



Figure 1

Madam & Eve: a change agent in the new South Africa

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Social development is determined by the ways in which individuals establish their life-worlds by means of meaningful exchanges with others and with mass-mediated messages. Media analysts have historically concentrated more on photography, television and film analyses, than on cartoons or comic strips, probably because the latter are treated as so-called *children's stories*. This article attempts to rectify this imbalance and to illustrate that an analysis of cartoons, as a graphic medium, has a legitimate place in mass-communication research. In so doing, this discussion aims to consider some answers to a question for which no universal consensus among researchers or academics currently exists, namely: How does communication contribute to development and change?

Although cartoons represent hypothetical 'as if' worlds, the cartoon world selects certain properties, issues and individuals from the real world and invites readers to interpret the cartoons from the perspective of the same social real world. In the case of South Africa this *same social real world* is in the process of changing. New national priorities include national reconciliation; socio-economic transformation; growth, employment and redistribution (Gear) strategy; nation building; eradication of poverty; land reform; the African Renaissance; and reconstruction and development as on-going programmes. Equality (irrespective of race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, belief, culture or language) is the nucleus of South Africa's new national fabric (cf. Act 108 of 1996, ch 2, sections 9[4] & [3]).

Against this complex and changing background, this article demonstrates how a multiframed cartoon, *Madam & Eve*, functions as a change agent in promoting some of the national priorities listed above. To this end, the question is asked: How does this cartoon series convey social interactions and reflect the dialectical relation between readers and a new South African society?

The past 40 years of communication theory and practice has, at different periods, dealt with four models of development: as modernisation through innovation and adoption; as liberation from dependency; as meeting basic needs and social marketing; and as human development, with communication fulfilling a supportive function (cf. Masilela 1996:97). Against this background, the concept **change agent**, is defined as *mass-mediated*



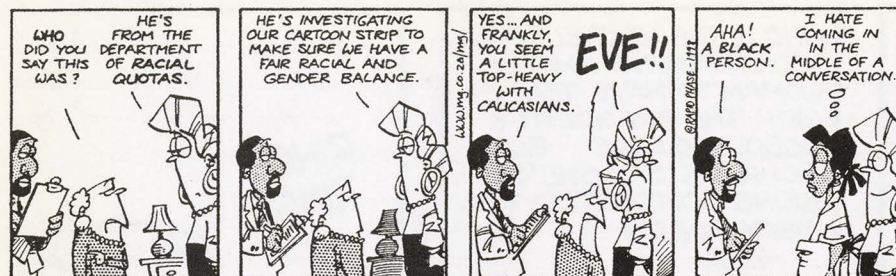


Figure 2

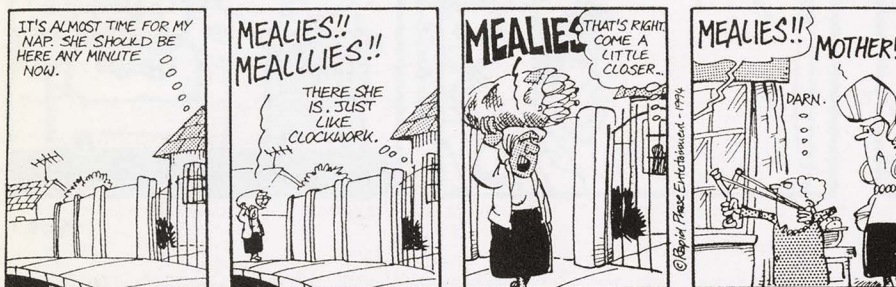


Figure 3

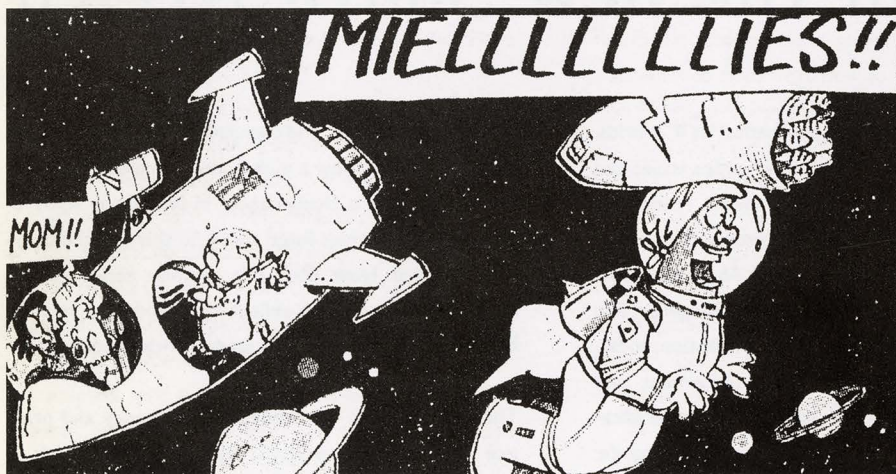


Figure 4

messages that effect change. This definition ascribes a human quality to inanimated printed pages and raises the following kinds of questions: How do four women as the main characters (Gwen Anderson, a white Madam; Gwen's mother, Mom Anderson; Eve Sisulu, Madam's black houseworker and Thandi, a black child aged six) counteract the destruction which apartheid caused to the self-esteem and confidence of people who were not white? How do they deal with the domination of privileged classes? And lastly, how do they promote learning?



SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND CHANGE

From a postmodern perspective, power, gender and race are regarded as so-called master codes. Power has been described as 'a function of what others are willing to do in response to the tacit or explicit demands of the powerful' (McLaurin 1982:267). If the role of power in social development is of any importance, then maximum benefits can only be obtained when (new) messages of power are projected in such a way that they are readily perceived and recognised by the readers. No wonder that new South African icons of power, such as Nelson Mandela, Louis Luyt, Bafana Bafana's soccer coach, Chief Buthelezi, Dali Thambo, Bishop Tutu, Alan Boesak, Matthews Phosa, Felicia Mabuza-Suttle, PAGAD, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Peter Mokaba, find themselves sharing the stage with Madam and Eve.

However, from a cultural perspective, Gwen (Madam) and Eve, as members of South African society, still find themselves living in a dominant culture, where success and control are associated with achievements obtained by male characters. The following are examples of roles that are fulfilled by men in these cartoons (with beards

or moustaches being used as gender icons): Michael Jackson's attorney; security guards; police and traffic officers; prison warders; a judge in a court of law; Bob Power the 'famous motivational expert' as guest speaker at the 'First Annual Mielie Lady Convention'; a jockey in the ANCVP handicap; a psychiatric doctor; television cameramen; a Hollywood agent; dustbin men; hijackers; Thandi's school teacher and the school's headmaster; not forgetting 'Father' Christmas.

To function as a change agent, *Madam & Eve*, as a series of cartoons, not only (has to) represent non-males, but the settings have to be timeless and familial. The past and references to the past are important only in that traditions from different pasts are interplayed with the narrative. For example, the conflict between Mom and the street hawker selling her *meallllllieesss!* is repeated from time to time, in different settings which vary from a home-street scene, to travelling in outer space.

Timelessness enables the communicator to break from the (any) past. Nevertheless, whilst representing multiculturalism in the selection of themes (and in so doing, acting as change agents for shifting cultural perceptions), *Madam & Eve* also reminds the readers that *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (Alphonse Karr 1808-1890). Therefore, events depicted include universally shared special occasions, such as celebrating birthdays, going on holiday, sharing Valentine's day, Easter, Christmas and New Year's celebrations and resolutions. Accordingly, *Madam & Eve* also deals with situations which involve hijacking, cash in transit robberies, illegal gun-running, because crime (as an extension of unemployment and poverty) is a global problem.

Madam & Eve manages to subvert and parody certain realities of South African culture, where social rules of inclusion and exclusion still prevail. For example,



Madam re-visits Eve's original CV (which states that Eve is a white nanny from England, the basis on which she was employed) at a time when the CV of a newly appointed black deputy vice-chancellor at a well-known South African university was questioned by whites and debated in the press.

Variables which have an accepted influence in any form of fictional communication include among others the following:

- The similarity (or dissimilarity) of interest between the communicator and the reader.
- Establishing a balance between an overtly expressed intent (e.g. to humour), and a presentation in which the intent (e.g. to educate or to persuade) is hidden.
- The credibility of the characters from the perspective of the reader.



Figure 5



Figure 6

The last variable gives rise to questions such as: What are the referential functions of the cartoon characters in *Madam & Eve*? And, what are the essential properties of these characters? Furthermore, the influence of these variables is dependent on whether or not the following requirements are met:

- The language must be easy to understand and the thematic content must be comprehensible.
- The meaning of graphic conventions (as symbolic codes) must be grasped and appreciated.



COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Language

The function of verbal language in the contextualisation of every cartoon story is particularly important because principal (visual) poses of the characters are often repeated through a series of frames. If a cartoon character says something, he or she performs an action. Perform also has the meaning of performance, which can be the representation or demonstration of entertainment, or instruction, now more popularly called *education*. If the cartoon character wishes to obtain consonance with her (his) values, the speech act must not only be observed, the content of the act must also be understood. Types of speech acts include questions, commands, demands, and affirmations, which are conveyed as dialogue, soliloquy or so-called off-stage commentary. Two questions are central to investigating such cartoon performances: What is communicated and how is it communicated?

In printed cartoons the verbal message is normally contained in a speech balloon or thought bubble, which can be framed in a solid, unbroken, perforated or spiked outline, or printed without an outline. In the case of speech balloons, continuity is established by means of

dialogue between two or more characters. Thought bubbles, on the other hand, because they represent intrapersonal communication, enable the communicator to introduce comments, reflections and/or reactions on a hidden or covert level.

The speech balloon, or thought bubble, adds to the psychological capacity of the character to convey alternative ways of life. In structural terms, such snatches of dialogue also fulfil a continuity link among two or more frames of the cartoon. Off-stage commentary places the visual event in a wider context. Gwen, for example, often ends the last frame with an off-stage speech bubble ("MOM!") that not only acts as an exclamation mark to whatever Mom has been up to, but also reminds readers that life goes on beyond the last frame.

Words – although printed – therefore represent a dynamic dialogue between characters, a *think out loud* soliloquy, a *behind-the-back* commentary, all of which are essentially addressed to the reader of the cartoon.

Conversational strategies

Themes are constructed by means of argumentation to which both verbal and visual codes contribute. *Madam & Eve* contains examples of how an overall argument is constructed by means of accumulation, rather than by deduction. For instance, Gwen is visually shown holding a feather duster and Mom holding a mop and bucket, to which references made in their speech bubbles accumulatively convey the message that they are now the maids, whilst Eve sits and reads a book, entitled *Hypnosis made easy* (cf. Figure 6). This cartoon also illustrates how social stereotypes are reversed and how contradiction between a verbal speech and kinesic signs (gesturing finger, large eyes, lifted eye-brows) can also be a source of comic effect.

Conversations between cartoon characters often serve purposes which are characteristic of interpersonal conversations. Affinity-seeking strategies are those messages which are intended to increase how much the characters (e.g. Gwen and Mom) like or support each other. Comforting strategies consist of messages which comfort or help the other person (e.g. Mother Anderson's concern about Thandi's questionable progress at school). Due to the nature of the themes (topics) dealt with and the type of characters, two strategies often used in *Madam & Eve* are compliance-gaining strategies and conflict management strategies. Compliance-gaining strategies involve the use of messages which persuade others to comply with a particular character's needs and requests (e.g. Gwen chokingly begs Eve not to leave for a long weekend, but to spend Worker's Day with her and Mom, when in fact the real motive for the request is a kitchen filled with dirty crockery that needs to be washed.) Conflict management strategies, on the other hand, consist of messages which are aimed at

managing relational disagreements (cf. Frey et al 1992:220-221). For example, Eve calls in an *Inyanga* (a traditional healer) to treat Madam and Mom's flu, and despite vomiting from drinking a special potion (consisting of roots, herbs, bark and powdered baboon liver), they, in the end, feel better. Another example is Gwen calling in a *Sangoma* who (by 'rolling the bones' and speaking with his ancestors) acts as her financial advisor regarding future investments.

Consequential structures

A structural approach to dialogue between two characters is focussed on an interactional perspective, which assumes that verbal exchanges are based on agreed-upon implicit 'rules' that are shared in a culture and in a particular context. Such rules apply as conventions with the initiation of a conversation, during turn-taking, changing topics and when terminating a conversation. The contexts differ, for example, from an informal situation in the kitchen, to a question-and-answer structure followed in a court of law, versus

the bargaining that takes place between Madam and Eve (for instance, when Eve is selling Nelson Mandela 80th Birthday commemorative coffee cups at a street stand).

Unlike dialogue in interpersonal communication, with its uneven interruptions, the dialogue in cartoons is carefully structured in a turn-taking manner, with the focus firmly placed on one character at a time. When analysing the character, together with the verbal speech/thought bubble, the following functional categories emerge, as set out in the adjacent panel.

When applying these categories as an analysis scheme, the notion of the *adjacency pair* (Alderton & Frey 1983:88-95) is revealed as the core of the conversational structures in these cartoons. For example, a question is met with an answer; or a request is met with it being granted or refused. This adjacency pair (e.g. request-refusal) creates a second pair position (e.g. refusal is met with an argument). Within each

The initiator in the cartoon (first speaker or character in the first frame):

- seems friendly/unfriendly
- overdramatises/appears unmoved
- gives verifiable information/
gives subjective opinion/
gives suggestion(s)
- requests information/
requests an opinion/
requests suggestion(s)
- shows tension/appears relaxed

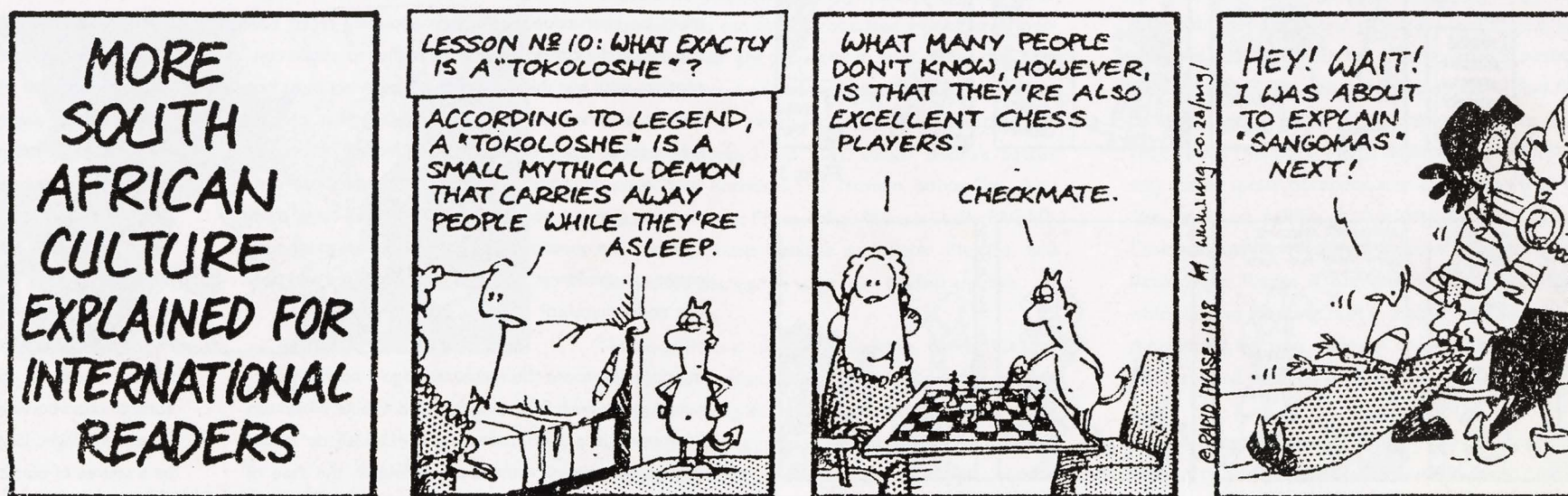


Figure 7

The respondent in the cartoon (as listener or as a second speaker):

- seems friendly/unfriendly
- overdramatises/appears unmoved
- gives verifiable information/
gives subjective opinion/
gives suggestion(s)
- requests information/
requests an opinion/
requests suggestion(s)
- shows tension/appears relaxed
- reacts positively/neutrally/negatively
- agrees/disagrees

frame the focus is either on the character 'talking', or the recipient 'listening'. Placing the focus on the 'reaction', contributes not only to the construction and exchange of the message, but also contributes to the outcome. Whereas the initial message format may be based on an argument, promise (see Figure 3), command (see Figure 10), apology, warning, invitation, or question (see Figure 2), the response mode (from either the respondent or subsequently the initiator) determines the consequential structure of that cartoon as

- either being supportive or nonsupportive (see Figure 6);
- being an extension of the initial message format or a confinement thereof (see Figure 1) and/or
- confirmation of the initial message format or as a disconfirmation thereof (see Figure 5).

By means of the above conversational strategies and consequential structures, *Madam & Eve*, functions as a change agent because the knowledge and meanings generated are not addressed directly, but are implied.

Thematic contexts

It is possible that all the printed words that constitute the message are understood by readers without them being aware of, or gaining an understanding of, the intent behind the theme. In other words, despite the possibility that the communicators' actual intentions may be quite different from the *intent* perceived or understood by readers, this article argues that intent is embedded in both the verbal and visual content (and form) of the cartoons.

Several *énoncés* from other texts underline the intertextual nature of cartoons. These include other mass-media messages, as well as other popular, cultural or topical references, which assume the readers' familiarity with other texts — perceptions are situated in frames of reference that are themselves the cumulative residue of earlier perceptions. Therefore, because each cartoon deals with a different theme, readers have to deal with what Elam (1980:95) refers to as 'a condition of "undercoding"' (in theatrical terms). Faced with innovativeness in each cartoon, the reader has to actively decipher the codes and meanings — which constitute the core of the pleasure derived from reading cartoons. It is therefore important to keep in mind that readers are progressively *educated* through continual exposure to similar messages.

Society is dynamic and multidimensional. The *reality* represented by cartoons is not an objective reflection of the real world. Nevertheless, *Madam & Eve* manages to deal with realistic subjects,

such as personal sentiment, group sentiment (e.g. the importance of a *Sangoma*), national sentiment, hardship, changing social roles, as well as well-known political, sport and entertainment personalities, and public figures, which are situated in personal, political, economic, local community, national and international events. However, they do so without imitating these *realities*. These subjects are dealt with and often combined in one cartoon, in imaginative ways and very often in ways that are unique to Southern African culture. For example: Mom answers the question *What exactly is a Tokkoloshe?* with the following answer: *According to legend, a Tokkoloshe is a small mythical demon that carries away people while they're asleep.* But who would have thought of combining Mom with a visual depiction of a diminutive 'devil' (with horns and an arrow-like tail) who plays chess and checkmates her ('*What many people don't know, however, is that they're also excellent chess players*').

This example also illustrates how (in psychoanalytical terms) condensation is used to combine two or more ideas in a single cartoon.

Thematic content can, however, only be comprehensible if the graphic conventions as symbolic codes are grasped.

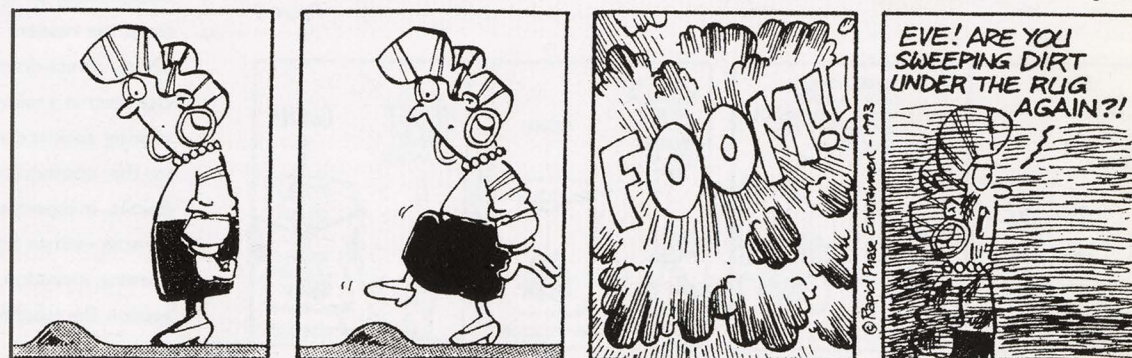


Figure 8



BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES

The images of cartoon characters can be evaluated in terms of traits or attributes (e.g. happy and honest), or in terms of their behaviours and actions. As social actors, they exhibit a behavioural consistency across a variety of situations. Cartoons use visual, symbolic conventions, as a 'shorthand' to convey such trait situations and to structure the performance of types of behaviours. Three of such conventions are discussed below: frame(s), movement and characterisation.

Frame(s) as paradigmatic-syntagm

Cartoon drawings are simple and two-dimensional, are usually framed in a linear manner and (in Western societies) arranged (and read) syntagmatically from left to right. The figures emphasise flatness, with faces and bodies often drawn in profile, and objects are often drawn

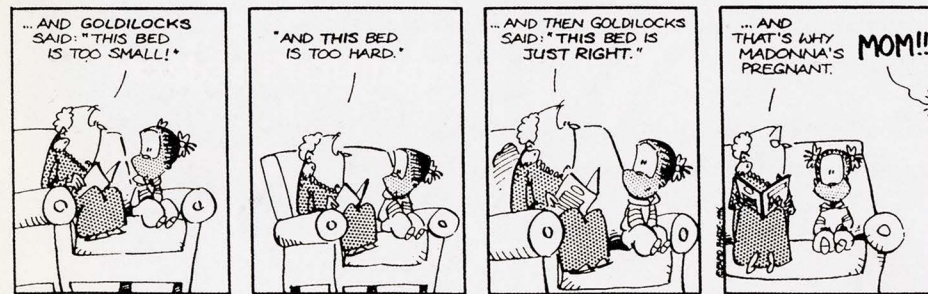


Figure 9



Figure 10

as outlines, rather than using depth codes, such as shadows, overlapping of planes or linear perspective.

The presentational devices, used in *Madam & Eve* include a frame as prologue, or one as epilogue. An example of the former includes a frame containing the words 'SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE EXPLAINED FOR INTERNATIONAL READERS'. This is repeated in a series of separate cartoons, which deal with themes, such as the meaning of biltong, an anti-theft gorilla bar, the taste of gin and tonic, why a traffic light is called a robot, and the meaning of a *Tokkoloshe*. Such prologual frames set the scene and prepare the readers for what is to follow. One example of a frame, used as epilogue, contains a red triangle (warning sign) with the letters 'V' 'L' below, together with this verbal message 'CENSORED! This Cartoon Panel contains scenes of Extreme Violence and Foul Language'. This epilogal frame functions as an invitation to readers to fill-in their interpretation of an open-ended narrative. (Prior to this frame, Mom was sitting reading, an insect buzzes above her head, and Eve stands posed to swot the insect on Mom's head.)

The above two examples function as *frame breaking* devices, because they force the characters in the cartoon to acknowledge the presence (and implied involvement) of the reader as part of a wider public. From the readers' point of view, they also introduce a 'shock' (meta-dramatic) effect, as would occur when a character in a television soap opera were to turn to the viewing audience and address the viewer directly. Due to the consequential combination of two or more frames, irrespective of whether the first frame commences with an argument, promise, command, apology, warning, invitation, request, statement, opinion or suggestion, the reaction to the latter is the crux of the narrative.

Movement

Movement is an essential characteristic of life. One of the most difficult challenges that faces a cartoon artist, is therefore to suggest life, caught in arrested motion. Each separate frame contains isolated moments, which give the illusion of continuous action. This is accomplished by isolating a momentary image, which suggests that the subject has been caught in the act of motion. Kinesics (as a code of content) is of particular significance, because a sense of being has to emanate from characters' faces and bodies. With a hand gesturing, with eyes raised, with hair that is lifted, with a certain posture, the still image is poised on the edge of movement.

The movement of every object in the natural world is controlled by physical laws, or forces of gravity and friction. Although humans have a will of their own, the graphic illustration of movement can use the modification of humans' behaviour in relation to these forces. Other natural powers can also be used as a central setting for visualised behaviour and on which the storyline (story incident) is based, such as wind, rain, waves, heat or cold.

Reading the resistance or over-emphasis of these natural forces is based on past experience. For example, when Madam presses the remote control to open a garage door, the reader expects to see the door opening in the next frame. Or if Mom aims and shoots her 'katty' (slingshot) at the *mealie lady*, the reader would expect a response from the latter in the next frame (except that Eve intervenes by closing all the windows, which results in shots bouncing around Mom's head).

Although readers anticipate that figures and objects should conform to natural forces that would affect them if they were to exist in actuality, every cartoon

between the past and the future. They create a binary balance between negating the stereotypical attitudes, actions or behaviours that have been ascribed to the past, and the hope and trust to be found by taking on new attitudes, behaviours, or ways of life. As interventionists, they represent a therapeutic *mirror*, which enables readers to escape, whilst at the same time enabling readers to fulfill their social integrative needs — strengthening their contact with a changing world.

From a perspective of development communication, *Madam & Eve* cannot be separated from the world of impressions, appearances, perceptions and value judgments, some of which are culturally determined. They not only comment on and respond to reconstruction and development issues, they have **become part of these processes**. By representing differences in experiences and opinions, they redefine the social functions fulfilled by cartoons in the development context of post-apartheid South Africa — they balance the apartheid imbalances. As a change agent, the roles fulfilled by these cartoons are neither discrete nor static. They function as enablers, facilitators, educators, social brokers, and as commentators of the 'old' and the 'new'.



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