

Visual Novels and Comic-Strip Poetry: Dino Buzzati's *Poema a fumetti*, Martin Vaughn-James's *The Projector*, and Avant-Garde Experimentation with Comics in the 1960s and 1970s

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## ABSTRACT

Visual Novels and Comic-Strip Poetry: Dino Buzzati's *Poema a fumetti*, Martin Vaughn-James's *The Projector*, and Avant-Garde Experimentation with Comics in the 1960s and 1970s

Julian Peters

This thesis focuses on two novel-length graphic narratives: *Poema a fumetti* (1969) by the Italian novelist Dino Buzzati and *The Projector* (1971), created in Toronto by the British-born visual artist Martin Vaughn-James. Through an in-depth analysis of these two works and by comparing them to other “avant-garde” comics from the 1960s and early 1970s, I seek to identify the factors that might explain the appeal of visual narrative to writers and artists from that era who were working outside of the world of comics as it would have then been defined.

The first chapter, dedicated to *Poema a fumetti*, begins with a discussion of Buzzati's use of the “poetic” aspects of comics, which I relate to various experimentations with comics among certain avant-garde poets. I then examine the influence of 1960s Italian erotic and crime comics on Buzzati, and how the disreputable aura surrounding these and other comics rendered them a particularly effective means for artists to express certain repressed impulses and desires.

The second chapter analyzes *The Projector* in terms of its subversion of: a) an alienating consumer-capitalist social order, b) a “normal” visual perception of reality, and c) conventional modes of ordering narrative. These three lines of analysis I relate to three contemporaneous cultural tendencies that I argue also influenced other avant-garde comics. These are, respectively: the *détournement* strategies employed by the Situationists, the “psychedelic” movement in the visual arts, and literary and media theories advocating for a radical break with the existing conventions of literary narrative.

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The two graphic narratives examined in my thesis were created in Toronto, where my father grew up, and Milan, seventy kilometres away from where my mother grew up. I would therefore like to thank my parents for finding each another across all the geographical and linguistic distance between them, thus providing me with the dual cultural heritage that has informed this study.

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## Introduction

This thesis looks at two remarkable novel-length visual narratives from the turn of the 1970s, Dino Buzzati's *Poema a fumetti* (1969) and Martin Vaughn-James' *The Projector* (1971), analyzing these unusual intersections of image and text in order to shed new light on a neglected chapter in the history of comics. As art historians continue to expand their scholarship to include aspects of visual and pop culture, these critical episodes in twentieth-century art deserve to be re-examined.

Neither of these two works fits neatly into a history of comics or graphic novels, from which, indeed, they are regularly omitted. Recent scholarly surveys of the evolution of these art forms by Charles Hatfield (2005)<sup>1</sup> and Jared Gardner (2012),<sup>2</sup> for instance, contain no mention of Buzzati or Vaughn-James's work. Nor is either artist mentioned in recent books by Rocco Versaci (2007)<sup>3</sup> and Bart Beaty (2012)<sup>4</sup> that seek to explore the connections between the history of comics and wider developments in the fields of, respectively, literature and the fine arts.

Both *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector* were created by artists operating outside of the traditional sphere of comics, as Buzzati was a celebrated novelist in Italy, and Vaughn-James was part of an active literary subculture in Toronto. As a result, both of these illustrated books engage directly with forms of "high" literature: *Poema a fumetti* is an extension of the major themes and aesthetic vision that characterized the entirety of Buzzati's writing, while *The Projector*, as Vaughn-James himself asserted, was

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twentieth-Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics As Literature* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

conceived in large part as a graphic response to the ideas of the experimental French “Nouveau Roman” literary movement. In this regard, it is also significant that neither work was released by a primarily comics-oriented publisher, but rather by a major publishing house (Mondadori) in the case of *Poema a fumetti* and a small avant-garde literary press (Coach House Press) in the case of *The Projector*.

The recent emergence of comics --particularly in their book-length, self-contained incarnation known as the graphic novel-- as a critically recognized art form aimed at a sophisticated adult readership has been posited, most notably by Charles Hatfield in his *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*,<sup>5</sup> as the culmination of a transformation of the medium that has its origins with the birth of so-called “underground comics” or “comix” in the late 1960s. Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton and others simultaneously undermined and extended the visual and narrative conventions of the American popular comics of an earlier era as a means of communicating a subversive social message. Among the artists to emerge from this underground scene was Art Spiegelman, whose 1986 graphic novel *Maus* is often viewed as ushering in a new era for comics as a fully-developed art form.<sup>6</sup> A Holocaust memoir, *Maus* demonstrated the ability of comics to take on the most serious subject matter, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1992.

In their targeting of an adult audience and their emphasis on uninhibited artistic expression, the underground comics movement is commonly conceived as the seed from

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<sup>5</sup> “From the promise of the underground comix, “ Hatfield writes in *Alternative Comics*, “stemmed the alternative comic book and graphic novel of the eighties and nineties, a vision of long-form comics that allowed unprecedented aesthetic freedom and diversity, as well as a new sense of purpose.” Hatfield, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Bart Beaty calls *Maus* “the most celebrated comic book ever published in the United States (and arguably the world)” and the work that “opened up comics as a serious arena for scholarly work in departments of English literature.” Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 117, 44.

which the abundant modern-day harvest of “alternative” or “literary” comics would grow. “The so-called ‘underground comics’ that emerged at the end of the 1960s marked a revolutionary break with the past,” Roger Sabin writes in his *Adult Comics: An Introduction*. “For the first time in the post-First World War era, it was shown that comics did not have to be exclusively for children.”<sup>7</sup> Dan Nadel, in his introduction to an anthology of comics from the pre-underground era, writes that the later comix artists “represent a major shift in twentieth-century comics: The re-envisioning of the medium as a place for free-form personal self-expression.”<sup>8</sup> This scholarly emphasis on the underground era as the genesis point of comics as a fully-fledged adult art form has obscured the fact that the same period also witnessed other ground-breaking forms of experimentation with sequential narrative combining words and images, undertaken by artists working outside the world of comics as it would have then been defined.

In the two case studies that make up this thesis, I closely examine the visual and textual contents of *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector*, with an eye to identifying key elements within the cultural climate, artistic tendencies and critical discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s that surrounded Buzzati and Vaughn-James as they set out to create their comics-derived works. The factors I discern from this analysis are by no means identical for the two books, which, for all their significant similarities, represent two vastly different artistic approaches. My aim is not to arrive at a narrow set of common explanations for the creation of *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector*, but rather to use the study as a means of opening up as many avenues of interpretation as possible for

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.

<sup>8</sup> Dan Nadel, “Introduction,” *Art Out of Time: Unknown Comics Visionaries, 1900-1969* (New York, Abrams, 2005), 9.

the awakened interest in comics among avant-garde artists of the period. I am confident that, taken together, the two case studies provide a comprehensive framework for the further exploration of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Before launching into the main body of my analysis, it will be useful to briefly situate these two works within the contexts of their respective authors' oeuvres. Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) is widely regarded in Italy as one of the country's most significant twentieth-century writers. His novels, short stories, poems, articles and plays have been translated into at least twenty-six languages (including English, although he remains relatively little-known in the English-speaking world). Often compared to such writers as Borges, Kafka and Camus (who adapted one of the Italian author's short stories into a play), Buzzati's work is characterized by its insertion of fantastical or supernatural elements into everyday settings, its allegorical undertones, and its sense of existential mystery. His most famous work, the 1940 novel *Il deserto dei tartari* (translated into English as *The Tartar Steppe*), is the story of a soldier at a remote frontier fortress who spends his entire life waiting for an opportunity for military glory that never comes. Buzzati is also known for his many collections of short stories, such as *I sette messaggeri* (Translated into English as *The Seven Messengers*).

In addition to his writing, Dino Buzzati had a parallel practice as a painter. In the last fifteen years of his life, this aspect of his creativity would take on an ever-increasing role, developing from what was little more than a hobby to constituting the main focus of his last artistic endeavours. Buzzati always insisted, however, that for him, painting and writing were essentially two aspects of the same creative project. "Whether painting or writing," he famously noted in his introduction to a 1967 catalogue of his painted work,

“I am pursuing the same objective, which is to tell stories.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed his paintings generally contain a strong narrative element, often with a surrealist subject matter that parallels that of his writing.<sup>10</sup> What is more, Buzzati frequently inserted written elements into his paintings, in the form of title banners, explanatory captions and comics-style speech balloons. Sometime in late 1966 or early 1967, Buzzati began working on a project that would utilize this combination of text and image on a far more ambitious scale and carry it to a new level of symbiotic interconnectedness. This project would ultimately be published as *Poema a fumetti*, a 212-page graphic narrative whose title literally translates to “A Poem in Comics.”

Although *Poema a fumetti*, along with Buzzati’s other visually-oriented artistic production, has long been overshadowed by his writing career, in recent years there has been a significant rise both in popular and scholarly interest in this important aspect of his creative vision. In 2002, *Poema a fumetti* was chosen as the focus of an international conference that was held to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the author’s death.<sup>11</sup> In 2006, the complete catalogue of Buzzati’s paintings was published for the first time, and a retrospective exhibition of his career as a graphic artist was held in Milan in 2006-2007. His collection of surrealist votive paintings, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, was reprinted in 2012 after having been out of print for nearly three decades. *Poema a fumetti*, was reprinted in Italy (for the first time since its original edition) in 1991, and then again in 2000 and 2009. A French-language edition of the graphic novel, the first since 1970,

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<sup>9</sup> Lorenzo Viganò, “L’unico vero pittore del xx secolo,” in *Buzzati racconta: storie disegnate e dipinte*, Maria Teresa Ferrari, ed. (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2006), 19.

<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Yves Panafieu, Buzzati identified the surrealist masters Max Ernst, Magritte, Delvaux and De Chirico as the “modern painters” whose work he most greatly admired. Yves Panafieu, *Dino Buzzati: un autoritratto* (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 33.

<sup>11</sup> “Poema a fumetti’ di Dino Buzzati nella cultura degli anni ’60 tra fumetto, fotografia e arti visive” held in Feltre and Belluno, Italy, between September 12 and 14, 2002.

was published in 2007, and in 2009 the work was at last translated into English, with the title *Poem Strip*.

The work of Martin Vaughn-James (1943-2009) has yet to benefit from such a widespread reappraisal. Born in Bristol, England, Vaughn-James spent his adolescence in Sydney, Australia, returned briefly to England, and eventually immigrated to Toronto in 1968. It was soon after his arrival in Canada that Vaughn-James, who had studied painting at the National Art School in Sydney, began experimenting with the comic book form, producing the first of his long-form graphic narratives, the 55-page-long *Elephant*, in 1970, and the 125-page-long *The Projector* the following year. After completing the much shorter and completely wordless *The Park* in 1973, Vaughn-James moved for a period of about a year to Paris. There he contributed illustrations to the avant-garde literary magazine *Minuit* and also completed the majority of the work on another visual novel, *The Cage*, which he published in Toronto in 1975, soon after his return to that city. Two years later he moved back to Paris, where he would publish one more book-length graphic narrative, *L'Enquêteur* ("The Investigator"), in 1984. In the last few decades of his life, which were spent in Belgium, Vaughn-James seems to have dedicated himself mainly to painting.

Today, Vaughn-James is principally --indeed almost entirely remembered-- for *The Cage*. Although it remains little known even among avid comics readers, this book has enjoyed a considerable degree of critical success among comics scholars, particularly in France and Belgium.<sup>12</sup> *The Cage* is also the only one of Vaughn-James's Toronto

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<sup>12</sup>Most notably, *La Construction de La Cage: autopsie d'un roman visuel* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2002) by the prominent Belgian comics scholar Thierry Groensteen is entirely dedicated to *The Cage*.

visual novels —each of which was originally published in an edition of only a few thousand copies, at most-- that is still currently in print. A French translation was published in 2006, and a new English edition appeared in 2013. *The Cage* is unquestionably an astounding work, which achieves, among other things, the remarkable feat of sustaining a 185-page graphic narrative without any visible characters, or even a plotline in the traditional sense. However, this exclusive critical focus on *The Cage* where Martin Vaughn-James is concerned has tended to obscure the perhaps even more groundbreaking work that is *The Projector*, which introduces most of the innovations that the subsequent book then further develops. It is my hope that this thesis will constitute a step towards the rediscovery of this important work.

### **The Two Streets**

If one turns simultaneously to the respective opening pages of *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector*, it is hard not to be struck by the remarkable visual similarities between the two (figs. 1&2). Each page contains two illustrated panels, accompanied by a few lines of text. The topmost panel, in both cases, presents a view of a large house. Both houses have an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century look to them, with dormer windows, bracketed eaves, and arched window openings, and both are surrounded by a large, tree-filled garden. In the second panel of each first page, one is presented with an image of a tranquil residential street, on which the house of the preceding panel is located.

The similarity between these two opening pages is of course in large part coincidental. The plotlines of the two books are completely different, and while the house and street at the beginning of *Poema a fumetti* play an important role in the ensuing story,

in the case of *The Projector* these elements do not reappear until the very end, and thus seem to be used primarily as a means of visually bracketing the narrative.

At the same time, however, the two views of a house on a residential street can, in the context of the opening pages of both books, be seen to fulfill a similar function, luring the reader into a false sense of security through the presentation of these quiet, respectable-looking scenes. The reader opening up *Poema a fumetti* or *The Projector* for the first time may thus have the feeling of encountering familiar territory. In the case of both books, however, this notion is quickly dispelled in the most dramatic fashion: Buzzati's house is shown undergoing a series of bizarre metamorphoses, while the façade of a greenhouse in the garden of Vaughn-James' house is suddenly shattered as a mysterious figure on a horse bursts forth from its interior.

In each case, this destabilization of narrative expectations is mirrored in the way that, from this point forward, the books begin to challenge readers' preconceptions as to what a comic book should be. From the subject matter to the narrative techniques to the interaction of image and text, the books seem to represent a total departure from the conventions of comics, which are either turned on their head or ignored completely, to the point that one may question whether they can properly be categorized as comics at all. When, at the end of both narratives, the respective protagonists are both returned to the quiet street on which their adventures began, readers may well feel that they too have returned from a strange and eventful journey, in the aftermath of which it is impossible to look upon once familiar sights, and modes of seeing, in quite the same way as when they first set out.

## Chapter 1

A Graphic Poem: *Poema a fumetti* by Dino Buzzati

A little less than midway through Dino Buzzati's book-length graphic narrative, *Poema a fumetti* ("A Poem in Comics"), in a section entitled "Explanation of the Afterlife," there appears a full-page drawing of a young nude woman standing against a loosely-sketched mountain landscape (fig. 3). The woman gazes out provocatively at the reader, concealing her breasts behind two human skulls that she is pressing up against them.

The image is executed in a no-frills linear style with pronounced outlines and schematic crosshatching, and is overlaid with flat blocks of garish colour. The overall effect is that of a cheap comic book illustration, or of the crudely-rendered images of naked women that one still sees over the entrance of down-market strip clubs. In spite of their apparent incongruity, the two skulls cannot be said to strike an altogether dissonant note with this effect, evoking as they do a fetishistic or sadistic element that has a long tradition in erotic imagery. In fact, the drawing was copied without great alteration from a French erotic photograph from the 1950s in which the Martiniquan-born stripper known as Madame Féline is depicted posing with two life-sized sculpted skulls (fig. 4).<sup>13</sup>

The great majority of the pages that make up *Poema a fumetti* feature a combination of imagery and text. So it is for the drawing of the woman with the skulls, which is accompanied by the following elegiac passage:

"Death, oh death/Gift of a wise God./All the charms of this world/Come from you/Even love./And here, now, in this place/To which you'll never return/With empty eyes we gaze/At the clouds, the sea, the forest/They hold no mystery."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Roda, "Nel labirinto di 'Poema a fumetti': un gioco interattivo 'ante-litteram,'" in *Buzzati 1969: Il laboratorio di "Poema a fumetti"*, ed. Mariateresa Ferrari (Milan: Mazzotta, 2002), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Dino Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, trans. Marina Harss (New York: New York Review Books, 2009), 87. The slash symbols, not present in the actual text, are included to indicate the line divisions.

Buzzati's comic book is a retelling of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and in this scene, the protagonist, a modern-day Milanese singer-songwriter named Orfi, has just succeeded in gaining entrance to the realm of the dead. Here he is met by a "guardian devil," curiously represented as an animated empty suit-jacket. This gatekeeper answers Orfi's questions as to the nature of the Underworld, where the young musician has come looking for his recently deceased girlfriend, Eura. The afterlife, the guardian devil explains, is exactly like the world one has known while living—in Orfi's case it looks like modern-day Milan. The only real difference is that there is no death, and consequently, no emotional intensity to one's existence. This is because, as Buzzati's entire narrative is bent on demonstrating, all human emotions are in one way or another connected to our knowledge of our own mortality.

The passage cited above can thus be read of an encapsulation of the book's central theme. Its lyrical tone and existential content seem to mark it as an eminently "literary," poetic text, one that, at first, seems to contrast with the image of pop erotica that it accompanies. In spite of their discrepant cultural registers, however, the text and image can be read as complimenting one another. Indeed, the pairing serves to amplify the power of each element: The original fetish photograph is transformed by Buzzati into an iconic depiction of that existential loss alluded to in the text, which is in turn infused with a sense of erotic longing (one which would otherwise not have been evoked by the word "love"). The suggestive power contained within this page, its aesthetic force, resides neither in the image nor in the text, although the latter is essentially a poem. Rather, it is to be found in the interrelation between these two components, thus demonstrating the

same interdependency that is so characteristic of the comics form.<sup>15</sup> And so it is for the great majority of the pages in Buzzati's book, which the author justly chose to title "a poem in comics," rather than "an illustrated poem."

Buzzati's interest in comics was not limited to an appreciation of their expressive possibilities, however. An equally important factor was surely the dark subject matter that was a distinguishing feature of many Italian comics of that period. The 1960s saw the emergence in Italy of a new and tremendously successful form of comics, the *fumetti neri* ("black comics"), as well as their more explicitly erotic variation, the *fumetti vietati* ("forbidden comics"). Such series as *Diabolik* and *Satanik* catered to an adult readership and were characterized by their eroticism and sadistic violence. *Poema a fumetti* was thus written at a time in which Italian comics had come to be associated with the expression of illicit impulses and desires. The imagery and subject matter of the *fumetti neri* and *vietati* seemed to tap deep into the collective subconscious, in a way that rendered them a curiously appropriate reference point for the sentiments Buzzati was seeking to give voice to.

Both the experimentation with combining text and imagery and the uncensored vision of a darkly destructive sexuality are characteristic elements of Buzzati's literary and artistic production in the years leading up to the creation of *Poema a fumetti*. This chapter examines the ways in which Buzzati's use of comics was linked to these formal and thematic concerns. As I address these factors in turn, I will also endeavour to address a larger phenomenon: the emergence during this period of comics as a mode of artistic

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<sup>15</sup> This observation concerning *Poema a fumetti* was made as early 1970 by Gianfranco De Turreis in his interview with Dino Buzzati, during a discussion of the denial the work's status as a genuine comic on the part of certain literary critics. Gianfranco De Turreis, "Un' intervista a Buzzati di trent'anni fa," *Studi Buzzatiani* 3 (1998), 156.

expression aimed at a culturally-sophisticated adult audience. In particular, I will discuss Buzzati's book in relation to 1) the interest in the "poetic" possibilities of comics among certain North American avant-garde poets and 2) the marginalized, disreputable status of comics as a key factor in the reappraisal of their artistic potential, as also witnessed, most notably, in the American "underground comix" movement.

### **The Poetry of Comics**

During the course of a 1962 interview with an Italian state television channel, Buzzati presents one of his recently completed paintings, entitled "Ragazza che precipita" ("Falling Girl"). The author describes the painting (fig. 5), which features speech balloons and the repeated representation of a young woman as she tumbles down from the summit of an immense skyscraper, as "making use of the system of comics."<sup>16</sup> After admitting that he still has a long way to go in terms of developing his technical skills, Buzzati asserts his belief that his paintings are nonetheless able "to express something that others don't express."<sup>17</sup> "For example," he continues, gesturing towards the above-mentioned painting, "These comics... comics of course usually give the impression of something shoddy, but why could it not be possible to use comics in an image in such a way as to achieve a kind of little figurative poem? It seems to me that that is a direction that could lead to something."<sup>18</sup>

"Falling Girl" is one of the first of Buzzati's paintings to feature comics-derived elements. From the beginning, then, Buzzati's incorporation of comics into his art was

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<sup>16</sup> Dino Buzzati interviewed by L. Di Schiena, Bernardo Valli and Mirella Delfini "Spezzone con Buzzati – 1962, YouTube video, 0:30, posted by "Giovannisenzaterra," August 27, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comv7f2DGpw> . Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3:12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3:26.

strongly linked to his perception of their potential for poetic expression. *Poema a fumetti* would seem to represent a natural extension of this interest in using comics in a “poetic” manner. In a 1966 letter to Vittorio Sereni, an editor at Mondadori, Buzzati’s long-time publisher, the writer alludes to his project for “that book, that novel, that poem in comics,” describing his vision for it in these terms: “I am sure that it will be something interesting and worthy: If not even –as is my secret hope- a true work of poetry.”<sup>19</sup>

What were these poetic qualities that Buzzati perceived in comics? Buzzati himself does not seem to have ever elaborated on this point in his writings or in any other public declaration. It may be possible, however, to deduce the nature of this intuited correlation by looking at the content and structure of its ultimate result, *Poema a fumetti* itself. There are various ways in which Buzzati’s graphic narrative employs elements drawn from comics to achieve what may be considered to be “poetic” effects.

As already suggested in my opening discussion, I believe a large part of the attraction of comics for Buzzati lay in their juxtaposition of imagery and text. As noted by Enzo Carli as early as 1961 in his discussion of Buzzati’s incorporation of textual elements into his paintings (and the artist’s creation of short written compositions intended to be exhibited alongside them),

The written text, whatever its origin, interests Buzzati not for how it can be illustrated, but for how it can be betrayed and subverted by the imagery: And it is from the clash, the conflict, the disproportionality in the forced complementarity of these two means of expression --the literary and the figurative-- that the spark of poetry is struck.<sup>20</sup>

In *Poema a fumetti*, these image/text pairings are almost never completely incongruous or non-sequitural. The content of Buzzati’s drawings is generally clearly

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<sup>19</sup> “La lettera l’appello a Vittorio Sereni: «Penso a un’ opera di poesia. Ti prego, rispondi», *Corriere della Sera*, April 29, 2009, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Enzo Carli, *Dino Buzzati pittore* (Milan: Martello, 1961), 9.

connected to the written passage they accompany, but often includes additional elements that bring new shades of meaning or connotations to the text. For example, a passage evoking the moment “when the great ships sail for glory, banners waving”<sup>21</sup> is paired with a drawing of a battleship whose shape recalls a human skeleton, thus hinting at the end result of many a quest for military glory (fig. 6). Similarly, a reference to the moment “when on the operating room table the scalpel draws near”<sup>22</sup> is given both a nightmarish and a sadistically erotic twist by its being accompanied by a drawing of a scalpel-wielding surgeon wrapped in mummy-like bandages looming over a naked woman who is bent over backwards and chained to an operating table (fig. 7).

While the imagery in *Poema a fumetti* adds new dimensions to the text, the latter serves to infuse Buzzati’s generally unsophisticated-looking and often deliberately “pulpy” drawings with an air of existential mystery and metaphysical portent. An example of this is the section in which the guardian devil/jacket attempts to dissuade Orfi from pursuing Eura by tempting him with a succession of nubile naked women (fig. 8). The women are depicted in poses clearly derived from pornographic magazines, thus suggesting a quasi-demonic dimension to the temptations offered by these magazines themselves.

Drawing and text in *Poema a fumetti* are not always arranged so as to form a complementary pairing, however. At many points throughout the book, the narrative is sustained through a back-and-forth alternation between these two elements. A drawing may be used to complete an unfinished phrase, or as a substitute for a descriptive passage (fig. 9). For the reader, this constant switching between visual and textual modes of

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<sup>21</sup> Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

interpretation results in a highly participatory and immersive experience. In this sense, too, *Poema a fumetti* can be related to poetry, much of which also tends to derive its communicative power from its semantic indeterminacy and incompleteness, and places greater demands on readers' ability to construct a satisfactory meaning for themselves.

Another way that Buzzati may have regarded comics as relatable to poetry is the concern common to both art forms with guiding the movement of the reader's eye across the page. In poetry, this is traditionally achieved through line breaks, spacing and punctuation. In comics, as has been examined in detail by such comics theorists as Scott McCloud<sup>23</sup> and Thierry Groensteen,<sup>24</sup> the order and pacing of reading is determined by a series of complex relationships between the size and positioning of panels and the arrangement of the visual and textual elements both within and between these panels. In *Poema a fumetti*, Buzzati often combines these poetic and comics-derived techniques, interspersing and dividing the illustrated and textual elements (including comics-style graphic renderings of onomatopoeias) throughout the page in such a way as to create a distinctive and, it could be said, poetic rhythm (fig. 10).

As pointed out by Daniele Barbieri in his discussion of the musical aspects of *Poema a fumetti*, a larger-scale “visual poetry” can also be perceived in certain sequences where Buzzati repeats the full-page image format as a means of unifying the disparate content within the various images.<sup>25</sup> This is most evident in the first series of “songs” that Orfi performs in the hopes of convincing the inhabitants of the Underworld to reveal

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<sup>23</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Daniele Barbieri, “I fumetti e il «Poema»: un' opera (quasi) in musica, in *«Poema a fumetti» di Dino Buzzati nella cultura degli anni '60 tra fumetto, fotografia e arti visive: atti del Convegno Internazionale Feltre e Belluno, 12-14 settembre 2002*, eds. Nella Giannetto and Manuela Gallina (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), 103.6

Eura's whereabouts. Each of these songs evokes one of those moments of human experience in which the essential mystery of existence can be most keenly felt. Save for a few exceptions, each of these moments is described in a single sentence, accompanied by a single drawing (figs. 6 & 7). Each of these drawings is inscribed within a full-page panel, and the repetition of this layout constitutes a kind of "visual rhyming" from page to page. This lends a unifying rhythm to the succession of images, one that parallels Buzzati's use of the word "when" at the beginning of each of the section's accompanying textual passages.<sup>26</sup>

Buzzati was not alone among his contemporaries in perceiving a link between comics and poetry. Indeed, the 1960s and early 1970s saw a remarkable flowering of interest in comics among avant-garde poets, principally in North America. As early as the late 1950s, in fact, the New York-based Swedish concrete poet and multimedia artist Öyvind Fahlström had begun creating collages that reassembled George Herriman's iconic *Krazy Kat* comics from the 1920s and 1930s. And in 1964, another New York-based poet and visual artist, Joe Brainard, published the first volume of his "C Comics," a collaborative project with various writers associated with the so-called "New York School" of poetry, who were asked to fill in the word balloons and captions in his comics-style drawing sequences. One of Brainard's collaborators on this project, Kenneth Koch, was, during the same period, also creating what he called "comics mainly without

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 113. The contemporary graphic novelist Seth has made a similar observation on the parallels between the rhythm of poetry and the rhythm of the page grid in comics: "I have felt, for some time, a connection between poetry and comics [...] When I am writing a comics page (or sequence of pages) I am very aware of the sound and 'feel' of how the dialogue or narration is broken down for the panels. If you have to tell a certain amount of story in a page then you have to make decisions on how many panels you need to tell it. You need to arrange these panels — small, big or a combination of the two — and decide how to sit them on the page. All these decisions affect how the viewer reads the strip; there is an inherent rhythm created by how you set up the panels." Marc Ngui "Poetry, Design and Comics: An Interview with Seth" *Carousel* 19 (Spring/Summer 2006), 17-18.

pictures,” poems in which the words are arranged across the page in comics-style grids of panels. As noted by David Lehman in his introduction to the recently published anthology of Koch’s poem comics, for Koch “the comic panel was like the line in poetry, a unit of composition, suggesting ‘new ways of talking about things and dividing them up.’”<sup>27</sup>

Toronto rivalled New York as a major centre of experimentation with the combination of poetry and comics during this period. Beginning in the mid sixties, the Toronto-based concrete poet bpNichol produced a slew of comics-inspired works, many of which played on the relationship between the comics panels, what Nichol termed “panelagic.”<sup>28</sup> In 1970, Toronto’s Coach House Press released the first issue of *Snore Comix*, which featured experimental comics-derived works by various visual artists, but also by poets such as Nichol and Victor Coleman. Coach House, a small literary press focused mainly on avant-garde poetry, was also responsible for publishing the “visual novels” of Martin Vaughn-James. Although most of Vaughn-James’s literary reference points appear to have been in the field of avant-garde prose writing rather than poetry, the abstract, seemingly free-associative quality of much its textual content is in some ways reminiscent of the contemporary production of some of the Coach House poets.

To relate the above-mentioned “poetry in comics” to *Poema a fumetti*, it could be said that, in very broad terms, Brainard’s project, the majority of the *Snore Comix* and Vaughn-James’s visual novels recall Buzzati’s way of generating poetic meaning through

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<sup>27</sup> David Lehman, introduction to *The Art of the Possible!: Comics Mainly Without Pictures*, by Kenneth Koch, ed. David Lehman (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2004),

<sup>28</sup> bpNichol, *bpNichol Comics*, ed. Carl Peters, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2002), 21.

the mutual influence of paired imagery and text,<sup>29</sup> whereas Fahlström, Koch and Nichol's works are reminiscent of Buzzati's interest in how comics direct the reader's eye across the page. As for the "rhythmic" quality of *Poema a fumetti*, this may be seen as constituting a common thread across all of these avant-garde experimentations.

The fact that Buzzati on one side of the Atlantic and these various avant-garde poets on the other would become interested in the poetic potential of comics during the same period is by no means a coincidence, as both can be related to the breakdown of the "high"/"low" barriers in cultural production that was such an important aspect of the visual arts in the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> The decision to fuse comics-derived elements to poetic aims could not, in the sixties and early seventies, be divorced from an implied rejection of the established hierarchy of artistic genres. Comics had long been regarded as a pre-eminent example of what Clement Greenberg had termed "kitsch," a generic and "pre-digested" art intended for mass popular consumption.<sup>31</sup> According to Greenberg, avant-garde art had to protect itself at all costs from this pervasive cultural contaminant. The use of such a "debased" cultural form in combination with poetry, an art form traditionally accorded a position of great cultural prestige, can clearly be read as effecting what Umberto Eco called a "pop operation," the transposition of a manifestation of "popular culture" into a

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<sup>29</sup> In discussing the relationship between text and image in his work, Vaughn-James stated that "a text can add a dimension, it can act like a voice over-dub, slightly altering your perception of the image, contradicting it perhaps, focussing on one aspect rather than another, it can run parallel or even cross over it by creating equivalents for what is present in the drawings." Martin Vaughn-James, "A Statement," *The Canadian Fiction Magazine* 42 (1982): 24.

<sup>30</sup> Though it should be noted that this breakdown was pioneered by earlier avant-garde movements, most notably Dada.

<sup>31</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 29.

“high art” frame of reference, in such a way as to highlight the contextual nature of these categorizations.<sup>32</sup>

The concept of the “pop operation” was laid out by Eco in his influential 1971 essay “Lowbrow Highbrow, Highbrow Lowbrow,” in which he posited that the categories of culture popularly referred to as “lowbrow,” “middlebrow” and “highbrow” were in fact all to be viewed as interrelated manifestations of a single dominant bourgeois capitalist culture. Eco credited Pop Art, in particular, for laying bare the artificiality of these categories by creating works in which “lowbrow” and “highbrow” elements were combined in various ways, rendering it effectively impossible to determine what side of the cultural spectrum they were to be ascribed to. Eco cited *Poema a fumetti*’s use of “comic strip techniques [...] in their most lowbrow form, to make a surreal novel,” as an example of the new mixing of avant-garde and mass culture that was taking place in the wake of Pop Art.<sup>33</sup>

The use of comics by North American avant-garde poets can be read in a similar light, as motivated by a desire to free poetry from narrowly elitist cultural confines and open it up to new influences, principally derived from the sphere of mass culture. As discussed by Andy Fitch with reference to Joe Brainard, this poetic tendency was greatly inspired by the Pop art movement.<sup>34</sup> The New York-based Brainard, Fahlström, and Koch were closely attuned to developments in the visual arts in that city, and moved in many of the same circles as the Pop artists. Fahlström and Brainard produced many entirely visual works incorporating comics-derived elements, and could be regarded as Pop artists

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<sup>32</sup> Umberto Eco, “Lowbrow Highbrow, Highbrow Lowbrow,” in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Mahsun (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1989), .

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>34</sup> Andy Fitch, *Pop Poetics: Reframing Joe Brainard* (Champaign, IL, Dublin and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 48.

themselves. Indeed, both were included in the “Pop Art Redefined,” exhibition of contemporary Anglo-American Pop artists that was held at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1969. Similarly, the poets published by Coach House Press were closely associated with Toronto’s avant-garde art scene, which in the late sixties was significantly influenced by American Pop art.<sup>35</sup>

A striking example of this crossover from comics-inspired Pop art to Pop art-inspired comics –not to mention from poetry to comics- is the short-lived (1968-69) Montreal comics collective *Chiendent*. The brainchild of the French-born poet Claude Haeffely, who wrote the texts, *Chiendent*’s colourful and surreal comics were illustrated by a trio of young Quebec pop artists whose previous works had been characterized by the inclusion of comics-derived visual elements.<sup>36</sup> Thus the works of *Chiendent*, and also, as we shall see, *Poema a fumetti*, seem to uphold Dick Hebdige’s assertion that “the final destination of pop art, pop imagery, and pop representational techniques lies not inside the gallery but rather in that return to the original material.”<sup>37</sup>

Pop Art was a major influence on Dino Buzzati, who seems to have been particularly taken by Roy Lichtenstein’s paintings of blown-up comic book panels. It is important to note, however, that Buzzati’s decision to integrate elements of comics into his painting actually predates Lichtenstein’s. Whereas the American Pop artist’s first comics-derived painting, *Look Mickey*, dates from 1961, Buzzati began including speech

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<sup>35</sup> Denise Leclerc and Pierre Dessureault, *The Sixties in Canada* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2005), 40-52.

<sup>36</sup> For more on *Chiendent*, see André Capentier, ed., *La Bande dessinée québécoise* (Montmagny: Éditions Marquis, 1975) and Yves Robillard, ed. *Québec Underground 1962-1972* (Montreal: Médiart, 1973).

<sup>37</sup> Dick Hebdige, “In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop,” in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop*, ed. Brian Wallis et al. (Boston: MIT Press, 1988), 85.

bubbles and onomatopoeia in his own work as early as 1957.<sup>38</sup> Until his discovery of Pop art, however, Buzzati made use only of certain narrative conventions of comics, rather than their characteristically “pulpy” visual style and subject matter. From the mid sixties onwards, however, his paintings often display an exaggerated comics-book stylization that recalls that of Lichtenstein, featuring thick black outlines, flat areas of garish colour, and close-ups of female faces.<sup>39</sup> This indebtedness is made quite explicit in his 1967 painting *Diabolik*: The text in the speech bubble, which translates into, “Never! I’d rather kill myself than read!” seems to be a humorous allusion to Lichtenstein’s famous *Drowning Girl*, with its thought bubble containing the line, “I’d rather sink than call Brad for help!”

Further evidence of the influence of Pop art in Buzzati’s painting during this period are the Warholian multiple depictions of female faces in such works as *Nove facce di donne* (“Nine Women’s Faces”),<sup>40</sup> and the incorporation of images reproduced from popular sources, as can be seen in *Un utile indirizzo* (“A useful address”) (fig. 11). The contorted nude female figure has been transposed, virtually unaltered, from an illustration

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<sup>38</sup> In his 1957 painting *Toc, toc* (“Knock Knock”), Buzzati for the first time makes use of speech bubbles and onomatopoeic text, using the latter to render the sound of knocking against a door. A further element in this painting that may likely have been inspired by comics is the cross-section view of the house, which divides up the depicted scenes in a way reminiscent of comics panels.

<sup>39</sup> As Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik demonstrate in their presentation of Lichtenstein for the 1991 “High & Low” show at the MOMA, the artist’s works are not, as is generally assumed, uninflected transpositions onto canvas of found comic book images. Rather, Lichtenstein introduced a slew of alterations to make his images “look more like comics than the comics were themselves,” simplifying the more illustrational style of a few specific artists working in the romance and war adventure genres and combining it with the thick lines and bright colours of Walt Disney cartoons. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 199.

<sup>40</sup> This connection to Warhol is noted by Nicoletta Comar in her introduction to the complete catalogue of Buzzati’s paintings. Nicoletta Comar, *Dino Buzzati: catalogo dell’opera pittorica* (Mariano del Friuli: Edizioni della Laguna, 2006), 60.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

in an American erotic magazine (fig. 12).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Pop art's uninhibited appropriation of images created by others appears to have been one of the elements of the movement that particularly struck Buzzati, as he emphasized in an interview with Yves Panafieu in 1971:

“But this is a concept that has by now entered the conscience of modern painting...! Appropriating images drawn by others is precisely the *modus operandi* of all American Pop art painting, for example... There, there isn't a single image that they have invented themselves! Not one!”<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, a great deal of the images in *Poema a fumetti* are transcribed more or less directly from found sources. Indeed, the book is prefaced with a page of acknowledgements in which the author cites various artists who provided the direct models for certain specific drawings. Here, in the same breath as canonical artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, celebrated contemporaries such as Salvador Dalí and Hans Bellmer, and filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau and Federico Fellini, Buzzati thanks the American fetish photographer Irving Klaw and the stripper Madame Féline. As noted by Roberto Roda in his discussion of the diverse visual sources of *Poema a fumetti*, the book's average reader at the time of its release would have been quite unlikely to recognize the names of Klaw and Madame Féline, and the mention of them seems to have been a semi-private joke on the part of the author.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Buzzati's decision to include them in his acknowledgments can be read as a profession of the author's openness to all registers of cultural production and rejection of a genre-based elitism. The description of the character of Orfi as a descendant of the old aristocracy who is making

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<sup>41</sup> Maria Teresa Ferrari, “Poema a fumetti: il laboratorio fantastico,” in *Buzzati racconta: storie disegnate e dipinte*, ed. Maria Teresa Ferrari (Milan: Electa Mondadori, 2006), 80. This same figure was also featured in a page of *Poema a fumetti* (fig. 7).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Roda, “Nel labirinto,” 34.

his fortune as a rock singer, “much to his family’s dismay,”<sup>44</sup> may reference Buzzati’s own position as a highly-respected literary figure turning to a mass cultural form, and the negative critical reaction he expected this to elicit.<sup>45</sup>

Compounding the “lowbrow” aspect of *Poema fumetti* was the decidedly disreputable subject matter of much of the appropriated visual imagery, which was derived from erotic magazines and bondage photography, as well as from Italian crime and horror comics, the “fumetti neri.” This imagery, which had also begun appearing in Buzzati’s paintings in the mid sixties, resonated with the themes the artist was dealing with in his literary production at the time. It therefore appears quite natural that he should have decided to combine the two, and thus create his own poetic, literary version of the kinds of comics that Eco had identified as representing their “most lowbrow form.”

### **Tiny Forbidden Windows**

*Poema a fumetti* is the tale of a descent into the Underworld. Already in the book’s early pages, however, there are hints that this voyage will be an internal one, that Buzzati’s Hades is the one lying just below the surface of the socialized self, in the dark and hidden recesses of the human imagination. One does not have to look far to find the entrance to this nether realm, although one may lack the courage or desire to do so: In *Poema a fumetti*, the entrance is a small door located in the exterior wall of an abandoned house on

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<sup>44</sup> Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> “From the start,” wrote Buzzati in a newspaper article published soon after the release of his graphic narrative, “I knew that *Poema a fumetti*, a book made up more of drawings than of words, ran the risk of being met with a strange reception, also on the part of critics.” Dino Buzzati, “Col ‘*Poema a fumetti*’ mi aspettavo di peggio in ‘Corriere della Sera’, 8 febbraio 1970” in *Buzzati 1969: Il laboratorio di ‘Poema a fumetti’*, ed. Mariateresa Ferrari (Milan: Mazzotta, 2002), 133.

Via Saterna, a street, Buzzati tells us, that no one wants to walk down at night. “Odd, don’t you think,” observes the narrative voice, “right in the center of town!”<sup>46</sup>

The book opens with the presentation of this abandoned house. There are mysterious tales surrounding it, tales that, more than anything, seem to reveal the fantasies of those who propagate them. “Some say that a rich man, misanthropic and depraved, lives in that house,”<sup>47</sup> we are informed. In the accompanying image, a naked woman poses before a man in evening dress who is reclining on a divan, his face contorted into a terrifying, scarcely human laugh. “They say that some nights desperate cries come from the house,” the narrative voice continues, “The neighbors’ imagination does the rest.”<sup>48</sup> Below this passage appears another woman, also naked as far as can be made out, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Desire and fear, lust and cruelty, and the mysterious overlap between these seemingly opposing impulses: as artistic themes go, these are hardly novel ones. Yet with *Poema a fumetti*, these time-honoured subjects are given an entirely new freshness through Buzzati’s recasting of them in the mould of the *fumetti neri*, an artistic genre in which, in 1960s Italy, the universal human preoccupations with sex and death were expressed in a particularly visceral and uninhibited manner.

The term *fumetti neri* (literally “black comics”) alludes to the jargon of Italian journalism, in which crime news is referred to as “cronaca nera” (“black news”).<sup>49</sup> Beginning with the series *Diabolik* (first published in 1962) this new breed of comics reversed the old superhero paradigm by featuring criminals as their protagonists (fig.

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<sup>46</sup> Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Simone Castaldi, *Drawn and Dangerous: Italian Comics of the 1970s and 1980s* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 14.

13).<sup>50</sup> Diabolik and his many imitators were suave but ruthless, technologically-sophisticated master thieves and killers who put the lie to the old moral maxim that “crime doesn’t pay.” Perhaps still more subversive were the series featuring female criminal protagonists, most notably *Satanik*.

As well as being characterized by a profusion of violence, often of a morbid or sadistic bent, the *fumetti neri* were also notable for their many scantily clad women, unseen in Italian comics until this time. Consequently, in 1965 there began a public morality campaign against these comics, resulting in certain series being labeled as forbidden to readers under the age of sixteen. Somewhat paradoxically, this restriction left the comics designated as *fumetti vietati ai minori* (“comics forbidden to minors”) a much freer rein to explore the original *fumetti neri*’s dark and erotically-charged themes in a far more explicit fashion.<sup>51</sup>

The second half of the 1960s saw an explosion of adult-oriented comics serials, all more or less openly erotic in nature, and in some cases blatantly pornographic. A few of these, such as Guido Crepax’s *Valentina* (first appearance 1965), which combined references to Freudian theory and *nouvelle vague* cinema with an elegant, art-nouveau-inspired drawing style, catered to the kind of cultivated reader who was beginning to appreciate comics in the wake of Umberto Eco and other Italian intellectuals’ championing of the form. The majority, however, had no pretensions towards any sort of artistic sophistication, and were directed at a decidedly “lowbrow” mass readership of adult males.

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<sup>50</sup> Testifying to Buzzati’s particular affection for *Diabolik* is a photograph depicting a poster of the character in his studio, and his decision to give the name “Diabolik” to a dog that he presented as a gift to his wife in 1970. Comar, 59.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Fully exploiting their disreputable, semi-clandestine status, the *fumetti neri* became vehicles for the expression of pent-up psychological and physical urges.<sup>52</sup> In decrying such comics in his 1970 *Enciclopedia del fumetto* (“Encyclopedia of Comics”), Gaetano Strazzula wrote that:

A junk heap of criminal exploits and sadomasochist orgies characterizes these adventures of nymphomaniac heroines [...] vulgar characters who feed the erotic fantasies of an underdeveloped proletariat, disposable “merchandise” that make visible the torpid and impossible-to-admit-to fantasies of men who have been repressed for too long.<sup>53</sup>

In *Nero a striscie*, a 1971 analysis of the negative social messages put forth by the *fumetti neri* and other genres of popular comics that was put together by a group of art historians at the University of Parma, adult comics are identified as a site in which submerged societal “complexes, frustrations, inhibitions, moralistic repressions” were allowed to float to the surface. Nevertheless, the authors continue, “this does not mean that these comics have a liberating function. On the contrary, they serve to increase neuroses.”<sup>54</sup>

What better reference point than the *fumetti neri*, then, for Buzzati’s depiction of the tormented longings that, in *Poema a fumetti*, are seen as constituting the heart of the experience of living? For to be alive, according to Buzzati, is to feel oneself at the continuous mercy of obscure anxieties, impulses and passions. Chief among these primal, irrational forces is one’s sexual desire, conceived of as a largely corruptive but inescapable compulsion: “Do you remember friends?” Orfi sings to his audience of dead

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>53</sup> Angelo Schwarz, “Eros e fotografia negli anni sessanta e «Poema a fumetti», in «*Poema a fumetti*» di Dino Buzzati nella cultura degli anni '60 tra fumetto, fotografia e arti visive: atti del Convegno Internazionale Feltre e Belluno, 12-14 settembre 2002, eds. Nella Giannetto and Manuela Gallina (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), 56-57.

<sup>54</sup> Luigi Allegri, Adelmina Bonazzi, Rossella Ruggeri, “Sexy e Neri” in *Nero a striscie, la reazione a fumetti*, eds. Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Luigi Allegri et al. (Parma: Università di Parma, 1971), 79.

souls, “The ultimate bliss/ But never joyful, never [...] Yes, nature urged us on,/ Encouraging even the most twisted vice/ To propagate the species.”<sup>55</sup>

As torturous and “impossible to admit to” as they were in life, it is precisely these overwhelming sensations and urges that the denizens of the underworld most long for, and whose memory they are forever seeking to rekindle. “The most serious vice,” we are told, “quite forbidden, is peeking through certain tiny windows to peer secretly at the world of the living, relishing a stolen glance at paradise lost.”<sup>56</sup> In the accompanying drawing, the little windows with their open shutter to one side almost recall the look of a book or magazine (fig. 14). Or perhaps a comic book? Was it Buzzati’s intention to draw a parallel between these forbidden peepholes and the depictions of forbidden desires offered up by erotic magazines and comics?

Certainly the comparison of such publications to windows seems a particularly apt one. In our own era of free internet pornography and (relatively) open attitudes towards issues of sexuality, it is difficult to realize the extent to which erotic and pornographic publications would have acted in Buzzati’s time as a kind of link between exterior and interior worlds, providing a rare glimpse into certain aspects of the collective erotic psyche. In *Nero a striscie*, the authors decry “the moralistic education that obliges adolescents to have to discover sex through the pages of adult comics.”<sup>57</sup>

Another personal discovery that such publications might lead to was the realization that one was not necessarily alone in one’s more unorthodox sexual proclivities. “If sadistic magazines exist, for example,” Buzzati remarks in his interview with Yves Panefieu, “this means they meet a widespread demand... It isn’t something

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<sup>55</sup> Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, 160.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Allegri, 79.

particular to me!”<sup>58</sup> The erotic magazines and comics of the 1960s held an almost exclusive monopoly on the expression of some of the most powerful human urges. For all their tawdriness, they would nonetheless have been imbued with the mystique of the initiatory, of the innermost sanctum in which closely guarded secrets are revealed. Viewed in this light, it seems only fitting that Buzzati’s explanation of the mysteries of life and death should assume the form of a trashy adult comic.

Also particularly suited to Buzzati’s purposes were the *fumetti neri*’s trademark combination of sex with murder, acted out in gothic, almost exclusively nocturnal settings. Such themes and atmospheres had a certain resonance with the dark, pessimistic vision of sexuality that was a prevalent theme of Buzzati’s later writings. In 1963, after generally avoiding the themes of love and sex in his writing, Buzzati published the novel *Un amore* (translated into English as *A Love Affair*), a thinly veiled account of his own desperate, all-consuming passion for an adolescent Milanese call-girl. Buzzati’s evocation of sexuality is never an untroubled or celebratory one; rather, it is almost always associated with feelings of interior torment and crippling longing. As has been pointed out by Carlo Della Corte, the visual terms of Buzzati’s erotic imagination seem to have been of a “nocturnal, almost theatrical, cemeterial” variety, favouring black leather, a profusion of straps and belts, and various bondage accessories.<sup>59</sup> This was a taste that was amply catered to in the *fumetti neri*, particularly in their more extreme *fumetti vietati* incarnations, and *Poema a fumetti*’s lasciviously posed and frequently bound and tortured female nudes evoke both these adult comics and the erotic and pornographic magazines to which they were, in 1960s Italy, so closely associated.

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<sup>58</sup> Panafieu, 222.

<sup>59</sup> Carlo Della Corte, *Lo specchio obliquo* (Venice: Edizioni del Ruzzante, 1978), 96.

Not only in its subject matter, but in its appearance, too, Buzzati's graphic narrative makes no attempt to distance itself from the characteristic "lowbrow" elements of pulp comics; quite the contrary. Much like Pop art, it positively revels in them, and is altogether unapologetic in the crudeness of its line drawings, the garishness of its colours, and the brashness of its imagery. Buzzati's comic also follows the *fumetti neri*'s pocket-sized format, and in many places, their characteristic two-panels-per-page grid.

Buzzati was able to see in comics the possibility of a new, and in some ways more direct and less baggage-laden means of developing the existential themes that had always been at the heart of his literary production because the *fumetti neri* had already infused the medium with a certain raw immediacy and an undercurrent of unexpressed impulses and desires. In this sense, interesting parallels can be drawn between *Poema a fumetti*'s indebtedness to *Diabolik* et al. and the American "underground comix" movement's link to the "horror comics" and "crime comics" of the 1950s. In both cases, comics were transformed into a vehicle of sophisticated artistic expression aimed at adult readers by building on certain features inherent to their disparaged, semi-clandestine status.

As already mentioned, the novelty of the *fumetti neri*'s foregrounding of sex and violence rendered them the target of a public morality campaign in 1965. This development bears some similarities with the larger scale anti-comics hysteria that occurred in the United States in 1954, the culmination of a growing public concern over the purported link between comics and juvenile delinquency. At the time of the creation of *Poema a fumetti*, the *fumetti neri* had come to hold much of the same stigma that comics had come to occupy in America a decade earlier.

In the United States, this stigma had the somewhat ironic effect of repositioning comics as a particularly fertile terrain for groundbreaking artistic experimentation. Already in the early 50s, a few comics publications, such as Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad* (first issue 1952) had begun to realize, as Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik would put it, "that the borderline zone that the comics had inescapably come to inhabit was itself a good place to be—a place outside of the consensus culture."<sup>60</sup> The first step had been taken towards the more subversive comics that would begin to appear in various college magazines in the mid 60s, and the subsequent explosion of the "underground comix" phenomenon a couple of years later.

There is no doubt that Robert Crumb and the other American underground cartoonists' marrying of comics with psychedelic imagery and explicit sexual content represented an absolutely novel development in the history of the medium; but the grotesquely caricatured faces, the grimy urban backdrops, the gallows humour, and the disenchanted satirical take on human nature were all elements imported into comix from their fifties progenitors. Indeed, many of the underground cartoonists, including Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and Art Spiegelman got their start in the pages of *Help!*, a satirical magazine founded by Kurtzman in 1958, subsequent to his departure from *Mad*.

It is also possible, as argued by Jared Gardner, that the underground cartoonist's perception of comics as an expression of repressed aspects of the psyche was "a logical consequence of the anticomics hysteria" fostered most notably by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham in such writings as *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).<sup>61</sup> Certainly, Crumb recollected his rediscovery in his early twenties of the comics of his childhood -an event

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<sup>60</sup> Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, 212.

<sup>61</sup> Gardner, 120.

that would have a seminal effect on his art- in terms that lend themselves to this interpretation:

I studied these funny books closely... Lurid funny animals that tried to look cute but weren't lived in a callous savage world of cold violence and bad jokes, exactly as Fredric Wertham and G. Legman had said. They were very much akin to the nightmare visions spinning out of my fevered brain.<sup>62</sup>

In a phrase unconsciously echoing Gaetano Strazzulla's characterization of the *fumetti neri* as making visible the "fantasies of men who have been repressed for too long," Crumb identified in these postwar comics "the psychotic manifestation of some grimy part of America's collective unconscious."<sup>63</sup> Much like Buzzati, Crumb and many of the other early underground cartoonists were motivated by a desire to give expression to repressed feelings and desires. As Crumb succinctly put it in an interview with the *Berkeley Barb* in 1968, "There's a lot of weird shit in everybody's head [...] The whole value of a cartoonist is to bring it all out in the open."<sup>64</sup> S. Clay Wilson would evoke his source of creative inspiration in similar terms: "Reach down and grab some in the murky recesses of your psyche, the dark side of your subconscious."<sup>65</sup>

For the comix artists, this psychic exorcism often involved depictions of sadistic violence directed towards women, in a manner that sometimes recalls some of the imagery in *Poema a fumetti*. Buzzati would certainly seem to have shared the underground cartoonists' belief in the value of an uncompromising honesty with regards to their sexual fantasies. "Of course, I am not a hypocrite," Buzzati says in his interview with Yves Panafieu, "Other people are... And my mind is very clear on this point. The

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<sup>62</sup> Varnedoe and Gopnik, 215.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>64</sup> Gardner, 120.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975* (Seattle, Fantagraphics Books, 2002), 87.

majority of the men I know are damnable hypocrites when it comes to sexual matters. And no one has the courage to tell the truth.”<sup>66</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Buzzati’s sexual sadism does not seem to contain the same misogynistic tendencies that occasionally transpire in Crumb et al.’s tackling of their “troubles with women.” Read in the context of the graphic narrative, *Poema a fumetti*’s depictions of naked women being attacked by demonic robots or roasted on a spit by devils appear as the representations of the irrational sexual urges that hold sway over the living. These sadistic aspects, however, do not appear associated with any kind of ill-will or resentment towards women, but seem rather to be presented as the result of ineluctable biological urges, aroused by the reproductive instincts in “the darkest corners of human fantasy.” It is certainly true that these urges are presented from a subjectively male perspective, one in which women are considered as nothing more than the vehicle for sexual temptations. For this very reason, however, Buzzati’s vision of sexuality seems above all an account of a passive male suffering in the face of irrational sexual compulsions, of which *Poema a fumetti*’s sadistic imagery can be taken as a kind of emblematic representation.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of the analogies I have drawn between *Poema a fumetti* and the US-based commix movement, it is undeniable that the former fits much less neatly into a genealogical history of the development of comics. While groundbreaking in their subject

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<sup>66</sup> Panafieu, 222.

<sup>67</sup> There is thus a curious contrast in *Poema a fumetti* between a conception of sexuality as a source of suffering for its subject, and the expression of this sexuality -at least in visual terms- as a desire to impose suffering on its object. Although such questions lie beyond the scope of this study, it would be interesting to explore Buzzati’s graphic narrative -and much of his visual and literary production from the same era- in terms of theoretical discussions of sadism as put forth, among others, by Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gilles Deleuze.

matter, the underground cartoonists can, all told, be ascribed a fairly direct line of descent from the 50s satirical comics appearing in such magazines as *Mad*. Buzzati's graphic narrative, on the other hand, though greatly inspired by the *fumetti neri*, is far too idiosyncratic and far too literary a hybrid to be regarded as an evolutionary offshoot of that or any other comics genre. Furthermore, while the underground comix were a major influence on the emergence of the "graphic novel" phenomenon in the 1980s, Buzzati's book, as will be discussed in my conclusion, seems to have had a very limited impact on the Italian comics that came after it.

*Poema a fumetti's* distance from major currents in the development of comics is also no doubt due to the very significant age gap between Buzzati and the comix artists. This might also in part explain a certain difference in emphasis that can be noted between the two in relation to their pulp comics sources. The underground cartoonists, almost all in their twenties in the late 1960s, and heavily influenced by the era's anti-establishment ethos, tended to concentrate more on counter-cultural issues, rendering explicit the veiled subversive suggestions that they had found in post-war American comics. The "horror" aspects of so much of these comics were only an influence on Crumb et al. in terms of the violent and sadistic impulses they were seen to embody. For Buzzati, on the other hand, who was 63 years old at the time of the publication of his graphic poem, and for whom the notion of death was a longstanding obsession, the *fumetti neri* were in part inspiring precisely for their macabre qualities.

On one of the first pages of *Poema a fumetti* there is a drawing of three curious-looking characters (fig. 15): A woman with an eye-patch and a low-cut top, a bird-beaked man in a bowler cap, and a grinning skeleton. In *Via Saterna*, Buzzati informs us in the

caption below this image, “they say you can meet some strange types!”<sup>68</sup> As suggested by Roberto Roda, this affirmation can be taken as a reference not only to the mysterious and disreputable street of the story, but also to the comics form. As Roda demonstrates, the appearance of the three figures are inspired by the villains in various contemporaneous comics series: The woman’s eye patch recalls that of the Black Queen of Sogo, the arch-nemesis of the swinging space adventuress Barbarella; the bird-headed man wearing dress gloves and gripping a curved cane handle that may be the end of an umbrella recalls Batman’s master criminal adversary the Penguin (whose trademark cigarette holder Buzzati has placed in the mouth of the patch-eyed woman); and the last of these “strange types” may reference the *fumetti neri* characters Kriminal or Killing, both of whom wear tights painted in such a way as to make them resemble skeletons.<sup>69</sup>

It is also possible, however, to interpret this last figure in another light. The skeleton, peeking out from its partially hidden position behind the other two characters, may be read as an embodiment of that which, in another page of *Poema a fumetti*, is termed “the age-old thought, perennial, our only thought, after all:”<sup>70</sup> the spectre of death that Buzzati had seen lurking between the cheaply printed pages of the lowliest of comics, imbuing them with a mysterious beauty.

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<sup>68</sup> Buzzati, *Poem Strip*, 12.

<sup>69</sup> Roberto Roda, “Il laboratorio di ‘Poema a fumetti’,” in *Buzzati 1969: Il laboratorio di “Poema a fumetti”*, ed. Mariateresa Ferrari (Milan: Mazzotta, 2002), 57.

<sup>70</sup> Buzzati, 162.

## Chapter 2

“A Kind of Image-Making Machine”: *The Projector* by Martin Vaughn-James

Sixteen pages into Martin Vaughn-James’s *The Projector*, the book’s bald-headed, bespectacled protagonist is confronted by a middle-aged male figure in a suit and tie seated behind a paper-filled work desk, and holding up an open newspaper in such a way that it completely obscures his face. “Explain yourself!” the man behind the newspaper demands, “What does all this **mean!!** It makes no **sense!** There’s no order, no system... no... no regulations! (fig. 16)”<sup>71</sup>

Although it is not made explicit what exactly it is that the man behind the newspaper is expecting an explanation of, it could be inferred that the reference is to the graphic narrative itself. If readers seem likely to make this inference, it is probably because, already at this relatively early point in their engagement with *The Projector*, they themselves will be experiencing a similar reaction to the material at hand. In the preceding pages, they will have been confronted by an opening sequence that is, to say the least, difficult to interpret: the book begins with a view of a tree-lined residential street, the tranquility of which is suddenly interrupted by a figure atop a horse bursting forth through the glass walls of a Victorian-style greenhouse. The rider, who is entirely wrapped up in what appears to be a burlap material secured with string, paces about on a

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Vaughn-James, *The Projector* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971), 16. In transcribing the textual elements in *The Projector*, I have followed the same procedure as with *Poema a fumetti*, which is to convert the original entirely capitalized text into lower case, capitalizing words where it seemed the most appropriate and natural to do so. While all caps are common in comics, and read quite easily within that setting, they connote an emphasis or stridency when transcribed into a typographic context, one that is both misleading and visually off-putting. Characters transcribed in bold are intended to convey the use of a noticeably thicker line in the hand-lettered originals.

shifting landscape filled with various amorphous shapes before falling off the top of a skyscraper.

Textual captions running along top the pages in this sequence present a parallel narrative, in which the reader, addressed in the second person, is described as experiencing a series of sensory impressions, seemingly with little or no relation to the accompanying images. For instance, the panel in which the rider bursts forth from out of the greenhouse is accompanied by an overhead caption that reads, “Your left hand tightens on the handle of your open umbrella, the scissors in your other hand are as heavy as your packed suitcase...(fig. 17)”<sup>72</sup> These captions do, however, foreshadow certain visual elements that are introduced soon afterwards. For the falling rider is replaced in mid air by the image of a falling suitcase, which comes to land atop the open umbrella of three anthropomorphic pigs, drawn in a cartoonish, Disneyesque style, who are sitting at a little round table next to a railway underpass. The suitcase falls open to reveal a photograph depicting the wrapped-up rider, which the pigs promptly set about cutting apart with scissors. Soon after this point, the man behind the newspaper appears, demanding explanations.

Yet if the man behind the desk appears to give voice to the reader’s frustration at the seemingly impenetrable abstruseness of the unfolding narrative,<sup>73</sup> he is also presented as an object of ridicule. As is soon made clear in a reverse angle view, the open newspaper is not in fact being held up by the man, but is rather affixed directly to his

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<sup>72</sup> Vaughn-James, *The Projector*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> A similar device is used in Vaughn-James earlier work, *Elephant* (1970), in which, twenty pages into this equally surreal graphic narrative, a talking alarm clock (perhaps another reference to a linear, mechanized technology) complains, “I don’t understand? For chrissake...! You think I... But there MUST be a reason, a plan, or it’s all just a big JOKE...” Martin Vaughn-James, *Elephant: A Boovie* (Toronto: New Press, 1970), n.p.

face. The man is insisting on an explanation for the presented visual narrative before him while remaining completely oblivious to the way he is being blinded by a physical barrier of printed words, which appears to be almost an extension of his person.

Marshall McLuhan, in his hugely influential treatise *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, first published in 1964, seven years before *The Projector*, explains how the adoption of a new technology serves to reorder people's manner of thinking about and engaging with the world around them. Each technology, once adopted, becomes in some sense an extension of the individual using it, so that it is difficult or impossible for that individual to form an awareness of how that technology is modifying his or her thought processes and behaviour. Since the invention of typography, McLuhan contends, the thought processes of individuals in Western societies have been highly conditioned by the technology of the printed word so as to privilege linearity, unambiguousness and uniformity. McLuhan repeatedly mocks the close-mindedness of "literate man", and particularly the "more lineal and literal-minded of the literary brahmins" who "have accommodated themselves to the completed packages, in prose and verse and in the plastic arts."<sup>74</sup> These individuals are unable to adapt to the more active involvement required by the media of the dawning "electronic age," such as television, which, in McLuhan's estimation, call on a greater degree of audience participation in filling in missing information.

It is precisely this kind of engagement, however, that *The Projector* would appear to demand from its "readers/spectators."<sup>75</sup> The book seems to disregard what could be

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<sup>74</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994), 324.

<sup>75</sup> The term "reader/spectator" appears in a quote by Vaughn-James on the dust jacket of *The Projector*. "The purpose of the narrative, then," Vaughn-James states, "should not be the presentation of preformed

considered among the most fundamental elements of narrative, both in prose fiction and in comics, including a linear logic of cause and effect, object continuity through time and space, and internal stylistic and tonal consistency. As I will argue, however, once one recovers from the initially jarring effect that results from *The Projector*'s disregard for these conventions, and begins to engage more actively in the process of piecing together meaning, it will be possible to see that book is very far from being devoid of an intelligible content.

Given the *The Projector*'s deliberate eschewal of logical orderliness, this search for meaning must proceed to some extent in an intuitive rather than a methodical fashion, and it is doubtless true that, in the words of an early commentator, "each individual's experience with the book will likely be as unique as the book itself."<sup>76</sup> However, the book does proceed through a series of thematic emphases, through which a coherent set of preoccupations begins to emerge. These preoccupations become much clearer, moreover, when considered within the cultural context in which the work was produced.

Essentially, *The Projector* is concerned with the subversion of conventional representations of reality. This subversive intent assumes three main forms, with much overlap between them: The subversion of an alienating consumer-capitalist social order; the subversion of a "normal" visual perception of reality, in a manner that parallels the so-called "psychedelic" movement in the arts during the same period; and finally, the subversion of conventional modes of ordering narrative, as discussed above. *The*

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and sterile conclusions and solutions but rather the evolution of an arena of words and images within which the reader / spectator can perform an active and participating role." Dust jacket quoted by Domingos Isabelinho in Domingos Isabelinho, "The Ghost of a Character: *The Cage* by Martin Vaughn-James" *Indy Magazine*, Summer 2004, n.p. [http://www.indyworld.com/indy/summer\\_2004/isabelinho\\_cage/index.html](http://www.indyworld.com/indy/summer_2004/isabelinho_cage/index.html) As well as referencing the collision of text and image with which *The Projector*'s audience must contend with, the term is also probably intended to reinforce the book's titular metaphor.

<sup>76</sup> Sarah E. McCutcheon, "Coach House – mixing design and content," *The Gazette* (March 18, 1972), 47.

*Projector*'s form can thus be considered as an inherent and complimentary component of its overall message.

In discussing *The Projector*'s use of these three strategies in turn, I will also discuss how they illuminate different facets of the appeal of comics to the artistic avant-garde of the period. While Martin Vaughn-James appears to have been somewhat wary of associating the term with his work,<sup>77</sup> *The Projector* is essentially a comic book. As such, it stands as a particularly developed product of the heightened interest in comics among the literary and artistic avant-garde in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

### **Subverting the Society of the Spectacle**

*The Projector* is divided into three sections of varying lengths, dubbed "passages", as well as a short introductory sequence.

This opening sequence begins, as already described, with a tranquil vision of a residential street, rendered in meticulously detailed black-and-white line drawings that suggest a fairly literal transcription of reality. This impression of realism in the first few pages is quickly dispelled by the irruption of the wrapped-up rider, and a series of progressively more bizarre images leading up to the title page of the "First Passage," the heading of which is "Fat on the Brain." This section opens with the above-mentioned confrontation between the man with the newspaper affixed to his face and the book's bald-headed protagonist, who makes his first appearance here.

Throughout the rest of the section's 48 pages, we are confronted with a variety of sequences that seem to allude to the dehumanizing and alienating aspects of

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<sup>77</sup> "Although my first two books are without much closer to the comic-book form than they are to anything else," he writes in an artist's statement in 1982, "I'm not really an enthusiastic reader of the *bande dessinée* as such." Vaughn-James, "A Statement," 22.

contemporary society. These include: an endless car pileup along an expressway lined with icons of consumerist desire; a conveyor belt on which men and women in business suits file by on their hands and knees, clenching suitcases inscribed with serial identification codes between their teeth; a juxtaposition between images of men in suits waiting on a subway platform and of the various stages in the processing of cattle in a meat packing plant; and a house party at which the guests engage in inconsequential chatter while stabbing at one another with scissors.

It is also in this “First Passage” that we are presented for the first time in the narrative with the recurring object that gives the book its title. This is an old-fashioned lantern slide projector, which is always depicted blown up to an immense scale. In this first appearance, the projector looks to be the size of a large building, and is set upon a raised mound in the middle of a desert landscape, facing an equally monumentally-sized screen. The word “LIFE” is then projected upon the screen, only that each letter of the word appears in reverse, recalling what happens when a slide is placed backwards into a slide tray (except that the letters still appear in the correct order -from left to right- in relation to one another) (fig. 18). In each of the following four panels, we are presented with a statement within a dialogue balloon in which one symbolically charged word appears reversed in this fashion: “Yes, I’d say I was free (“free” appears reversed)... yes,” reads a line that appears to be spoken by a car projected onto the screen; “Uh-uh... I love (“love” appears reversed) my wife... I guess,” says a man on a television screen, and so on.<sup>78</sup> In these projected images, such fundamental human concepts as freedom and love, and indeed life itself, are transformed into empty, inconsequential abstractions.

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<sup>78</sup> The reversed words in the statements in the other two panels are “law” and “man.”

Given that Vaughn-James opted to title his graphic narrative after the image of the projector, we may assume that it constitutes a key to the reading of the book as a whole. In a 1977 interview, the artist stated that he selected the image of the slide projector because he had been looking for “a metaphor, not only for ‘society’ but for the generative process of narration itself.”<sup>79</sup> Leaving aside the reference to narrative, which will be dealt with in a later section, what can one make of this comparison of society to a slide projector? If one considers the sequence described above, in which the projector appears to be casting distorted facsimiles of human sentiments and values, it can be speculated that Vaughn-James is thinking of the way in which the individual in contemporary capitalist society is constantly being presented with a falsified, illusory vision of reality.

This supposition is reinforced by various other elements in the narrative, particularly in the “First Passage.” One may consider for instance the previously mentioned scene of the traffic pileup, in which the sides of the expressway are lined with the towering embodiments of consumerist desires, drawn in such a way that they appear to have more substance and reality than the cartoonishly-rendered drivers to which these billboard-like presences (which indeed are transformed into billboards in the following panels) are addressing themselves (fig. 19). In the conveyor belt and subway platform scene, as well, the participants appear oblivious to the oppressiveness of their situation, while in the party scene, the polite chatter of the guests masks their true hostility towards one another.

Guy Debord, in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* (originally published in French in 1967, translated into English in 1970) postulated the advent of a society in

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<sup>79</sup> Geoff Hancock, “An Interview with Martin Vaughn-James,” *The Canadian Fiction Magazine* 42 (1982): 16.

which individuals no longer experience their social reality directly, but instead passively contemplate an illusory “spectacle”, a set of primarily visually-oriented corporate-manufactured narratives idealizing a life of unbridled consumerism. The spectacle represents a further step in the dehumanizing effect of capitalism, from the “degradation of being into having” to “a generalized sliding from having into appearing,”<sup>80</sup> and “the affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance.”<sup>81</sup> Debord was the most prominent figure in the Situationist International, a mainly European-based group of Marxist-inspired intellectuals and artists calling for the overthrow of the consumer capitalist system. By engendering passivity and disengagement from the real world, the spectacle, according to Debord, is instrumental in upholding this system.

While it cannot be determined with certainty whether *The Projector* was inspired directly by Debord’s notions as laid out in *The Society of the Spectacle*, it would certainly seem to constitute a similar vision of contemporary capitalist society. This connection is reinforced by the profusion of imagery in *The Projector* relating to notions of representation and spectatorship: Not only the titular slide projector, but also the numerous recurring depictions of television screens and television viewers, of theatre stages and audience seating, of advertisements and of billboards: all seem to emphasize the constructed, representational nature of our perceived reality.

*The Projector* also appears to share some affinities with one of the Situationists’ most influential proposals for counteracting the domination of the spectacle. This is the artistic strategy of *détournement*, involving the modification of a previously produced mass media material, considered as an expression of the consumer capitalist system, in

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<sup>80</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: A Black & Red translation, 1970), Thesis 17, n.p.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, Thesis 10, n.p.

such a way that it expresses a critique of that system. Comics were one of the favourite objects of such Situationist détournements, and indeed would appear to have been ideally suited to this purpose. Not only were comics widely regarded as pure expressions of capitalist mass culture (it could be recalled that Clement Greenberg had listed comics alongside magazine covers and ads as examples of *kitsch* -debased commodity art),<sup>82</sup> comics also possessed the quality of being especially easy to subvert through the simple substitution of the original words contained within the dialogue balloons. A favourite strategy was to replace the original dialogue with extracts from essays of Situationist theory, lending the texts a note of subversive humour.

The influence of détournement can also be detected in the various *Snore Comix* collections produced by Coach House Press around the same period that they began publishing Vaughn-James's works.<sup>83</sup> Although the individual works within them are generally unsigned, these chapbooks are collectively attributed to various Toronto-based artists and poets, including Greg Curnoe, Michael Tims (later to achieve renown as A. A. Bronson of the General Idea collective), Victor Coleman, and bpNichol. They feature many re-appropriations of short commercial comics or European *photo-romans*, in which absurdist juxtapositions have been created through the substitution of the original dialogue with incongruous material such as advertisement copy or sexually explicit

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<sup>82</sup> Greenberg, 25. On the other hand, the Situationist René Viénet seems to have had a great respect for comics, as he described them as "the only truly popular literature of our time." René Viénet, "The Situationists and New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art," *Internationale Situationniste* #11 (October 1967), trans. Ken Knabb, Situationist International Online, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://www.eddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/against.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Cain, "Imprinting Identities: An Examination of the Emergence and Developing Identities of Coach House Press, 1967-1982" (PhD diss., York University, 2002), 85.

banter. Like the Situationist comics, moreover, the content of *Snore Comix* is often overtly political, referencing such issues as Canadian nationalism and the FLQ.<sup>84</sup>

Détournement comics are generally taken to involve the appropriation of previously existing comic book images, although there are also examples of Situationist “comics par réalisation directe,” comics composed entirely of original content, as for instance certain works drawn by André Bertrand or Gérard Joannes to accompany texts by Raoul Vaneigem.<sup>85</sup> While *The Projector* does not feature any appropriated drawings, certain aspects of the book do appear to have been inspired by détournement strategies. Most obviously, the text in the dialogue balloons and captions often seems incongruous with the accompanying drawings. An image of a meat packing plant, for instance, is accompanied with a caption describing a train passing over a railway bridge, while in a scene in the corridor of a ruined building the bald-headed protagonist holds some sheets of paper in front of his face and says (or reads from one of the sheets): “I am often reminded, as I **pass wind**, of my **desire** for a far **softer** tissue in which to wrap my **files!!**”

Vaughn-James’s use of various exaggeratedly cartoonish characters (who contrast sharply with other more realistically drawn characters, and with the often-times meticulously detailed backdrops) could also be read as a subversion of comics as a commercial mass medium, represented in its most artless and clichéd form. Speaking of the characters in his early graphic narratives, Vaughn-James describes them as “comic book characters, with all the limitations that definition implies, the evil pigs distorted

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 85. The *Front de Libération du Québec* (Quebec Liberation Front) was a terrorist organization aimed at achieving the independence of Quebec from Canada.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Genty, “La critique situationniste ou la pratique du dépassement de l’art,” Nothingness.org, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/fr/display/219>

from Disney, the bewildered dog, the bald anti-hero (in an era of hair).”<sup>86</sup> His recycling of these stock characters may thus be interpreted as an effort to subvert comics as a commercial medium. Albeit with a less direct, more subtle touch, *The Projector* may be read in part as echoing the Situationist practice of turning mass consumer culture against itself through the reappropriation and subversion of one of its characteristic forms of expression.

I have already described how the first section of *The Projector* lays out a critique of the dehumanizing effects of consumer-capitalist society. This critical message recedes into the background in the wordless second section, in which the bald-headed protagonist moves through a series of bizarre, surreal scenes, but returns with a vengeance in the “Third Passage,” entitled “Springtime in the Overcoat Pit.” This final section opens with a sequence in which the protagonist is depicted achieving various forms of normative societal success: He receives a promotion, obtains a diploma, wins a car race, and is awarded a trophy. Soon after this, however, the protagonist appears to snap, and enters into active revolt against “the system”, smashing a cash register with a shovel, setting off a bomb in an office building, and walking out from his job.

Far from the Marxist revolution envisioned by Debord, however, the revolt portrayed in *The Projector* is an individual one, leading towards personal liberation. As he leaves his office, exclaiming, “Damn this cube!”, the protagonist passes through a door that appears to be marked “Real Life,” and boards a train while declaring that “there are immense vistas!” Once aboard the train, however, the protagonist walks in on a compartment (looking much like an apartment interior) in which various long-haired countercultural types lounge about smoking from a hookah pipe, playing instruments, and

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<sup>86</sup> Hancock, 10.

singing: “We’re leaping off! We’re leaving it behind!!!” “But you’re still on board,” the bald-headed protagonist counters, and proceeds to jump off the train, which is in that moment passing over a high trestle bridge.

The moment immediately following the protagonist’s leap is depicted in an image spread over two pages, in which the passing train is seen from below. As in several of the previous depictions of trains throughout the narrative, its shape recalls that of the enormous slide projector. The bald-headed protagonist hurtles downwards from the train bridge towards the foreground of the picture plane. He appears to be laughing, and his right fist is raised in a gesture of triumph, for he is finally free of the projector, and of the oppressive, illusory existence that it represents.

### **The Liberation of Perception**

In this same two-page image, the bottom portions of the trestle bridge supports appear to be morphing into columns of lush vegetation. During the course of the following six pages, we are presented with a wordless sequence in which vegetable forms are depicted sprouting out from malleable-looking, shape-shifting objects, and gradually growing until they take over the entirety of the picture plane. These vegetable forms themselves then begin to morph into more stylized and geometric shapes, until by the last page of this sequence, the depicted imagery appears almost wholly abstract. Startlingly, the sprouting plant forms, and the abstract shapes they grow into, are coloured a deep mauve, whereas all the drawings up to this point in the book appear entirely in black and white (fig. 20).<sup>87</sup>

The imagery has a distinct hallucinatory quality, both in its dramatic injection of bright colour into an otherwise black and white world and in the ongoing metamorphosis

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<sup>87</sup> Or, more accurately, in black and beige, given that the book is printed on a beige-coloured paper.

of its abstract forms. Indeed, the sequence is strongly reminiscent of the “psychedelic” aesthetic which was a prominent aspect of so much of the visual art of the late sixties and early seventies, and which took its inspiration from the interior visions experienced under the influence of psychotropic drugs, especially LSD.

In his introductory essay to the catalogue of the 2005-2006 Tate exhibition, *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, Christoph Grunenberg characterizes the psychedelic style as tending towards “a maximalist representation of cosmological visions through formally complex, obsessively detailed, self-involved abstract designs.”<sup>88</sup> The imagery in the above mentioned sequence of the *The Projector* corresponds quite well with this description. This section is very much the exception, however, as the remainder of *The Projector* features recognizably figurative imagery, which, moreover, exhibits little or none of the curvilinear flourishes and orientalising decorativeness that are usually associated with the psychedelic style in the graphic arts.

Nevertheless, the unprecedented use of colour in the short abstract sequence and its position nearly at the very end of the narrative suggest its central importance to the interpretation *The Projector* as a whole. And indeed, it is easy to see how the non-linear, logic-defying nature of the narrative and its bizarre, surrealist imagery could be interpreted as an attempt at creating a hallucinatory reading experience, a psychedelic “trip” on paper.

This is especially true of the “Second Passage” of the narrative, entitled “Scythes in the Night.” In the thirty pages that make up this entirely wordless section, the protagonist moves through a succession of landscapes, cityscapes, and interiors, all

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<sup>88</sup> Christoph Grunenberg, “The Politics of Ecstasy: Art for the Mind and Body” in *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, ed. Christopher Grunenberg (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 17.

devoid of other human figures, and characterized by incongruous juxtapositions or visual reversals. These include: a city scene in which everything, from the cars to the clouds, appears to be constructed entirely out of bricks; a subway car being invaded by giant cacti; a bathroom in which the bathtub, the toilet, and sink project outwards from the walls rather than resting on the floor; and a palatial home set on its side, so that its horizontal lines run perpendicular to the ground.

The depiction of absurd, dreamlike imagery in this section, and throughout *The Projector* as a whole, is of course strongly reminiscent of Surrealism, and indeed, there is no doubt that Surrealism constituted a central source of inspiration for Vaughn-James in the creation of his graphic narrative.<sup>89</sup> In his 1982 interview, he states that, “Surrealism had a big influence on my early work. The whole idea of transforming life through ‘the Marvelous’, the resolution of paradox, the liberation of subconscious desires and all that.”<sup>90</sup> The European art movement is directly alluded to at the very beginning of *The Projector*, as the book is prefaced with a quote from André Breton’s *Soluble Fish*.

This indebtedness to surrealism is a characteristic that Vaughn-James shared with Buzzati, whose painting practice was heavily influenced by the Surrealist and proto-Surrealist masters, such as René Magritte, Salvador Dali, and Giorgio De Chirico. It seems likely that this Surrealist influence may have played a large part in predisposing both Vaughn-James and Buzzati to embracing the comics medium, given the movement’s interest in certain mass-produced forms of visual expression, such as print illustrations. It

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<sup>89</sup> In his review of *The Projector*, Greg Curnoe writes that “It gives some indication of the resurgence of surrealism in Canada.” Greg Curnoe “The Projector” *The Canadian Forum* v. 52, 617 (June 1972), 41. Aside from this comment and a general complimentary phrase, Curnoe’s review consists entirely of a scene-by-scene description of the book’s unfolding narrative, from beginning to end. This strictly descriptive approach may indicate Curnoe’s unwillingness to venture an interpretative framework for such an abstract, open-ended work.

<sup>90</sup> Hancock, 13.

should also be remembered in this regard that Max Ernst created an entirely visual book-length narrative of his own, the collage-based *Une semaine de bonté*, which was first published in 1934.<sup>91</sup>

The Surrealism of *The Projector*, however, would appear to be a Surrealism filtered through the influence of psychedelia.<sup>92</sup> This can principally be seen in the way the book's bizarre, mind-bending imagery and narrative techniques appear to be aimed at expanding the reader's modes of conscious perception, as well as in the way this expansion of consciousness is presented as a means of escaping the strictures of a conformist and oppressive societal order.

Psychedelic art was not intended merely to capture the hallucinatory sensations of a drug experience in visual form, but also, as Grunenberg puts it, "to serve as a sensual catalyst in the evocation of fantastic, mind-expanding visions and to stimulate creative activity."<sup>93</sup> This intent fits quite well with Vaughn-James' characterization of *The Projector* as a narrative "in which the reader/spectator can play an active and participatory role,"<sup>94</sup> as well as with his later declaration that "the whole idea of changing the reader" had held a great deal of interest for him in the creation of his early visual novels.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> In his 1977 interview with Geoff Hancock, Vaughn-James points to "Max Ernst's collage novels" as the most closely relatable work to his own. He also mentions "those woodcut narratives of the same period," presumably the wordless novels of Frans Masereel and of Lynn Ward.

<sup>92</sup> It could be mentioned that psychedelic art had been characterized by the critic Barry N. Schwartz in a 1968 article as the "Surrealism of our technological age." Grunenberg, 17.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>94</sup> McCutcheon, 47. Given that this declaration is presented in quotation marks by McCutcheon in her article, we can assume that it is a quote from Vaughn-James. There is also the possibility that it is a quote from someone else working at Coach House Press, although it seems likely, in that case, that they would be paraphrasing one of the artist's own declarations.

<sup>95</sup> Hancock, 7-8.

While the psychedelic ethos stressed the importance of individual liberation, it was also at the heart of a collective social project conceived in opposition to the dominant, “establishment” culture. The overthrow of the existing social order was the long-term objective, but in the meantime the form of personal resistance most commonly espoused was to disengage oneself from status quo society,<sup>96</sup> to “tune in, turn on, and drop out,” as Timothy Leary famously put it. I have already discussed in the previous section of this essay how *The Projector* can be seen as constituting a revolt against an oppressive consumer capitalist system, one which can be read in part as a reflection of the revolutionary message advocated by the European Situationists. In the end, however, Vaughn-James’s protagonist achieves personal liberation not by taking direct action against the system, but by jumping off—quite literally “dropping out”—from the train/projector, which, as previously discussed, is conceived of as a metaphor for society.

In the two pages that follow the sequence with the mauve vegetation -the final two pages of the narrative- we return to the quiet residential street depicted in the opening sequence. The images are once again in black and white. The bald-headed protagonist is depicted walking down the street, and looking about himself with a contented -- liberated?-- smile upon his face. While the leafless trees in the opening sequence suggested the late fall or winter, the vegetation now appears to be in the full bloom of spring, perhaps indicating a new sense of hopefulness.

Given that *The Projector* opens and closes with a view of the same tranquil street, and that these images are perhaps the only ones in the entire book that present a “normal”

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<sup>96</sup> Joe Austin, “Rome is Burning (Psychedelic): Traces of the Social and Historical Contexts of Psychedelia” in *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, ed. Christopher Grunenberg (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 190.

vision of reality, it is my belief that the narrative as a whole can be read as a kind of psychedelic “trip”, as a liberatory flight into the irrational. The visually uninflected street scene could then be seen as the representation of our everyday reality, a reality to which, at the end of Vaughn-James’s book, we are ultimately restored, although hopefully not without having refreshed or expanded our perception of it. The “Second Passage” can also be read as “trip within the trip,” as the absence of secondary characters and the particularly surreal imagery seem to represent an interior journey for the protagonist (one that, moreover, is contrasted quite explicitly with the societal metaphor of the projector, which appears, in a particularly menacing aspect, both immediately before this section and at its close).

While *The Projector* would thus appear to have drawn a considerable degree of inspiration from the psychedelic movement, it is important to note that Vaughn-James seems to have kept a certain distance from certain aspects of the countercultural lifestyle. Many of the characters appear to be caricatures of countercultural “hippie” types, as in the above-mentioned scene aboard the train, and it should be recalled that, with reference to *The Projector*’s protagonist, Vaughn-James explicitly contrasted his baldness with the florid hirsuteness of “an era of hair.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, there are no explicit references to drug use, and indeed Vaughn-James claimed to have never used drugs himself.<sup>98</sup> His interest in psychedelia would appear to have been associated not so much with the liberatory possibilities of drug use as with the overall tendencies towards experimentation and revolution being felt at the time both in politics and in the arts. This at any rate is the

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<sup>97</sup> Hancock, 10.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

impression that emerges from this quote in which Vaughn-James describes his arrival in Canada in the summer of 1968:

The “counter-culture” was at its height. It was the “Trudeau years” — deserters, the Vietnam War, the FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec), Canadian identity, May 68, American assassinations, Watergate, Pop Art, Bacon, Dylan and Zappa, Borges, Bergman and Beckett, Godard and Pasolini. And I was immersed in it. The psychedelic made its presence felt in graphic art and the distant thunder of revolutions could be heard on the calm, green streets of Canada.<sup>99</sup>

Another factor pointing to a psychedelic aspect to *The Projector* is the close identification of its publisher, Coach House Press, with Toronto’s psychedelic drug counterculture.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, many Coach House publications that appeared during this period bore a colophon that read, “Printed in Canada on Canadian Paper by Mindless Acid FreaKs.” Although this inscription was clearly meant to be taken somewhat ironically, a great deal of their published works contained more or less explicit references to drug use.<sup>101</sup> In the case of one publication, the use of drugs may have been more than just referenced: Each copy of Stan Bevington’s wordless three-page booklet, *Pink White and Clear* (1968) was rumoured to have been dabbled with a drop of LSD.<sup>102</sup>

Coach House’s association with the international drug counterculture was likely a decisive factor in the press’s foray into comics at the turn of the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> 1968 saw the publishing in San Francisco of the first issue of Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix*, an event sometimes seen as marking the beginning of the “underground comix” phenomenon.<sup>104</sup> These comics, in the same manner as the music, poetry, and other cultural manifestations

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<sup>99</sup> Martin Vaughn-James, “La Cage ou la machine à fabriquer des images,” trans. Fanny Soubiran, preface to *La Cage*, by Martin Vaughn-James, trans. Marc Avelot (Paris, Brussels and Montreal: Les 400 coups, 2006), n.p.

<sup>100</sup> Cain, 84.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>104</sup> Gardner, 119.

emanating from San Francisco's "Haight-Ashbury scene," were strongly associated with, and frequently referenced, the consumption of psychotropic drugs. Indeed, Crumb credited his extensive use of LSD during this period as providing much of the creative spark for his revolutionary approach to comics,<sup>105</sup> and many of his more abstract comics from the period appear to represent an attempt to capture the experience of an acid trip in comics form.<sup>106</sup>

As mentioned above, in 1969, Coach House published the first of its *Snore Comix* collections, the spelling of which was meant as a reference to the American comix movement.<sup>107</sup> The actual content of these comics, however, has little in common with the production of Crumb et al., being far more indebted to the kind of avant-garde experimentation habitually found in the publications of Coach House Press, with a pronounced influence of Dadaism, Surrealism, and Situationist *détournement*.<sup>108</sup> The same can be said of *The Projector*: Vaughn-James's visual narrative shares in the underground cartoonist's subversive ethos, and also bears an occasional stylistic similarity with certain exponents of the American underground (particularly the finely rendered black-and-white psychedelic forms of Victor Moscoso<sup>109</sup> and the grotesquely caricatural faces of S. Clay Wilson). Ultimately, however, it takes a far more self-consciously literary and experimental approach. *Snore Comix* and *The Projector*, unlike their American comix counterparts, were the creations of practitioners with a primarily

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Crumb and Peter Poplaski, *The R. Crumb Handbook* (London: MQP, 2005), 132.

<sup>106</sup> Gardner, 120. One thinks, for example, of the entirely wordless "Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics" in *Zap Comix No. 1*.

<sup>107</sup> The influence of Robert Crumb's comix on *Snore Comix* is explicitly mentioned in the Coach House's *Twenty/20* catalogue, where it is stated: "First there was R. Crumb's *Zap Comix*. Then there was *Snore Comix*." Cain, 120.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>109</sup> The likeness to Moscoso has been noted by Domingos Isabelinho in relation to *The Cage*. Domingos Isabelinho, "The Ghost of a Character: *The Cage* by Martin Vaughn-James" *Indy Magazine*, Summer 2004, n.p. [http://www.indyworld.com/indy/summer\\_2004/isabelinho\\_cage/index.html](http://www.indyworld.com/indy/summer_2004/isabelinho_cage/index.html)

avant-garde, even “high” art sensibility who were seeking fresh inspiration in a popular artistic form. The works of the American underground cartoonists, on the other hand, appear to actually *be* an instance of this popular artistic form, albeit one that has been endowed with a radically new range of expression.

American comix were instrumental in challenging the widespread perception of comics as being exclusively a subset of children’s literature, as well as in associating the medium to psychedelic drugs and an anti-establishment social stance. For Martin Vaughn-James and other avant-garde artists seeking to express a countercultural message that was inspired in part by the consciousness-expanding effects of psychotropic drugs, the work of the underground cartoonists rendered the medium of comics an obvious choice.

### **Challenging the Conventions of Narrative**

It has already been mentioned how, in a 1982 interview, Martin Vaughn-James stated that his use of the recurring image of an old slide projector was intended as a metaphor for “society.” The artist added, however, that the slide projector was also meant to embody a second metaphor, one representing “the generative process of narration itself.” How are we to interpret this statement, which Vaughn-James did not elaborate upon?

First off, it seems Vaughn-James wanted to call attention to his “visual novel” as a distinctive art form. *The Projector*’s titular “mechanistic metaphor,” as he later termed it in his introduction to the French edition of *The Cage*,<sup>110</sup> invites comparisons to an artefact in the history of visual technology (the slide projector depicted appears to be a Bausch & Lomb Balopticon Projector from the 1920s). The old-fashioned quality of this

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<sup>110</sup> Vaughn-James, “La Cage ou la machine à fabriquer des images,” n.p.

projector appealed to Vaughn-James, perhaps because of the lower reliability --and resultant openness to chance-- that it suggests. “My ‘Projector’ was a kind of image-making machine,” he says in the same preface, “a railway train, perhaps a bit dilapidated, that has been fitted out for one last voyage.”<sup>111</sup>

If we are to consider a slide projector in terms of the particular kind of narrative that it permits, namely the slide show, one of the device’s most distinct characteristics is the ease with which one can rearrange the images within it. Each reordering of the slides, moreover, will immediately suggest a new narrative relation between them, one that, in a typical slide show, is made explicit orally by the individual giving the presentation. A similar process could be seen to be at work in *The Projector*: Its various narrative sequences, and indeed even its individual comics panels, do not always bear an obvious relation to one another. It is only our ingrained mental habit of looking for causal links between the various individual elements in a sequence that leads us to construct a narrative logic out of this assemblage. Thus the term “projector” may also serve as a reference to the book’s reader. Owing to the abstract nature of Vaughn-James’s narrative, readers can only derive meaning from it if they are willing to project their own subjective interpretations onto its open-ended visual sequences.

This dependence on the reader to fill in missing information and connections is a characteristic of comics generally. As discussed by Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics*, comics rely on a process of “closure,” the mental ability to perceive a single completed idea out of incomplete, separately observed parts.<sup>112</sup> This closure is what allows the reader to perceive a single sequence of narrative between two panels depicting

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>112</sup> McCloud, 67.

separate instances in that sequence, for instance. As McCloud observes, the relationship between the panels need by no means be an obvious one in order for a meaningful relationship to be inferred between the panels. In a passage that recalls Surrealist theories on the capacity to evoke new meaning through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, he asks,

Is it possible for *any* sequence of panels to be *totally unrelated* to each other? Personally, I don't *think* so. No matter how *dissimilar* one image may be to another, there is a kind of *alchemy* at work in the space between panels which can help us find *meaning* or *resonance* in even the most *jarring* combinations.<sup>113</sup>

As I shall discuss in this section, the book is conceived in such a way as to preclude a linear, “objective” reading, thus transforming the reader into an active participant in the creation of meaning within its pages. Underlying my discussion of *The Projector* thus far has been my conviction that the graphic narrative is far more intelligible than might appear from a first reading, and is intended to convey a definite message of social critique and personal liberation. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the book is deliberately conceived to confound the reader’s efforts to impose a logical order upon it. Rowan Sirkie, in describing *Elephant* and *The Projector* in his brief introductory text for the catalogue of Vaughn-James’s 1975 solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario,<sup>114</sup> describes how “Images and words, freed from logical contexture, create absurd and startling oppositions that cannot be ordered, and in fact contradict and falsify the very idea of orderliness”<sup>115</sup> Directly indicative of the calculated nature of the

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>114</sup> The AGO’s decision to put on an exhibition devoted entirely to the work of an obscure artist working in the then critically undervalued fields of illustration and comics is a surprising one. Although I have unfortunately not been able to obtain any information as to how this exhibition came about, it could be speculated that it was the result of some personal esteem for Vaughn-James’s work on the part of one or more individuals closely connected to the museum.

<sup>115</sup> Rowan Sirkie, “Visual Narratives by Martin Vaughn-James” in *Image... Word... Sequence: Visual Narratives by Martin Vaughn-James* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1975), n.p.

disruption of readers' narrative expectations is this statement from Vaughn-James' 1982 interview, pertaining to his use of the conventions of comics:

I filled speech balloons with narrative instead of dialogue, or described a place or action in a fragment of text that didn't correspond to the image below or even somewhere else in the book, I repeated images, re-ordered the chronology in an attempt to free the narrative to operate on many levels simultaneously.<sup>116</sup>

One should consider as well the André Breton quote that prefaces *The Projector*, taken from the Surrealist writer's poetic novel *Soluble Fish* (1924):

... We are taking the machines that have ceased to be useful, and also a few others that were beginning to be useful, to the bottom of the water, at great expense, and it is a pleasure to see the mud voluptuously paralyze things that worked so well.

While this citation may be taken as a reference to the overthrow of the mechanized social order that *The Projector* seems to be advocating, it could also be read in relation to the book's subversion of the established conventions of narrative.

As I suggested in the introduction to my discussion of *The Projector*, the book cannot really be said to have a plot in the traditional sense. Rather, the narrative proceeds through an accumulation of thematic elements whose meaning can only be derived aggregately, in the relationship that these elements bear to all the others. Readers must cease to focus on the strictly linear connection between the successive textual and visual elements, and begin to take a more participatory role, what Marshall McLuhan termed "depth reading."<sup>117</sup>

Throughout *Understanding Media*, McLuhan holds up television as the pre-eminent example of the emerging media that he saw as challenging the more linear and rational modes of engagement privileged by "literary man." This brings to mind a short sequence in *The Projector* that immediately follows the first appearance of the man with

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<sup>116</sup> Hancock, 22.

<sup>117</sup> McLuhan, 315.

the newspaper affixed to his face: The same figure is shown seated in front of a television set, his view of the screen completely obscured, as before, by the “typographic extension” to his person (fig. 21). “Explain yourself!” he shouts at the screen, upon which the bald-headed protagonist presently appears, his head bizarrely held aloft by a hand that emerges from out of his shirt collar, in lieu of a neck. “Impossible!” he replies, an amused smile upon his face. A parallel seems to be established between the kind of engagement required by Vaughn-James’s graphic narrative and that of the new media of the “electronic age” as perceived by McLuhan. It should be recalled in this regard that McLuhan specifically likened comics to television in that they were also “a highly participational form of expression.”<sup>118</sup>

Certainly, McLuhan’s media theories would appear to have been an influence on Stan Bevington, the founder of Coach House and the press’s “head printer” at the time that it published Vaughn-James’s works. Bevington’s assertion in a 1967 interview that, “with the advent of other media, electronics and such, books need to be re-evaluated”<sup>119</sup> would seem very much to echo Marshall McLuhan’s prediction that, “the book, as it loses its monopoly as a cultural form, will acquire new roles.”<sup>120</sup>

In this same interview, Bevington states his desire to expand the potentialities of the book as a medium onto itself, “to explore more closely,” as he puts it, “books as a form of communication.”<sup>121</sup> And indeed, as noted by Stephen Cain in his case study of Coach House, one of the defining elements of the press’s book production in the late

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 165. This idea is echoed by Jared Gardner in his recent (2012) book chronicling the transformation of the comics throughout the last century, significantly titled “Projections,” in which he argues that the comics form “depends inevitably on a participatory relationship to its readers,” demanding that they “project themselves actively into [it].” Gardner, xiii.

<sup>119</sup> Stan Bevington, “Small presses: An Interview”, *Canadian Forum* 47 (1967), 108.

<sup>120</sup> Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992), 59.

<sup>121</sup> Bevington, 108.

1960s and in the 1970s was the use of visual and tactile elements to create a more direct interaction between the reader and the work.<sup>122</sup> Examples include: bpNichol's *Two Novels* (1969), containing adhesive illustrations that the reader is meant to affix within the pages of the narrative; Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* (1973), the perforated pages of which are intended to be torn out and arranged into a visual poem in whatever order the reader sees fit; and the dust jacket of George Bowering's *Genève* (1971), which can be unfolded to reveal a full-colour photograph of the sequence of tarot cards that inspired the book's poems. Noting the "difficulty of constructing a stable meaning, or of reaching narrative closure" in Vaughn-James's graphic narratives, Cain speculates that it was not only their visual aspect, but their encouragement of "active participation of readers in generating meaning" which relates them to Coach House's other experimentations with the book medium.<sup>123</sup> It is interesting to speculate on the influence that Coach House poets may have had on Vaughn-James's work. However, when asked in his 1982 interview with *The Canadian Fiction Magazine* whether he thought he had "anything in common with any Canadian writers of poetry or prose," including the specifically named bpNichol and bill bissett, Vaughn-James stated that he was "not familiar enough with their work to make a comparison."<sup>124</sup>

McLuhan was only one of many influential voices during this era contributing to a growing sense that established literary forms were entering a period of crisis. In 1967, the American novelist John Barth published his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," in which he postulates what he called the "used-upness" of the traditional novel as a fruitful

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<sup>122</sup> Cain, 101.

<sup>123</sup> Cain, 121.

<sup>124</sup> Hancock, 8.

means of artistic expression.<sup>125</sup> The same year saw the publication of Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," which undermined the importance of authorial intention and designated the reader as the true creator of meaning in a work.<sup>126</sup> And in 1969, John Updike gave a lecture to the Bristol Literary Society on the subject of "the death of the novel," in which he considered some of the new creative avenues that the novelists of the future might take, notably declaring that he saw "no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic-strip novel masterpiece."<sup>127</sup> Bristol, as it happens, was Martin Vaughn-James' hometown, and it is an interesting coincidence that Updike's prediction should have been validated --in such short order-- by a native son of the city in which it was put forth.

Also making the case for a radical renewal of literary narrative was the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. In *For a New Novel* (first published in French in 1963 as *Pour un nouveau roman*, translated into English in 1965), he argued that the great majority of modern novelists continue to mediate their vision of reality through the same literary conventions and narrative structures uncritically carried forward from the nineteenth-century, and encouraged novelists to create works that would instead make apparent the artificial nature of these constructs.<sup>128</sup> Directly relatable both to the figure with the newspaper affixed to his face in *The Projector*, and to McLuhan's ideas on the limitations of "literary man" is Robbe-Grillet's declaration that the "new novels" he

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<sup>125</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984).

<sup>126</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

<sup>127</sup> Paul Gravett, *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>128</sup> Robbe-Grillet also believed that writers should attempt as much as possible to describe their experience of reality in straightforward, "neutral" terms, and it is worth noting for the purpose of connecting these ideas to *The Projector* that Robbe-Grillet considered the sense of sight as the novelist's best weapon in this unmediated description of reality.

espouses, “are only difficult for those who insist on trying to impose their interpretative schemes on them,” and that, “it may even be the case that a certain kind of literary culture makes them more difficult to understand.”<sup>129</sup> Vaughn-James repeatedly cited Robbe-Grillet’s theories as a driving inspiration in the creation of his visual novels, and described *The Projector* specifically as “following in the wake of the Nouveau Roman.”<sup>130</sup>

Given that Vaughn-James’s first sustained use of comics, in *Elephant*, was aimed at the subversion of narrative conventions<sup>131</sup> in the same manner as *The Projector*,<sup>132</sup> it seems likely that he was attracted to the medium precisely because of the particular possibilities that it offered in that direction. Due to the comics’ striking combination of textual and visual elements, and their highly distinctive narrative devices (such as speech balloons, movement lines, and onomatopoeic renderings of sound), the artificiality of the medium’s narrative conventions may perhaps seem more readily apparent than what are ultimately the equally artificial conventions of prose fiction or film.

Certainly some of the earliest instances of avant-garde experimentation with comics would appear to be concerned mainly with the subversion of these medium-specific narrative conventions. Between 1952 and 1959, the San Francisco artist Jess Collins (usually referred to simply as Jess) produced his *Tricky Cad* “paste-ups,” created entirely out of Dick Tracy comics (from which the collage series derives its anagrammatic title). By re-arranging the images, the words, and the order of the panels,

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<sup>129</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1965), 140.

<sup>130</sup> Vaughn-James, “La Cage ou la machine à fabriquer des images,” n.p.

<sup>131</sup> Vaughn-James tells Geoff Hancock that his experimentation with comics began soon after his arrival in Canada, in 1968, with “little cartoons in sequences of 2, 4, 6 frames” that led directly to the creation of *Elephant*. *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>132</sup> Vaughn-James described *Elephant* former as “in some ways a dry-run” for *The Projector*. *Ibid.*, 10.

Jess transforms Chester Gould's classic crime comics into a surreal sequence of enigmatic juxtapositions and absurdist non-sequiturs.<sup>133</sup> Beginning in the early sixties, the Swedish artist and concrete poet Öyvind Fahlström performed a similar operation on George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat*.<sup>134</sup>

While Vaughn-James's subversion of narrative in *The Projector* presents analogies with these approaches, it is distinguished notably by the fact that all of the images are original, rather than appropriated from pre-existing comics. The individual panels do, however, often give the impression of having been rearranged from an original configuration into a less intelligible order, an effect that, as we have seen, Vaughn-James had specifically intended (and indeed, the use of original drawings calls attention to this deliberateness). Another major point of distinction is the sheer length of *The Projector*, which demands a sustained effort on the part of readers, and a commitment to suspend their ingrained narrative preconceptions. Furthermore, by responding, in a novel-length work, to the call of the literary avant-garde for a renewal of narrative,<sup>135</sup> *The Projector* implicitly makes the case for itself as an alternative to the novel, conceived of in its most "highbrow," literary form. In this respect, it anticipates –and decisively substantiates–the claims put forth in recent years on behalf of the graphic novel as an art form worthy of serious literary consideration.

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<sup>133</sup> Varnedoe and Gopnik, 193.

<sup>134</sup> Fahlström's approach to language structures and grammar in his poetry would appear to echo Vaughn-James's approach to narrative. In describing his poetry, Suzy Gablik describes how "Withholding syntactical connections achieved a richer implication: total experience rather than a rational, sequential one only." Suzy Gablik, "Öyvind Fahlström" in *Pop Art Redefined*, John Russell and Suzy Gablik, eds. (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praengers Publishers, 1969), 72.

"For me the only tradition I think about," Vaughn-James told Geoff Hancock, "is the modern one that goes back to Flaubert or Conrad or wherever you want to start it [...]" Hancock, 12.

## Conclusion

Examining *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector* side-by-side reveals the many commonalities that exist between these two works in spite of the very different cultural contexts in which their respective creators were operating. These commonalities include: the use of elements of comics as a means of experimenting both with narrative and with language, the appropriation of commercial imagery in order to subvert it or reveal its hidden subtexts, and the integration of canonical and contemporaneous “high brow” artistic and literary influences into a book of comics, or at least of comics-inspired work.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, these two books are to be understood within the context of a generalized interest in comics-derived forms of visual narrative among avant-garde artists and writers, a trend that peaked in the late sixties and early seventies. I would argue, moreover, that Buzzati and Vaughn-James’s works are among the most highly developed products of this experimentation, by virtue of the depth and multifaceted nature of their engagement with the comics form, as well as the uniquely sustained nature of their efforts, taking place as they do over the course of novel-length books. Despite these considerable achievements, however, neither Buzzati’s “poem in comics” nor Vaughn-James’s various “visual novels” served to usher in a new era of widespread experimentation with graphic narrative among creators having their main artistic reference points outside of the world of comics.

*Poema a fumetti* was a commercial and, for the most part, critical success, receiving a good deal of attention in the mainstream press, and quickly selling out its first edition. It received mainly positive reviews in the major periodicals, and garnered its

author the prize for “best comic of the year” from the newspaper *Paese Sera*.

Nevertheless, the book subsequently remained out of print for over twenty years, a fact that greatly limited its influence. It is true that the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by the emergence in Italy of the so-called *fumetti d'autore* (“auteur comics”), which emphasized personal expression and dealt with adult-oriented themes. However, the works of these cartoonists still followed the narrative conventions of comics, and showed no evidence of following Buzzati’s looser and highly poetic approach to the juxtaposition of image and words.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, *Poema a fumetti* does not seem to have inspired any other Italian writers to attempt to create their own visual narrative. In fact, Dino Buzzati remains, to my knowledge, the only example --in Italy or anywhere else-- of a prominent literary figure turning his hand to the writing and illustration of a long-form graphic narrative.

Martin Vaughn-James’s visual novels, all of which were published in runs of only a couple of thousand copies (at most), had even less of an immediate cultural resonance than did *Poema a fumetti*. Nor do his primary creative concerns appear to have been echoed by any of the key figures in the gradual evolution of underground comix towards the more “literary” and book-length form known as the “graphic novel.” These artists have generally seen themselves as expanding the expressive and thematic range of comics through an actualization of the true potentialities inherent to the form’s existing narrative structures, and are therefore very far from sharing Vaughn-James’s desire to

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<sup>136</sup> An exception may be found in some of the later comics of Andrea Pazienza, particularly his semi-autobiographical *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* (“The last days of Pompeo”), first published in 1987. Combining passages of more traditional comics storytelling with other pages dominated by text, this book-length work presents a gut-wrenching account of the cartoonist’s (ultimately fatal) struggle with heroin addiction. Testifying to the value of Pazienza’s narrative captions and dialogues as literary achievements in their own right is the fact that *Pompeo* is sometimes presented in the form of a public reading.

create narratives that would eschew “the accepted formulas or conventions of either the novel or the comic book.”<sup>137</sup>

As the contemporary graphic novel continues to develop in ever more ambitious and artistically daring directions, it has often times begun to mirror some of the concerns and strategies of the avant-garde experimentation with comics from four decades previous.<sup>138</sup> This renewed interest in non-conventional forms of comics art was no doubt a factor in the publishing of the first English-language edition of *Poema a fumetti* in 2009 and of the new French-language edition of Vaughn-James’s *The Cage* in 2006. In October 2013, Coach House Press reprinted *The Cage* in English for the first time since its original publication in 1975; it does not seem so unrealistic, therefore, to imagine that a reprint of *The Projector* might follow before too long.

It is to be hoped that a greater awareness of Buzzati and Vaughn-James’s work will also lead to a renewed interest among comics scholars and readers for the larger production of “avant-garde comics” during this era. More broadly, the critical re-examination of this phenomenon may help illuminate aspects of the other experimentations with combinations of visual and textual elements, with sequential narrative, and with popular culture during the same era, whether in pop art, artists’ books, or conceptual art. It is my particular hope that these areas of investigation may provide new openings towards the study of comics among art historians, who have tended to lag behind literary and communications scholars in exploring this multi-faceted art form.

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<sup>137</sup> Hancock, 6.

<sup>138</sup> In his 2007 book *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*, Bart Beaty recounts how the last decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the first of what he terms “modernist comics,” comics that, in the modernist tradition, call attention to and subvert the conventions of the medium. *The Projector* in particular can be seen as a very early precursor to this trend.

Many avant-garde comics from the 60s and 70s were only released as privately-published chapbooks, if at all, and there is no telling the quantity and variety of work that may yet turn up in searching through archival libraries or in the private archives of poets and artists who were active during this period. In recent years, the forays into comics of certain avant-garde poets such as bpNichol,<sup>139</sup> Kenneth Koch<sup>140</sup> and Joe Brainard<sup>141</sup> have been gathered together and published (respectively in 2002, 2004 and 2008). Jess Collins's *Tricky Cad* comics mash-ups were reproduced together in their entirety for the first time in 2012.<sup>142</sup> Eventually, enough such material may emerge as to prompt comics scholars to re-inscribe this forgotten period of avant-garde experimentation into the canonical history of comics. It is also to be hoped that the products of this experimentation, of which *Poema a fumetti* and *The Projector* are unquestionable highlights, may yet serve as inspirations to contemporary artists both inside and outside of comics, and thus contribute to the future development of graphic narrative.

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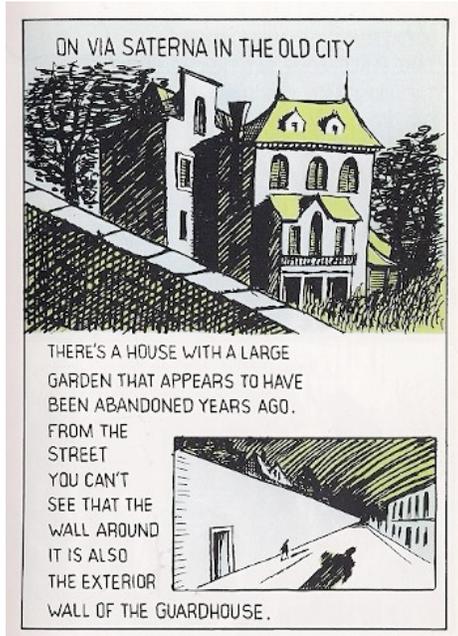
<sup>139</sup> bpNichol, *bpNichol Comics*.

<sup>140</sup> Kenneth Koch, *The Art of the Possible*.

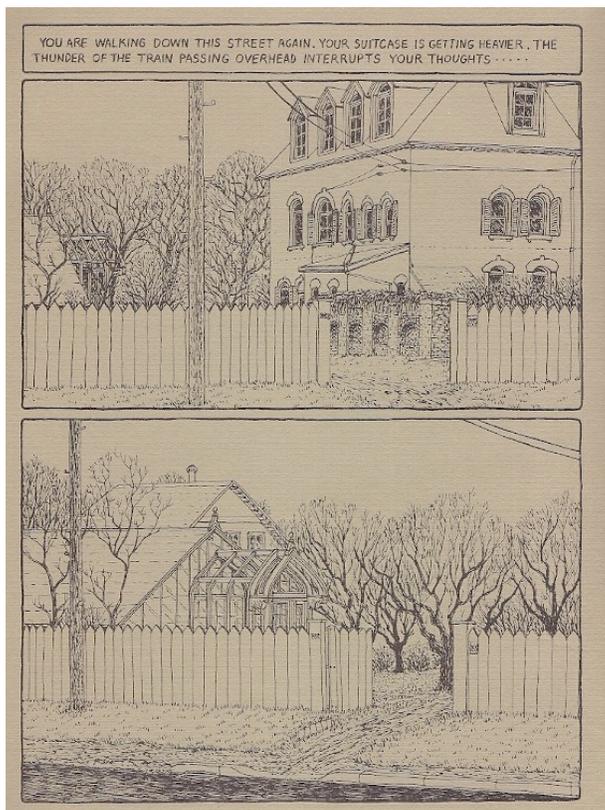
<sup>141</sup> Joe Brainard, *The Nancy Book*, ed. Ann Lauterbach and Ron Padgett (New York: Siglio Press, 2008).

<sup>142</sup> Jess, *Jess: O! Tricky Cad and Other Jessoterica*, ed. Michael Duncan (New York: Siglio Press, 2012).

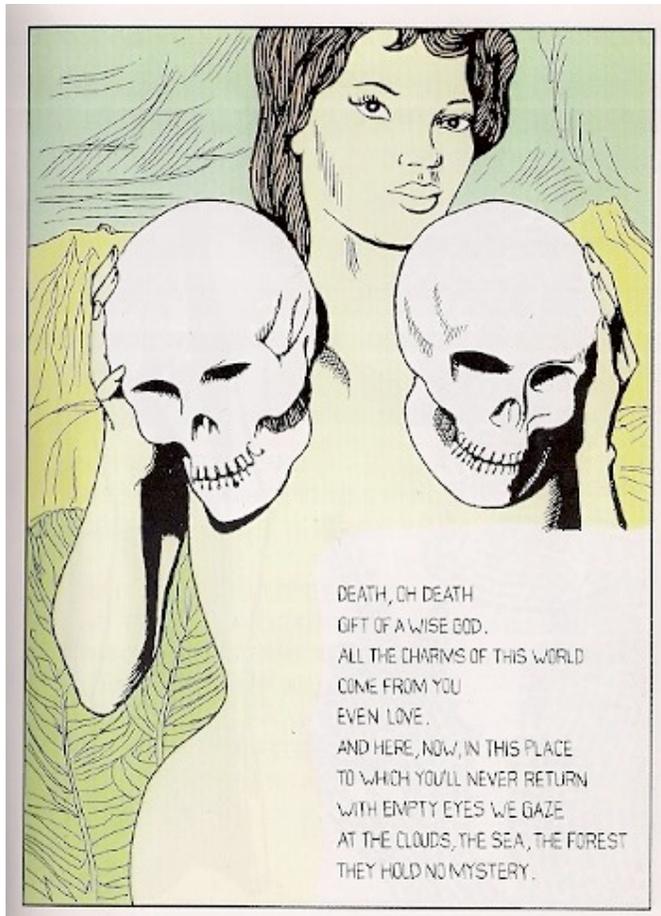
## Figures



**fig. 1** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 5. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



**fig. 2** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 5. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.

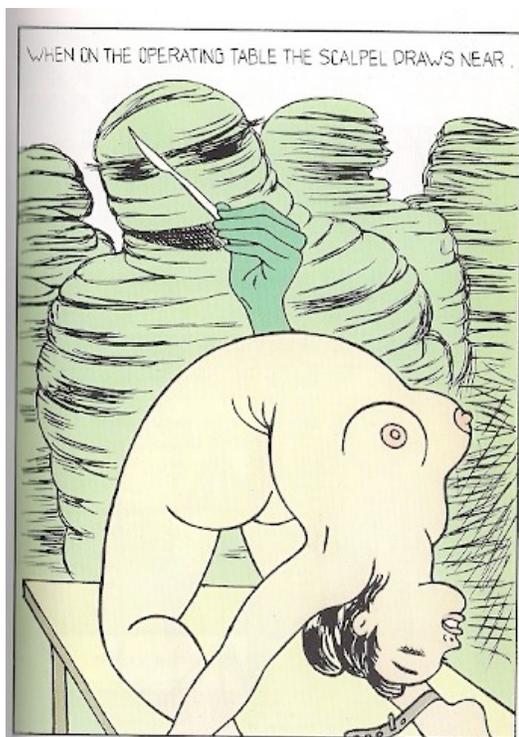


**fig. 3** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 87. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.

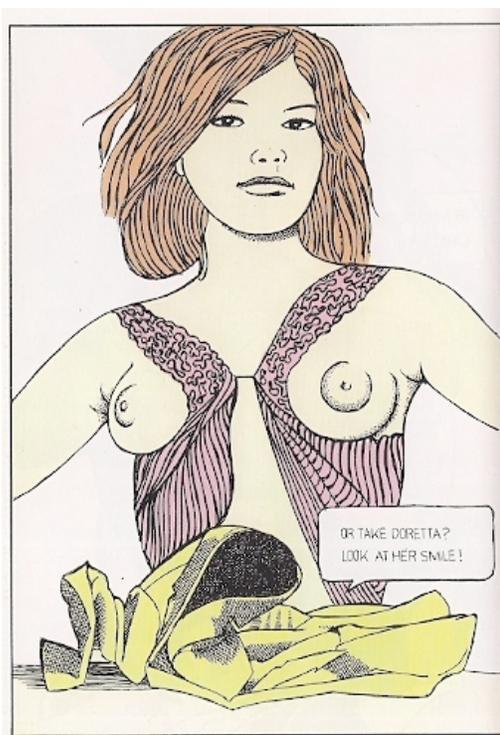


**fig. 4** Photograph of Mademoiselle Féline. In *Métaphysique du strip-tease*, 1961.





**fig. 7** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 119. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



**fig. 8** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 96. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



**fig. 9** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 6. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



**fig. 10** Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 28. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



fig. 11 Dino Buzzati. *Un utile indirizzo*, 1968. Acrylic on cardboard. 36 x 51 cm.

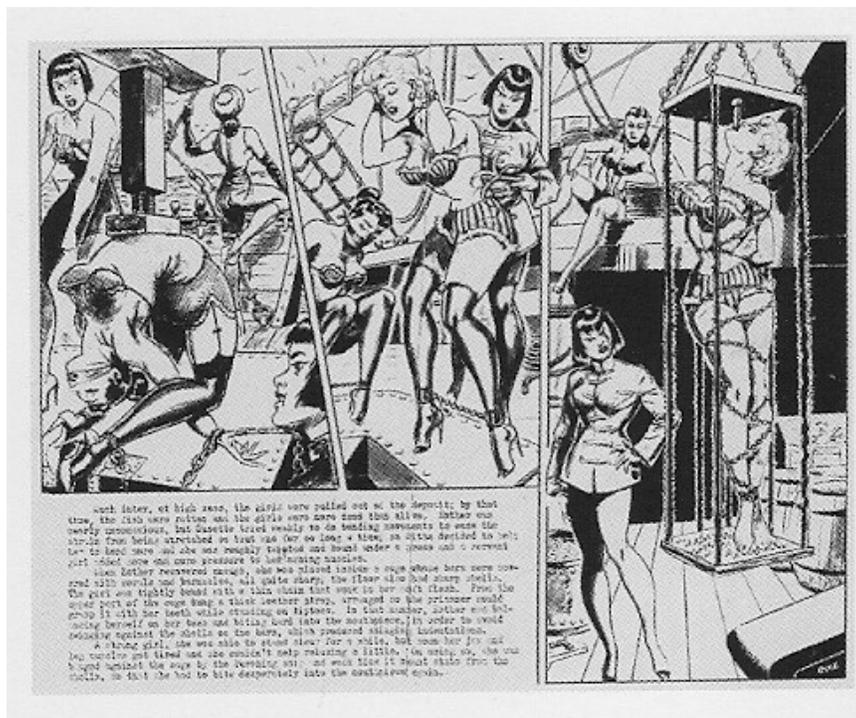


fig. 12 Ruiz. *Kidnapped and Enslaved*. New York: c. 1950s.

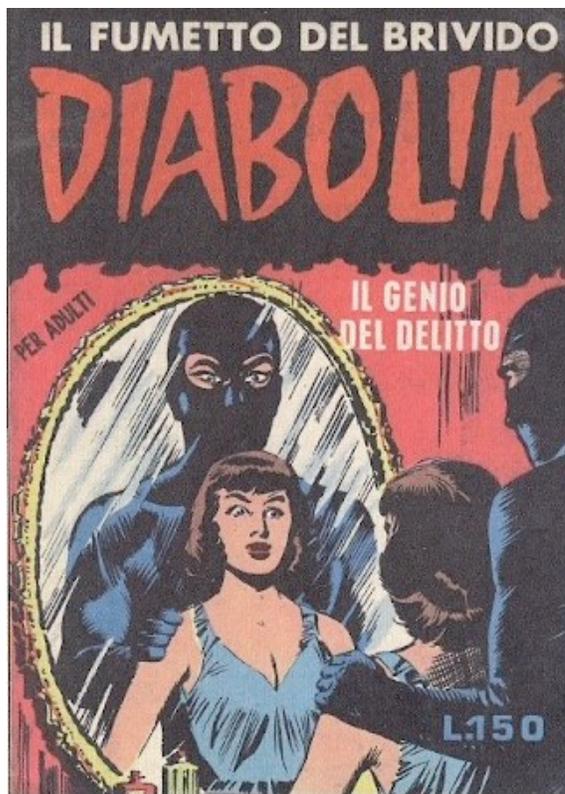


fig. 13 Cover of *Diabolik* n. 5 (May 5, 1963).

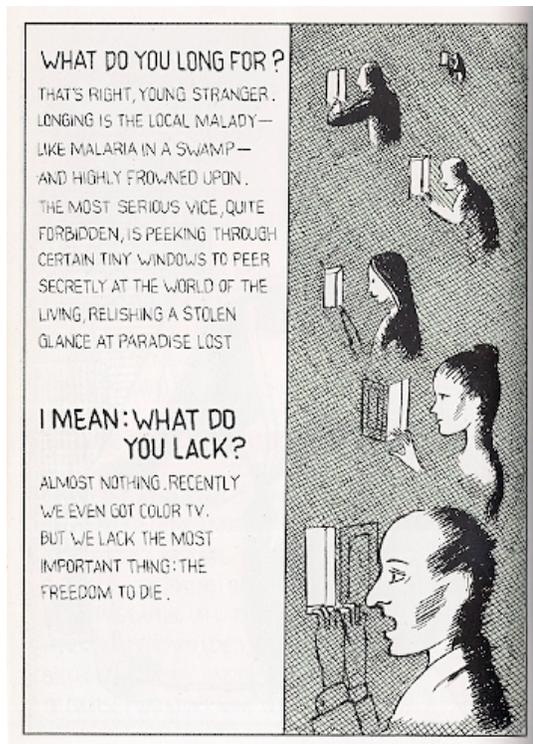


fig. 14 Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 74. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.



fig. 15 Dino Buzzati. *Poem Strip*, page 12. Translated by Marina Harss. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.

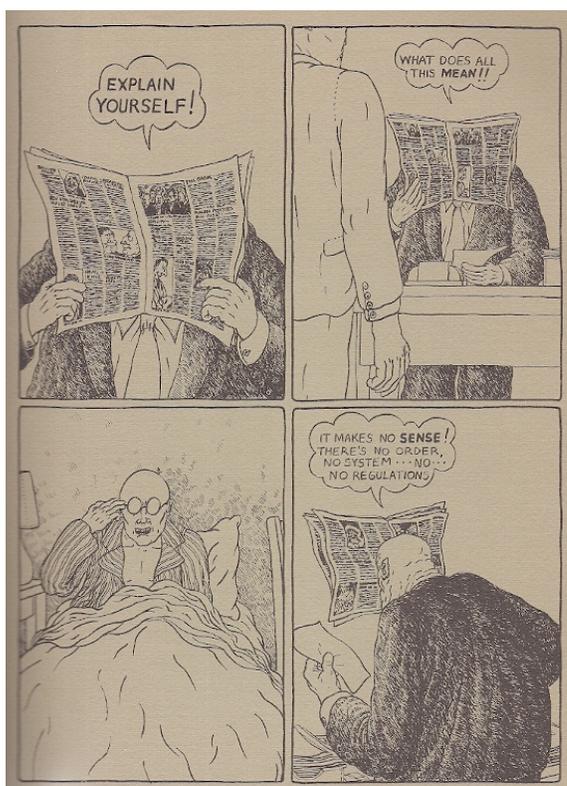
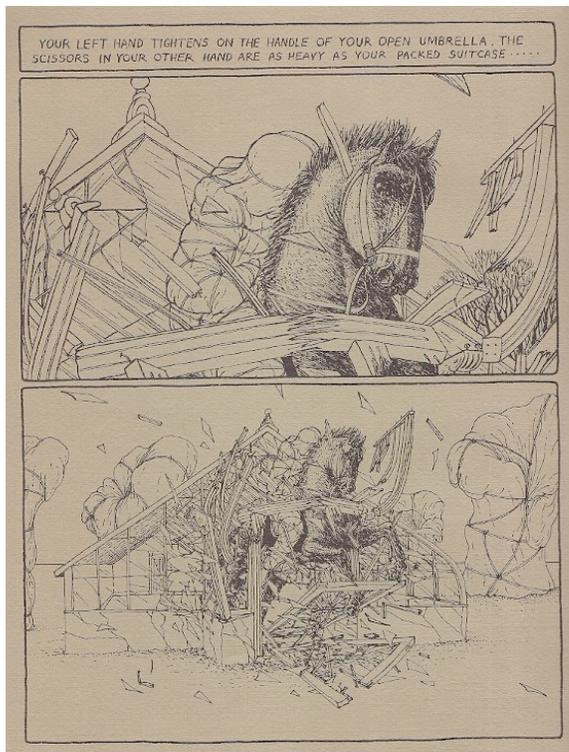
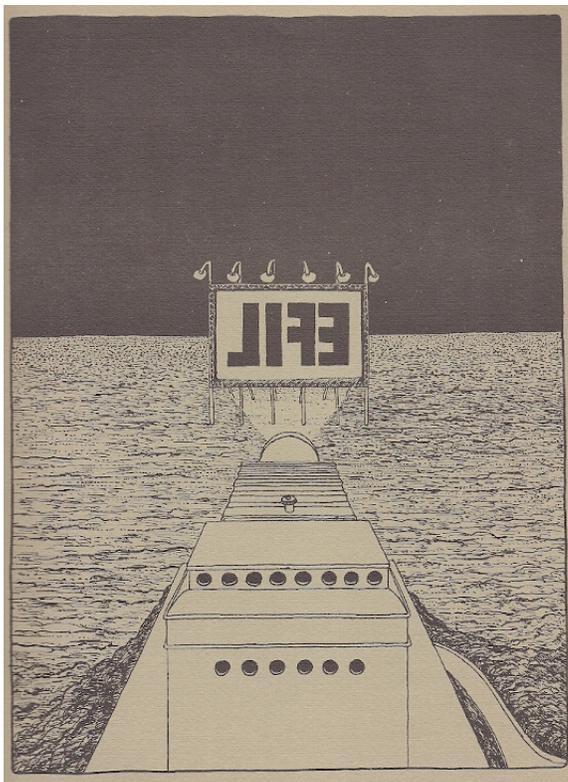


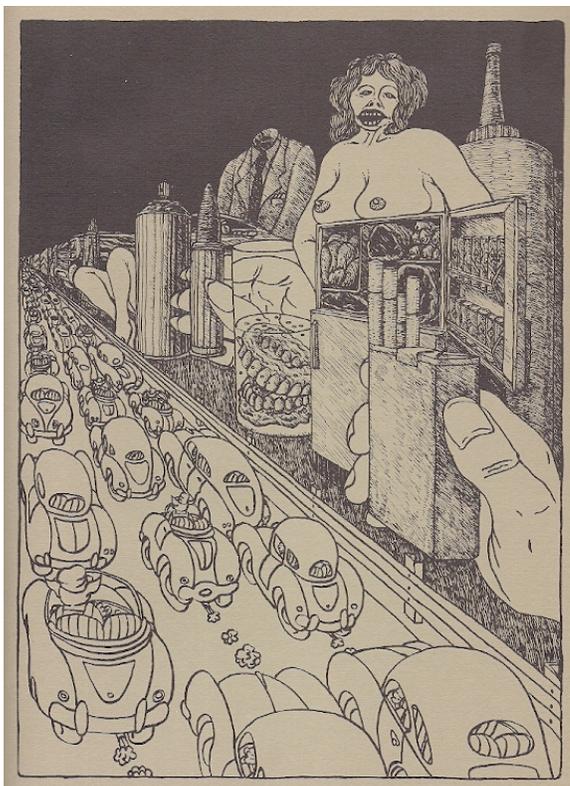
fig. 16 Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 16. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.



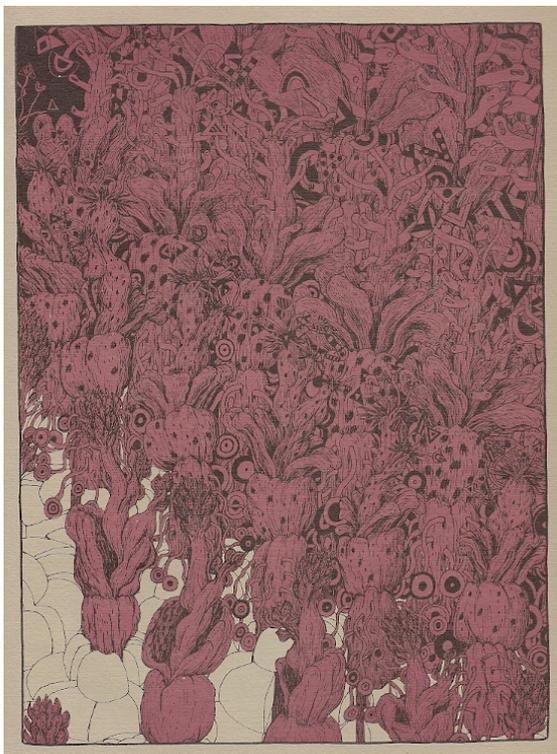
**fig. 17** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 7. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.



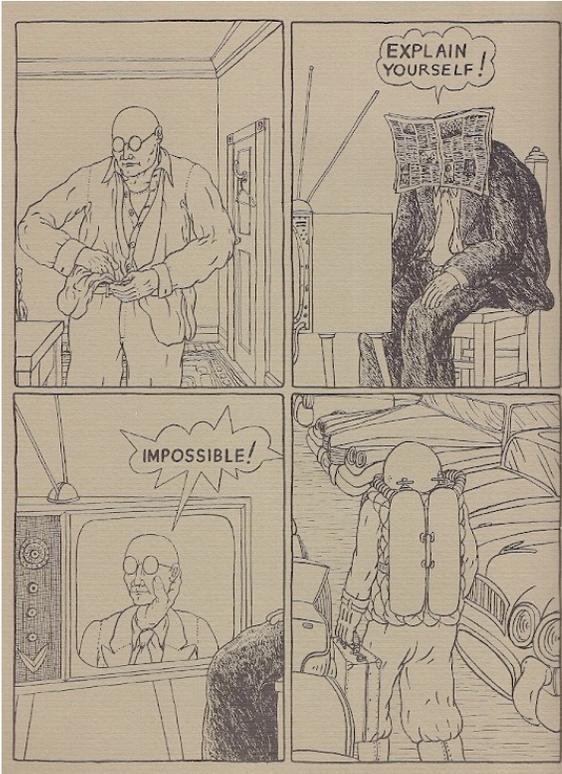
**fig. 18** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 56. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.



**fig. 19** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 28. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.



**fig. 20** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 118. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.



**Fig. 21** Martin Vaughn-James. *The Projector*, page 17. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971.

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