

## Humor for Intellectuals: Can it Be Exported and Translated? The Case of Gary Trudeau's *In Search of Reagan's Brain*

Roland Diot

Volume 34, Number 1, mars 1989

Humour et traduction  
Humour and Translation

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002570ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002570ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)  
1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Diot, R. (1989). Humor for Intellectuals: Can it Be Exported and Translated? The Case of Gary Trudeau's *In Search of Reagan's Brain*. *Meta*, 34(1), 84–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/002570ar>

# HUMOR FOR INTELLECTUALS : CAN IT BE EXPORTED AND TRANSLATED ?

The Case of Gary Trudeau's *In Search of Reagan's Brain*

ROLAND DIOT

University of Bordeaux, Talence, France

Roland Barthes once wrote that he absolutely refused to translate anything. However paradoxical and self-defeating this statement might seem, one may contend that the linguist and stylistics expert was basically right. When it comes to translating humor, the operation proves to be as desperate as that of translating poetry. Humor, like other types of discourse, is based on the communication circuit: the transference of codes, and the interpretation of signs, some of which are linguistic, others nonlinguistic, and still others metalinguistic. While the denotations can roughly be translated into a different language, the connotations cannot. They resist the process of exportation and perish in the shipping. Also, what makes one nation laugh is hardly what turns on another nation. Apart from allusions, references and various cultural idiosyncrasies, the content and the form of the jokes and of the comedy are radically different. If one compares the popularity and diffusion of two American humorists, Gary Trudeau and Woody Allen, one observes a wide difference in their respective popularity abroad. Allen's humor, largely derived from parody and Jewish humor, has been successfully translated into French; whereas Gary Trudeau is still widely ignored, even in Britain, an English-speaking country. Both Trudeau and Allen are favorites of the intellectuals who appreciate their highly referential comedy, self-derogatory humor and parody of their own language and discourse, pet ideologies and habits. What intellectuals have in common, it seems to me, is an enormous amount of narcissism and an equal, if not superior, amount of masochism. They also share a number of neurotic tendencies, among which is a guilt complex associated to a wounded conscience which Sartre used to call "the petty bourgeois syndrome". And although the expression assumed by these common syndromes may vary in form according to the various cultural environments, yet the intellectuals seem to derive their pleasure from the same themes, among which is a systematic debunking of political figures and leaders. They are almost always in "the opposite camp", namely, the opposition to whatever party might happen to be in office: it is an institutional position. The French intelligentsia has a tradition of criticism and satire inherited from a mixture of Roman Catholicism (the Inquisition) and Marxism, allied to an almost maniacal obsession with classification, perverted logic and rationalism. The French political game and political comedy are infected with this weird germ. Since ideologies and theologues play a paramount role in the French political carnival, one is likely to expect more satire than humor, more aggressive, manicheistic confrontation of "the right" and of "the left", namely of "evil" versus "good". It appears that things are not that clear as far as the radical chic American intelligentsia is concerned.

Trudeau's strip *In Search of Reagan's Brain* is based on verbal and non-verbal humor. Its "symbolic action", to use Kenneth Burke's phrase, follows the pattern of classic scapegoat ritual: the elimination of the pharmakos, symbol of evil — the Evil King — the Father Figure: the President. The scapegoat is frightened with all kinds of imaginary

diseases and defects. In Trudeau's strip, the case is brain pathology, and the tabooed figure of the President is assimilated to an object of scientific curiosity — a case for biological exploration and medical diagnosis. This represents the first level of meaning. The second is pure satire: the media, TV and pressmen, the well-known Washington papers and circles, TV stars, etc. The third aspect of the comedy is parody: following the pattern of the *Fantastic Journey*, a scientific journalist, Roland Hedley, dressed as a speleologist, leads all readers, adults as well as children, intellectuals and non-intellectuals into the fascinating recesses of the human brain — Ronald Reagan's brain. This is an intellectual game that pleases everybody, regardless of age, class and educational status.

The 24 drawings of the strip include scenes with the reporter in them, others without him, some with scientific charts and sketches. The voyage is a surrealistic one, meant for voyeurs and rapists who penetrate the sacred space of the human brain. This causes a complex mixture of various types of pleasures: that of violating taboos, social and moral, but also an ambiguous combination of repulsion and sadistic joy. When the reporter wades, waist-deep in some unidentified fluid, which we imagine is the soft and moist substance of cerebral matter, it means the forbidden gratification of the primary self, regressing into anal and oral pleasure. Other devices include the reduction and/or assimilation of intelligence, psychic responses and general public ego of the President to images of flesh and meat-like substance, conjuring up memories of lab dissections of a frog's innards. Other comic techniques play upon the intellectual curiosity of the reader, eager to get information and anticipating the inevitably "funny" conclusion and phony scientific explanation about the functioning or dysfunctioning of the "subject's" brain. But guilt and shame are entailed in this operation desecrating the image of the superego. The whole process consists of having the reader gradually accept an escalation: from the normal to the abnormal, and thanks to the necessary suspension of disbelief, have him adopt this acceleration in chaos and scandalous representation of reality. The game is built on the violation of all logical rules, ranging from scientific verisimilitude to political accuracy. The reader's pleasure increases proportionally to the violence of the scandal. The reader also gets gradually involved in the process, by the clever introduction of recognizable and familiar tokens of his normal environment, a well-known trick of sci-fi writers. Some drawings appeal to our sense of analogy: trees are nothing but neurones, the brain's circumvolutions look like lascivious nudes lying on soft cushions, with human buttocks sprawled on Oriental carpets, etc. A final rabelaisian device used by Trudeau is the heterogeneous list, or "fatrasie", which amalgamates tree-pollution and Reagan's irrepressible public utterances to brain dysfunctioning in a farcical levelling of categories and hierarchies.

The humorist here assumes the function of a "farcical semiotician" selecting the signs he chooses for further interpretation, thus elaborating an entirely subjective and absurd system of hermeneutics (selection of adequate signs). He then rearranges these signs into an equally farcical and disorderly system of signification (semiology). It is the solipsist's representation of reality. Laughter is aroused by this chaotic aesthetic image, but it is mixed with a certain amount of terror: the anxiety that seizes a normal, logical, rational mind in front of a topsy-turvy universe, failing to conform to the familiar rules of its organization. The child in us, as Freud would say, rejoices at the sight of this man-created "chaosmos", but the adult, on the other hand, recoils and shudders. The tension releases itself into a nervous giggle that cannot completely obliterate the uneasy feeling. The question is then raised of whether humor, whose function is to lift this existential terror through reduction and disguise of the causes of anguish, should produce this ambiguous malaise and emotion. In the case of Trudeau, the frank and direct pleasure of satire largely counterbalances the transient and elusive presence of an infinitesimal dose of sur-

realistic humor: the symbolic action of the conventional comedy and its denouement are preserved, and the restoration of sanity after the brief parenthesis of the carnival is ensured. The purification rite has been completed.

If self-debunking means therapy for the self and purification from the neurotic repressions and suppressions, if it means a momentary pause in the dull and oppressive course of ordinary existence in the Kingdom of Order and the superego, then the process must be analogical in the case of what may be termed "national self-debunking". Trudeau, as an American citizen, can afford this perilous game: it is a purification of the "national self". The image of disorder — aesthetic representation of reality — will bring about the cure and the restoration of Order: a healthier and possibly more desirable order (as Northrop Frye would say). I, as a foreign observer, cannot be implied in this ritual. I watch the imaginary chaos, I enjoy the sight of it as the image of a distorted reality — a foreign reality — but I feel no sympathy for it; I remain 100% detached and ready to laugh malignantly and without any reluctant emotion. There is the rub: my aggressive energies are being released at the carnival figures and drama but there is no therapy involved in the procedure; I keep apart and aloof; I am an outsider, unconcerned and alienated from the operation. Otherness is my problem: I may compare the American political carnival to the well-known and familiar mess at home but there it stops: to me it is satire, not humor.

As regards the drawings and the graphic representation of the American political scene, there again I feel like an outsider and spectator. I am not an American TV addict; I remain outside the screen, even outside the outside (the cups of coffee, books, cigarette butts, popcorn are folklore to me, "American folklore", as Roland Hedley puts it). The tone, style and general form of the strip are filled with socio-cultural and linguistic connotations. Trudeau points to two typical American obsessions: information and didacticism. Explaining Einstein to the layman or the working of the human brain to eight-year olds. The language is that of a popular scientific series ("Hi! Welcome to the mysterious world of...", "What wonders await us!", "So, fasten your seat belts"). Nothing like this on my side of the Atlantic, but arrogant and pedantic journalists and TV men, ponderous and stuffy scientists explaining the cosmos to us, dumbwitted TV audiences. No equality or democracy like "Hi! This is Roland Hedley!" Also: "Reagan's brain — Brought to you by Anacin!" I, as a translator, can adapt the term and replace it by a popular local pain-reliever: but how about the allusion to a familiar TV commercial? French TV has state-sponsored programs with a few commercials placed before the shows, not interspersed through the programs. It is part of Trudeau's carnival technique to mix up trite and serious matters: it debunks both subject-matter (the President's brain), and the medium (TV discourse). Among other untranslatable, metalinguistic components of Trudeau's humor one can also mention psychoanalysis and the need for direct information.

So it appears that the satirical part of the strip (the allusions to Ronald Reagan's figure, character, public declarations, past history, etc.), can be translated for and understood by a foreign audience. But so long as the process is also that of humor, when the national identity, symbols, myths and mythology are being debunked but at the same time acknowledged as part of one's self-image, the operation means the killing of one's symbolic image. There the foreign reader finds himself in a sad predicament: he resents his alienation and is tempted to gloat over another country's misfortunes and political chaos, but he feels excluded from the family ritual and festival. He can call the attention of his neighbors to the great American values of optimism ("Our political folklore is the richer for it!") and the great deal of liberty enjoyed in the United States: no censorship for the desacralization of the presidential figure, etc. Would this be tolerated in a country which claims it is a "socialist democracy" and a puritanical country like France? A country

where a former humorist once raised the issue of whether anyone can possibly be “a socialist” and a humorist at the same time (Robert Escarpit)? Humor is anarchy; total subversion. Intellectuals are supposedly free minds, freed from nationalism and puritanism: citizens of the world, all right. But there are still totems and taboos, it seems. So, where do we go from here? I certainly grasped the myth and the mess, but missed the message. *QUOD ERAT DEMONSTRANDUM*.