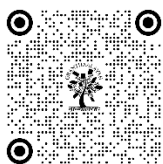


REYNOLDS' USE OF EDITORIAL CARTOONS FOR FIREBRAND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Thankam K Abraham ¹  , Dr. Anej Somaraj ²  

^{1,2} Assistant Professor, Department of English, Christian College, Chengannur, University of Kerala, India



ABSTRACT

Brandon Reynolds addresses issues of environment in his editorial cartoons and the paper aims to unravel how he manipulates the conventions of the medium for public awareness and opinion formation. Both the formal and thematic aspects of the cartoons are analysed. Reynolds' cartoons are an ample testimony of how cartoons hold their own as literary texts in the dissemination of ideas. The paper discusses how they serve as texts of ecocriticism. Since the medium has not much been brought under ecocritical analysis like poems and novels earlier the unique features of cartoons are focused. The dynamics of verbal and visual components are brought under study. The ecological and historical aspects are discussed.

Keywords: Editorial Cartoons, Environment, History, Humour

Received 16 February 2023

Accepted 15 May 2023

Published 20 May 2023

Corresponding Author

Thankam K Abraham,
thankamkabraham@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.334](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.334)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore the possibilities of political cartoons as ecological texts.
- 2) To unveil the interplay of the verbal and the visual in awareness creation and opinion formation.

1.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed is that of qualitative method involving an in-depth analysis of the cartoons selected.

Brandon Reynolds is an established editorial cartoonist from South Africa. The attempt of this paper is to enquire into the ways that Reynolds has adopted to address the issues of environment and climate change in his editorial cartoons featuring on Business Day and later posted on his website. [Witek \(2012\), p.34](#) remarks on the political roots of cartoons and goes on to say that they are more than just “juvenile humour and formulaic fantasy” as is evident in the works of Reynolds. [Weinstein \(2013\), p.45](#) observes that

Ecological texts, therefore, are texts that incorporate the concept that an individual is inescapably interdependent with their surroundings. They entertain the possibility of understanding the environment as representing continuity between any one individual part and the whole, with harmony and complexity as foundational principles. They recognize individuals as complexly interwoven and mutually constitutive of a population, community, ecosystem, and the ecosphere—radical unity in radical complexity.

The intention is to read these texts as ecological texts. The works under study date from June 2021 to November 2022. That 15 cartoons highlight environment related issues in this brief period is a remarkable fact. This reflects on the growing concern shared by the artistic world over the current global crisis. A serious engagement with ecological concerns is betrayed in them Zapf speaks of [Zapf \(2006\), p.51](#).

A content-oriented, sociopolitical form of ecocriticism in which literary and nonliterary texts are examined from criteria such as their attention to natural phenomena, their degree of environmental awareness, their recognition of diversity, their attitude to nonhuman forms of life, or their awareness of the interconnectedness between local and global ecological issues

This study is focussing on degree of environmental awareness present in the selected texts. Since they are political cartoons, they discuss the environmental impact of political decisions. Some of them may not contain direct political criticism but reflect on the sense of alarm that humanity should feel in the wake of a new geological age characterized by human interference. These ecological texts serve as historical texts too for they are commentaries on current events. In them we find a co-existence of ecology and history. As [Chakrabarty \(2009\), p.212](#) remarks in his seminal work “The climate of history” human history has become important to planetary history in the age of climate change.

Adam [Trexler \(2015\), p.5-6](#) makes the following observation in *Anthropocene fictions*

Cultural texts like novels, poems, and plays show complex networks of ideas: history, scientific ideas, political discourse, cultural rituals, imaginative leaps, and the matter of everyday life. Interpreting such texts can be understood as a way of describing the patterning of enormous cultural transformations, such as the Anthropocene. Just as important, literary studies can describe these patterns without reducing their complexity to a monovocal account, a set of bare “interests,” an immovable orthodoxy, or a predetermined certainty. It is able to accomplish this by examining a range of preexisting texts, not as mirrors of a culture, but as specific artifacts in wider networks of meaning.

The texts under scrutiny do not come under the categories of novel, poem or play but qualify as cultural and literary texts nevertheless. Though of a single author, they do exhibit a complex network of ideas that chronicle the transition to a new age. They are representative of the existential angst of the entire human civilization. They mark key decisions and figures that inform the environmental policy of South Africa that in turn contributes to the global scenario.

The selected editorial cartoons are single panel works with captions below them. For some of them the verbal content is limited within the frame when the message is clear enough. The humour is sardonic and wry, very much in the line of serious humour. In "How comics came to be," [Harvey \(2009\), p.29](#) discusses the evolution of gag cartoons and emphasizes the significance of captions in establishing the punch of the humour.

Whatever the cause, by the 1920s, a new style of gag cartoon was evolving. Cartoonists had discovered that all cartoons—not just visual puns—were funnier if the humor arose from joining picture to words in such a way that the one "explained" the other. In this form, gag cartooning achieves its apotheosis when neither the picture nor the words have humorous meaning alone. The picture sidles into a reader's consciousness as a kind of visual puzzle, meaningless until reading the caption "explains" it. The picture likewise "explains" the caption. Either way, as comprehension dawns—in the flash of an instant—the humor is revealed, and the revelation, coming, as it does, suddenly, gives comic impact to the combined "meaning" of the visual-verbal blend.

It is not rib tickling humour that we come across in the works of Reynolds. Yet the punch remains strong with irony. The visual and verbal elements work in unison to achieve that effect. And Reynolds is literally shouting his head off with the words written almost wholly in capital case. The messages are strong and clear.

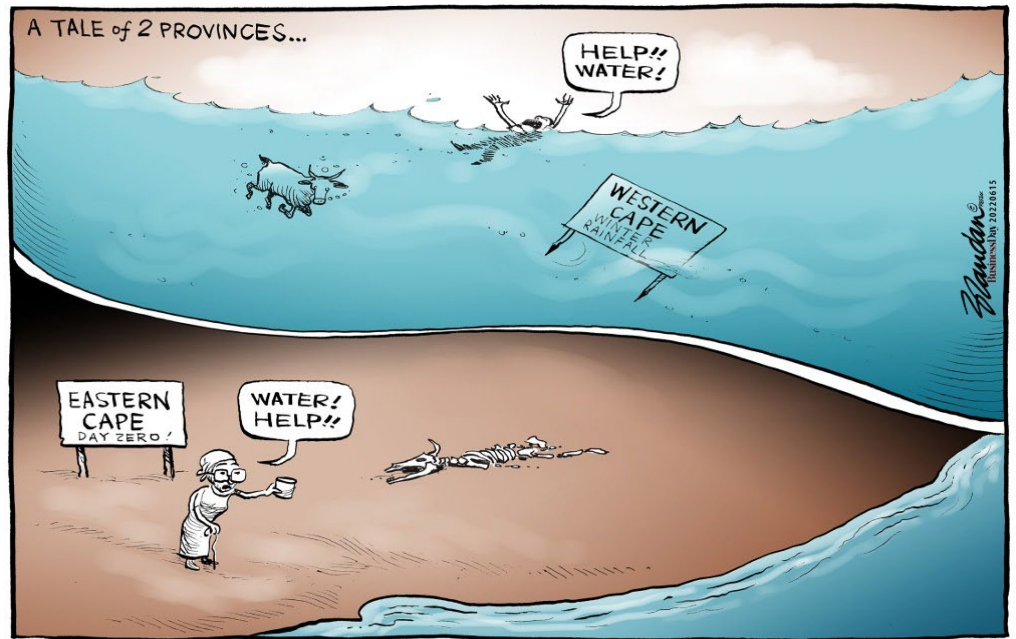
What follows is a thematic analysis of the selected cartoons. A flooded globe with cancerous plastic accumulation is the status of earth on Oceans day 2021. The planet has literally turned blue living up to its title of the blue planet in a catastrophic manner. Most of the cartoons are a reflection on the energy crisis faced by South Africa and the choices made by the leaders make them the subject of these cartoons. The solution to the energy problem must be green enough if we want to avert an existential crisis. Reynolds has sufficiently highlighted the idea in his works under scrutiny. The Titanic of Turkish Karpowerships meets its doom on the icebergs of environment impact assessment. One can also read that the icebergs are turning into water soon. The smoky fossil fuel chef is putting the planet to an oven following the recipe for disaster near at hand. The recipe book has a red flag of danger flying out of it. In another cartoon Eskom's chief is facing a block due to a coal mountain in his attempts to find a greener alternative to South Africa's energy requirements. The mountain has the face of Minerals minister Gwede Mantashe. It is a satiric statement on Mantashe's energy policies.



Minerals Minister Gwede Mantashe pours cold water on Eskom's plan to go green and reduce its reliance on coal... [Reynolds \(2021\)](#)

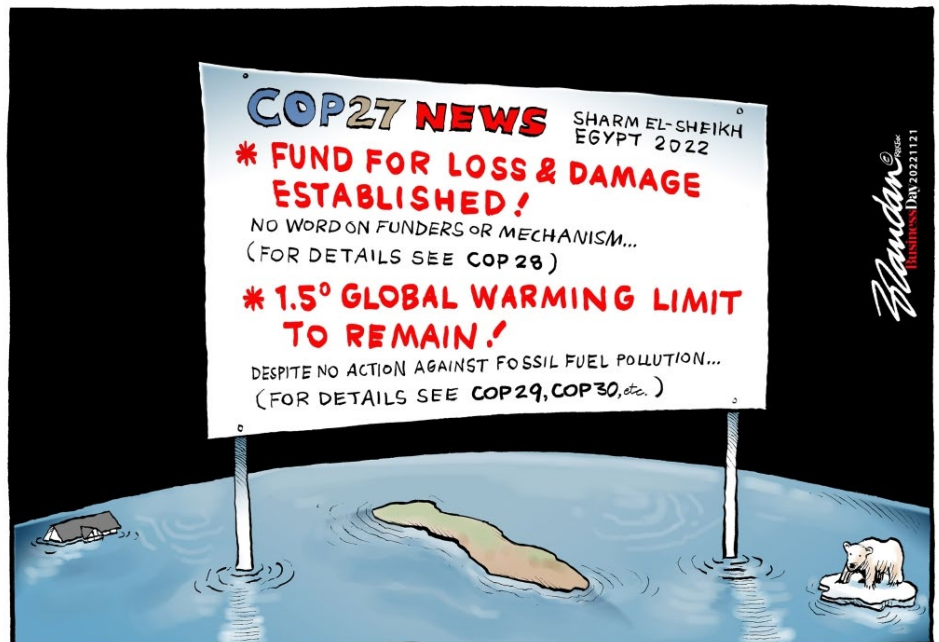
Yet another hit at Mantashe is a cartoon featuring him announcing his 'contribution' to renewables by 'renewing' the 2500 MW nuclear tender. Six months have passed but Mantashe remains adamant in refusing renewable alternatives for energy and the coal mountain still has his face even though Eskom chief is nowhere to be seen. Karpowerships head keeps his fingers crossed as he receives the Nersa approval from Mantashe even before environmental clearance. A dig at Andre de Ruyter from Eskom as he is shown receiving the award for 'greenest coal fired power stations' due to the frequent breakdowns at COP26. A skullfaced Mantashe declares that Eskom's attempts to go green will happen only over his dead body. The pun on the image is too vivid to be missed. The word play on 'fossil fool' strikes one as brilliant and unfortunately, apt. The COP26 president Sharma kicks the coal issue bucket out of his way to the COP27 conference by diluting the resolution on reduced coal consumption. It is a symbolic death of COP26 and everything it promised. A cartoon on the 2021 local government elections in South Africa is drawing its pun from climate change with President Ramaphosa conceding that climate change real even as he skips COP26.

The logo of Shell Oil company replete with the two flaming bones spell danger to the planet as evidenced by their survey mechanisms off the South African coast. Brandon Reynolds goes to the extent of calling Shell Oil company 'climate criminal.' Mantashe seems to have grown a Shell Oil logo beard as he is bent on supporting the company's activities. In the cartoon titled 'A Tale of Two Provinces', Reynolds depicts the parched landscape of eastern cape coupled with a western cape under the siege of water, both casualties of climate change.



Reynolds (2022)

In a cartoon that announces COP27 as our last chance to survival, Reynolds employs an hour glass that has a green earth filtering out as desert sand into the lower half. The artist has effectively captured the urgency of the issue and picturesquely conveys that time is indeed running out. The November 21st cartoon depicts disillusionment with COP 27. It discusses the major outcomes of the conference namely fund for losses and damages with no word about the source of fund and a sustainment of the 1.5°C limit with no measures to contain fossil fuel consumption. The decisions are infinitely postponed to the future conferences. The signboard announcing these outcomes stand out conspicuously in an inundated north pole landscape or rather waterscape with an iconic polar bear stranded on a fast melting iceberg.



Outcomes of COP27 Reynolds (2022)

The colors employed in the selected cartoons are largely black, grey, blue, pale pink, occasionally red, yellow, and rarely green. It is not a coincidence that the cartoons reflecting the dismal present are grounded in black. It is to make more vivid the stark reality of the times. There are many cartoons by Reynolds during the said period other than those under scrutiny which deal with the energy crisis faced by South Africa. The cartoons are a play of the light and dark shades of these colors and the contrast is vivid and far from diminishing softly. Significantly the color green features only in COP cartoons. It is perhaps an indication that any hope of turning green is heavily leaning on such conferences. In "Shape and color as hermeneutic images in Asterios Polyp" [Duncan \(2012\), p.45](#) remarks that "Hermeneutic images do not represent either the physical or mental reality of the fictional world; they are not meant to be part of the diegesis. These images are the author's commentary on the story and are often explicit attempts to influence the interpretation of the story." Even though it's no fictional world under study here, colors can nevertheless be considered to influence the interpretation of the cartoons. The world that he depicts deals with stark realities of the times with no soft cushioning offered around hard facts. Hence the powerful contrast of colors.

His favourite punctuations are ellipsis and exclamation mark, possibly to indicate what is mostly left unsaid and the consternation that he feels at state of things respectively. It has been noticed that he suggests delicate shadows of the figures depicted so as to perhaps indicate that they are indeed under limelight and are powerful enough to remain there. And the powerful takes decisions on behalf of the entire planet. Reynolds comes across as a master in caricature, a skill that infinitely helps him editorial cartoons. He being an editorial cartoonist has highly influenced the subject matter of his cartoons on environment. They target policy makers and large corporations like Eskom, or else they are general exhortations on the need to change. The cartoons are a critique on the prevalent democratic institutions. Nevertheless, one has to agree with [Trexler \(2015\), p.134](#) that:

Accordingly, climate change is best addressed with existing democratic institutions creating aggressive reductions in greenhouse gases, rather than through entrenched environmental protest. In this account, environmental pressure groups and NGOs have a role to play in encouraging action, but only within the overall structure of existing democratic states.

The image that grows out of these cartoons is a dismal one what one can call dystopic. The impression received is that of a nightmarish vision bringing to mind the Munchian nightmare with humanity desperately trying to break out of that nightmare but failing, nevertheless. In this regard these cartoons can be termed 'declensionist' narratives as D.deB. [Richter \(2016\), pp. 97-100](#) calls them as they deal with extinction, degradation, climate change and so on.

In this regard the cartoons of Brandon Reynolds are actively engaged in resisting the process of climate change. Editorial cartoons are indeed a democratic way of sustaining public interest in turmoil of events that determine the future of our planet. One cannot belittle them as propaganda for they aim at achieving a global consensus on sensitive issues that address personal as well as national and international choices. The goal is sustained life on earth which is far from petty profiteering. These cartoons serve "as a potential medium of consciousness change and an increased ecological sensibility which, however indirectly, can help contribute to a change of political and social practice" [Zapf \(2006\), p. 51](#).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The Climate of History : Four Theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), Winter, 197-222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>.
- Duncan, R. (2012). Shape and Color as Hermeneutic Images in Asterios Polyp. In M. J. Smith and R. Duncan (Ed.), *Critical Approaches to Comics : Theories and Methods*. New York : Routledge, 43-54.
- Harvey, R. C. (2009). How Comics Came to be. In J. Heer and K. Worcester (Ed.), *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 25-45.
- Reynolds, B. (2021, August 26). Minerals Minister Gwede Mantashe Pours Cold Water on Eskom's Plan to Go Green and Reduce its Reliance on Coal. Editorial Cartoons by Brandon Reynolds.
- Reynolds, B. (2022, June 15). A Tale of two Provinces. Editorial Cartoons by Brandon Reynolds.
- Reynolds, B. (2022, November 21). Outcomes of COP27. Editorial Cartoons by Brandon Reynolds.
- Richter, D. B. (2016). The Crisis of Environmental Narrative in the Anthropocene In : Whose Anthropocene ? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses. *RCC Perspectives : Transformations in Environment and Society*, (2), 97-100.
- Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene Fictions : The Novel in à Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1r99>
- Weinstein, J. A. (2013). Urban Ecology in Gary Snyder's 'Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads' and 'Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin. In K. E. Waldron and R. Friedman (Ed.), *Toward a Literary Ecology : Places and Spaces in American literature*. Maryland : The Scarecrow Press Inc.
- Witek, J. (2012). Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family'S Dirty Laundry. In M. J. Smith and R. Duncan (Ed.), *Critical Approaches to Comics : Theories and Methods*. New York : Routledge, 27-42.
- Zapf, H. (2006). The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology. In C. Gersdorf and S. Mayer (Ed.), *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. New York : Rodopi B.V., 49-69.