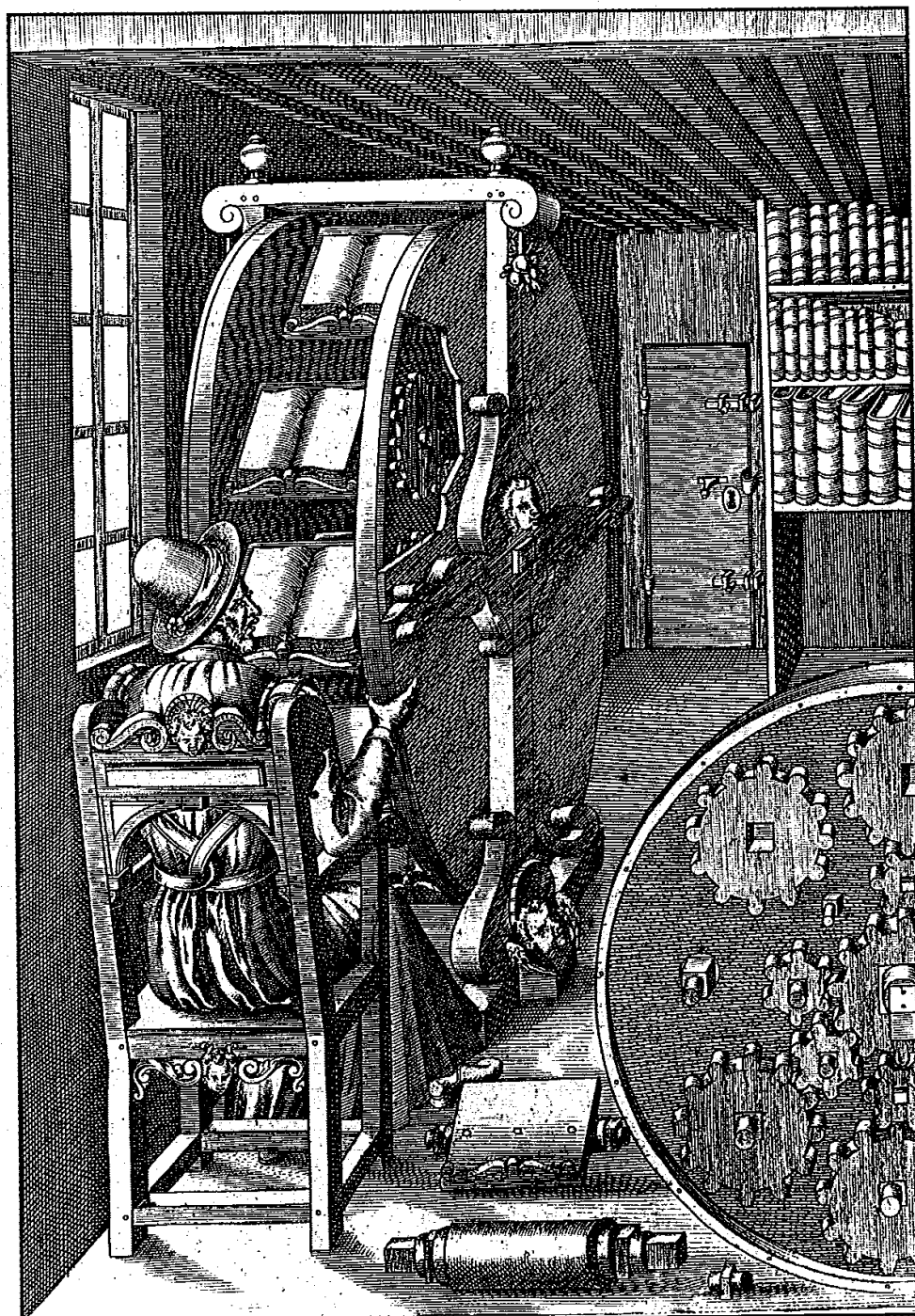


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MEDIA MATTERS:
Technologies of Literary Production

Mosaic

a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature

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Artif[r]acture: Virulent Pictures, Graphic Narrative and the Ideology of the Visual

WILLIAM ANTHONY NERICCIO

In a heretofore alphabet-dominated textual arena, words are giving way to pictures: from *America Online*® and *USA Today*™ to the Internet and *The NBC Nightly News*®, territories once dominated by printed and spoken words are becoming more and more the home of diverse, seductive and, at times, dictatorial images. In the last decade, Microsoft Corporation's development of a graphic-user "Windows" environment, an operating system which derives in large part from one popularized by the Apple Macintosh, has accelerated this evolution. Indeed, the exponential growth of the Internet (in particular, its graphic-friendly segment known as the World Wide Web with software like Mosaic® and Netscape™) signals a small strategic victory in the war between word and image.

"War," however, may invoke the wrong metaphorical matrix. Perhaps it is more apt to think of this process as the "contamination" of word *by* image. In this scenario, picture an innocent, isolated, pristine alphabet infected with virulent visual elements born from, borne by infectious, digitized image-laden bodies. Slipping from the terminology of war to that of disease, we more clearly align ourselves within a pathogen sensitive, post-Darwinian logic cognizant of a growing symmetry between realms/bodies technological and biological. The etymological entanglements to be found in an examination of the term "computer virus" have much to say about the increasing fit of "bio" with "techno." What I cast as the war of word and image, then, may also be seen as a regional skirmish in a broader campaign between digital and somatic organisms.

So it is only for rhetorical reasons that I want to sustain a binary tension between word and image, for I read it as a foregone conclusion that the days of the illuminated manuscript have returned—medievalists take note! Yet the current cyber-injected offspring of the Gutenberg Bible and Egyptian hieroglyphs available on numerous Internet off-ramps are more cagey, more

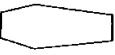
sophisticated. Diverse images move and metamorphose, eliciting and soliciting our desire, leaving words to scurry behind, filling in the gaps and needs of our word-addicted Reason. One might argue at this juncture that Philosophy is nothing more and nothing less than the collective attempt to regulate the Babel-like chaos of word-dominated discourse. As we move from words to picture, however, Philosophy as we know it does not provide us with the critical tools necessary for our encounter with the oscillating dynamics of Image. Hermeneutic troubles clearly loom ahead.

Allow me to elaborate: without doubt, pictures and words access and develop distinct neural sites within our psyche. One noted critical interrogator who has struggled down this path is Michel Foucault. In his landmark study of European madhouses—this, too, is not without some importance—he has this to say about word and image:

Between word and image, between what is depicted by language and what is uttered by plastic form, the unity begins to dissolve; a single and identical meaning is not immediately common to them. And if it is true that the image still has the function of speaking, of transmitting something consubstantial with language, we must recognize that it already no longer says the *same thing*; and that by its own plastic values painting (*animation*) engages in an experiment that will take it farther and farther from language, whatever the superficial identity of the theme. (18)

Foucault sketches here a portrait of language and image at odds in a context where they are conceptually, if not literally, contiguous, and wherein their proximity to each other, their relationship (if one can speak of such a thing) is ever evolving. I believe it safe to venture the following view: not content to limit its hegemony to cinema and television, images encroach increasingly upon previously printed-word dominated media to the point where one recognizes a manifest shift in the textual *order of things*, to allude to Foucault once again. Traditionally, literature departments in North America and Europe have (predictably) been “word” dominated—nothing earth-shattering in that comment. If my suspicions are correct, these shifts have already begun to reveal serious limitations in the methods of textual investigation utilized by critics at institutions of higher education. Storytelling is changing, and it is best not to take anything for granted; these days, one is as likely to give new parents a piece of children’s software as a children’s book. French critic Paul Virilio’s work on the nexus of narrative and technology in *War and Cinema* nicely outlines problems implicit in this sort of synergy.

As is to be expected, these paradigm deviations bring with them demands for a recalibrated hermeneutic: our capacity to read images is immense, as immense as our inability to read them critically; our capacity to interrogate

They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clove shape, like this  with every joint and seamed and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket, and they had laid her head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was a flared dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could spread out, and they had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the angles in her face wouldn't show.

When we are going out, Whitfield comes. He is

Fig. 1.

Detail from the "coffin" page of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

© WILLIAM FAULKNER, 1930; 1957.

tail of exclamatory punctuation, its stars and spirals, and setting that down on paper was what gave him most relief, for it had the feel of the boiling intensity in him. He would often include a rough illustration, a sketch of the chair that he was condemned to sit in.



Fig. 2.

A close-up of an illustrated "paragraph" from Tennessee Williams: *One Arm and Other Stories*.

© TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, 1948.

words critically outstrips our ability to reshape them progressively. Most literary critics, especially those not yet bowled over by the intoxicating contagion named "cultural studies," are not always, or have not always been, comfortable with pictures. They will venture to a museum here, attend a film festival there, but rarely will they interrogate the "infection" of image within the bodies of words they navigate. For instance, it is a commonplace for some to say that Hollywood ruined the talents of one William Faulkner (never mind his legendary booze fetish). Yet it is quite possible to argue the opposite: that Faulkner's work cannot be understood without some rigorous thought about the figuration of the visual in his oeuvre. To illustrate, one might provide a series of quotations from *The Sound and the Fury* and *Sanctuary* but better still is to consider a curious passage from *As I Lay Dying* (Fig. 1). Faulkner gives us a coffin, plain and simple. Or, perhaps, and this is all to the point, the strategy is not so simple at all. Why the odd appearance of the pictured coffin in lieu of the word "coffin" in a novel known for its innovative structuring? To say that *As I Lay Dying* is built around the burial of Addie Bundren's coffin is a commonplace. To say that the novel comes to crisis around the literal figuration of that very coffin is another story altogether.

Nor is Faulkner's cryptograph an anomaly. There are numerous

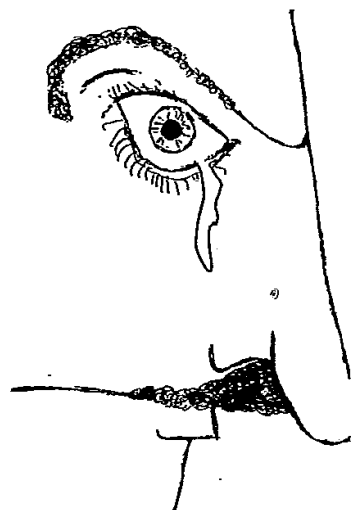


Fig. 3.
Detail from the "About the Author" page of
Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*.
© KURT VONNEGUT, 1973.



Fig. 4.
A snapshot from the author bio overleaf of
Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*.
© ART SPIEGELMAN, 1986.

contemporary fictions which in no small way depend upon words interacting *with* images: like Tennessee Williams's short story "One Arm" (Fig. 2), Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Breakfast of Champions* (Fig. 3), and Art Spiegelman's oral-graphic history/memoir *Maus* (Fig. 4). The common critical procedure has been to overlook these graphic bodies as interruptions or, at best to regard them as curious experimentations. Yet even in itself Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* challenges us to see a case of a medium in crisis, to read the appearance of Addie Bundren's coffin as a systemic interruption. Faulkner signals, or, rather, underscores the fractious semantic/familial intrigue which the novel works to unfold.

Similar kinds of media oscillations occur even in texts where illustrations per se do not appear but in which illustration functions as a vital pivot point of the novel, or wherein protagonists are obsessed with the intoxicating lure of singular pictures: recall here the aging portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the virulent post horn which sustains Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (Fig. 5) or the odd coin which offers a glance at the absolute in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Zahir."

Short of going to art history departments for a second degree, what is the solution for literary critics to their hermeneutic lag with regard to the realm of the visual? I would

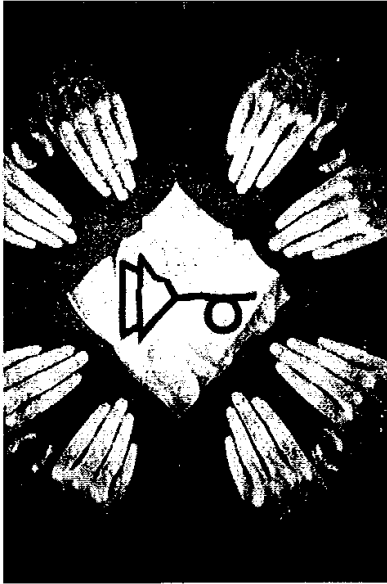


Fig. 5.
Detail from Christopher Zacharow's cover illustration depicting Oedipa Maas's bane, the post horn, from Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.
© CHRISTOPHER ZACHAROW, 1986.

argue that recent developments in graphic narrative provide a fertile half-way zone of sorts for those seeking to couple the visual and the literary—for those who would reconcile painting, photography, television and film *with* literature. But the going will be tough because the best example of graphic narrative is to be found in comic books. Thus the first step necessitates our countering the now weakened yet still common perception that comic books are inferior products for the post-drool, pre-shaving set. So we must confront the media-centric biases that one finds among professionals, just as we must guard against perpetuating the institutional snobbery which exists against this particular form of printed matter.

All these ruminations began, as most things academic do, with an experiment in the classroom. I decided to introduce graphic narratives in my undergraduate and graduate seminars on The Psychological Novel, 20th-

Century Critical Theory, Latin American Literature, and Modern American Fiction. My purpose was not only to investigate the dynamics of this popular mode of narrating stories, but also to see what new readings of older, more traditional fare might arise out of their juxtaposition with graphic narrative. It is one thing to read Freud's "Dora" case history in conjunction with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and yet another to read Gilman's story in the context of Argentine illustrator Oscar Zarate's portrait of Freud in Richard Appignanesi's *Freud for Beginners*. Consider Zarate's depiction of Freud's familial milieu (Fig. 6). Some elements here are obvious, but they merit note: the position of Freud's parents' hands, little Sigmund's mother's palpable indulgence, the incipient sibling rivalry. Zarate's illustration of Freud as a child sitting for a family portrait is as succinct a summary of psychoanalytic suggestions regarding the dynamics of sexuality in bourgeois European families as any that one might find in a prose account of the Viennese doctor's career. Introducing graphic interpretations adds a new dimension to what is called literary hermeneutics. And really, if we are to speak to Freud, of Freud and of the impact of his work, who better than a graphic artist to render critically the contours of "dreamwork" or "the unconscious."



Fig. 6.
Freud and family as imagined by Oscar Zarate.
© OSCAR ZARATE, 1979.

Another pedagogical experiment I conducted involved the use of Dennis Bernstein, Laura Sydell and Bill Sienkiewicz's *Friendly Dictator Trading Cards* in a course I taught on "The Literature and Culture of the So-Called Third World." The form of the cards is innocent enough, enlisting no more than the lust for novelty, diversion and data that is associated with sports trading cards (the type in which this medium reached its apex in

terms of development and dissemination). Yet if the form of the *Friendly Dictator Trading Cards* is familiar, the information they carry is not. One side of the cards features short essays which reveal disturbing information about various foreign despots/assassins on the dole from Uncle Sam this century. Writers Bernstein and Sydell include a veritable rogues gallery of shiftless, venal allies including, among others, Manuel Noriega (Panama, card #14) and General Augusto Pinochet (Chile, card #13)—not surprisingly, the "General" tag evolves as a telling motif of the series. Argentina, Card #8, features Sienkiewicz's portrait of the Argentine monster/general Jorge Rafael Videla (Fig. 7), architect of the "Dirty Little War" against his population in the mid 1970s. Videla's claim to fame will win no patent awards: he is the torturer/innovator who helped develop the technique of dropping political prisoners naked from helicopters while on the take from the CIA and US Army Special Forces. Sienkiewicz's pen and airbrush capture the despotic vision (note the manic eyes) of a man who helped redefine the contours of state terrorism earlier this century.

The information these "novelty" cards contain literally devastated many of my students who were curious as to why information of this sort had not chanced to cross their path. My strategy in turn was to ask them to concentrate on what *had* crossed their path. Unfortunately, sugar-coated fantasies about the righteousness of American "freedom fighters," about George Washington chopping down a cherry tree (that he lies seems to be the most telling element of this tale), and about the glories of technology and democracy had done little to raise the critical acumen or the political sensitivity of this the latest generation of university students—at both the undergraduate and the graduate level.



Fig. 7.

The telling eyes of General Jorge Rafael Videla. A stunning portrait of the tyrant as a not so young man.

© BILL SIENKIEWICZ, 1989.

Departments of English across this planet are charged with the task of documenting developments in the praxis of storytelling. For some of us, however, even more interesting than analyzing what has passed for conventional literature itself, is the task of assessing more general textual trends within the mass culture, reading backwards from the heterogeneous bodies of text it produces. This explains, somewhat, the interrupted neologism “artif[r]acture” in the title of my essay. The distracting brackets are necessary, signaling the insuppressible resonance of at least two dominant semantic/semiotic emphases: at once, both “artifact” and “fracture.” The “artifact” under consideration is the graphic narrative, more specifically, graphic narrative as a medium which allows us to rethink the dynamics of images in the West.

The “fracture” here connotated is a break in the textual order of things where images are in the ascendant mode with regard to words.

Artif[r]acture is a word, but it is also, in its own way, a picture. It looks odd, different, the bracketed (“[r]”) adding to the already taxing demands of the neologism, “artifacture.” In the present critical moment, brackets are quite common, calling attention to ideologically-elided semantic details, as in the following example: “[wo]man.” One might even suggest that the increase in the use of brackets, quite common in poststructurally-inflected critical studies, is nothing more and nothing less than a symptom for the spread of images themselves. In this view, punctuation marks reveal their debt to the domain of the image, the semiotic read here as an eruption on the skin of the semantic.

Texts carry gobs of information. A book, a picture, a word, a line: texts are not unlike cells within which rest DNA, codes which carry the collective history of an organism—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari take a version of this to its theoretical extreme in their exploration of rhizomes. Biochemists have genetics, Philologists etymology. All of this recalls the cliché that literature is a mirror of society, which I think needs to be revised rather than dismissed. Literature (and by literature I include all the media that a community

uses to tell stories about itself: television, cinema, advertising, fiction, poetry, video games, etc.) is like a mirror of society, but today one needs to employ the metaphor with two caveats: first, it is a shattered mirror, with brittle edges that cut and permanently scar the psyche of those who peer within; secondly, the mirror is not passive—one looks into this mirror and is affected (unpredictably) by what one sees: memory, in this regard, tattoos the mind. Literature mirrors, or, better put, literatures mirror the nations that re-produce them; the mirroring is always already a kinetic rendering that is subject to the pull of diverse gravities, with significant indices of refraction.

With or without knowing it, we have returned to that ever popular category, the dialectics of representation, a dialectic central to the Humanities at least since Plato's Socrates and Glaucon spoke of shadows and prisoners within an allegorically-pregnant cave. We should equally note that concern with simulacra is not peculiar to the poststructurally-sensitized thinking of the late 20th century. As early as the middle of the last century, writers like Oliver Wendell Holmes were busy theorizing the impact that picture industry technologies would have on culture and, by implication, on textuality in general. By 1859, as Stuart Ewen cleverly suggests, "technically reproduced surfaces were beginning to vie with lived experience in the structuring of meaning. The image offered a representation of reality more compelling than reality itself, and—perhaps—threw the very definition of *reality* into question" (25).

This, then, is the point at which we should move from the theoretical to the material, from the shadows of Plato's cave to the cheap newsprint and runny ink of comic books—which constitute the kind of "graphic narrative" that I am concerned with exploring. Although terms like "comic," "comic strip" and "comic book" are overdetermined by infantile associations, we should not forget that what we call childish or insignificant are to a great extent the very instruments responsible for our early education. Archie or the Silver Surfer, Batman, Little Dot, Tintin, Lotta, Little Audrey, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Plastic Man, Speedy Gonzales, Wonder Woman, Bugs Bunny, Richie Rich and the Super Mario Brothers are more than two-dimensional cardboard cut-outs, forged for a feeble, innocent body of infantile consumers. For most, they represent the first introduction to the choppy waters of narrative. All the skills we later develop to interrogate and evaluate stories are informed by this panoply of "childish" narratives.

Nor are these "childish" stories simple or static. Consider the way that Children's Literature has evolved in this century: from colorful oversized hardboard books to 32-bit, cybersmart, postmodern software in video games. It may well prove that the ubiquitous Super Mario and his cousins in other popular forms of what I would call "digital children's literature" (i.e., video games like Mortal Kombat, Donkey Kong, etc.) embody an evolutionary

quantum leap from the “good ol’ days” of Dick and Jane. The seriousness of this leap can in turn be seen in the fact that video-game protagonists die (albeit repeatedly) in their challenging, addicting (if monotonous) video-game universes, which is, in the end, something that Dick and Jane never seemed to get around to worrying about—even if Jack and Jill’s adventure on that fateful hill does carry within it the seeds of the tragic.

At this point, let us now return again to the general premise of this essay in the form of allegory: “Word” is on the lam, hounded, displaced by the pesky, resilient and persuasive pleasure of “Picture.” Because we have not kept check on Picture’s wanton spread, we have been left rather ill-equipped to decipher his(?) logic. So if we concede the rather obvious point that image saturation is somehow impacting upon the intellectual/social boundaries which have heretofore defined the literatures, then it seems urgent to note that the medium of graphic narrative is where local, identifiable acts of resistance to the corporate/network narrative status quo may be observed. Drawing as it does from television, cinema, literature and the fine arts, graphic narrative, with its bastard lineage, exhibits a conspicuous range. Through this medium, combining both words *and* images, comic-book artists push the limits of conventional narrative practice and, in the process, provide new means of critical inquiry.

One has only to walk into to the nearest B. Dalton Bookseller, Waldenbooks, college bookstore co-op, or fantasy and graphic narrative specialty shop to witness the proliferation of comic-books in the United States. From the avant-garde post-modern anarchy of Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s *Raw* magazine (their slogan, “The Graphic Aspirin for War Fever” or “Open Wounds From the Cutting Edge of Commix”), to Donald Barthelme and Seymour Chwast’s alcohol-stained narratives in *Sam’s Bar* and Daniel Clowes’s noir-meets-de Sade reverie *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (Fig. 8), more and more gifted storytellers are eschewing prose fiction for the comic book form. These graphic narratives are politically savvy, gender-bending and provocative—in particular, Clowes’s meditation on motion pictures, pornography, solitude and crime marks a return to an existentially charged terrain well-trod by Genet and Sartre earlier this century.

For example, Eclipse Books’s continuing series of graphic albums which address US government foreign and domestic policy (CIA plots, black budgets, death squad financing/training etc.) is particularly compelling. Their best volume to date is Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz’s *Brought to Light*, a fresh take on the dealings of the US Military Industrial Complex south of the US/Mexico border; in addition, Eclipse’s exposé of US Navy training atrocities

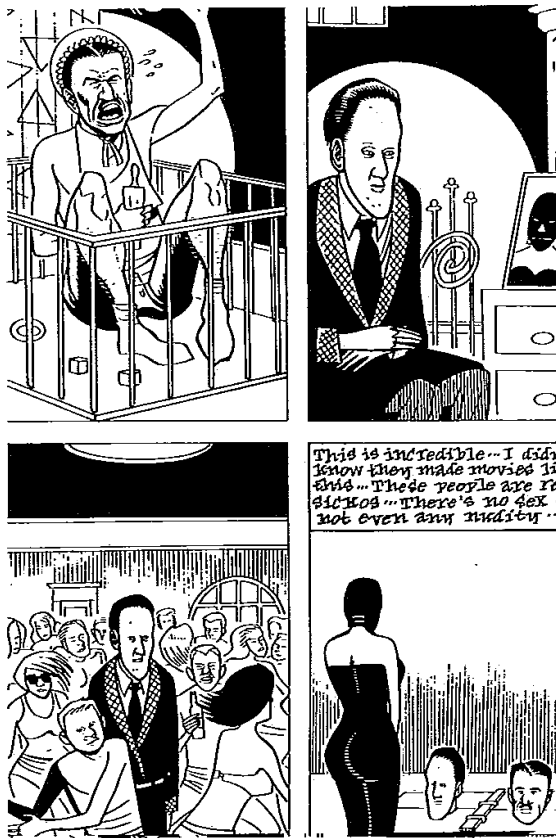


Fig. 8.

A surreal film-within-a-graphic-novel sequence from Dan Clowes's *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*.

© DAN CLOWES, 1993.

to update via prose the unpredictable adventures of George Herriman's famous comic-strip character. One might argue, in addition, that the vignette-driven form of Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire* trilogy is a meaningful prose echo of the Uruguayan novelists's previous incarnation as a political cartoonist. With Dorfman, the case is made more interesting by his previous and extensive critiques of mass cultural fiction. Oddly enough, Dorfman was both critic and *producer*. Previous to his exile from Chile following the US-sponsored ouster of Salvador Allende, Dorfman was responsible for the production of a new line of comic books. His efforts yielded popular entertainments with original characters and off-beat plots which did not replicate racist, politically right-of-right-storylines readily available to children in pre-Allende Chile. Thus it is all the more curious, given his résumé, that comics should infiltrate Dorfman's fiction. It is as if the object of Dorfman's analysis had intercepted his narrative praxis so that a version of it now contaminates his writing of prose fiction. Yet this

against its own enlistees in "Body Washing" (by Sienkiewicz, based on a Jim Naureckas script) is also especially disturbing. Narratologically complex and disruptive of the present politico-ideological status quo, these "fictions" cannot be reduced to basic paraphrase or gloss. Yet they *are* comic books—making use of visual and linguistic tactics particular to that medium. Like *Uncle Scrooge Adventures*, *Superman*, *Zap*, *Betty and Veronica* and *Mad*, these stories unfold via words and pictures in panels with speech balloons and exaggerated, at times caricatured figures.

Of late, the intoxicating, some might say "primal" dynamics of comic books are being felt elsewhere, increasingly infecting prose fiction. Not for nothing does Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman's *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* use speech balloons within key chapters, just as Jay Cantor's novel *Krazy Kat* tries

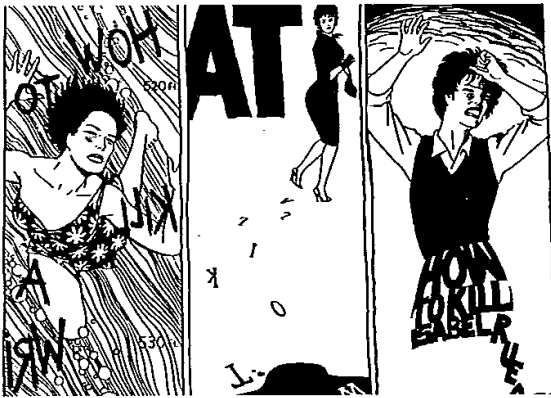


Fig. 9.

Isabel Ruebens reels through a series of semiotically loaded hallucinations in "How to Kill a...By Isabel Ruebens."

© JAIME HERNANDEZ, 1982.

contamination does not represent a weakening of either the literary or graphic media. It represents, rather, a case of cross infiltration—of narrative with both literary and comic-book origins.

These things work both ways, of course. An inverted, yet similar exchange between media provides the plot twist in Jaime Hernandez's "How to Kill a...by Isabel Ruebens." Hernandez's illustrated tale follows the exploits of a Chicana writer by the name of Izzy Ruebens who is attempting to work her way through a writing block. The three panels

(Fig. 9) derive from a hallucination/dream sequence in the story. Note how the illustration underscores both Hernandez's sensitivity and his protagonist's susceptibility to the interpenetration of pictures by words and of words by pictures; note, also, the way that the writer who cannot write is ironically plagued in these illustrations by imposing, amputated words which frame her.

"How to Kill a...By Isabel Ruebens" mates word and image as well as enacting *word as image* in a way consistent with the logic of surrealist film (e.g., Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, 1928) and dadaist literature. In the last panel, Izzy Ruebens is literally clothed by the incompleteness of the very story within which she stars. Consider how Izzy's unraveled skirt (Fig. 9) is at once a mirror of her unraveling psyche and a surrogate echo of the story's title, a title which is itself, like Isabel, interrupted—an incompleteness that is "graphically" indicated through the use of ellipses. Jaime Hernandez's short story is a meditation on identity and self-reflexivity worthy of Cervantes, Borges or Pynchon. In addition, his panels provide us with a film-noir-inflected theatricalization of the Picture/Word romance allegory noted above, a kind of visual shorthand for our ongoing thesis.

Having returned momentarily to the context of mated and/or infected media, of media at war with each other and somehow oddly inert without each other, I would like to suggest that graphic narrative might best be read as a *mestizo* medium. While "mestizo" has classically figured as a Spanish language term signifying the offspring of Spanish couplings with indigenous Meso-American women, it has evolved in the Chicano and Chicana critical community (mostly thanks to the landmark critical work of Gloria Anzaldúa)

as a more generally used concept, evoking the rich, at times contentious, mosaic dynamics of Mexican-American culture. I want further to appropriate the term as a way of describing the lineage of a comic-book medium, whereby comics are read as the illicit progeny of a *ménage à trois* of film, painting and prose fiction. The irony in my use of "How to Kill a...By Isabel Ruebens" as a springboard for my argument lies in the fact that this work is in fact a *mestizo* text produced by a Southern California *mestizo* artist, Chicano writer and illustrator, Jaime Hernandez.

Not surprisingly, it is in graphic narrative that documentation of the ongoing intrigue of word and image finds its most eloquent expression and analysis: one should expect as much of a medium which is nothing more and nothing less than a suggestive farrago of word and image. The recent spate of scholarly inquiries concerning comic books confirms this trend. Projects of note include Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, William Savage's *Comic Books and America* and *Dark Knights: The New Comics In Context*, edited by Clive Bloom and Greg S. McCue. In addition, the University Press of Mississippi has published a series of works which explore the critical implications of graphic narrative; these include Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar*, M. Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* and, more recently, Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*.

How is it that comic books have begun to enter the sacred halls, the pristine ivory towers, of the intelligentsia? The fact is that these *mestizo* forms of narration represent rich textual artifacts for cultural interrogators curious about self-evident, unconscious values (*ideology* proper) of a particular community. As Ariel Dorfman explains in his cleverly titled *The Empire's Old Clothes*:

Industrially produced fiction has become one of the primary shapers of our emotions and our intellect in the twentieth century. Although these stories are supposed merely to entertain us, they constantly give us a secret education. We are not only taught certain styles of violence, the latest fashions, and sex roles by TV, movies, magazines, and comic strips; we are also taught how to succeed, how to love, how to buy, how to conquer, how to forget the past and suppress the future. We are taught, more than anything else, how not to rebel. (ix)

So it is that ostensibly peripheral elements of culture (comic books) participate in the shaping of the collective imagination.

Innovative graphic storytellers profit by upsetting the status-quo diet of pabulum usually associated with pulp literature for the masses. For example take Frank Miller's postmodern reconstruction of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In the collection of essays edited by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, the significance of Miller's Batman (a remarkable cross/species-dressing phenomenon if there ever was one) is explored at length, and here I would venture briefly to suggest that much of the controversy and acclaim which attached itself to Miller's *Dark Knight* derived from his revisionary, not to say revealing, depiction of Superman as a neo-fascist Ronald Reagan sycophant, disclosing in one fell swoop a reactionary aroma always implicit in DC Comics's "Man of Steel." Let us also recall Roland Barthes's description of how this bulging, latex-wrapped superhero impresses himself upon the bodies/minds of young graphic narrative consumers: "an American child jumps out of a seventh story window because he wants to fly like Superman. One might say in the same manner that Madame Bovary died from having read books" (112); Barthes vignette ends with an unattributed interlocutor cynically jeering, "be careful, soon you will be justifying censorship." One point here among others is that we gain nothing by underestimating the influence any literature has on the "passive" body of spectators who are its audience; another is that a study of Superman comics and democratic fascism may well be overdue.

In the context of agency and spectatorship, we might also note the suggestive comments of Rosalind Krauss in *The Visual Unconscious* concerning the complicity of the ostensibly disengaged visual spectator: "There is no way to concentrate on the threshold of vision, to capture something *en tournant la tête*, without siting vision in the body and positioning that body, in turn, within the grip of desire." As for the question of whose desire—yours, theirs, mine?—Krauss's telling conclusion is: "Vision is...caught up within the meshes of projection and identification, within the specularity of substitution that is also a search for an origin lost" (140). Siting vision, sighting vision—Krauss's pun here tells the story: the spectator *is* agent—there is nothing passive or docile or ex-centric about the act of witnessing. Krauss's findings, moreover, also reveal something more about watching, reading and seeing: the spectator *is* not only an agent but a nostalgic one; the pathos-rich enticements of nostalgia afford us the opportunity to corrupt anything we witness with surrogate flashes of the familiar which have the effect of over-writing the "reality" of the contemporary spectacle.

It seems reasonable to conclude at this point that declaring "comics are for kids" misses key points about that medium's operating logic. Yet it is also critically useful to argue that comics *are* for kids, albeit in a markedly different manner. As Dorfman shows in *How to Read Donald Duck* (Fig. 10),

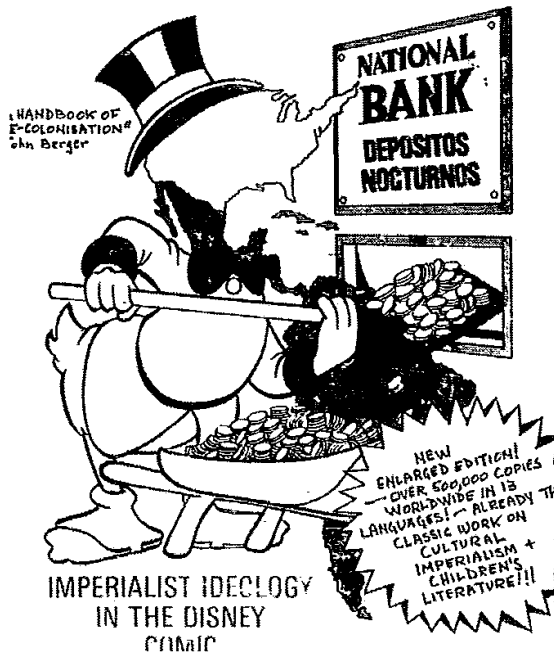


Fig. 10.

The unattributed, controversial cover design of Armand Mattelart and Ariel Dorfman's *How to Read Donald Duck*.

© INTERNATIONAL GENERAL 1975, 1984.

comic books are more or less responsible for how we train children to read texts and, necessarily, how we train them to read the world:

...it is the adult who produces the comics, and the child who consumes them. The role of the apparent child actor, who reigns over this uncontaminated world, is at once that of audience and dummy for his [parent]'s ventriloquism. [Parents] deny [their] progeny a voice of [their] own, and as in any authoritarian society, [they] establish [them]selves as the other's sole interpreter and spokesman. All the little fellow can do is to let his [parents] represent him. (30)

Because comic books play fundamental roles in developing a child's reading skills, they reinforce—perhaps more than any other form of

children's narrative—patterns of interpretation and characterization that the child will bring to future encounters with books, with cinema, and necessarily, with people.

One small example drawn from a recent comic book will suffice: an Uncle Scrooge story by illustrator Don Rosa, which reached the reading public courtesy of the Walt Disney Corporation. Set in a quaint, rural village full of numskull, rural Latinos in some ill-defined burgh of South America, Rosa graces his graphic novella with the pun-laden title, "The Son of the Sun" and depicts the knee-slapping adventures of Scrooge and his nephews on their quest for gold and adventure (in that order). Examining one panel closely, one comes across loaded words from the story's omniscient narrator: "So the soggy ducks dry out and prepare for a long trek back to *civilization*" (29).

A "long trek back to *civilization*": somehow we know at once where our merry troupe is headed—the return to civilization is a common turn of phrase, a familiar figure of speech: our omniscient guide signals Scrooge McDuck and company's return from the exotic, savage sticks to the more reassuring climes of the USA. After they have plundered *and* destroyed the

ruins of an Inca-esque temple located somewhere (anywhere?) south of the border, *civilization* beckons. The problem with the term is not what it represents, but what it does not. Here “civilization” has a single generic flavor: suburbs, lawns, sidewalks, supermarkets, interstate highways, multinational corporations (Disney/Capital Cities/ABC Inc. included), *Hard Copy*, strip malls, “Have a nice day,” etc. In short, “civilization” is synonymous with “our” lifestyle—which in turn becomes narrowed to an *American* or United States-inflected version/vision. Apropos of another Walt Disney Production (*The Three Caballeros*), Julianne Burton has recently argued how “Disney’s ‘gift’ of intercultural understanding turns out to be the act of packaging Latin America for enhanced North American consumption” (38). The gulf suggested by Rosa’s segue—not from one civilization to another, but from a site sans civilization to Civilization proper—adds further strength to Burton’s conclusions.

Corporate comic-book publishers (Marvel, DC, Disney) profit from and task themselves with the continual regeneration of predictable stereotyped figures: they are as unlikely to have a radically progressive impact on the cultural status quo as are major motion picture studios, advertising firms or, for that matter, Time Warner. Not all comic books, however, tell the same story or in the same way; the graphic medium at large ought not suffer for the banalizing sins of Disney’s Uncle Scrooge. After all, no one maligns Wilder, Gutierrez Alea, Hitchcock or Godard for the cinematic sins of directors Ed Wood or Samuel Z. Arkoff. The Hernandez brothers (Gilbert, Jaime and, less prolific, Mario) understand the potential of the graphic medium they pursue as a trade, and they understand as well the need to move it in another direction. Repeatedly, their self-consciously wrought mixtures of words and pictures seek to do more than maintain the status quo banalities of bulging muscles and colorful latex intrinsic to the comic-book industry.

For example, both Jaime and Gilbert routinely question issues of representation indigenous to their medium. Take the practice of photography—no small issue for individuals curious about the complex fugue of representation which has evolved about depiction of Latin Americans and Latinos in US mass culture. As demonstrated in the works of writers like journalist George Black (*The Good Neighbor: How the United States Wrote the History of Central America and the Caribbean*) and historian John J. Johnson (*Latin America in Caricature*), there is nothing quite like an image which seeks to intercept and disrupt the logic of an other image.

This is the strategy of the short story “An American in Palomar,” wherein Gilbert Hernandez probes imperialistic desires implicit in journalistic photography with his depiction of Howard Miller, a “*Geographic Monthly*” photographer and ugly American extraordinaire (Fig. 11). Possessed of a

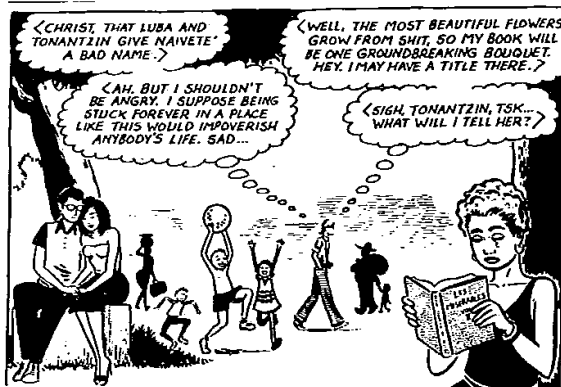


Fig. 11.

Photographer Howard Miller contemplates his aesthetic gifts, oblivious to all.

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1985.

predictably limited, stereotyped perception of the Central American community of Palomar, Howard Miller “sees” nothing there, or better put, he sees “shit,” ignoring the irreducible vivacity of a Palomar he cannot see, with its citizens who play, who love, who read Victor Hugo and one, in particular, who carries a water jug on her head to help balance her briefcase. Some odd brand of esthetic fetishism frees Howard Miller from the burden of visually encountering the world which passes right

before his eyes. Thus does an opportunistic, bearded *gringo* visitor to Palomar re“place” the photographed object of his lens, target of his gaze, Palomar, with a pre-destined and primitive visual simulacrum. It is as if Palomarians were solicitous masochists, begging for the status of palimpsest canvas; Miller manipulates the frame so that it coincides with his vision/version *estadounidense* (Unitedstatesian) of Latin America. Displaced, painted over, objects rendered by Miller’s enterprising camera lens become raw materials in the service of the photographer’s individual “genius.” Cleverly dramatizing the potential menace intrinsic to “scientific” or “anthropological” photography, Hernandez indicts cultural imperialism *estilo National Geographic*.

Earlier in the same short story, Hernandez exposes (no pun intended) still photography’s technological bedfellows, linking the complexities of the camera’s logic with that of motion pictures and his own india ink stylus. In three small panels, Hernandez captures in microcosm a brief history of image technology and its impact upon the collective imagination of Palomar. Howard Miller has just arrived in Palomar and three of its female citizens (Tonantzín, Carmen and Sheriff Chelo) are bickering over Miller’s affection—they are also openly competing, seeing who can best exploit Miller. Yet that is only the plot; what happens when we take a step back and consider the illustrated panels in sequence? The first panel, just following the trio’s friendly female joust, positions us in two places at once: without, as spectator, watching Tonantzín and within, inside her mind (Fig. 12). Hernandez’s illustration renders Tonantzín’s dream of following Howard Miller to Hollywood; in a very Freudian form of “condensation,” Tonantzín’s body fuses with a version of the classic pose of Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* (1958), popping camera flashbulbs highlighting her *mestizo* silhouette. Hernandez’s second panel moves from a psychoanalytically informed melange

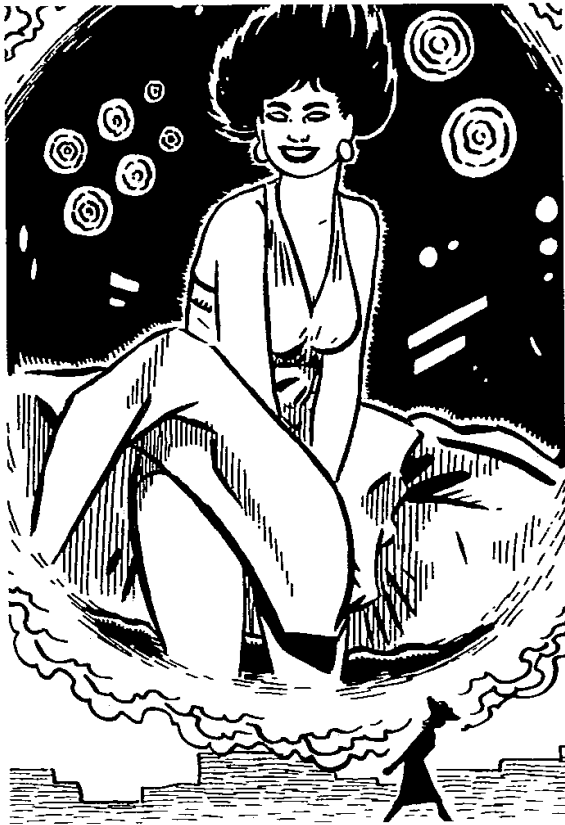


Fig. 12.

Marilyn Tonantzín: an iconic fusion drawn from the pages of "An American in Palomar."

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1985.



Fig. 13.

Between camera and cinema. An allegory on technology-assisted voyeurism tucked into "An American in Palomar."

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1985.

to a primer on the mechanics of photographic representation (Fig. 13). "Click": Hernandez's places us inside Howard Miller's camera where we are literally caught within the machine which renders "shit" into "beautiful flowers." The third panel (also Fig. 13) completes the circuit, as Hernandez moves us from the guts of a still camera to an exterior low-angle shot of Palomar's only movie house, where imported American movies ("Jerry Lewis" no less) thrive. From dreamwork to camera to cinema: ironically, the tour ends in front of the very site wherein Palomar's locals encountered the source (Marilyn Monroe movies) for the *dream condensation* seen in the first panel.

This sequence reveals that Hernandez's interest in "cinema" extends both to content (Monroe, the movie theater in the background of the third panel) and form (the three panels advance utilizing cinematic narrative techniques: match cut, point of view shift, montage). In Gilbert Hernandez's hands, graphic narrative captures and deftly comments upon the dynamics of cinema, of culturally suggestive, not to say imperialistic images, in a Central American context. Through these images and words, Hernandez explores the impact of late 20th-century technologies of communication.

The foregoing images and discussion remind us that the ostensible immediacy of printed images, the ease with which one associates images/photography with reality ("you are there") should be challenged. Susan Sontag's view here seems salient:

The now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic damage needed to build modern, inorganic societies. But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images. (4)

The depicted wor[l]d continues, in many ways, to prove more dangerous, ever more manipulable than the written wor[l]d.

A well-worn cliché (even for a cliché) holds that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Gilbert Hernandez allows us to overhaul this truism, to dismantle its facile yet seductive procedures. After getting to know Howard Miller, ace photographer for *Geographic Monthly*, we now know that *yes*, a picture *is* worth a thousand words and that like a thousand words, pictures lie. For these reasons among others, I have used Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez’s texts in my graduate and undergraduate courses in literature and theory and have read them alongside prose fiction by Jorge Luis Borges, Rosario Castellanos, Rolando Hinojosa, Thomas Pynchon, Sandra Cisneros, Kurt Vonnegut and Toni Morrison—viewing Hernandez’s work as a singular component of 20th-century storytelling and discourse analysis. Like these fellow artists, both Hernandez brothers are as interested in telling a story as they are in telling a story about the telling of stories.

In “Love Bites,” Gilbert Hernandez examines the relationship of Carmen and Heraclio, focusing on marital tensions between lovers who, among other things, find themselves far apart when it comes to literacy—Heraclio is the well-read music teacher, and Carmen (Fig. 14) a struggling reader/house-



Fig. 14.

Carmen’s trouble reading is graphically echoed by eerily silent panels in Gilbert Hernandez’s “Love Bites.”

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1985.

wife, known more in Palomar for her remarkable temper than for any affinity with literature. In these panels, Hernandez does not succumb to the temptation (evident in select corporate comic books) of producing storylines which would either glorify, indict or pop-psychoanalyze the couple’s domestic turmoil (e.g., Spiderman aka Peter Parker’s recent marital tryst or *Superman* aka Clark Kent’s ongoing liaison with Lois Lane). Rather, Hernandez traces out relational nuances between a man and woman, between this man Heraclio and this woman Carmen.



Fig. 15.

A philandering husband returns to his philandering psychoanalyst wife's bed in Gilbert Hernandez's *Birdland*.

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1990.

That in the process Hernandez's tale undermines stereotypical depictions of sexism in Latino culture is just one added facet of his narrative product. The words Carmen haltingly stutters come from Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, one of Gilbert Hernandez's stronger narrative influences. In this way, literary traditions from north and south of the border meld together. With respect to our ongoing concern with the consortion of word and image, we might also note in passing how the

silent panels rendering Carmen in Heraclio's study (image) are interrupted by the introduction of stuttered words: Carmen's voice as she sounds out García Márquez's writing (word). It is instructive to juxtapose these panels with brother Jaime Hernandez's analogous image of Isabel Ruebens (Fig. 9). Hernandez combines elements from prose fiction (the novel à la García Márquez) with his own medium (the graphic short story) and, in the process, invites analyses which speak to the complicated dance of text with image. In his most recent work, the pornographic serialized novel called *Birdland*, he continues these domestic explorations (Fig. 15).

Another instructive example from the Hernandez oeuvre is the story "The Life and Times of Errata Stigmata: Tears From Heaven" originally published in 1985. In this work, Gilbert Hernandez follows a singular young girl, Errata Stigmata, a victimized child, feminist hero and modern-day stigmatic. The story indicts religious fundamentalism, the growing intersection of Christian fanaticism and tele-techno-culture, signaling how voyeuristic pathologies are re-written and extended by media innovation. The story is also a moving, disturbing study of child abuse. An orphaned child, mysteriously spared the murderous wrath of a serial killer terrorizing Palomar, Errata is adopted by a vicious Aunt Zephie who shows Errata the mysteries of life and death using visual instruction (she has sex in front of the child and later has her tour a morgue by herself). After this, Errata is forced to endure a series of explicitly violent and sexual adventures. One of the more intriguing sequences occurs when Errata's abusive, fundamentalist music teacher arrives and interrupts the little girl's TV viewing for a lesson (Fig. 16). This is no regular television. Note that the oversized screen before the diminutive child (a cathode-ray festival of viscera, blood, detached eyeball) may also be

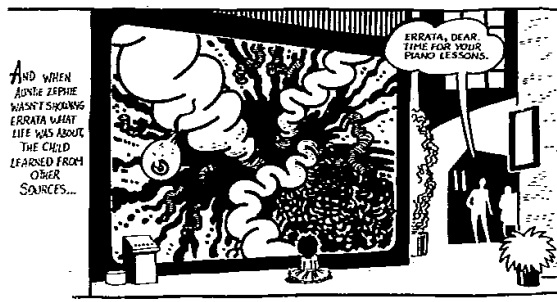


Fig. 16.

Errata Stigmata passes the time away between sadomasochistic abuse sessions in "Tears from Heaven."

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1985.

graphic narrative televises the allegory in this minor tale of violation, Christian fundamentalism and tabloid television.

What Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez do best is prey upon conventions of the mainstream comics. For example, in Jaime Hernandez's "8:01am—11:15am: A Locas Tambien Story," Maggie Chascarillo (Fig. 17) undermines expectations of a voluptuous middle-class Betty and vivacious aristocratic Veronica vying for inane redhead Archie Andrews's affection in Riverdale; and in Gilbert Hernandez's "Bullnecks and Bracelets: A Heartbreak Soup Story," the depiction of Israel (Fig. 18), as a promiscuous bisexual gigolo, forces us to rethink fond remembrances of Archie and Jughead cavorting at ol' Pop Tate's soda shop or, even, of Lucy pulling a football from a hapless Charlie Brown. Not to be dismissed as parody—or worse, simple-minded exploitation—Hernandez's protagonists confront readers with their inviting otherness. Maggie Chascarillo's most un-Barbie-like contours appear with-

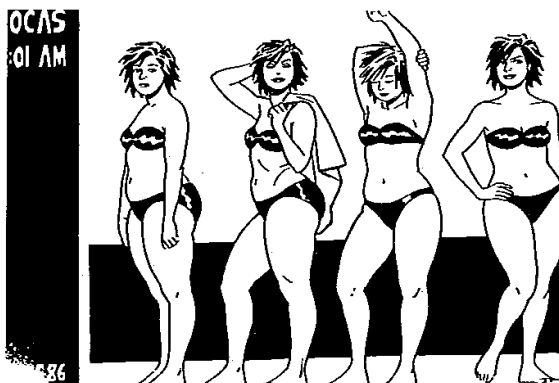


Fig. 17.

Margarita "Maggie" Chascarillo as anti-Betty/anti-Veronica visual vaccination.

© JAIME HERNANDEZ, 1986.

out comment, complaint or sidestepping. Somehow the adventurous planet-trotting female rocket mechanic from East LA escapes the tacit valorization of what Luce Irigaray calls "her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values" (180).

read as an existentially attuned mirror. Read as such, the television/mirror evokes Nietzsche's pointed intimation in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

"And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss looks long into you" (89). Nietzsche, who had thoroughly thought through (often with great suffering) insidious potentialities implicit in Christianity, forges here as apt an allegory for the consequences of moving-picture technology as might be made. Hernandez's

Writing in the same decade as Irigaray, Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos had spoken of much the same thing, maintaining in "Woman and Her Image" that "man converts



Fig. 18.

Scenes of homoerotic pathos from Gilbert Hernandez's "Heartbreak Soup" series of tales.

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1987.

dominating hetero-eroticism of comics in general as well as the legend of Latino machismo, reeking as it does of misogyny-dusted, testosterone-laced excesses and fiery *amor caliente*.

Things are never quite predictable in the *Love and Rockets* universe. In *Blood of Palomar: Human Diastrophism*, for instance, we have a novel about a serial killer terrorizing Palomar, a novel which also chronicles the suicide of Tonantzín (the woman with the Marilyn Monroe daydreams). This work, however, is also an autobiography-tinged quasi-memoir of a young illustrator, a would-be artist savant by the name of Humberto. An accomplished illustrator himself, Hernandez presents a *Bildungsroman* of a struggling neophyte artist—Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* re-imagined pen in hand



Fig. 19.

Close-up of the artist probing his aesthetic lineage, from a key sequence in Gilbert Hernandez's *Blood of Palomar*.

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1989.

whatever is feminine into a receptacle of contradictory moods....We are shown a form that, although varying in form, is monotonous in meaning" (237). Hernandez's characters—men, women, space aliens, animals and "others"—while varying in form from issue to issue (*Love and Rockets*, where all these stories originally appeared, is published serially every two months or so) are more cacophonous than "monotonous." For example, Israel and his lover's homoerotic domestic exchange overwrites at once the

south of the border. Given Hernandez's interests (he recently scripted a striking graphic biography of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo), one might expect Humberto's education to include the canvas innovations of Siquieros, Rivera and Tamayo, all influential Mexican artists. In *Blood of Palomar*, however, Humberto's teacher is the frustrated, well-read, music instructor Heraclio, who dutifully gives Humberto bound reproductions of artists like Grosz, Kandinsky, Miró, Cassatt, Picasso and Paul Klee (Fig. 19) in addition

to the 19th-century Mexican graphic artist Jose Guadalupe Posada. There is nothing provincial about this spectrum of artists; nor is one surprised when the introduction of these works throws Humberto into an existential crisis of sorts—witnessing an attempted murder while sketching also has something to do with his breakdown.

While art historians have begun to chronicle the esthetic Diaspora of European artists in the Americas, the equally important and influential travel of Latin American artists and art to and through Europe has been slower in coming. Caught within an illustrated novel filled with lurid spectacles of murder, vilified lesbian desire, and fundamentalist theology-inspired suicide, Hernandez's Humberto embodies the beginnings of such a quest. Yet, one ought not look past the strong regionalism of these works. In *Love and Rockets* one sees a series of narratives whose aims more closely approximate the fiction of Latin American and Mexican-American writers (García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Juan Bruce-Novoa, Sandra Cisneros and Rolando Hinojosa to name a few) than the tradition of Batman or Dick Tracy, though the Hernandez brothers would be the first generously to signal their artistic debt to Bob Kane and Chester Gould. Linking graphic narrative with the literatures of Latin America and the American Southwest yields textual artifacts which necessitate a comparative literary hermeneutic.

Still "Latin America" is just one of the "fictional" domains that the Hernandez brothers inhabit. Earlier in the 1980s, they also extended their

settings to the dark cold streets of an anyplace Eastern/UK urban metropole in a four-issue series called *Mr. X*. In *Mr. X* (written with Paul Rivoche and Dean Motter), the Hernandez brothers explore the Postmodern near future in a city called Somnopolis. A dank matrix of robots, surveillance cameras, speed-crazed architects, drugs, dreams and nightmares, Somnopolis is a city which shares more with the apocalyptic, futuristic visions of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Terry Gilliam (*Brazil*) than it does with the progress-intoxicated utopias of Flash Gordon. This odd skyscraper-filled burgh is "where technology addresses every need,"

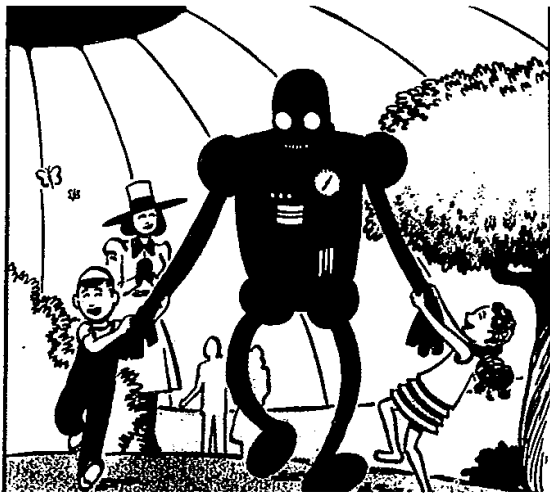


Fig. 20.

Sunday in the park with Robot. A chilling allegory of things to come from Gilbert Hernandez's "Tales from Somnopolis."

© GILBERT HERNANDEZ, 1984.



Fig. 21.

Gilbert Hernandez alludes to Nietzsche with snapshots of the urban darkside in "Tales from Somnopolis." Coming soon to a city near you.

© GIBERT HERNANDEZ, 1984.

even the ever-pressing domestic needs of a future nuclear bourgeois household (Fig. 20). Note the juxtaposition employed in this panel: the happy and unhappy marriage of organic and machine culture (yet another form of *mestizo* dynamics at play).

Mr. X is a discredited city planner, who, having designed Somnopolis, finds himself summarily ousted by his corrupt corporate partners. Addicted to a drug which does not let him sleep, Mr. X roams the bizarre city he designed in search of justice and more narcotics (Fig. 21)—note the amputated allusion to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* in the panel background. Somnopolis embodies the metropolitan landscape of an ideal future gone bad, at one with other literary dystopias like Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. "Los Brothers Hernandez," as they are known to their fans, navigate the

frontiers of an image-obsessed age and allow its extremes to contaminate their stories. Yet this contamination is not fatal. Rather, it motivates the production of heterogeneous, problematic stories which comment upon, even as they contribute to, their body of visual/textual narratives.

Reading graphic narratives in conjunction with other traditional narrative forms (film, the novel, newspapers), one is in a better position critically to interrogate diverse media disseminations emanating from what has come to be called the global village. If this is the high age of the multi-national corporation it follows that this is also a watershed moment in the "development" of multi-national information systems. Assassinated political scientist Walter Rodney showed earlier this century how tales of development always and necessarily mask the dynamics of their accompanying acts of "underdevelopment." Select comic books like those of Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez provide the means to graph this [de]evolution.

An odd, uncomfortable position we find ourselves in: image, image everywhere and not a thought to think. In order to understand the role played by the development of graphic narrative, we need to note the way that their development has been mirrored in other more widely recognized vehicles for narrative dissemination in the late 20th century: TV, mass-trade paperbacks, magazines and newspapers. These media all show a growing reliance on a display of words *and* graphics. We now have analyses which are all graphics and no text: consider the colorful news charts in *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *USA Today* which often proxy for traditional prose "stories." Or, perhaps more remarkable, we now have "magazines" without paper, of which the World Wide Web-situated, hypertext-driven *Urban Desires* is just one of many examples. Interestingly, recently concluded military spectacle/sideshows in the Persian Gulf, Somalia and Haiti, and mounting "conflicts" like that of Bosnia Herzegovina have only accelerated this word to image evolution, reinforcing among other things Paul Virilio's suggestion of how the technology of visual-textual dissemination follows upon developments in military surveillance technology. Why read a description of a F-117 Stealth fighter on a bombing run when you can access real-time video of it via CNN or Quicktime MPEG views of it via the Internet—albeit carefully edited and packaged by a compliant, not to say complaisant, "Pentagon press pool."

In "Killing Time Should Be Prime Time," British novelist J. G. Ballard has discussed our community's growing image fetish, keying in on television and violence. He concludes that we live in a

...season for assassins. How far does our fascination with Oswald or Charles Manson, Gary Gilmore, and James Earl Ray play on the edgy dreams of other lonely psychopaths, encourage them to gamble their trigger fingers on a very special kind of late 20th-century celebrity....Lee Harvey Oswald, had he not been shot by Jack Ruby, would presumably now be up for parole, ready to play his part—as TV anchorman, or special assignments writer for *Guns and Ammo*. (108)

Perhaps the NRA would also have place for him. In Ballard's view, television not only reports incidents; in addition, it provides a subtle and not so subtle sponsorship underwriting the event itself. Less and less the news is written; quickly, suggestively, it flashes on the screen before us. With every passing moment, we rely less on words to tell the stories of our passing times.

That television should figure in Ballard's observation and the work of the Hernandez brothers (e.g., the Errata Stigmata illustration) is anything but an accident, television being the narcotic of choice of a global community

addicted to the truth-value of images. Indeed, the Internet may be read as the latest, most highly addictive form of digital heroin now available. Writing of “terrorists” and the mass media, Jean Baudrillard has addressed this logic and concludes: “the media are terrorists in their own fashion, working continually to produce (good) sense, but, at the same time, violently defeating it by arousing everywhere a fascination without scruples, that is to say, a paralysis of meaning, to the profit of a single scenario” (113-14).

Things are going to get only more complex. Radical changes in cultural and political structures in the East and West are already resulting in more and more individuals having increased access to image-manufacture technology; needless to say, this shift has led more to the sale of high-tech surveillance products than any renaissance in our critical ability to survey or “see through” images. Susan Sontag’s mid-70s findings on photography are still salient:

Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images. (178-79)

Also thinking through the logic of photography in “Toward a Hypertelic Art,” the late Cuban scribe Severo Sarduy describes the issue in words that resonate in deep harmony with those of Sontag: “Photos fix. They fix their objects in an immobility outside which the entire show of mimicry and get-ups would be consigned to the law of illusion” (122). Sontag and Sarduy lead us to a crisis of sorts: are we readers or gazers, “textators” or *spectators*? And does the answer to that question also define the fundamental character of the communities within which and out of which we navigate as citizens or consumers—or, better put, as citizens whose nature *is* consumption? What interpretive formulas are upset or displaced in a context where the hierarchy of text and image is in flux? We may well be too late to enter this speculation if Stuart Ewen’s recent findings continue to hold true. In *All Consuming Images*, he describes a decaying Western culture which has declined from a select, voting citizenry sustaining the Declaration of Independence to a polled, consumer-culture horde voyeuristically worshiping the “decoration of independence” (101).

Why should literary critics and theorists, guardians and problematizers of language and narration, bother to consider the problem of the image? Alas, we have no choice. In the past hundred and fifty years, images began

proliferating, first with photography, later in movie houses and then through TV. Such an expansion could not but impinge on the domain of the written word. Predictably, the amount of time spent by readers has decreased in inverse proportion to the number of hours spent in front of the silver screen and television. Such a flux brings the domain of the image and the text into direct conflict. The Cuban critic Edmundo Desnoes, discussing image imperialism in this century, finds that "the ambiguity of the image...requires definition, demands a context. The image...incites us, it does not commit us. It customarily manipulates us. For better or for worse" (402-03). Keeping the potential of this manipulation in mind, agencies of information distribution and analysis (especially those analyzing the consuming habits of mass culture) need to recognize that the very near future promises a growing reliance on audio-visual instruments and pictorial illustrations to communicate analyses. The translation of events into narrative in journals, newspapers, magazines, television and cyberspace, relies less on linguistic discourse legislated by grammar and more on pictorial translations regulated by perspective.

If one is to understand the problems implicit in an interpretive arena where word and image come into open conflict, where the interpretive structures invented for texts no longer hold, perhaps it is with graphic narrative—where word and image (co)operate—that such an investigation should begin. These graphic narratives evoke narratological spaces akin to those Freud outlined in his discussion of dreams:

The manifest content of dreams consists for the most part in pictorial situations; and the dream thoughts must accordingly be submitted in the first place to a treatment which will make them suitable for a representation of this kind. *If we imagine ourselves faced by the problem of representing the arguments in a political leading article...in a series of pictures*, we shall easily understand the modifications which must necessarily be carried out by the dream work owing to considerations of representability in the content of the dream. (51 emphasis mine)

Freud's analogy here seems eerily familiar. The touted Viennese doctor comes off as a 19th-century Nostradamus of sorts (or, alternatively, as a budding *Time* layout designer) as well as developer of the psychoanalytic method. The speedy progress of our techno-fetishized age suggests that it may not be long before our critical landscape comes more and more to replicate the contours of Freud's imagined space for the production of dreams. And this is not a bad nor a good thing. It may well be that the "image cult" of the late 20th century represents the natural evolutionary result of a First World reality that derived by and large from a determining Freudian logic.

Those concerned with the political implications of a shift in hegemony from text to image might begin to imagine a critical program for the future. John Berger's conclusions from *Ways of Seeing* merit review:

If the new language of images were used differently, it [c]ould, through its use, confer a new kind of power. Within it we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate. (Seeing comes before words.) Not only personal experience, but also the essential historical experience of our relation to the past: that is to say the experience of seeking to give meaning to our lives, of trying to understand the history of which we can become the active agents.

The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose. (33)

One senses the choice of either participating in this progress and engaging in a progressive critique or somehow being lost in its wake, leaving ourselves passively to witness the activities of other institutions, those more willing to cash in on innovation within the domain of image/word proliferation: the CIA and the National Security Agency come to mind.

As literary critics confront narratives and theories of narration produced in this era, it will reward us to rethink carefully the political implications of an interpretive literary practice which acknowledges the growing influence of the image. As Gayatri Spivak observes in a related context, a textual study "that can graduate into [the next decade] might teach itself to attend to the dialectical and continuous crosshatching of ideology and literary language.... such an activity, learned in the classroom, should slide without a sense of rupture into an active and involved reading of the social text within which the student and teacher of [narratives] are caught" (676-77). The social text being what it is these days, the time seems right for an analysis of our culture of the image.

According to the latest (1989) edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "image" derives ultimately from the Latin word *imitari*, "to imitate" (7:663). That our culture should generally assign the value of truth to an object, i.e., the image, whose originary identity revolves about an act of mimicry, of copying with all its attendant potentialities for drift, contamination and appropriation, should give us some pause. Alongside this finding, let us place a peculiar confession extracted from Jacques Derrida's recent impersonation of an art historian in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*:

A double infirmity: to this day I still think that I will never know either how to draw or how to look at a drawing. In truth, I feel myself incapable of following with my hand the prescription of a model: it is as if, just as I was about to draw, I no longer saw the thing. (36)

Confronted by an exigent, "prescripti[ve]" model, Derrida is rendered both artistically inept and practically blind, not "know[ing]," even, "how to look." This thoughtful French metaphrast's moving deposition, coupled with etymology's ironic disclosure of the skeletons that lurk in Image's closet, strikes an appropriate allegorical note on which to close this essay.

We must accept the Image-saturated epoch which dawns and gains momentum with each passing moment, and confront also the limitations of a literary hermeneutic left speechless before the specter of a picture. My critical interrogation of contemporary graphic narrative yields an unsettling diagnosis: that we are infected with desires for visualizable objects that are always already somewhere outside truth. One might imagine it possible to resolve our pendulation between the idyll of truth and the inferno of copy, but copy is "truly" all we ever see.

Already ours is an age determined by the way pictures shape the reality of the everyday, and yet our eyes are not true: our astigmatism is chronic, and our only viable, if rudimentary, corrective lens is close, rigorous, cultural study and dynamic, textual, critical scrutiny. Word-based criticism might thus accept the challenge to analyze the complicity of images and word, even if that critical project begins with the comic book itself. Now, more than ever, the time seems right for the critical community to confront the innovative space of graphic narrative: to understand it as both epitome of and reaction against an age obsessed with "moving" pictures.*

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