

Rendering the Image Legible

Chair: Prof. Anthony Purdy

**'The Terror of the Uncertain Sign': Tactics of Counter-Censorship in Alberto Breccia's *Buscavidas***

**- Aarnoud Rommens (Theory and Criticism, UWO)**

Counter-censorship can be seen as the effect of textual or visual configurations that always already anticipate the intervention of a censoring instance through tactics of displacement, distortion, camouflage, encryption, equivocation, erasure and allegorization (which, incidentally, are reminiscent of Freud's *Traumarbeit*). Counter-censorship thus comprises a 'paranoiac' paradoxical visual or verbal economy that evades institutional suppression by mimicking the latter's procedures of erasure by putting itself under erasure.

My conception of counter-censorship was borne out of an analysis of the cultural production within a specific socio-historic context. As a cryptic or enigmatic medium maximizing its potential for 'anamorphic distortions' (Lacan), my presentation will focus on a number of comics and graphic novels produced in Argentina during its "Dirty War," or what the junta euphemistically dubbed the "Process of National Reorganization," i.e. the years of the 1976-1983 dictatorship. As a 'marginal' medium, comics made a virtue of their structural incapacity in order to voice a discordant note through a highly idiosyncratic juxtaposition of word and image, producing something one could call a calligraph interpellating the reader-viewer as decipherer of subversive signs that upset the "common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous" (Arendt). As such, the constraints of censorship proved productive for a range of graphic novels published during this period in the sense that, as a constellation of images and words, they exploited the 'polysemy of the image' to the detriment of the ideological function of strict verbal anchorage. Counter-censorship replied to state terror with the 'terror of the uncertain sign' (Barthes), in order to unveil a 'secret Argentina' by means of veiling.

I will attempt to explore the interdependence between excess and censorship by positing a reading hypothesis of a comic by Alberto Breccia published during the military dictatorship.

**Blank Slating the Visual/Blanking Out the Conservative**

**- Erin Morton (Department of Art, Queen's University)**

Those who resisted the Canadian state nation's project of liberal order—founded on notions of “peace, order and good government”—indelibly re-shaped its process of hegemonic liberalization. Canadian historian Ian McKay argues that the extension of liberalism across Canada was “a dramatic, revolutionary, contested, difficult, and contingent process, and it remains so today.” This is evident in Nova Scotia, insofar as the defense of “region” and “regionalism” in the tradition of national(ist) historiography often marginalizes topics located in Atlantic Canada. As a result, both the region and those who live there operate on the periphery in the writing of these master-narratives.

And yet as McKay points out, the notion that the region produces peripheral ideas from peripheral figures is empirically and ontologically ineffective. Constructions of Canadian region, east and west, which have conventionally posited the western frontier movement as an masculine, innovative expansion and which establish Atlantic Canada as a feminine, tradition-laden counter-frontier must be—and indeed are being—resisted. This paper considers the historically reductive yet pervasive constructions of Nova Scotia as an antimodern, culturally conservative Folk society and the way these primitivist stereotypes are advanced and resisted through visual culture production. I take as my starting point an exhibition celebrating the centenary of one of the province’s most influential cultural institutions, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. The curators of this exhibition argue that before the arrival of the college’s American ex-patriot professors in the 1960s, Nova Scotia was as a “blank slate” of cultural activity and thus a receptive environment for vanguard artistic practice. By examining this exhibition in relation to counter-narratives that offset these notions of local conservatism—namely those put forth by Nova Scotia’s economically disenfranchised Folk artists—I will expose the region’s own role in advancing, resisting, and re-shaping the installation of liberal order in Canada.

### **Rebels Without an Ethos: Countercultural Ethics in Tactics**

**- Cynthia Foo (Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, NY)**

In their monograph, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, authors Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter take aim at the notions of “cool” and “countercultural” to argue that neither category ever had (or have) much significant, lasting political traction. They conclude that the reasons for what they perceive to be the lack of sustained impact of punk, D-I-Y and countercultural tactics, are located within the culture against which these resistances or rebellions were positioned: there can be no anti-Christ without Christ, no counterculture without its necessary and essential handmaiden, consumerism. They suggest that sustained and significant change is instead to be found in “traditional” methods of advocacy: through legal channels, through “old-fashioned” policy-making and tactics some countercultural advocates would label “conservative” (and therefore harmful or at the least, obsolete).

In my essay I will examine Shepard Fairey’s “Obey Giant” graffiti to engage with some of these issues. I will focus on the potential for the creation of community that his anonymous project first suggested, to Fairey’s subsequent creation of a clothing and merchandise line under the same image, to argue for an ethics rather than a tactics of counterconsumerism. His tactics, while an essential tool to propose a different way of looking at the urban landscape, nevertheless need to be situated in an ethics of practice if it is to be anti-authorial or anti-consumerist in message. Unlike Heath and Potter’s insistence, therefore, on tactics, I will argue that it is the ethics rather than the tactics which provide the contextual cues, and thus the possibility for sustained political change in any activist approach.