

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

UTC Scholar

Honors Theses

Student Research, Creative Works, and
Publications

5-2014

Funny or French: how humor varies across cultures

Audrey Mefford

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, acmefford@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mefford, Audrey, "Funny or French: how humor varies across cultures" (2014). *Honors Theses*.

This Theses is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research, Creative Works, and Publications at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Funny or French: How Humor Varies Between Cultures
Audrey Mefford
Departmental Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Humanities
Project Director: Dr. Victoria Steinberg

March 26, 2014
Dr. Verbie Prevost, Dr. Stylianos Chatzimanolis, Karen Buntin

Signatures:

X

Project Director

X

Departmental Examiner

X

Departmental Examiner

X

Liaison, Departmental Honors Committee

X

Chair, Departmental Honors Committee

The cartoons of Claire Bretécher, Roz Chast, Jean-Jacques Sempé, and Saul Steinberg provide insight into the mode of humor employed by their respective cultures. By comparing the work of these four cartoonists with each other, I have been able to discover some of the similarities and differences that seem to exist between the humor of the French artists with that of the American artists, revealing perhaps some aspects of humor which are intrinsic to those cultures in general. From an intensive study of the cartoons themselves, during which I analyzed everything from subject matter to visual style, I was able to spot trends and patterns in the different bodies of work. In this way, I found that the microcosm of cartoons shows how French humorists objectively laugh at the absurdities of the society around them while American cartoonists are more apt to laugh subjectively at their own role within society at large.

Humor is an aspect of human nature so deeply rooted in the modes of human communication that it seems to lose something in the translation from one culture or language to another. Some of this has to do with the mechanics of the languages themselves: just because a pun exists in English, the same word play may not necessarily be possible in, say, Swahili. Some of the miscommunication, however, may lie in the differences in humor that exist across cultures. The way that we perceive humor, the jokes we accept as funny, and the way in which we construct them can all have culturally-influenced nuances that we are not even aware of on the surface.

In order to delve into the labyrinth of these comedic nuances, I chose to focus on a particular format for expressing humor that is both accessible enough to analyze and varied enough to provide a comprehensive basis of information. By

studying comics and cartoons, I was able to control for such variables as time period and type of audience while exploring all the other factors of the works in terms of their styles and senses of humor. All of the cartoonists I chose are similarly enough situated in their respective societies as to have similar audiences: Chast and Steinberg are both well-known for their work that has appeared in *The New Yorker*, while Bretécher and Sempé have readership in the corresponding French circles of relatively well-off urbanites. The artists are also by-and-large contemporaries of each other: Bretécher and Chast have been publishing since the 1970s, and Steinberg and Sempé began in the 1940s and 1950s. Because of these corresponding timelines, as well as a notable similarity in style, subject matter, and, incidentally, gender, I chose to pair the artists up in order to do two individual comparisons, Chast with Bretécher and Steinber with Sempé, allowing for an in-depth look at the nuances between the individuals' works.

One of the necessities for this examination is to have a definition and some parameters for what exactly the subject matter is. The scholarship surrounding comics and cartoons is not as vast as it is in other areas of art and literature, perhaps because they fall somewhere in between those two categories. There are two scholars, however, at the center of the study of comics, and their works provide the basis for analyzing the rhetoric of comics. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Visual Art*, which is inspired by Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, offers a framework for analyzing the method and art behind cartooning, and McCloud's work is the basis for all vocabulary concerning the work of each of the artists I have evaluated.

The first, surprisingly difficult question that McCloud tackles is “What is Comics?” Obviously, for the purposes of this study, the subject matter will be the specific works of the artists I have chosen to focus on. McCloud makes one observation in particular, however, which is important going forward. “Comics” he defines as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 20). He derived this definition in part from Eisner’s classification of comics as “sequential art.” In other words, comics are made up of a series of multiple images, a distinction which omits many of the single-panel illustrations that appear among the works of Bretécher, Chast, Sempé, and Steinberg. In fact, many examples of Sempé’s and Steinberg’s work are illustrations of a single scene, and most of Chast’s contributions to *The New Yorker* are also considered one-panel images. McCloud concedes that such works are examples of cartoons, of even “comic art,” but they are not, strictly speaking, comics (McCloud 21). In gathering examples of their work, however, I did not make that distinction, because it is not specifically pertinent to the question of this study, so both types appear here. For this reason, I primarily refer to the subject matter as cartoons, cartooning, “comic art,” etc., except when explicating an example that happens to conform to McCloud’s definition.

More pertinently, in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud establishes some parameters for analyzing and understanding the style of comic art. In particular, he identifies the ways in which cartoons represent reality, the methods which they use to do so, and what the typical effects are. First, he addresses the spectrum of iconism used in cartoons. There are varying degrees to which a drawing can be

either realistic or symbolic (McCloud 29). The further an image gets away from reality, and the closer it gets to the purely symbolic, the more relatable the image becomes. For example, not everyone could identify with a photograph of a real person, because the picture includes all of the details unique to that person's face and physique. A more iconic image, on the other hand, such as a smiley face, is more readily relatable to anyone who has a face, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth (McCloud 36). The simplicity with which a cartoon is drawn, therefore, does not necessarily represent its lack of sophistication. Instead, it can be a stylistic tool that the artist uses to connect with the audience. The less detail that the artist provides, the more the viewer becomes involved in what is happening on the page, because he or she gets to mentally fill in the rest according to personal history, experience, or impressions. The result is what McCloud calls "viewer investment."

The ultimate form of visual symbolism is language itself (McCloud 47). Letters, taken to their extreme definition, are just ink markings that do not inherently have significance. The letters that are typed on this page do not resemble the real, physical form of their meaning, and yet they effectively represent the idea of their subject when they come together to form words. For example, the letters "t-a-b-l-e" do not look like a raised, flat surface supported by legs, but that is most likely what your mind's eye sees when you look at those letters put together in that order. This is the extreme form of viewer investment, because the viewer's mind is working the hardest at this point to fill in the gaps. Your eyes see "table," and your mind has to come up with an image of a table without any other visual cues, so it relies on memory, experience, and context to

create the image in your head. When text appears in cartoons, it is therefore a sort of continuation of what the artist has already communicated with more traditional images and pictures.

McCloud also addresses the spectrum between reality and a different kind of abstraction, the kind that one refers to with the phrase “abstract art.” Using this kind of abstraction, the artist does not simplify an image down to its most essential recognizable parts, like the elements of a face becoming a smiley face. Instead, the artist does the opposite by removing meaning, significance, and recognizable elements from the image (McCloud 50). A human form, for example, can be portrayed using simple shapes and patterns, none of which, objectively speaking, resemble a person. Instead of drawing attention to the subject matter, abstraction of this kind draws attention to the artwork itself, making the viewer consider how the images play out on the page, or even how the ink is interacting with the paper. This objectivism is not as prevalent in the cartoon world, but it is worth noting when cartoons diverge from more traditional story-telling formats.

In addition to having a baseline vocabulary for the cartoon medium, someone examining these cartoons needs to be aware of the existing scholarship on French and American culture in general. Of particular importance is establishing the two societies’ different approaches to social interaction, because humor is a profoundly social concept. Much of what creates the opportunity for comedy has to do with whom or what people are laughing at, and the types of subjects that are acceptable targets of humor can vary from culture to culture. Equally important, and what I am specifically looking at in this study, is the

question of how people orient themselves with respect to the joke-teller and the subject of the joke, all of which can have different implications depending on the societal setting. If a French social scene is different from an American one, the humor that is produced in each one will look different.

In their textbook on French culture *Les Français*, Laurence Wylie and Jean-François Brière lay out some aspects of French society that are important to know, especially because some of them look different from an American perspective. One of the points they make is that French people tend to develop their concept of social unity at a young age, but differently than Americans (Wylie and Brière 106). At school, for example, bonds are developed among classmates on the basis of a sort of collective justice: if the administration or teacher singles out one child on a matter of punishment, the rest of the class is apt to band together in defense of that one child. This sense of community is compounded by the fact that, because of how the neighborhood and the school system work, the same group of children tends to be with each other throughout all the years of childhood and adolescence. They eventually form a social environment that works much like a family: friends are friends, and there is not much that anyone can do to change that or upset the community dynamic (Wylie and Brière 107).

The result of this strong communal bond is that the French feel comfortable testing it; in fact, they like to do just that. Relations among French friends, according to Wylie and Brière, are hard-wired with the ability to tease, make fun of, or even honestly critique each other, without doing damage to the relationship. On the contrary, some occasional prodding proves that the relationship is a strong one, because it can withstand such bluntness. A friend

group thus takes on a familial dynamic among French peers: once these people are connected to one another, that bond does not go away, and they are able to interact with one another candidly, knowing that the relationship will not dissolve.

Without this aspect of cajoling, they would say, the relationship is not a true friendship.

Wylie and Brière contrast this portrayal of French inter-personal relationships with that of Americans by pointing out how much weight Americans place on being unobtrusive to each other, even to people that are considered friends. They suggest that the family-like generational bond that the French seem to develop with those in close proximity to each other does not exist in the same way in the United States. Instead, Americans base their friendships on one-on-one interaction, where the relationship needs consistent goodwill to survive (Wylie and Brière 108). Rather than French friends imposing an opinion or a favor on someone else because the relationship is already established, American friends might refrain from such behavior precisely because the person is a friend whom they do not wish to harm or burden. The ability to critique and bluntly make fun of someone cannot be as prevalent in a society where offending that person can result in a relational schism.

Alternatively, some experts have documented the differences between French and American social interaction when it comes to dealing with strangers. In her book *Cultural Misunderstandings*, Raymonde Carroll notes the different approaches that French and American people take when engaging in conversation. Americans, she says, have the ability to hold a conversation with almost anyone without any serious consequences (Carroll 30). It is culturally natural in the

United States for people to nod, smile, or say hello to one another in the street or around the neighborhood, and even having a longer discussion with someone simply because they are in close proximity is not unusual. This feeds Carroll's observation about Americans' ability to have "superficial" or even "promiscuous" interaction with one another (Carroll 38). Americans take on a certain sociability with the people around them that may only last for however long they are together, and that is acceptable, even encouraged. In American culture, it is simply called being friendly.

Although this friendliness is normal in the United States, it may be a strange concept to someone in France. According to Carroll, conversation is considered an art form in French society, and it is a skill that is used primarily according to certain guidelines. If a French person speaks to someone else, it is because that someone is a friend, co-worker, family member, or perhaps a shopkeeper who speaks with regulars on a daily basis (Carroll 28). With these different groupings of people, different categories of subjects can be broached: with friends and family, you can talk about anything, but getting into a prolonged one-on-one conversation with someone you just met at a cocktail party is inappropriate. In a way, communication takes on a more serious connotation in France than in the United States, because you do not have a personal conversation with just anyone, but the conversations you do have are important. Discussion is the food of French relationships, but it is culturally defined within the context of those relationships; the habit of diffusing discussion more indiscriminately among passers-by and one-time acquaintances is a distinctly American one.

These basic attitudes toward societal interaction and relationships can have some interesting implications when translated into the realm of humor. What kind of joke can a French person tell to communicate with a large audience? Direct but impersonal ones. What kind of joke can an American tell while maintaining the goodwill of an audience? Self-deprecating ones. Two different approaches for two different sets of societal rules.

What I have looked at is how the cartoons of each country reflect these cultural norms about communication, particularly in how they choose to relay their thoughts: the French artists appear to pull no punches while making fun of the world around them, because criticism is healthy and the discussion is an impersonal one, while the American cartoonists are more likely to speak more freely about their own personal world based on their internal observations and thereby include themselves in the joke. One group keeps everything external and objective while the other makes everything reflect the subjective view of the individual.

Claire Bretécher is a French cartoonist who has worked in the medium since the 1960s with various magazines and publications; by the 1970s she was publishing books of her own, filled with her cartoons about everyday French life (Dupé). Her typical audience has been described as “*riches, intellectuels et désabusés*” (“*rich, intellectual, and disillusioned*”), and much of her work focuses on the social life of the same subsection of people (Dupé). She is also sometimes known for a feminist slant and her discontented teenage character Agrippine. Not a simple Sunday morning joke-machine, Bretécher approaches her

cartoons from an almost sociological standpoint, taking on the world around her by pointing out its everyday absurdities and hypocrisies.

The style of Bretécher's cartoons makes it clear that her social commentary has a uniquely French attitude in the way it approaches critiquing certain ways of life. Based on the way that she chooses to tell the stories in her comics, I find that Bretécher conforms to a French mode of communication that allows her to publish observations about various social quirks bluntly and honestly while remaining acceptably within the norms of French conversation in general. Simply put, her work takes on the French attitude of bluntness in her social observations while maintaining a conversational formality between herself and her readers. The two aspects of Bretécher's cartoons that most readily reveal this stance are their visual style and their use of language.

For the purpose of analyzing Bretécher's style and perspective, I chose to look at *Les Frustrées*, one of her more famous books. This collection of comic strips in particular covers a myriad of themes and topics, all to do with the "frustrations" of a French person's everyday life. She takes on parenthood, marriage, and other aspects of domestic life, as well as class struggles, women's issues, and occasionally French politics. At the heart of it all lays a fully realized depiction of what issues she sees being dealt with in society, played out on personal and inter-personal levels by the characters she creates to mimic them.

Bretécher uses a basic and consistent style and format throughout *Les Frustrées*. Most of the individual comics in the collection are one-page spreads made up of 8 to 10 panels in which some form of story and/or dialogue plays out. Figure 1 shows a typical example of her work.

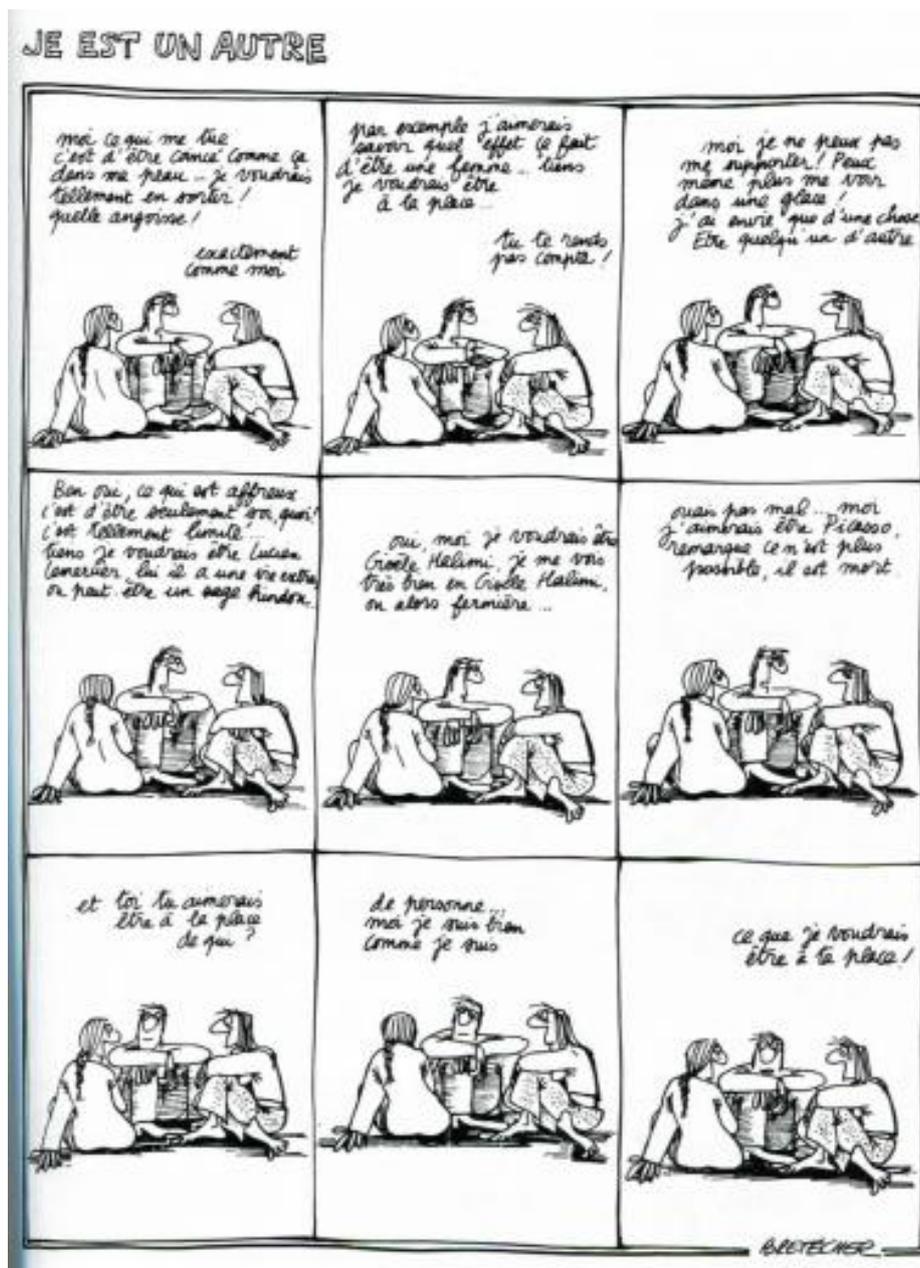


Figure 1 Claire Bretécher, “Je est un autre,” *Les Frustrées* (Paris : French & European Pubns, 1987) 23. Print.

There are, of course, many variations—some take up multiple pages, while others are single images.

Using the guidelines laid out by McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, the reader can plainly see how *Les Frustrées* can be so engaging to its audience

while it derides the particular quirks of social life in which that audience lives. This dynamic succeeds because Bretécher's particular visual style manages to achieve a balance between a good deal of viewer investment in the cartoons with not too much personal identification. Basically, Bretécher makes the situations, settings, and characters recognizable to the viewer, but she does not personalize them to the point that they represent particular individuals. This distanced, objective French style allows her the freedom to reflect clearly her commentary on French society, particularly the subsection inhabited by the bourgeoisie.

The first notable visual element of Bretécher's work is her use of very little background detail to create the world within her cartoons. Instead of overpowering the viewer with specifics, she allows the audience to situate themselves in her world based on their previous experiences, impressions, and observations of the real world. Most of the panels that make up her comics include only the most necessary set-pieces in order to provide context for the story. The effect of this approach is that the cartoons take on the appearance of being "anywhere France," the kind of setting that any average reader would recognize. The viewer can then fill in the gaps that she leaves open on the page, creating a scene full of detail and contextual associations in the mind's eye. In this way, a line representing a bench or the vague outline of a couch usually suffices to place the story on the streets of Paris or inside a family's apartment.

Without attention being drawn to the scene's surroundings, the focus of Bretécher's cartoons is then on the characters, which are more filled out than their backgrounds, but in a substantially symbolic manner. She files down the human form somewhat, emphasizing some things and ignoring others. Everyone

has the basic elements of human anatomy, of course, but their feet are longer than normal, their eyes bulge to an impossible degree, and their jaws do not seem to exist. Her faces have exaggerated noses and no foreheads to speak of, and her bodies are often oblong or otherwise disproportionate. Altogether, Bretécher draws these characters to be recognizable as people, but not in an overly realistic manner.

The effect is a certain “cartoonish” aspect of her characters, and this stylistic trait serves a few different purposes. First, it allows for a good deal of viewer identification. The people are not drawn realistically enough for the details to get in the way of how the audience perceives the image; the reader may see a woman, but not a specific woman. She may resemble people that the viewer knows personally, but she does not look like an actual person that could be introduced at a friend’s party. Take, for example, the image of a husband and wife in Figure 2. This couple is a reduction of what a real-to-life domestic portrait might look like: the couple is obviously having a conversation after the man gets home from work, but all that the artist actually provides to show this is essentially the outline of two people and a chair. This allows the scene to be identifiable as a moment between two married people without being realistic enough that the audience feels as though it is looking at an actual photo of a couple who might live around the corner. This style conveniently offers the viewer both recognition and anonymity.

UN HOMME SIMPLE



Figure 3 Claire Bretécher, "Un homme simple," *Les Frustrées* (Paris : French & European Pubns, 1987) 23. Print.

Second, Bretécher emphasizes those aspects of each character which symbolize most readily the type of person she is portraying. She uses this kind of iconism to narrow in on the kind of person she wants to depict. Giving long hair to a man, for example, puts him in the category of a bohemian youth to her readers, or a giving a certain kind of handbag to a woman makes her seem matronly, or even look like a grandmother. In the case of the above example, the woman gets an apron and the man gets a pipe, emphasizing the roles that they are playing in relation to each other—the woman is the domestic, while the man relaxes in his home—as well as the roles that they play in society at large—they are comfortable enough to have nice clothes and at least a few luxuries, but she still does her own housework. Bretécher provides just enough information to give the impression of a character's gender, approximate age, and perhaps social class. The rest of the characterization is revealed through dialogue, which will be discussed later, and how the viewer chooses to interpret the few signifiers that the artist does provide.

Third, in emphasizing those generalized traits, Bretécher is able to exaggerate them to the point of rendering them silly. She satirizes the trait which will throw into relief the aspect of the character's lifestyle she is criticizing, often forming the basis of the joke she is telling. One of the most prevalent examples of this method is Bretécher's portrayal of the *bourgeoise-bohème* (bourgeoisie bohemian), which is a category of character that she often refers to. In many of her depictions of them, such as the example in Figure 3, all she offers the viewer is the outline of a couch, drawn at eye level, so that the only visible part of the characters is their legs, and maybe a cigarette in one of their raised hands.

LA BOHÈME

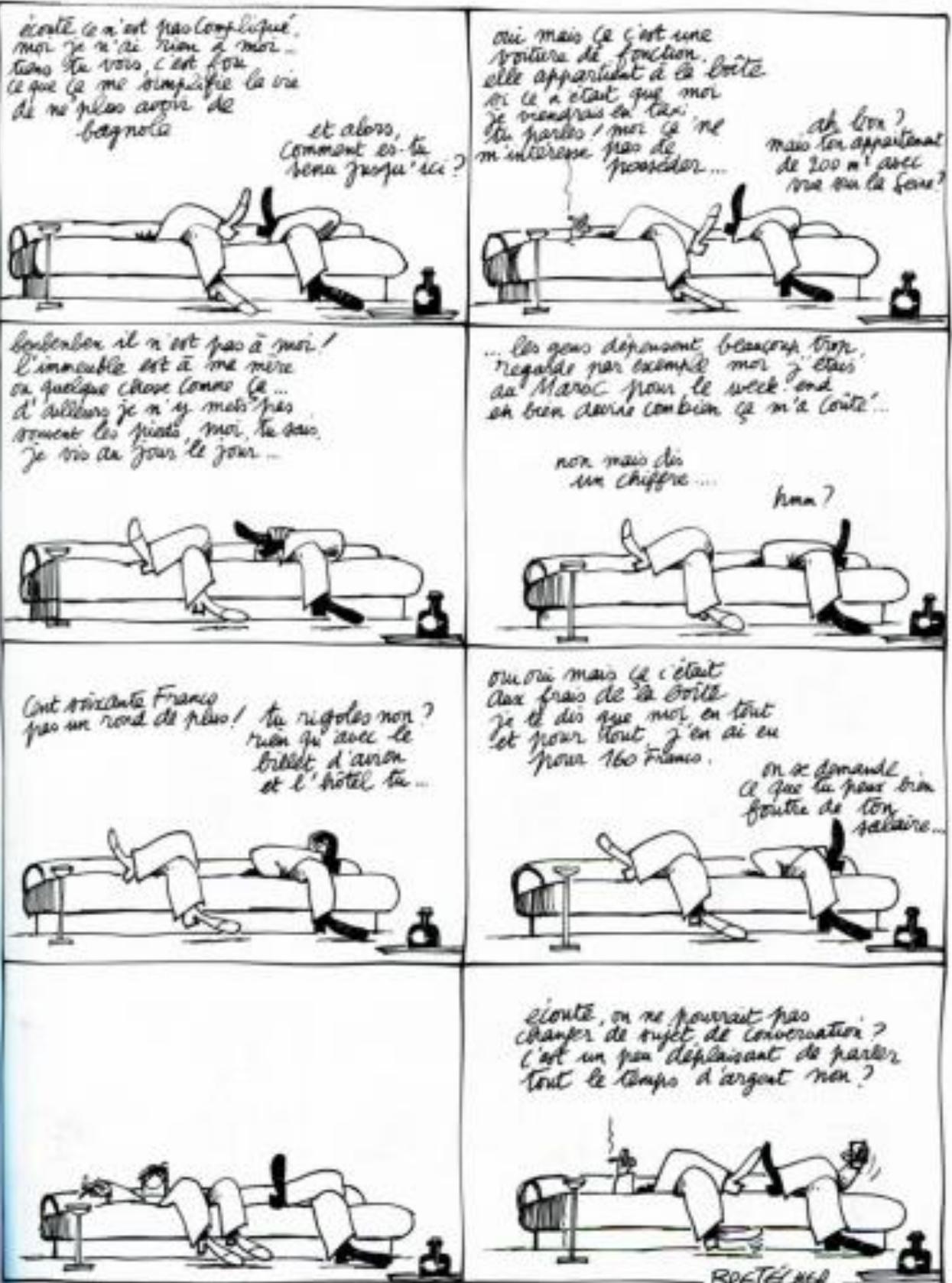


Figure 3 Claire Bretécher, "La Bohème," *Les Frustrées* (Paris : French & European Pubns, 1987) 7. Print.

What she emphasizes here is their idleness. By letting them relax so much that the viewer cannot even see their faces, she points out the luxury of the couch and their situation, which increases the contrast between their words and their actions. These *bohèmes* are not nearly as non-materialistic as they claim.

In addition to maintaining a pervasive visual style, Bretécher writes her comics along a consistent structural basis: they depict a normal social situation which keeps building in its absurdity until they abruptly end on a note of particularly biting satire. She consistently constructs her pieces so that the last panel contains the final beat of the story, where the humoristic aspect of the situation, which the viewer has become increasingly aware of, breaks through to affect the characters within their own world. In the example from above, the *bourgeoise-bohème* makes increasingly ridiculous claims about his devotion to being free from the snares of materialism, and the viewer watches as his words build to a point where he cannot get out of the verbal trap he has laid for himself. Ultimately, he has to change the subject because he is close to being exposed as in the wrong, ending the comic on a note of laughable absurdity.

This progressive structure in each of Bretécher's cartoons is usually based primarily on the characters' dialogue, and this type of language is one of the most important tools she uses to get her point across. In *Les Frustrées* in particular, most of the installments are centered on some form of conversation by the characters—either between two people, or as an inner or external monologue. In fact, apart from the titles of the pieces, Bretécher uses language almost exclusively to reveal her characters' words and thoughts. These dialogues help

form the framework for the joke, as the words build on each other to create that moment of absurdity at the end of the comic.

Her particular use of words as dialogue means that there is no narrative voice within Bretécher's cartoons to describe the scene or relate what is happening. The story is told only by the minimal visual setting and what the people within that setting are saying, and there is no narrator that the viewer can identify as a distinct personality or voice. Bretécher does not insert herself or a fictional narrator anywhere in the cartoons, not even in the form of a scene-setter or storyteller; she does not include herself in her creation, even as a point of reference or to establish a personal point of view. In this way, she distances herself from what is happening within the frame of the cartoons and literally lets the characters speak for themselves.

Ultimately, Bretécher's role is one of a hidden critic, satirizing the world around her by recreating it in an absurd light. Her critiques are directed outward in a way that points to the French cultural trait of being brutally honest in their criticism. Just as Wylie and Brière described such conversations among French friends, Bretécher chooses to be blunt because it is honest and it is effective; any other meandering, less direct way of getting her point across would not be as real, pertinent, or important to her French audience. At the same time, Bretécher's mode of communication reflects Raymonde Carroll's observation about how French culture promotes a more conservative attitude towards conversation. Rather than being more open-handed with her way of telling stories, Bretécher distances herself from her audience by placing the characters she has created in

between herself and her readers. Bretécher is blunt in her social commentary, but she is not direct.

Bretécher externalizes her observations so that they are entirely an expression of how she views the rest of the world, without her in it. This changes when we start looking at her American counterpart, Roz Chast, who focuses on many of the same subjects and ideas as Bretécher, but whose work represents an opposing dynamic between artist and viewer.

Roz Chast is a New York-born cartoonist who earned notoriety for her single-panel cartoons that began appearing in *The New Yorker* in the 1970s. She is known for her musings on domestic life, often literally placing her cartoons in the framework of a mundane living room. Out of the several books that she has published over the past few decades, I focused on her compilation title, *Theories of Everything*. This collection offers examples of some of her best work from over the years and combines it, which gives it a wide variety subject matter to explore.

Chast's approach to social commentary is in some ways the reverse of Claire Bretécher's. Rather than making observations solely about how other Americans act, she tends to relate her cartoons back to herself, plainly incorporating her own life and experiences into what she puts on the page. This self-involvement changes the conversation from the French style—a friend honestly critiquing the lifestyle of someone else—into the American version: avoiding the offense of calling someone else into question by turning the critique around on oneself. The evidence of this approach again lies in the visual style and use of language in Chast's cartoons.

The formatting choices in Chast's body of work are more diverse than in Bretécher's, but there are some stylistic points that she is consistent in using which are comparable to the patterns in the work of her French counterpart. The structures of the cartoons themselves vary wildly: some of Chast's pieces are pages-long comics made up of multiple panels that create one cohesive story, much like Bretécher's work, but most of the cartoons in *Theories of Everything* do not conform to just this one pattern. Instead of a cartoon narrative, many of her pieces are single-panel depictions of a more introspective thought or observation. Many of them show people in everyday situations, such as being at home or work, but just as many are highly symbolic depictions of Chast's observations that do not prominently feature people, rendered in unexpected form. Figure 4 is a good example of this.

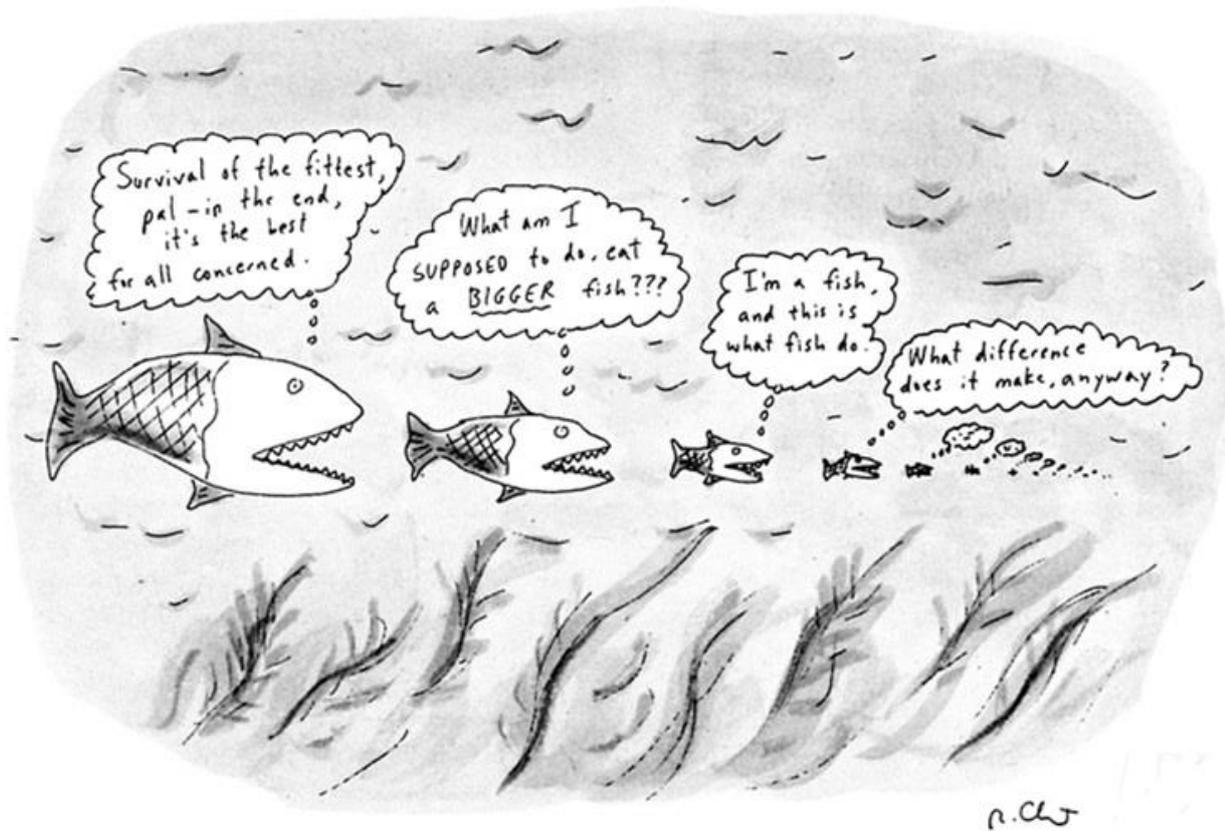


Figure 4 Roz Chast, *Theories of Everything* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006). Print.

Chast is able to expand her work to include any variety of musings with this flexible attitude towards format. More specifically, she is able to communicate these musings without using a character as a surrogate mouthpiece.

There are some ways in which the visual styles of Bretécher and Chast are similar. Their characters, for example, are similarly abstracted. Chast uses simple body shapes, lines, and colors to render the people in her cartoons less than realistic. This simplicity gives the audience the same kind of viewer investment that comes with Bretécher's cartoons, letting the mind's eye account for whatever realistic details the artist chooses to leave out. A difference exists, however, in the fact that Chast does not abstract her characters in a way that makes them less relatable to the viewer. Although the people in her cartoons are not drawn to look exactly like the real thing, they are not drawn to look absurd, either. She therefore retains the viewer investment in the image without creating a distance between the audience and the subject.

There are also some major differences between how the two artists portray the environments of their drawings. Chast includes a lot of detail in her artwork, particularly in the background. She includes small objects, markers, patterns, and shading to create more fully the world where her characters exist. This has the effect of presenting a more ready-made environment for the view to take in. Look at Figure 5 for a typical example of this.



Figure 5 Roz Chast, "Kwality Time," *Theories of Everything* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006). Print.

It is easy to see that there is less abstraction involved in the background of this scene than in similar living room scenes created by Bret cher. Just like the reappearing *bourgeoise-boh me* apartment in *Les Frustr es*, these typical American living rooms repeatedly crop up throughout Chast's cartoons. In her

version, the scene is usually set with a couch, lamp, rug, wallpaper, and any number of other small details that give the scene a more individual character than if she had left it a blank slate. Instead of existing in a more general “anywhere America” as Bretécher does with her minimalistic representation of “anywhere France,” Chast limits this cartoon to a specific setting within America, one which the viewer can recognize and accept, but with less input from his or her own imagination.

The tone of Chast’s work also takes a turn away from Bretécher’s standard build-up of satire, and this is evident in the structure of her pieces. The mood of her cartoons is more subdued, acting more as musings about some subject or other, rather than a pointed critique leveled at a specific target. Because Chast’s comics are not so honed in, they are not all based on a progressive structure like Bretécher’s. They meander more, and oftentimes there is no biting ending, no final beat or punch of satire meant to bring home the absurdity of the moment being depicted. They function instead as an American conversation between friends might: casual-sounding, friendly, and above all non-accusatory.

Another of the major contrasts between the approaches of the two artists lies in the way that they choose to use language to convey their point. Unlike the way that Bretécher uses language strictly as dialogue in her work, Chast liberally incorporates words into her cartoons in a variety of ways. She often gives her characters things to say, of course, as well as frequently revealing their thoughts. However, she also includes additional commentary, narration, and farcical addendums, all of which end up lending the cartoons a specific voice. Often, this

takes the form of a literal narration: someone, be it Chast as the writer or simply an omniscient narrator, is telling the story that is unfolding on the page.

The existence of a narrator means that the piece automatically takes on a certain point of view. If the story is being told, then someone has to be doing the telling. The presence of such a storyteller reinforces the structure of Chast's mode of communication; the idea that someone is behind the words and images on the page gives the impression that the author is somehow speaking to the people looking at her work. While Bretécher's characters seem to exist solely in the world that she created, insulated from either creator or audience, Chast's act as more of a conduit in between the author and her readers.

Sometimes, especially when the format is not panel-to-panel like Bretécher's typically are, the words that appear in Chast's cartoons are one of the most important conveyors of the joke she is telling or the point she is trying to make.

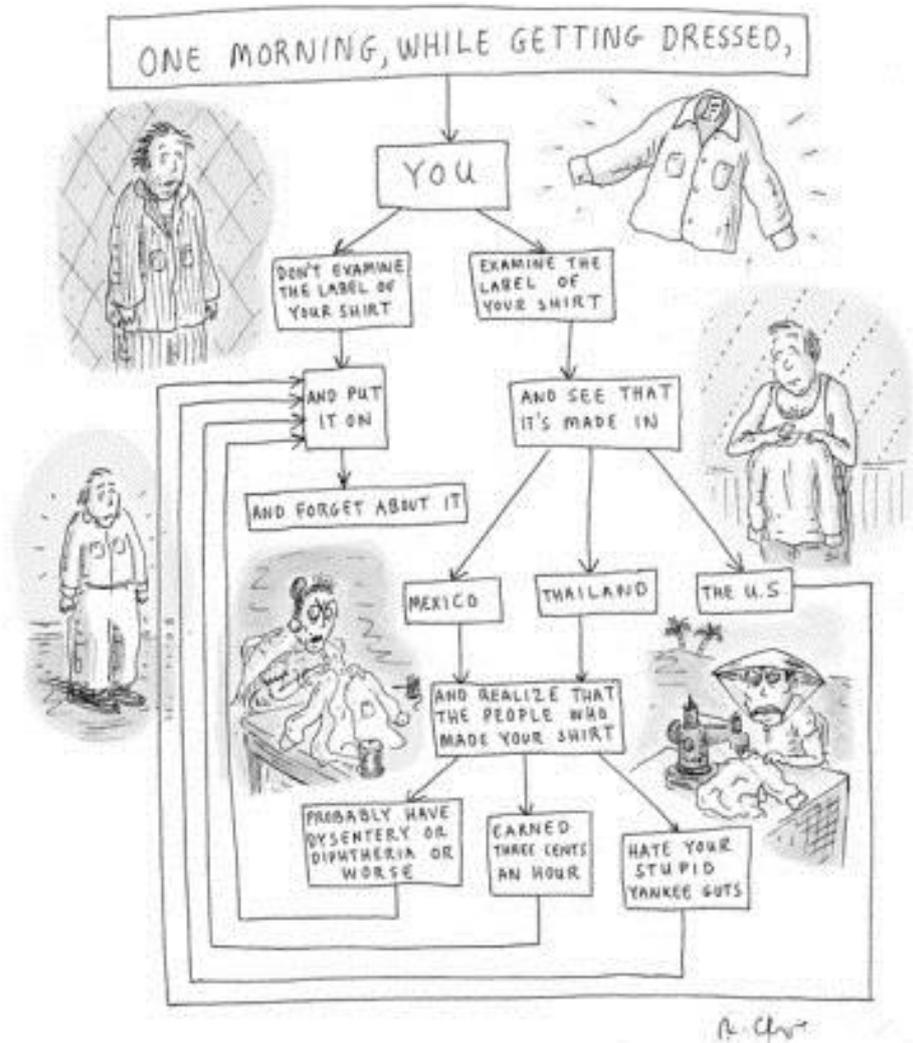


Figure 6 Roz Chast, *Theories of Everything* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006). Print.

In cases like Figure 7, there seems to be direct communication happening from Chast to the viewer. She has drawn and written out her thoughts on soap, and her audience gets to see those thoughts laid out directly on the page. It is not a

Examples like this one reveal the specificity of Chast's point of view. Her work clearly derives its inspiration, character, personality, and voice from the artist's own life experience, which she then shares with her viewers.

This quality that Chast's work has of bringing herself onto the page is exemplary of Raymonde Carroll's observations about how conversation works in the two different cultures. Chast's approach is an inclusive one that makes free use of language and communication between the artist and her readers. She is "promiscuous" with her words and revelations, inviting people to share in her observations and ideas as if she were having a conversation with her audience, regardless of who they are, because what she discusses are the types of universal life quirks that anyone in a similar situation to her would understand. By American standards, her style is no different than a shared glance or a short chat between a few strangers while stuck in a long check-out line at the grocery store.

Chast's mode of communication also enlightens some of the cultural comments that Wylie and Brière make about criticism among friends. Rather than turning a critical French eye to her surroundings and offering blunt conclusions about it, Chast takes the American route in her work and dulls the blow by focusing her observations on herself and her own personal point of view. Instead of pointing out that something in society is strange or humorous by depicting other people acting it out, she decides to point out how life in general is strange or humorous by giving a personal or universal example of it. She typifies the attitude of American unobtrusiveness and politeness by not imposing a specific critique on her viewers but simply offering an invitation to join in the critique on life in general.

The works of Claire Bretécher and Roz Chast reveal nicely that cultural modes of communication have an effect on how cartoons are created. To take the theory further and see if it applies to different artists who have different styles and purposes than these two women, I looked at the works of Jean-Jacques Sempé and Saul Steinberg. What I found was an even more abstracted example of the French and American dichotomy when it comes to how cartoon artists choose to express themselves on the page. Both men work in thematic areas that try to reveal how absurd and wild the world can be, and both have distinctive styles that are whimsical and simplistically reduced. However, what they choose to depict and how they choose to reveal it align with the modes of communication already established as a part of each of their cultures: Sempé depicts his thoughts on the world in the French way, by creating a caricature of reality that only deals in external observations; meanwhile, Steinberg has the American tendency to personalize his drawings by making them expressions of his inner thoughts and unique perception on the world.

Jean-Jacques Sempé is a French icon in the world of cartoons and illustrations. He became truly famous in the 1950s when he entered the comics scene of France and Belgium, and he has continued to draw and publish ever since (Sempé, Jean-Jacques Sempé's *Tales of Two Cities*). Sempé is known for his depictions of childhood, primarily in *Le Petit Nicolas*, as well as for his illustrations of sprawling cityscapes. I have focused on examples of the latter for the purposes of this comparison, drawing primarily from his early and most famous collections such as *Rien n'est simple* and *Tout se complique*. Altogether

they offer some superb examples of the type of rich world that Sempé creates in his fictionalized version of France.

In some respects, the world that Sempé creates in his drawings is comparable to a fun-house mirror reflection of reality. He creates scenes that are normal, for the most part, or at least highly recognizable to the viewer. However, it always turns out that the images are not entirely realistic on the whole. He usually adds an element of fantasy or absurdity to an otherwise banal image, and the surprise of this extra element is what makes Sempé's drawings funny, approachable, and alluring.

His approach is also, like Claire Bretécher's, an external one. His humor and creativity lie in the way that he represents, changes, mocks, and admires the world around him. Any commentary to be found in Sempé's work is derived from this specific trait of abstract representation, not from a direct communication from the artist himself. In fact, language itself is often nonexistent in his work. Sempé takes the world as he sees it, warps an aspect of it that he wants to emphasize just enough to get his viewers' attention, then sits back and lets the image speak for itself.

Sempé's visual style is, therefore, one of the most important aspects of his drawings because it is the primary mode of communication. His art involves a relatively high amount of abstraction but primarily in the sense that it is a simplified version of reality. Regardless of the setting, the backgrounds of his scenes are typically realistic, if not overly detailed. Sempé has an affinity for drawing buildings in particular, and he creates recognizable cityscapes with

seemingly a few simple lines. These simple environments are what ground many of his cartoons, binding them to the real world because of their easy familiarity.

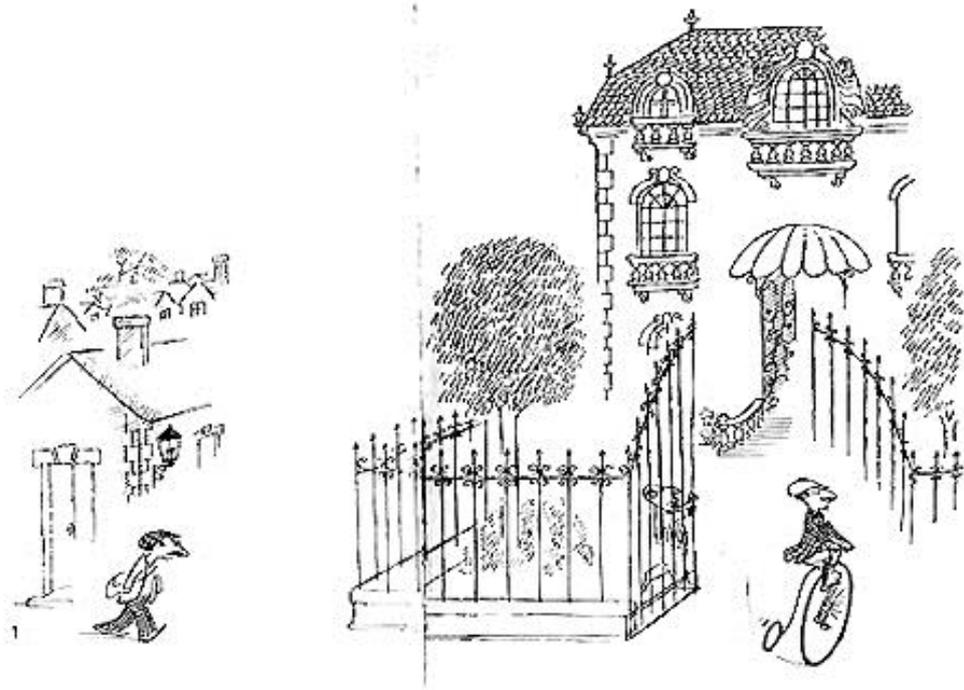


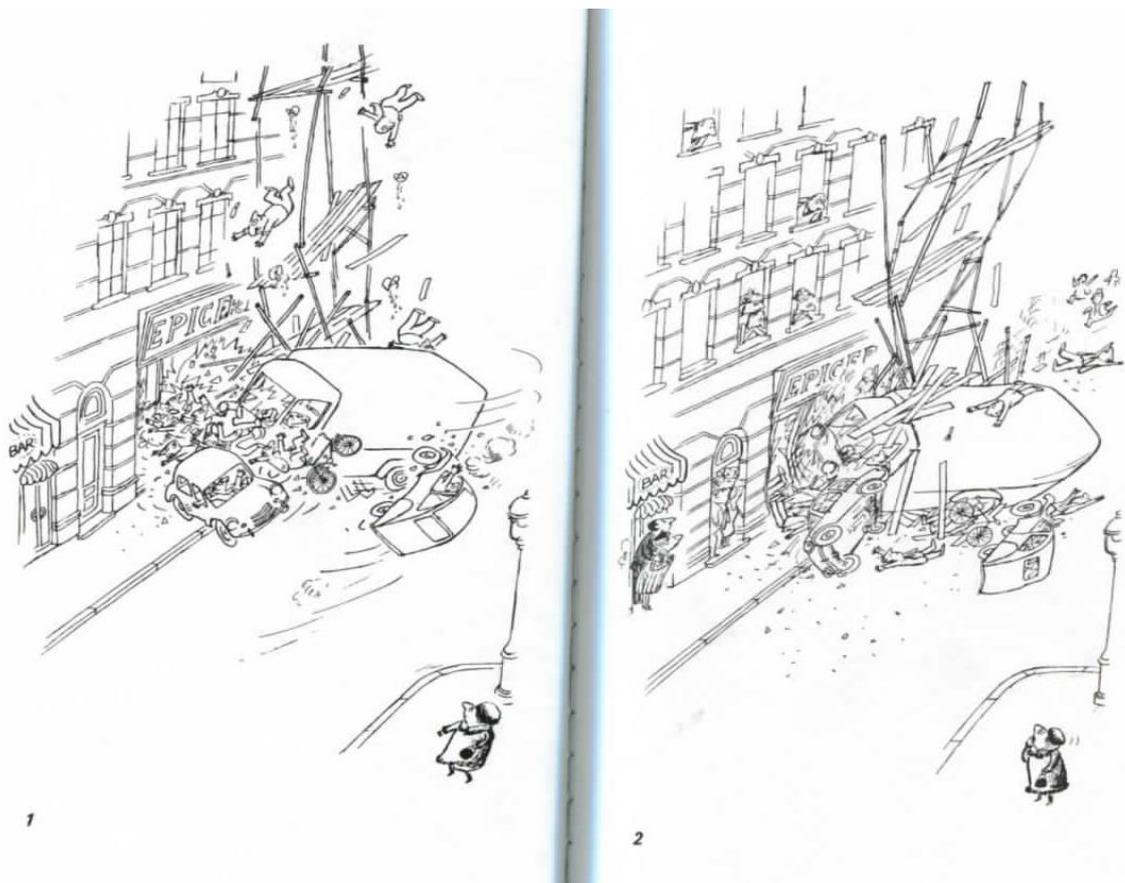
Figure 8 Jean-Jacques Sempé, *Rien n'est simple* (Denoël, 1962). Print.

In Figure 8, the audience can identify immediately with what it sees because his meticulous outline of a house in the city is basic enough that it could represent any neighborhood in almost any city in France while being true enough to life that the viewer's brain does not have to strain or adjust to comprehend it.

There are, of course, those certain aspects of his cartoons that Sempé does abstract further from reality, and these are the ones that are meant to provoke a laugh. Sometimes his scenes play out over several images, and sometimes they are depicted in one big tableau, so the humorous trait is found either in the final image of a series or in one aspect a large scene. Whatever the method, the element of whimsy is always derived from some aspect of real life. In highlighting it, Sempé

heightens the absurdity of an otherwise realistic moment, creating a humorous contrast between his relatively normal scenes and the warped aspect that he adds to it.

In the case of a multi-panel cartoon, Sempé tends to create a slow-building joke that does not pay off until the final moment. He achieves this by making the set-up ordinary; while absorbing the first several images, the audience thinks it knows what it is looking at. Then, at the end, the element of the absurd catches the viewer off guard and changes the meaning of everything that came before. Take, for instance, the comic in Figure 9.



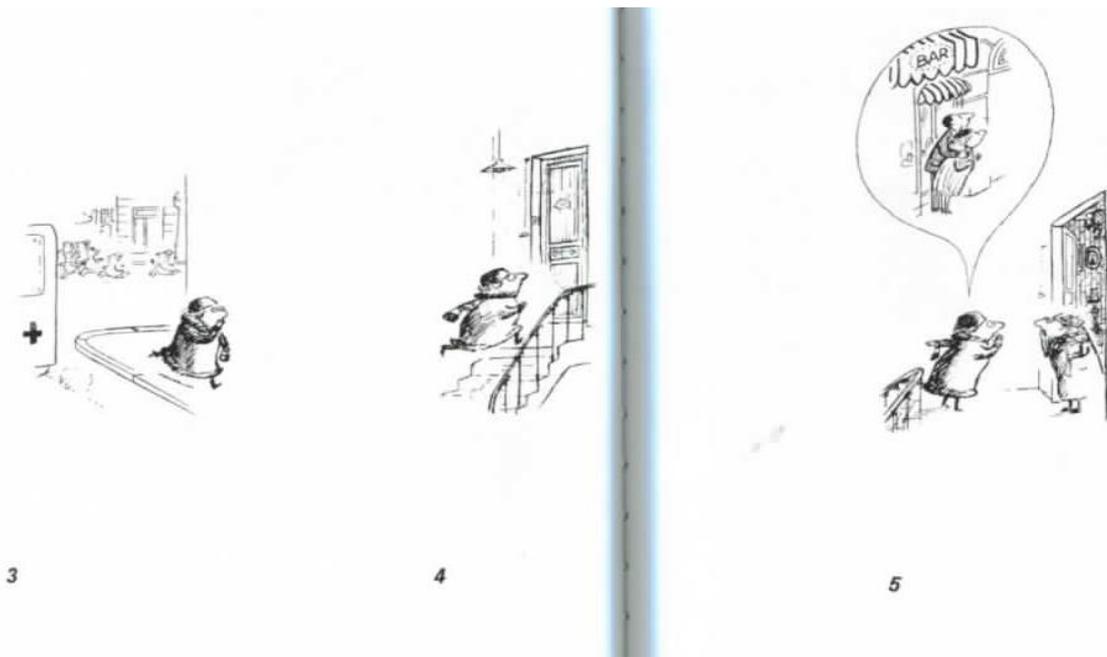


Figure 9 Jean-Jacques Sempé, *Rien n'est simple* (Denoël, 1962). Print.

The normalcy of this scene lies both in its visual style—the buildings, street, and even people look relatively realistic—and in the progression of events up until the end. When a tragic event happens in public, it is natural to expect the news to spread via the standers-by who witnessed it. The viewer is not surprised that the news-spreading woman in this case quickly travels from place to place to make others aware of what happened. The surprise comes with the revelation that she was not spreading a news-worthy story at all, but rather spreading some scandalous gossip.

The beauty of this comic is that the element of surprise is not, after all, extremely surprising. The habit and inclination to gossip is not unusual or unnatural in and of itself; it is a well-documented and rather obvious trait of human nature. Sempé takes that realistic trait and emphasizes it to the point of absurdity by putting it in a setting where it seems ridiculous and blown out of

proportion. It is still a reflection of ordinary life, but he points out the humor of that aspect of ordinary life by highlighting, underlining, and otherwise emphasizing it so that it takes on a more noticeable appearance.

In other pieces, Sempé simply includes the humor in some aspect of whatever larger scene he creates. The general structure of the image seems normal, but there is also an element, sometimes more obvious than others, which does not belong to reality, or at least not to the expected chain of events.



Figure 10 Jean-Jacques Sempé, Rien n'est simple (Denoël, 1962). Print.

The setting and visuals of the scene in Figure 10 are standard: a couple gets out of their car to take in the view from a cliff face. There is nothing too abstract or symbolic about the drawing. The joke is in the thought bubbles, and based on the French standard of reading from left to right, the viewer takes in the husband's fantasy, and then the wife's. The husband's is again not too unexpected; jokes about a middle-aged married man being fed up with his wife are not unusual or original, especially during the time period that Sempé drew this. The punch, then, comes with the revelation of the wife's thoughts. The fact that she would not only anticipate her husband's thoughts but also have a planned counter-attack is really just representative of the dynamics of a marriage. The fact that this reflection happens to take place in such a strange location with such extreme circumstances simply serves to highlight the humor in what is already there.

The absurdity creates the humor and poignancy of Sempé's cartoons, and he derives those elements of the unexpected from real aspects of life, or simply what he has observed about it. He essentially takes a moment that reflects the truth, and then warps just a bit of it to make it stand out in its strangeness. His world is highly recognizable, which makes his cartoons accessible to the viewer and makes their jokes that much funnier for being relatable.

Sempé's manner of representing the world exemplifies the same kind of objective critique as Bretécher's style does. He does not incorporate his own thoughts or personality in his work; he prefers to draw what he sees and let that speak for itself rather than try to speak directly to the viewer. His counterpart in America, Saul Steinberg, has a different approach to representing his notions

about the world that resembles the more easily personal style exemplified by Roz Chast.

Saul Steinberg was born in Romania in 1914 but came to live in the United States by virtue of *The New Yorker* in 1942. He began cartooning as he studied architecture in Italy and kept “doodling,” as he called it, until his death in 1999 (Blechman 228). Along the way, his work graced the cover of *The New Yorker* dozens of times, in addition to appearing in other illustrations and even murals. He became a huge presence in the world of cartoons, and he was famous in particular for his depictions of his adoptive country: “His chosen subject was America, which he examined with the critical but passionate eye of an anthropologist” (Mankoff and Remnick 320).

Compared with the work of Jean-Jacques Sempé, Steinberg’s illustrations have an American quality that is evident in both subject matter and style. The two men have comparable bodies of work: both artists create images that seem simplistic at first glance because of their minimalist approach, but they often produce drawings of wide cityscapes or more unorthodox smaller scenes, and they both include fantastical elements in their work. They differ, however, in where that fantasy comes from and how it communicates to the audience. While Sempé’s creations are reflections of the real world with an added element of fantasy in how he mirrors it, Steinberg’s cartoons are much more representative of an internal version of fantasy. Instead of being creative with what he sees in the world around him, Steinberg draws his fantastical elements from his own plainly vivid imagination and recreates it on the page.

Steinberg's distinctive visual style is both highly iconic and fairly abstract; in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud specifically places him all the way to the extreme end of the symbolic simplification spectrum and half way along the spectrum from recognizable to purely abstract (McCloud 53). He uses symbols to represent words, words to represent people, animals to represent ideas, and a mixture of all of these to create landscapes. His work is fantastical regardless of subject, which can vary from depictions of single thoughts to personality sketches of whole cities. Ultimately, the world he creates in his cartoons is made up of introspective observations about what the world looks like from the mind's eye.

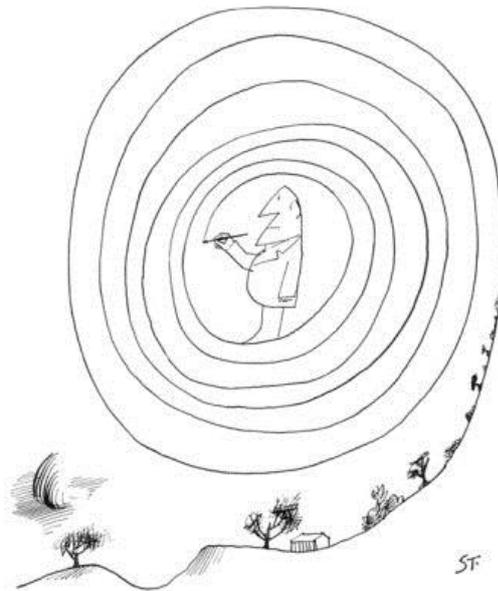


Figure 11 Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*, 1963.

One of the rules of the game when it comes to Steinberg's artwork is that anything can be symbolized or abstracted. People in particular are abstracted in

his cartoons, both symbolically and objectively. His figures are typically not detailed or realistically representative of any one real person; rather, they are symbolic representations of human beings. The people are simplified, first of all, without any reason to resemble photographic reality, and this allows the audience's mind and imagination to activate while looking at them, because he leaves plenty of room for viewer investment. However, Steinberg also works in an area of objective abstraction, where the people do not exactly look like people, even in a simplified sense. Figures are instead distorted so that some aspects are emphasized and some are diminished. Some of Steinberg's figures are technically closer to a compilation of geometric shapes than to images of identifiable people.

Figure 12 shows a couple that is certainly identifiable as two people dancing, even though the drawing itself is simply one continuous line. Neither person gets a complete body or even a full outline, defined instead by each other and negative space (and the helpful addition of a mouth and one eye each). Steinberg does not need to make the image any more realistic, however, because he has already represented the idea of a couple dancing with just these few lines.



Figure 12 Saul Steinberg, Untitled.

The way in which Steinberg composes his famous cityscapes is similarly irreverent of appearing natural. To form these tableaux, he takes what is impressionable, memorable, or iconic about the city and uses those elements to create the feeling of having been there. He creates a personality portrait of the city, rather than taking a snapshot of it. To this end, he uses words, symbols, and

whatever other maneuvers he feels are necessary to represent the idea of the place, not its true-to-life image. Figure 13, for example, shows one of his more famous depictions of the United States.

The image does not stay in any way true to photographic, geographic, or objective reality. What it does do is represent effectively his perspective on the country as a New Yorker. It is a depiction of the idea that New York is such an important and sprawling metropolis that when you are in the midst of its buildings it seems like it is all there is, for the most part. Steinberg's impression of the city in regards to the rest of the country is laid out clearly here, and he successfully captures that idea and that feeling with symbolic imagery, not realistic representation.

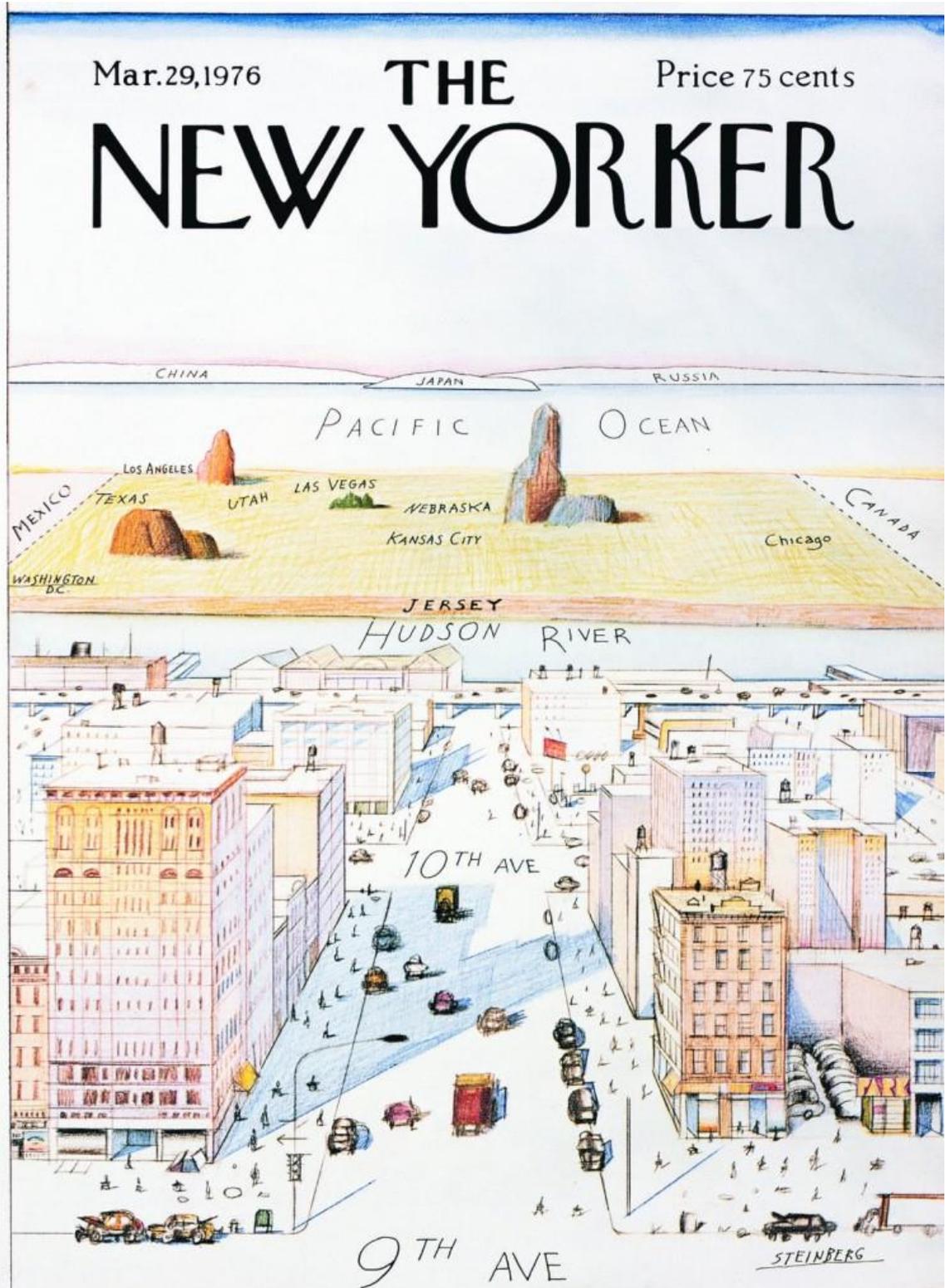


Figure 13 Saul Steinberg, cover of *The New Yorker*, 1976.

Steinberg's work is, essentially, an expression of his own unique perspective on the world. Most of his illustrations exist to create ideas that cannot be expressed by language or picture alone. His fantastical images are highly abstracted and strongly symbolic because with each drawing he attempts to recreate what is happening in the mind and imagination, which does not always look like reality. Steinberg's element of fantasy serves to recreate on the page a particular perspective about the world around him, rather than the world as it is.

The artist for France and the artist for America once again prove to have opposing approaches to a similar idea. Steinberg incorporates fantasy into his work in order to reflect an internal idea about the world, and Sempé's work incorporates fantasy in order to reflect and emphasize aspects of the world as reality. Steinberg's depiction of America reveals a unique mindset which the artist is willing to reveal to all who see his drawings, while Sempé's depiction of France remains a more distanced observation about his culture that does not necessitate any revelations about the artist himself.

The ultimate difference between the cartoons of France and the cartoons of America comes down to the cultural differences of communication and thought processes between the two countries. I have already established that the cartoons reflect their respective cultures' attitudes toward criticism and conversation in general. The French bluntly criticize, but they do so without attempting to communicate directly with their viewers. The American works are more mild-mannered in their commentary while personalizing it to a greater extent. These observations about communication extend further, however, to reveal that the underlying mindsets in the creation of these cartoons also differ along cultural

lines by expressing either a primarily rational mode of thought or a viewpoint that is based more on personal perception.

When French people express an opinion, they tend to do so as if it were fact. This is because French culture relies so heavily on rationality as the basis for everything they say. In the French mind, every assertion has a chain of logic and reason leading up to it, lending a tone of objectivity to their claims. Contrast this with American discussions, during which it is much more likely to hear someone using phrases such as “I feel as though...” or “In my experience...” While the opinions following those words may also be backed up by reason and rationality, they give the claim as a whole a subjective slant. The tone of this kind of American assertion makes for a discussion based on individuals’ perceptions, rather than a demonstration of objective reality.

By viewing the work of these four artists as typical examples of how each society expresses humor, one can plainly see these differences in their methods. Bretécher and Sempé are both objectivists in this sense. They take their physical observations about their worlds to their rational ends, objectively representing what they see as the nuances of reality by zooming in on a few of them and letting their audiences draw reasonable conclusions about what they see. Chast and Steinberg, meanwhile, are more interested in voicing their own opinions and perceptions by explaining to the audience how they formed them, based on their subjective points of view. They illustrate their own perspective on things and then let the audience take or leave it as simply one person’s experience. Humor, and communication in general, simply looks different when it appears in disparate cultures.

Works Cited

- Blechman, R.O. «Consider Saul Steinberg.» Katz, Harry L. *Cartoon America: comic art in the Library of Congress*. New York: Abrams, 2006. 228-231. Print.
- Carroll, Raymonde. *Cultural Misunderstandings*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988. Print.
- Dupé, Yves. *biographie*. 2003. Web. November 2012.
<http://clairebretecher.com/NET/fichiers/biog.html>
- Mankoff, Robert et David Remnick. *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2004. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Print.
- Sempé, Jean-Jacques. *Jean-Jacques Sempé's Tales of Two Cities* Charles McGrath. 8 November 2006. Web.
- Smith, Joel. *Steinberg at The New Yorker*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2005. Print.
- Wylie, Laurence et Jean-François Brière. *Les Français*. 3rd. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001. Print.

Bibliography

- Blechman, R.O. «Consider Saul Steinberg.» Katz, Harry L. *Cartoon America: comic art in the Library of Congress*. New York: Abrams, 2006. 228-231. Print.
- Bretécher, Claire. *Les Frustrées*. Paris: French & European Pubns., 1987. Print.
- Carroll, Raymonde. *Cultural Misunderstandings*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988. Print.
- Chast, Roz. *Theories of Everything*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006. Print.
- Dupé, Yves. *biographie*. 2003. Web. November 2012.
<http://clairebretecher.com/NET/fichiers/biog.html>
- Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. W.W. Norton, 2008. Print.
- Mankoff, Robert et David Remnick. *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2004. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Print.
- Platt, Polly. *French or Foe?: Getting the Most Out of Visiting, Living and Working in France*. 3rd. Distribooks, 2003. Print.

Sempé, Jean-Jacques. *Jean-Jacques Sempé's Tales of Two Cities* Charles

McGrath. 8 November 2006. Web.

—. *Rien n'est simple* . Denoël, 1962. Print.

Smith, Joel. *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations*. Yale University Press, 2006. Print.

—. *Steinberg at The New Yorker*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated,
2005. Print.

Wylie, Laurence et Jean-François Brière. *Les Français*. 3rd. Upper Saddle River:
Prentice Hall, 2001. Print.