Political Cartoons: History, Features And Functions

A Historic Look on Political Cartoons

The word ‘cartoon’ is derived from the Italian word ‘cartone’ meaning ‘paper’, the term was used by painters for preliminary drawings on paper which were then transferred, either through tracing or punching, on to a surface which may be a ceiling, a large canvas or a wall (Jegedemi 1990, p. 2 and Adekanmbi 1997, p. 7). According to Adekanbi (1997) “the word cartoon is used loosely to describe any drawing published originally in a periodical that makes its own point, with or without a caption”. He posits further that the uniqueness of a cartoon can be clearly distinguished from an illustration or sketch, in that the cartoon strip or comic strip usually tells a story and often appears in periodical publications, whereas an illustration simply illuminates a scene or point accompanying an extended text in a publication.

Cartoons are amalgams of images (the symbols), captions (the written words), and social commentary (the spoken and unspoken words). They combine all of the information needed to understand their message into one simple visual form and present it in an easily accessible medium in books, newspaper, or the web. A cartoonist uses various icons which are symbols representing objects within a bordered object called a panel, or frame. These panels represent a single moment in time: a slice of life caught in mid-pose, much like a photograph. Unlike comic strips or comic books (mediums that have multiple panels), all information is found within the single image, thus they may be complicated and difficult to decipher at first glance. Cartoons also utilise specific visual elements in order to replicate human communication. Sound (dialogue, self-talk, music, etc.) is created using words and symbols (Akinloye, 2010).

Political cartoons dated back to the ancient Egypt’s culture 1360, B.C. where human and animal caricatures were painted on the walls later this genre travelled to Europe and other parts of the globe (Johnson, 1937; Willett, 1993). An unknown artist satirized Ikhnaton, the unpopular father-in-law of Tutankhamen. This marked one of the numerous satirical attacks on ancient Egyptian leaders that ranged from Cleopatra to low-level government officials (Moyle, 2004). Editorial cartoons also called political cartoons is a type of cartoon that is satirical by nature, using humour to draw attention to a significant social-political issue and are usually featured on the editorial page of newspapers. According to Agberia (1993, p. 10), editorial cartoons are designed to satirise current political matters and offer subtle criticism cleverly coated with humour and satire.

Historically, political cartoon is recognized as one of the earliest forms of political satire (Townsend et al., 2008). The basis of satire as fundamental ingredients of political cartoon today largely depends on the criticism of the injustice and the abuse of power usually perpetrated by those in power or the dominant ruling party (Bal et al., 2009). In recent years, there has been an increasing research on political cartoons across disciplines. This has made political cartoons a potent interdisciplinary research field crossing different research boundaries such as education, sociology, sciences, psychology, health, pragmatics, communication etc. This growing research interest demonstrates that political cartoons have become a distinct and established genre within media discourse.

The first picture to be called a cartoon was John Leech's drawing in 1843 in the 'Punch' newspaper in Britain. The word was first used when a great exhibition of cartoons were given for a competition, devised by Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert, to prepare designs for Frescoes for the new House of Parliament. From the entries which were naughty and ridiculous in subject matter, John Leech drew a series of imitations in Punch, satirizing them and railing at social and political abuses of the day (Popoola 1983, p. 5). Earlier than this, in Britain, William Hogarth (1697-1764) had established a reputation as the first political cartoonist while, in Spain and France, Goya (1746-1828) and Honore Daumier (1808-1879) respectively, used the medium to launch vicious and satirical attacks on those socio-political practices which they considered repulsive to public sense of decency (Jegede 1990, p. 3).

Political cartoons are effective means cartoonists use to express their thoughts and ideas about political issues, events or personalities in a particular period in a playful manner (Becker, 1959).They are openly and discreetly used to make compelling statement and provide specific knowledge on contemporary socio-political issues. Part of the goal of political cartoon is to raise public consciousness using figurative tone and graphical imageries to address crucial issues and criticize political leaders and their contemptible practices. In other words, the genre serves as a medium of political reporting, articulating a particular message from a particular point of view using language and imageries as prime tools.

Lamb (2004) considers political cartoons as critical artifacts used to lampoon political leaders and their contemptible policies. Cartoons' depictions are usually satirical; their militant effects are just like that of armour used for launching attacks on the political leaders and the democratic process through pictorial depictions.

Functions of Political Cartoons

According to Medhurst and DeSousa (1982), political cartoons have four basic functions in social life which are entertainment, aggression reduction, agenda setting and framing. In entertainment, cartoons possess the ability to make readers laugh at different scenarios and personalities. Political cartoons have elicited much interest from many scholars, particularly because of their engagement of humour in projecting salient issues. Humour itself serves some communicative functions (Sani et al., 2012). In their study of the role of humour in constructing satire, Sani et al. highlight the functions of political cartoons in this regard as follows.

1. They are used to express opinions.
2. They are aimed at constructing valuable arguments and provide specific knowledge on contemporary social issues.
3. They provide political commentary.
4. They address crucial issues.
5. They artfully criticise political leaders and their contemptible practices.

Satire in Political Cartoons

Cartoons are mostly satirical and humorous in subject and inevitably elicit readers' participation. In some cartoons, the message is so subtle that readers debate among themselves as to who is being attacked (Adejuwon et al ,2004) .The process of unveiling serious ideas through cartoon may involve satire, humour, contrast, surprise and even

sometimes what seems as nonsense. Satire is a literary term used to refer to a witty criticism of behavior aimed at ridiculing societal faults by use of irony or sarcasm (Bal et al, 2009). Thus, satire is viewed as criticisms of various societal follies which are blended with humour or other comedic elements such as exaggeration and irony (ibid). Something or someone's weakness or shortcomings are exposed, the prime goal being to safeguard normative boundaries of society by denouncing follies and promoting standard of social norms and values. Political cartoon is recognized as one of the earliest forms of political satire (Townsend, et al, 2008). The basis of satire today largely depends on the criticism of the injustice and abuse of power usually perpetrated by those in power or the dominant ruling party (Bal et al, 2009). This is done by the cartoonist in a subtle manner that attacks the behavior of a person in a position of power with a clear intention to communicate an important message meant to guide the concerned party into mending their awkward ways or behaviour.

Political Cartoons as Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing effectively. It is the art of persuasion. Medhurst & Desousa (1981) formed a two-level classification scheme to analyze the techniques of graphic persuasion found in a political cartoon. First is to examine the elements within the cartoon that persuade. The other scheme is based on the assumption that cartoons convey or persuade communication. Medhurst and Desousa presented a framework for macro level scheme of cartoons based on five divisions of rhetoric used to analyze oral persuasion which are as follows:

1. Invention, or discovery and the main stream topic in the subject matter.
2. Disposition, the structure and arrangement of the discourse.
3. Style or the appropriate use of language in graphic elements.
4. Memory or the cartoonist's grasp of content of the cartoon.
5. Delivery, or the 'voice' gestures used or message conveyed.

In view of the fact that their contents are mostly expressed through visual illustrations, political cartoons are best understood through investigation of incorporated visual rhetoric. Research has shown that political cartoonists dominantly employ satire and attendant humour to draw the attention of the public. As a consequence, the communicative functions of humor and satire and the attendant visual power have made political cartoons an interesting research field across academic disciplines.