An animated discussion about political cartoons

by Lucien Leon

In 2007, for the first time in its history, The Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning was awarded to a cartoonist whose submission consisted of both print cartoons and animations.

America's editorial cartoonists, already under siege from dwindling newspaper circulation, syndication and political correctness, were quick to circle the wagons around their craft. "What next...the Family Guy gets a Pulitzer?" bleated USA Today's Scott Stantis.

They miss the point. Anybody who's ever picked up a pixel and tried to churn out an animation knows how laborious, how mind-numbingly tedious, how frustrating a process it can be.

Mark Fiore, the first cartoonist to figure out how to make a buck out of being a full-time political animator, manages to produce two, sometimes three animations a week. Pixar would be hard pressed to be as prolific.

And there's the rub: political animation simply cannot compete with the still image cartoon as a vehicle for spontaneous and immediate satirical comment. The static cartoon and the animated cartoon occupy different cheap seats in the gallery of political heckling and lampooning; one resides in the realm of the 24-hour or weekly news cycle, the other in the weekly, bi-weekly or monthly news cycle.

In terms of their visual character, however, political animations tend to rely on the same satirical devices and metaphors for understanding as static cartoons. While the gestural and expressive qualities that reveal the artist's hand in the process may differ to varying extent, they are in many respects the same beast. Just compare Peter Nicholson's single-panel cartoons with his animations - both are drawn with a bright, vibrant palette and in the same distinct visual style.

What distinguishes Nicholson's animated work is the integration of clever scripts and dialogue that reinforce the comic impact of the caricatures.

For the Chicken Littles of the cartooning world, an even more fertile area for Puritanism can surely be found in the "mash-up" phenomenon. A mash-up is typically produced by re-editing audio and video content to comic effect. Hugh Atkin has enjoyed enormous success with his satirical mash-ups of the Australian and American election campaigns; his "Chinese Propaganda Video" has been viewed over 200,000 times on YouTube.

Atkin incorporates audio, video and illustration in a piece whose relatively short duration and topical nature made it ideal for inclusion on online newspaper sites at the time. His work was one of dozens created by so-called 'guerilla video makers' during the 2007 Federal Election campaign that helped establish the satirical 'mash-up' as a widespread media practice.

The often amateur nature of mash-ups lends to them a raw, unpolished quality that, among other things, promotes the idea that ours is a democracy where anyone with a bit of technical nous and something to say can contribute to the democratic conversation.

On the other hand, all satire is not created equal. For every Hugh Atkin there are dozens of others who are not so adept at the art, and subject their audience to the satirical equivalent of a Persian carpets ad. The real value of those experienced and well-practised in the art of visual satire is as evident now as it has ever been.

The main function of the political cartoonist is to keep the metaphorical blowtorch firmly on the bellies of those in positions of power. Rather than decry the threat to the art posed by animating upstarts and mash-up parvenus, cartoonists can afford to embrace the digital revolution in the same way their forebears embraced...
lithography and photo-engraving. It’s really only cartoonists who care who wins The Pulitzer after all – everyone else just wants to enjoy a good satirical lynching, be it digital or otherwise.

Lucien Leon is a lecturer in animation at the Australian National University School of Art, where he is also doing a masters degree in visual arts. His own satirical lynchings can be viewed on his YouTube site.

stephen says:
02:35pm | 13/07/09
Yes Lucien, I think of it as ‘wiseguy’ commentary. I look at this stuff, fold my arms, tilt my head, and go “huh, KOOKY”, (then check the t.v. guide when’s showing re-runs of Mister Ed.)

These ‘cartoon capers’ is where bart simpson, Jay Leno and any advertising gets its ‘philosophy from : smart one-liners that dismay and surprise us, and because it’s new, we give it the title of superior. (Therefore, it must be right.)

Reply