

Cradled in what? A Foreword

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In April 2010 a visit to Manchester, the Whitworth Art Gallery to be precise, provided the unexpected kernel from which two events and the present issue blossomed. Erected there in an exhibition entitled ‘Walls Are Talking: Wallpaper, Art and Culture’ was a piece by David Shrigley in which identikit boxes combine to form a crude shopping centre, their putative function only identifiable by a sign over the door. As I was mulling over this on a return train to the Home Counties, it occurred to me that my interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century graphic satire connected to the concerns of many other scholars through the notion of ‘caricature’. But what, you may quite reasonably ask, does a satire on repetitious hyper-functionalist architectural design have to do with caricature? Well, for me at least, Shrigley’s design was deceptively elegant. Alongside a blunt critique of multi-purpose out-of-town commercial building projects he weaves a subversive study into what businesses do to become more than the box they inhabit. For while in Shrigley’s design these businesses place ‘Chemist’, ‘Supermarket’ or ‘Pet Shop’ above their doors in order to demarcate their function, in reality few businesses give prominence to such direct linguistic cues; rather the marketing strategies they deploy play upon what we expect a ‘Chemist’, a ‘Supermarket’ or a ‘Pet Shop’ to look like, to smell like and to be like, with the intention of exploiting these expectations to gain our attention, our custom, our money. In short, businesses play into stereotypes of and caricatures about themselves, stereotypes and caricatures developed and understood through a process of social consensus.¹

Thus whilst aware that — to paraphrase the art-historian Ernst Gombrich — there is no better way to kill a joke than by explaining it, Shrigley’s wallpaper is funny (for me at least) because it shows us a world where these stereotypes and caricatures do not matter, a world which is not cradled in caricature. However, as both the *Cradled in Caricature* events and this present volume explore, this world is not possible: the societies and cultures which humans have built positively thrive on prejudice, crude characterisation, visual association, exaggeration and unreliable perception. The world is cradled in caricature.

¹ Some of this material was published previously as a Meta Grid post in *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*; see Baker 2012.

In June 2011 the first *Cradled in Caricature* event, a symposium supported by the Graduate School at the University of Kent, brought together postgraduates from across the University of Kent to discuss and explore these themes. This multi-disciplinary event attracted contributions from students studying history, literature, art, film, music and law, all of whom tackled a range of issues touched by caricature: on-screen masculinity, enforcement of ‘Nazi’ Jazz, the work of psychiatrists, super-heroes and racial applications of legal structures. The second event, held in April 2012 and supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Kent and the History of Art Department at University College London, continued this multi-disciplinary conversation on the notion of caricature. Art-historians, anthropologists and comedians added their voices, responding to a series of questions which framed both this event and the present volume: why are societies framed by traditions of exaggeration and stereotyping? To what extent does caricature disseminate didactic and polemical messages? What is the importance of media to the efficacy of caricature, and how have print culture and the popular press played a role? Under what cultural circumstances has caricature flourished in the past? Where has caricature been located in the narrative of Western ‘art history’? Are all societies and cultures (real and imagined, past and present) cradled in and constructed by caricature?

The phrase ‘cradled in caricature’ is sadly not of my own creation. Towards the end of his life the great Victorian illustrator and comic artist George Cruikshank (1792–1878) described his childhood as ‘cradled in caricature’. This is hardly a surprise. George grew up in the tumultuous decades after the French Revolution and was quickly tasked with assisting his father Isaac Cruikshank (1756–1811) in inventing and manufacturing satirical designs for London’s foremost print-sellers. Isaac Cruikshank, a late-Georgian contemporary of James Gillray (1757–1815) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), was one of the most prolific visual satirists of his age, and we can imagine that caricature of the graphic, imaginative, literary and conversational kinds must have abounded in the Cruikshank household. George, like his father, was known to his contemporaries as a caricaturist. Yet as should be clear, caricature is a slippery word. Formally ‘Caricature’ it is a type of cartooning, one where a person’s characteristic and striking features are exaggerated to ludicrous effect. And yet the word cartoon in a modern sense dates from an era after the late-Georgian caricature we have described. Indeed ‘cartoon’ was coined around 1843 and comes from *Punch*: the great Victorian illustrated magazine which, alongside prose and commentary, was full of graphic satires: cartoons which used caricature. ‘Cartoons’ and ‘Caricature’ then were and are far

from one and the same. For crude corroboration we might turn to the Google Ngram Viewer, a corpus containing in excess of 5 million books, that is, over 500 billion words (Michel and others 2010).² Here we note the ascendancy of caricature over cartoon until the mid-twentieth century. This we might expect: caricature is, as we have suggested, a word with multiple contexts, multiple applications. Cartoon in its modern sense (as opposed to its early-modern meaning as a preparatory drawing, often for a tapestry) only trumps caricature in word frequency in the 1970s, yet what is striking about these patterns is not the point of crossover between the two words but rather their lack of co-dependency. The situation is neither one of cartoons and caricature nor of cartoons or caricature: the development of both words existed interdependently.

This is because, as this volume explores, the reach of ‘caricature’ — both linguistically and ontologically — extends far beyond the visual arts. It is then this multiple meaning of ‘caricature’ to which the *Cradled in Caricature* project attends, a definition which goes beyond deploying caricature as a comedic form of art, to investigate the function of caricature in as seemingly unrelated arenas as literary works, political economy, high art and our shared biological heritage. We find, for example, grotesque likenesses of persons in literary description, a commonplace literary device which crosses a line between the visual and the verbal imagination, actively imposing the former upon the latter. For a classic example we might look to the mid-eighteenth century, to the birthplace of the European novel. In *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) by Laurence Sterne, our narrator Yorick sees a lady in the streets of Calais. Sterne writes:

I had not yet seen her face — ’twas not material; for the drawing was instantly set about, and long before we had got to the door of the Remise, *Fancy* had finished the whole head, and pleased herself as much with its fitting her goddess, as if she had dived into the Tiber for it — but thou art a seduced, and a seducing slut; and albeit thou cheatest us seven times a day with thy pictures and images, yet with so many charms dost thou do it, and thou deckest out thy pictures in the shapes of so many angels of light, ’tis a shame to break with thee (Sterne 1984: 17).

Caricature here infects, inflects and subsumes reality. It is seductive, so much so it tempts us into falsification, and yet — Sterne makes clear — it remains compelling regardless: we want

² See Michel, Yuan, Aiden and others 2010. (published on-line ahead of print) Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, William Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden. ‘Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books’, *Science* (Published online ahead of print: 12/16/2010). This is neither the time nor the place to engage with the debate over the power and utility of culturomics, though for philosophical musings on big data see Weinberger 2011.

our characters to appear as we imagine them, and we find ourselves hostile and forlorn when a reality imposes itself upon the caricature image we have erected.

Hostility can equally arise when habitual caricatures are challenged. This dynamic is most evident when we gaze into the past, when we examine attitudes to gender, race, sexuality and religion. It is remarkable how alien once commonplace attitudes towards people within these categories appear to us today: not least defences of those alien attitudes which lay claim to objectivity or natural reasoning. Our constant surprise at the prejudices of our forbears, especially those who otherwise appear ‘modern’ or ‘rational’, perhaps explains why historians have often — consciously or otherwise — placed caricature at or toward the centre of their work. Take for example David Cannadine’s classic *Ornamentalism* (2001). Cannadine’s monograph explores how the Victorians constructed an image of themselves through their Empire, and utilises as its organising concept the world of stereotypes and caricature: it is from and through these concepts, Cannadine argues, that Victorian Britain was made. Yet, as he observes, neither the Victorians nor the British were alone in their ‘irrational’ actions. Thus Cannadine proclaims in his introduction to *Ornamentalism*:

Nations, it has recently become commonplace to observe, are in part imagined communities, depending for their credibility and identity both on the legitimacy of government and the apparatus of state, and on invented traditions, manufactured myths, and shared perceptions of the social order that are never more than crude categories and oversimplified stereotypes [...] the British Empire was not only a geopolitical entity: it was also a culturally created and imaginatively constructed artefact (2001: 3).

If Cannadine’s perspective is focused on imaginings of political and social structures, caricature is just as comfortable in the realm of personal memories. Turning to Milan Kundera’s mercurial novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, caricature weaves itself firmly into his existential narrative. Indeed in one of the many moments at which Kundera inserts himself into the narrative he writes of his protagonist Tomas thus:

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite.

This is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about (1984: 221).

Tomas is an invention of Kundera, and yet, the author concedes, even within the confines of the writing process he retains a ‘life’ of his own not fully under the control of his creator. For as Kundera notes, Tomas, as a character, is born not of a woman but of a situation, and is hence imbued with a situationality, a system of symbols and signs, which a single author can only shape — initially at least — from the periphery. And yet as we too all inhabit a world of

systems and signs, a situationality, then in turn to somebody somewhere we are all characters — individuals flattened and reduced to characters to suit local contexts.

This observation that a broad based definition of ‘caricature’ is an all but ubiquitous human experience, leads us to a point of convergence between scholars working across the academic disciplines. It ties in, for example, with the work of the pioneering political scientist Walter Lippmann whose 1922 work *Public Opinion* coined the word ‘stereotype’. ‘The system of stereotypes’, Lippmann writes, may be not only ‘the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society’, but, he continues ‘the fortress of our [collective] tradition’ behind whose boundaries ‘we can continue to feel safe in the position we occupy’ (1922: 63–64). This system is multi-faceted, at the apex of which resides the ‘perfect stereotype’, the hallmark of which ‘is that it precedes the use of reason’ and is ‘a fiction accepted without question’ (Lippmann 1922: 65, 80). These ‘perfect’ stereotypes rely for meaning on caricature, their egregious fictionalised examples made possible by an instinctive economisation of human experience. As Lippmann notes ‘for the most part, the way we see things is a combination of what is there and of what we expect to find’, and hence, in what he terms the ‘pseudo-environment’ (1922: 76, 10), that mental space between man and his environment:

Real space, real time, real numbers, real connections, real weights are lost. The perspective and the background and the dimensions of action are clipped and frozen in the stereotype (1922: 100).

This discussion of perceptual expectation and caricature intersects with the work of the art-historian and visual theorist Ernst Gombrich. His 1960 work ‘On Physiognomic Perception’ argued that humans immediately characterise that which they see in comparison to that which they have seen (1963: 45–55). This best guess at understanding based solely on appearance is then complemented, refined and rectified by everyday activities: communication, interaction, cooperation. For Gombrich, the absence of these latter activities in the appreciation of art is what makes good art so powerful: for by tapping into culture contexts such art apes these human activities on the canvas, on the page and in the photograph. By extension, these insights have great relevance to a discussion of caricature. Stereotypes are formed, typically, in an experience deficit where little or no communication, interaction and cooperation has taken place with those being stereotyped. At yet knowledge of their existence demands that their character is explained: in the absence of experience, a fiction around their collective person is constructed, one which corresponds to initial perception but is complemented by speculations which pretend to speak to objective

experience, to natural reasoning. Such is the purchase within group consciousness of some caricatures constructed in this manner, that experience is no longer able to refine them: a triumph of collective fiction over experiential reality which underpins Edward Said's groundbreaking, if controversial, *Orientalism* (1978).

In recent years, social explanations of caricature have been expanded upon by scholars offering psychological, biological and neurological explanations of stereotyping, of Gombrich's 'physiognomic perception'. Susanne Quadflieg and C. Neil Macrae begin their survey of social-cognitive and neuroscientific perspective on this very phenomenon: 'stereotypes', they write, 'offer apparent insights into the personalities and deeds of others without the cumbersome necessity of getting to know them' (2011: 215). These stereotypes are then formulated, developed and sustained by a number of seemingly instinctual human characteristics: fixed impressions on the world around and outside, an elision of behaviour and 'inner dispositions', person categorisation, the attribution of positive qualities to in-groups (i.e., social groups of which they are a member) at the expense of out-groups (i.e., social groups to which they do not belong), a desire to simplify and economise knowledge and communication ('stereotypes can save perceivers the effort of putting limited processing resources into individuated impression formation') (Quadflieg and Macrae 2011: 223), and social learning. In short, our shared neural architecture has much to answer for.

Precisely how the brain processes such complex phenomena remains beyond the reach of science, and Quadflieg and Macrae are correct to remain sceptical of neuroscientific explanations of and for the stereotype, ergo the caricature. Such caution is not shared by all. Most notably, Semir Zeki has sought to use the neural basis of perception to advance explanations of the interaction between the perceived and the perceiver (1999). In his quest to interrogate the correlation between neural activity and subjective human experience, Zeki has faced accusations ranging from overstating his evidence (or, more precisely, the evidential integrity of fMRI scans) to crass neurodeterminism. And yet by crediting artists with an instinctive understanding of human neurology — in short, Zeki argues, they know how to push our buttons — Zeki recognises that groups of humans have available to them a broad range of symbols and signs whose character can be observed and exploited. Some of these, for example the negativity readily associated with excrement and darkness, blur the boundary between instinctive and cultural meaning: an area teased at with some success by the geographer David Sibley in *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995). Others, stereotyping and caricature included, are cultural constructions which in order to be effective and sustainable

must appear to be objective and natural: gender, race, sexuality and religious discrimination legislation, for example, effectively place themselves in opposition to actions which were once considered — by the majority, the powerful, or both — natural and based on objective reasoning. These metanarratives are clearly necessary at a cognitive level, and yet, as Sterne's example reminds us, the transition from one position to another has the potential to cause confusion, concern, consternation and conflict.

One economising narrative (i.e., women are not equal to men) is then replaced with another (i.e., women are equal to men), thus returning us by way of neuroscience to Lippmann, Gombrich and Said. Moreover Zeki's work show how studies of caricature can fruitfully move freely through disciplinary boundaries, something all the scholars we have encountered have been keen to stress. As Quadflieg and Macrae state in their concluding remarks:

Only a multidisciplinary approach comprising the work of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and neuroscientists can ultimately succeed in explaining when, why, and how the human brain and mind are drawn to stereotypes and stereotyping (2011:254).

Caricature is then a post-disciplinary, nay trans-disciplinary, term: an organising concept that rewards investigations which do not limit themselves to working within a single set of paradigms, traditions and literatures.

Of course the problem with tracing caricature across disciplines is that to do so risks making the study of caricature not only unworkable in practice but also granting to 'caricature' an influence so ubiquitous so as to be meaningless. If caricature exists everywhere all of the time, how can we usefully bound it, conceptualise it and interrogate it? The essays which comprise this volume overcome this challenge, to some extent at least, by confining themselves to approaches and subjects familiar to humanities scholars, by not reaching decisively towards post- or non-disciplinary readings of caricature. And yet they also overcome this challenge by not attempting to establish if society is cradled in caricature, but rather by identifying where that caricature is of significance to the lives of past actors — both those doing the caricaturing or those suffering from its dehumanising gaze.

The issue begins in the 1790s, during not only the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution but also Britain's so-called 'Golden Age of Caricature' (Donald 1996). At this time satirical artist-engravers such as Isaac Cruikshank, James Gillray, Richard Newton and Thomas Rowlandson vied for the attentions of well-off metropolitan consumers with lurid, provocative and masterful caricature designs. One common genre, as Amy Milka explores, was the contrast print. In this genre of prints the characteristics of two opposing individuals,

groups or types were compared for comic pleasure. It is commonplace to observe that in British prints at least, signifiers of England, among the most prominent of which was John Bull, represented what was natural or normal — in particular when the contrast was concerned with France. But, as Milka argues, there is a more complex narrative to be found here. Rather than examples of a direct and unambiguous ‘us and them’ discourse, Milka locates in early-1790s dialogue pamphlets contrasting England and France a clear sense of conversation and interaction. As forerunners of the contrast print, dialogue pamphlets then place strain on readings of the former which neglect their conversational and interactive aspects, which stress their loyalist and anti-revolutionary character. Even in an era of acute ideological conflict, consumers of prints and pamphlets were asked to draw their own conclusions from these contrasts: blunt propaganda would not do.

Propaganda and caricature are themes expanded upon by Will Studdert. Moving our chronological focus to World War II, Studdert illuminates a narrative of compromises within the Nazi propaganda machine. But rather than examine these dynamics in traditional venues such as speeches, posters and events, Studdert examines the Nazi relationship to Jazz music. For in spite of their anti-modernist and racial agenda, both of which precluded the adoption of Jazz into the NSDAP’s cultural compass, demand from troops prompted attempts to relax restrictions on music listening. Thus a programme of ‘new German dance music’ was established, consisting of crude imitations of American Jazz, in order to discourage soldiers from tuning into British radio stations. However prejudice, as Studdert argues, won out, and the clumsy solution was ill-equipped for the cultural challenge posed by Jazz.

If Nazi propagandists were concerned with their caricatured and prejudiced understanding of Jazz corrupting individual Germans, then the caricaturist artist Edmund Xavier Kapp was concerned with embodying personality through caricature, with lifting the individual from the crowd. In doing so Kapp, as Emalee Beddoes explores in her essay on this little known early-twentieth century artist, was deploying caricature as an art form so as to detach individuals from the condescension of social caricature. Beddoes focuses on Kapp’s caricature portraits of geniuses, among them Picasso and Einstein, and demonstrates that although there are stereotypical elements within these works that bind them together as studies of ‘creative genius’, each is in fact better seen as a study of individual personality: of the unique as opposed to the generic. Caricature, she reveals, is just as crucial in the process of person recognition as it is group recognition.

As these essays explore, there are many outlets for caricature. To study caricature, then, is to study the historical, the local, the particular, the culturally contingent. And yet what makes caricature so fascinating is its centrality to human experience, social interaction and neural function. In short, the world — real and imagined, past and present — is cradled in caricature. It is then the murky terrain between the particular and the general, the micro and the macro, the antiquarian and the philosophical, that this volume occupies.

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