

Alternative comics & censorship:

legal and cultural boundaries marginalize an art form

Robert Butz

Censorship in the West usually takes quiet forms: a government can quietly vote down funding for subsidized alternative publishers, or stop "questionable materials" at a national border. Alternative comics, however, are perhaps the art form today which are most subject to the knock on the retailer's store window from the police, who have arrived to confiscate materials. This past year, two comic book shops in Toronto, *Planet Earth* and *Dragon Lady*, were raided for carrying titles labelled "obscene" by Metro Police, such as *Omaha the Cat Dancer*, *Cherry Poptart*, and much of the *Eros* comic line, on the basis of these publications' sexual content. Comic bookshops, having limited funds to fight the charges, and being aware that the great majority of their business comes from mainstream comics (ie. those lame, superhero-fawning catalogues of pre-adolescent power fantasies), usually pay the fine and drop the alternative titles — as if alternative comics didn't have enough problems just being generally ignored; most people still dismiss comics as "kiddie books".

Police policy on insuring that "obscene" comics are not sold is not consistent. But fearing economic ruination by way of court costs, comic distributors and retailers have imposed sweeping self-censorship measures. While the majority of the books confiscated were not the medium's best (either you're really suffering that *Wendy Whitebread*, *Undercover Slut* is no longer available, or you aren't), the best of alternative comics, being art, are



what suffer. Most comic shops which weren't prosecuted have dropped the alternative titles they did carry and have since shied away from carrying anything resembling sophisticated material. Andromeda, a comics distributor which was raided, recently refused to handle Julie Doucet's brilliant comic, *Dirty Plotte* on the basis that it might be considered obscene, effectively ending Doucet's distribution everywhere except directly through her publisher, Drawn and Quarterly.

Coupled with the more mundane problems leading to censorship—Canadian publishers such as Vortex Comics, who send their artists' work to an American printer, only to find their products confiscated re-entering the country; it

is also taxing to dig up a local printer/binder who isn't offended by a publishers' material—an intelligent, sophisticated art form whose best titles often test the medium's limits—are difficult to locate in Toronto, if not impossible.

Superficially, comics with sexual content, like any other sexual representation, resemble pornography. But because comics word-and-picture format is traditionally thought of as essentially a children's medium, the whole notion of an "alternative comic" depicting adult situations strikes some people as being nothing less than a conspiracy of perverts using a medium which children will naturally seek out to put deviant ideas in their heads. Such a "natural attraction" idea is a myth. (While I wouldn't count my own experience as seminal, I clearly remember at the tender age of ten coming across oral penetration sequences in a Robert Crumb book, and being bored because the storyline confused me.) However, such a myth is the foundation of the legal code which determines whether a comic is labelled

restricted or obscene in New Zealand: a book of the *Omaha* creators' art has a special restriction placed upon it merely because its characters are anthropomorphized animals, a representation deemed "naturally appealing" to children. Here, the *Toronto Sun* was both victim and exploiter of this myth in labelling the comic shop crack-downs "a kiddie porn raid".

Alternative comics evolved from 60's "underground comics", and the best of them are in keeping with that medium's tradition of exploring mature or taboo themes. Typical mandates of the undergrounds were explorations of drugs, self-loathing, deviant sex, misanthropy—a desire to put into print everything that had been previously excluded in the 50's image of a civilized being. Authors of today's alternative comics take the cathartic expressionism of the undergrounds and channel it into a more sophisticated, focused—though no less disturbing—treatment of their themes. As critical attention to literature is shifting from the traditional canon to accommodate an upsurging interest in "post-colonial" work (literatures by Native North Americans and other colonized peoples), the Eurocentric professor would do well to also admit the refused literature of her/his own stagnating culture past the purple ropes surrounding Literature Deemed Worthy: alternative comic books. Here are some of the best:

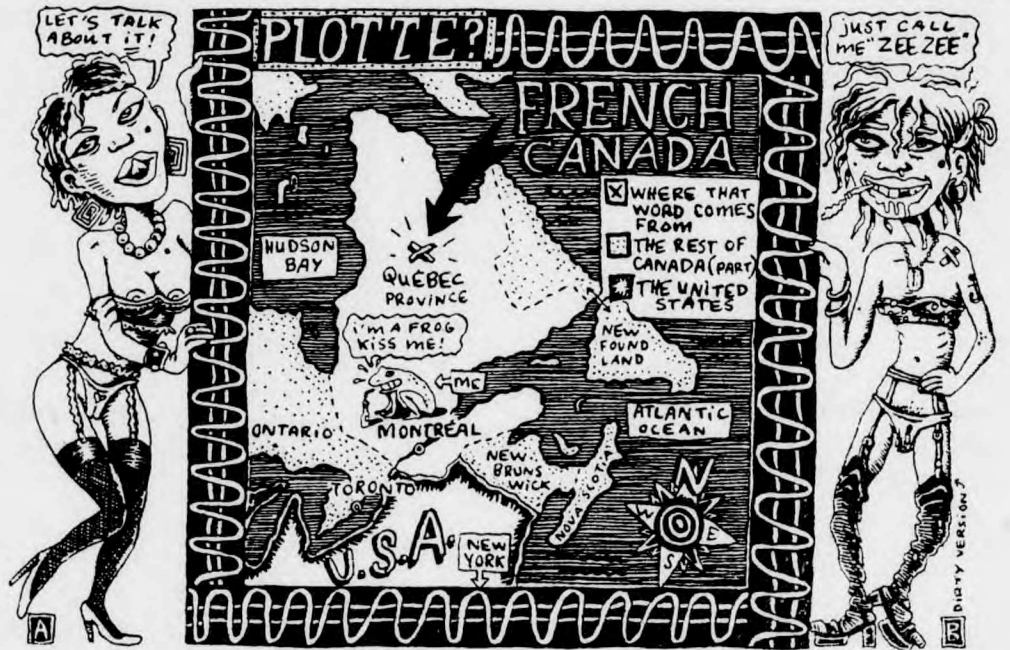
Yummy Fur

by Chester Brown: The longest running storyline in Chester's comic, "Ed the Happy Clown", told the story of an earnest clown subjected to extraordinary tortures, using deadpan humour and sci-fi B-movie conventions (eg. "meanwhile in another dimension"). The cheesy devices disguise the fact that something profound is going on; Chester's obsession with bodily fluids (recalling Doucet's) was read by one reader as a political allegory, describing the way a state uses fear of the body as a way of maintaining power. "Ed the Happy Clown" is available in book form. More recently, Chester has taken this fear-of-the-body

theme into the context of autobiographical material. A new YF multi-part series, "Fuck", looks promising.

In addition, Chester adapts a section of the New Testament in the back of each YF. Reading these instalments, I often think how Timothy Findley's adaptation of a Genesis chapter, the CanLit course favourite *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, pales in comparison. Findley's book is so obviously filtered through a 20th-century suburban man's consciousness; Chester's more successfully portrays the utter brutality of existence in that era.

Yummy Fur #'s 16 and 18 were detained at the Canadian border by Canada Customs officials in 1989, and then released.



Dirty Plotte

by Julie Doucet: Used to their creations being classed as "subliterature", cartoonists have never felt the same pressure as mainstream lit to steer clear of "lowbrow" themes; eg. grotesque violence, bodily fluids, masturbation/ deviant sex, and kitsch. The stories in Doucet's *Dirty Plotte* ("plotte" is a French-Canadian slang word equivalent to "cunt" or "slut") are little praises to all of the above, celebrated in

autobiographical vignettes, such as when Julie dreams of waking up in bed with her Tampax "topped up", and she has to levitate herself to the bathroom. A charm surrounds the whole ensemble of Julie's immersion in the grotesque, which her broken English only serves to accentuate. Interestingly, though *DP* subverts a pornographic reading in various ways, *La Librarie Alternative* in Montreal refused to carry it on the grounds that it promotes violence against women.



Hate

by Peter Bagge. *Hate's* theory of comedy is that there is nothing funnier than different types of reactionary forces butting heads. *Hate* is in a satirical vein similar to *Married with Children* but is a far, far more vicious

satire of North American middle-class white trash. Bagge's hysterical argument scenes threaten to fly off the page, with characters combust into monstrous, shark-toothed versions of themselves. Issues of *Hate* vary in availability, depending on each issue's sexual content.

other plugs

Buy the anthology of comic artists, *The True North*, whose proceeds go to the Comics Legends Legal Defense Fund, which aids besieged comic book stores busted for carrying alternative comics which they do not wish to drop. *The Comics Journal*, in addition to being the best for comics news and criticism, prints the latest on busted comic shops and follows up on the trials. I should mention that women cartoonists are notoriously underrepresented and are rarely approached by publishers to do their own comic; thus until the revolution, the anthology *Wimmen's Comix* should be read. Aline Kominsky's work is anthologized in *Love that Bunch*. Other good anthologies are *Buzz*, *Drawn and Quarterly*, *Snake Eyes*, *Raw*,

Weirdo, and *Itchy Planet: Stories, Humour, Information* (an anthology of political cartoons; discontinued but still available.)

More great alternative comics: Doug Allen, *Steven*; Dan Clowes, *Eightball*; Lloyd Dangle, *Dangle*; Dennis Elchorn, *Real Stuff*; Mary Fleener, *Slutburger Stories*; Brothers Hernandez, *Love and Rockets*; Gilbert Hernandez, *Birdland*; Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor*; Seth, *Palooka-Ville*; Jim Woodring, *Jim*.

Where to get everything: *The Beguiling* is far and away Toronto's most legally unfettered comic shop. 601 Markham St. (in Mirvish Village), phone 533-9168 for hours.