

The COVID-19 pandemic in political cartoons inspired by classical themes: a case-study in classical reception.



Background

My core research can be summarised as the archaeology of humour: Greek vases (*Greek Vase Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* CUP, 2009, 2012), Greek and Roman terracotta figurines, and since 2013 humour in the field of classical reception. I now work mainly **the reception of classical myths, ideas, imagery, events and statesmen in political cartoons from the turn of the 20th century to the present day**. I have gathered thousands of political cartoons (database hosted on <https://classicalreception.eu>), given several papers on various aspects of this work and hope to finish writing my new book on this subject by 2024.

There is much debate on who reads classics, whether it is only of interest to the elite, or whether it is useful to the wider public. There is however a huge and uncharted territory which has been overlooked by most classicists: the world of editorial cartoons. They are very accessible, challenging, and mass-produced, in numerous languages and throughout the world. Why do cartoonists find inspiration in antiquity to mock politicians and current affairs? Maybe it lends gravitas to the cartoons, prestige, or a semblance of respectability, and credibility. Having analysed how the cartoonists 'repackage' antiquity and whether some themes are more popular than others, I will try to investigate all the reasons why cartoonists use (and abuse) classical culture to mock current affairs.

Summary of the paper

I have chosen a transversal topic, *the COVID-19 crisis*, to present a range of my cartoon material. The pandemic has been devastating on a global scale and widely represented in editorial cartoons. I will analyse how a significant number of cartoonists throughout the world have used different visual *topoi* inspired by classical culture to criticise measures taken by the authorities to tackle the crisis or conversely, to decry the appalling situation. Greek myth is very present with Atlas, Icarus, Pandora, Sisyphus, the Trojan horse and Zeus but also historical figures like Damocles and the Emperor Nero or famous sculptures like the Discobolos and the Venus de Milo.

Bibliography

- Mitchell, Alexandre G., "Democracy and popular media. Classical receptions in 19th to 21st centuries political cartoons: statesmen, mythological figures and celebrated artworks", in L. Hardwick, S. J. Harrison (eds), *Classics in the Modern World: A 'Democratic Turn'?*, Oxford, 2013, 319-349.
- Mitchell, Alexandre G., "La réception de l'antiquité gréco-romaine dans les dessins de presse en Chine et à Singapour", in Yue Yue and Jean-Claude Gardes (eds.), *La perception de la Chine dans la caricature occidentale, Ridiculosa* [Hors-série], 2023, 1-12.

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Selection of classical themes in political cartoons

Introduction

Cartoon research, Classical reception & cartoons

Political Cartoons

1. Heroic health workers, the Wonder vaccine and the Evil antivaxxers.
2. Self-serving, incompetent and autocratic leaders
3. Social fallout due to the pandemic and safety measures

Conclusion