

I Hate it Here:

The Gonzo Way of Deconstructing Dreams in *Transmetropolitan*

#1-9

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Master REVI - Université Bourgogne Europe

Supervision : Candice Lemaire

10 May 2026



I HATE IT HERE

THE GONZO WAY OF DECONSTRUCTING DREAMS IN

TRANSMETROPOLITAN

#1-9



ARE OUR LEADERS INVOLVED IN SEX TRAFFICKING?

"JFK'S MAGIC PENIS" FINAL EPISODE THIS TUESDAY AT FOUR



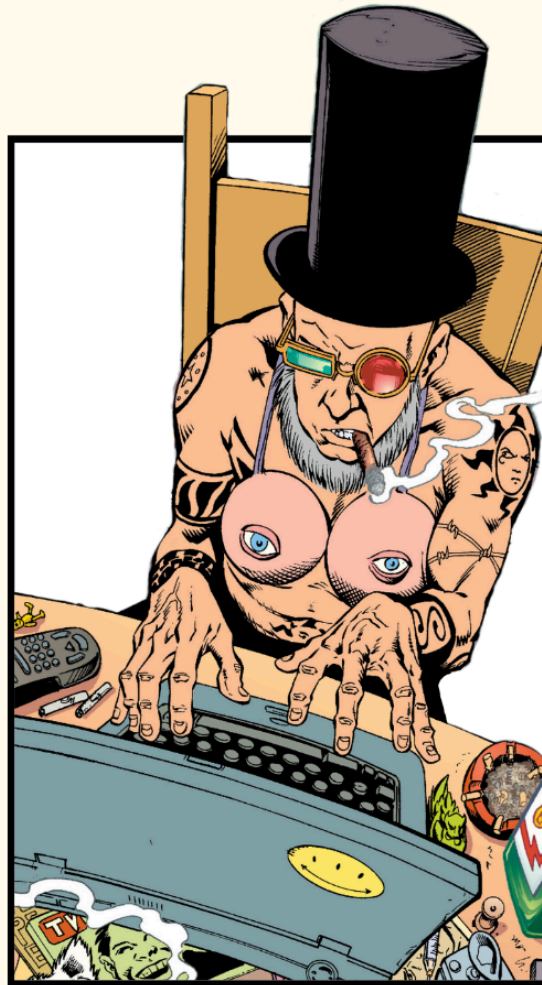
SPIDER JERUSALEM RETURNS TO "THE CITY", A DYSTOPIAN METROPOLIS, TO WRITE ABOUT ITS EXCESSES.

GONZO

SPIDER IS HIGHLY INSPIRED BY HUNTER S. THOMPSON AND HIS *FEAR AND LOATHING* SERIES. GONZO JOURNALISM IS HYPER SUBJECTIVE, VIOLENT, VULGAR, HIGH ON DRUGS... IT'S HUMAN.

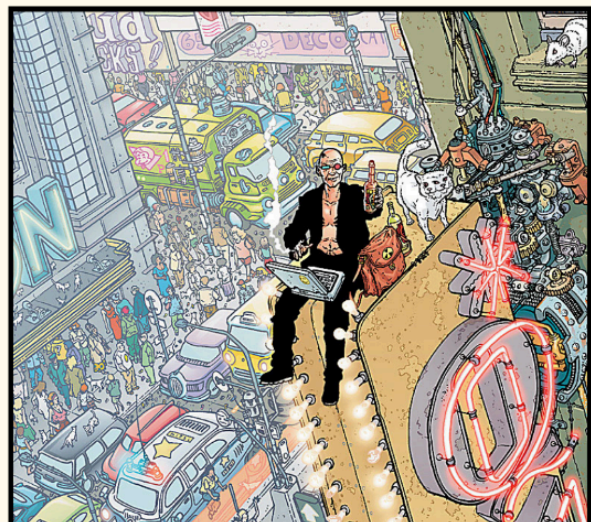
ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER AIMS TO EXPLAIN HOW GONZO ELEMENTS RIDICULE AMERICANA, TECHNOPHILIC ABERRATIONS AND ABUSES OF POWER IN ISSUES #1-9.



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vote for CANDICE LEMAIRE



METHODOLOGY

- VISUAL ANALYSIS OF DARICK ROBERTSON'S ART THROUGH MCCLOUD'S *UNDERSTANDING COMICS*.
- COMPARISON WITH *FEAR AND LOATHING*.
- ANALYSIS OF REFERENCES



Made by Human

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Abstract

“The concept of the future that Transmetropolitan puts forth is one of the present gone to extremes in all directions, as opposed to the more commonplace vision of the future as one where some single social feature has run rampant over all others. The dominant visual motif of much of the work could be described as sprawling, chaotic – even, if we wanted to get cute about it, Gonzo.” (Michelitch 7)

This paper aims to explain how the beginning of the science fiction comic book Transmetropolitan uses a Gonzo prism to unveil the excesses of a dystopian America. It examines how both textual and visual elements ridicule Americana and expose technophilic aberrations as well as abuses of power.

Keywords: Gonzo, comics, American Dream, Science-Fiction

For ease of reference, when citing Transmetropolitan, only the chapter number and the page will be written. “(#1: 15)” will refer to: Ellis’ and Robertson’s *Transmetropolitan* (1997), issue #1, page 15.

Introduction

Created by writer Warren Ellis and penciler Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2004) is a 60-issue science fiction comic book published by DC Comics under the Vertigo label¹, which included more provocative titles, such as *Preacher* (1995), *Sandman* (1989), *Hellblazer* (1988) or *Y, The Last Man* (2002). It tells the stories of Spider Jerusalem, a Gonzo journalist who returns to The City after several years alone in the mountains. The City is the place in which the entire story is set and is the stage for an urban dystopia resembling cities like *Blade Runner's* (1982) Los Angeles or *Akira's* (1988) Neo-Tokyo (Witzke 2): omnipresence of (sometimes pornographic or gory) advertising, new technologies, extreme poverty, drugs, litter, smoke and bright colours. Spider Jerusalem feared The City and fled, but in issue #1, he returns to finish a writing contract that he owes to his tyrant editor, Mitchell Royce, of the newspaper The Word. It is then followed by his rediscovery of The City and his field investigations on its hidden faces (issues #1 to #12) and then his coverage of the presidential election between outgoing president Bob Heller, "The Beast", and Gary Callahan, "The Smiler" (issues #13 to #24). Most of the comic book is dedicated to Spider trying to take down The Smiler from presidency (issue #24 to #60).

Ellis is transparent about this, but it is obvious throughout the series: Spider Jerusalem is heavily inspired by Hunter S. Thompson and the characters that he birthed in his works. *The Fear and Loathing* series and other of his works are pillars of Gonzo journalism. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), for instance, Hunter S. Thompson tells the story of Raoul Duke, an uncontrollable journalist, and his attorney Dr Gonzo², driving to Las Vegas and reporting on the dark side of the American Dream, both heavily armed with more kinds of drugs than one can count. He inserted his hate of politics, hypocrisy, the press and all kinds of power at the core of his work. This psychedelic journey with its hallucinations and crash outs is exactly where Gonzo takes over: the acme of hyper subjectivity. Hyper subjectivity also significantly shapes form, as illustrated by the

¹ It was first under the Helix label, for more information, read William Brett's *From Helix to Vertigo: The Unusual Publication History of Transmetropolitan*.

² Raoul Duke and Dr Gonzo are pseudonyms that Hunter S. Thomoson used, at times, to refer to him and to Oscar Zeta Acosta, his lawyer.

omnipresent vulgarity, Ralph Steadman's crude illustrations, and the ink stains that can be found on certain pages throughout the book³. Extracts like these “[...] The press is a gang of cruel faggots. Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits—a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy piss-riden little hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage.”⁴ are nothing like traditional journalism.

At heart, Gonzo, the “least factual, most accurate” (Nevett 2) form of journalism, is outraged, frustrated, violent, vulgar, militant, drunk, high on drugs, unpredictable and above all, human; it hates politics and media and does whatever it takes to “[get] at the Truth, even if it mean[s], technically, lying” (Elborough 17). The term was first used in 1970 by journalist Bill Cardoso to praise Thompson's *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved* (1970), and it was immediately adopted by the latter (Elborough 16).

Gonzo is a great tool for discussing beliefs and setting the cat among the pigeons. Hunter S. Thompson handles it virtuously to explore the American Dream, and so does *Transmetropolitan*. While *Transmetropolitan* tackles different types of myths and Dreams, the common denominator is the American Dream. Defining it is challenging, as it is an idea that has evolved a lot through time and that keeps evolving, but historians and scholars have agreed on common concepts that the expression embodies. Its foundations are the pursuit of happiness, freedom, upward mobility, equality, home ownership, American exceptionalism and the idea of expanding West (W. Lassagne). Other concepts derive from this base and remain part of the American Dream, such as free enterprise (Osteen 2) and material success (Cindy Dermo 1), which derive from upward mobility and home ownership, and the dream of inalienable rights within the political sphere, which derives from equality. In the early and mid-20th century, the importance of ownership and materialism in the US led to the birth of marketing as a discipline (McCarty⁵) and made advertising a core interest. Notable examples of this are Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, stating in 1925, “Advertising Is a Vital Force in Our National

³ pages 105, 137, 154 and 188

⁴ on page 200, Hunter S. Thompson high on amphetamines after reading about a US ship captain “diced up like pineapple meat” in Guas

⁵ in *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*

Life”, and head of the U.S. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce Julius Klein, stating in 1929, “Advertising is the key to world prosperity”. Despite being a central tool, advertising has become a symbol of the US and revived the “national mythology of the American Dream, that is, every citizen’s birthright to [...] enjoy the fruits of consumer culture” (Samuel 10). Technology has a comparable place in the US, as the race for new ideas has always been central to the American way of thinking (W. Lassagne), and Silicon Valley is not only a global centre of innovation but a beacon of the US’s skills and a paragon of the US’s exceptionalism. According to Cindy Dermo, the main purpose of the American Dream is to “keep the worker producing and consuming” (1); technology and media apply to it and can constitute other ideals, or Dreams⁶. It was in the twentieth century that American soft power became an essential catalyst of the Dream with the birth of Hollywood, the ‘dream machine’, and of superhero comic books. The stories told on screen and in print established tropes, traditions, concepts, gave birth to archetypes and celebrities that all represent the United States of America and embody the Dream around the world. As a consequence, other works of fiction took advantage of it, and deconstructing the Dream is a recurring theme in fiction.

Scholars have long scrutinised the American Dream in literature and cinema (S. Khan; H. Maqbool; M. H. Khan; W. M. Khan⁷), especially in works like Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and its adaptations (Bruls⁸; Maklad⁹), or in science fiction (E. McNelley¹⁰). In comic books, research on this specific topic is limited; some of it discusses symbolic leaders like Captain America or Superman as witnesses to the evolution of the Dream over time (Angarra)¹¹ (Karp)¹²; Captain America, again, is looked at as a symbol of resistance, fighting against the hegemonic vision of the Dream brought by Ronald Reagan during his presidency (McGuire¹³). Zlatko Bukač focuses on the construction and deconstruction of the American Dream in a particular era of the X-Men, the *Giant Size X-Men* (1975). As far as manga is concerned, even

⁶ More about this later.

⁷ authors of *The American Dream’s Representation in Literature and the Media*

⁸ author of *The Representation of the American Dream in Film Adaptations of The Great Gatsby*

⁹ author of *Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby: Critical Reception and Visual Interpretation*

¹⁰ author of *Science Fiction and the American Dream*

¹¹ for Captain America

¹² for Superman

¹³ author of *Science Fiction and the American Dream*

less research is found: a few examples are Marica Orru, who examines the influence of American culture on *My Hero Academia*'s (2014) animated series adaptation (2016), focusing on All Might, a character from Horikoshi's work; or Kasiyarno, who rapidly mentions the influence of Batman over Masakazu Katsura's works (Kasiyarno 18).

It can be noticed that scholars tend to focus exclusively on superhero comic books to talk about the Dream. They have indeed been widely studied, and certain writings are pillars of the comic book's state of the art, like Umberto Eco's *The Myth of Superman* (1972). Nevertheless, non-superhero self-contained comic books are also very popular among academic researchers: authors like Alan Moore (*Watchmen* (1986), *V for Vendetta* (1982)), Art Spiegelman (*Maus* (1986)), Frank Miller, Will Eisner, Neil Gaiman or Grant Morrison have inspired generations of readers and have also inspired research. In this paper's case, *Transmetropolitan* clearly falls in the second category: while it is debatable, Spider Jerusalem is not a superhero (Carlson 9), the story was meant to have a plot that ends, and it is written and pencilled by the same artists; thus, according to Cyril Camus, *Transmetropolitan* could even be considered as a graphic novel. Its publication under the Vertigo label clearly puts it on the same page as other self-contained titles like *Preacher* or *Sandman*, and whilst research on *Transmetropolitan* might still be very niche and limited, it is not totally absent from the academic environment. Unsurprisingly, given Spider Jerusalem's battle and the comic book's main story arc, the most common themes that have been examined in *Transmetropolitan* are The Truth and politics. Steen Christiansen wrote about how in the comic book, words are a bearer of truth while images of lies, or, as he puts it, "words as true and images as false" (147). He also looks at how words and images work together within the pages, whether one prevails over the other. Nicolas Labarre, on the other hand, examines *Transmetropolitan*'s politics through the prism of current and former US politics, both linking the comic book to American political history and to the 2016 presidential election. There is also a short paragraph about The Smiler in Christina Knopf's book about politics in comic books (64). Yet, these are not the only topics that interest scholars: *Transmetropolitan*'s geography, the City as a key to narration, is a popular theme as well. Francesco Alessio Ursini looks at how intra-diegetic and extra-diegetic places in science fiction can influence the comparability of real and fictional spaces through either world-building or world-reduction (2);

the City is one of the examples studied. Scott Common uses de Certeau's idea of creating spaces from places to explain how the City's inhabitants are "both part of the place and the elements that make it a space" (12) while, at the same time, Joao Rosmaninho DS reveals geographic representations of "human and urban aberracies" (1) in the City. Outside these themes, an article written by Christian Hviid Mortensen describes media-futurism and media-anachronism in *Transmetropolitan*, that is to say, the presence of both futuristic media devices and technologies, and more old-fashioned ones, and how they coexist to put "media environments" (56) into perspective and create a "sensual overload" (49). As far as published academic work on *Transmetropolitan* is concerned, that is about it. However, one of the most-cited works on the comic book in academic research is not exactly an academic publication. *Shot in the Face - A Savage Journey to the Heart of Transmetropolitan* (2013) is a 155-page book collecting multiple articles analysing Ellis' and Robertson's work through different perspectives such as: context of publication and structure of the narrative (William) (Darius), science fiction and dystopia (Witzke), the representation of women (Burgas), the influence of Hunter S. Thompson (Nevett), the protagonist (K. Ellis) (Carlson), visual analysis (Michelitch), and, obviously again, journalism and politics (Murphy) (K. Lindsay) (Meaney). Two interviews also appear at the end, one with Warren Ellis and one with Darick Robertson (Thurman). The reason it is not exactly an academic book is that the contributors are of various backgrounds. As a matter of fact, they are writers, journalists, comic book artists, bloggers, filmmakers, and a scholar: Julian Darius, the founder of Sequart Organisation, the publisher of the book. This diversity of profiles does not affect in any way the quality of the articles, and they have been cited several times by scholars in later works. Put aside Chad Nevett's article¹⁴, the current state of research about *Transmetropolitan* clearly lacks writing on Gonzo and on the American dream.

Transmetropolitan is sixty issues long and contains many story arcs, characters, and references to American culture and American political history; altogether, making it a very dense work to analyse. This is one of the reasons why this paper focuses on the beginning of the comic book. The other reason lies in the nature of the beginning itself inside the structure of the whole series: As reported by Julian Darius, *Transmetropolitan's* structure is very ambitious

¹⁴ *Fear and Loathing in the City: The Influence of Hunter S. Thompson on Transmetropolitan*

in its division into “year-long seasons” (14), and ‘Year One’¹⁵ is much more memorable (10): the reader follows Spider Jerusalem’s rediscovery of the City in episodic issues, each one exploring and introducing us to different aberrations in the City through his Gonzo point of view. Issue #1, ‘*the summer of the year*’, is a general introduction of Spider, his editor, Royce, and the City. ‘*down the dip*’ (#2), is an introduction to the transhumanist, ‘transient’, community and its dishonest leader and ‘*up the roof*’ (#3) shows a transient riot being turned into a bloodbath by the police. In ‘*on the stump*’ (#4), Spider and Channon Yarrow¹⁶, his new assistant, go to The Beast’s press conference, and Spider encounters him in the public toilet. This encounter leads to a verbal confrontation and ultimately to Spider firing at the outgoing president with his ‘*bowel disruptor*’. In issue #5, ‘*WHAT SPIDER WATCHES ON TV*’, he immerses in television and



figure 1: New Religious Movement Convention, Issue #6 page 14

stays on the couch in front of TV programs and advertisements for the entire issue. In ‘*GOD*

¹⁵ *Transmetropolitan* is composed of five 12-issues years. Thus, Year One includes issues #1-12.

¹⁶ Channon Yarrow is Mitchell Royce’s niece and one of Spider’s two ‘filthy assistants’

RIDING SHOTGUN (#6), Spider, high on ‘jump start’, and Channon go to the “New Religious Movement Convention” to put it into shambles. *BOYFRIEND IS A VIRUS* (#7) focuses on Ziang, Channon’s boyfriend, who broke up with her, decided to destroy his body and to be ‘downloaded’ into a ‘foglet’, a cloud of a billion electronic nanoparticles. Issue #8, *‘another cold morning’*, a fan-favourite, tells Mary’s story: in the late 1900s, Mary, an old and sick woman, decided to be cryo-frozen. Her head was put into a steel can full of liquid nitrogen at -186°C. Now, in the City, Mary is revived into a young body; she is a ‘revival’, and like every other revival, the discovery of the City constituted a deep trauma, causing considerable brain damage. Spider follows her and writes about her terrible condition, in the name of every revival. Finally, in *‘WILD in the COUNTRY’* (#9), Spider discovers the ‘reservations’. Reservations are human zoos that accurately replicate ancient civilisations, and people can choose to erase their memories and live inside them. On the other hand, other people are born inside them without knowing that there is a world outside. Living conditions, diseases, and traditions (including human sacrifice or genital mutilation) are also replicated inside reservations. Issues #1-9 and their unique quality of being “all about exploring the universe of the series” (Darius 8) and the issues’ episodocity created the “I HATE IT HERE formula” (Rosmaninho DS 4). Indeed, issues #10, #11, and #12, named *‘FREEZE ME WITH YOUR KISS’* Part I, II, and III, respectively, are part of Year One, but they are not included in the corpus of this paper. Those three issues were not selected since they do not really fit the ‘I HATE IT HERE’ formula. The story spans three issues, and Spider writes only a few sentences about the City in his column. This story arc is much more about Spider Jerusalem’s past excesses than about the City’s current ones. Four elements of his past appear in order to give depth to his background: The reader learns about his cryo-frozen ex-wife; about the vengeful police dog ‘Stomponato’; about Indira, Royce’s assistant, “made [...] into a pornstar” (#11: 22) by Spider years back; and about ‘The War of the Verbals’, a war that younger Spider Jerusalem covered. Although Spider’s journalistic works are constantly referred to, *FREEZE ME WITH YOUR KISS* is rather centred around a man on the run, chased by his own past, than around a journalist, exposing the City’s insanity. Nonetheless, Gonzo stays at the heart of narration (e.g., Stomponato, the police dog, hunting Spider Jerusalem because, at the time when Spider was the boss of a strip club and Stomponato one of

his bouncers, Spider knocked the police dog out and paid a vet to remove his “huge wanger”. #10: 19).

‘I HATE IT HERE’ sure is a central concept in the first issues’ narration, but it also is an expression that has been used twice, as a nod to Spider’s column, in writings about *Transmetropolitan*. There is a journalistic article entitled “*I Hate it Here: ‘Transmetropolitan’ and the Election Season*” (Parker) and an academic one entitled “*I Hate it Here: Creating Spaces from Places (and vice versa) in Transmetropolitan*” (Common); Spider Jerusalem’s column inspires journalists, scholars and now junior researchers as well.

This paper scrutinises the deconstruction of the American dream at the beginning of *Transmetropolitan* by identifying the City’s excesses, analysing how the Gonzo prism criticises them and how it can be linked to the US. The first topic analysed will be *Transmetropolitan*’s media and technological environment. The second topic will be about the comic book’s link to relations of power. Lastly, this paper will examine American symbols through mockery and similarities with Hunter S. Thompson’s works. The study relies on visual analysis, following Roland Barthes’ *Rhétorique de l’Image* (1964), Martine Joly’s *Introduction to Image Analysis* (1993) and Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994) for comic book-related analysis, especially “transitions” (70). There are several types of transitions between panels (see figure 2),



figure 2: Categories of transitions (McCloud 74)

and each one of them requires a different amount of closure, creating different effects. These

authors helped interpret the different offences made by *Transmetropolitan* towards the American Dream.

I) “Who do I have to kill to find some news ?” - Defining the Dystopian America

a) *City of Fire* - Visual Overload

Scholar Ted Ownby stated that “consumer culture has developed as a series of social and personal ideals—or dreams—that emerged at different points in American history” among which, he includes “The Dream of Abundance”, in other words, the dream of “material paradise”, making the American people “People of Plenty” (Ownby 1). This abundance is transcribed in *Transmetropolitan* through visual overload.

While Spider Jerusalem affirms, in the first issue, that the City’s richness and variety of cultures is its strength (#1: 15), *Transmetropolitan* keeps exposing the excesses of such a saturation as “all [its] visual culture functions as a negative part” of the City (Christiansen 149). There are several encounters of Robertson’s “mayhem-filled panels” (S. Ellis 1) in issues #1-9: on Spider’s arrival in the City, while he is stuck in traffic, two pages show the street he is surrounded by. They show an large quantity of advertisements, colours, people, and his car is crushed by the City’s verticality (#1: 12, 13). Another great example of the City’s saturation is found in issue #8, when the narrator puts the reader back in Spider’s time after having told Mary’s past. Robertson gives us a wide shot in one of the City’s streets, and pure chaos is coming out from the page (see figure 3). The “sensory overload” requested by Ellis to Robertson for this panel is met (Thurman 6): The outstanding amount and variety of people, colourful advertisements and buildings strike the reader’s eye, making it a strong definition of the City. Note how the only elements that come out from the horizontal lines of the two bridges, and the vertical lines of the street, the broken lamppost on the left side, the buildings in the background, and the floating lewd advertisement going between the bridges, are the ornaments of the upper bridge and the tree in the middle of the street¹⁷. They ironically are not only the few organic elements on the page (excluding humans), but they also are covered by “incongruous signifiers”, as Sean Witzke delicately puts it (“*The Future...*” 6). The tree is covered

¹⁷ There also is a hidden tree on the right side of the page.

by signs promoting pornography, necrophilia and pedophilia related services, and the upper bridge has an ad for “Mr. Man” on the left, one for “Ebola Cola” sodas on the right, and an anamorphic floating sign with a naked woman going under it (#8: 6). This treatment of vital elements matches the idea that saturation can cover essential information.

In 2004, in their review of literature on the global concept of information overload, Martin J. Eppler and Jeanne Mengis created a table¹⁸ listing each consequence of this phenomenon. Among them, difficult “identification and selection of relevant information”, “omission”, “loss of control”, “superficial analysis”, “loss of differentiation”, and “misinterpretation” of information are clearly effects that both inhabitants of the City and the reader experience. As far as the reader is concerned, the saturation of elements within the panels is so strong that it can sometimes affect the readability of the action. Consequently, in some panels¹⁹, the characters in the background of the action are sometimes monochrome, making the action before them stand out. As far as the people of the City are concerned, a good example of this is found when Channon is heartbroken and complains to Spider at a bus stop, shocking a priest because of their vulgarity, to the point that he throws up (#6: 10-12). The irony is that from the beginning of the conversation, the priest was surrounded by pornographic advertisements in the bus stop; information overload makes immorality invisible, but Gonzo makes it clear.

b) Everything - Media Saturation and Mass Consumption

Scholars have argued that matters like television, consumer society or marketing are essential to American identity. It is also the case of advertising: “Given how deeply rooted it is in [American] society, it is not difficult to understand why advertising seems so ‘natural’ [...]” (Rotzoll and Haefner 3). *Transmetropolitan*, an arguable “critique of current media saturation” (Christiansen 147), depicts media and consumer society as a nullifier of Truth. It is illustrated by the vast number of television channels (#5: 2), the abundance of televisions in the City (some

¹⁸ (Eppler 333)

¹⁹ It can be found in: Issue #1 page 25, panel 4; issue #4 page 14, panels 1, 3 and 4; issue #6 page 7, panels 3 and 4; issue #6 page 15, panels 1, 3, and 4; issue #6 page 16, panels 1 and 5; issue #9 page 6, panel 2; and issue #9 page 15, panel 3.

are even integrated to the City's pavement²⁰), and the prevalence of entertainment over information, as seen in issue #2, when Spider, in front of "the *forty-ninth* morning talk show", asks his television: "Who do I have to kill to find some *news?*" (#2: 18, emphasis in original). This prevalence is much more striking in issue #5 'WHAT SPIDER WATCHES ON TV', which is dedicated to criticising television. During his immersion, the media's emptiness is highlighted by moment-to-moment transitions (McCloud 70) between repeated panels of Spider watching the television, emphasising his boredom. This is deepened by the programs appearing on the channels, which range from the gory "Anthrax Cat" (#5: 6), to the absurd "JFK's Magic Penis" (10). Mass consumption is represented through a channel that exclusively broadcasts trailers, mocking Ownby's "The Dream of Novelty" (Ownby 2). Spider's experience while watching television has a big impact on him, as he finds himself losing his journalistic stance, and buying "air jesus sports shoe[s]" (#5: 8), losing his temper at a political lecturer (15), showing a sad child's behaviour, by crying in a bucket of candies (19) and becoming zombie-like after being victim of a buybomb²¹ (21).

Worse than buybombs is "informational pollen", a banned technology that inserts a shot of information directly in the brain. Spider is a victim of the pollen in the 'Farsight Community' and it visually appears like an explosion of senses, turning Spider into the panel of the page (see figure 4); according to him it was like "washing down a bucket of peyote with a vatful of absinthe" (#9: 20). In the Farsight Community, information is revealed to Spider the Gonzo way, as drugs. The point the comic book makes is that the Truth is "mind-bending" (Lindsay 5), and if it is not ignored or drowned in obsolete entertainment.

²⁰ found in (#1: 15; #8: 15-16; #9: 18)

²¹ buybombs are flashes that "load your brain with compressed ads that unreel into your dreams" (#5: 22)

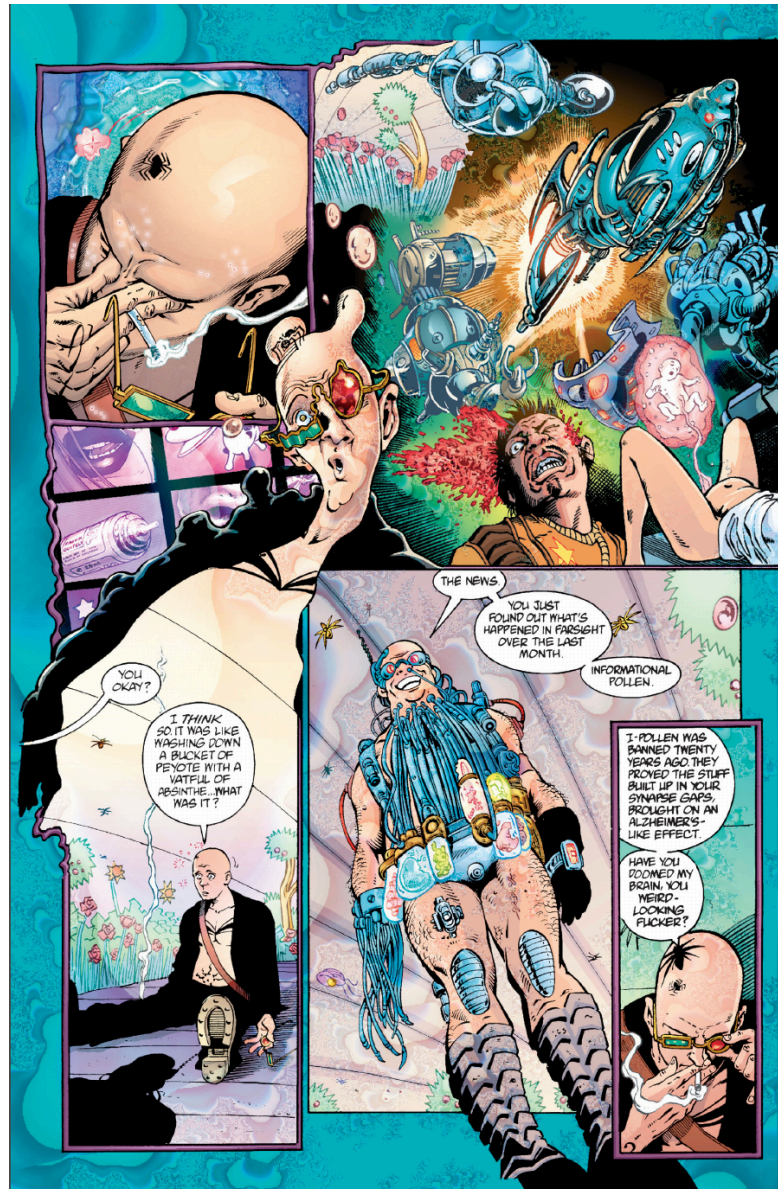


figure 4: Spider victim of informational pollen (#9: 20)

c) *DNA*² - Technological Dream

The City is full of new technologies, but they are rarely depicted as something to be proud of. Initially, advanced technologies do not worry Spider during his rediscovery of the City, but stupidity always takes over. An example of this is when he discovers his new ‘maker’²² is on drugs (#1: 22), setting the tone for the rest of the story. A comic book in which, in issue #1, it is shown that children on the street deal drugs and a home appliance is addicted to hallucinogens, is a case study of writing foolishness (or Gonzo).

²² Makers are house appliance systems that can produce anything. They are fuelled by garbage.

The artificiality of the technological dream in which the City seems to live in is put forward throughout the nine studied issues: transients and tempers²³ are qualified of being “body-perverts” by Spider (#2: 12); later, he encounters a smoking “gengineered” cat who has two heads, but reveals being weak and awkward (17); after explaining to Channon the history behind foglets and downloaded people, he states that “*body perverts* got involved” (#7: 13, emphasis in original), and the reader is shown Ziang, Channon’s boyfriend, who, “was arrested for masturbating over supermarket shelf-stacking systems” (9), having sex a few seconds after being downloaded; reservations were presented initially as an interesting idea by Spider, but it was totally blown of by a conversation between two men in a bar about whether every reservation is “fuck central” (#9: 6); the only exception is the bowel disruptor which never disappoints.

At times, the future shown by Ellis and Robertson is a failed one, as in the first page of issue #4, where Spider is writing on his laptop, around fancy white buildings, on a levitating table and chair, while contrastingly being naked, littering the place with fast food and cigarette ends and talking about how “on a good day” he has a view on dead dogs floating on the canal’s surface.

Transmetropolitan takes a good shot at deconstructing consumer society, the technological dream, and The Dream of Abundance by creating a world overwhelmed by artificial progress and absurd entertainment, all covering the Truth.

²³ Temping is “temporarily taking on the characteristics of an animal through genetic manipulation” (Lampe 97)

II) “ Let’s go out and stomp on children, lunatics and incompetents, because by damn it makes our balls feel big”: The City, a Stage for Abuses of Power

Stating that Spider Jerusalem hates power and those who hold it would be a euphemism. Every form of power is concerned: it ranges from his editor, Mitchell Royce, to religions, cults, the press, a tollbooth employee, the police, and, obviously, politicians. He sure is not the kind of person who likes being controlled or told what to do or not to do, especially when his fight is for absolute Truth and against hypocrisy. In the crooked world of *Transmetropolitan*, it is no surprise that Spider, the embodiment of Gonzo (with hatred of power at its core), is an anti-system and anti-authoritarian character.

a) *The Authority* - Mechanisms of Power

Spider Jerusalem’s rejection of power is the very first thing that readers encounter in their discovery of the comic book. Even before seeing the protagonist, on the very first panel, Royce, the “ignorant, thick-lipped, evil whorehopping editor” (#1: 1), tells Spider on the phone “Does the word *contract* mean anything to you, Jerusalem ?” (1, emphasis in original), before being yelled at. The relation between Spider Jerusalem and Mitchell Royce is built around Royce’s phone calls, checking on Spider’s progress with his signature line “Where’s my fucking column?”, and on Spider’s violent and spontaneous insults as an answer to his editor’s orders. Their arguments are omnipresent through the beginning of the comic book: In issue #1, right after reminding Spider of his contract, Royce strongly suggests he should move back to the City to write his books, enraging Spider, who points a gun at his phone on a panel exposing his dilapidated house and his naked, neglected body full of tattoos. His rage can also be explained by his hate of the City, but orders are always followed by violence. After finally driving to the City, breaking into Royce’s office, and hearing him talking about “deadlines” (among other matters) (#1: 18), Spider points his gun at him as well. The panel in which Royce gets up from his desk chair and brings up deadlines is wider than the others, breaking the page’s symmetry, thus enhancing the idea that orders get on Spider’s nerves. Royce’s calls get so annoying to him

that he unconsciously puts the wired telephone in the toilet water in issue #2 (19) and does not mind taking the call while sitting on the toilet, and figuratively, on his editor. Even bolder and more explicit, on the very next page, Spider calls his freshly adopted double-headed cat to urinate on the telephone's microphone (see figure 5). He antagonises his editor so much that when Channon tells him to “be *dressed*” (#4: 7 emphasis in original), Spider, still naked, kicks the switch to close the door behind her, saying “Everyone’s a fucking editor.” (7), making it evident that he associated work, requests, orders and comments to Mitchell Royce. Speaking of work, Spider’s loathing of it made him instinctively think that Royce was forced, “caged” in The Word’s office, and the first thing he asks him is “How long have they held [him] prisoner?” (#1: 17).



figure 5: The cat urinating on Spider’s phone (#2: 20)

Mitchell Royce is not the only figure of authority that bothers *Transmetropolitan*’s protagonist. Spider’s very first in-person interaction in issue #1, with the tollbooth operator, sets the tone regarding his “distrust of authority” (Murphy 2): Spider, driving down to the City, is stopped by this “lazy” (2) man and is asked to pay five dollars. He is not only the first person Spider encounters, but also the first person of the City shown in the comic book. He is depicted in the least elegant way, as he addresses Spider in a very disdainful manner, all curled up on his seat, with his asymmetrical moustache, the medication on the counter, the violent show on the television, the Sex Puppets²⁴ calendar hung on the wall behind him, and the presumably infected device connected to his neck that he scratches (#1: 10). To that Spider’s answer and opinion is crystal clear as he qualifies him as “a worthless scrap of frogshit with a pulse and a bit of

²⁴ Sex Puppets is a pornographic television show for children.

authority.” (#1: 10; emphasis in original). This scene establishes, from the start, that Spider hates “even [...] small doses” (Murphy 4) of authority.

Readers are also witnesses to the abuses of power from systems like the police, religions, and cults. The case of the police in *Transmetropolitan* is “the most blatant example[...] that authority is a dangerous thing for anyone to hold [...]” (Murphy 4). The “filth”, in Spider’s own words (#2: 2), is shown as a cruel entity that can be reduced to violence. This can be illustrated by their extremely brutal repression of the transient riot in issue #3 and their arrival in Angels 8, the transient district. In the middle of the first page of issue #3, the riot squad is walking in a row towards the transients; they are all equipped with blue armours and red shields bearing “SUBMIT NOW” in white. The almost absurd simplicity of the signifiers on this panel strengthens the impact of the signified: Scott McCloud calls it “amplification through simplification” (30) and argues it is an important part of comic books’ tradition (31). The squad is not trying to bring peace; the message is clear, it wants submission. The red from their shields is present throughout the issue on the transients’ faces, covered in blood²⁵. It is arguable that the choices made to represent the police squad, like the colours and the stars on their shoulders, were made to recall the US flag, “the Red, White, and Blue“ (R. Vile 37), linking their bloodthirst and desire to dominate to a greater idea; here Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson point directly at a country, or at its myth. Another abuse from the police’s part is found at the end of the issue when police officers give Spider Jerusalem a gratuitous beating after he exposed their doings in his column (#3: 20, 21). Spider exposes the police with a typically Gonzo straightforward harshness, but does not spare the transient community that he regards as a cult, composed of people “shitfull of fake authority” (#2: 12): he burns the eye of a transient that does not want to let him in Angels 8 with his cigarette (2), and he punches and kicks the two transients guards (8) that are dressed as nazi officers (7) and have the transient smiley tattooed on their heads, after keeping him from entering into a bar.

As far as religions are concerned, *Transmetropolitan* centres an entire issue on the topic. Issue #6 begins in a rather blasphemous way, with Spider being high on jump start and probably other drugs (#6: 5), writing about how he hit a “Zealot” and told him how he “killed God” and

²⁵ see pages 2, 3, 4, 6, 13, and 16 of issue #3.

“raped him with a corncob” (1), dressed as Jesus, with a badly fitting fake beard, a home made aureola, and a stolen bathrobe from a hotel as Jesus’ cloth. Religions’ parody and mockery in *Transmetropolitan* will be discussed later in this paper, but this issue also serves as a stage for criticism of their manipulation as institutions, and, here, criticism is inevitably Gonzo. Spider argues, yelling at pedestrians on the roof of a car, that religious people step aside from The Truth and “suck up” the “spare sanity” of the City (7). When Spider and Channon arrive at the convention, the new religions are depicted as pretexts, obsessed with money and sex they can get from members (13, and figure 1). Then, Spider gets in a fight with the head of the “Church of Release” (18-20) and starts to curse everyone in the convention while destroying every stall. He does not hesitate to call them “scam artists”, “thieves and leeches”, and “vampires” (21).

It is indisputable that *Transmetropolitan* does not give a good image of anyone or anything holding any kind of power, whether it is manipulation for sex and money, or being bossy and domineering. Spider Jerusalem recaps it all in issue #3, while writing about the bloodbath of the transient riot:

“Your boss does what he likes. The asshole at the toolbox, the bouncer at your local bar, the security guy who frisks you at the clinic, the papers and feedsites that lie to you for the hell of it. They do what they like. [...]” (#3: 15)

b) 20th Century Boys - American Political History

Transmetropolitan’s main bearer of power was omitted until now. Spider Jerusalem’s lifelong enemy has always been politics, as established in issue #1, where it is said that he wrote ‘*Shot in the Face*’ for a former election of The Beast (#1: 8); and throughout the whole series, his main concern still is politics, with Gary Callahan, The Smiler, as the antagonist. The comic book’s political satire not only shows Spider’s hatred of politicians’ power but also a means to appeal more strongly to readers by using tropes and references to History, especially American political History of the 20th century. According to Nicolas Labarre, *Transmetropolitan*’s approach to political coverage originates from the 1970s frames of journalism, which the comic book embraces (4), further enhancing its appeal to US politics. Deconstructing the built ideals

of “social order” (Adams 404) and democracy (Churchwell; King Jr.), both central to the American dream, becomes an obligation, with Gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem in charge.

One interesting thing that the comic book does subtly is that it brings back historical elements, more or less already gone by its publication. There are multiple examples of this, as the presence of nazi swastikas in several places in the City (in the street, #4: 13; in the convention, #6: 14), the Native American and human-zoo-inspired reservations, the revival armbands reminding the Ältestenrat armbands that Jewish people could wear in the Kovno ghetto, in Lithuania (#8: cover, 17, 19). There is also a character in the ‘Farsight Community’ Reservation that explains how they pushed eugenics and ‘survival of the fittest’ to its limits for technology’s sake, without minding about death rate (#9: 21). Even subtler details are hidden in *Transmetropolitan’s* beginning, such as the simple fact that Bob Heller, The Beast, is a candidate for a third consecutive term, thus implying that the 22nd amendment does not exist anymore, or the US flag only having three white stars, a bigger one amidst two smaller ones, instead of fifty (#4: 11), revealing how far the political situation has degraded, witnessing the collapse of the traditional view of the unified states into lesser dominant powers (besides, the difference of size between the stars could signify that there might be a dominating state, compromising equality).

A strong appeal to the US is Spider’s first nemesis: Bob Heller. Issue #4 truly raises The Beast as the representation of US politics in the comic book. He is first shown on the news, along with Channon’s and Spider’s comments that he would “[...] fuck [his] grandmother’s bones”, “[i]f he thought there was a vote in it.” (#4: 11-12). It is widely discussed that The Beast, and his red, white and blue tie, is inspired by American politicians, but scholars have failed to agree on which one. Some think Ellis’ inspiration for the conservative, populist, outgoing president is Bill Clinton (Williams 4), others think it is Fred Flintstone (Michelitch 8), and several think it is Richard Nixon (Nevett 4; Labarre 3), as confirmed by Ellis (Thurman 7). The connection with Richard Nixon is not surprising, considering his strong relationship with Gonzo journalism and the existence of a nightclub called “Nixon” in Angels 8 (Labarre 3).

The most symbolic scene of distrust towards US politics might be the accidental encounter between Spider Jerusalem and The Beast in the toilets before his reelection speech. It

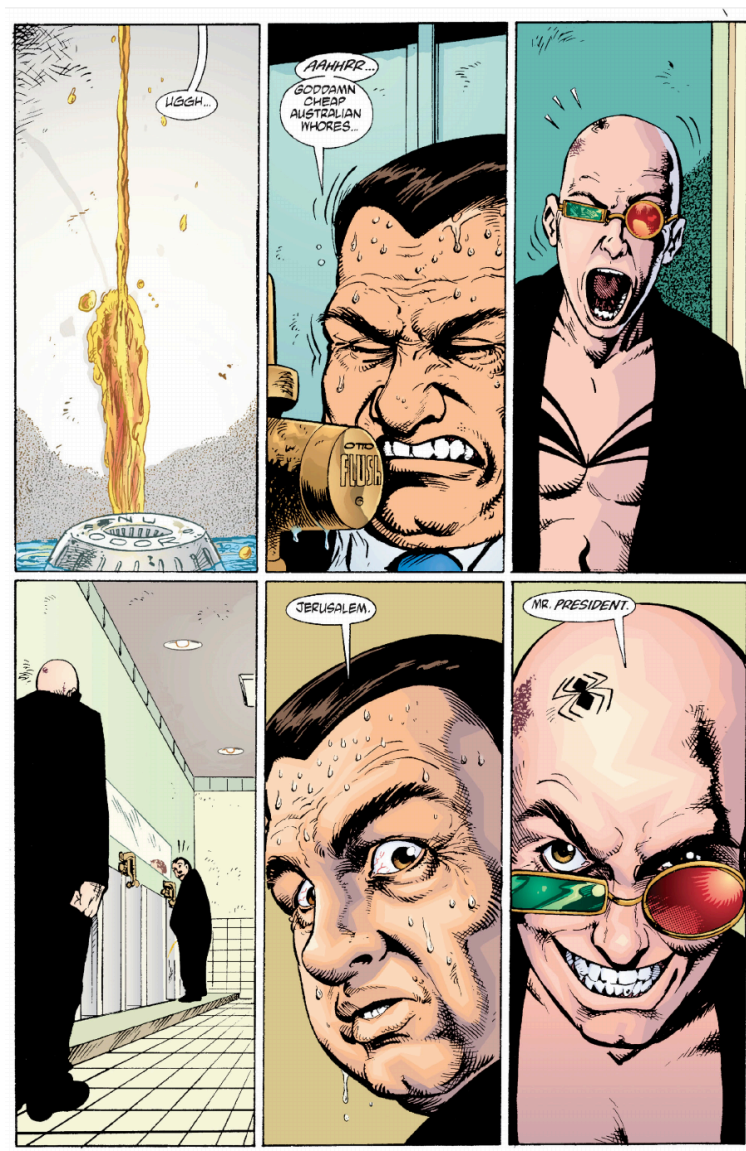


figure 6: The encounter with The Beast (#4: 17)

is also the readers' first in-person encounter with The Beast. Page 17 of issue #4 shows his true face, that of a miserable person (see figure 6). The disgust towards him that the page conveys is strongly intensified by its composition and colours. The succession of the six straightly ordered panels, going from subject to subject (McCloud 71), creates a humorous rhythm by showing the different reactions of the characters, as they realise in what unexpected situation they find themselves. The structure of the panels also creates symmetry between the two lines of panels (between panels 1, 2, 3 and panels 4, 5, and 6): in panels 1 and 4, The Beast is seen urinating; in panels 2 and 5, there is a close-up on his face; and in panels 3 and 6, a close-up on Spider Jerusalem's. These parallels highlight The Beast's hidden face's mediocrity in private, but also Spider's Gonzo thrill in reaction to the awfully shameful position his opponent finds himself in.

The main elements playing a role in shame and disgust are, first, the close-up on the brightly coloured urine amidst the plain beige, white and black of the page, followed by The Beast's complaint about his painful urination, caused by his irresponsible perversion, and second, the sweat and fear on his face, expressing his vulnerability.

While on this issue and on The Beast's planned speech²⁶, it is no insignificant matter that the meeting was supposed to take place in "Bulgakov Studio" (#4: 15), as it certainly is a reference to other abuses of power through the direct allusion to Mikhail Bulgakov, a Russian and Soviet writer of fiction and non-fiction, strongly linked to social satire, who faced a lot of censorship during his career.

In a slightly more understated manner, the beginning of the comic book keeps sliding barbs at the US politicians' behaviours, ranging from adultery to pedophilia. The Republican Party is mocked several times over the updates of the "Republican Party Reservation Compound" television show, and its members are presented as perverts. An example of this is in issue #9, where Spider hears about a "Christian pro-life lobbyist" who used illegal technology "to fall secretly pregnant" (#9: 4). Another is during a previous episode of the show, where a certain Howard wants a certain Ronald to be the "mother of [his] children" (#5: 10). Here Howard and Ronald probably refer to Presidents William Howard Taft and Ronald Reagan. This focus on Republicans can be explained by the repeated scandals that burst out between 1980 and 1999, involving 12 Republican Representatives and 2 Republican Senators in sex scandals²⁷. Presidents William Howard Taft and Ronald Reagan are not known to have been involved in any affairs of the sort, but other presidents have. Known adulterous Presidents are Warren G. Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, Bill Clinton and John Fitzgerald Kennedy (as of the publication of the issues). Speaking of Kennedy, he is massively quoted throughout the beginning of *Transmetropolitan*. He keeps being brought up by Spider as a comparison for Fred Christ. Fred Christ is the leader of the transient movement and has, at multiple times, demonstrated his dishonesty and his perversion; according to Spider, "Fred's

²⁶ which probably does not take place after Spider shot The Beast with his "bowel disruptor" in "prolapse" mode (#4: 21)

²⁷ Full list on:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_federal_political_sex_scandals_in_the_United_States#1970%E2%80%931979

do[es] half his thinking with his dick and the other half with his asshole” (#2: 16). In issue #2, when Spider breaks into Fred Christ’s bar (used as an office), Fred gets out of a room, half-naked, complaining that he had “told [...] people, it’s *vital* to the *cause* that [he] get[s] *uninterrupted sex* at *least* every six hours...” (#2: 9, emphasis in original). This quote is a clear reference to one of JFK’s famous ones: “If I don’t have a woman for three days, I get terrible headaches.” (Reeves 328). Later, in issue #3, before starting to write about the transient riot, Spider says everything is happening “because Fred Christ feels a bit Kennedy and Civic Center got nervous.” (#3: 9). There is also a television show called “JFK’s Magic Penis” and Spider ironically mentions “John Kennedy playing grab-ass in the White House” when talking about the great days of America (#8: 19).

Transmetropolitan does not skimp on political satire, nor on revisiting the hidden, ridiculous faces of those who represented the US republic.

c) *Sin City* - The Natural Connexion between Power and Perversity

Politicians are not the only ones pointed at regarding immoral taboos. In *Transmetropolitan*’s first issues, perversity and even perversion are common traits of all holders and institutions of power.

Fred Christ’s perversion is not only a means of satire towards John F. Kennedy, but it is also a way of showing what people in power can do in the City. Fred is constantly brought up as a degenerate throughout the comic book: When Spider goes to Angels 8 to meet him in issue #2, he bumps into a homeless transient woman carrying one of his illegitimate children, to that, he murmurs, “For fuck’s sake, Fred. I swear, you’d stick it in mud if you thought it’d wriggle.” (#2: 6). After the transient riot, Spider reveals that Fred Christ “was found huddling in a bar with a thirteen year-old girl with no clothes on, so that’s the end of him”(#3: 19), removing the creep of the equation (for a time).

As a leader, Fred took advantage of his dominion to be an “alien love messiah” (#2: 12), but in the City, institutions themselves are depicted as perverted. Religions are widely shown as an excuse for vices in issue #5, with, for instance, Ziang, Channon’s boyfriend, being part of the Gaian-bias Buddhists, who don’t consider sex as cheating. Then, the convention really is a

compilation of what can be done in terms of deviance. On page 13, the panels, working with an aspect-to-aspect (McCloud #72) feel, each show a different faith. Among them, a man's hand is shown, holding a business card stating, "THOR NEEDS VIRGINS"; the card and the bar code on the man's wrist work as signifiers of the faith's artificiality and perversion. Another sign, on the last panel of the page, that offers, "Do you want to eat [...] Human Flesh on the path to Spiritual Fulfilment? Or just for the hell of it?" and other details being fairly straightforward as well, like the stall with the nazi swastika on page 14, are other clues that help state that in the City, religions and cults can freely enjoy the practice of taboos and aberrations like adultery, cannibalism or Nazism.

Every institution of the City seems infected by licentiousness and composed of sex maniacs. The scientific team at the revival company in issue #8 is no exception, especially in how they treat clients during and after their second birth. During Mary's revival, two named, but unknown, drunk scientists have intercourse in the toilets of the revival centre (#8: 10), and ten minutes after Mary's revival, while in shock, the counsellor approaches her, to give her a bathrobe and take her in charge, but above all, to find out if she can be used as a new sex partner, who could "do all the horrible things in bed that he require[s] to get it up" (11), without caring about her state of shock (figure 7). The visual narration of this scene makes it particularly disgusting: the narrator is Spider Jerusalem, and the text in the panels, along with its sober and traditional font²⁸, is in fact his column, illustrated by visuals of Mary's experience. Spider writes about the counsellor's thoughts; still, he puts readers in Mary's place from the first page of the issue, creating a documentary feel and thus making readers live what she lives. In other words, forcing readers, with a low over-the-shoulder shot, to observe slowly the counsellor touching his crotch in front of her, barely conscious, while reading about his most lewd and immoral thoughts. The focus on his outrageous gesture is enhanced by the moment-to-moment closure in panels 3, 4, and 5, which requires less reader involvement to understand the action (McCloud 70). The high-angle shot of Mary and the low-angle shot of the counsellor on the

²⁸ instead of the comic book one

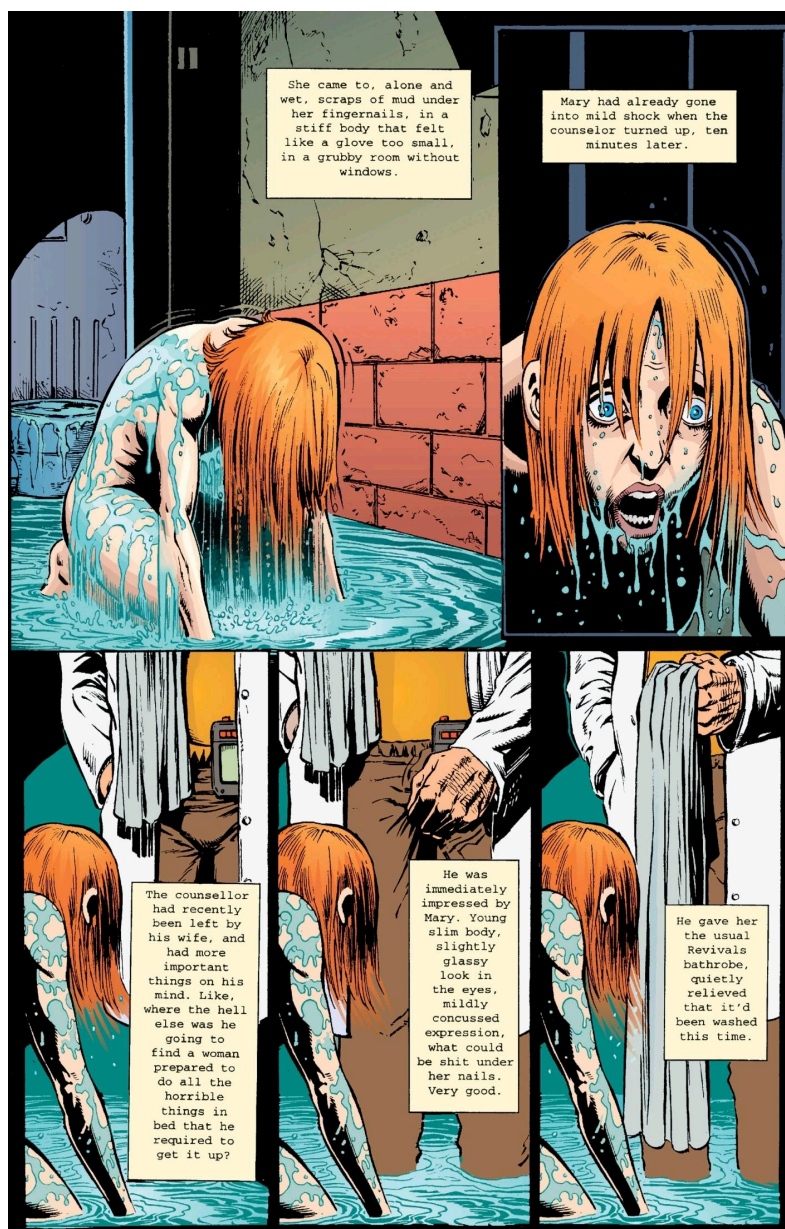


figure 7: Mary's revival (#8: 11)

next page (#8: 12), in addition to the fact that the counsellor's face is never shown²⁹, convey the effect of a person in miserable conditions, against not a man³⁰, but a system.

The message is clear. From Nazi faiths to pedophile leaders, perverse scientists and cops “groping [their] own erection” during massacres (#3: 13); by depicting taboos as a normalised,

²⁹ The person that later leads her to her bed in the hostel (17) has a different outfit, skin colour and no hair on their hands.

³⁰ As indicated on his badge (14) the counsellor is named “Michael Lark”. It only is a reference to award-winning comic artist Michael Lark and does not compromise his deshumanisation.

existing feature of the City, *Transmetropolitan* succeeds in associating institutions and structures of power with perversity.

d) *A Drifting Life* - “All Men Are Created Equal”

Like many science-fiction dystopian cities, the City is full of marginalised people. The common denominator is poverty, omnipresent throughout the comic book. In the first issues' expository panels of the City, homelessness, litter, and graphs keep appearing (e.g., #1: 15). After leaving The Word and accepting his return to the City, while getting to his new home, Spider points out litter as a sign of extreme poverty, explaining that if a “middle-class area- was nearby, there would have been “garbage scavengers”. It is in the context that he encounters, in front of his home, which “is poorer than a stack of dead beggars”, a boy working as a spotter and drug dealer whose ear is plugged by, according to the skull sign, a dangerous bright liquid (19). He is not the only person needing to do such exaggerated things for a living. Notable examples are Channon, who revealed that she worked in the Angels 8 strip club three times a week to pay for her journalism studies (#4: 5), and the aliens from the colony of Old Vilnius who, “don't have much to trade” (#2: 11) and “sold their own genetic structure [...] in order to survive” (12).

Poverty is often a consequence of other factors, such as being part of minorities like transients or revivals. Transients have widely been shown as a persecuted and extremely poor community, especially through the lens of Angels 8, their home district. Simply Spider's surprise at the taxi's price (#2: 1) to get to “one of the poorest” districts (Gibson 18) of the City illustrates its isolation and inaccessibility from the rest. The issue's cover shows a significant degree of deterioration and litter in Angels 8, but it is rather bright. On the other hand, page 4, announcing the start of the reader's discovery of the district, is much sadder. The overall dark and red tone, the few lights from helicopters and barrels on fire, and the wrecked object used as a barricade in the bottom-right corner of the foreground create the impression of a wounded community. An impression reinforced by the sober lowercase title of the issue, “down the dip”³¹, appearing on the page, and an impression confirmed by Spider's thoughts on the transients he comes across. The situation is comparable to a persecuted community forced to

³¹ Every issue title is displayed differently, with different fonts and colours.

live in a ghetto³², non-transients have been cleared out of the district, and their fear is noticed by Spider; they are “waiting to be killed” (#2: 5). In addition, the fabricated riot and gratuitous massacre in issue #3 aligns with the feeling of injustice and “highlight the [...] disparity between rich and poor” (Williams 5).

Revivals affected by ‘future shock’³³ don’t have a specific district to live in; they are on the City’s streets during the day, and sleep in the Revival Hostel. From their second birth, revivals experience terrible conditions: unsanitary revival centre, usually unwashed bathrobes (#8: 11), and overloaded dormitory in the Hostel (18). The rows of numbered beds and their armbands dehumanise them to the point that their situation reminds concentration camps. It is clear that revivals are not wanted. On page 17, “FUCK OFF BACK TO YOUR FREEZERS” is tagged on the walls of the Revival Hostel on a panel that “bleeds” off the edge of the page, no longer containing time in it, and setting the tag as a timeless atmosphere determiner (McCloud 103). Furthermore, on page 19 of the issue, the first panel shows Mary hidden, crouched behind a skip in the bottom-left corner, unable to find her place, neither in the City nor on the page.

Ellis and Robertson depict a city in which the dream of equality is crushed by the constant discrimination experienced by outcasts. The City’s only interest in them is when they exist sexually, whether it is Channon in the strip club, Mary desired by the counsellor, or transients in pornographic magazines (#6: 2).

³² The word “ghetto” does not appear to describe Angels 8. But it is interesting to note that in *Transmetropolitan*’s French edition by Urban Comics, the French word “ghetto” is used by Fred Christ during his interview with Spider (#2: 12, French Edition).

³³ “future shock” (Gibson 17) is a reference to Alvin Toffler’s book of the same name. It is a state of psychological trauma that revival usually experience during their discovery of the City, “a future they cannot understand” (#1: 23)

III) American Mythology, Gonzo's Target

a) *Punk Rock Jesus* - Blasphemy and Mockery

Mockery and satire are at the core of Transmetropolitan, and while political satire (which has been discussed in chapter II-b) is, indeed, one way of dishonouring the image of the US, it is not the only one. Some details are direct criticism of some of the US's symbols. In issues #1-9, gun control is not a topic discussed, but once, in the religious convention issue, interest in guns is associated with perversity and ridiculousness, by showing a golden plate pierced in someone's nipple, on which "god loves guns and so should you" is engraved (#6: 13). As argued before, the US flag is represented by the bloodthirsty riot squad during the transient riot, but it is also ridiculed by being worn as a tie by The Beast, in issue #4, during his encounter with Spider. The Beast, wearing this grotesque, almost comical tie, matches him as the face of the City's absurdity (#4: 18). An even more absurd representation of the US flag can be found before Spider visits his first reservation, on the back of a jacket and sleeve of a man in a bar (see figure 8). On the back of the jacket, the flag does not have three stars but a single one containing a bomb, and beside it are two bullets, while on the sleeve, beneath the cross, the flag has a simple star. The jacket is a stereotype gem: the collar has red and white stripes, and on its front, although it is

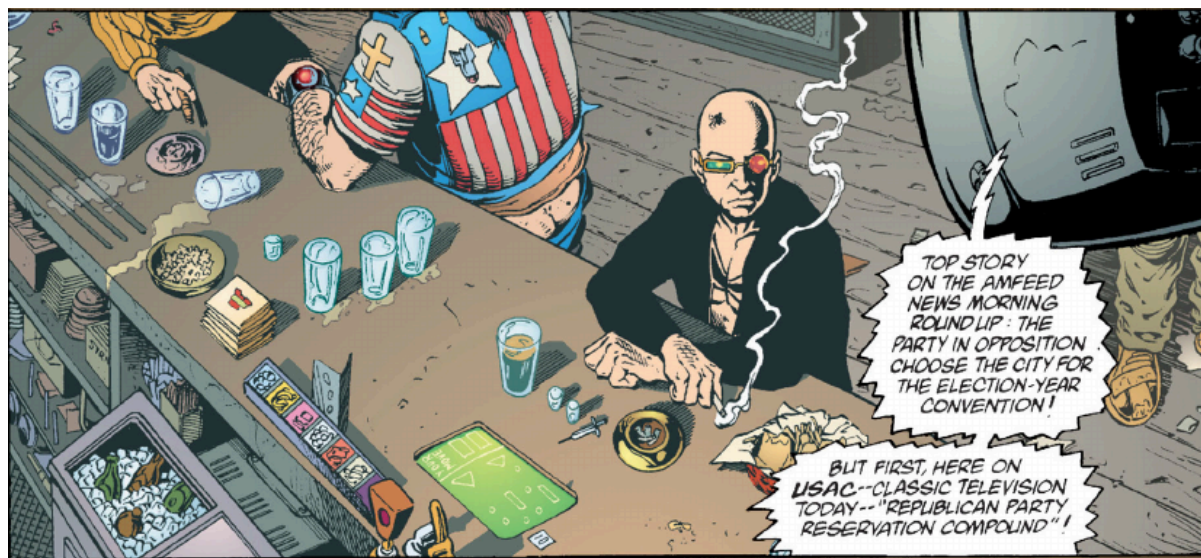


figure 8: Spider in a bar next to a man with a US flag jacket (#9: 5)

not completely legible, it is probably written: "damned proud". This man, being a big concentration of symbols, is not shown in a nice manner, as he only talks about sex and his son's

genitals³⁴. His first two lines show that his interest in reservations only lies in sex, deconstructing the image of the “styl[ish]” (#9, 1) way of preserving their past that Spider created.

The most parodied topic is surely religion, particularly Christianity. Criticism of religions and cults as dishonest institutions has already been covered in this paper, but it also affects religion as part of the US’s foundations. Religion is central to puritanism, to the Declaration of Independence, overall to American identity, traditions and ideals; and obviously to the American Dream, yet, the amount of offences to faith and Christianity is considerable in issues #1-9 of *Transmetropolitan*. From issue #1, religion is put forward through the discovery of a character named ‘Jerusalem’, with “years’ worth of hair growth” (Michelitch 5) and a long beard, living at the top of a mountain, coming down to spread The Truth, hearing about his old friend ‘Christ’. Onomastic comes into play; Spider’s last name evokes the New Jerusalem, the inspiration of Puritans and the foundation of America. He embodies the US’s link to Christianity through his body, showing common features with Jesus Christ. He is often used as a reference to Jesus and other messiahs³⁵, like when he walks on cars (#1: 14) or literally dresses up like Jesus to go to the convention. However, each time he looks like Jesus, he is always depicted as twisted or unflattering, to say the least. This is illustrated, for example, in issue #6, before leaving for the convention, when he is slumped on a chair, scratching his crotch (5), or on the issue’s first page (see figure 9), where several elements contribute. Aside from the highly blasphemous and vulgar text, the dressing up as Jesus is totally Gonzo: his fake aureola is absurd, the fake beard is positioned on his chin, and the dirty, slightly ripped cloth is actually a stolen bathrobe. On the floor are more than fifty cigarette ends as well as litter from fast food and soda cans. The panel is surrounded by heaven and hell, respectively on the left and on the right, voluntarily or not inverted; John Lennon, a dog, and a baby Elvis Presley with a cigar and sunglasses, are among the angels and in hell, there is no reference to anyone except a sign

³⁴ his son is said to be named Eichmann Dobbs (#9: 7). ‘Eichmann’ probably refers to Adolf Eichmann, the nazi war criminal. ‘Dobbs’ could be a reference to Lou Dobbs, a conservative political commentator, or to Harold Dobbs, an influential civic leader in Jewish communities in the middle of the nineteenth century, making the name Eichmann Dobbs the cherry on top of the character’s absurdity.

³⁵ Fred Christ compares him to Moses (#2: 13)

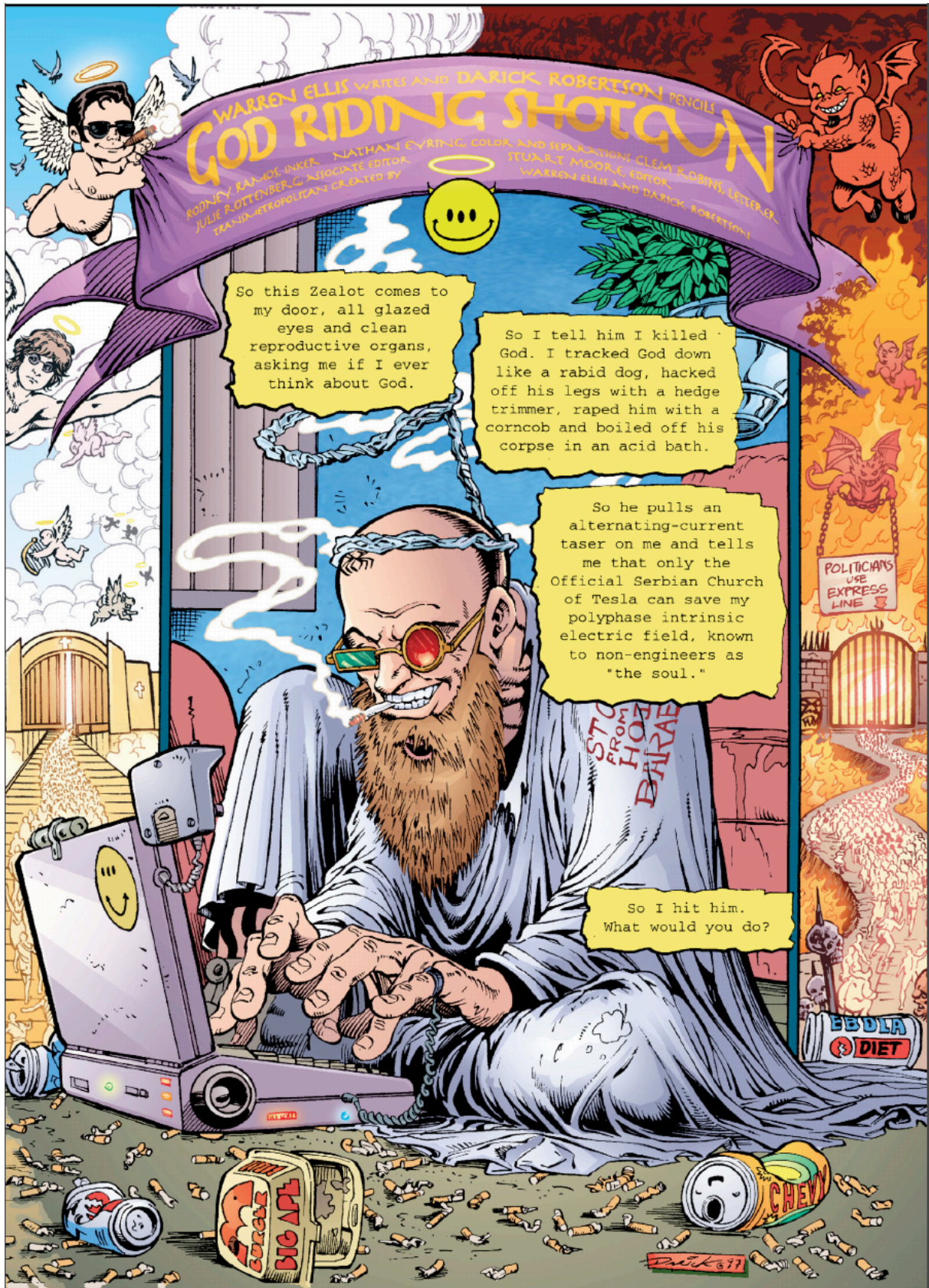


figure 9: Spider, high on jumpstart and dressed up (#6: 1)

indicating an “express line” for politicians. Clearly, no detail is left over by *Transmetropolitan's* desire to mock, shock, parody, and be Gonzo.

b) *City Hunter* - Hunter S. Thompson From The Future?

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) is what originally sparked the idea for this paper. The idea was as straightforward as this: this book reveals the “dark side” (back cover of the Harper Perennial edition) of the American Dream and is a significant inspiration for *Transmetropolitan*; thus, *Transmetropolitan* deconstructs the American Dream. Hunter S. Thompson and his journey are everywhere in *Transmetropolitan's* beginning.

“They are the racists and hate mongers among us - they are the Ku Klux Klan. I piss down the throats of these Nazis.” (Thompson “*Kingdom of Fear*” 67; about people in the White House). Thompson's hatred of power, the press, religion, and Nixon is noticeable throughout *Fear and Loathing's* first episode. Thompson does not hesitate to call God an “evil bastard” (“*Las Vegas*” 87) and to provoke him, to criticise Nixon and his “doomstruck era” (178), nor does he skimp on expressing his distrust towards the Church, the military and politicians:

“This is the same cruel and paradoxically benevolent bullshit that has kept the Catholic Church going for so many centuries. It is also the military ethic . . . a blind faith in some higher and wiser “authority.” The Pope, The General, The Prime Minister . . . all the way up to “God.” ” (“*Las Vegas*” 179)

Furthermore, his disinterest in the press (“*Las Vegas*” 200) resonates with a newspaper that Spider has on his flat's floor, ironically named “LIES” (#5: 1, 2).

One of the most symbolic aspects of Gonzo journalism is the omnipresence of drugs. Indeed, Thompson states that “all these drugs were necessary to [his] work” (“*Las Vegas*” 100), and Spider Jerusalem is no different. He asks a child in the street to buy him several types of drugs that will help him write for his contract (#1: 19), he calls that “professional medication” (#6: 3). While teaching Channon about journalism in her beginnings as her assistant, Spider strongly advises her to start smoking, which she does three pages later, after an initial bad

reaction to this suggestion from her part (#4: 6, 9), matching the necessary quality of drugs in Gonzo works.

Ellis' and Robertson's work has other similarities with Hunter S. Thompson's. The link between dark humour, caricature, and Darick Robertson's "ease with drawing exaggerated and ugly characters" has been analysed by Jason Michelitch (8), but it also echoes Ralph Steadman's Gonzo illustrations, originally present in the *Fear and Loathing* series. Steadman's crude, grotesque, and violent drawings illustrate the characters' unflatteringness and sometimes are a consequence of Thomson's drug consumption. His fine and sketchy lines, contrasting with the thick and anaemic eyes of the characters he crowds his illustrations with, fit the books' lawlessness and create a disorder comparable to Robertson's "sprawling, chaotic - even [...] gonzo" visuals (Michelitch 7, emphasis in original). Robertson's exaggerated ugliness can be found in characters like the tollbooth employee, in close-ups of The Beast's sweaty, balding head, and mostly in Spider Jerusalem. Other similarities include the presence of a physically

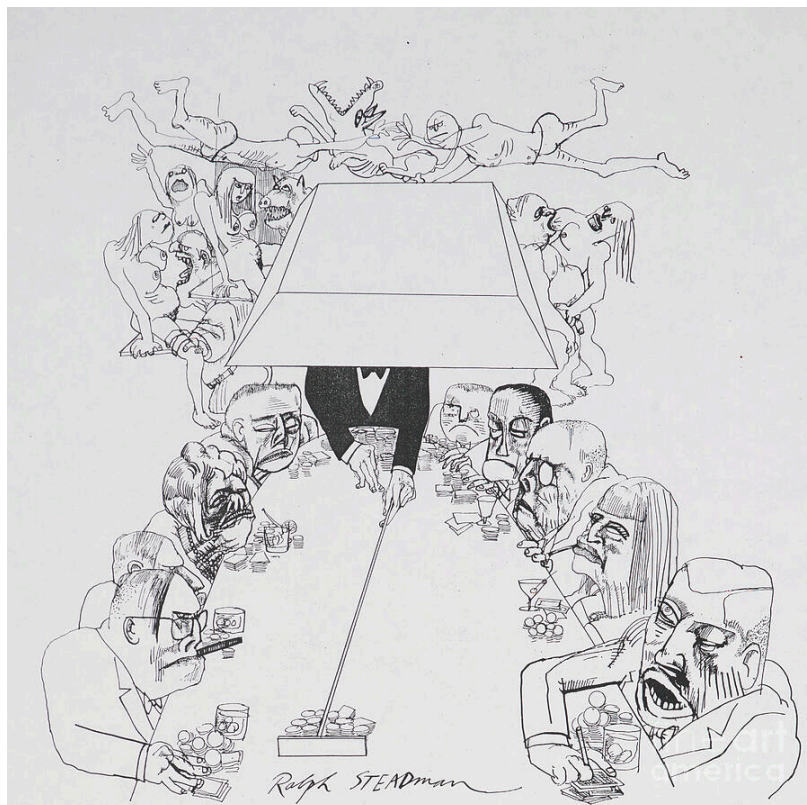


figure 10: The Casino (Thompson "Las Vegas" 49)

imposing assistant (Channon and Oscar Acosta), the accidental encounter between Spider and The Beast, inspired by Thompson's and McGovern's encounter in the toilets (Nevett 9), and the

use of lies to get to The Truth. Both Hunter S. Thompson and Spider lie extensively to get where they want to, like when Acosta and Thompson lie to a woman named Lucy on the phone (“*Las Vegas*” 130) and when Spider pretends to be pregnant to get into the club during the Angels 8 riot (#3: 6).

c) *Crying Freeman* - Illusion of Freedom and Happiness

The Pursuit of Happiness and Liberty is, inarguably, the basis of the American Dream and its identity, and *Transmetropolitan* does not spare it. In the City, freedom is to consume and forget, to lose truthiness in the storm of novelty, drugs, and media overload. James Truslow Adams states that the American dream aims for a “better, richer, and happier life for all.” (404); the City denies “better”, “richer”, and, when television channel slogans admit keeping you “stupid and happy” (#5: 21), happiness is an illusion.

Freedom in issues #1-9 translates into minor to major body modifications (from barely noticeable features to cryo-freezing and becoming a transient or a foglet) and freedom of faith. Yet, being revived after cryo-freezing, being a transient or a foglet, ends up being a way of being marginalised and discriminated³⁶ against. The technological dream is a scam that also hides overall surveillance and private intrusion. Massive surveillance can be found in the City in the form of an airship above it with “SKY CAM” written on it, and people, reminding the “Eye” and the “Ear”, in Moore’s and Gibbons’ dystopian *V for Vendetta* (1982): in issue #4, a cameraman from one of the biggest feedsites of City, SPKF, has “EYE” written on their back and a hat in the shape of an eye (23), and “Listener[s]” can be found in issues #1 and #9, still from SPKF, broadcasting and recording everything on the City’s streets (#1: 15, #9: 15).

A feature that embodies the principle of freedom as an illusion is reservations. Reservations are human zoos, replicating past cultures so people don’t forget them. Their inhabitants are volunteers who chose to have their initial memories wiped, and people who were born inside, without knowing they live inside an artificial “cultural bubble” (Gibson 19), making their lives an illusion. While the initial idea of keeping the past alive does not bother Spider at first, the reader then discovers the reservations’ hidden face, involving human sacrifice

³⁶ or at least isolated, in foglets’ case

and genital mutilations, for the sake of a History nobody pays attention to. According to Richard Gibson, the structure of the issue and its narration “gives the reservations a feeling of segregation from the City and from the way the rest of the narrative is told.” (Gibson 19). This feeling is enhanced by the appearance of “dissenters”, escapees from reservations whose “memory locks” (#9: 18) dysfunctioned. Some escapees can experience future-shock, just like Revivals, again marginalising them, but some are actually freed from the reservations’ fantasy, like lovers freely enjoying their relationship outside the Chinese Reservation (#1: 15, #9: 18). The close-up on the gay couple kissing followed by Spider’s relaxed smile, noting that “Some are just happy to be in love” (18) highlights his appreciation of people seeking freedom.

Freedom of faith is also depicted as a problem, mainly translating into freedom of self-harm, as seen in the New Religious Movement Convention, in which Spider runs into different leaders trying to convince people to choose their church. A notable example is the Church of Christ Breathairian stall, where an unhealthily thin person tells about how they “only need air to survive”, no food or water.

“Ellis and Robertson make the silent argument that a million personal freedoms don’t amount to much, when larger forces dictate the actual narratives of [...] lives.” (Witzke “*Zero Society...*” 4). The City’s multiplicity of faiths and technological specialities gives people a wide panel to choose from, creating an artificial freedom, mostly leading to discrimination and suffering. It is clear that *Transmetropolitan* states that in its crooked world, unconditional freedom can only lead to excesses and aberrations.

Conclusion

“There are times, however, and this is one of them, when even being right feels wrong. What do you say, for instance, about a generation that has been taught that rain is poison and sex is death? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring breeze on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal blue lake into a puddle of black poison right in front of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation. It’s a strange world.” (Thompson “*Generation...*” 10).

Transmetropolitan’s dystopian social and political satire offers an interesting interpretation of American ideals. It damages the US’s image by attacking its culture of consumption and mass media, as well as by putting forward a distrust towards institutions, partly by drawing parallels to historical facts. Spider Jerusalem’s hypersubjective, vulgar, and confrontational narration succeeds in ridiculing the City’s absurdity. Like Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing* series, the comic book uses humour, chaos, and satire to expose the collapse of America’s founding myths.

While issues #1-9 offer an interesting world building, though, certain strong symbols of the Dream, such as upward mobility, westward expansion and immigration, don’t stand out. A similar study, open to the entire comic book, could reveal other topics treated by Ellis and Robertson. Another interesting study would be one examining what kind of new dream Spider creates in *Transmetropolitan*, as it contains multiple utopian elements (Witzke “*The Future...*” 8). More generally, it would be worth expanding the analysis of the American dream in comic books and even in manga. As far as manga is concerned, it could be curious to discuss the influence of American ideals on such a historically close country like Japan, perhaps linking it to the American occupation in the 1960s. While on Japan, it might be the chance to try to define a ‘Japanese dream’ and link it to its pop culture.

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