Comics - Carol Borden

13 Ways of Looking at a Bat

Among twenty empty warehouses,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the Batman.
—sorta Wallace Stevens1

You should know right from the start that I'm a terrible geek—not extremely geeky, but bad at being a geek. Continuity in the sense of an overarching, epic and harmonized chronology just isn't that important to me. What I really like about comics is the possibility of seeing different versions of the same character or even the same story. To me, comics are a mythic media using shared characters and stories.

Sure, it's still corporate and commodified and god knows artists get screwed. But there is so much possibility within a simple discipline: a boy sees his parents gunned down in an alley, swears to avenge them and grows up to be a vigilante. It's mythic, only this time with by-lines.

There's a couple of pages in writer Warren Ellis and artist John Cassaday's Planetary/Batman crossover, Night on Earth (Wildstorm, 2007) that I've been thinking about. Planetary is a secret organization busy uncovering the "hidden history of mankind." They claim to be "archaeologists of the impossible." In Night on Earth, Planetary are in Gotham City busy tracking down a kid who unfortunately causes reality to shift all around him like he's flipping channels. Gotham slips from one possibility to another and because it's Gotham, Batman gets involved and moves through several incarnations himself from Bob Kane's to Adam West's to Frank Miller's and each one is slightly—or radically—different from the others. And it all happens in the alley where Bruce Wayne saw his parents gunned down.

Those few pages really struck me. They made me think of all the different Batmans: detective Batman, ninja Batman, crotchety right wing vigilante Batman, monomaniacal Batman, Batman with baggage, trapped in a well Batman, campy Batman, deputized peace officer Batman, science Batman, loner Batman, Batman leading his own flock of superheros, future Batman, the sorta Peter Parker Batman on The Batman cartoon, Batman created by crime and creating criminals.

And while for the purposes of this essay it doesn't matter which ones I like and which ones I don't that doesn't mean I don't have preferences. My feelings about Adam West in the Batman tv show have been

inconstant. As a kid, I took every peril very seriously ("Oh, no, Batman is going to be turned into a giant key!"). When I was older, that Batman was painfully uncool. Now I love camp. Superfriends Batman left me cold. His reliance on gadgets, his lack of superpowers and his relentless toadying for the Man just irritate me. Both these shows might well also be responsible for my abiding Robin issues. While clearly seminal and definitely testosterrific, Frank Miller's ninja Batman is starting to wear on me. I am ever fond of Bob Kane's stiff and pointy-eared 1940s Batman.

The stripped down, streamlined Batman from Bruce Timm's Batman: The Animated Series and Batman Adventures is the Batman in my heart and I don't care who knows it. For me, somehow, that Batman embodies what Jules Feiffer says in The Great Comic Book Heroes: "With Superman we won; with Batman we held our own."2 That Batman's victories are often about holding his own, in surviving. He is vulnerable without being entirely defined by that vulnerability—a phobic boy trapped in a well—or a fascist, psychotic thug or a schizoid mirror image of the Joker. Although, the Joker thing is still interesting.

So with, say, Batman Begins, I can think it's very good and very interesting even though I wouldn't make the same choices. My Bruce Wayne wasn't a boy trapped in a well. I like a Batman who likes bats. But the story works well, and while I might regret it's becoming canonical, I can turn to another I prefer—even one that's not as good.

Or I can wait for a new take. No one storyline ever wins for long. There's always an artist fascinated by some new take or another artist who remembers something they liked and revamps it when they get a title.

I hear that just as crows come in a murder and ravens come in an unkindness, bats come in a cloud. I can live with a cloud of Batmans floating like electrons in indeterminate relation to one another—some of them even generated in an attempt to clean up the continuity or re-appearing when an artist or writer misses an old storyline or incarnation. But if all those Batmans didn't exist in their infinite possibility, there would never be those huge multi-comic spanning arcs trying to harmonize the back story once again. And other fans wouldn't get the chance to see their favorite old Batman rise again.

One Batman doesn't supplant another. Adam West doesn't nullify Alan Moore. From Bob Kane to Frank Miller to Neal Adams to Bruce Timm to Warren Ellis and John Cassaday's, all the Batmans stand in a line holding hands. All Batmans equally.

1 Stevens, Wallace. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Eds. Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair. The Norton Anthology of Modern

Poetry: Second Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988 :287. Print.
2 Feiffer, Jules. The Great Comic Book Heroes. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965: 27. Print.

Space to Move

The same week that I walked over to the rep theater to see Persepolis. I watched the straight-to-DVD Justice League: The New Frontier. And, yes, it's probably wrong to write about The New Frontier within pixels of Persepolis, even if they're both comics that became animated movies with very different results.

I admit it. I like Persepolis better as a movie than as a book. Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud fuse Satrapi's two volume comic memoir about her life in post-revolutionary Tehran and European exile into one movie. The story seems smoother. But the real difference for me is the art. The film gives it some space.

While she doesn't paint with a single kitten hair, Satrapi's work gestures toward Persian miniatures, even sharing their geometric focus. But Pantheon's 9" x 6" book seems less like a collection of miniatures than cramped Victorian curating, with panels squished closely together without much border. Even a miniature needs space. On screen, her art has more depth and texture, from rough pastel shading and gray washes to tumbling flowers and twining branches. The blacks are much more expansive.

And Satrapi uses the movie to explore different styles for each narrative, from a blackened out Social Realist woodcut look for the Iran-Iraq War to the overarching frame of Marjane at the airport, the only segment in color. Her Uncle Anoush's story begins as an animated miniature before sliding seamlessly into a puppet play of his flight to the Soviet Union. My favorite segment depicts the tempting of Reza Khan to become shah. I love its mockery of the British diplomat (Edmond Ironside?) and Reza Khan's self-importance and vanity. Their flapping arms are perfect.

But her story also escapes the reverence in which we might hold it. The respectable ratios. The dominance of text over art. The binding that makes it harder for the art to open up like the jasmine spilling down the screen. Pantheon has nice graphic novels, but there's an ambivalence in the materials themselves, an unwillingness to risk not being taken seriously as books, even when some of the conventions of comics publishing—the ratios, the binding, the borders, the paper—might serve Satrapi's art better.

Still what can compare with the luminosity and absolute blackness of the film? The monochromatic silence so much deeper than the book?

How do I go back to static Satrapi when she's created something perfect with Vincent Paronnaud?

More brightly-colored than Persepolis but darker-toned than Warner Bros.' Justice League tv series, The New Frontier is set before the Justice League became the Justice League. The story addresses the Cold War, McCarthyism and the threat within using heroes in capes, tights and star-spangled shorts. In their 90 minutes, Darwyn Cooke and Bruce Timm make a nice allegory for contemporary America, focusing on the heroes' relationships, the capture of the Martian J'onn J'onzz, and rampant paranoia. But the end's rushed. There's a monster kinda out of nowhere. Superman suddenly stands up for what's right and calls everyone to look past a feared alien threat—whether pinko or green—and work together. It's a nice little trick, an homage to 1950s alien menace movies that are anti-Communist or anti-McCarthyite depending on how you squint.

Better fans than I can write about the truncated story and the references to DC comics history. Really, I'm not the one you want to go to for that. I can say that Cooke's art had more space and flexibility before it was animated straight to DVD. I didn't expect the movie to compete with the books' expressive art or multiple artistic styles; and it doesn't. But while the film's slicker, it's not as painful as Disney Hellboy. J'onn J'onzz remains tragically expressive. Blocky Korean War Wonder Woman is an Amazon's Amazon and who doesn't like to see pointy-eared Batman wearing purple gloves? But while superhero cartoons—and maybe cartoons in general—benefit from The New Frontier's new medium, I can't say that The New Frontier does. Its sacrifice is certainly appreciated, but Cooke's art flattens out on the screen.

It's funny that the more literary text would benefit so much more from its transposition. The New Frontier becomes more stereotypical on screen, while Persepolis escapes the pieties of literature with all the force of a francophone woman singing, "Eye of the Tiger." Literature is supposed to be more expansive than genre. Superheros are supposed to be tough.

But there are little overlaps. Both movies are about profoundly distrustful societies turning against themselves to battle their own fear. Satrapi humanizes what is too easily understood as dehumanized political history, seeking solidarity in our common humanity. The New Frontier presents the parable of a Martian squatting in a black site cell. One is a helluva lot more respectable than the other, but learning to love the alien is always worthwhile.

Weighing the Hearts of the Dead

In this age of fast zombies and vampires sparkling in the sun, maybe it's time to remember the overlooked, the eternally cursed, the bandaged, leathery and passionate undead: mummies.

Mummies are all about undying love. Not only does the resurrected Imhotep doesn't only try to bring his dead love back to life in the 1999 film The Mummy, he does the same in the 1930s film after meeting Helen, the very image of his beloved Anck-es-en-Amon. In the graphic novel, The Professor's Daughter, Imhotep falls in love with Lillian, a woman who resembles his dead love, lost two thousand years ago. Maybe that's why Maat weighs hearts in The Book of the Dead.

Written by Joann Sfar and drawn by Emmanuel Guibert, The Professor's Daughter was first published in France in 1997 and has been translated into English by Alexis Siegel for First Second Books' 2007 edition. Guibert is now best known for The Photographer and Alan's War: The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope, books about the experience of war. Sfar is probably best known for Dungeon, his Dungeons and Dragons parody collaboration with Lewis Trondheim. Sfar and Guibert collaborate on another children's series—one about space pirates—Sardine in Outer Space, with art by Sfar and a script by Guibert. But The Professor's Daughter is my favorite of all my collaborations. The London they have created is an idealized Victorian one: whiskers and tweed, professors and antiquarians, Scotland Yard and Queen Victoria, poisoning and propriety. I wish Guibert would illustrate more of Sfar's stories. It's nice to see his ink in the service of fun.

Guibert's art is lovely, the ephemeral graphite, deep inks and shading ground the book in three dimensions. The colors and lines give it a nice Late Victorian feel. The hand-rendered serif lettering on the cover is delicately antique. Sfar's script is charming and filled with derring-do—murder, close escapes, dockside gangs, courtroom drama and kidnapping. The book's also funny:

Imhotep [aiming a gun at Professor Bowell]: I love Lillian and we're going to get married.

Bowell: You are the property of the British Museum. You are dead. Stay out of this!

Lillian [in Imhotep's arms]: Imhotep, where are you taking me?

Imhotep: To Cairo!1

Sfar and Guibert's Imhotep is not The Mummy's vengeful and desperately lonely high priest. This is Imhotep IV, Prince of Egypt, and, as

indicated in the passage above, he has a problem. He's a mummy in the Victorian era, and despite the fact that he dresses, walks, talks, drinks tea and smokes like a gentleman, he is legally not human. He is an antiquity and property of the British Museum. The man who discovered him, Professor Bowell, is content to have Imhotep displayed in a glass case forever.

The professor's daughter, Lillian, awakens Imhotep to accompany her on a walk in Kensington Gardens and Imhotep falls in love with her, but unlike other mummies, other Imhoteps, he does not try to channel his beloved's soul into Lillian's body. He wants to marry her. Lillian fears that Imhotep only loves her for her resemblance to an ancient dead woman and "want[s] no part of his neurosis."2 But Imhotep IV is also wanted for murder by Scotland Yard, which seizes all the mummies in London for examination as suspects before finally arresting a very much unmummified Lillian as a murderess. So it comes down to romantic angst with linen wrappings, grilled crickets and the examining of hearts.

And I don't mean to spoil anything, but Imhotep's father, Imhotep III, also falls in love too easily. Is it because he's a mummy or because he's named, "Imhotep?" Imhotep III's approach to love—kidnapping—is just as supervillainous as his approach to fatherhood. Imhotep III wants to make right a marriage he prevented 2000 years ago, while saving his son from the Queen's justice and will do so by any means necessary, including forcing Queen Victoria to marry him. Prof. Bowell, on the other hand, is an aloof and preoccupied scientist, apparently a good man—and an adventurous hero in Sfar's later stories—but not an attentive, affectionate father.

While vampires are all hunger and desire and no one wants to think about the love lives of zombies, love weighs heavily on the hearts of mummies—or at least mummies named, "Imhotep." Incidentally, there was a historical Imhotep, but he wasn't a pharaoh. He was: "Chancellor of the King of Egypt, Doctor, First in line after the King of Upper Egypt, Administrator of the Great Palace, Hereditary nobleman, High Priest of Heliopolis, Builder, Chief Carpenter, Chief Sculptor and Maker of Vases in Chief."3

He was an architect, physician and later a god. But as far as I know, the historical Imhotep never attempted to reincarnate his ancient love in another woman's body or traveled across time to escort his sweetheart to the bandstand in Queen Victoria's Kensington Gardens.

1 Sfar, Joann and Emmanuel Guibert. The Professor's Daughter. Trans. Alexis Siegel. New York: First Second Books, 2007: 20. Print.

2 Sfar and Guibert 35
3 “Imhotep.” Wikipedia.org. Wikipedia, n.d. Web. Oct. 2009.

Catwoman: Silicon-Injected

In 2001, Catwoman was everything I ever wanted in a comic. I admit I was a sucker for her new look. A woman's stompy black boots are her pride and Catwoman's boots were stompy, black and flat after years of thigh high Pretty Woman stilettos. Not to mention that zippers with rings, black leather, kitty ears and experimental night vision goggles are just cool, way cooler than purple latex. The art by Darwyn Cooke, Cameron Stewart and Mike Allred was loose, expressive and playful. Ed Brubaker's writing was hardboiled, but took after Raymond Chandler's fragile and battered humanism rather than Dashiell Hammett's breezy amorality.

As in Chandler, Selina Kyle (aka Catwoman) discovers that getting ahead as a hero is often just being able to walk away and call it even and that a second chance is its own reward. A lot of beat up Robert Mitchum look-alikes teach her about regret, loss and the necessity of doing the right thing—from offering a petty thief the second chance his father never had to giving a diner waitress $100,000 for years of tolerating the "Midwest Mob." I am a total sucker for all that—nice art, good writing, noir, the vulnerability in standing up for what's right. It was too good to last.

While I was busy enjoying the writing (old guys filled with regret, lesbian punklings in love) and the art (so fun and expressive), I should have paid more attention to the letters column because, in the end, I am not the demographic DC wants. Fans complained that the art was cartoony and when Darwyn Cooke and Cameron Stewart moved on, Catwoman's costume underwent another redesign. The new costume wasn't a purple bodysuit but hearkened back to Frank Miller's "realistic" re-imagining of Selina Kyle as a dominatrix. The next thing I knew Brubaker was still writing, but Catwoman had a new pair of boots—low pointy heel, but ankle-breaking just the same—and a larger pair of breasts, which have been steadily expanding since.

Writing and art are carefully balanced in comics and I honestly couldn't say which weighs more heavily in my decision to pass over a comic or not. At least I couldn't until Catwoman. I might have felt it in some way before, as I cringed through copies of X-Men, but now I know that the deal breaker for me is breasts. Superhero boobs pretty much represent everything I find painful and alienating in comics. Teen heroes and sidekicks have breasts the size of real adult women. Full grown superheroes have breasts that are impossibly huge, impossibly perky and

impossible to subvert no matter how artists try. They endure as buffed, waxed and gleaming as a vintage Sunbird and, along with every superhero's musculature, as carefully highlighted in white cg airbrush fuzz as conversion van fantasy art. Yes, the hot art in comics right now looks a little automotive to me. If only they used larger metal flake and more chrome on their rides.

Fans complained that the art was cartoony and unrealistic. I think what they meant was that rendered in a more obviously abstracted way, wearing a more practical (in the same sense that Batman's costume is practical) outfit, Catwoman wasn't special private time material anymore. The lesbianism Catwoman's usual fans want isn't cute girls in love, it's a little more Reform School Girls. And the outfits they want Catwoman to wear aren't for crimefighting, or even catburglery. Batman's life in leather might be a subtext, but Catwoman's life in latex isn't. Her old costume features her breasts in a way that rendering her nude cannot: shiny, sleek and frequently nipple-less. Somehow, the absence of nipples makes Catwoman appear more naked than naked.

Before Brubaker's run, the writing was frequently all about putting Catwoman into certain places, positions and purple latex. It reminds me of porn narratives. I'm not denigrating porn here. It's just that porn narratives are not character or story driven. They are goal-oriented. They provide short hand reasons for why things happen in the story: Protagonists meet because he's a pizza delivery guy or she's stealing a statue of Bast.

So on one side, it's me (hi!), all excited about Catwoman in her 'kickers, finally noir like I always wanted. On the other side, there are many, many more male fans with particular needs they expect Catwoman will fulfill. I think on both sides we look at comic breasts in the same way, take them as the same signs, and draw different conclusions. Every time I see the huge, buffed and sanded, silicon-injected, all-weather rated breasts of superheroines, I see all the desire and expectation and hope that fans can put into them and all the impossibility of those breasts in the world (or maybe even their terrifying reality). I see a reminder that Catwoman is intended for another audience. But even though it seemed there's no way to compromise between my cool antihero and their safe fetish pin-up, something broke through. For 25 issues, I got mine.

Stainless

Recently, one of my friends told me that Superman was an inch from becoming a dictator. It didn't seem likely to me, but I didn't have any arguments, just a sense that Superman wasn't inclined toward world domination. Luckily enough, the public library system provided me with, The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman, a 2006 collection of essays edited by Glenn Yeffeth.

The Man from Krypton is part of Benbella Books Smart Pop series. Smart Pop includes geekily academic and academically geeky books on The Matrix, NYPD Blue, King Kong, The Golden Compass, Farscape, Pride and Prejudice and anything Joss Whedon. Sadly, aside from the pastel Lichtensteinish cover, there are no pictures. Still, it's a fun book with essays on Krypton, Christopher Reeve, Smallville, Lois and that one by Larry Niven about how Superman'd kill Lois if they had sex. Ladies, I suggest staying away from it. Gruesome. The Man from Krypton also gave me some perspective on how the Superman might differ from other Men of Steel, say Josef Stalin (despite obvious differences like never creating a system of gulags, Phantom Zone aside).

Sure, Superman has the ability to set himself up as King of the World, but he chooses not to. That choice counts, just as my own choices not to be an asshole count. I think I hadn't read much Superman because it was hard for me to sympathize with him—his power, his belief in Truth, Justice and the American Way. Maybe as I get older and more aware of how I can hurt people, I sympathize more with Clark, who can hurt people every day if he's not careful all the time.

In "History of Violence," David Hopkins surveys hundreds of covers and consults an uber Superman geek friend. He discovers that Superman damages a lot of property, but not people. He concludes that Superman's nature is "one of power, restraint and, finally, theatrics."1 It's a side issue, but theatrics is worth pondering. Jules Feiffer wrote in another book that Clark Kent was Superman's cover and reflected his view of humanity2. Hopkins adds, "Clark Kent, the mild-mannered Daily Planet reporter, is an act, but, to some degree, so is Superman. Both hold back. Power and violence do not show the true strength and courage of a person, but control and restraint do."3

Screw the flying, super strength and heat vision, Superman's greatest power might well be that he's always in control. He restrains himself while appearing to hit a thug as hard as he can. But Superman never does. That restraint is exactly where stories of alternate universe or

Kryptonite-addled Superman gone wrong or Superman letting loose get their thrill. The Warner Bros. animated series managed to reflect the fearsome nature of his power, mostly in the amount of crater-causing damage he took because he could and, occasionally, in his letting go on superpowerful villains like life-hating alien dictator and bad father, Darkseid. In one episode of Justice League, an other dimensional Superman imposes order and security by killing Lex Luthor and lobotomizing antisocial elements. Encountering this alternate self reminds Superman of what he could become and clarifies why Superman binds himself with human-imposed limits like the law and Clark's daily life. The fact that it's Superman binding himself—choosing not to be a dictator—and nothing else, is part of what worries people, mostly fictional people but also fans like my friend.

Of course, people don't just worry about what Superman could do. They worry about what Superman doesn't do. Paul Levinson agonizes over the implications of Superman's restraint in "Superman, Patriotism and Doing the Ultimate Good: Why the Man of Steel Did So Little to Stop Hitler." And what Superman doesn't do is stop World War II. Levinson's caught like a coat in a car door on why Superman lets bad things happen to good people. In his desire to maintain his suspension of disbelief, he disregards his best answer: Superman couldn't end World War II because readers in the 1940s would find it unbelievable. For Levinson, finding an explanation outside the story kills the magic. He wants to believe in Superman. And so he tugs away, pained by Superman's refusal to do more about suffering in the real world, pained by Superman's refusal to take the control people want to give him to end evil.

Levinson might not be the only one frustrated. Superman just doesn't make the world, even a comic book world, a better place, despite the universal experience of fucking things up when we're trying to make them better. Sometimes that frustration leads to dismissive representations of Superman as a boy scout or a government flunky—someone who submits to imperfect authority even though he seems to know innately what is right and good. Superman could be a tyrant for truth, justice and the American way, but he's just not that Man of Steel.

1 Hopkins, David. "History of Violence." The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman. Ed. Glenn Yeffeth. Dallas: Benbella Books, 2006: 19. Print.

2 Feiffer, Jules. The Great Comic Book Heroes. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965: 19. Print.

3 Hopkins 19.

Frank Miller's Hot Gates

A feeling's been gnawing deep inside me for a while. A feeling that maybe Frank Miller's hypermasculine antiheros and faceless, breast-thrusting women are exactly what they seem, not just sketchy parody. After reading 300, Miller's 1998 account of the Spartans at Thermopylae, I don't have any doubt: Miller means it. His aesthetic is fascist.

Fascism isn't all jackboots and Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS. Sometimes it's well-hung Spartans toting big spears. In this case, 300 is beautiful with art worthy of a picture book. Lynn Varley's goauche-like washes and thick spatters of rain, blood and ash are lovely. Some panels look like ukiyo-e woodcuts, and Miller demonstrates a fluid line reminiscent of Will Eisner. In prose worthy of Thea von Harbou, Miller sings of 300 Spartans' defense of "Reason," "Justice" and "Law" against "darkness," "mysticism" and the "stupid" ways of the past:

One hundred nations descend upon us. Snorting, snarling desert beasts. Howling barbarians. The armies of all Asia—pledged to crush the impertinent republics of Greece—to make slaves of the only Free Men the world has ever known
(all emphases Miller's).

It is beautiful work and pernicious as hell. Yukio Mishima would love this picture book. I'm not sure that would trouble Frank Miller at all. He's probably spent too much time with Sun and Steel.1

Fascist aesthetics don't only celebrate authoritarianism. They also focus on ideal leaders; the exercise of will over the body and the masses; ecstatic self-abnegation and self-surrender; freedom from weakness; physical perfection; death as transcendence and death as ultimate victory. In her essay, "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag writes that fascist aesthetics "endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude."2

And then there is sexuality. Miller keeps bringing homosexuality up and then dismissing it—like someone else brought it up. I sure didn't. It's not like sex is necessary in a war story and nothing's more irritating than Freud when he's right, but this whole comic is tumescent. And I'm not sure it's even fair to call the sexuality repressed, what with naked Spartans sleeping spears between their legs and those spears later erupting from the mouths of Persian scouts. And Thermopylae's English translation, "The Hot Gates," becomes positively turgid, as if the Spartans were dead sperm blocking the Persians' entrance into Greece

"herself," or something more man-sex, given Delios the storyteller's focus on butts.

But the homoeroticism is denied and the Spartans presented, historical sources be damned, not only as not homosexual but as homophobes, spitting insults at "pretty" Athenian "boy-lovers" in an attempt to provide a different context for lines like, "I'm ready for my punishment, Sir." The threat gay men pose is no different than the threat women pose. Sexuality and sentiment are weakness. Miller's ideal manly, manly Spartans aren't weak.

The narrator of 300 reports:

'Goodbye, my love,' [Leonidas] doesn't say it. There is no room for softness. Not in Sparta. No place for weakness. Only the hard and strong may call themselves Spartans.

Only the hard.

Only the strong.

Just so everyone understands that Leonidas totally could get some but being so virile, he's not interested, his wife remarks that his plan to die at Thermopylae explains his "enthusiasm" the night before. Leonidas responds, "Sparta needs sons." At least Miller drew her with a face.

In 300, it's not just homosexuality or women that are filthy and degrading. Sex and love are tainted in themselves. Manliness is killing and dying, no kissing. Sontag writes:

[S]exuality [is] converted into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers. The fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a "spiritual" force, for the benefit of the community. The erotic… is always present as a temptation, with the most admirable response being a heroic repression of the sexual impulse.

And we are treated to the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers. "Joined—fused—a single creature—indivisible, impenetrable, unstoppable—we push."

300 is the first time I've ever read something written in first person plural omniscient. The style reads so well I didn't notice until, halfway through, I started thinking about fascism. It leads the reader to identify with the Spartans' identification with Leonidas. "We" narrate the story as Spartans who—unlike Xerxes' "enslaved" army—chose to lose ourselves in the phalanx, in destroying Asian hordes and in Leonidas, the singular hero who makes us all heroic. How is this freedom? Like Sontag says it is all "egomania and servitude."

In the end, fascist aesthetics celebrate the ecstatic and transcendent purity of death. In 300, the Spartan goal is death and that goal is fulfilled

in the last chapter, “Victory.” Miller focuses not just on death itself, but on mortification of the flesh. Leonidas has more in common with Mel Gibson’s pizzafied Jesus than Yukio Mishima’s Saint Sebastian or von Harbou’s static Siegfried pieta. Leonidas’ mortification is victory—not holding off the Persians until the Athenian navy arrives, not even killing Xerxes, in all his pierced, effeminate, dark-skinned glory. Stelios, the sidekick youth, finally becomes a man and Spartan by dying. Death itself is victory.

1 Mishima, Yukio. Sun and Steel. New York: Kodansha International, 2003. Print.

2 Sontag, Susan. “Fascinating Fascism.” New York Review of Books. February 6, 1975. Marcuse, Harold. The Holocaust: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. UC Santa Barbara, Mar. 2006. Web. Feb. 2007

Tired of Saving You

There's a panel in Secret Agent X-9 that fascinates me. In it, X-9 tells a woman and her father, "I'm tired of saving your lives." The panel appears in the second half of Dashiell Hammett's first Secret Agent X-9 storyline, "You're the Top!" That's right—Dashiell Hammett scripted a daily comic. And he did it with Alex Raymond, whose Flash Gordon was launched the same month, drew all seven storylines collected in Kitchen Sink Press' 1990 Secret Agent X-9. King Features Syndicate made a pretty good match with Hammett and Raymond, too bad they couldn't leave them be.

According to Bill Blackbeard's introduction, there was some conflict around who exactly X-9 was. King Features wanted a government agent and Hammett wanted a private detective more in line with his work as an author and former Pinkerton. Hammett tried to compromise with a secret agent whose cover was as a private detective, possibly following the plot of a 1933 William Powell film, Private Detective 62, about a G-man who retires and becomes an private investigator. But to get what they wanted, the people at King were willing to alter Hammett's scripts before handing them off to Raymond. This created strange continuity and straight out consistency problems around X-9's nebulous identity. "You can call me Dexter—it's not my name, but it'll do," X-9 says. Is he a private eye? A secret agent? A G-man? What agency is he working for? Why is he paid by the people he saves?

What was King Features thinking when they decided to shift a writer they'd hired for his hardboiled cred over to writing the story of a government agent? Seems like a waste to me, but how many syndicates are happy to let people do their thing? Suffice it to say that of the four storylines with Hammett's byline, two were certainly fully scripted by him: "You're the Top" and "The Mystery of the Silent Guns." His contract was up halfway through the third, "The Martyn Case." The Saint author Leslie Charteris took over after Hammett quit. Charteris left a few months later and stories were thereafter attributed to "Robert Stone"—a house name similar to Alan Smithee in film but without the judgment. Blackbeard details the history much better than I ever could.

"The Martyn Case" is kind of obnoxious what with its reliance on blatant bathos—a widowed mother, a wealthy aunt, a kidnapped ingénue and the newsy who loves her. It's saccharine enough to make me feel sick deep down inside. I have a hard time with ineffective damsels and sidekick kids. I think all that hackneyed peril and sugarless bathos is

more the fault of King's softboiled house writers than Hammett, who casually describes Sam Spade as a "blond Satan" in The Maltese Falcon. Ironic detachment is rarely broken by anything other than exhaustion in Hammett's writing.

The remaining two Hammett storylines are engaging in different ways. "The Mystery of the Silent Guns" is old timey serial fun with a masked gangster and his radio set up in a secret cavern lair. Not to mention that the Mask is allied with nefarious cowboys. I always like the villains in old serials that wear hoods or robes and might have an electromagnetic ray, but rely on the traditional methods of organized crime. They're like supervillains in the awkward tween years—almost Magneto, but no mutant powers and toting tommyguns, but too magenta for Al Capone's pin stripe set.

"You're the Top" is the best storyline of Hammett's run. And that brings me back to exhaustion and the panel I mentioned. Halfway through, "You're the Top," a ragged and bandaged X-9 tells Evelyn he's tired of rescuing her father and her. He has every reason to be as they chase her crazed father through the city, trying to save him from the Top and themselves from dad's panicked attempt to burn them alive. But in a way, that panel and that statement are the last things I expect. The 1934 image of a roughed up X-9 is more visceral to me than later attempts to achieve the same effect—a bloodied Superman or haggard Bruce Willis flicking his tongue at his cut lip. X-9 doesn't awe with his ability to take damage. It is his fragility that is arresting. Raymond's brushwork shows a man worn down and ready to drop but needing to do a little more. The sequences that follow—X-9 steadying himself against a wall and later collapsing in a policeman's arms in the last panel—are powerful. His statement becomes more a bone weary truth than a superhero's resentment or an anti-hero's preference for acting alone.

I can't help wondering about the parallels between X-9 and Hammett at that same moment. Hammett euphorically racing through his first comic story, hoping King will help him, pushing his work and his new medium, weary and not necessarily saving anything in the end, but trying just the same.

Yellow Peril

I've learned something reading Terry and the Pirates: There's no way around the yellow peril in the Golden Age. Good comics sometimes have racist renderings in them.

IDW Publishing's Library of American Comics is reprinting Milton Caniff's 1934-1946 Terry and the Pirates with archival material and even a nice ribbon bookmark. The strip features boy adventurer Terry Lee and manly journalist Pat Ryan's journey through China. The Sunday strips are in color. The books' ratios recall a time when newspapers' daily strips were higher quality than comic books. In volume 2, Pat is kinda wooden and Terry's wide-eyed surprise and sweater are creepy sidekick. But, as Jules Feiffer notes in The Great Comic Book Heroes: "Who cared about [heroes], when there were oriental villains around?"1

Enter the Dragon Lady, stereotypically duplicitous and ruthless but also a pirate captain and, later, a nationalist leader. She has an anti-hero frisson. Terry and Pat's guide Connie, though, is an embarrassing stereotype, buckteeth, dialect and all. In another setting, I might think that Connie was a different species, the only one of his kind. No other Chinese character looks like him; very few say things like, "Little missy get bump on noodle in big boom-bust."2

Still, Caniff researched his work meticulously. He had Chinese-American fans and informants. He wrote sympathetically about people struggling with British and French colonialism as well as the Chinese resisting the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In volume 2, just months after the Rape of Nanking, the Dragon Lady gives a 4- strip speech exhorting an overthrown warlord's followers to join her in fighting the Japanese.3 Caniff's views annoyed 2 of his publishers who were prominent isolationists. New York Daily News' Joe Patterson told Caniff not to write about the war in China. In response, Caniff's scripts began using "the invader" instead of, "Japanese."4

But as Caniff depicted the Second Sino-Japanese War, World War II revived the oriental villain. Only this time, the oriental villain was Japanese:

Until the war we always assumed he was Chinese. But now we knew what he was! … . He often sported fanged bicuspids and drooled a lot more than seemed necessary. (If you find the image hard to imagine I refer you to his more recent incarnation in magazines like Dell's Jungle War Stories where it turns out he wasn't Japanese at all: He was North

Vietnamese. At the time of this book's publication the wheel will, no doubt, have turned full circle and he'll be back to Chinese).5

I've heard the arguments about these stereotypical depictions—they are of their time, they're comedic and shouldn't be taken seriously. But from Connie to Jar-Jar Binks, what denigrates humanity more than comic relief?6 It's easy to say that readers should overlook Connie's rendering as the conventions of a more racist time or because of Caniff's groundbreaking work chronicling and humanizing the turmoil in China. It's just as easy to dismiss the whole strip as racist while we progress on our upward trajectory, rocketing into the future. But one doesn't cancel out the other. They exist side by side.

What's striking about comics like Caniff's is not just the historical curiosity of the stereotypical depictions. It's the ways those depictions could exist now. And it's the way that right now we are doing something that people will find as painful as Connie, and we just don't know what it is.

Grant Morrison's recent DC Asian superteams skirt the edges. I like Morrison, so I'm not condemning his work, but Mother of Champions is painful. A member of Chinese superteam The Great Ten, Mother of Champions' passive, squickening power—one that's more a curse than anything the X-men agonize over—is birthing 25 supersoldiers every three days. A Chinese woman whose power is breeding for the state? It could be a criticism of the Chinese government, but it's not well-grounded enough to be. Besides, reproduction is used so often to freak out fanboys that any insect mother depiction, let alone of a Chinese woman, is sketchy. Mother of Champions apparently picks her donors. Maybe it's an attempt to give her some agency. Still, I wonder if she decapitates them when she's done?

Meanwhile, manga fans dislike Morrison's Japanese superheros for DC's hero-culling event, Final Crisis.7 They're troubled by the depiction of Japanese men as shallow fashionistas and superhero names like, "Most Excellent Superbat" and "Shy Crazy Lolita Canary" that are more like an idea of Japanese in translation than Japanese in translation—or even "engrish." Worse yet, the names come across as a gesture towards speech like Connie's, a gesture I don't think Morrison intends.

That said, Caniff's drawing of Connie is much more offensive than any of Morrison's designs. Morrison's superteams don't have buckteeth or "skin the color of ripe lemons."8 But Caniff's work is also more grounded in the reality of the people and places he's depicting. So what do we do with that? Or the fact that Connie's comic relief and the old slanty-

eyed, long-fingernailed yellow peril might distract us from recognizing perilous depictions here in comics' postmodern age?

1 Feiffer, Jules. The Great Comic Book Heroes. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965. 16. Print.
2 Caniff, Milton. The Complete Terry and the Pirates: Vol. 2: 1937-8. Ed. Dean Mullaney. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2008. 234. Print.
3 Caniff. 226-7.
4 Caniff. 26.
5 Feiffer. 47-8.
6 To be fair, Connie has more redeeming characteristics than Jar-Jar Binks.
7 See Nenena. "Most Excellent Super What?" Paper Moon. Nenena.livejournal.com. 15 May 2008. Web. 2 Jun. 2008. ; and the Sooz. "Morrison, What the Hell?!" Furikku. Furikku.livejournal.com. 27 May 2008. Web. 2 Jun. 2008.
8 Feiffer. 16.

Godzilla vs. MechaRealism

A while ago I watched some Godzilla movies with some people who don't exactly appreciate the aesthetics of suitmation / kigurumi, or, in less technical language, a guy in a rubber suit. One of the things I like best about Godzilla movies is that as soon as I glimpse Godzilla rising from the depths or appearing behind the mountains, I'm forced to suspend my disbelief.

I'm pretty sure it's the rubber suit and that suit serves as a reminder that realism might be ascendant, but is still only an aesthetic and not suited to every genre.

I willingly admit that there are downsides to monsters played by guys in suits, but not the one my friends assert—rubber suits are "unrealistic." I guess that means, "A giant city-devastating monster would not look like that." My personal problems with rubber suits are encompassed by one monster: Minilla, Godzilla's son. I don't know how bad Minilla is in Japanese, but in English he is unbearable. With his googly eyes, hyucking laugh and hokey Davey and Goliath voice, Minilla was made to be dubbed. His anxious jiggling is the precursor to the frenetic wigglings of monsters in live action Japanese superhero shows like Ultraman, Kamen Rider and Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers. Minilla was invented at a time when Toho had decided Godzilla appealed to children and he is patronizing in every way a corporation can conceive. He's special friends with a latchkey kid and smoke ring blowing sidekick to Godzilla. The best thing I can say about Minilla is that he calls in to question Godzilla's sex.

That said, it is funny when, in 2004's Godzilla: Final Wars, Minilla's driven around in a Japanese lorry. The scene makes me think of the possibilities of Jim Jarmusch's Godzilla. John Lurie wouldn't like Minilla, but he'd give him a lift because someone had to. Lurie'd end up in a conversation with Ifukube Akira at some 24 hour diner while Minilla went off to stop Godzilla destroying the greater metropolitan area.

But Minilla and his radioactive smoke rings cloud the issue. Rubber suits are not off brand computer-generated special effects, they are puppetry. Confronted with a guy in a rubber suit, I suspend my disbelief right quick in a way I don't with computer generated monsters. Roland Emmerich's 1998 CG Godzilla forces me to confront its artificiality over and over. Every attempt to make the monster more plausible (it's a mutant komodo dragon), every little bit of scientific exposition (its atomizing breath is bacterial komodo breath), only kicks me out of the movie,

especially since the "bad science" is part of the draw for me. I love the transparencies of Godzilla's cells and the crazy explanations of "regenerator g-1." Why make things less fun? Like Wittgenstein says, I like science as a manner of speaking. If you're looking for a film with realistic aliens and plausible science, go see Contact.

Every realistic explanation about something unreal requires another and Hollywood's Godzilla becomes all about justifying a giant monster's plausibility. It distracts from the heart of Godzilla movies. Godzilla is not about what a monster would be like in the real world. Godzilla represents an experience. Until the occupation ended in 1952, the U.S. military censored all representations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, U.S. military footage of the cities was not released to the Japanese government, let alone the American public, until 1978. As far as I am concerned, if it's not about annihilation, it's not a Godzilla movie.

In Central and South America, writers used magical realism to write about terrifying political realities. Looking at Toho studio's monsters and armies, I ponder how puppetry trumps direct representation, capturing the simultaneous intentional and impersonal nature of the bombings, deliberate and caused by humans but too totally devastating to comprehend as anything but disaster.

Until a few weeks ago, I would've said that CG always threw me out of the movie, at least out of movies with giant monsters traditionally played by guys in rubber suits. But then I saw Bong Joon-Ho's The Host at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. The CG worked fine for a slippery river monster spawned from formaldehyde dumped into Seoul's Han River, on the orders of a U.S. military commander. What is it about it U.S. military actions that lend themselves to processing through giant monsters?

What part of that's a guy in a suit don't people understand? The guy in a suit is a metonym that stands for all the movie's implausible parts. The guy in a suit reminds us that Godzilla is about something else, maybe has more in common with magical realism or medieval morality plays than science fiction cinema, if you don't mind me going off half-cocked. If you can't get over Godzilla being a guy in a suit in the first five minutes, then you are missing the point. Honestly, why attack a genre for its conventions?

Love Song of the Black Lagoon

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By gillmen wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.
—sorta T.S. Eliot1

Do you hear that? Off in the distance? A song too beautiful to be real but somehow… familiar? The song twines over the water, through the cattails and the woods, into the window, eighth notes swirling all around. The creature in the lagoon is singing. He's not dead after all and who are we to resist him and the "centuries of passion pent up in his savage heart?"2

Lilli Carré's The Lagoon centers on that song and the nameless family who hear it. It's hard to say what the creature's motivation is. Revenge? Love? Loneliness? And it's hard to say what's going on with the family, but something's ragged claws are scuttling beneath the surface. Maybe it's the creature. Maybe not. "What was it? Science didn't know, but dedicated scientists were willing to risk their lives to find out!" a trailer for The Creature from the Black Lagoon exclaims. Though I was dedicated, I never found out the family's secret, let alone their names.

Carré's book reads like an epilogue to Universal's 1950s horror trilogy: The Creature from the Black Lagoon, Revenge of the Creature and The Creature Walks Among Us. With its cinematic, swamp gothic feel, The Lagoon fits with the trilogy's arc—the gillman provoked in his paradise, displayed in an aquarium and finally operated on by a mad scientist, burning away the outer scales and revealing "a structure of human skin" to make the gillman more human.3 Now the creature, if it is the same creature, lives in a swamp near a development.4

The Lagoon inverts a couple of The Creature from the Black Lagoon's elements. In the film, an explorer drops her cigarette into the water, a Fall from Eden gesture that turns the gillman's Amazonian paradise into a scientist's ashtray. In The Lagoon, the creature returns the favor by flicking a still burning butt into a woodpile outside the family's house. And the creature not only smokes, he has an affair with the woman, who might be one of those women in the movies whose "beauty [had been] a lure to even a Man-Beast from the dawn of time" and led him to be shot, exhibited and experimentally altered.5 This time, it's not the Man-Beast who's lured to his doom. Late at night, the creature sings and people stand in the water listening. Some of them drown.

Carré's choice to organize a silent medium around sound is an interesting one. She could've made a short film. She's made other ones. (You can see them at her website, www.lillicarre.com). Comics critic Glen Weldon writes that horror comics by their very nature defy a central horror tenet,"The scariest stuff is the stuff you don't see."6 In The Lagoon, the most haunting and seductive song is the one we never hear. We see the song as a series of eighth notes winding through woods, whistled by grandpa or played on the piano by the daughter. But even in a film, the siren song we hear only represents the one that could drown us. Because she's working in a silent medium, Carré's never stuck with a siren song's conventions, which are usually soprano and operatic if sword and sandals movies are anything to go by. A song that lures us to our doom might be an aria, but it could also be something unconventionally beautiful or yearning, something like Tom Waits' falsetto in "Sea of Love." In a comic, it can be anything.

I can't help but have a vague sense of the creature's song as a scratchy old jazz record—an instrumental I can almost remember. Something half-heard. Seeing a song visually represented creates the sense of something on the verge of consciousness. And that sense of something half-remembered, half-conceived or half-understood is part of how I think the creature's song draws people. The family's humming, whistling, playing the piano, their attempts to recreate the song, maybe understand it, are part of the hook.

Horror like The Creature from the Black Lagoon isn't just shock, gore and endangered virtue; it's also about the unknown and the tragic, gradual realization of unbridgeable distance. The creature in The Lagoon is unknown and possibly unknowable to the people who exist beside it. Men listening in the weeds warn the woman's husband, "Who knows if the creature intended to drown people or if it just wanted someone to sing to and didn't know any better."

In one of his philosophical fortune cookies, Wittgenstein says something like, "If a gillman could talk, we couldn't understand him." In The Lagoon, that's the crux of the problem. So, sure, the song is a connection between the creature and the people, but his audience can't be sure they understand him. The woman has a relationship with the creature, but doesn't necessarily know how the creature understands that relationship. There is attachment and a song. The creature sings and humans feel.

But we never know what song will do us in.

1 Eliot, T.S. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair. The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry: Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988: 482. Print.

2 “Taglines for The Creature from the Black Lagoon.” IMDb.com. Internet Movie Database, n.d. Web. Mar. 2009.

3 “The Creature Walks Among Us Trailer.” YouTube.com. YouTube, n.d. Web. Mar. 2009.

4 If it’s not the same creature, the issues would probably be the same: scientific experiments, exhibitions and the inescapable beauty of human ladies, especially white ladies.

5 “Taglines for The Creature from the Black Lagoon.” IMDb.com. Internet Movie Database, n.d. Web. Mar. 2009.

6 Weldon, Glen. “Funnybook Roundup, Halloween Edition: Braaaaaaaaaains… .” Monkey See Blog. National Public Radio. NPR.org. 28 Oct. 2009. Web. March, 2009.