

The Deadly Drawing: an artistic research by Self-reflective Steve

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Abstract

This article, consisting of 31 illustrations with annotation, presents the result of an artistic research project revolving around the question of how to use one's power as a creator of humour. The reader/viewer is presented with insight into the life and thinking of cartoonist/artistic researcher Self-reflexive Steve, who engages in self-investigation because he is conscious of the virtues as well as the dangers of humour. In a globalised, diverse, and democratic world, it is important to consider different sensibilities within society. Self-reflexive Steve always regarded humour as a form of connecting communication, because when people are able to laugh together, they understand each other. However, Self-reflexive Steve increasingly wonders whether he has achieved his set targets, as he primarily acts for a captive audience and creates his humorous drawings from a safe stand-off in his ivory tower. His publications are always endorsed by the editorials of the magazines he is working for and this within a society where humour makers are protected and esteemed. However, in today's society humour is frequently used to divide. As a cartoonist/researcher, Self-reflexive Steve explores the limits of his medium, deliberately going off the rails at times. As a humour maker he seeks to reclaim the right to use fantasy, lies, distortions, exaggerations and wild associations from those in power who deploy these qualities of humour to divide and rule.

Keywords: dangerous humour, artistic research, self-reflection, cartoon, comic.

The Deadly Drawing by and about Self-reflective Steve (aka Steve Michiels, b. 1970, Belgium)

This article is unconventional within the context of an academic journal. In fact, it originated within an artistic research project as part of a PhD in the Arts. This has existed in Belgium since 2004 and is a consequence of the academization of higher Arts education as agreed in the 1999 Bologna Treaty. The PhD in the Arts is a “practice-based PhD,” the form of which can be variable. In this case, the medium of a graphic novel was opted for because it is in line with the artistic practice of the cartoonist/researcher “Self-reflective Steve” (S-r.S.). This introductory note accompanies the following 31 illustrations and subsequent endnotes.

In *The Deadly Drawing*, the reader/viewer is presented with insight into the life and thinking of cartoonist/artistic researcher S-r.S. He represents both researcher and research object. S-r.S. engages in self-investigation because he is conscious of the virtues, on the one hand, but also the dangers of humour, on the other. In a globalised, diverse, and democratic world, it is important to consider different sensibilities within society. S-r.S. has always regarded humour as a form of connecting communication, because when people are able to laugh together, they can understand each other. Nevertheless, it is not always clear whether he has achieved his set targets. He primarily acts for a captive audience and creates his humorous drawings from a safe stand-off in his ivory tower. He seldom receives comments on his work. Furthermore, his publications are always endorsed by the editorials of the magazines he is working for and this within a society where humour makers are protected and esteemed.

It annoys S-r.S. that in today's society humour is frequently used to divide. Some politicians use humour to minimize responsibilities, ridicule political opponents or depict populations, for example.

As a cartoonist/researcher, S-r.S. explores the limits of his medium, deliberately going off the rails at times. As a humour maker, S-r.S. seeks to reclaim the right to use fantasy, lies, distortions, exaggerations and wild associations from those in power who deploy these qualities of humour to divide and rule.

The key question of whether S-r.S. uses his power as a humour maker himself correctly is the main question guiding his artistic research. However, are there many reflections on what humour could possibly do that are conducive to humour? Perhaps the humorous way of communicating is outdated? For in humour nothing is truly articulated. Humour is eminently ambivalent; the world is constantly being turned upside down and there are confusing aspects. So is it permissible to create even more confusion in confusing times?

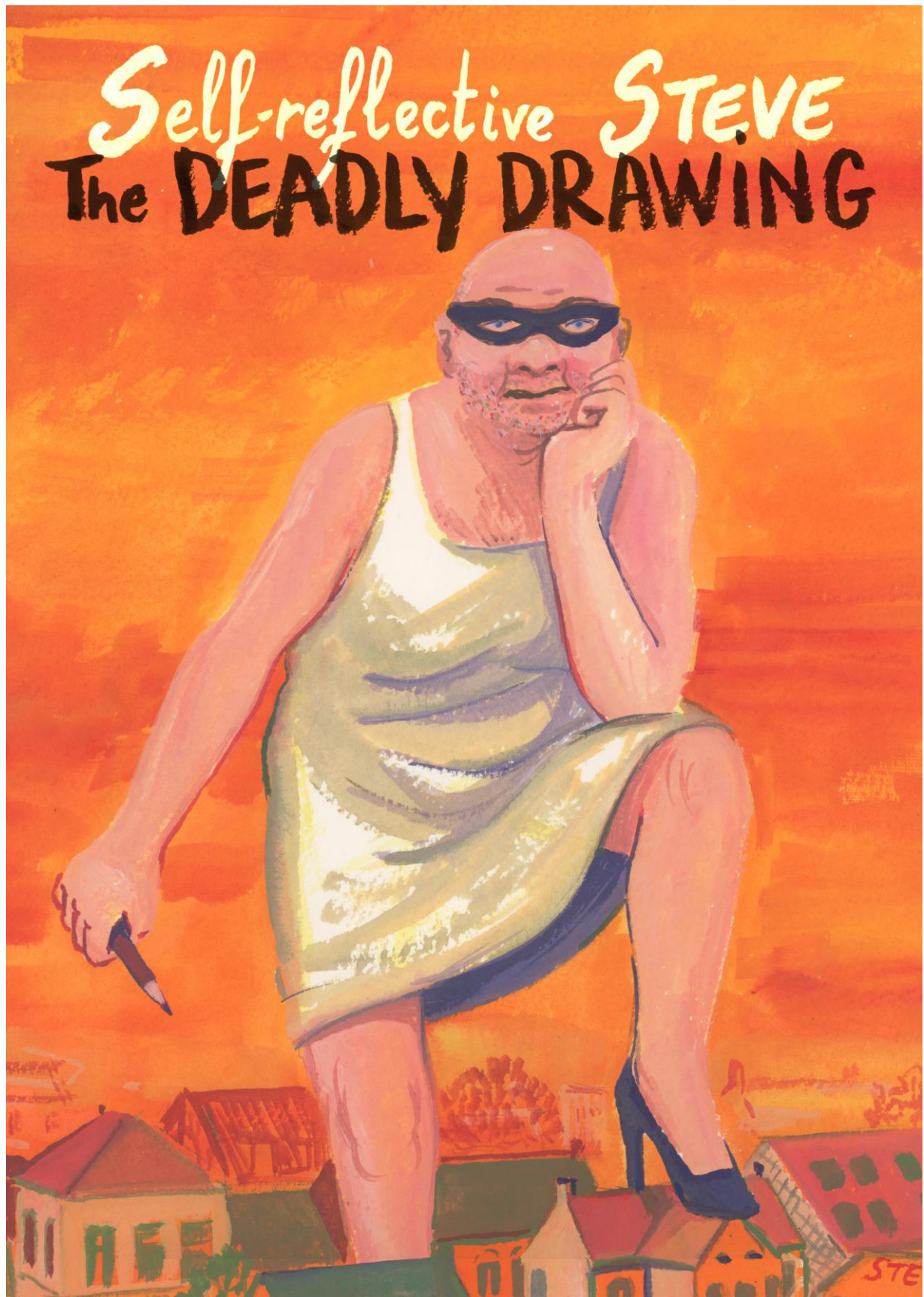
Many questions posed by the cartoonist/researcher are examined in detail scientifically in this special issue of EJHR. The parallels with the articles by the various humour scholars featured here are clearly articulated in the preface by Giseline Kuipers and Dick Zijp.

However, the main references on which this artistic research is built have their origins within the arts field. The truth is that a cartoonist is also a fine artist. In this artistic research, for instance, René Magritte (1898-1967) is frequently referred to, as this Belgian surrealist artist eagerly made use of humour to create his alienating art images. However, Magritte refused to explain the humour in his work because he wanted to preserve the generated mystery. Still, Magritte recorded his theory of the imagery in the pamphlet *Les mots et les images*. He was an artistic researcher *avant la lettre*, and the way he composed his image associations echoes today in the imagery generated by A.I.

René Magritte's artistic vision was significantly influenced by *Fantômas'* adventures. This artistic study also refers to this fictional, masked, pre-war (1913) anti-hero on the grounds that he was a precursor to superheroes such as *Batman*. The Batman comics, in addition, are a major inspiration for this artistic research.

The humour of the comedy troupe *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is also an important inspiration for this artistic research. The latter collective's absurdist humour exemplified the humour S-r.S. grew up with as a young artist. These references to the art of the past are juxtaposed with more recent work by S-r.S. himself made for the Belgian magazine *Knack*. These contrast the tension between brutal war, on the one hand, and sensitivity to inclusivity on the other. The numerous other references within this artistic research are detailed in endnotes. In this academic context, this is unconventional, but considering that we are concerned here with an artistic study in the context of a graphic novel, this format is nevertheless preserved. The reader is advised to go through the full graphic novel first and subsequently read the endnotes. In the following illustrations, you will see and read about an on-going incomplete self-examination, a self-portrait in progress. Self-reflective Steve will conclude his PhD in 2026.

Nonetheless, he hopes, or I hope, to contribute to the scientific research on humour within the public sphere through this intermediate result of my artistic research.

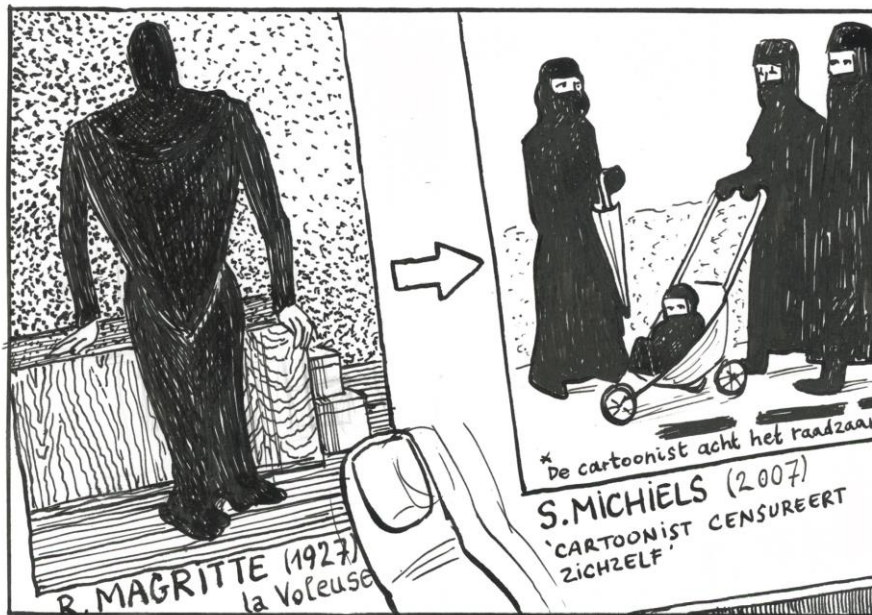


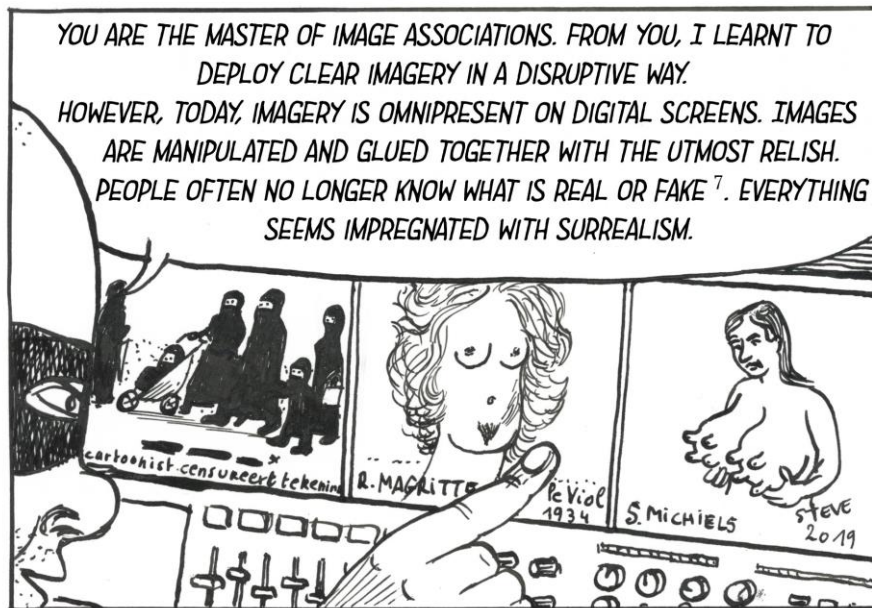
IN THE IVORY TOWER WHERE HE RESEARCHES HUMOUR¹, CARTOONIST STEVE IS ON THE VERGE OF A REVOLUTIONARY BREAKTHROUGH...



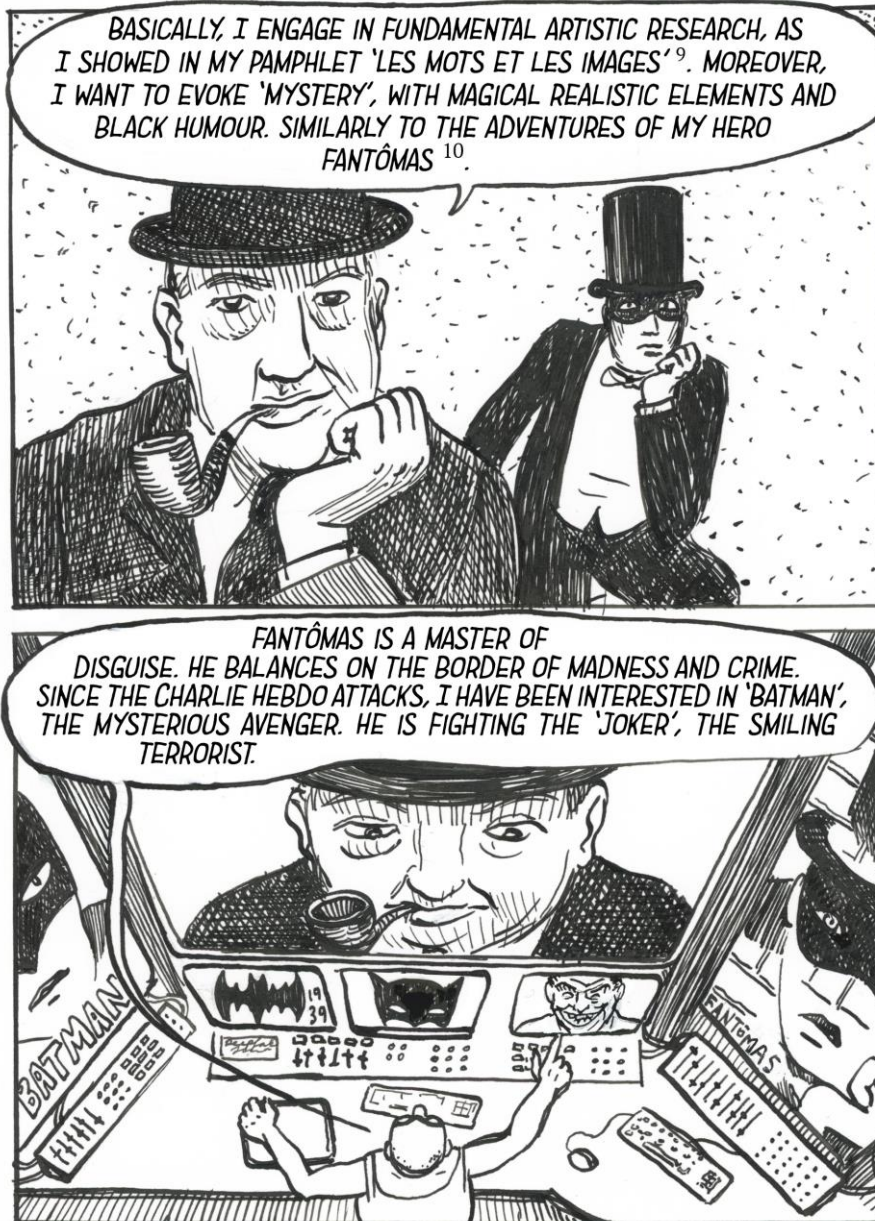


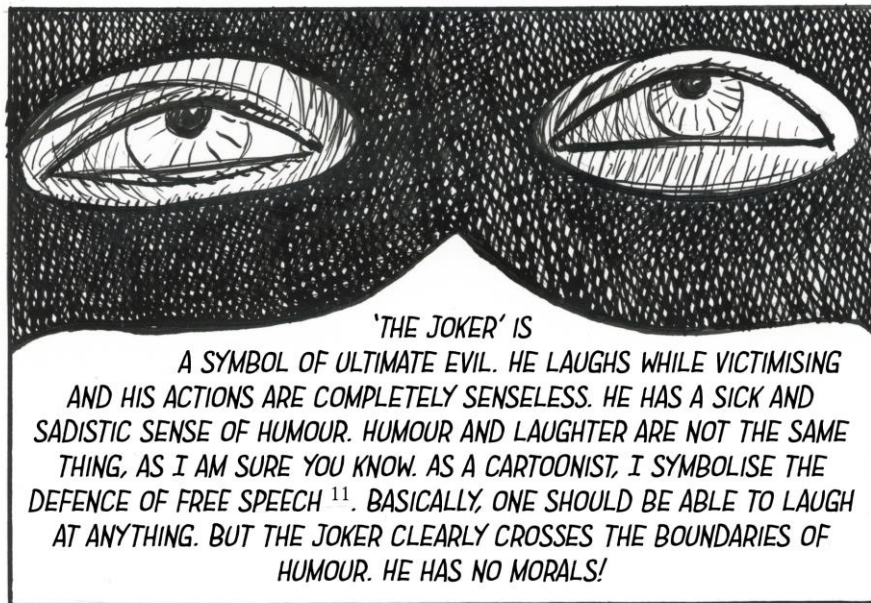




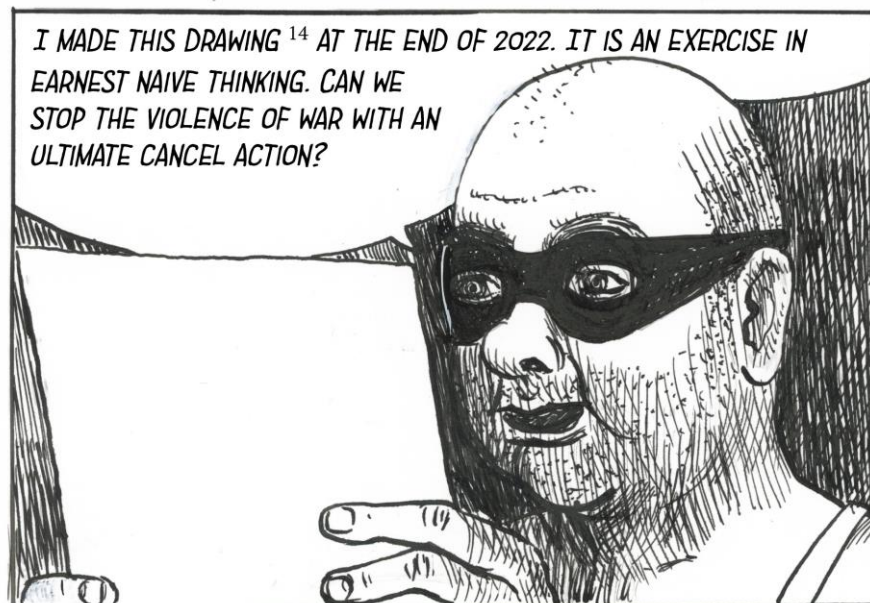
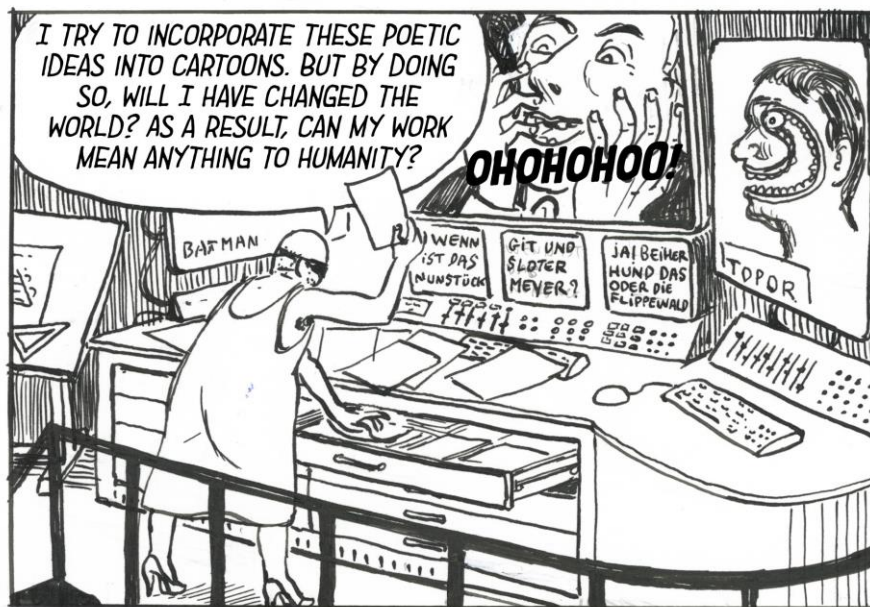


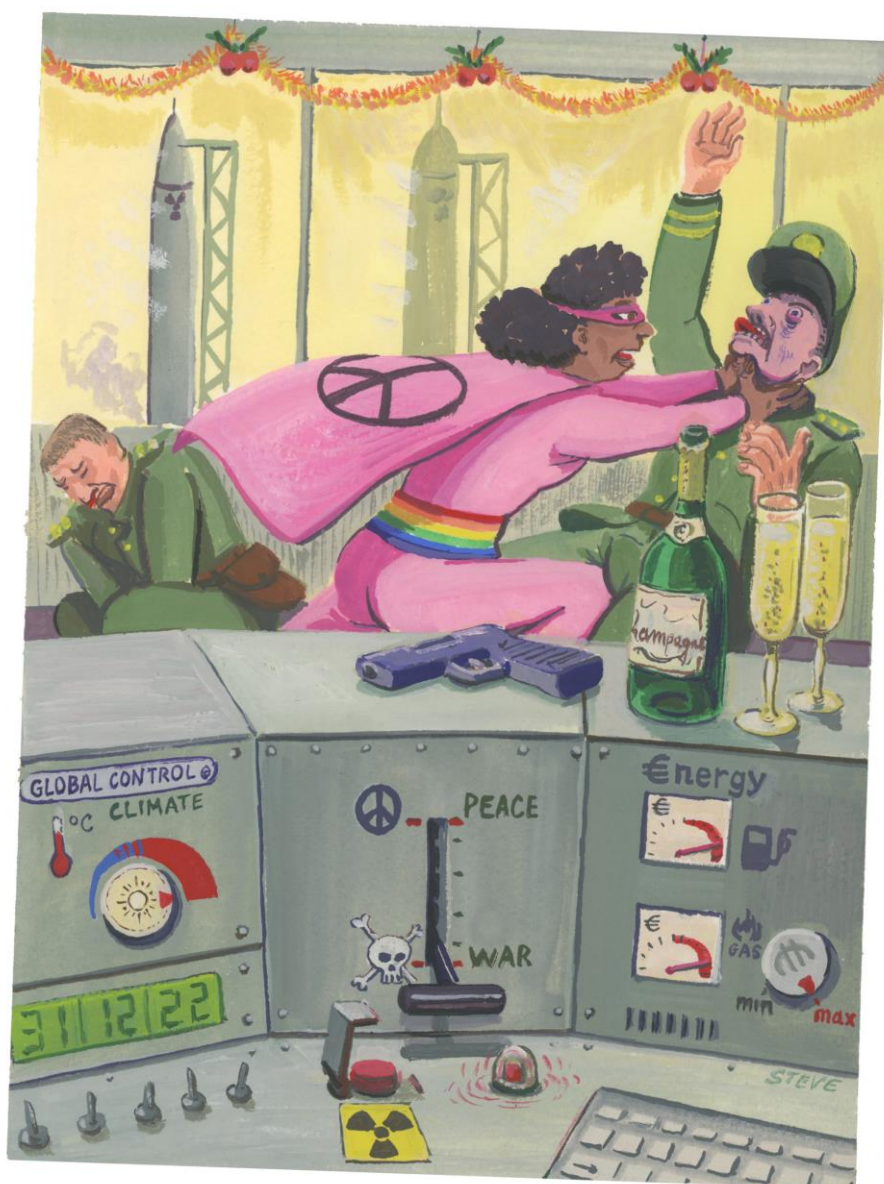




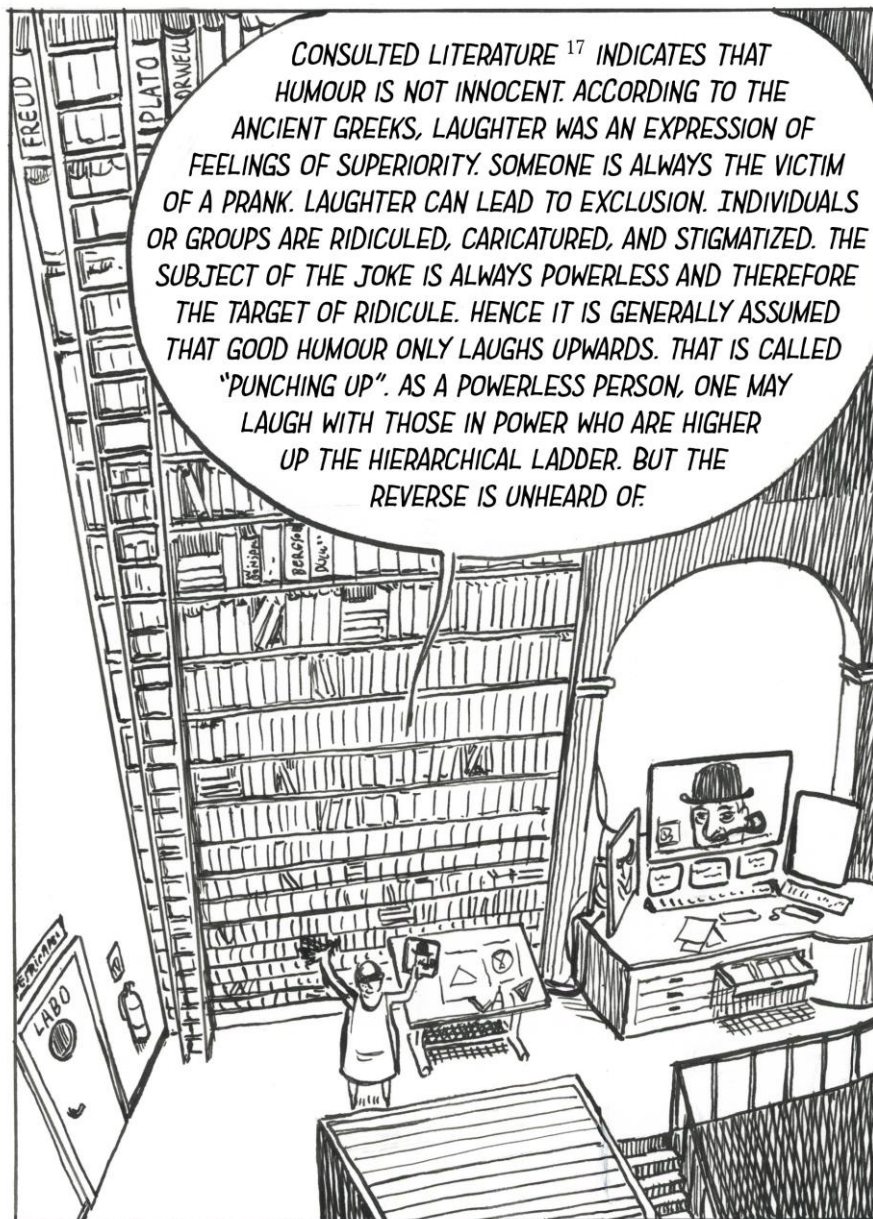


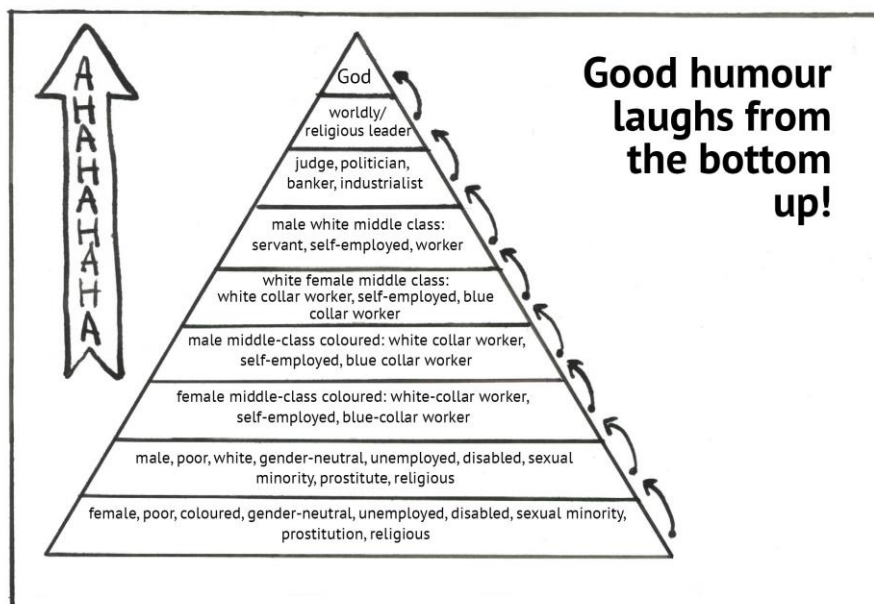
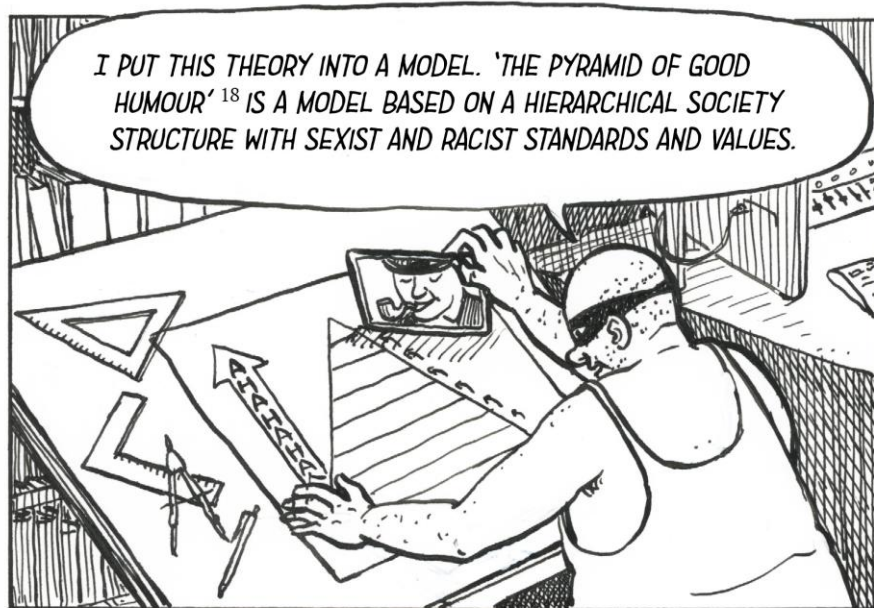


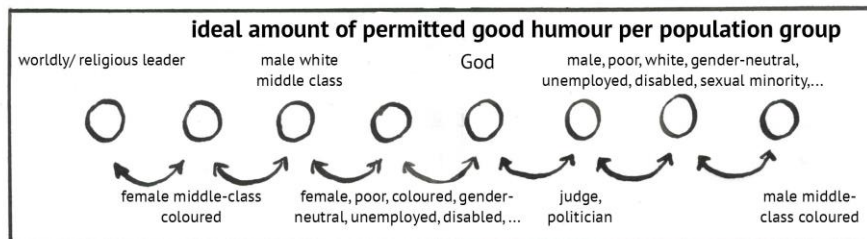
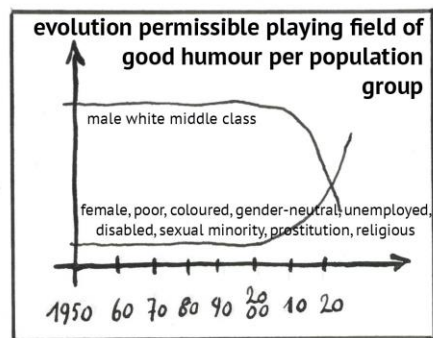
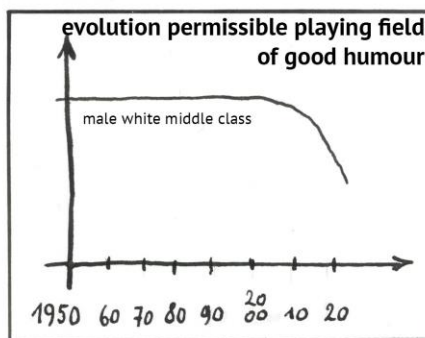
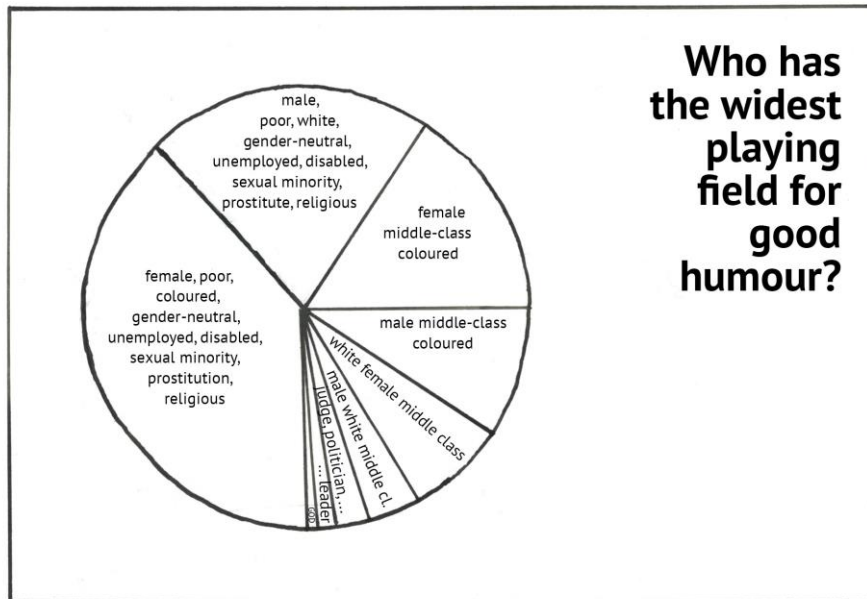


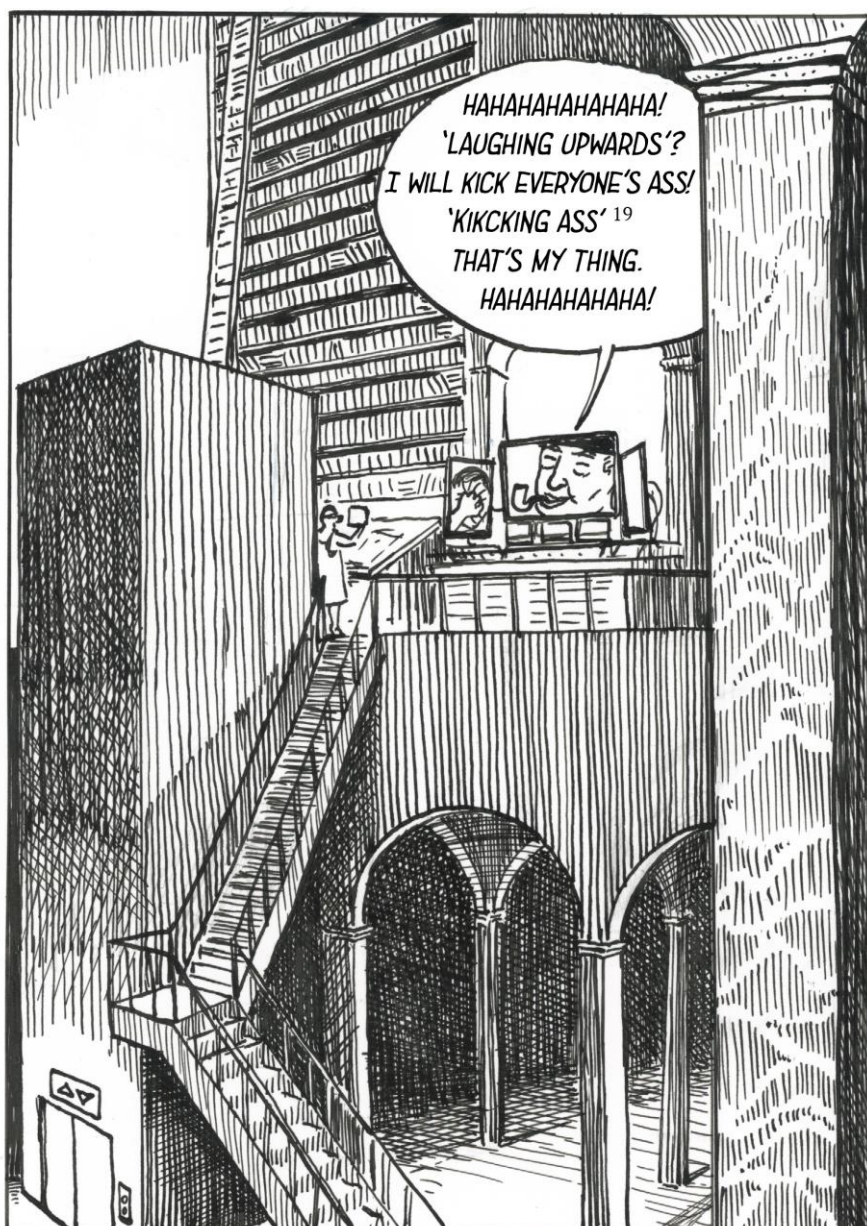












IN A MONTY PYTHON SKETCH, A MAN'S PRESENCE MAKES THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM LAUGH. THE PEOPLE STOP FUNCTIONING FROM LAUGHING. AS A RESULT, THE LAUGHABLE MAN'S EMPLOYER IS FORCED TO FIRE HIM²⁰.

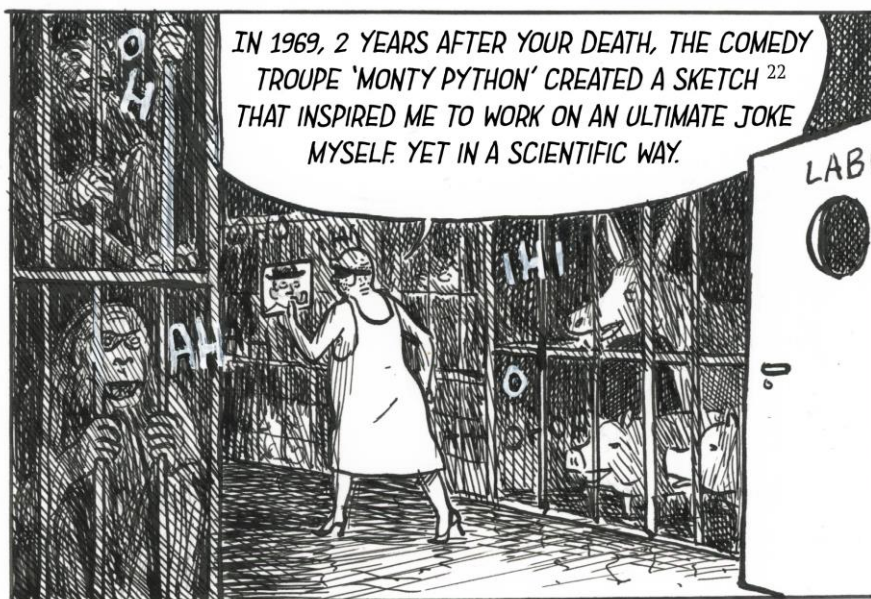
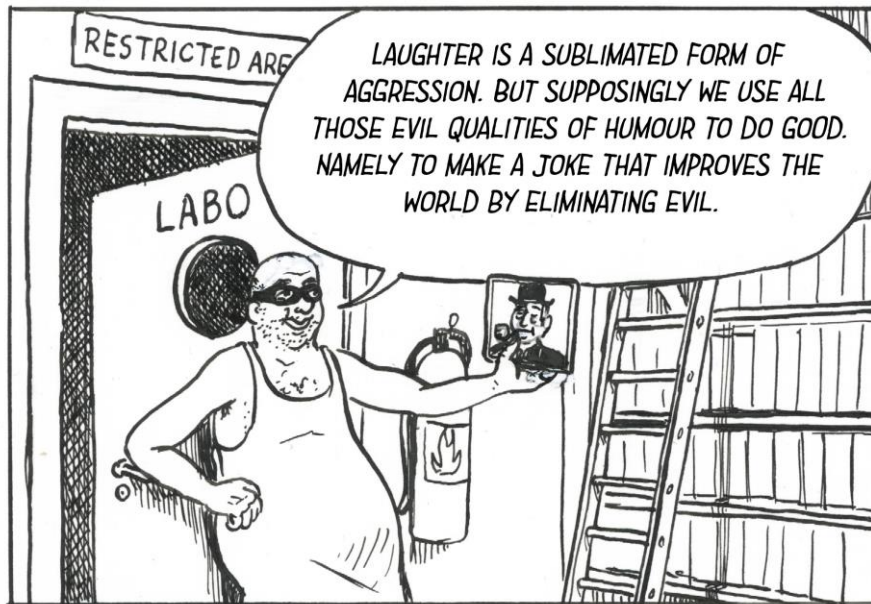


SO THE MAN EVERYONE LAUGHS
AT GETS FIRED EVEN THOUGH
HE IS THE VICTIM OF LAUGHTER.
WE LAUGH OUT OF MALICIOUS
AMUSEMENT. WILL WE CONTINUE
TO DO SO WHEN WE REPLACE THE
STEREOTYPICAL MAN ²¹?



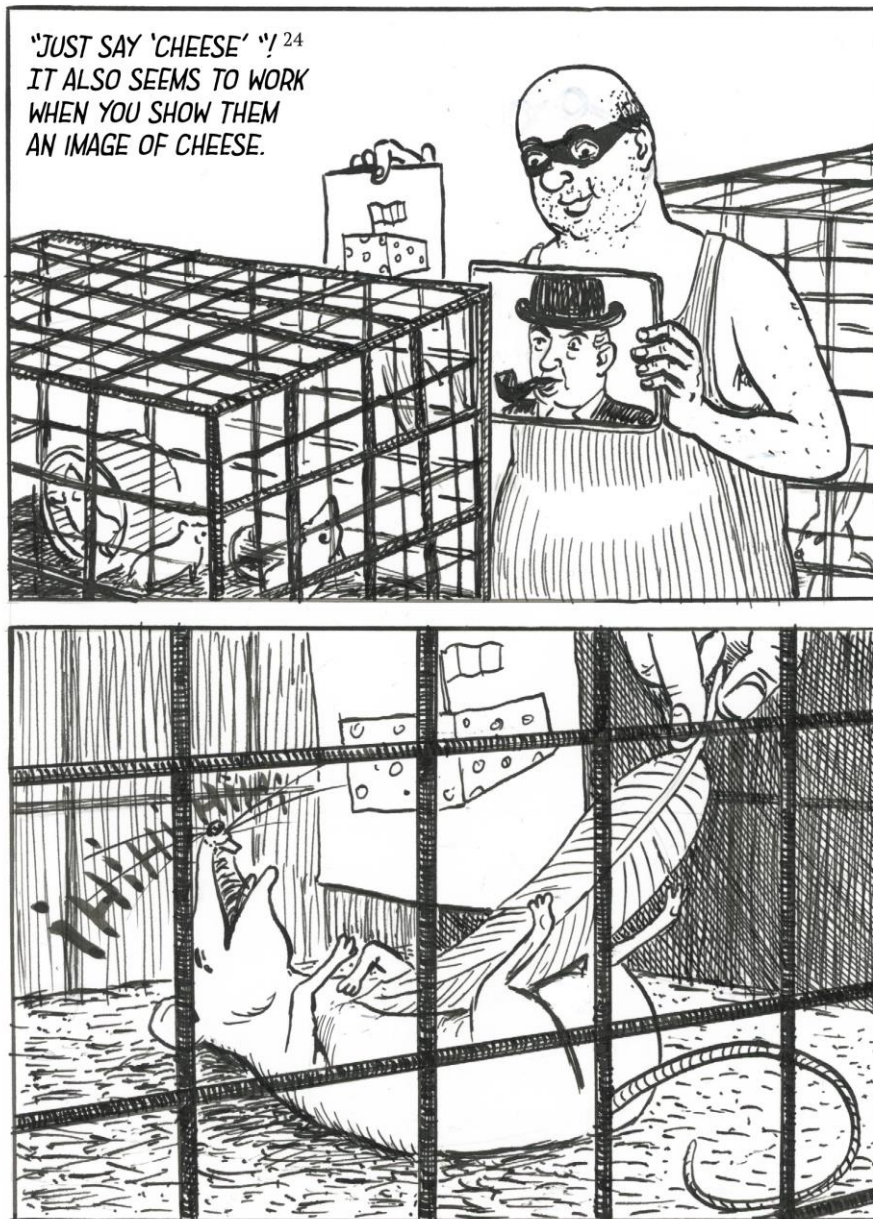
*THERE IS NO COMPASSION IN
HUMOUR.*

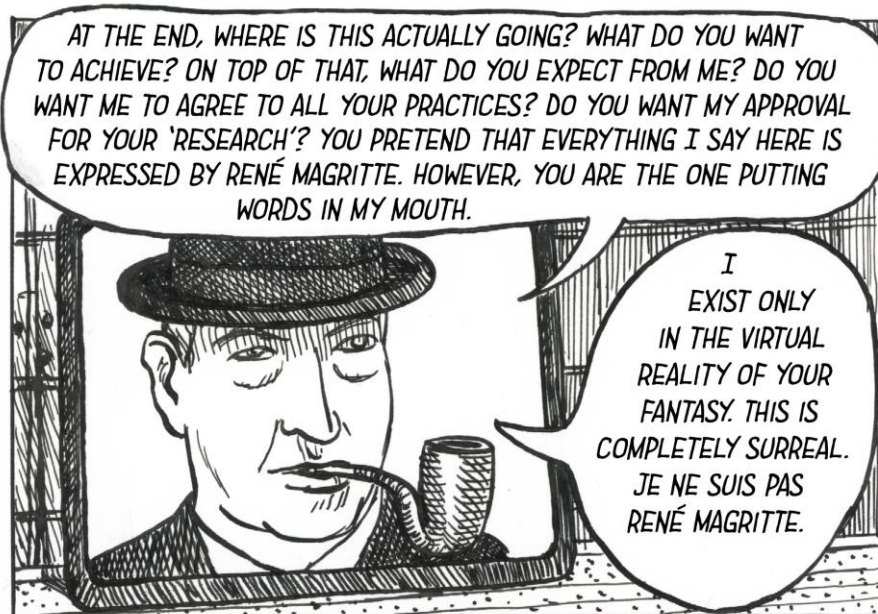




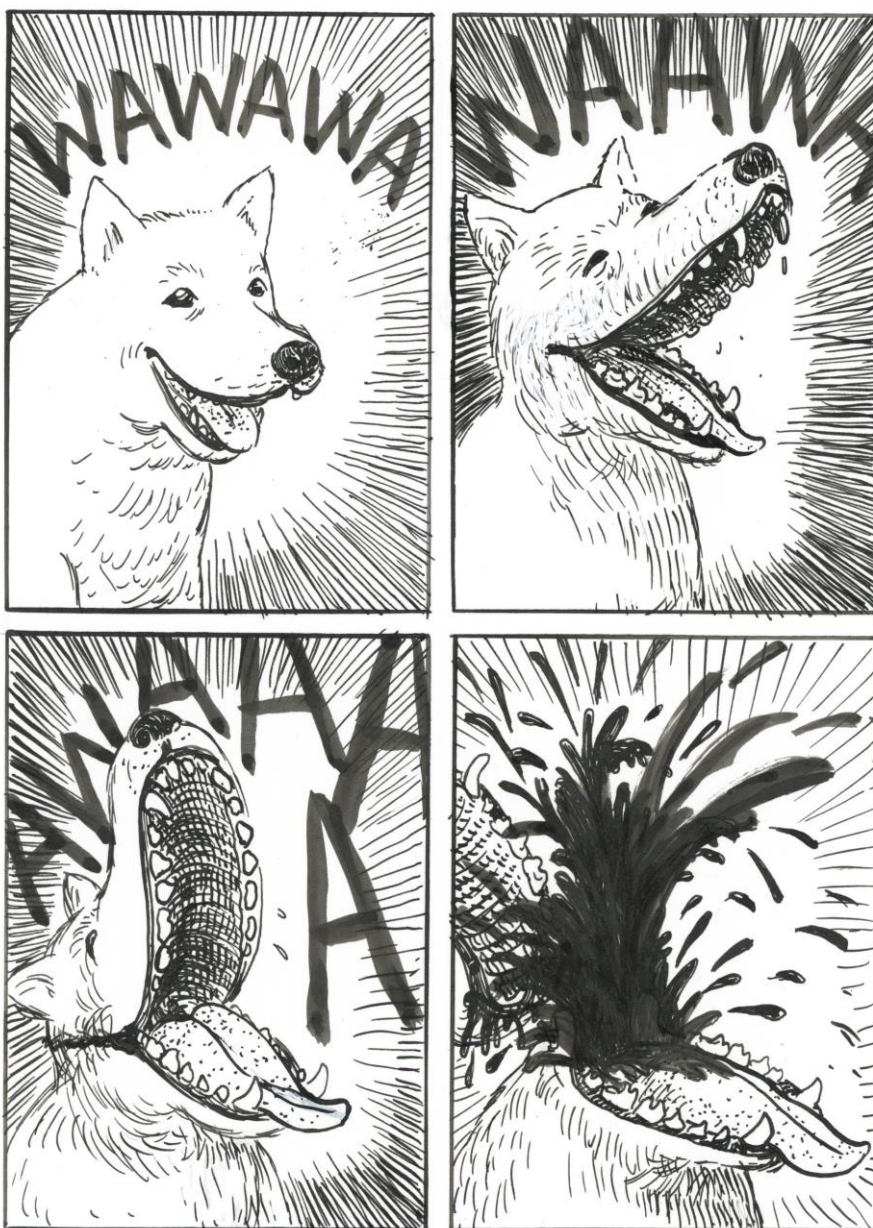












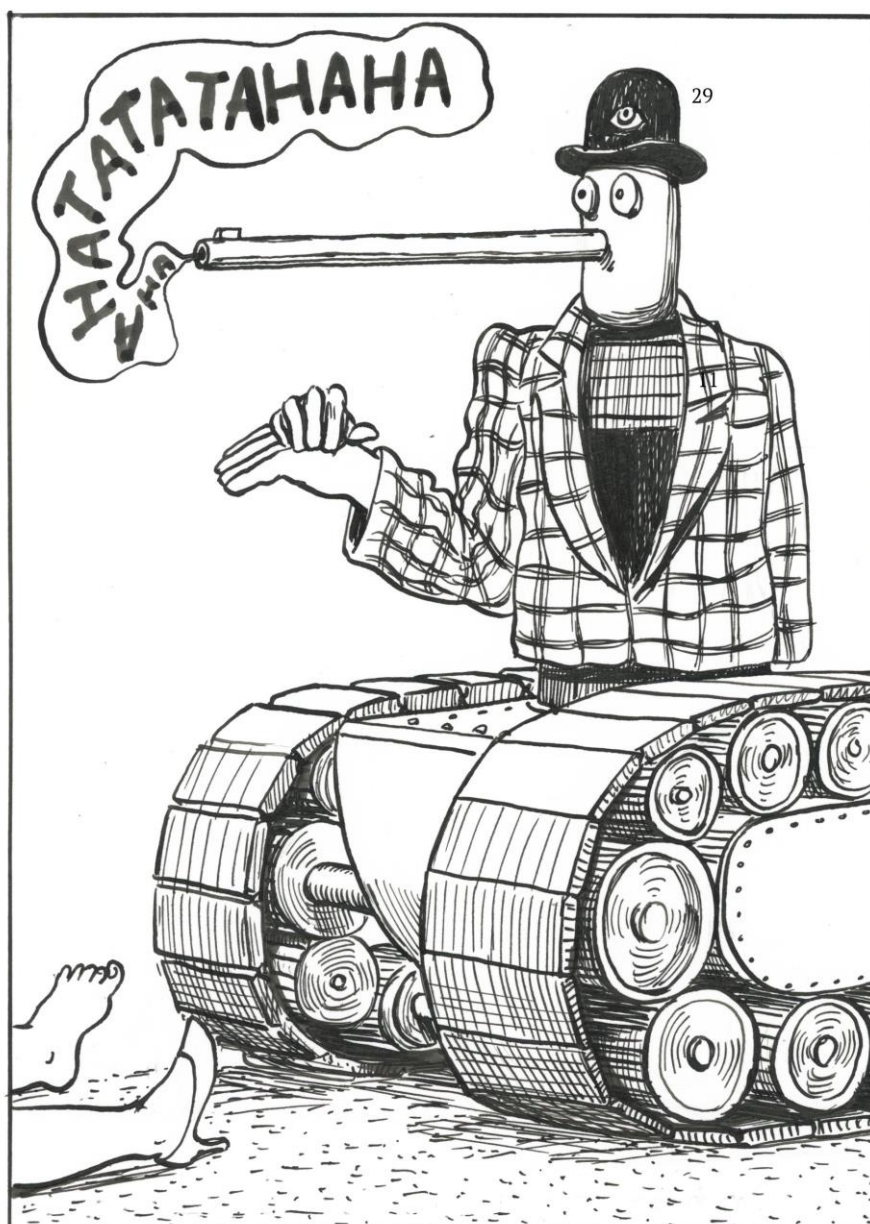












TO BE CONTINUED... ³⁰

Notes

¹ The resemblance to the campus of the University of Bologna in Bertinoro is no coincidence. Cartoonist Steve Michiels attended the conference of ISHS - International Society of Humour Studies from 28 June to 2 July 2022, and presented the results of his artistic research there.

² The Batman comic *The Killing Joke* (Moore & Bolland, 1988) tells the history of The Joker. The psychopathic clown was originally a stand-up comedian who failed to support his family with his botched performances. The figure of The Joker is inspired by Victor Hugo's *l'Homme Qui Rit* from 1869.

³ Roland Topor (1938-1997) was a French cartoonist, illustrator, author, filmmaker, and actor. His surrealistic and often painfully sadistic humour was an important influence on the work of the young cartoonist Steve. Topor himself was strongly influenced by René Magritte, among others. Topor's drawing *Un éclat de rire hystérique* is continued in this story.

⁴ Cartoonist Steve chooses René Magritte (1898-1967) as his mentor because Magritte, together with the Dadaists and Surrealists, were the first to systematically introduce humour into the visual arts. From September 15, 2021 to January 15, 2022, the exhibition *Hahaha* ran at the ING Art Centre, Brussels. This exhibition highlighted the importance of humour in the work of René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp, among others. The catalogue of this exhibition is an important source of inspiration (Bertail & Liucci-Goutnikov, 2021).

⁵ Did Magritte forget that the image of a nose does not equal the actual nose? In *La trahison des images* or *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1928-1929), perhaps the most famous painting by the Belgian surrealist, he shows that the image of a pipe is only a reflection of the real pipe, or the representation of the concept of "pipe." Therefore, the image is always a deception. So how can Magritte's nose in this drawing be his real nose?

⁶ In Denmark, on 30 September 2005, the daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Muslims were offended by this matter and manifested against the West. Several newspapers stood up for the Western cartoonists because they had the right to free speech, regardless of the content of their work. The cartoons caused much collateral damage because they were taken out of context and because images are now open to multiple interpretations. Cartoons, like works of art, are ambivalent (cf. Kuipers, 2011).

⁷ In the book *Dit is geen propaganda (This is not propaganda)*, Peter Pomerantsev (2019) describes fake news and disinformation as the new form of censorship, designed to destabilize society and undermine our idea of truth. With the rise of social media, the old methods of silencing and breaking people's mouths have become unsustainable. Those in power have adapted, and instead of an ideology of information scarcity (censorship), they are tactically moving towards an ideology of information overload in which expression itself is a weapon with which to conduct censorship (Pomerantsev, 2019, pp. 50-51 and 173-177). The technology of social media, combined with a worldview in which the mass of information is not necessarily based on actual facts, is causing us to become disoriented.

⁸ Several versions of the painting *l'Explication* exist, as is often the case with Magritte. The version referred to here, oil on canvas, from 1952 is on display at the Magritte Museum, in The Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels.

⁹ In a letter to *Paul Nougé* in November 1927, Magritte announced that he had made a remarkable discovery. He mixed two images with no logical connection so that, once connected and ‘fused’ together, they offered a third image. Magritte synthesised these image-word associations in an illustrated text published in issue 12 of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in December 1929 under the title ‘Les mots et les images’ (Magritte, 2001, p. 60-61).

¹⁰ *Fantômas* was written in 1911 by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain in monthly episodes that were very successful (Fantômas’, 2024). But Fantômas became best known for the film series directed by Louis Feuillade in 1913-1914. In 1928, Magritte painted *Le Barbare*, a vanished painting in which Fantômas fuses with a brick wall. Fantômas is also said to have been a model for the later Batman. In “Entretien avec René Magritte”, the first question asked of the artist was: “Magritte, êtes vous Fantômas’?” (Magritte, are you Fantômas’?).

¹¹ On the 7th of January 2015, a terrorist attack was carried out by two brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, at the headquarters of the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in Paris. Ten people were killed, including five cartoonists. The attack was claimed by al-Qaeda. In the aftermath of the attack, there were massive expressions of support for cartoonists and calls for freedom of expression with the slogan “Je suis Charlie.” In the aftermath of the attacks, Steve attended a gathering of cartoonists at The Cartoonist gallery in Brussels. The streets were cordoned off for the occasion and there was police surveillance so that the cartoonists who were present were able to meet in safety.

¹² Bossart (2023).

¹³ The dialogue in the following three pictures consists of the answer to a question about “The role of humour in Magritte’s work.” This interview with René Magritte by *Life Magazine*, 1967, is included in Margritte (2001, p. 609).

¹⁴ The drawing published in Flemish weekly *Knack* (50/2022, p. 95). The drawing refers to “cancelling” from the woke movement and the new cold war that has prevailed since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Is evil here permanently silenced, cancelled? Cancelling is opposed to censorship; if censorship is imposed by those in power to suppress opponents, is cancelling an attempt by the powerless to silence unwanted voices? The drawing denounces the impotence of do-gooders in the face of aggressors.

¹⁵ “According to US political scientist James Scott, the oppressed and weak (have) means of resisting those in power. One such ‘weapon’ can be humour. (...) humour especially in its guises of sarcasm, parody, irony and humiliation, can be a fearsome political weapon and consequently an important source of power. Humorous expressions are regularly uttered to undermine the power and dominance of politicians. Throughout history, using cartoons, ...”

(Driessen, 2002, p. 65)

⁶ “Hahaha! A foot-note!” Below you can read more about the role of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* in Self-reflective Steve’s research.

17 There is a connection between humour and aggression. People also lose self-control and physical control when laughing. Humour breaks social conventions. Humour consists of exaggerations, lies, mixing fantasy and reality, ambiguities and absurdities. This is why, for example, in the Bible or Greek philosophy, laughter is often seen as an act of aggression. Laughter also creates victims. Plato regarded humour from the superiority viewpoint as inferior; it was unworthy of placing yourself above the other by mocking. But the feeling of superiority alone is insufficient to explain humour. Humour also arises when our expectations are broken. We laugh at the unusual, the unexpected, provided it is harmless to ourselves. Laughter also causes relief by releasing accumulated emotional energy. Sigmund Freud (2008) also connects that physical phenomenon of humour with aggression and with lust. He considers telling jokes as processing repressed emotions. According to Freud, with humour we break through our inner censor. He explains making jokes as an unconscious process by which we release repressed thoughts and feelings in our consciousness. But this does not explain why cartoonists consciously use techniques to evoke laughter. The American philosopher John Morreall addresses these issues in the book *Comic Relief* (Morreall, 2009).

18 This model was first used in the cartoon *Steven and Steve*, a drawing dialogue between cartoonist Lectrr (Steven Degryse) and Steve (Michiels) (Degryse & Michiels, 2021).

19 “(René Magritte) is newly married and home alone, his wife has gone into town with a friend. There is a call. It is the friend’s husband who has arranged to meet him at Magritte’s. The man introduces himself, as the painter does not yet know him. It is a very decent, bourgeois gentleman, a loyal visitor to playrooms. Magritte lets him in, lets him lead the way, and just as the man wants to enter the salon, he kicks him in the butt. All kinds of thoughts bubble up in the mind of the stupefied visitor who has no idea how to react and finally, as if nothing had happened, sits down on the chair with which Magritte - also as if nothing had happened - very obligingly approaches. (...) Incidentally, this was not the first time, because when entering a restaurant Magritte had apparently kicked a friend while giving a lady a kiss on the hand, so that both went to the floor,”

as chronicled by Louis Scutenaire in 1947 (Ceuleers, 1999, p. 20).

20 Steve grew up in the 1970s. The prevailing “alternative humour” at the time was strongly influenced by the absurdism of the British comedy group Monty Python. They were influenced by the surrealism of Magritte, among others. Monty Python made absurdist and simultaneously intellectualist humour. In several of their sketches, they ridiculed humour itself.

21 The “stereotypical man” in the sketch “The man who makes people laugh” (Monty Python, 1972) wears a bowler hat, umbrella, and raincoat in the same manner as the stereotypical men in René Magritte’s work wear them. Once, this humour was revolutionary. But today it is harmless because the target of ridicule, the stereotypical middle-class man with the bowler hat, no longer appears on the streets. There is a huge distance between this man and present-day society.

22 On October 5, 1969, the first episode of the then groundbreaking *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* aired. This episode also featured the sketch “The writing of the funniest and deadliest joke in the world.” In this sketch, the story is about a comedy writer Ernest Scribbler who writes a joke so funny that anyone who reads or hears it immediately dies of laughter, the writer dying first. The sketch is structured as a reportage reconstructing the history of the joke. A journalist reports from near the house where the comedy writer and his mother were just tragically killed by the violent joke. Moments later, a retrospective follows showing that the joke was used as a

weapon of mass destruction against the Germans in WWII. In turn, the German military tried unsuccessfully to create a deadly joke. After peace broke out, the last copy of the deadly joke was laid to rest in the countryside and never be told again (Monty Python, 1969)

23 In the lab, Steve works on experimental humour. Here we see the following joke depicted: ‘A carrot and bone go to the supermarket together. “I long so deeply for peas” says the carrot. “Oh yeah?” replies the bone, “I could use some meat otherwise.” A lot of guinea pigs particularly enjoy this kind of joke.

24 “How do you get a mouse to smile? Say ‘cheese!’” is a joke for children that circulates on the Internet.

25 This drawing was inspired by a 1946 photo of René Magritte and his dog Loulou (Canonne, 2020). René and Georgette Magritte were very attached to their spitz dogs. The spitz dog, German spitz or Pomeranian, is a medium-sized Spitz breed that stands out for its smile. This cheerful dog is affectionate and funny. Learn more: <https://www.fci.be/en/nomenclature/GERMAN-SPITZ-97.html>

26 According to Henri Bergson (2011), humour is relentless, and one can only laugh when one shuts off one’s feelings. As a humourist, one must view the world in a neutral way and distance oneself from it; only then can one put things into perspective. Bergson also views humour from a social perspective; when one does not show enough flexibility in life, one is socially punished. All what takes itself too seriously is rigid, stiffened and must therefore be loosened; as punishment, it is laughed at. In 1900, the same period that Bergson published his essay *Laughter*, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 2008). Instead, Freud regards laughter as an outlet and a gateway to the unconscious. According to Freud, many jokes contain repressed desires. The censorship of the mind is eliminated in the joke.

27 To create this story, cartoonist Steve called on *ChatGPT*. For example, he asked, “Is there such a thing as a killing joke? A joke so hard on the laugh track that it makes you choke?” ChatGPT’s answer:

There have been cases of people who have choked while laughing, but it is very unlikely to be the result of a joke so funny that it is deadly. The idea of a “deadly joke” has often been used in popular culture, such as in the 2019 film “The Joker,” in which the Joker claims he can make a joke so funny that it is deadly. However, this is only fiction and there is no evidence that a joke by itself can physically harm someone. People can, however, choke while laughing if there is an obstruction in the respiratory tract, such as food or an object. However, this can happen during any activity where breathing is affected, not just while laughing. It is important to remember that laughter is a positive and healthy part of life and that it is unlikely that a joke by itself is deadly.

28 In his essay ‘The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility’ (1935), Walter Benjamin describes how sensory perception changes with the entry of lithography and film. He talks about the decay of “the aura” of the work of art, its uniqueness undermined by reproducibility. One no longer must move around to interact with a work of art, the artwork comes to the viewer in printed (or photographed) form. Much of what Benjamin writes also applies to contemporary visual revolutions. Today, we are almost incessantly confronted with images. These include artistic, documentary, journalistic, scientific, historical, private, and amateur images. Digital “works of art” are distributed via the internet and viewed on portable mini screens. Nowadays, we literally carry images in our pockets. Moreover, those images are

now also artificially generated. It has become extremely easy to spread a message, but will it find its intended audience? As an artist, Steve has experienced the digital revolution. His cartoons are created as visual commentary within print media. The cartoon was born out of reproducibility; it is an art form that uses and depends on printed media.

Walter Benjamin's now almost 90-year-old findings still hold true for our media-dominated age, as the following quote shows:

For centuries, the situation in literature was such that against a small number of writers stood a number of many thousands of readers. This changed towards the end of the last century (the 19th century). With the growth of the press, which offered readers ever-new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local journals, ever-larger sections of the readership ended up - sporadically at first - with the writers. It began when the daily press opened its 'letterbox' for letters sent in, and today it is such that there is hardly a working European who could not in principle find an opportunity somewhere to publish a work experience, complaint, report, or something similar. With this, the distinction between author and audience is about to lose its principled character. It becomes a functional, case-by-case distinction. The reader is at all times ready to become a writer. (...)

(Benjamin, 1935, p. 28-29)

We can also call this the democratization of the media which in itself has nevertheless been a positive evolution.

The quote by Walter Benjamin is supplemented by a footnote:

Technical progress has [...] led to vulgarity [...], reproduction by mechanical processes and rotogravure printing have made possible an incalculable multiplication of writings and images. General schooling and relatively high wages have created a very large public that can read and acquire learning materials and images. An important industry was created to make these accessible. Now artistic talent is very thin on the ground; it follows [...] that always and everywhere the majority of artistic production has been inferior. But the share of rubbish in total artistic production is greater now than ever before (...) For one printed page of reading or visual material published a hundred years ago, twenty, if not a hundred pages are now published. But against every talent of the past, there are now only two. I concede that as a result of general schooling, a large number of potential talents can be realized today who could not have reached the fruition of their gifts back then. But even if we assume [...] that there are now three or even four artistic talents to one artistic talent of the past, it nevertheless remains beyond dispute that the consumption of reading and visual material far exceeds the natural production of gifted writers and illustrators. (...) It consequently results that in all the arts the production of rubbish is greater than it was in the past, both absolutely and relatively; and so it must remain until people continue, as at the present time, to consume a disproportionate amount of reading, visual and listening material' (Aldous Huxley, 1933)

(Benjamin, 1935, p. 28-29).

²⁹ Shortly after WWII, the then 50-year-old René Magritte created a series of colourful, cheerful, and cartoonish paintings including *L'ellipse* (1948). In this painting, we see a strangely composed cartoon character with a long nose formed by the barrel of a rifle. This is shown in the upper part of the drawing. During this so-called "Période Vache," Magritte raised a middle finger to the Paris art scene. He wanted to bring entertainment after the dark war years. His work aroused laughter but unfortunately nothing was sold. After this brief period of rebellion, Magritte resumed his tried-and-true "bourgeois" style of painting that finally brought commercial success. Can we speak here of self-censorship in exchange for prosperity?

³⁰ The author has several sequel scenarios in mind. In a first possible sequel, A.I. takes over the world and cartoonists are rendered totally obsolete. A second scenario focuses on the fate of cartoonists around the world, inspired by the report *Les dessinateurs et dessinatrices de presse sur le fil* [Press cartoonists on the web] by Cartooning for Peace & Cartoonists Rights (2023). Cartoonists are increasingly threatened, imprisoned, or murdered by the rise of totalitarian regimes. In a third possible sequel, cartoonist Self-reflective Steve is revealed to still be alive, and he and René Magritte continue to search for a way to improve the world through visual language.

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