

CONTROVERSY, from page 4

a) they are by definition unfair because they exaggerate weakness or foibles, but b), and more importantly, they're not only unfair, but there's no way to respond to them. If you don't like the way you or someone you identify with is portrayed in a caricature, there's no such thing as a cartoon to the editor, unless you happen to be a cartoonist. This is terribly frustrating and causes a feeling of impotence.

To add to that is the lingering suspicion that maybe the cartoonist, unfair though he or she may be, has gotten to the real you: the ugly truth about yourself under the cosmeticized picture of yourself you put out to the world. The art critic Ernst Gombrich said that "The perfect art is the perfect form, but the perfect caricature is the perfect deformity."

R.L.: You write that French King Louis Philippe [in the 1830s] felt threatened by the cartoons of Honoré Daumier and others, and he saw words as opinion but caricatures as "acts of violence," and he ended up censoring caricatures — but not print articles.

V.N.: Yes. He saw something, and he not only put Daumier in prison but his publisher, [Charles] Philipon, was prosecuted many times. The king became known as "La Poire" because he was portrayed in the shape of a pear.

At his own trial, Philipon introduced four pictures. One was the king and the fourth was a pear, and each one successively got closer and closer to the pear image. He said, "What are you putting me in prison for? Because I drew a pear or are you putting me in prison for the third one or the fourth one? Can I help it if the king happens to be shaped like a pear." He made the good literal point by stressing the peculiarity and illogic of the punishment.

R.L.: You also note that caricatures were especially powerful when many people were illiterate. Martin Luther has been called the father of political cartooning because he commissioned artists to draw anti-Catholic images such as the 1545 work by Lucas Cranach the Elder entitled "The Birth and Origin of the Pope" that depicts Satan excreting the Pontiff.

V.N.: Absolutely. Before there was general literacy, cartoons and pictures were one of the ways people got information.

And jump ahead to the age of literacy. In Nazi Germany a publication called Der Sturmer would run vicious anti-Semitic caricatures of the Jew every week. They were not just on the cover of the magazine, but they would be displayed publically as posters.

The image of the Jew in Germany, one could argue, was set by Der Sturmer itself. It's telling to me that, in the trials of Nazi enemies at Nuremberg [in 1945], the defendants received sentences of a few months, a few years, and life and execution. And the only nonmilitary leader [that] I could find [who] was sentenced to death was the publisher of Der Sturmer. I think those who sentenced him had a general understanding of the power of these caricatures.

R.L.: Don't those images register with readers and trigger a response much more quickly than a printed story?

V.N.: Yes. The Old Testament forbids graven images. And in the book I provide three theories of what's going on: content, image and neuroscience. Content is the political message or rational aspect of the cartoon. Of greater importance is the image or "the cartoon as totem."

There's a whole new visual culture movement elaborating on that. W. J. T. Mitchell at the University of Chicago, a guru in that movement, he talks about how we patronize primitive peoples who believe pictures are alive. He argues that, in some sense, they are alive, and that's why people find them so threatening. In the past, he argues, we would say these primitive people were guilty of idolatry or fetishism or animism or totemism, but maybe they know something we don't know.

When I began to look at these images and how governments have feared them, it occurred to me that the so-called primitive people are onto something. The Masses, a



Victor Navasky's editorial decision to include the caricature of Henry Kissinger "screwing" the world in *The Nation* was highly controversial.

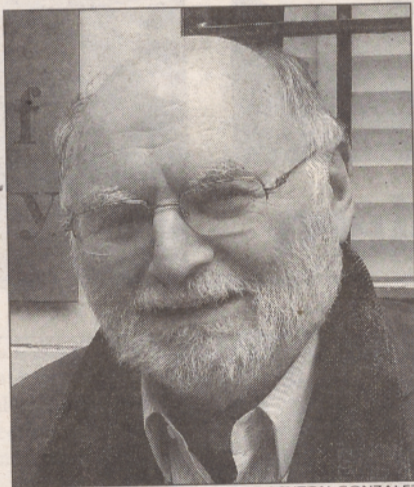


PHOTO BY EUGENE ASHTON-GONZALEZ

Victor S. Navasky

magazine at the time of World War I, published the drawings of Art Young, and they were put out of business under the Espionage Act. He and other cartoonists ran things like a wanted poster that said "Jesus Christ: Wanted for Sedition" and said he was a carpenter with his picture. They [publishers of *The Masses*] were accused of undermining the war effort, and they were against the war.

R.L.: Do you think any political cartoons actually affected the course of history?

V.N.: It is hard to say, but different people's consciousness is affected in different ways.

The great British cartoonist Ralph Steadman said that the great caricatures, at their best, are things that you can't put into words. If you look at his Nixon, you understand. But if you can't put them into words, you can't make a logical argument

about which cartoons affected the course of history. We're dealing in a world of symbols and paradoxes.

But there's a general consensus that cartoons have affected events. For example, the great cartoonist Thomas Nast, who showed the corruption of the Tweed Ring [in New York], brought down Boss Tweed. Ironically, when Tweed fled to Europe, he was identified in Spain by someone who recognized him from Nast's cartoons, and then he was brought to justice and thrown into prison.

R.L.: You also discuss great artists such as Goya, Picasso and Kathe Kollwitz. Speaking of Kollwitz, it seems that there weren't many female political cartoonists in the history you cover.

V.N.: I attended an editorial cartoonists convention in Salt Lake City and, at this convention, a female cartoonist thought that I didn't treat that subject with sufficient seriousness. She believed — and I don't disagree with her — that women are discriminated against as cartoonists in the same way they are discriminated against in our culture, so they haven't been generally employed.

And I go from that to think that not many women have sought being cartoonists because they didn't see a career path there. But there are some marvelous women cartoonists.

When someone from my generation thinks of a cartoonist, I think of Herblock. And he had a role in bringing down Richard Nixon.

He didn't do it all by himself, but he set the image of Richard Nixon [in the early fifties], which was so consistent with what later happened to him that it had credibility.

There's a great cartoon he made in 1954 where a group of supporters are waiting for Nixon, and someone says, "Here he comes

now," and you see Nixon emerging out of the sewer from underground. That said it all. And he [depicted Joe] McCarthy with his tar brush. Great cartoonists, male or female, have that ability.

R.L.: David Levine called Bill Mauldin, the creator of the GI characters Willie and Joe in World War II, a great antiwar artist.

V.N.: Willie and Joe are figures who are easy to identify with. They got to the quick and the heart of the war. And Mauldin combined that gift with his own radical political sensibility to great advantage.

I see him in the tradition of Art Young, although their styles are quite different. I put in the book one of my favorite Art Young cartoons. It shows two children, and one is saying, "Gee Annie, look at the stars, thick as bedbugs." It shows these poor kids, and it's a comment on poverty.

R.L.: Some media critics now say that political cartooning is a vanishing art. What do you think?

V.N.: They say it's disappearing. With the advent of the online, digital world, while editorial pages in print may or may not be at the end of their run, which I don't believe they are, you've never had more of an opportunity to use visual means of communication than you have now.

Every day, there seems to be a new app invented, whether for a cell phone or another device you carry in your pocket or the computer on which you get your mail. So this is an art form that will have a new rebirth in a new incarnation.

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