Comics, Form, and Anarchy

Frederik Byrn Køhlert

At least since their modern inception in the late nineteenth century, comics have been deeply entwined with anti-authoritarian politics and resistance. As the various contributors to this special issue point out, comics have played (and continue to play) a particularly significant role in the history of anarchist thought, whether in the form of satirical cartoons aimed at deflating authority, rousing calls to arms, or visual histories portraying specific instances of anarchist organization. While comics thereby have served as a vehicle for the dissemination of anarchist ideologies, and, conversely, anarchism has provided the ideological fodder for much political cartooning, scholars of either field have until now only rarely paid attention to this apparent overlap. One notable exception is Jesse Cohn, whose work on anarchist visual culture has often touched directly as well as indirectly on the particular relationship between anarchism and comics art. According to Cohn, comics "bear the trace of a certain historic association with the anarchist movements of the late nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries" (n.p.), an association he investigates thematically through such lenses as caricature and narrative. Cohn's contribution in this special issue, an examination of the diagram as an exemplary form of anarchist comics, continues his engagement with theorizing this important connection.

But where Cohn's approach often emphasizes historical considerations or investigates the political potential of individual comics, what I would like to suggest in the following is both a more general and an even deeper formal relationship between comics and anarchism. The examination of this fundamental relationship will serve to illustrate how similar organizational and communicational principles are embedded within these two apparently disparate forms of human expression, and will therefore also make an argument for why an understanding of the

history and form of comics is incomplete without a consideration of anarchism, and vice versa. In order to provide an example of how the two traditions have fruitfully cross-pollinated each other, I end by offering an examination of several anarchism-inflected underground comix from the American counterculture years and beyond, including a reading of perhaps the most explicit attempt to bear out this relationship in practice, namely the four-issue series *Anarchy Comics* (1978-1986). In my reading of *Anarchy Comics*, additionally, I expand my analysis beyond narrow structural concerns and discuss various other anarchism-inflected strategies of visual narrative available to comics makers, including such punk-inspired techniques as collage and *détournement*, as well as the satirical redeployment of corporate comics and cartoon characters for subversive purposes. While my focus in what follows is largely on formal features, therefore, my argument ultimately aims to illuminate the relationship between comics and anarchism at the levels of both form and content.

Throughout its history, the political philosophy of anarchism has been based on principles of non-hierarchical social organization, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's concept of "spontaneous order," Mikhail Bakunin's anti-capitalist collectivism, and Peter Kropotkin's notion of "mutual aid," the latter developed partly in response to social Darwinist views of human society as inherently based on competition and conflict between individuals seeking power. Considering power and authority—as embodied often, but not exclusively, by the state—to be unnecessary, undesirable, and ultimately oppressive, anarchism favors instead individual freedom and voluntary cooperation. As a radically anti-authoritarian ideology and praxis, anarchism thus opposes all forms of hierarchical structures on the grounds that their power can only be achieved through violence (or the threat thereof) and other forms of oppression directed at individuals.

Since the early 1990s, certain postanarchist writing has sought to challenge what it considers a simplified or outdated concept of power by using poststructuralist theory to highlight and analyze the complex network of hierarchical power structures that have supplanted the twin pillars of capitalism and the state as the principal modes of domination in late modernity. Borrowing the concept of the rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari, theorists of postanarchism instead focus their analysis on "fluid political and changeable social identities that come into conflict with hierarchical power," in order to show how "like a rhizome, power works through 'connection and heterogeneity' (difference). Its roots intersect and sometimes merge" (Franks 134-35). Extending this view to aspects of anarchism beyond the conceptualization of power, leading postanarchists such as Saul Newman argue that the rhizome "may be seen as an anarchic model of thought" because it "rejects binary divisions and hierarchies, does not privilege one thing over another, and is not governed by a single unfolding logic" (105). Similarly, Peter Marshall characterizes rhizomatic anarchism as an "a-centred, non-hierarchical" (696) system, and Uri Gordon describes "a structure based on principles of connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity and non-linearity" (33). A rhizomatic approach to anarchism, according to Newman, challenges our proclivity for constructing hierarchical models; instead it "is a model of thought that defies the very idea of a model: it is an endless, haphazard multiplicity of connections not dominated by a single center or place, but rather decentralized and plural," allowing "differences and multiplicities to function in a way that is unpredictable and volatile" (105-06). Theorizing anarchism through the model of the rhizome thereby not only allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple, interconnected, and network-like power structures that must be challenged, but also provides for a flexible model of thinking, the heterogeneity and instability of which has the potential to empower the individual within hierarchies of domination.

While the decentralization of power into the roots system of Deleuze and Guattari's original metaphor might do away with hierarchical models of domination, however, what Newman calls "the line of revolution" nevertheless remains "capable of forming a multitude of connections, including connections with the very power that it is presumed to oppose" (106). In this way, a rhizomatic conception of anarchism cautions against the dangers of forming connections with power at the same time that it acknowledges its productive potential. Embedded in this notion, of course, is the awareness that power might never be equally disseminated in a rhizomatic network, and that some connections may at times be stronger than others. The ebb and flow of these dynamic interactions of power, Benjamin Franks notes, is built into Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome metaphor itself, and they acknowledge that "in some contexts there are more powerful encoding structures. Flows are not equal in force, as their other simile of the Amsterdam canal system indicates: at some points certain stem-canals are more significant than others" (137). What all of this suggests is a view of anarchist thought as a heterogeneous, dynamic, unpredictable, and highly volatile construct that might sometimes disperse entirely with organization and sometimes follow certain dominant currents in attempts to harness the productive energies embedded within power itself—even if, as Deleuze and Guattari themselves point out, "it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel" (20) that may threaten to overwhelm the entire structure. As such, rhizomatic anarchism is conceived of as being in a constant state of tension between dominant and emergent powers, fluctuating as it does between alternating currents that always hold the potential to spontaneously forge new connections across and between its various networked elements.

This rhizomatic view of anarchism as a vast network with virtually unlimited potential for the creation of new connections has evident resemblances with the comics form, which has often been theorized in similar terms. In the relatively new field of formalist comics studies—

beginning, in many views, with the publication of Scott McCloud's comic-about-comics primer *Understanding Comics* in 1993—much has been made of the form's network of fragmented verbal and visual codes, which combine to create meaning that is always unstable and in danger of becoming unfixed from authoritative models of interpretation. Most influentially, McCloud himself has argued that the "gutter"—the (usually) white space between panels—functions as a kind of gap in the narrative that the reader must bridge by performing the imaginative act of "closure" between two juxtaposed panels (66; 63). McCloud's framework includes both pictorial, verbal, and extradiegetic elements such as panel borders and page layout, all of which the reader must navigate and combine in order to make meaning from a comics page. In McCloud's conceptualization, therefore, a comics page is always subject to the reader's participatory collaboration, a circumstance that provides for a view of the form as both volatile and ever-open to the creation of new meanings.

In a more rigorously semiotic exploration of many of the same ideas, comics theorist Thierry Groensteen has argued for a more elaborate system of "arthrology," by which meaning is created not only through connections between individual elements on the same page, but also through the reader's ability to discern connections throughout the text as a whole. In Groensteen's analysis, panels at opposite ends of a comic might speak as easily to each other as those on either side of a gutter, in a reading process he calls "translinear and plurivectoral" and which depends on the reader "braiding" the various threads of the narrative together (*System* 155). In order to further theorize this aspect of the form, elsewhere Groensteen borrows from Deleuze and Guattari and—echoing much postanarchist theory—calls comics a "network that is multiply extended in different directions" and "a spatial configuration on the mode of the rhizome" (*Comics* 73). Importantly, while Groensteen considers comics a predominantly visual form and bases his analysis on what he calls "iconic solidarity" between similar or otherwise

related images throughout the narrative, he is quick to point out that while many of the same observations might apply equally to film, the constant temporal progression of filmic images makes them "monovectorized and irreversible; the filmic images are fugitive, and the echo of an image already passed is without another reality" (*System* 18; 155). Comics, conversely, are traditionally printed and distributed in formats allowing for the reader's active engagement with a tangible object, and combined with the near-infinite connections made possible by its networked visual architecture, the "flippability" of a comic can thereby be understood as affording substantial narrative agency to its reader.

Groensteen's conceptualization of comics as a networked form allowing for the unpredictable formation of new connections between its various elements has been picked up by several other comics theorists. Most prominently, perhaps, Nick Sousanis considers the form as a "de-centered, laterally branching, rhizomatic structure, where each node is connected to any other" (39). Sousanis's own work in particular, which combines text and images in novel and intricate ways, takes advantage of what Jochen Ecke, in a different context, has described as "the human eye's anarchic tendency to roam and to sometimes disregard conventional sequence entirely" (8). In *Unflattening*, a book-length meditation on the communicative and educational potential of combining text and images, Sousanis consistently draws comics pages that defy conventional hierarchic logic and allow the reader to find new connections between the many visual elements. One page in particular illustrates Sousanis's view of the form as "a connected space, not reliant on a chain-like sequence linearly proceeding from point to point" (62) (figure 1). Dividing the page into a traditional nine-panel grid, Sousanis treats each panel both as a separate entity with its own distinct motif and as one part of a larger whole. This page-size whole, appropriately, is made up of a rhizomatic roots system in the middle of which a Buddha figure is seated. Playing explicitly with ideas from Eastern philosophical traditions about "each element"

being “one with everything” (62), the many roots crisscrossing the page allow the eye to wander and thereby illustrate the multiple connections made possible by what Sousanis calls the comics form’s “spatial interplay of sequential and simultaneous” (62). In addition, a different layer of simultaneous visual allusion across the page is added by the various animals included in the composition—such as a snake and a raven—whose eyes are reminiscent of the knots and joints of the roots themselves. The effect is striking, and creates the impression of numerous dark nodes in a large network, between which any number of different paths can be traced. As a striking visualization of the “dual nature” (62) of the comics form, by which sequential reading order can be simultaneously maintained and disrupted, the page thereby itself makes an argument for Sousanis’s view of comics as “both tree-like, hierarchical and rhizomatic, interwoven in a single form” (62).

This dual nature of the form, which means that hierarchical sequentiality is able to coexist with decentered and unpredictable interpretations, is similar to the way rhizomatic anarchism fluctuates between alternating currents of power. Along these lines, Jason Dittmer and Alan Latham have noted about the complex negotiations demanded by the form’s surplus of potential connections that “this set of relations is variable in intensity, with the writers and artists signalling more or less intense connections between panels by making some paths through the comic more intelligible than others, and by embedding non-sequential relations that may or may not be picked up on by readers” (431). As certain nodes and connections in the network might at various times take precedence over others, in other words, the ultimate meaning of a comics page—and, following Groensteen, the rest of the comic beyond it—is always an unstable construct in constant tension between what Deleuze and Guattari might call the “despotic channel” of a privileged interpretation and a virtually unlimited number of alternative readings. As the dark knots and animal eyes on the page from Sousanis’s *Unflattening* shows, these nodes

and connections might operate at the level of visual allusions, or they might be more straightforwardly conceived as connective tissue—a drawn network of roots, in this example, but also textual or extradiegetic elements—that the reader might follow around the page. Although a comic is of course always the product of one or more organizing artistic consciousnesses, the interpretative surfeit presented by its various formal elements can thereby be seen as radically empowering for the reader, opening up new spaces and opportunities for meaning-making. Although this line of analysis suggest that the comics form thereby shares part of its basic structure with certain conceptualizations of anarchism, it is important to note that individual variations in both production and reception will inevitably produce different results, and that a straightforward action comic might look and read significantly different from more experimental incarnations of the form.

What is possible, however, is to suggest that the volatile non-linearity built into comics has the *potential* to compel or inspire the kind of rhizomatic thinking associated with anarchism, and that the form may thereby also be individually empowering as it disturbs—or, perhaps, to turn Sousanis's metaphor on its head, flattens—certain assumed hierarchies and established relationships of authority. In an analysis limited to the sequentiality of comics, Michael Demson and Heather Brown argue that "the narrative dimension that sequential images introduce to the form opens up the possibility of a counter-cultural forum" (153), and an expansive view of the form on the model of the rhizome might therefore see comics as enabling alternative ways of thinking. In an argument about the political implications of this kind of "fragmented, non-hierarchical" comics, Georgiana Banita examines the "diagrammatic" comics of Chris Ware—partly the topic, also, of Jesse Cohn's contribution here—and argues that Ware employs slowness, deliberateness, and an "excess of narrative connectivity" in order to stage "a critique of contemporary capitalist technology that demands an ever-growing reliance on speed and temporal

acceleration" (183). In Ware's comics—which are admittedly fairly unusual in their extreme use of this kind of comics-making—the visual complexity thereby becomes a political act that resists the ever-forward drive of consumer capitalism and instead places emphasis on the connections and networks that make up a vast rhizomatic structure where each element is in possible relation to everything else. As such, the aesthetics of comics have the potential to be truly radical in their ability to suggest other ways of thinking, acting, and organizing in the world—ways, that is, that we may consider anarchic in their resistance to the hierarchically linear logic of state-sponsored capitalism.

While this analysis of comics aesthetics suggests that principles of anarchist thought and organization are built into certain qualities of the form itself, the question of how comics and cartoons have been employed as vehicles for the expression of anarchism on the level of content is a different one. Historically, as Michael Cohen has argued (and as several of the contributions to this special issue bear further witness to) the early decades of the twentieth century—the height, often conceived, of anarchist ferment—saw comics and cartoons playing an important role "in framing the popular radical movement and visualizing its ideological contours. Radicals found cartoons to be uniquely suited to challenging the values of the capitalist enemy while envisioning a new set of ideologies and institutions with which to replace the old" (56). As Cohen shows, artists such as Art Young and Ernest Riebe harnessed the expressive power of cartoon art to produce scathing critiques of such subjects as capitalism, rising inequality, and World War I while promoting a radical and in many cases specifically anarchist worldview. Common to most of these early cartoons and comic strips, however, is a relatively unadventurous approach to form—their work is described by Cohen as "simply drawn, politically pointed, and cheaply reproduced black line cartoons" (36)—and it is therefore perhaps a rather curious fact that early comics explicitly identifying as anarchist only rarely made use of the kind of formal

inventiveness described above. Cohn, too, notes that "it is surprising to discover that the form of mise en page favored by anarchist comics has historically been what Benoît Peeters calls 'conventional'," and even suggests that "the formal possibility most explored by anarchist comics artists has been the one which *obscures* form in favor of content" (emphasis in original) (n.p.). Addressing this apparent paradox, Cohn proposes that it "is perhaps in keeping with the pedagogical function of much anarchist culture, which places a priority on accessibility; the grid is the easiest layout to find one's way through" (n.p.). Although many of the comics and cartoons discussed by both Cohen and Cohn do take advantage of the pedagogical potential of the form to communicate clearly and directly, an equally important feature attracting anarchists to the form may have been ease of reproduction and distribution, both of which enabled artists to expand their rhetorical reach. As Art Young himself noted, "a cartoon could be reproduced by simple mechanical processes and easily made accessible to hundreds of thousands. I wanted a large audience" (9). While the relationship between comics and anarchism in the first half of the twentieth century might therefore have been one dominated by practical over aesthetic concerns—getting the word out, after all, is central to any political ideology—the arrival of the underground comix movement in the 1960s and 1970s combined more adventurous formal experimentation with radical and sometimes explicitly anarchic content, and did so without much concern about reaching a large audience with work that was easy to read.

The term "underground comix" refers to the many heterogeneous comics published by a loose group of cartoonists in the American counterculture years from the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In addition to the unconventional spelling of "comix" to suggest an alternative attitude, "underground," in this context, indicates that the comics were published outside the established comics industry, which had in 1954 created the self-policing Comics Code Authority as a way of warding off the kind of controversy that led to what David Hajdu has called "the great comic-

book scare" of the early 1950s. Perceiving the decade's many violent and otherwise explicit comic book stories as at best a harmful influence and at worst partly responsible for a national rise in juvenile delinquency rates, politicians, social reformers, and concerned parent groups threatened the industry with boycotts and forced a series of congressional hearings examining the supposed negative effects of comics reading. Under pressure, the industry responded by establishing a set of moral guidelines modeled on the Motion Picture Production Code, in a move that effectively served to sanitize comics of objectionable content such as—in the phrasings of the Code itself—"excessive violence," "sex perversion," and the use of the words "terror" and "horror" in titles (quoted in Nyberg 166; 68; 67). Importantly, the Comics Code only applied to members of the Comics Magazine Association of America, but its prevalence (and the threat of boycott) meant that distributors were unlikely to risk carrying comics that had not been approved by the Code. The result was an entirely new face of mainstream American comics, one in which moral standards were upheld, law enforcement always won, and the sanctity of marriage remained unthreatened. In addition to the often salacious content of pre-Code comic books, their cheapness had also meant that they could be purchased and read outside the sphere of parental control, a circumstance that afforded them an aura of subversive appeal for younger readers. But with the removal of all objectionable content coinciding roughly with the advent of the exciting new entertainment option of television, the cultural status of comics diminished significantly both in terms of popularity with young readers and as an important American mass medium (Gabilliet; Nyberg; Wright).

Seizing on the sanitized and quaintly old-fashioned cultural object of the comic book with a subversive zeal aimed at breaking every taboo and challenging every authority, the underground cartoonists of the 1960s set out to redefine what a comic could, and perhaps should, be. Circumventing the Code by self-publishing and distributing their comics through alternative

venues such as head shops, the cartoonists associated with the underground movement—the epicenter of which was in San Francisco—produced comics that were explicitly sexual and bluntly violent, often in the service of satirizing or otherwise opposing various incarnations of establishment culture and politics. Using the comics form in innovative ways and frequently appropriating popular cartoon styles or characters such as Mickey Mouse for their own subversive ends, central figures of the underground like Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and Skip Williamson created an entirely new context for comics—one that amounted to an artistic revolution in both form and content that revealed the comic book as capable of expressing everything from deeply personal issues to revolutionary politics.

While experiments in form were central to many, if not all, underground comix, expressions of anarchism sometimes followed the more didactic approach favored by earlier generations of anarchist cartoonists. Cliff Harper's *Class War Comix No.1* from 1974, for example, took place after the eponymous war and earnestly depicted life in a post-revolution commune. Harper had worked as an illustrator for British anarchist publications such as *Black Flag* and *Undercurrents*, and the comic is little more than a series of straightforwardly arranged and stiffly-drawn panels of people walking, eating, and driving while discussing various anarchist principles (figure 2). While Harper's puzzling decision to draw the images first and only retroactively consider a narrative for them (as he explains in the afterword to the 1979 Kitchen Sink Press edition) might be considered a kind of dada-inflected anarchist approach to narrative, the comic only rarely exhibits any unity of form and content. Intended as the first volume of a projected six-part graphic novel about society after the anarchist revolution, Harper apparently lost interest and never finished the project.

In an apparent coincidence that is perhaps testimony to the affinity between underground comix and radical politics, leading underground cartoonist Skip Williamson also drew a series of

short comics entitled "Class War Comix." Where Harper's comic was an explicit attempt to communicate peaceful anarchist principles such as mutual aid and spontaneous consent, Williamson's approach was acerbically satiric and openly fantasized about violently "smashing" the state (figure 3). Sporadically published in various anthology comix (and collected, along with such other work by Williamson as "Racist Pig Comix," as *Class War Comix: A Brief History of the Revolution* in 1993), the short stories consistently compare the government to Nazis or the mafia and feature heroic anarchists righteously killing "imperialistic reactionary business administration majors" (3) in the service of the revolution. Throughout, Williamson's approach to narrative is impressionistic, and the stories read more like a loose riff on anarchist or counter-cultural themes than a coherent ideological statement. Visually, too, the comics are casually drawn, in the densely cartoony style of both Williamson and the underground in general. As images, words, and symbols blend into each other and suggest connections between and across panels, the comics begin to illustrate the kind of dense network of codes proposed by a rhizomatic understanding of the form. Although ultimately little more than a series of jokey satirical strips, Williamson's *Class War Comix* thereby nevertheless suggest how the form and content of comics might usefully inform each other in the service of anarchist themes.

Where Williamson's short strips are self-contained one-off satires, the long-running series of stories drawn by the cartoonist Spain and featuring the character Trashman are both more narratively ambitious and come even closer to espousing traditional anarchist principles of "propaganda by the deed"—associated, most infamously, with a wave of political assassinations carried out by anarchists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Simultaneously a parody of secret agent fiction and an earnest attempt to produce an anarchist comic book hero, the stories featuring the eponymous character appeared sporadically in such underground magazines and comic books as the *East Village Other* and *Subvert Comics*. The world of *Trashman* is a

dystopian future where "social ferment had divided the land into a patch work of virtually self-governing areas" (25), and the hero himself, repeatedly introduced on the title pages as an "agent of the 6th international," is drawn with a mix of counterculture and revolutionary visual codes, equal parts Abbie Hoffman and Che Guevara. While Trashman has the power to "change his molecular structure" (24)—into a banana peel, for example, but most often into "a copy of last week's East Village Other" (57)—his weapon of choice against the often unspecified "oppressors" is a machine gun, which he uses repeatedly and to great effect (figure 4). Unremittingly violent and at best ideologically incoherent, *Trashman* perhaps too often seems like an excuse to draw bloodshed and shiny motorcycles while keeping the actual plot and dialogue vague and in the background. This strategy is both accentuated and redeemed somewhat by the dense but slickly drawn visuals, which overwhelm the eye with details and dark shadings. Employing experimental page layouts and customarily letting characters and other elements break through panel borders, the overall visual impression of the collected *Trashman* stories is one of dense unpredictability and a decidedly non-hierarchical approach to graphic clarity. As none of the underground years' most explicitly anarchist comics in terms of content, *Trashman* thereby also goes further to illustrate how principles of rhizomatic anarchism may be embodied in comics formally—and how the two levels have the potential to work together and influence each other in the service of communicating the tenets of anarchist organization and revolution.

The most consistent combination of anarchism and comics form coming out of the late-period underground, however, was the anthology series *Anarchy Comics*, edited by Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides and published in four issues by Last Gasp Eco-Funnies between 1978 and 1986. According to Kinney—a figure so central to politically-minded underground comix that he wrote the introductions to both Harper's *Class War Comix* and the collected edition of *Trashman*—the comic was a product of a feeling that the counterculture and New Left had

largely run their course by the late 1970s (Kinney 9-10). Directly inspired by punk in both aesthetics and thematic concerns, the series brought together a heterogeneous group of international cartoonists who, true to anarchism itself, contributed stories and strips exhibiting a remarkably wide-ranging and often inconsistent or directly clashing approach to politics as well as to cartooning. Among many other things, the four issues contained satirical collage work by Kinney, Emma Goldman quotes illustrated by Melinda Gebbie, a philosophical meditation on the nature of government by Cliff Harper based on the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a "choose your own cartoon" story by Norman Dog where every outcome leads to nuclear annihilation, a humorous comic-within-a-comic renaming Archie as Anarchie and casting him as a rebellious punk, as well as several straightforward historical strips by Spain and French duo Épistolier and Volny, illustrating such key events in anarchist history as the Spanish Civil War and the Kronstadt Rebellion. Offering a combination of information, satire, outrage, and revolutionary inspiration, the fragmented nature of *Anarchy Comics* meant that the comic was never in danger of succumbing to potentially tiresome ideological dogma, and instead provided a playful and non-hierarchical space for exploring and experimenting with themes and forms embodying anarchist ideas in various ways.

Although visually heterogeneous, most contributions across the four issues of *Anarchy Comics* can be read as sharing a preoccupation with employing the comics form in the service of the political content. Kinney, who conceptualized the comic, commissioned the many artists, and contributed several pieces himself, explicitly recognized a revolutionary potential in the form. As he told Mark James Estren in 1970, "one of the nice things about working in the comics medium is that of being able to shock people into awareness. Most people have become so accustomed to comics as innocuous Dagwood Bumstead forms of pop trash that when confronted with an underground comic they are momentarily flustered" (quoted in Estren 81-82). Noting also that

"people will read a comic strip while they will ignore a pamphlet" (quoted in Estren 82), Kinney thereby realized the distinctive power of presenting revolutionary political ideas in the accessible and traditionally inoffensive vernacular of the comic book—a power several of his central contributors set out to investigate or exploit thematically as well as formally.

One of the contributions taking the clearest advantage of the connection between comics form and an anarchist agenda, Gebbie's "The Quilting Bee," from the first issue, provides a dense rhizomatic network of text and image that uses the quilt as its guiding structural metaphor (figure 5). Mixing impressionistic storytelling with extra-diegetic political editorializing in a cluttered and ever-changing drawing style heavy on black cross-hatchings, "The Quilting Bee" is a visually unstable structure that resists cohesion. Less a traditional narrative—the strip is nominally the story of a teacher's radicalization, but it contains very little in terms of traditional plot—than a kind of free-associating meditation on feminist resistance to male-identified conceptions of power and the state, some of it humorously delivered in the form of an exploding cake, "The Quilting Bee" thereby invites the eye to roam and create its own associations between its many disparate and visually heterogeneous elements. Associating her thematic resistance with women-identified objects such as cakes and quilts, not to mention the "women's poetry collective" from which the story takes its name, Gebbie makes clear that the anarchist revolution must be led by women if it is to successfully undo the hierarchies established by men. As the comic serves to visually and thematically challenge ideas of structured identity and unchecked progress, it allows for and perhaps inspires the development of an alternative visual politics of equality. In its refusal to adhere to traditional notions of linear narrative progression in favor of the non-hierarchical patchwork embodied by the quilt metaphor, therefore, Gebbie's comic makes an implicit argument for the form as fundamentally anarcho-feminist.

Well-known underground cartoonist Gary Panter's sole contribution to *Anarchy Comics*, similarly, a short two-page story printed in the third issue and entitled, through the sequential placement of one letter in each panel, "Purox and Clorex the Mad Bombers," employs decidedly non-hierarchical visuals to create conceptual equality between its many elements. Drawn in Panter's customary busy style, the story's visuals blend together to the point where characters, backgrounds, panel borders, speech balloons, and other unsystematically-placed non-diegetic elements such as lines, dots, and the black tape holding everything together inhabit the same visual plane where nothing is accentuated or elevated beyond the surface level (figure 6). A play on the theme of anarchist violence, the story tells a seemingly rather nonsensical story of two aspiring anarchist bombers who get distracted from their task of blowing up various buildings by the prospect of eating breakfast. While the overall contours of the story are fairly clear, however, strictly linear narrative progression is called into question both by the disordered visuals and the fact that the panels appear to be sequentially scrambled. As such, for example, a building is shown to be blown up before it appears undamaged further down the page, and conversations between the two main characters do not continue coherently from panel to panel. Even more disorienting, while Panter has numbered the story's panels consecutively from 1-30, each also contains a date stamp indicating what appears to be a creation date, although these do not correspond chronologically to the panel numbers. The narratively bewildering result implies that the black tape can be metaphorically peeled off and the story reassembled any number of ways, an effect that is accentuated by the tape resembling directional arrows pointing in several different directions at once. In this way, reading the story can be a confounding experience requiring making sense not only of the narrative but also the many competing and overlapping codes occupying the visual field. Whether Panter's undoing of a privileged sequential reading order is a result of an actual narrative experiment or not, the story thereby goes even further than

Gebbie's "The Quilting Bee" in illustrating the fundamental ability of comics to endlessly proliferate connections between its various elements in a rhizomatic and non-hierarchical structure that challenges the reader to navigate its visual anarchy.

While the stories by Gebbie and Panter are the foremost examples of contributions to *Anarchy Comics* taking full advantage of the comics form's ability to create a networked and rhizomatic reading experience, Kinney and Mavrides themselves produced work that combined this aspect of the form with other visual strategies associated with anarchist art. "Too Real," one of Kinney's contributions to the first issue, is a case in point. Nominally a satirical story of a white-collar worker's gradual conversion to anarchism through a series of encounters with the darker side of capitalism, the real topic of "Too Real" is Kinney's use of old advertising imagery and corporate clip art to illustrate and essentially guide the narrative (figure 7). As Kinney explains in the introduction to the collected *Anarchy Comics*, he had "been soaking up the work of the Situationists" (Kinney 12), and "Too Real" is a work of satirical Debordian *détournement* reappropriating existing drawings in an act of defamiliarization that gives new meanings to tired visual clichés. Discussing this approach to comics-making in a different context, Cohn characterizes it as "an act of cultural *reprise individuelle* facilitated—really made possible—by the liberal addition of captions and word balloons which radically undermine and recontextualize their meanings" (emphasis in original) (n.p.). Noting the subversive effect of adding text to reappropriated images, Cohn thereby suggests not only that a central property of much comics art—the combination of text and image—might further decentralize authoritative readings by providing yet another layer of interpretative codes to the rhizomatic visual network presented by the comics page, but also that the strategy of using already existing images adds to the destabilizing effect. In the example of "Too Real," this effect is accentuated by the conceptual disconnect between text and image, as well as by the knowledge that the drawings are satirically

pilfered from a corporate context and provided with new meanings that directly oppose their originally bland intentions. As such, "Too Real's" narrative of "Normal Joe's" political awakening is mirrored in the story's visuals, which refuse the capitalistic worldview embodied in dull advertising clip art in favor of the détourned anarchic aesthetics of collage comics. As the opening story of the first issue of *Anarchy Comics*, "Too Real" thereby serves as something of a program statement for the series, with Kinney providing an example of comics' ability to proliferate radical new meanings through formal experimentation.

Kinney took a similar yet more narratively ambitious approach to comics making in "Kultur Dokuments," his lengthy collaboration with Mavrides for the second issue. The story of the citizens of "Dullsville" and their ideological awakening to political radicalism, "Kultur Dokuments" begins in a diagrammatic style. Reducing the city and its inhabitants to quantifiable measurements through a series of infographics, the opening page makes clear that a world expressed in pie charts and population statistics has no room for individualized appearance (figure 8). Accordingly, every inhabitant resembles a schematic idea of a human, including the central characters introduced as "the picto family" (67). As various events lead to one family member after the other being converted from their pictogrammatic identity to a visual appearance resembling cubism by "the political bizarros" (67), the story makes clear that an ideology turning "unwitting dupes of Anglo-American intelligence networks" (69) into variations of the same visual cubism is not a satisfying outcome of the revolution. Cautioned (by a talking dog) not to "convert vital theoretical praxis into reified ideology" (74), both the family and the citizenry at large are inspired to "seize control of our graphic style" (73), which they do by remodeling their drawn appearance into individual visual expressions of their true selves. As a formal illustration of postanarchism's belief—as outlined above—that hierarchical power can be strategically opposed by "fluid political and changeable social identities" (Franks), the visually represented

ideological developments of "Kultur Dokuments" thereby functions as an argument for the ability of comics to express the variety of human experience in a society based on anarchist values of individuality and heterogeneity.

Aside from this sophisticated use of the form to suggest the value of anarchist principles, the most noteworthy feature of "Kultur Dokuments" is a three-page story interrupting the main narrative. Introduced as a comic read by a member of the picto family, the story follows Anarchie, Ludehead, Moronica, and Blondie in a satirical take on the Archie Comics universe that depicts the group as alternately bored and angry anarchists (figure 9). While the story itself is slight, and culminates when the Red Brigades (in a panel thematically reminiscent of Trashman administering violent justice) storm into a party hosted by Moronica's father and shoots him in the knees, possibly as revenge for "his corporation foreclosing on some little country" (70), the reappropriation of established cartoon characters for subversive ends has a long tradition in underground comix. Most famously, the comics collective known as the Air Pirates produced a series of stories in 1971 depicting Disney characters like Mickey Mouse engaging in drug consumption and various sexual acts. Similarly, in Greg Irons' *Heavy Tragi-Comics #1* from 1969, Mickey Mouse is portrayed as the embodiment of ruthless capitalism, presiding over "Ghettoland" like a mafia boss, and *The Adventures of Tintin: Breaking Free*, published in 1989 under the pseudonym J. Daniels, features the famous boy reporter as a militant strike organizer. Going a step further than "Too Real" by turning not just bland advertisement clip art but recognizable corporate entities unto their heads, "Kultur Dokuments" thereby satirically undermines the pro-establishment ideological content of the original comics along with its visual expression as—in Kinney's phrase—innocuous pop trash. While seeing Archie portrayed as an anarchist punk is unlikely to convert anyone to anarchism, however, the symbolic value of the comic within the context of "Kultur Dokuments" serves to further establish the conceptual

connection between the expressive potential of comics and a de-hierarchized and empowering anarchism. As the newly individualized inhabitants of Dullsville gather around a burning police car in the story's memorable final panel, they are joined in song by—among others—Anarchie, Trashman, and Tintin, who are eager to roast their celebratory marshmallows over the dying embers of the oppressive police state (figure 10).

While many of the stories published in *Anarchy Comics* settle for narratives that are thematically *about* anarchism, the contributions by Gebbie, Panter, Kinney, and Mavrides, among others, thereby employ various visual strategies rooted in an anarchic approach to form in order to challenge or undo straightforward narrative progression. By wedding subject matter to aesthetic strategies in this way, the artists discussed illustrate the potential for comics to unsettle authoritative models of linear progress in favor of an alternative and acentred visual politics of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and individual agency. Although not all comics can be said to embody anarchist ideas and principles, of course, the examples illustrate the form's particular ability to produce rhizomatically networked and defamiliarizing visuals that might inspire radical new ways of thought and organization. While the attention to the historical relationship between comics and anarchism in this special issue amply shows that comics and cartoons have a long-standing relationship with radical politics in terms of their communicative and material qualities, further, my analysis suggests a fundamental formal affinity between the two—an affinity that should have implications not only for our understanding of the history of comics, but also for how we continue to read and study them as cultural documents.

Captions

Figure 1:
From Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening*, page 62. © Nick Sousanis. Used by permission of the artist.

Figure 2:
From Cliff Harper, *Class War Comix No. 1*, page 8. © Clifford Harper. Used by permission of the artist.

Figure 3:
From Skip Williamson, *Class War Comix: A Brief History of the Revolution*, page 3. © Skip Williamson. Used by permission of the artist.

Figure 4:
From Spain, *Trashman Lives!: The Collected Stories from 1968 to 1985*, page 22. © Spain. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 5:
From Melinda Gebbie, "The Quilting Bee," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 33. © Melinda Gebbie. Used by permission of the artist and PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

Figure 6:
From Gary Panter, "Purox and Clorex the Mad Bombers," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 126. © Gary Panter. Used by permission of PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

Figure 7:
From Jay Kinney, "Too Real," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 25. © Jay Kinney. Used by permission of PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

Figure 8:
From Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides, "Kultur Dokuments," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 67. © Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides. Used by permission of PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

Figure 9:
From Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides, "Kultur Dokuments," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 69. © Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides. Used by permission of PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

Figure 10:
From Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides, "Kultur Dokuments," in *Anarchy Comics: The Complete Collection*, page 74. © Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides. Used by permission of PM Press (www.pmpress.org).

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