



The UKZN Griot - of Cartoons and Censorship

Word has reached the College of Humanities that some of our colleagues in the hard sciences are concerned about some of the fluffy thesis titles that are emanating from our part of the academic world. Not serious enough, we're told. Well, I can commiserate with this sentiment. In a previous column on "[Hoaxes and Parody](#)" I talked about the thesis that had the same title as a US soap opera broadcast daily on SABC.

The content of the thesis, however, was a lot less coherent than the soap. Yet, this thesis had been approved, supervised, submitted and passed. This was institutionally approved fluff. That's the problem with postmodernism. It's difficult scientifically to separate out the wheat from the chaff. Who knows, maybe this thesis is light years ahead of its time?

This example came to mind again during the annual CCMS/Amnesty International seminar, this time on the topic of "Cartooning and the Protection of State Information Act". The event was addressed by the august UNESCO Chair of Communication at UKZN, Professor Ruth Teer-Tomaselli. She took the audience on a historical, theoretical and methodological journey of the role played by cartoons in enhancing the public sphere, ensuring debate and protecting the democratic dialectic. No fluff here, as entertaining as the talk was. Cartoonist Brandan Reynolds followed with case studies deriving from his own work for *Business Day*, *Weekend Argus* and *Rapport* (see: <http://brandanreynolds.com/>)

Zuma, of course, is the archetypal caricature. The sliding vertical shower head has entered into pan-African folklore. Zapiro is continuously fending off court actions lodged against him by the President. Indeed, all 28 South African cartoonists banded together in a shared theme to remember Black Tuesday in 1977 when Black-targeted newspapers were banned, and Black Wednesday, the day that the Protection of State Information Act was passed by Parliament in 2012.

Looking at this corpus of unfolding history is a chilling reminder of how easily democracy can go wrong and presidents led astray. With but a few squiggles and brevity of words, cartoonists are able to generate objects on which PhDs have indeed been written. Some academic journals are now devoted to the topic. Cartoon discourses, their economy of signs, and the capturing of prevailing social sentiment, is remarkable. These speak both literally and symbolically, and analyses that cannot be made in words for fear of legal action are generally permissible in this visual form.

Getting back to the fluff. Reynolds is preparing a book of his cartoons on the President, which he will call, *SETTING A BAD PRESIDENT: The Rise, Coming To Power and First Term of Jacob Zuma*. The title is catchy, but the topic is deadly serious. Cartoon images might be interpreted by some as "fluff", but cartoonists' arguments go to the core of the public sphere. I know this because two of my MA students, both graphic

designers, wrote MA theses on the topic. One of them, by Andy Mason, is *Black and White in Ink: Discourses of Resistance in South African Cartooning* while the other by Nicolas Vergunst is the less “fluffy”, *Revolutionary Culture and Images of Political Struggle in South Africa Since 1976*.

My colleague, Lauren Dyll, came up with the snappy Spielberg-like main title for her MA thesis, “Close Encounters of the First Kind”, a thesis on development communication and cultural tourism in the Kalahari. By calling on popular film imagery she was contesting received stereotypes about the ‘Bushmen’ as a First People, while also attracting readers relating to policy development, implementation and use-value. Indeed, her thesis provided a blueprint for a particular community-based business model of tourism across the country.

For non-scientists, science-type titles are incomprehensible, but we do not make fun of them. See, e.g., “Hypercarnivory, durophagy or generalised carnivory in the Mio-Pliocene hyaenids of South Africa?” Ya well, no fine. Apart from the prepositions, I recognised only two of six scientific terms in this 12-word title (see *SA Journal of Science*, May/June 2013). No matter, the article itself was quite readable.

The humanities deal with humans who actually do the interpreting, whether or not they are scientists, engineers or accountants. Indeed, it is scientists who devised ways of seeing that was once considered “fluff” by their own communities: gravity, relativity theory, uncertainty principles, and so on. What’s fluff or science fiction today is hard science tomorrow. Anybody who watches the Discovery or BBC Knowledge channels knows this. As an aside, quite what DSTV has done to the History Channel is now anyone’s guess with their fluffy series on Pawn Wars, Shipping Wars, Storage Wars and other kinds of non-wars.

I guess one could talk about Cartoon Wars. The cartoonists are not warring with each other, but with attacks on democracy, restrictions on free expression and with the narrowing of the public sphere. They are like bees. They pollinate public discourse and when their pens are made silent, the public sphere will die. As Einstein once said: ‘If the bee disappeared off the face of the earth, man would only have four years left to live.’ If cartoonists are bees to political commentary, the implications of their suppression would be equivalent in the realm of public debate.

And what, finally, of columnists? As one of my correspondents, a US-based Anthropologist, put it: ‘I read your comments about DIFF and was charmed by your voice and clear-headed writing, as usual ([UKZN Griot: Of Festivals and Policy](#)). I also loved the caricature! The drawing is very funny and recognisable (tho’ I’m not sure you frown that much) and I think you might be the only academic I know who can increase his prestige and panache by using such an illustration. Sometimes, they refer to people like you and Noam Chomsky as “Public Intellectuals” (hope that’s not an insult). I always look forward to what’s next!’ Well, the caricature was done by none other than Durban’s own Nanda Soobben.

Until next time ...

*** Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of the Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He’s a real character. Just ask his students.**

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author’s own.