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“I’M NOT A LOSER, I’M JUST DRAWN THAT WAY”: COMIX, GRAPHIC NOVELS, AND THE ETHOS OF THE ANTIHERO[1]

*Gelido, consapevole di sé e dei suoi torti,
non è cattivo. È il buono che derideva il Nietzsche
"... in verità derido l'inetto che si dice
buono, perché non ha l'ugne abbastanza forti ..."
(Guido Gozzano, "Totò Merumeni")*

1. Losers and superheroes: a relationship of mutual dependence

American comics are, still today, often regarded as undemanding books starring a few well-known superheroes wearing masks and costumes. This is only partially true: comics are not necessarily about superheroes, the latter being starred, in fact, only in a limited amount of the comics ever published and circulated in the US. The golden age of comics, which saw superhero comics gain immense popularity, reached its momentum in the 1930s, when Superman, Captain America and Wonder Woman were created in order to give a body and a face to traditional American values (like freedom and democracy), and, thus, to symbolically vilify the European dictatorships of the time. Before the 1930s, however, comic strips published in magazines and newspaper chiefly featured ordinary people (or sometimes animals), often portrayed in surreal and paradoxical contexts. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, superheroes were not the only protagonists of comic stories, horror and science fiction comics being, at the time, as much as popular as the stories about superheroes. The supremacy of superheroes in American comics was sanctioned during the Cold War. When the Comics Code Authority, established in order to prevent young people from reading those comics that would encourage bad behavior, imposed its ban upon a high number of publications, only superheroes were spared, since they clearly met at least one of the Authority's requirements: "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds" (Johnson 81). From the 1960s, the traditional superhero's features started to change: no longer an exclusively "positive" figure, the new superhero was "the psychologically torn hero-villain" (Witek 49). The late 1960s and (especially) the 1970s, saw the increasing popularity of independent and underground comics, which in few years secured their niche in the comics industry: stories of antiheroes, as well as parodies of the most celebrated comics heroes, gained an almost immediate following. The era of graphic novel (from the late 1970s on), finally, witnessed the birth of art comics, radically different, on the whole, from old superheroes magazines, and the growing importance of authorship over marketability.

In this essay I will try to analyze the figure of the "loser", one of the most typical embodiments of the antihero of present comics and graphic novels, as simultaneously opposite and complementary to the traditional superhero of mainstream comics. In particular, I will foster attention on a specific kind of character, the cartoonist or comics drawer, as the "loser" par excellence in comic books. I will, first, reflect on readership, as playing an important role in originating the figure of the loser through a process of identification and projection between comics and their readers; I will then try to trace the historical origins of the loser as the antihero of comic stories back to the 1960s; finally, I will analyze three comic books featuring cartoonists as protagonists (two of them being authors of superhero comics), thus highlighting how many contemporary works in this genre invite readings that take into account their status as meta-comics. The aim of these three comics, as I hope to make clear in the essay, is to show that traditional comics heroes have almost invariably been created by socially awkward types, who shaped them as to be idolized for their superpowers and fabled charisma. It follows, thus, that superheroes, rather than generic emblems of strength and courage, function as symbolic figures that counterbalance the flaws and the fears of their creators. This need for compensation is quite often related to gender and sex roles, which effectively explains why superheroes (and superlosers as well) are, with few exceptions, male.[2]

2. The Nerd Club: readers, comics freaks and losers

The comics-freak as the loser par excellence has become such a common character to be frequently represented as the antihero of strips and graphic novels, and his popularity, as I previously suggested, can be explained in terms of identification and dis-identification between readers and characters.

A passage by Edward Said could be useful to understand the process of multiple identification (between readers/authors/characters) that distinguishes comics as a subcultural phenomenon. In his introduction to Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, Said argues:

Many comics (...) seem to acquire a life of their own, with recurring characters, plot situations, and phrases that turn their readers, whether in Egypt, India or Canada, into a sort of club in which every member knows and can refer to a whole set of common assumptions and names. Most adults, I think, tend to connect comics with what is frivolous or ephemeral, and there is an assumption that as one grows older they are put aside for more serious pursuits, except very occasionally. (i)

Said, thus, does make two points, absolutely relevant to my argument: first, comics actually establish a connection among their readers, which has no equivalent among people interested in "serious" books (being, on the contrary, quite diffused among the fans of specific sub-genres, from music, to cinema to literature).[3] Second, the reasons for the solidarity among the readers of comics and graphic novels is to be found in the marginal, and often despised position that comics still occupy among literary texts. It is undeniable, in fact, this type of art still "suffer[s] from a considerable lack of legitimacy", as Thierry Groensteen puts it (1), summarizing the reasons of this bias in the following terms:

1) It is a hybrid, the result of crossbreeding between text and image; 2) Its storytelling ambitions seem to remain on the level of a sub-literature; 3) It has connections to a common and inferior branch of visual art, that of caricature; 4) Even though they are now frequently intended for adults, comics propose nothing other than a return to childhood. (7)

The first two points are also effectively addressed by Scott McCloud, in his pivotal *Understanding Comics*: "traditional thinking has long held that truly GREAT works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm's length. Words and pictures TOGETHER are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst a product of crass commercialism" (140).

Groensteen's and McCloud's analyses, as well as Said's intuition, focus on a common prejudice: comics are books for readers that reject the "great works of literature", and prefer clinging to an oversimplified, almost infantile genre, thus refusing the challenges posed by more serious, complex and mature books. People reading comics, basically, are seen as adults that do not want to grow up, and that stubbornly claim their right to enjoy a condition of cultural infancy.

This mixture of complicity and marginality, perfectly summarized by Said, could at least partially explain why the loser, as such, has become in some comics a sort of icon, effectively functioning as a recurring role model. The awareness of participating in a collective experience that is foreclosed to the majority of readers, who despise comics for being naïve and infantile, characterizes the experience of comics as subculture, that is, as the will to collectively and rebelliously share something that grown-ups and judicious people do look down upon. The loser, as the hyper-infantile hero of the comics' world, is the perfect site of identification for those readers that are kept at the margins of the imagined community of "serious" writers and readers, representing their ironic and (sometimes) pathetic counterpart.

3. Back to the 1960s: archaeology of the loser



Let us start with what the word "loser" evokes in common usage, and what its origins as a central figure in the history of US comics are. A comparison with superheroes could be precious to elucidate the opposite polarities around which these two icons have traditionally been constructed. In response to Peter Coogan's essay "The Definition of the Superhero", I will try to list the most common features that identify



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losers as the antiheroes of comics and graphic novels.[4] The archetypal loser of comics and graphic novels is a man (but there are also some female instances)[5], usually in his twenties. He is typically into “geeky” stuff: computers, sci-fi, role-playing games, and obviously comics. Although not necessarily unattractive, more often than not he is. He has a problematic (to say the least) relationship with women and with sex in general, but he is (almost) invariably heterosexual. He is generally white, though ethnicity is not necessarily a case in point – but I will mention a controversial example with regard to this issue in one of the texts I am going to analyze. He has some friends, but is often solitary or prefers hanging out with his closest friend rather than partying and enjoying other people's company.

As for the historical origins of the loser as an icon, easily recognizable for the features I have tentatively listed above, my hypothesis is that they can be traced back to independent and underground comics (the *comix*) that, between the 1960s and the 1970s, featured parodies or

caricatures of the celebrated superheroes of the time, ironically embodying their opposite: in the early 1960s, for example, Gilbert Shelton and Tony Bell created a parody of Superman, the “wonder wart-hog”, a counter-superhero with piggish features, who killed the people he did not like.[6] “A particularly fruitful ground for iconoclasm” (Witek 50), *comix* countered the American traditional and ordinary values embodied in mainstream comics, emphasizing, among other things, authorship as an essential component of artistic (and cultural) creation, valuing “the productions of the lone cartoonist over collaborative or assembly-line work” and thus establishing “a poetic ethos of individual expression” (Hatfield 16). This specific feature, moreover, even more closely associates *comix* with graphic novels, in which the role of the individual author (who makes both the drawing and the writing of his/her texts) is paramount.

Among the most influential of all underground comic artists, Robert Crumb emerges in the 1960s as “an anxiety-ridden perpetual loser” (Mouly 279), who first had the merit of “ironizing (...) the comic book medium itself” (Hatfield 12). Crumb's art, “unabashed in its vulgarity”, has been also interpreted as “the glorification of his own nerdiness” (Mouly 279). Among the characters Crumb created for the magazine *Zap*, at least a couple are to be mentioned: Fritz the Cat, the feline superhero famous for his sexual performances, and the guru Mr. Natural, supposed to have renounced all material goods and nevertheless obsessed with sex and luxury.[7] Rightly considered “the Bruegel of the second half of the twentieth century” (Mouly 282), Crumb immediately became popular in the circuit of underground comics, and his characters were recognized for some of those very traits that, in a few years, would have marked the loser of graphic novels as well: they are ordinary people, they always show an unrestrained sexual appetite (which is an obvious reference to the utopia of sexual liberation of the time), and they visibly contrast with and contradict the supposedly “positive” values that superheroes have traditionally embodied.[8] As Witek argues, “The *comix* creator cultivated an outlaw image, and their works systematically flung down and danced upon every American standard of good taste, artistic competence, political coherence, and sexual restraint” (51).

This complex and fascinating world of the underground production of the 1960s-1970s is of great help in order to understand the origins of the loser as the key-figure of a number of graphic novels published for almost thirty years now: being marginalized and ridiculed by mainstream society is the essential feature of the typical comics' loser, and sex-related themes play a pivotal role as well. However, whereas in the past the *comix* anti-heroes freely expressed their sexual needs and preferences – and, in the surreal world in which they lived, there was even room for their oddities – [9] graphic novels unmistakably veered towards realism, thus turning the sexual eccentricities of the past into shameful anomalies. Yet, while so-called “normal” people usually conceal their weirdness, fearing of being,

otherwise, openly ridiculed and mocked at, graphic novels' antiheroes often are proud of weaknesses and flaws commonly ascribed to them, and eager to turn them into markers of their own identity. As I will try to show especially in my second and third case studies, sexual eccentricities serve the purpose of questioning and criticizing the normative gender, and more specifically male, role played by superheroes, thanks to which the latter can adequately embody "positive" values (courage, generosity, righteousness).

Let me now move to an analysis of three texts that, each to a different extent, highlight some of the abovementioned peculiar features of the loser.

4. Loser degree zero: Joe Matt's *Peepshow/The Poor Bastard*

The relationship between the loser as the antihero and the world of independent comics is particularly evident in the first of the texts I am analyzing, the autobiographical graphic novel *The Poor Bastard* by Joe Matt. The protagonist of the book is a cartoonist who tries to earn a living by drawing independent comics, thus perceiving himself as rather an intellectual than simply a drawer. When his girlfriend, who takes drawing classes at college, tries to show him a sketch featuring Goofy she has been working on, he disdainfully refuses: "They're training us so we can get jobs", she argues, to which he abruptly replies: "Jobs at Disney. No thanks" (1992, #2, 10). Though laying no overt claim to any continuity between the independent comics of the 1960s-1970s and the new antihero of graphic novels (condemned, by now, to be a loser), the text implicitly (and proudly) foregrounds this lineage.

The Poor Bastard was published as a book in 1996, gathering a six issue comics previously published under the title *Peepshow*. Being an autobiography, it naturally foregrounds the issue of identification, which I have previously referred to as crucial to comics as a subculture: author and protagonist perfectly overlap, to the point that they are both named Joe, and the reader is aware that identifying with the protagonist means identifying with the very author of the story.[10] Joe desperately tries to earn a living by his artistic craft, is utterly addicted to pornography, and shows no respect whatsoever to his girlfriend, who eventually breaks up with him. The issues of sex and gender, thus, are evidently paramount to the construction of the character and to the self-definition of the author; yet, the text features no superhero, being valuable, rather than for the customary and almost standardized featuring of a loser as a protagonist, for disclosing the close relationship between the author, his book, and its readers.

The Poor Bastard's protagonist, thus, can be identified as "loser degree zero", as the text presents him through no filters, metaphors or narrative detours. This is also true of the graphic component of the book, drawings being, with few exceptions (that is, the panels about the protagonist's inner conflicts and anxieties), regular and homogeneous, with no ostensible emphasis on any aspect of the story over others, or on any of the characters.[11] The relationship



of identification between readers and characters is even more visible in the *Peepshow's* issues, which precede the publication of the volume. The second issue of *Peepshow* features a letter from a reader to Joe Matt: "Dear Joe, after reading about what a selfish, thoughtless, bastard you are in *Peepshow* #1, my girlfriend thinks I'm a prince! Thanks for making *the rest of us* look good" (1992 #2, first inside back cover, my emphasis). Apart from the close relationship between comics' authors and readers, quite unusual for "ordinary" books, the message adequately expresses the role of the loser as a catalyst of bad qualities and, as such, as a symbolic site upon which readers can simultaneously project their own alter egos and disown the very projection they have produced. Moreover, shedding light on the community of comics' freaks the protagonist belongs to – on their very frequent errands to comics stands, and on their little manias and fanaticisms – the text features this entire subculture as itself an ideal cradle and heaven for losers. Obsession with comics is reported, indeed, as the real reason of Joe's bad behavior, of his selfishness and stinginess (comics are the only items he spends money on, showing, on the contrary, no interest at all in going out to dinner or to the movies with his girlfriend or friends), and of being more absorbed in his erratic (and often erotic) fantasies than attentive to the people around him.

The process through which the loser is constructed as the result of identification and rejection is also staged within the very storyline of the text. The perspectives of the narrator and the protagonist on this process, in fact, diverge only as to the different degree of awareness of themselves as losers: whereas the author implicitly acknowledges it, the protagonist, on the contrary, repeatedly rejects any assumption about being himself "the" loser of the story, and thus projects this stigma upon another character. Joe, in fact, shares his apartment with an older man, Charles, whom he overtly describes as a weirdo, a lonely man with no job or friends, who spends whole days in the kitchen frying bacon and anxiously trying to find someone to talk to. Speaking about Charles over the phone with a friend, they refer to him as a "poor bastard" (1992 #2, 3; fig. 1), thus resorting to the same mechanism of identification/rejection that the reading of his strips actually trigger for his readers. Like his readers who, as I have previously shown, use *Peepshow's* characters not so much to "look better", as his fan's letter reports, as to "feel" better, the protagonist of the story, by showing his contempt for Charles, demonstrates how gratifying it is to have someone to look down upon and identify as a loser. The same dynamics of projection and dis-identification, thus, is operating within the story and outside of it, both at the level of the narrative and of the author/reader relationship, thus enhancing the potential of the text as a site of identification/rejection.

5. It takes three to know one: all the losers of Alex Robinson's *Box Office Poison*



My second example further explores the connection between losers and comic artists that I have analyzed in Joe Matt's magazine and graphic novel. Published in collected form in 2001, Alex Robinson's *Box Office Poison* is "a convincing, absorbing and satisfying fictional portrait of post-college life in mid-1990s New York City" ("Review"), and is essentially based on the protagonists' daily lives and their attempts to face personal issues and the precarious job market of the 1990s United States. Quite originally, in *Box Office Poison* the features of the typical loser of comics are distributed over three different characters, which, besides suggesting how diverse the very figure of the loser might be, further complicates the dynamics of identification between the author and the protagonists, and between the latter and the reader. Sherman, the "positive hero" of the book, unmistakably features some of the most



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easily identifiable characteristics of the comics' loser: he is a wannabe writer who earns a living by working in a bookstore and is deeply frustrated in his job (he angrily claims that he has a college degree and yet is treated like a servant by his bizarre customers, 32); however, despite the rejections he continually gets after sending his manuscripts to publishers, he has friends, a girlfriend, a sex life, and is rather good-looking. Sherman could be better defined as only a half-loser also because,

differently from Ed Velazquez, his comics-addict best friend, his literary aspirations prevent him from being fully associated with "nerdishness". To complement Sherman, the book features two more characters who better fit the prototype of the loser and provide an interesting comparison between what being a loser means today and what it used to in the past. The character that any reader immediately sympathizes with is in fact Ed Velazquez, who dreams of becoming a major cartoonist, despite the economic crisis in the comics industry. Ed is not very good-looking, often complains about his fatness, has no luck with women, still lives with his parents, and, unlike the WASP Sherman, is of Hispanic heritage. Ethnic connotation is one of the traits that controversially identify losers in *Box Office Poison*, though never being explicitly addressed as such, but I will take this point up later.

In the eyes of people around him, being a cartoonist is the worst of Ed's shortcomings, as shown in figures 1-2 (58-59): everything can be accepted and tolerated, but working in comics necessarily amounts to being a loser, and lacking any attractiveness for the woman he is trying to seduce (and, in a broader sense, for anyone looking at comics from the outside). People who are into comics are unredeemable dorks, not because they have any flaw in particular, but because their very interest for comics is itself a flaw. Moreover, being a cartoonist is scorned as a fallback, something that people end up doing because they do not succeed in their real aspirations. This is openly stated by the second cartoonist featured in *Box Office Poison*, Mr. Irving Flavor, a former comic artist who created the superhero Nightstalker (a tongue-in-cheek reference to Batman, the "dark knight", the allusion being confirmed by Nightstalker's aspect, almost identical to Batman's). Irving started his career as a cartoonist in the 1930s, at the age of nineteen, and was later fired by the company that had hired him, Zoom Comics, which however kept the copyright on Nightstalker and left him in poverty. Referring to cartoonists, Irving bluntly affirms that, back in the past, their real professional aspirations were addressed elsewhere, and that they turned to comics only because it was the easiest way to earn money. Those who really loved and wanted to work in the comics industry were regarded as losers, as Irving states in figure 3 (117). Irving's point can be more easily understood by looking at the history of the genre itself, as summarized in figure 4 (178), which elucidates the pure entertaining role of comics in the US popular culture during their so-called golden age. As a pioneering study published in 1950 by Leo Bogart maintained, in fact, comics "provide some sort of satisfaction (some tension reduction) for the individual reader, either in a conscious, purposeful way, or in a mechanical, unconscious way. Tensions may be reduced simply by a relief in monotony, by a break in accustomed activity, by the pure mechanics of variety" (190). Comics, back then, were the purest expression of escapism, a pastime that especially children and adolescents enjoyed, something that adults more often than not disapproved of, but that was however tolerated as a way to spend one's own leisure time. Likewise, in *Box Office Poison*, Irving declares that publishers "didn't give a shit *what* you did, as long as kids kept buying it. ... you had total freedom ... we sure as hell had to fill up a lot of pages quick" (178). An easy money job, comics were far from being appreciated as a culture or even a subculture; reading comics, thus, did not amount to being a comics-addict, or, to put it differently, to being a loser. Only people really keen on comics are, in fact, rated as losers, just because they turn something trivial and infantile, and only profitable for making money, into a lifelong and absorbing passion. Mr. Irving's story, on the contrary, suggests that in the past the average middle-class American man, perfectly embodied by him at the time of his job at Zoom Comics, was not supposed to have any other personal interest than the ones commonly and unanimously sanctioned by mainstream society:



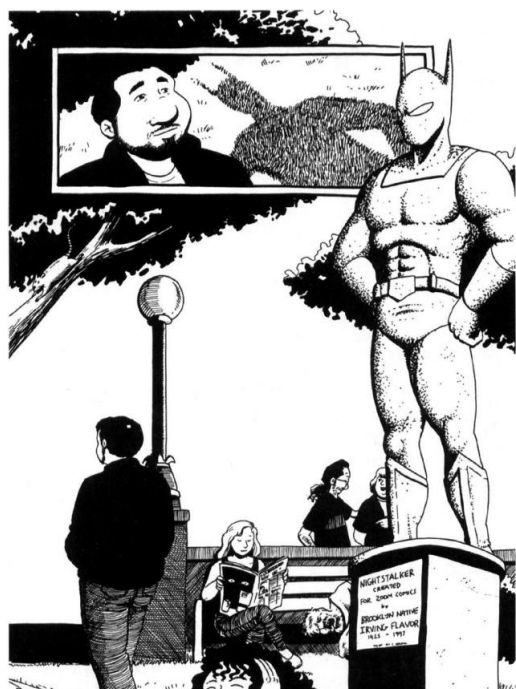
owning a house and having a wife was all he needed to be happy, satisfied and proud of himself. Channeling one's own desires into unusual directions was completely unconceivable, and nurturing a passion for what was simply a job would probably sound like a sort of morbidity, something that only losers could possibly dwell on. The use Robinson makes of the characters of Ed and Irving sheds light on the different functions that comics have had in American society over the decades, and, as a consequence, perfectly renders the slippage from comics as a part of the entertainment industry to comics as a subculture. This slippage, which actually occurred in the 1960s, has produced a considerable shift also within popular imagination: the comic artist, back in the past, was a simple cog in the machine of comics industry; after the countercultural turn, comics have become more complex, halfway between the homemade, amateurish artifact, targeted to a small audience that usually shares the same milieu as the author, and the countercultural product, which has, theoretically, higher intellectual standards than mainstream comics and is aimed at a wider audience, more *engagé*, or at least supposed to be so.



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Superheroes are featured, in *Box Office Poison*, as the silent alter egos of both Mr. Irving and Ed, who are the creator of Nightstalker and one of his devotees respectively, and thus symbolically figure as the author and the consumer of mainstream comics. The association between comics and losers, thus, plainly hinted at in *The Poor Bastard*, is here charged with another, absolutely crucial, meaning, that is, the role of the loser as the actual counterpart of the superhero. This element will be finally addressed and thematized, as I hope to make clear, in the third book I am going to analyze.

Before moving to *Pussey!*, the last of my three case studies, however, two more issues raised by *Box Office Poison* must be addressed. The first one is that of ethnicity: both Ed and Irving, in fact, belong to clearly identified ethnic groups. Ed is Hispanic, and, to further emphasize his background, the author repeatedly underlines that he still lives with his parents, a possible indirect reference to Latinos' supposedly strong sense of attachment to their family.



Moreover, Ed is obsessed with his being still a virgin, which, though not obviously related to his Hispanic heritage, completes the picture of him as the typical "mama's boy" of Latino cultures, and is thus contrasted with his more independent and adult Anglo-Saxon peers. As for Irving, though his ethnic origin is never openly mentioned, there are several clues that allow the reader to identify it: his constant use of the word "schmuck", the *kippah* that Ed wears during his funeral viewing, and his almost stereotypical physical aspect, especially in those panels featuring him as a young man, let the reader easily infer that he is of Jewish descent. The fact that Ed and Mr. Irving play the role of comic artists, and, as such, of "losers", legitimately raises questions of ethnic bias: the overall idea conveyed by the story, indeed, is that there are, on the one hand, more or less neutral characters, invariably white and middle class, whose virtues and vices are almost equally balanced, while, on the other, freaks are either non-white, or, at least, non-Anglo-Saxon.[12] Rather than hypothesizing that Robinson has voluntarily assigned negative roles to non-Anglo people, I would suggest that *Box*

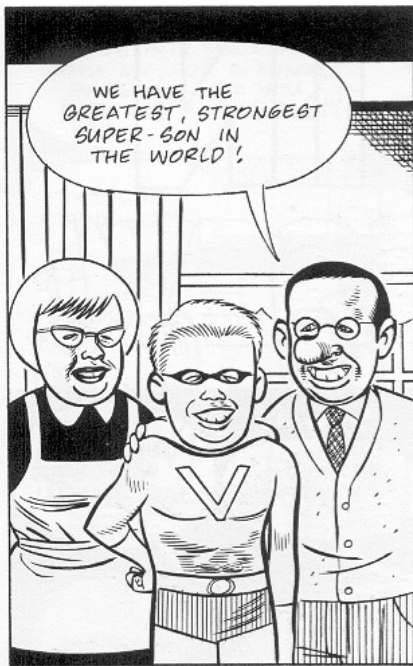


Office Poison, as comics and graphic novels often do, has absorbed the stereotypes most frequently attached to different ethnic groups, immediately turning them into, and circulating them as, cultural icons.

This reading only partially explains the author's choice, and raises questions as to whether or not comics and graphic novels should address thorny issues, or whether they, as the expression of unofficial, often marginalized and despised countercultures, can legitimately infringe the norms of political correctness.[13]

The second point to make in this brief reading of *Box Office Poison* pertains to the ending of the story, and is quite relevant to my analysis of the loser as the comics antihero. Sherman, put aside his artistic aspirations, ends up working as an assistant manager, which causes his friendship with Ed to end; the latter gets married to Hildy Kierkegaard, a Scandinavian girl who works at Zoom Comics; Irving finally manages to get money from his former employers, which still owns *Nightstalker*, and dies a rich and respected old artist: a page-size panel featuring a monument built in his honor closes the whole book (figure 5, 602). This apparently positive conclusion can yet reveal a certain degree of ambiguity: though on the one hand it suggests that a happy end is always awaiting those who fight against difficulties, on the other it implies that, for all their efforts, losers cannot aspire to anything more than an ordinarily petit-bourgeois life, a dull middle-class routine.

6. Superman vs. the Überloser: Daniel Clowes's *Pussey!*



The third graphic novel I am going to analyze sums up and fully deploys most of the issues I have addressed in my analysis of *Peepshow/The Poor Bastard* and *Box Office Poison*. *Pussey!* by Daniel Clowes is, as the Fantagraphics website puts it, "a brutal and scathing peek into the insular, pathetic world of the comic book industry, as seen through the eyes of antihero Dan Pussey." [14] A short graphic novel, published in eight issues of the series *Eightball* and then collected in 1995, *Pussey!* evokes distinct elements of *The Poor Bastard* and *Box Office Poison*: the protagonist, Dan Pussey, as a comic addict and, later, a professional drawer, embodies the stereotype of the comics freak (as in *The Poor Bastard*), and, at the same time, calls for a more complex analysis of the loser as a cultural icon. Whereas *Box Office Poison*, however, chiefly deals with the loser's transformations over the decades, *Pussey!* unfolds a genealogy of the loser as an individual, shifting the focus from the historical to the individual plan.[15] Finally, *Pussey!* combines the figure of the cartoonist as a loser with the iconic superheroes of mainstream comics. Dan Pussey is, in fact, an avid reader of superheroes comics, and the most interesting (and funniest, too) sections of the book spring out of the sheer opposition between his fantasies, deeply indebted to his favorite

comics' heroic scenarios, and his real life, which is, quite predictably, the life of a nerd. The book is remarkable for at least one more reason: it caustically attacks not so much comics addiction and its "nerdishness", as the haughtiness of those wannabe alternative artists that, despising comics as commercial and commercialized art, claim their status as artists to guarantee for the high quality of their work.[16]

On its very cover, *Pussey!* declares its intent: it wants to sketch the story of "our hero from cradle to grave". Pussey is thus ironically labeled as "our" hero, though being, in fact, the typical weirdo of comics who, since his childhood, has dreamt of himself as a superhero ("Volcano Boy", fig. 6, 44). Moreover, the story insists on the mutual dependence between losers and superheroes, overtly maintaining that the latter can be conceived and decently dignified only by the former. As Dr. Infinity, the man who hires Pussey in his publishing house and makes him a celebrity argues, "there have always existed a handful of creators with a loftier aspiration: to create MODERN MYTH for adults, or at least college students. Such a man is our Mr. Pussey" (8). The alleged opposition between superheroes and losers, thus, turns out to be in fact the expression of sheer continuity: not only do losers sublimate their anxieties and frustrations into powerful figures of strong and successful men, but their very status as losers is the necessary condition to conceive superheroes, who are just unthinkable of by ordinary men.

Clowes explicitly relates the present status of



Dan Pussey as a loser to his childhood, to the relationship with his family, and to troubles with sexuality since his teen years, as the titles of several chapters and, obviously, his very name emblematically suggest: "The Young Manhood of Dan Pussey – Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pussey", "The Origin of Dan Pussey", or, as to insist on the troublesome relationship that Pussey, and losers in general, have with sex and with women, "Dan Pussey's masturbation fantasy". Going back to the years spent in school means, for Pussey, going back to the memory of his schoolmates bullying him and of girls being totally disgusted by those guys crazy about "Star Trek, science fiction, and comic books and stuff" (47).



Pussey's family, too, is deemed as responsible for having transformed an insecure teenager into a total loser, since his absent father and domineering mother mistake Dan's lack of social skills for homosexuality (fig. 7, 46), thus implicitly maintaining the equation between a socially integrated behavior and normative sex/gender roles. According to this perspective, a loser can be easily mistaken for a gay man, since they both embody alternative and nonconformist models of masculinity. Fully upholding these stereotypes, Dr. Infinity admits that there is nothing "wrong to make a few bucks from exploiting the repressed homosexual urges and castration fears of undeveloped adolescent minds (especially when they belong to 37 year-olds!)" (23). Pussey's traumas and frustrations, as a matter of fact, are clearly related to sex; his inadequacy to fully participate in the world of adult people makes him a grown up man who still lives the existence of a shy and awkward teenager whose fantasies have completely replaced reality.

However, as I have previously mentioned, *Pussey!* is noteworthy also for drawing a parallel between the world of comics and the world of allegedly "high" art, thus showing that there are no actual differences between the two and that, moreover, the apparently sophisticated and intellectual artists are, more often than not, completely incompetent, and more interested in just making money than their despised and more commercial antagonists who work for the comics industry. Clowes insists on the economic issues at stake in cultural industry, and on the deceitful strategies used to trick losers into working for no money in return: Pussey is often reminded that he is, actually, an artist, and that, as such, he should not care about money. Pride and passion are the triggers that motivate Pussey, whose genuine interest in comics is exploited in order to force him to do an exceptional amount of work, with little or no rest and payoff. He is a loser, after all, and there is nobody better than a loser to take advantage of, because all that he needs is someone who sincerely admires him and his work and efforts. Losers are, according to Clowes' perspective, completely innocent and firmly convinced that all people, like them, strongly and genuinely believe in what they do and are up to.



In his search for losers' redeeming qualities, thus, Clowes tries to counterbalance the worst stereotypes attached to comic artists as social misfits, by pointing out the role played by the culture industry in arbitrarily sanctioning the divide between art and mass culture, and, consequently, between the professed artists featured in the book and cartoonists, on the mere basis of market trends and demands. Trying to run away from the comics industry, Pussey is gradually convinced of his qualities as a "real" artist by a man who runs an art gallery and encourages him to set up an exhibit. Unfortunately, this man, after showing considerable enthusiasm for Pussey and his drawings, abruptly dismisses him to make room for another wannabe artist. After this episode, Pussey is finally pushed back to the world he always belonged to, realizing that he will be forever a loser.



Dr. Infinity confirms him in this opinion, triumphantly claiming him to the world of comics (fig. 8, 26). However, incredible as it may sound, the last chapter features Pussey happily married, thus confirming the idea that a loser can obviously

only aspire to be a regular man, the “quiet American”, whose life is finally as ordinary as the lives of his peers, those who have always looked down upon him.

The book ends with Dan Pussey, a celebrated icon of comics industry, witnessing his gradual decline when *The Mutilators*, the debut comics of Trent Gaswell, a 17 year-old artist, starts selling more copies than Pussey's *Nauseator*. Pussey dies a very old man, surrounded only by his books; Gaswell, the new star of superhero comics, is his ideal heir, being as talented as him in drawing superheroes, and, obviously, looking as much like a loser as Pussey did in his youth. The wheel, thus, comes full circle: losers and comics heroes form a dyad that outlives actual comic artists, confirming that the mythical qualities traditionally projected on superheroes (strength, courage, audacity) do not exist and never existed but as losers' idealizations.

Whereas traditional superhero comics stubbornly maintain that every man is, at least potentially, a hero – as witness Superman or Batman, ordinary American citizens that turn into heroes when someone needs help – losers show that heroism can be, at most, the desperate effort to compensate for being, and being identified as, unsuccessful in anything. Described by Clowes as the real heroes of his book, losers of all generations have been given the arduous task to debunk the myths of courage and to unveil the mysteries of heroism which, especially in the United States, have been and still are used as a cover for nationalistic and, often, racist, chauvinistic and militarist ideologies. We definitely agree with Bertolt Brecht that “unhappy is the land that needs a hero” – but, fortunately, we can add: happy is the land that breeds so many losers.

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[2] For the question of female superheroes in comics and popular culture, see Knight.

[3] Whereas the question of comics as a genre in its own right is a highly debated one (Golomb 103), in fact, few doubts exist about comics as a subculture.

[4] According to Coogan's analysis, a superhero is the "champion of the oppressed", must be "prosocial and selfless" (which implies that he fights against evil not in order to achieve personal benefit, but in the sole interest of the community), must have exceptional powers (true also of those characters, like Batman or Iron Man who, though not having traditional superpowers, are much stronger and smarter than ordinary people) or weapons, and, finally, must wear a costume and have a codename (30-32). Coogan's description fails to notice, however, that, as Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne demonstrate, heroes often disguise ordinary men, thus serving the function of blank screens onto which anyone can cast his dreams, desires and projections. For the role of superheroes in American comics, see Harvey, especially the second chapter "Legions in Long Underwear. The Advent of the Comic Book and the Reign of the Superhero."

[5] Among the comics featuring female losers, I will just mention the short story "Hawaiian Gateway", by Adrian Tomine (included in his collection *Summer Blonde*, published by Drawn&Quarterly in 2003), and the graphic novel *Bottomless Belly Button* by Dash Shaw (published by Fantagraphics in 2008).

[6] Several traits that characterize the figure of the loser are also detectable in Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*, which started being published in 1950; yet, some of the loser's most emblematic features, and his strong connotation in sexual terms, are obviously lacking in Schulz's characters.

[7] In 1981 Robert Crumb founded a magazine whose name is quite telling, as to relationship between the old antihero of comix and the new loser of graphic novels: *Weirdo*, published until 1993. The case of *Weirdo* is quite interesting, since a lot of new-generation cartoonists have published on it, like Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns, Peter Bagge, Gilbert Hernandez and Joe Matt. *Weirdo* shut down when graphic novels had already landed in the US book market.

[8] All the more surprisingly, there also was a female anti-superhero that gained immediate popularity at the time, Angelfood McSpade, a black woman represented, according to the worst and politically incorrect stereotypes, as a nymphomaniac who even enjoys being sexually abused, rape being thus presented as an event that can ordinarily occur to a "primitive" African woman craving sex in all forms. Among the comix magazines dealing with, and addressed to, women, at least *Wimmen's Comix*, started in 1971 and edited by Patricia Moodian, has to be

mentioned.

[9] “Underground comix conveyed an unprecedented sense of intimacy, rivaling the scandalizing disclosures of confessional poetry but shot through with fantasy, burlesque, and self-satire” (Hatfield 7).

[10] Dale Jacobs indirectly points out how strong the identification between the text and its readers is: describing the protagonist of *Peepshow*, he remarks that “most of us are not as obsessed with sex, pornography, or money” (76), thus implying the existence of a mainstream, normative “us” to which Joe Matt (and, consequently, anyone who identifies with him) is sharply opposed.

[11] Jacobs provides a more detailed analysis of *Peepshow*'s graphic features (66).

[12] I am not only referring to the two comic artists, but also, for instance, to the old woman who owns the building where most of the graphic novel is set: she is from eastern Europe and is portrayed as a sort of grotesque Dickensian Scrooge, maniacally attached to money, eventually dying alone and forlorn during Christmas holidays.

[13] For a more in-depth analysis of the issue comics-ethnicity, see Brown (especially chapter 5) and Rifas.

[14] <http://www.fantagraphics.com/browse-shop/pussey.html>. Recognized as one of the most interesting and prolific authors of the graphic novel generation, Clowes has been praised as “a worthy successor of Robert Crumb” for creating “a sharp-eyed view of the American popular culture of these two decades [1950s and 1960s]” and for the “outcasts and tragic figures” that populate his comics (“Daniel Clowes” 67-69).

[15] Clowes resorts to his characters' ugliness to classify and label them as losers (10), as well as Robinson in *Box Office Poison* (363). Emphasizing the physical unattractiveness of people who are, generically, connected with comics (as artists, publishers, or simple amateurs) reveals what they really look like in the eyes of “mainstream” people.

[16] Fantagraphic website reviews *Pussey!* as a *roman à clef*, some characters clearly embodying real people working in the comics industry, like Art Spiegelman, in *Pussey!* featured as Gummo Bubbleman.

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