for front page cartoons was Saturday. Prior to the election on November 4, 1884, political cartoons ran about four days a week—usually on Saturday and Sunday, but other days as well. After the election, Pulitzer ran fewer cartoons, but if a cartoon ran, it probably ran on Sunday (with the exception of Thanksgiving in which it ran on Thursday). Of the cartoons in The World, David R. Spencer, author of The Yellow Journalism, states, “They were particularly mean-spirited and pointed.” Pulitzer particularly loathed Republicans and their presidential candidate, James G. Blaine. When cartoonist Walt MacDougall presented him with a particularly vicious cartoon called “The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings at Delmonico’s,” he ran it across the entire top of his October 30, 1884 issue under the masthead (figure 15). It satirized a fund-raising dinner James Blaine held at New York’s Delmonico Hotel. The cartoon depicted Blaine and robber barons feasting, while

---

a couple and child in rags begged for food. In addition to running the cartoon in *The World*, it was also published in upstate newspapers. Perhaps, as a result of Pulitzer’s efforts, Blaine lost New York’s electoral votes, and as a result lost a close election to Grover Cleveland. Since the political cartoons were the anchors of Pulitzer’s campaign against Blaine, and his campaign succeeded, newspaper cartoons became a force in print media. As a result of Pulitzer’s success, William Randolph Hearst took the challenge and competed with Pulitzer by publishing cartoons as well.

The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings

![Cartoon Image]

Figure 15: This Walt MacDougall cartoon may have been the bane of the Blaine campaign.

---

52 Ibid., 211. In the book, Spencer alludes to the possibility that *The World* was a significant force in the defeat of Blaine, but it is difficult to prove.
An especially noticeable format of *The World* is that Pulitzer used multiple headlines for each story. There was a primary headline usually followed by two subheads. In the case of the story on *The World’s* circulation, there was a headline followed by four subheads and an article summary. That attention-getting technique became a part of *The World’s* political cartoons as well. Unlike the earlier *Harper’s Weekly* cartoons, a majority of *The World’s* cartoons carried a title or headline at the top above the panel. Of the 35 cartoons that were published from September 1, 1884 to December 31, 1884, 24 had typeset titles above the panel, and one had a hand-lettered title in a ribbon within the panel. Even if titling was not mandatory for the cartoons in *The World*, they were advantageous.\(^{53}\) The titles set the tone of the cartoon, but the caption generally retained the authorial voice. The procedure of titling cartoons eventually became a staple of the cartooning industry. From the early 1900s until the 1960s, the vast majority of editorial cartoons that were published had titles above the panel.

**Yellow Journalism**

“Yellow journalism” got its name from the technological phenomenon of printing color in newspapers. Publishers exploited the new technology to arouse interest and boost sales of newspapers. According to Dennis Pett and Trudy Nelson in “Color Research and Its Application to the Design of Instructional Materials,” published in *Educational Technology Research and Development*, “Color is an attention-getting device that can provide measurable effects on

\(^{53}\) *The World New York*, 1 September 1884 to 31 December 1884.
If one applies that research to newspaper publishing, color got the readers’ attention. The reader was then rewarded by retaining more of the information that s/he saw in the newspaper. In 1893, Richard F. Outcault exploited that attention-getting device by drawing an urban scene called *Hogan’s Alley*, featuring a bald, ethnically ambiguous character called the Yellow Kid. Because he is the “Yellow” kid, there is an assumption that he is oriental. However, nothing in the story lines or in his physique confirms that. Because of this ambiguity, *Hogan’s Alley* quickly became popular with working class people and immigrants. By 1894, Outcault was hired by Joseph Pulitzer of *The World* to draw the weekly feature. According to David R. Spencer:

> The Yellow Kid comic strip was never political in a direct way, but it addressed some serious social concerns that should have been on the discussion table in fashionable New York. Much of the inspiration for the strip came from Jacob Riis’s photographic study of the slums of New York entitled, “How the Other Half Lives.”

> Although some attribute the term “yellow journalism” to the Yellow Kid, it is more likely attributable to the phenomenon of coloring pictures in both cartoons and advertisements. According to Sidney Kobre in *The Yellow Press*:

> Outcault painted a bright yellow dress on the leader of the Hogan Alley gang, and this one-tooth ragamuffin, the “Yellow Kid,” was such an outstanding success that it became the symbol of the Pulitzer-Hearst brand of sensational journalism. [At the same time], a magazine in England, “The Yellow Book,” filled with similar material, had become known in America, and Gilded Age journalism was stamped “Yellow Journalism” as a term of reproach.

---

Certainly, the popularity of *Hogan’s Alley* was a major factor in the creation of the term “yellow journalism,” but the entire phenomenon of printing color led to the coinage. Additionally, the success achieved by using color for one cartoon led to the use of color for many cartoons and the spread of color technology to newspapers across the United States.

**Use of Titles**

Although the cartoon was called *Hogan’s Alley*, most of the weekly cartoons had a unique title at the top of the panel. The titles include “Golf—the Great Society Sport as Played in Hogan’s Alley” (5 January 1896), and “The Great Bull Fight in Hogan’s Alley” (23 August 1896). Like the cartoons that were published in *The World* during the presidential campaign of 1884, the *Hogan’s Alley* cartoons had titles more often than not. From January through October 1896, Outcault drew 28 cartoons. They began as half-page features, and all of them were given titles. In May, *The World* published the first full page *Hogan’s Alley*. By July, nearly all of the *Hogan’s Alleys* were full page drawings. However, only two of the full-page projects had titles at the top of the panels. Outcault usually put the identifiers at the bottoms of the panels in the caption position. But those captions were only identifiers and did not express either object language or the authorial voice in the cartoon. Essentially, the title was put below the cartoon. However, the authorial voice was always on the Kid’s nightshirt.

---

57 San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library, [http://cartoons.osu.edu/yellowkid/1896/1896.htm](http://cartoons.osu.edu/yellowkid/1896/1896.htm). INTERNET.
Titles have also been used for conveying dialogue. From the early 20th century until the early 1960s, much of the dialogue in editorial cartoons was in the title position above the panel. That is generally the first part of the cartoon that the skimmer sees. After reading the title, the skimmer looks through the cartoon and finds the speaker and figures out what the speaker is talking about. If the authorial voice is contained in the quote/title, the artist has given away the parting shot to the object language, lessening the affective engagement of the skimmer. One reason why cartoonists changed their protocol from the use of quotes in titles is likely because they discovered that their authorial voice was compromised.

A review of cartoons from the 19th century indicates that cartoonists who wrote text above the panel or toward the top inside the panel merely wrote descriptors of the content within the panel. The descriptive title was one step in the process of drawing the skimmer into the story that the artist was telling. After reading the descriptor, the skimmer would look at the picture and read any text within the panel that elaborates on the descriptor. Below the panel, the caption would contain text or dialogue that was intended to cement the artist’s intent in the mind of the skimmer. By the 1920s, the protocol of putting text in the title position became more mandatory than one of many possible methodologies.

A survey of various cartoons drawn by many different cartoonists during the era before 1900 indicates that of 124 political cartoons, 26 (21%) contain text in the title position. In those cases, the titles were nearly all exclusively descriptors and none were quotes or dialogue. From 1900 to 1959, a similar survey of
political cartoons from the same source indicates that of 81 cartoons, 50 (62%) contain titles. A survey of cartoons from the 1960s indicates that of the 21 cartoons in the sample, only 5 (31%) contain titles. That is evidence that the technique of titling cartoons rose and fell through the first half of the 20th century.

Three Examples

Cartoonists must be careful where to place text both in and out of the tableau. Flow is essential for the skimmer’s engagement with a political cartoon, and words may be placed above, within, or below the frame as dialogue or description. The cartoonist must be aware of the western skimmer’s natural eye movement. Therefore, the artist must align the argument so that the skimmer sees the “set-up” first and then sees or reads the punch line last. The history of the use of putting titles at the top of editorial cartoons is a lesson in how verbiage must meet the rhetorical needs of both cartoonists and skimmers in a manner that allows skimmers to best understand the rhetoric of the cartoonist.

It is possible to discern the differences in uses of titles by studying the works of three of the most prominent cartoonists of the 20th century. Vaughn Shoemaker (1902-1991), the cartoonist for the Chicago Daily News for 22 years, always included text in the title position. Of the cartoons in the book, Cartoons by Vaughn Shoemaker (1947-1966), all of the cartoons in the book that contain any text at all, have text in the title position. Although most of the text is descriptive,

---

some of it carries the artist’s voice above the panel, giving away the punch line at
the beginning (figure 16). During this period, all of Shoemaker’s cartoons had
text in the title position and none in a caption.  

Figure 16: This 1963 cartoon by Vaughn Shoemaker gives away the author’s intended message in the title position that America is “getting soft” because the government is providing money to schools. The argument is that it should be in a caption so that the skimmer sees it last.

Similarly, Herbert Block (1909 to 2001) of the Washington Post drew cartoons with text in the title position. His cartoons also contain descriptors, monologue, and authorial voice in these texts. The difference is that during the 1970s, Block moved away from putting text on top of the drawings to sometimes placing text  

on top and sometimes on the bottom. Another cartoon that is exemplary of why monologue on top of the tableau impedes understanding of the cartoon is a particular Block cartoon from 1951 (figure 17). In it, one of the many characters comments, “Say, whatever happened to ‘freedom-from-fear’?” The skimmer who reads from left to right and top to bottom must look at 13 characters before finding the speaker, an “Everyman” character with an open mouth (who speaks for the artist), at the bottom of the cartoon. Although Block uses the rare rhetorical device of drawing the principle characters in bolder ink than the other eleven characters in the cartoon (a similar device to emboldening words that are meant to be stressed), it is a subtle technique that is not readily recognized by the skimmer. Nevertheless, the dialogue belongs in the caption in order for the skimmer to better understand the artist’s intended meaning. By putting the dialogue in the title position, Block misplaces a piece in the cartoon puzzle and impedes the flow of the cartoon. It is likely that many skimmers, having read the punch line first, actually read the object language last and the artist’s intended meaning is, if not lost, obscured. By the end of the 1970s, perhaps because of causing unintended confusion in some of his cartoons, Block began putting monologue in the caption, reserving the last word for himself (through his Everyman characters).

---

60 Herbert Block, *The Herblock Book*, (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), 156.
On the contrary, Bill Mauldin (1921-2003) is among the few cartoonists who never put text in the title position. Any descriptors were integrated into the drawings. He rarely used balloons, but if Mauldin introduced the skimmer to the issue in the cartoon, he usually used signs on walls (similarly to R. F. Outcault in Hogan’s Alley/Yellow Kid); the monologue and statements expressing authorial voice went into the caption (figure 18).  

Though the cartoonists may not know the terms “object language” and “authorial voice,” they do understand the concepts. When other cartoonists present a similar concept more effectively, it stands to reason that bettered artists

---

will improve their technique. Thus, when Mauldin won his second Pulitzer Prize, his rhetorical devices carried weight with other artists, and many cartoonists discarded the long-held custom putting monologue in the title position in order to improve their own ability to communicate. Although titles have gone out of vogue as a standard rhetorical device—especially for quotations by the characters, they are not extinct in the cartooning world. Presently, the function of titles on cartoons has reverted to its purpose from the 19th century. It is to introduce the reader to the topic of the cartoon as the skimmer may not readily perceive it.
Figure 18: Bill Mauldin places the punch line of this World War II cartoon below the panel so that the skimmer sees the picture first and better appreciate the artist’s intent.

Balloons

Conveying dialogue is an important aspect of political cartoons. The most recognizable method of conveying dialogue is through talk balloons which date back to at least 1753 in an English cartoon by William Hogarth concerning the mystery of Elizabeth Canning (figure 19). In that cartoon, the words are written in elongated ribbons instead of the more “egg-shaped” balloons that skimmers are
accustomed to seeing.\textsuperscript{62} Not only that, some of the dialogue is written upside-down, and some is written vertically. That “talk ribbon” continued as an accepted mode of conveying text into the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{63} However, that technique gave way to more compact ovals during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The advantage of the “talk ribbons” over the more current ovals is that where the characters are standing is not an issue. The ribbon on the top is the first speaker whether that person is on the left or right. In current cartoon protocol, the first speaker in a panel is most often positioned on the left so that the balloon for that speaker is the one the skimmer reads first.

\textsuperscript{63} Talk ribbons were used in cartoons by James Dove in 1764 and by Amos Doolittle in 1813.
Figure 19: In this 1753 cartoon by William Hogarth, the artist communicates using talk ribbons, an obsolete alternative to the more ovate talk balloon.

Even though ovate balloons came into vogue during the 19th century, they still had not evolved to what 21st century skimmers are accustomed to seeing. Early ovate cartoons have balloons drawn as if the text were written as an afterthought, and there is little evidence that in some cases it was not. There are examples of “clear balloons” to convey text that are drawn by several different 19th century artists. One such cartoon from 1824 is called, “A Foot Race” and was drawn by
David Claypool Johnson (figure 20). Although much of the text is written over white space above the landscape in the drawing, some of the text in the balloons is drawn over the background making many of the words difficult to read (especially on the right side of the tableau). These clear balloons are balloons that are drawn so that the lines in the background of the cartoon can be seen through the balloon and around and among the words that are written within the balloon. In most cartoons of the time, the artists attempted to place the text in white spaces on the page. Others were known to erase the background art before adding the balloon; however, the clear balloon technique was used by several well-known artists including Jack Downing (1841), Currier and Ives (1860), and R. F. Outcault (1896). Perhaps due to improved printing techniques that were being used in the 20th century, or because the artists noticed the possible confusion with the lettering, balloons were cleaned up completely. They became standardized as white spaces with words in them. Any background lines that would have otherwise remained in the panel were erased. That made the text easier for skimmers to read as there was no confusion between the lettering and the background.

---

66 Ibid., 75.
The Foot Race

Figure 20: In this 1824 cartoon, David Claypool Johnson wrote the dialogue in clear balloons over the background on the right hand side of the cartoon. By 1900, cartoonists cleaned up the balloons so that the background no longer showed through.

R. F. Outcault used other communication methods as well as the talk balloon. The most inventive and popular of them was writing text on the Yellow Kid’s nightshirt (figure 21). That text was generally the authorial voice of the cartoon. However, he also shows characters carrying signs, scraps of paper on the ground with messages, and signs posted on walls that further the object language discourse. He also uses talk balloons for characters other than the Kid himself. The use of balloons is a technique that had caught on and was in full use by the turn of the century, but to Outcault, the balloon was merely one of several means of conveying text. The busy panels that were most of a full page of a newspaper provided several opportunities to creatively place text. And

68 Ibid.
throughout the history of *Hogan’s Alley/The Yellow Kid*, Outcault did not favor one method over another except that the authorial voice was carried by the Kid on his nightshirt.

The Yellow Kid character was usually placed at the bottom of the panel and was a prominent figure in the front. As the skimmer views the scene containing both action and text, s/he takes in the scene and then reads the artist’s viewpoint of the events on the Kid’s nightshirt. Even though the cartoons may have a title, caption or both, those are merely descriptors or object language. In the cartoon “What they did to the dog-catcher in Hogan’s Alley,” the skimmer knows that the man on the ground who is being bitten by dogs and beaten and kicked by boys is the dogcatcher. The fact that the dogcatcher’s coach is on fire in the background provides another clue as well, but with the caption we know, for sure, who he is and why the Hogan’s alley children and dogs are abusing him.

Figure 21: This is the bottom of a Hogan’s Alley cartoon by R. F. Outcault. There is text throughout the cartoon in balloons, on signs, and scraps of paper. The artist’s intent is written on the Yellow Kid’s nightshirt.
Talk balloons evolved from their early inception as an effective means of expressing dialogue. However, because of the need for exactness, they became more specialized than the line from the speaker’s mouth that opens into a generally ovate shape that is large enough to contain the dialogue of the speaker. Balloons have evolved into devices that indicate the nature of the language. An “AT&T” is a balloon with something resembling a lightning bolt extending to the electronic source of the comment: a telephone, radio, television, or computer, for instance. A cumulus is a balloon that indicates that the comment is merely a thought and not actually intended to be heard by another character; however, the skimmer is privileged. The cumulus has small bubbles extending from the balloon to the speaker. There are numerous other balloons as well, and the limit of them is the limit of the collective imaginations of cartoonists, but these devices, along with captions, are common methods of communicating text in cartoons.

Captions

Like balloons, captions have historically carried the dialogue of political cartoons as well. Captions are used almost exclusively by magazine cartoonists to convey dialogue (usually monologue with other voices assumed from the text). They are also used by syndicated cartoonists that have single-panel features.

---

[69] Mort Walker, *Backstage at the Strips*, (New York: Mason/Charter, 1975), 28. Mort Walker created *Beetle Bailey* and collaborates on other cartoon strips. This volume is the source of the names of the different kinds of balloons that are shared between the different cartoon media.
Captions are most convenient when there is one character in the tableau that is speaking, usually indicated as the only person with an open mouth.

Conversation in the caption was discontinued early in the 20th century in two ways. Captions would contain one speaker’s voice, and any other applicable text was either presumed from the context or there were clues to the prompting of the comment drawn into the panel. Cartoonists also began producing multi-panel cartoons in which conversations could take place using balloons instead of captions. By putting dialogue in the caption the artist reserves the last place that the skimmer looks to put his/her own voice and opinion. Captions are often used in conjunction with balloons. Other than in cases of embedded panels, object language is usually contained in the balloons, while the artist retains the authorial voice in the caption as the last thing the skimmer sees. If the authorial voice is reserved in a caption, it is often attributed to an Everyman character that the cartoonist has drawn into the cartoon.

Rarely is there an indicator of a speaker stemming from a caption (unlike a balloon which has a string to the speaker’s mouth). However, necessity deems that a speaker must be indicated on occasion. One example of the creative use of a caption is in a cartoon from 1997 by Dick Locher in which the artist puts the voice from a radio in a caption. The words of the announcer are carried in the caption, and a small AT&T bolt extends from the middle of the caption to a radio indicating the source of the words (figure 22). This technique clarifies to what

the words are attributed. Since no characters have open mouths in the cartoon, without the bolt extending to the radio, it is likely that the skimmer would not have attributed the words to the radio, and with all the other visual effects in the panel, it would have caused confusion. This is another case of a cartoonist putting visuals and text in the right places to solve the puzzle of creating an effective cartoon.

Figure 22: This 1997 cartoon by Dick Locher shows an AT&T from the caption to a radio at the bottom of the panel.

Calligraphy

More important than the location of text is the content of the text, but as each cartoon is different, it is difficult to make generalizations about what the artist
chooses to say about each issue in any given situation. However, the way the words are written sometimes affects the understanding that skimmers have of the text. An artist may use calligraphy in order to reinforce the words. Calligraphy includes simply making a word or phrase bold in order to draw attention to it. It also involves hand-lettering elaborate fonts in order to depict a symbolic representation. The affect of calligraphy is that it guides the skimmer to the emotional response that the artist wishes of his/her audience.

The simplest form of calligraphy is for the artist to embolden words in a text to cause the skimmer to read that word with more emphasis than the words around it. In this way, the artist guides the skimmer to understand the cartoon as the artist intended for it to be understood. In a *Pogo* cartoon of September 18, 1952, artist Walt Kelly publishes a series of cartoons in which his title character runs for President of the United States. In this animal strip, Deacon Mushrat is sitting next to cowbirds talking to three bats about Pogo's candidacy (figure 23). The bats ask a question in which one word is emphasized in a question in the third panel. Emboldening one word can make a difference in the perception of the skimmer. There is a difference between the following sentences: “How can the deacon be *biased* like that?,” and “How can the *deacon* be biased like that?” In the first sentence the artist stresses the word “biased” in order to emphasize that the deacon’s opinion is not neutral. In the second sentence, the stress is on the word “deacon” in order to distinguish the bias of the deacon from any other character in the strip. The artist draws attention to the word “biased” over other words in the sentence in order to guide the skimmer toward the succeeding
phrase in which another one of the bats asks, “Yeh! Why can’t he be biased like us once in a while?” Again, the stress is on the object of the sentence in order to guide the skimmer to the understanding that the artist wishes of the skimmer. Without the calligraphic guides, the skimmer may not have the reaction that the artist is attempting to affect.

Figure 23: This *Pogo* cartoon by Walt Kelly show two types of calligraphy. Words that are meant to be stressed are emboldened, and the words of Deacon Mushrat are written in a gothic script to indicate piousness.

**Heteroglossia**

Besides dialogism, discussed previously, heteroglossia is also a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe rhetoric that appears dichotomous. There are three ways that this could happen. Heteroglossia is a single utterance with two different meanings—often opposed to each other. Sue Vice, author of *Introducing Bakhtin* states, “Heteroglossia...refers both to a variable state of affairs and to one which is constant.” This opposition of constant and variable states lends itself to political satire in that while politics is a constant, the issues and personalities are always in flux. Dialogism is a single utterance that comes

---

from two or more sources. Vice explains, “Dialogism takes on its more precise characteristics, such as ‘the mixing of intentions of speaker and listener.’”

Dialogism is a useful tool of cartoonists who wish to convey the complexity of an issue. Finally, dialogized heteroglossia is a single utterance from multiple sources that carries a mixed meaning. Vice further explains, “‘Dialogized heteroglossia’ refers to the combative relations different languages enter into when they come into contact, most clearly perceptible in a text.”

Political cartoons contain dialogized heteroglossia. The May 11, 2011 cartoon by Clay Bennett of the Chattanooga Times Free Press is a case in point (figure 24). The cartoonist shows a doormat made of wood. On the front edge of the mat are the words, “immigration policy.” The word “welcome” is formed by nails sticking up through the board. Because of the two different languages, English and nails, there is a mixed message as to whether immigrants are welcome or not. Of course it may depend on who the speaker is. There are some industries, such as agriculture, that welcome, and even encourage, immigration and immigrant labor. There are others, labor unions, who discourage immigration and immigrant labor. Those are the dichotomies that are apparent in this cartoon.

Politics is notorious for its disagreements, so these rhetorical techniques help to explain some of the complexities political cartoonists attempt to address when satirizing political controversy. As with this cartoon, often, when cartoonists draw cartoons that are dialogic, they do not take sides, but illustrate the complexity of an issue.

---

73 Ibid., 45.
74 Ibid., 49.
Figure 24: This Clay Bennett cartoon from May 11, 2011 is an example of dialogic heteroglossia in that it sends a mixed message coming from different voices.

Calligraphic dialogism is the multiple-voiced text of a cartoonist using fancy script. Referring to the *Pogo* cartoon strip of September 18, 1952 (figure 23), when Walt Kelly writes text for Deacon Mushrat, he uses gothic script in order to indicate the pious attitude of the character. The skimmer not only reads the words of the character but also sees the fancy font that the artist uses in order to indicate snobbishness. The heteroglossia exists in the two voices (the text and font) in the single utterance. Because of the unfamiliar font, the skimmer must also slow down as s/he is reading the text in order to understand the meaning. A complaint by an editor confirms this. In his autobiography, Kelly states, “One editor wrote me that the [calligraphic] speech was hard to read. I could only reply
that it was mighty hard to letter, too.” That it is hard to read forces the skimmer to take a little extra time to appreciate the artist’s intent. The extra effort that artists put into their work is sometimes the difference between a successful cartoon and one that is forgettable.

While Pogo is a marginally political cartoon strip, similar devices are used in editorial cartoons. In 1997, Roy Peterson of the Vancouver (BC) Sun drew a cartoon criticizing President Clinton for his possible role in accepting $366,000 in campaign contributions from California businessman Johnny Chung, allowing access to the President from Chinese businessmen (figure 25). The cartoon’s text, which initially looks like Chinese characters arranged vertically, when examined more closely, becomes English words arranged vertically. The text, “It is deemed most fortunate that donations to the Democratic Party from China have had no influence on the presidency,” could be interpreted as either a pseudo-Confucian saying or a fortune from a cookie. That the cartoon’s text is written in calligraphy slows the skimmer down and demands that s/he give the cartoon more attention than most editorial cartoons demand. Though the words say that the Chinese have had no influence on the presidency, the Chinese writing calls that notion into question causing the single utterance to not only be heteroglossia in its Chinese/English hybrid but to be dialogism in that the skimmer is not sure whether the Chinese influenced the presidency or not. In this case, the cartoonist is neither confirming nor denying the guilt of the President. The cartoonist is defining the issue as controversial.

76 Kelly, Ten Ever-lovin’ Blue-eyed Years with Pogo, 44 (interpolation added).
Figure 25: The pseudo-Chinese calligraphy in this Geoff Olson cartoon from 1997 sends a mixed message to the skimmer. Has the presidency been influenced or not?

The text of a cartoon makes up much of the puzzle that cartoonists assemble on a daily basis. It is paired with a picture to tell a story. It is possible for the elements of a good cartoon to be present in the tableau, but if the arrangement of the elements is inconsistent with a logical story-telling process, the puzzle pieces will not fit and the cartoon will be less enjoyable.
Conclusion

Like all art forms, the editorial cartoon has been evolving in order to meet the needs of those who appreciate the medium. Deriving from classical art forms, cartooning began as art with a wink. Focusing on topical subject matter (as opposed to religion and mythology), cartooning crossed the Atlantic and became a part of the American journalism.

According to James H. Billington, the Librarian of Congress, “Editorial cartoons are part of the political discourse of our democratic society….They reflect the passions of the moment; they also tell us, over time, a great deal about the history of our nation.” The cartoonists, who are often dismissed as japers of the art world, continually tweak their craft in an effort to be the one who best reflects the passions of the moment. Moreover, there is substantial evidence their jesting influences opinions and affects policy. Therefore, what they do and how they do it should demand more scrutiny.

Using Dr. LeRoy Carl’s research as evidence, only 15% of the population understands editorial cartoons. Because cartoons combine metaphors, symbols, and other pictorial representations with text, political cartooning could be considered, if not another language, a dialect of a language only partially

---

intelligible to, and therefore, less appreciated by those who are unfamiliar with its rhetorical elements. Therefore, this art form reaches a vast minority of Americans. Why is cartooning important? The people who appreciate political cartoons are the ones who keep abreast of issues and influence policy.

There is ample evidence that politicians appreciate editorial cartoons. In 1956, Dwight Eisenhower invited 95 U. S. editorial cartoonists to the White House for a luncheon in which they caricatured the President while he spoke to them. That collection of cartoons was bound, and published.\footnote{George M. Humphrey, \textit{President Eisenhower’s Cartoon Book}, (New York: Frederick Fell, Inc., 1956).} As well, according to Gary Yarrington, the Curator of the Lyndon Johnson Library, L. B. J. collected the editorial cartoons that were drawn of his administration, and the library contains 3,800 of them. In 1968, Willie Day Taylor, Johnson’s assistant, stated, “We request all kinds of originals—those opposing the Administration as well as those favoring it. We will let history judge the comments.”\footnote{Gary A. Yarrington, \textit{L. B. J. Political Cartoons: The Public Years}, (Austin: The Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation, 1987), 4.} Senator Jesse Helms collected editorial cartoons about himself and published the collection in 1998.\footnote{Jesse Helms, The Thing that Intimidated D. C., (Wingate, NC: Jesse Helms Center, 1998).} The list goes on of politicians who have framed original cartoons hanging in their offices.

In addition, political cartoon strips are also gaining popularity, possibly because of the increased involvement skimmers can enjoy with the subject matter. Although syndicates keep the exact number of newspapers that carry cartoon strips close to the vest, according to the \textit{Irish Times}, in June 2011,
*Doonesbury* was published in about 1,100 newspapers every day, making it one of the most popular syndicated strips in the world. That indicates that there is a market for political cartoons. That a cartoon strip should be more popular than any editorial cartoonist indicates that the market is changing. *Doonesbury* has a strong presence on the Internet indicating that it may be adapting to the new media better than traditional cartoons. The art form, in general, must adapt in order to attract skimmers.

Newspapers have been going out of business because news information is available on the Internet and sales of newspapers have been decreasing. Editorial cartoons are going to have to adapt to new market demands in order for the general population to embrace the art form. Pat Oliphant’s Punk the Penguin, Garry Trudeau’s *Doonesbury*, and Nick Anderson’s long format editorial cartoons are popular for a reason—they are easier to understand than most editorial cartoons. Therefore, they attract more readers than those cartoons that assume the skimmer knows the rhetoric and is abreast of current events. These kinds of adaptations and new innovations are necessary to ensure the survival of the political cartooning media.

---

Bibliography:


*Harper's Weekly,* 3 January 1857 through 29 December 1861.


Hosterman, Alec R. “Amplification through Simplification: Rhetoric Invades the Funny Pages.”


Johnson, Isabel Simeral. “Cartoons.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (July 1937): 21-44.


Pett, Dennis and Trudy Wilson. “Color Research and Its Application to the

*Philadelphia North American.* 1 January 1903 to 30 June 1903.


Reeves, Wendy Wick. E-mail to the author, 18 February 2010.


*World New York, The*, 1 September 1884 to 31 December 1884.

