

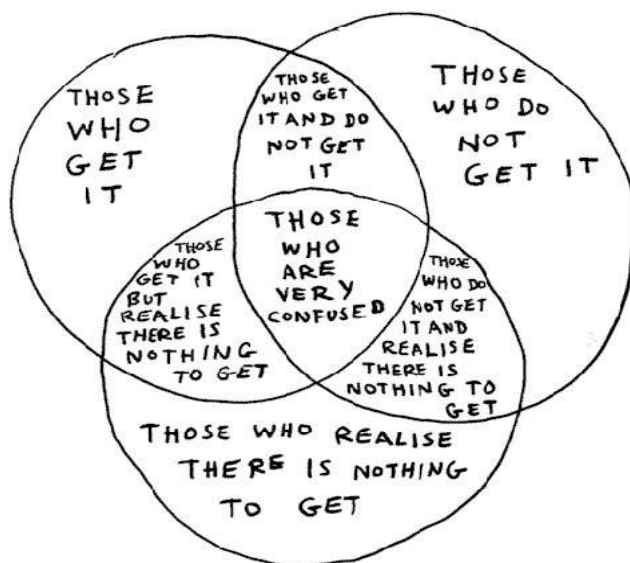
## **Humour in the visual arts. What is it, how does it work, & can it be useful in drawing to communicate scientific and medical concepts?**

In the last essay I examined aspects of how science and health issues have been communicated visual. This essay builds on that platform, looking at how visual humour has been used for communication. I look at the major types of humor at use in the visual arts & take a historical perspective to see what factors have shaped our view of humor today. I examine the rich history of caricature, it's exponents, targets and mechanisms. The use of satire to address social & political issues will be discussed.

An import problem to be addressed in my practice is the inclusion of text within the drawing. In this essay I also examine how the union of text and art has be approached by visual artists & satirists such as Ralph Steadman, Steve Bell, John Callahan and David Shrigley. Finally, I consider if humor can be a useful vehicle for communicating ideas around science and health.

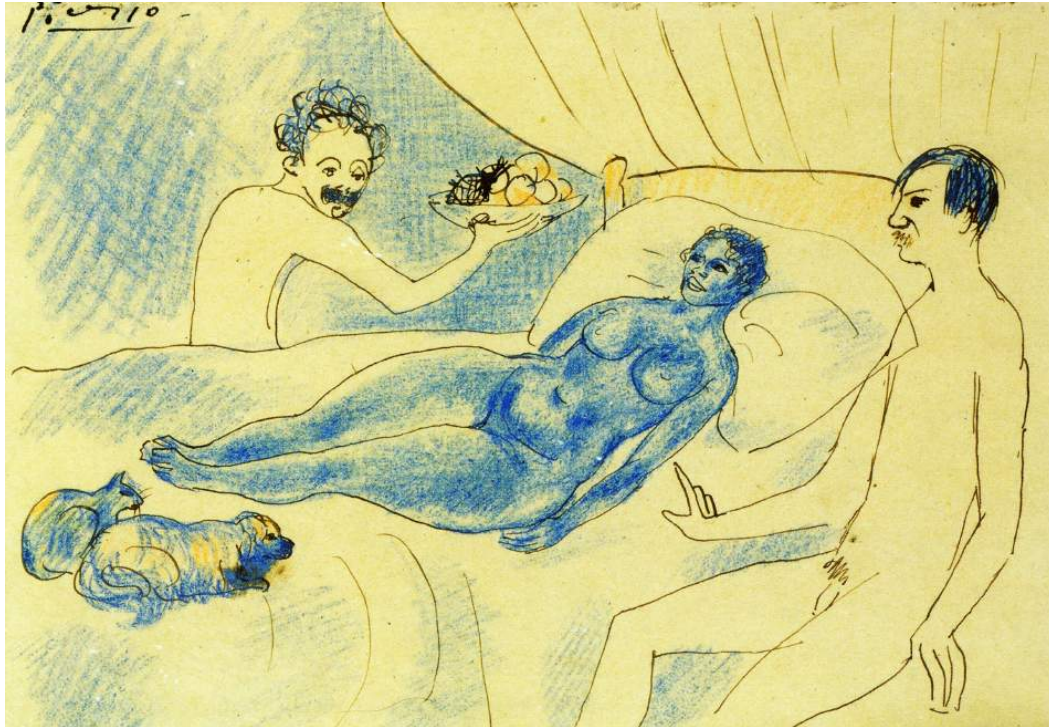
### **The major kinds of humour associated with visual art.**

There are a plethora of descriptions of humour, it's types, histories & mechanisms; they overlap like sets in a Venn diagram (see Figure 1. David Shrigley). To begin, it may be useful to consider the diversity of the major types of humor used in visual arts & to illustrate them with a few brief examples.



**Figure 1.** David Shrigley. "Those who get it" (2011).

**Parody**, is imitation turned as to produce a ridiculous effect. It's effectiveness lies partly in the in viewer feeling a degree of superiority in their recognition of the parody. Examples can be seen in the work of Banksy and on the Simpsons.



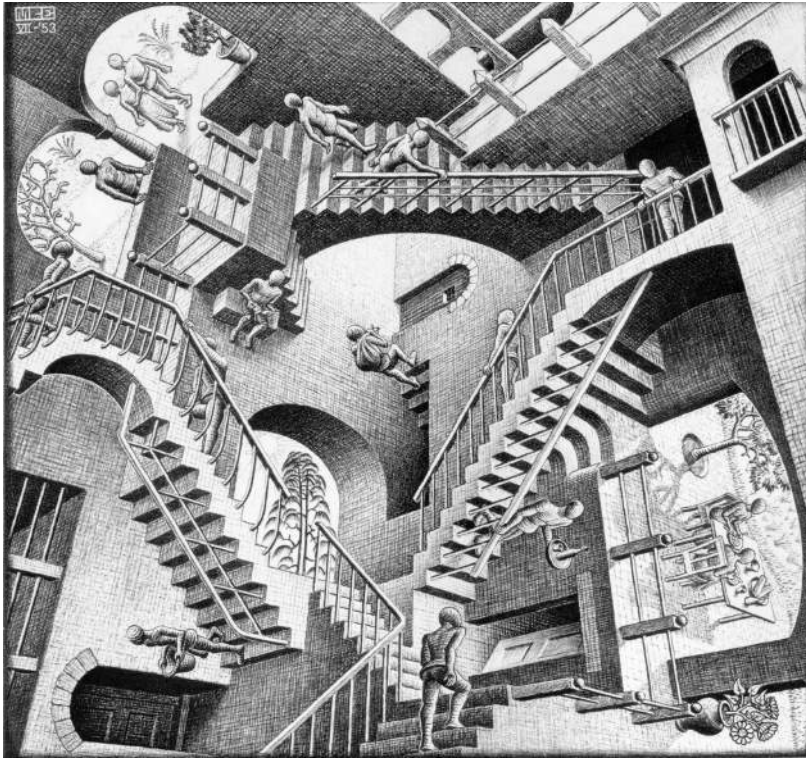
**Figure 2.** Pablo Picasso. “A parody of Manet's Olympia with Junyer and Pablo Picasso” (1902).

**Pun** or paronomasia, is a play on words. A visual pun involves an image or images (in addition to or instead of language). Visual puns in which the image is at odds with the inscription are common in cartoons such as The Far Side.



**Figure 3.** Giuseppe Arcimboldo. “The Librarian” (1566).

**Visual paradox**, is an image that apparently contradicts itself and yet might be true. Paradox is routine in the work of the Surrealists.



**Figure 4.** M.C.Escher. “Relativity” (1953).

**Irony** is the expression of something completely different/opposite from the literal meaning of the image for humorous or emphatic effect. Irony can be situational irony (i.e. absurd, ironic situations based on coincidence or unexpected events) or linguistic irony (the use of ironic language such as puns, sarcasm and hidden messages). Irony has been used by numerous artists including Bruce Nauman.



**Figure 5.** Rene Magritte. “The treachery of images (This is not a pipe)” (1928–29).

**Dark & gallows humour** utilises our fear of morbidity, absurdity and anarchy. It may be useful in my own practice for asking people to confront issues they might otherwise choose to avoid. The grotesque falls in to this category & is characterised by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions of the natural to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or caricature. People such as the Chapman Brothers are exponents of this genre.



**Figure 6.** David Shrigley. "25 Postcards For Writing On" (2007).



**Figure 7.** John Callahan. "Suicide hotline".



**Satire** is where shortcomings are held up for ridicule. Visual satire is often achieved through shifts of emphasis & exaggeration, as found in caricature. As well as generating the immediate humour, the ultimate aim of satire may be to drive changes in behavior. The remaining examples cited below are predominantly satirical.



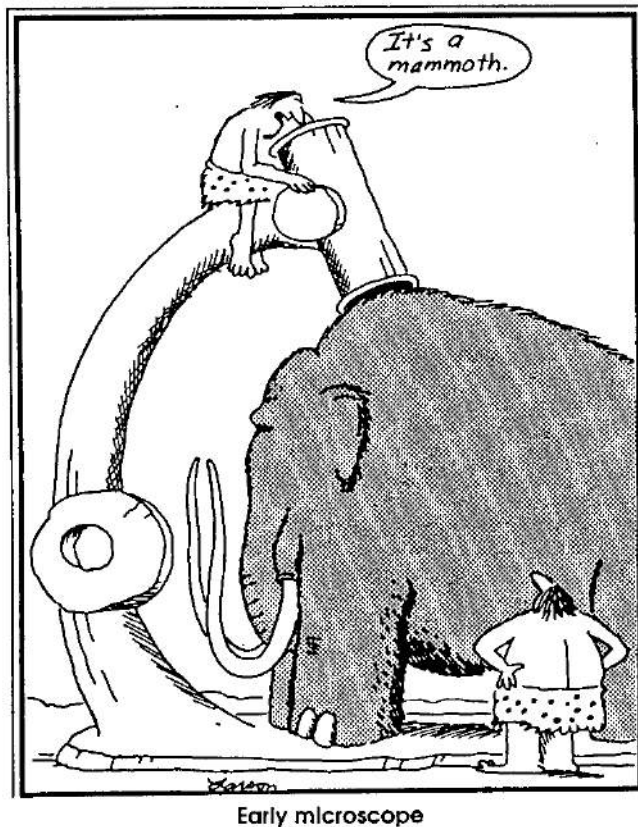
**Figure 8.** Fluck & Law. Spitting Image (1980's).



**Figure 9.** Banksy. "Airstrike" (2010).

### **A Short “Long-view” of Humour: Imitation, Foolishness & Parody.**

People have been commenting on one another in pictorial form since we were able to draw on cave walls. Indeed, we know from the work of Gary Larson in the “Far Side” that visual humor was alive and well in pre historic period (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. Far Side. “Mammoth” (1998).**

As long ago as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC troupes of itinerant clowns & acrobats were described as mimi or mimes - which originally meant imitation or parody not silent acting. This type of character can be traced through ancient history to Roman comedy, where they are described as pantomimus, the “imitator of everything”.

An interesting & predominant figure in the history of comedy is the fool, who is worthy of consideration here. Foolishness is not the same as idiocy, but rather an expression of the ambiguous, doubled and inverted ideas of wisdom & folly that existed during the medieval period (Scott, 2005). The medieval Christian God viewed knowledge as dangerous, after all, the desire to know had led to expulsion from Eden. The foolish however could not be corrupted by their own ingenuity. Folly was seen as part of the human

condition, but it could also be adapted as an ironic & paradoxical identity for the purposes of social commentary & satiric attack. By the close of the Middle Ages folly had become a distinct voice mocking pretension & belittling pride.

Unlike caricature (see below) graphic satire has no clear origin and is more associated with northern Europe than Italy. Since ancient times artists have distorted images to illuminate folly or to convey a moral message. Artists in the Middle Ages (5th to the 15th century) in possible attempts to lighten the dearth of scholasticism decorated the margins of manuscripts & corners of cathedral with grotesques, drolleries and odd biomorphic creatures such as gargoyles (McPhee & Orenstein, 2011). Satirical images are common in Western art from the Renaissance in the work of artists such as Hieronymus Bosch (born circa 1450; died 1516). Bosch filled his paintings with grotesque scenes of fantastical creatures and the tradition was carried on with Pieter Bruegel the Elder's paintings. The transformation of humans to hybrid creatures provides symbolic imagery, humorous spice and emblematic meaning to satirical drawings. This symbolism is still widely used today, for example, we readily identify the snake, pig, goat or spider respectively with deception, gluttony, lechery & and cunning.



**Figure 10.** Hieronymus Bosch. "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1503–1504).

In parallel with graphic satire, comedy performance continued to evolve and in Italy in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century the commedia dell'arte was first reported.

Commedia dell'arte utilised verbal & non-verbal “slapstick” type comedy. It also spawned several stereotypical comedic characters, including Pulcinella who went on to become the jovial English seaside wife beater, Mr Punch. Punch later gave his name to humorous magazine (1841-1992) pivotal in the promotion of British satire.

The term Caricature, is derived from Italian “*caricare*” meaning ‘to load’ or ‘charge’ where a portrait is charged with exaggerated or simplified features. The first recognized professional caricaturist was Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674 – 1755) who made thousands of pen and gouache caricatures of Romans and (in a process now repeated the world over) he also drew well-to-do tourists.

### **Satirical prints.**

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward the primary way Western society commented visually on it's self was through print satire. Increased production of print satire largely corresponded with increased social upheaval. Social & political satire has a rich history in Britain, western Europe & north America. Often combining low humour & high sentiment, satirical drawing was largely considered separate from art with a few notable exceptions in artists such as Hogarth, Goya & Daumier.

In 1730's few prints were sold to a relatively low number of individuals, as satirical printing was a fashionable hobby for the wealthy. As print satire developed from literature satire it is not surprising that in early work text was interwoven through many humorous prints. In 1750's increased numbers of publishing enterprises were established in London, Paris & New York & printing flourished but remained a largely amateur enterprise.

The 1770's were a watershed for satires developing into political prints. Hogarth who did his best work between 1730-1760 used traditional narrative methods as see in “A Rakes Progress” Figure 11. Hogarth insisted on there being a difference between the characters in his work & and the techniques of caricature which he abhorred. Gilray who was at his height between 1790-1810 and his contemporaries combined the traditional methods based on symbolism & allegory with a flair for personal caricature (Figure 12).





**Figure 11.** William Hogarth. “The Rakes Progress” (1733).



**Figure 12.** James Gilray. “The Plumb-Pudding in Danger” (1805).

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were seismic shifts occurred in print satire. Firstly, the advent of copper sheet facilitated a change in the relationship between the text and the image. Coincidentally, most European governments censored etchings as vigorously as other printed media. In

England however, political print satire was immune from prosecution. These factors synergised to produce a heyday for British political etching characterised by works brimming with aggression, anger, and independence. In first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the works of Gillray, Rowlandson & Cruikshank, it became apparent it was possible to make money in satire. Social and political satire prints began making their way into newspapers and periodicals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The satirical magazine *Punch* reached prominence during 1840s and 50s publishing political cartoons by artists such as Sir John Tenniel's

As the 19th century progressed there was a rise in the illustrated press allied with development in techniques of wood engraving and lithography. The text in political prints began to be pared down, with the advent of headlines & Gilray began to experiment with the speech bubble. Goya, arguably, performed some of the last experiments on the relationship between the text and the image in social/satirical printing, reducing captions further (Figure 13). His print captions are examples of stark economy. Daumier who became dominant across Europe between 1830 -1870 also conformed to the confined titling method (Figure 14). In some later political & social satire prints by Dix, (Figure 15) Ensor & Beckmann the text was entirely lost.

In addition to their extended use of text the English style typified by Hogarth, Rowlandson Gillray and Cruikshank had several other shortcomings, notably their "pictorial agoraphobia" which lead to all the available space becoming covered with detail, producing very busy images. Goya & Daumier following the dictum that "less is more" recognized sparseness & concentration in rendering the social horror. Later satirical artists such as David Shrigley also adhere to this dictum producing pared-down work for immediate and accessible appeal (Shrigley, 2012).





**Figure 13.** Francisco Goya. "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" (1797 and 1799).



**Figure 14.** Honoré Daumier. "The Legislative Belly" (1834).



**Figure 15.** Otto Dix. "Street battle" (1927).

George Grosz drew political satire and caricature of 1920's Berlin life in ink for mass production (using transfer lithography) Figure 16. Grosz' work lends itself to a discussion of structure & continued evolution of political prints. His ink lines embody his satiric and moral outlook. In numerous studies of satire Grosz' work is often contrasted with that of David Low also working in war torn Europe but who soft fat lines reflect his comfortable condensation in a rather different society Figure 17. (Lambourne, (1984); Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, (1989)).





Figure 16. George Grosz. "The toads of the property" (1920).



Figure 17. David Low "There was an old woman who lived in a boot" (1943).

### The Newspaper Cartoons and the rise of Private Eye.

Following the Second World War Punch's dominance of visual satire began to wane & the cartoon became an increasing common feature in newspapers, thanks in part to the popularity of small, pocket cartoons, named after pocket battleships & developed by Osbert Lancaster (Figure 18). "Matt" is probably the most prolific and well known exponent of the pocket cartoon practising today (Figure 19) & "Grizelda" is an award winner in this genre (Figure 20).



**Figure 18** Osbert Lancaster. "Let it ring! Ten-to-one it's just another leaking Cabinet minister"



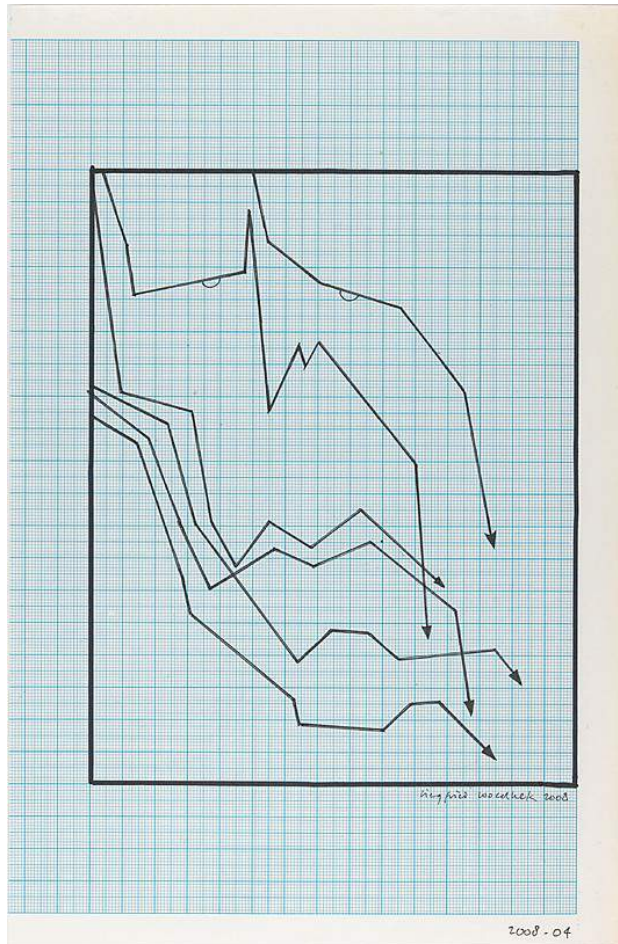
*'You fainted when I told you the price. I'm afraid while you were unconscious it went up another £5,000'*



*"Can you lend us some money?"*

**Figure 19 & 20.** Matt. Pocket cartoon. Grizelda. Joke cartoon award winner (2008).

Siegfried Woldhek follows in the caricatural tradition of depicting people as objects in newspaper cartoon. Woldhek renders the depressed features of George W. Bush's with just a few straight lines in a parody of a tumbling stockmarket graph from the years of the Bush administration.



**Figure 21** Siegfried Woldhek. "The Bush Years: A Summary" (2008).

A historical view of satirical drawing is necessary for a comprehensive understanding work currently being produced as many contemporary cartoonists are mindful of the genre's rich tradition and certain images are frequently reused (Figures 13, 22, 23).

Revisiting work has been taken to near it's logical extreme by the Chapman Brothers who in "Insult to Injury" 'reworked &

improved' over 80 etchings in Goya's "Disasters of War" before turning their attention to Goya's "Los Caprichos" & Hogarth's "Rake's Progress" Figures (11 & 24), apparently satirising the great, untouchable social satires.



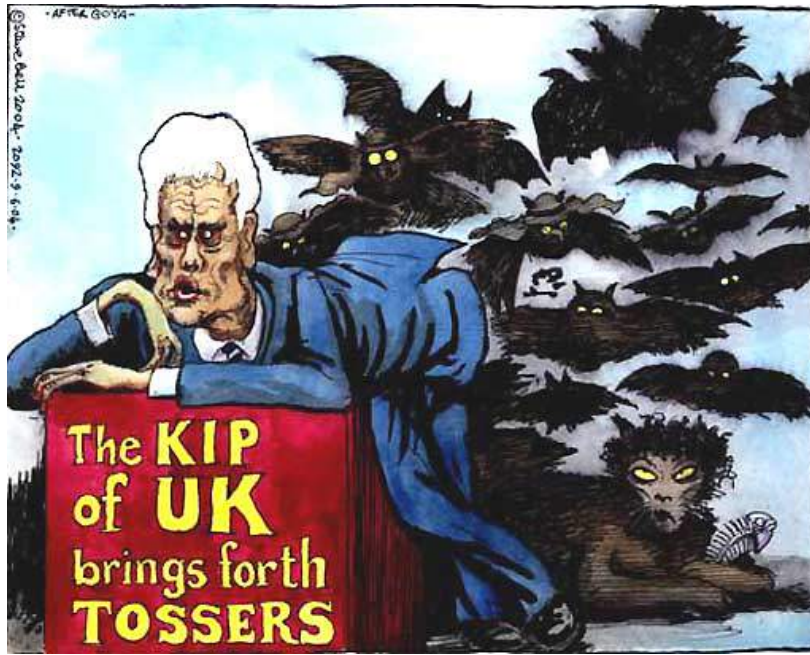


Figure 22. Steve Bell. "The KIP of UK (2004).

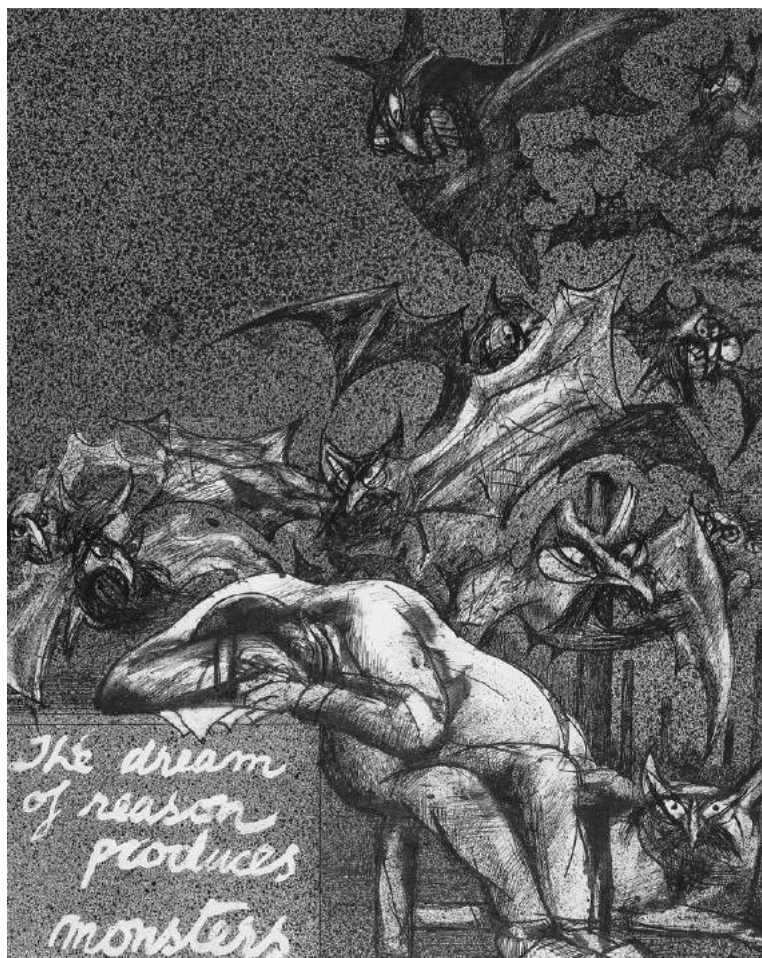


Figure 23. Ralph Steadman "The dream of reason" (1998).





**Figure 24.** Jake and Dinos Chapman “Dinos and Jake’s Progress. Plate 8” (2007).

### **Does satire have a format?**

As well as recycling each other’s work across the centuries artists have employed a limited number of visual tools to express humour. What humans find innately funny has change little over time and, within the original culture, many older drawings still hold their appeal today. Despite the outward impression of the often anarchic & rebellious nature of satirical drawings, the majority in fact conform to a readily identifiable structure. The next time you study a satirical print try to apply the following checklist:

**Comment:** Is the drawing is making a political or social comment?

**Contention:** What is the contention of the work?

**Tone:** Is the tone serious, funny, dark and gloomy, witty or biting, factual?

**Irony:** Does the drawing use irony?

**Components:** What are the different elements of the drawing for example it could be a single panel or cartoon strip?

**Symbols:** Cartoonists often use symbols to convey complex ideas with an economy of detail. Flags, animals, light bulbs *et cetera*.

**Text:** Often text can be used to help explain the drawing. It can be found in

speech bubbles to tag lines or may constitute the entire work

**Caricature:** Caricature is a common & powerful tool used for immediate dramatic effect.

### **Jokes as code: Culture & humour.**

An interesting & important question when considering humour of any given type is it's universality – do different people find the same things funny? When planning this essay I consulted my tutorial group, all from a different cultural background to me, to see if they shared my perspective on humour. The answer was a resounding no. What I consider the pillars of my Pantheon of visual humour (even those of global impact, such as, The Simpsons) went unrecognised. The only common funny ground with my Western perspective was to be found in the slapstick shenanigans of Charlie Chaplin, a form nonverbal comedy retraceable to the Commedia dell'arte

Humour has been described as a form of cultural insider-knowledge, that functions like a linguistic defense mechanism (Kataoka, (2008). This insider element has lead to certain visual humour genres picking up the moniker of Outsider art? If, as we suspect humour is not universal then the visual artist engaging humour may, or not, wish to consider who is the target audience. After all, identifying the target may not be easy as or helpful as humor I seems is an individual taste, covers a large spectrum of types and may be culturally determined.

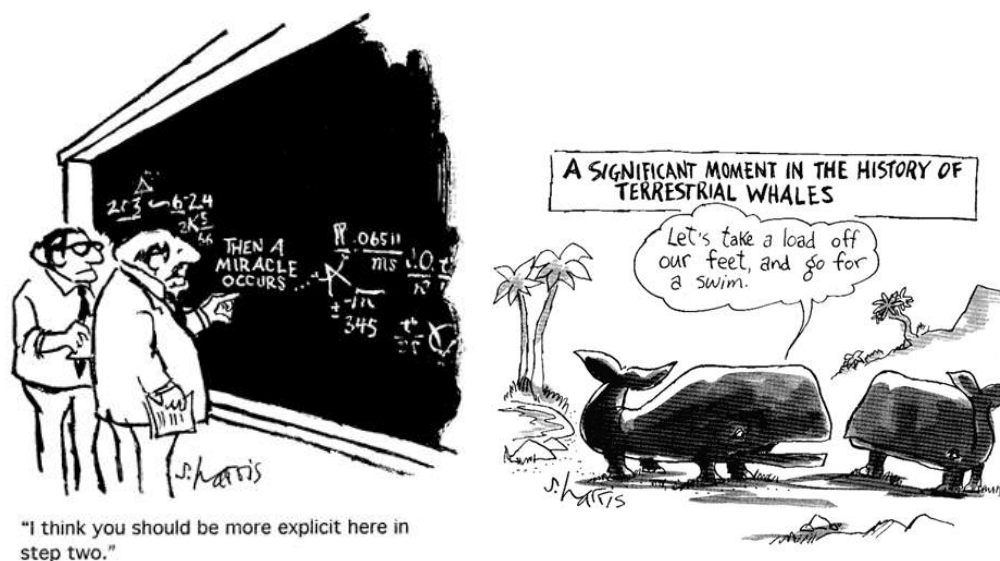
### **Visual humour in science & health.**

What capacity is there for cartoons and satirical drawing in communicating science & health? One of the most successful science cartoonists is Sidney Harris whose work has appeared in high impact, broad readership publications such as Science and Scientific American for nearly 60 years (Figure 25) makes it clear he is a non scientist yet his cartoons demonstrate a profound scientific understanding of the articles they illustrate. Similarly, the Far Side's creator Gary Larson's cartoons ask many interesting & pertinent questions about Natural History & biological sciences (Figure 26), which serves as an excellent teaching aid when describing the importance of avoiding the generation of artifacts in microscopy.

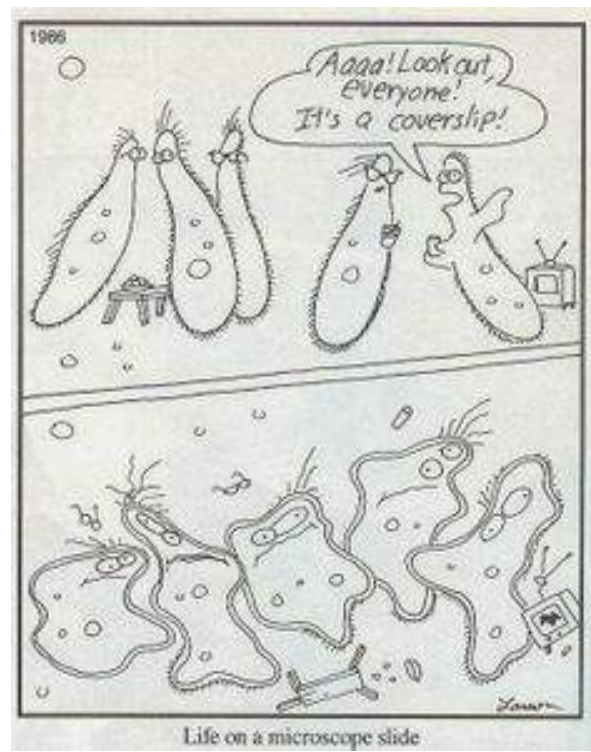
It seems science provides a rich hunting ground for cartoonists. Personally, I find there is something extremely pleasing about putting the immutable laws of Nature against the preposterous & the absurd on the drawing board (Figure 27).

In the world of academia there is room for cartoons, but it is largely aimed at the cognoscenti. For example 'Sticky Wicket', is an irregular series of writings and cartoons from practising scientists, under pseudonyms such as Mole & Caveman, in the Journal of Cell Science (**Figure 28**). Another academic example is Walter Pories MD, a Professor of Surgery who also draws cartoons about his work for academic and trade journals (Figure 29).

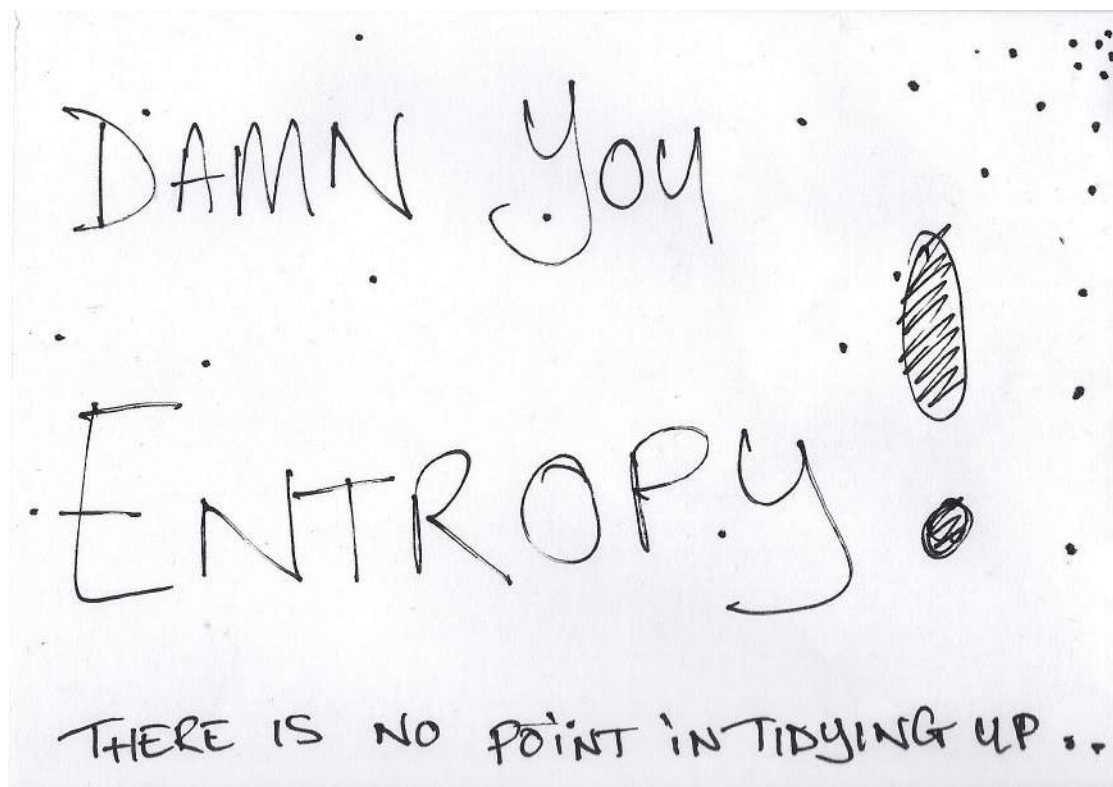
Perhaps the most interesting cartoonist to date to tackle the issues of health & disability, at times brutally honestly, is John Callahan. Callahan used his experience of quadriplegia (the result of a car accident at 21) & dealing with his alcoholism in drawing sketch-and-gag works on disability & various macabre subjects (Figure 30) which occasionally brought protests against his publishers. Much has been written about Callahan's own disability & his rights (or not) in the ways he portrayed & provoked others, but perhaps Callahan's work is best summed up by Sam Gross, a cartoonist for the New Yorker and the National Lampoon, "He is in the vein of sick humor -- but sick humor that's funny. He's intelligent and witty -- that is why he gets away with it." (Egan, 1992).



**Figure 25.** Sidney Harris. "I think you." (2007), "A Significant Moment." (1990).



**Figure 26** Far Side. "Life on a microscope slide" (1986).



**Figure 27.** "Damn you Entropy".





Figure 28. “Mole and Caveman” (2004).

## Walter Pories's CARTOON CORNER

Original Cartoons by



**WALTER J. PORIES, MD, FACS**

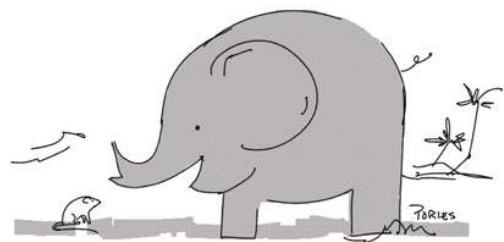
Professor of Surgery, Biochemistry and Kinesiology,  
East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina

*Minimally Invasive...by Pories*



“Ah, you’re Doctor Franz, the famous scientist.  
You’re going back to earth as a white rat.”

*Minimally Invasive...by Pories*



“You’re right. I’m fatter, I don’t like exercise, I  
love sugar but I’m still going to outlive you...”

Figure 29. Walter Pories's. “Cartoon Corner” (2014).



**Figure 30.** John Callahan. "Don't worry. . "

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**On-line resources:**

- The British Museum. [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)
- The British Cartoon Archive. <http://www.cartoons.ac.uk>
- The Cartoon Museum. <http://www.cartoonmuseum.org>
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