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Comic art as medicine Calvin and Hobbes and the subjective nature of reality

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COMIC ART AS MEDICINE
CALVIN AND HOBBS AND THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF REALITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Greg Beda

December 1996

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ABSTRACT

COMIC ART AS MEDICINE: CALVIN AND HOBBS AND THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF REALITY

by Greg Beda

Comic Art is a miniaturization of the world in form, encompassing both inner and outer realities--a container for the world images that *make up* our "social construction of reality." Comic Art is also a process, a participatory experience, a context. Indeed, Comic Art can be looked at, and studied, in a variety of contexts--as Entertainment, as Social Commentary, and as Medicine. Comic Art as Medicine, which both includes and transcends its predecessors, is a potent antidote for our one-sided, secular "social reality." This thesis will show that Comic Art as Medicine, through the use of paradox and imagination, is a poetic elixir, offering us insight into how the mass media creates reality and how each of us can, if we are willing, create a multifaceted world view that honors the rational and its oft neglected siblings, the pre-rational and the trans-rational.

DEDICATION

This non-linear thesis/rudimentary "book"--and the author it has attached itself to--wish to acknowledge Gabriele Rico, our thesis advisor, for introducing us to the Creative Process, listening to our endless chatter (and off-the-map "mind-leaps"!), and for being an inquisitive and caring mentor, above and beyond the call of duty. Thank you for sharing my vision!

I also dedicate this work to everyone who is curious about Comic Art Studies and the future of transpersonal inquiry.

Questions? Comments? You can E-Mail me (GregBeda@anxst.com) or write me (**Re-Imagining Comic Art**, P.O. Box 610154, Redwood City, CA 94061). If you want to see examples of my own cartoons, visit the **Postmodern AnXst World Wide Web** (<http://www.anxst.com/postmodern>). ThanXst!

True humor is, indeed, laughter at one's Self--the Divine Comedy, the fabulous deception.... --Alan Watts (156).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Comic Art: A Product of Modernism

Many cartoonists consider strips a commercial product and are therefore able to justify turning the strip into factory work, hiring a team of writers and illustrators to crank out whatever the public will consume. That kind of cartooning holds no appeal to me.

--Bill Watterson (Nordling 114).

*May I draw mustaches on all the superheroes?
--Hobbes to a 'fake' Calvin while the 'real' Calvin, locked out of the house, escalates into anger (Watterson, Scientific 106).*

Comic Art is a "product" of modernism: its parents, we might say, were the industrial revolution and the frenzied consumerism that followed. Comic Art, society tells us, is a commercial commodity, with little, or no, literary or poetic value. Comic strips, history tells us, became popular at the turn of the century because they appealed to "common folk" (immigrants, laborers, children) and, subsequently, helped sell newspapers. Put simply, comics caught on because of economic reasons, not because of artistic merit. Comic books, too, were quite an enterprising novelty when they first appeared in the 1930's; and today they are frequently viewed as "collectibles," and seldom as "works of art."

Unfortunately, Comic Art has been linked as a consumer good, created solely for entertainment purposes, ever since.

Even the late Alan Watts, in The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are, had bleak views of Comic Art: "our culture produces very few magical objects.... Children's books are written by serious ladies with three names and no imagination, and as for comics, have you ever looked at the furniture in Dagwood's home?" (114).

Comics are shallow, not deep. What an unlucky fate bestowed on such a spirited and fruitful medium.

Can we alter the course of Comic Art in midstream and see the future in a new light? Yes, but we must first recognize that our individual views of Comic Art are largely a result of group consensus. If our culture signifies comics as a popular and commercial entertainment medium, with no deeper significance, we, too, are likely to share this belief. "Common sense" tells us that Comic Art is not a *legitimate* art form, right? Indeed, until recently Comic Art has been greatly neglected and ignored in academic circles. "Comics" and "Art" appear to live on two opposite sides of the globe, miles and miles apart; or they appear as

parallel lines, never meant to cross over. And when a comic--like Calvin and Hobbes, for example--does reach worldwide acclaim as both a funny comic strip and a poetic work of Art, it is deemed as almost an anomaly.

What is the difference between fine art and commercial art? In the Calvin and Hobbes strip that follows, our two principle characters explore this distinction. Calvin, our six-year-old protagonist/antagonist, and Hobbes, his toy tiger/imaginary companion, are playing with clay. "Fine art is dead, Hobbes," announces Calvin, "Nobody understands it. Nobody likes it. Nobody sees it. It's irrelevant in today's culture." Calvin continues: "See, the problem with fine art is that it's supposed to express original truths. But who likes originality and truth?! Nobody! Life's hard enough without it! Only an idiot would **pay** for it!" Calvin prefers "mass market commercial art": "But **popular** art knows the customer is always right! People want **more** of what they already **know** they like, so popular art gives it to 'em!" Hobbes creates a clay tiger; Calvin, shrunken heads of popular cartoon characters (Watterson, Days 98-100).

In another strip, Calvin complains to Hobbes: "Mom doesn't understand comic books. She doesn't realize that comic books deal with serious issues of the day. Today's superheroes face tough moral dilemmas. Comic books aren't

just escapist fantasy. They're sophisticated social critiques." "Is Amazon Girl's super power the ability to squeeze that figure into that suit?" Hobbes asks. "Nah, they all can do that," Calvin replies (Watterson, Days 115).

Calvin and Hobbes manifests the genius of creator Bill Watterson, and exemplifies the poetic richness of Comic Art. Calvin and Hobbes stands out because of its own intrinsic beauty, insight, and wit--and also because most comic strips look so *pale* and *flat* in comparison. Indeed, most comics appear lifeless, trite, devoid of pensive humor, and are even quite ugly. And yet they are apparently "popular"--whatever *that* means--and are thus "profitable." This superficial view of Comic Art as a commercial good makes sense in the world of big business, but limits the growth of an exciting, blossoming art form. Yes, it appears that the current state of Comic Art is a complacent, mediocre muddle--even within the cartooning community itself. Indeed, most aspiring cartoonists, as well as many professionals, view Comic Art as a commercial product and not as a place for genuine self-expression. And if we break convention and say "Comic Art deserves a department of study in universities around the world!" people are liable to call us mad! Alas...

My goal, or intention, is to create a clearing through which we may see Comic Art as a poetic expression of the creative process, rather than as simply a "bastard art form," a commercial commodity or, at best, a cultural artifact.

There is *more* to Comic Art than meets the eye. The evolution of Comic Art is an unfolding "work-in-process" that is, in my opinion, on the threshold of breaking out of its commercial womb and entering into the world of serious intelligent expression. Comic Art needs to mature, ripen, and "grow up." Comic Art needs to be taken just as seriously as any other American art form--as a vehicle for truth, beauty, inquisitiveness, and depth--in addition to its current status as popular entertainment. In other words, our individual and collective ideas about Comic Art will need to enlarge and expand. As Bill Watterson notes about his own creative process:

Behind the jokes, I try to talk about life in a serious way. I don't think of cartooning as just entertainment. It's a rare privilege to be able to talk to hundreds of millions of people on a given day, and I don't want to squander that privilege on mindless chatter. There is an opportunity here to talk about real issues of life with sensitivity, warmth and humor. This is where the greater significance of the comic strip lies.
(Nordling 114)

This thesis will be using the term Comic Art in its original sense: as Art that is also comical or funny. *Comic Art* implies humor. This definition, however, does not eliminate the application of my thesis to "serious" subject matter. Indeed, as we pierce through the cultural armor placed on comics, we will discover that Comic Art is definitely not limited to just *humor*. Irony, often the basis of so-called *serious Comic Art*, is closely tied to the comic--both emanate from paradox. "As good comedians know, humor is the art of capitalizing on life's sorrows," writes Gabriele Rico in Pain and Possibility (226). Perhaps the silly and the serious are not too far apart! "Laughter and tears are intimate partners," notes Rico, "At some moments we laugh until we cry; at others we cry until we laugh. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between them" (202).

In addition, this thesis will be studying Calvin and Hobbes from the perspective of its characters, without any reference to the life of the creator. Bill Watterson's personal life or "inner depths" do not interest me, nor do they merit speculation. To try to "understand" the imagination of Mr. Watterson does not honor him nor his work. Rather, we will be exploring the world of imagination that lives inside us, as audience, as a response to his work. Images, dialogue, and culture--this is what interests

us here. Indeed, rather than trying to assess Mr. Watterson's creative process, a better quest/question for us is: How does Calvin and Hobbes resonate within my own imagination? How does Calvin construct and deconstruct reality? How can I transform my experience of being-in-the-world?

This thesis will explore the latent potential of Comic Art, a cherished and yet undervalued American art form. Comic Art will be studied as an entertainment medium and as a vehicle for social commentary, as well as a context within the mind of the reader, providing much needed nourishment for the soul. The construction of Comic Art that emerges from these pages is poetic, intelligent, and magical, an art form inherently more valuable to the human psyche--and our shared humanity--than we've ever imagined.

Shifting Context: Comic Art As A Process

When the mind is stuck in a particular context, it may appear that limitations are built into that situation. Limitation is actually a function of context and the appropriate change of context makes what had appeared to be limitations become something else.... There is no context that a person would wisely choose to be stuck in all the time; the ability to shift contexts freely is highly desirable.

--Jim Leonard and Phil Laut (2-3).

As my artist's statement explains, my work is utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance.

--Calvin to Hobbes (Watterson, Magical 68).

Comic Art is more than simply a "product" of modernism--Comic Art is also a PROCESS, a participatory experience that implies movement, action, vitality, a flow of energy. Comic Art is fluid, not stagnant. Comic Art, in its usual context as a noun, is a "thing," a "commodity," a one-dimensional "object," something to read and look at. We do not often think of comics as a *living presence*. Comic Art as a *process*, however, implies participation. We do not simply view passive pictures and read static words on paper: we transform what we see into spirited images and vibrant prose *in our imagination*. The operative word here is "imagination." If these words have any impact at all, they will invoke and resonate within the imagination of the reader. Indeed, the "inner world" of imagination, and the expansion thereof, is the underlying theme of this work. Our exploration of Comic Art, when all is said and done, reveals more about the human psyche, the "unknowable" world of *fantasy as reality*, than it does about the various disciplines we'll be drawing from. Communication Studies, Art, English, Psychology, and Sociology give us subsistence; imagination, a foundation.

When we hold Comic Art in general, and Calvin and Hobbes in particular, in the realm of imagination, we discover a vibrant world of latent potential, a future rich in possibility, rather than simply a mediocre "flatland" of entertaining words and pictures. We will discover--or, perhaps, re-discover?--a unique and timely/timeless American art form, the future of which greatly depends upon our ability to *re-imagine Comic Art...*

Comic Art, I maintain, can be held in a variety of contexts. Comic Art is not just an art form--Comic Art is also an experience. Put differently, Comic Art is both content, or *what* we see, and a context, or *how* we see. Comic Art is deemed useful or useless, artistic or banal, richly complex or stereotypically simple based upon the way we perceive it. We can view comics as an entertainment medium; that is one way of seeing. Or, if we expand our imagination even further, we can say that comics are a cogent podium, disguised as entertainment, for social commentary. And yet if we unfold our imagination even more, we will see that Comic Art can be viewed as both "entertainment," "social commentary," and--here's the twist--as "medicine."

Comic Art as *medicine*? Medicine for what? Well, perhaps Comic Art is medicine for a nihilistic world view, our current social malaise which the mass media, along with "Corporate America," continually perpetuates and profits from. Comic Art as Medicine honors the inner world of imagination and is thus a potent antidote for a secular, materialistic, and linear world image. Indeed, Comic Art as Medicine is a poetic elixir, an enchanting remedy to the seriousness and pretentiousness of everyday life.

Of course, our perception of Comic Art is always subjective; if we have a negative view of comics, for example, they might appear trite and lifeless. My argument, however, will leave little room for doubt: Comic Art as Medicine is the wave of the, as yet *undetermined*, future. Comic Art as Medicine sets the stage for what is not only *possible*, but what is also, in my opinion, most *desireable*: Comic Art as Medicine enfolds and invokes more and more

imagination than its predecessors. Subsequently, Comic Art as Entertainment, Comic Art as Social Commentary, and Comic Art as Medicine cannot be viewed as "separate" categories. Our conventional state of mind, however, might see these three points of view in opposition, with the later "superior" to the former. But actually we are not dealing with opposing points of view; as such, Comic Art as Medicine is not "better" than Comic Art as Social Commentary. Our three theoretical constructs are not linear, abstract, or autonomous ideas floating in space. Rather, each vantage point gives us a different perspective. Each perspective is *separate but related*: Comic Art as Social Commentary transcends and includes Comic Art as Entertainment, and Comic Art as Medicine both transcends and includes its two predecessors.

In other words, Comic Art as Medicine embraces Comic Art as Social Commentary and Comic Art as Entertainment. In order to understand this in a non-linear way, let's construct a mental image. Imagine, if you will, three concentric circles: the largest circle, Comic Art as Medicine, encompasses the middle circle, Comic Art as Social Commentary, which in turn encompasses Comic Art as Entertainment. Each circle, beginning with Comic Art as Entertainment, expands exponentially, unfolding more and more imagination than its predecessors. Each successive layer, in other words, adds more and more *depth* and *healing potential* into our view of Comic Art. In short, Comic Art as Medicine might best be described as a *deep context*, encompassing images and stories which speak both the outer language of culture and the inner language of imagination.

Calvin and Hobbes and the "Subjective Nature of Reality"

The moment we say something is "what happened" we're announcing, "This is the myth I no longer see as a myth. This is the myth that I can't see through." "That's not a myth, that's what happened" suggests that myths are the things we don't believe and are in the middle of, we call them "fact," "reality," "science."
--James Hillman (17-18).

It's not denial. I'm just very selective about the reality I accept.
--Calvin to Hobbes, after announcing that he's 'pretty sure' his homework assignment was 'optional' (Watterson, Days 147).

Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. But what about "reality"? If we want to break out of, or break through, our conventional way of thinking about Comic Art as little more than a commercial commodity, the first thing we need to do is take a closer look at our conventional way of viewing reality. We will need to examine the myths surrounding Comic Art and, in the process, we will discover the assumptions that underlie our entire culture and even--ahem!--our own world image. Yes, we will have to pierce through that vague, abstract, *subjective* word/world--REALITY--and glimpse what's inside. The "subjective nature of reality" beckons...

"Why are you digging a hole," asks Hobbes. "I'm looking for buried treasure," replies Calvin. "What have you found?" Hobbes asks. "A few dirty rocks, a weird root,

and some disgusting grubs," Calvin says. "On your first try?" Hobbes asks. "There's treasure everywhere!" Calvin beams (Watterson, Treasure 3). But what did Calvin actually find: "junk" or "treasure"?

We often think there is "one reality," and that that reality is the same for everyone. Reality, we have been taught, is "objective" and lives "out there." That's common sense, right? That's the way the empirical sciences view reality, isn't it? And that's what we were taught in school, right? Reality, however, comes in many different flavors, as this thesis will demonstrate. Calvin, for example, often hears voices talking to him from underneath his bed. Are these monsters "real" or "imaginary"? Well, they are real to Calvin!

And is Hobbes, Calvin's "animated" toy tiger, simply a figment of Calvin's imagination? Watterson explains:

Calvin sees Hobbes one way, and everyone else sees Hobbes another way. I show two versions of reality, and each makes complete sense to the participant who sees it. I think that's how life works. None of us sees the world in exactly the same way, and I just draw that literally in the strip. Hobbes is more about the subjective nature of reality than about dolls coming to life.
(Tenth 22; italics added)

"You know what I've noticed, Hobbes? Things don't bug you if you don't think about them," Calvin tells his companion, "So from now on, I simply won't think about anything I don't like, and I'll be happy all the time!" "Don't you think that's a pretty silly and irresponsible way to live?" Hobbes asks. "What a pretty afternoon," Calvin says (Watterson, Attack 124). Reality, as a mental construct or subjective experience, is indeed very selective about what is *important* to think about and what is not *important* to think about, as the above example illustrates.

Calvin and Hobbes can teach us a lot about the subjective nature of reality, as well as the potential genius of Comic Art. Calvin and Miss Wormwood, his teacher, for example, each have radically different and conflicting "constructions of reality"--and therein lies humor. Here's an example: Calvin, sitting at his desk at school, yells "This is a big, fat waste of my time!" in the third panel. In the next and final panel, our hero is shown rushing from the classroom, with his teacher's hands reaching after him: "Hellpp! It's the thought police!" Calvin yells (Watterson, Homicidal 128). Calvin perceives school as a place to daydream and goof off; Miss Wormwood views school as place for learning and obedience. Who is right? Well, they both are if we accept each of their premises, or constructs, as *is*.

Understanding the *subjective nature of reality* is both good news and bad news. First, the BAD NEWS: "reality," as we know it--the underlying beliefs, laws, customs, morals, social institutions, etc. that *make up culture*--is a fiction, a construct, a myth, a story we tell about the way life is. "Truth," "justice," and the "American Way" are all human-made inventions, fabrications, vital lies, and, increasingly, "consumer goods." We might think we are living in a "democracy" and that we all have "free-will," but, actually, our free-will is deeply, and *implicitly*, embedded into the culture we live in, the culture we've internalized into our very being. Tradition and patriotism are simply myths we forget we created. Our "opinions" might appear to be direct communications from an autonomous inner self, but actually our opinions, no matter how unique and personal they may seem, are largely a reflection of group convention. And, yes, even those opinions that appear to be the "opposite" of society-at-large are still largely derivative of the same underlying social structure; rebellion might wear a different mask, but it has the same face. When all is said and done, "capitalism" is just a word, American currency means nothing to an aborigine, and cats do not know what day of the week it is.

Oh, yes--the GOOD NEWS about reality construction: once we have the proper tools, we can create the reality we want! In reading this thesis, for example, you will learn how to recognize and transform your world image.

"Reality," as defined in this thesis, is subjective. Reality is a "mental construct," or "image," about the way the world is, a belief that we've forgotten is a belief. Reality is not something that lives "out there"; there is no "real world." We do not suddenly "grow up," develop a "world view," and become an "adult," and then wipe our hands clean from learning. No, we don't "fall into" reality; rather, we create reality and keep creating reality *through fantasy* everyday. More often than not, however, we forget this and become victims not of the world, but of our own world image. Fortunately, our construction of reality is fluid, plastic, malleable. Reality, as such, is more like a flowing vapor, and is never a static truth. With the right tools, we can learn how to transform reality.

The way we *describe* reality using language has a direct correlation with the way we *experience* reality. No two people see reality in EXACTLY the same way--and if they did, how could we prove it? Our different points of view, our opposing world images--ah, these make life quite, um, what's the word? ...*interesting*. Calvin's mother tells him

they are having "fish" for dinner. **"Knife welding mother hacks ichthyoid! Grim melee is evening ritual! Suburban family devours victim!"** Calvin exclaims while creating a newspaper to report "household events" (Watterson, Scientific 46).

Everything we see, feel, and do can be held in different contexts; that is the subjective nature of reality. Some people might find the above strip highly amusing; other people may not. A six-year-old and a 60 year old will have radically different opinions! The strip is content; the way we view it is context. How we view content makes all the difference in the world, as Leonard and Laut explain:

When you look at an object, you can only see one side of it at a time; that is the nature of vision. In exactly the same way, when you think about something, you can only think about it in one context at a time; that is the nature of thought. Context determines what your mind thinks just as surely as viewing-angle determines what your eyes sees. (1)

The same joke, for example, can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In like fashion, we all have our own unique way of seeing the World: a doctor, a lawyer, a cartoonist, a Communication Studies Professor, a scientist, a poet, a baby, an inner city youth, a member of a Satanic cult, a priest, a brain-injured policeman, an adult with

Down Syndrome--they all have their own distinctive world image or construction of reality. Understanding the process through which we create reality is experiential, not analytical, requiring us to question the subjective nature of "intelligence." Indeed, the transformation of our world image requires an inquiry and reassessment of what constitutes a well-rounded education. In sum, we need to create a world view that is far more flexible and expansive than is currently the norm. Each of us must be willing to see ourselves with fresh eyes and view reality in a new light. As R. D. Laing points out: "One can see the same facts differently. One can construe them differently. I believe that to give serious consideration to the issues that arise from seeing the same differently itself contributes to lessening some of the fear, pain, madness and folly in the world" (x).

My thesis statement:

Comic Art is a miniaturization of the world in form, encompassing both inner and outer realities--a container for the world images that make up our "social construction of reality." Comic Art is also a process, a participatory experience, a context. Indeed, Comic Art can be looked at, and studied, in a variety of ways: as entertainment, as social commentary, and as medicine. Comic Art as Medicine, which includes and transcends its predecessors, is a potent antidote for our one-dimensional secular "social reality." This thesis will show that Comic Art as Medicine, through the use of paradox and imagination, is a poetic elixir, offering us insight into how the mass media creates reality and how each of us can, if

we are willing, create a multi-faceted world view that honors the rational and its oft neglected siblings, the pre-rational and the trans-rational.

We will be studying Calvin and Hobbes in order to understand how reality "works." Calvin and Hobbes, like nearly all Comic Art, is a miniaturization of the world in form, encompassing both inner and outer realities. Calvin and Hobbes, an innocuous and seemingly harmless humorous respite from everyday life, is also a container for the "social construction of reality." Indeed, Calvin, our hero and protagonist/antagonist, can teach us a lot about the intrapersonal and the interpersonal dimensions of reality: by observing Calvin, we will learn the principles of reality construction. And, most importantly, we will learn how reality can be transformed.

Reality comes in various hues and frequencies, and is not at all monotone. Change is the essence of reality, and our relationship with change impacts every facet of our life. And if we think we "know" the ultimate reality? Well, perhaps there are monsters living under our beds!

Calvin often uses "fantasy" to escape "reality." How odd... "fantasy/reality" are actually two sides of the same coin!

A *problem* for our hero, a *paradox* for us.

Enjoy the journey!

CHAPTER 2

COMIC ART AS A MINIATURIZATION OF THE WORLD IN FORM

World Image: Reality as a Personal Construct

The environment as we perceive it is our own invention.

--Heinz von Foerster (Watzlawick, ed. 42).

My dreams are getting way too literal.

--Calvin, upon waking from a series of images depicting his 'morning routine' (Watterson, Yukon 89).

Let's begin with a key premise: Reality is made, not found.

In The Book On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are, Alan Watts uses a wiggle as an analogy for the World. He then places a net (or grid) on top of the wiggle. The net divides the wiggle into pieces, or squares. The net might be described as a construction of reality. But the net--or construction of reality--"is always an image," writes Watts, "However much we divide, count, sort, classify this wiggling into particular things and events, this is no more than a way of thinking about the world: it is never actually divided" (Watts 59-60).

"Reality," as a personal construct or subjective process, might be called a "world view," or, for the purposes of this thesis, a WORLD IMAGE. A world image does not exist in isolation; rather, a world image is deeply embedded in group consensus. The criteria for whether a world image is functional or dysfunctional is the degree to which it "fits" the social system from which it came. Calvin's world image is firmly planted in the social world but is often, as will see, at odds with the world images of those around him.

A world image is a context, or frame of orientation, learned through socialization. Socialization is the process of becoming indoctrinated within one's culture. We learn how to talk, for example, by hearing our parents talk. As Eric Fromm notes, "Man needs a map of his natural and social world, without which he would be confused and unable to act purposely and consistently" (Monte 440). Our world image tells us what is important and filters out what is not important. In other words, our morals and values emanate from our world images. An open world image creates flexibility and a closed world image invites rigidity. Quite often, however, people forget that their world image is an invention, a creation of their own mind, and is not simply "a priori." "There is something people routinely do after they have created a ritual, a belief, a myth, a social

role or a law: They forget they created it, and live in a world they never knew they made" (Anderson, ed. 36).

A world image, as we will see, is never complete; rather, who we *think* we are is permeable, a work in progress, an expression of the creative process.

Social Reality: Reality as a Social Construct

You can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements.

--Norman Douglas (Frank 130).

Why would it be worth four dollars a minute to talk to goofy ladies who wear underwear on TV commercials?

--Calvin (Watterson, Days 104).

"Reality," as a construction of group consensus, or agreement, might be called "consensus reality," "agreement reality," or, for the purposes of this thesis, SOCIAL REALITY. "Social reality" lives inside the various "social institutions" that teach socialization: the family, the school system, the government, and, increasingly, the mass media, as well as the objective products, or artifacts, thereof. These "products of culture" are created in order to dispense information (i.e. school texts, newspapers, magazines) or entertain (i.e., film, Comic Art, TV). Put differently, social reality lives inside the world images of

the people who make up society, as well as inside the products, services, and institutions they produce and endorse.

Language is the foundation of social reality. But, as Kenneth Gergen notes: "words are not mirror like reflections of reality, but expressions of group convention" (119). Thus, a simple opinion like "technology equals progress," when shared by millions of people, ceases to be an "opinion" and appears to be the "truth." In other words, social reality, as expressed through the mass media, teaches us what is true and what is not-true. In one strip, Calvin decides to believe in astrology and horoscopes: "The newspaper couldn't print it if weren't true!" he tells Hobbes (Watterson, Days 60).

Social reality also teaches us what is *important* and what is *not important*, as the following strip illustrates:

Calvin: It's hard to know what's important in life.

Calvin: We don't notice the small stuff and we're never prepared for the big stuff.

Hobbes: What about the stuff in between?

Calvin: That stuff's boring.

Hobbes: Let's hope bumblng along without a clue is important.

Calvin: According to the ads, fresh breath and dry armpits are crucial. (Watterson, Treasure 172)

In another strip, Calvin asks Hobbes: "What do you think is the meaning of true happiness? Is it money, cars and women? ...or is it just money and cars? Well-1-1-1?" (Watterson, Yukon 102).

Social reality teaches people how to "fit in" and be "happy." Calvin is very selective about the "reality" he accepts and, although he is not very fond of the restrictions social reality imposes on him, he does tend to embrace it wholeheartedly nonetheless. "I'm home! I'm free! The rest of the day is mine!" Calvin exclaims, running excitedly from the school bus. "Finally, some time to myself! Liberty, precious liberty! Ha ha ha!" he yells, heading towards the front door of his house. In the last panel, Calvin is shown sitting in front of the TV, dazed and half-asleep (Watterson, Homicidal 22).

MASS MEDIA: The "Reality" Maker

Everyone is Entitled to My Opinion

--David Brinkley, TV newscaster (book title).

Shock and titillate me! I've got money!

--Calvin shouting at the TV (Watterson, Magical 74).

"What is truth? For the multitude, that which it continually reads and hears.... What the Press wills, is

true. Its commanders evoke, transform, interchange truths. Three weeks of press-work, and the 'truth' is acknowledged by everybody," writes Oswald Spengler (Frank 104). "Oh, great altar of passive entertainment.... Bestow upon me thy discordant images at such speed as to render linear thought impossible!" Calvin bows to the TV (Watterson, Attack 49). Calvin, as this example illustrates, is quite mesmerized by the social reality created by the media. Like Calvin, we are all living in the "information age," or at least that's what the proprietors of information keep telling us.

The purpose of the news is to "inform"; the purpose of entertainment is to "entertain." But increasingly, the distinction between the news media and the entertainment industry is becoming blurred. Technology, and the birth of electronic communication, has transformed the way we educate, inform, and entertain ourselves. MASS MEDIA, the marriage between "information that entertains" and "entertainment that informs," dominates nearly every facet of our lives. The mass media is a school system of sorts, is it not?

What is "entertaining" and what is "educational" appears to be *anything* that captures our attention: CNN, the latest Budweiser commercial with those *annoying*, er, I mean, *amusing* frogs, a virtual reality "Flight Simulator,"

the latest murder trial, an amusement park, "America's Funniest Home Videos," campy grade-B horror flicks, multimedia magazines, baseball cards, "infomercials," violent video games, the latest "action figure" (if you're a boy) or "doll" (if you're a girl), a camping trip, cybersex, old time radio, "Cops," and, yes, even politics.

The buzzword for the 90s might be INFOTAINMENT, the hybrid, or secular wedding, of information and entertainment. We cannot escape the "Infotainment Age": newspapers, magazines, comic books, popular fiction and non-fiction, network/cable/satellite TV, film, popular music, CD-ROMs, and the World Wide Web all serve to both educate and entertain. All information *implicitly* has entertainment value, and all entertainment *implicitly* conveys information. In other words, our values--both individual and collective--are transmitted through the airways and the printing press. But what are our values?

"The dominant message found in all the corporate ads is BUY, BUY, BUY. The collective impact of this message has had its effects over the past fifty years of intimately linking our most basic needs to consumer items and channeling all our energies into the marketplace" (Altschuler and Regush 31). In one sequence, Calvin and his parents tour a Natural History Museum. At the end of their

visit, Calvin tries to talk his mother into buying him some "dinosaur stuff" from the gift shop: "But mom, it's all **educational!** You want me to **learn**, don't you??" In the next panel, Calvin has a dinosaur hat, a dinosaur T-Shirt, etc. "Boy, she fell for **that** one," Hobbes comments. "I'll say!" Calvin beams, "I wonder if we could get any Batman stuff this way" (Watterson, Revenge 112).

The basis of all entertainment and information is our innate need to buy consumer goods--oops!, I mean COMMUNICATE. Communication lives "midway" between one person and another: underlying every communication, or "intentional exchange of data," as it might be called, is the world image of the sender and the world image of the receiver. E-mail, Fax machines, pagers, and cellular phones have radically increased the number of ways that we can send messages to each other--but has technology helped us learn how to communicate more effectively?

Communication can be harmonious bridge or an unfathomable chasm. Of course, what is interesting to one person may not be interesting to another: "When I spit, I get pretty good saliva cohesion, but I'm still not getting much distance or accuracy," Calvin tells Hobbes, "I think the problem lies in the mix of phlegm. If you don't get that critical mucus mass, you just..." Calvin discovers

Hobbes has left: "Nobody likes to hear about a hobby," Calvin shrugs (Watterson, Homicidal 134).

The mass media are perpetually sending out "messages" (or "social reality," for our purposes here) which, when digested in large quantity, help each of us shape our world image. These "media-generated" world images, in turn, create mass media, ad nauseam. A vicious cycle indeed! But electronic communication is largely a one way street, with the mass media sending out messages and we, the consumer, receiving them. And if we do use the media as a forum to expound our beliefs and values, we often forget that our world image--largely an "internalization" of social reality--is simply a variation on, or reaction to, the very same social construction of reality that created it!

The evening news, for example, creates "reality" everyday. In one strip, Calvin's Dad hears the TV proclaim:

Next, on eyewitness action news: blood-spattered sidewalks and shroud covered bodies! Could the next victim be **you**?? We'll get the story from the living rooms of sobbing, hysterical relatives and we'll tell you why **you** should be paralyzed with helpless fear! That's eyewitness action news! It's what **you** need to **know**! (Watterson, Treasure 135)

In the last panel, Calvin's Dad is shown reading the paper--the TV screen is black (Watterson, Treasure 135). "News is a business, but it is also a public trust," comments Dan

Rather, anchor of the CBS Evening News (Frank 102). A burning irony!? Or a simple statement of "truth"?!

Jerry Mandler, in his book In the Absence of the Sacred, writes about the dangers of technology on our senses:

With each new generation of technology, and with each stage of technological expansion into pristine environments, human beings have fewer alternatives and become more deeply immersed within technological consciousness. We have a harder time seeing our way out. Living constantly inside an environment of our own invention, reacting solely to things we ourselves created, we are essentially living *inside our own minds*. (32)

The electronic media creates a "conceptual experience" of reality. Often, instead of living in the present moment, Calvin wants "reality" to be "different," or, preferably, "better," than it actually is. Calvin's experience of being-in-the-world is constantly *superimposed* with illusions created by the media: "so much of our self-image is intimately related to corporate images of happiness" (Altschuler and Regush 30). More often than not, Calvin chooses a media-induced stupor over the hum-drum of everyday life. "Oh greatest of the mass media, thank you for elevating emotion, reducing thought, and stifling imagination," Calvin solemnly tells the TV, "Thank you for the artificiality of quick solutions and for the insidious

manipulation of human desires for commercial purposes." Calvin bows, eyes closed: "This bowl of lukewarm tapioca represents my brain. I offer it in humble sacrifice. Bestow thy flickering light forever." In the last panel, Calvin is gone, and we find his Mom, half-awake, noticing that the TV is on: "?" (Watterson, Days 125).

As the above strip illustrates, Calvin watches TV religiously--er, regularly--and often compares his life to the life he sees conceptualized on the screen. "Look, Hobbes, this world is kind of like TV," Calvin comments, with a black tree trunk in the background and a few leaves overhead, "A casual observer might even confuse the two. But if you notice, here the colors are less intense and the people are uglier. Also, I see that several minutes can go by without a single car chase, explosion, murder or pat personal exchange." In the last panel, our hero is sitting in a recliner, pointing to something (a TV?) off-panel. Hobbes: "Why settle for less, hmm?" Calvin: "Shh, this is my favorite deodorant commercial" (Watterson, Homicidal 120).

"These television programs sure are rotten," Calvin comments in one strip; and, in another: "I think life should be more like TV" (Watterson, Revenge 33; 89). Calvin's monologue from the latter gives us further insight into how

his *world image* is largely an internalization of the *social reality* created by television:

I think all of life's problems ought to be solved in 30 minutes with simple homilies, don't you? I think weight and oral hygiene ought to be our biggest concerns. I think we should all have powerful, high-paying, jobs, and everyone should drive fancy sports cars. All our desires should be instantly gratified. Women should always wear tight clothes, and men should carry powerful handguns. Life overall should be more glamorous, thrill-packed, and filled with applause, don't you think? (Watterson, Revenge 89)

"I think my life is too featherbrained already," Hobbes replies. "Of course, if life was really like that, what would we watch on TV?" Calvin asks (Watterson, Revenge 89). A lot of "shoulds" indeed! (A caveat: Calvin's monologue is complemented by Watterson's characteristic "wagon ride over a cliff" motif. Ascension, going over the cliff, and descension, falling back to earth, will be discussed later.)

Reality, in Calvin's eyes, is one non-stop amusement. In one strip, Calvin places a cardboard "TV screen" over his head and creates his own TV show:

He's Ca-a-alvin!
Amazing, great Ca-a-alvin!
Oh, he's the one that you'd like to meet!
He's the one who just can't be beat!
He's Ca-a-alvin! (Watterson, Attack 44)

In another strip, Calvin makes a lot of noise and laughs: "I thought my life would be more interesting with a musical score and a laugh track," he tells his Mom (Watterson, Yukon

81). In another strip, Calvin tells Hobbes: "They say the world's a stage. But obviously the play is unrehearsed and everybody is ad-libbing his lines." "Maybe that's why it's hard to tell if we're in a tragedy or a farce," Hobbes responds. "We need more special effects and dance numbers," Calvin comments (Watterson, Treasure 62). Calvin even finds his food entertaining: in a delightful Sunday strip, his meal--colored green, of course!--recites Shakespeare and then bursts into song (Watterson, Treasure 11). "In **my** book, food should be nutrition **and** entertainment," Calvin tells Hobbes after biting the bottom of his ice cream cone so he can suck out the ice cream (Watterson, Revenge 100).

The bottom line? Our hero demands that reality be entertaining... and is disappointed when it's not. Calvin blows a soap bubble, it pops, and then, with a weary expression, he says "wheee" (Watterson, Weirdos 77). And when Calvin stands on his head, he comments: "Somehow I imagined this experience would be more rewarding" (Watterson, Scientific 79). And when Calvin plays paddle ball, he laments: "I kind of resent the manufacturer's implicit assumption that this would amuse me" (Watterson, Attack 115).

In one strip, Calvin spews a long monologue about how his life pales in comparison to the adventures he sees on TV:

Get a load of **this** dumb assignment! I'm supposed to write about an adventure I've had! I haven't had any adventures! My life has been one big bore from the beginning! Have I ever been abducted by pirates? Have I ever faced down a charging rhino? Have I ever been in a shoot-out, or on a bombing raid? **No!** I never get to have adventures!

Hobbes comments: "What about the time you backed the car through the garage door?" "You call that an adventure? I didn't even get on the highway," Calvin responds (Watterson, Revenge 29).

For Calvin's life to be exciting, he needs an audience. "Aaaughh! I skinned my knee! Ooh! Ow!" Calvin yells. Not finding anyone around, he stops yelling, finds his mom, and starts yelling again (Watterson, Weirdos 50). Calvin's pain is meaningless... unless, of course, he has an audience. In another strip, Calvin plays with his food, making funny faces and convulsions. After his "performance," Calvin's parents applaud half-heartedly (Watterson, Yukon 54). And in a strip that sums up Calvin's "real" intentions: "I like people. I'm interested in people." "You??" Hobbes asks. "As an audience, I mean," Calvin replies (Watterson, Homicidal 158).

To summarize: Reality, as a personal construct, is called a world image and lives inside the subject. Reality, as a group construct, is called social reality, and lives inside the world images of the people who create and maintain our various "social institutions," i.e., the family, the school system, the government, the mass media, and the products thereof. But we must always remember that social reality, no matter exciting and engrossing it may be, is simply a construct, a fabrication and, like a map or picture, is never really an accurate representation of reality.

CHAPTER 3

COMIC ART AS ENTERTAINMENT

"I Wish I Had More Enemies": Comic Art and Structure

Where is Hollywood located? Chiefly between the ears. In that part of the American brain lately vacated by God.

--Erica Jong (Frank 107).

People complain that the entertainment industry caters to the lowest common denominator of public taste, but I disagree. ..I think it's a fallacy that taste bottoms out somewhere. If they could find a way to aim ever lower, they'd make some real money.

--Calvin to Hobbes (Watterson, Days 142).

Entertainment is a misnomer, a slippery word to define. What is entertaining to one person may not be entertaining to another. Indeed, entertainment means a lot of *different* things to a lot of *different* people. But if we strip down entertainment to its *bare essentials*, we notice a few basic patterns. The "underlying structure" of nearly all entertainment, including sporting events, is the play of power: the build-up of tension and the wind- down of resolution. The maxim of tension/resolution is also the hallmark of most comic strips: in a "typical" four panel joke, for example, the first three panels usually generate tension, leading to a punchline, or resolution, in the last

panel. Robert Fritz describes three important characteristics of tension:

1. Tension is formed by a discrepancy between two elements.
 2. Tension creates a tendency for movement.
 3. Tension resolves when the discrepancy ends.
- (Corporate 19)

Here's an example: In the first panel, Calvin is building a snowball, laughing to himself. In the second panel, his laughing becomes more and more diabolic as his snowball takes form: "Heh heh heh heh heh oh boy oh boy oh boy ha ha ha ha ha ha." In panel three, he stops laughing and pauses. In the forth and final panel, Calvin comments: "Obviously I've tapped into some primeval well of the human psyche" (Watterson, Treasure 139). The first two panels: tension; the last two panels: resolution. Note the juxtaposition between panels two and three: Calvin appears devilish in one and dumbfounded in the next, a very abrupt mood swing!

This simple "tension/resolution" formula is also applicable to stories. In one sequence, lasting ten strips, Calvin breaks his father's binoculars and, from that moment on, the tension builds. Also, during various points in the story, tension appears to wind down, and then,

unexpectedly, builds up again. In the third strip, for example, Calvin decides to buy his dad a new pair of binoculars and appears quite relieved--only to discover later that they are way out of his price range; an "anxiety attack" ensues. Calvin considers various ways to resolve his dilemma until, finally (in strip seven), the tension becomes too great to hold inside: "Aaugh! I did it! I did it! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!!" Calvin confesses at the dinner table. Calvin's Dad yells at him and the whole episode winds down with our hero receiving a pair of toy binoculars in the last strip (Watterson, Weirdos 43-46). In this sequence, we see tension build in the first eight strips, and wind down in the last two. And we also see little pockets of tension/resolution sprinkled throughout the story.

Comic Art as Entertainment is a container for social reality, stressing three pertinent values: self-interest, competition, and control. Indeed, these three motifs weave a toxic, albeit funny, tapestry throughout the entire chapter. Here's an example that combines all three: Calvin, with a devilish grin, fills a water balloon. He hides behind a tree, awaiting his next victim. Night falls and he is still waiting, now with a blank stare. In the last panel, Calvin appears disappointed while his mother tucks him into bed. "I wish I had more enemies," he says. "I'm

sure you will someday, honey," his Mom replies (Watterson, Days 106).

Most entertainment has a protagonist and an antagonist, a hero and a villain, a home team and a rival team. One character usually wants to dominate, victimize, or exert power over another character (tension); usually, the victim will resist domination and thwart the aggressor (resolution). Thus, the aggressor becomes the victim, a flip-flop, or the opposite, of what the aggressor intended. A rather clinical explanation, without much depth, but, alas, bona fide "entertainment" in a postmodern age is not created to be poetic: it is created to make money. And what sells? Self-interest, competition, and control.

Competition, currently an "important" part of social reality, requires losers and winners, antagonists and protagonists, aggressors and victims, people wanting to dominate and people willing to submit. Sometimes Calvin plays the role of aggressor and sometimes, much to our delight, he plays the role of victim. We infer Calvin's world image from his words and actions. Calvin's world image, we might say, is saturated with images of domination and submission, the hallmark of mass media. Calvin values self-interest--"I don't need to improve! Everyone else does!" (Watterson, Yukon 105); and the use of excessive

control--"I tripped a kid yesterday, and he fell in the mud. It was hilarious" (Watterson, Something 121), the very same values found in social reality.

"Calvin, The Great": Calvin as an Isolated Bag of Skin

Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos.

--C. G. Jung (Jacobi 264).

I hate everybody.

--Calvin (Watterson, Weirdos 108).

Rather than feeling connected to others, Calvin might best be described as "an isolated bag of skin"--borrowing Alan Watt's metaphor for an "isolated ego." Calvin's narcissistic tendencies outweigh any and all attempts to appear selfless or caring. "Narcissus, as the Greek myth goes, stared endlessly at his own reflection," writes Joel Covitz, "He had no desire to develop his genuine self; he was in love with what has been called 'the false self'...." (9). Calvin, like Narcissus, thinks endlessly of himself: "Look out for number one," he comments (Watterson, Attack 70). And lest we forget Calvin's club: "This meeting of G.R.O.S.S. is now called to order by the great grandiose dictator-for-life, the ruler supreme, the fearless, the

brave, the held-high-in-esteem, Calvin the bold!"

(Watterson, Days 12).

Calvin and Hobbes are frequently shown playing alone. Indeed, Calvin rarely plays with other kids. Susie, his "friendly enemy," and Mo, the school bully, appear more as adversaries than friends. "I wish I had more friends, but people are such jerks" (Watterson, Scientific 16); "I don't see how anyone could ever fall in love" (Watterson, Weirdos 108); "I'm never gonna get married" (Watterson, Yukon 47); "People are rotten. When I grow up, I'm going to live a million miles away from everyone!" (Watterson, Revenge 28). And when Calvin dons the role of "advice columnist," his sample answers are anything but consoling: "Stop whining and get a life, bozo"; " Don't tell **me** your stupid problems. I've got plenty of my own"; "Go soak your head, you big baby"; "Want some advice? Drop dead" (Watterson, Days 53).

In one sequence, Calvin reluctantly joins the softball team at school to avoid being teased. Calvin explains to Hobbes why he doesn't like team sports: "It's fun playing baseball with just **you**, because we both get to pitch, bat, run and catch all at once. We get to **do** everything. But this will be with **teams** and assigned positions and an umpire! It's **boring** playing it the **real** way!" (Watterson, Revenge 97). Calvin dislikes rules and prefers creating his

own. Social reality is, after all, composed of rules. Calvin's Dad offers some advice: "Well, sports are good for you. They teach you cooperation. You learn how to win graciously and accept defeat. It builds character." Calvin, however, doesn't want to learn teamwork--and he doesn't like *building character*. "What's wrong with having fun by yourself, huh?" he asks. "When you grow up, it's not allowed," his Dad replies (Watterson, Revenge 97).

Calvin plays softball and is assigned left field. Our hero catches a fly ball--for the opposing team. One of his teammates complains: "You caught the ball for the wrong team! You got our own guy out! What a dweeb! What a jerk! What an *idiot*!" Calvin quits softball and sits in a tree with Hobbes: "I don't understand it, Hobbes. The kids teased me when I *didn't* play baseball. Then they yelled at me when I *did* play. ...unless you're a star, you can't please *anyone*." "In that case, why not please yourself?" Hobbes asks (Watterson, Scientific 100-101).

Calvin has a very grandiose world image: "Calvin boy genius, hope of mankind" (Watterson, Days 136). We might even say that he has a "superiority complex": Calvin is depicted as a maniacal tyrant (Watterson, Days 75); as a dictator (Watterson, Calvin 73); and as Godzilla stomping downtown Tokyo (Watterson, Calvin 54). Calvin is even shown

growing as big as the entire galaxy (Watterson, Scientific 36).

Calvin is also very fond of daydreaming. Calvin's self-absorption is often depicted as "spacing out."

Calvin's Mom: "You just don't pay attention. That's why you never know what's going on" (Watterson, Weirdos 5). Calvin: "It's the present I don't like" (Watterson, Days 166). And, in another strip, Calvin's Mom turns off the T.V. and (literally!) throws Calvin out of the house:

Calvin's Mom: What are you doing inside? It's a beautiful day out! Go move around!
Calvin: **Hey!**

Calvin: It's too hot! It's too bright! It's too humid! It's too buggy!

Calvin (outside): **It's too real!** (Watterson, Days 105)

"At any moment, whatever we are experiencing, only one of two things is ever happening: either we are being with what is, or else we are resisting what is," writes John Welwood in Ordinary Magic (3). School gives our hero numerous opportunities to daydream and resist the present moment. "All right, class, who would like to give his book report first?" Miss Wormwood asks. "Calvin, how about you? Calvin?" In the last panel, Calvin pictures his teacher as a hideous alien and himself as Spaceman Spiff, his alter-ego

(Watterson, Calvin 28). Calvin also resists school by trying to cheat on tests, teasing Susie, asking irrelevant questions, and giving trivial answers.

Calvin also appears hungry for appreciation, a quality absent in his relationships. And so Calvin "invents" appreciation by creating a construct of reality--a world image--with Calvin in the spotlight, as the following example illustrates. Calvin is shown standing in front of class, telling everyone about his paleontology findings. At the end of his speech, he says "I'm now accepting a limited number of applications to be my pal. The cost is just \$20 per person, and you can revel in the association for a lifetime! Any takers?" (Watterson, Attack 75).

"Water Balloons and Snowballs": Calvin and Control

I want total control of emotions/total control of the wind/total control of beginnings/total control of the end/total control/total control.../I'm sure that's what happiness means

--Michael Nesmith ("Total Control").

I wish I had a baby brother... I want someone small I could beat up.

--Calvin (Watterson, Days 160).

Calvin's pre-occupation with himself does not lend itself to what might be called "mutually satisfying"

relationships. All of Calvin's relationships are infused with power struggles and one-upmanship. The thirst or thrust to dominate or avoid domination appears to dominate every aspect of Calvin's life. If we had to choose one word to describe Calvin's relationships with others, it might be CONTROL. Calvin is always trying to control his environment--and his environment is always trying to control him. A problematic and parasitic relationship for our characters, but a humorous one for us, the audience.

"Every human relationship and interaction involves an exercise of power in which one person has some control over the other," notes Thomas Moore, "...one person may take on authority while the other habitually submits to that authority, or in some cases, power is tossed back and forth between the people but is so polarized that one person is always dominant and the other submissive" (Soulmates 216). As we will see, Calvin loves to dominate: he creates suffering for his parents, throws water balloons and snowballs at Susie, and causes havoc for Rosalyn, his babysitter. He is, however, brought down to earth by Mo, the school bully, and is almost always thwarted by his so-called "victims."

Let's begin with Calvin's parents. Social reality is taught, or passed on, through the process of socialization.

Socialization, as the following examples show, is often exemplified by parental authority. "I'm going to hang around the drugstore all afternoon and eat candy and read comic books!" Calvin tells his mother. "Oh, no, you're not!" she replies. "Why not?!" Calvin asks. "Because I'm your mother and I said so" (Watterson, Something 15). And in another strip, Calvin announces to his Mom that he will not be having dinner with his parents that night. "I'm just going to eat cookies in front of the TV," he says. "You, young man, are going to sit at the table and eat what I've fixed, just like the rest of us," his Mom replies. Calvin stares blankly into space: "Oh, yeah. That's what I meant" (Watterson, Weirdos 50).

In another strip, Calvin races excitedly into the kitchen: "Mom, can I get a big tattoo? I want a winged serpent coiling around one arm, clutching a ship on my chest, with..." Calvin's Mom's expression is quite aversive, and our hero's enthusiasm wanes. "Did you know Mom can communicate telepathically?" Calvin tells Hobbes (Watterson, Treasure 61).

Calvin's relationship with his Dad shows a similar pattern:

Calvin: Election day is coming up, Dad. People want to know where you stand on the issues.

Calvin's Dad: Such as?

Calvin: Later bedtimes, expanded TV privileges, shorter school weeks, and less discipline.

Calvin's Dad: I'm against them all.

Calvin: I see.

Calvin: How's your IRA? Pretty well funded?

Calvin's Dad: Go to bed. (Watterson, Weirdos 103)

Susie is Calvin's neighbor and classmate. She is kind-hearted and a good student, qualities which might be described as the "opposite" of Calvin. She might even be described as Calvin's "better half": she possesses values and qualities antithetical to Calvin. For example, Susie tends to be sensitive and sweet, whereas Calvin is mean and cerebral. Susie might best be described as Calvin's "friendly enemy."

Calvin and Susie's relationship is characterized by one-upmanship: each tries to "one-up" or "outsmart" the other. Calvin is clearly the aggressor and Susie, the victim, but these roles are often reversed, much to our amusement. The first time Calvin attempts to one-up Susie, his attack is simply verbal: "Hey Susie Derkins, is that your face, or is a 'possum stuck in your collar?" (Watterson, Calvin 12). Likewise, the first time Susie insults Calvin is also a verbal retort. Calvin yells to Susie from his tree house: "You can't come up here, Susie! No girls allowed." Susie replies: "What makes you think I'd

want to sit in a stupid tree in the first place?!?"

(Watterson, Calvin 13).

Calvin and Susie frequently call each other names and various "one-liners" intended to upset or discredit the other. "Everyone I know thinks your destiny is a private cage in the primate house," says Susie. "**Your** destiny is to have a smile that's all gums," Calvin replies (Watterson, Days 45). And in another strip, Susie comments: "Talking with you is sort of the conversational equivalent of an out-of-body experience" (Watterson, Yukon 72). And in another strip, Susie tells the reader: "Our class voted Calvin the 'most likely to be seen on the news some day'" (Watterson, Attack 13).

Susie is Calvin's only female friend, and yet Calvin appears to "know" everything about girls. The mind "must decide which aspect of a thing is important and then use that aspect as a symbol of the whole" (Leonard and Laut 2). Calvin's world image encapsulates countless stereotypes about girls, all stemming from his relationship with Susie. Does Calvin see Susie as "Susie," or simply as a "girl"? Calvin's world image stereotypes girls and boys equally, and, in the process, Calvin ends up stereotyping himself. "Let's see what you drew for art class, Susie," Calvin asks. "Well, a tidy little domestic scene," Calvin begins, looking

at her picture, "A house in a yard with flowers. How typically female. Girls think small and are preoccupied with petty details. But **boys** think **big**! Boys think about action and accomplishment! No wonder it's **men** who change the world!" And what did Calvin draw? "A squadron of B-1s nuking New York" (Watterson, Yukon 63).

Calvin's world image of the other sex is quite distorted: "Girls are like slugs--they probably serve some purpose, but it's hard to imagine what," he comments (Watterson, Yukon 68). And in another strip, Calvin and Hobbes make a list of what girls are good for: "1) Girls are good for water balloon targets; 2) They're good for **nothing**!; and 3) Girls are good for colonizing Pluto" (Watterson, Days 80). "It must be awful to be a girl," Calvin tells Susie, "I'm sure it's frustrating knowing that men are bigger, stronger, and better at abstract reasoning than women. Really, if you're a girl, what would make you go on living?" Susie: "The thought of a jerk like you begging one of us for a date when you're seventeen" (Watterson, Weirdos 122).

Calvin's attempts to one-up Susie frequently backfire... but Calvin doesn't seem to mind. In one strip, for example, Calvin asks Susie to pick a number and letter in his paper fortune teller. The flap says: "You're a

mouth-breathing bag of boogers!" Calvin laughs, but Susie is not amused. In the last panel, Calvin is shown lying on the ground, beat to a pulp: "Life doesn't get much better than this" (Watterson, Days 170). In another strip, Susie finds Calvin and Hobbes playing in the mud. Susie adopts Calvin's role as prankster: "Don't bend over! Your curly pink tail shows! Oink! Oink! Oink! Oink!" Calvin throws a mudball at her: "**Eat some mud, Susie!**" Susie escapes and Calvin is filled with rage. Hobbes smiles: "Ahhh, spring! That magical time of year when a young man's fancy turns to love!" (Watterson, Revenge 86).

Calvin and Susie form a strong coalition, a fine synthesis of two opposing personalities fermented into a solid antagonistic, albeit humorous, relationship.

Rosalyn, Calvin's baby-sitter, plays a similar role as Susie. Rosalyn, however, is older than Calvin and is thus an "authority figure." "She's a barracuda in a high school senior suit," comments Calvin (Watterson, Something 88). Rosalyn, however, is the only one in the neighborhood who will put up with Calvin's antics.

Frequently, Calvin's attempts to one-up Rosalyn backfire. "Tonight: The Revenge of the Baby-Sat," Calvin tells Hobbes. Calvin steals Rosalyn's science notes, locks

himself in the bathroom, and pretends to flush her notes down the toilet. Calvin gives her a list of demands: "OK, first we want to stay up until my parents drive in. Second, we want you to go pick up a pizza and rent us a video player..." After a few panels, Calvin no longer hears Rosalyn and opens the door to investigate--he is immediately seized by his irate baby-sitter (Watterson, Revenge 38).

Mo, the school bully, is Calvin's tormentor. As Calvin is to Susie, Mo is to Calvin. Mo and Calvin have the same construct of reality--dominate, at all costs--but choose different victims. Mo ostracizes Calvin by calling him names, shoving him for no reason, and threatening to beat Calvin up if he doesn't submit to Mo's demands. "In my opinion, we don't devote nearly enough scientific research to finding a cure for jerks," complains Calvin after Mo takes his ball (Watterson, Attack 58).

Inflation/Deflation

To be a human being means to possess a feeling of inferiority.... The greater the feeling of inferiority that has been experienced, the more powerful is the urge for conquest and the more violent the emotional agitation.
--Alfred Adler (Seldes 7-8).

Ace Pilot Spaceman Spiff cruises low over the planet at high speed! I wonder what this "E" on

the fuel gauge means.

--Calvin AKA Spaceman Spiff (Watterson, Scientific 95).

"Me, Tarzan! King of the Jungle!" Calvin beams. "Nice underpants," comments Susie (Watterson, Attack 20).

Superiority, as we have seen, has its pitfalls: inferiority is often lurking in the shadows. And this is where the humor comes in: "Oh great ouija board, will I grow up to be president?" Calvin asks. "God forbid," is the answer (Watterson, Something 57).

In another example, Calvin brags to Hobbes: "I tripped a kid yesterday, and he fell in the mud. It was hilarious." Hobbes then trips our hero, but Calvin is clearly not amused (Watterson, Something 121). In another strip, Calvin is shown running with a football. He stops in his tracks, cowering in fear (presumably Hobbes is going to pounce him), and, in the next panel, tosses the football to Hobbes. "They say winning isn't everything, and I've decided to take their word for it," Calvin sighs (Watterson, Attack 53).

Fortunately for us, the audience, Calvin is always surrounded by people willing to deflate him: Susie thwarts Calvin; Mo bullies Calvin; Calvin's parents punish Calvin; Miss Wormwood sends Calvin to the Principal's office; and Hobbes pounces Calvin, a theme we'll explore later.

Calvin even deflates himself: "I've decided I don't want to be famous," he tells Hobbes in the bathtub. "Any idiot can be famous. I figure I'm more the **legendary** type!" Calvin then creates a pair of rabbit ears out bubble bath. "Well I didn't mean right this second!" (Watterson, Attack 68). But even deflation, for Calvin, is an extension of inflation!

CHAPTER 4
COMIC ART AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY

"Skip the Moral... OK?": Comic Art and Culture

Technology... has thrown us into a moral spin. Without a moments notice, the electronic media beam their values into our lives; they shout so loudly we can barely hear ourselves think.
--Joshua Halberstam (xvii).

Life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions.
--Calvin (Watterson, Weirdos 25).

"I've concluded that nothing bad I do is my fault," Calvin tells his Dad, "Being young and impressionable, I'm the victim of countless bad influences! An unwholesome culture panders to my undeveloped values and pushes me to maleficence. I take no responsibility for my behavior! I'm an innocent pawn! It's society's fault!" Calvin's father remarks: "Then you need to develop more character. Go shovel the walk." Calvin quips: "These discussions never go where they're supposed to" (Watterson, Days 29).

Calvin's world image from the perspective of his parents might be described as "bad" rather than "good." Calvin appears to avoid enculturation at all costs. And yet, Calvin's world image from his own perspective might be

viewed as the only reality worth knowing, with his parent's restrictions an unbearable nuance. Being "good" implies following convention and actually listening to and obeying what his parents and Miss Wormwood are telling him. Being "bad" implies breaking convention and thwarting his elders. And yet, if our current social reality values self-interest, competition, and control, is Calvin's chaotic world image and iconoclastic behavior really a break in convention... or is our hero simply enjoying the "freedom" social reality tantalizes him with?

In one strip, Calvin is writing a letter about an "objectionable" TV show: "I'm telling these companies I intend to boycott all their products if they don't pull their ads from a TV show I find offensive," he tells Hobbes. And then, in the last panel--aye, here comes the rub: "This clean, wholesome television! Ughh, it makes me sick" (Watterson, Revenge 100). Calvin, as the above strip illustrates, despises *wholesome* TV. Calvin has his own ideas about what is entertaining: "This is what entertainment is all about. ...Idiots, explosives, and falling anvils," he says while watching Saturday morning cartoons (Watterson, Calvin 33).

When Comic Art is perceived as "social commentary" (which is also, by definition, "entertaining"), the

characters appear to BOTH *criticize* AND *embrace* the social reality they live in. This doesn't make sense from a rational point of view, but comics are anything but rational. And, likewise, our current world image, and the social reality that enfolds it, is anything but logical. Here's an example. Calvin shouts at the T.V.: "You call this **news**?! **This** isn't informative! This is sound bite! This is entertainment! This is sensationalism!" In the last panel, however, our hero smiles at the reader: "Fortunately, that's all I have the patience for!" (Watterson, Days 96). Calvin's world image appears both to embrace and despise social reality!

In one strip, Calvin's Dad is about to read Calvin a bedtime story. Calvin inquires: does it have any romance or boring description? Skip it if it does, he says. "It doesn't have a moral, does it? I hate being told how to live my life. Skip the moral, too, OK?" Calvin explains (Watterson, Yukon 88). What is morality? Morality is the glue that holds culture together: a breakdown of morals implies a breakdown of culture. A moral might mean a punitive consequence for socially unacceptable behavior, but morality has much more to do with one's world image than with the sanctions or consequences imposed by social reality. Morality can never be imposed from without--

morality is always a function of a world view, echoing, once again, the subjective nature of reality. In other words, true morality comes from within, not without.

Calvin appears to disagree with the *responsibility* imposed by social order, and yet firmly embraces the *freedom* embraced by pop culture! Calvin appears to be demolishing a brick wall with one hand ("deconstructing social reality"), while building the same brick wall with his other hand ("constructing social reality"). Is it any wonder his world image is so fractured?

"It's a Crass Culture": Calvin, the Unenlightened Fault-Finder

Moral self-judgment is paradoxical. How can someone use his morality to judge his own morality? That's like measuring a ruler with itself!

--Joshua Halberstam (119).

People think it must be fun to be a super genius, but they don't realize how hard it is to put up with all the idiots in the world.

--Calvin (Watterson, Revenge 100).

Calvin is an unenlightened fault-finder: he frequently complains about *other people*, but seldom finds fault within *himself*. His critiques of social reality are legend, and his self-awareness is nil. "People are so self-centered,"

he tells Hobbes, "The world would be a better place if people would stop thinking about themselves and focus on **others** for a change." "Gee, I wonder who that might apply to," Hobbes says. "Me!" Calvin replies, "Everyone should focus more on **me**!" (Watterson, Days 108).

Calvin's voice is loud, but his implicit motto might be "much ado about nothing": when all is said and done, Calvin's complaints do not change anything. Calvin, the unenlightened fault-finder, is on a treadmill to oblivion, as the following Sunday strip illustrates:

Hobbes: Are you making any resolutions for the new year?

Calvin: Resolutions? **Me??** Just what are you implying? That I need to **change??** Well, buddy, as far as **I'm** concerned, I'm perfect the way I **am**!

Calvin: For your information, I'm **staying** like this, and everyone else can just get **used** to it! If people don't like me the way I am, well, **tough** beans! It's a free country! I don't need anyone's permission to be the way I want! This is how I am--take it or leave it!

Calvin: By golly, life's too darn short to waste time trying to please every meddlesome moron who's got an idea how I ought to be! I don't need advice! Everyone can just stay out of my face!

Calvin (noticing Hobbes is gone): I... ..Hobbes?

Calvin: Hmph!

Calvin: He should resolve to be more attentive when someone is speaking. (Watterson, Scientific 51)

In another strip, Calvin gives Hobbes a lecture on the "lost tradition" of making snowballs: "The whole problem with modern times is that there's no pride in craftsmanship. When most kids make a snowball, they just mush a bunch of snow together. Everyone's a slave to efficiency! No time for aesthetics! No love of things for their own sake! But when I make a snowball, it's a work of art! ...**My** snowballs aren't assembly line productions! They take me longer to make, but each one is a unique masterpiece! That's why I sign them." Calvin prepares to throw a snowball at Susie, but Susie beats him to it. Calvin, defeated and lying passively in the snow: "It's a crass culture, Hobbes. Shoddy and quick is all anybody knows." Hobbes: "Artists always suffer" (Watterson, Days 27).

Calvin, as we have noted, is frequently "bad" and is seldom "good." Why is Calvin always *bad*? Well, if we have learned anything from the mass media, it is this: in order to see ourselves as *good*, we need to have someone "out there" to call *bad*.

Does it really take any considerable time or effort just to *understand* that you depend on enemies and outsiders to define yourself, and that without some opposition you would be lost? To see this is to acquire, almost instantly, the virtue of humor, and humor and self-righteousness are mutually exclusive. (Watts 125)

"I'm getting nervous about Christmas," Calvin tells Hobbes. "You're worried that you haven't been good?" Hobbes asks. "That's just the question," Calvin says, beginning a lengthy monologue, "It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody. See, that's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars. I don't practice cannibalism. Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get lots of presents?" Calvin then asks Hobbes for a "glowing character reference," but Hobbes declines (Watterson, Attack 81).

If Calvin were *good*, would we still find him entertaining? If Calvin did not complain about culture while clinging to collective values, would we still find him amusing? We want Calvin to be *bad* and we want Calvin to be *inconsistent*: this is why he is so captivating and this is why we laugh. Being bad means throwing the monkey wrench of CHAOS into the fine tuned motor of ORDER. Calvin's daily routine, for example, appears quite ordered and predictable: wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast, catch the bus, go to school, follow the teacher's directions, eat lunch, go home, play, eat dinner, do homework, watch TV, take a bath, and go to bed. A "day in the life" Sunday strip illustrates the certainty of Calvin's daily routine. Calvin's mom yells:

"You're going to miss the bus! Now get out of bed!"; Miss Wormwood complains: "You don't know the answer? Then sit down"; Mo threatens Calvin: "Hey, Twinky, want to see if there's an afterlife?"; a parents voice at home: "No, you can't go play until you finish your homework"; Calvin's Dad: "Just eat your food. You don't need to play with it"; Calvin's Mom: "Stop stalling and get in the bathtub"; Calvin's Dad turns off the TV: "No, you can't stay up a little longer. Go to bed"; and finally Calvin's mom kisses him on the cheek, saying "Have a good night's sleep. Tomorrow's another big day!" Calvin, alone in bed, cowers in fear: "...sighhhhhh..." (Watterson, Revenge 59).

Calvin's life appears very ordered--order imposed on him from *without*. But where does order originate? Is order really something that is imposed on us from the outside world? Reality as a *subjective construct* implies an internal order, an ordered world image that is usually obscured from view. Order, when perceived as emanating from the outside world, creates a proclivity toward rigidity which, in turn, invites resistance--and this creates quite a few problems for our friend. Indeed, Calvin tends describe his life circumstantially, seeing himself as a victim of forces beyond his control. In school, for example, there is a "right" way to behave and a "wrong" way to behave, according to the explicit and implicit rules of school

etiquette. "Do as you're told" might be the motto. But Calvin's world image, although deeply embedded in social order, also has its roots in chaos. We, the reader, want Calvin to break convention--this is why he is so appealing to us, and this is why we laugh.

Calvin hates school: "I say it's a fallacy that kids need 12 years of school! Three months is plenty," he comments (Watterson, Revenge 14). One strip shows Calvin in his bedroom, pausing from doing his homework: an image of Calvin looking out the window is juxtaposed with an image of Calvin looking out behind bars. Our hero complains that he is "stuck inside doing math problems on a beautiful Sunday" (Watterson, Revenge 82). Calvin equates doing homework with doing time: his room becomes a prison. Math simply doesn't "fit" into Calvin's world view. Calvin's Dad: "You can't add things and come out with less than you started with!" Calvin: "I can do that! It's a free country! I've got my rights!" (Watterson, Attack 36). In a related joke, Calvin refuses to answer the question "2+7," claiming "I cannot answer this question, as it is against my religious principles" (Watterson, Calvin 28).

Calvin frequently daydreams in school, imagining that he is Spaceman Spiff and pretending that Miss Wormwood is a hideous alien (Watterson, Calvin 28). Calvin might be best

described as a class clown, as the following joke illustrates. "Miss Wormwood, I'm a fierce advocate of the separation of church and state," Calvin tells his teacher, "Nevertheless, I feel the need for spiritual guidance and comfort as I face the day's struggles. So I was wondering if I could strip down, smear myself with paste, and set fire to this little effigy of you in a non-denominational sort of way." Calvin is sent to the principal's office: "Boy, what a touchy subject!" he complains (Watterson, Days 145).

Calvin simply doesn't like following directions: "Everything's gotta have rules, rules, rules!" he complains (Watterson, Attack 51). "I hate all the rules and organizing and teams and ranks in sports" (Watterson, Scientific 96). Calvin prefers creating his own rules: "The only permanent rule in Calvinball is that you can't play it the same way twice!" (Watterson, Scientific 113). Social rules live inside one context; Calvin's rules, inside another.

In sum, Calvin, the unenlightened fault-finder, is quite aware of other people's problems and yet is completely oblivious to his own.

Hobbes: How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions?

Calvin: I didn't make any.

Calvin: See, in order to improve oneself, one must have some idea of what's "good." That implies certain values.

Calvin: But as we all know, values are relative. Every system of belief is equally valid and we need to tolerate diversity. Virtue isn't "better" than vice. It's just different.

Hobbes: I don't know if I can tolerate that much tolerance.

Calvin: I refuse to be victimized by notions of virtuous behavior. (Watterson, Treasure 129)

Calvin's take on social reality is always entertaining because it is skewed, upside down, unexpected, exaggerated. Calvin's commentary on the problems of nuclear power, for example, can be quite amusing: "[For Halloween] I'm going as a barrel of toxic waste," Calvin tells Susie (Watterson, Something 38). And his relationship with his mom also reveals the influence of a capitalistic society. Mom: "How about a big hug?" Calvin: "Can I have 20 dollars?" (Watterson, Attack 51). And yet if the *implicit* rule of social reality is to break rules and the *explicit* rule is to follow them, is Calvin really deviating from convention or covertly following it?

"Mainstream Commercial Nihilism Can't Be Trusted?!"

Popular culture is no longer marginal; for most people it is all there is. It is about having reality defined for one in advance, by increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques. Our social identities are defined by what we consume. Questions like depth and meaning seem strangely irrelevant.

--Rob Weatherill (136).

Bad news, mom. I promised my soul to the devil this afternoon.

--Calvin (Watterson, Revenge 25).

If we had to choose one word to describe Calvin's relationship with social reality, it might be NIHILISTIC. Nihilism, for the purposes of this thesis, is defined as a belief in nothing. Calvin's nihilistic world image "fits" a nihilistic social reality. Nihilism, as we will see, is a common theme in Calvin and Hobbes, as the following example illustrates:

Test question: What important event took place on December 16, 1773?

Calvin's answer: I do not believe in linear time. There is no past and future: all is one, and existence in the temporal sense is illusory. This question, therefore, is meaningless and impossible to answer.

Calvin smiles at the reader: When in doubt, deny all terms and definitions. (Watterson, Treasure 99)

Social reality, we might say, is a hodge-podge of seemingly "chaotic" world images. "If there is anything we have plenty of, it is belief systems," writes Walter Truett Anderson in Reality Isn't What it Used to Be, "But we also have something else: a growing suspicion that all belief systems--all ideas about human reality--are social constructions. This is a story about stories, a belief

about beliefs...." (3). Our current postmodern culture, for example, is saturated with numerous opposing and conflicting "countercultures": liberal vs. conservative, pro-choice vs. pro-life, the rich elite vs. the indigent poor. The mass media appears to embrace a heap of world images and values, with the upper class on the top of the heap. But, along with this cornucopia of values often comes a heap of trouble. In fact, we might even say that "problems make the media go round."

A "problem," as defined in this thesis, is a state of tension or uncertainty generated by two (or more) opposing ideas or forces. Problems, however much we may want to change them or get rid of them, are inherently valuable: they generate *tension* that hungers for *resolution*. The creative process, as Robert Fritz notes, rests on the fundamental principle of tension/resolution. A problem is also exemplified by a clash between two opposing world images. One of Calvin's biggest problems, for example, appears to be the conflict generated between his own ("liberal") world image and his parents ("conservative") world image, as the following monologue illustrates:

Somewhere in Russia I'll bet there's a little boy who has never known anything but **censorship** and **oppression**. But maybe he's heard about **America**, and he dreams of living in this land of **freedom** and opportunity! Someday, I'd like to meet that

little boy... and tell him the **truth** about this place!! (Watterson, Calvin 70)

"Calvin, be quiet and eat the stupid lima beans," his Dad replies (Watterson, Calvin 70).

And yet the conservative nature of Calvin's parent's world image is also an excellent target: Calvin frequently uses the chaos of "counterculture" to shock his parent's ordered world view. "I got a new album by Scrambled Debutante," Calvin tells Hobbes, "All their songs glorify depraved violence, mindless sex, and the deliberate abuse of dangerous drugs." "Your mom's going to go into conniptions when she sees this lying around," Hobbes comments, looking at the album cover. "Well, I sure didn't buy it for the music.." says Calvin, throwing the record in the trash (Watterson, Calvin 47).

We like Calvin, not because of his problems, but because of his ability to make us laugh at the absurdities of contemporary life. Good and bad. Right and wrong. Diversity rules... or chaos reigns? What is "normal" in a culture with uncertain values? Calvin's world image might be described as a skeleton key that fits into the convoluted door of social reality. Yes, the mass media appears embedded into his very being:

Calvin's Dad: "Once upon a time there was..."

Calvin: Hold it. This story doesn't have any shoot-ups in it, does it?

Calvin's Dad: You mean guns? No.

Calvin: Any violence at all?

Calvin's Dad: Um... Not really.

Calvin: Any references to Satanism? Any profanity? Any car chases? Any lewd parts?

Calvin's Dad: Of course not!

Calvin: What makes you think I'll like this?
(Watterson, Scientific 117)

Calvin, as the above example shows, can even find fault in the most "wholesome" of places!

Calvin's parents want to impose their values onto our hero, and yet, it is too late: the media has beat them to it. Calvin appears to have more values--mostly conflicting--than he knows what to do with. Take paranoia, for example: "Omigosh! This library book was due two days ago! What will they do? Are they going to interrogate me and beat me up?! Are they going to break my knees?? Will I have to sign some confession???" Calvin's mom: "They'll fine you ten cents. Now go return it." Calvin: "The way some of those librarians look at you, I naturally assumed the consequences would be more dire" (Watterson, Something 60).

In our current social reality, breaking convention often appears to be more *in vogue* than following convention. Indeed, it appears that those people who

"deviate" from cultural norms--murderers, criminals, rapists, corrupt politicians, unholy evangelists, eminent celebrities, and greedy multi-millionaires, for example--receive the most coverage from the media. Animosity sells commercial endorsements; altruistic behavior apparently doesn't. And who, for example, receives the most attention in a classroom of 30-35 kids? The class clown, or the so-called "problem" child.

Our current social reality appears to be dominated by the HYPER-RATIONAL, a collective *high-tech world image* that appears to value computers and technology above all else; and the ANTI-RATIONAL, as evidenced by MTV, postmodern theory, Zippy the Pinhead, and other artifacts of nihilism. But, as our hero notes in a neo-cubist world: "The multiple views provide too much information" (Watterson, Scientific 120). Nihilism, anxiety, and the "information age" go hand in hand. But instead of decreasing uncertainty, notes Richard Saul Wurman, the information explosion has actually increased anxiety. "So the great information age is really an explosion of *non-information*; it is an explosion of data" (38).

Magazines, for example, cater to very selective tastes. "Oh boy, the new issue of 'Chewing'!" Calvin tells Hobbes, pulling the magazine out the mailbox, "Wow, this looks

great! 'Special sugarless gum issue--choosing an artificial sweetener that's right for you.... tongue exercise for bigger bubbles.... rad fashion kneepads for walking and chewing.... plus an interview with Bazooka Joe!'" Calvin then proceeds to "educate" Hobbes: "See, it's all target marketing! Advertisers don't waste their time on mass audiences any more. They find your special interest and they nail you!" (Watterson, Days 71).

In a nihilistic culture, differences of opinion reign supreme... and the more fragmented and extreme the differences, the better the revenue. "Mom, can I have some money to buy a Satan-worshipping, suicide-advocating heavy metal album?" our hero asks. "Calvin, the fact that these bands haven't killed themselves in ritual self-sacrifice shows that they're just in it for the money like everyone else. It's all for effect. If you want to shock and provoke people, be sincere about it," Calvin's Mom tells him. "Mainstream commercial nihilism can't be trusted?!" our hero asks. "'fraid not, kiddo," his mother replies. "Childhood is so disillusioning," Calvin comments (Watterson, Days 46). The more rebellious and outlandish the belief, the profit it appears to generate.

Calvin is part of the MTV generation: his social construction of reality is not unlike that of a rock video.

As Kenneth Gergen points out, touching on the work of E. Ann Kaplan:

[Music Television] relies heavily on the breakdown of objective reality: The shape or identity of an object or person may change several times within a given video clip.... Rock videos also revel in their challenge to authority--often... attacking the economic class system, or revealing the foibles of parents and policymakers. But most pertinently, rock videos represent a full breakdown in the sense of a rationally coherent world. (133)

Without a "rationally coherent world," it is often hard to know who to trust. "Let's see your teaching certificate, lady!" Calvin yells at his substitute teacher (Watterson, Something 110). And, in another strip, Calvin fears his mother's cooking after watching a TV program describing a mother bird regurgitating "worms to feed her hungry brood" (Watterson, Scientific 103). And in one strip:

Calvin: Why do you suppose we're here?
Hobbes: Because we walked here.

Calvin: No, no... I mean here on earth.
Hobbes: Because Earth can support life.

Calvin: No, I mean why are we anywhere? Why do we exist?
Hobbes: Because we were born.

Calvin: Forget it
Hobbes: I will, thank you. (Watterson, Weirdos 21)

In one overtly *nihilistic* strip, Calvin opens a new box of crayons: "Now they're all pointy, lined up in order,

bright and perfect! Soon they'll be a bunch of ground-down, rounded, indistinguishable stumps, missing their wrappers and smudged with other colors." Calvin pauses, and then, in the last panel says: "Sometimes life seems unbearably tragic" (Watterson, Treasure 166).

Nihilism appears to permeate every facet of our lives, including our so-called "sacred" holidays. "Yep, Christmas is just around the corner," Calvin tells Hobbes, "And what better way to celebrate a religious holiday than with a month of frenzied consumerism!" Hobbes: "I'm surprised other religions haven't picket up on that." Calvin: "Getting loads of loot is a very spiritual experience to me" (Watterson, Treasure 65). "Santa Claus: kindly old elf or CIA spook?" Calvin asks in another strip (Watterson, Yukon 98). And in one strip, Calvin announces: "I think angels are everywhere." "You do?" asks Hobbes. "They're on calendars, books, greeting cards ...almost every product imaginable," Calvin replies. "What a spiritual age we live in," comments Hobbes (Watterson, Treasure 170).

What is the cause of nihilism? Perhaps one reason is a mass media that glorifies violence and views suffering as profitable. "If we're just going to die, what's the point of living?" Calvin comments (Watterson, Something 31). And, in another example, Hobbes is reading a newspaper: "It

says here that by the age of six... most children have seen a million murders on television." "I find that very disturbing," exclaims Calvin, "It means I've been watching all the wrong channels" (Watterson, Calvin 25). And, in another strip, Calvin creates a *nihilistic* snow sculpture: "this sculpture is about transience. As this figure melts, it invites the viewer to contemplate the evanescence of life. This piece speaks to the horror of our own mortality!" (Watterson, Scientific 73).

And finally one last nihilistic stab at death: "I wonder where we go when we die?" Calvin asks. "Pittsburgh?" Hobbes replies. "You mean if we're good or bad?" Calvin wants to know (Watterson, Calvin 20).

Ascension/Descension

To live in perpetual flight from ourselves is a bitter thing....

--C.G. Jung (Jacobi 221).

*I want my life to be one never ending ascension! Only losers go **down**! For me it's going to be **up** and **up**!*

--Calvin to Hobbes while riding his wagon over a cliff (Watterson, Scientific 118).

It appears that no matter how hard Calvin tries to act "good," he always ends up being "bad." "I **try** to be good!

I do! My heart is as pure as driven snow! It's just that, well, sometimes events beyond my control conspire against me!" Calvin complains to Hobbes explaining the dilemma of being "good" and "bad" during the Holiday season (Watterson, Scientific 43). Like a stretched rubber band, the path of least resistance always pulls our hero back to where he started. Calvin appears "pre-destined" to be "bad".

In one sequence, a "good" Calvin suddenly appears. His mother is dumbfounded: "I heard Calvin splashing in the tub, but there's no water on the floor. His towel is hung to dry! The toothpaste cap is on! There's no mess anywhere." And Calvin even goes to bed on time: "Would you check over my homework tonight, so I can correct any mistakes in the morning before school? Thanks mom." We later discover that Calvin has created a duplicate of his good side. "There's nothing this twerp likes better than making everyone's life easy! He lives for it!" Calvin tells Hobbes, "Talk about someone easy to exploit!"

Calvin's alter ego, the "good" Calvin, attempts to be nice to Susie, but she interprets his benevolence as sarcasm. The good Calvin becomes disappointed and soon the two Calvins begin calling each other names and start fighting. "Wow, how existential can you get," remarks

Hobbes. The good Calvin clenches his fists: "So it's a fight you want, is it?! Why, I'll tear you limb from.." In the next panel he evaporates: "Oops! I had an evil thought!" Hobbes: "You're the only person I know whose good side is prone to badness." "He could only be perfectly good as an abstraction," Calvin explains, "In his human manifestation, he wanted to throttle me" (Watterson, Attack 118-122). In sum, Calvin's bad side outweighs, and thus outlives, his good side.

The path of least resistance always pulls our hero back into his old self. Put differently, social reality always pulls Calvin back into his world image. A world image can only thrive in the culture from which it came.

Calvin's thirst toward ascension and the pitfalls of descension illustrate this pattern perfectly. In one strip, Calvin dons construction paper feathers and asks Hobbes to toss him over a ledge. Calvin shouts "I'm flying! I'm flying!" before finally crashing (Watterson, Yukon 62). And in another strip:

Calvin: I got a helium balloon.
Hobbes: Very nice.

Calvin: I'm going to stand on this ladder and let the balloon carry me up and away."

Calvin (standing on a ladder): Nothing's happening.
Hobbes: Try jumping.

(Calvin is lying face down on ground)
Hobbes (looking up): See? There goes the balloon.
You didn't hang on. (Watterson, Calvin 105)

Living in social reality is a lot like flying: we are exposed to so many different and opposing world images, it is often hard to choose which ones to hold onto and which ones to let go of. "Do I really have to **be** good or do I just have to **act** good?" asks Calvin (Watterson, Revenge 8). In another strip, our hero asks his companion: "Do you think morality is defined by our actions, or by what's in our heart?" "I think our actions show what's in our heart," Hobbes replies (Watterson, Attack 53).

Which beliefs are the most "truthful"? Will the *Really REAL Reality* please stand up?!

CHAPTER 5

COMIC ART AS MEDICINE

"Maybe It's Opposite Day!": Comic Art and Healing

Life is crazy and meaningful at once. And when we do not laugh over the one aspect and speculate about the other, life is exceedingly drab....

--C. G. Jung (Jacobi 285).

I try to make everyone's day a little more surreal.

--Calvin (Watterson, Something 23).

Comic Art as Entertainment and Comic Art as Social Commentary are two ways of viewing this rather unique art form. But if we expand our imagination even further, we will see that comics do more than just entertain and comment on culture: Comic Art as Medicine takes us full circle, encompassing BOTH of its predecessors AND adding a *paradoxical* twist. Comic Art as Medicine is a non-linear vaccine from the linear arrows of social reality: by making everyone's life a "little surreal," Calvin gives us a skewed perspective on social reality, and perhaps, if we are willing, a fresh angle on life and the "problems" therein.

Comic Art as Medicine is a process that cannot be "understood" through analysis. Comic Art as Medicine pierces through the *maya* of social reality. We cannot

cling to our previous notions of competition and self-interest, nor can we hold onto our ideas about fault-finding and nihilism. Our postmodern mindset will have to be discarded. We must dig deeper. What lives behind our world image and the social reality that enfolds it? Well, perhaps a world that is "unknowable" or "paradoxical" through our ordinary state of consciousness. Paradox is simply a way of bridging the knowable and the unknowable. As Jung points out: "The paradox... reflects a higher level of intellect and, by not forcibly representing the unknowable as known, gives a more faithful picture of the real state of affairs" (Jacobi 259).

In other words, we know that Calvin and Hobbes is a fiction, but what we often forget is that our own world image and the social reality that enfolds it are also fictions. Reality is a *work in progress*. We must gain access to that "unknowable" state of consciousness if we truly intend to transform our world view. Comic Art as Medicine is a form of scared storytelling, and, increasingly, a "postmodern" fairy tale or myth. As such, Comic Art, when held in a soulful context, *heals*.

What is healing? Healing might be described as the unfolding of imagination, both individually and collectively, into the everyday aspects of our lives. How

do we create the relationships we want, the lifestyle we want, the community we want? Through our imagination. How can we tap into that plastic, fluid state of mind? All that is required is the willingness to be receptive to the creative process. As Thomas Howard points out in Chance or the Dance?:

It is common enough for us to think of imagination as something for poets, or, if it has anything to do with us, as brought into play only in our reveries when we dream of flying away to some fruited island in a tropical sea. But it is more than that. It is something that is at work in us every moment of our lives, sleeping and waking, and that shapes every thought we have about ourselves or anything else. (21)

True healing begins when we ask ourselves: what is "truthfulness" and what is "illusion"? Are we all simply passive victims of a social order gone haywire... or are we actually victims of our own secular, polarized world image? We also need to make a distinction between *true healing* and *relieving the problem*. True healing invokes creativity and is a lifelong endeavor; relief from our problems, however, is always transitory, involving resistance and impatience. Healing requires an inquiry into the subjective nature of reality. Answering the question, "What is real and what is not real?" appears quite obvious when looked at from a *materialistic* perspective. But asking this question from an *ontological* framework often invites more questions than answers. Grasping for a definition of reality and

truthfulness is a lot like grasping for a bar of soap: the moment we think we have it, it slips away. This is because social reality, grounded in the secular, empirical world "out there," has radically colored our perception of reality and has subsequently created numerous biases. We live within a box ("world image") within a box ("social reality"). We must be willing to take off our *rose-colored glasses* and see the world with *fresh eyes*. "I want another eye put in my forehead," Calvin tells his Mom (Watterson, Homicidal 59). Perhaps we all need a third eye, an intuitive sword to cut through, and look *beyond*, the pretense of our one-dimensional, nihilistic world view.

Responsibility and self-awareness are not a given; they require a willingness to see through the blame and self-deception that permeates our self-image. When Susie gets a perfect score on her math quiz, she informs our hero that he owes her 25 cents. Calvin, however, is outraged and simply cannot accept what is happening: "I ran out of time!" he tells her, "It's **biological!** Girls mature faster than boys!" Calvin's denial of reality runs rampant. "Pay up," says Susie, hand outstretched. "Maybe it's opposite day!" our hero exclaims, "Maybe all these X's mean my answers are **correct!** Maybe your 'A' is really an 'F'! That must be it! I win the bet!" (Watterson, Attack 40). In the strip following this one, Calvin explains to Hobbes that he

flunked the math quiz and had to pay Susie 25 cents. "But get this!" Calvin laughs, "I cheated her! I only gave her three dimes! Ha!" (Watterson, Attack 40). Perhaps the transformation of our world image occurs when we do the "opposite" of what we have always been doing. In sum, the acceptance of our problems, rather than denial or the futile attempts to control them, catapults true healing. Being a perpetual learner also helps.

Let's explore Comic Art as Medicine and dive into our problematic "postmodern" world image and see what's on the other side...

Paradox: Synthesis of Opposites

It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.

--Sally Kempton (Frank 144).

This will be my strongest fort ever! Calvin says rolling a big snowball. With these massive walls, I'll be safe from any attack! In the last panel, Calvin is trapped within a snow fort of his own creation: Helllp! (Watterson, Treasure 79).

Our current world image might be described as problematic because it is polarized. Put simply: we live in a culture in which "either/or" thinking is the norm. We have been taught how to analyze, not synthesize. And most

of us have not been taught how to reframe problems as paradox.

A problem, as defined previously, is a state of tension or uncertainty generated by an apparently "irreconcilable clash" between two or more opposing forces, or points of view. A better description, perhaps, is that a problem is always a DICHOTOMY.

Dichotomous thinking is narrow, linear, cut-and-dried, and reductionistic. When we are caught in a problem, our view contracts and, more often than not, our attention is drawn to a single angle or perspective. Perhaps I have an opinion and someone else has another, radically different, opinion. Or perhaps, I have one recollection of "what happened," and someone else has a very different interpretation of "what happened." A problem develops when each person clings to their own subjective version of reality and steadfastly declares--either implicitly or explicitly--"I am right and you are wrong!" A problem is thus comparable to a quandary, an irreconcilable *split* between two different and opposing ideas or world images. When these two opposing forces are held together in one context--a comic strip, for example--then we have created a *hermetic vessel* that reconciles these opposites.

A hermetic vessel might be described as a "space" within your world image wherein two opposites cease being dichotomous and become *something else...* a joke, for example. And that hermetic vessel, that space, is inside all of us. We all have the ability to reconcile opposites and create a more harmonious, albeit paradoxical, world image. The way we *imagine* our problems makes all the difference in the world. As James Hillman points out: "an image is not *what* you see but the way you see" (Moore, ed. 62). Perhaps our problems are caused, not by the situations or circumstances we find ourselves in, but rather, by the context we hold our circumstances in. In other words: reality might appear to be innately problematic, but it is actually our world image, our internalization of a toxic, flat, secular social reality, that is the real source of our problems. Comic Art as Medicine is a container for the fluid chaos that is so easy to be swept into, and yet so difficult to transcend. As Charles Handy notes in The Age of Paradox: "Framing the confusion is the first step to doing something about it" (17). Comic Art as Medicine teaches us how to reframe problems as paradox and is thus inherently useful in transforming our world image.

A paradox is defined as a synthesis of two (or more) opposites. A paradox might also be described as the opposite of a dichotomy, and vice-versa. For example:

good/bad; up/down; black/white. These are all paradoxes. But when we split a paradox in half--"good" and "bad," for example--we have created two separate and opposing parts (antithesis rather than synthesis), and have thus created a dichotomy or problem. In other words: when "either/or" thinking appears to be the norm, or dominant way of thought, problems are inevitable; and yet, with "both/and" thinking, the proper antidote, we begin to see the paradoxes that live at the heart of all our problems.

Technology, for example, is good/bad: it improves the quality of life and creates unexpected--and increasingly, *recognizable*--problems. In Calvin and Hobbes, the paradox of being silly/serious is paramount. Our two principle characters are playing in their sandbox:

Calvin: Here's a little town.

Hobbes: Here's a steam shovel scooping out a giant hole.

Calvin: Here comes the bulldozer, pushing thousands of barrels of toxic nuclear waste into a giant hole.

Calvin: Over the years, these dangerous poisons seep into underground waterways.

Calvin: The cancer rate of the nearby little town triples.

Hobbes: If you want me, I'll be under the bed
(Watterson, Yukon 13)

Calvin's world image is quite paradoxical. Our hero, for example, often collapses two "incongruent" ideas into

one context. Calvin tells Hobbes: "You know, I don't think Math is a science. I think it's a religion." "A religion?" asks Hobbes. "Yeah. All these equations are like miracles. You take two numbers and when you add them, they magically become one new number! No one can say how it happens. You either believe it or you don't. The whole book is full of things that have to be accepted on faith! It's a religion!" Calvin exclaims. "And in public schools, no less. Call a lawyer," comments Hobbes sarcastically. "As a math atheist," Calvin declares, "I should be excused from this" (Watterson, Attack 112).

Paradox is the essence of all Comic Art and yet is surprisingly missing from nearly all books on cartooning. Quite often, the beginning cartoonist will concentrate on "form and technique," with little emphasis on developing a paradoxical world view. Many aspiring cartoonists might think "paradoxically" and yet have probably received little training on how to reframe problems as paradox. In other words, developing a paradoxical world image has been largely absent from the aspiring cartoonist's milieu; that is, until now.

If we try to understand paradox inside our conventional modernist or postmodernist frame of mind, we will fall into an abyss. As Jung notes, "Paradox... does more justice to

the unknowable than clarity can do, for uniformity of meaning robs the mystery of its darkness and sets it up as something that is known" (Jacobi 259). To the conventional mind, paradox is an enigma: jargon at best, gobbledygook at worst. No, we cannot understand paradox in a hyper-rational or an anti-rational world view. We must cultivate, as Zen Buddhism tells us, a "beginner's mind." Otherwise our whole venture of seeing Comic Art as Medicine will collapse into a heap of words and crumble into kfijJofwQnj^#*.. .!

Comic Art as Medicine is thus valuable *beyond* reason. Indeed, Comic Art as Medicine restores paradox to a medium that has far more *depth* than meets the eye. Depth, too, might appear abstract to most ears. Depth refers to the deep interior, to that which lives beyond our rationalistic, empirical frame of mind. We are now getting closer and closer to that "forbidden realm" in the world of academia: the non-linear. Non-linear thinking is often not cultivated when we are young. "Think straight," we are told. "Be reasonable," we have been taught. The non-linear "inner world of imagination" is discouraged at school, as we have seen in Calvin's inevitable clashes with Miss Wormwood. Imagination lives in one context; reason, in another. It is quite hard to "define" or "describe" imagination using the language of reason. Imagination is linked more with the

intuitive, holistic "right brain," whereas reason is linked more with the linear, analytical "left brain."

Paradox appears spontaneously with holistic, nonlinear thinking. Comic Art as Medicine will help us invoke that state of mind. Comic Art as Medicine transforms conventional "either/or" *thinking* into "both/and" *knowing*. Humor makes the illogical seem... well, logical. This is the nature of paradox and the comic: we enjoy being "deceived" and then discovering the "truth"; we enjoy seeing the big guy conquer the little guy who, at the last possible moment, thwarts his aggressor. Paradox opens up life's mysteries by helping us enter the realm of unknowable, a place largely foreign to the world of academia. Perhaps humor--through the process of bypassing our conventional state of mind--is a *mindless* activity after all. Put differently, paradox relies on imagination in the same way that reason relies on order.

In order to understand the non-linear nature of reframing problems as paradox, let's begin with a key premise: problems are *both* attractive *and* repelling. "Why do we focus so intensely on our problems," Hillman asks, "What draws us to them? Why are they so attractive? They have the magnet power of love: somehow we desire our problems; we are in love with them much as we want to get

rid of them...." (Moore, ed. 275). "Eww, mud," Calvin says, sticking out his tongue, "Look at this gooshy, dirty, slimy, thick wet muck!" "Blecchh," he shrugs, walking away. "Talk about a kid magnet!" Calvin beams, ready to pounce (Watterson, Homicidal 98). Problems, like mud, are both repelling and attractive--this is perhaps the biggest paradox of all!

We all like problems, whether we are conscious of this or not. Our world image, and the social reality that enfolds it, is also both attractive and repelling. We are constantly surrounded by "information" that is both useful and useless, illuminating and confusing, sacred and profane--and it often difficult to tell the wheat from the chaff. When we are caught in the midst of a problem, it is best to be neutral and not take sides; this will clarify our vision. Reframing problems as paradox requires a willingness to tolerate confusion and ambivalence. In other words, we must be willing to see conflict in a new light. "Conflict is not necessarily bad or evil. It is as much a part of social existence as is the desire for harmony and integration. We tend, however, to deny conflict in ourselves and in our environment. Therefore, we fail to appreciate that some conflict is positive and desireable" (Feuerstein 5).

Accepting conflict as useful and valuable requires a willingness to see that our problems arise first and foremost within our world image. Usually, in the normal course of events, we tend to view our problems as caused by something or someone "outside" of ourselves, by forces that appear beyond our control. This is the nature of "cause-and-effect," "if-then" reasoning, "either-or" thinking. But, as William Glasser points out in Control Theory: "Everything we think, do, and feel is generated by what happens inside of us." For example, the red light does not cause us to stop, nor does the ringing of a telephone cause us to answer it (1).

Do Calvin's problems live "out there" (in social reality) and or "in here" (in his world image)? Is he merely a hapless "victim of circumstance," unable to create any lasting changes in his life? **"I've been disempowered! My centering, self-actualizing anima has been impacted by toxic, co-dependent dysfunctionality!"** Calvin screams. "You've been temporarily inconvenienced. Take out the trash," his mother says. "Are you saying there's a difference?!" Calvin asks (Watterson, Homicidal 130). In another strip, Calvin gives Hobbes a "sermon" about responsibility, or the lack thereof: "Nothing I do is my fault. My family is dysfunctional and my parents won't empower me! Consequently, I'm not self-actualized! My

behavior is addictive functioning in a toxic codependency! I need holistic healing and wellness before I'll accept any responsibilities for my actions!" "One of us needs to stick his head in a bucket of ice water," Hobbes comments. "*I love the culture of victimhood*," Calvin beams (Watterson, Homicidal 50; italics added).

Calvin's problems live inside his world image: changing his circumstances without changing his world image accomplishes nothing--what he really needs to do is learn how to *distinguish* his world image from the matrix of social reality. But, alas, he doesn't and this is why his circumstances never change. We, the reader, however, can learn from Calvin's mistakes because we are blessed with the power of detachment. The ability to detach ourselves from our problems is the first step in learning how to transform them. The vantage point from which we view our circumstances leads us to yet another facet of paradox: what is a problem for Calvin is simultaneously a paradox for us, the audience. Here's an example: Hobbes, suspended in mid air, is about to pounce our hero (Watterson, Homicidal cover). We, as a detached observer, see both characters at once; if we saw only Hobbes or only Calvin, there would be no tension between opposites. But when we see both figures together, we see a synthesis of opposites. A paradoxical

image for us, the viewer; a problematic image for Calvin, who is unaware of Hobbes.

Paradox is also prevalent in characterization. Why do most comic strip series, for example, thrive on a seemingly "incompatible" cast of characters? Calvin and his parents, for instance, have very "incongruent" world views. And even Hobbes often has a very different outlook on life compared to Calvin. Why the dissimilarities? Why, it makes perfect nonsense. One of the joys of Comic Art is the experience that occurs when two "world images" collide. "To understand human creativity, says Arthur Koestler, it helps if we can first grasp the structure of wit (the word means both humour and inventiveness). In humorous stories... we witness a surprise collision between two self-consistent but mutually incompatible frames of reference" (Hampden-Turner 100).

For our purposes here, humor is defined as a surprise collision between two (or more) opposing ideas or world images, often characterized by the build up of tension followed by a punchline, or resolution. Humor is a wonderful tool for seeing world images collide, as the following Sunday strip illustrates:

Calvin: If you could have anything in the world right now, what would it be?

Hobbes: ..hmm...

Calvin: Anything at all! Whatever you want!

Hobbes: A sandwich.

Calvin: A sandwich?!? What kind of stupid wish is that?!

Calvin: Talk about a failure of imagination! I'd ask for a trillion billion dollars, my own space shuttle, and a private continent!

Hobbes (eating a sandwich while Calvin sulks): I got my wish (Watterson, Tenth 201).

In this strip, Calvin and Hobbes each answer the same question from two radically different points of view. The question remains the same, but *how* they answer it reveals something unique about each character's personality: Hobbes approaches the question from what is *possible*; Calvin, from what is highly *impossible*. Hobbes gets his wish and is happy; Calvin doesn't get his wish and is frustrated.

Watterson comments on this particular strip:

Some of my strips end up being little sermons, and this can be annoying and sappy if it's not handled lightly. One of the ongoing jokes in the strip is that Calvin usually learns the wrong lesson from his experiences, if he learns anything at all. Calvin's expression in the last panel suggests that he is resisting the moral here too. (Tenth 201)

To reiterate: Calvin and Hobbes each have a different world image, the collision of which results in humor. The strip is a container that reconciles these two "incongruent" world images. Hobbes, for example, likes girls; Calvin does not. When Calvin's horoscope reads "Emphasize Romance. Opposite sex finds you irresistible. Lucky day for love,"

Calvin appears angst-ridden, whereas Hobbes is quite cheerful (Watterson, Days 62). Paradox appears to be the elixir that meshes these two opposites into a cohesive, albeit incongruent, fit--or is it an *incongruent*, albeit *cohesive*, *fit*??

Calvin and Hobbes gives us the opportunity to see Calvin's problematic world image--his illusive, delusional construction of reality--as paradoxical and humorous, even if Calvin cannot. In other words: what is a problem to the characters *inside* the strip is simultaneously a paradox to the audience *outside* the strip. During the Christmas season, for example, being bad (instead of good) is definitively a problem for our hero. "They say Santa knows if you've been good or bad, but what if someone had been sort of **both**?" Calvin tells Hobbes. "I mean, suppose some kid **tried** to be good... at least, well, most of the time... but bad things inexplicably kept happening? Suppose some kid just had terrible luck, and he got blamed for a lot of things he did only **sort** of on purpose?" "Who exactly might we be talking about?" asks Hobbes. "This is a purely hypothetical case, Mr. Smartypants" (Watterson, Yukon 99).

In the above strip, we, the reader, see Calvin's "problem" from one angle; Calvin, from a different angle. We are able to see the humor in a situation that Calvin

takes quite seriously. Indeed, many Calvin and Hobbes strips are both silly and serious, or silly/serious. Is the issue of good vs. bad, silly vs. serious, self-awareness vs. self-deception an irreconcilable quandary? Or is good/bad, silly/serious, self-awareness/self-deception a paradox of the highest degree? Well, it all depends on your perspective!

Paradox offers us two perspectives at once. A problem is typically one-dimensional; a paradox, on the other hand, is a multi-faceted. A problem restricts thinking, whereas a paradox expands thinking. In other words, thinking paradoxically stretches one's normal frame of reference laterally and exponentially. Here's an example: "**Bath time, Calvin!**" Calvin's mom yells. She looks all through the house but cannot find him. In the last panel, we, the audience, find Calvin "hiding" in the bathtub: "She'll never look here" (Watterson, Yukon 93). Calvin's mom wants our hero to take a bath, but Calvin doesn't like baths; hence, two irreconcilable world images. Comic Art, however, creates an excellent container for reconciling these two opposing images. Calvin "out-smarts" his mom by doing exactly what she wants him to do but does not expect him to do, and therein lies humor. We see both "frames" at once: what is a problem for Calvin's mother (she has one view) is a paradox for us (we have both views).

Indeed, another facet of paradox is that we, the audience, often have access to information that the characters in the strip do not. When we interpret at the *same content from different contexts*, humor is often the result. "'Content' means the thing itself and 'context' means how you interact with it" (Leonard and Laut 1). Here are a few examples. "I have to go. Bad," Calvin tells his teacher. "All right," she replies. In the next panel, Calvin is home. "What are **you** doing home?!" his mother exclaims. "I had to go," Calvin replies (Watterson, Weirdos 92). Miss Wormwood and Calvin each hold "I have to go" in different contexts; we, the reader, infer both. In another example, Calvin smiles at his mom: "Hi, it's me, your big accomplishment in life." "I'm depressed," Calvin's Mom tells his Dad (Watterson, Treasure 45). Calvin's words are the same, but Calvin's "positive interpretation" and his Mom's "negative interpretation" differ radically. We, the reader, are privy to both.

As observers, Calvin and Hobbes offers us three perspectives at once: we see Calvin as a "subjective self," we see Calvin as an "objective person," and see everything that is "not-Calvin." Our awareness is much greater than Calvin's, as the following gag illustrates:

Calvin: Psst, Susie! What's the answer to question two?

Susie: "Eli Whitney and the cotton gin."

Calvin: But this is a math problem.

Susie: It's a trick question.

Calvin: How come you wrote something different?

Susie: I'm going to get this question wrong, so it won't look like you copied.

Calvin: Wow, thanks!

Susie: Oh, I owe it to you. (Watterson, Treasure 21).

"Oh, I owe it to you" lives inside of a *devilish* context for Susie and a *benevolent* context for Calvin. We are aware that Calvin is being deceived but he is oblivious--and therein lies humor!

Content is *what* we see; context is *how* we see. Humor, like beauty and reality, appear in the *mind's eye* of the beholder. How can we learn how to reframe our problems into paradox? Our best bet: be mindful of the language we use to describe reality. Calvin, for example, doesn't like the term "the big bang." "That's the whole problem with science," he tells Hobbes, "You've got a bunch of empiricists trying to describe things of unimaginable wonder." "What would you call the creation of the universe?" asks Hobbes. "'**The horrendous space kablooie!**'" our hero exclaims (Watterson, Days 101). Perhaps the Universe is both "empirical" and "wonderful," and the REAL problem lives inside how we *describe* the Universe. When

our world image separates the "empirical" from the "wonderful," for example, and elevates the former at the expense of the latter, we have declared an inner civil war between the empirical sciences and the magic of wonder. Put another way, when we contemplate the wonders of life and slice them up into an empirical heap, our world image has taken the sacred and made it secular. Perhaps science and wonder are actually two sides of the same coin, rather than different denominations...?

And perhaps the "problems" we want to change, solve, and get rid of, once accepted, are inherently valuable when held in the right context. More often than not, however, we tend to see our problems as obstacles to be overcome, rather than as paradoxes to be embraced. Indeed, what is "useless" to one person, may be "useful" to another:

Hobbes: Whatcha doin'?
Calvin: Looking for frogs.

Hobbes: How come?
Calvin: I must obey the inscrutable exhortations of my soul.

Hobbes (joining him): Ah, but of course.
Calvin: My mandate also includes weird bugs
(Watterson, Tenth 196).

How we view reality is always a matter of perspective, as the above strip illustrates. At any given moment, what our world image needs may be at odds with what social reality wants us to have. We might see problems as "worthless";

that's one context. But perhaps problems are "worthwhile" as an impetus to personal growth and the transformation of our world image; that's another context. In either case--whether we despise our problems or embrace them--problems are always "worthy" of our attention.

Learning from our mistakes is inherently valuable. When Calvin assembles a model airplane without reading the directions, he creates a mess. "I can't think of an afternoon I've enjoyed less," he tells Hobbes, "What a waste. What a dumb hobby." But then, in the following panel, an *insight*: "...of course, with this for practice, I'll bet we could do great on another model!" (Watterson, Weirdos 32). Problems are actually opportunities in disguise. In the preceding example, Calvin was able to discover the secret or concealed paradox hidden within every problem. Put differently, Calvin was able to learn from his mistakes--something he rarely does. More often than not, however, Calvin does NOT learn from his mistakes and keeps repeating the same problems over and over again. This is quite amusing to the reader, but rather frustrating for our hero.

In one strip, Calvin is "forced" to play outside by his Dad. Calvin "refuses" to have fun--he would rather watch TV. Paradoxically, Calvin does have fun playing outside, so

much fun, in fact, that when his father tells him it's time for bed, our hero wants to stay out longer. "Ha! First you didn't want to go out, and now you don't want to come in!" his father tells him, "See, by not watching TV, you had more fun, and now you'll have memories of something real you **did**, instead of something fake you just **watched**." In the last panel, Calvin lies in bed, feeling dejected: "Nothing spoils fun like finding out it builds character" (Watterson, Attack 9).

Our world image and social reality are actually two sides of the same coin: once we see this, we will experience paradox. **"I stand firm in my belief of what's right! I refuse to compromise my principles!"** Calvin yells. In the next panel, Calvin's face is filled with fear as his mother enters the panel. In the last frame, Calvin is in the bathtub: "I don't need to compromise my principles, because they don't have the slightest bearing on what happens to me anyway" (Watterson, Attack 53). Calvin's principles (world image) appears to be at odds with his mother's world image (social reality). No matter how much Calvin tries to "change" his world image or "change" social reality, the path of least resistance always pulls him back to where he started. Another way of saying this: the more Calvin tries to empower himself, the more he *simultaneously* disempowers

himself! Calvin simply doesn't have the tools to transform his world image.

In sum, Calvin's world image, or construct of reality, is quite problematic... or paradoxical, depending on how we look at it. Calvin can be *cynical* in one strip: "When I grow up, I want to be a radical terrorist" (Watterson, Calvin 51); and *humane* in another: "It's hard to believe people still starve in this world" (Watterson, Something 48). The ultimate paradox? Calvin, despite his embeddedness into social order, and his over attachment to his problems, is sometimes painfully aware of paradox: "Dad, how do soldiers killing each other solve the world's problems?" (Watterson, Attack 106).

Fantasy as Reality: The Power of Imagination

The psyche creates reality every day. The only expression I can use for this activity is fantasy.

--C. G. Jung (Jacobi 9).

Any monsters under my bed tonight?? Calvin asks. *Nope! No! Uh-uh.* is the reply (Watterson, Calvin 9).

Calvin and Hobbes is a "comic strip" and is thus "not real," right? Well, if that is true, why do we laugh? We

would not be reading Comic Art if it wasn't "real."
Literature, of which Comic Art transcends and includes,
takes on an intrinsic reality of its own in the mind, or
imagination, of the beholder. Put simply: we do not
passively read Comic Art--we experience it and participate
in the unfolding of passive images into active fantasies.
This, too, appears quite paradoxical. With humor, William
Fry notes in Sweet Madness, "a part of life is set aside; it
is designated as being fantasy, as not being real. Paradox
revolves all about it. If it is unreal, it is real; if it
is real, it is fantasy" (143).

The unreal is real, the real is unreal: the ability to
take what we see, hold it in our imagination, and respond
requires participation. In like fashion, the transformation
of our world image also requires our focused attention. The
ability to shift context between Comic Art as a product to
Comic Art as a process is essential.

Comic Art as Medicine helps us view comics as a scared
object that acts as a medium, or middle ground, between the
visible world of social reality and the invisible world of
imagination. In this sense, Comic Art is our ambassador to
the "unconscious underworld." Comic Art as Medicine is
read, not simply as mere entertainment or social commentary,
but as a myth, a parable, a postmodern fairy tale, a story

not unlike the story we tell ourselves about the way life is. Indeed, Comic Art as Medicine reunites us with the inner world of imagination, giving us access to the tools we will need to empower ourselves and transform our world image.

By way of illustration, Calvin and Hobbes, more than any other recent comic strip series, quite literally exemplifies the power of imagination: Calvin frequently uses fantasy to create the reality he wants in the "inner world" of his imagination--he just hasn't been able to figure out how to use fantasy to create the reality he wants in the "outer world" of form! Calvin's inner circumstances may change, but his outer circumstances never. Thus, Calvin's imagination, rather than empowering him, often disempowers him by getting him into trouble with the powers that be. Indeed, Calvin often appears to have very little control of his imagination. In like fashion, we, too, when "stuck" inside of a world image we forgot we created, also appear to have very little control. Fortunately, the ability to tap into the "power of imagination" is always at our disposal once we learn how.

As Bruno Bettelheim notes in The Uses of Enchantment: "To the child, there is no clear line separating objects from living things...." (46). Calvin is attacked by "snow

goons" (Watterson, Attack 85-90), or is abducted by aliens (Watterson, Tenth 197); Calvin hears monsters talking from under his bed (Watterson, Calvin 9), or becomes two-dimensional (Watterson, Yukon 9); Calvin's backyard becomes populated with dinosaurs (Watterson, Days 74), or turns into a baron planet (Watterson, Tenth 195); Calvin is transformed into "Stupendous Man" (Watterson, Homicidal 69-74), or shrinks down to the size of an insect (Watterson, Something 82); Calvin's bed and chair spring to life (Watterson, Something 106), or he is chased by his bicycle (Watterson, Homicidal 131); and Calvin is attacked by a growing pile of leaves (Watterson, Treasure 28), or is devoured by his breakfast (Watterson, Homicidal 104).

Calvin--like the postmodernist trapped inside a problematic world image riddled with dichotomies--has trouble distinguishing *fantasy* from *reality*. "As Piaget has shown, the child's thinking remains animistic until the age of puberty. His parents and teachers tell him that things cannot feel and act; and as much as he may pretend to believe this to please these adults, or not be ridiculed, deep down the child knows better" (Bettelheim 46). In one sequence, for example, Calvin and Hobbes travel in a "time machine"--a cardboard box!--to the Jurassic Age. "All we need are a few good dinosaur photos and we'll be rich when we get home," Calvin tells his companion. Fantasy replaces

reality: Calvin and Hobbes are shown surrounded by "real" dinosaurs. Later, when Calvin tells his mom where he's been, she replies: "You were playing in a cardboard box out back." Likewise, when Calvin shows his Dad the photos he took, his Dad says "I didn't realize dinosaurs looked so small and plastic." In the end, Calvin is frustrated because his dad doesn't "believe" him (Watterson, Scientific 123-126).

In order to transform our world image, we must learn how to distinguish fantasy from reality, a paradoxical journey to be sure! We will need to understand *experientially*, and not just *conceptually*, HOW reality is created through fantasy. When we learn how to use fantasy in a constructive way, we will then have the tools we need to create the reality we truly want. Indeed, the ability to NOT differentiate fantasy from reality, within the perimeters of a flexible world image, can actually be quite useful. When we try to "actualize a dream," for example, aren't we simply holding fantasy and reality in the same context? Put another way: when we have an idea and take actions to make it come true, we are intentionally creating a "fantasy/reality" paradox--which is quite different than a dichotomy. Recall that a paradox views fantasy and reality as two sides of the same coin, whereas a dichotomy sees two radically different denominations. A "fantasy/reality"

paradox empowers us by using fantasy to create the circumstances we want, whereas a "fantasy" and "reality" dichotomy disempowers us by using fantasy a hollow substitute for escaping the present moment. An elusive pipe dream may help us avoid our current circumstances, but seldom, if ever, helps us create what we want.

Calvin has a wonderful knack for reframing his external circumstances within the context of his imagination. Put differently: Calvin likes to daydream. Calvin's daydreams are a cogent reminder that reality, far from being the ultimate truth, lives inside the mind of the beholder. In an early Sunday strip, for example, we see a monster barging into Calvin's bedroom shouting "**What's all the noise?!**" and then, in the next panel, we see Calvin's Dad leaving Calvin's room covered with rubber-tipped arrows (Watterson, Calvin 8). In another Sunday strip from a much later period, we glimpse Calvin's ability to "reframe problems as paradox" par excellence: Calvin is shown coalescing with a herd of cattle, having his head filled with green liquid on a conveyer belt, and transmogrified into a hamster on a treadmill, to name only a few images. At the bottom of the page, in an open, borderless panel, we find our hero and his companion coasting downhill on his red wagon: "Another typical school day?" Hobbes asks (Watterson, Homicidal 80). Our conventional frame of mind might interpret this Sunday

page as a heap of silly non-sequiturs, whereas a paradoxical state of mind might view these surreal images as symbols expressing Calvin's disdain for public education--perhaps better than words could ever express. Calvin's imagination speaks the language of metaphor, a language we too will need to explore if we want to transform our world image.

In one sense, fantasy and reality appear superimposed on top of each other, and yet in Calvin and Hobbes they are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition--and apparent dichotomy--exists because Comic Art is a sequential art form and has to live inside those perimeters. But are fantasy and reality really divided? And, likewise, when we create a dream that demands fulfillment, can the gap between current reality and our goal, or vision, ever be bridged? The answer lives inside the plasticity of our world image and our willingness to take action on behalf of our dream.

Comic Art as Medicine requires a multifaceted world view. In Calvin and Hobbes, for example, we see Calvin's *form* (the "outer Calvin"), Calvin's *subjective self* (the "inner Calvin"), and Calvin's environment (everything that is "not-Calvin"). We see all three at once! In like fashion, each of us has the ability to experience ourselves in a new light: the personal "I", the interpersonal "we", and the transpersonal "Not-I". We are all unfolding human

beings, capable of creating a world image that honors imagination as our divine birthright, rather than as simply an idle childish pastime or a whimsical luxury.

In sum, although Calvin's circumstances appear rigid and unchangeable, our hero does have a rich fantasy life, creating imaginary companions, fictitious personas, and surreal environments. But perhaps his greatest creation, and closest companion, is Hobbes.

Love and Fear: "The Animal in Man"

When we say "the animal in man," this always strikes us as something horrible. But this animal in man is not horrible, no more than animals are horrible, for they fulfill their Creators purpose. We do not do this. We meddle with the work of the Creator, for we are always want to be something different from what we are.

--C.G. Jung (Jacobi 310-311).

I sure am glad you're an animal. Animals sometimes make a lot more sense than people do.

--Calvin to Hobbes (Watterson, Yukon 71).

Comic Art as Medicine views facial expressions as a river of emotion. Emotion might be described as "energy in motion." Better still, emotion is the lifeblood to the inner world of imagination. Truthfulness begins with an awareness of what we are thinking and feeling, and not simply with what we ought to think and feel. In order to

transform our world image, we must be aware of our internal reactions to external circumstances. We must be cognizant of affect, or our lack thereof. Social reality wraps certain boundaries around our world image by "limiting" the types of emotions that are "normal" or "acceptable" for public display. Some feelings, we have been told, are "good" and some are "bad." In many contemporary comic strips, the principle characters are quite often emotionally dead. In a traditional comic strip series like Blondie, for example, most characters have a very limited emotional palette. Dagwood, for instance, has a very narrow range of affect: he has a happy face, a sad face, a sleepy face, etc., with very little gradations in between. Calvin and Hobbes, however, conveys a wide spectrum of emotion, the largest, perhaps, of any other comic strip series. Watterson can take a seemingly simple emotion like anger and squeeze out every nuance and subtle shade. Seeing our private emotions externalized and exaggerated in Comic Art enlarges our imagination and is thus an important part of transforming our world image.

Love and fear, two principle emotions, appear frequently in Calvin and Hobbes. Indeed, it is the interaction of our two principle characters that trigger the most emotion. Hobbes, for example, likes to "pounce" our hero, and Calvin likes to nuzzle tiger tummies. Indeed,

Calvin is both very fond of Hobbes AND is very afraid of Hobbes. We thus find the paradox of "love/fear"--the desire for connection and the pain of separation--deeply embedded within their relationship. Understanding the interrelatedness of these two emotions offers us insight into the nature of paradox. As The Course of Miracles reveals: "love is letting go of fear."

Hobbes was originally introduced as a toy tiger who came to life via Calvin's active imagination. Hobbes, however, is more than simply an "imaginary companion" or a sounding board for Calvin's philosophical ponderings and half-baked ideas. Hobbes is an anthropomorphic synthesis between a human being and a tiger, and is thus more symbolic than tangible. "A symbol (something compounded) is usually composed of a *thesis* (woman, for instance) and *antithesis* (a fish, which is "opposite" to woman) whose combination produces a synthesis, a symbol (mermaid) with a meaning that is beyond a simple woman or a simple fish" (Pascal 228). The synthesis of man and beast further elaborates the paradoxical nature of being human: is it really possible to call ourselves "rational" without fully integrating our pre-rational nature? Put differently: when we "disown" our primal instincts in order to be civilized, what types of problems might arise?

Rather than thinking of Hobbes an imaginary companion, Hobbes might best be described as Calvin's "animal totem," an inanimate object fused with life. If we put our hero on the couch, we could say that Calvin is projecting his "primal nature," or "shadow side," onto Hobbes. Hobbes is Calvin's link to the pre-rational world of nature. Hobbes does not live within the framework of social reality; rather, Hobbes lives within the world of instinct and imagination. Through the process of enculturation, we have given up our "animalistic" tendencies and have become "civilized," or so we've been told. The goal of socialization is to "fit in" the matrix of social reality, but the price we pay for being "normal" is often at the expense of our humanity, our capacity for being "multifaceted" human being. In other words, no matter how rational and civilized we've become, our world image is still largely controlled by love and fear, our so-called "baser instincts." And the harder we try to control, deny, or hide our animal nature, the more it erupts in pathological forms.

Calvin and Hobbes are frequently shown playing in the woods. The woods appear in fairy tales as enchanted and magical, a far cry from the pavement lined streets and skyscrapers that fill our cities. "Calvin's woods is important to the strip because it's the place where Calvin

and Hobbes can get away from everyone and be themselves," explains Watterson, "The solitude of the woods brings out Calvin's small, but redeeming, contemplative side" (Tenth 104). The woods reveal nature; the city, social reality.

Calvin's woods are a place of refuge for our hero. In one sequence, Calvin asks Hobbes to teach him how to be a tiger. Calvin dresses like a tiger and the two head for the woods. "This book says tigers are solitary and secretive creatures," comments Calvin (Watterson, Weirdos 14). The book also says that "tigers are territorial and won't share their grounds with other tigers" (Watterson, Weirdos 15). Hobbes reads a passage: "It says tigers nearly faced extinction and their future remains in doubt" (Watterson, Weirdos 17). Calvin learns a lot about tigers--more from the book than from Hobbes. But there is one thing that Calvin cannot learn: "It's instinct. You can't teach that," says Hobbes (Watterson, Weirdos 14).

Hobbes is secretive, instinctual, and territorial. Indeed, Hobbes can also be quite sly and deceptive. In one strip, for example, Hobbes refuses to let down the rope to the G.R.O.S.S. tree house, requiring our hero to repeat the secret password:

Tigers are mean!
Tigers are fierce!
Tigers have teeth

And claws that pierce!

Tigers are great!
They can't be beat!
If I was a tiger,
That would be neat! (Watterson, Something 119)

Hobbes likes to pounce our hero when Calvin arrives home from school. "Every day this maniac is so glad to see me that he blasts out like a big orange torpedo! A **dog** will just wag its tail, but of course a **tiger** has to **pounce** on you! Stupid animal!" Calvin tells Susie. Calvin continues: "Oh, and don't think he doesn't enjoy the cunning and treachery of it all! Tigers **live** for the thrill of a sneak attack! It's their evil nature!" (Watterson, Scientific 19). In one strip, Hobbes pounces Calvin, leaving his clothes soiled and his face a mess: "What did you do, step on a land mine?" his mother asks (Watterson, Revenge 5). In another strip, Hobbes pounces Calvin and a fight ensues until both are exhausted. "What on earth happened?" Calvin's mom asks. "Let's just say sometimes I wish I had a gerbil," replies Calvin (Watterson, Yukon 67). And, in another strip, Calvin comments: "The problem with having a tiger for a friend is that he always appears out of nowhere, coming right at you at a good 90 miles an hour!" (Watterson, Weirdos 75).

Hobbes is Calvin's link to the natural world. We might think of Hobbes as Calvin's "animal helper," a common motif in fairy tales. "Both dangerous and helpful animals stand for our animal nature, our instinctual drives," writes Bettelheim, "The dangerous ones symbolize our untamed id.... The helpful animals represent our natural energy... but now made to serve the best interests of the total personality" (76). "Natural exuberance is one of those qualities that makes us tigers so darn enduring," comments Hobbes (Watterson, Yukon 7). Hobbes has an instinctual urge to pounce: "You can take the tiger out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the tiger!" notes Hobbes (Watterson, Revenge 93). In one strip, Calvin attempts to appease Hobbes' "evil nature" by affectionately rubbing his sleeping companion's tummy: "**That** ought to get me out of a few years purgatory," Calvin smiles at the reader (Watterson, Yukon 95).

Hobbes is an embodiment of love and fear: he both pounces our hero and, intermittently, offers tender affection. In one strip, Hobbes lies asleep in the first panel. In the second panel, Calvin is shown excitedly running. In the third panel, Calvin nuzzles Hobbes tummy. And in the last panel, Calvin is beat to a pulp, walking away smiling: "It's a high price to pay, but nuzzling tiger tummies is one of the great pleasures of life" (Watterson,

Days 168). In one strip, Calvin tells Susie: "Beneath that soft exterior lie terrible mandibles of bone-crushing death! Each mighty paw hides razor-sharp claws to rip the living hide off any human that wanders too close! He's a monster!" Susie hugs Hobbes and smiles: "No, he's not. He's a big cutie" (Watterson, Something 25).

Thus, aside from the pounce attacks, Hobbes can be tender and affectionate. "Tigers are very comforting," comments Calvin, "I always fall right asleep when I listen to Hobbes breathing" (Watterson, Revenge 67). In another strip, Calvin gives Hobbes a hug for Christmas: "The best presents don't come in boxes. I'll treasure this one forever," says Hobbes (Watterson, Revenge 15). And in another strip, Calvin walks wearily with his tongue out: "What a rotten day." He nuzzles Hobbes' belly and sighs: "Ahhhh..." Calvin walks away refreshed: "Fuzz therapy," he smiles (Watterson, Something 52). In one strip, Calvin is afraid of the dark. "At nighttime, the world always seems so big and scary, and I always seem so small," Calvin says. He holds Hobbes: "Things are never quite as scary when you've got a best friend" (Watterson, Revenge 72). According to Watterson: "...I would hope that the friendship between Calvin and Hobbes is so complex that it would transcend a normal fantasy" (West 61).

Hobbes appears pre-rational and yet, paradoxically, he also appears to be quite... well, trans-rational. "Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man?" Calvin asks Hobbes, jumping over rocks. "I'm not sure man needs the help," Hobbes replies. "You just can't talk to animals about these things," Calvin says (Watterson, Homicidal 54). Indeed, Hobbes often appears to be quite wise. On a camping trip, Calvin becomes bored: "There's nothing to **do** here." "That's sort of the point, don't you think?" Hobbes comments, "It's good to stop running around. Sometimes one should just look at things and think about things, without **doing** things" (Watterson, Weirdos 59). A form of mindfulness? Our secular, materialistic social reality tends to emphasize *doing* at the expense of *looking* and *thinking* and *being*. The transformation of our world image requires the subtle art of contemplation and reflection, a bonafide necessity that is often not included on our busy list of things to do.

In one strip, Hobbes clobbers our hero with a cavalcade of snowballs: "Are you ready for unconditional surrender?" he asks. "That above all else," Calvin replies (Watterson, Treasure 133). To surrender to the "animal in man"--and to the "healing imagination" that is released--requires a new attitude towards ourselves and our place in the Cosmos. Do

we dare face our instincts and embrace the paradox of love/fear? Can we cultivate a renewed relationship with the "unknowable" and with what Zen Buddhism calls "the face we had before our parents were born"? "Made in God's own image, yes sir!" Calvin beams, flexing his muscles in the mirror. "God must have a goofy sense of humor," Hobbes ponders (Watterson, Treasure 31). Calvin and Hobbes have a very paradoxical relationship; but, despite their differences, they are the best of friends.

"Crazy Wisdom": Calvin as Holy Fool

Look over the comic strips you read daily and notice which are based on turning around commonly held beliefs about reality. Find examples of how comic strips "upside-down" things, "opposite" them, or "backward" them.

--Louis M. Savary and Margaret Ehlen-Miller (97).

The traditional single viewpoint has been abandoned! Perspective has been fractured!

--Calvin in a neo-cubist world (Watterson, Scientific 120).

"The purpose of Spiritual practice is to 'deconstruct' our carefully constructed consensus reality so that we can recover the Reality that lies beneath, or beyond, all our signs and symbols," writes Georg Feuerstein (123). Calvin, for example, often takes the established ways of doing things and turns them upside down. In one strip, for

instance, he wears his paints and shoes on his head and his shirt on his legs (Watterson, Scientific 30). Indeed, Feuerstein's description of "crazy-wise adepts, holy fools, and rascal gurus" might even apply to Calvin! As Feuerstein points out:

...an adept--a master, sage, saint, or holy person--...typically instructs others in ways that are designed to startle or shock the conventional mind. From the conventional point of view, the crazy-wise teachers are eccentrics who use their eccentricity to communicate an alternative vision to that which governs ordinary life. They are masters of inversion, proficient breakers of taboos, and lovers of surprise, contradiction, and ambiguity. They share these skills and penchants with the traditional figures of the trickster and the clown. (3)

"The more you think about things, the weirder they seem," Calvin tells Hobbes, "Take this milk. Why do we drink cow milk?? Who was the guy who first looked at a cow and said, 'I think I'll drink whatever comes out of these things when I squeeze 'em!?' Isn't that weird?" Hobbes, squinting and facing the other direction, replies: "I think conversation should be kept to a minimum until afternoon" (Watterson, Homicidal 130).

Calvin and Hobbes "de-constructs" social reality: Calvin helps us see through the maya, the absurdity, of our current cultural consensus. Calvin's world image has an "illogical logic," that, while it might cause endless frustration between Calvin and the other characters, is

quite funny for us, the detached observer. Calvin has his own "idiosyncratic" way of seeing the World. Calvin plays with our *normal frame* of "reality" by adding his own *special twist*. Calvin's snowmen, for example, are anything but "typical"--much to his parents horror and the reader's delight: "You don't ~~like~~ my 'Snowman House of Horror,' ~~do~~ you?!" he asks his Mom (Watterson, Scientific 50). "Your snowmen lead tragic lives," comments Hobbes in another strip (Watterson, Treasure 103). Calvin is a wonderful "crazy/wise" teacher--even if he cannot learn from himself!

Social reality, as we have seen, sends out a lot of incongruent messages. These incongruencies, when held in an irreconcilable context, can appear quite problematic and confusing. But when these incongruencies are held together as paradox, they can quite amusing... and perhaps even illuminating. Calvin, as a holy fool, shoots holes through social reality. But when we "deconstruct" social reality, we often find a hollow center. Does this mean life is empty and meaningless, leaving only nihilism to fill the cracks? Or, perhaps our lives are an interwoven Zen tapestry: life *is* empty and meaningless--awake and be enlightened!

Comic Art and Transformation

*The Soul is more inclusive, more encompassing,
than reason.*

--William Barrett (19).

*I go to school, but I never learn what I want to
know.*

--Calvin (Watterson, Weirdos 109).

"Calvin, your test was an absolute disgrace!" complains Miss Wormwood, "It's obvious you haven't read any of the material. Our first president was **not** Chef Boy-ar-dee and you ought to be ashamed to have turned in such preposterous answers!" Calvin pauses, looking at his test, and then says to the reader: "I just don't test well" (Watterson, Treasure 23). In a complementary strip:

Miss Wormwood: If there are no more questions,
we'll move on to the next chapter.

Calvin: I have a question.

Miss Wormwood: Certainly, Calvin. What is it?

Calvin: What's the point of human existence?

Miss Wormwood: I meant any questions about the
subject at hand.

Calvin: Oh.

Calvin: Frankly, I'd like to have the issue
resolved before I expend any more energy on this
(Watterson, Days 36).

As these two strips point out, Calvin's thoughts tend to gravitate toward pop culture and philosophical ponderings, rather than the issues at hand. For Calvin, school is a problem. Perhaps this is because our current

social reality, as manifested through public education, brands the pre-rational as "irrational" and the trans-rational as "supernatural," dismissing them both as "unscientific" and thus "worthless." Intelligence, in modern times, is synonymous with logic and reason, science and mathematics. But isn't intelligence much grander than *that*? Howard Gardner's theory of "multiple intelligence's," for example, includes musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal as all forms of intelligence (17-26). Perhaps Calvin "doesn't test well" because his real, and unappreciated, aptitude lies in some other branch of intelligence; non-linear creativity, perhaps?

The transformation of our world image requires a multifaceted view of intelligence that is much more inclusive than our rational, logical way of thinking. Is it possible to transform our world image while refusing to acknowledge it and let it go? Calvin's disdain toward rote learning, coupled with a world image that "fits" very comfortably within the confines of social reality, underlies this fundamental paradox. We simply cannot change our world image within the confines of our ordinary perception of reality.

Do we dare step outside all that is familiar--no matter how problematic or confusing it may be--and step into the "unknowable"?

Where does the future reside? Social reality tells us that the future lives in science, technology, computers, outer space, and global communication. We live in a "high-tech" world/world view that equates *technology* with *progress*, a paradigm in which consumerism reigns supreme--or at least that's what we've been told. "All societies are rapidly becoming consumer societies in which the production and acquisition of consumer goods and services is viewed as the ultimate sign of human progress" (Altschuler & Regush 23). And yet:

The advanced consumer societies such as the United States, Canada, Japan, and West Germany are now world models of progress, despite the multitude of problems which plague these countries: pollution, spiritual poverty, meaningless work, broken families, anxiety, mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, political corruption, and mass confusion as to who one is and what one has to do to be happy. (Altschuler & Regush 23)

Or, as Calvin's Dad notes: "It's going to be a grim day when the world is run by a generation that doesn't know anything but what it sees on TV!" (Watterson, Something 100).

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" asks Calvin's Dad. "A caveman," Calvin replies (Watterson, Attack 36). In a related strip, Calvin tells his mom: "When

I grow up, I want to be a radical terrorist" (Watterson, Calvin 50). If we read Calvin's statements metaphorically, rather than literally, we might want to reclaim our "pre-rational" proclivity for imagination and "radically terrorize" our current one-dimensional world view! Perhaps the future lives is the "trans-rational," or the TRANSPERSONAL, which *transcends* and *includes* it's predecessors, the pre-rational and the rational.

"What a clear night! Look at all the stars. Millions of them!" exclaims Hobbes. "Yes," says Calvin, "We're just tiny specs on a planet particle, hurling through the infinite blackness." Calvin and Hobbes pause, looking at the stars. And then, in the last panel, Calvin starts running: "Let's go in and turn on all the lights" (Watterson, Weirdos 46). In a related strip, Calvin yells to stars: "**I'm significant!**" Our hero then pauses, commenting in the last panel: "Screamed the dust speck" (Watterson, Treasure 30). Perhaps thinking of ourselves as "separate parts" or "cogs" or "specks" is simply an *illusion*. Perhaps--in addition to being a "speck"--Calvin also encompasses the entire "spectrum"!

"Arthur Koestler coined the term *holon* to refer to that which, being a *whole* in one context, is simultaneously a *part* in another," notes Ken Wilber (Sex 18). "And if you

start to look closely at the things and processes that actually exist, it soon becomes obvious that they are not merely wholes, they are also parts of something else. They are whole/parts, they are holons" (Wilber, Brief 20). Holons, or whole/parts, remind us of our fundamental independence and interdependence within the Cosmos. "I wonder why we dream when we sleep," muses Calvin. "I think we dream so we don't have to be apart for so long," comments Hobbes, "If we're in each other's dreams, we can play together all night!" (Watterson, Attack 93).

We, the reader, enjoy, and are privy to, a wonderful advantage with regards to our friend Calvin: we know him *inside* and out. Calvin and Hobbes gives us the opportunity to see the "inner Calvin," the "outer Calvin," and everything that is "not-Calvin." A greater sense of self-awareness, a necessary step in the transformation of our world image, is available to all. Perhaps what is "out there" is also "in here": the inner "I", the social "WE", and the outer "IT" are all inclusive and interrelated. A rather heavy-handed analysis when all we are actually doing is reading a comic strip, a construction of reality in form which might, if we are willing, offer us a new perspective on life and a renewed appreciation for the feelings, sensations, and intuitive longings that our "postmodern" secular culture tends to overlook. Ken Wilber's approach to

"transpersonal psychology" is very inclusive: a world image embracing "both/and" thinking is holistic and is thus inherently valuable.

How do we create a transpersonal world image? Well, we just *make it up*! We must first know, however, that *reality-is-fantasy* and that *fantasy-is-reality--and* this can be quite disillusioning. We must withdraw all projections we have on others and take responsibility for our own subjective experience of reality. "This phenomenon of projection is how we first encounter factors that are in reality more inside ourselves than outside. In fact, most of what we observe in others and in the world around us are really projections of unconscious contents onto our outer environments...." (Pascal 82). We must also learn to distinguish our largely "unconscious" world image from the matrix of our internalized social reality. As long as they both remain collapsed, we will always be in chains, living in the midst of self-interest, control, blame, and nihilism.

The transpersonal encompasses the pre-personal and the personal, echoing our model of Comic Art as Medicine including and transcending Comic Art as Entertainment and Comic Art as Social Commentary. The transformation of Comic Art and the transformation of our world image, and the social reality that enfolds it, requires us to re-examine

our relationship with imagination. The constructive use of imagination is crucial to the re-enchantment of our everyday lives, the evolution of culture, and the transformation of higher learning. Imagination can be tapped into through the use of guided mental imagery, meditation, fairy tales, mythology, music, comparative religion, and the study of ethics and morality. Storytelling and imagination also go hand in hand. The "stories" we hear on the news, for instance, are actually quite biased and are never an accurate picture of reality. Film, too, might be viewed as a modern and postmodern myth, invoking images and insight into how reality is constructed; Courage Under Fire is but one recent example.

And, finally, Comic Art--created with integrity for its own sake, rather than simply as means toward commercial ends--is also a wonderful container for imagination. The postmodern cartoonist needs to take responsibility for the images he or she sends out into the world. As connoisseurs of Comic Art, we also need to be mindful of the images we digest: do they invoke the imagination and touch our soul, or are they simply recycled gags with flat artwork and cardboard characters? The more we grow as individuals, the more selective we will be regarding the images we feed our soul. We might also recognize that the paradoxical nature of Comic Art--perhaps more so than radio, film, and TV--

offers us the possibility of detachment from our problems. Indeed, the use of visual images juxtaposed with visible dialogue are clear indications that reality is both a subjective experience within the imagination of the beholder, and well as an objective manifestation of poesies when recontextualized as Comic Art. Seeing words and pictures side-by-side is perhaps the greatest paradox of all: how can we have one without the other? To experience reality *without thinking* is the greatest of all spiritual tasks; and to experience words without imagery is impossible because words are imagery!

We are resilient beings: we have the ability to question our own values and to "take what we like and leave the rest." Oh, it may not always be easy--life-long habits *taken for granted* die hard. Our postmodernist world view appears to be the way life is, but, to paraphrase Alan Watts: our experience of the world is a hoax! But, alas, taking our blinders off can be a very... well, humbling experience. "You know, there must be thousands of animal species, and of **all** of them, only humans wear clothes," Calvin tells Hobbes, "Isn't that weird? I wonder why other animals don't wear clothes." Hobbes responds: "If our naked pink butts showed, we probably would" (Watterson, Homicidal 82). And yet, the transformation of our world image, as well as the social reality that our culture holds Comic Art

in, requires the willingness to lift the veil of illusion and look underneath.

A flexible, expansive world view is inherently valuable and Comic Art as Medicine is a wonderful tool for invoking our imagination and transforming our world image. We can choose new values. We can choose a new orientation, a fresh perspective on life. We can choose to invoke and embrace the chaos that accompanies our journey from one world image to another. We can choose to create a world image that stimulates our imagination, embraces paradox, and honors self-discovery and profound relatedness for all. An enchanted life!

We can plant the seeds for a better tomorrow today. We can "shift context" and see reality in a new light. Our first step is MINDFULNESS: we must all be willing to recognize that our world image--our cherished beliefs, values, and, yes, even our "bad habits"--are embedded into the very same underlying "social reality" we often complain about. We need to accept our chaotic, and perhaps toxic, world image "as-is" before we can transform it. Perhaps the chaos is the transformation! As Joseph Campbell notes: "The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of soul, is to be read, not as a contraction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man. The

objective world remains what it was, but, because of a *shift* of emphasis within the subject, is beheld as though transformed" (Campbell 28; italics added).

Calvin offers a good observation: "...When you look into infinity, you realize there are more important things than what people do all day" (Watterson, Days 104).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Two Brains, Two Views: The Future of Comic Art Studies

Our current definition of thinking has tended to emphasize verbal, analytical processes. We now have proof that this view ignores half of the mind's capabilities. What about the other half? What new possibilities open to us if we expand our approach to teaching to take advantage of both hemispheres?

--Linda Verlee Williams (2).

I've got more brains than I know what to do with.

--Calvin (Watterson, Attack 56).

Comic Art is both an art form, a container, a tool... and also a process, a participatory experience, a context. Two brains, two views: the "left-brain," or empirical approach, views Comic Art from a historical, sociological, or aesthetic perspective; the "right-brain," or transpersonal approach, views Comic Art as a participatory experience, living, if you will, in the imagination of the beholder rather than simply on the printed page. The future of Comic Art Studies needs to recognize both views, without elevating one perspective at the expense of the other. This thesis has been my attempt to reconcile the "right brain" approach with the "left brain." The "left-brain"

approach, as we will see, is a limited perspective and is only part of a much larger picture.

In the current web of social reality, the study of Comic Art almost always amounts to nothing more than instructional or informational books for children and adults on cartooning fundamentals, such as form and technique, the so-called "visible" aspects of Comic Art. Comic Art Studies is also equated with history, or yet another tome chronicling the rise (and fall?) of comic strips, or, perhaps, a detailed analysis of a popular strip or a biography of a prominent creator. The abundance of historical surveys are designed to give the lay person a skeletal overview--in short, an "objective" account--of well-known and long forgotten strips, accompanied with micro-biographies of their creators. Often these histories are deemed useful because of the "social significance" of comics, rather than because of the intrinsic, poetic value of Comic Art.

In Academic circles, for example, it is quite fashionable to view comics as a social or historical marker. The historical and sociological approach, although important and informative, does have its limitations: it is a rather linear and research-oriented approach, invariably omitting the "inner world" of poetry and imagination. A recent

example is The Funnies by Ron Goulart, "one of the leading historians of pop culture," according to the back cover. The Funnies traces the evolution of the comic strip between 1895-1995, with an emphasis on comics as a mirror of American life. Comic Art is not studied as a means within itself, but as an ends toward sociological inquiry. The *implicit* message: Comic Art is worthy of study because it is an objective mirror of social reality. Read almost any comic strip from the 1920s, for instance, and you'll get a taste of what "pop culture" was like during that time period. M. Thomas Inge, general editor for Studies in Popular Culture for the University Press of Mississippi, also exemplifies the "sociological" approach. "The comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores," writes Inge in Comics as Culture (xi).

Another avenue in the budding field of Comic Art Studies is the "aesthetic" approach, exemplified by Will Eisner, R.C. Harvey, and Scott McCloud. Will Eisner, a 60 year veteran comic book creator, published Comics and Sequential Art in 1985, the first book to seriously tap into what might be called the "underlying structure" of Comic Art. Eisner's book is unique because, in addition to focusing on drawing fundamentals, Eisner emphasizes the *hidden language* of imagery, the frame (or panel), and expressive anatomy. Eisner even attempts to synthesize the

various elements of Comic Art--writing, drawing, design, storytelling, etc.--into a cohesive theory. His latest book, Graphic Storytelling, is a continuation of the teaching methods he's developed at the New York School of Visual Arts and Nova University in Florida.

Robert C. Harvey, an eminent Comic Art critic/cartoonist, also discusses aesthetics in his twin books, The Art of the Funnies and The Art of the Comic Book, both of which bear the subtitle An Aesthetic History. Scott McCloud dived even deeper into the nature of aesthetics in his important contribution Understanding Comics, subtitled The Invisible Art. McCloud, an earnest creator/critic, has an intuitive eye for seeing Comic Art as a full-fledged art form with unlimited, albeit underdeveloped, potential. Eisner called McCloud's book "a landmark dissection and intellectual consideration of comics as a valid medium" (McCloud, back cover). But Understanding Comics seeks to understand how comics work through "analysis," which, by definition, eliminates any attempt at discovering depth and imagination. What does that enigmatic word *invisible* mean anyway?

The "left brain" approach to Comic Art is a valid, useful, and assessable form of study... and yet has no soul. Comic Art is studied as a form of "communication": our

participation in the unfolding of the words and images into an active fantasy is only touched upon only briefly by Eisner and McCloud. The relevance of Comic Art to our imagination--the importance of Comic Art as Medicine--is never addressed. Morality is also absent from most inquiries into the nature of Comic Art. Comic Art is more than just aesthetics and sociology: when we hold Comic Art in a "deep" context--Comic Art as Medicine--we uncover a divine expression of the creative process, with a poetic richness that can touch our very soul, in addition to our cultural pulse.

Comic Art is both a container for our individual and collective imagination, as well as a stimulus for our own subjective flights of fancy. Through the active use of our imagination, we open the possibility of creating a new future for Comic Art and the study thereof, a future that reconciles all three contexts we have studied. Indeed, Comic Art as Medicine is open-ended: the only prerequisite is a willingness to see through the confines of our narrow, one-dimensional social reality. As Scott McCloud notes: "Comics are just an empty vessel until the artists come and bring their life experiences, their desires, and their passions to it" (Wiater and Bissette 7).

If we want to change the future of Comic Art and Comic Art Studies, we need to build a curriculum of Comic Art that honors both hemispheres. We must shift our attention to the creative process, to the synthetic nature of mind, and develop an interdisciplinary approach to learning. Self-knowledge and the study of psychology, mythology, sociology, and physics, must be balanced with the insights gleamed from art, design, creative writing, and communication studies. Other fields of inquiry, such as philosophy, comparative religion, and cultural anthropology, will also contribute to our storehouse of knowledge. The aspiring cartoonist must also be willing to embrace a wide variety of influences--from music, film, and literature, for example--in order to keep their work fresh and inspired. Cartoonists who are primarily influenced *only* by other cartoonists often produce work that is flat, repetitive, and mediocre. Most importantly, all cartoonists must be willing to find their own voice.

The key to "successful" cartooning, in my opinion, is not popularity, but rather a unique, personal voice that speaks to the human condition, the heart of humanity. A cartoonist who bathes in self-awareness and deep sensitivity is a truly gifted individual indeed. "Oddly, the more personal something is, the more universal it is as well," comments Watterson, "Cartoonists don't often write very

honestly--the need for a punchline and a tidy story encourages glib writing--but when we dig deeper to truthful experiences, that's the work that really touches people and connects us all" (Nordling 12). And, as Jung notes: "The essence of art is... in its rising above the personal and speaking from the mind and heart of the artist to the mind and heart of mankind" (Jacobi 197).

When all is said and done, the future of Comic Art is an open-ended podium of latent possibility. And yet our familiar ideas about comics--heralded by social reality as "gospel"--are likely to die a slow, combative death. Our culture is full of numerous misconceptions about Comic Art--"Comics are for kids," or "Comics tackle irreverent issues and are therefore not poetic or artistic," or "Comics are shallow are thus not worthy of academic study"--all of which are merely fictions and are far from the final word. Our taken-for-granted assumptions about Comic Art will need to be reassessed, acknowledged, and repudiated. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to a deeper appreciation of Comic Art.

Calvin and Hobbes, although no longer thriving in our daily newspapers, is alive and well in over a dozen paperback collections, leaving behind a potent legacy of the poetic richness of Comic Art. As Watterson notes:

The best comics expose human nature and help us laugh at our own stupidity and hypocrisy. They indulge in exaggeration and absurdity, helping us to see the world with fresh eyes and reminding us how important it is to play and be silly. Comics depict the ordinary, mundane events of our lives and help us remember the importance of tiny moments. They cleverly sum up our unexpressed thoughts and emotions. Sometimes they show the world from the perspective of children and animals, encouraging us to be innocent for a moment. The best comics, that is to say, are fun house mirrors that distort appearances only to help us recognize, and laugh at, our essential characteristics (Tenth 207)

"In the words of a Chinese Zen Master, 'Nothing is left to you at this moment but to have a good laugh!'" (Watts 156).

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