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## Breaking the Frame: Anarchist Comics and Visual Culture

Comics, as a medium, [are] not conducive to expressions of democracy ... Democracy is for people who can deal with compromise and delayed gratification and accumulations of little victories ... what comics are really, really good at expressing and embodying is *anarchy*. Impulses and moods that, in real life, can make a person sound like an overgrown kid in full whine mode can, transferred to the page, fuel kick-ass adventures in mainstream comics and blossom into wild-eyed, raving satirical fantasies ...

-Phil Nugent, *The Children's Crusade*

In the theater or at the cinema or even watching TV ... because the frame or the proscenium arch is always the same, you usually block it out. You don't notice it, and you get sucked into the picture that much more quickly.

- Dave Gibbons, *Pebbles in a Landscape* (100)

I am a little apprehensive that your Lordship will think me too lenient towards these men, and half a *frame-breaker myself*.

- George Gordon, Lord Byron, letter to Lord Holland, 1812 (135)

It cannot be said that anarchists welcomed the cultural prospects of what Walter Benjamin called "the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" uncritically. As early as 1909, in an essay on "The Cinema as Educator," Franz Pfemfert protested that "cinema destroys fantasy": "even if film was put only to really good use, I would withhold this soulless, fantasy-killing food from the people" (62, 61). In a 1913 article for *La Bataille Syndicaliste*, anarchist Victor Roudine lamented the growing "success of the cinema":

Modern life drains more and more of the muscles and nerves of the working population. How can you ask that a spectacle which does not require any sustained attention, which is understood by all the intelligences of all nationalities of which the population of a large city is composed; which acts at once on the two most developed feelings of our time: sentimentality and brutality - how could you ask that such a spectacle should not garner all the votes?

The problem with "spectacle," as he clarified in the subsequent issue, was not only one of ideological content: earnest attempts to create a *théâtre social* in opposition to bourgeois theater still constituted the working-class audience as either an object to be represented ("used as studies") or a presumably approving audience ("a rather passive role").<sup>1</sup> The problem was that the spectacle required not "active collaboration" but spectatorship. A politics of the radical subject which, in the words of Émile Pouget, "teaches her will-power, instead of mere obedience, and to embrace her sovereignty instead of conferring her part upon a representative," could not content itself with merely appropriating the existing means of

representation ("Direct Action").

The history of comics, when it is told, is told primarily in terms of the rise of a new commercial property, and sometimes - only more recently - as a formalist cosmogony, the slow unfolding of a new aesthetic possibility. If the formalists are to be believed, comics are coeval with humanity, an almost ontological emanation of our nature: in Scott McCloud's chronology, we peer through the mists of time to glimpse the first comics in the dawn of civilization itself (131, 141-142, 161, 164-165). As seen through the materialist optic, comics appear rather as a reflex of modernity, the shadow cast by industrialization and its discontents, a symptom of the increasingly rationalized division of time into interchangeable segments (Hayward 84-86). Rarely can we find comics accounted for in political terms per se, as part of the making and remaking of a common life, as a space for the formation of collective subjectivities and their projects, or as an object of power. At best, one finds an uncritical celebration of them as an inherently "subversive" genre redolent of a vague but authentic populist "antiauthoritarianism" (Martin Barker qtd. in Hart 151; Berger 94) or a condemnation of comics as "hegemonic," "naively conformist," another ideological tool of international finance capital (Williams 136, 142; Faust and Shuman 195; Dorfman and Mattelart). Almost entirely missing from these discussions is any account of their historical association with organized anti-authoritarian movements against capital: anarchism is a near non-subject here as elsewhere in the archives of our official memory, a ghost topic, relegated to that astonishing non-place between pictures and beyond words, the gaps between panels, the gutters of history.

Comics, like much of "high" modern culture, bear the trace of a certain historic association with the anarchist movements of the late nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries. Patricia Leighton has established that seminal modernists such as Pablo Picasso, Frantisek Kupka, and Juan Gris honed their abstractionist techniques through their early apprenticeship as political caricaturists for anarchisant anti-militarist/anti-clerical journals such as [L'Assiette au beurre](#), the anarcho-syndicalist [Voix du Peuple](#), and the anarcho-communist [Les Temps nouveaux](#) (18, 24-25); David Kunzle has shown how this same Parisian anarcho-aesthetic milieu became a laboratory for the elaboration of the same techniques which were quickly being commodified by media magnates like Hearst across the Atlantic (*History of the Comic Strip* 190-214). What has not been well documented are the ways in which anarchists themselves have attempted to take stock of or intervene in these developments.

## 1. Caricature

In the fin-de-siècle Montmartre that witnessed the birth of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, the thick growth of cafés and cabarets nourished an emerging aesthetics of art-pranksterism or *fumisterie*. While Émile Pouget cranked out his radical broadsides in [Le Père Peinard](#) (1889-1900), Rodolphe Salis, proprietor of [Le Cabaret Chat Noir](#), issued his own journal, [Le Chat Noir](#) (1882-1895). In some respects, these two projects certainly worked in opposite directions: where *Le Père Peinard* attempted to make the "class war" a reality, *Le Chat Noir* invented unreal wars just for fun, from its promotion of Salis' publicity-stunt candidacy for municipal office (on a Montmartrois-separatist platform), to its announcement of a "siege of Montmartre," to the ferocious denunciation of a fictional "coup d'état" by

the President of the Republic, issuing the cry: "Vive l'anarchie!" (*Cate and Shaw* 26-28). However, the *Père Peinard* is also considered "[one] of the most radical caricature journals of the early 1890s," prominently featuring a carnivalesque writing style and parodic cartoons by the likes of Maximilien Luce (Goldstein 247; Lay 88-89; Scholz 113-114). In fact, Pouget himself seems to acknowledge a connection between caricaturists' anarchic play with images and the anarcho-syndicalist strategies of sabotage: for instance, in his seminal work on *Le Sabotage* (1911), while explaining a method of slow-down strike called "obstructionism" - "a process of sabotage in reverse which consists in following the rules with a meticulous care," thereby bringing the pace of work to a crawl - he quotes approvingly from a journalist's description of the "grotesque or merry" results of this method, applied to a train station, as having furnished a sight "to make Sapeck's ghost swoon with pleasure" (55-57). Sapeck," also known as Eugène Bataille (1853-1891), was a *fumiste*, an art-prankster of high repute in Montmartre, now best remembered for his 1887 portrait of [Mona Lisa Smoking A Pipe](#), a prefiguration of Duchamp's later *détournement* of the painting (*Cate and Shaw* 103-104) (fig. 1). In both Sapeck's *Mona Lisa* and Pouget's "obstructionism," processes of repetition, imitation, mimicry, mimesis - the very machinery of representation - are turned into vehicles for mockery, methods of antiauthoritarian insubordination, whether against the authority of the *chef* for against that of the *chef d'oeuvre*, that of the boss or that of tradition.

It is significant that this Montmartrois milieu, with its thick interactions between avant-garde art, political ferment, and popular culture, should have become such a vital laboratory for the emerging art of the comic strip. Only in such an atmosphere of political and cultural experimentation, perhaps, could the question be properly (and collectively) posed: is there a way to make the mass-reproduced image into a vehicle of popular "sovereignty" rather than simply a commercial "spectacle"?

One who answers this question in the affirmative, in the same year that Roudine mourned the rise of a mass image culture, one of Roudine's counterparts in the American movement, is the Wobbly leader (and theorist of sabotage) Walker C. Smith. Smith's introduction to a collection of comic strips by Ernest Riebe likewise apprehended the present time as "an age in which pictures play a leading part, an age where the moving picture show has stolen the audiences of the church and where the magazine without illustrations has fallen by the wayside" (1). Smith, however, sees possibilities for action in this situation which Roudine does not. If, more than ever, it is the image which tells us who we are - "as [if]," in the words of his comrade Voltairine de Cleyre, "the image in the glass ... should say to the body it reflects: 'I shall shape thee'" (80) - then radical image-making might help us to reject and destroy a certain false, repressive, or reified self-image in favor of other liberatory, proletarian identifications. Thus, he hails Ernest Riebe's anarchist comic strip, [Mr. Block](#) (fig. 2), as a vital intervention, as an attempt "to catch the eye and mould the mind of any Block into whose hands it might fall":

This pamphlet may enable the readers to see their reflection on a printed page without the aid of glass or quicksilver. Right off the reel we wish to state that these cartoons that please you are portraits of the other fellow, while the ones that arouse your ire are exactly as though you had looked in a mirror. (1)

Rather than following the narcissistic procedures of the culture industry, then, the anarchist comic strip should confuse and disrupt the reader's self-image. It is, in short, a method of sabotage directed at the image- and identity-making apparatus of modern capitalism, aimed at producing moments of self-consciousness in the form of an uncomfortable laughter.

Mr. Block, the American worker as wooden-headed "willing slave" (Riebe, *Mr. Block and the Profiteers 2*), never sees anything funny in his own person and behavior. He resolutely refuses subjectivity, resists seeing the world from the standpoint of his own material interests and conditions, thus impersonating the inanimate object that capital requires him to be - the producer mimicking his own alienated product: "As a human being," in Riebe's words, "he is only an imitation, a nature faker" (4). Other *anarchisant* cartoonists of the time draw similar images of the deracinated working class: Frans Masereel's stark engraving of ["the ideal producer of the future"](#) in Zo d'Axa's *La Feuille* (October 27, 1919) and Robert Minor's grease-pencil sketch of the "perfect soldier" in [The New Masses](#) (July, 1916) likewise reveal the absence of a human head - the removal of brain and face, the person deprived of personality, the subject deprived of subjectivity (fig. 3).

Crude though they may have been - as social critique, they have (and are intended to have) all the subtlety of a sledgehammer - what these portraits evoke is an anarchist aesthetics of *caricature* with a Proudhonian pedigree. Indeed, whereas the dominant reading of Proudhon's aesthetics has tended to interpret him as a kind of hidebound social realist, Marc Angenot insists that Proudhon's specific interest in the "ideologico-caricatural" aspect of Courbet's realism is key (178). Proudhon's posthumously published work on aesthetics, *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, was written not only as an elaboration of his own aesthetics, which he called "critical idealism," but as an extended defense of a work by his protégé, Gustave Courbet, titled *Le Retour de la conférence* (also known as *Les Curés*) - a scabrous caricature of the clergy, refused even by the Salon des Refusés (Matossian 115-116):

therein, one sees encompassed in a holy image, under the sardonic glance of the modern peasant, a scene of drunkards all belonging to the most respectable social class, to the priesthood: there, sacrilege joining the drunken binge, blasphemy falling on sacrilege; the seven deadly sins, hypocrisy at the head parading in ecclesiastical costume; a libidinous vapor circulating through the groups; finally, by the last and vigorous contrast, this small orgy of clerical life happening within a landscape which is at once charming and imposing, as if man, in his higher dignity, existed only to soil innocent nature with his indelible corruption: here, in a few lines, is what Courbet has decided to represent. (Proudhon, *Du Principe* 38-39)

Courbet, in turn, tutored the young Louis-Alexandre Gosset de Guines, better remembered as André Gill, who quickly "mastered" the art of "the *portrait-charge*, the practice of drawing a large caricatural head on a squat comic torso" (Crafton 11). Gill, a Commune member of Courbet's Federation des Artistes and sometime contributor to Jules Vallès' *La Rue*, came to edit a series of influential satirical journals ([La Lune](#), closed down by censorship in 1868, resurrected first as [L'Eclipse](#) the same year, then as *La Lune rousse* in 1877, which turned into *La Nouvelle lune*

in 1881), and in turn mentored a new generation of caricaturists. If anything passed down this genealogical chain, it certainly was Proudhon's sense of "scandal":

The point of departure for Proudhon ... is not an axiom, it is a scandal: it is the sentiment of living in an omnipresent imposture, it is a twilight vision of a moment in time conceived as a world turned upside down, *mundus inversus*, the image of an evil and a falsity triumphant. (Angenot 172)

To draw a true picture of a false world is to leave behind, at the very least, naïve notions of verisimilitude: "The real is not the same as the truth," Proudhon declares, warning "writers of the new school" that "your realism would compromise truth ... The early schools of art departed from truth by way of the ideal; do not yourself depart from it by way of the real" (qtd. in Rubin 94, translation his). In a similar vein, the anarchist art critic Mécislas Golberg (1869-1907), reviewing the abstract caricatures of André Rouveyre, proposes that caricatural "deformation" is "the very principle of human creation" (27).<sup>2</sup> While most accounts of comics as a *medium* emphasize the "tendency to simplification" or "iconic abstraction" as a founding visual principle (Reynaud 140; McCloud 51), Proudhon's "critical idealist" response to the spectacle of a debased modern world - an incredulous apprehension of *the real as the false* - is perhaps equally essential to comics as a visual *genre*. Thus it is, for Hans-Christian Christiansen, that comics are more closely linked to caricature than to film:

Classical cinematic narratives ... presume a stable world that can be recorded - and as such implement a version of positivistic realism - corresponding with the narrative form of 19th century realism ... Comics, on the other hand, are rooted in a parodic tradition, a mode that motivates extreme departures from concerns of verisimilitude ... the challenging of authority from social hierarchies and the challenging of textual illusionism *per se*. (118)

Likewise, for Patrice Terrone, there is a link between the radical impulse of "anti-art" and the practice of caricature: both are "opposed to the established aesthetic canons, to art conceived as representation of the Beautiful" (312). From such a perspective, it is perhaps easier to appreciate the critical departure from mimesis in Riebe's "Mr. Block" cartoons, their non-realism or anti-realism, their curious aggression towards reality, as part of an anarchist aesthetic - an apprehension of *empirical actuality as senseless, preposterous, impossible*.

This incredulity at the actual animates another leitmotif of anarchist caricature around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the floating or suspended reality. In the July 16, 1899 issue of *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (*The Son of the Troublemaker*), the repeatedly-banned critical and satirical journal produced by the Magon brothers in Mexico, appears [a cartoon](#) prominently featuring a balloon - bearing not words of dialogue but the single legend, "MONOPOLIO" and an impossible cargo of farm animals, dangling over the upraised hands of "CIUDAD DE MEXICO" (fig. 4). The title above reads "Noticia carnicera" ("News From the Meat Market"). The caption explains that an importers' monopoly is keeping meat out of the hands of Mexico City's working classes (Horowitz et al). The balloon bobs improbably into the frame of a Spanish anarchist *historieta* to pluck a young apple-

thief out of a landowner's tree in what the caption tells us is "science applied to the protection of 'sacred' property" (in Litvak 92). Lily Litvak comments on the way this image satirically underscores the alienation of workers' "imagination and creative power," the ability to midwife "fantasy" into reality, under capitalism (32). If, as Pfemfert argued, the modern era is "a time in which fantasy is pushed into the morgue" (61), this capacity for "fantasy" reappears in the semblance of the absurd, the repressed returning as an uncannily alien force that stands apart from and above its creators.

Mr. Block - this Pinocchio who does not even dream of being a real boy - is then the natural "representative" of an artificial world, a world in which the ideological fantasies of the marketplace and the nation-state have assumed the force of natural law:

Mr. Block is legion. He is the representative of that host of slaves who think in terms of their masters. Mr. Block owns nothing, yet he speaks from the standpoint of the millionaire; he is patriotic without patrimony; he is a law-abiding outlaw; he boasts of "our tremendous wheat exports," yet has no bread on his table; he licks the hand that smites him and kisses the boot that kicks him ... (Smith 1)

Only an art of radical defamiliarization - not the positive re-enchantment of the world heralded by Pierre Quillard, the moment in which "the world manifests itself before the spirit in the glory of a new revelation," but the induction of disbelief, "dizziness," through a confrontation with the absurd "intolerable" and "unthinkable" - could adequately represent such a subject to itself (Quillard 258; Angenot 172 n7). Thus it is that in every generation of anarchist militance - from Courbet and Gill to Jules-Félix Grandjouan, Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, Félix Valloton, Aristide Delannoy, Ernest Riebe, Robert Minor, Frans Masereel, and others - a great many hands have held up to our faces the deforming mirror of caricature.

## 2. Words/Images

How Block "thinks" is only partially manifested in his appearance - his literal block-headedness; it is made even more manifest by the word balloons which tumble abjectly out of his slack cartoon mouth. "This here paper is honest," he reasons (in an episode titled "[He Peddles Signs](#)"), "because it is so very popular, everybody is reading it" (Riebe, *Mr. Block: Twenty-Four IWW Cartoons* 4.1; fig. 2). An additional unboxed caption indicates that the ideas enunciated by Block's wooden head are "solid oak philosophy" - objectified, perhaps even too "material" to *be* ideas; yet the job he takes is an exercise in idealism: he literally "peddles signs" for goods and services rather than the things themselves. Indeed, he is not "material" enough in his identity as consumer either: "For his recreation," Riebe comments, "he meekly accepts imitations of the good things of life" (*Mr. Block and the Profiteers* 4). He has been swindled out of his own material interests by a savvy sign-peddler - the very newspaper whose representations he has taken for real on the basis of its popularity. The preservation of capitalism, the reproduction of its ideology, is revealed as nothing less than the selling of selling ("The success of our salesman is phenomenal," trumpets the next advertisement he falls for) - an endless proliferation of signs without referents, valueless tokens presented as the touchstone of value (5.1).

Riebe's comics consistently exploit one of *the* primary resources afforded by the comics - *the* primary resource, according to Robert C. Harvey: the duality and interplay of words and pictures. For Harvey, "comics are a hybrid form: words and pictures," and thus resist reduction to cinematic or literary models: "Neither can wholly embrace the unique aspect of comics' static blending of word and picture for narrative purposes" (3). Riebe's work seems to demonstrate that the power of the image to present a critical vision is often enhanced, rather than undermined, by playing on the disparity as well as the coincidence between visual and verbal codes: one code can be used to criticize the other. Here, perhaps, is a source for Smith's relative optimism about the potential of comics in contrast with other anarchists' pessimism about cinema. Mr. Block indeed passes Harvey's "litmus test of good comics art": rather than presenting us either with a predominantly visual narrative accompanied by essentially redundant captions (as in the model of the silent film) or a predominantly verbal narrative accompanied by decorative images (as in the model of the illustrated novel), Riebe plays off the visual against the verbal, "using to the fullest the resources the *medium* offers him" (Harvey 4). In this interplay, it is the visual register which most consistently tells the truth, the material truth of situations and actions; the verbal register is that in which lies and propaganda crowd out truth, in which empty "signs" proliferate.

Some commentators have argued from this predominance of the visual that the "wordless comic" is the most prototypically anarchist *genre*. Undeniably, Frans Masereel's wordless romans in beelden, such as *Mon Livre d'Heures* ([Passionate Journey](#), 1919), *Die Sonne* ([The Sun](#), 1920), *Die Idee* ([The Idea](#), 1924), *La Ville* ([The City](#), 1925), and *Geschichte ohne Worte* ([Story Without Words](#), 1927), have formed a particularly powerful example for latter-day anarchist comics writers such as [Peter Kuper](#) and [Eric Drooker](#), who learned from them how one might create art as, in Masereel's words, "communication addressed to all men," while at the same time avoiding the "traps" of the dominant language, its tendency to hypostasize social conventions as the categories and structures of "reality" as such, putting in its place the bodily language of "gesture" (Houp; Huang; Masereel qtd. in Avermaete 84; Colson 127, 131-132). Thus, Kunzle writes, what is *drawn* can present a more materialistically forceful "truth" than the textual caption. Indeed, with respect to Steinlen's wordless comic, "the addition of captions would only vulgarize and banalize," reducing the complex meaning of the images to an "official line" or "received truth." Instead, Steinlen allows the "conventional morality, expressed by captions which traditionally functioned as a kind of censorious social super-ego" to "[fall] mute," leaving the reader to "visualize the social struggle ... as it really is, rather than as we have been taught to read it" (*Willette, Steinlen, and the Silent Strip* 15). The adventures of Steinlen's black cat - the *Chat Noir* that was also the emblem of the [satirical journal](#) and [Montmartrois cabaret](#) of the same name - play out scenarios of desire, danger, and death without verbal commentary, in a "morally indifferent" atmosphere that leaves the determination of their meaning to reader's sense of sympathy or irony (12).

We will see whether this interpretation of the specifically anarchist virtues of wordlessness holds up. However, we may note that one of the most recognizable and memorable styles of anarchist comics comes from the tradition of *détournement*, the creative appropriation of cultural commodities for subversive purposes. Blending left marxism with the anarchist tradition, the "friends of Marx and Ravachol" who in 1966 produced the *détourned* comic book [Le Retour de la](#)

[colonne Durutti](#), translated into English as *The Return of the Durutti Column* - the title of which represented an homage (albeit misspelled) to a fallen hero of the most intransigent faction of the Spanish anarchists in the thirties (Davidson 56) - consistently reversed Kunzle's formula. Instead of supplying the voice of convention, returning the unruly image to order, here the text generally represents the invasion of an unlicensed narrative, the irruption into the domain of the conventional lie repeated everywhere of *unofficial truths* ("public secrets," in Ken Knabb's fertile phrase).

The majority of the images in *The Return of the Durutti Column*, apart from the handful of crudely drawn pictures, are stolen from commercial product, an act of cultural *reprise individuelle* facilitated - really made possible - by the liberal addition of captions and word balloons which radically undermine and recontextualize their meanings. Thus, tough-talking American cowboys are made to spout French radical theory (3.4); a glamorous model smilingly denounces "two thousand years of Christianity" (1.7); a pair of toothbrushes mockingly disparage every political faction from the right ("the fascists," "the Gaullists") to the sectarian left ("the J.C.R. [*Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires* ]" and "the anarchists of 'Le Monde Libertaire'") (4.1); the doomed king in Delacroix's famous canvas, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, pronounces on the "critique of everyday life" (4.2). Without Bernard's text, the images merely refer us back to their original contexts - entertainment, advertisements, the institutions of official art; with the texts, they become stolen artifacts, pregnant with new meanings. "Ultimately," as Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman boasted, "any sign or word is susceptible to being converted into something else, even into its opposite."

At the same time, it is worth noting what comics constructed through *détournement* (and particularly détourned comics) do not do. Although the panels of *The Return of the Durutti Column* indeed must be read in a sequence (following the traditional top-to-bottom, left-to-right order of the Western printed page), the sequentiality of the comic is maintained entirely by the text. That is to say, the *visual* transition from panel to panel is always in the form of a non sequitur (McCloud 72); each segment of *text* follows the last more or less in the manner of paragraphs in an argumentative prose essay. This is perhaps due to Bertrand's overreliance on what Debord and Wolman called "*minor détournement*," i.e., "the *détournement* of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed," rather than "the *détournement* of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a *different* scope from the new context" (emphases mine). Bertrand's *written* argument becomes the context which overcodes and determines the otherwise trivial or meaningless *images* he has appropriated. Although Debord and Wolman trace the technique back to the inspiration of Lautréamont's *Poésies*, "minor détournement" hardly resembles Lautréamont's "chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (216); on the contrary, it can assume a unilateral, arbitrary character, an appropriation of one discourse by another - putting one's own words into somebody else's mouth.

Indeed, the potential for authoritarian or vanguardist uses of *détournement* is a perpetual danger. Thus, [Wildcat Comics](#), a comic-strip "intervention in a San Francisco wildcat strike of cable-car drivers" produced by Knabb's group, "Contradiction," in 1971 superimposes word balloons - almost certainly written by



white radicals - over photographs of black strikers, one lamenting that "we let someone represent us," another agreeing that "we never did grasp the significance of our action" (in Davidson 69.7). Did not the artist (perhaps Knabb himself) take on a similar privilege, here, of representing the strikers to themselves? Another 1971 strip, *The Sexuality of Dialectics*, by Chris Winks's group Point-Blank!, using détourned panels from romance comics, stages dialogues between women over the feminist movement: "Love isn't possible in this society," one opines; "All men want is your body." The reply: "To say that love isn't possible is to be counter-revolutionary." The conclusion, placed in the mouth of a determined-looking woman: "Remember, sister, don't let all the bosses, cops, priests, teachers, and militants fuck with you. MAKE LOVE WITH REVOLUTIONARIES!" (in Davidson 73.6, 11) Evidently, women are to achieve the status of revolutionary subjects by mouthing the right "revolutionary" lines and spreading their legs for their authors. Similar examples from France are often cruder; for instance, a similar strip, circulated in Paris during the May-June events of 1968, supplies a softcore porn image of a woman with word-balloons in which she dismisses male leftists as 'petit cons' and invites Situationist men to "come and fuck me violently": "Judging by their practice, their theory must be truly radical," she says (in Mairowitz and Stansill 141.1-4). The unstated assumption behind this discourse would seem to be that liberation means sexual liberation, which is to be understood as the liberty of (active) men to "fuck" (passive) women; a deeper subtext is the notion that women who refuse this role are bourgeois "bitches," "frigid," and/or counter-revolutionary, with the further implication that men who are insufficiently "radical," conversely, are impotent, weak, effete, "feminine." Truly, within the world imagined by these comics, to paraphrase Stokely Carmichael, the only available subject position for women would appear to be "prone."<sup>3</sup>

In the end, Richard J. F. Day is right to question whether the détourned comic is destined, by its form, to carry a radical content, or whether it is always in danger of "failing to adequately distance itself" from the "spectacular representations" on which it is parasitic. At the same time, however, one of the more intriguing aspects of détourned comics is their occasional suggestion that they are *not* merely imposing a predetermined political script upon a passive-receptive surface of images but discovering a latent or unconscious content *within the images themselves* - that they constitute "a certain utopian extrapolation," to borrow a phrase from David Graeber (out of context), a method of "teasing out the tacit logic" (32). Deprived of their textual alibis, childrens' humor strips reveal a universe of slapstick and absurdity, refusals of the politics of everyday life; superhero comics divulge fantasies of escape, struggle, contestation; in other *genres*, too, there are scenarios of criminality, romance, enjoyment ... In short, détourned comics appeal to the essentialist hope that "our ideas are in everyone's heads" (Vienet) - that the reason the otherness of the comics can exist within a capitalist framework because we in fact already desire *something other than capitalism*.

### 3. Narrative

If the détourned comic demonstrates the presence of subversive fantasy within the most banal forms of entertainment, it often does so at the cost of the *dialogic* dimension of sequential art: a single voice speaks from these pages, no matter how many balloons and boxes it may appear in. However, like the novel, comics are capable of representing more than one perspective at once. Jack Daniels' [The](#)

[Adventures of Tintin: Breaking Free](#) (1989) attempts to combine this kind of polyvocality with the subversive fun of *détournement* (fig. 5).

Daniels steals not only a few particular images, but an entire graphic vocabulary, from one of the most famous (and lucrative) comic-book series in the world: Hergé's Tintin. For the first few pages, the reader is invited to laugh at the spectacle of the erstwhile inhabitants of Marlinspike Manor, Tintin the "boy adventurer" (and campaigner for good Catholic values against godless Communism) and faithful pal Captain Haddock (memorable for his euphemistic, made-up oaths: "blistering blue barnacles!" etc.) spouting a gleefully foul Cockney English: "Tintin, me old mate, how's it going?" "Well things ain't that hot to tell you the truth ... you see, they cut me dole last week!" (1.4, 1.6). Soon, however, the fact that these characters inhabit the bodies of Hergé's creations fades in importance in the face of the larger situation inhabited by these bodies: the frustration of proletarian life in Thatcher's Britain, juxtaposing labor precarity with a rollback of the welfare state, the squalor of decaying council flats with yuppie gentrification, race riots and the rise of neo-nazism. Daniels's real preoccupation is with finding the radical potential hidden in this landscape: the possibility of solidarity.

This solidarity is conceived, on fairly traditional anarcho-syndicalist terms, primarily through class identity (67.6). However, the story does attempt to grapple with some of the other identity politics and new social realities that have emerged since the heyday of Ernest Riebe's IWW, and a few of the best scenes play out in miniature the conflicts between these emphases and priorities, simulating the kinds of dialogues through which they might be resolved: "I mean it's all this women's liberation stuff ... it's *crap!*" Tintin fulminates to his friends Nicky and Mary. "Y'know ... *lesbian feminists in woolly hats ... middle-class wankers!*" (25.8-9) Here we are back with Mr. Block, the object who cannot recognize his own subjective interests in those of his kind - but whereas Riebe was content to satirize, Daniels pushes his objects toward ever-greater subjecthood, toward the mutual recognition that makes revolution possible. "That's *bollocks*, Tintin, and you know it!" Nicky counters. In the end, "there ain't no contradiction" between her struggle and his (26.1, 104.3). The status quo is effectively preserved by strategies of "divide and rule," and ultimately, as the Captain puts it, "we're all in the same boat" (125.4, 44.4). Struggles against sexism, racism, heterosexism, ecocide, and exploitation converge in a general uprising that pits a reassembled working class against the increasingly isolated managing elites.

Clifford Harper's remarkable early work, ["New Times"](#), also attempts to explore this perspectivist potential (fig. 6): in one page after another, we watch a group of revolutionary "communards" attempt to sort out their considerable differences. The ratio of words to panels in Harper's comic is quite high, with considerable attention given to the hand lettering, done in a incongruously pretty art nouveau font, while the images are done in an extremely photorealistic style (which gives each panel a curiously static appearance). The heroic gestures and kooky capers selected for visual attention in the comics of Point-Blank! are absent here; instead, we are watching standing figures in a public space deliberating together, exchanging views and proposals, occasionally bickering. "So ... should we widen the existing bridge ...? /Or can we build another bridge somewhere else?" one asks. "Or leave things as they are," interjects another. "I've thought about it a lot and I think Jim's overestimated the dangers. It seems to me we can't afford to spend time and

energy .../on dismantling the bridge - when there are so many other more important jobs to be done in the commune like - " *Bullshit!*" breaks in a voice from off-panel (1.2-4). The sentences which clutter these frames are relatively cleanly bitten (free from stammers, hesitations, and phatic particles), and some of them have a certain dramatic closure or wholeness which smacks of speech-making - "If we sit back and let them get away with this," a woman warns, "one day we will wake up to find our freedom *has passed away like a dream!*" (3.4) Nonetheless, the total effect tends to foreground something quite different from the defiant declarations and scenarios of rebellion advanced by détourned comics: the density and disorder of actual argument, the process of negotiating the use of power among free and equal people.

The reliance of *New Times* on the word balloon to carry the weight of narrative may obscure other modes which other anarchists have exploited. Thus, Paul Glover's eco-utopian [Los Angeles: A History of the Future](#) (1983) uses sequential images and caption boxes to narrate [the process](#) of "a Santa Monica neighborhood ... evolving toward self-sufficiency" in seven stages, showing how a square mile of "car-clogged road grid" in Boyle Heights "gradually becomes orchard looped with bikeways and solar rail" (fig. 7). Glover's choice of visual angles, however - the god's-eye view of the cartographer, rendering everything "legible from above and outside" - seems strangely inappropriate to the anarchist vision; this is transformation envisioned from the vertical perspective of a planner, not the horizontal perspective of citizens on the ground (Scott 43). Here, perhaps, the [horizontal panel illustrations](#) recently added by Thomas Slagle to the original work not only flesh out this urbanist vision in color and depth, but do more to invite us to imagine ourselves as potential participants in the process (fig. 8).

Chad McCail, too, "narrates the attempts of a small, urban community to create its own 'utopian' society" in a series of drawings titled ["Evolution Is Not Over Yet"](#) (1999), in which we watch as "roads are dug up," "money is destroyed," "people build homes and grow food," "soldiers leave the armed forces," "armour dissolves," "land is shared," and ultimately "everything is shared" (fig. 9) While *Evolution Is Not Over Yet* lacks the strong sense of chronology manifested by *Los Angeles: A History of the Future* - in McCail's vision, "evolution" seems to erupt spontaneously in every area of life, all at once - it, too, is clearly narrating a process of revolutionary transformation, the force and profundity of which is also conveyed by the recurrence of erotic body imagery (men and women in business suits stripping down and plunging into a pond) and surreal motifs (a banquet of skeletons). This libidinal content is nonetheless also strangely at odds with its form: the drawings use a kind of *ligne claire* style that flattens out color values and erases depth, effectively closing us out of the frame, distancing us from what we are looking at rather than pulling us in: "a better world is set out, one by which we may judge our own," critics complained, "but there is no longer any sense that any political action we might take (revolutionary or reformist) could ever bring us closer to this utopian state," dismissively concluding that "it is all impossibly idealistic, and the gap between fantasy and reality gives McCail's tableaux a strange, dream-haunted melancholy" (Rumney et al 25; Cork 31). Yet we may observe that like Glover, McCail makes use of the rhetoric of the schematic, the technical diagram, the very form of contemporary technological "realism." Indeed, in McCail's object world, the cars, buildings, machines, and even articles of clothing stand out in crisp, outline, as if traced from photographs - reminiscent of the corporate clip-art appropriated

by David Rees in *Get Your War On* - while his subjects are left weirdly blank, faceless, as if radical equality has made all these individuals interchangeable. This may be the source of comparisons of these drawings to "Chinese propaganda cartoons from the Mao era" (Cork 31). Once again, subjects seem to be reduced to objects.

Perhaps, however, this impression is misleading. In the vocabulary of the history of art, abstraction is often taken to signify this kind of objectification or distancing; the flattened, stiffened lines of a Byzantine *Madonna-and-child*, for instance, are commonly said to represent the compromise reached with iconoclasm, an attempt to observe (even in the breach) the commandment against making likenesses and thereby reducing the difference or distance between the spiritual and material worlds, whereas a Renaissance treatment of the same subject in terms of codes of verisimilitude (depth, texture, light and shadow, etc.) signifies a humanization of the divine, and so on. Theories of graphic narrative, however, have often inverted this scheme, as per McCloud's dictum of the "masking effect," wherein the placement of "very iconic [i.e., abstract] characters" are set against "unusually *realistic* backgrounds" is said to enhance, rather than diminish, "the degree to which the audience *identifies* with a story's *characters*" (43.5, 42.5-6). Just as the extended use of "subjective" camera angles is unusual in cinema - it quickly becomes both disorienting and "claustrophobic," as Slavoj Žižek points out, inhibiting rather than facilitating audience involvement (41-42) - its use in graphic narrative is relatively restricted; "viewer-identification" tends to be facilitated instead by inviting viewers "to mask themselves in a character" (McCloud 43.1). By rendering his revolutionary protagonists blank, empty, McCloud is perhaps attempting to leave them open for us to project ourselves onto them, to inhabit them. Indeed, it is interesting, in this context, to note that one of McCloud's first examples of the masking effect is the Tintin series appropriated by Daniels, and that another is the work of Jacques Tardi, a French graphic novelist with markedly libertarian tendencies (42.6, 43.4). Indeed, Tardi's most politically engaged work - his antimilitarist [C'Était la guerre des tranchées](#) (1993) and his four-volume graphic realization of Jean Vautrin's novel of the Paris Commune, [Le Cri du peuple](#) (2001-2004) - make abundant use of this principle (fig. 10).

Within the anarchist tradition, the trope of the "mask" has a range of connotations. In the nineteenth century, while "the theme of the mask is important," according to Caroline Granier, it is generally a negative theme, associated with the lies and hypocrisies of bourgeois society. In recent years, however, with the intensification of surveillance and "societies of control," masks appear to have been recoded, in the figure of the Black Bloc, in conjunction with another traditional leitmotif of anarchist culture. The manifest taste of nineteenth century anarchism for "the internal, the private, and the secret, as opposed to the external, the explicit, and the public," Daniel Colson argues, beyond merely reflecting the exigencies of politics in a time when worker organization was almost entirely illegal, embodies a certain critique of "the person," the unified subject produced by a dominatory social order - self-identical, identifiable, representable, and "docile" (165, 231-233). It is interesting to see, in this connection, how Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* revives the appeal of clandestine *propagande par le fait* in [the figure of "V,"](#) the masked anarchist superhero (fig. 11). V's all-concealing Guy Fawkes mask is not only protection against the "Leader" and his omnipresent security cameras - an objectifying apparatus of identification if ever there was one - but against the

tendency of the oppressed to identify their own emancipation with a single person, to find a new "leader." Anarchists have always been wary, as Mitchell Verter points out, of the danger of "*personalismo*," of "identifying the struggle for human liberation with a certain leader," but Eve, V's protégé, is all too tempted to hypostasize V into a personal savior, a replacement for her lost father (and for the patriarchal authority whose downfall he has helped to engineer). When V is mortally wounded in the penultimate battle, in what appears to be a kind of "suicide by proxy" he boasts that "There's no flesh or blood within this cloak to kill. There's only an *idea*./Ideas are bullet-proof" (Lukin 139; Verter, translation his; [Moore and Lloyd 236.7-8](#); fig. 11). As the Mexican anarchist saying has it, *las personas mueran, pero los ideales buenas son eternos* ("persons die, but noble ideals are eternal") - by eliminating the fiction of the "person," demonstrating "the limits of personhood," V extends his freedom to infinity, eternalizing himself as a "hope" in others (Verter). Eve, realizing "who V must be" - herself - takes up the mask and appears before the people of London to demonstrate that V survives (250.9, 257.8). The reader, by extension, is invited to imagine himself or herself as V - a creature of "preternatural strength and speed," "superhuman feats and perceptions," possessed of a "prescience" which "verges on the prophetic," capable of embodying and realizing all the unrealized revolutionary fantasies of history (Lukin 137).

Here, however, objections can be raised, once again from an anarchist perspective. Josh Lukin takes Moore to task for essentially ignoring his own critique of "the superhero." In [Watchmen](#) (1986), indeed, Moore unmaskes the superhero as not only a kind of vanguardist (acting on behalf of society, in place of others, standing in for us, representing us) but a closet fascist - a vigilante who decides what is right and wrong for the rest of us, setting himself up as the sovereign exception over and outside of humanity. Ultimately, Lukin argues, despite his final self-cancelling gesture, "V is in fact as much a monitory figure as the Fascist Leader" (143). As a vehicle for intrinsically irresponsible fantasies, fantasies of power over others, superhero narratives align our desires with domination.

If we are flattered by our reflections in the mirror of the comics page, Lukin seems to worry - in a striking echo of the terms set by Smith's 1913 preface to *Mr. Block* - we may fall in love with them, losing our ethics in the trance of mediated narcissism. On the other hand, instead of fearing seduction by the narrative "mirror" image, à la Lacan, as an incitement to egoism, some anarchists have called attention instead to the uses of such mirrors as instruments of ascetic self-inspection. In a 1906 attack on the classical theater, for instance, Max Baginski questions the use of narrative mimesis as a means of "chastisement," an inducement to "resignation": in their claim to hold up a "mirror of life" to the spectator - *de te fabula narratur!* - tragic narratives make us afraid of "the terrible consequences of uncontrolled human passion" and thereby "teach man to overcome himself" (36). Where tragic narrative focalizes the acting subject as agent of his or her own acts, leaving "the individual alone ... to carry the weight of all responsibility," leaving the larger social context invisible, Baginski advocates the modern social narrative, with its emphasis on *collectivity*. Instead of functioning as an apparatus of culpabilization (or, conversely, an apparatus for the construction of "the impossible figure of the hero," inevitably framed against "a gesticulating crowd in the background"), narrative ought to serve as a vehicle for collective empowerment, the discovery of social agency (Baginski 38-39; "Observations and Comments" 5). A number of anarchist comics take just this approach, favoring

ensemble casts: thus Tardi's *Le Cri du Peuple* and Daniels's *Breaking Free*, for instance - and, once again, *Watchmen*, which perpetually pulls our attention away from the would-be "heroes" (all but one of them entirely ineffectual) to probe the significance of the intersecting lives of "minor" characters: a newspaper vendor, a butch lesbian cabbie and her punk girlfriend, a psychiatrist and his wife, a black kid engrossed in reading a comic book. No perspectives are privileged (not even the panoptical perspective of Adrian Veidt, the self-appointed *Übermensch*, "watching" over the world from his Antarctic castle); all are partial, all are blind, all are ultimately dependent on one another ("inna final analysis," as the vendor's refrain has it) (3.25.9). Indeed, it is perhaps here that *V For Vendetta* falls short: to the extent that V is "superhuman" - a status reinforced by the way in which his face (and body) are masked, kept hidden from our inspection - we are in fact barred from entering and occupying V's subject position. As Seth Tobocman complains, "V is not a real person" (qtd. in Lukin 137). He is, finally, what Emma Goldman would have called "the impossible figure of the hero"; he resists authority so that we don't have to ("Observations and Comments" 5).<sup>4</sup>

V does *not* share one trait of the classic comic book superhero, however: he is not unambiguous. More so than Stan Lee's neurotic Spider-Man, more so even than Bob Kane's remarkably dark Batman, V is posited as problematic from the very first. Standing over the bodies of dead policemen, Detective Edward Finch confiscates whatever enjoyment we might have taken from watching them fall to V's flashing knife: "Whatever their faults, those were two human beings ... / ... and he slaughtered them like cattle" (*V for Vendetta* 24.4-5). While their confrontation is still chapters away, the detective has already begun to interrogate V's morality, the ethics of "vendetta," of violent revolt against a violent regime. And yet, in order to pursue V, Finch is forced "to get right inside his head - to think the way *he* thinks" (23.3). In a parallel movement, as Finch gets closer and closer to his target, he and V move closer and closer together morally and mentally, so that in the end, their two perspectives annihilate one another: V allows Finch to destroy him, and Finch internalizes V's insights so entirely that he can no longer see any purpose in the "order" he is supposed to be defending (252.7). From early on, Eve, too, has declined to follow V's path, accepting his ends but rejecting his means as radically inconsistent with them: "I won't do any more killing, V .../Not even for you" (64.1-5, 66.8-9). Moreover, it is by no means certain that "V" stands for "victory"; perhaps Helen Heyer will not find another Juan Peron to sponsor her will to power, but no guarantee is given that another oppressive order will not emerge from the ruins of the old (265.4). All that wins out over fascist absolutism, finally, is existential ambiguity.

Is narrative ambiguity *per se* anarchist, however? Kunzle raises this question in his analysis of one of Steinlen's signature pieces, "[Idylle](#)," a one-page narrative told in twelve borderless panels ("a grey world deprived of spatial coordinates," as Kunzle remarks) in an 1885 issue of *Le Chat Noir* (fig. 12). We watch the black cat yowl his cry of love from his rooftop lair across the foggy nighttime street to the white cat ("surely a female") in the window opposite, who, in attempting the impossible leap, "drops to her death below": "She dies for following a fatal, instinctual signal, and for her enticer's unwillingness or inability to help." Which is it - callous indifference or innocent helplessness? Is this a tragedy lightly drawn or a rather dark comedy? Is this an "idyll" in the sense of a (failed) romantic episode or in the sense of a vision of peace? Nature, as an evolutionary motor driven by forces of sex

and violence, admits of both interpretations, and so we are left with "a kind of social-Darwinist anarchist" world-hypothesis (*Willette, Steinlen, and the Silent Strip* 12-14).

The very phrase "social-Darwinist anarchist," however, is a contradiction in terms, as Steinlen surely would have known from his broad association with the actual anarchist movement in fin-de-siècle Paris. In Elisée Reclus's *Evolution et Révolution* (1891), to which Steinlen supplied the rather less ambiguous cover illustration - an allegorical woman with a torch leads prisoners striving to breach the walls of their cell - Steinlen would have read a vigorous repudiation of laissez-faire notions of natural "survival of the fittest" as "the rude struggle of conflicting egoisms" in capitalist society (trans. anonymous). Steinlen also published far more pointedly radical illustrations in such anarchisant publications as *L'Assiette au Beurre*, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, and *La Feuille*. If he remained of necessity a commercial artist, if he was sometimes prey to patriotic and racist impulses, if he was at times fascinated with violence itself as a kind of natural spectacle, these are not evidence of his anarchist commitments, nor do they constitute a contribution to the history of anarchism in comics. The question is whether Kunzle is correct in the lessons he draws from these observations. Rather than see these two sides of Steinlen as simply contradictory, he interprets them as two phases of the artist's political development and the development of the art form itself:

In 1890 Steinlen abandoned narrative, and the *Chat Noir*, to dedicate himself to that rich iconography of the poor and oppressed for which he has achieved lasting renown ... now, as a contributor to politically engaged socialist and anarchist magazines, Steinlen could no longer treat human struggle, suffering, and exploitation, or its animal analogues, with the moral ambivalence or relative detachment of his *Chat Noir* period. The serious philosophical undertow of his narrative strips surfaced openly in large, powerful, self-sufficient images, the humanitarian purpose of which would only be undermined by the whimsical and anecdotal or by formalistic overconcern with movement for its own sake. At this point in its development, then, by the fin de siècle, the comic strip form had become an impediment to serious, radical political commitment. (Kunzle, *History* 212)

In short, for Kunzle, single-panel caricature is the anarchist *genre*; the attempt to narrate, to add time and motion to the image, leads to formalism and the abandonment of political content. Political content is conceived of, here, in the form of ideals, and ideals are to be thought as static rather than as mobile, fluid, and living. Once again, nothing could be further from the anarchist tradition, which conceives of the "Idea" as "neither an ideal, nor a utopia, nor an abstraction," but as "a living force" - witness Masereel's depiction of "l'Idée" as a woman in struggle with the world, as if literalizing Paul Brousse's insistence on the embodiment of thought in action, so that "the idea ... shall walk in flesh and blood and bone," or Joseph Déjacque's description of "the idea" as a "lover" - and demands of art that it provide "forms which, if they are not living in the sense of real life none the less excite in our imagination the memory and sentiment of ... the living, real individualities which appear and disappear under our eyes" (Colson 152; Brousse and Déjacque qtd. in Colson 152; Bakunin 57). If Steinlen fails to find these forms, it is not proof against the content.

Frans Masereel, stemming from strong Flemish and Belgian traditions of social art, made an even more vigorous attempt than did Steinlen to wed form and content, his aesthetics and his ethics (Parys 28). While he is more frequently remembered as a "pacifist," his anarchist credentials are firmly established: as Joris van Parys points out, his commitment to a "radical conception of liberty and solidarity" was lifelong, and even as an old man, he believed in "an anarchist communism, a communism without coercion" (Parys 28-29; Masereel qtd. in Parys 29), and he never ceased to associate himself with other anarchists, contributing illustrations to Joseph Ishill's *Free Vistas: An Anthology of Life and Letters*, Zo d'Axa's *La Feuille*, and Claude Le Maguet's *Les Tablettes* as well as drawing satirical cartoons against fascism and militarism for the local anarchist federation (Parys 61, 64, 179; Vorms 42). "As a young bloke," in his own words, Masereel had picked up his aunt's Flemish translations of Peter Kropotkin's *Idealen en werkelijkheid in de Russische literatuur* (*Russian Literature: Ideals and Realities*, 1907) and *Wederkeurig dienstbetoon: Een factor der evolutie* (*Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, 1904) (Parys 27). In the first, he would have read the anarchist's admonition that "realistic description" in literature must be coupled with "an idealistic aim" (Kropotkin, *Ideals and Realities* 86). The latter book, however, exemplifies this strategy, locating the anarchist ideal within the material processes of nature, wherein, demonstrably, "mutual support not mutual struggle ... has had the leading part" (*Mutual Aid* 300). These two ideas seem to recur in Masereel's woodcut novel, *Mon Livre d'Heures*.

A "book of hours" is, of course, a medieval religious *genre*, an illuminated prayerbook for lay worshippers, and Masereel does testify in a letter of 1922 to being "deeply gothic and more religious than you seem to believe" (qtd. in Parys 93). Nonetheless, the book's title seems to testify less to his affinity with "gothic" spirituality than to the kind of gothicism espoused by Kropotkin (along with Morris, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelites), tied to an emphasis on craft and populism: the medieval artist, wrote Kropotkin, "spoke to his fellow-citizens, and in return he received inspiration" (*Conquest* 139). At the same time, the possessive *My* modifies the sense of a Book of Hours: the choice of a quotation from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* as an epigraph ("Behold! I do not give lectures, or a little charity: When I give, I give myself") suggests that this book too is, if not a "genuine autobiography," then "a '*Song of Myself*' on Whitman's model, a picture-poem in which dreams and fantasies merge with the memory of everything that he really experienced" (Parys 91). It is indeed possible to read *Mon Livres d'Heures* as a kind of *Kunstlerroman* tracing the artist's journey from youthful innocence, through the joys and sorrows of experience, toward a kind of self-transcendence. The gestures of transcendence, however, are also directed at the society against which this journey unfolds - a radical content that is frequently disavowed by commentators intent on confining Masereel's narrative to a mystique of the inward.

When he writes his preface to Masereel's *Mon Livre d'Heures*, in 1926, Thomas Mann has just published his portrait of the radical as utopian fanatic in the *Magic Mountain*, and is in the process of redefining himself as the man who will be an ideological hero for post-Nazi Germany: the "'nonpolitical' modernist" as liberal humanist for whom irony is a both a call to political responsibility and a prophylactic against all forms of political idealism (Weir 262, 85). It is telling, then, that in his sympathetic portrayal of Masereel, he evinces some "hesitation" in calling Masereel "subversive" or "a revolutionary": while he acknowledges that this work "accuses



and condemns our civilization," he insists that Masereel "has no intention of teaching or exhorting," arguing that the protagonist's journey is

really too planless to be considered a virtuous life, the life of a revolutionary. It does not involve principles. So it is not incongruous to see our hero burst with laughter at the sight of a bejewelled priest and then, one day when his anguish and disgust are great, to encounter him in a church, bowing his head and kneeling in the mystic atmosphere of muted sorrow. (17-19, trans. Joseph M. Bernstein)

Thus Mann reads *Mon Livre d'Heures*, after the manner of his own work, as a "human-moral" rather than an engaged novel - at the cost of distorting it almost entirely. In order to do so, he must supply the novel with its missing captions, explicating its inarticulate conclusions. "Do you understand?" Mann asks the reader, in a pedagogical tone - adding quickly, in case we do not, that "its meaning is clearly conveyed: the catharsis of human suffering ... His heart, not Socialism, made a revolutionary of him, even when he indulged in pranks and follies. For the true revolution is not 'in principle,' not in 'The Idea,' but in the human heart" (19, trans. Bernstein). The final lesson of the wordless novel, then, is to be oneself wordless, inwardly free and outwardly quiet.

It would seem, however, that the meaning is not "clearly conveyed" enough by the visual narrative, since it requires this exegesis, which seems particularly preoccupied with asserting that "Socialism" has no place in such a "human" story except as part of a young man's "experiences and follies": "Four of the one hundred sixty-five pictures present him listening to a speaker at a mass meeting, studying social problems in a library, even making a revolutionary speech himself and stirring a crowd of men to revolt. Then come other adventures, showing that he has also sown his Socialist wild oats" (19, trans. Bernstein). In fact, despite his apparent disillusionment with "mass" politics (Masereel, *Mon Livre d'Heures* 84), the protagonist returns again and again to acts of political defiance, snatching the whip from a father beating his daughter (99), knocking down a slavemaster in colonial Africa (134), mocking the good bourgeois citizen (140) and refusing to take up the rifle and bayonet in his wars (160), laughing before the courtroom and its "law" (161), and, amid a popular riot, climbing the statue of a medieval hero in the town square to crown it with the bourgeois bowler hat (167). Mann has even gotten the sequence of panels wrong, inverting the order and hence the meaning of events: whereas an earlier "episode" of rejection and despair drives the protagonist to fall on his knees in a church (97), by the *end* of the book, he has regained himself and shows his contempt for its consolations by lifting his coattails to fart at a priest (159).

Anti-clerical, anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonialist - at every opportunity, this book gestures toward the negation of dominatory order, the overturning of every kind of hierarchy and its transcendence in the direction of nature, a living order. It is perilously open to the kind of reading to which it is subjected by Mann, however, not only because of its muteness (which opens a space for the critic to become its "representative" by default), but because of its *mise en page*. Since we encounter just one image per page, juxtaposition is enacted only by a page turn. This separation of panel from panel tends to inhibit "closure," the meaning-making process that allows us to leap the abyss between

one moment to another, to see them as images in action, forming a sequence - e.g., arriving in the city by train, *then* disembarking onto the platform, *then* bending down to peer curiously at the great wheels of the engine (Masereel, *Mon Livre d'Heures* 23-25). It is relatively easy to look at each image in isolation, as a fixed and separate composition (a problem perhaps compounded by the woodcut technique Masereel uses, which encourages both the artist and the viewer to perceive the image as a unified "block" of space), rather than as *narrative* at all.

While Kunzle argues that the trajectory taken by Steinlen is symbolic of a more decisive turn in anarchist aesthetics toward "radical political commitment" and away from "the comic strip form," it would appear that anarchist work in the visual field actually may *require* the force of narrative if it is to prevent its own recuperation. Joan Ramon Resina seems to reach similar conclusions in his analyses of anarchist and fascist filmmaking during the Spanish Civil War, suggesting that whereas fascist film "denarrativizes" documentary images, reducing them to "the static and the iconic" and then milking them for their "purely emotive" shock value, documentaries produced by the anarchist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo rely on "sequence" and "chronology"; while each image is in many respects simply "permitted to tell its own story," the editing provides a "metanarrative" framework for the ensemble of images, giving "a teleological ... center of gravity to the visual content" (78-79, 82). This, in turn, suggests that an authentically anarchist sequential art would be characterized by an aesthetic aiming to produce a participatory, dialectical play of forces between the producers and consumers of images - one in which otherwise ambiguous visual contents are invested with unambiguously contestatory meaning by the *narrative form* into which they are inserted. Narrative form, in turn, is a matter of the spatial representation of time. Such considerations of spatiality and layout deserve further consideration, and it is to these that we now turn.

## 4. Space

Apart from caricatural abstraction, *mise en page* is perhaps the dimension of comics that most distinguishes it from cinema. It is true that the very phrase is modeled after *mise en scène*, a cinematic term borrowed in turn from the drama, where it refers to the disposition of light, color, line, and shape on the stage. However, two key differences intervene in this analogy: first, the comics *frame* is capable of changing its shape, whereas the proscenium arch of the stage or the movie screen are (relatively) fixed, and secondly, the juxtaposition of panels on a page allows the reader to experience their spatial relations to one another - relations which are meant to stand in for temporal relations - in terms of simultaneity (viewing the page or multiple panels within a page as a single design unit), sequential repetition (reading from left to right and top to bottom, but backtracking to reread), or nonsequential meandering (roaming around the page, jumping back and forth between regions or points of "relative visual salience") (Kress and van Leeuwen 139). In other words, the comics page is a uniquely plastic space; in the plasticity of *mise en page*, it offers a degree of freedom, and thus of power, that other art forms do not.

Given this range of options, it is surprising to discover that the form of *mise en page* favored by anarchist comics has historically been what Benoît Peeters calls "conventional," that is, determined by "a strongly codified system in which the arrangement of the panels on the page, by repeating itself, tends to become

transparent" (42). In short, the formal possibility most explored by anarchist comics artists has been the one which *obscures* form in favor of content. This is perhaps in keeping with the pedagogical function of much anarchist culture, which places a priority on accessibility; the grid is the easiest layout to find one's way through, so it makes sense that comics addressed to a broad public, such as Paul Robin and F. Lochard's [flyer advocating birth control](#) (fig. 13) or Paul Glover and Jim [Houghton's pamphlet explaining the way a local currency works](#) (fig. 14), would arrange themselves into geometrical tiers of more or less equally-sized and like-shaped panels. Both examples deviate from the strict "waffle iron" pattern to a minor degree - Lochard gives the upper left and upper right panels a decorative shape, giving the ensemble the look of panels in a church window, and Houghton staggers the frames a bit, alternating closed with borderless panels and violating gutter boundaries occasionally to suggest exchange - but both allow the reader's eyes few decisions about where to begin, how to proceed, what to rest on, and when to stop. If we take seriously the dual denotation of the word *sens* in French (and its cognates in other Romance languages), as both "direction" and "meaning," then it follows that to so closely determine the direction of reading is to exercise maximum control over the reader's production of meaning.

Is this compatible with an anti-authoritarian ethos? Peeters himself is quick to point out that this is far from equivalent to a conventional content: "The conventional character by which this mode of organization is defined must be understood in its own sense and not as a value judgment ... In any case, the most interesting uses of this principle are those which, far from minimizing it, push this constancy of the framework to its limits" (42). Indeed, for many critics, anarchist usages of the "conventional" mode for unconventional ends - in particular, those employed to such subversive effect in Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* - are the limit case that undermines Peeters's entire taxonomy of *mise en page* (Baetens and Lefevre 60, Groensteen 116-117).

Without departing from the pedagogical tradition, however, [McCail](#) and [Glover](#) suggest another model for anarchist *mise en page*: once again, the *diagram* (fig. 15). In the diagram, indeed, the reader encounters a field of juxtaposed images so organized as to suggest certain relations between them without dictating the order in which they are to be read. As Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen remark, on such pages, we find only "semi-linear" structures to guide the reader's eyes, so that "where the eye will move ... is difficult to predict" and "there is neither chronology ... nor a clear hierarchy of salience." It is perhaps not without justice that they call this an "anarchic" scheme of *mise en page*: a decentered, paratactic, nonlinear page that enables multiple reading paths (220). Might this not be the kind of space that corresponds to what Colson conceives of as a specifically anarchist temporality - "a multiple and qualitative time," as he puts it, which is determined not by any universal clock, but by the "relations of composition, recomposition, and decomposition" among a plurality of beings (230)?

The diagram, distanced from its techno-bureaucratic uses and significations, offers to join formal experimentation to the pedagogical purposes and requirements of populism. It makes it possible to present, not fantasy "persons" with imaginary agency, but networks of relationship, social structures, systems. They can be rhizomatic, spreading in all directions without a root, presenting a world in which "the center, the origin of force" is "scattered and disseminated," simultaneously

"everywhere and nowhere" (Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets* 117).

The dichotomy between grid and diagram, however, can be overstated. As can be seen from McCail's work, diagrams often incorporate little linear strips of panels (fig. 15), and grids can be manipulated to enable multiple reading paths as well. Short of abandoning the strip-and-tier form altogether, some anarchists have found ways to use it to approximate the virtues of diagrammatic *mise en page*. For instance, Kuper's *The System* (fig. 16) and Glover's [Five Months in the Life of an Hour](#) (fig. 14), each tracing the circulation of paper money from one hand to another to another - official currency in the first case, alternative labor-note currency in the latter - both push conventional layout in the direction of the diagram, dislodging the *character* from the center of narrative and allowing us to see lives in terms of their interconnectedness. The dollar links work to hunger, hunger to crime, crime to law, law to wealth; the HOUR links labor-power to labor-power, neighbor to neighbor, economy to community, community to itself. In both cases, frames are repeatedly broken.

## Conclusion

We have not examined the work of [Grant Morrison](#) here, and have barely mentioned that of [Seth Tobocman](#), let alone Donald Rooum's *Wildcat* or Ghigliano and Tomatis' *Solange*; we have not even mentioned [Melinda Gebbie's](#) contributions or the surprisingly everyday autobiographical comics of [Isy](#); we have passed over anarchist participation in the underground comix revolution of the sixties, from [Paul Mavrides](#) and [Jay Kinney](#) to [Spain Rodriguez](#), without comment. This can in no way pretend to constitute a complete or even a representative overview of the engagement of anarchists in the comics field, what it has *been* historically. What I would like to have done, here, is to suggest at least four dimensions of this engagement, to give a sense of what is *possible*.

Unlike most other forms of art today - e.g., painting, poetry, film, the novel - comics are indeed a popular *genre* in the sense that they can establish a relatively unmediated relationship between authors and audiences, without the intervention of museum and gallery curators, editors and public-relations firms, government and corporate sponsors, studio budgets, broadcast licenses and equipment, and so on. With the addition of cheap and readily available drawing supplies and photocopying, the means of production are within reach of almost everyone.

Like other art forms, comics provide frames through which we are invited to see the world, ways of seeing that suggest ways of being: "an artist," as Ursula K. Le Guin says, not only "makes the world her world," but "makes her world *the* world" - if only "for a little while" (47, emphasis mine). The trick, for a radical artist, is to demonstrate, somehow, that this substitution of a world for the world, of a trammled and blocked-in "worldview" for the "unspeakable" plenitude and plurality of things as they are, is the stuff of everyday life under domination (Landauer 6).

We are always seeing the world through frames, a world as seen through "enframing" (Heidegger 36-37). The anarchist project demands that we find ways to reframe the world, to see it anew by breaking with the framework of conventional perception, transforming the means of perception into its own object, calling attention to the frame as frame, making ourselves aware that it is a frame -

and not the limits of the world itself.

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Note: all translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.


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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>  By contrast, despite her reservations about the propaganda culture created by the early Spanish anarchist movement, María Antonia Fernández finds that their teatro social was largely "participatory": "the workers, in addition to being the spectators, were also the actors and, on many occasions, the authors of the works staged."

<sup>2</sup>  David Cottington notes the strong influence exercised by Golberg's book, *La Morale des lignes*, over the turn-of-the-century generation of French modernists, from Apollinaire to Matisse, but regards it as a brief for "aestheticist withdrawal" rather than political engagement, "a quietist justification of the social status quo" (28). Granier acknowledges that Golberg seems at many points to resist the Proudhonian call for "social art," as voiced by Bernard Lazare, in favor of the autonomy of the artist; however, she argues that "in spite of this opposition, seemingly irreducible, it seems to me that Mécislas Golberg's conception of art is not so far from that of Bernard Lazare - in terms of the multiplicity of life, dynamic evolution and symbolic complexity." Indeed, Golberg closely echoes Lazare's critique of Naturalism as "status quo observations" that "take the world as fact" rather than regarding the world as "fecund" with potentiality, "fertile and mobile," bearing the "seeds" of many possibilities (Golberg qtd. in Granier). This insistence on the need to be representationally "true" to a living world which is, as Proudhon put it, in a state of perpetual "creation," "composition," "movement," and "transformation" indeed appears to constitute the great binding theme of social anarchist aesthetics *per se* (Progrès 57-58, 51).

<sup>3</sup>  Evans 87. To be fair, radical feminists were entirely capable of turning the technique to their own ends, demonstrating not only a stronger grasp of the Situationist critique of commodity fetishism but also a sharper wit: one particularly incisive example, titled *Rex Macho, S.O.B.*, simultaneously sends up the melodrama of soap-opera strips like *Rex Morgan, M.D.* and the sexism of macho male radicals. The visuals tell a coherent story of a romantic dinner date, while the word balloons undercut the "romance" between male and female activists: wistfully leaning over the dinner table set with wine glasses, "Gertie Guerilla" asks, "Could anyone as alienated as you ever make a revolution worthy of the name?" while her would-be beau grumbles, "Women are so illogical!" This strong-jawed male lead is no match for Gertie: from predicting that "If I can make her feel insecure enough she'll tell me their secrets and lay me too," he is reduced to wheedling, "Why don't you struggle with my chauvinism instead of just being castrating?" - finally stalking off with a resentful promise that "When we make our revolution, we won't invite any heavy chicks." Her cool reply: "Who will do your typing?" (In Mairowitz and Stansill, 206.1, 4, 3, 6, 7)

<sup>4</sup>  This criticism rather blithely ignores the increasingly important roles played by other, non-superhuman characters in the later chapters of the book: e.g., Ally Harper, the gangster who inevitably becomes the law's left hand; Rose Almond, the victimized and humiliated widow who ultimately becomes the Leader's assassin; and

Valerie Page, the prisoner who teaches freedom in the face of death.