



Humour in Joel Pett's Environmental Cartoons on Climate Change

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Abstract. The discourse of humour has become a common research topic, but few have analysed the use of humour in environmental cartoons. This study analyses the use of humour in the climate change cartoons of the famous American cartoonist Joel Pett. The analysis explores the verbal and non-verbal means of constructing humour and their interplay. The research was conducted by analysing Joel Pett's environmental cartoons, examining their content, language and visuals, and identifying the means that enabled the amusing effect. The analysis revealed that the most common verbal means of humour construction in Joel Pett's climate change cartoons were irony and satire. The study also showed that an interplay between visual and verbal means facilitated humour. In most cases, multimodality, or the interplay between verbal and non-verbal means, was an essential element that allowed the reader to perceive humour. Therefore, it can be suggested that both modes are equally important in the construction of humour in Joel Pett's environmental cartoons. The results of



this study can be used to begin to analyse how humour appears in the work of different environmental cartoonists.

Keywords. Irony, cartoonist, humour, climate change.

1. Introduction

Humour can be used in many different ways. People often use humour to interact socially. Humour can also be used to make a situation more pleasant and less tense. The assumption is that most people have a sense of humour, which can be an important part of everyday conversations and situations. In marketing, public speaking and social media, it is also widely used. It is even used in discussions of sensitive political, social, economic and other global and domestic issues. Given the relative breadth of the challenges facing the world today, this paper will focus on environmental issues. There are many ways in which humour can be used to raise awareness of these issues, cartoons being one of them. These exaggerated, sardonic and often provocative graphic means of addressing issues that government, society or business seem to overlook have become commonplace. As a result, many more humorous environmental cartoons aim to raise awareness of issues relating to nature, climate, etc. Although humour is a reasonably common research topic, humour in environmental cartoons has been less explored and needs further study.

The research has been carried out based on the theoretical insights of Charles J. Forceville in *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* (2006), Charles J. Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi in *Multimodal Metaphor* (2009), Paul Simpson in *Stylistics* (2004) and in *On the Discourse of Satire* (2003) and Villy Tsakona and Elena Diana Popa's *Studies in Political Humour* (2011). The analysis was conducted using descriptive and analytical methods. The collected database includes cartoons by a famous American cartoonist, Joel Pett, that were published from 2012 to 2019. Most of them appeared on the newspaper's Lexington Herald-Leader official website.

American editorial cartoonist Joel W. Pett, born 1953, has worked for the Lexington Herald-Leader since 1984. He has gained national recognition for his work, which has appeared in the Washington Post, the New York Times and other publications. Pett's cartoons, which often address social and political issues, have won prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the Global Media Award and the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award. His cartoons cover a wide range of topics. This analysis focuses on his environmental cartoons and their use of humour.

Humour is roughly divided into verbal and non-verbal forms. Verbal humour relies on words (spoken or written), playing with language structures such as syntax and word meanings. Nonverbal humour uses visual elements such as body language, facial expressions and tone. It is primarily concerned with jokes. However, the concept of humour extends to any combination of these elements, even across genres.

Ross (2005) identifies several methods of creating verbal humour, including lexical ambiguity (e.g., puns) and semantic incongruity. This principle of incongruity is fundamental to humour in general (Simpson 2004). Verbal humour often arises from deliberately exploiting language conventions, and this chapter will delve into these verbal humour techniques.

2. Punning



The first way in which verbal humour is constructed is through the lexicon, of which the most important method is probably the use of double meanings or puns (Ross 2005, p. 74). One of the most commonly used ways of playing with words is to pun. Pun is “one of the most commonly used stylistic devices for creating humour” (p. 45), according to Paul Simpson (2004) in his book *Stylistics*. Pun is a linguistic resource, and this stylistic device operates at the lexical level. This idea is confirmed by Ross’s (2005) statement that “the common source of puns is the lexicon or vocabulary” (p. 16). For example, Kim Binsted and Osamu Takizawa (1998) have analysed this lexical mechanism and provided a definition. According to them, a pun is “a text (spoken or written) that makes use of linguistic ambiguity to deceive the audience (the listener or reader) for humorous effect” (Binsted, Takizawa 1998, p. 3). This definition implies that puns in language function exclusively as a means to provoke a humorous response.

A subsection

3. The irony as a basis for verbal humour

Irony is a powerful tool for the creation of verbal humour, the effectiveness of which is based on the linguistic notion of incongruity. This basic element of humour is evident in both irony and puns. Simpson (2004) expands on this view by pointing out that irony is the basis of satire and parody, noting that they rely on “stylistic incompatibility” (p. 46). He defines irony as the space between the literal meaning and the intended meaning (p. 46), creating a direct dissonance.

The main challenge in understanding irony is reliable identification. How do we distinguish ironic statements from genuine misinterpretations? Ross (2005) highlights the potential for misunderstanding, especially when the discrepancy between literal and implied meaning is subtle (p. 50). This fragile boundary between irony and misunderstanding highlights the complexity of deciphering ironic intent.

Recognising irony goes beyond simple linguistic understanding. It requires “world knowledge” (Ross, 2005, p. 50) – a contextual understanding of language use. Indeed, context often replaces literal definitions of words, as situational application largely determines meaning (Colebrook, 2006, p. 179). Therefore, successful interpretation of irony requires a nuanced understanding of language, context and relevant background knowledge.

4. Parody and satire

Parody, which often relies on stylistic imitation for humorous effect (Simpson, 2004, p. 217 ff.), depends on irony as a key component. Parody is defined as the humorous highlighting of linguistic oddities (Simpson, 2004, p. 219; Collins English Dictionary, 2003, p. 1185; The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 2001, p. 1350; Garmendia, 2018; Harvey, et al., 2015) and can therefore be a tool for constructive criticism or playful analysis. Although it may offend, it can act as a subtle means of highlighting points for improvement without its inherent negativity (Simpson, 2004, p. 218).

The relationship of parody to satire, another form of verbal humour, encourages comparison. While parody can maintain a positive or sympathetic tone, satire often has a negative or offensive connotation (Simpson, 2004, p. 47). When parody remains milder, satire can be more harshly criticised. Ross (2005) defines this distinction by stating that humour takes on a critical tone when it turns into satire (p. 49), in which “mockery, irony, sarcasm, etc.” are used to expose flaws or ridicule individuals (p. 113).



Satire's ability to raise awareness is multifaceted. It can arouse public opinion against perpetrators and open the way for social action. This is consistent with Pollard's (2018) view that satire highlights the gap between reality and ideals (p. 3). Satirists focus on shaping public opinion and exposing society's flaws to correct or improve. While satire is directed at the broader landscape to bring about change and reform, parody can be directed at individuals, ridiculing their quirks to provoke a humorous reaction. Despite their similarities, there is a fine line between them.

Thus, parody and satire, although related, differ in their intensity and aims. While parody can be less edgy, satire is often an effective means of highlighting the discrepancies between reality and aspiration. As a means of criticism, satire shapes public attitudes while retaining a humorous basis.

5. The indispensable role of images in understanding cartoon humour: visual mode

Humour in cartoons goes beyond verbal communication. Research by Ross (2005) shows that audiences are more attracted to visual and auditory humour than written humour (p. 87). This is consistent with multimodal humour, which includes verbal and non-verbal elements (Cook, 2001, p. 2).

Therefore, to fully understand the message of a cartoon, especially one related to environmental issues, it is necessary to analyse more than the textual content (Cook, 2001, p. 1f.). Cook stresses the importance of considering the context, which often includes visual elements, such as pictures, along with other factors such as the situation and the participants. Although some contextual elements may not be present in print media, pictures remain important to cartoons.

Forceville (2006) reinforces this idea by stating that textual elements often rely on "information provided by the picture" (p. 73). This highlights the need to consider the pictorial manner to grasp the message intended to be conveyed fully. Furthermore, Wendt (1956) argues that images can become so powerful that they "overshadow verbal language" (p. 281). He defines a picture as a "configuration of symbols" that requires prior experience to interpret (p. 285). This highlights the importance of visual literacy, where previous experience helps viewers to decipher the symbols and to grasp the intended message more effectively.

Drawing on the work of Barthes (cited in Forceville, 2006, p. 71ff.), a distinction is made between the "denotative" (literal) and "connotative" (symbolic) aspects of pictorial representation in the passage. The "denotated" image is the original, uninterpreted visual information. Conversely, a "connoted" image includes induced associations and symbolic meanings. However, Forceville (2006) stresses the inseparability of these two aspects. It is almost impossible (p. 72) to perceive an image solely in terms of its literal meaning, as there are inevitably symbolic connotations. In fact, an image is perceived through a combination of both literal and symbolic interpretations, neither of which can be completely ignored.

6. Multimodality in print media: the importance of the visual and the verbal

Although a comprehensive definition and exhaustive list of semiotic modalities is still incomplete, Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009, p. 23) suggest the following categories: (1) visual signs, (2) written signs, (3) verbal signs, (4) gestures, (5) sounds, (6) music, (7) smells, (8) tastes, and (9) touch. In the context of print media, such as cartoons, a clear hierarchy

emerges. There is a preference for visual (pictorial signs) and verbal (written signs) techniques. The combination of these leads to multimodality (ibid., p. 23f.).

Environmental cartoons rarely rely solely on imagery to convey their message. The interplay of techniques, or multimodality, enhances their sense of humour. Incongruity, a key element of humour, can manifest itself in a deliberate dissonance between visual and verbal elements. This contradiction creates a fertile ground for irony.

Gunther Kress (2010) agrees with this idea, arguing that readers interpret “ensembles of signs” together. The contradictions in these ensembles allow a deeper understanding of the individual signs and the overall message (p. 74). This highlights the ability to perceive incongruity, irony and, ultimately, humour through the interaction of visual and written means.

Therefore, while multimodality cannot be a direct source of humour in itself, it helps to facilitate other stylistic devices, such as irony. It comes from the deliberate integration of verbal and non-verbal humour to create a rich tapestry of meaning. This interplay of techniques is crucial to understanding the whole idea and humour of cartoons.

7. The peculiarities of humour in Joel Pett’s cartoons

Climate change, global warming, renewable energy and sustainability have become ubiquitous terms in the global media. Alongside serious warnings from the scientific community, humour is often used to engage the public in environmental issues. Joel Pett’s environmental cartoons are an example of this approach, presenting profound messages about climate change through a humorous but disturbing prism.

Consider Figure 1, a cartoon by Pett published on 24 May 2013. It shows two men seeking refuge in an underground bunker, presumably a “safe room”. One of the men confidently declares: “IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A “SAFE ROOM””, while the other holds a sign reading “CLIMATE CHANGE IS A LIE”. Despite the men’s apparent calm, as evidenced by the signs on the wall suggesting a long-term underground presence, the landscape outside the bunker is chaotic and apocalyptic. Tornadoes, thunderstorms, fires and floods dominate the background, visually representing the catastrophic consequences of climate change.

Through these symbolic elements, Pett juxtaposes the men’s illusory sense of security in the bunker with the undeniable reality of environmental devastation outside. From this discrepancy emerges a humour that highlights the stupidity of those who deny climate change despite the overwhelming evidence.



Figure 1. Joel Pett, 2013

The stark humour of this cartoon lies not in its simple verbal messages but in the interplay between them and the stark visual context. This creates a dissonance that underlines a deeper irony. The men’s unwavering denial of climate change (“CLIMATE CHANGE IS A HOAX”), juxtaposed with the devastating images of unfolding environmental disasters, creates a

powerful example of multimodal incongruity. This incongruity mocks the stubborn ignorance of climate change deniers.

Furthermore, the ironic use of “safe room” (emphasised by quotation marks) implies a false sense of security. The visuals reinforce this absurdity by starkly illustrating the consequences that render their “safe haven” inadequate. The men’s bunker becomes a symbol of the futile self-deception of those who refuse to acknowledge the dangers of climate change. Clearly, these imaginary havens offer no protection from the reality depicted above ground.

Move on to your insightful point about the second cartoon (Figure 2). Here, the humour seems less overt. Instead, it is probably satirical, aiming at the apathy of climate summits. The sign “CLIMATE SUMMIT”, juxtaposed with the mundane presentation and disengaged audience, suggests the ineffectiveness of such gatherings. The lack of visible reaction from those attending the summit suggests a deep-seated indifference to the urgency of the presenter’s message.



Figure 2. “Joel Pett: The cartoon seen “round the world””, 2012

While the second cartoon (Figure 2) delivers its humour primarily through a single utterance, the visuals play a crucial supportive role. The slide presents earnest solutions (“PRESERVE RAINFORESTS”, “SUSTAINABILITY”, “GREEN JOBS”), starkly juxtaposed against the audience member’s absurd question: “WHAT IF IT’S A BIG HOAX AND WE CREATE A BETTER WORLD FOR NOTHING?” This rhetorical question becomes the central source of the cartoon’s humour. It simultaneously reveals the questioner’s ridiculous logic and parodies the indifference often found within political circles.

Your identification of parody as the key verbal device is astute. The cartoon subtly critiques Republican intransigence on climate issues (signalled by the red tie) but lacks the sharp, moral judgment characteristic of satire. Instead, it gently lampoons flawed political logic for comedic effect. While the utterance is the primary humorous element, the visual mode remains essential. It provides context, visually establishing the setting and creating the dissonance that makes the man’s question so darkly funny. Thus, multimodality amplifies the humour; visual and verbal elements are vital to its construction.

Despite its later publication date, the third cartoon (Figure 3) shares a striking thematic resemblance to the second. Once again, we see a climate summit punctuated by a jarring question from the audience: “BUT... WHAT HAVE FUTURE GENERATIONS EVER DONE FOR US?” This, coupled with the “CLIMATE ACTION” sign and the burning Earth in the background, constitutes verbal humour. The question highlights the absurdity of ignoring climate change based on a selfish, short-term perspective. As before, this implies a critique of a particular political mindset by exaggerating its flaws for humorous effect. The visuals underscore the urgency and consequence of climate inaction, amplifying the humour within the question.

Multimodality remains essential. Humour stems from the interplay between the sincere environmental message communicated visually and the callous, short-sighted verbal question.

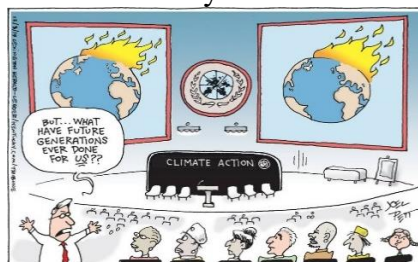


Figure 3. “Joel Pett: On climate, what have future generations ever done for us?”, 2019

After analysing the verbal and visual elements of this cartoon, it becomes clear that the primary source of humour lies in the written text. The man’s question about the contributions of future generations is darkly humorous, exposing the flawed logic and selfish priorities prevalent in certain political circles. It parodies politicians who seek excuses for inaction on climate change, implying criticism of those who disregard the well-being of future generations. While this could border on satire, the humour comes directly from the exaggerated portrayal of this illogical mindset, making it primarily a case of parody.

Importantly, your observation about the paradoxical nature of the “future generations” argument is insightful! This absurdity reinforces the cartoon’s critique. Furthermore, the visual elements provide a crucial context that enriches the humour. Thus, while the verbal elements are the main driver of the humour, the overall effect is a product of multimodality, with both the written and visual modes working in tandem.

The humour works differently in this Joel Pett cartoon (Figure 4). A man expresses fear of a small bomb labelled “ISIS” while seemingly ignoring the far greater threat of a burning Earth labelled “CRISIS”. The humour of the cartoon lies in the strong visual contrast, and the bomb symbolises terrorism, a widely recognised but geographically limited threat. The burning earth represents the existential threat of climate change.

The man’s fear highlights a misplaced sense of urgency and a failure to recognise global threats. While not directly mocking an individual, the image subtly parodies the skewed priorities prevalent in media and public discourse, where immediate concerns often overshadow long-term, catastrophic risks. Thus, humour can arise from symbolism and visual juxtaposition and highlights the importance of multimodality in understanding the full impact of a cartoon.



Figure 4. “Joel Pett on Climate change, ISIS”, 2015

It is clear that the bomb is a symbol of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which has been and continues to be a major issue and threat to many nations. The Islamic State and its actions have received a lot of media coverage, especially after ISIS killed an American journalist. The man – a symbol to Americans and people around the world – is terrified of the organisation. However, the author suggests that while ISIS is an important issue, a much more serious threat is looming that is not receiving the attention it should be – the climate crisis.

It is easy to see that the similar spelling of the words “ISIS” and “CRISIS” requires the reader to draw certain parallels, and the rhyme reinforces the common element of danger rather than making it more enjoyable and amusing. Humour, however, is mainly created by visuals. The image of the man being afraid of a small thing when he has a much bigger problem hiding behind his back is ridiculous. Small details, such as the glasses flying off the man’s face, make the image even more amusing and visually appealing. The man’s pose looks as if he has jumped up in fear after seeing the bomb, which, together with the glasses and the panicked look on the man’s face, creates this visually amusing image, which is the main source of humour in this case. The situation (the man being afraid of a minor thing when a major problem is approaching) is somewhat humorous. However, it accurately describes people’s attitudes towards the two problems. The reader is made to laugh at his attitudes and ignorance.

The next Joel Pett cartoon on climate change (see Figure 5) was published on 9 August 2017. It shows a village slowly being submerged by rising sea levels (a result of global warming) and an indigenous man standing on the shore. The man’s clothes are primitive, and the houses in his village look rather neglected. The goat next to the man indicates that he belongs to the working class, probably a shepherd, and that the people in his village live mainly from agriculture. Another man in the cartoon, on the boat, is well-dressed and probably from the upper class. The man’s costume, hat, and the glass of martini in his hand that he is sipping on the yacht suggest high social status and wealth. This man does not seem bothered or concerned about the first man’s situation. His statement, “MY GOOD MAN, YOUR VILLAGE IS HALF FULL!” indicates his positive attitude towards the situation due to his ignorance.

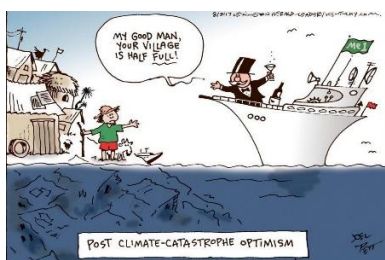


Figure 5. “Pett on climate change”, 2017

The statement “MY GOOD MAN, YOUR VILLAGE IS HALF FULL!” and the accompanying title “POST CLIMATE-CATASTROPHE OPTIMISM” are the primary verbal elements in this cartoon. However, its humour is based on a deliberate misinterpretation of the familiar “glass half full” proverb (Herzberg, et al., 2012). In this context, the phrase signifies an oblivious, privileged perspective – a literal reading that ignores the impending destruction depicted in the visuals. This creates a powerful example of irony, where the optimism expressed starkly contrasts the catastrophic reality faced by the villagers.

Pett’s labelling of this attitude as “optimism” serves as a further irony. Instead, it highlights the callous indifference and lack of empathy of the rich man. This sentiment is reinforced by the condescending phrase “my good man”, a linguistic marker of social superiority. This distorted optimism, expressed through linguistic mannerisms, is an example of subtle parody – a humorous exaggeration of upper-class behaviour and disregard for those less fortunate.

The visuals reinforce the irony and parody. They do not convey the humour directly, but they provide an important context and a jarring contrast to the verbal elements. Exaggerated details, such as the man’s martini glass, reinforce the parody of wealth and privilege.

Importantly, this demonstrates how visuals and language intertwine to create a multimodal humorous effect. Neither could achieve the same effect in isolation.

The final cartoon (Figure 6) uses a different form of humour based on the grotesque. The man's statement "DON'T TELL ME... YOU WERE AT THE ECLIPSE!" immediately establishes a cause-and-effect relationship with the neighbour's grotesque injury. His exaggerated features – the eye patch and the dangling eyeball – visually confirm this suspicion in a darkly humorous way.

This visual irony is crucial. It delivers the punch line without the need for explicit words. In addition, the neighbour's clothing reinforces the message: his "CLIMATE CHANGE A HOAX!" T-shirt underscores the absurdity of ignoring scientific warnings and highlights the self-destructive nature of such beliefs.

Hence, the humour in these cartoons can come from different sources: irony, parody and even the grotesque. However, the visual mode remains essential, either providing the context or delivering the humorous effect itself.



Figure 6. "Pett on eclipse", 2017

The humour of this cartoon comes from a strong multimodal irony. The neighbour's statement sets the stage, but the visual depiction of the injured man, combined with his explicit anti-science rhetoric, delivers the ironic punchline. His insistence that "CLIMATE CHANGE A HOAX!" stands in stark contrast to the absurd consequences of ignoring scientific warnings – his grotesque eye injury. This highlights the self-destructive nature of his stubborn beliefs about climate change and those who study it.

The cartoon does not just depict the man's irony; it parodies the broader attitude of scepticism towards scientific consensus. By exaggerating his ignorance and stubbornness, Pett mocks those who ignore the overwhelming evidence of the environmental crisis. This blend of visual and verbal humour demonstrates the essential role of multimodality in constructing the comedic effect.

The final cartoon (Figure 7) subtly shifts its humour by juxtaposing images of record-breaking environmental disasters ("HURRICANE RECORD", "FLOOD RECORD", etc.) with the incongruous image of a music record. This abrupt shift undermines the initial pattern, highlighting that while natural disasters set devastating records, there is a different, consumerist obsession with breaking records.

This sharp contrast offers an incisive critique of priorities. It suggests that there's a misplaced focus on trivial records within music or other consumer-driven industries in unprecedented environmental devastation. Whether intentional or not, this final image introduces a layer of social critique – an implicit parody of complacency and misplaced priorities in the face of climate change.



Figure 7. “Joel Pett’s Editorial Cartoons”, 2018

While the visuals themselves do not convey humour directly, a witty interplay occurs between them and the written word. The first five images of environmental disasters (“HURRICANE RECORD”, “FLOOD RECORD” etc.) present a stark contrast. The term “record” implies achievement yet depicts catastrophic events. This incongruity creates situational irony, highlighting the absurdity of celebrating environmental devastation.

The final image unveils a pun, a wordplay on the polysemy of “record”. Here, “record” refers to a music disc, jolting the viewer out of the initial disaster-focused pattern. This abrupt shift emphasises the humorous incongruity between environmental concerns and our consumerist culture.

The humour does not merely reside in the pun. It critiques our misplaced priorities. The record-breaking disasters depict a planet in crisis, contrasted by the triviality of breaking records in the music industry. This juxtaposition suggests a societal complacency in the face of climate change, further amplified by the “BROKEN RECORD” caption under the music disc. The metaphor implies a constant barrage of negative environmental news, potentially leading to desensitisation and a sense of “nothing new here.”

The multimodal elements – visuals of disasters, the written word emphasising records, and the final pun – work together to create a layered critique. The humour arises from a combination of situational irony and a pun, ultimately serving as a wake-up call about our priorities in the face of climate change.

8. Conclusion

A consistent pattern emerges in these Joel Pett cartoons: humour arises from multimodality, a complex interplay between verbal and visual elements. While verbal devices such as parody, irony and puns often drove the humour, the visuals played a crucial role. They provided context, created ironic contrasts, and sometimes even delivered a humorous punchline. This demonstrates the interdependence of the two modes in effectively conveying the messages of the cartoons.

Crucially, the humour in these environmental cartoons serves a purpose beyond mere amusement. It uses a dark, almost satirical tone, highlighting serious and urgent issues. The humour often comes from the absurdity of human ignorance and inaction in the face of the climate crisis. It is a bitter humour that simultaneously criticises society and invites self-reflection.

In essence, Pett’s cartoons use the power of multimodal humour to raise awareness and provoke critical thought. Her humour is not just about laughter; it is a powerful tool to expose the consequences of complacency and, ultimately, to encourage action. By using humour in this nuanced way, Pett’s cartoons leave a lasting impression on viewers, encouraging them to confront the environmental crisis with a renewed sense of urgency.



List of cartoons

1. <https://www.cartoonistgroup.com/store/add.php?>
2. <https://www.kentucky.com/opinion/op-ed/article44162106.html>
3. <https://www.kentucky.com/opinion/editorial-cartoons/joel-pett/article238005519.html>
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5. <https://www.kentucky.com/opinion/editorial-cartoons/joel-pett/article166195027.html>
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