

Comic Purgatory

The shortest story is a picture, or a sentence long. It took humans many thousands of years, till the development of writing, to bring both together. It needed the competition of the cinema to use the sequence of several images (a strip) to make their characters move in hilarious ways that would be impossible in real life—even children (like *The Yellow Kid*) or animals (like *Krazy Kat*). Their characters would defy gravity, accelerate to the speed of light and be destroyed and completely restored in no time.



Krazy Kat by George Herriman (1913-44)

One could have called these strips ‘fantasticals’ or ‘supernaturals’ but as the first successful versions in newspapers worked as distractive cartoons, they were called ‘comics’. This name stuck to the strips, even when they evolved into movies and extended to stories about grim superheroes. In the Western world it took almost a century for more serious strips to become their own genre: the graphic novel.

This was because of another advantage drawn characters had to real actors: they weren’t subject to life’s greatest tragedy, aging then dying. A comic strip could turn into a never-ending series, and its characters could acquire a commercial value exceeding that of famous actors by far. A saga about gods and empires could also go on forever but it’s way easier that the characters and even their settings just don’t change: in each episode of a typical comic series, the protagonists go through tremendous adventures, only to end up in exactly the same circumstances in which they began. They keep the same age, character, skills, friends, family, belongings and hardly remember anything that

happened in the previous episodes. No foreknowledge is necessary; new audiences and illustrators can join the series at any point. Furthermore, comic series comfort with the certainty that whatever great, bad or bizarre thing happens, in the end it won't have any consequences. Life is like a play that after a fixed period of time is set back to zero. When Albert Camus famously declared in 1942 that "one has to imagine Sisyphus as happy,"¹ he likely thought of him as a cartoon character.

¹ *Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus)*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1942

Comics are particularly appealing to small children. Their episodic memory is still evolving and when they actively adopt the world, they tend to do it through the harmless form of playing. To learn as fast as they do, they avoid and are kept safe from harsh consequences. But even for small children, watching comic series is regarded as escapist or regressive. The characters are released from the pressure to learn and take responsibility; they are stuck though happier not knowing. Tales come with a lesson and when playing you are enforced to constantly make and test your own decisions, while in the comic series things happen so fast and outrageously that it does not believe itself. At the end of each episode it undoes all its developments in no time. The comic is a self-dissolving dream in reverse, nourishing the dream of eternal life and return.

Overcoming finiteness in general and mortality in particular has been regarded as the ultimate, unfulfillable human ambition. Religions claim immortality as what defines gods and offer humans passage to their realm in the afterlife. Wars have been fought, discoveries have been made, artefacts have been produced to at least gain memetic immortality. But soon we might reach a point in technological progress where we or our successors could enter a state of personal immortality and overall contingency. Ultimate truth and happiness might take a bit longer or are—as in comics—impossible to reach.

Already today many people expect themselves, their family and their friends to live eighty, ninety pretty healthy years. Early death or invalidity are regarded as avoidable accidents. Aging is delayed or compensated with a large variety of tools and techniques. Risks are cushioned by a multitude of state securities and private insurances. Our subsequent unwillingness to risk our life and end up as a martyr has earned us the label post-heroic. We don't even realise why personal sacrifice would be needed.

Since humans started to gain control over their life expectancy, they also started to move dumping grounds, cemeteries, slums, prisons, and later factories, power plants and server farms outside the city, while sewage and cables go under the earth. Due to recursive technological progress, the world is changing faster and faster, yet people live more and more shielded from the immediate effects and insights of this transformation. In planes and high velocity trains, we are under the impression we hardly move. The intelligent gadgets that guide, entertain and surveil us are handy and cute. The more our society is driven by mechanisms and machinery that are far too complex for us to understand or to interfere with, the more we resemble idle comic characters.

In a largely pre-technological, aristocratic society there are the few who rule and the masses who obey. In a mechanised, bourgeois society there are the few who create or accumulate and there are the masses who are

stuffy and square. In an automatised, comic society there are the few who script the next episode, and there are the masses who try not to lose their part. We legitimise ourselves no longer through authority or merits but through our capability to entertain.

When Neil Postman famously warned in 1984 that we “amuse ourselves to death,” he was observing the transition from a bourgeois to a comic society. Back then the entertainment industry was muting the masses, who were still stuffy and square. In the fully evolved comic society, we’d rather amuse each other to stay alive, like jesters at a court of nothing but jesters.

The aristocratic society disposes of limited wealth that can be fought for. The bourgeois society disposes of potentially unlimited wealth that can be generated through intelligence and labor. In a comic society all basic needs are already fulfilled. Wealth has to be less achieved and multiplied than protected against intrinsic and extrinsic dangers. Not only that we don’t risk our lives, we only fight not to lose them. We would risk too much in following teleological masterplans. It’s not that “our society no longer believes in anything but bare life,” as Giorgio Agamben claims,² but we are so spoiled that only a threat to our bare lives would make us risk any deliberate, fundamental change. We need our possible end as an ecosphere (“Fridays for Future”), a species (“Extinction Rebellion”), a subspecies (“White Genocide”), a culture (“War on Terror”), a nation (“Make America Great Again”) or as individual bodies (“War on the Virus”) in order to gain determination.

² Quoted in *Hannah Arendt Center*, <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/bare-life-and-the-animal-laborans-2020-03-21>. Citing Giorgio Agamben: *Clarifications*. Translated by Adam Kotsko, 17 March 2020. <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>



Extinction Rebellion during London Fashion Week, The Strand, Feb 2020.
Photo: Crispin Hughes and XR.

The collective realisation of an existential threat is accompanied by the appreciation of self-imposed lifesavers. It has always been a way to power: to wait for or to provoke a major crisis to then install oneself as the saviour. But while the saviours of the aristocratic age sought for divine legitimation and those of the bourgeois age for ideological legitimation, the saviours of the comic age are chosen for their sense of urgency. Even when the masses feel safe, they’re already sniffing the next catastrophe. Till it becomes impossible to overlook the disaster, they have to persist as ridiculed sidekicks, then rise up as acclaimed superheroes.



Friday for Futures, Stockholm

Photo: Anders Hellberg.

Courtesy Fridays for Future International

The mission of superheroes is to turn back time but they lack a coherent conservative agenda. Our world is in constant, accelerated change and to be able to undo one major aberration comes with indifference about the rest. It's not that superheroes aren't guided by ideologically coloured mindsets. They might even regard themselves as prophets. But they have to be innocent outsiders in the political realm and not be affiliated with any established party. Acknowledging them as political figures comes as a surprise: the reality TV villain, the bipolar rapper, the innocent Asperger's child, the nerdy scientist, the provincial doctor, or maybe an animal, a river, an algorithm. Even more in times of crisis, we don't want to get bored. To be boring is to be lame.

The mission of superheroes is to put the world back to order—that is to make the episode end where it started. But in real life we don't know about such an exact moment in time: what would actually be an acceptable amount of carbon emissions, pollution, immigrants, humans or infections that we have to get back to? The mission of the superhero stays a bit random and vague, and it rather ends with people losing interest or getting fed up than with clear success. Triggering a sense of urgency is one thing but actually turning the whole world upside down in no time would create a gigantic mess, while turning it upside down in a sustainable way is

both lame and dangerous. Even more so when all that is at stake is getting back to a previous, already not ideal condition. The superhero turns into a Sisyphus who fails to push the stone up the hill in the first place.

From reality TV, US President Donald Trump learned that to keep punch and drive as a superhero he had to bring each episode to a quick end. Not having solved a case properly gives reliable material for new trouble, that is, the opportunity to start a new episode and forget about the previous one. Even his enemies couldn't help it—everybody was part of his show. Greta Thunberg acted as his exact inversion: young versus old; female versus male; small versus tall; innocent versus guilty; true versus fake; steady versus flighty; serious versus clownish. Trump was the Joker, and she was not Batwoman but the Anti-Joker.

In the aristocratic saga and bourgeois bildungsroman, you have to keep in mind the whole narrative to fully grasp them. A cartoon practices tactical amnesia. A saga or bildungsroman is trying to make you believe in its plausibility, however unlikely it might appear. A comic is deliberately unbelievable. The negation of the glory of the saga is the tragedy, the negation of the rationality of the bildungsroman is absurdity. Both can be perceived for the sake of nihilism or cathartic edification. A comic is an enormous accumulation of tragic and absurd moments, only to zero them out. In real life, the more superheroes overstretch what is usually acceptable behaviour, the more they bullshit or dramatise, the more they are reassuring people in the belief that in the end, everything will stay the same.

The fact that the comic has become the leading social paradigm doesn't mean that people are done with progress. Quantitatively speaking, saga and bildungsroman are still the dominant cultural narratives—including interactive formats like role play or video game. But saga and bildungsroman are too stringent and clear (even in being erratic and mysterious) to feel real. The moment our life fulfills the criteria of being a remarkable story, we are under the impression that it rather complies with a novel, a film or a game.

Saga and bildungsroman deliver a definite scenario of what happens. This is not how we perceive life. We can interpret our past in ever new ways, and when it comes to the future, the facts are not a given. Stories help us to understand how things might develop or might have developed over a period of time but we never know for sure. Games allow to choose between different scenarios but only within certain fixed parameters. Our lives and societies are too complex to be contained in such vessels. In times of crisis we realise that the uncertainty about the results of our actions is so high that even several parallel scenarios are insufficient to cover the entire realm of possibilities. But the longer we remain undecided about what to do, the likelier it is that we'll regret what we finally came up with. Time will be lost and we will realise what it will cost us. It would have been better to follow our first intuition or throw the dice.

Even in fiction, a good story can't be completely planned. You have to let it go and adapt. Even more so in real life: You have to allow your story to be freed from you. You have to let it write itself. When you realise that you yourself don't fit into it anymore, you have give up on it and switch to another. And when there is no more satisfiable story left for you, then it's time to die. In this case it's advisable to have one, or several, grand finales in petto.

Our risk aversion and post-heroism depends on our ignoring the fact that we will die, and that it's not up to us to wait for fate to come but to decide when and how. The state offers palliative care, in some countries even euthanasia, and our heirs profit from life insurance. But when we choose to die—not in the immediate process of dying—we are left on our own. More and more, countries are offering legal procedures for divorce, deselection, and abortion, but they all hesitate to offer general assisted dying—often even declaring it illegal. Life insurance loses its validity in the case of a suicide.

The plea to end up being spoiled by the fake reality of a never-ending comic series and to become again more risk-taking is for nothing. There is no voluntary way back to less safety. Rather, we have to include our deaths into our preparations. As we instinctively resist dying, we have to trick ourselves with options for not just a pain-free but ecstatic euthanasia. Our suicide could be framed by outlandish festivities before and after our death. We could pre-book a surprise bag of manifold actions. Our heirs could profit from a special life insurance that is only issued in the case that we kill ourselves. Should we lack the financial means, we could reach mutual agreements to service each other.

It's not realistic to live every day or every year as if it were our last—only if it *might* be our last. Not just in the sense of a danger but as an option. The possibility to kill oneself is mankind's ultimate freedom—accessible even under the most devastating circumstances. Death is the joker that is always at hand. We only have one but if we don't use it, we'll eventually lose it to a “natural” death that medical progress might turn into a long-lasting procedure. Waiting till all treatment eventually fails is hardly affordable and little fun. Even if we manage to stop aging, the fear that we would eventually die would torment us. To choose death is a modern necessity. It's only a matter of when and how.

Saga and bildungsroman describe how people succeed or fail in unfolding their potentials. But our own story only ends with our death. The one image or sentence that an intelligent life evolves from is how we would like to die—not as a pious hope but as a substantial undertaking. From there we can imagine our future backwards. Everything that we do has to be legitimised as leading toward that death and as better than dying already—for us, the society, and the environment.

To follow this inverse storyline and leave comic purgatory, we have to drill ourselves to make dying part of our daily lives. Things have already started to change with many young people engaging in voluntary palliative care. In a next step, we have to also assist in voluntary euthanasia. People who are dying or committing suicide could invite the public, as German artist Gregor Schneider envisioned for his *Death Room*.³ The setting could be a minimalist, sober white cube—or a seductive circus of death.

³ Sterberaum, 2011. Kunstraum Innsbruck, Innsbruck