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Below the metaphor of intent: one author-illustrator's view of the monstrous, and what he didn't see

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Below the Metaphor of Intent: One Author-Illustrator's view of the Monstrous, and What He Didn't See

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Abstract: This paper details the findings of a project that focused on illuminating how one of Australia's leading graphic-novelists, Marcello Baez, created the ideal of the monster and the monstrous in his best selling text, *Diablo*. The interviews with Baez revealed he deliberately inserted a series of symbolic elements in his visual storytelling; in particular he deliberately underpinned his text-illustration journey with what he considered to be generic view of what constitutes a more global ideal of the monster in the Western World. However, during the course of the interviews an ideographic set of highly personal fears relating to the concept of the 'monstrous' also emerged. Unaware that he had unconsciously inserted these manifestations of his "false self, or mask""[1] , Baez recognised that he had also centred on a deeply held view of the monstrous that centred on sexuality, the binding of time and the need for an affirmation of living. While this paper gives further weight to Chetwynd's claim that the rise and nature of the monster in a text represents the "author's deepest repressed feelings, fears and failures"[2], it also sheds light on one view of the nature of the monstrous as held by Generation X.

Key Words: Visual literacy, monsters, myth, mask, false self

1   Setting the Context: From accident to application

In this chapter I want to argue that the primary nature of the monster, and the pristine meaning of the term monstrous is not based on or found within an external source from the human condition. As I see it, the beasts and monsters found in our oral histories or written texts, are first and foremost firmly grounded in the 'collective consciousness' of the human psyche. All other manifestations emanate from this source. The monster stories that we tell are derived not from the beasts that come to take us, but from the creatures that already inhabit us. We don't tell monster stories we live them. For me, this is the terrifying facet of all the characteristics, forces and appropriations of monsters. Lurking in the inner being, the piloting vision of self and the guiding dialogue we all carry within us is the monster par excellence.

How did I come to this conclusion? While my research is primarily based in the areas of narrative and archetype, and I therefore had a belief that

monsters are an integral component of all narratives across all cultures. It wasn't until I stumbled into the project described in the ensuing pages that I began to understand that these monsters simply reflect the true nature of the human condition. It is through our narratives that we can gain insight and access to how fictional others dealt with all our potential whereby our lives could become a "Gollum like stumbling" and a two edged sword that has an edge so fine, that it can render one a wielder of kindness or in an instant an inflictor of pain. This is dualistic nature relates to the manner in which we treat each other, but has a more tighter relationship to the manner in which we treat our sense of self.

The focus of the research that led to these conlcusions initially had nothing to do with the concept of monsters, self or inner demons. In seeking to understand what one cohort of adolescent school aged students were actually reading, and why they were reading hard copy texts in a generational context apparently dominated by electronic visuals and a reluctance to read, inadvertently led me back to the ideal of the monstrous in concert with the concepts of myth and the "mask metaphor."[3]

While a majority of the respondents I had been interviewing did not read for pleasure at all, many of those who did reported that they had become engaged with the graphic novel. A genre that I had previously dismissed as simply being a glorified comic on steroids. An author of this text type that received repeated mention as being 'totally sick' was Marcello Baez, and in particular his graphic narrative Diabla was given the same endowment. I began to wonder what was in Baez's text that grabbed these readers. Obviously the research gods of 'methodological appropriateness'[4] were smiling on me because once having tracked him down he was only too willing to be interviewed and share his work.

As soon as Baez opened the drafts of his text at our initial interview I recognised that this is place of research focus where I had been before. While admitting the possibility of a-priori presumptions, my mind's eye was immediately drawn to the visual elements, I could see that littered through the frames of his illustrations and filtered through his character's movements and interactions were hints of monsters and glimpses of the monstrous. My immediate reaction was that these obviously carefully crafted drawings appeared to be elements of what Miller calls the 'animal-monstrous double'[5]. In other words, elements that are a pastiche of the human, animal and monstrous. These facets typically give the reader a jolt, as they do not appear

to fit the fabric of the archetypal narrative that first world readers have become accustomed to or are instinctively repellent to the typical image of the central character found in narratives. In this text these 'animal-monstrous doubles' were realised as images of dinosaurs, a 'horned' central female character, dragons, a reoccurring cat, a shrivelled demonic father and vulture like masks. As seen in the ensuing paragraphs, my reaction to these elements in concert with the author's intentions and the use of the mythic literature base formed the tools of analysis as to what is the potential nature of the narrative and the accompanying sub-text of the novella in focus.

The monochromatic visuals were accompanied by a story line that focused on a young girl named Lucy (the only character with horns) who wanted to be a rock star, had a broken down father, a kilt wearing boyfriend and who at the end of the novella was simply drawn as sinking into a desert.

While the text clearly suggested a storyline that focused on a young woman's lack of identity as we unpacked Baez's drafting process and the intersection between his ideological purpose and craft, I soon realised that I was also dealing with the revealing of personal myth, "the unfolding of symbolism of self transformation, … complex, grotesque and a challenge to one's self concept."[6] Baez admitted that he had intentionally designed to underpin his visual narrative with an insertion of layers of metaphor that he considered to be his personal slant on cultural truth. These embedded motifs relating specifically to generation x signposted his personal beliefs but at the same time were also designed to be ambiguous. Rather than being a barrier to the meaning making process the ambiguity was also a deliberate tool of drawing the reader into the text, a non-linear form of visual reading that Baez believes is a particular generational process of comprehension.

However, through a series of subsequent iterative "rabbiting interviews"[7] it soon became apparent that he also introduced a second series of unintentional layers of metaphoric meaning. To paraphrase Kittleson in an attempt to personalise the generic content of his thoughts, Baez had to also created layers of meaning through visual elements that revealed;

> essential storylines, recurrent ones that run deep
> in the psyche of the culture. These mythic
> themes express our deepest goals and values,
> give credence to our everyday lives in the shape
> of their settings, characters, and plots. [8]

What triggered this realisation that there was an undercurrent of hidden elements was a discussion focussing on the visual literacy tools that Baez had developed to create a coherent flow between the discontinuities that

the use of individual frames of illustrations naturally engenders. As we unpacked his notion of coherence it became apparent that he had inserted a set of what he thought were apparently benign elements that operated as tools of what I believe can be termed syntagmic flow; visual features that draw the reader-viewer through the text to create cohesive meaning.

As we discussed these, Marcello realised that these visual elements of meaning making pull the reader that he considered to be non-monstrous elements were in fact the exact opposite. As we discussed the meaning potential of each Baez realised that while they appeared to be completely disconnected from the storyline, he had unconsciously created a thread of correlation between them, which underpinned the journey of the central character as both a sub-context of the surface storyline and his own deeper reflective moments. These stylistic devices were more grotesque forms of monstrosity in that they represented the deeper and darker side of the human condition.

Baez was quite shocked at this insertion of a personal filter. As we continued to talk we came to the conclusion that these facets represent the mask that we each hide behind, the enabler of being and psyche that make it possible for us to slip relatively easily between the "golem like shambling creation of our faults and fears"[9] and the mask of respectability that we all hide behind in our normal daily life.

In this text these visual elements of birds, flight and feathers were in fact the "buffer between others and the real self"[10]. They represented the author's own individual fears and an insight into his own personal monsters, and perhaps the monsters inhabiting a generational psyche.

2   The Depths of the Monstrous
A. Monsters of the Cultural Unconsciousness.

As this author sees it, the youth of the western world are haunted by monsters at every turn. He believes these monsters are firmly entrenched in their cultural psyche and lie just below the surface of consciousness waiting to escape. While there is a realisation they are there, Baez further believes there is no real understanding of what they are let alone how to exorcise them. As this author-illustrator sees it, there is a cultural malaise of cultural unconsciousness. And so the reoccurring symbols he had inserted into his text, in tandem with the accompanying succinct wording, were designed to not only focus the reader on the basic flow of the plot but also provide the reader-viewer with alley ways of reflection through which the visual elements

subtlety hinted at an understanding of the nature of the monster as a social semiotic, and an insight into the behemoths that inhabit the current adolescent psyche. The primary elements of deliberate metaphor inserted into this text were Lucy's horns, the cat figure, and the ideal of horizon.

As stated previously, the central character of Diabla is Lucy, and while the text and facial visuals reveal that she wants to be something greater than she is, that is a 'rock star', a facet Baez considers to be a generational cultural aspiration, heroic identity or facet of cultural transmission. Baez has drawn her having a petite set of horns and she is the only character who has. Baez inserted this focus on difference, to emphasise the duality of the human psyche. While this admitting this represents his own struggles with identity, Baez'z horned female also represents what he believes are the small indicators of the larger inner struggle that all humans undergo. For Baez, the horns represent the personal deeper subconscious monsters of identity crisis that inhabit us all, and also show we keep the monsters at bay by ignoring them. As represented in this text there are occasional outbreaks and temporary flashes of this psychical monster, and it this constant battle to control these outbreaks and the polarity created by the inner battle to subdue the constant surfacing of these fears that not only determine our day to day existence but determine our level of personal satisfaction with self. In this case the character Lucy cannot become what she wants, and is unaware of what she truly needs because she firstly has not come to grips with who she is. This inner turmoil with monsters that she knows are alive within but can not fully articulate is also realised visually in that Baez has drawn her so that she never looks directly at the reader of text. In a constant focus of slanted vision and cropped frames, Lucy is also juxtaposed with the uncertainty of the relationship she has with her male counterpart in that he is nearly always looking up, a visual literacy device that in previous research I demonstrated often signifies uncertainty or lack of power. The one being she seems to have genuine contact with is powerless to help her.

In contrast to this direction of gaze, is the focus or vector of her demanding father. Drawn with a hint of the monstrous or demonic, the father would seem to be cast as the "beastly form of fallen grace"[11] . While her father is obviously a key figure in this text and has the demeanour of a haunted being, the text also clearly reveals that he is responsible for much of Lucy's current lack of identity and past problems. The visuals and text reveal that their relationship is fraught with tension and at the end of each interaction beasts within each character are clearly seen to rise. For Lucy the monster that haunts her creates constant inner turmoil.

Another continually reoccurring motif in this text is the cat, an ever-present watching character. While obviously a major element, this deliberately inserted facet, is always in the background or on the periphery but its role is not immediately clear. Baez would appear to have cast the cat as a "beautiful beast"[12], a metaphor that Warner contends is often found in metaphoric literature. In contrast to Lucy it has the appearance of beauty without any flaws and ease of movement. In this text this 'beautiful beast' also represents the trickster motif, the being that is "a border breaker, or the creature that shifts between the known and that shadowy world of unknown change."[13]. Thus the figure acts a counterpoint to Lucy's inability to cope with her world and current situation.

However, the cat also has a secondary illuminative role. Just as Lorenz and Vescy contend that metaphors such as this evokes the "polysemous nature of existence"[14], it was Baez's intention to draw the reader into seeing the cat as an alter ego, a guide always following as the unknown protector as Lucy can no longer cope with the multitude of competing tensions in her life and slips over the abyss into absolute loneliness. With the loss of all genuine relationships Lucy is portrayed in the final full page spread as sinking into the barrenness of a desert.

It is this final element of the desert that completes Baez's visual and metaphoric symmetry in this text. Chiastic in nature, as I suspect is the nature of all metaphoric literature, while apparently unconnected visually, the symbolic intent of the author was to reveal the fractured and superficial existence that he believes Generation X has fooled themselves into believing is meaningful. Using the frames themselves, the storyline and the metaphoric subtext Baez was attempting to demonstrate that the current external foci of this generation masks a desperate need to find lasting meaning to their lives.

With the opening scene portraying a city with no horizon and the final scene having the depth and definition that only a desert can reveal, Baez was attempting to visually create a sense of excitement and vibrancy of current first world existence while at the same time gently easing the reader into the notion that without a personal existential or spiritual horizon and related set of goals there is no definition. As well as the initial setting showing an expanse of city, Baez cut this scene into three overall frames which looks to some degree like a set of prison bars. His aim was to set the reader's focus on the dual nature of city living. While it offers a great deal of freedom and stimulation, at the same time it amplifies loneliness and isolation. In contrast to the last desert frame that takes up a whole page, Baez decided that the first page should deliberately

highlight the main characters sense of separation in combination with the fracturing of self within an exuberant society.

For Baez, the greatest monster that Generation X has to contend with is the existential angst of not being able to clearly answer the questions of who am I? - Where have I come from and where am I going?

As Lucy sinks into the desert sands Baez has drawn her looking down, unaware that in this place of desolation she has for the first time a clear horizon, but she is so caught up in what she thinks is her imminent demise she is unaware that the city in which she thought was her salvation was in fact deceit, and that to give purpose to her life, to find herself and a genuine relationship with another all she has to do is look up. The "journey into the void may be one of death, but it is also one of vision."[15]

B. Monsters of the Personal Unconsciousness

As detailed in previous paragraphs, during the unpacking of the creative processes involved in the construction of this novella Baez came to the realisation that he had unconsciously inserted a set of highly personal metaphors that appeared at critical points as a continuos thread in the text. At the central peak of the chiastic structure these disappear. In the central frames when the reader is introduced to Lucy's unloving and demonically drawn father the subtext was lifted to another level as the author's own monsters surfaced.

As the storyline shifted into the personal agony and dilemma of the central character, the visual sub-textual threads reappeared but resurfaced as different motifs. Having for the first time seen the placement of the falling feather and the falling Lucy; a flying bird and the bird masks; and the appearance of the little girl who looks like Lucy, Baez commented that not only were these a further entre into Lucy's psyche and the monsters she was facing, but represented connections to his own life.

As we spoke it became clear that while he had drawn Lucy as hiding behind a mask of "self advancement and self preservation"[16] he now understood he had drawn his own mask, one of non-disclosure. This non-disclosure in that was a symbolic interface that held at bay his own monsters and operated as a barrier to the articulation of his deepest reflections.

Contending that these were also generational concerns, on a personal level these metaphors whispered trepidation about identity, belonging, spirituality and sexuality. It would appear that Baez also believes that Generation X is a possessed by lurking "beautiful beast" monsters but choose to suppress them by hiding behind masks of superficial beauty alone. The beast within is simply ignored. But there is a cost for this action. Hence, just as

in the text there is a theme of falling so to Baez believes that by relying solely on the skin deep this generation is falling into a psychical realm that has dissolvable boundaries or horizons that are transient and fail to satisfy the human hunger or desire to overcome the lurking monster that whispers the notion that the forces which govern life as a whole are capricious at best and nihilist at worst. And so in the last half of the text, Lucy sees the little girl who looks like her but she is always out of reach.

While also representing Lucy's a loss of innocence and desire for the superficial, the implanted visual motiffs also represent what Baez believes is Generation X's, and his own inability to cope with the allure of beauty they are immersed in through the visual media, but in reality they are not truly at ease with. It would seem that rather than denigrating Generation X, Baez believes that the forces within popular culture and advertising has provided a single focus which is in direct opposition to the manner in which they actually think. The images of beauty they are seemingly absorbed in are in fact relics of a previous generation. Lacking the financial or political power to overcome this generational overlap, they have simply cloaked themselves with the mantle or symbols of beauty but subverted the symbols to suit their own particular time and place. Thus there is no one set of factors that determine or classify this group. While they appear to have the trappings of the advertising world that bombards them, closer inspection reveals that they have actually taken on a pastiche, or enmeshed themselves in clothing, music and elements that are external only. They are defined by being ill defined. However, Baez contends that because they have been left with virtually no existential legacy, or a set of belief patterns that manifest themselves in genuine positive change or virtue, they have become to believe in the power of the external pastiche and fallen prey to the belief that what you **fix this.**

Similar to what Walcot has termed the "homelessness of the homeland"[17] Baez also contends that this allure is itself a mask for the predatory nature of sexuality they are confronted with on a daily basis. While they immerse themselves in visual media, and are supposedly comfortable with this world of the screen, the ideals of beauty, truth and a sense of belonging have been distorted or lost in a world where "rather than being less circumscribed by sexuality"[18], Generation X may instead be more confused and circumscribed than ever. Baez has also inadvertently created Lucy with this air of the predator by an explicit plot line and inadvertent visual sub-theme in which she is seeking to get what she believes is hers, but her focus continually shifts to the little innocent girl who she can never be again. He also

views his main characters inability to catch this identical female as metaphor for a generation caught in a time not of their making and caught in a culture that has an inability to cope with transition between the warrant of virtue and the growing false sexual allure of beauty.

3   What Does This Mean? A view from education

If the themes deliberately and subconsciously embedded in this graphic novel represent the fears and concerns of Generation X then this cohort are not as totally self absorbed as Hinds (2001) and the host of other commentators would have us believe. Rather this cohort would appear o indeed be the "Chameleon Generation"[19] and have become this way because they see no opportunity to escape the monsters within and the monsters created by what they perceive to be a society in freefall. If they are engaging with this text type and discourse elements it contains then perhaps the answer to their dilemma could be partly resolved by an education system that recognises that these children are indeed reading, but in a very different manner and for a very different purpose than the linear reading and pointless deconstruction of traditional texts as found in many schools. Perhaps the monsters dwelling within this generation could be partially exorcised by the use of appropriate culturally and community based texts that of themselves act as a mediator between the adults that teach and the students themselves. Only then may the situation exist in schools that allows for this generation genuine engagement

with texts and learning. To conclude using a central metaphor contained in the text discussed in this paper, the term engagement in this sense is to

> Alter what one is and has been, to place the present a risk, and to open the gates of a new city and to make it new.[20]

was n on-directive, allowed for full disclosure with minimal imput,theraputive

Notes

1.   Laing. 1969, 39
2.   Chetwynd, 1982, 9
3.   Allport, 1937, 25
4.   Patton, 1990, 39
5.   Miller, 1988, 56
6.   Larsen, 1996,122
7.   Fitzsimmons, 2001, 399

8.   Kittleson,
9.   Larsen, 1996, 131
10. Monte, 1995,200
11. Warner, 1995, 72
12. Warner, 1995, 63
13. Hynes, 1997, 39
14. Lorenz and Vescy, 1988, 253
15. Wieland, 1988, 254
16. Coupland, 1992, 83
17. Walcott, 1990
18. Rakoff, 2001, 20
19. Coupland, 1992, 86
20. Brockheimer, Wang and Olsen, 2002, 297

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