

CREPAX AND MAGNUS: THE ART OF PORNOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Abstract. *The paper will focus on the political dimension of two comics belonging to the golden era of the Italian comic-book genre fumetto nero: Guido Crepax's Valentina and Magnus & Bunker's Alan Ford. My claim is that their respective provocative effectiveness is the result of combination of two artistic approaches. Following Deleuze, I will name the first approach "pornological reflection" (i.e. the comic-book's specific capacity to mirror the perversities that are inherent to society). The second approach, I will describe as "meta-physical" – for it consists of the artist's capacity to "capture" (deeper layers of political) reality within its seemingly false negations.*

Keywords: *Crepax, Magnus, Alan Ford, pornological, false negation*

Introduction

Guido Crepax and Roberto Raviola (also known under the pseudonym Magnus) are two of the most famous and influential figures of the Italian comic-book genre, which emerged in the mid-sixties and became known as the *fumetto nero* (the black comic).

In this article, I will mainly focus on the political dimension of Crepax's and Raviola's art. More precisely, I will try to grasp the operative concepts that render their comics extremely effective (or even visionary) in terms of political interventions. In order to pin-point these operations, I will mostly limit my analysis to two of their best known comic-series: Crepax's erotic masterpiece *Valentina*, and *Alan Ford* – the legendary comic that Roberto Raviola created together with the text-writer and producer Luciano Secci (aka Max Bunker).

There are principally two methodological concepts linking Crepax's and Raviola's respective approaches:

a) I will name the first approach "pornological reflection". The term "pornological" was introduced by Gilles Deleuze in the context of his analysis

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of Sacher-Masoch – obviously through specification from a much more common phenomenon, pornography (Deleuze, 1996: 16–21). While *pornography* obviously tries to be as graphic as possible, to show as much as possible, it is also notoriously sparing in words. By contrast, the focus of *pornological* art is directed towards discourse, towards a certain *logos*. However, in order to introduce language in sexuality, pornological art necessarily inclines to the element of perversions. Within representations of “normal” sexuality, one can hardly find very illustrative dialogues. On the other hand, sexual deviations – such as masochism or sadism – introduce active use of language into the very core of sexuality. One (non-clinical) way of defining perversion would be: sexuality that speaks; sexuality that is organized around a certain discursive logic or a ritual of the respective perversion. Ron Jeremy “performs”; Leopold Sacher-Masoch writes, and he writes obsessively. As Deleuze describes it – writing is the essential, inner component of his sexual life, perhaps even more so than the masochistic act itself.

So, pornological discourse tends to be both – more perverted, but also much more intellectually challenging than ordinary pornography. Now, what is crucial from our point of view is that – when it comes to comic-book art – it becomes necessary to take the following fact into consideration: an erotic comic can obviously easily regress into ordinary pornography, but on the other hand, it can never become fully pornological – for a comic-book can never just “speak” or describe without visualizing. A comic-book *exists* in the interstice of discursive and visual arts of expression (that unlike in film, coexist on the same surface) – always slightly inclined towards the visual element. It may just show, but not the other way around. An erotic comic can therefore only be described in terms of *semi-pornological art* (for it always retains some graphic features).

I think this necessary partial regression into pornography presents the erotic comic-book’s great advantage. Why? Because it allows it to keep the intellectual (language orientated) charge of pornology, and combine it with the *stronger effectiveness of a scene*. The strength of every good pornological comic is precisely this: in using scenes of sexual perversion as a mirror of perversities that may be present within society, or may even present the society’s driving force. Georges Pichard, Milo Manara, Crepax or Dolcett – they all resort to this same strategy.

Now, in the case of Guido Crepax’s art in general, this reflexive component is very openly stated, and will be discussed in detail below – but what about *Alan Ford*?

It may come as some surprise to the readers of *Alan Ford* (which is essentially an asexual comic, perhaps even more so than Snoopy or Mickey Mouse) that the majority of Roberto Raviola’s opus involved a fair amount of uninhibited sexuality. This ranged from slightly “naughty” to full-blown

porn such as the brilliant *1001 Pills* or *Necron* – the morbid story of the German scientist Dr. Frieda Boher, who created her own version of Frankenstein’s monster in order to satisfy her insatiable appetite for necrophilia. So, in contrast to Frankenstein, her aim was not to create a creature that would truly rise from the dead, but rather to *keep her monster “dead enough”* to remain appealing to her perversion. “Life”, on the other hand, is to be considered quite literally here – merely as the “vehicle” that enabled the corpse to sexually “perform” and “transport” itself around. The creature Necron can therefore be regarded as the *invention of the lowest possible form of life* (very well suited to the “brain of a comic-book writer” installed into his skull by ingenious Dr. Boher) (Magnus, 2001: 37).

Clearly, nothing so sinister is at work in *Alan Ford*. But nonetheless, I will still argue that *Alan Ford* (asexual as it is) belongs to the field of pornological art. My first thesis is namely that *Alan Ford* – sooner than presenting an exception in Raviola’s otherwise largely pornological approach – presents its minimal (or perhaps even pure) form. Even though it is stripped of explicit sexuality, *Alan Ford* still retains what is essential for pornology: its capacity to reflect the inner perversion of society (within one single grotesque subject-figure). The monster Necron and Raviola’s perhaps most famous character, the legendary Super Hick, differ in most of their characteristics, but they nonetheless share one key common feature – they are both *grotesque* (in the rather precise sense of this notion – as it was defined by Foucault) (Foucault, 2003: 10–23). And – as I will show – it is precisely the grotesque nature of Super Hick that incorporates the essence of the whole series.

b) I will name the second common feature “metaphysical”. Not because it might necessarily be deeper than the pornological method, but simply because it can be described in terms of classical metaphysics. Namely, this second operative concept refers to the *structure of presentation of reality* as it appears in the two comics.

1. In both comics, reality as such is first presented as split into two separate worlds that do not share any “common reality”. It is important to note straight away that this first, “ontological” incision – so to say – immediately overlaps with some sort of a silent political antagonism (or even substitutes it).

In *Alan Ford*, the central scission runs between the reality of the “poor”, and the reality of the “rich” that *coexist on the same spot without really existing for each other*. Similarly, in *Valentina*, reality as such is split between the “upper”, superficial world of democracy, and the “lower”, underground world, dominated by a racist Nazi regime.

So, the first premise – shared by the two comics – is the implicit (structurally inscribed) thesis that (in contrast to our spontaneous perception)

there is *no single reality*; reality as such is split into two antagonistic parallel worlds.

2. In the second step, the first missing common reality appears after all – emerging as the result of two different operations that somehow *challenge it to the surface*. What is perhaps most interesting in this regard is namely the fact that – although Crepax and Raviola both start with the same premise of an antagonistically split reality – they use this same premise in two almost diametrically opposed ways, but nonetheless end up with almost the same effective result.

To “falsify” by means of what lies underneath

The French intellectual milieu in particular adored Guido Crepax’s refined and imaginative erotic art. After all – as Georges Wolinski (the recently assassinated editor of Charlie Hebdo) put it: “Crepax designs the most astonishing behinds of them all – within the comic-book scene – and I do know a few things about comics”. (Wolinski, 1983) There is but little doubt that Crepax’s popularity had something to do with this “fact”, which he (as well as his heroines) was well aware of. Certainly, Guido Crepax was much more than just someone who knew how to draw appealing behinds. And one can basically say the same of his favorite character Valentina Rosselli, who is certainly much more than just another “exhibitionist” enjoying having her perfect buttocks exposed. Valentina is arguably one of the most psychologically elaborate and dynamic personages to have ever appeared in the world of comics: intelligent, fashionable and politically opinionated (sharing her creator’s enthusiasm for Trotsky and Freud’s psychoanalysis),¹ she is anything but a pin-up. It is nonetheless true – one way or another – that in the case of Crepax – at the bottom of it all stands the bottom. Women’s behinds – naked or dressed – form the central element of Crepax’s compositions; however, it is the way he changes them (sometimes quite literally)² into series of letters, words, numbers, meaningful sentences and political messages – that probably forms his art. If Žižek often says that the mouths of Hitchcock’s heroes usually look like arses, one can assert with certainty that Crepax designs arses that can speak in a silent language of their own.

Alfabeto muto (The Mute Alphabet) is the title of an episode of the *Valentina* series, which in a way perfectly illustrates his art: Crepax was a genius of hidden symbolical connotations, a genius of signs, a master of changing bodies and their relations with strange, unidentifiable objects into language. For that, he was praised by no less than two of the most prominent

¹ See: *Subconscious Valentina (Crepax, 2012 b: 42–54)*.

² See picture #1.

researchers in the field of semiotics – Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, who both recognized his importance for the emerging semiotic science.

Crepax was a perfectionist, obsessed with one and the same character, one and the same story, which constantly kept growing in complexity. He designed Valentina throughout his career, while the rest of his heroines (Bianca, Anita, O³ or Justine⁴) resemble her at least in some key features (such as the visual appearance and the more or less apparent masochistic tendencies). Roberto Raviola's art was more diversified. He too knew how to draw a pretty behind – no doubt about that. *1001 Pills* and *Ten Faces for a Perfect Orgasm* are two rather telling titles underlining the fact. However, the reason for Raviola's greatly unexpected success in socialist Yugoslavia came from a very different source. The *Alan Ford* series is a deeply sarcastic pocket-comic, which has very little (or nothing) to do with sex. As a matter of fact, *Alan Ford* is arguably the least sexual comic ever (except for making Lacan's thesis on the non-existence of the sexual relationship – a matter of visible reality).

Pretty ladies do appear in *Alan Ford*, but they *appear* only – the ontological status of “attractive women” (as well as of the skyscrapers symbolizing the riches of New York) is namely close to that of an illusion. In *Alan Ford*, the expression “reality” means nothing but the name of its own falling apart into two separate realities: the reality of the poor, and the remote reality of the rich. These two “realities” coexist on the same spot (called New York) without really existing for each other. “Reality” – at its deepest – is nothing but this semi-invisible drifting apart of two separate worlds (without common reality). The only rule of “reality” is that the poor will become poorer, and the rich will become richer. The attractive ladies somehow belong to this second world (the world without reality, from the poor-man's perspective, or rather: they belong to the “other” world that exists, obtains reality, only as an illusion designed for the poor).⁵

The narration of *Alan Ford* is difficult to present, since the comic is mostly built upon a number of very strange characters, all of them quite difficult to describe. But the narration is nonetheless less important: the true secret of *Alan Ford* – and this is where its political dimension comes to the fore – lies within the details that make “reality” appear. This basically means: to show how one single space, New York, harbors two realities that are only connected by their drifting apart; to *make visible this falling apart* of the two realities – the second one of which (the reality of the rich) hardly exists, since it lacks any “substance”.

³ The main character of Pauline Reage's BDMS classic *Histoire d'O*.

⁴ The main character of Sade's famous novel.

⁵ *Alan* (the hero) falls in love occasionally – always with the same outcome, though: the beautiful lasses either turn out to be mad criminals (Margot), already dead (as in the case of Ghosts), or even prove to be old hags filled with Botox, which eventually loses its effect making them fall apart – quite literally.

The visualization of the falling apart of the two realities usually takes up the form of *garbage*. The scenery in *Alan Ford* always appears littered with garbage. As a matter of fact, the scenery is almost entirely scrapped together out of various waste materials, rags and patches. The reality of the rich lacks “substance” precisely because it is *seemingly* not composed out of garbage (that is, of the only thing that truly remains, subsists any change). However, apart from garbage, there is *somebody* else: the personage who entirely encapsulates its essence – the garbage-man.

Not without irony – it was the creation of Super Hick, nick-named “the alcohol menace” – that turned *Alan Ford* into a commercial success. Super Hick is indeed a peculiar character: an unemployed street-sweeper and the worst possible alcoholic, he decided that enough is enough, and that the time has come to take matters into his own hands. The time to change the World by action. Therefore, he solemnly dedicated the rest of his life to one sole purpose, namely, that he shall “steal from the poor and give to the rich”. Using his stinky breath as a deadly weapon, he thus embarks on his new career of a super-hero defending the well-deserved rights of those who have earned them, while ruthlessly attacking every pauper in sight, stealing the poor children’s lollypops, etc. The funniest thing about Super Hick, though, is probably that his new career – to no such surprise – meets no better end: after several initial feats, the rich suddenly decide that his help is not really needed. The citizens complained, the expenses of the police kept growing, the mayor of New York faced accusations of incompetence: the rich eventually discovered that Super Hick’s assistance was actually counter-profitable (despite the fact that he was working for free). The stale bread and lollypops he was bringing them were certainly not worth the cost. Sacked by the rich, their defender thus re-enters the world of unemployment. Most of the times we get to meet this strange personage, he is actually taken prisoner by the secret agents of the TNT group who desperately try to sell him to the police – to no avail though: “the alcohol menace” is no longer worth a dime. The once mighty Super Hick, “the scourge of the poor” – fell victim to the inflation of his cost-free services.

Why is Super Hick so important? Clearly, the World need not wait for Super Hick in order to reflect it was an unjust place, or to rediscover the realities of capitalist society. What Super Hick is all about, is thus not a matter of discovering a certain truth, but rather a matter of its *universal presentation*; a matter of making people see – even if they do not want to. What Raviola actually does with Super Hick is namely: he challenges reality to appear within its deliberately false and grotesque negation (represented by the figure). By saying “to appear”, I mostly mean: to defeat – the collectively agreed to – “capacity” of pretending to be blind (for “reality”).

Viewed in terms of “method”, Super Hick clearly consists of a double

effect, which enters into synthesis with time. That is to say, he strikes us in two sequences. At first glimpse, Super Hick is not only grotesque and unreal – he is unidentifiable: nobody – not even the staunchest follower of the political Right – could possibly identify with his bizarre political views, which he holds prolonged speeches on (e.g. on how the poor spit on the floor, while the rich have never offended him – mostly because he has only seen their limousines passing by, etc.). But the truth is that – even though he might appear unreal – Super Hick *is the “reality” appearing*. While one negates reality by the means of “Super Hick” (type of fiction), reality strikes back by negating his own non-reality: even though no one could possibly identify with him, he in fact incorporates the reality we *all* share. It is important to note that *the act* of disclosure (of its true face) truly befalls on reality (the object), and not on the subject (who observes it): clearly, this is not simply a matter of us (the observers) who first thought “Super Hick was a very non-realistic fictional character, a ridiculous copy of Robin Hood”, simply changing our minds in order to observe: “but in fact there was something realistic about him”. Why should we change our minds so suddenly? Rather, one could say that – challenged by the grotesque fiction – “reality” *as such* is forced to appear (such as it is), while spontaneously negating Super Hick’s non-reality.

Grotesque and unreal at first sight, Super Hick is *what actually lies beneath*. Or rather: he is the presentation of “reality” of the non-relationship of the two realities (after all, he only hates the likes of himself, the poor), which precedes any possible subjective experience of reality (that would necessarily belong to one of the two separate hemispheres). Therefore, one could say that at least one of the aspects of Raviola’s approach consists in this capacity to capture reality within the forms of its *grotesque and deliberately false negations or counter-principles* (Super Hick, who seems unreal, is in fact the “reality” appearing: he is what attracts it to the surface; he is the presentation of reality that encapsulates it). And then again – of course – making reality appear, creating a figure that incorporates reality with such clarity – is obviously much more effective than endless attempts to explain some facts through words (to people who probably do not want to hear any of it). Therein lays Raviola’s strength. Nobody can escape Super Hick’s grip (or his deadly stench): his message provides a universal blow one can difficultly pretend not to understand.

The Nazi Underworld

Now, how is the two-partite structure of reality presented in Crepax’s *Valentina*?

At first, it needs to be taken quite literally: namely, another world supposedly exists in *Valentina*: a secretive world, which is hidden deep below

our own; a world that will eventually deeply influence Valentina Rosselli's existence. Some two thousand miles below the surface (sometimes more, sometimes less), beneath the world of Valentina – which is basically the modern western world of democratic political protests, posh Milanese fashion parties and jazz (she adores) –, there lies the underground World of the Subterraneans, also referred to as the “blind knights”. Despite being literally blind, the Subterraneans are a super-race, physically superior to our own: taller, stronger and infinitively more agile. Apart from that, they also possess the power of “freezing reality” with the gaze of their blind eyes. What is however much more important, is the fact that the Subterranean civilization, which was at first divided between the underground cities of KÓMYATAN and TÓITATNAN, eventually became dominated by the latter.

Crepax leaves us with no doubt whatsoever that TÓITATNAN was a fictional Nazi regime. The “blind knights” of TÓITATNAN execute all – within their ranks – who do not reach the prescribed physical requirements. Their society is hierarchically structured according to the purity of one's ancestry, highly militarized, and governed by the “race of superiors” led by the “Great Superior”. “DÁUT KÓMYATAN!” (Death to KÓMYATAN!) – says their formal greeting, which later on changes into “TÓITATNAN beyond all!” Their chief political principle – as formulated by the Great Superior himself – says: “ÍH, MÁKLA HÁUHTSA MÁTNA QÉDA TÁI WÉIT BRÁUKJAN LÉBANRAUM-NAN” (“I, the Great Superior, say that we are in need of living-space”). (Crepax, 2010a: 33)

In short: beneath our World of democracy (on the surface), lies the (underground) Nazi civilization. Or more precisely: *during our lifetimes*, an underground war took place – *concealed from our eyes* – that ended with Nazi domination (“blindness” is therefore the one feature that connects us). We actually stand on top of this other world, which lies just beneath our feet. Or rather, our world of relative freedom and democracy suddenly appears to be groundless, *superficial*. At least, this is the effect that Crepax tries to achieve.

Despite being dislocated in space, the two Worlds constantly interact (in secrecy).⁶ Unlike the two realities in *Alan Ford* – that seem to only be linked together by their constant dripping apart – the two worlds of Valentina's become more and more intertwined until merging almost completely. From the very moment she first meets them, the Subterraneans haunt Rosselli. They secretly appear out of everywhere: from beneath the channels of Venice, out of Valentina's closet, out of her cellar, disguised as circus acrobats or

⁶ The narrative lets us “know” that there has always been a common history of the two worlds: the order of the “blind knights” itself was established by the formidable Teutonic princess Helena, who – accused of witchcraft – took refuge in the underground abysses. In one of the decisive battles of the underworld, the “blind knights” are joined by the “terrestrial” mercenaries equipped with modern weapons.

as suspiciously quiet American students. Our world seems to be infiltrated by their spies or agents. Even though it remains *perfectly unclear* – whether or not – they truly exist, their constant apparitions start to codetermine Valentina’s reality. Their intentions remain uncertain, though. They do not seem to be planning an all-out offensive of the surface. Rather, it seems as if our own world might be sinking into theirs, as Crepax illustrates by the sudden rapid flooding of Venice, accompanied by their renewed arrival.⁷ Besides, Valentina Rosselli finds them sexually attractive. When asked – aged forty (in an interview dedicated to her anniversary) – what type of men she prefers, she immediately replies: “the blind knights of the abysses”. (Crepax, 2012a: 5) Their presence nonetheless becomes increasingly oppressing, eventually bringing Valentina’s state of mind close to (what others perceive as) paranoia.

Another important comparison needs to be made. We have already emphasized that in *Alan Ford*, the “reality” (that marks the non-existence of a common reality of the two worlds) is not purely immaterial or neutrally positioned in an abstract straight line dividing the two worlds. The “reality” that divides the two worlds (the rich and the poor) is in fact materialized within garbage, thus being unilaterally posited within the reality of the poor. This is why “reality” can only be seen from “the poor’s” perspective, while the “rich” seem to deny its existence: the abundance of garbage and leftovers that litters the scenes of *Alan Ford* is the sole indicator, reminiscent of the other world’s (lacking) existence.

The scenery in *Valentina* is also often littered with strange, abandoned old-looking objects. These objects are certainly not garbage though. All of them appear valuable and complicated – as if they suddenly materialized from another, parallel dimension. Some of them seem to be designed to serve some unclear sexual purpose. But apart from these unidentifiable strange objects, there is something else that characterizes Crepax’s scenery: the *cracks*. Cracks that seem to appear out of nowhere; cracks that spread, and seem to be witness to this colossal, almost geological torsion between the two worlds: the upper, surface world of relative freedom and democracy, and the lower, underground world, dominated by the totalitarian and racist regime. Despite being dislocated – the two worlds – seem to belong to the one and the same reality after all.

These cracks can be found everywhere, but the most famous one is located in an old house in Milan that belongs to Baba Yaga – a strange witch who seems to be the mediator between the two worlds, and who exerts control over Valentina by manipulating her masochistic desires.

⁷ See: *Les Anges Déchus* (Crepax, 1978).

Two layers of Valentina's masochism

Valentina – the antifascist who enormously hates and despises Nazism – finds herself drawn to it in two different ways. We have already pointed out her openly admitting she was attracted to the “blind knights”. However, this basic attraction seems to be caused by their physical appearance. The “blind knights of the Abysses” – so to say – personally appeal to her: tall, disciplined, mysterious, silent men they are. As a matter of fact, Valentina's attraction to the “blind knights” seems to reveal an almost girlish romantic feature: the sort of longing for the utmost different or the unknown. And then again – not all of the Subterraneans follow the Great Superior of TÓI-TATNAN.

The Nazi (or Tsarist) officers, who appear in her masochistic fantasies, perform a far less naïve and essentially different role. What is set forth in her masochistic dreams, is precisely the *impersonal* moment – the pleasure of being “processed” (that is – of being reduced to an object by someone who genuinely perceives her as such). The role of the officers is thus precisely to *personify the impersonal*, they are merely a structural function of the “processing” machinery; the physical preferences play very little (or no) importance here. Sometimes (not always) their presence may be therefore substituted by the strange, unidentifiable sexual devices (or the “processors”) that we mention above.

First of all, it is important to observe that any attempt to treat the theme of masochistic fantasies – by means of visual arts – raises a tricky problem. Deleuze may be perfectly right in insisting on the importance of the precise distinction between sadistic and masochistic perversions. According to Deleuze, there is no such thing as a “sado-masochistic entity”: one can either be a sadist, or a masochist – never both; for the two perversions consist of two incommensurable logics (Deleuze, 1991: 35). At the level of discursive art, this insistence seems almost “natural”: Masoch's claustrophobic discourse in fact has very little in common with Sade's grandiose theorizing and exemplifications. However, the situation changes significantly when it comes to visual arts. What appears (or better yet: what needs to appear) in front of us – is a *scene* of a body being (probably) exposed, (probably) humiliated and – to various extents – tortured. This cannot be avoided: how else – can the subject of masochism present itself within the medium of visual expression? The scene itself is – in a way – necessarily “neutral”: it equally refers to both masochist and sadist impulses. The scene itself thus presents a “sado-masochistic object-entity”.

As mentioned earlier, the comic-book obviously belongs to both art-forms, but – in this case, the significance of the visual scene clearly prevails. Furthermore, in the case of *Valentina* (or, to be honest, in most cases), such

scenes (concerning a woman) are designed *by* a male, *for* a largely male audience. Crepax creates Valentina's masochistic fantasies (not only for us, but for Valentina as well). Therefore, the question seems obvious, perhaps even naïve: is the scene that appears a genuine expression of "Valentina's presupposed masochism", or is the latter merely a cover for male sadism; a perverse excuse for displaying her butt-naked and whipped?

This question can be answered very precisely: what can be referred to as the presentation of "Valentina's masochism" – consists of *two different layers*. The second, deeper level of "Valentina's masochism" is – in a way – aware of certain naivety of the (liberating dialectical) logic, which is constitutive of the first layer. On the other hand – the first, "superfluous" layer can to some extent be perceived in terms of a cure or remedy for the actual pain that emerges on the deeper level – a remedy, though, which is perfectly aware of its insufficiency and mere temporary effectiveness. Now, it is on the first, "superfluous" level of Valentina's dreamy masochism – where she actually gets "spanked" or put through various odd-looking devices (such as antique type-writers, weaving-looms or vacuum-cleaners). And *clearly* – at this first level – the answer to the question raised above is all but obvious: the bizarrely outfitted super-models, who playfully introduce Valentina's gorgeous behind to the art of acupuncture, do belong to some sort of "male" voyeuristic incursion – this can hardly be denied.

However, this may just not be of the case when it comes to the second layer. What is essential of this second layer is, namely, something else. The story no longer proceeds by means of *representing* some sort of physical castigation. This second layer of the presented masochism is rather the *source of emergence* of almost tangible pain and melancholy, which is – most certainly – Crepax's own. Why? Because in the case of Crepax, masochism as such seems to be closely connected to some sort of *unclear awareness of impending defeat*, shared by him and his heroine:

In one of her dreams in the *Baba Yaga* episode, Valentina appears accompanied by a firing-squad. The cross-like insignia indicate that the soldiers belong to some sort of counterrevolutionary white guard (German or Russian; First World War, later period). A younger, rather attractive, decorated officer is already waiting for her near the beach, carelessly smoking a cigarette. He allows her a last dance (with another woman, which Valentina was desperately jealous of at the time). Then he cynically remarks: "this was a real pleasure, ladies". He then orders Valentina to strip naked, which she does. He semi-discretely turns the other way while she undresses. She is then ordered to step into the water. "Two more steps," he says. Then, she is executed. (Crepax, 2010b: 43–44)

Now, is this still the same fake masochism (reproduced by restless "male" voyeurism)? Taking all of the circumstances into account, I do not think

so. Clearly, there is more than one element involved in this scene (jealousy being just one of them). But what strikes us most, are the serenity and the political dimension: the deep humiliation of putting Valentina naked in front of the counterrevolutionary firing-squad; her humble acceptance; the sense of defeat. This eventually provokes an essential shift in relations: Valentina is no longer a “pin-up” who “suffers” for our pleasure in her dreams; rather, it is we who suffer on her behalf. She is the means – used by Crepax – of making us feel his own, deep and politically related melancholy.

Another sequence reveals the overall momentum with an arguably even greater degree of precision (especially since it includes the elements of both “layers”, thus allowing for a better comparison). The prefix to the *Subterraneans* begins with a magnificent battle-scene. On the opposing side of the chessboard-like battlefield (directed towards us), there is – what appears to be – a (white) charging battalion of the Royal hussar-cavalry. The *ancien-ne-régime* forces, clearly. Their bearskin hats cover dead skulls. Facing them (from our side of the view), there is a (black) battalion of infantry soldiers – in each one, one can actually recognize Valentina – who wear the uniforms of revolutionary France. The revolutionaries resist bravely, but it is obvious they are going to be overrun. The leader of the dead-skulled hussars exclaims: “We cannot tolerate violence and pillage. We will take all the necessary measures to disperse the groups who resolve to violence, and reinstall order.” (Crepax, 1969: 9)

In the next picture, the scenery changes: Valentina is now taken prisoner, but instead of the white hussars, her captors seem to be a group led by a prominently tall American marine, who raises Valentina above his head (as if she were some sort of trophy). Strangely enough, the remaining members of the company appear to be hippies, bikers and sexy looking (barely dressed) decadent young women. One of them wears Nazi insignia. As a matter of fact, this latter scene represents the “true reality”: namely, what is actually going on, is a wild student party. Valentina (clearly “high”) and the “marine” (who is actually a companion of hers) have been enacting some sort of “East vs. West” struggle, which got a little out of hand. Valentina – sensitive as she was – lost herself completely in the role (of the humiliated East) she was supposed to impersonate. Hence, the dramatic “film” in her head continues. In her parallel world, she is now again a prisoner of the white hussars. She was sentenced to be “disciplined” in the following order: first she is “falsely hanged” (by her legs), this is then followed by a “false crucifixion”; then she is “falsely” shot dead by a laughing female soldier – only to come alive again in order to be further humiliated, forced to whip another woman – and so on (and on). The next day (after being awakened at 4 p.m.), she feels fresh, invigorated and filled with creative energy.

The central component of this sequence obviously consists of yet

another brilliant “game of realities”. What at first appeared to be some sort of an illogical interruption of the narration, namely the scene of the “marine” displaying “vanquished” Valentina as a trophy – reveals itself to be the “true reality” of what was actually going on, and this “reality” was basically an innocent game among friends, which to some extent explains Valentina’s unreal imaginations. But is this really so? What if – our recognition of the “true reality” – does not merely refer to what is appearing in front of us? What if – we were *somehow tricked into recognizing true reality as such*? “Oh, this is it then – what’s going on!” Yes, this is it, but not so – merely at the level of appearance: what first appeared as an interruptive illusion “coincidentally” coincided with the momentary appearing of truth (that stands beneath the appearance), followed by our (forced) recognition. In fact, what Crepax is aiming at, is that the story was *never really interrupted*: only the uniforms (belonging to one and the same reactionary army) have been changed (to take on correct historical order). The only illusion that really occurred was *the illusion: there had been an illusion* going on within Valentina’s perception of reality. And within this glimpse of true reality, the Subterranean world seems to *already be there*.

It is thus clear that Crepax employed Valentina’s expressive masochism – as a means of striking back at *systemic violence* (or in Žižek’s terms – objective violence) (Žižek, 2007: 15–18). In fact, he succeeded in doing so by translating the *essential invisibility* of systemic violence into the *essential visibility* of his own visual language of bodies and objects. By means of manipulating the two ontological levels of reality (appearing vs. being), he basically made visible what – in “normal circumstances” – would have necessarily remained unseen: the secretive forces, which are in charge of preventing any political change; and therefore of continuity. And he did this by means of reflecting the hidden perversities of systemic violence onto the corporeal language of the imaginary punishments that Valentina had to endure due to her rebellion (false hanging, false crucifixion, false execution). One could thus say that, in her own way, Valentina incorporates the essence of the pornological art: it is true that she enjoys being subdued, but at the same time, she uses her perversion as a means of reflecting the violence back to its (previously) invisible sources.

Conclusion

It is certainly not difficult to notice the difference between the two artistic operations:

In the shortest possible terms: in *Alan Ford*, the world seems to be in danger of *falling apart* indefinitely into two separate realities (of the poor, and the rich). By contrast, the two worlds of Valentina’s (the democratic

surface and the Nazi underworld) seem to be *doomed to collide*. What is at stake, thus seems to be some sort of an opposition between the ceaseless force of repulsion, and the violent magnetism underpinned by the sexualized dimension.

This generalized picture is nonetheless only the outer exposure. What is much more difficult to discern, is the most profound similarity of the two approaches. I think this symmetry can best be described by the formula I have already used as the title of the first chapter: *to falsify by means of what lies underneath*.

We have already seen how this formula applies to *Alan Ford*. Since reality as such is nothing but the name of its constant dissolution, it also seems to elude all possible subjective experience, because every imaginable subject belongs to either one or another of the separate worlds (the ones that reality has already dissolved into). This evasive reminiscence of “reality” is then salvaged by the least expected of characters, one of Raviola’s inventions of the lowest possible forms of life, Super Hick, garbage-incorporated. Super Hick namely presents a counter-principle of reality that eventually forces it to the surface, or better yet, he forces it to *appear universally*. Super Hick – the one who steals from the poor, and gives to the rich – first appears to be a pure negation of reality. But in fact – through the very process of negating him – the “reality”, which is thus forced to appear, reveals itself as no different from what was at first considered to be its grotesque falsification. Super Hick is thus the deliberately false negation of reality that at the same time forms the principle of its universal presentation.

But does this formula (perhaps even more literally) not also apply to Crepax’s procedure? Clearly, the real danger of the Nazi underworld does not lie within the possibility of its true existence; the real and very realistic threat – on the contrary – lies within the possibility that the underworld is just an external reflection of something, which *is already at work within our world*. Namely, that democracy and relative freedom are only fetishes that prevent us from seeing how easily the Nazi regime can reestablish itself (within our “democratic” society”).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance, from Crepax’s point of view, to make us see the hidden “objective” violence that is in charge of preventing any possible change of the given trajectory (of the collision). And this is where Valentina’s ambivalent capacity of attracting and reflecting violence back to its sources acquires its indispensable political meaning.

But let us return to the basic structure. The fiction of the underground Nazi world – the antithesis of our world of “freedom” and democracy – paradoxically does not present a threat until it *exists* (until it is presupposed as independently existing); the effect that Crepax very clearly tries to achieve is to make us discover that the underworld was merely a fiction, which

nonetheless reflects something that – indeed – lies deeper than our subjective view, limited by the false (sense of) security. But, on the other hand, it clearly belongs to our own world. What is at stake is yet again a seemingly false antithesis of reality, which nonetheless cannot be efficiently negated without simultaneously presenting truths about our own society (previously covered by our false sense of security).

The city of TÓITATNAN was eventually crushed by the mighty KÓBTAN, the giant Capricorn. The “blind knights” were enslaved by a race of grotesque mechanical robots. To no avail though: *within our world* – they kept on appearing. “Perhaps it would be better to think that the *Subterraneans* do not exist... they are simply the monsters of the subconscious... *they are the Reason’s own dream*”. (Crepax, 2012b: 133)

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