Ian Hornsby

****Retro!**** ****Time, Memory, Nostalgia****

### ****The Ninth International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference Bournemouth**** ****27th - 29th June 2018****

### ****Friday 29th June 2018****

Panel 17c – Art and Technique

15:05-16:00pm

(18-minute paper: 2500 words)

**Ed Piskor and the Art of Nostalgia**

This paper is a part of an ongoing research project which attempts to recognise **comic books as philosophy**. This approach resists interpreting comics as supplements to written philosophy or using comics as a convenient means by which to elucidate philosophical ideas. This project also moves away from interrogating comic books through already existing philosophical lenses. However, this doesn’t mean completely ignoring philosophical ideas, which clearly exist within the context from which comic books themselves are made and read, and which have an impact upon both their fabrication and interpretation. What this project attempts to illustrate via theoretical, contextual, and practical undertakings, across multiple engagements with mainstream popular ‘superhero' comics that we buy each and every Wednesday; is to appreciate how western notions of ontology, our definitions concerning the nature of existence, and epistemology, our knowledge of the world; have been radically transformed through our fabrication of, and encounters with, the form and content of comic books. This claim suggests that our engagement with graphic narratives has caused a measurable shift in our interpretation of space-time, image and text, as well as our grasp of psychology, ethical questions, aesthetic sensibilities, and styles of composition, in what I term the ‘combined intensity’ of the comic book.

In this paper I want to interrogate Ed Piskor’s *X-Men Grand Design*, a series of six books that was begun in 2017 with issues #1 and #2 and will continue with two further issues later this year and the final two instalments in early 2019.

Piskor, like many of his ‘Xennial’ generation, born in the 80s, was captivated by the popular ‘Fox Kids’ Animated TV Series *X-Men,* of the early 90s. A series which in so many ways foreshadows his own *Grand Design*, in that it sets out to re-write the X-Men continuity and re-focus its convoluted storylines from the first 280 issues of the *Uncanny X-Men* comic published between the mid-sixties and early-nineties. After leaving the Kubert School, Piskor worked with underground comix pioneer Harvey Pekar on *American Splendour* and *Macedonia* in 2007, and then on *The Beats: A Graphic History* in 2009. He then began fabricating his own internet comic *WIZZYWI: Portrait of a Serial Hacker,* which was published in 2012. However, Piskor really came to prominence as an auteur of comics in 2013, with his ongoing title *Hip Hop Family Tree*, which connected the art and style of underground comic books with pop culture music. This nostalgic retelling of urban African American rap culture, published by Fantagraphics, is an ongoing work that so far covers the years from 1970-1983 in four volumes. I’ll be talking more about this title at the Brighton Graphic Conference on the 20th of July this year.

In 2017, Piskor began his publication of *X-Men Grand Design,* which from a purely commercial perspective, on the part of Marvel Comics, is a book designed to re-energise, if not reboot, the X-Men line of comics, which at this time, is at its lowest ebb in terms of readership and popularity since its original cancellation in March of 1970 with issue #66. In this respect, Piskor uses the first two issues to ‘tidy-up’ the Kirby and Lee years. These two issues establish the main theme of the series which is the coming of the Phoenix Force, the symbol of rebirth and resurrection from the flames of destruction, an uncanny homecoming that lays the foundations for a nostalgic return to the Chris Claremont, Dave Cockrum and John Byrne years, which revitalised the title from the mid-seventies to the early nineties and formed the basis of the Animated TV series. With *X-Men: Grand Design,* Piskor sets out to take the thousands of pages that make up issue #1 to #281 of the ‘original’ *Uncanny X-Men* run, and make a complete and concise, 240-page story which will, eventually when finished, include the ‘most important’ elements of the ‘messy continuity’ in a ‘revised’ form. It’s interesting to see how often nostalgic retelling are in fact, complete revision.

It should be remembered that Jack Kirby and Stan Lee did not set out to make a comic book that would last for over fifty years; nor did they have time to think about continuity from month to month but were making things up as they went along. This process of creating a story on the fly, where everything is an unknown unknown, inevitably ends up being incredibly complex and convoluted as Kirby had to miraculously get himself out of impossible situations, which often lead to moments of *Deus ex Machina*. This unknown unknown approach led to the death and resurrection of Professor Charles Xavier on several occasions and created unrealistic and disjointed narratives and characters, whose motivations and goals were underdeveloped and changeable from book to book. Piskor’s approach radically revises the story’s continuity by taking out the unknown unknowns and replacing them with known knowns. A method that stems from the existential anxieties cause by an uncanny return to the past which is ‘out of joint’. In an online interview, he states, “One of my cardinal rules for purchasing comics as a lad was never to buy a story that was halfway through being told. If I saw “Part 3” on the cover or the splash page, I was out.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

All of Piskor’s work so far is nostalgic in this sense. He sets out to replace complex histories with linear narratives. Yet any return to the past that wants to claim fidelity to its historical subject, must take into account the multi-layered and contingent complexity of historical narratives which inevitably leave anyone retelling these stories with feelings of uncertainty, where one is set adrift in an unstable ocean that is without a clear sense of the past, and with no intuitive sense of the future. This state of exhilaration, of wanting to find out more, of truly living in the moment of uncertainty, can also be experienced in the opposite manner, as a state of anxiety where complexities are overlooked, and reductive processes are employed to construct an idea of wholeness.

Issue #1 of *Grand Designs* opens with Uatu, the Watcher, transcribing to *The Recorder*, a small mechanical man with a reel-to-reel recorder built into his chest, preserving the history of the mutants of earth by retelling it to The Recorder. This clever narrative device, employed throughout the series, narrates the stories and major events of the X-Men without being overly intrusive. Uatu and his Recorder begin and end each of the issues, and the Watchers’ yellow caption boxes, are used to guide the reader through the revised story as well as enabling us to suspend our disbelief and lessen the impact of an omnipotent narrating author. By using Uatu, we are happy to hear his retelling of all that he has seen, as Piskor skilfully presents Uatu observing the earth from multiple angles and positions from panel to panel. A device that adds to the omnipotence of his viewpoint and lends objectivity and authority to what is a very subjective retelling. Piskor positions himself in the role as the auteur, the all-seeing Watcher, who has closely read each and every *X-Men* comic and is supplying us with this information via The Recorder who becomes the comic book that we hold in our hands. As we can see from this brief description, Piskor’s completist, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, comes across strongly here.

In the final panel of issues #2, we have Uatu telling The Recorder that “Until the universe blinks out, there is always more to the story.” This existential idea that a life, be it that of an individual, a civilization, a fictional story, or existence itself, can only be summed up after at its end or in death, is a further example of the nostalgic desire to return to the past by cleaning up its uncanny loose ends and taking back some kind of authorial control.

Piskor creates much in the way of retroactive continuity in *Grand Design* as can be seen on page two of issue #1, where he re-writes the history of homo superior into the western historical cannon by returning to the original theme of persecution by homo sapiens that has gone on over many centuries. The image of a giant ‘para-human’ Jeremiah, who appears as a golem helping homo-sapiens across a ravine to safety, is fascinating if understated panel. This scene, as well as many others, clearly have political connotations, especially in respect to the persecution of particular races by imperial and colonial white supremacist nations. Yet, this political dimension is not explored in any real detail in Piskor’s a-political retelling of the X-Men mythology.

Another fascinating nostalgic aspect of *Grand Design* is the simulation of discoloured newsprint paper stock, screen-tone shading, and a limited nineteen-sixties colour palette, all of which are used to lend an aspect of ageing and authenticity to the comic. However, these elements can also be read as being part of the problem of any ‘nostalgia work’ which often try so hard to be authentic, they end up drawing attention to their own artifice and reconstruction. The simulacra of faded paper merely acts to focus our attention upon the nature of the copy itself. A copy that is no longer meant to be a piece of ‘kids’ pulp fiction, discarded after being read; but is made as a collectable artefact for forty and fifty-year-old western men who have the cash to spend and are looking to return to their lost childhood in moments of ‘first-world’ middle age anxiety. Piskor's book bears no relation to the ‘original' which now, in fact, bears no relation even to itself with the passing of time, as now it would cost you a cool half a million dollars to buy. Quite an increase on the 12-cent cover price it once had. To paraphrase Jean Baudrillard, “the simulation is not what hides the truth, it is the truth that hides the simulation.”

However, with all of this being said, what I do find most interesting and creative about this simulated use of faded newspaper stock, is the way in which it enables Piskor to use whites within scenes and panels of his book that a modern comic, printed on high-quality white paper stock, would not be able to do. If we look at the way Magneto and Charles Xavier are both presented against starkly contrasting backgrounds of white, as each begins to realise the full extent of their mutant potential. The colour white is used to enhance their stature in the minds of the reader in a manner which can’t be easily ignored but is not intrusive upon the narrative itself. This same high contrast use of the colour white is also used to draw our attention to the nuclear aspects of the atomic age and its connection to the evolution of homo-superior that remain, for the most part, hidden from the naked eye of homo-sapiens.

Yet, perhaps, the most striking use of white is on page 19 and 40 of issue #1, where Piskor presents the phoenix force, the cosmic deity of pure energy, said to be older than the universe itself, which is searching infinity in order to find her next divine physical host. Even though the Phoenix saga is not part of Kirby and Lee’s Uncanny X-men series and doesn’t make its appearance until issues #101 of the ‘Claremont’ years, Piskor makes the whole Phoenix saga the lynchpin and central motif for his nostalgic retelling and literal rebirth of the X-Men timeline.

As we can see from the covers of the two collected editions of *X-Men Grand Design*, the fiery colours of yellow and red dominate the images. And it is with the figure of Jean Grey, who is given a much more rounded character in the writing of Claremont than she ever was as a two-dimensional teenage girl in Stan Lee’s writing. We see Jean take centre stage in Piskor’s fabrication as she is presented consistently surrounded by the colour red which can be seen on the cover of issue #1 and on Page 37. This sub-textual use of colour runs all the way through Piskor’s work and adds extra layers to his re-telling of each of the characters and their motivations. The coming of the Phoenix force in both the Phoenix saga and Dark Phoenix saga are extremely convoluted, and somewhat bamboozling, and involve plots of deception, genocide, patricide and suicide. What Piskor does by placing the Phoenix sagas as central to his nostalgic retelling of the story, is to position ideas of rebirth and resurrection as a means to create a more coherent whole?

If nostalgia is, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, an Island best viewed from a passing boat whose oarsmen have wax filled ears and whose captain is tied securely to the mast, as Homer presents in book XII of the *Odyssey*. Piskor too touches upon this same theme of an inherent fear of being consumed by the sound of the Sirens Song. A situation that lulls the listener into a state of jouissance, a state that can only lead to contentment and death where nothing new is brought into the world. A place of petrifying presence and known knowns. A dark uncanny nostalgia for the safety of what one already knows, rather than the sheer exuberance of living in the perpetual present of the unknown unknown.

Piskor addresses just such a theme with the figure of Lorelei, a woman from the Savage Lands who is transformed into a Siren by Magneto. A theme originally addressed in X-Men issue #63. Once again, we see Jean Grey as the central hero of the story, who, as Marvel Girl, is depicted in a position of action and control through the use of concentric red circles which show that she is able, unlike her male counterparts, to resists the sirens song and save the day.

However, as much as I would like to present Piskor’s *Grand Design* as a nostalgic feminist retelling of the X-Men tales, it falls well short of this particular claim. Rather, Piskor’s nostalgia is a return to his own improbable childish belief that all of what takes place in the original series has a plan behind it, or at least would have had, given more ideal circumstances. That this vast world of the X-Men of Kirby and Lee, a world held together by spit, sticky-tape, and imagination is nothing short of a singular and coherent saga. In this respect, Piskor’s *Grand Design* is a reimagining of our early childhood impulse to control the world in what Freud’s reference to as the ‘fort-da’ game. The X-Men as a toy thrown from the pram but miraculously returning to make the world whole once again and within our control. Piskor isn’t only attempting to appeal to this impulse by re-writing history, he is attempting to manifest it by “making” it coherent and authentic. Quite literally fabricating memories and making a reality that never was. History as simulacra.

The story Piskor tells is both a homage and a pastiche to Kirby’s style, yet in terms of Political themes such as Anti-war protests, themes of gender and racial equality, and issues of class and third world liberation, Piskor’s comic is painfully silent. This conservative a-political stance is rather sad in an age where, through his talent as a storyteller and artist, Piskor could have made a real statement. But instead, the piece reads more like what Jameson would term, blank parody, “the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, a flattening of history”.

I’d go even further and say it colonizes rather than simply revises or flattens history, because what Piskor is doing is not simply a daydream of the past but is in fact, nothing more than a “nostalgia work” that attempts to force the present into a neo-liberal context that is defined by a past that he himself has created. Colonial revisionism that burns down the past and resurrects a simple clean line of history, at the very end of history, to paraphrase Francis Fukuyama. No negative dialectic here, just a political cleansing of the unknown unknowns, in favour of a sterile apolitical form of nostalgia that purports to be a retelling when it is a mere revision. And rather than return to themes from the past in order to add to our understanding of the past so that we can revisit the present, Piskor’s *Grand Design* turns the X-men into a simulacrum of itself, a copy without an original.

1. https://boingboing.net/2018/04/03/x-men-grand-design-1.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)