

Fabrice Leroy

## « C'est tout mal fait, pardon »: The Rhetoric of Politics in Pierre La Police's Comics

The work of contemporary French cartoonist Pierre La Police remains largely unknown outside of France, where it has enjoyed mild success thanks to its exposure in *Les Inrockuptibles*, an alternative rock magazine, and *New Look*, a men's magazine. Pierre La Police has authored various forms of comics, ranging from nonsensical black and white graphic novels (staging the adventures of a misshapen monster named Fongor and two mutants both named Thémistècle) to small 7 by 4-inch color panels collected in book format under the title *Véridique* (5 volumes since 1999).

The latter series, which is the focus of this essay, displays a recurrent political content whose subversive graphic treatment is worth examining. *Véridique* systematically parodies the format and subject matter of newspaper headlines. It reports daily news, often of a political nature, through infantile misrepresentation or absurdist juxtaposition. In a recently published article, Livio Belloi and I examined Pierre La Police's parody of media representation, his ironic stance toward mass culture in general, and his reflexive deconstruction of the comics medium, as a network of complex and consistent semiotic structures. At the encoding level, Pierre La Police highlights the systematic distortion and oversimplification of reality usually found in print and television news media, which tend to mythologize (in the Roland Barthes sense) their referent for public consumption. At the decoding level, he relies on his reader's awareness to gauge the ironic transformation of real people and events into nonsensical ones. While these general principles have been asserted in the aforementioned essay, I am convinced that Pierre La Police's political cartooning alone deserves a closer and separate examination, as it constitutes an important and recurrent element of Pierre La Police's pseudo-news, and depends itself on a finite series of verbal and iconic tropes.

As a starting point, I propose to categorize Pierre La Police's transformation of a political referent according to the Groupe  $\mu$ 's classification of rhetorical operations in its seminal 1970 essay, *Rhétorique générale*. Positing that all figures of speech can be explained as deviations from a norm, the Groupe  $\mu$  distinguishes between 4 categories of figures. *Métataxes* are figures of rhetoric that play on syntax (parataxis, syllepsis, chiasma); they alter the grammatical organization of discourse. *Métoplasmes* play on form or morphology (anagram, neologism, palindrome); they alter the signifier. *Métasémèmes* play on meaning (metaphor, metonymy, oxymoron, etc.); they alter the relation between the signifier and the signified. *Métalogismes* play on logic (irony, paradox, euphemism, etc.); they alter our conceptual understanding of discourse. Obviously, such concepts are intended to analyze language and will have to be adapted to the visual code of comics. Nevertheless, I am asserting from the start what I perceive to be the profoundly *deviant* nature of Pierre La Police's comics, which I hope will become apparent through the examples discussed below.

I will begin by examining various forms of *metataxes*. A recurring tendency in Pierre La Police is to resort to syntactic - and by extension stylistic and orthographic - misuses. For instance, in the sentence "Lionel Jospin s'est même engagé personnellement à venir chez tout le monde pour vérifier combien il en mange de la viande" (1: 5), the subject "tout le monde," is referred to in the same sentence by a singular pronoun ("il"); the direct object "de la viande" is unnecessarily repeated by a pronoun ("en"). The panel also contains two infantile expressions using the common verb "faire:" "Ça va faire très mal/ Fini de faire les marioles avec le manger," the latter containing a slang term inappropriate in journalism ("marioles"), and the infantile transformation of an infinitive into a noun ("le manger"). Such lexical malapropisms are frequent in Pierre La Police, as for instance in a sentence such as: "[Les routiers irakiens] revendiquent le droit à la féminité et le port de sous-vêtements sexistes" ( 1: 8), an adjectival misuse which entirely subverts and reverses the meaning of the phrase.



Image 1

Evidently, other discursive deviations are at play in the Jospin caption. It presents a highly positioned government official (the prime minister) personally enforcing state policy, and systematically doing so in each individual's domestic space, two absurd logical shifts that fall under the category of *métalogismes*. Pierre La Police relies therefore on the cumulative, multi-layered effects of different strategies of deviation.

"A Drancy, les évêques a regretté son silence à l'époque des juifs" (1:30) contains a similar agreement discrepancy (the plural subject "les évêques" is followed by a verb wrongly conjugated in the singular form, "a," and by a singular possessive adjective, "son"). "A l'époque des Juifs" articulates a paradoxically non-historical expression of historical facts, as it oversimplifies a phrase that should normally state: "at the time of Jewish persecution during World War II." The discursive

shortcut leaves us with a meaningless formulation, which in return parodies the reader's poor historical conceptualization and negates its own tasteless content.



Image 2

In another panel, entitled "Des chômeurs empêchent Lionel Jospin de prendre son bain," (1: 8) the statement "Ils ont essayé de lui casser le magnéscope mais l'armée il les a empêché" is faulty in several regards. The definite article ("le magnéscope") does not refer to a known or depicted object, and is used grammatically in the sentence as if the VCR were a body part ("lui casser *le bras*," for instance). "L'armée," a collective feminine noun, is replaced by a singular masculine pronoun ("il"); and the past participle ("empêché") is improperly modified by the direct object "les". This tendency to create redundant utterances, where a noun and its pronominal substitute can be found in the same sentence, is similarly at play again in a caption like: "Ce qu'ils ont fait en vacances les vedettes/ Chirac il s'est baigné avec la montre à quartz," (1: 29) where "ils" and "les vedettes" are redundant, as well as "Chirac and "il," which refer to the same person. The use of the definite article "la" in "la montre à quartz" reminds us of the nonsensical "le magnéscope" in the Jospin bath scene.





Image 3

These morphosyntactic distortions ironically imply that the news tends to reduce political reality to an infantilized oversimplification, and that news consumers in return process information at a most simplistic, and sometimes ridiculously transformative level (as recent electoral campaigns proved to many observers).

A form of *métatexte* is also at play in the spatial layout of Pierre La Police's panels, which differs profoundly from the usual sequential organization prevalent in the narrative code of standard comics. Pierre La Police borrows instead from a non-sequential juxtaposition typically found in newspaper headlines, a rhetorical figure known as *parataxis*, often used in surrealistic collages. For instance, a panel such as "Spécial 1999ème anniversaire du monde" (2: 29) randomly juxtaposes various items, vaguely linked thematically by the thin thread of existing on Earth during a 2,000 year period, and bearing no syntagmatic connection whatsoever.



Similarly, the panel captioned "*Véridique: Spécial la vie du monde*" (3: 6) is so thematically non-specific that it allows for the juxtaposition of various athletes and politicians in absurd situations.

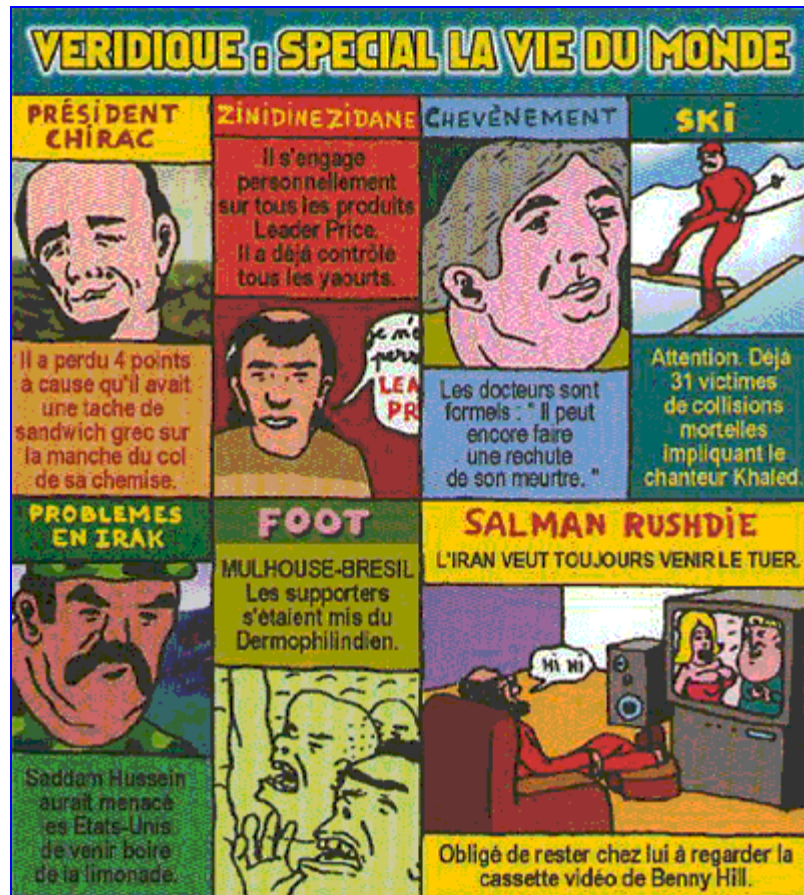


Image 5

Even a panel that contains a semi-sequential progression, like "Lionel Jospin s'est fait jeter des cailloux sur lui par des arabes" (3: 26) concludes a chronological narrative in three segments by a non sequitur, the random and unexplainable addition of "Bob l'oiseau."



Image 6

The aforementioned Lionel Jospin panel depicting the prime minister's troubles with

Arabs is littered with logical leaps and implausibilities that clearly fall under the category of *métalogismes*. The three-part sequence of events is presented as a slow-motion replay, an absurd yet reflexively deconstructive statement since comics are by essence an art of fixed images that does not involve speed, unlike moving pictures. Lionel Jospin is throwing insults at Arabs as a generic group, an act which in itself contains multiple layers of implausibilities: 1. As a socialist, Lionel Jospin has been known as an anti-racism militant, and an opponent of the xenophobic far right in France. Such a confusion implies that all political figures are interchangeable in the mind of the uninformed public. 2. The insult itself has no racial content, but appears unexplainably homophobic. Of course, the entire formulation of this scene is infantilized ("dire des insultes sur les arabes" and "bande de pd va!" are the type of discourse that belongs on a school playground, not in the adult political realm). The childish penmanship inside the speech balloon adds to the infantilization. This entire scene reduces political debate to school ground repartees. 3. The insult is a retort to a spelling argument, not an international relations incident. The random choice of the expression ("papa poule") and its extreme orthographic simplicity make this diplomatic crisis even more absurd. 4. Stereotypically bearded Arabs then stone the prime minister, perhaps a decontextualization of the stoning practice in the Arab world. The men throwing stones shout the least articulate possible insult, "con!", to which Lionel Jospin responds simply "non!". The incorrect preposition ("dessus la figure" instead of "sur la figure") further situates the level of discourse at the childish level. 5. Lionel Jospin was not hurt because the scene took place in slow motion, which closes this loop of logic, yet adds another dysfunctional layer. Lionel Jospin does not feel the impact of the stones for it is not the representation that is supposed to happen in slow motion, but reality itself. Indeed, the image of Lionel Jospin on the screen or the page is incapable of feeling. Therefore, Pierre La Police turns the entire mimetic representation on its head, indicating that news spectators are incapable of distinguishing between reality and its media depiction, between fact and image. The tabloid-like label "Et en plus c'est vrai!" as well as the title "Révélation sincère" (as if sincerity was an issue in journalism) could not be more ironic.

Such logical shifts are at play in the various media scandals that constitute a recurring topic in the *Véridique* series. One panel which deplores two unconnected environmental disasters, the daily washing ashore of 40 tons of dead jellyfish on French beaches and the effects of a summer drought (2:8), concludes that, since jellyfish are composed mostly of water, they should be used to alleviate the drought problems.



Image 7



The accusatory statement at the end of the panel ("Alors pourquoi est-ce qu'on ne fait rien du tout alors?") appears not only nonsensical (given the absurdity of the proposed solution) and childishly phrased (with the word "alors" used twice, and the responsibility placed on a generic, impersonal "on"), it also parodies the media's usual discourse of blame and indignation. The right side of the panel depicts former prime minister Edouard Balladur as the main culprit of this scandalous affair: he selfishly keeps all the jellyfish for his own depraved use. Balladur can be seen speaking to a jellyfish, which he has dressed in human clothing. We also learn that he enjoys kissing and spanking them, while referring to himself as their "daddy." Balladur's bizarre and sexually connoted behavior appears even more scandalous given the demonstrated usefulness of jellyfish. Such indignant reports mock the press's usual eagerness to pin scandals on public figures.

One finds various public officials in similarly compromising positions throughout the *Véridique* books. Media scandals alleging corruption or unethical behavior constitute a recurrent pattern in Pierre La Police. For instance, an Elvis-looking Charles Pasqua, flanked by two bikini-clad women, is depicted partying in Honolulu with "drug money" (the exact source of which is unexplained, but presupposed to be familiar to the reader by the use of two definite articles, "L'argent de LA drogue"), while a plethora of concurrent social problems aggravates his apparent insouciance (2: 18). The caption listing social problems illogically combines various unconnected items (unemployment, political struggle, urban violence, the 35-hour work week, Corsica, and homelessness), all of which render Pasqua's self-enjoyment even more shameful.



Image 8

In yet another panel, former prime minister Laurent Fabius involved in a scandal caused by a contaminated blood supply (3: 2). Once again, the politician is depicted as a physical participant in the scandal, not just a behind-the-scenes mastermind. To crown it all, Fabius can be seen performing a transfusion of a yellow liquid containing "contaminated animal fat" from Eastern Europe, which doubly aggravates the initial accusation, but also contains two additional shifts of logic (blood is replaced by animal fat, which cannot be transfused, and the Eastern Bloc origins of the product, although stereotypically scandalous, do not seem to have anything to do with the product or with Fabius). In this case, like in the others previously discussed, Pierre La Police practices what Roland Barthes has called "la figure du comble," the search for the most unlikely qualifier, used as a form of one-upmanship to create the uttermost indignation on the part of the public.

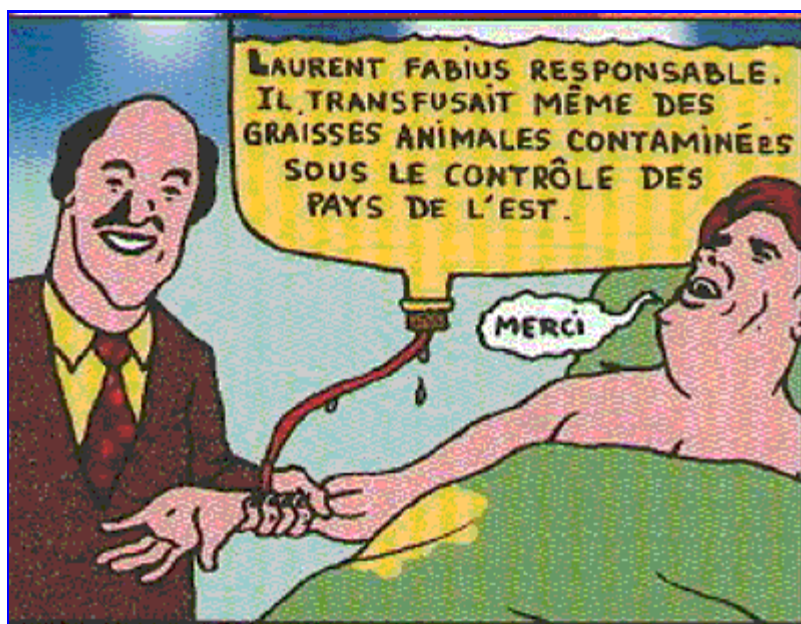


Image 9

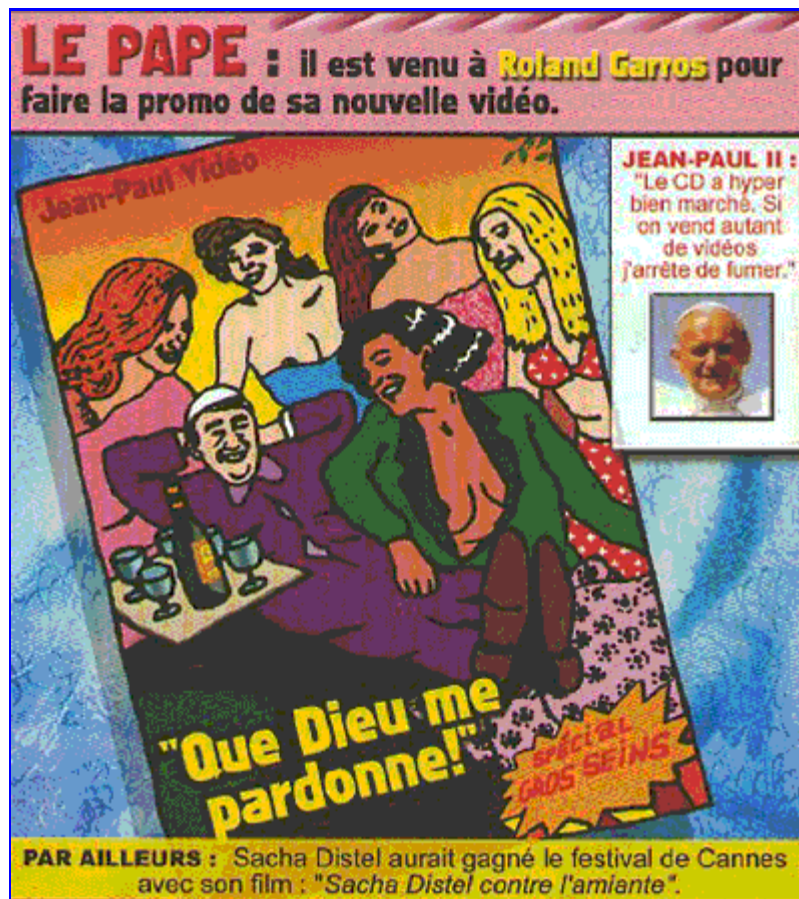
As Livio Belloï and I have shown, *métalogismes* in Pierre La Police tend to create their own absurd network of inside references, their inner logic, deviant yet consistent within the series. For instance, once Pierre La Police has asserted in one panel that the Pope smokes cigarettes, which is obviously untrue but comical, he can verify and confirm this assertion by showing the Pope as a smoker in other panels. In this case, we learn that Elton John is recording an album about lung cancer to eulogize the Pope, shown smoking in the same panel (1: 30).





Image 10

Of course, such a drawing contains several logical leaps: Elton John has eulogized one famous person (Lady Di) in song, but not the Pope, who, additionally, does not smoke and is not dead. Furthermore, in another panel, which represents the Pope promoting his new pornographic video (the metalogical elements of that particular drawing are self-evident), one finds a picture of John Paul II exclaiming: "[my] CD sold so well, if we sell as many videos, I'll stop smoking." (3: 14).



Incidentally, this piece of news does not distinguish between celebrities practicing a form of self-marketing (actors and directors, for instance), and the Pope, as if all celebrities portrayed in the media were interchangeable. A similar, self-validating repetition is at play in the recurrence of Boris Yeltsin's character, shown several times with an amputated leg replaced by an elephant trunk, after an incident at a political meeting regarding the Euro currency (3: 1; 3: 7).



Image 12



Image 13

Laurent Fabius's involvement with blood transfusions also reappears in various panels, including one alleging that Fabius created a Disney-like theme park on the theme of contaminated blood (3: 10).





Image 14

Some political news in Pierre La Police does not rely on scandals and famous politicians, but simply on an absurd transformation of current events. Many panels poke fun at the French bureaucracy and the French public's inability to conceptualize government policies. For instance, a caption such as "Lower taxes: this time it's for real!" (3: 25) (let us note not only the usual infantile formulation, "c'est pour de vrai" instead of "c'est vrai," but also the underlying implication that such announcements are sometimes not true) reveals that savings will be used to create... *another tax* on women's illnesses (like "filaments"), a complete contradiction of the first proclamation, yet causing the uncritical viewer to rejoice nevertheless ("Ça c'est une bonne nouvelle"). The bottom caption indicates that the new tax policy is subject to reversal, conditional upon the behavior of the French, yet another infantilization of the French public. Indeed, if they misbehave by slacking at work or making crumbs with their snacks (two school-related forms of misconduct), they will be "punished" and their tax privileges will be instantly revoked.

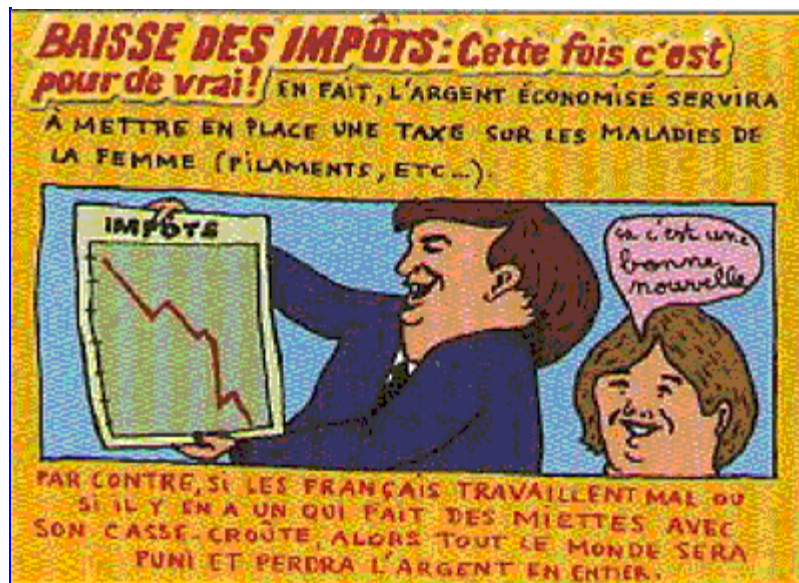


Image 15

A similar drawing in the first volume of *Véridique* claimed that the new European currency (the infamous Euro) would be prohibited from use by short people, who could be punished for doing so (1: 22). Elsewhere, Jospin is depicted personally torturing a gypsy with a towel (2: 7) as part of the new governmental measures against delinquency (same principle as described before: the individual intervention of a public figure to implement abstract, generic state policy, and the subsequent deviant translation of its abstract nature in a concrete, yet nonsensical, action).



Image 16

While most of Pierre La Police's comics rely on logical operations, they also often involve various semantic devices or *métasémèmes*, many of which deconstruct in return the standard code of comics. A simple figure of rhetoric can be described as a form of understatement or *misstatement*. The caption "Devenez ami avec des femmes nues," (2: 17) for instance, contains a semantic shift or gap in its relation to the picture of a naked woman kneeled in a provocative pose. Nakedness, which should be obvious and not worth mentioning in these types of ads, is redundantly stated, while the erotic relationship to the image is underplayed and childishly transformed into "becoming friends" with the nude model. La Police frequently uses captions that are not picture specific, or inaccurately describe their iconic counterpart. Such is the case in "Grève à la RATP vendredi," (3: 19) in which the announcement of a public transportation strike can hardly be associated with the

juxtaposed panels (a woman accidentally dropping flowers, a Tunisian man burping, an opinion poll about Nick Nolte, and the bizarre surgery undergone by French singer Pascal Obispo). This dislocation of the usual bond between text and image often reaches a near-breaking point, or creates a semantic void. Pierre La Police's art questions the interdependence between text and picture, whose connections often appear tenuous or incongruous.

Pierre La Police also frequently uses the opposite metasemic effect: while the text is somewhat picture specific, its corresponding image seems meaningless. The page representing "some photos of Indian men with oil" (1: 13) is a masterpiece of nonsensical humor in this regard. The first anomaly is that few photos are to be found on this page, which contains mostly drawn faces. The reader may resolve this anomaly by considering the drawings of Indian men as the iconic equivalents of photos, so that the caption becomes therefore vaguely appropriate. But the second anomaly cannot be remedied: the presence of Indian men and their relationship to cooking oil remains unjustified and meaningless. This dysfunctional use of descriptive inserts reflexively emphasizes the representational limits of comics.

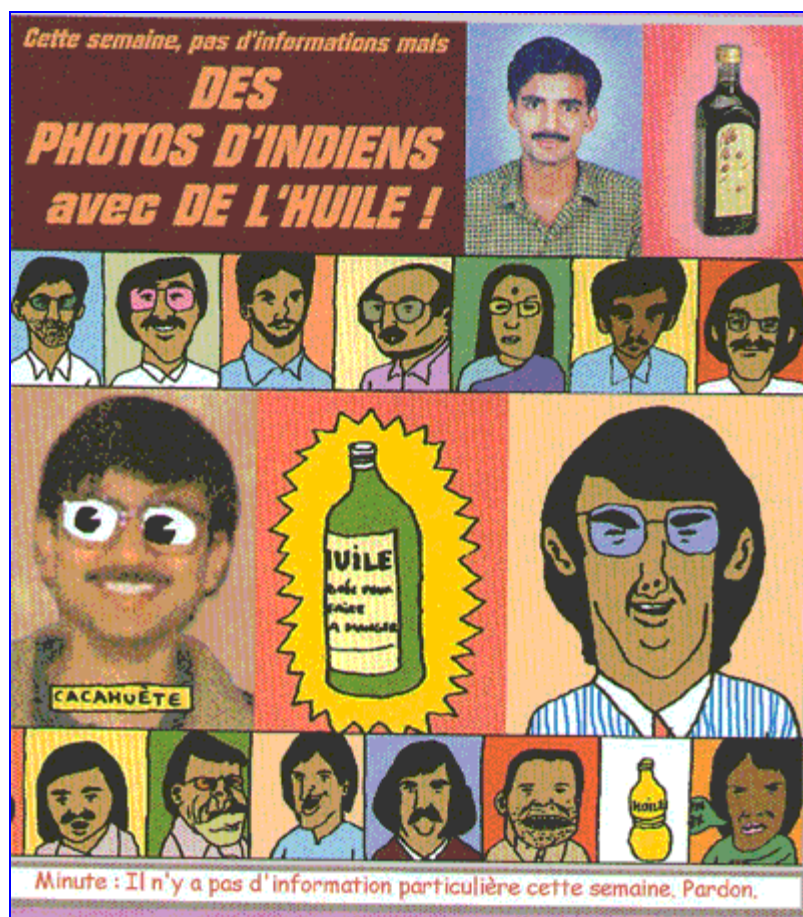


Image 17

Another metasemic play on the semantic code of comics in Pierre La Police lies in the recurrent use of misframed speech balloons, as in "Lionel Jospin s'est fait opérer des bras" (2: 21), where the balloon is amputated by the side of the panel, rendering its content illegible. Such figures evidently imply the author's reflexive understanding of the comics language and his systematic intent to subvert it.





Image 18

But the most striking form of deviance in Pierre La Police is perhaps a simple matter of form, a *métaplasme* that the author describes by the concept of "mal fait" or "badly done." For instance, one of the panels depicting the "festival des arts martiaux à Bercy" (2: 11) asserts about the drawing of a Brazilian man: "il est tout mal fait, pardon." « Poorly done » metanarratively describes Pierre La Police's awkward, infantilized draftsmanship, with its obvious mimetic deficiencies, for which he often ironically apologizes. Indeed, Pierre La Police's portraits of celebrities and politicians, as well as his representation of reality in general, often strike us by their absolute dissimilarity with their referent, which is hardly recognizable in some cases (Jean-Claude Van Damme, 2:11). Pierre La Police's art explores the thin line and plays on the very cusp between resemblance and dissemblance. Such mimetic ambivalence reminds us, as Scott McCloud aptly theorized, that pictural

representation in comics relies on iconic abstraction, offering no ontological connection with its referent. By stretching the resemblance between these signs and their tangible referent to a near breaking point, Pierre La Police brings attention to the arbitrary nature and extreme plasticity of comics signs. Such metaplastic transgressions play an important part in Pierre La Police's take on politics, to the same extent as his syntactic, logical, and semantic distortions of reality.

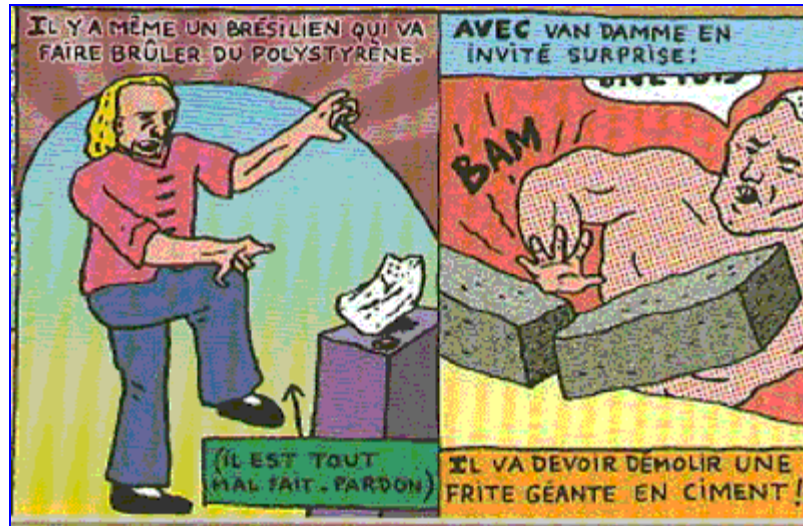


Image 19

Such an analysis of the recurring tropes that are at play in Pierre La Police's political cartooning (or anti-political anti-cartooning) remains, of course, necessarily limited in scope, and must be reinscribed in a larger study of media parody and misrepresentation in Pierre La Police's work, although the systemic consistency of rhetorical figures justified, in my opinion, a separate examination. However, the very recurrence of these tropes requires two additional comments as a conclusion. The first one must recognize the danger of predictability in this reliance on a finite bag of tricks. Although political references only constitute a fraction of Pierre La Police's vast and complex repertoire of humorous strategies, the reader may gradually become desensitized to this form of humor because of the sheer repetition of its mechanisms, to which he/she becomes inevitably accustomed, consciously or unconsciously. Various readers have noted that the first two volumes of *Véridique* reflected, in their estimation, the author's creative peak, although there have been obvious attempts on Pierre La Police's part to renew his catalogue of figures in subsequent volumes, with mixed results. The same danger unfortunately faces most cartoon humorists (Uderzo, Gotlib, Edika, etc.), although there are luminous exceptions (André Franquin). In some cases, predictability, in its serial form, tends to generate a comics author's success (Hergé).

The second concluding statement must insist on the reader's role in decoding the various forms of deviation inscribed in these tropes. Far be it from me to suggest that La Police's play on media and comics representational codes should be described or understood in a vacuum. In fact, all comic devices analyzed above can only function with the interpretive cooperation of the reader. By definition, deviations require that the reader measure the distance between a voluntarily flawed or transformative (simplified, exaggerated, embellished, etc.) enunciation and its actual referent. Such is the case, of course, of caricatures, but also, to a certain

extent, of the *ligne claire* aesthetics as well (readers of *Tintin* must recognize signs of gender, age, or psychology in Hergé's simplified expression thereof). Scott McCloud's notion of an iconic abstraction in comics reminds us of the active role of the comics reader in the signifying process. In the case of *La Police*, the reader is entrusted with far more decoding competence than in average comics. In order to « get » *La Police*'s humor, the reader must recognize the cast of politicians depicted (particularly because they are often so poorly sketched), the current media scandals (and absurdist variations thereof), and the format of news media itself, as well as of comics narratives. In a paradoxical sense, as with other forms of irony, *La Police*'s oversimplification appeals to the reader's sophistication, and his dumbing down of the world to the reader's intelligence.

---

## Works Cited

*La Police*, Pierre. *Véridique* (vol.1-3). Paris : Editions Cornélius, 1999-2002.

Leroy, Fabrice, and Livio Belloi. « *The Cartoonist as Iconoclast : Flaubertian Irony and Media Parody in Pierre La Police's Comics.* » *The International Journal of Comic Art* 6 :2 (2004) : 222-237.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York : Paradox Press, 1993.