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Truth, Justice, and the Critique of Globalization in a Mexican Superhero Parody

The superhero takes flight, launching himself in a long arc over the city with a look of determination and righteous purpose in his eyes. In his sights: A monstrous threat to the innocent citizenry looms on the horizon, a swath of crushed buildings and terrorized victims trailing behind. The superhero aims himself like a bullet, rocketing through the sky directly at his target. The embodiment of the collective good slams violently into the embodiment of anti-social evil (a crazed or subhuman ferocity, hell-bent on mass destruction). As the smoke and flame of a pitched, epic battle dissipates, the battered but victorious hero stands firm, order once again successfully defended and affirmed. Individual prowess — including personal abilities that closely mimic the flight, speed, and explosive force made possible by modern technologies of energy, transportation and war — has once again served the common good.

If there is a familiar, even predictable, feel to this storyline, it is because, in generic terms, the description above of the comic book superhero’s exploits and moral profile hews to a standard template of the superhero genre, a narrative standard generally considered to have originated in the United States with the *Action Comics* Superman series in 1938. The schematic narrative outline presented above is not, however, drawn from the adventures of the vaunted “Man of Steel,” that globally recognizable popular cultural representative of U.S. exceptionalism. Instead of a broad-shouldered, deep-chested, Anglo male, whose red and blue cape and tights mirror U.S. national colors as he defends “Truth, Justice and the American way,” in this case the superhero hails from Mexico, speaks Spanish, and has a short, stocky body. Instead of a journalist who moonlights as a caped crusader, the Mexican hero is born from a picture bulb released from a discarded television set, brought to life by the magical incantations of an amateur TV repairman in Mexico City. Behold: El Bulbo (The Bulb).

the center of a radically different threat environment. This becomes clear when one considers the same basic narrative structure sketched out above, but now filled out with greater specificity vis-à-vis character and context: In issue #3 of Bachan’s superhero series, “El Bulbo vs. Toyzilla,” the animated picture tube from a junked television set faces a Godzilla-like monster who stomps madly through Mexico City, leaving terror and rubble in its wake.

Unlike the Godzilla of motion picture fame, however, this monster is not an organic mutant, but a child’s wind-up toy, greatly enlarged and set in motion by the evil Adolfo, another animated television picture bulb sprung magically from the same original event as El Bulbo. Adolfo is an evil doppelganger for El Bulbo, distinguishable principally by his unmitigatedly evil postures, and the Hitler-style mustache he sports. After being vanquished in an earlier encounter with El Bulbo (issue #1), Adolfo has been restored to life by an equally morally-compromised factory owner, who bestows upon Adolfo the visage of George Lucas’ Darth Vader, the super villain of the filmmaker’s Star Wars trilogy. The embodiment of evil, in other words, drags along behind it an entire production chain of globalized mass cultural authorship and imaginary anti-social malevolence.

El Bulbo’s moral authority is also distinct from the U.S. superhero standard. Before engaging Toyzilla in battle, El Bulbo addresses the monster with a detailed, and somewhat lampoonish, civic discourse: “I inform you that the city has 25,000 street sweepers and cleaning services, who make their living picking up the rubble created by you and your kind, and if things continue they will soon go on strike. As a decent citizen, I exhort you to surrender, return to whatever place you have come from, and by the authority I vest in myself I exorcize you.” Battle is then engaged when El Bulbo’s civic-minded speech draws a fiery, contemptuous snort from Toyzilla, blasting El Bulbo from the sky.

After several failed assaults, El Bulbo turns to the city’s electrical power grid, availing himself of greater power for an expected final scene of combat that might finally bring the demise of the terrible plaything. No such luck, El Bulbo finds, as his newfound power is still no match for Toyzilla. Finally, enraged with frustration, El Bulbo’s heroic moment is powered in the end by simple, crude anger. “If I had half a brain I would think of some ingenious strategy,” El Bulbo’s thought bubble informs the comic book reader, “but that’s not my style.” A furious uppercut delivered on the fly to the monster’s jaw sends it skyward, and subsequently its now inert gigantic bulk plummets back to earth with an explosive “chunnk,” leaving an enormous impact crater and smoking disaster in the center of the city, where the lifeless bodies of numerous victims can be seen strewn about. Apparently oblivious to the massive collateral damage caused by his battle with evil, El Bulbo declares triumphantly “It’s a good thing I was able to stop that monster before it destroyed the city!”
So what is one to make of El Bulbo’s ineffectual bumbling and disproportionate destructiveness; his lack of insight and of self-awareness; his ill-conceived reduction of an imminent threat to the very existence of society to mundane political preoccupations of everyday life (e.g., the threat of a strike by sanitation workers)? Bachan describes El Bulbo as “more a humor comic than a superhero comic,” and notes that none of his other works are based on the superhero figure. (Personal correspondence with Sebastián Carrillo, November 6, 2006) But what is the Mexico-specific significance to this superhero parody? In order to understand the unconventional behaviors of El Bulbo, it is important first to acknowledge that the superhero comic book is much more than just another time-honored and market-proven package of genre-specific semiotic, aesthetic and narrative constructs.

The history of the genre is first of all a uniquely modern one. Students of the genre note the twentieth century origins of the superhero, with Superman, Wonder Woman and Captain America frequently cited as foundational figures. These figures are, of course, both historically- and nationally-specific, concocted and entered into mass circulation in the mid-twentieth century United States, in the context of World War II, the New Deal of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration and early public morals crusades against the perceived corruptive nature of graphic narrative. In these circumstances, Superman’s initial adventures have been characterized as those of a “reformist liberal,” insofar as he confronted social ills such as domestic abuse, and institutional failures like police corruption, government inaction in the face of poverty, and unethical private enterprise. (Gordon, 1998 and 2001) In addition to occasional frontal assaults on the police and business interests, the Superman of the first two years of the series also opposed U.S. involvement in European conflict, all under the moral authority special to his powers.

By 1940 U.S. involvement in World War II, the ubiquity of official patriotism, the growing commercial value of the Superman series and morals complaints about comics in general would conspire to produce a “shift of character from iconoclast individualistic liberal reformer to mainstream liberal organizational man.”(Gordon 2001, 183) The publisher of the comic even hammered out moral standards for the Superman stories, standards that “prohibited — among other things — the destruction of private property.”(Gordon 2001, 181) In other words, the modern moral code inherent in the superhero profile was not built originally on philosophical universals, but on a national ethos. Thus, a close relationship can be discerned between a national, status quo vision of modernity and the emergent twentieth century cultural figure of the superhero: “the American Way” of individualism and capitalist democracy in superhuman form, dressed up in tights for good measure.

If the discursive, or propositional, features of the genre’s implicit regulations comprise a recognizably national face, it is therefore necessary to interrogate the aesthetic
dimension along these same lines. Geoff Klock has argued that the core aesthetic proposition of the contemporary superhero comic is its revisionary posture with respect to its own generic tradition, “because as a serial narrative that has been running for more than sixty years, reinterpretation becomes part of the survival code.”(13) While this aesthetic formalism, borrowed from Harold Bloom’s literary theory of poetic influence, may be useful for observing the productive relationships between generations of artists, it has little to offer with respect to the uniqueness of the superhero genre per se, and is silent on the kinds of aesthetic re-envisioning that are motivated not by the diachronic tensions between generations but the synchronic border conflicts between national culture codes and traditions. On the first point — that is, what is unique to the genre — it is useful to recognize in both the aesthetic and the discursive dimensions of the superhero genre a distinctive interplay of individualism and collective identity, of modernity and the moral order, of power and vulnerability in the context of modern mass society. As for the second point, importantly, it is in relation to these same modern, mass societal concerns where one can begin to recognize what is distinctive, even tendentious, about El Bulbo’s position in the field of comics culture in Mexico.

El Bulbo’s heroism is profiled in a global battle between the recycled and reanimated television picture tube and a host of super villains, all of whom, like El Bulbo, hail from the realm of the modern mass culture industry. The episodic conflicts of the El Bulbo series are as global as the mass cultural media from which El Bulbo’s evil antagonists are seemingly derived — television in particular, as the principal marketing medium for children’s toys, fantasy film vehicles, animated cartoons, adventure series and related product lines. Japanese manga, Star Wars, Superman, all turn up in El Bulbo’s reality, and co-habit the Mexican superhero’s cultural landscape alongside other figures (Marge Simpson makes a cameo appearance in issue #9) from transnationally syndicated television cartoon series, or who bear a striking resemblance to such characters. At the same time, the setting for the expected morally charged combat between superhero and super villains is most frequently the Mexican metropolitan core.

These particulars of El Bulbo arise from the cultural preoccupations of artists (Bachan and his collaborators) who work at the urban epicenter of Mexico’s own mass media market — Mexico City, the single largest urban cultural market in the Western Hemisphere, and the most important production and distribution center for the Spanish-language cultural market in the Americas. Bachan’s artistic development is uniquely tied to this mass cultural arena, with all of its contradictions: his earliest interest in sequential art was as a childhood fan of Spanish translations of French and American comics series, like Alberto Uderzo’s Asterix, Jean-Claude Mezieres’ Valerian, the Belgian artist Morris’ Lucky Luke, and fellow Belgian Peyo’s Smurfs, followed by the superhero comics illustrations of John Byrne, Arthur Adams and Alan Davis. By the late 1980s Bachan had also encountered Japanese Manga in the form of Katsuhiro
Otomo’s *Akira* series and Masamune Shirow’s sci-fi *Appleseed*. Meanwhile, he developed his drafting skills principally through six years of work for Mexican-owned Editorial Novedades, drawing for the popular *historieta* series “Hombres y Héroes,” “Joyas de Literatura,” “El Solitario,” and others, as well as for Editorial Ejea’s “Sensacional de Luchas,” “Sensacional de Vacaciones,” and “Así Soy y Qué.” (Personal correspondence with Sebastián Carrillo, January 22, 2007)

The artist’s depiction of Mexico City, and use of intertextual devices to reference visually what Arjun Appadurai has called global “mediascapes” (visual and informational environments created by transnational media conglomerates and consumer habits), draw together the national and the global into a vortex of conflict surrounding the parodical superhero. A close examination of the formal, aesthetic mechanisms through which El Bulbo is situated in his episodic confrontations with evil demonstrates that — despite the idiosyncratic and playful character of the series — El Bulbo represents an important critique of the consequences for the local cultural imagination of a globalized culture industry. At the same time, many of the problems confronted by El Bulbo, among them his own identity as superhero, together comprise a critical representation of free market globalization as a corrosive force that strips traditional cultural models of their authority and relevance.

**The Bulb Goes Out on the Superhero**

The central conflict facing El Bulbo is one that implicates his very identity as a superhero. Indeed, this conflict can be viewed as the organizing principle of the discursive and aesthetic presentation of El Bulbo to the comic book reader, wherein the heroic television picture bulb is simultaneously Olympian and plebian, high-minded and low-brow. In important ways, El Bulbo’s skewed antics and his unstable identity as the exceptional individual protector of Mexican society take on their critical, even political, meaning against the backdrop of the reader’s accumulated cultural knowledge and sophistication vis-à-vis the codes of the mass cultural field. That is to say, Bachan’s playful representational strategies presume a kind of double-edged cultural knowledge brought to bear by his readership. First, the cultural knowledge required of the El Bulbo reader includes a familiarity with generic conventions — of the superhero standard and of the related visual field of animated villains and heroes emanating from globally syndicated mass cultural programming. Second, the superbulb’s ability to critically leverage those conventions into something new presumes on the part of the reader a nationally-specific cultural competence capable of recognizing the idiosyncrasies of Mexican social realities and experience, and of acknowledging the general exclusion of these national particularities from the horizon of globally marketed mass cultural products.
It has been noted that the U.S. superhero standard has fallen on hard times in recent years. Richard Reynolds observes that by the early 1990s it had become fashionable for graphic works to be “used as a stick to beat the superhero and other forms of genre writing,” frequently deconstructing or undermining the superhero with morally ambiguous characters, fragmented narrative continuity, or even human frailty and death (as occurred famously with Superman in 1993). Interpreted symptomatically, this phenomenon of the U.S. comics market could very well indicate, as Reynolds argues, that the field of comics “is restructuring itself as a diminutive reflection of the mainstream culture which still largely rejects it.” (Reynolds, 122)

In Latin America, where Mexico has been the regional epicenter for comics distribution, the superhero has represented a vexed mass cultural figure for some time now, with a mainstream profile dominated by DC and Marvel Comics imports. The graphic mugging of the superhero in Latin America could just as easily be interpreted as symptomatic of local unease with a figure representative of mainstream U.S. culture. Latin American artists and intellectuals have cast a jaundiced eye on the superhero, often perceiving in his or her individualized super powers an implicit cultural model originating from outside Latin American national cultures. Anyone familiar with Latin America knows that this critical view pre-dates significantly the anti-superhero trend Reynolds observes in U.S. graphic works of the 1990s.

The most emblematic work in this regard was Argentine Julio Cortázar’s experimental novella Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales (Fantomas against the Multinational Vampires), published by the Russell Tribunal in 1977. The novella combined the comic book format and the popular 1960s Mexican superhero series Fantomas, La amenaza elegante (Fantomas, The Elegant Menace; written by Alfredo Cardona Peña for Editorial Novaro) with the avant garde literary techniques of the celebrated Latin American novelist. In effect, Cortázar made use of the popular vehicle of the graphic story book, and the semiotic envelope of the widely read and recognizable Mexican figure Fantomas, in order to deliver for a broad regional readership a summary of the findings of the Russell Tribunal, which convened an international grouping of intellectuals and activists in Rome in April 1974 and again in Brussels in January 1975 to publicly condemn U.S. imperialism, human rights abuses and military intervention in Latin America.

Cortázar’s Fantomas differed from the original Mexican superhero in his frank recognition of the necessity of defending human rights and national sovereignty against the predations of multinational capitalist interests and U.S. superpower intervention in the Third World. Whereas the Fantomas series published by Editorial Novaro (and later Editorial Vid) presented an appropriately muscled, macho and be-masked hero who struggled against elite corruption and thievery, and occasionally against police corruption and other social ills, Cortázar’s novella presented a superhero who con-
sorted with regional intellectuals (Cortázar in Latin America, for example, and Susan Sontag in New York, among others) and showed signs of developing an awareness of real-world and world historical villainous behavior. Ultimately, in Cortázar’s version of the superhero it becomes clear that Fantomas represents an unsustainable model of response to social problems and structural evils, such as the political manipulation and economic exploitation of Third World countries by First World powers. In the words of one of the novella’s characters: “[T]he error lies in presupposing a leader […], in sitting around waiting for a leader to appear and to bring us together. … The error is being faced with an everyday reality like the findings of the Russell Tribunal […] and still waiting for someone else to respond.” (Cortázar, 71) In Cortázar’s variant, Fantomas is exposed as an individualistic and even messianic cultural model, inadequate and inappropriate to real world problems, the solutions for which can only arise from mass organization and democratic social movements.

A similar critique was leveled more recently against Superman and Wonder Woman in Latin America. DC Comics had announced in 1996 a partnership with the United Nations (UNICEF) and the Clinton administration in the U.S., whereby Superman and Wonder Woman would appear in popular education materials (including a comic book) explaining about the dangers of land mines in Bosnia. A Spanish-language version of the comic books — *Superman y la Mujer Maravilla: El Asesino Escondido* (Superman and Wonder Woman: The Hidden Killer, 1998) — was eventually published for distribution in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua. (United States, 1998) In the Central American countries, where the U.S.-backed Contra war had left a perilous quantity of unexploded ordinance on the ground, U.S. popular culture enjoys a high-profile presence. Although the most obvious anti-imperialist argument would have insisted on use of a homegrown hero or heroes instead, the critique of the superhero comic successfully levied by Nicaraguan anti-landmine activists held that the superhero per se was inappropriate to the nature of the problem. “With this [comic], which was also totally inappropriate culturally given what Superman represents in the social imaginary, what happened was that lots of kids wanted to find landmines and deliberately put themselves in danger, so that Superman or Wonder Woman would come to their rescue.” (Powell)

Alongside this critical intellectual and activist circumspection with regard to the cultural figure of the superhero in Latin America, one cannot ignore another important pressure point on the genre and its received conventions, namely, the regional commercialization of the superhero and its absorption into advertising campaigns and market discourse at best tenuously related to the moral discourse and aesthetics of the genre. Thus, one can see Klock’s revisionary pressures on the genre at work in the marketing campaign of the Mexican company Grupo Industrial Cuadritos Biotek,
which decided in 2004 to outfit its executives in black t-shirts emblazoned with the Batman symbol on the chest, and to dispatch to the schools of Mexico City, Guanajuato and Monterrey “an army dressed up as Batman, Superman, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman, among other characters,” in order to conquer the children’s market for their yogurt products. (de la Torre) The company’s marketing strategy, coordinated with Warner Brothers in the U.S., appears to be a logical extension of a previous agreement between DC Comics, Warner Brothers and the Burger King Corporation which resulted, as explained in the Spanish-language press, in “seven of the most popular crime-fighting Super Heroes — Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Flash, Martian Manhunter and Hawkgirl — leaping from the pages of DC Comics and from the television screens to appear in a powerful children’s promotional campaign in participating Burger King restaurants.” (PR Newswire)

These are unavoidable contextual considerations for understanding El Bulbo’s relationship to the aesthetic and discursive norms of the superhero genre. The parodical re-working of the superhero figure by Bachan and company, as well as their artistic revisions of the aesthetic contours of the genre, can best be understood against the backdrop of the peculiar politicization of cultural forms effected by capitalist globalization. On the one hand, national cultural discourses square off; on the other, commercial processes absorb and re-deploy these same discourses for transnational economic ends. The received model of the superhero, originating in the U.S., weds specific discourses of economic and social modernity (individualism and technological power) with a national semiotic template (imagery signifying individual strength, collective will, moral order), and is ultimately consummated in cultural practice in the sentimental affinity between the individual reader and a collective moral order. This same affinity becomes problematic when the cultural document in question crosses national boundaries and comes in contact with other, competing, configurations of individual with nation and a proposed moral order. Meanwhile, Japanese and U.S. comics enterprises, and related culture industries globally diffuse images and fantasies of power, individualist agency and moral conflict, and enter into contractual arrangements that add specific products and a consumer ethos to the mix. The resulting discrepancies with the original generic model are multiple and complex (the Turner Broadcasting Company’s Cartoon Network alone reaches viewers with Justice League characters in 145 countries throughout the world).

As with any superhero, the story of El Bulbo’s origins is important. The story of origins is, in fact, an emblematic moment in the construction not only of many a superhero character, but of a specific kind of narrative frame. The genesis story aids in the establishment of that character’s powers and agency within a mythic time/space framework capable of standing outside the ordinary world of real historical experience,
and at the same time operating within that ordinary plane of existence. One could argue that this narrative moment subtends the superhero genre’s inclusion as a category of myth, especially as defined by Mircea Eliade as a story of origins that establishes a lived relationship between the quotidian and the supernatural. The tale of origin is a key moment, in other words, in the mythological nature of the superhero — providing an original guarantee for one of Richard Reynolds’ definitive features of the superhero, specifically, that “The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.” (Reynolds) Perhaps more importantly, the genesis narrative for the hero’s super powers allows for an ascension of the ordinary to what Umberto Eco called, with reference to the Superman stories, “a kind of oneiric climate — of which the reader is not aware at all — where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy.” (Eco, 336)

The El Bulbo storyline arises from precisely this narrative structure. In issue #1 of the series, the story begins with an ordinary, urban Mexican, Eugenio, receiving an old television set from his uncle Eulalio. The narrator explains that he had asked for the television even though it no longer worked, because “it was the television on which I watched cartoons as a kid.” (1) Unable to find the parts necessary to make the television work again, the narrator takes recourse to a “repair manual” that requires less sophisticated technology. This manual turns out to be a book of black magic incantations, allowing the television to be reconstituted despite its obsolescence. The apparatus that delivered the cartoons of childhood thus becomes the supernatural source for the animated picture bulbs, which burst forth from the black magic spell with the ominous declaration “We are going to conquer the world!” Horrified by the unintended consequence of his television fetishism, the narrator desperately tries a different spell on the one bulb remaining in the broken television set. And so El Bulbo is born (“¡Sopas! With a little cape and everything!” exclaims the narrator). El Bulbo’s first words as a living reality are just as indicative of his moral character as the pronouncement by his evil counterparts is of theirs: “Let me at them! Where are they? How many of them are there? What have they got? How much am I getting paid?”

One can hear in the newborn superhero’s voice how Eco’s “oneiric climate,” a myth-time that allows, on Eliade’s view, for the supernatural to accompany mundane experience, is penetrated by a much less dreamy plane of existence where clichéd speech, pedestrian concerns and narrative self-consciousness crop up like day residue in an afternoon nap. Indeed, even the evil plans of the bulbs led by Adolfo have this mundane and self-referential quality. In the first episode, Adolfo gives a rallying speech to his minions in an abandoned factory (“of the sort that frequently appear in comic books” the narration observes): “The moment to awaken has arrived. The moment to rise up in arms and shout with one voice No more! To say to the world: I refuse to live
my life as part of a domestic appliance that offers vacuous entertainment! The microchip has not made me obsolete! Compañeros: The world must know that it belongs to the bulbs!” The evil at work here is at once megalomaniacal and ordinary; the hackneyed form of an immense and apocalyptic evil on the march is inhabited by the more routine content of personal resentment and domesticity.

On the one hand, Adolfo’s plans for world domination are monumentally reactionary and deeply threatening, much like those of his namesake Adolf Hitler, lashing out against new forms of power that have overtaken the old. On the other hand, the stakes of Adolfo’s reactionary designs are the contours of the same mass cultural media environment — the television bulb and the computer microchip, the realm of personal meaning and the threat of cultural obsolescence — where the bulbs’ petty self-interestedness arises and resides. The terrain of moral struggle mapped out in the tale of origin leaves no doubt as to the precise location of the hazy “oneiric climate” where supernatural beings struggle mightily amid uninspired clichés and pedestrian realities.

Following El Bulbo’s debut as the savior of humanity from the evil Adolfo, our superhero returns to Eugenio’s apartment building to ask about his “honoraria.” A knock on the door turns out to be the concierge, who informs “Mr. Bulbo” that several “gentlemen” are asking for him at the front door of the building. Downstairs the superhero encounters a long, diverse line of comics characters, led by a cartoonish King Kong figure and with a Silver Surfer-like character silhouetted in the distance against the sky, all of whom wish to “play” with El Bulbo (the concierge has helpfully provided them with numbers, in the manner of clients ordering take-out from a restaurant, in order to facilitate things). A shift in frame to a full-page, single-panel final image for the issue emphatically reinforces the visual punch-line: crowded with gigantic characters drawn in the style of children’s cartoons, the last page suggests that the supernatural myth-time that accompanies El Bulbo in everyday life is, in fact, none other than the imagined, if somewhat predictable, globalized mass cultural environment emanating from the television set and coordinated entertainment media. (See figure 1)

The Bulb Goes On for a Critique of Globalization

As mythic discourse, the story of origin establishes the parameters of reality as occupied by the superhero. For El Bulbo, reality entails constant reminders of self-interest and economic necessity, and an awkward disjuncture between the simplistic high stakes morality of heroes and villains and the complex needs and circumstances of a real modern society. In El Bulbo #2, “The Tragic Death of Genoveva the Cow,” the superhero, having been struck extra hard by “the malevolent Dr. Smurf,” lands in the
El Bulbo discovers his calling — to do battle with other denizens of mass cultural “reality.” (Image courtesy of Sebastián Carrillo)
countryside and inadvertently kills the only cow owned by a rural Mexican couple. In consequence, El Bulbo is obliged to work off the damage done by doing chores around the house, and taking over from the dear departed bovine the task of plowing the couple’s meager plot of land. Meanwhile, the arch-villain Dr. Smurf has hitched a ride with a Mexican truck driver in pursuit of his enemy. The dialogue between the super villain and the truck driver is suggestive of the comic collision between mythos and modern reality:

Truck driver: So, what kind of work do you do?
Dr. Smurf: I’m a super villain. And I will conquer the world, imposing my will as Supreme Emperor of Planet Earth — a title I would already possess if not for the meddling of that ridiculous yellow superhero, who ruined my latest weapon of mass destruction and thereby required me to go hitchhiking in pursuit of him.

Truck driver: Hey, that whole being super evil thing, can you make money at that? (3)

This conversation eventually sours as the super villain’s overblown ego and threatening language results in the truck driver calmly shooting Dr. Smurf and throwing his corpse from the cab of the truck. “That’s what I get for picking up hitchhikers,” he says to himself. “My boss told me not to mess with chilangos [a slang term for people from Mexico City], they’re totally nuts.” (4) Meanwhile, El Bulbo discovers that his new employers are members of a millennial doomsday cult who, faced with signs of prophecy (which happen to include standard features of the globalizing economy — “when prices take flight, and the whole world is connected”) are preparing to be transported by aliens to a kind of Mexican nationalist consumer paradise: “a thousand years of Fun and Games with the Chivas soccer team and the Zacatepec resort — with a free courtesy cocktail.” (12)

El Bulbo’s reality is, in effect, the point of contact between the fabricated realm of the supernatural and the contemporary social world, between the imagined plane of existence articulated through the products of mass entertainment culture and the lived reality of the society that consumes those products. (It almost goes without saying that, examined objectively, the culture industry comprises precisely such a reality: joining economic interests with the dissemination of entertaining fictions and moral fables.)

From the outset, therefore, in El Bulbo’s world one encounters a corrosion of the traditional superhero mythos: at his very birth the superhero undergoes a reduction to the status of a “professional,” collapsing the important gap between the ordinariness of workaday concerns and the extraordinariness of the heroic. The hero is now an employee, hired help, who labors for a wage and kvetches about his working conditions.
Bachan’s comic book depicts, in this way, not only an important cultural dimension of globalization (i.e., the transnational diffusion of superheroes and villains, and of the cultural model implicit to them) but the relationship between the now globalized mass cultural field and the market forces that determine, in no small measure, its aesthetic forms and ideological values. El Bulbo’s parodic embodiment of the superhero role can be viewed as a kind of critical demonstration of the revisionist pressures brought to bear by the forces of globalization on the formal contours of the superhero comic.

The reader encounters the pressures and anxieties of the global horizon repeatedly throughout the longer narrative arc of the 10-issue series. After being born from the mechanical guts of the 20th century’s most powerful visual medium of cultural globalization, the superhero wanders through a series of adventures framed by millennial hysteria reminiscent of the suicidal Heaven’s Gate cult (issue #2); an alliance between an exploitative factory owner and a plan for world dominance (#3); the proliferation of U.S.-style Christmas decorations in commercial settings throughout Mexico City (#5); unethical genetic experimentation and murderous violence perpetrated by a Japanese transnational (#6); commercialization of the superhero and manipulation of the cultural environment for profit (#7); unemployment and wage exploitation (#8); and border-crossing and income disparities between the U.S. and Mexico (#10).

Although at times such globalization-related concerns are indirectly present — as in #5, where El Bulbo is suspected by the authorities of carrying out a series of mass murders in Mexico City’s business district, when the true culprits are revealed to be strings of homicidal Christmas tree light bulbs, seasonal decorations emblematic of U.S. cultural influence — most frequently El Bulbo finds himself personally and directly entangled in the market logics of the global economic order. Even in the otherworldly issue #4, in which El Bulbo sneaks into Hell to retrieve Genoveva the cow (who he killed in issue #2) for her heartbroken owner, he must sell his soul not to the Devil but to Bilal P. Gato, an intermediary paralleled by the real-life “coyotes” who charge migrants for safe passage across the U.S. border, who facilitates the bulb’s safe passage back across the river Styx and into Mexico. (The issue concludes with a conversation in Hell between Stalin, Genghis Khan and Carlos Salinas de Gortari — Mexico’s neo-liberal president from 1988 to 1994, whose administration negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement.)

Reading this illicit border crossing as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of the Mexican experience of globalization might seem a stretch, except for the fact that the U.S.-Mexico border occupies such a special place in the Mexican popular imagination (from Cantinflas films to norteña music). And if that were not a sufficient thematic linkage, throughout Bachan’s series, El Bulbo repeatedly encounters the problems of compensation, and of compromised ethical and creative autonomy faced by many
a skilled laborer in globalized economic circumstances. In issue #6, the superhero is hired to solve a bloody mystery unfolding in Japan: someone is brutally assassinating Manga characters, violently dismembering the lovable little animated creations before the very eyes of the reader. (One pair of cute Manga cartoon characters — stylized bunny rabbits, one pink and one blue — are hacked to pieces by an axe while discussing what love is. “A multinational corporation,” says one. “A brand new BMW,” says the other.) (2)

What El Bulbo discovers is that the laboratory scientists of the Nasrio Corporation, corporate owner of murdered Manga characters with names like Akudo the Penguin, Biyoshi the Little Pig and the Ketsuben Bunnies, are generating the Manga within a cartoon habitat “biorama,” and then killing them experimentally. Corporate representatives explain to El Bulbo that no crime has been committed, since the Manga are the property of Nasrio. In issue #7 — written and drawn by Bef, with colors by Bachan — the superhero subsequently discovers that the entire episode was a ruse designed to trick him into signing himself over to Nasrio as yet another company employee.

What results in issue #7 is the total commodification of the Mexican superhero by a Japanese-based transnational corporation. El Bulbo awakens one morning to discover that extensive marketing agreements have turned his name and image into a brand, appearing in radio and television programming, children’s toys, t-shirts and other merchandise, and used to promote synergistically a range of other products. A confused superhero demands answers and is informed by Ortyx Gasset, the “Latin America Regional Director” for Nasrio Corporation, that “The real motive for calling you to Japan was to analyze you, create a prototype and market it throughout the world.” (6) As Gasset explained, the transnational corporation had patented El Bulbo and taken legal ownership of him and his image. Meanwhile, the evil Doctor Verboten, another of El Bulbo’s several arch-nemeses, is hired by Nasrio as its new “Director of Creative Development,” allowing the evil villain to work off his debts by designing monsters and machinery of mass destruction for El Bulbo to fight — with each battle serving as a new pretext for merchandizing.

The superhero now shares the workaday realities of most urban Mexicans, commuting to work on the pesero (private mini-bus that serves as a key feature of mass transit in Mexico City) and fretting about his stress-level and poor compensation, despite his employer’s soaring profits. (see figure 2) The artist’s use of comic book panels reminds the reader that El Bulbo is now in the grips of not only the market logic of commodification but also the reductive cultural logic of television. In figure 2, El Bulbo’s fate is presented in three page-width and horizontal panels that read from the top down, wherein the sequentially increased size of the announcer’s head in the foreground simulates a “zoom-in” camera perspective common to television news
The commodification of the superhero: El Bulbo’s battles promote “Bulbo” product lines, including detergent, pencils and hair clips. (Image courtesy of Sebastián Carrillo)
and infomercial reporting. In the same short panel sequence, Bef and Bachan alter incongruously several contextual details (the announcer’s suit color, the Bulbo product being hawked, the monster battled by the superhero in the background), intimating visually and satirically the sameness-despite-differences of much televisual discourse. The panels in this case, as elsewhere in the El Bulbo series, serve as semiotic elements that reference other visual cultural forms (here signifying televisual discourse at work) in addition to their function as framing and sequencing devices.

Although El Bulbo eventually escapes from his contractual obligations with Nasrio (the corporation is bankrupted by the astronomical collateral liabilities resulting from one of the bulb’s battles), in the concluding issue the reader finds El Bulbo consulting with a more financially successful superhero about how to improve his earning power. “How do you do it to be such a successful hero? I’ve been in the biz for a good while and I just can’t seem to get ahead.” (7) Here, the narrative reaches, in an important sense, its logical conclusion in the final episode. Underemployed, and having discovered that his Mexican government paycheck cannot be cashed due to lack of sufficient funds, El Bulbo turns to the private sector model represented by La Cucaracha (The Cockroach), a masked superhero who lives in a mansion with a butler, and conducts his work with the aid of numerous advanced technological gadgets and rigorous physical training, rather than an innate superpower.

The parallels with Batman, who also takes his name from a creature of the night, are unavoidable, and Bachan’s freelance hero appears to exploit the homologies in order to draw out the private sector cultural model implicit in Batman: the public sector is incapable of adequately fighting crime, and requires the assistance of the private entrepreneur. Whereas Batman presents the secret life (and greater crime-fighting efficacy) of the U.S. metropolitan bourgeois Bruce Wayne, La Cucaracha is his peripheral counterpart, a Mexican superhero who has been able to amass his personal wealth and status by seeking more lucrative work on the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico border. In “Gringolandia,” La Cucaracha observes, “they pay in dollars, you know.” Neo-liberal economics have produced a counterpart to the Justice League: “All of us members of the NAFTA League work [in the US] and live here [in Mexico].” (7)

The message vis-à-vis the superhero is clear: one must be employable, no matter what one does — regardless of the moral commitments or claims of a social project or ethical program, a position in the marketplace must be staked out like any street vendor or craftsman, like any product or service. Despite his dramatically and obviously exceptional individual nature, El Bulbo finds himself in a world where, in the final analysis, he is no different than the vast majority of the other 100 million inhabitants of Mexico. The superhero is threatened with unemployment or declining wages … like most any other wageworker in the globalized economy. At the end of the series,
El Bulbo is arrested by “La Migra” (US Immigration authorities) and deported to Mexico. La Cucaracha, it turns out, has a green card.

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Works Cited


