



Comics as a Cross-Writing Tradition

— Glenn Willmott

An observation by Charles Hatfield set a challenge for this roundtable. “Comics and childhood: the pairing of the two seems inevitable, yet remains, somehow, both contentious and under-examined” (par. 1). Might this pairing be explained readily as merely ideological or commercial, a historically entrenched but not actually “inevitable” artifact of the modern rise of comics? Undoubtedly, yes, in part at least, but I would like to propose a broader explanation that is also theoretical and that embraces both the inevitable and the ambiguous aspects of the association between childhood and comics.

In his meditation on this subject, Hatfield begins by insisting on the distance between comics and young people’s cultures (YPC), remarking that comics has roots in adult social and political satire and has conveyed themes (and aesthetics, I would add) that are addressed directly to the unique experience and concerns of adults (par. 2). Yet he also acknowledges the close, even integral institutional relationship

between comics and YPC as well as some thematic consequences of this symbiosis:

Undeniably, the dominant comics markets or cultures are rooted in children’s publishing traditions, whether European . . . , Japanese, or American. Every such market has given rise to its own hegemonic model of “mainstream” comics, rooted in children’s titles, as well as its resistant counter-models, its “alternatives.” Children’s comics, selling across generations to millions of readers, are the taproot of modern commercial comics, the ideological counterweights to alternative comics, and, inevitably, items of talismanic significance, so often invoked in the nostalgic reminiscences of today’s comics creators and enthusiasts. . . .

In short, both adult and children’s comics, and the ways we talk about them, testify to the centrality of children’s comics. In addition, many of

the best—the most stimulating, most troubling, most psychologically questing, ideologically fraught, and artistically vital—comics for adults have as their subject matter *childhood* and its possibilities: its potential for tenderness, awe, terror, and social critique. (pars. 9–10)

What I would like to take away from this institutional picture of comics history is a simple question: why? I would like to play with the idea that it is no accident, that there is something intrinsic to comics that enables this pull toward the child in its history: specifically, that across diverse institutions of comics, whether they are purely for children, purely for adults, or addressed to both, there is an inescapable aspect of comics that is a mode of *cross-writing*, “dissolv[ing] the binaries and contraries” of child and adult perspectives that, ideologically if not in practice, “our culture has rigidified and fixed” (M. Myers and Knoepfelmacher viii).

This aspect of comics is illuminated best when, in addition to viewing comics as a diverse social and economic *institution*, we consider comics as a mercurial creative *tradition* that crosses institutional boundaries, both as an artistic practice and as a symbolic network over time. This is a cross-writing tradition in two ways: formally, in its roots in what has been called caricature, understood as an iconography or kind of style, and thematically, in what I will call its

animalization, understood as an iconology or vehicle for ideas.

In concert with leading comics historians such as David Kunzle, Roger Sabin, and Brian Walker, Hatfield recognizes the centrality of an adult institution of caricature in satirical cartoons that were the forerunners of comics style, for example in newspaper and magazine social satire and political cartoons (2).¹ I propose that these forms of caricature are themselves rooted in a longer artistic tradition of the *grotesque*—of weirdly distorted or oddly animalized, defiantly unrealistic and often playful figures in European public and domestic art from the Roman Empire forward. This tradition was always considered unserious ornamentation, just fooling around, ludic. Whether as a gargoyle poised above a busy town thoroughfare or as a crowd of chimera ornamenting the ceiling of a wealthy home, this insistently decorative, *carte blanche* art typically made no distinction of age or sex in its audience.² Caricature, as a tradition, belongs to the cross-writing iconography of grotesquery.

Grotesquery, and caricature with it, takes liberties with nature, inventing impossible or distorted creatures and environments. In this sense, every caricature is animalized, by which I mean, reduced to a biomorphic plasticity and equivalence in some weird, defamiliarized nature: humans are no longer normally human, dogs are no longer normally dogs, vines are no longer normally vines, and they all do odd things. This



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aesthetic dovetails with a thematic or, more precisely, an iconological tradition in comics that is rooted in animalizing stories: animal fables, trickster tales, and shape-shifter lore. These stories with personages neither familiarly animal nor familiarly human, with didactic messages or covert warnings but also thrills and fun, are ubiquitous across cultures and deep into the past. These educational and folk traditions—the werewolves and vampires, the hares and tortoises, the bear mothers and crow fathers—are the cross-writing foundation for comics tales of Crazy Kat, Batman, and even, I would suggest, resolutely human characters like Tintin who cohabit with fantasy creatures like Milou/Snowy. There do exist comics that depict worlds whose nature is entirely consistent with our own, but they are rare, and they pin down just one end of a fantasy ecology spectrum that is the *métier* of comics art, a bizarre world-building that pulses everywhere with unexpected anima, with unexpected embodiments of life. This folk tradition of animalization is, like caricature, a mode of cross-writing.

I do not think it is accidental, either, that grotesquery and animalism—and hence comics—have defied a sharp distinction between adult and child mindsets. Despite the risk of falling into the trap of a misguided primitivism—the idea that YPC or children themselves are more natural, simple, or innocent—I do ask myself whether comics artist and author Lynda Barry, is right to worry that there is something about doodling, a name for amateur grotesquery, that is embraced by children and gradually deprogrammed by and from adult life (73). I believe there is a clue in what psychologist Gene Myers observes is children’s capacity for wonder at the mystery of non-human lives and nature, which he thought opened children to an ethical relationship to others more generally, to an “ecology of subjects” (16).³ The biologist Rachel Carson, best known for her pioneering environmentalist science book

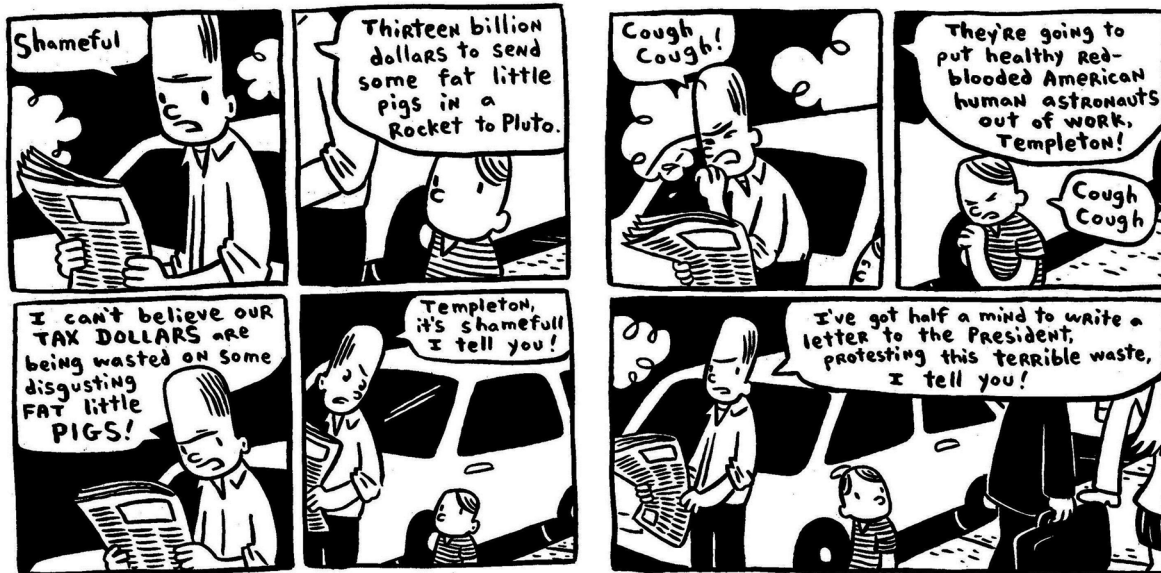


Figure 1: From *Pinky and Stinky*, copyright James Kochalka, 2002, 2008. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Silent Spring, affirmed the same ethical implications for wonder in natural mysteries, as leading to greater knowledge and sympathy, in her last book, *The Sense of Wonder*:

If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions

have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. (45)

Even Martha Nussbaum, the prominent ethical philosopher and an Aristotelian like Carson, promotes the ethical importance of wonder in early education (426). But what could be natural about the fantasy

worlds of comics? Animalizing stories and freehand grotesquery engage our imaginations of nature by creating always partly human but insistently defamiliarized, distorted versions of humanity, other beings and their worlds. Comics is rooted in these traditions, and via caricature and animalizing fabulation, will always convey an aura of intrinsic wonder at the otherness of both human and non-human natures, an openness to an ecology of subjects. Comics creators may tap into that power directly to provoke thinking about what nature is and what our nature is. Alan Moore and his collaborating artists, for example, dwell upon nature as a partially unknown, risky entanglement with human life in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (Willmott 92). Or they may overlook or even work against that power in pursuing ecologically complacent plots and themes. Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* represents the nature of the planet Mongo either as ornamental abstraction or as plot-specific material resources (two sides of one coin, perhaps) and nothing more. But the undercurrent of wonder at unconventional nature will always be there: even *Flash Gordon* offers fantasy types of humanoid races or species that undermine conventional signs of skin colour and animal physiognomy in relation to privileged white sociability.⁴

Cross-writing is a deliberate genre in comics, and one of my favourite examples is James Kochalka's story for "all ages," *Pinky and Stinky*, about a pair of

gentle-minded space pigs. Its introductory panels show how masterfully Kochalka embeds challenging ideas of humanity, non-humanity, environment, youth, and wonder together in what will be a playfully grotesque animal fable (see fig. 1). The father's head satirizes his big brain; his mouth is always open, talking, talking, talking. The boy is diminutive, his head not yet inflated by adult knowledge of the kind spouted by the father, and his mouth is not merely closed but absent, suggesting his internality and distance from adult communication. His mirroring of his father's coughs reproves tacitly the healthiness of the adult world while subtly expressing a possible future in assimilation to it. In the last panel, the boy turns in wonder away from his father to gaze at the unseen nature of pigs in space. So do we. Throughout, the images communicate more than the words, speaking to us almost secretly below the noise of the adult verbal tirade, one child to another.

The last words of this paper I leave with Lynda Barry: "What is an image? / At the center of everything we call 'the arts,' and children call 'play,' is something which seems somehow alive. . . . [M]ade of both memory and imagination, this is the thing we mean by 'an image'" (14). Barry thinks—and I am drawn cautiously to this idea—that you have to have affirmed something in childhood capacities and experience, acknowledged or not, to recognize and to hear that weird, handmade life.

Notes

¹ David Kunzle's work is largely devoted to this caricatural/satirical cartoon history; see also Sabin 12–19; Walker 9–10.

² See the seminal work by Wolfgang Kayser as well as subsequent surveys by Philip Thomson and by Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund.

³ I discuss this idea more fully in Willmott 94–99.

⁴ See Alex Raymond's first Flash Gordon episodes for examples of nature assimilated to style (100–101), nature as pure resource (43), and—in terms of humanoid racial/species relations mix-ups—the tigers, lion man, human, and Orientalized humanoid conflicts and bonds (31).

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